

THE MATHEMATICAL GAZETTE

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SIR PERCY NUNN, 1870–1944.

PRESIDENT OF THE MATHEMATICAL ASSOCIATION, 1917–1919.

So T. P. N. is dead! Having known him as a friend for many years and having enjoyed a fairly steady correspondence with him during his years of exile in Madeira, I find it a stern task to endeavour to assess his influence on the teaching of Mathematics.

To begin with, he was one of the two outstanding lecturers on mathematical topics (the other being A. R. Forsyth) to whom I have listened. He had the knack of making whatever he touched extraordinarily fresh and interesting. He had a lively illustration for every point he wished to make and very likely some ingenious model which rendered it impossible to fail to understand him. If the successive sets of teachers whom he trained could have attained to his skill as a lecturer, his influence would indeed have been great. Few can have succeeded to the full in acquiring his methods, but many must have done so in part, and all had an inspiration and a model at which to aim.

Probably his most important book on school mathematics was his *Teaching of Algebra including Trigonometry*, in one volume with two volumes of exercises to go with it; three large volumes with something original on every page. This was extraordinary as a one-man piece of work. At the time that it was published, 1914, its novelty was much more striking than it would be now, for writers of mathematical textbooks have been cribbing its ideas and suggestions steadily ever since—and I may add that the mine is not by any means exhausted yet. It must not be supposed that there is any very strict limit put to the Algebra of the title. From the book can be learned how to teach astronomy, map projections, statistics, calculus. No young teacher of mathematics can afford to leave it unread. It is as a book to teach teachers that it excels. As a book for the class-room, I fear it was only the exceptional man in whose hands it proved a workable textbook, so that as far as royalties were concerned it was again a case of

“Who fished the murex up? What porridge had John Keats?”

But I do not think T. P. N. minded much. The influence of the book is probably just as great at second-hand, and his aim was to influence teaching.

A

As the title of the book shows, he was keen on bringing trigonometry into close touch with algebra; he was also a warm advocate of a close association of trigonometry with geometry.

On geometry he held strong views, his idea being that the twin foundation-stones of geometry are the principle of congruence and the principle of similarity, and that a course of geometry based on them should have as its completion some such sequence of theorems as that of which he wrote in the *Mathematical Gazette* for July, 1938. The most recent developments in geometrical teaching which seem likely to reduce the ordered mountain chain of theorems to a few isolated peaks to be climbed, do not fit very well with the till recently fashionable "sequence of theorems" at the end of a book, so perhaps it may be suitable to say here that the key theorem of which he once wrote to me that it would be "found engraved on his heart" was that in which, from the principle of similarity, he deduced one of the variants of the parallel postulate—the "any transversal if one" property of parallels. This will be found as Th. VI, p. 242 of the *Gazette*, July 1938.

His work for the Mathematical Association, of which he was President for 1917–1919, was of long duration and of great value. In particular, he was a member of the sub-committee which drew up the 1923 *Report on the Teaching of Geometry in Schools*. It is perhaps not giving away a secret to say that he and one E. H. N. were the two principally responsible for this Report, which has been a best-seller ever since.

Of his work in philosophy and of his admitted masterpiece, his *Education, its Data and First Principles* (1920), I am not qualified to speak, and will only say that in his last year of life the effort to finish the revision of this book for a new and up-to-date edition was found by him to be a very severe one, and he was profoundly thankful to have finished it. Probably he felt in his heart that this revision completed his life's work.

C. O. T.

My memory of the late Sir Percy Nunn will be of a man who was loved, in the fashion that men of full stature can love one another. I think that at school I loved him, but as that word is so readily misused by the writers of modern school fiction, let us use Paul's phrase and say that he was "esteemed very highly in love for his works' sake"

In 1900 he was taking the Upper V form of a school specialising in science and mathematics. The fact that I was, and am, academically weak in both those subjects, and yet had no criticism of my relations with the Master, indicates his breadth of vision. A few years ago I showed him his report on me dated "Spring Term 1901", with position in form 1st, Percentage marks in three English subjects 98, 96, 91, and at the other end Algebra 28, Mechanics 10. "What will you think of them, forty years on?" We laughed together over the last two, he sympathising cordially, admitting that he realised that I was a fish out of water in a form that produced Wranglers and at least two University Professors of Mathematics. Yet he made me thoroughly happy in that company. He was an enthusiast in Literature and Language. He knew all about football and cricket. He knew all about the school argot. He knew all about stamps and hobbies. He cycled to school every morning. He manipulated the typewriter competently. He wrote topical verse (signed "Zero") in the school magazine. He appeared on the school stage to our vast entertainment, and I strongly suspect he wrote the texts of some of the amusing things we said or sang together. He organised class competitions on general knowledge. After a vacation he would talk to each boy about sights and journeys.

The general impression left is of a competent energetic man with wide interests and encyclopaedic knowledge, commanding respect, and justifying

the use of the capital letter in calling him Master, and his forty-five lines in *Who's Who*.

Just after the end of the last war we began a regular, intimate, and eventually, I am proud to say, affectionate correspondence, the last document of which was written by him three weeks before his death. I believe I have most of his letters. They reveal a continued widening of interests and a kindly altruism. They discuss books and plays, hock and burgundy, the possibility of his writing on the "NU SPELIN", and the teaching of astronomy. They show his enthusiasm in my amateur archaeology and my poor efforts at poetry. On his knighthood his acknowledgment of congratulations was a printed slip, with a statement in the text that he had personally both set it up and struck it off on his own printing press.

For the last ten years he suffered increasingly with failing sight and a regularly recurring bronchitis, and this necessitated prolonged absences in Madeira, where his life was serene, though for a long time only one of his lungs was functioning.

He was happy in the arrangements for the second edition of his *Education, its Data and First Principles*, but his heart was rapidly failing him, and in November a bad turn was followed by prolonged weakness. The proofs of his book arrived shortly before he died, perhaps two hours. He was very pleased and just glanced at them, but was too weak to do more. The end was sweet and peaceful, without any suffering. H. A. T.

SIR ARTHUR EDDINGTON, O.M., F.R.S., 1882–1944.

PRESIDENT OF THE MATHEMATICAL ASSOCIATION, 1930–1932.

By the death of Sir Arthur Eddington, the world has lost one of its greatest scientists.

Eddington went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, from Owens College, Manchester; he was Senior Wrangler in 1904, Smith's Prizeman and Fellow of Trinity in 1907. After a short period as chief assistant at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, he returned to Cambridge in 1913 as Plumian Professor of Astronomy. Among the many honours he received were the Royal Medal of the Royal Society in 1928, a knighthood in 1930, and the Order of Merit in 1938.

This Association will not easily forget that Eddington was its President for the period 1930–1932, and his two Presidential addresses, "The End of the World" and "The Decline of Determinism", lucid, stimulating, provocative and full of that pawky humour of which Eddington was a master, made a deep impression on the minds of those who listened to him. On less formal occasions, the humour and lucidity were always evident in his conversation, but here the impression was not so much that of a brilliant scientist, but of a man of courtesy and charm both simple and sincere.

This brief note is simply to record the death of a great man, of whose connection with our Association we are very proud. A full account of Eddington's outstanding contributions to cosmology and ultimate physics is being written for the *Gazette* by Professor Sir Edmund Whittaker, and will appear in a future issue.