

INTERVIEW

A Tapestry

Susan Edwards-McKie Interviews Professor Dr B. F. McGuinness on the Occasion of His 90th Birthday*

EDWARDS-MCKIE: With the philosophy of language being so prominent in the 20th century, how did you come also to the philosophy of science and mathematics in the study of Wittgenstein, which now, of course, is beginning to move into important focus?

MCGUINNESS: The papers from the Vienna Circle were making their way to Europe and the U.S. – new scientific literature to the English-speaking world. Oxford people were approached to participate in the series, the *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*. Then Frege – Blackwell thought they had to have one.

EDWARDS-MCKIE: Yes, from you we have the early Cambridge correspondence 1974, the philosophical papers of Waismann 1977, Kauffmann 1978, Hahn 1980, and then a series of learned essays in the 1980s including “The so-called realism of the *Tractatus*” 1981, “Wittgenstein on Probability”, “The Path to the *Tractatus*” both 1982, followed by Frege 1984 and the landmark biography *Wittgenstein: a life* in 1988. I thought it would be interesting to start with your first article “Pictures and Form in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*”. When I read your 1956 essay it struck me as having all the hallmarks of the classical scholar – the concern with, and not shying away from or doing away with the careful discerning of levels – like the ancients did and those who read them must be cognizant of.

MCGUINNESS: Yes, I read ancient philosophy and had thought to go into that. The Italian Jesuit Colombo, a translator of the *Tractatus*,

* Brian McGuinness reached his 90th birthday on 22 October 2017. I had the privilege of meeting with him in Oxford – over a two-day period – in August of that year. His is an intellectual journey of uncommon depth and breadth. The questions were designed to highlight strands in this complex tapestry. I wish to thank him for his generosity in respect of his time and the providing of materials throughout the interview process.

suggested I write the article that became “Pictures and Form” for the Italian journal *Archivio di Filosofia*.

EDWARDS-MCKIE: “Pictures and Form” was a courageous article by a very young man. It seems to have at least the same sort of concerns – if arguably not the same conclusions – that you brought to the translation of the *Tractatus*. How did you come to work on the translation of the *Tractatus*?

MCGUINNESS: Gilbert Ryle thought the existing translation bad – and induced David Pears and me to take it on. We had thought of a joint commentary, but that never came to be.

EDWARDS-MCKIE: I suppose the real difficulty was over the translation of “*Sachverhalt*”. Geach and Urmson praised your translation. Any opposing views seem to centre on the argument that “*Sachverhalt*” cannot be translated “state of affairs”.

MCGUINNESS: But it’s NOT an atomic fact.

EDWARDS-MCKIE: What were the considerations in translation, then?

MCGUINNESS: *In-potentia*, can exist or not. There was no attempt in the first translation to distinguish between potentiality and actuality. That was a mistake.

EDWARDS-MCKIE: Also, your biography is a very intellectual biography – the ideas of the *Tractatus* run like a thread through all the other things, not a history of intellectualism.

MCGUINNESS: Yes, I’d like to think so.

EDWARDS-MCKIE: You have said that the notes buried in the Ashmolean – Waismann’s shorthand notes, which became your 1967 publication, and Engelmann’s notes – led you to present the fact to von Wright that the wealth of material should be made into a life. It is interesting to me that your work – indeed your life – is guided by your archival journeys and joys.

MCGUINNESS: Yes, there is something in that. I came across the Waismann papers when they were being neglected and one thing led to another. Of course I was trained really as a textual scholar. Von Wright said that “he himself could not write that life”, and put me in touch with the Wittgenstein family.

EDWARDS-MCKIE: Perhaps we can turn to characterising some of the aspects of the Oxford of the time, and later figures. We seem to have

the intersection of ordinary language philosophy and something that was brought by those from the continent, which you comment on in your 2001 contribution to the journal *Philosophical Investigations* in which many scholars write about how they came to Wittgenstein, and elsewhere in your work on the Vienna Circle. What was Waismann's place in Oxford?

MCGUINNESS: Oxford accepted Waismann as someone to contribute as an expert on logic and mathematics. Cambridge had that. Students would seek out his lectures.

EDWARDS-MCKIE: What about Austin?

MCGUINNESS: Austin started before the War. There was Austin's discussion group on Saturday mornings. Patrick Gardiner, David Pears and I would attend. Austin always said: "Moore's my man." Kenny arrived at Oxford much later, after leaving the church; Grice and Strawson were later too with lectures well attended. And Dummett, of course.

EDWARDS-MCKIE: Could you say a bit about Dummett. One of your publishing contributions 1994 focuses on Dummett.

MCGUINNESS: Dummett was Austin's student. Austin started him off on Frege. Dummett made another step, with much use of logic and mathematics in his explanation of Frege.

EDWARDS-MCKIE: In the 2006 article on Ryle's letter to Paton you make the point that Ryle believed that Russell's philosophy should be read "despite the fact that at that time most Oxford philosophers despised it". Could you say just a bit on that?

MCGUINNESS: Ryle's remark about Russell was very characteristic of him, he was proud of his cussedness, but the atmosphere in Oxford when I started was dismissive – my first tutor, a classicist and Hegelian, said Russell changed his mind too often and when he addressed the Philosophical Society the typical PPE tutor (a wing-commander in the war) said "Who cares what Bertie thinks", equalling Russell's own *sprezzatura*. Of course it was different when we studied TLP with Ryle.

EDWARDS-MCKIE: Any comments on Anscombe's 1957 Oxford lectures on the *Tractatus* (which as you know form the basis of her *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*)?

MCGUINNESS: I didn't attend Anscombe's lectures. I was extremely busy that year and anyway I already thought I knew as much as she did. I liked to quote Michael Dummett's comment on her *Introduction* when she published it: "a tissue of confusions".

EDWARDS-MCKIE: Any comments on Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard?

MCGUINNESS: Kierkegaard is discussed in Wittgenstein's confessional notebooks from Norway. His was the attitude Wittgenstein was tempted to adopt but didn't quite – his "soul drew back" (Herbert).

Bibliographical postscript

Brian McGuinness' continuing scholarly work in the late 1980s and 1990s included textual exegesis in his acclaimed critical edition of the *Tractatus*, with Joachim Schulte, and work on the Pre-Tractarian manuscripts, both in 1989, a thorough bibliographical guide to the Wittgenstein literature in 1990, further work on Waismann, *Ethics and the Will* in 1994, on Dummett in 1994, on Menger in 1994, *Wittgenstein – Familienbriefe* in 1996. With the seminal article "Manuscripts and Works in the 1930s", in 2000, a high level of evidentiary support for textual claims generally, and for textual exegesis of the *Philosophical Investigations* particularly, was mobilised in McGuinness' argument that the early *Philosophical Investigations* should include the philosophy of mathematics typescript TS 221. In "On Wittgenstein" (2001), McGuinness outlined his intellectual development from "Pictures and Form" (1956), through "On the so-called realism of the *Tractatus*" onwards, concerning the ontology of the *Tractatus*. McGuinness' philosophical essays, which, by and large, had not been readily available to an English speaking audience, appeared in the Routledge collection *Approaches to Wittgenstein* (2002), including the important essays "Mysticism" (1966), "Philosophy of Science" (1969), and "The Grundgedanke of the *Tractatus*" (1974). The last fifteen years have included articles on von Wright in 2005, Ryle in 2006, Ramsey in 2006, new or expanded collections of letters and documents, in 2008 and 2011, Waismann in 2011, and the New Wittgensteinians in 2012. His current project, at the age of 90, is a completed and full edition of the Wittgenstein family letters.

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