

## Obituary

### Edwin Kerr

(1926-2012)

Dr Edwin Kerr, who was President of the Mathematical Association for the year 1976-77, died on 12 May 2012. He was born on 1 July 1926 and educated at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, and it was to Northern Ireland that he returned in retirement. But apart from a short period as assistant lecturer following his PhD at Queen's University Belfast, his professional career, which progressed steadily from teaching towards administration, was spent entirely in Britain.

The late 1950s were a time of lively debate about the need for reform of the school mathematics curriculum and the direction which this should take. One strand of this was an awareness that mathematics in school was losing touch with the applications of the subject in industry. The computer was no longer regarded as a mathematical toy, but was destined to have fundamental implications for technology and commerce. So Edwin Kerr's decision to join the Mathematical Association in 1959, soon after his appointment as Head of the Mathematics Department at Salford, was a signal of his intention to take an active part in this debate, and to encourage his colleagues to engage with these issues.

It is significant that the four academic institutions in which he worked – Birmingham College of Technology, Manchester College of Science and Technology, the Royal College of Advanced Technology Salford, and Paisley College of Technology (this last as Principal) – all went on in due course to advance to university status (Aston, UMIST, Salford, the West of Scotland respectively). But until that occurred, although many of the courses offered were of degree standard, these institutions were debarred from awarding their own degrees. In earlier times this situation had been met by using the model of the 'external degree' validated by some existing university, but this was no longer acceptable: the colleges sought a form of administration which allowed greater scope for designing their own curricula and forms of assessment. And in 1965 this need was met by the establishment of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA).

His earlier experience made Edwin Kerr an ideal candidate for the post of Chief Officer of CNAA, to which he was appointed in 1972 and where he remained until his retirement in 1986. And it was the good fortune of the Mathematical Association that, as President, he was available to contribute his experience at CNAA to the construction of its new diploma qualification for primary school teachers.

The Association's original Diploma in Mathematics (Teaching), which aimed to strengthen the very limited subject knowledge of teachers in secondary schools recruited to teach mathematics because of the shortage of adequately qualified staff, was awarded on the basis of conventional examination papers (see [1]). Set up in the early 1960s, it had largely lost its

relevance by the mid-1970s. There was, however, a growing awareness of the need within primary schools for teachers who could give a lead in mathematics, and the Association set up a small committee, with Edwin Kerr in the chair, to examine the possibility of offering a qualification to support such teachers. Out of this emerged the Association's Diploma in Mathematical Education.

It was Edwin Kerr who persuaded the committee to abandon the idea of a centrally prescribed curriculum for the diploma, but to adopt the 'CNA model' whereby each course-providing institution would propose its own syllabus and scheme of assessment within broad general outlines, validated and moderated by a Diploma Board for the Association. It was a model which proved very popular and successful, and it had a widespread effect on mathematics in primary schools in the period leading from that time up to the introduction of the national curriculum.

Edwin Kerr's Presidential Address to the Association in 1977 [2] offered a broad survey of the current state of education and mathematics teaching across the UK, and challenged the Association to consider its priorities in the light of the new initiatives in education taken by Prime Minister James Callaghan and his Secretary of State Shirley Williams (now Baroness). His dominant themes were the supply and qualifications of teachers, and the need for a committed budget for in-service training. There have been few Presidents better able to see these issues in their proper context, or to have made a greater contribution to their resolution.

Edwin Kerr was awarded the CBE in 1986, and in retirement took on consultancy work at Regent's College (where he was founding director of Regent's Business School from 1997 to 2001), the Singapore Institute of Management and other institutions.

He is survived by his wife Gertrude and three children.

### *References*

1. Michael H. Price, *Mathematics for the Multitude*, The Mathematical Association (1994), pp. 200-202.
2. E. Kerr, Some thoughts on the educational system and mathematics teaching, *Math. Gaz.* **61** (October 1977) pp. 157-173.

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