

## J. C. Beaglehole. *Public Intellectual, Critical Conscience*

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Colin Newbury

The author of this very short monograph is well-known in New Zealand as a biographer and historian. The work is a reprint and revision of his chapter on John Beaglehole in a book published in the United Kingdom three years ago.<sup>(1)</sup> By way of explanation, Munro submits that few copies sold in New Zealand, so this revision has been prepared 'for a parochial audience' and cheaper distribution (p. 2). That aside, it is a pleasure to review for a wider readership in *Reviews in History* his insights into the life of a scholar who will be familiar to historians for his superb editions of Cook's voyages and his unsurpassed biography of the great navigator. Readers expecting new insights into Beaglehole's tireless work as an editor, however, will find them more readily elsewhere.<sup>(2)</sup> Munro's emphasis is on a Pacific scholar's engagement in public affairs and his long campaign in a variety of causes to improve the quality of intellectual life in a society that was mostly indifferent, even hostile, to challenges to its complacency in the inter-war years.

Accordingly, this biography falls into two parts – Beaglehole's personal formation as an intellectual when a student in Wellington and as a postgraduate in London, followed by seven chapters covering his reluctant return and fraught engagements in academic and public life. He was lucky enough to be born into a cultured middle class family in Wellington in 1901. His three brothers became engineers and a professor of psychology. The young John Beaglehole, intelligent and with a sharp and critical pen, made his mark from 1919 at Victoria University College, by using a student newspaper to excoriate civic leaders for the Wellington environment and lampoon academic heads for the structure of the University of New Zealand which controlled the country's four regional colleges. Nevertheless, his MA thesis in History <sup>(3)</sup> earned him a travelling scholarship which took him to London University in 1926. His PhD, however, on the rather dull topic of 'Royal Instructions to Colonial Governors', under the supervision of A. P. Newton, did him no

favours and never found a publisher. But other contacts such as Harold Laski sharpened his scepticism for the received wisdom of any political establishment and the imperial metropolis enlarged his appreciation of music and the visual arts. So much so, that he took little pleasure in returning to New Zealand in 1930.

From then on, a comfortable reintegration into a country in the midst of the Depression was unlikely. His first post was as a tutor with the WEA in Otago in 1930. His radical support for waterfront strikers set him at odds with university authorities and sent him into periodic unemployment when his contract was not renewed. It is all the more remarkable that with only odd jobs for material support he managed to produce between 1934 and 1937 a very good history of Pacific exploration, a very critical history of the University of New Zealand and an unflattering short history of his homeland that was light on historical background and heavy on the social consequences of recession. Despite that output (or perhaps because of some of it), he missed out on tenured posts, until his successful rival for the chair of history at Victoria, aware of his qualities, generously found him a lectureship in 1936.

That date and the election of a Labour Government with sympathy for cultural causes marked the beginning of a vitally constructive period for Beaglehole. There were several reasons for this turn in his fortunes, one of which is not mentioned – notably the improvement in New Zealand's economy in the immediate pre-war and war years. More specifically, he moved into the sphere of government patronage extended through the Internal Affairs Department and its very broad-minded under-secretary, J. W. Heenan. Through Heenan, Beaglehole was relieved in 1947 of some of his teaching duties with the award of a government-funded professorial fellowship affording him time and money to tackle his Cook research in all the relevant archives and to follow his subject's explorations in fieldwork at his most important Pacific landfalls. As if that did not keep him busy enough, prior to the first Cook edition appearing in 1955 he also produced books on Tasman's discovery of New Zealand, an edition of New Zealand attitudes to the Statute of Westminster and a book on the university college that employed him.

But no matter what government was in power, there were inevitable rifts even with generous patrons. In the same year as the award of his professorial fellowship he took issue with the unwise insistence by Heenan and the government on the appointment of Andersen Tyrer as conductor of the country's new National Orchestra. Tyrer's inaugural performance fell far short of Beaglehole's balanced but critical expectations, published in a review.<sup>(4)</sup> There was a long battle with the incoming National Government over its threat to end funding for an Historical Atlas (eventually resolved by compromise); and there was a much more serious and public opposition to repressive legislation following a waterfront strike in 1951. That stand may have cost him his part-time advisory position with the Department of Internal Affairs, though the evidence discussed is not entirely conclusive on this point (pp. 50–2). There were further battles with whatever government was in power over resources for an Arts Advisory Council, and over the New Zealand Council for Civil Liberties, particularly with regard to the banning of Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *Lolita*, (for which the Council sued the government – and lost). More enduringly, Beaglehole was the power behind New Zealand's Historic Places Trust and the successful preservation of Old St Paul's Anglican Church, Wellington, which later honoured him with a memorial plaque suitably reproduced here as an illustration (p. 12). But that was about his limit in time and energy spent on public causes. In his mellower years he did not participate in other issues of the 1960s that engaged New Zealanders, such as Vietnam, rugby tours of South Africa or French nuclear tests in the Pacific.

By way of conclusion, in chapter eight Munro supplies some thoughtful answers as to what kind of public intellectual Beaglehole was (pp. 64–74) on the basis of the evidence surveyed. He finds it easiest to typologise him for what he was not. With one exception <sup>(5)</sup> he did not write works that engaged directly with contemporary affairs; he was never part of a party machine; and he deplored violence in street confrontations. In short, he was no revolutionary in the grand style of the philosopher, John Locke, who opposed the late Stuart kings, worked from exile and assisted in the bloodless change of monarchy in 1688. True, the times from a New Zealand perspective were very different from the 1930s through to the 1950s, though, arguably, no less fraught than for intellectuals in Europe caught up ideological wars more bitter than those of the 17th century. It is curious that Beaglehole's long and very active association with the New Zealand branch of the Institute of International Affairs did not yield material on his attitude to great power

questions.

It may simply be, therefore, that Beaglehole's 'critical conscience' was not global, but domestic, in the sense that he battled for excellence in the performing arts and in literature as much as for civil liberties at home. Munro draws a parallel with G. M. Trevelyan: 'both were modest and hard-working and each was infused with a sense of altruism' (p. 65). It is an interesting assertion. Both were certainly liberal minded and given to public service and conservation work; they both believed that big books on big subjects were essential to any civilised nation.. But there were differences, apart from Trevelyan's ancestry, war service and independent means. As a 'public intellectual' Beaglehole never indulged himself in patriotic nostalgia in his historical work on New Zealand in the style of Trevelyan's *History of England*, or made a heroic figure out of Cook in the manner of Trevelyan's glorification of Garibaldi.

Munro is on safer ground explaining his subject's public intellectualism. He argues that Beaglehole's adherence to causes came from a sense of duty, as much as moral conviction. His sense of 'freedom' was freedom to disagree which he encouraged in his students, and a freedom to read whatever was published which led him to oppose censorship. It says much about New Zealand society over the period under discussion (and I remember it well) that such views aroused indignantly intolerant opposition. 'It was not a receptive setting for the social critic; Beaglehole was definitely not regarded as being in ancient and honourable company' (p. 66). The fact that he campaigned at all, let alone with such a sharp tongue, on his return in 1930 marked him out as subversive and dangerous. Later in life, in calmer waters, he did not get so worked up about early ratification of the Statute of Westminster which would have allowed separate and independent diplomatic representation abroad, but welcomed it when it came in 1947. He set more store by the Canberra Pact of 1944 which asserted the right of Australia and New Zealand to have a say in regional Pacific issues, though I am not sure he thought through the eventual implications for defence costs.

In the end, Munro does not try to pin his subject down with a slick phrase, and that is to be applauded. If I were asked to summarise Beaglehole I would make a slightly different approach and place him among the foremost artists and writers who defined New Zealand's home-grown renaissance by selecting from their cultural roots - and especially the English language and its literary wealth - to fashion a distinctive idiom in which they came to terms with their natural and social environment. In that way New Zealand became less alien to the generation of the 1920s and 1930s. His monumental work on Cook was among those roots, as a product of Europe's age of Enlightenment. His civic causes were more parochial with a leaven of feeling for natural law and a visceral opposition to injustice. Much of the documentation for that view derives from the abundant literature used and cited by Munro. For that synoptic and well-researched account New Zealanders will be grateful.

## Notes

1. Doug Munro, *The Ivory Tower and Beyond: Participant Historians of the Pacific* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Most notably in Tim Beaglehole, *A Life of J. C. Beaglehole: New Zealand Scholar* (Wellington, 2006).  
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Later published as *Captain Hobson and the New Zealand Company: a Study of Colonial Administration* (Northampton, MA, 1928).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. C. Beaglehole, 'Reflections on an orchestral performance', *New Zealand Listener*, 21 March 1947, 8-9.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *New Zealand: a Short History* (London, 1936).[Back to \(5\)](#)

The author is grateful for this generous and perceptive review and wishes readers to know that he accepts Dr Newbury's corrective comments on his typologising of Beaglehole as a public intellectual.

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/53679>