

BERTRAM MARTIN WILSON, M.A., D.SC., F.R.S.E.

By U. S. HASLAM-JONES.

Bertram Martin Wilson, born in London on the 14th of November 1896, was the younger son of the Reverend Alfred Henry Wilson. From King Edward's School, Birmingham, he went up to Cambridge in 1916 with an open scholarship at Trinity: in 1919 he took the Tripos, and remained in residence until, in January 1920, he was appointed as Lecturer in Mathematics at the University of Liverpool. Here he stayed for more than thirteen years under three professors, Carey, Burkill and Titchmarsh, and finally, for eighteen months, as Lecturer in charge of the department of Pure Mathematics. In 1933 he succeeded Professor Steggall as Professor of Mathematics at University College, Dundee, and he had occupied the chair barely eighteen months at the time of his death, after a very brief illness, in March 1935.

One is liable to be so obsessed by Wilson's personal attractiveness, by his hospitality and general humanity, as almost to forget the large amount of work which he contrived to do. His early interests in mathematical analysis are shown in some dozen original papers, published between 1919 and 1924, mainly on the theory of numbers and on integral equations and orthogonal functions, but these were only a small part of his total contribution to mathematics. Subsequently, most of his attention was directed to the study of the remarkable Indian mathematician, Srinivasa Ramanujan: he was one of the editors of the *Collected Papers*, published in 1927, and at the time of his death was still occupied, again as joint editor, in the much greater task of annotating Ramanujan's note-books. He was also on the editorial board of the new *Compositio Mathematica*, and contributed many reviews to the *Fortschritte*. The amount of examining which he did cannot be described otherwise than as appalling. The month of July, and part of August were annually given up to an orgy of marking, with very brief intervals for sleep, but there was hardly any season of the year when his room did not contain scripts to be marked for at least one examining board. But in spite of these and other labours, it is probable that his most valuable work was done as a teacher. Wilson was an admirable lecturer. It would be misleading to use the word "inspiring," for that would imply an oratorical fervour which he never possessed: but he did in some way inspire his audience by his slow logical development of his theme.

As he talked, his half-closed eyes and habitual frown suggested that he found lecturing difficult, but there was no confusion of thought, and no half-expressed ideas or half-finished sentences: when he had finished the main points of argument stood out clearly, and even the poorest student could hardly fail to understand.

His slow and considered speech was no affectation, it was entirely in keeping with the rest of his personality. Yet, although he was never impetuous, he could show genuine enthusiasm. In this respect the development of his musical appreciation was typical of him. A few years ago he described himself as completely non-musical: his conversion was rapid and sincere. The rather casual purchase of a gramophone for the expressed purpose of playing exclusively records of Gilbert and Sullivan operas led him to experiment in other forms of music, and eventually his collection of more than a thousand records included composers of almost every century and school. But still he did not lose his reputation as a perfect host, and the non-musical could ask him for music with the certainty that the records he chose would be adapted to their understanding.

His manuscript was as careful as his speech, and as a letter writer he belonged to a past generation. He would write to his friends as a relaxation after a busy day, filling many pages in his large, almost schoolboyish writing, with wise and humorous comment on the world in general and mathematics in particular. On committees he was for the most part silent, but when occasion arose and a principle which he valued was under consideration, he would advance his arguments in detail, and more than once he has, in the modern phrase, found a formula which could satisfy two opposing parties.

In Dundee he had for the first time complete and unfettered control of his department, and, although he held the chair for so short a time, his outstanding qualities had already been recognised. Dr F. Bath (to whom I am indebted for much information concerning this period of his life) writes of him "... as to the eighteen months in Dundee, he had made for himself a very warm place in the affections of staff and students, and had already won confidence and admiration of an unusually high order. He gave his energies freely to many sides of College life, and was fully supported in those outside the lecture room by his wife Margaret Wilson. His death came with a stunning suddenness and brought a tragic loss to the college where he had entered happily upon a life that gave every promise of demonstrating to the full his ability as a mathematician and his sagacity as an administrator."