

WARNER, MARY WYNNE (1932 - 1998), mathematician

Name: Mary Wynne Warner

Date of birth: 1932

Date of death: 1998

Spouse: Gerald Warner

Child: Sian Warner

Child: Jonathan Warner

Child: Rachel Warner

Parent: Esther Davies (née Jones)

Parent: Sydney Davies

Gender: Female

Occupation: mathematician

Area of activity: Science and Mathematics; Education

Author: Gareth Ffowc Roberts

Mary Warner was born in Carmarthen on 22 June 1932, the elder of the two daughters of Sydney Davies (1901-1978), a mathematics teacher later to become a headteacher, and his wife Esther (née Jones, 1899-1982).

Mary received her primary education in Carmarthen before the family moved to Llandovery where she attended the local grammar school, later moving to live in Holywell and studied for her A levels at Howell's School, Denbigh. She excelled at mathematics and won a scholarship to Somerville College, Oxford. After graduating in 1951 she began to undertake research in mathematics. While at Oxford she met Gerald (Gerry) Warner who studied history at St Peter's College.

Shortly after they married in 1956, Gerry Warner, who was by then working for the Government's Secret Intelligence Service, was appointed to the British Embassy in Beijing. Although Mary looked forward to undertaking her duties as a diplomat's wife she was also eager to continue her work in mathematics and was fortunate that Chang Su-chen, one of her co-researchers in Oxford, had returned to Beijing University and that they were able to meet to discuss their work. This was during the period of China's Great Leap Forward led by Mao Zedong, Chair of the Communist Party, and the clouds of the Cultural Revolution were beginning to threaten. Many academics, including Chang Su-chen, suffered directly as a result. On his last visit to Mary and Gerry's flat it appears that he hid behind the sofa in fear of being caught by the secret police and whispered that he would not be able to visit her again.

In 1960 Gerry Warner was appointed to a diplomatic post in Burma (now Myanmar) and lived in its capital, Rangoon. Mary still wished to pursue her work in mathematics and applied for a post at Rangoon University. However, no wife of a British diplomat had ever been allowed to take a full-time job; women were supposed to be addenda and supports to their husbands. With Gerry's backing, Mary stood her ground and the rules were bent. As a consequence, she was a lecturer at the university when the first shootings of students began as Burma moved towards dictatorship, and was the only Western witness to events that the army tried to conceal.

In 1964 Gerry Warner was moved to the embassy in Warsaw, Poland, where Mary registered to study for a doctorate. By the time she had completed her thesis, Gerry had been transferred to the embassy in Geneva, Switzerland, and Mary returned to Warsaw to receive her doctorate from the Polish Academy of Sciences. As Poland was part of the Soviet Union at that time, graduands were required to sit an examination in Marxist-Leninist theory, but that constraint was sidestepped in her case and Mary became the first diplomatic wife to obtain a doctorate in a foreign country, opening the way for others to follow.

Mary Warner didn't lose her Welsh or her sense of Welsh identity, despite having spent most of her life travelling the world. She was a plain speaker with a sharp sense of humour, but she sought to control her emotions in company to save the professional blushes of her husband. However, on one occasion she went overboard during a reception that they had arranged for diplomat guests during their period in Switzerland. They were at an hotel in Geneva famous for its tartes à la crème. Some of the guests were poking fun at Welsh poetry, much to Mary Warner's annoyance. She was unable to retaliate directly but decided to throw one of the hotel's cream concoctions at her defenceless husband. She had no rationale for doing so, of course, but her action certainly cut the conversation short.

During periods back in London, she took advantage of the opportunity to lecture in mathematics at City, University of London, where she established an MSc course and was promoted to the post of Reader in 1983. Soon Gerry Warner was appointed to the embassy in Malaysia and they both moved to Kuala Lumpur, where Mary developed contacts with local mathematicians and became the only person there to hold teaching posts at both the Malaysian and Chinese universities.

Following Gerry Warner's retirement and the receipt of a knighthood in recognition of his service to MI6, they returned to Britain in 1991, where Mary Warner was awarded a Chair in mathematics at City, and she continued to publish extensively up to her retirement in 1996 and thereafter. She lay great store on lecturing at the university as well as tutoring research students, including many from overseas, and was widely respected and admired.

Mary Warner was also the mother of three children, all born abroad. Although each of the three had successful careers, two of them, Sian and Jonathan, suffered from mental problems and took their own life within a few years of each other. It appears that Mary turned increasingly to her academic work partly in order to put such tragedies to the back of her mind.

Mary Warner's mathematical creativity showed no sign of waning and, contrary to the more normal pattern among mathematicians, she accomplished her best work during her latter years. Her main research focus was, in her words, 'to make precise the property of imprecision' and she made significant contributions to this field, which developed into an important branch of research referred to as 'fuzzy mathematics'. Concepts that have been developed in this field can be applied to solve problems that are inherently imprecise, such as the prediction of faults in nuclear reactors and the prediction of earthquakes.

After retiring from City, her health having broken slightly, she continued to work on her research, attending conferences worldwide. A year or so before her death Mary Warner was working on a paper to be presented at a mathematics conference in Oslo and was also planning to spend six months in Brazil as a visiting professor. But that was not to be and she died peacefully in her sleep on 1 April 1998, aged 65, while visiting friends in Spain. She was buried in the graveyard of the parish church in Kennerton, Gloucestershire, close to her parents and two of her children.

Authors

Gareth Ffowc Roberts

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Sources

I. M. James and A. R. Pears, 'Mary Wynne Warner (1932-1998)', *Bulletin of the London Mathematical Society*, 34 (2002), 745-52

MacTutor History of Mathematics Archive: [Mary Wynne Warner](#)

Personal information from Gerry Warner

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