



Douglas Gasking

## Douglas Aidan Trist Gasking 1911–1994

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**D**OUGLAS GASKING, who died on May 3, 1994, was born in Canada in 1911, the son of a clergyman in the Anglican communion, during much of Douglas's boyhood in the Episcopal church in Scotland. Douglas himself was never a believer in the Christian dogmas (even, so he told me, at the age of three!). He was educated at St John's School, Leatherhead, at the University of Liverpool, and at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he read for the moral sciences tripos. At Cambridge he was naturally very much influenced by Wittgenstein. However, he recently told me that his sympathies even then (as well as subsequently) were very much 'Vienna Circle'. This perhaps explains why even when expounding Wittgenstein he was always lucid and straightforward, without the deep and tortuous intellectual agonisings of many of Wittgenstein's disciples.

After a period at the University of Queensland he was instructor in scientific method at the Land Headquarters School of Civil Affairs. Douglas said that he taught inductive logic to generals! To the great good of Australian philosophy Gasking came to the University of Melbourne in 1946, and taught there for thirty years, becoming Boyce Gibson Professor in 1966. In their very different but complementary styles he and A.C. Jackson provided outstanding philosophical leadership.

Gasking's publications were few in number but very high in quality. There were seven papers in philosophical journals, one in *Historical Studies* (May 1950), one in the *Australian Journal of Science*, and a paper 'Avowals' (important for the philosophy of mind) in R.J. Butler (ed.) *Analytical Philosophy* (1962). There was also a pamphlet *Examinations and the Aims of Education* (1945, 2nd ed 1948, repr. 1968). With A.C. Jackson he also wrote an illuminating memoir of Wittgenstein in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (hereafter 'AJP') 1951, concerned almost entirely with Wittgenstein's method of lecturing and thinking philosophically.

The young Turks of the present generation of philosophers who judge too much by quantity of publications would not easily understand the huge influence that Douglas had in Australia and his deserved reputation overseas. At conferences Douglas often read papers. When others did so he nearly always engaged in the ensuing discussions and these contributions were always definite highlights. I.T. Oakley has recounted how he and other honours students would go back to his course on 'honours logic' that they had done in earlier years. He changed the content of his lectures from year to year. One year, says Oakley, it might be 'probability, meaning and

indeterminacy', another year it might be 'nomic necessity, the foundations of logical truth and explanation'—there was so much to learn from him.

Before I came to Australia I knew of Douglas through his 'Mathematics and the World', *AJP* 1940, and his 'Anderson and the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus', *AJP* 1949. The presence of Douglas Gasking in Melbourne was an important motive for me when I decided to come to Australia. 'Mathematics and the World' has been frequently discussed and cited in the literature. Together with a reply by the American philosopher Hector-Neri Castañeda it is included in a well known selection of readings in the philosophy of mathematics edited by Paul Benacerraf and Hilary Putnam. Eventually I have come to side with Castañeda but Gasking's paper is still instructive as an effort to see how Wittgenstein's conventionalist philosophy of mathematics might be worked out. The paper 'Anderson and the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus' was foredoomed to failure in its attempt to bring mutual comprehension between Sydney Andersonians and Melbourne Wittgensteinians and analytic philosophers but the article was extremely useful in its elucidation of the *Tractatus*. At the end it gave a wonderfully deflationist interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks on the mystical. A few years ago I said to Douglas that biographical evidence has suggested that Wittgenstein really had been a mystic. 'Yes', said Douglas, 'the old boy had us tricked!'

The paper 'Causation and Recipes' (*Mind*, 1955) is frequently cited in the philosophical literature. Other important articles are 'Clusters', *AJP* 1960, which can be thought of as a precise and extended discussion of the sorts of concepts to which Wittgenstein had referred as 'family resemblance' concepts, and 'The Analytic-Synthetic Controversy', *AJP* 1972, which has to do with an important critique by W.V. Quine of a favorite philosophical distinction. Gasking lectured on Quine's ideas when he went to Cornell as a visiting professor. (He declined an offer of a permanent professorship there.)

In the immediate post-war years there was much mutual interest and cooperation between the two fine Melbourne departments of philosophy and of history. Gasking contributed an article to the Melbourne journal *Historical Studies* on 'The Historian's Craft and Scientific History' (May 1950). This article is a real beauty and it would have become very much better known if it had been published in a philosophical journal.

Gasking was almost my ideal of a philosopher. I admired his apparently total lack of worldly ambition. This went with his calmness and utter objectivity in philosophical discussion. It also went with a certain indolence not so much in actual writing but (so it seemed to me) as in getting round to putting what he had written in a brown envelope and posting it to an editor. Douglas loved good food and wine and always looked young for his age. He

had quickly become a real Australian and his English accent mixed amusingly with his extensive use of Australian colloquialisms. When in his final years Douglas was immobilised by a stroke and living in a nursing home he was still reading technical philosophy and linguistics and eager to discuss philosophical questions, mainly on visits by his friend and ex-student Len O'Neill. His first wife Betty (Marshall), with whom he had two children, was a biologist and an historian and philosopher of science. They had met as students at Liverpool. After Betty's untimely death Douglas married Lyn Brown. Lyn was to give Douglas great loving support during the difficult years of his disablement.

*J.J.C. Smart*