

## EDINBURGH MATHEMATICAL SOCIETY

### HONORARY MEMBERSHIP ADDRESS

At the meeting in St Andrews on 2 June 1990, Professor Robert A. Rankin of the University of Glasgow was elected to Honorary Membership of the Society.

In presenting him for election, Professor J. M. Howie spoke as follows:

Mr President, it is both a privilege and a pleasure to present Robert Alexander Rankin to you for Honorary Membership of the Edinburgh Mathematical Society.

Robert Rankin was born on 27 October, 1915 in Galloway. His father Oliver Rankin was a minister, who later occupied a chair of Hebrew and Old Testament in Edinburgh. Fettes College was followed by studies at Cambridge and (in the fateful year of 1939) a fellowship at Clare College. Like most of his generation he found that his orderly progress in the academic profession was disrupted by the Second World War, and for five years he worked on rocket research at the Ministry of Supply. In 1951, with the depth and quality of his mathematical work becoming ever better known, he was appointed to a chair in Birmingham. Then in 1954 he returned to his native Scotland to succeed Professor T. M. MacRobert in the chair of mathematics at the University of Glasgow.

His contribution to mathematical and academic life in Scotland has been immense. Rotating chairmanships are a recent fashion, and Robert Rankin carried the burden of the headship of the large Glasgow mathematics department from 1955 until his retirement in 1982. From 1971 to 1978 he bore a far from negligible extra burden while he was Clerk of the Senate of the university.

Yet despite this heavy administrative burden his commitment to mathematics and his mathematical activity remained as strong as ever. His work on modular forms established his international reputation at an early stage in his career, and much of his early work had a long shelf life. In particular, his 1939 paper [*Proc. Cambridge Phil. Soc.* **35** (1939), 351–372] proved to be one of the keys to Deligne's proof [*Inst. Hautes Etudes Sci. Publ. Math.* No. 43 (1974) 273–307] of the Weil conjecture for algebraic varieties over finite fields. An expository article by Katz [*Proc. Symposia Pure Math.* **28**, (1976), 275–305] on the Deligne theorem includes a diagram of the antecedents of the theorem in which the name Rankin appears in exceedingly eminent company.

Serge Lang's *Introduction to Modular Forms* (Springer, 1976) makes approving mention of Rankin as one of the people who kept the subject alive in the lean years following the collapse of the German mathematical school. Rankin's own book *Modular Forms and Functions* (Cambridge, 1977) was reviewed with what appears to be approval

by Swinnerton-Dyer [*Bull. London Math. Soc.* **10** (1978), 233–234], who regarded it as indispensable for any serious worker on modular forms.

Robert Rankin is one of those people who appears to have time for everything. He was a careful and effective administrator, he was an active mathematician who made frequent and deep contributions to the subject over many years, he was a meticulous and conscientious teacher of undergraduates, but his talents went well beyond the limits of his contract of employment. Those of us who used to enjoy our visits to 10, The University knew that the piano, the organ and the harpsichord in that fine drawing room were not just there for decoration, and many young men in his department who were rash enough to accompany their middle-aged professor on a hill-walking day found that the pace was more than they could stand.

His love of Scotland's mountains was echoed by a love for Scotland's ancient language, and he is, so far as I know, the only person in history to have written a mathematical paper in Scottish Gaelic [*Proc. Royal Irish Acad., Sect A* **52** (1948), 87–93]. He was also the only person on the files of *Mathematical Reviews* who had declared a willingness to review papers in that language, and so the review of the paper by Rob Alasdair Mac Fhraing was written by Robert Alexander Rankin.

Massively talented people like Robert Rankin can be a little frightening. I met him first in 1961 when I arrived as a lowly assistant in his department, and though his manner could seem severe on first acquaintance, it was not long before the real warmth shone through, and like many another young member of staff I learned to mix a large amount of respect with an equal amount of affection. Here at the Edinburgh Mathematical Society Robert is among friends, and it is in a spirit of friendship as well as great respect and gratitude that today I invite the Society to add him to the very select company of its Honorary Members.