

Paul Halmos and the Macquarie Annual Meeting

On 25–29 September 2006, at Macquarie University, the Society held its 50th Annual Meeting. Several days later, on 2 October, Paul R. Halmos, one of the most striking personalities of 20th century mathematics, passed away in California, USA. Halmos had been an invited speaker at a previous Annual Meeting at Macquarie: the Society's 33rd, in the week of 3–7 July 1989. Three present-day Macquarie mathematicians have related their reminiscences of Halmos in connection with that earlier conference.

John Corbett: When Halmos came to Australia for the Macquarie conference in 1989, he also gave a talk in the University of NSW Mathematics Department. I was in the audience, sitting near the back of the room, and before he spoke, Halmos spent a few moments looking at the faces before him. He quietly walked up to me, shook my hand and, remembering my name, asked me how I was. I was flattered but I don't know whether anyone else noticed. It was very kind of him.

Ross Street: The advertised topic of Halmos' talk in the 1989 conference was, 'Fifty years of linear algebra: A personal reminiscence'. I recall that he didn't wish to provide an abstract for his talk; I think this was one of his general principles, and that he felt an abstract would reduce the impact of a good talk.

Halmos came to Australia on at least one other occasion. His passion for taking photos of mathematicians, and for remembering names, became very obvious during these visits. Especially in view of John Corbett's comment above, I feel quite distinguished because Halmos could not remember me from previous occasions when we'd met. Yet Halmos had his own lack-ofrecognition story, which I think went like this. He was in a lift one day, at a US university, when his colleague, André Weil, mistaking him for the lift operator, turned to Halmos to tell him the floor they wanted to go to!

Mike Johnson: I particularly remember Halmos at the 1989 Macquarie conference, because his presence was very nearly responsible for what might have been my greatest claim to fame in mathematics. Early one morning, hurrying into the university to set up for the first session, I was driving quite fast down the entirely clear curbside lane of Herring Road, when, from be-



Paul Halmos

tween cars queued in the centre lane (waiting to turn right to Macquarie Centre), hobbled Halmos. He seemed to move very quickly, on his walking stick, from between the stationary cars; but to walk painfully slowly once he was in my lane. With considerable effort I missed him, very narrowly. He was a lovely bloke, and I'm very glad he lasted another 17 years, and that I avoided being known as the mathematician who killed Halmos!