

Hans Freudenthal and Modern Mathematics: Fiction and Facts

Harm Jan Smid

The impact of the Modern Mathematics movement of the sixties and seventies in The Netherlands was relatively moderate and did not last too long. That is often attributed to the influence of Hans Freudenthal; the official ICME-site even claims that he performed such single handedly. There is no doubt that in later years Freudenthal became a convinced opponent of “modern mathematics”, but his position in the sixties was not that unambiguously. The actual content and interpretation of the curriculum of 1968, with a moderate influence of modern mathematics, was determined for a large part by another factor: the textbook series *Moderne Wiskunde*. Freudenthal was a member of the State commission that prepared the new curricula for 1968, and in later years he often suggested that the introduction of that series had been a fatal blow to the work and ideas of that commission. However, that reproach seems unfair and unjustified. The development of *Realistic Mathematics Education* did not get started before the seventies, with the activities of the Wiskobas-group for primary education, and RME did not get a foothold in secondary education until towards the end of the seventies. Due to the introduction of a new law for secondary education, a new curriculum had already to be introduced in 1968, and the State commission had just finished their work some months before, providing only a global curriculum. It did not want to publish the experimental texts it had used and did not give a more detailed interpretation of the curriculum and no didactical guidelines. That caused great problems for textbook authors. The author group behind the *Moderne Wiskunde* series provided a solution for this problem. *Moderne Wiskunde* was an adaptation of a Scottish textbook series, *Modern Mathematics for schools* and was, in spite of his name, only moderately influenced by the ideas of modern mathematics. Besides that, *Moderne Wiskunde* introduced also some didactical innovation, such as more opportunities for self-activity by the pupils, and it integrated topics als algebra and geometry within one book. No wonder that the great majority of the schools decided to use these books. Its success prevented a large scale introduction of modern mathematics such as in neighbouring Belgium. Without *Moderne Wiskunde*, Dutch mathematics education would have found itself in 1968 in an impossible position: the introduction of a complete new, still global curriculum without the availability of textbooks according to that curriculum.