Donald Darrow Matson

November 28, 1913–May 10, 1969

by Eben Alexander, Jr. M.D.

Donald Darrow Matson died May 10, 1959, in the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital at the age of 55 of periarteritis nodosa. Death came after a prolonged illness with many continuous months in the hospital.

He was born at Fort Hamilton, New York, on November 28, 1913. His father was a regular army officer, and he lived in many parts of the United States when he was a child. His early abilities were clearly recognizable, and he was selected for a Telluride Scholarship. Subsequently, he was graduated from Cornell University in 1935 with an A.B. degree.

He entered the Harvard Medical School in September, 1939, was elected to Alpha Omega Alpha, and was a member of the Boylston Society. While a member of that organization, he wrote and presented a paper on “Chronic Pulmonary Sepsis,” which was eventually published in the New England Journal of Medicine when he was still a medical student.

Donald Matson had an extraordinary array of human talents. Every subject that captured his interest received the benefits of his incisive and penetrating mind with its prompt perception of facets of a problem so often overlooked by others. Yet, gifted as he was, his manner was unobtrusive, and his gifts were used as resources for the solution of problems in his cooperation with colleagues and in the launching of new ideas. Among his many talents was the inherent ability to make those around him feel at ease, children, peers, and those older and more experienced than himself. His superior abilities were never used to embarrass colleagues; somehow he contrived to use his strength to supplement the strength of others or to utilize the strength of others to bring to fruition a plan worthy of his efforts.

He selected the surgical traineeship at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital and Children's Hospital, a combined 29-month internship at that time, and he had just completed this when World War II came on the scene. He then was assistant resident in surgery at the Brigham Hospital, and following this a fellow in Neurosurgery until 1943. During this time, he managed to complete the classic paper with Dr. Franc D. Ingraham on “Subdural Hematomas in Infancy,” published in Pediatrics, a paper still of importance to the field of pediatric neurosurgery and pediatrics generally.

He entered the Army of the United States as a lieutenant, and after a period of training in this country, which included Lawson General Hospital, Halloran General Hospital, and Walter Reed General Hospital, he went to the European theater of operations where he headed a neurosurgical team with the 3rd Auxiliary Surgical Group. His performance with this group was so outstanding, even at the age of 30, that he was asked to write the monographs on head and spinal injuries due to missiles for the Surgeon General of the United States Army.

After three years in the service, he returned to the Children's Hospital to be Research Fellow in Neurosurgery and participated in the re-opening of the old Benedict Laboratory across from the Children's Hospital, which was converted into a neurosurgical research laboratory under Dr. Franc D. Ingraham. During that period of time, he participated in fundamental neurosurgical and neurophysiological investigations, studying hydrocephalus, craniosynostosis, and nerve regeneration. His early work on polyethylene as a useful surgical material led to the eventual construction of valves for the treatment of hydrocephalus.

He served as resident neurosurgeon at Duke University Hospital, at the Children's Hospital in Boston and at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, and he was a neurosurgical fellow at the Lahey Clinic in Boston.

Above all, Donald Matson was a respon-
sible person; he fulfilled his obligations and it was characteristic of him to go the extra mile. When he was an intern and resident, he worked tirelessly on all of the serious problems that came under his care. He was much beloved by patients, respected by his fellow house officers, and trusted by his preceptors. He was invariably implored to perform countless important tasks of a peripheral nature to his usual work, and as he grew older these became more important. He selected those he knew he could accomplish well and invariably did more than was expected of him.

The motivation which propelled Donald Matson was so strong that one could scarcely quantify it. He worked to the point of exhaustion, even when he was in the research laboratory, and he seemed to be a man of unlimited energy and ability in all phases of his development.

After completion of his training, he was asked by Dr. Ingraham to join him at the combined neurosurgical service of the Children's Hospital and the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital. During those years, he and Dr. Ingraham were extremely productive in forwarding the progress of pediatric neurological surgery, in which they became the recognized leaders of the world. The early development of the use of ACTH and cortisone as adjuncts to the surgery of pituitary tumors and craniopharyngiomas was classic and led to the general use of adrenal corticosteroids in the treatment of cerebral swelling.

Patients from all over the world came to these men. When Dr. Ingraham retired from active head of the neurosurgical service, it was natural that Donald Matson should continue the work in which he himself had had a primary part. He was, in fact, appointed to the Franc D. Ingraham Professorship of Neurosurgery at the Harvard Medical School, the first incumbent of this chair. He and Dr. Ingraham published the standard neurosurgical textbook in 1954, *Neurosurgery of Infants and Childhood*, a book now completely rewritten and soon to be republished.

Donald Matson was a just man who knew the right and did not remain silent when it was important to be counted on one side of a controversy or the other. As Secretary of the American Board of Neurological Surgery for five years and with this position as neurosurgical representative on the President's National Review Committee, he was constantly in a position to make decisions which were important either to neurosurgery as a whole or to individuals who were seeking accreditation. His wisdom, calmness, and innate ability through all this allowed him to maintain respect of his contemporaries, the admiration of his students and house officers, and the strong support of those who had been in such responsible positions before him.

He was naturally selected to be consultant not only to many hospitals in the New England area but also Civilian Consultant in Neurosurgery to the Department of the Army, a member of the Special Medical Advisory Group of the Veterans Administration and Consultant in Neurosurgery to the Veterans Administration, and a member of the Training Grants Committee of the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness.

He was a member of many *ad hoc* committees called by the Public Health Service and the Veterans Administration to settle immediate problems, and he served the cause of neurosurgery in many important areas as an active member of the Harvey Cushing Society, the American Academy of Neurological Surgery, and the Society of Neurological Surgeons.

His easy self-confidence, his skill as a surgeon and an investigator, his ability to communicate on every level, social, political, and scientific, designated him to be a member of every important scientific body he could be asked to join and a recipient of every honor that could come to a person of his age.

He was recognized by his surgical colleagues by election to the American Surgical Association, the American College of Surgeons, the Halsted Society, the Daland Society, the Society of University Surgeons, and the New England Surgical Society. In addition, he was a member of the Scandinavian Neurosurgical Society and the American Neurological Association.

He traveled widely at the invitation of numerous neurosurgical societies abroad, spending extended periods of time in Scandinavia, England, and Australia, where he invariably cultivated and kept warm and last-