

Obituaries

J. J. O'Neill (1886-1966)

A *Who's Who*-type biographical sketch of J. J. O'Neill might read as follows: O'Neill, John Johnston, born Port Colborne, Ontario, Canada, 12 November 1886, died Ottawa, Ontario, 1 June 1966; son of Thomas John and Mary Jane (Henderson) O'Neill. B.Sc. McGill University 1909; Ph.D. Yale University 1912. Married Lillian Mary Campbell, 9 December 1918. Children: Gordon Campbell, killed in action in World War II, and Melville Henderson. Geologist, Canadian Arctic Expedition, 1913-16; geological staff, Geological Survey of Canada, 1914-20; assistant professor of geology, McGill University, 1921-27; associate professor 1927-29; Sir William Dawson Professor of Geology and Head, Department of Geology, 1929-52; Dean of Science, 1935-39; Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, 1938-42; Dean of Engineering, 1942-52; Vice-Principal, McGill University, 1948-52; President, Royal Society of Canada, 1950-51; a Founder, Governor, and Board Chairman Arctic Institute of North America; Fellow, Arctic Institute of North America, Geological Society of America, Royal Society of Canada; Sigma Xi; Freemason; Conservative; Anglican. Club: Faculty (McGill).

However detailed, such a sketch would give only an incomplete glimpse of a highly accomplished man who could be stern and awesome, yet kindly and informal, adventurous yet conservative, critical yet forgiving — in short, a whole man.

It may be difficult for some who knew O'Neill as an administrator rather than as a young field geologist to visualize him as an adventurous person in addition to one who took a judicious and studious approach to problems. Yet in 1913 when he joined the Canadian Arctic Expedition in his late twenties he took a leading part in almost as venturesome an enterprise as a trip to the Moon would be today. The measure of the man is illustrated by the fact that although he and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, leader of the expedition, found themselves in opposing camps following strong expedition disagreements, O'Neill voluntarily, and at the expense of possibly handicapping his own work, gave his personal chronometer to Stefansson — an act that saved the latter's exploration program.

O'Neill was the first geologist to study the mainland coast of Arctic Canada from Darnley Bay to Bathurst Inlet, a coastline distance of some 600 miles. The resulting publications indicated the bright future that lay ahead of him — Vice-Principal of McGill University, President of the Royal Society of Canada, and many additional honors about which others will write more appropriately than I.

When I first met Dean O'Neill in 1938 to seek his aid in connection with further geologic research in the region he had studied, his friendliness and helpful advice made a great impression on me. Later, after World War II, as a Founder and Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Arctic Institute of North America, he continued to provide excellent counsel and generous assistance during the early critical days of the Institute, when his wisdom helped to assure the organization's future. When O'Neill and Stefansson became fellow Board members, the differences that had developed during the Canadian Arctic Expedition still lingered, and it is a credit to both that when they met at an Institute Board meeting in Montreal, they shook hands for the first time in some thirty years and worked harmoniously together for the Institute. It takes great men to do this and O'Neill was such.

John Johnston O'Neill was in a unique position to contribute to the Arctic Institute of North America and he did so most effectively. He contributed significantly to science, to international cooperation in science, and in the broader context to mutual understanding and respect between nations.

A. L. WASHBURN