

Karl Pearson, M.A., LL.B., LL.D., F.R.S.

KARL PEARSON was born in 1857, and died on April 27, 1936, almost exactly two years after the dinner at which his past students, colleagues, and friends gathered to honour him after his retirement, where he spoke in his reply of the "short road I have still to travel." It has been shorter than we expected and hoped. But we must be grateful for the forty-nine years of professorial activity which preceded, years all spent at University College in Gower Street.

The son of a K.C. of a Yorkshire family, Karl Pearson was a boy at University College School, entered King's College, Cambridge, in 1875, and was in due course third Wrangler. But it was almost by chance that he remained a mathematician, and he was always throughout his life straying into other fields. In the year in which he took his M.A. he published anonymously a Passion Play in verse, and five years later a study of the Veronica portraits of Christ. He entered the Inner Temple, and intended to become a lawyer like his father, but, as he said in his reply on the occasion referred to above, "varied legal studies by lecturing on Heat at Barnes, on Martin Luther at Hampstead, and on Lassalle and Marx at revolutionary clubs round Soho." After a temporary post at King's College he became, almost despite himself, Goldschmid Professor of Applied Mathematics and Mechanics at University College. His early work there was mainly on engineering and on the theory of elasticity and similar topics. Right up to 1911 he continued this side of his activity, and returned to it as war work in 1914-18. But through Francis Galton he had become interested in the idea that sound mathematics could be applied to natural phenomena not only under the category of causation, but also under the broader category of correlation, and had in 1893 contributed his first statistical paper to the Royal Society, of which he was elected a Fellow in 1896. Whatever his other distinctions, he will be most widely known to posterity as the inspirer and largely the creator of a body of statistical theory concerning frequency curves, correlation, goodness of fit, etc., most of which has appeared in *Biometrika*, begun in 1901 after the Royal Society had "resolved that mathematics and biology should not be mixed," as he himself phrased it. In 1911 the will of Francis Galton made possible the endowment of the Galton Professorship of Eugenics, which he held until his retirement in 1933. Throughout almost the whole of Pearson's work there runs a vein of

polemic, arising from intense sincerity and earnestness. "Questions of the Day and of the Fray" might almost have been the title, not of some pamphlets, but of all his writings. It is hard to say whether science has gained or lost by this trait in him, which his opponents respected, and even his colleagues recognised without difficulty: but without it "K. P." would not have been the man he was. One other personal trait must be mentioned—no one was ever readier than he to do justice to a collaborator, or to help an unknown contributor to the province of research of which he was the pioneer and the master.

He was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Society in 1934.

See also *Obituary Notices of Fellows of the Royal Society*, vol. ii, No. 5, 1936.

G. H. T.