



Professor J A Passmore
(1914–2004)

John Arthur Passmore (1914–2004)



The world has many very clever people. John Passmore was one of them. What is less common is someone who sets an agenda, who does things in new ways, who shapes the way we tackle central problems. Passmore was one of the less common.

Passmore was an early student of the influential Scottish-born philosopher John Anderson at the University of Sydney. There are conflicting reports of what it was like to study under Anderson. But there is no disputing that some outstanding philosophers came through Anderson's Sydney school. Passmore, along with David Armstrong, would have to be the most prominent.

Passmore taught at Sydney before going to the chair of philosophy at the University of Otago in 1950. He then moved in 1955 to the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, where he was reader and then professor of philosophy and head of department. He held a number of distinguished visiting appointments at universities outside Australia including Gauss Lecturer, Princeton University, and was Tanner Lecturer on Human Values at Cambridge University in 1980.

He gave the ABC Boyer Lectures in 1981. He was a director and later governor of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and was made a Companion of the Order of Australia in 1992.

Passmore was never one to ride with the herd and for a good part of his career was something of a lone voice in Australian philosophy. His interests were more historical – in many ways he was as much a historian of ideas as a philosopher – and more applied than was usual in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. During this period his work was probably better known in Britain, Europe and the US than Australia.

The situation changed partly through an increase in interest in the history of philosophy in Australia – or, more precisely, a better appreciation of the importance of seeing philosophical problems in their historical context. Passmore felt very strongly about this, reflecting in part the influence of Anderson – but mostly through the recognition that philosophers can and should contribute to the public debate.

It is now widely recognised that philosophers can make important and distinctive contributions to discussions of the value of the environment, land rights, euthanasia, abortion, our obligations to contribute to famine relief, the role of science, education policy and so on. The work of Australian philosophers such as Peter Singer, now based

at Princeton, and Tony Coady at Melbourne are reference points in the public debate – albeit sometimes reference points from which to dissent.

But Passmore laid the groundwork and must be regarded as a pioneer, indeed arguably the parent, of what is now called applied philosophy. Here Passmore was effectively doing some rebalancing. Plato's best known work, *The Republic*, was, as the title suggests, a work in political theory intended to influence the way we organise society. (Its impact was perhaps diminished by its advocacy of philosopher kings, an idea more appealing to philosophers than non-philosophers.) The 'professionalisation' of Australian philosophy that started in the 1950s and 1960s was in many ways a good thing. There are important philosophical issues that cannot be tackled without sophisticated machinery, but equally there is a major role for philosophy in the public domain.

His work in applied philosophy was wide-ranging, covering the limits of government (the topic of his Boyer Lectures), the philosophy of teaching, of serious art, of science and the philosophy of the environment. His work in environmental philosophy laid out much of the agenda that structures the current debate. He was characteristically rigorous and philosophically sophisticated, while being accessible to those not professionally trained in philosophy. He argued strongly that we need to change our attitude to the environment and that we cannot go on living, as we have been, as predators on the biosphere. But he rejected the view that we should see our present predicament as showing that we should abandon the Western scientific and rationalist tradition and embrace some form of irrationalism or mysticism. Here his grasp of the historical context was important. He argued – I would say showed – that the view taken by some of the more radical members of the environmental movement that it is the Western scientific tradition *per se* which is responsible for our present predicament is based on a misreading of and a selective attention to the complex historical facts.

He also put clearly the importance of the fundamental distinction between valuing the environment in and of itself versus his preferred position of valuing it in terms of what it contributes to the flourishing of sentient creatures including humans.

Although his work in applied philosophy will, I suspect, be the most influential in the long term, the work that put him on the international map was an essay on the history of ideas. *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, first published in 1957, is a remarkable work of scholarship displaying an encyclopedic knowledge of the major philosophical movements of the preceding hundred years, combined with an intimidating understanding of their historical origins. It is common to meet people who cannot quite believe that it was written by one person.

Passmore was one of those fortunate people who, once they reach a certain age, never seem to get much older and he was working at a high level well into his eighties. He naturally took some satisfaction in this. I chaired a public lecture he gave timed to be near his eightieth birthday. The original venue had to be shifted at the last minute

when it became clear that we had badly underestimated how many people would come out on a cold Canberra night to hear him. During the shift he left his notes behind in the original venue and they had to be recovered (and yes, we worried that they had been lost). In the fuss I forgot to mention his birthday in my introduction. He rectified this omission in the nicest possible way and gave a fine lecture unfazed by the to-ing and fro-ing that had preceded it.

We tend to measure academic esteem in terms of honours and lists of books and papers, and Passmore had many of both. He was a corresponding fellow of the British Academy, honorary foreign member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, foreign member of the Royal Danish Academy of Science and Letters, a fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and a founding member of the Australian Academy of the Humanities – of which he was President in 1974–77.

There is an annual lecture at ANU in his name and he published about 20 books, many of which have been widely translated. But when I reflect on his life, what strikes me is the way he shaped the public debate and opened up philosophy and history of ideas to the wider world. We are in his debt.

He is survived by his wife, Doris Passmore, and his two daughters, Diana and Helen.

Frank Jackson

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