

John Douglas 1828-1904: The Uncompromising Liberal

**A thesis submitted to the Department
of Humanities Central Queensland
University for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy**

**Jeremy Martin Hodes (BA, H Dip Bibl,
Hons B Bibl, Dip Cont Ed, M Litt)**

March 2006

Abstract

Douglas was born in London in 1828 and migrated to New South Wales in 1851 where he represented both the Darling Downs and Camden districts in the New South Wales parliament before embarking on a lengthy parliamentary career in Queensland, one that culminated in the premiership from 1877 to 1879. He was subsequently appointed government resident for Thursday Island in 1885, a position he held until his death, nearly 20 years later, aged 76, in 1904. During this period he also served as special commissioner for the protectorate of British New Guinea, administering the territory prior to it being formally proclaimed a crown colony.

Douglas's involvement in Queensland public life was significant and encompassed the entire period from the colony's formation in 1859 to the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901. In this respect, his career allows, through a study of his long, eventful and varied life, for this thesis to examine aspects of the development and progression of Queensland's political system as a nascent yet robust, representative democracy, through most of the second half of the nineteenth century until the colony's incorporation in the newly formed Commonwealth of Australia.

This thesis argues that John Douglas was an uncompromising Liberal in an age of Liberalism, a principled politician in an era of pragmatic factionalism and shifting political allegiances. Perhaps because of this he was more popular with his electorate than with his parliamentary colleagues.

Douglas's contribution to Queensland life was in large measure shaped by his character and the formative influences on it. This included his aristocratic upbringing, his public school and university education, his abiding religious faith, a profound sense of fair play, and a desire to participate fully and selflessly in the life of the community he lived in, despite the vicissitudes of his personal life.

As this thesis further demonstrates, an examination of Douglas's life affords us an insight into an energetic, accomplished, erudite, and compassionate man. Yet while his intellectual curiosity, thirst for knowledge and wide-ranging interests marked him as a Renaissance man, he also had many failings, most noticeably that of extreme obstinacy. Therefore, this thesis will analyse Douglas's convictions and beliefs while examining the strengths and flaws inherent in his character. It is because Douglas lived a life characterised by complexity and contradiction, leavened by a mixture of accomplishment and failure, that his life, and the times he lived in, are worthy of examination.

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Acknowledgements

Researching and writing this thesis has been a seven-year labour of love and has been immeasurably enriched and improved through the support and encouragement of numerous people.

Douglas family descendants have generously provided me with ongoing support, encouragement and assistance, in particular Catherine McCourt, Andrew and Lorraine Douglas, Barbara Douglas and Margot Douglas.

Libraries and archives have been indispensable, as has been the assistance provided by their staff. These include the State Libraries of New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria; the National Library of Australia; the libraries of Central Queensland University, James Cook University, the University of Queensland, the University of Hawaii, the University of Sydney, the University of New South Wales and the Australian National University. Archives include the National Archives of Australia, State Records New South Wales and the Queensland State Archives. Historical societies include the Cairns Historical Society and the Rockhampton District Historical Society.

Individuals who have made a significant and very welcome contribution to this thesis include Dr Anna Shnukal, Dr Beverly Kingston, John Scott, Katie McConnel, Noreen Kirkman, Gil Jennex, and, last but certainly not least, a very special thanks to my supervisors, Dr Malcolm Saunders and Professor Steve Mullins, for their commitment and support.

I also want to record my gratitude for the support of my family, my parents, Ruth and Lionel, my daughter Lauren and my partners for sharing the journey with me.

They all share in my success but any failings are my own.

Declaration

I declare that the work presented in this dissertation is, to the best of my knowledge, original and that the material has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for the award of any other degree at this or any other university.

JEREMY HODES

Canberra

March 2006