

John Ewing Retires from the AMS

Allyn Jackson



Photograph by Tom Stio.

John Ewing

In 1996, when John Ewing had been AMS executive director for about a year, several Russian translation journals that the Society had been publishing pulled out and went to other publishers. This move, coming in the wake of the many upheavals in the Russian mathematical community after the fall of the Soviet Union, meant a US\$1.5 million loss in income for the AMS—a substantial chunk of the Society’s budget, which was US\$20 million at the time. This episode was a stark reminder of how outside events could jeopardize the financial health of the AMS. Ewing rose to the challenge, working with the staff and the volunteer leadership to make cuts in nearly all areas of AMS operations. The AMS not only survived the immediate crisis—in fact, it never even dipped into the red that year—but is today in better fiscal shape than ever before in its history and is a model of financial health for a nonprofit professional society.

At the beginning of January 2009 Ewing will retire as executive director of the AMS to become president of Math for America, a project that aims to improve mathematics instruction in the nation’s schools.¹ His tenure at the Society was marked by intelligent management of the many things the AMS did well and alacrity in tackling the challenges the Society faced. He also brought a deep belief in the value of the traditions developed over the Society’s more than 100-year history and a vision for building on and diversifying them. Ewing leaves the AMS a stronger and more vibrant organization

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¹ See “New York City programs provide a model for National Teaching Corps”, by Allyn Jackson, *Notices*, March 2007; and “Math for America and the Math Science Teaching Corps”, by Irwin Kra, *Notices*, December 2006.

than when he started as executive director thirteen years ago. As former AMS president James G. Arthur of the University of Toronto put it, “Under his leadership the AMS has greatly enhanced its standing as a professional organization of which mathematicians everywhere can be proud.”

When one asks those in the AMS leadership what Ewing’s biggest accomplishment has been, many point to the financial health of the Society. After fiscal crises in the 1980s, the Board of Trustees established an “economic stabilization fund” of 75 percent of the operating budget, to enable the Society to weather tough financial times. Ewing worked hard to build this fund, which today has surpassed the target set by the trustees and now operates something like an endowment, providing income of over one million dollars each year that helps support AMS activities. The net assets of the AMS went from about US\$24 million in Ewing’s first year with the Society, to nearly US\$80 million in 2007. “That really took great political skills on his part, because...there was often pressure to spend the money,” Arthur noted. “‘Why should the AMS be accumulating money? That’s just wrong,’ people might think. But it’s not wrong...It’s extremely important that the activity that we mathematicians live for be protected and have reserves that can keep it vibrant. I think that’s John’s biggest accomplishment.”

The primary means for improving the financial position has been careful investment in and cultivation of the Society’s publication program. (Dues and registration fees for meetings account for only a small portion of the AMS budget; close to 80 percent comes from publications.) Ewing strengthened and expanded the publication program at a time of huge uncertainty about and upheaval in scholarly publishing. In 2002, with the retirement of AMS publisher Donald G. Babbitt, Ewing took on the role of publisher himself—on top of all of his other duties as executive director. In one sense, this was no surprise, as publishing is in Ewing’s blood: His father was president of van Nostrand Reinhold publishing company from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s and a vice president of McGraw-Hill before that.

Ewing worked on improving the Society's twelve journals and building the book program, which now publishes about 100 titles per year. He was also deeply involved in the development of the Society's most important publication, the *Mathematical Reviews* database, which most mathematicians today access over the Internet using MathSciNet. When MathSciNet came online in 1996, some thought that it might become obsolete as search engines for the Web proliferated. In fact, just the opposite has happened. MathSciNet is nowadays an indispensable tool for mathematicians in everything they do, from carrying out research to checking on the publications of job applicants. Ewing made sure that investments and improvements in MathSciNet have been continually made, including the gargantuan task of keyboarding all reviews that were on paper only, going back to the first *Math Reviews* issue in 1940. He also realized that expanding access to MathSciNet would be crucial to its success, and under his watch the AMS developed a novel pricing scheme to reduce subscription rates for small institutions and for poor countries. As a result the number of institutions with access to MathSciNet has doubled in the past decade.

Ewing has over the years emerged as one of the world's leading experts in electronic publishing and digital archiving, and his knowledge and wisdom have greatly benefited the AMS. Amid all the fervent discussion over the past decade or so about the future of scholarly publishing, Ewing was sometimes criticized for being too conservative. "Certainly he has not rushed out to make things free, for the pretty sensible reason that he thought it would in the end cripple the ability to produce journals at all," said former AMS president David Eisenbud of the University of California, Berkeley. Other groups that did start free electronic journals are now coming to realize that they need some income to make the journals viable over the long term. "He is a tremendously respected voice in [electronic publishing technology]," said Eisenbud. "People didn't always like what he said, but I don't think anybody ever proved him wrong on an issue."

The AMS is in one sense a business—and Ewing knows how to run a business. "He seems to have more raw talent than CEOs of major American corporations," remarked Arthur. "He has all of the talents that would make him successful at running a much larger business than the AMS. But given his outlook and his idealism, this is probably not something he would seek." Indeed, Ewing's combination of business acumen and idealism have brought a healthy balance to the Society, so that, as its fiscal health grew, it never lost sight of its role as a nonprofit professional society dedicated to serving the mathematical community. The success of the AMS publication program has served

Some Reflections on John Ewing

Like many members of the mathematical community I have known John Ewing for a long time and have known *of* him for much longer. I knew of his distinguished contributions as a researcher and of his substantial skills as an editor and as an administrator. I had seen him in action as the deft and entertaining host of the AMS banquet at the Combined Membership Meetings.

But it was only in 1998, when we both began ten-year terms as members of the International Mathematical Union's then-new Committee on Electronic Information and Communication (CEIC, <http://www.ceic.math.ca>), that I had the privilege to get to know John well. We both finished our twice-extended terms this July. In the intervening time I learned a great deal from John and quite a lot about John. Let me touch on both.

John is an enormously hard-working man—this is not a secret—who wears his remarkable erudition and breadth of knowledge very lightly. He is patient, hard to ruffle, and even harder to alienate. The CEIC was formed with many passionate members; all knowledgeable about some bits of the puzzle. It had only one expert: John Ewing. John's patience and generosity in educating the rest of us about the many pitfalls and subtleties was extraordinary. His care in trying to distinguish his role as committee member from that as AMS executive director (which could have made him the eight-hundred pound gorilla on the committee) was remarkable.

After all, only John actually had to publish, manage, and communicate electronic information on a pretty large scale. The rest of us had opinions on everything and expertise on a subset—often a small subset. John was a "decider" who had expertise on everything and opinions (at least expressed) only on a subset. It is a measure of John's probity that over the decade we "opinionators" sometimes changed the opinions of the decider. It was the quality of its members and the remarkable give-and-take that made the CEIC a wonderful committee to work on.

I learned John did not especially like the social-public parts of his job—despite being extremely good at them. I learned he would often rather be home reading a good book than going to one more party. That said, John is definitely a beer man not a wine drinker, and has a large repository of subtle jokes. I also learned it was hard to find an area in which he was not knowledgeable, be it about matters legal, political, scientific, or cultural. This I discovered over many days and many nights in many cities, sometimes over dinner, sometimes in the very wee hours in taxi rides to distant airports. During the last ten years, I spent two as Canadian Mathematical Society president and consequently several as CMS observer to the AMS Council. This allowed me to confirm that John plays the same thoughtful and effective role outside the CEIC.

It is conventional to say that an individual is irreplaceable to an organization. John is irreplaceable to the AMS. It is luckily not the case that irreplaceable individuals cannot be replaced. John is off to master other challenges and we shall all be richer for that. I am eager to see the fruits of his ambitious new undertakings with Math for America. I am very proud to call John my friend.

—Jonathan Borwein, University of British Columbia

John Ewing and *Math Reviews*

John has been extremely successful at what is an almost impossible job, particularly for a hands-on perfectionist as John is. He has always seemed totally in command of all aspects of the AMS, usually knowing as much or more than the staff member with direct responsibility for a given aspect. Not only is he able to absorb large amounts of diverse and detailed information but with his acute intelligence he is able to use that knowledge constructively and imaginatively.

That John has been so successful is in part due to his control of the budget. His careful management and fiscal conservatism (at times a great frustration to staff!) led to many years of budget surpluses, which allowed new projects to be developed.

John arrived at the AMS when MathSciNet was well along in its development but hadn't been officially released. He has been instrumental in its growth since then, from all points of view—fiscal, technical, and mathematical. He pushed for investment in the database by digitizing the complete run of reviews from *Mathematical Reviews* from 1940 on and for the ongoing development of the citation database. He ensured that MathSciNet was available to mathematicians around the world by developing the database fee/consortium model of pricing, which at the same time has put the MR Database on sound financial footing. There is almost no aspect of MathSciNet, from what “author” means in a search to answering librarians' concerns about usage statistics, in which John has not been actively involved. Finally, John has for the last few years served as an active MR reviewer. His reviews, mostly on topics of general interest, are always lucid and very well written; these models of a good review should be required reading for aspiring reviewers.

John visited MR regularly throughout his tenure. At these regular meetings, John discussed aspects of MR of current concern. Because he had learned so much about the workings of the MR office and the individual staff members, he was able to provide support and valuable, and often imaginative, suggestions to the executive editor to tackle problems.

John was an exacting boss. It was sometimes hard to live up to his example of hard work, imaginative management, intimate knowledge of one's sphere of responsibility, and high standards of integrity, but he inspired one to try.

John is one of the most intelligent and moral people I have ever met. It was an honor to work with him.

—Jane Kister, *MR Executive Editor, 1998–2004*

the community by providing a model of low-cost, high-quality publishing, thereby goading commercial publishers into keeping their own prices in check. The community has also benefited from the Society's author-friendly copyright policies, strongly supported by Ewing, which have pressured other publishers to follow suit.

The financial strength of the AMS makes possible everything the Society does—national and international meetings, the employment register, the annual survey, prizes, etc. Three important activities that have blossomed during Ewing's tenure are the Washington Office, the Public Awareness Office, and the Epsilon Fund. Samuel M. Rankin III,

who since 1991 had been AMS associate executive director at Society headquarters in Providence, was hired as director of the Washington Office in 1995, shortly after Ewing joined the AMS staff. The Washington Office today runs several programs, including the annual Congressional briefings in which mathematicians make presentations to members of Congress and their staffs; the Mass Media Fellowships, which bring math graduate students into media outlets for summer internships; and the Congressional Fellowships, in which mathematicians spend a year working on the staff of a member of Congress or a congressional committee.

But Ewing understood that the most important function of the Washington Office is to cultivate relationships with government and with other scientific societies, so that mathematics has a place at the table when decisions are made. “What I have valued most in working with John is that from the beginning he allowed me the time to find out how other scientific societies work in Washington and develop the DC operations around what I find useful,” Rankin said. “He has given me the freedom to form collaborations with other professional organizations and coalitions, which I believe helps enhance mathematics policy as well as science policy...John's supportive and decisive management style has allowed this to happen.”

The AMS leadership talked for years about the need to improve awareness and understanding of mathematics among the general public. Ewing came to realize that a focused effort would be needed to pursue this goal, and he spent a couple of years laying plans for the Public Awareness Office before it got off the ground in late 2000. The office is staffed by Mike Breen, a Ph.D. mathematician, and Annette Emerson, who previously was an AMS employee in the promotions department. Today the office bustles with activity, developing the popular “Mathematical Moments” program (a brainchild of Ewing), staging the wildly successful “Who Wants to Be a Mathematician?” game show for high-school students, preparing the monthly “Math in the Media” webpages, as well as issuing news releases and fielding inquiries from reporters and the general public. “The things the Public Awareness Office is doing are quite remarkable, especially considering the size of the operation,” Arthur remarked.

“The Epsilon Fund has been one of John's most cherished projects,” said Eisenbud. This fund was started to help support summer programs for mathematically talented high-school students. Many of them go on to pursue mathematics as a career, while the others carry with them through their lives a realistic sense of what the field is like. In the late 1990s, because funding sources at the National Science Foundation (NSF) had dried up, some of these programs were experiencing

financial difficulty. Ewing, together with the Board of Trustees, created the Epsilon Fund to provide small grants for these programs. An endowment was set up, with a target of a US\$2 million. Through the generosity of the AMS membership, this target has nearly been reached, and grants have been given for several years now. Ewing has also devoted much energy to many other fundraising efforts for the AMS, and recently he persuaded an anonymous donor to endow fully all of the AMS prizes. "This was a great feat that will benefit the Society for the rest of its life," remarked John B. Conway of George Washington University, a member of the AMS Board of Trustees.

Ewing has also been deeply involved in one of the Society's newest endeavors, Mathematics Research Communities (MRC). Created by Ewing, Eisenbud, and AMS associate executive director Ellen Maycock, the MRC program provides a structure for mathematicians just starting in their research careers, to help them build networks of peers and collaborators. The program, supported by the NSF, started in the summer of 2008 and featured three one-week summer conferences on specific mathematical areas (the number of conferences will increase to four in summer 2009). In addition, there will be special sessions at the Joint Mathematics Meetings, discussion networks by research topic, ongoing mentoring, and a longitudinal study of early career mathematicians. The MRC received an enthusiastic response from the young people who attended the 2008 summer conferences and has the potential to make a large difference in their future careers.

Of course, there are many others, volunteer members and staff, who share responsibility for the accomplishments mentioned here. Nevertheless Ewing was a major figure in making all of them happen. Moreover, he knows how to pick the right people. As Conway put it, "He has a trait that all of us doing any form of administration aspire to: choosing the right person for the right job and convincing them to fully dedicate their talents to carrying out their mission." Ewing has been an effective manager of the 200-plus staff of the AMS, and he has had excellent relations with the volunteer leadership. When he speaks at meetings of AMS committees, the Council, or the Board of Trustees, he commands great respect and trust for his insightful command of the issues. "But there is a kind of lightheartedness about John as well as the great gravity that he has as his public face," Eisenbud noted. Often Ewing emceed Society events, such as the banquets at the Joint Mathematics Meetings, and proved himself to be a delightful, witty host. "He did this with such care and love that he gave a warmth and family feeling to the events, and made them quite special," Eisenbud said.

The esteem in which Ewing is held extends beyond the AMS as well. "Right now relations be-

John Ewing and the *Notices*

John Ewing came to the AMS as executive director right after the *Notices* had been completely redesigned, in content and appearance, by a committee specially appointed for this task. His support and encouragement as the *Notices* went through this transition were crucial to its success. He has told me that people regularly ask him if he can publish this or that article in the *Notices*, and he has to explain that no, the *Notices* is an independent publication whose content is decided by the editor and editorial board. And—apart from official reports that appear in the *Notices* because it is the Society's journal of record—this really is how the *Notices* is run. John strongly supported the policy of the *Notices* being independent because he wanted it to be a lively, interesting publication and not just a house organ. Because of this independence, the *Notices* has occasionally done things that John really didn't like—and he let us know! But much more often he enthusiastically cheered us on, telling us how much our work is valued and inspiring us to do better. That he is himself such a talented and experienced writer and editor makes his appreciation all the more meaningful. There were a couple of episodes—including the time we stopped the presses because I forgot to include a world-famous mathematician in a faculty list, and the time one of my articles was plagiarized by a French magazine—when I was especially grateful for his support. His great sense of humor, intelligence, and charm made working with him a real pleasure. He will be very much missed—by the *Notices*, and by me.

—Allyn Jackson

tween the AMS and the other professional societies are very positive, and I think in large part it's due to the fact that other executive directors and the key people on their boards both like and respect John," said AMS secretary Robert Daverman of the University of Tennessee. In addition, Ewing has increased the international presence of the AMS, serving on committees of the International Mathematical Union and building ties between the Society and other mathematics organizations abroad through, for example, his strong support for AMS international meetings. "He has worked hard at the diplomatic aspects of his job," said AMS treasurer John Franks of Northwestern University.

John Ewing has strengthened the AMS so that it could diversify its activities to meet the needs of the mathematical community while also remaining true to its original purpose of helping mathematicians to connect, communicate, and support one another. "He captures the soul and the spirit of the Society," remarked AMS president James Glimm of Stony Brook University. "He has an acute view of the many different constituencies that make up its membership and the many different roles that it plays for them and in society. I think that panorama is probably unique among mathematicians I know...And he is certainly loved within the mathematical community."