

**Albert John Coleman**  
**1918 – 2010**

His father was a worker on the Canadian Pacific Railway and with the help of a scholarship John gained admission in 1935 to the University of Toronto. In 1938, the team of John Coleman, Nathan Mendelsohn and Irving Kaplansky won for Toronto the inaugural Putnam exam. Following that he obtained an MSc at Princeton (1940) and a PhD at Toronto in Relativistic Quantum Mechanics under the supervision of J.L. Synge and then Leopold Infeld. He spent 10 years as Assistant and Associate Professor at Toronto, and in 1960 began his 20-year tenure as Head of the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at Queen's University.

*Mathematics.*

From 1973 to 1975 he was the President of the Canadian Mathematical Society, and in 1995 he won its Distinguished Service Award. From 1973-77 he was a member of the Science Council of Canada and in 1975 he was the senior author of the Science Council Report (#37) on the Mathematical Sciences in Canada. Between 1974 and 1982, John was first Chairman and then Treasurer of the Commission on Exchange and Development of the International Mathematical Union (IMU).

When asked whether he was a mathematician or a physicist, John would reply that he was a quantum chemist. He published over 50 papers and gave lectures in Dublin, Princeton, Moscow, Leningrad, Jilin (China) Hong Kong, Shanghai, to name a few cities. He was made an Honorary Professor at the University of Shandong in Jinan, China. In the 1970's and 80's he was a leading player in the scientific exchange program between Canada and the USSR.

*Mathematics Education*

In the early 60's, John was senior editor of the Gage series of school mathematics textbooks which effectively brought the "New Maths" to Canada. One of the recommendations of his Science Council Report led to the establishment in 1977 (made "official" at the next meeting in 1978) of the Canadian Mathematics Education Study Group, the founding members being John, David Wheeler and William Higginson. CMESG is the envy of many from other countries who attend its annual meetings as it brings together university mathematicians and math educators, graduate students and teachers for 3-4 days of vigorous workshops and talks.

As a teacher, much revered by his students, he rambled over rich and beautiful and often chaotic worlds and then focused sharply on his point, leaving us to reconstruct the technical development. In this regard he was a true disciple of his mentor Alfred North Whitehead, whose *Aims of Education* was one of his bibles. [This extraordinary collection of essays, written in the 1920's, is more relevant today than it has ever been.]

*Theology (the other bible).*

In his undergraduate days, John was secretary of the Student Christian Movement at Toronto. From 1945-49 he was University Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation in Geneva, visiting 100 universities in 20 countries and writing a book on *The Task of the Christian in the University*. At that time he met his wife, Marie Jeanne de Haller, a Swiss Theologian, and a remarkable kind, gentle and wise woman, who died in 2006. In 1978 he

was the only Canadian layman to participate in the Lambeth conference in Canterbury. [The big issue that year was the admission of women to the clergy.]

Starting in 1960, and for many years thereafter he ran a seminar at Queen's for 12 students in their second year. The summer before, we had the task of reading a number of books: Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, J B Phillips *Letters to young churches*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and others, and during the year we met every second week at his home to take turns presenting papers on the books. It was an extraordinary and formative experience for all who were fortunate enough to take part.

### *The Man*

John was a remarkable man. His idiosyncratic style, a child-like directness, distanced him from some but won the passionate allegiance of so many others. As a Head, he had a firm and open leadership style. As a colleague and a friend, he was generous with his time, a superb listener, and always interested in the tales that his companion had to tell. He was a devout man, with a strong faith in a just God. He even had a fine run as a politician, almost taking the Kingston federal seat from Flora MacDonald. In these uncertain, morally ambiguous times, I am struck by how much the world now needs folks of his wisdom, clarity, and integrity. In the early morning of September 30th 2010, John died quietly in hospital in Kingston at the age of 92. The week before he had been keen to have a young undergraduate I had told him about come to his bedside so he could talk to him about Whitehead's theory of relativity.

Peter Taylor  
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