



Letter to the editors

Another interpretation of Cherry's appointment over Wiener

Graeme Cohen's recent book *Counting Australia In* and the excerpt published in the *Gazette* (Volume 33, No. 1) tell a story of great interest, one that has been accorded a long and undeserved neglect. This is the account of Norbert Wiener's application for the Chair of Mathematics at the University of Melbourne in 1928. It is pleasing that this situation is now rectified and one can only agree with Cohen that the omission of this episode from Selleck's official history of that university was an egregious oversight.

To say all this, however, is not to conclude that Cherry's appointment over Wiener was an incorrect or unfair decision. One might so conclude from the quote from Franklin's testimonial 'Professor Wiener is of the Hebrew race, and he has some very peculiar traits', which, taken at face value, suggests the conclusion that Wiener was overlooked on account of a prevailing anti-Semitism.

However, another interpretation is possible, and, as I will here argue, is more plausible. First take account of what those 'very peculiar traits' actually were. They are described by Hans Freudenthal in his entry on Wiener in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*. Freudenthal devotes an entire (long) paragraph to their description. Some excerpts:

He was a famously bad lecturer ... his papers, and especially his books, remain difficult to read. His style was often chaotic ... He would assume without proof a profound theorem that was seemingly unrelated to the preceding text, and then continue with a proof containing puzzling but irrelevant terms, ... quote [the wrong] chapter of the book ... treat unrelated questions consecutively, ... and [demonstrate] difficulty in separating the relevant mathematics ... even from his personal experiences.

There is no question that even at the time of the applications for the Melbourne chair, Wiener's achievements already overshadowed Cherry's. From Cherry's obituary in the *Journal of the Australian Mathematical Society* (Volume 9, No. 1), we learn that by the end of 1927, Cherry had published 10 papers for a total of just under 200 pages. Wiener was much more prolific. A precise count is somewhat difficult; his *Collected Papers* lists 70 papers published over this period, but this total includes some very slight items and others with little or no mathematical significance; Cohen quotes a figure of 56 published over a slightly longer period; *Poggendorffs Handwörterbuch* (Volumes 5, 6) lists 39 for a total of almost 400 pages. Even on this last figure, Wiener clearly outshone Cherry. Moreover, Wiener's work, even then, included his highly significant contributions to Potential Theory.

However, the mere counting of publications (even of the highest order) is not the only consideration facing a selection committee. In 1928, Melbourne was a very isolated place, and the fitness of a candidate for the social position that a chair implied, the administrative

capacities required, and the quality of the applicant as a teacher were all matters also deserving of consideration.

As Cohen's article clearly demonstrates, these extra-mathematical matters were accorded great weight by the selection committee, and one need not put any sinister or even negative complexion on this emphasis. The subsequent course of events may actually be seen as justification of their choice. Even had Wiener stayed in Melbourne, there is no reason to think that his research career would have been any longer than in fact it was (it effectively ended during the years of World War II, whereas Cherry remained active almost to his death in the mid-1960s).

Finally, let me address the accusation of anti-Semitism. A hasty first reading of the sentence from Franklin's testimonial leaves us with that impression, it is true. However, another reading is possible, and is to my mind more plausible. It is really quite unlikely that Franklin was referring to 'very peculiar traits' as being characteristic of 'the Hebrew race' in general; clearly most Jews *do not* manifest the idiosyncrasies that Wiener displayed. Rather Franklin was most probably talking in specifics of Wiener's own case.

From a recent biography (*Dark Hero of the Information Age*, by Flo Conway & Jim Siegelman, Basic Books, 2005, pp. 23–25), we learn that Wiener was unaware until he was 15 (and a graduate student) that he was in fact Jewish. His mother (*née* Kahn) had so assimilated into the mainstream of American life that she actually denigrated Jews, and (pp. 57 *et seq.*) pushed him into marriage with a like-minded woman (who was later to become an admirer of Adolf Hitler!). Both *Dark Hero* and Gerald Alexanderson's review of it in *Mathematical Intelligencer* (Volume 28, No. 2) see this strange situation and the inner conflict that it entailed as the cause of recurrent severe depressive attacks that underlay the 'very peculiar traits' that observers remarked.

More plausible than the view that Franklin was offering an insulting and unsupportable generalisation, is the interpretation that has him addressing the particular, and highly unusual, case of Wiener himself.

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