

Bartlett, Maurice Stevenson

(1910–2002)

- Peter Whittle
- <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/76690>
- Published in print: 05 March 2009
- Published online: 05 January 2006
- This version: 08 January 2009

Bartlett, Maurice Stevenson (1910–2002), statistician and probabilist, was born on 18 June 1910 at 64 Wellesley Road, Chiswick, London, the third and youngest child of William Stevenson Bartlett (c.1864–c.1959/60), a confectioner's clerk, and later a clerical officer in Customs and Excise, and his wife, Eva, *née* White (1870–1944). The circumstances of the family were humble, but Bartlett won a scholarship to Latymer Upper School, having received his early education at Addison Road primary school and Latymer Foundation School. In 1929 he was awarded a state scholarship to Queens' College, Cambridge, where he read mathematics. In 1932 he achieved the rank of wrangler (with distinction) in schedule B of the tripos, and in this and a graduate year published his first two papers. In 1933 he accepted Egon Pearson's offer of an assistant lectureship in the new statistics department at University College, London. This led to contacts with J. Neyman, and also with R. A. Fisher and J. B. S. Haldane in the adjoining Galton Laboratory. Haldane in particular proved a stimulating collaborator and a generous co-author of two papers on inbreeding.

Bartlett had developed a yearning for involvement in projects of clear practical importance, and in 1934 took up the post of statistician at the ICI agricultural research station at Jealott's Hill, Warfield, Berkshire. He characterized his four years at ICI as 'not only the happiest period of my life (professionally), but also the most creative' (Bartlett, 44). The practical challenges of the post stimulated Bartlett to a succession of technical advances and left him with a lifetime's store of research problems. A correspondence with Godfrey Thomson also led him to studies of the concept of mental factors and of genetic components of ability. Nevertheless an unwelcome reorganization at ICI, which led to Bartlett's nominal promotion but his separation from research, prompted his successful application in 1938 for a lectureship in mathematics at Cambridge. With the onset of the Second World War he spent the years 1940–45 at the projectile development establishment of the Ministry of Supply, concerned with the development of rocket batteries against air and surface targets. His interest in stochastic processes (dynamic processes which incorporate an intrinsic randomness) dated from this time. Jose Moyal, who had escaped to Britain after the fall of France, opened his eyes to a whole corpus of continental work on the subject which had gone rather unregarded in Britain. The war had revealed a lack of trained statisticians and, with the return of peace, efforts were made to mount courses answering this demand. Bartlett, once back in Cambridge, played his role in this, with an emphasis on stochastic processes and time series analysis.

The post-war realization that teaching in mathematical statistics needed strengthening was a general one, and the University of Manchester, almost incandescent with returning post-war talent, created the first new chair in the subject in the UK since University College, London, had founded Karl Pearson's chair in 1911. Bartlett was the obvious candidate; he took up the position in 1947 and held it until 1960. With his own statistical laboratory, Bartlett was able to develop a range of courses based on the conviction he had formed during the war, that students should be offered courses in basic disciplines rather than something occupationally tailored. On 11 September 1957 he married Sheila Rosemary Lockwood (1915–1998), daughter of Charles Ernest Chapman, a police inspector. She had previously been married to Henry (Lyn) Lockwood, brother of the film actress Margaret Lockwood, and had herself at one time been on the London stage. The Bartletts had a daughter, Penelope (Penny).

When Egon Pearson retired from his chair at University College, London, in 1960, Bartlett was invited to become his successor. Despite the fact that he had been very happy at Manchester, Bartlett found himself attracted by the 'lustre' of the post, and so took up the appointment. He found the post a congenial one, but could not resist the challenge when, a few years later, the University of Oxford tried to rationalize its idiosyncratic treatment of the subject of statistics by the creation of a new chair of biomathematics. Bartlett was appointed to the chair in 1967, and set out a research programme which emphasized biological relevance.

Over his career Bartlett wrote some 170 papers (of which a selection was collected in three published volumes) and five books. Particularly notable was his *Introduction to Stochastic Processes* (1955), which integrated his own work with the then scattered literature of the subject, giving the field of stochastic processes both definition and substance. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1961 and a foreign associate of the US National Academy of Sciences in 1993. He was awarded honorary doctorates by the universities of Chicago (1966) and Hull (1976), the Royal Statistical Society's Guy medal in gold (1969), and the University of Oxford's Weldon prize and medal (1971). He was also made an honorary member of the International Statistical Institute in 1980 and served as president of the Manchester Statistical Society (1959–60), of the Biometric Society (British Region) (1964–6), and of the International Association of Statistics in the Physical Sciences (1965–7). His insight and power as a problem-solver brought him an international reputation. He made early key advances in what came to be called multivariate analysis, developed time series analysis, produced a coherent and innovative theory of stochastic processes, and studied stochastic models of, for instance, the growth of population, the course of epidemics, and systems with a spatial dimension. A much less tangible phenomenon which never lost its fascination for him concerned methods for the identification of 'factors' in psychology or performance.

Bartlett was a pioneer who revolutionized his subject in his lifetime. A somewhat austere manner imperfectly concealed a nature both generous and sensitive; a generation of workers in his subject owed much to his inspiring and kindly influence. He retired from his Oxford post for medical reasons in 1975, two years early. This was from conscience rather than necessity; he felt that he was not able to give his best. He retired first to Worthing, then to Totnes, and finally to Exmouth, continuing to enjoy a ruminative style of research, visits by friends, music, and his collection of paintings, until a cardiac condition brought about his peaceful death at his home, Overcliff, 4 Trefusis Terrace, Exmouth, on 8 January 2002. After cremation in Exmouth on 18 January, his ashes were interred at St Margaret's, Topsham. He was survived by his daughter Penny.

Sources

- M. S. Bartlett, 'Chance and change', *The making of statisticians*, ed. J. Gani (1982), 42–60
- I. Olkin, 'A conversation with Maurice Bartlett', *Statistical Science*, 4 (1989), 151–63
- The Independent* (2 Feb 2002)
- J. Gani, 'Maurice Stevenson Bartlett', *Journal of Applied Probability*, 39 (2002), 664–70
- P. Whittle, *Memoirs FRS*, 50 (2004), 15–33
- WW (2002)
- personal knowledge (2006)
- private information (2006) [Penny Robinson, daughter; J. Gani]
- b. cert.
- m. cert.
- d. cert.

Archives

- RS

Likenesses

- W. Bird, photograph, RS
- photographs, priv. coll.
- self-portrait, wood engraving, priv. coll.

Wealth at Death

£274,125: probate, 6 June 2002, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*