Guiengola
Softly in the Footsteps of Thomas MacDougall

In the history of every category of collecting by foreigners in southern Mexico, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in south-eastern Oaxaca, belongs to Thomas Baillie MacDougall (1895–1973), the modest, methodical and tireless Scottish naturalist (Fig. 1). Every year, from January 1931 until his death in 1973, he left the Bronx, New York, where he worked in the nursery of the Shemin family and spent the winter months (from November to May) in Tehuantepec. From there he would venture widely, traveling by foot, local bus and train and collect fauna and flora, especially cactus and succulents, from the remote cloud forests and the lowland tropics of southern Mexico.

Throughout these 40 years of exploration, MacDougall returned repeatedly to certain chosen landscapes that, over time, became layered with personal meaning, a strong self-identification and the source of exceptional scientific expertise. On the CSSA trip, we stopped at two isolated sky islands in the Isthmus, that signal the dwindling of the Sierra Madre and that MacDougall knew intimately, Cerro de Las Flores and Guiengola. The latter became the deepest example of his attachment to southern Mexico, his affinity with its people and the site of some of his most fruitful collaborations (Fig. 2).

About nine miles west of Tehuantepec, the truncated mountain of Guiengola rises suddenly to a height of around 3300' from the windswept Pacific plain. It is bordered on the east by the Tehuantepec River, south east by the ancient town of Santa Maria Mixtequilla and on the west by a pass, now Interstate 190, the Pan American Highway. It is from there one begins the climb today. This mountain was always a watch-tower guarding the entrance to the valley and city of Tehuantepec and the Zapotecos exploited its position in their successful resistance of Aztec encroachment from the north. The ruins

1 Tom MacDougall. Photo taken in the 1960’s over breakfast in Oaxaca by his friend the photographer Martin Schweig.