CORRADO SEGRE

BY J. L. COOLIDGE

There is a pronounced rise and fall in the tide of mathematical interest in different countries and at different times. This is well shown in the case of geometry. In Great Britain and Ireland, in the Victorian era, Hamilton and Clifford, Salmon and Casey, Cayley and Sylvester, constituted a veritable English-Irish geometric school. With the deaths of these men, and the decline in the fashion for algebraic invariants, all of this efflorescence seemed to wither away, till the University of Oxford appointed to the Savillian professorship of geometry a man who had attained high distinction in the analytical theory of numbers. In France, the name of Chasles exercised, at one time, a fascination which we perhaps do not quite understand today. Darboux, with his masterly *Théorie Générale des Surfaces*, raised to himself a monument more enduring than bronze, but no geometric school arose therefrom, and the center of gravity of mathematical interest in France today is certainly not in the field of geometry. In Germany, the fluctuation has been distinctly less. In Italy, the interest in geometry has produced notable results. The classical differential geometry owes an immense debt to Beltrami and Bianchi; the Riemannian geometers take as their starting point the absolute calculus of Ricci and Levi-Civita; as for the modern birational geometry, that is almost a monopoly of Italian mathematicians and a few others like Macaulay and Snyder, who have been strongly influenced by Italian thought.

What is the reason for this state of affairs? It would be equally wrong to ascribe it entirely to chance or to seek a recondite explanation in the psychology of peoples. The real ground is to be found in the presence or absence of great teachers of geometry. Salmon was a great teacher indeed, but Dublin was not a good center for distributing the pure milk of the word. Darboux was a marvellous lecturer, but he lacked the personal qualities necessary to inspire youth. It is of Jules Tannery, not of Darboux, that the French mathematicians of today say: "C'était notre père à nous tous." In Germany, on the other hand, Klein's extraordinary inspiration was felt quite as much in geometry as elsewhere; Reye created an enthusiasm for pure projective geometry that went almost to excess; the present geometric activity in Hamburg and Bonn is directly traceable to the influence of Study. The geometric "risorgimento" in Italy is the result of the efforts of certain great teachers such as Cremona, Battaglini, D'Ovidio, and the subject of the present sketch.

Corrado Segre was born in Saluzzo, August 20, 1863*, and received his laureate at Turin when less than twenty years of age. He never left

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* In preparing the present account, I have consulted, in addition to Segre's own writings, Castelnuovo, Rendiconti dei Lincei, (5a), vol. 33[2]