

# Notices

of the American Mathematical Society

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## Editorial

### The AMS in Retrospect

At this time toward the end of the century, some publications are reviewing the past hundred years to see what can be learned, while others are predicting the future, always a hazardous thing to do. The *Notices* has already published some predictions about mathematics in the coming century, and now it undertakes a small project of review, highlighting some of the giant figures and activities of the AMS during the past one hundred years. This column and some future ones between now and the end of 2000 quote from two history books: *A Semicentennial History of the American Mathematical Society 1888-1938* by Raymond Clare Archibald and *A History of the Second Fifty Years, American Mathematical Society 1939-1988* by Everett Pitcher, both published by the AMS.

—Anthony W. Knapp

### AMS in the Twentieth Century

#### Maxime Bôcher

We begin our series about the important figures and activities of the AMS during the past century with Maxime Bôcher (1867-1918), in whose memory the Society created the Bôcher Prize. This prize, given every five years, was recently awarded to Demetrios Christodoulou, Sergiu Klainerman, and Thomas Wolff (*Notices*, April 1999).

Maxime Bôcher was the tenth president of the Society, 1909-1910, and an important mathematician, but we describe only his role in connection with the *Transactions of the AMS*. We quote from the *Semicentennial History* about his work as editor, a post he held during 1908-1909 and 1911-1913:

"He was a fine critic, ever free with constructive suggestions. For many years he served as an assoc. ed. of [the *Annals of Mathematics*]. He was never very strong, and long he had to combat ill health...."

The founding of the *Transactions* is described elsewhere in the *Semicentennial History*: "Prof. W. F. Osgood's [editor of the *Transactions*, 1910, and eighth president of the AMS, 1905-1906] vivid reminiscences of events...may be inserted here.

"Toward the end of the nineties the need of a journal for the publication of mathematical material became more and more pressing. The *American Journal of Mathematics* [published by Johns Hopkins University] inclined naturally enough to the European groups from which its contributions had come in the past, and although in financial straits, failed to discern new strength in young mathematicians of this country...."

"Finally a meeting was called in New York by Fiske [founder and seventh president of the AMS, 1903-1904] to consider the project...with Fiske in the chair, Dr. McClintock [second president of the AMS, 1891-1994] on his right and Bôcher on his left...."

"Bôcher was a man with a passion for fair dealing and with extraordinary insight and judgment. ...[H]e turned to McClintock and said: 'Will Doctor McClintock be so good as to state his views for us?' In substance Dr. McClintock said that he should consider the founding of a journal which would be a rival or competitor of the *American Journal* unfortunate, and that such a step would be of the nature of an unfriendly act toward The Johns Hopkins. Here was opposition with a vengeance, for Dr. McClintock was one of the strongest mathematicians among the older men, and he had been President of the American Mathematical Society. It was a most unpleasant difficulty that now suddenly confronted us. And then, with something akin to genius, Bôcher's great powers of diplomacy came to the rescue. With all the grace and dignity and charm which were a part of his simple and direct nature he said: 'Would Doctor McClintock feel it improper for the Society to publish its *Transactions*?'"

"No, certainly not. Any society may publish its *Transactions*. With that formula, the one word 'Transactions' replacing an opprobrious word like 'Journal' or 'Annals' or 'Acta', the whole opposition collapsed and good relations were established. The power of a word!"

"...[In April 1899] the committee reported to the Council that towards the support of the publication of the *Transactions*, the subscriptions of one hundred dollars a year for five years had been practically guaranteed by representatives of each of nine institutions; a tenth was added to this list before the first number (96 p.) was published in January 1900."

—A.W.K.