

# Confused Distinctions: The Secret History of the pre-1960 Fields Medal

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007 Kemeny Hall, 3:30PM  
Tea 3:30PM 300 Kemeny Hall

## Abstract

First presented in 1936, the Fields Medal quickly became one of mathematicians' most prestigious, famous, and in some cases notorious prizes. Because its deliberations are confidential, we know very little about the early Fields Medals: how winners were selected, who else was considered, what values and priorities were debated—all these have remained locked in hidden correspondence. Until now.

My talk will analyze newly discovered letters from the 1950 and 1958 Fields Medal committees, which I claim demand a significant change to our understanding of the pre-1960 medals. I will show, in particular, that the award was not considered a prize for the very best mathematicians, or even for the very best young mathematicians. Debates from those years also shed new light on how the age limit of 40 came about, and what consequences this had for the Medal and for the mathematics profession.

This talk should be accessible to undergraduates.