

## **The illogical death of a brilliant logician: George Boole**

by S. Parthasarathy - Sunday, March 13, 2016

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This story is about George Boole, who made several fundamental contributions to mathematics. His contributions have applications in computer programming, electrical engineering, satellite pictures, telephone circuits and even [Einstein's theory of relativity](#). His most famous contribution is "Boolean algebra", which forms the basis of symbolic logic and all [Computers](#) of today.

George Boole was born in Lincoln, Lincolnshire, England on November 2, 1815. He died in Ballintemple, County Cork, Ireland December 8, 1864. The rest of this article concerns his incredible death.

In 1855, George Boole married Mary Everest (daughter of George Everest, for whom the mountain is named). They had five daughters. Alicia Boole Stott (1860 to 1940) became an expert in four-dimensional geometry. Ethel Lilian (1864 to 1960) was the author of a number of works including *The Gadfly*. She was married to Polish revolutionary Wilfrid Michael Voynich. Lucy Everest (1862 to 1905) was a talented chemist and became the first woman Fellow of the Institute of Chemistry. Mary Ellen married mathematician Charles Hinton and Margaret (1858 to 1935) was the mother of mathematician G. I. Taylor.

Mary Everest had, however, at least one fatal flaw. Mary's father had been a devoted disciple of Samuel Hahnemann. She spent a large part of her childhood, living in Hahnemann's house in France, where she too became an adherent of his medical philosophy.

In late November 1864, Boole walked, in heavy rain, from his home at Lichfield Cottage in Ballintemple to the university, a distance of three miles, and lectured wearing his wet clothes. He soon became ill, developing a severe cold and high fever. As his wife believed that remedies should resemble their cause (as is proposed in homeopathy), she put her husband to bed and poured buckets of cold water over him – the wet having brought on his illness.

Boole's condition worsened, and on 8 December 1864, he died of fever-induced pleural effusion.

This story is not based on hearsay or a popular myth, but the written testimony of one of their daughters who never forgave her mother for having, in her opinion, killed her father.

The next time somebody tells you that homeopathy is harmless, you can tell them that it killed one of the greatest mathematical minds of the nineteenth century, on whose algebraic logic both the software and the hardware of your computer (and many applications which run on them) function.

*[The author is a teacher of discrete mathematics. He shares his birthday with George Boole]*

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