Memorial to John Gray Douglas
1900-1974

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The life of John Gray Douglas was ended abruptly by a cerebral hemorrhage on November 30, 1974, thus bringing to a close a distinguished career devoted to petroleum geology and to university teaching. While his physical life has ended, his influence in geology will continue for a long time through the work and lives of his numerous students and other young geologists who worked under his direction. All were permanently influenced, not only by the enthusiastic instruction he gave them in geology, but also by his zest for life and work and by his constant example of gentlemanly conduct guided by the highest standards implied by that term.

Doug, as he was called by many friends, was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on August 1, 1900, the son of Eugene Douglas, M.D., and Ethel Gray Douglas. He attended the public schools in Baltimore and the Johns Hopkins University, where he received the A.B. degree, with a major in biology, in 1921.

His introduction to geology and his decision to become a geologist resulted from taking an elective course in the science during his senior year. During the succeeding seven years, additional training for his career alternated between study at the university and work in petroleum geology in Venezuela, a pattern that was followed throughout his life and one that made it easy for him to integrate the academic and applied facets of geology. From 1924 to 1927 he worked as subsurface geologist for Venezuela Gulf Oil Company. In 1928 he was awarded the Ph.D. in geology and paleontology from the Johns Hopkins University, the title of his dissertation being “Some Miocene Molluscs from Northwestern Venezuela.” In the same year he returned to Venezuela as paleontologist for Lago Petroleum Corporation, now Creole Petroleum Corporation. The severe restriction of activities in the petroleum industry in Venezuela that resulted from the depression of the early 1930s interrupted the work of Doug and many other geologists, and he returned to the United States in 1931. From then until 1934, he was associate professor of geology and paleontology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. When activity in the petroleum industry in Venezuela increased in 1934, his former employer, Venezuela Gulf Oil Company, now Mene Grande Oil Company, again offered him employment there. I was one of his students and witnessed the difficult decision he had to make between his two loves, teaching and petroleum geology. The latter finally prevailed, possibly influenced by the rather harsh economic realities of the time, and he returned to Venezuela, where he was to remain until he retired in 1955.

During Doug’s second, and much longer, period of employment with the Gulf Oil Corporation subsidiary in Venezuela, he served in successive positions of increasing responsibility. He performed with distinction in each, beginning as Resident Geologist in the Bolivar Coastal Oil Fields and later heading the Western District Geological Department, which embraced all geological activities of the company in the Maracaibo Lake basin.
Upon reaching retirement age of 55, Doug again had the opportunity of returning to a former love, teaching. In 1955 he was offered, and eagerly accepted, a position as assistant professor of geology at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. The responsibilities given him in that educational institution mounted rapidly: He was appointed to the graduate faculty in November 1955; he was made full professor and acting chairman of the geology department in 1956, chairman in 1957, and chairman of the department of geology and geological engineering in 1961. He retired as chairman in 1965 and from teaching in 1970. The success he achieved in this final phase of his active career may be judged by the fact that he was awarded the Best Teacher Award by the School of Engineering and the Outstanding Service Award by the Ole Miss Alumni Chapter of Engineering and Geology. In addition to his teaching, he left a permanent influence at the university by introducing geological engineering into the curriculum, by finding financial support for equipping an x-ray diffraction and spectrographic lab, and by securing for the university one of the seismic stations that constitute the Worldwide Standard Station Network.

John Gray Douglas' contributions to geology must be measured principally by the instruction, criticism (always constructive and gently given), ideas, advice, and encouragement he gave in daily exchanges with students, assistants, and associates everywhere he worked. Only these individuals can have any appreciation of the cumulative magnitude of these contributions over the half century spanned by his active career. This mode of evaluation of his professional life must be used because the nature of his work in the competitive petroleum industry largely precluded publication of the results of his geological studies. His rigorous concept of his responsibilities to students, together with administrative responsibilities placed upon him by the university, consumed so much time that little was left for research and publication. Those who knew him well realize that he did not consider these circumstances restrictive, because he greatly enjoyed all of his work, especially the kind that provided opportunity for informal exchange of ideas with his geological colleagues.

Doug was author of many private reports on various aspects of the petroleum geology of the Lake Maracaibo basin and especially on the geology of the oil fields at the east side of Lake Maracaibo (of which he had encyclopedic knowledge almost certainly surpassing that of any other geologist). In April 1938, he attended the Second Venezuelan Geological Congress in San Cristobal and presented a paper entitled "Reservas de Agua Dulce de la Región Costanera del Distrito Bolivar, Estado Zulia," which was published in the Boletín de Geología y Minería, Volume II, 1938. His last major assignment for Mene Grande Oil Company was a comprehensive report on the geology of the Lake Maracaibo basin oil fields, which included a full account of the history of development of properties operated by that company.

In 1959, at the request of Gulf Oil Corporation, he attended the Fifth World Petroleum Congress in New York and led the discussion on a paper entitled "The Geology and Development of the Bolivar Coastal Field at Maracaibo, Venezuela," by H. D. Borger and E. S. Lenert. Doug's comments were published in the Proceedings of the Congress, Section I, Paper 26, 1959.

As one who was fortunate in coming under Doug's influence and supervision both as a student and later as an employee of the same company, I believe I am expressing the consensus of those with the same experience in saying that his contributions to geology were most significant and that none of us could do better than to strive toward his level of performance in both our professional and personal lives.
Doug was a member of the following scientific and professional societies: American Association for the Advancement of Science (Fellow), American Association of Petroleum Geologists, American Society for Engineering Education, Gamma Alpha, Geological Society of America (Fellow), Mississippi Geological Society, National Association of Geology Teachers, Scabbard and Blade, Sigma Gamma Epsilon, and Sigma Xi. He was active in societies that had local chapters where he resided. He was a founding member of Alpha Alpha chapter of Sigma Gamma Epsilon at the University of North Carolina in 1931, he was president of the first alumni chapter of this honorary earth sciences fraternity in the Lake Maracaibo basin in 1938, and he was instrumental in getting the Gamma Mu chapter installed at the University of Mississippi in 1972. He was president of the Maracaibo Section of AAPG in 1939.

Doug was also active in the Anglican Church and during World War II was vice-president and then president of the North American Association for War Relief, which raised substantial amounts of money for war relief projects.

Doug's personal life was as admirable as his professional life. He was a sensitive, generous, witty, patient, gregarious, and humane gentleman who loved people and involved himself with them. His desire and ability to communicate with others was an important factor in his success as a teacher. His students and young assistants could recognize immediately that he was genuinely interested in helping them to learn or to complete a project, and they responded to this sincerity.

Doug's favorite recreation was sailing, in which he had a high degree of skill and a passionate interest. He was owner or co-owner, at different times, of two Star class boats while residing in Maracaibo, and he raced them regularly during the season. In 1943 he entered the International Star Class Yacht Races at Great South Bay, Long Island, and won the Invaders Trophy, which pleased him greatly. Other recreational activities included tennis, golf, bowling, and bridge, but his interest in these was minor compared with sailing.

The most important event in Doug's personal life was in 1936 when he was married to Miss Violet Marshall, whom he had met several years earlier on a ship, while both were en route to England. A more congenial match can scarcely be imagined. Although this charming lady had grown up in Washington, D.C. (where her father was a member of the White House office staff for some thirty years), and she had never been near an oil field, she quickly adapted to a new life style. They boarded a Gulf Oil Corporation tanker and sailed off to Venezuela, where she created homes in Lagunillas, Maracaibo, and Caracas that were welcome oases of hospitality for their numerous friends, including the young geologists who worked under Doug's direction and who were treated as members of the family. Mrs. Douglas continues to reside in Oxford, Mississippi. Doug also is survived by a sister, Mrs. Marion J. Woodford, of Baltimore, Maryland.

One can only be grateful that men like John Gray Douglas have lived, and especially for the opportunity of working with them. We can only say "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" and hold to our memories.