



The Grasshopper

The Organ of The Gresham Society

Language is the road map of a culture; it tells you where its people come from and where they are going to (*Rita Mae Brown*)

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College Notes

Hearty congratulations go to Debby Ounsted CBE and Simon Duckworth OBE DL who have been appointed Honorary Fellows in recognition of many years' service and support. Our outgoing Provost Martin Elliott has also been recognised with thanks for his time as Provost, Professor and Fellow as well.

We bade farewell to Martin as Provost in January with Sarah Hart becoming acting Provost until the Autumn. Recruitment is under way for the new Provost.

Sophie Caranta has left us and we welcome Christine Goodfellow as our new Academic Programme Manager.

The College is just completing its initial programme with Mulberry Academy to bring the College's work to new audiences. In particular the audience there is dominated by young people who would be the first of their family to go to University (78% of attendees) as well as young people who have at some point been entitled to free school meals (76%).

Work on the 2025-6 programme is nearing completion! (Watch this space.)

Members' Corner

Congratulations go to Melissa Lane on the publication of *Of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political* which has won the prestigious History of Philosophy's Book Prize 2024.

A snip at £42 (and a bargain as it is 480 pages long) it was published in 2023 by Princeton University Press.

It has been a busy month for Robin Wilson: his book "Sum Stories: Equations And Their Origins" has just gone to press, which is just as well as this will be the theme of his forthcoming lecture (with the London Mathematical Society) on Wednesday June 4th at 6pm (everyone please note!) Then "Milestones In Graph Theory" is on its way, while "Oxford's Savilian Professors" (though merely co-authored) is on the stocks. This of course draws on Robin's Gresham lecture of three years ago. Rumours that he has learnt to type with both hands at once are exaggerated (though probably not by much...)

And Dominic Broomfield MacHugh has been busy editing the Oxford Handbook of the Disney Musical with Colleen Montgomery, a weighty tome at 666 pages.

From Sir Bryan Thwaites (Part 2)

As Sir Bryan celebrates his Centenary we hear more about his mathematical career and the remarkable people he met

James Lighthill saw himself as a pure mathematician at Trinity Cambridge, while I hoped to become the Headmaster of one of our best schools, preferably Winchester.

That neither ambition was ever fulfilled is due to C.P. Snow who had, in 1941, ensconced James in a room in the Aerodynamics Division of the NPL. Then in 1942 he ensconced me in the same room to work on low-drag aerofoil design and boundary-layer control. So for over a year, James and I were closeted by ourselves in the same room. It was an arrangement which, given our two strong personalities, could have been disastrous. In fact, it was there that we developed the strong mutual respect which underpinned our later life-long intimacy.

James had already established his reputation. I then made my name by inventing the Thwaites Flap which, but for a little matter of atmospheric dust, could have revolutionised low-speed flight. I also designed the wing sections of the up-and-coming Comet aircraft. So in 1947 the Professor of Aeronautics at Imperial College snapped me up, while James, after a couple of years back at Trinity, went off to the Mathematics Department at Manchester which made him a Professor in 1950.

By that year, however, my school ambitions had taken the better of me and I returned to Winchester as the junior mathma don out of six. But I spent the school holidays writing my *magnus opus* "Incompressible Aerodynamics" for which I had been commissioned by the then Aeronautical Research Council of the Ministry of Supply. That, together with a string of other publications, led me to being invited to take, in 1959, a newly-created Chair of Mathematics at Southampton University. My colleague dons were so flabbergasted that they forgot to congratulate me!

But I was sorry to leave the very happy environment of Winchester College in which so many people lived and worked at close quarters.

So I moved to Southampton, and James moved at the same time to the Directorship of the RAE Farnborough which in that era was a truly enormous establishment. After the RAE, he went to Imperial College in 1964 as a Royal Society Professor, while I, two years later, became Principal of Westfield College, London. But if I thought that, as a College Head, I had at last got one up on him, it didn't last long, for in 1979 he, after a stint in the Lucasian Chair at Cambridge, became Provost of University College, London - check mate!

My tale could well end there – the tale of two very close friends, both knighted though with differing citations, whose careers started in the same room at the NPL and ended as Heads of two Colleges in the same University.

But it would not be complete without reference to our contrasting views on computers. As soon I was appointed to the Southampton chair, I began something of a crusade for the use of computers in schools and universities. So when I became the second President of the newly-founded Institute of Mathematics and its Applications, James having been the first, I took the opportunity to make a lengthy exposition of my views in my Presidential Address of 1967. The title was "1984 - Mathematics \Leftrightarrow Computers?" and it was a fully-researched effort with fifty-two references in the published version. As James and I strolled out of the auditorium together after the lecture, he turned to me and said "Bryan, you can't believe any of that!". And in later conversations, he took exception to such of my prophecies as this one: "Well within the next century, we shall be wearing computers of Atlas' power on our wrists". I was out by half-a-century!

Reflections

Too long; Didn't Read (TL;DR)

Committee Member Richard Harvey reflects on the process of reading and writing – and how things have not necessarily changed for the better:

I'm sure readers of *The Grasshopper* can remember the time when publication meant being on all fours with a can of *Spray-mount* adhesive, sticking bits of typeset text and figures onto A3 sheets of paper – the, so called, *camera-ready* copy. Electronic publishing changed all that. Thus, one of my friends was deprived of one of his favourite jokes – as we knelt, can-in-hand, he would always murmur “Let us spray”. Another victim of technological progress will soon be proof-readers’ marks – the hidden hand of AI will soon be lurking in the background of your word processor and urging you to either hyphenate like Winston Churchill (ie not at all since Churchill was rumoured to have disapproved of the hyphen) or by some other chosen literary guru. They are not yet gone but the writing (doubtless un-hyphenated) is on the wall.

So, in future, we should only focus on matters of style and substance. Well, that sounds very nice since, presumably, matters of trivial style, such as whether *data* are a plural (not according to the *Financial Times* – horror!), will have been decided by some AI arbiter. But unfortunately the world has not yet developed approved abbreviations for high-level editorial remarks. Apart, that is, for the internet-derived, TL;DR. Although originally intended as an insult to overly-verbose internet posts, TL;DR soon became the rallying cry of those suffering from *infobesity* or TMI (too much information). And now, speaking to a friend who works in the City, it has circled back to being a put-me-down that is scrawled on the work of hapless underlings. Let's not use it – no-one enjoys being called a windbag and anyway readers of the *Grasshopper* should be writing *TS; DL – too short; didn't learn*.

[*Editor's Note: The Grasshopper Himself assures me that Richard's worthwhile screeds can never be too short. In fact contributions are always welcome from members!*]

Back to banknotes (following on from G22)

I never realised that the late Queen was actually the first monarch to appear on an English banknote – and that was in 1960. It was not till 1970 that pictures appeared on the reverse, in that case Shakespeare on the 20 pound note. Of course, today they are an important element to prevent forgeries, along with the watermarks, holograms, miniaturised lettering and the rest. But if you are stuck with a forgery, unfortunately you will not be reimbursed.

On from the Sheerness scorpions (see G22)

Scorpions of course are not nice critters, even if the ones on Sheerness are practically harmless. But it does put me in mind of an episode in Mexico days when a flatmate stepped out of a car in the dark. He was barefoot, as he was driving back from the beach in Acapulco and felt a stab of pain. He didn't think too much about it till he got back up to Mexico City when the venom started to take effect. This led to two problems: one was that chemists did not stock black widow serum as Mexico City is too high for such malarkies and it was Holy Week and everywhere was shut anyway. There followed a kind of serum treasure hunt at two in the morning as we dashed around trying to find anywhere that was open while telling our friend excruciating jokes in order to keep him cheerful, the only thing being that (as they say) it only hurt when he laughed. Of course the famous Cowdray Hospital was the place to go and an injection was duly given, whereupon there was sudden doubt as to whether he had been stung by a scorpion or a black widow as the patient/victim said that he could feel the venom going up one arm and the serum down the other... The combined effect of both did cause a certain amount of discomfort for some time but we all dined out on that particular story for a long time after. Happy days they were!

Editorial

American Wars

Current tensions between Canada and the US are a reminder that such things do go back a long way, even though the border (the longest and what must be the straightest mainly unguarded border in the world) has had its fair share of disputes. The most celebrated must be the Pig War, arising from the Oregon Treaty of 1846 which established the 49th parallel as

the border between Oregon and British Columbia, the only problem being that the main source of data came from the expedition of Captain George Vancouver, published in 1798. The details were vague and the topography there did not lend itself to straight lines. All went fairly well until a dispute arose between two settlers, one American and the other Irish, as the former shot a pig belonging to the latter, the pig being quite oblivious to boundary markers on San Juan Island. Neither government could tolerate such an affront to national sovereignty (even though the nationality of the pig was not in question) and both navies were soon involved and digging in onshore. Common sense soon prevailed and both sides were reduced to a token force of one hundred men each, who seem to have spent their time drinking together and playing football. However, national pride could not be assuaged and none other than Kaiser Wilhelm II was eventually called upon to adjudicate, which he did – in favour of the USA.

History may not repeat itself quite, but the current tense standoff between Canada and America over what might be called the 51st State Issue has flared up on the other side of the shared continent over lobster fishing rights between New Brunswick and Maine. The issue has been exacerbated by the fact that Maine sends its lobsters to be processed in New Brunswick and these are then re-exported to the USA. All of which will give a headache to anyone wanting to set tariffs. And the Kaiser won't be there to adjudicate.

Envoi

Thanks to the many people who were supportive during my recent period of ill health as I am out and about again. And I have sent best wishes on behalf of the Society to the excellent Basil Bezuidenhout who is recovering from a lengthy bout of medical treatment.

The Annual General Meeting Wednesday June 18th

All this has led to a hiatus in our normal range of activities, but the AGM will now be held at or near Barnard's Inn Hall with a cup of tea and a bun at 4pm on Wednesday June 18th, before the Provost's Lecture at 6pm. A booking form will follow shortly.

We will also plan to hold a pub night over at the Sir Thomas Hatton – details to follow too.

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The College is offering people a chance to record their views of the lectures with testimonials which may be recorded at the College on 14 and 15 May. Contact Celia Blakeway-Phillips if you would like to take part on <c.blakeway-phillips@gresham.ac.uk>

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