

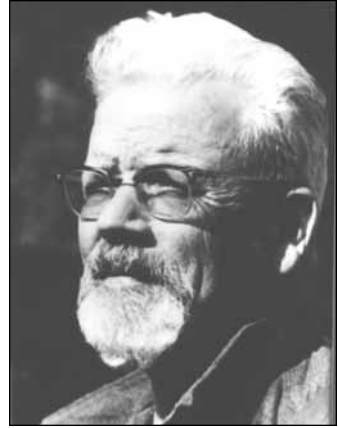
Memorial to J. Wyatt Durham

1907–1996

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J. Wyatt Durham was an invertebrate paleontologist and biostratigrapher. After an early career in petroleum exploration, he spent most of his life as curator and professor in the Museum of Paleontology and the Department of Paleontology at the University of California at Berkeley. During his 28 years as curator of fossil invertebrates, he greatly increased existing Mesozoic and Tertiary invertebrate collections and started an aggressive program building collections of older invertebrates. In addition, he brought the collection up to 20th century standards. This included an intensive search for type specimens that, in earlier days, had not been segregated and catalogued separately. Many of these fossils were part of the historically significant Whitfield and Pioche collections, purchased when the university first began its program in paleontology. Some were dispersed in the general collections, many of them not labeled as “type.” In fact, quite a few Whitfield “types” were being used in teaching collections! In addition, he promoted computerization of curatorial records.



Throughout his professional career, Durham actively pursued field investigations, collecting thousands of fossils, and, more important, processing them into curated collections. Durham’s patient, systematic reconnaissance on the outcrop and his sharp, informed eye were impressive in action. He found interesting fossils where others walked right on by. He had a comprehensive interest in all aspects of paleontology, and his collecting wasn’t limited to immediate particular research projects; he avidly gathered materials likely to be important to others. Furthermore, he usually brought these fossils to the attention of the appropriate specialists. In some cases this led to joint publication with vertebrate paleontologists, paleobotanists, and investigators of invertebrate groups peripheral to his normal work.

Durham organized the undergraduate and graduate invertebrate paleontology curriculum in the Department of Paleontology during the late 1940s and the 1950s. From the beginning, he kept pace with the rapid evolution of paleontology as the balance of interests shifted from description and biostratigraphy to greater emphasis on paleobiology, paleoecology, and patterns of evolution. His advanced courses and seminars dealt mostly with Mesozoic and Cenozoic fossils and problems. He also was largely responsible in the early 1950s for starting a graduate program in Paleozoic invertebrate paleontology and an undergraduate course in principles of stratigraphy.

In parallel with his interest in the history of paleontology and geology, he collected antiquarian books in the field, restored them, and bound them in their original, tooled leather style. This work was done at a professional level. He also grew orchids and built his own telescope. Finally, perhaps in continuation of youthful avocations, he was an avid deer hunter.

Durham was born August 22, 1907, at Okanogan, Washington, the son of John Wyatt and Sarah Evelyn Vandiver Durham. At the time, his father was dry-farming in eastern Washington,

but his primary occupation was as a shipwright. Thus, most of Wyatt's formative years were spent on the shores of Puget Sound. There he discovered paleontology when his high school science teacher encouraged his youthful interest in animals, plants, and fossils. After graduating from high school, he entered the University of Washington, where he was inspired and influenced by Charles Edwin Weaver. Weaver, with whom he maintained close association for as long as Weaver lived, sent him to study for his graduate degrees under Bruce Clark at the University of California at Berkeley. Thus, Durham acquired an abiding interest in Mesozoic-Cenozoic systematic paleontology and biostratigraphy, while training for a professional career in Mesozoic-Tertiary terrain under the mentoring of Weaver and Clark. After finishing his M.S. in 1936 he became a petroleum explorationist until 1939, working in Java and Sumatra for Nederlandse Pacific Petroleum Mij. While in the Dutch East Indies he collected the first Paleozoic fossils identified from Sumatra. According to his story, he thought they were Mesozoic, definitely not Tertiary; so he sent them to The Hague where they were identified as Paleozoic. Another incident, told in Berkeley, involved collecting a python. The job required using his full crew of local bearers and brush choppers to pin the snake down yard by yard. Returning to Berkeley and Bruce Clark, he completed his Ph.D. in 1941. From 1943 to 1946 he was chief paleontologist and geologist for Tropical Oil Company, a Standard Oil of New Jersey subsidiary, in Bogotá, Colombia. Sojourns in the East Indies and Colombia broadened his interests and scope beyond the American West Coast and introduced him to the art of field study in tropical and primitive regions. After a year, 1946–1947, as an associate professor of paleontology at the California Institute of Technology, he moved to the University of California at Berkeley as an associate professor of paleontology and curator of fossil invertebrates in the Museum of Paleontology. He was promoted to professor in 1953, and was chairman of the department from 1956 to 1957. After retiring in 1975, he continued active research in residence as professor emeritus until his death.

He married Jane Roberts on August 6, 1935, and they had one son, John Wyatt Durham. Divorced in Berkeley, California, in 1971, he married Jean Brower Firby in 1972.

In addition to being a Fellow of the Geological Society of America, Durham was a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the California Academy of Sciences. He was a member of the Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists, the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, the Society of Systematic Zoologists, the Paleontological Research Association, the Palaeontological Society (London), and the Japan Paleontological Society. He also was a Correspondent of the Instituto Ecuatoriano de Ciencias Naturales.

Wyatt was a three-time officer of the Paleontological Society: vice president, 1951–1953; president, 1965–1966; and co-editor of the *Journal of Paleontology*, 1971–1976. During his presidency and on the Council thereafter, his unflappable fair-mindedness was invaluable in dealing with “winding down” PS-SEPM dual sponsorship of the *Journal of Paleontology* and with the aggressive young paleobiologists starting publication of *Paleobiology*. Both of these events were traumatic incidents as the balance between scholarly and applied paleontology and among biostratigraphers, paleoenvironmentalists, “classical” systematists, applied micropaleontologists, and paleobiochemists shifted drastically during the second half of the 20th century. Durham also was a longtime (1950–1965) member of the Science Council of the California Academy of Sciences. He was a trustee of the Academy from 1959 to 1970 and president in 1966–1968. From 1966 through 1970 he was a member of the U.S. National Committee on Geology.

Durham was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1954–1955 and 1965–1966. He received the Paleontological Society Medal in 1988 and the *Journal of Paleontology* Best Paper Award in 1993.

Durham was a large, well-proportioned man of deliberate mien. He always thoroughly thought through his message before he spoke or wrote and, thereafter, expressed himself briefly and efficiently. When sharing his office, I noted that he carefully composed papers by hand on yellow legal paper. After being typed, these first drafts required only minimal editing. He invariably was serious in professional conversation, but did not lack a sense of humor. Both, or all, sides of every contested question always were examined carefully before decisions were rendered. This meant that his reactions were slow, but it also meant that he rarely found it necessary to give up a position. He usually turned out to be right. As a consequence, leadership responsibilities tended to fall upon him wherever he went.

Durham supervised about 50 doctoral students among his more than 80 graduate students. He was author of about 125 papers and books. He could be considered to have had at least four major, separate scientific careers. He began working on the systematic and descriptive paleontology of Tertiary and Mesozoic molluscan corals and echinoderms. This led him into the biostratigraphy of these fossils and problems of global zonation, especially reconciling biostratigraphic schemes founded on different organisms. A "California School," including Hubert Schenck, Simeon Muller, Robert Kleinpell, Ralph Chaney, R. A. Stirton, Durham, and their graduate students, hammered out these problems during the 1950s, 1960s, and later. They were major players in the post-World War II redirection of stratigraphy. At the same time, he associated himself with Paul Hurd and Robert Usinger's paleoentomology program, searching for and determining the age of amber deposits containing fossil insects. Notably, Wyatt organized and directed a broad exploration and investigation of Chiapanecan (Mexico) amber deposits, involving his own graduate students and a group at the University of Illinois. A large collection of amber insects was gathered and their geologic distribution and age were established. Geologic mapping, stratigraphic description and correlation, studies of the botanical origin of the amber, and diverse paleontologic studies also resulted. Finally, late in his career, he became interested in late Precambrian and earliest Paleozoic invertebrates, mostly small diverse echinoderms. Here again, his work was a major component in a major advance in paleontologic science: the late 20th century reevaluation of the transition from late Precambrian to earliest Paleozoic faunas.

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