

The strange case of Paul Appell's last memoir on Monge's problem: "sur les déblais et remblais"

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Abstract

We analyze a case of plagiarism that appears in a work published in 1928 by Paul Appell (1855–1930) in the collection *Mémorial des sciences mathématiques*. Appell's memoir entitled *Le problème géométrique des déblais et remblais* contains a verbatim copy of several pages from a memoir published in 1886 by Albert de Saint-Germain (1839–1914). By tracing back Appell's last years, we have found historical evidences that might cast a shadow of doubt on Appell's full responsibility by the plagiarism that appeared under his name.

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"It means that I can make neither head nor tail of it. So far as I can see it is just as tangled a business as ever I handled, and yet at first it seemed so simple that one couldn't go wrong. There's no motive, Mr. Holmes. That's what bothers me – I can't put my hand on a motive. Here's a man dead – there's no denying that – but, so far as I can see, no reason on earth why anyone should wish him harm. Holmes lit his cigar and leaned back in his chair. "Let us hear about it," said he."¹

1. Introduction

Paul Appell (1855–1930) was one of the most important French scientists from the end of 19th century to the first quarter of the 20th century (see [Leloup, 2009; Gispert, 1991; Gispert and Leloup, 2009]). Together

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¹ The adventure of the golden pince-nez, in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle, 1904.

with his friend Henri Poincaré (1854–1912) and Emile Picard (1856–1941), Paul Appell was a member of the brilliant trio of French mathematicians that blossomed at the end of the 19th century. Besides being a great mathematician, Appell played a decisive role in the creation and consolidation of many social and scientific societies and institutions. In November 1918, Paul Appell became president of the *Association française pour la Société des Nations*² [Guieu, 2006; Renoliet, 1999]. In 1914, he founded the *Comité du Secours National*,³ which helped the most needy sections of the population, the elderly, women and children, without discrimination as to religious beliefs or political opinions. He was also active in important events in French history such as the Dreyfus affair,⁴ in the dispute between France and Germany for Alsace⁵ and World War I.⁶ As an administrator, he was president of the French Mathematical Society (in 1885 and 1923), dean of the Faculty of Sciences of Paris from 1903 to 1920, president of the French Academy of Sciences and of the *Institut de France* in 1914, and Rector of the Academy of Paris from 1920 to 1925. To put it briefly, Paul Appell can be considered as an example to be followed as a scientist and as a citizen.

However, in 2012, the French mathematician Etienne Ghys [Ghys, 2012], while revisiting the classic “*Mémoire sur la théorie des déblais et de remblais*”, written by Gaspard Monge (1746–1818) in 1781 [Monge, 1781], noticed that a memoir by Appell in 1928 [Appell, 1928] on the same subject contained entire pages that were copied word for word from a work by Albert de Saint-Germain [Saint-Germain (de), 1886] published in 1886. In fact, Appell himself had written in 1884 a long memoir on the same subject that was also published in 1887 [Appell, 1887]. Both memoirs were candidates for the so called Bordin Prize,⁷ offered by the French Academy of Sciences.

Unnoticed for more than eighty years, the unquestionable plagiarism discovered by Ghys contrasts with Appell’s attitude towards science along his whole life and makes this an intriguing case.

It is then natural to ask: why did Appell do such a thing? In our opinion, it is not easy to find a motive. For, in the first place, the mathematical content that was copied from Saint-Germain’s memoir can hardly be considered fundamental for Appell’s 1928 memoir. If Appell had chosen to reproduce parts of his own 1887 memoir instead of copying Saint-Germain, we think that this hypothetical memoir would probably not be much better nor worse than the actual one. Secondly, it seems that there was no money nor fame involved and at the time Appell was a prominent figure in the French academic circles. In other words, it looks as if he had nothing to win and a lot to lose.

On the other hand, unpredictable behavior is not uncommon among human beings and there might not be a reasonable rational explanation for this feature of Appell’s 1928 memoir. Considering that the default attitude in cases of plagiarism is to blame the author for the works that were published under his name, we fear that a superficial analysis of this case would certainly change future biographical accounts of Paul Appell.

But maybe the story around this 1928 memoir is not as simple as it looks, and it deserves a more detailed analysis. In the present work we have gathered some historical evidences from Appell’s last years that we regard as essential to understand this unusual case of plagiarism. And even though our historical search did not enable us to fully explain what really happened, we believe it is important to be aware of all

² The League of Nations.

³ Starting from an idea of the banker Albert Kahn (1860–1940), see <http://albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.net/english/>.

⁴ In 1898, Paul Appell signed the Dreyfusard *Manifeste des Intellectuels*. Moreover, Henri Poincaré (1854–1912), together with Paul Appell and Gaston Darboux (1842–1917), wrote in 1904 a report on the analysis that claimed that the *bordereau* (detailed memorandum) was written by Alfred Dreyfus. Their report shows that the reasoning used against Dreyfus was flawed [Rollet, 1998; Rollet, 2013].

⁵ His half-brother Charles was harshly sentenced by the German authorities who occupied Alsace [Appell, 1923].

⁶ Paul Appell was the first president of the *Commission Supérieure des Inventions* [Galvez-Behar, 2005].

⁷ Charles-Laurent Bordin was a notaire that died in 1835 and in his will he donated the funds that would finance the prize that from then on bore his name. Up to 1902 the candidates were anonymous as Bordin desired [Gauja, 1917].

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