EDWARD BURR VAN VLECK—IN MEMORIAM

The death of Edward Burr Van Vleck on June 2, 1943, at almost eighty years of age, in Madison, Wisconsin, will bring regret to a wide circle of friends and to American mathematicians generally. His creative mathematical work, his important role in the development of American mathematics since 1890, and his qualities of personality were such as to make all feel that something of inestimable and characteristic value has departed and yet remains in treasured remembrance.

Van Vleck was born in Middletown, Connecticut, on June 7, 1863, of Knickerbocker stock, for the first Van Vleeck came from Amsterdam, Holland, to New Amsterdam (New York) in 1658. His father was a distinguished American mathematical astronomer, Professor John Monroe Van Vleck, in whose memory has been erected the Van Vleck Observatory at Wesleyan University, given by a brother. The scientific tradition, thus doubly established in the Van Vleck family, has been notably continued to a third generation by his son, Professor John Hasbrouck Van Vleck, now Professor of Mathematical Physics in Harvard University.

The general account of Edward Burr Van Vleck's life is simple. As a boy, college student, and instructor, he developed in the typical New England environment of Middletown, living at home with his parents and three sisters (one of whom survives him) until about twenty-five years of age, obtaining an A.B. degree from Wesleyan University at twenty-one years of age and an A.M. degree three years later. Then he spent two years as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, where he veered from the field of physics to that of mathematics. After this came three further years at the University of Göttingen, Germany, where he was inspired by the great mathematician Felix Klein. He obtained his Ph.D. degree in 1893 at Göttingen at about thirty years of age. Thus he entered upon his mathematical research work somewhat later than usual, a fact which he always felt to be regrettable.

His first college post was that of instructor for two years at the University of Wisconsin, after which he taught for ten years at his alma mater, Wesleyan University, becoming associate and full professor there. In 1906 he went to the University of Wisconsin as Chairman of the Department of Mathematics, and, except for a half-year (1919–20) when he was visiting lecturer in the Department of Mathematics at Harvard University, and for various periods of travel in