

## **J.B. Auden – A Centenary Tribute**

The Geological Society of India at a simple but solemn function held on 15 December 2003 at Bangalore paid its centenary homage to John Bicknell Auden, formerly of the Geological Survey of India (1927-1953). Auden was truly a great scientist specialized in the study of the Himalayas, a pioneer in the field of Engineering Geology and Groundwater studies in India and a remarkable man of varied and broad interests.



(1903-1991)

A Memoir (No.56) specially brought out on the occasion entitled – ‘J.B. Auden – A Centenary Tribute’ by Dr. B.P. Radhakrishna was released at the function. The presence of Shri Otto Money, the 30-year old grandson of J.B. Auden, who came all the way from U.K. to Bangalore to be present on the occasion, lent a special charm. The Centenary Volume contains an inimitable and masterly biographical sketch of J.B. Auden by Dr. B.P. Radhakrishna highlighting Auden’s seminal contributions to the geology of India and bringing out the many-splendoured and humane personality of Auden. A note on the family background by Anita Money, eldest daughter of Auden is equally touching and offers rare insights into the Auden family that only a close relative can provide. The volume contains selected papers of J.B. Auden including the classic works on the Geology of the Krol Belt and the Geology of the Vindhyan Sedimentation.

The Centenary function was appropriately presided over by Dr. S.V.P. Iyengar, formerly of the Geological Survey of India and perhaps the eldest resident former officer of the Survey at Bangalore. S.Shri B. Ramachandran and A.S. Ramiengar, two of the earliest associates of Auden in the Geological Survey, narrated their first hand experiences and

recollections of the great man. Ramachandran recalled the habit of Auden to reply promptly to all geological correspondence from younger colleagues, full of references and cross-references and attention to minute detail, culled from his own copious notes and diaries even after a long lapse of time. Shri S.V. Srikantia highlighted the salient contributions of Auden to Himalayan Geology and the meticulousness of his work that stood the test of time.



Auden Centenary Function (L to R): B.P. Radhakrishna, B. Ramachandran, Otto Money, S.V.P. Iyengar and A.S. Ramiengar.

Auden was the last Britisher to be recruited to the permanent cadre of the Geological Survey of India in 1926 and the last to leave the organization in the year 1953. Thus, his career in India spanned the transitional phase of India's emergence as a free nation from the colonial yoke. Society's Memoir is thus devoted to the life and work of a geologist, who in a way was caught up in this transition in more than one way.

From the historical perspective, the British Raj in India brought in its wake interaction with white man in different roles, planes and levels. The introduction of the modern scientific methods of investigation, whether it is for the preparation of topographical maps of the country they ruled or for discovering its mineral potential for exploitation to serve the industrial revolution at home, all these left an indelible impress on the country on its own path of self-discovery and assertion of its independence at the end of an epic struggle. It is not by accident that the British rulers set up the Survey of India and the Geological Survey of India as the earliest scientific departments of the Government of India. However, it must be said that some of the best brains from Britain found their way to India to dedicate themselves to pioneering scientific work that laid the foundations and introduced us afresh to the modern scientific method that has benefited us immensely.

In this context it is apt to quote Dr. B.P. Radhakrishna from the Auden Volume.

“The European officers of the Geological Survey of India of those early days were an exclusive lot and avoided all social contacts with Indians. The advice given to the British community in India was: ‘never under any circumstances give way to a native or let him regard himself as your superior. We rule India in one way – by safeguarding our position.’ The Indian officers too came to accept western culture as superior to their own and started aping European customs and manners. The Englishman of those days had no sympathy for Indian aspirations towards Independence.

Auden proved a notable exception to this general rule and mingled with his Indian colleagues and took part in the cultural activities of Bengal.”

Auden married Sheila Bonnerjee, grand daughter of W.C. Bonnerjee, the founder President of the Indian National Congress. Auden had to pay a price for taking an Indian as his life-partner. He had to give up being a member of the ‘whites only’ exclusive clubs and many other privileges enjoyed by the ruling elite. Perhaps the greatest compensation for Auden was the veneration and affection his Indian co-workers showered on him as is reflected in a letter written by Shri V.S. Krishnaswamy, who later became the Director General, Geological Survey of India, to Auden in 1957:

“I have not so far given expression to my feelings of regard for you as an able scientist, a benevolent boss and a very humane personality. I have mentally paid homage to these excellent attributes on a number of occasions and wished to God that I may imbibe at least a fraction of these very desirable qualities for my betterment in life, both as a man and a scientist”.

Rita, Auden’s daughter describes her father as a dedicated scientist, a writer of distinction and lover of fine arts including painting, music and literature. Perhaps all are not aware that the famous poet laureate Wystan Hugh Auden was the younger brother of John B. Auden.

Auden spent 27 years in the Geological Survey of India. Ten years in the Himalayas and the rest in Engineering and Groundwater Studies in different parts of India. His devotion to work and commitment was so strong that he undertook self-sponsored and funded traverses in 1939 to the Nelong-Gangotri region of the Himalaya, when the Department did not support him.

Geological Survey of India offered him the Directorship of the Survey in 1953, but Auden declined it partly on health grounds and partly because he felt that an Indian should succeed Krishnan, the first Indian Director. He also felt that GSI’s expansion would be “soon out of control” resulting in “too many headaches in the recruitment...”

His words ring prophetic even in the present context of the GSI, fifty years hence.

Auden’s scientific contributions to the Himalayan Geology and his path-breaking work in the fields of Engineering Geology and Groundwater will always be remembered by the

geological profession of this country. More importantly, however, he will be cherished for his sterling human qualities, his total dedication to work even under trying circumstances and his catholicity of outlook.

In remembering and celebrating the centenary of John Bicknell Auden, the Geological Society of India has paid homage to a great geologist, a person who loved India and its culture and a humanist *par excellence* worthy of emulation by the younger generation.

M. SARVESWARA RAO

*New Release*

**Memoir 56**

## **J.B. Auden – A Centenary Tribute**

**B.P. Radhakrishna**

Brought out to pay homage to J.B. Auden, formerly of the Geological Survey of India on his birth centenary, the Memoir contains selected works of Auden on Himalayan Geology, Vindhyan Sedimentation in the Son Valley, Aspects of Engineering Geology, Seismicity, Global Tectonics and Crustal Evolution. Carefully chosen and put-together by Dr. B.P. Radhakrishna, the volume contains a masterly biographical account of Auden by the author and insights into the many-sided and humane personality of Auden by his daughter Anita Money.

The Memoir revives memories of this great geologist, his interest in the culture of India and his dedication to geological work worthy of emulation by the younger generation.

This volume will be a priceless possession in the hands of all professionals, teachers, researchers and students in the field of earth-sciences for making available at one place the best of J.B. Auden coupled with facets of his inspiring personality.

**Pages: 332+vi (2003)**

*(Copies can be supplied at concessional price to Fellows and bonafide students.*

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