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Grattan-Guinness, Ivor

The bulk of this book consists of seventeen papers by Grattan Guinness, prominent historian of mathematics, that were published in the past decades. Some of them were hard to find; that is no longer the case. The essays address quite different subjects. There is, for example, a nice overview of activity in the history of mathematics in the twentieth century. There is also a paper on the relevance of the history of mathematics for mathematics education. And there are historical papers on mathematics and Christianity (including some thoughts about the mechanics of crucifixion) and on numerology in Mozart and Beethoven. Yet the papers do not form an incoherent whole. They show together that the author’s approach to the history of mathematics has been consistent over the years. The clue is in an important methodological paper on the difference between history and heritage. Gratten Guinness has introduced these names for two essentially different, but both legitimate approaches to the history of mathematics. Heritage stands, for example, for judging the past on the basis of modern values. It leads to questions like “Who did what first?” and statements like: “He was ahead of his time!”. From the point of view of heritage numerology is pseudoscience and not interesting. The other notion, history in this context refers to genuine attempts to understand the past. The book contains some lovely examples of history. The paper on ratios and proportions in Euclid’s Elements is another nice example.

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