Sir Edmund Whittaker

1873–1956

Sir Edmund Taylor Whittaker, Kt., M.A., Sc.D. LL.D., F.R.S., Professor Emeritus in the University of Edinburgh, died in Edinburgh, Scotland, on March 24, 1956.

Born on October 24, 1873 in Lancashire, he received his education in Manchester and Cambridge, England. After lecturing for some years at Cambridge, he was appointed Royal Astronomer of Ireland and Professor of Astronomy in Trinity College, Dublin in 1905 and in 1912, Professor of Mathematics (i.e., head of the Mathematics Department) in the University of Edinburgh, a position which he held until his retirement in 1946. During Whittaker's tenure of the Chair, the Edinburgh Mathematics Department achieved well-merited international fame, and today former members of that department occupy important academic positions all over the world.

Whittaker's scientific activity extended over more than half a century and over many branches not only of mathematics but also of astronomy, physics, and philosophy. If he was a great and scholarly mathematician, he was equally great as a teacher and administrator; and those who had the good fortune of knowing him well admired him to the point of veneration. His gracious urbanity, his humane interest in people and affairs, his readiness to listen to and help people in trouble, his thorough knowledge of history and inexhaustible fund of anecdote, and his skill as a gardener are some of the many facets of a rich personality now no longer among us.

A biography and an analysis of Whittaker's scientific work will appear elsewhere. Here it will be sufficient to say a few words of Whittaker's work in those fields of particular interest to readers of *MTAC*.

Shortly after coming to Edinburgh, Whittaker established a Mathematical Laboratory, the first enterprise of this kind in Great Britain, and probably one of the first attempts to make numerical analysis an integral part of the university curriculum. It is probable that in starting this new venture, Whittaker was influenced by his work in astronomy, and by his friendship with the great actuaries of the period; and to the knowledge of the present writer, he regarded the introduction of the Mathematical Laboratory course as his most notable contribution to mathematical education. He and his associates, among whom the most outstanding was A. C. Aitken, researched on curve fitting, numerical solution of integral equations, and similar topics; and his thorough knowledge of the history and practice of numerical analysis found expression in his *Calculus of Observations* (written in collaboration with G. Robinson) which today, more than thirty years after its appearance, and after two revolutions in numerical computing, is still one of the most important works on the subject.

Much of Whittaker's work in analysis is distinguished by a trend towards practical applications. He was not satisfied with the mathematical investigation of a function unless means were found for its computation. The number of his pupils and associates in this field is legion; the one who developed the "practical" orientation to the greatest extent is E. L. Ince whose work on Mathieu and Lamé functions is a point in case. To this field belongs Whittaker's most widely known

work, *A Course of Modern Analysis*, which, especially since its second edition in 1915 (prepared in collaboration with G. N. Watson), influenced generation after generation of analysts.

In the course of a long and fruitful life Whittaker received many honours and distinctions; a bare enumeration of these would double the size of this brief notice. At the early age of thirty-one he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, and half a century later he received the Copley Medal of that Society. Among the numerous honours those probably giving him the most pleasure were his election as an Honorary Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and his appointment to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences accompanied by a Papal Medal.

A. ERDÉLYI

Mathematics Department
Hebrew University
Jerusalem, Israel

CORRIGENDA

Review **97[K]**, *MTAC*, v. 10, 1956, p. 243,

for G. W. THOMPSON,   *read* G. W. THOMSON.

The same misspelling occurs on page 267, line 5 (first column), and also on page 268, line 16 (second column), in the Index.