

Address read at Memorial Service for Dr. J.V. Harrison
in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, 18 November 1972,
by Professor E.A. Vincent.

We are here today to remember, with gladness and with gratitude, the life of John Vernon Harrison, a world-renowned professional geologist, a distinguished teacher of this College and University, and above all the friend and colleague of many of us.

J.V., as Dr. Harrison was universally known to all his acquaintances, spent a happily long life in the service of geological science, achieving much himself and, latterly, showing his younger pupils how to do the same.

At Glasgow University, the young J.V. Harrison came under the spell of the great geological explorer, J.W. Gregory, then Professor of Geology there, and Gregory's early influence set the pattern for Harrison's own geological work for his whole lifetime. Graduating at the outbreak of the First World war, he was engaged as an explosives chemist before being commissioned in the Royal Engineers and serving in Mesopotamia. At the end of the war he was seconded to the then Anglo-Persian Oil Company as a geologist and on demobilization joined their permanent staff.

This saw the beginning of J.V. Harrison's long and distinguished career as an exploration geologist, and the opportunity to order his own professional life in a manner broadly similar to that of his teacher, Gregory. He first worked in Persia and Iraq - then territories virtually unknown geologically - later spending some years in many different parts of the world, including Central and South America and the Far East. Most of the ten years immediately preceding his coming to Oxford in 1938 were spent in Persia, again with interludes in other places, and this period of Harrison's life saw his greatest geological achievements and his emergence as one of the great 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 which enabled him clearly to visualise the large-scale geological structures with which he was confronted and the processes - sometimes novel - which had given rise to them. Harrison's work, with his friend and colleague N.L. Falcon, on the mechanism of salt dome intrusion and the role of gravitational forces in mountain building, will long retain the status of classic contributions 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 doing its best to obscure the picture. He was always at his happiest, one felt, in broad geological reconnaissance, carried out, for choice, under the most arduous and Spartan conditions. One of his former colleagues in Persia, Mr. 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 Harrison's service in Persia became a by-word among the oil company's staff.

His major achievement in Persia was the geological mapping of most of the immense Zagros mountain range from the Iraq border to Baluchistan - some 30,000

square miles of rough country - in which he never had more than one or two other geologists assisting him.

J.V. Harrison came to Oxford as a Lecturer in 1938, when the University's Department of Geology was very much smaller than it is nowadays. Among a small team of teachers, J.V. proved a stimulating mentor 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 accurately to recognise without constant recourse to textbooks the common minerals, rocks and fossils upon which the accurate interpretation of geological structures in the field depends. 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 experiences - geological and non geological - in the course of his reconnaissance mapping of many more thousands of square miles of remote and mountainous terrain, this time stretching from the forests of the Amazon to the Pacific Coast, work which culminated in the publication of a fine geological map in 1957 and for which he was made a Grand Officer of the Order of Merit for Distinguished Services by the Peruvian Government.

J.V. Harrison was a lucid and effective lecturer, reflecting his own clarity of mind; never better, naturally, than when dealing with a topic capable of illustration from his own wide field experience. His droll, slightly acid sense of humour added further spice to his discourses, as did his ready fund of reminiscence of the great geologists he had known and with whom he had worked.

He would insist upon his pupils' proper performance of their laboratory work, too, and was himself not only, as might be expected, an expert interpreter of geological maps and structures, but also a fine petrographer and more than averagely good stratigraphical palaeontologist. As a tutor, he seemed able to satisfy all his pupils' needs to an extent to which few of his successors can lay claim, spreading his expertise over very wide fields and penetrating each to considerable depth, whether one of his own particular main interests or not. One of his more disconcerting habits at times was to feign ignorance, or at best to keep silence, when some esoteric geological topic or another was being discussed, and then to chime in with some brief quiet comment indicating that in fact he knew more about it than most of us.

Towards the end of J.V. Harrison's active geological life the science has seen great and rapid developments in many new directions, with the consequent dangers that the younger men emerging from our University departments may, unless we are very careful, be already specialised in peripheral branches of earth science without the solid knowledge and experience of the central core which teachers like Harrison made sure were at their command. The same attitudes of mind which made him perhaps the finest reconnaissance geologist of his time led him instinctively to incorporate into his own thinking and his own teaching only those broader geological principles emerging from the newer and more specialised researches which he felt would prove of lasting significance to the general geologist, leaving aside matters which, though he might or might not admit their inherent interest and value, were of little immediate application in the field.

J.V. was a field geologist and regarded his undergraduate vacation classes in the field as his most important teaching activity, and they became legendary. His favourite elementary teaching ground was the Island of Arran where, dressed in a kilt of no known tartan, or at any rate belonging to no regularly recognized clan he became well-known year by year to the local inhabitants. I myself well remember, years before I had the privilege of knowing J.V., whilst leading an undergraduate

party from another university in Arran, an occasion when the driver of our hired coach, observing that we carried but a single heavy sledge-hammer between us, was somewhat critical of our approach: Dr. Harrison from Oxford, I was told, insisted that little toffee hammers were no good at all and everyone had to carry a sledge.

Although J.V. finally retired, as Reader in Structural Geology, in 1959, he continued to work at the problems of Andean and Persian geology that had always absorbed him, and he remained very much a member of our Department here. The years brought him some - but not perhaps all – of the honours he deserved, and the award of the Lyell Medal by the Geological Society of London in 1961, linking his name with that of the greatest geologist Oxford has produced, gave him particular pleasure.

J.V., believing that any young geologist who married was placing fetters upon his activities to the extent of being unfaithful to his science, did not himself marry until after he had begun his second career, in academic life at Oxford. Then, characteristically, he married a professional geologist. We cannot remember J.V. without remembering also his wife Janet, whose tragic death some months earlier much clouded his own last days. They were a devoted pair who enjoyed working together, whether for their Church, the local community in which they lived, or simply in entertaining J.V.'s undergraduate pupils. Both were well-known figures in Oxford - among other interests assiduous supporters of musical life here: J.V.'s musical sympathies ranged effortlessly from the activities of the Oxford Bach Choir to the Gilbert and Sullivan Operettas, to which latter he was particularly addicted. He would often speak, too, of the great days of the Vienna State Opera in the late 1920's when he was studying in that city with Professor F.E. Suess. He was also a keen and expert gardener, and several of his colleagues' children will remember being invited to visit the conifer plantation at the Harrison's house at Kennington to choose their own Christmas trees.

J.V. Harrison's life was dominated perhaps by three major passions: geology, hard work, and Scotland, and he brought to 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 perhaps felt a little guilty at accepting them. On first acquaintance he was a rather forbidding personality, but time revealed the widely cultured and interested, kindly and humorous man underneath, so that his associates, instantly respecting him, also quickly grew to regard him with a lasting affection. All of us who, at one time or another have had the good fortune to know J.V. and his charming wife, Janet, can never forget them or fail to recognise that our lives were tangibly enriched by the experience. The whole geological world is the poorer for J.V.'s passing - Oxford particularly so. Let us be thankful to have had him among us for so long.