

Douglass, John Jordan ^[1]

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by C. Sylvester Green ^[2], 1986

4 Aug. 1875–28 May 1940

John Jordan Douglass, clergyman and poet, was born in Cumnock, Lee County ^[3], the oldest of nine children of William Campbell and Josephine Tysor Douglass. His father was a successful attorney and his brother, Clyde A. (1889–1973), was a longtime counselor-at-law in Raleigh. His childhood was spent in Troy and Carthage, but the family later moved to Raleigh ^[4].

In 1892 Douglass finished his preparatory schooling in Carthage and that fall entered Wake Forest College ^[5], where he was a student for two years and distinguished himself for his work in the Literary Society and for his writing, especially poetry. In later years he often paid tribute to Dr. Benjamin Sledd, his English teacher at Wake Forest. He also studied for a short time at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky. In 1892 he had been licensed in the Baptist ministry by the Carthage Baptist Church and subsequently was ordained by a presbytery appointed and functioning on behalf of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association in its 1895 session. From his studies at Louisville, he went to Beaufort ^[6] as pastor of the Baptist Church and then successively served Baptist churches at Clinton, Warsaw and Mt. Gilead, Wilson ^[7], and Dunn, as well as at Clio, S.C. In 1910, following his five-year ministry at Clio, he changed his denominational affiliation to Presbyterian and distinguished himself as pastor, preacher, and community leader in churches at Blenheim, S.C. (1910–18), Wadesboro, N.C. (1918–25), Jefferson City, Tenn. (1926–29), and Newton, N.C. (1930–40).

An avid reader, Douglass accumulated a formidable library and was known both for his studious care in preparing sermons and the superior quality of his delivery. He spoke clearly and forcefully in an extemporaneous fashion, without notes of any kind. His sermons were sprinkled with high imagery and multiple poetic references to buttress his careful exegesis of the Scriptures. In all communities where he ministered, he found time to be active in local affairs, particularly in matters relating to education and religion. He was a true community leader.

For more than fifty years, Douglass produced a voluminous amount of written material, both prose and poetry. Three volumes of his poems were published: *The Bells* ^[8], *The Quest of the Star* ^[9], and *The Gates of Dreams* ^[10]. The last was a carefully selected arrangement of his poems, published by his wife the year after his death. He also published one novel, *The Girdle of the Great* ^[11], or *The New South*. He left three unpublished novels; those manuscripts have been lost or, in one instance, destroyed by fire. Although no definitive study of his literary production has been made, his individual poems appeared in many magazines and journals and frequently in the *Raleigh News and Observer*, some of them even boxed on the front page.

Douglass gained national publicity through a tribute in verse to President Woodrow Wilson, to which Wilson responded personally with appreciation. In 1938 Douglass read some of his poems before the Edgar Allan Poe Society in New York, and he often appeared before clubs and civic groups to lecture and read his poems. He was an active member of the North Carolina Poetry Society ^[12] and the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association ^[13]. In an appraisal of his poetry, G. A. Wauchope, professor of English literature at the University of South Carolina, wrote: "As a sea-poet, the author's style and treatment remind one of Allen Cunningham, a poet of a century past who excelled in ballads and songs of the free salt seas. . . . Mr. Douglass' mind is modern, but his soul is Greek. Though by profession he happens to be a Protestant clergyman by divine calling he is a son of Apollo whose magic flute has lured him into the secret haunts of nature, where he communes with the lovely nymphs and goddesses of the great outdoors."

Douglass was married first on 24 Feb. 1897 to Annie Duncan Rumley of Beaufort. They had five children: Annie (died in infancy), John Jordan, Jr., Mary Elizabeth (Mrs. Walker Hudson), Josie Tysor, and Donald Drake (died in infancy). Mrs. Douglass died 16 June 1927. In 1928 Douglass married Martha Taylor of Laurel Springs. He met her when she was a student at Carson-Newman College, Jefferson City, Tenn., where he often spoke and conducted panel discussions on poetry during his ministerial tenure in that city. They had one child, Clyde Virginia (Mrs. John M. Harper).

Douglass died at Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte ^[14] at the age of sixty-five. Memorial services were held in the Newton Presbyterian Church of which he had been pastor, and burial followed in the family plot in Oakwood Cemetery ^[15], Raleigh.

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