Douglas as editor

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When I was invited to meet Douglas in 1968 to discuss the possibility that I might join him as editor of the *Archives*, I felt that I was being privileged to meet one of the great names of British paediatrics. As a student, two of the books which had most kindled my interest in paediatrics were the splendid first and second editions of *Recent Advances in Paediatrics*, in which he was both editor and an important contributor. I had also met his name on several important papers—on Schönlein-Henoch syndrome, and on haematology of the newborn. Douglas's constant additions to paediatric knowledge from his own research over the whole of his career remain one of the most remarkable and impressive characteristics of this remarkably impressive man. It must be comparatively unusual to be able to base a number in tribute to a great editor on his own contributions to the literature, but I had no doubt that this was most appropriate for Douglas. My only problem was trying to find all his papers! They have been published in many journals, though he has been very faithful to the *Archives* both before and during his editorship. When I was going through the indices of the *Archives* to locate his contributions since 1948, I started by taking down from the shelves those volumes in which his name appeared. However, it soon became apparent that it was much simpler to take down the volumes in which his name did *not* appear and leave on the shelves the much larger number where it did.

Working with Douglas proved as great a privilege as I had expected, but also full of unexpected pleasures. The alternate Tuesday afternoons of our regular meetings were always occasions to look forward to, and if we had time to meet for lunch beforehand I would be entertained with his conversation which always included sailing but also ranged over archaeology, history, biography, or politics. Douglas is an avid reader of considerable erudition, and would often be bursting with enthusiasm about the book that he had just read on one of these subjects. Human motivation fascinates him, and he would certainly have made a splendid novelist if he had had time to follow five careers instead of just the three or four which he successfully encompassed. What he said was always

enlivened by a great sense of humour and by great kindness, something of which I am particularly reminded on looking back over the letters he wrote during our years together as editor.

Whether or not we had a leisurely start to our afternoon's editing, there was always a great deal to discuss and do, and the pace of work and of Douglas's activities would accelerate from about 4.15 pm onwards. At 5 o'clock he would leap up, shoving an armful of papers into a capacious travelling bag (which he regarded as a *sine qua non* for an editor, ordinary brief cases being much too exiguous) and dash out of the office in the curious slightly squashed blue headgear which he called a yachting cap, but which was certainly not Cowes style. One or two things would usually have been left behind, but even in his 70th year his time for the sprint from BMA house to King's Cross would be difficult to beat. Astonishingly, he practically never missed a train.

Douglas's scientific and clinical achievements and his rounded personality have been acclaimed in Donald Court's James Spence medal citation and in the other articles in this special number. I therefore wish to write particularly about his work as editor. Of all the qualities which he brought to this task, the two which impressed me most have been his enthusiasm and conscientiousness. Editing a major journal for 16 years is very hard work. Richard Dobbs compares an editor to the skipper of a yacht, but in some ways I think the editor is more like one of a rowing crew—in the case of the *Archives*, which has a long tradition of two editors working harmoniously together, a coxed pair, the technical editor being the cox. Most editing is a long, steady, hard pull over very similar stretches of water and it is only occasionally that some kind of tidal wave in the shape of angry would-be authors, delays at the printers, or terrible editorial oversights threatens to engulf the boat. New papers come into the office daily—now over 600 a year—and each one is likely to be seen and worked over by the editor several times between its submission and rejection or publication. Every stage on every paper would be dealt with by Douglas with the same scrupulous care.

The popular notion of editors is that they come in

two main kinds. On the one hand are policymaking editors, taking a broad view of what the journal should be doing and not too much concerned with details. On the other hand are editorial editors concerned with details of accuracy, style, spelling, and format. If these two kinds of editors exist, Douglas was emphatically both at the same time. He was constantly concerned with the broad responsibilities of the *Archives*. He felt it part of his job to try to obtain the best papers for the journal by keeping his ear to the ground for what was going on in research and being presented at meetings. Could an original paper be encouraged to come our way, or was there some new topic ready to be dealt with in an Annotation or some other special invited article? He was also concerned with trying to take the *Archives* to parts of the world where it was less widely read, and his new ideas for doing this have been a constant theme in the Minutes of meetings of the Editorial Committee over the last 15 years. The ethics of paediatric research is an issue in which he has taken a particular and long-standing interest. He tried to ensure that articles published in the *Archives* met the highest ethical standards and that children were not exploited or misused for research. However, on this subject like all others his view was a balanced and moderate one, and he has also been keen to ensure that proper and beneficial research is protected and not impeded. Of the three policymaking leading articles on this subject published in the *Archives* in the last 12 years, the most important was undoubtedly the 1973 one (Volume 48, page 751), and this was almost entirely written by Douglas.

Douglas's broad editorial grasp was always apparent when we discussed what to do with a difficult paper. Confronted with a lengthy article, often containing unfamiliar technical detail, and a lengthy and detailed referee's report, he would always cut through the befuddlement which is apt to afflict editors in this situation. He would rapidly pick out the main points which the authors were, or ought to have been, making. He would then ask: Was it scientifically convincing? Was it clearly expounded? Was it important? Confusion rapidly vanished.

However, Douglas was also an editor with an irresistible interest in detail and style. A manuscript which he had read—even one we were most unlikely to publish—would always be covered in corrections made either in pencil or in fine ink (the traditional thick blue pencil never seems to have been part of the editorial equipment in this office). All his alterations, his letters to me, and his drafts of letters to authors would be written out in longhand, not always particularly legibly. (Much of Douglas's

writing was certainly done on the train between Cambridge and London, but his writing *always* looked as if it had been done on a bumpy train-ride.)

Douglas was particularly appreciative of the invaluable service given to the *Archives* by its technical editors, and he would certainly be very disappointed if this special number did not include a tribute to the splendid work of Rita Carne, Susan Burkhart, and Jennifer Orton, the three who have assisted us during his editorship. However, Douglas's attention to detail, including punctuation and the use of particular words, occasionally led to one of the very few disagreements between him and them. In general, commas are regarded as the property of the technical editors—at least ordinary, common-or-garden, tactical commas which make sentences easier or more difficult to read. Only the much rarer strategic comma which may totally alter the sense of a sentence is regarded as coming within the purview of the editors. But Douglas could sometimes not resist a wholesale attack on commas of all kinds to the consternation especially of Rita Carne. His desire for stylistic accuracy met its Waterloo over a problem related to drug dosage. 'Milligrams per kilogram per day' is an expression in everyday use in clinical medicine. It is of course scientifically and mathematically incorrect, the correct expression being ' $\text{mg kg}^{-1} \text{day}^{-1}$ '. However, the latter expression is not only a typographical monstrosity but it bears no relation to the colloquial one in clinical use. Douglas chewed over this problem for several years during his editorship. He could not bear the incorrect ' mg/kg/day '. He toyed with various compromises, finishing up with ' mg/kg per day ', mainly I think because it at least indicated that we could see there was a problem. However, I believe he still experiences a mild twinge of pain every time he sees this expression printed.

Another stylistic problem which vexed him was that of sibs and siblings. After consulting various genetic experts (who frankly do not seem to have been terribly clear themselves about the distinction between these words), Douglas concluded that the correct term for 'brothers and sisters' was 'sibs', and that 'siblings' was incorrect because it was a diminutive and referred only to children. In the volumes of the *Archives* spanning several years, therefore, the word 'siblings' does not appear unless inadvertently it escaped Douglas's editorial pen. We subsequently discovered that we were quite wrong. 'Siblings' is the correct term for children having one or both parents in common, and 'sib' is a broader and vaguer term connoting kinship. (Interested readers looking up '-ling' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* will find an explanation of why it is not a diminutive in words of this kind.)

Douglas was not particularly put out by this discovery—his occasional conservatism is always blended with a willingness to change in the light of new evidence, and siblings are now to be found in the pages of the *Archives*.

Another example of Douglas's willingness to change even his most cherished ideas concerns the title of this journal. Periodically there are rumblings in the BPA, the Editorial Committee, or just among interested readers, that our title is old fashioned and carries an air of musty Dickensian attics—which is not the image we try to convey. Douglas was always rather fond of the title and was skilled at marshalling arguments in its defence. The truth

was that he would have been perfectly happy to change it if someone suggested a better title, but that exercise is a great deal more difficult than it sounds, and so far no one has.

Working for nearly 11 years with Douglas at the *Archives* has been a high privilege and pleasure. The British Paediatric Association, British paediatrics in general, and the journal itself owe him a great debt for all that he has contributed over so many years. However, I will especially remember Tuesday afternoons sitting with him in a smallish room in BMA house at a smallish table piled with papers. About them, and about everything else, he always has something interesting to say.