John Mayberry Remembered

John L. Bell

I remember John with great affection. It was always a keen pleasure to sit down and talk with him into the night about everything under the sun - and far beyond. His largeness of mind embraced literature, music, art, history, philosophy and last but hardly least, mathematics - all were grist to his conversational mill.

I cherish the memory of the week I spent with him in Bristol in 2010 - the last time we passed in each other's company. This was soon after my wife Mimi (whom he knew well) had died and I was searching for consolation and diversion. John provided both, in abundance. Having lost his own wife a few years before, he was familiar with the pain I was trying to assuage and he quickly moved to relieve it with humour, for example by describing, with his characteristic rueful wit, the two of us as " a pair of grumpy old men on displeasure bent".

There was something appealingly old-fashioned about him. His very name, John Penn Mayberry, possessed a certain dignity which seemed of a piece with his gentlemanly American manner and the care he always took in expressing himself. His wit was sharp, occasionally self-deprecating, ever ready to puncture the ridiculous, but never cruel. It was as if Mark Twain, still retaining his birth name Samuel Langhorne Clemens, had somehow stepped into the pages of Henry James.

He was quick to ridicule what he saw as pretension, but generous in his praise of those whose intellectual attainments he admired, even when he disagreed with their conclusions, or, more importantly for him, the assumptions from which those conclusions flowed.

As a mathematical logician, John had little interest in proving flashy theorems. His goal, from which he never swerved, was to identify the basis on which mathematics - and logic - ultimately rests. He had no truck with infinite regresses - he spurned the idea that the world is just "turtles all the way down". He wanted to know where, exactly, the intellectual buck stops. Philosophically, he was the very opposite of a formalist. I was made aware of this time and again in our conversations when he would gently, but persistently, attempt to persuade me that formalism and abstraction (which have a certain appeal for me) could have no content without a properly formulated solid foundation. As a philosopher of mathematics he was, in spirit, Fregean rather than

Hilbertian, even though he was critical of some of the details of Frege's analysis of number.

I venture to think that John would be amused, but not displeased, to be described as a gentleman and a scholar. His passing leaves a hole that can never be filled. I shall miss him greatly.