

William Leonard Edge

Michael Atiyah¹

some personal memories

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I got to know Edge through his attachment to his alma mater of Trinity College Cambridge, where he had been a Research Fellow in his youth. He came down to Cambridge from Edinburgh at every available opportunity and, as a staunch Catholic, he always stayed at St. Edmund's House, a theological establishment.

I went up to Trinity in 1949 and must have met Edge soon afterwards, but Trinity was not our only link. Many Edinburgh University students were inspired by Edge's lectures, and he naturally guided the best of them to Trinity. Many of these including James Mackay (later Lord Chancellor and Lord Mackay of Clashfern) became my friends.

In fact James was best man at my wedding. The bride Lily Brown, had also been a mathematical graduate of Edinburgh and an enthusiastic student of Edge. Of course, in those days, Trinity was not co-ed and Lily went to Girton. It must be admitted that Edge was something of a misogynist and, when Edge strode up the Scottish hills, he only took male students with him. For Edge this was a matter of principle and Lily was never invited. On the other hand, Edge had a kind heart and, perhaps secretly, a soft spot for the ladies. So when he sent his best students south to Trinity he also, through his contacts with the formidable Bertha Jeffreys, arranged for Lily to go to Girton. I therefore have Edge to thank for introducing me to my future wife and our best man.

In 1955 I was asked to deliver one of the courses of lectures at the St. Andrews Colloquium, and I presented a summary of the great new developments in algebraic geometry by Cartan, Serre, Hirzebruch and others. Edge, as my sponsor, had to deliver the vote of thanks, which he did in a barbed way, making it clear that sheaf theory was far from what he considered geometry. He was right but times change and Edge's

✉ Michael Atiyah
atiyah@maths.ed.ac.uk

¹ School of Mathematics, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH9 3FD, Scotland, UK

work on finite geometries is now fashionable again, making his name known to the younger generation. Looking down from above he will be gratified.

Edge had a magnificent voice which thundered across the lecture room, making sure the students did not nod off. But he also sang Schubert Lieder in the remarkably musical department of the time. Edge consciously modelled himself on Felix Klein as a geometer but was equally proud of his singing. He had real charisma, though like many prima donnas (male or female), his vanity was transparent. He gloried in his role.

Lily and I kept in touch with him over the years in Cambridge and finally back in Edinburgh, where he passed his last years in a catholic home for the elderly. We brought him memories of both Edinburgh and Trinity, the institutions which meant so much to him.

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