How I Learned to Love the History of Mathematics

Hardy Grant (York University, posthumous)

Editor's Note: Hardy Grant (1939–2023) was a CSHPM member for more than 30 years. During most of that period, he was officially retired from York University, where he was best known for teaching a humanities course on mathematics in cultural history. However, he was an especially active member: co-editing the Society's Proceedings in 1991; resurrecting its Bulletin newsletter in 1995 after a 27-month hiatus and editing it alone and with Sharon Kunoff for the next four years; serving four terms on the Executive Council; providing the annual Kenneth O. May keynote lecture in 2010; and establishing and co-editing the CSHPM Notes column with me in 2014 after Tom Archibald and Glen Van Brummelen twisted both of our arms. His most important contributions to the history and philosophy of mathematics, though, came from his indefatigable good humor and keen interest in the scholarship of others—perhaps particularly in encouraging early-career academics. For more on Hardy's life and influence, see the November 2023 memorial by Tom Drucker.

Hardy often mentioned that he should write a CSHPM Notes column himself, but he still had not gotten around to it when he died unexpectedly after a brief illness in September 2023. This installment acknowledges his indelible stamp on the 57 pieces that have appeared so far by revisiting a column series he coordinated for the Bulletin in 1999–2000. He described the concept thus in May 1999:

> One night last May [1998], during the Society's annual meeting in Ottawa, the seven members whose names appear below stood on a street corner and fell to swapping personal histories of their involvement with mathematics and/or its history and philosophy—how they learned to love the subject, how it came to be part of their professional lives, and so on. Eventually someone suggested that it would be fun to share these accounts with other members, through the newsletter; hence the snippets of autobiography that follow. There must be many other such tales out there. . . .

Read on for a reprint of the account Hardy penned. I am looking for a historian or philosopher of mathematics, preferably based in Canada, to succeed Hardy. Contact me at the email address above for more information about this collegial and delightful editorial task.

Hardy Grant and a butterfly, ca 2010.

One of Rodney Dangerfield's best jokes—so, okay, call me a lowbrow—is about the guy who's *so* old that in his school days they couldn't teach history: nothing had happened yet. *I'm* so old that at university I couldn't study history of mathematics—the subject's professional and curricular status was then still marginal at best. Not that I ever *wanted* to—the idea never entered my head; which is perhaps the more surprising as I was already established in the lifelong joy and dilemma of squarely straddling Lord Snow's notorious cultural divide. I always loved history; two of my four "desert island" authors (Will Durant and Joseph Needham) have that distinction just because they dared to write history on the Grand Scale. But I always loved mathematics too, and since one has to specialize in *something*, I made that my major, and I never regretted the choice.

I was duly ensconced in a university department (York, in Toronto) before I was obliged to concede once and for all that I have no talent whatever for original research in mathematics. But meanwhile I found that by pure luck I had stumbled onto a scene graced by several people who were (and are) very interested—and in some cases very active—in the subject's history: Israel Kleiner, Trueman MacHenry, Martin Muldoon, Pinayur Rajagopal, Abe Shenitzer. Abe and Israel in particular prodded and supported me in ways not easy to acknowledge, let alone to repay. After a while our little cabal contrived official approval for an undergraduate course (eventually third-year) in York's Humanities Division on the history and cultural influence of mathematics, and when the dust settled I wound up as principal instructor. I scrambled to organize and supplement a lot of desultory reading, realized how much I love the stuff, taught it for 17 years, joined the CSHPM, and now propose to live happily ever after. Moral? None at all that I can see, unless it's the banal observation that if you're going to insist on sitting astride disciplinary boundaries it is very agreeable to find a seat that fits your butt.