

'I think I am becoming a New Zealander': Letters of J.C. Beaglehole

Chosen and edited by Tim Beaglehole.

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Reviewed by Doug Munro

New Zealand historians have often penned their memoirs but only J.C. Beaglehole (1901-71) has received extended biographical treatment. In 2006, Tim Beaglehole published a substantial biography of his father; three years later my own short monograph on Beaglehole as a public intellectual appeared.¹ Beaglehole is best known for his work on Captain James Cook but he has other claims on our attention. The gifted historian who reluctantly returned from England after postgraduate study was victimized in the academic employment stakes during the 1930s for speaking his mind on public issues. But he got the breaks – notably a senior research fellowship at Victoria University College – that enabled him to embark on editing *The Journals of Captain James Cook* for the Hakluyt Society, and ultimately his massive biography of the explorer. He was also active in the public domain, occasionally criticizing the government of the day. Additionally, he was a staunch advocate of civil liberties and consistent in his support of cultural institutions, including the Wellington Chamber Music Society, the Historic Places Trust and the campaign to save Old St Paul's. Far from being an historian *pur et simple*, he sought to make New Zealand a more enriching and interest place in which to live.

Although frequently a controversialist, John Beaglehole was not a conversationalist. He found it difficult to verbalise his feelings and emotions. A stutter in his earlier years was an inhibiting factor but it did encourage writing, which then blossomed into exceptional powers of written expression. He needed this degree of literary facility to do justice to his observations, to adequately express his feelings and, above all, to give vent to his capacity for indignation, which was invariably aroused in the face of injustice. These attributes, and more, are on full display in Tim Beaglehole's selection of his father's letters.

The book comprises 206 letters, starting in 1924 with sweet nothings to his future wife and ending in 1971 with an exploratory missive in 1971 to the artist about the official portrait commissioned by Victoria University. One editorial decision was to reproduce entire letters rather than selections from letters. That was a sensible choice. There is also numerous cross-referencing in the footnotes to the earlier biography, making the two books genuinely complementary. Another decision was to adopt a light editorial hand in the scholarly annotations,² and there is occasional regret that there is not more. Dates of birth and death of the various protagonists are usually given, which provides the reader with a clear idea of the person's age in relation to Beaglehole's. Less satisfactory are the omissions in the index. The ones I happened to notice are Professor Julius Stone (p. 195), Professor Williams (p.195), Lytton Strachey (pp. 211, 264-65, 342), A.C. Reid (p. 378) and Donald Munro (p.

¹ Tim Beaglehole, *A Life of J.C. Beaglehole: New Zealand Scholar* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006); Doug Munro, *J.C. Beaglehole: Public Intellectual, Critical Conscience* (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2012).

² In contrast to two other recent selections of historians' letters: Michael O'Brien (ed.), *The Letters of C. Vann Woodward* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2013); Richard Davenport and Adam Sisman (eds), *One Hundred Letters from Hugh Trevor-Roper* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

390). Such omissions would be neither here nor there in a monograph but in a book of this sort, without a narrative line, they can make it difficult to follow particular episodes. Take, for example, the sad demise of the Historical Atlas in 1951. There are numerous references to the Atlas (pp. 206, 217-18, 223, 243, 246, 262, and especially 265-66 and 303-03) but no index entry to this effect.

John Beaglehole's regular and newsy letters to his family during his three years in London as a postgraduate student in the late-1920s foreshadow the character of the volume as a whole. One rapidly gets a sense of his sensibilities –for books, paintings and the theatre, a capacity for friendship, the enquiring mind, and a willingness to observe and to pronounce on what was going on around him. One can see why he later said of the experience that 'all the wealth in the world was poured out before me.... If a man could choose, indeed, there are few more intoxicating, more admirably ideal, modes of life, at a certain stage of one's career, than that of a postgraduate student in London'.³ He added that England's green and pleasant land also harboured a good deal of poverty.

If the late-1920s are dominated by Beaglehole's letters to his family in New Zealand, the 1930s and early 40s would be thin but for Tim Beaglehole having been given copies of his father's letters to Norman Richmond, a pioneer of adult education in New Zealand. They first met when Beaglehole had a temporary position at Auckland University College. They co-authored the letter 'Communism and Hysteria' (*New Zealand Worker*, 18 May 1932), which resulted in Beaglehole losing his job at Auckland University. There are things that one doesn't say in one's letters to parents, but Beaglehole was more than willing to let his guard down when writing to trusted friends, and so demonstrating his gift of candour and occasional indiscretion. The lengthy letters to Norman have the same discursive quality as those to his parents and one wonders how the relevant sections of the earlier biography, especially on professional matters, would have looked had this rich vein of information not been available.

The irreverence and discursiveness is even more pronounced in his letters to Janet Paul. She had been an assistant at the Historical Branch in the early-40s and sometime later began an affair with Beaglehole. Following her own marriage, she moved from Wellington and for the next 25 years was the recipient of over 500 letters from her former lover – almost a letter a fortnight on average. The letters to Janet Paul are well worth reading sequentially, but don't go looking for anything in particular. Savour the overall experience and let the particulars come to you. Let them catch you unawares. The letters to Janet cover seeming every conceivable topic but on closer inspection the subject matter can be narrowed down to John and Janet's shared interests in books, paintings, mutual friends, and the artistic scene generally – the things that made up 'John's world'.⁴ It remains a source of nagging puzzlement why John so insistently wrote to Janet when she so seldom replied – or did John destroy most of her letters? One letter ends with a plaintive 'Please write to me sometime' (p.223). Writing to Janet was an outlet, the expression of a deep-seated longing and inner compulsion of some sort. Beyond that, we enter the realm of speculation as to motives.

Yet another category of letters is those to R.A. (Peter) Skelton of the Hakluyt Society concerning the road to publication of *The Journals of Captain James Cook* (1955, 1961, 1967). Skelton was Beaglehole's main point of contact at the Hakluyt Society and was intimately involved in the production of the first two volumes of the *Journals*. A number of points emerge from the correspondence. One is that attentiveness to minute and excruciating detail that was integral to the editorial success of the *Journals*. Another is the logistical

³ J.C. Beaglehole, 'The New Zealand Scholar' (1954), in Peter Munz (ed.), *The Feel of Truth* (Wellington: A.W. & A.H. Reed, 1969), pp.242-43.

⁴ The phrase comes from Tim Beaglehole, *A Life of J.C. Beaglehole*, p.145.

difficulties inherent in a project of that size and complexity. Instead of the technology that we now take for granted, and could barely function without, the *Journals* were edited and printed in the age of snail-mail, manual typewriters and carbon copies, and letterpress printing. A third point to emerge is the worry and occasional self-doubts that lasted the duration of the project. At one stage he complains that, 'My life-work on Cook is pottering along slowly' (p.288). Further down the track he is 'exasperated with the multitudinousness & fatuity of things that keep me from getting on with my work' (p.402). Part of the cause for delays was fieldwork. Beaglehole explicitly recognised the need to visit as many of the navigator's landfalls as possible (pp. 293, 460), and it crucially informed his editing of the *Journals*. He never got as far as the Alaskan and Aluetian Islands but the soundness of his descriptions of these places in volume three of the *Journals* deceived Alan Villiers, himself the author of books on maritime navigation, into thinking that he had been there (pp.455-56)

The hardest part about writing this review was to use my own words and to avoid the easy option of quoting from the letters. But one passage is particularly worthy of extended quotation. It concerns Beaglehole's difficult colleague Averil Lysagh and her inability to get down to writing, using as her rationalisation the need for yet more research. Beaglehole's point was that until you've written something, you haven't even started:

Am I insane to ask the question, why can't you summarize at this point? Surely you have enough to go on for 10,000 words? You don't have to give the final word on everything... Honestly, what I am frightened of with you is that if you got more funds from some foundation or other you'd just go on and on researching well beyond the point of useful return – for an *essay* – & get nothing written at all. You may think I'm superficial, unscholarly, unscientific, & all that, but I think the point has come when you must write. You can go over your draft afterwards as rigorously as you like, but you must get something down. And I think I should tell you to, as now. I know all about the difficulties of screwing oneself up & having a stab at it – it happens everytime I start a new chapter on Cook. – I'd far rather read about it again, & paw over notes, but that way lies disaster' (p. 463).

Wise words, and these from someone who was never entirely happy with his own work. Beaglehole was also a perfectionist, but not to a self-stultifying degree. He had moments of frustration to which we can all relate. When in London in 1956 he described 'a day of rage and despair... I swore when I went to bed last night that today I really would be at the B[ritish] M[useum] by the time the MS room opened at 10. And at 10 precisely I woke up. Oh God' (p. 361). Lesser mortals will be gratified to hear that he heaped further guilt on his puritan conscience by wasting much of the remainder of the day. Such lapses notwithstanding, he was able to cut through the thickets of hesitancy, procrastination and self-doubt that assail us all and to knuckle down to writing, thereby achieving his life's work and justifiably receiving recognition and honours. The latter came in such profusion as to embarrass him.

Above all, the letters are a record of Beaglehole's friendships. They reveal a man of wit, sensitivity and learning. He combined focus and industriousness with compassion, yet had a talent for the barbed phrase in the face of perceived injustice or foolishness: 'This licking of Sid Holland's boots, makes me see red' (p. 359). Occasionally mundane, and certainly idiosyncratic, he sometimes gets the wrong end of the stick. Others will share my bewilderment that the music of Tchaikovsky (someone else who goes unmentioned in the index) is described as 'an unwearying hammering away at a few simple themes, no suggestion, no touching-on, nothing left to the imagination, remorseless underlining of the obvious to the bitter end (p.216). Beaglehole was also off the mark in doubting 'if there is

anything in [the Nash Papers] really worth getting hold of' (p.459). The occasional lapse only emphasizes that the letters are overwhelmingly incisive, as instanced by the devastating critique of Peter Munz's 'complete contempt for the students' when he was a young lecturer (pp.297-98). In short, the *Letters of J.C. Beaglehole* are a perfect reflection of the man who created them and reveal not only the scholar but the man behind the scholar.