

Notices

of the American Mathematical Society

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AMS in the Twentieth Century

Frank Nelson Cole

Frank Nelson Cole (1861–1926) was secretary of the AMS and editor-in-chief of the *Bulletin* for more than twenty years. In his honor the AMS Cole Prize is awarded twice every five years—once in algebra and once in number theory. The most recent recipients are Michel Raynaud and David Harbater (in algebra in 1995) and Andrew Wiles (in number theory in 1997). In the November 1997 *Notices* one reads, "The original [Cole Prize] fund was donated by Professor Cole from moneys presented to him on his retirement, was augmented by contributions from members of the Society, and was later doubled by his son."

Cole's research was largely in finite groups and in the application of Galois theory to polynomials of the fifth and sixth degrees. He was a master lecturer. It is said that his 1903 address "On the factoring of large numbers" to the Society was met with a standing ovation after he lectured without saying a single word, multiplying two large integers and verifying that their product was $2^{67} - 1$, a number that Mersenne had thought should have been prime.

Some information about Cole may be found in a book on the history of the first fifty years of the AMS, written by Raymond Clare Archibald. Archibald writes, "After two years under Klein at Leipzig, Cole spent the next three years at Harvard, where his career as an undergraduate had been so brilliant. Aglow with enthusiasm, he gave courses in modern higher algebra, and in the theory of functions of a complex variable, geometrically treated, as in Klein's famous course of lectures at Leipzig in 1881–82. He was the first to open up modern mathematics to Prof. Osgood, as a student, who characterized the lectures as 'truly inspiring.' Another student, M. Bôcher, as well as nearly all members of the Department, attended his lectures. He received the doctor's degree from Harvard."

Thomas S. Fiske, founder of the AMS, took on the combined roles of the first secretary of the AMS and founding editor of the *Bulletin*. Archibald writes, "[Cole] was appointed prof. of math. at Columbia U. and Barnard C. in 1895, and immediately relieved Fiske of his burden as secretary of the Society; two years later he became an assoc[iate] editor of the *Bulletin*. In the following spring Fiske was appointed chm. of a comm[ittee], whose recommendations later led to the founding of the *Transactions*. Work on this comm[ittee] demanded so much of his time and thought, that he resigned as editor-in-chief of the *Bulletin*, and Cole assumed this office in Feb. 1899 and continued as both secretary and editor to the end of 1920....

"Cole's twenty-two years of joint service as secretary of the Society and editor-in-chief of the *Bulletin* began just as the decision had been made to publish the *Transactions*, twenty-one v[olumes] of which were issued during his régime, and added not a little to the load that he carried as secretary... Except for changes which would naturally result from [thirty years of increasing mathematical activity], the general style of the *Bulletin* was simply a continuation of the features so thoughtfully developed by Prof. Fiske. Cole (as Fiske before him) suppressed any reference to himself as editor-in-chief, and put in one group the names of assist[ant] editors and members of the committee of publication....

"Beginning with 1921, a period of many changes was initiated. The tremendous load carried by Cole was... divided between Prof. Richardson, the new secretary, and Prof. Hedrick, the new editor-in-chief of the *Bulletin*....

"The frontispiece of the AMS *Bull[etin]*, v. 27 (1920–21) is an excellent likeness of Cole at that time, and the Council ordered that the v[olume] be dedicated to him, 'in appreciation of his devotion to the Society during his twenty-six years as Secretary and in recognition of his leadership in the editorial work of the *Bulletin* for the past twenty-four years.'"

—Anthony W. Knapp