Memorial to J. Donald Ryan
1921–1994
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Happily for institutions of higher learning, there appear in each generation a few extraordinary individuals who are willing to devote much of their personal energy and time to the betterment of their alma mater and to the intellectual and personal well-being of its students. One such exceptional person was J. Donald Ryan, and the institution and academic department to which he was devoted were Lehigh University and its Department of Geology (later Department of Geological Sciences).

J. Donald Ryan (he was known to friends and acquaintances as “Don”) was born and brought up in Norristown, Pennsylvania. He matriculated at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where he was strongly influenced by Bradford Willard and Lawrence Whitcomb. He graduated in 1943 with a B.A. degree in geology. The United States was already engaged in World War II, and Don was inducted into the U.S. Army and spent 20 months in the European Theatre of Operations. He was discharged in 1946 as a first lieutenant of infantry, returned to Lehigh University as a graduate assistant, and received the M.S. degree in geology from Lehigh University in 1948. He then worked as a geologist in Grand Junction, Colorado, on the uranium program of the U.S. Geological Survey for 18 months, following which he entered the doctoral program in geology at the Johns Hopkins University as a graduate assistant. In 1952 he completed his doctoral dissertation, which was supported by the Maryland Department of Mines, Geology, and Water Resources, under the direction of Francis J. Pettijohn, and immediately joined the faculty of the Department of Geology at Lehigh University as an instructor. He rose steadily through the academic ranks to assistant professor (1954–1957), associate professor (1957–1962), and professor (1962). He served as head (later chairman) of the Department of Geology from 1961 to 1976. During this period Lehigh University was striving to transform itself from a regional teaching-oriented institution to a nationally known research and teaching institution, and Don served his alma mater well in this objective. Under his leadership, his department grew from a faculty of five (four teaching assistants and one secretary) to nine faculty, six teaching assistants, two secretaries, and a technician. The change in name from Department of Geology to Department of Geological Sciences was not just cosmetic but signified a change in direction to more quantitative, analytical, and experimental studies including those in geochemistry, geophysics, and marine science. The number of undergraduate majors and graduate students increased exponentially during this period. Under his guidance, new B.S. programs in geology and in geophysics were developed and launched. Don was the consummate educator and motivator for undergraduate and graduate students alike, and he spent unlimited time with them both in and out of the classroom.

For the fall semester of 1972, Don was on leave as a Fulbright lecturer at the Central University in Quito, Ecuador. He retired from the Lehigh faculty in 1984 as professor emeritus after 32 years on the faculty. During this period he served on virtually every university committee of consequence, including several ad hoc committees designed to resolve “difficult” or “sticky” personnel and other matters for which his skill in reaching a consensus was widely sought, and he
served one year as the faculty co-chair of the University Forum. He also supervised some ten M.S. theses and five doctoral dissertations. In 1973 he received the Hillman Award for outstanding service to his university, and in 1993 he was the recipient of the Alumni Association Award.

Don was a Fellow of the Geological Society of America and a member of Sigma Xi and the Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists. He served as vice president and president of the Eastern Section of the National Association of Geology Teachers, secretary of the Pennsylvania Academy of Science, chairman of the 26th Field Conference of Pennsylvania Geologists, and chairman of the Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Section of the Geological Society of America when it met in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

Don married Marjorie Bean in 1943, and they had three daughters: Elizabeth Anderson of Cincinnati, Ohio; Barbara Ryan of Hellertown, Pennsylvania; and Judith Abramowicz of Allentown, Pennsylvania. There are three grandchildren. Don and Marj settled in Hellertown, Pennsylvania, a small town adjoining Bethlehem, where they were active civic-minded citizens for many years. Among these activities were volunteer work and service on the Board of Directors of Northampton County Meals-on-Wheels and volunteer work at the local hospital. Don truly enjoyed family life. His comment to me upon learning of the marital breakup and divorce of several mutual friends after many years of marriage was, "Charlie, the question is not what are they doing wrong; the question is what are we doing right?" Marj and Don celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary one year before his death. Many students and faculty recall with fondness the warmth and gracious hospitality of the Ryan family during Christmas parties at their home.

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