

The Bets of G. H. Hardy

*A contribution to our celebration of the 400th Anniversary of the
Savilian Professorships in Geometry and Astronomy*

On 19 January 1920 Godfrey Harold—better known as G. H.—Hardy was admitted as a Fellow of New College, following his election the previous November as Savilian Professor of Geometry. During the next decade the College was privileged to have as a member one of the great names of British mathematics (indeed, at the time of his election the scientific ‘H’s of New College—Haldane, Hardy and Huxley—would have graced any university anywhere at any time).

The candid author must acknowledge we were lucky to get him. If Hardy had not then been unhappy in Cambridge due to the martial spirit of wartime Trinity and in particular its treatment of Bertrand Russell, he may not have come. Oxford was not a powerhouse in mathematics and research was something of a novelty. In its obituary of him, the *New College Record* noted that Hardy arrived somewhat as a missionary to the heathen—a mission in part fulfilled through lectures entitled ‘Mathematics for Philosophers’.¹

Hardy is—of course—famous, and not simply in the world of mathematics. He deserves a full biography—which this is not. This is a note. It will not be about Hardy the discoverer of Ramanujan, and neither will it analyse the collaborative genius that was Hardy-Littlewood. It is not about Hardy the author of *A Mathematician’s Apology* or the Hardy who read the cricket scores with obsessive interest. Nor is it psychobunk about sex, mothers and his various personal quirks. Finally, it is certainly not about Hardy the mathematician, the many theorems he proved and the deep ramifications they have since led to.

Instead, this is a note about *our* Hardy, the Hardy of the Senior Common Room who left such a vivid impression on his contemporaries for his wit and conversational brilliance. His obituary in the *College Record*² recorded him, even in 1948, as ‘one of the almost extinct race of ‘good talkers’’, reporting that ‘not infrequently colleagues waited in Common Room to see what Hardy was going to talk about’. This is the Hardy to whom, according to his Royal Society obituary³, we owe the clause that Fellows with a personal objection to entering the Chapel for the election of a Warden may still send their vote to be counted.⁴ This is the Hardy who the economist Lionel Robbins recalled as the one undoubted genius among the distinguished New College common room of the 1920s.⁵

And yet—what did he say? What were the post-cenal pyrotechnics that led his non-mathematical colleagues to regard him so well? The details of the verbal jousting are lost to history, but some of their culminations are not. Inside the SCR lies the betting book, a rather solid if aging hardback volume. Its precise origins are not known. However, given that the first three bets in it (from 1923) all involve Hardy, it is a fair surmise that he had some role in the appearance of the book within the Common Room, and he features prominently in it for the decade covering his time in Oxford.

What did he bet on? The bets cover a range of topics both serious and frivolous—politics and elections, court cases, prayer books and the prospect of ordinations,⁶ an SCR tennis tournament, and the eternal question of whether the sun will rise tomorrow.

¹ *New College Record*, 1947-48.

² *ibid.*

³ E.C. Titchmarsh, ‘Godfrey Harold Hardy 1877–1947’, *Obituary Notices of Fellows of the Royal Society* 6 (18) (1949), pp. 446–461 <<https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbm.1949.0007>>.

⁴ His great collaborator, Littlewood, was likewise responsible for the clause in the bye-laws of Trinity Cambridge that the Senior Fellow is not charged for after-dinner port in the Combination Room.

⁵ John Buxton and Penry Williams (eds.), *New College, Oxford, 1379-1979* (Oxford: New College, 1979).

⁶ The atheist Hardy maintained a personal and antagonistic relationship with the God he did not believe in.

Rather than attempt a poor summary, I have transcribed all of Hardy's bets below, plus an additional one for which he was the subject of the bet (on whether or not he would help entertain a successful rowing crew at High Table).⁷ Question marks denote uncertainties in the handwriting.

Transcription of Bets from New College SCR Betting Book By or Involving G. H. Hardy

- Feb 6th 1923 'Professor G H Hardy bets Mr S. Casson an even shilling that Mr Henderson will not corroborate the assertion of the Sub-Warden, Mr. Smith, that he (Mr. Smith) once defeated Prof. Hardy at chess' (won by Prof. Hardy)
- Feb 6th 1923 'Mr S. Casson bets Prof. Hardy five shillings worth of French francs at the then exchange that the French exchange with the £ on Friday evening Feb 9th will be 74 – 76 (inclusive) to the £.
- Feb 6th 1923 'The Subwarden bets Prof Hardy his fortune till death to ½ d that the sun will rise tomorrow, 7th Feb 1923.'
- Feb 15th 1923 'Mr Smith bets Mr Henderson 2/6 that Prof. Hardy would not join Mr Henderson in entertaining the First Torpid to dinner (won by Prof. Henderson).'
- March 1st 1923 'Professor Hardy bets Mr Casson an even 2/6 that Dr M. Stopes will not win her action'
- Nov 22nd 1923 'It being agreed that any majority for the Conservative Party over all other parties taken together should have the value of 1d per unit, Mr Smith sold to Mr Salvesen the Conservative majority for 3/-, undertaking to buy it back after the election on the above valuation. Mr Smith also sold to Prof. Hardy and Prof Hardy sold to Mr Radcliff at the same figure. Prof Hardy sold to Mr Salvesen for 2/10 and also for 3/- (doubled Dec 5th, paid)'
- Nov 24th 1923 'Professor Townsend bets Professor Hardy an even 1/- that the Conservative majority over all other parties would number 30 or more'
- Nov 24th 1923 'Professor Townsend bets Professor Hardy 1/- to 2/- that the Conservative majority over all other parties would number 50 or more'
- Nov 24th 1923 'Dr Manning bets Professor Hardy 1/12 his fortune till death to 1d that the sun will rise tomorrow'
- May 15th 1926 'Mr Salvesen bets Prof. Hardy 4/6 to 7/6 that A.H.S will fail in election to the Hebdomadal Council (paid by HKS)'

⁷ The context for this is that Hardy disliked rowing; supporting Oxford in the boat race when at Cambridge and *vice-versa*.

- 4th December 1926 'Prof. Hardy bets Mr Casson 5/- to 2/6 that he will not produce a certificate signed by Mr Cox that Mr Casson identified the [Major??] before the end of Act 3'
- 16th February 1927 'Mr Lightfoot bet Professor Hardy 2/6, and Mr Creed bet Mr Smith 2/6, that the Master of Pembroke College will become a bishop if he survives to the age of 70'
- 29th July 1927 'Mr Lightfoot bet Prof Hardy £1 to 5/- that J. McDougall, late Scholar of this College, will not take Orders within five years from this date'

'Mr Smith bet Prof Hardy 3 guineas to 1 guinea that J. McDougall etc within ten years from this date'
- 6th August 1927 'Prof Hardy bets Mr Woodward 10,000 to 1 in halfpennies that he (Prof Hardy) will not be the next President of Magdalen, and Mr Woodward bets Prof Hardy 1 to 5000 that he (Mr Woodward) will not be the next President of Magdalen.'
- Feb 1927 [sic] 'Professor Hardy bets Mr Creed 2/6 to 1/6 that the New Prayer Book will go phut. Mr Smith, Mr Casson & Mr Woodward to adjudicate if necessary (Paid by Mr Creed)'
- Jan 1928 'Mr Creed bets Professor Hardy an even 2/6 that a revised prayer book will be authorised by law before the end of 1928 (Paid by Mr Creed)'
- May 1928 'Mr Yorke bets Professor Hardy 2/6 to 6d against Mr Casson winning the tennis tournament. (won by Mr Yorke)

Mr Creed bets Professor Hardy 2/- to 6d against Mr Casson. (won by Mr Creed)

Professor Hardy bets Mr Yorke 2/6 to 3d against Mr Yorke.

Professor Hardy bets Mr Yorke an even 2/- against Mr Lightfoot.

Professor Hardy bets Mr Yorke four to three in sixpences that he will not beat Townsend/Henderson in the tournament.'
- May 22nd 1929 'Professor Hardy bets Mr Smith 5/- to 3/- on the next Govt being Labour and 5/- to 2/- against Labour being the largest party (paid)'
- May 22nd 1929 'Professor Hardy bets Mr Cox 3/- to 1/- against the next Prime Minister bring a Liberal'

'Mr Creed bets Professor Hardy 20/- to 1/- that the numbers of the three major parties will not satisfy the relation $x^2 + y^2 = z^2$ (paid)

'Professor Hardy bets Mr Henderson 7/6 to 2/6 that the number of Conservative MPs will be less than 300'(paid)

‘Mr Casson bets Professor Hardy that in the course of 10 minutes bowling at the nets by him (Mr Casson) at him (Prof H) he will hit either the wicket or the body of Prof Hardy’

‘Professor Hardy bets Dr McCallum that Ly(?) will not be elected to Council (an even 1/-)’

7th October 1929 ‘Mr Creed bets Professor Hardy 2/6 to 1/- that Mr Drew will be tried on a charge of murder and be found guilty’⁸

15th February 1930 ‘Mr Cox bets Professor Hardy 10/- to 2/- that Rev. Canon. Cox (“Fred”) will not be the next Bishop of Nyasaland’

Joseph Conlon
Professor of Theoretical Physics
New College, Oxford

⁸ This presumably relates to the murder of a tobacconist Alfred Oliver in Reading in June 1929. The police arrested a travelling American actor Philip Yale Drew seen behaving oddly near the victim’s shop, but no conviction was ever obtained.