

Michael Francis Atiyah
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ForMem of the Norwegian Academy of Arts and Sciences
22 April 1929 – 11 January 2019

Those elected to the office of President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) are by any standards, outstanding and distinguished individuals. But even by these elevated standards, Sir Michael Atiyah was truly exceptional.

He was the first to be President of the RSE, Scotland's National Academy, after having been President of the Royal Society in London – the world-renowned science academy. Only Lord Kelvin has also been President of both Royal Societies.

Sir Michael became an Honorary Fellow of the RSE in 1985; its highest category of Fellowship, given in recognition of his exceptional brilliance in mathematics. He was awarded the Fields Medal in 1966.

In 1990 he concurrently became President of the Royal Society (until 1995), Master of Trinity College Cambridge, and Director of the Isaac Newton Institute – a feat only possible for someone of his extraordinary energy, drive and retentive memory.

In 1992 Her Majesty awarded him the Order of Merit and in 2004 he received the Abel Prize from the King of Norway; an award he shared with Isidore Singer 'for their discovery and proof of the [Atiyah-Singer] index theorem, bringing together topology, geometry and analysis, and their outstanding role in building new bridges between mathematics and theoretical physics'.

Although Sir Michael had enjoyed a glittering career in Oxford, Princeton and Cambridge, and had received many international honours, he decided to retire to Scotland in 1997. Being very proud of his Scottish descent on his mother's side and having a Scottish wife (Lily Brown), he was very much at home in Scotland.

Not for him, however, a quiet retirement, resting on his laurels. He still had plenty of energy and became an active Fellow of the RSE. It was therefore with universal acclaim from the RSE Fellowship that Sir Michael was elected President in October 2005. His was a far from titular Presidency and he relished the role with characteristic energy and vision.

One of his key objectives was to increase awareness of the genius of the Edinburgh-born mathematical physicist and 19th century Fellow of the RSE, James Clerk Maxwell. This took various forms.

The first was to re-name the large Committee room on the ground floor of the RSE's George Street building as the James Clerk Maxwell room. It was there under the portrait of Maxwell that Sir Michael signed an Agreement with the President of the IEEE (Institution of Electronic and Electrical Engineers) to create a joint Maxwell Prize. This prize, funded by Wolfson Microelectronics plc has since been awarded to several very eminent scientists and engineers, with the Medals being presented by Prince Philip on HRH's regular visits to the RSE.

The most obvious evidence of Sir Michael's determined efforts at improving public recognition of James Clerk Maxwell was the creation and erection of the fine statue of Maxwell in George Street by Alexander Stoddart. The process of securing planning permission from the City of Edinburgh Council to erect the statue, securing the site in George Street, designing and commissioning the statue, raising the money to pay for it, and then having it installed, was a complex and labyrinthine project. Only someone of Sir Michael's determination, drive and ingenuity could have brought this project to a successful conclusion. The statue was unveiled in November 2008, shortly after Sir Michael had completed his 3-year term as President and handed over to Lord Wilson of Tillyorn KT. The unveiling ceremony was the highlight of an international commemorative conference about

Maxwell and his legacy, and the proceedings were published by the RSE. The Maxwell statue is owned by the RSE which maintains it.

The other major achievement of Sir Michael's Presidency was signing several Memoranda of Understanding (MoU's) with major overseas national academies. Having been President of the Royal Society and a foreign or honorary member of many academies, he fully appreciated the role they can play in fostering international research and allowing bright young researchers to work with the ablest minds in other countries.

The MoU with the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NNSFC) in 2007 complemented that signed earlier with the Chinese Academy of Sciences and provided funding for an extensive series of joint projects between Chinese and Scottish researchers. A partnership that continues to this day.

MoUs were also agreed and signed with the Indian National Science Academy, the Pakistan Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Sciences Malaysia, where the esteem of having Sir Michael as President greatly facilitated creating these relationships and ensured that the MoUs became vehicles for action.

The RSE commissioned a pleasing portrait by Juliet Wood of Sir Michael. This was unveiled by his life-long friend and colleague, Lord Mackay of Clashfern KT and it hangs in the RSE's Kelvin Room.

When Sir Michael celebrated his 80th birthday in April 2009, the RSE played an important part, and hosted a unique gathering of the many outstanding people who came to pay tribute to his genius and friendship.

In all these various ways, Sir Michael greatly raised local as well as international awareness of the RSE and that legacy continues.

Sir Michael is survived by his sons David and Robin.

William Duncan
Former Chief Executive (1985 – 2017)

Michael Francis Atiyah. BA, PhD, DSc(Cantab), HonDSc(various). Kt, OM, Grand Officer of the Legion d'Honneur. HonFFA, HonFMedSci, HonFREng, FRS, PPRS, ForMem of the Norwegian Academy of Arts and Sciences. Born 22 April 1929. Elected FRSE 1985. Died 11 January 2019