Pitt, Sir Harry Raymond

(1914–2005)

- N. H. Bingham

Pitt, Sir Harry Raymond (1914–2005), mathematician and university administrator, was born on 3 June 1914 at 212 Oldbury Road, West Bromwich, Staffordshire, the only son of Harry Pitt, iron turner, and his wife, (Florence) Harriet, *née* Draper. His father, who had left school at thirteen, later became an engineer in the motor industry; his ancestors were small farmers and craftsmen. Pitt received an excellent education at King Edward VI School, Stourbridge, and went as a state scholar to Peterhouse, Cambridge (1932–5), where he took first-class honours in parts one and two of the mathematics tripos, and a distinction in part three. His undergraduate tutor was J. C. Burkill. He went on to do research at Peterhouse under the supervision of G. H. Hardy, becoming a bye-fellow (1936–9) and spending the year 1937–8 as a Choate memorial fellow at Harvard University.

At Hardy's suggestion Pitt made a deep study of the then new general Tauberian theory of the pre-eminent American mathematician Norbert Wiener. Tauberian theorems (which stem from the work of the Slovak mathematician Alfred Tauber, published in 1897) deal with the passage from the average, or some other smoothed version, of a function or sequence, back to the function or sequence itself. Taking an average typically improves mathematical properties, and so the reverse operation typically makes them worse, but this may not happen under suitable auxiliary conditions, known as Tauberian conditions. Such results had been studied in special cases by Hardy and his collaborator J. E. Littlewood—the term Tauberian theorem is due to Hardy and Littlewood—but it was Wiener's work, and powerful new methods based on the Fourier transform, that changed the whole area by making it possible to work generally. Pitt wrote two papers in collaboration with Wiener during his year at Harvard; he wrote eight papers altogether in 1938, including much of his best work.

Pitt was a lecturer at Aberdeen University from 1939 to 1942, before being seconded to the Air Ministry to work with RAF Coastal Command on the then new area of operational research. His war work concerned the most efficient use of RAF resources, including fuel. On 5 April 1940 he married (Clemency) Catherine Jacoby (*d*. 2004), a 21-year-old secretary, and daughter of Henry Charles Edward Jacoby, engineer. They had four sons.

Pitt was appointed professor of mathematics at Queen's University, Belfast, in 1945, at the age of thirty-one. He moved in 1950 to be professor of pure mathematics at Nottingham University. During this time he continued his work on Tauberian theory, and other areas of mathematical analysis such as Fourier analysis. He worked on the connection between Tauberian theory and number theory, in particular the then newly discovered elementary proof of the prime number theorem (which says that the number of primes up to a large number x is approximately x/log x, where log x is the natural logarithm of x). He summarized his work on Tauberian theory in his book *Tauberian Theorems* (1958). He also developed new interests, in probability theory, statistics, and ergodic theory. At Nottingham he supervised the doctorate of Clive Granger, later a Nobel laureate in econometrics. He also performed a number of senior administrative duties, including those of deputy vice-chancellor (1959–62).

In 1964 Pitt made a career switch from academic mathematics to academic administration, and became vice-chancellor of Reading University, a post he held until his retirement in 1978. During this time Reading University expanded from a small institution in the centre of the town to a much larger one on the parkland campus of Whiteknights. Pitt's time as vice-chancellor included the student disturbances of the 1960s. His strategy for dealing with these was one of masterly inactivity, and forethought: at one time he and his registrar were locked in by protesting students, but escaped by using a spare key.

As a mathematician Pitt is best remembered for a result of his from 1938, Pitt's form of Wiener's Tauberian theorem (still the basis of textbook accounts), and as the author of the first book on Tauberian theorems. As a vice-chancellor he was notable for his leadership of Reading University for fourteen years during a period of expansion, and for his consensual style of leadership. He was a kind and a religious man, and was described as a 'communicator extraordinaire'. He combined great intelligence with personal humility; it was said of him that 'his power was only equalled by his modesty' (private information). He was widely honoured. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1957, and received several honorary doctorates. He was knighted on retirement as vice-chancellor of Reading in 1978. He died on 8 October 2005 at St Mary's Nursing Home, Ednaston, near Brailsford, Derbyshire, of vascular dementia and atrial fibrillation. He was survived by his four sons, his wife, Catherine, having predeceased him.

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