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Autor: Mckinnon Riehm, Elaine; Hoffman, Frances

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One of the little-known effects of World War I was the collapse of international scientific cooperation. In mathematics, the discord continued after the war's end and after the Treaty of Versailles had been signed in 1919. Many distinguished scientists were involved in the war and its aftermath, and from their letters and papers, now almost a hundred years old, we learn of their anguished wartime views and their struggles afterwards either to prolong the schism in mathematics or to end it.

J.C. Fields, the foremost Canadian mathematician of his time, was educated in Canada, the United States, and Germany, and championed an international spirit of cooperation to further the frontiers of mathematics. It was during the awkward post-war period that J.C. Fields established the Fields Medal, an international prize for outstanding research, which soon became the highest award in mathematics. J.C. Fields intended it to be an international medal, and a glance at the varying backgrounds of the fifty-two Fields medallists shows it to be so.

Who was Fields? What carried him from Hamilton, Canada West, where he was born in 1863, into the middle of this turbulent era of international scientific politics? A modest mathematician, he was an unassuming man. This biography outlines Fields' life and times and the difficult circumstances in which he created the Fields Medal. It is the first such published study.