



Monroe E. Spaght

MONROE EDWARD SPAGHT

1909–1993

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SECRETARY

MONROE EDWARD SPAGHT, a research chemist and former president and chairman of Shell Oil Company, died June 27, 1993, at the age of eighty-three.

Born near Eureka, California, December 9, 1909, Monty Spaght worked his way through college playing trombone in a jazz band, graduating with a major in chemistry from Stanford University where he also earned his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees. A fellowship from the Institute of International Education (IIE) enabled him to study physics for a year at the University of Leipzig in Germany. He remained a lifelong supporter of the IIE and a vocal proponent of quality education.

Dr. Spaght joined Shell in 1933 as a researcher. He was responsible for many contributions to scientific books and journals, and was credited with a number of important patents involving the recovery of chemical by-products from refining; by 1940 he was a manager of the company's technical activities on the West Coast. During the Second World War he served on a naval technical mission to Europe, moving into Germany with the Allied forces to study technical developments in German industry. Soon afterward he spent seven months in Japan as a director of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey analyzing the effects of bombing on Japanese industry.

Upon his return from these duties, Spaght resumed his progress up Shell's corporate ladder, first as vice-president and

then president of Shell Development Company. In 1953 he was promoted to executive vice-president and elected a director of the company. He became president and chief executive officer of Shell Oil Company on January 1, 1961, and served in that position until 1965, when he became the chairman of the board of Shell Oil Company and the first American appointed a managing director of Royal Dutch/Shell Group of Companies, the parent company of Shell Oil. So remarkable was Spaght's induction that it required an alteration of the parent company's long-standing bylaws on nationality; until then the team of managing directors had been made up exclusively of Dutch and British members.

Spaght retired from both positions in 1970 but continued to serve as a director of Royal Dutch Petroleum Company and Shell Oil Company until 1980.

At various times over a long career Spaght was a trustee of Stanford University, a director of the Stanford Research Institute and the American Petroleum Institute, and a trustee of the Institute of International Education. *Fortune* magazine in 1966 described him as belonging to "that modern-day school of executives who are distinguished for their strong sense of social responsibility," and as one who took on public service activities "not as a dilettante or figurehead, but as a vital and knowledgeable leader." In his social views he combined a love of order and civilized behavior with a passion for justice and fair play. His interest in education was by no means superficial, and his legacy can still be seen in the Shell Companies Foundation, which he helped organize and once directed.

Monty Spaght was elected a member of the National Academy of Engineering in 1969. He was cited for his creative management of research, design, construction, and operation in the petroleum and petrochemical industry. Spaght was also a member of the American Chemical Society and a fellow of both the American Institute of Chemical Engineers and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

His many honors and awards included the Midwest Research Institute Annual Award (1962) "for contributions to the advancement of technical knowledge, advocacy and utilization

of scientific research, and support of education"; the Chemical Industry Medal from the American Section of the Society of Chemical Industry (1966); the Axel Johnson Lecture from the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences (1966); and numerous honorary degrees from colleges and universities. He belonged to the Order of Francisco de Miranda from the Office of the President of Venezuela (1968) and held the honorary rank of commander, Order of Orange-Nassau from the Chancery of Netherlands Orders (1970).

Among Monty Spaght's many publications, perhaps the most widely read and admired was *The Bright Key*, a book on the relation of business to research and education. Never has the case for business and corporate support of higher education been made more eloquently and persuasively. *The Bright Key* showed Spaght to be decades ahead of his time in his championing of excellence and quality, and John Gardner's introduction described Spaght as one of those sorely needed individuals "who can work with complex organizations yet retain their individuality, who can master technology yet retain their humanity, who can move easily between reflection and action." Spaght often discoursed within Shell on the ancient Greek ideal of *arete* (excellence) as a way of life. In Monty's words, "*Arete* conveyed the idea of wholeness, of the fullest and finest exercise of one's abilities in all activities recognized as good. The Greeks prized it, strived for it, recognized it, and rewarded it wherever it appeared." Needless to say, Spaght urged Shell managers to do the same.

Wholeness, of course, requires not only a great deal of imagination but considerable tolerance for opposing views and creative conflict. Indeed, Coleridge said that the power of imagination "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities." By that standard, or any other, Spaght certainly possessed imagination; he once described a good research director as "a man imbued with a chaste spirit of scientific inquiry, and a good sense of double-entry bookkeeping." It was this sort of unlikely combination of apparently opposed qualities that Spaght not only valued but embodied. He knew that a research scientist, however idealistic, could not

afford to imagine himself opposed to his company's profit-making purpose. Nor could a profitable and successful company remain that way for long if it mistook the idealism that energized its researchers for impractical naivete. Monte Spaght simply refused to regard these conflicting forces as irreconcilable, and by uniting them brilliantly in his own person, he provided unparalleled leadership by example. If there was a secret to his leadership style, it was a refreshing combination of maximal individuality and minimal egotism.

Anyone seeking to understand life in Shell Oil Company and the Royal Dutch/Shell Group would do well to start with Spaght's charming autobiography, *The Long Road from Eureka*, published in England in 1986. *The Multinational Corporation: Its Manners, Methods, and Myths*, another of his most informative books, appeared in 1978.

As president of Shell Oil, Spaght excelled at fostering cooperative action or, as he put it, "the establishment of an environment of maximum freedom in which a man can perform to his full ability. What a president can do, at most, is help an organization to flower." Flower Shell did under Spaght's leadership, particularly in marketing, with simplified lines of communication and decision making, combined with creation of a system for basing marketing decisions on sound economic analysis.

Monty Spaght was a perfect spokesman for Shell and the oil industry in the turbulent decade of the 1960s when the rationale of almost every institution came under intense scrutiny. He was a living refutation of the stereotypical view that large corporations, and particularly oil companies, were cold, heartless, irresponsible, and dehumanized organizations. He was easily approachable, and no one who ever met Monty Spaght or spoke with him, however briefly, came away with stereotypes unchallenged.

As a young researcher, Spaght was the kind of person a large corporation dreams of recruiting. As an administrator, he was the kind of leader a young researcher dreams of working for. As a friend, colleague, or mentor, Monty Spaght was a man who would have been a credit to any organization or

endeavor. We will never know what contribution he might have made had he remained a research chemist, but on the path he chose—or that chose him—his impact was large and lasting, his role was vital, and his gifts were many and remarkable.