

Obituary

John Cawte Beaglehole, O.M.

John Beaglehole the historian will be known to posterity primarily as the biographer of Cook and the editor of a superb edition of Cook's Voyages. These great works do indeed illustrate on a grand scale his qualities as man and scholar, yet it is proper to remember that, setting them aside, the corpus of his professional work handsomely demonstrates his eminence. Indeed, before the Cook project loomed on the horizon his reputation was established. He was a research worker without parallel. This was not just a matter of technique. He pursued facts down to the minutest detail; every matter studied was probed to the heart, all surrounding territory explored till its every aspect was intimately familiar. His quiet manner concealed a fierce integrity. More deeply important were the qualities of humanity and compassion, of sensitivity combined with toughness, of enthusiasm and quizzical humour, of artistic appreciation. The qualities which made him loved as a man shone through his professional work. He was an artist in insight, and in the skill which in him combined literature and history. A scholar-artist can illuminate without distorting his subject, and Beaglehole as biographer had the touch of genius. Such quality can give life to whatever it touches, and the quick sketches of Victoria University's founding fathers (1949) are as convincing as the mature studies of Cook and Banks and Bligh.

Beaglehole grew up during the rather painful period when his country was emerging from dependence towards nationhood, and some of his most sensitive writing is in this field. As historian and patriot he strove mightily for a New Zealand culture infused with the values of European civilisation: he told the story later in *The Development of New Zealand Nationality* and in his moving personal pilgrimage as *The New Zealand Scholar*. He stood for a disciplined liberty of thought and action. History nourished his principles and sharpened his pen, and righteous indignation in earlier years sometimes strained his tact. It was, however, increasingly controlled by a mature and kindly wisdom.

Beaglehole's pen, his counsel, his time unstintingly given, his extraordinarily wide-ranging expertise, were at the service of countless unpublicised activities which helped to form New Zealand's growing sense of identity. During the formative years of work for the Centennial of 1940 and the wartime experiences that followed, he was historical adviser to a sympathetic government. Under the aegis of that great civil servant

Joseph Heenan the Centennial Branch (later the Historical Branch) of the Department of Internal Affairs was born, and Beaglehole helped to turn the Centennial chore into an artistic as well as a scholarly enterprise: witness, for example, the series of Centennial Surveys, and the pictorial *Making New Zealand*. The great long-term project of a *New Zealand Historical Atlas* inevitably slowed down under the impact of war, and, especially after Pearl Harbour, the resources of the Branch (including the historical expertise, typographical skills and good taste of its adviser) were increasingly applied to some phenomenally good publicity, which helped to remind New Zealanders of the values for which they fought — and to cementing relations with our allies. The graceful booklet for the Tasman Tercentenary may be seen as an example, and *Introduction to New Zealand*, a fine and admirably illustrated volume (kept from local circulation by war-time shortages) which attempted to show the American public the nature of the small country which their forces were rescuing. The war over, there followed the short though productive period when Beaglehole supervised government-sponsored research towards a revitalised Atlas project; but the Historical Branch perished with a change in government and in civil service personnel. In later years Beaglehole's skill and dedication underlay the patient work of the Historic Places Trust.

Such were fruitful background activities to years of devoted service and deep affection for Victoria University and its department of history. For hundreds of students his classes (and less formal contacts on the campus) were mind-stretching experiences. For all his humanity, Beaglehole was uncompromising on standards and on craftsmanship as an expression of sound thought. The scholar, the civilised man, was always there, never the purveyor of pre-digested dogmas or clichés. Beginners were led into the subject through the study of a few, carefully selected books, and taught to dig out the facts for themselves before grappling with problems of interpretation. For advanced students, doors opened, horizons widened, the sense of ultimate values peeped through. And for all—students and friends alike—there was the concern for people as people, the same meticulous and constructive criticism of work submitted. His teaching never fostered a string of would-be Beaglehole-imitators. It did produce lively, balanced and independent minds, well equipped research workers, and young men and women who had at least glimpsed the ideals by which he lived.

For practice matched precept. The exigencies of the university system, accepted and even welcomed by a lively mind, called on Beaglehole to teach at advanced levels a widening range of subject matter. The colonial policy and administration of his London research could be a starting point. It linked backwards into the rich fields of the eighteenth century, into seventeenth century Puritanism, and the early phases of European colonisation. It linked forwards into American history, colonial self-government and the evolution of nationhood, which was to be a major field of his activity as historian and citizen. The range of his expertise seemed unlimited—in particular there was an abiding interest in political philosophy—which was the basis of the outstanding course offered for many years to

honours students; Harold Laski, it is said, told him he should have been a political scientist, not a historian. But he never taught a subject to which he could not bring a deep understanding, founded on solid knowledge and constructive insight.

He ranged widely, but from early days he was, as he once remarked, an eighteenth century kind of man, and with the invitation to edit the journals of Banks and Cook this interest flowered into mastery. He taught till his retirement, but now only to small, advanced groups, and his main strength was given to research and writing. The results are known to the world, and they gave a new dimension to the concept of editing. Yet the weight of scholarship in the edited texts, so immense and so graciously borne, is not more characteristic than the demonstration that minute knowledge in depth can be applied in a few brilliant pages to illuminate a broad topic, indeed a whole civilisation. The Young Banks and the General Introduction to Cook's *Journals* should be compulsory reading for those who wish to know what historical scholarship is all about. To these might well be added his moving essay on the death of Cook, with its mastery of fact, compassionate insight and intellectual integrity.

F. L. W. WOOD