Neville, Eric Harold

(1889–1961)

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Neville, Eric Harold (1889–1961), mathematician and educationist, was born on 1 January 1889 at 2 Creswick Road, Bow, London, the second son of Mynott Neville (1854–1925), analyst, and his wife, Edith, *née* Batt (1861–1949). He was educated at the William Ellis School, where his mathematical abilities were recognized and encouraged by his mathematics teacher, Percy Nunn. He entered Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1907, before graduating as second wrangler two years later and subsequently winning a college fellowship. While at Trinity he became acquainted with other Cambridge fellows, most notably Bertrand Russell and G. H. Hardy. On 15 March 1913, in Sidcup, he married Alice Maud Emily Farnfield (1875–1956), daughter of Samuel Farnfield; they had one son, who died in infancy.

When the First World War began in 1914 Neville did not join the army, despite being eligible for active service. Instead he openly declared his opposition to the conflict and refused to fight—a declaration that probably resulted in the non-renewal of his Trinity fellowship in 1919. On leaving Cambridge he was appointed to the chair of mathematics at University College, Reading, where he helped to further not only the growth of his department, but also the institution's elevation to university status (achieved in 1926).

Neville had a wide variety of mathematical interests, but his principal areas of expertise were geometrical. Greatly influenced by Bertrand Russell's work on the logical foundations of mathematics, he published his *Prolegomena to Analytical Geometry*, a detailed axiomatic development of the subject, in 1922. He later wrote an introductory tract on how to generalize concepts and operations of three-dimensional space to the four-dimensional arena, but his ambition to write a comprehensive treatise on differential geometry was never realized. He also had a long-term interest in elliptic functions, which resulted in his best-known and perhaps most original work: *Jacobian Elliptic Functions* (1944). This volume, like all of Neville's books, while intricate and not easy to read, is expertly crafted and painstakingly thorough. But its appearance came too late to have any real effect on the teaching of the subject at British universities.

It was for his work in mathematical education that Neville was primarily remembered. He was a skilful teacher, being described as 'an inspiring guide (though sometimes so far ahead as to be almost out of sight)' (Langford, 134). Indeed, his sharpness of mind could often leave less able students feeling rather baffled:

Honours students were inspired by the brilliance of his lectures and the immensity of his erudition; and if the pass degree pupils sometimes found

him above their heads, this was never from any failure of his sympathy, but because he could often modestly forget how fast his own mind worked.

Broadbent, Eric Harold Neville, 479

The challenges of teaching mathematics at Reading prompted the beginning of Neville's active involvement in issues concerning mathematical education, and his membership of the chief organization in Britain devoted to mathematical pedagogy, the Mathematical Association: 'In the steady growth of the Association from 1920 onwards, in the widening of its interests, in the spreading of its influence, Neville played a part second to none' (Broadbent, On the teaching committee, 139). His involvement with the association's chief publication, *The Mathematical Gazette*, spanned four decades, via a series of contributions on a wide variety of topics. He also briefly edited the journal in the late 1920s, as well as serving as the association's librarian for over thirty years, from 1923 to 1954, and its president in 1934. The high regard in which he was held by the British pedagogical community was reflected in his election in 1932 to the central committee of the international commission on mathematical instruction, to which he was re-elected in 1936.

Neville was also an active member of several other mathematical and scientific bodies. Elected to membership of the London Mathematical Society in 1913, he served on its council from 1926 to 1931. He was president of the mathematics and physics section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1950, chairing its mathematical tables committee from 1931 to 1947 and later contributing two sets of tables: *Farey Series of Order 1025* (1950) and *Rectangular-polar Conversion Tables* (1956).

Neville published many papers, but the vast majority were short items, on concise and succinctly solved problems. As with all of his writings, they were focused and highly polished, yet, as one obituarist observed with regret, 'so brilliant and versatile a talent could have been harnessed to some major mathematical investigation' (Broadbent, Eric Harold Neville, 482). Indeed, a former student at Reading could 'never understand why his published work of substance was so small in quantity' (Langford, 133).

Neville retired from the University of Reading in 1954, after which he continued to publish papers in the *Mathematical Gazette*. He was working on a sequel to his book on elliptic functions when he died of bronchopneumonia and kidney failure at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Reading, on 21 August 1961. He was cremated at Reading crematorium eight days later.

Sources

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Wealth at Death

£6288 14*s*. 0*d*.: administration, 7 Nov 1961, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

External resources

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