Memorial to John Vernon Harrison
1892-1972

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An article on August 3, 1972, in the London Times began in the following manner: “Dr. John Vernon Harrison, who died on Monday at the age of 80, was a field geologist dedicated to reconnaissance surveys in inaccessible regions. He was one of the most experienced exponents of this art of his generation.” In this day and age with the great specialization on the part of geologists and the increased emphasis on and comfort of the laboratory, J. V. (as he was known to his students and friends) was truly an exceptional person. He represented the very best of his generation of geologists.

Born on March 16, 1892, at Bloemfontein, South Africa, he was educated at George Watson’s College, Edinburgh; Allen Glen’s School, Glasgow; and at Glasgow University. At the latter institution J. V. came under the spell of the great geological explorer, J. W. Gregory, then professor of geology there, whose early influence set the pattern for Harrison’s own geological work for his whole lifetime. After research in the Glasgow area and chemical work during the first part of World War I, he was commissioned in the Royal Engineers and sent to the Middle East on a water assignment. In late 1918 he was seconded to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and shortly afterward, upon demobilization, joined its geological staff.

Until early 1920 he worked in southwest Persia. Between 1920 and 1928 he worked in Honduras, Mexico, British North Borneo, Peru, Jamaica, Venezuela, Trinidad, and Colombia and then returned to Persia, where over a period of ten years he was responsible for the greater part of the geological surveys of the Zagros Mountains and the Persian Makran. It was during this second long term of duty in Persia that J. V. saw his greatest geological achievements. He emerged as one of the finest structural geologists of his time. As testified by those who worked with him in the field, he was a meticulous observer, who was at the same time blessed with a vivid geological imagination. This enabled him to clearly visualize the large geological structures with which he was confronted and the processes—sometimes novel—which had given rise to them.

J. V.’s work with his friend and colleague, N. L. Falcon, on the role of gravitational force in mountain building will long retain the status of a classic contribution to geological science. J. V.’s great strength as a geologist lay in his ability to distinguish in the field between the basic essential evidence needed to elucidate the broad geological structure and the less important detail obscuring the picture. He was always at his happiest, one felt, in broad geological reconnaissance carried out by choice under the
most arduous and Spartan conditions. One of his former colleagues in Persia, P. T. Cox, has told me that hard work was probably J. V.’s prime passion, and that it was defined as something involving evident physical discomfort. Office and laboratory work were merely regarded as soft options compared with the desirable rigours of field work in difficult and uncomfortable circumstances; the number of mules who died in J. V.’s service became a byword among the oil company’s staff.

In 1938 when his company had no reconnaissance work for him, he resigned and joined the Geological Department of Oxford University as a lecturer, subsequently becoming Reader in Structural Geology. In the small team of teachers that composed the staff at that time, J. V. proved a stimulating member to his students, who were all devoted to him. He insisted that there was no substitute for a pupil really knowing his stuff—being able to recognize (without constant recourse to textbooks) the common minerals, rocks, and fossils upon which depends accurate interpretation of geological structures in the field. Once at Oxford, he began an ambitious project to map a broad zone across the Andes of Peru. For this project he spent periods of time in field mapping during 1939, 1946, 1947, 1951, 1953, and 1954. Some of his more fortunate pupils were selected from time to time to accompany J. V. on his summer vacation journeys to the Peruvian Andes, where they gained unforgettable experience—geological and nongeological—in the course of his reconnaissance mapping. His fantastic ability to walk at a rapid pace through most of a day in the high Andes gave him the reputation among the natives as the “English llama.” He finished this project in 1957 and was made a Grand Officer of the Order al Mérito por Servicios Distinguidos by the Peruvian government.

By the end of J. V.’s active geological life, the science had seen great and rapid developments in many new directions. He was always very concerned about the specialization trend dominating the young student and the danger of losing sight of the solid core of the science. The same attitudes which made him perhaps the finest reconnaissance geologist of his time instinctively led him to incorporate into his own thinking and teaching only those broader geological principles emerging from the newer and more specialized researches. He put aside matters which were of little immediate application in the field, though he might or might not admit their inherent interest and value.

In 1961 the Geological Society of London awarded J. V. the Lyell Medal. The opening remarks by the president in the presentation of this medal are worth quoting as they reflect so well the totality of this man: “In awarding you the Lyell Medal the Council were aware that the founder of the medal covered the whole field of geology. You, too, have ranged far and wide in space and in the scope of your studies. To stratigraphy, structure, and geomorphology and to the study of epigene and hypogene processes as affecting mountains in general you have made notable contributions.” In his acknowledgment of the medal, he typically paid tribute to colleagues he worked with in Persia and to the palaeontological fraternity which had helped him so much.

J. V. did not marry until he began his second career at Oxford. In the earlier period he was too preoccupied and dedicated to even entertain the thought. When the time came, he married a professional geologist, Janet Dingwall. They were a very close and devoted couple, sharing activities at Oxford and on field excursions in many parts of

J. V.'s life was dominated by three major passions: geology, hard work, and Scotland, and he generated for all three a most unusual degree of enthusiasm. His geological achievements would have been impossible to a man of lesser determination and dedication to his work. He lived simply and, although enjoying the good things of life, he perhaps felt a little guilty about accepting them. On first acquaintance he seemed a rather forbidding personality, but time revealed the widely cultured, interested, kindly, and humorous man underneath, so that his associates, instantly respecting him, also grew to regard him with a lasting affection.

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