

J.C. Beaglehole: Public Intellectual, Critical Conscience

By Doug Munro.

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Reviewed by Melanie Nolan

Why do we need another biography of J.C. Beaglehole? Tim Beaglehole wrote a 480-page (excluding the notes) biography in 2006. This publication is extracted from a larger work on participant historians of the Pacific which Doug Munro published in Britain in 2009. Munro justifies this replication because the larger work was British published and ‘priced beyond the tolerance of the New Zealand market.’¹ One cannot plagiarize oneself but this is a ‘revision and expansion’ of the earlier book chapter, albeit still short at 80 pages (not counting the notes). In a piece he wrote for the Institute of Historical Research last month Munro gives us further validation for a separate publication on Beaglehole noting that ‘monograph-length biographies of Australian historians ... are not exactly numerous.’² For the record there have been 18, whereas there have been only two biographies on New Zealand historians: Tim Beaglehole’s and, indeed, now also Munro’s on J.C. Beaglehole. At a time when consideration of historians’ lives is held to help us understand the stories historians have written, this is then a useful account in New Zealand’s historiography even if it is a companion rather than a competitor to the Beaglehole biography. For in the end, these works, like their authors appear to be, friends and companions rather than adversaries developing a debate.

There is of course wide agreement that J.C. Beaglehole (1901-1971) has had the greatest international reputation of any New Zealand historian. Beaglehole might have enjoyed a research fellowship from 1949-1963 with relatively few graduate students to supervise, few PhD theses to examine and no lectures and tutorials to give but New Zealand’s ‘investment’ in Beaglehole was vindicated. Sheer hard scholarship won him world-class status as the editor of Captain James Cook’s journals, Joseph Banks’ Endeavour journals and the biographer of Cook. Beaglehole turned down a Chair at the Australian National University in 1949 (and maybe an Australian offer a few years earlier) and, as we are told three times, the Beit Chair at Oxford in 1962. Forsaking all offers, Beaglehole stayed in New Zealand and agitated to make it a better place as a public intellectual.

In teasing out his public intellectualism, Munro concentrates on three controversies over which Beaglehole’s conscience made him ‘go public’. The first was the National Orchestra Imbroglio in 1947 when Beaglehole did not support Andersen Tyrer’s appointment as the foundation conductor of the National Orchestra of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service (now the New Zealand Sympathy Orchestra). After protesting at the appointment, Beaglehole could not help himself but write a review in the *New Zealand Listener* holding the inaugural programme and the performance to be below international standards. The second was the ‘Captain Cook and Civic Controversy’ when the National government abandoned the previous Labour government’s bold plan for a national atlas and, instead, supported a smaller-scale project, McLintock’s *Descriptive Atlas of New Zealand* (1959). In the process the government also sacked Beaglehole from his Department of Internal Affairs’ role with the Centennial Branch, the Historical Branch from 1940, which imaginative public servant Joe

Heenan had assiduously cultivated. The third was Beaglehole's agitation over culture, including for an Arts Advisory Council on which he sat, and later an Arts Council, which did not include Beaglehole. Meanwhile Beaglehole worked with the New Zealand Council For Civil Liberties in 1952 against the censorship of literature; and with the New Zealand historical Places Trust for the preservation of St Paul's Cathedral Church in Wellington. Munro argues that Beaglehole's public conscience was activated over these issues at cost in time and energy to his scholarship. Beaglehole attracted a great deal of controversy: 'New Zealand was - still is - too small a place for candour.'³ Munro also notes that Beaglehole did not protest over the Vietnam war, nuclear testing in the Pacific or South African apartheid; he was, at heart, a scholar entering into public life selectively, as Munro characterizes it, 'a specialist surgeon rather than a general practitioner in terms of activism.'⁴

In passing we learn a further rationale for a different perspective on Beaglehole than that given by his son. Tim Beaglehole's was a 'filial' biography while Munro's is not. Of course we learn that Andersen Tyrer awarded Munro's father first prize for bass solo at the Dunedin Competition in 1937 and that cellist Marie Vandewart played with Munro's mother in the Alex Lindsay Strong Orchestra.⁵ Of course Munro's father, Donald Munro, who founded an opera company, met Beaglehole at 'our next door neighbour's place.'⁶ Despite their common interest in music they had 'nothing to say to each other.' Such is the nature of New Zealand society in several ways. More to the point, there are no significant or obvious differences in their view of John Beaglehole between his biographers, his son or Munro. There are no views that Tim has that Munro would deny or vice versa. Munro knows his music and gives a balanced consideration of Tyrer but Tim Beaglehole reproduces most of Beaglehole's *Listener* review of the National Orchestra's first performance.⁷

Munro's analysis is good, sound, well written and economical. Beyond the controversies, however, Munro has two sections about which we might make critical points: his treatment of the early years and his typologising of the public intellectual.

Munro has several chapters before the controversies in which he surveys Beaglehole's first thirty-five years which includes his fear that returning to New Zealand after Oxford was 'committing intellectual suicide' and his sad, but all too familiar tale now, of getting a tenured academic job. Munro argues 'to Beaglehole's way of thinking there was a synthesis between the scholar-teacher and the public intellectual: the two went hand in hand, each contributing to the other.'⁸ Surprisingly, however, Munro glosses over Beaglehole's work with the Workers' Education Association (WEA) between 1930 to 1932 and summer school 1932-33. The WEA experience was transformative for other public intellectual historians, such as R.H. Tawney, E.P. Thompson, J.F.C. Harrison and Raphael Samuel.⁹ Their careers were distinguished as non-standard from the outset and propelled them into public outspokenness. Indirectly, through his WEA work, too, Beaglehole came across Frederick ('Froggie') de la Mare and, no doubt, his formidable wife, Dr Sophia de la Mare and, while these networks are examined in Tim Beaglehole's book, there is no space in Munro's account to consider them.

Which brings us, secondly, to the literature on public intellectuals. Munro develops a typology of the public intellectuals in chapter 8 in order to place Beaglehole among public intellectuals. He identifies four kinds: the cultural critics (such as C. Vann Woodward,

Richard Hofstater and Christopher Lasch); powerful public serving intellectuals (Arthur Schlesinger Jr); intellectual public ‘bruisers’ like Keith Sinclair on occasion and one might suggest Manning Clark in Australia - although Munro differentiates Beaglehole from Clark more emphatically; and public spirited intellectuals with a ‘profound sense of duty’ like the English historian G.M. Trevelyan.¹⁰ Munro likens Beaglehole to Trevelyan. But this begs the question about place: what was Beaglehole’s place as a New Zealand public intellectual?

Both the ‘making of the public intellectual’ and the consideration of Beaglehole’s place as a critical conscience in Munro’s book needed to be placed more in New Zealand terms. Moreover, we have a study of conflict but what of collaboration and Beaglehole’s relationships with other New Zealanders? If I can make an adaption of Stefan Collini’s question, ‘perhaps the most common assumption about any book announcing public intellectuals in New Zealand as its theme is that it will be short.’¹¹ If the ‘New Zealand’s 100 History-Makers’ in a 2005 television poll did not include public intellectuals like John Beaglehole (which Munro complains about, and I should admit that I was involved in the programme) that is because we have not written about nor publicized our public intellectuals.¹² Australia, for instance, had a public poll for its top 100 public intellectuals in 2005.¹³ Instead we have a book about the current lack of New Zealand public intellectuals.¹⁴ Certainly historians need to set the record right; Munro has bravely begun the process.

There are intimations of Beaglehole’s place among New Zealand public intellectuals. Beaglehole noted himself that New Zealand’s ‘creative spirit has flourished not in art of any sort but the more characteristically colonial field of humanitarianism.’¹⁵ We need a study of that New Zealand (I would suggest antipodean or Australasian) humanitarianism and its liberal basis, in particular. Beaglehole’s public statements and publications considered in a wider social, religious and intellectual context would be a good start. Of course Munro’s book is not about the ideas either explicit or implicit in Beaglehole’s texts or talks. Dare I suggest we need a third, intellectual, biography on Beaglehole?

¹ Doug Munro, *The Ivory Tower and Beyond: Participant Historians of the Pacific* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

² Doug Munro, 'Historians' Auto/biographies: What's Happening Down Under' and 'Biographies of Historians since 2005', Institute of Historical Research website, <http://winterconference.history.ac.uk>, accessed April 10, 2013.

³ Doug Munro, *J.C. Beaglehole: Public Intellectual, Critical Conscience* (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2012), 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-71.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 319-320.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹ See for instance Lawrence Goldman, *R.H. Tawney: Socialism and History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Luke Fowler's film, *The Poor Stockinger, the Luddite Cropper and the Deluded Followers of Joanna Southcott* (2012); J.F.C. Harrison, *Scholarship Boy: A Personal History of the Mid-Twentieth Century* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1995); and Sophie Scott Brown, 'The History-maker: Raphael Samuel and the Politics of People's History', PhD thesis, Australia National University, in progress.

¹⁰ Munro, *J.C. Beaglehole*, 9-10.

¹¹ Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.

¹² Munro, *J.C. Beaglehole*, 14.

¹³ Laurence Simmons, ed., *Speaking Truth to Power: Public Intellectuals Rethink New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 12, 2005.

¹⁵ Munro, *J.C. Beaglehole*, 68.