SYDNEY REX TIMS

(born 21 December 1926, died 16 February 1971)

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Rex Tims, Senior Lecturer in Mathematics at King's College, London, was killed in a domestic accident at the age of 44, leaving his friends in the mathematical community with a calamitous sense of loss which it is the writer's unfortunate duty to try to convey to those who had not the good fortune to know him well. All the friends† to whom I wrote for help sounded the same notes. The most brilliant summary of it all is provided, not surprisingly, by the telling and economical prose of his Cambridge supervisor, Professor J. E. Littlewood, who in a dozen brief lines expressed the sense of shock caused by his death, his great personal charm, the considerable mathematical abilities he showed as a research student (" he did excellent work "), his delightful sense of humour (" he had quite a pretty wit ") and his powers as a teacher.

Tims was the eldest of a family of three (one brother, to whom he was always very close, and a sister), attended a State Primary School and Watford Grammar School, and entered Chelsea Polytechnic in September 1944. Here he made a great impact, getting a (then rather rare) First Class General Degree in Mathematics and Physics, followed the next year by another First in Special Mathematics and the year after (during which he was a member of the College Staff) an M.Sc. with Distinction, working under Dr. A. E. Ludlam, the Head of the College's Mathematics Department, with whom he struck up a particularly close and lasting friendship. From Chelsea he went on to Peterhouse, Cambridge with a University of London Sherbrooke Studentship and took his Ph.D., as Professor Littlewood writes, " with a lot to spare ".

After Cambridge he spent his working life at King's College, London except for a year's break (under his old King's colleague Professor Rado) at Reading and a year as a Visiting Professor at Wesleyan University (where the students apparently examine the staff and Rex got alpha grades for all his courses). At King's he played a notable part in College life. For many years he was solely responsible for selecting the mathematical undergraduate intake, a job at which he was fantastically successful. As a teacher he was generally recognised in the College to be in a class by himself and he was an unusually able examiner. His company was always a real pleasure to his colleagues: whether suddenly deploying his own quiet and brilliant, and totally unmalicious, shafts of wit, or just puffing his pipe and blessing us by his presence, he was a joy to be with. His colleagues were all greatly distressed by his death and though (mainly through shyness) he never essayed the modern fashion of easy

† I should like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have taken so much trouble to assist me in this melancholy task, and to regret that I have neither the space nor the ability to represent fairly all that they have written about Rex.

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fraternisation with students and always appeared to them as a slightly remote character, they felt his loss even more than his colleagues did.

Besides his sense of humour and personal charm, his chief characteristics were an essential modesty, impeccable taste and a dazzling sense of style in everything with which he was concerned. Perhaps these are not the best additives to mathematical talent for a creative mathematician (the modesty reacts badly with the other highly desirable qualities). Rex's standards were too high—he could not bear merely to do the useful work which lay well within his powers, and he didn't trust himself to attempt the standards he so much admired. So his output was small, but in compensation he was a first class scholar with discriminating mathematical tastes. He loved mathematics for itself, not for the reputation he might make from it, and his unsurpassed skill as a University teacher derived directly from his sense of style and his joy in communicating his own pleasure to others (he always said that the purpose of a lecture was " to convey enthusiasm "). And this he invariably succeeded in doing not only to future professional mathematicians but also to hundreds of students at King's who were unwillingly coming to compulsory ancillary courses and there discovering his teaching of comparatively routine material to be the most exciting part of their education.

Outside his work his taste and style displayed themselves in many ways. He loved the Arts (though he had strong reservations about Opera which was perhaps too incongruous for his sharp sense of fun and too lush for his refined tastes), the countryside and his lovely vintage motor car (and he was also a marvellous driver of much cruder machines). His modesty made him far shyer than most of his friends could fully appreciate. It was a delight to work with him, as so many of his colleagues, in the Mathematics Department and outside, have emphasized. Our own collaboration on our text-book extended over some 10 years: we agreed immediately and happily on many things, but had great fun in defining, disputing and resolving our differences. Despite a most unpromising start to the printing, it was his sense of style and form which so far retrieved the situation that the publishers (C.U.P.) obtained, for the presentation of the book, their first-ever award at the Leipzig Book Fair.

Their friends were delighted when Rex married Jill White on 29 August, 1967. The first year of their married life was spent in the U.S.A. and, at the time of his death they had only recently acquired, and not yet tamed, the first real house of their own. His widow is left with a small daughter.

Bibliography

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