OBITUARY: David Blackwell

1919–2010

THE LAST OLYMPIAN figure of the statistics pantheon residing in the University of California at Berkeley has fallen. David Blackwell passed away on July 8, 2010, at the age of 91.

David Blackwell was born on April 24, 1919, in Centralia, Illinois, where he went through the public school system. He was awarded the AB (1938), AM (1939), and PhD(1941) degrees, in mathematics, from the University of Illinois; Joseph Doob was his thesis advisor.

After three-year appointments as a Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies (Princeton), and Instructor at Southern University (Baton Rouge, LA) and Clark College (GA), he joined Howard University (Washington DC) in 1944 as an Assistant Professor, to be promoted to Associate Professor in 1946, and Professor in 1947; he served as Head of the Department of Mathematics from 1947 to 1954.

He was Visiting Professor at UC-Berkeley from 1954 to 1955, and stayed on as Professor in the Department of Statistics, newly established by Jerzy Neyman, declining offers from the University of Chicago and Stanford. He served as Professor of Statistics from 1955 to 73, and as Professor of Mathematics and Statistics thereafter. He chaired the Department of Statistics from 1957 to 61, and retired in 1988.

Between 1966 and 1992, David Blackwell was awarded 12 Honorary D.Sc. degrees by ten US universities, one British, and one South African university. He was elected Fellow of all major professional societies (IMS, ASA, American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Mathematical Society), and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society, and the American Philosophical Society. He was elected a member of the National Academy of Sciences in 1965, and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1968.

David Blackwell was the W.W. Rouse Ball Lecturer at Cambridge University, UK; Wald Lecturer of the Institute of Mathematical Statistics; and Faculty Research Lecturer at UC-Berkeley. He was awarded the TIMS/ORSA John Von Neumann Theory Prize, the R.A. Fisher Award by the Committee of Presidents of the Statistical Societies, and the Berkeley Citation.

During his professional tenure, David Blackwell served the UC System in many ways, including the directorship of the UK-Ireland UC Study Center (1973–75) (in the framework of Education Abroad Program), his campus, including an Assistant Deanship of the College of Letters and Science (1964–68), and his department in a multitude of ways. Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that he was the conscience of his department and a colossal figure on campus.

He served his profession as President of the IMS, the International Association for Statistics in Physical Sciences, the Bernoulli Society for Mathematical Statistics and Probability, and as Vice-President of the American Mathematical Society and the International Statistical Institute.

David Blackwell's research consists of ground-breaking work and covers a wide spectrum of subjects in mathematical statistics, probability, measure theory, and game theory. It is represented by more than 90 papers, each of which is a specimen of deceptive simplicity and sparkling clarity, and a joy to read. His book on game theory, *Theory of Games and Statistical Decisions* (1954), co-authored with M.A. Girshick,

David Blackwell at his 90th birthday party at Berkeley

is a classic on this subject matter, and his book on elementary statistics, *Basic Statistics* (1969), is a gem and a breeze of fresh air in the existing curriculum. Between 1955 and 1981, David Blackwell was the advisor of 65 students. In a single year alone, he graduated 7 students!

The hallmark of David Blackwell was elegance and simplicity over mathematical abstraction. He was spoken of with awe in professional circles, and in many ways, he was larger than life. He was a wonderful person, but always retained an air of privacy. He had the ability and gift to take a complicated situation, scientific or personal, and resolve it with remarkable clarity and simplicity. It has been said that when he first arrived at Berkeley, he had difficulty in locating suitable housing to accommodate his large family (David and his wife Ann had 8 children) so he solved the problem by camping temporarily in a park! He was keenly aware of social injustice perpetrated in the world, but also espoused the position that a truly worthy person would eventually be recognized as such, and be accorded appropriate treatment.

David Blackwell will certainly be missed by his many students, colleagues and friends, and will always be affectionately remembered for the great mathematician, superb teacher, and sterling human being he was.

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