

ALICE VIBERT DOUGLAS, 1894–1988

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With the death of Dr. A. Vibert Douglas in Kingston, Ontario on the 2nd of July, 1988, Canada lost one of its world-famous and well-loved pioneers in the teaching of astronomy and physics. She was born in Montreal in 1894 and the seeds of her reputation as an internationalist were planted when, at the early age of eight, she toured the great cathedrals of England with her grandmother. After some elementary school training in England she returned to Montreal and later commenced her studies in mathematics and physics at McGill University. But, as the intensity of World War I increased, the young student interrupted her undergraduate activities by returning to England, where she worked as a statistician in the London War Office. Here, at the age of 23, Alice Vibert Douglas was awarded the Order of the British Empire on 1st January, 1918, in recognition of her war work. Once again, back in Montreal after the war, she earned the B.A. degree in 1920 and in 1921 the M.Sc. degree.

Post-graduate studies at Cambridge University, England, followed where Miss Vibert Douglas studied under Professor A.S. Eddington. Here commenced her life-long devotion to astronomy. Her book *The Life of Arthur Stanley Eddington*

was published by Nelson, London in 1956 and has been cited for its “scientific fact and literary talent”. A Ph.D. degree in astrophysics was awarded Miss Douglas by McGill in 1925 and she remained on the staff of this university for the next 14 years. Her research field was the spectroscopic study of the very hot A and B stars. However, her great contribution was the spark of enthusiasm for science which she passed along to her students. In 1939 she accepted an appointment as Dean of Women at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, a position she held with distinction for 20 years. She was also appointed Professor of Astronomy at Queen’s in 1946 and retired in 1964.

Dr. Douglas was noted not only for her scientific ability but for her wide-ranging human interests, particularly in raising the status of women throughout the world. While Dean of Women at Queen’s she was influential in having women accepted in engineering and in medicine. In 1947–1950 she was the first Canadian President of the International Federation of University Women, and in 1943–1945 was the first woman to be President of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada. In 1954, as a Canadian delegate to the U.N.E.S.C.O. conference in Montevideo, Uruguay, she insisted that women be given their proper place in the wording of resolutions. She has received honorary degrees from McGill University and Queen’s University in Canada and from Queensland University in Australia. In Canada’s Centennial year of 1967 she was named as one of the eleven women of the century 1867–1967 by the National Council of Jewish Women of Canada. On the 22nd December, 1967, she was made an Officer in the Order of Canada. In *Minor Planet Circular* of the I.A.U., 27 August, 1988, *Minor Planet 3269* was officially named *Vibert-Douglas*.

But a listing of the honours and awards received by A. Vibert Douglas tells only half the story. There was the unique and lovable character of the woman herself. She loved to travel and did so frequently until a few years before her death. In descriptions of these excursions by her friends the word “intrepid” keeps appearing. Whether it was urging on a taxi driver over almost impassable trails in the interior of Ghana, or traversing the Khyber Pass three times in one day, which she did in a lorry, nothing daunted her. After retirement she still was in regular attendance at international astronomical conferences. Her great-niece, Marianne S.V. Douglas, recalls that at one of these gatherings she had collected her bags at the airport when a colleague offered some help in carrying them. She informed him that when she could no longer carry her bags she would no longer attend conferences. My own most vivid personal recollection of Allie Douglas at a conference was in Moscow when the International Astronomical Union met there in 1958. My wife and I were in the long line-up for visiting the massive tomb outside the Kremlin walls where, at that time, both Lenin and Stalin lay in state, side by side. We noticed that Dr. Douglas was a short distance ahead of us in the line-up. When we had paid our respects to the former leaders of the Soviet Union

and were filing out of the mausoleum we found Dr. Douglas somewhat subdued pulling a long roll of 35-mm film from her camera under the watchful eyes of two Soviet guards. These guards, having made sure that her whole film was hopelessly fogged, allowed her to walk outside with us. I asked her “didn’t you know that all photography in there is absolutely forbidden”, and she replied, with the ghost of a twinkle in her eyes “Of course I knew, but a sudden impulse came over me and I thought I must take a chance on getting a unique picture”.

The students at Queen’s used to say that Dr. Douglas was the kind of person that you would go to first if you were in any kind of trouble at the university. I understand that the girls used to refer to her affectionately as Dr. D., and the boys respectfully as Vibrating Douglas. I am indebted to her long-time friend, Shirley Brooks, for the following direct quotation from Dr. Douglas, one I had not heard before her death. It coincides so closely with my own philosophy of living that I am happy to leave it with you as a memory of a most remarkable lady—“Things of the spirit have no relation to time and space”.