



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Michael Sean Mahoney

1939 – 2008

This Memorial Resolution
Prepared by a special committee,
was approved by unanimous rising vote at the meeting
Of the Princeton University Faculty
On November 3, 2008 and ordered spread upon the
records of the Faculty.

Michael Sean Mahoney

June 30, 1939 – July 23, 2008

Michael Sean Mahoney, Professor of History, died in the University Medical Center on Wednesday July 23rd. He had suffered cardiac arrest on Friday the 18th while swimming laps in Dillon Pool and never recovered consciousness.

Mike Mahoney graduated magna cum laude from Harvard College in 1960, having concentrated in the paired fields of History and Science, with emphasis on mathematics. He received a two-year German Foreign Service Fellowship and studied in Munich under the supervision of the eminent historian of mathematics, Kurt Vogel. Thereupon, Mike became a member of Princeton University as a graduate student in the fledgling Program in History of Science, then in its third year. His participation in that program was a signal contribution to its gathering success. In 1965 he was appointed to the faculty as an Instructor, rising through the ranks to a professorship in 1980. A slight elaboration of his email address, mike@princeton.education, may be said to epitomize his manifold service to this University for close on to half a century.

Mike's earliest interest centered on medieval and early modern mathematics. Developed out of his thesis in that area, his most widely read book is [The Mathematical Career of Pierre de Fermat, 1601-1665](#) (1973). A revised edition was published in 1994 on the occasion of Andrew Wiles's proof of Fermat's last theorem, of which Fermat had given the statement but not the proof. Mike also published an annotated translation of Descartes' [Le Monde](#) (1979), and for

a Japanese publisher a 1982 survey of which the English title would be Mathematics in History. A revised and expanded edition appeared last year.

Mike's was a focussing mind better adapted to articles than to books, however. He contributed some sixty-five articles and chapters to collections of various sorts along with numerous book reviews, and gave over a hundred invited lectures and papers at universities and meetings of many sorts. Among them were monographic studies of the mathematical techniques of Descartes, Barrow, and Newton. Mike's was an active, not to say a hyper-active, life of scholarship of the highest order.

As time passed, his interests expanded to history of technology and, finally, to the origin and development of computer science. Software engineering was his prinipal preoccupation. None of this excluded his earlier specialization. He frequently recurred to the place of Christiaan Huygens in the Scientific Revolution, particularly with respect to time-keeping. A favorite topic was an analysis of structural similarities between medieval mathematics and computer science.

His expertise was recognized in the industry itself. He was a member of the Association for Computing Machinery, served on several of its committees, and edited its History Series (ACM Press) from 1987 to 1985. Mike also served from time to time as a member of the technical staff and a consultant on software development at Bell Labs. He was never an uncritical observer,

