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LGBTQ rights

Alan Turing "Pardoned" by Queen of England

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV468 - January 2014 -

Publication date: Tuesday 21 January 2014

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On Christmas Eve the Queen of England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the Commonwealth deigned to pardon one of the twentieth century's most important mathematicians of the crime of homosexuality.

In 1952 Alan Turing was tried and convicted of engaging in sex with other men. He was then presented with the choice of prison or chemical castration. He chose the latter, estrogen treatments that caused him to grow breasts, made him impotent, and sent him into depression. He was fired from his job with the British government. Washington barred him from entering the United States, which he had often visited to work with mathematicians in Bell Labs.

In 1954 he ate an apple laced with cyanide, which was ruled a suicide. He was 41 years old.

In 1936 Turing developed a model of the "universal computing machine," a concept which lies behind all computers. Other subsequent mathematical models of computers have been found to be equivalent to what has become known as the "Turing machine." Besides this accomplishment, Turing broke the German enigma code in the Second World War, and proved two important mathematical theorems, among other important work.

The law under which Turing was convicted was repealed in 1967. But in the years since, attempts to have him pardoned were repeatedly rebuffed. The most recent was last year, 50 years after his conviction, when Parliament voted down a motion to pardon him. The reasoning of the majority of this most august body was that since the law was the law in 1952, and Turing had knowingly violated it, he was a lawbreaker and lawbreakers cannot be pardoned. This decision provoked an immediate response, when 10,000 signed a petition that Turing be put on the new 10-pound note.

There was international outrage in addition. All this led to the Queen's pardon this year. The wording of the pardon itself is disgusting: "Now Know Ye: that We, in consideration of circumstances humbly represented unto Us, are Graciously pleased to extend Our Grace and Mercy unto the said Alan Mathison Turing and to grant him Our Free Pardon posthumously in respect of said convictions."

The "We" and "Us" and "Our" refer to the Queen's double personhood, as both the physical person Elizabeth II and as the embodiment of the "body politic," which is immutable and "utterly void of Infancy and Old Age." It's something like the Pope's "We," which refers to him and God.

But Turing does not need forgiving because he did nothing wrong. If any entity requires being extended Grace and Mercy it is the UK government for its crime against Turing, which arguably directly led to his death.

Turing was pardoned because of his fame and accomplishments. But some 75,000 men were convicted under the same law as Turing, of whom 26,000 are still alive. Turing's pardon should be extended to the 75,000, and would improve the lives of the 26,000 today.

A final thought — those reading this are doing so on a "Turing machine."

January 2, 2014