



John Von Neumann

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

Anecdotes about John von Neumann have been circulating for a long time in the flood of memoirs, biographies, and histories devoted to the creation of the atomic bomb, the development of the computer, and other key episodes in the shaping of the world as it is today. Surprisingly, however, not until now has there been a biography of von Neumann himself.

Born in Hungary in 1903 (the distinctive culture of pre-World War I Budapest, the milieu that nurtured von Neumann's genius, is vividly evoked here), von Neumann was publishing major papers in mathematics and mathematical physics while still in his early twenties. In 1930, after a stint in Germany during which he participated in the first flowering of quantum mechanics, von Neumann emigrated to the United States, which remained his home until his premature death from cancer in 1956.

Norman Macrae, who served as editor of *THE ECONOMIST* for many years and is the author of several previous books, including a prescient study of Japan's economy, tells von Neumann's story in a fluid, casual style. Von Neumann is "Johnny" in this account, which resembles the after-dinner conversation of a gifted raconteur. Macrae is often slapdash ("Much earlier," we read, "Johnny had been a young mathematics prodigy"—as opposed to an old prodigy?), but he is an utterly unpretentious guide who commands on a great fund of worldly experience.

This project was started by another writer, Steve White, who was commissioned by the Sloan Foundation to collaborate with Stanislaw Ulam on a biography of von Neumann. Much of the material in the first three chapters, Macrae acknowledges, is drawn from White's first drafts. Loaded with anecdotes and written explicitly for non-mathematical readers, this is a lively and engaging biography. The text is supplemented by skimpy source notes, a bibliography, and an index; the absence of photographs is a disappointment.

Copyright Notice

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:
<http://www.enotes.com/john-von-neumann-salem>