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Editorial

Readers expecting to see Sue Sanders' Presidential Address in this issue of the *Gazette* can be reassured that it will appear in March; the deferment is due to copyright difficulties. One of Sue's themes – which I will reveal without giving too much away – is public awareness of mathematics and mathematicians. Part of this perception, clearly, is the way in which mathematics is treated in TV and the press.

The media have particular problems coping with the concept of mathematically gifted pupils. Whereas sporting, musical or dramatic ability is easily recognised, it is clearly very hard to understand what it is that mathematicians do. Whenever examination results are published, there are always stories about 8 year olds who have passed GCSE level, but, as we know well, this isn't a reliable indicator of genuine potential and is certainly not the best way to nurture genuine talent.

During the International Olympiad in Glasgow this summer, there were reports in the local press before the event and even a short item on Scottish TV news covering the opening ceremony. While the latter did not fall into the trap of presenting the contestants as calculating geniuses, it was obviously rather mystified that young people could actually get a kick out of solving tough mathematics problems. A BBC2 documentary is currently being made on how best to make provision for mathematically able young people. This should appear sometime next summer and will, I am sure, make interesting viewing.

It might be argued that public appreciation of mathematics is irrelevant to encouraging promising pupils, that what is important is to provide facilities to develop their aptitudes and to advertise this in schools. Whilst there is an element of truth in this, it cannot be entirely true. Films such as *A Beautiful Mind* play an ambiguous role in that their protagonist is seen as emotionally incomplete, and they tend to suggest that mathematical genius is paid for by instability and inadequacy. What we need is a positive role model which can do for mathematics what David Attenborough did for natural history. Is this a realistic goal, and how can it be achieved?

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