Wright, Sir Edward Maitland

(1906–2005)

- N. H. Bingham

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Wright, Sir Edward Maitland (1906–2005), mathematician, was born on 13 February 1906 at Park Side House, Farnley, near Leeds, the son of Maitland Turner Wright (*d*. 1943), soap manufacturer, and his wife, Kate, *née* Owen (*d*. 1954), music teacher. When he was three his father's business (manufacturing Wright's Washall soap) failed; his parents separated, and he moved south with his mother. She worked at boarding schools, where he was able to study for free, with a reduction in his mother's salary. He worked as a teacher from the early age of fourteen, though he was sacked at the age of sixteen for being too young for his post. He was able to find another post, at Chard grammar school in Somerset, where he taught from 1923 to 1926. Until the age of fourteen he knew no mathematics beyond elementary arithmetic, but on being exposed to algebra fell in love with mathematics, which he taught himself to degree level. It was then possible to study for an external degree from the University of London without attending lectures, which, having a full-time teaching job, he was unable to do. He obtained his first degree in this way. On being told by a colleague that a London degree was only equivalent to scholarship standard at Oxford or Cambridge, he investigated the Oxford and Cambridge scholarships available. He was then twenty, and found that he was too old for all except one scholarship, at Jesus College, Oxford, which was unrestricted in subject or age. He successfully applied for this, and took up his scholarship in 1926 to study mathematics.

Wright's years at Oxford were happy and successful. He achieved firsts in mathematical moderations in 1927 and mathematics in 1929, and won the junior mathematical scholarship in 1928 and a senior studentship in 1929. He was then a research student of G. H. Hardy at Christ Church, Oxford, where he took his DPhil and was a junior research fellow from 1930 to 1933;

during this time he spent a year in Göttingen and a year as a lecturer at King's College, London. He spent 1933–5 at Christ Church as a lecturer. At Oxford he met (Elizabeth) Phyllis Harris (*d*. 1987), a student of English at St Hilda's College, cox of the Oxford women's eight, and daughter of Harry Percy Harris, mining engineer. They married on 15 August 1934, when she was twenty-seven. They had one son, John.

In 1935, at the unusually early age of twenty-nine, Wright became professor of mathematics at Aberdeen University. While at Christ Church he had learned to fly with the university air squadron (though he never learned to drive). His year in Göttingen convinced him that war was coming. This was a belief he shared with his Christ Church colleague F. A. Lindemann, later Lord Cherwell and Churchill's scientific adviser, and Lindemann's pupil R. V. Jones, who became prominent in scientific and technical intelligence. As a result of his connection with Lindemann he was seconded to work as principal scientific officer with the Air Ministry, working in intelligence, from 1943 to 1945, having previously served as a flight lieutenant in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (1941–3). After the war he returned to Aberdeen, where he remained until his retirement in 1976. Having served as vice-principal in 1961–2, he became principal and vice-chancellor of the university, from 1962 until 1976. As principal he oversaw a significant expansion of student numbers and facilities and (despite a reputation for working on mathematical problems during meetings) an effective and respected committee chairman. When offered a post in Oxford he turned it down, preferring to remain in Aberdeen. The Edward Wright Building on Dunbar Street was later named in his honour.

Wright's mathematical papers were principally on number theory (including the theory of partitions, the representation of integers as sums of squares of integers, or generalizations of this such as Waring's problem, and the Erdös-Selberg elementary proof of the prime number theorem), combinatorial theory (including enumeration problems for labelled and unlabelled graphs), and complex analysis. But the greatest impact of his work was through his book with G. H. Hardy, *An Introduction to the Theory of Numbers* (1938), always referred to as *'Hardy and Wright'*. This book was widely praised by number theory specialists for its excellent exposition, very broad

range, and good judgement in the selection of material. Its continuing sales, through five editions (the last in 1979), was testimony to the great use made of it by mathematicians generally, as a textbook and as a work of reference. Wright was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1937, and received various honorary degrees and academic prizes and distinctions. He was knighted in 1977. He lived in retirement in Aberdeen until after his wife's death in 1987, and then in Reading. He died at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Reading, on 2 February 2005, of septicaemia caused by a urinary tract infection. He was survived by his son, John, also a distinguished mathematician.

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