

Refuge New Zealand

By Ann Beaglehole

Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2013

ISBN: 978 1 877578502

Reviewed by Molly George

Ann Beaglehole's *Refuge New Zealand* is an in-depth examination of New Zealand's response to refugees and asylum seekers. Beaglehole seeks to explain which groups and categories have been accepted as refugees in New Zealand, which have been kept out, and why such choices were made. She examines government policy and public opinion beginning with a discussion of Māori as refugees under colonization in the late 1800's and early 1900's and finishes her discussion as recently as 2013 with mention of the refugees fleeing Syria as she writes. (Indeed, the reader gets the feeling of Beaglehole putting down her pen and ceasing writing in mid-sentence to send the book off to print as the matter of refugees in New Zealand is still, of course, immediate and evolving.) Beaglehole writes that historical perspective is largely missing in New Zealand debates around refugees and asylum seekers and her book aims to fill this gap (17). It explores the country's policies as well as the community and public reaction to these policies and to the refugees whose lives were largely determined by them. Beaglehole pays particular attention to "the gap that has sometimes existed between reality and rhetoric" and examines whether or not New Zealand's reputation as having "one of the fairest, most thorough and most efficient refugee determination procedures in the world" is justified (14, 17).

Just shy of 200 pages, the book contains 9 chapters and a short introduction and conclusion. It is extremely well-researched, drawing on a wide variety of sources including historians and academics, refugees themselves, print media from various eras, archival photographs, government documents and much more. The healthy endnotes and bibliography are a wealth of suggested readings about immigration in New Zealand, from broad discussion to minute, pinpointed facts buried deep in government reports. At the centre of the book sits 15 pages of photographs illustrating the very human faces and personal narratives behind more pragmatic discussions on refugees, including two photos of the author herself as a young girl - one with her mother on board the ship to New Zealand in 1957. These colorful middle pages also include reproductions of some political cartoons reflecting the refugee-related public debates and sentiments of different eras.

The first chapter revolves around Beaglehole's argument that many Māori ended up in a refugee-like situation under colonization and that the term is therefore wholly justified in this context. She writes of Māori demoralization and loss of mana as they became "fugitives under foreign rule... impoverished and landless" (21, 22). Chapter 2 focuses on refugees from Europe and Asia in the 1930's and 1940's, a period in which New Zealand was still remarkably "isolated from the rest of the world, except Britain" and still blatantly desired and favored immigrants solely from Britain (30). Beaglehole focuses on Jewish immigrants and refugees, writing that policy makers regarded Jews as particularly "unsuitable" for New Zealand and public opinion was so strongly against Jewish refugees that even the few who had gained admittance were encouraged to leave once WWII ended. Chapter 3 considers New Zealand's role in solving the Displaced Persons (DP's) problem after WWII while adhering to its strong preference for "white," single, unskilled refugees. The expansion of this self-serving criteria was reluctant and slow. Beaglehole contrasts this reluctance with the warm welcome extended to Cold War refugees fleeing communism, particularly Hungarians. Though this warm reception fed New Zealand's reputation for being "generous" in its refugee policies, Beaglehole

clarifies, as she does throughout the book, that New Zealand's selection criteria of Cold War refugees was still very motivated by political and economic benefit to New Zealand rather than altruistic notions.

Chapter 4 focuses primarily on the government and public responses to Ugandan Asian immigrants as a case study exemplifying the nation's increasing tolerance of more ethnically diverse refugees and a more humanitarian emphasis on receiving refugees as opposed to continuing to look for "the best apples in the barrel" (73). Beaglehole also touches on a pivotal debate in New Zealand immigration discussion that continues in earnest to this day: the nation's responsibilities to its own indigenous population and close neighbors, the Pacific Islands, versus refugees from further afield. Chapter 5 focuses on refugees from Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the policy shift away from the historical, long-standing opposition to Asian immigration and the reluctant yet progressively more tolerant public sentiment toward Asian immigrants. Yet there is a caveat that is by now quite familiar to the reader: accompanying any humanitarian motivation was an equal economic and political motivation as New Zealand attempted to promote its "regional interests" (81).

With Chapter 6, the book shifts to looking at the long-term process of settlement. Beaglehole writes that government sponsored services for refugees were severely lacking right through the 1980's and settlement aid was largely provided by volunteer sponsorship and grassroots community efforts – a hallmark, she says, of New Zealand's refugee history. Chapter 7 focuses on refugee children, largely focusing on Polish children orphaned in WWII as a particular success story and the perhaps less successful (or at least more complex) case of unaccompanied Cambodian minors in the 1980's. Chapter 8 looks at asylum seekers, notably Fijian Indians in the 1980's, the much publicized case of Ahmed Zhoui and the Afghani refugees aboard the ship, *Tampa*. Beaglehole explains why a "rosy... self-congratulatory" view of New Zealand's response to asylum seekers is far too simplified: without having to deal with the sheer numbers that other countries contend with, New Zealand can more easily maintain "a liberal tradition of dealing fairly" (161, 162). Finally, in the last chapter, Beaglehole describes the continued diversification of refugees in New Zealand. She also writes about the growing recognition, however, that small numbers of spread-out refugees (in accordance with the country's historical dislike of ghettos) means that New Zealand has often been a "lonely" country for refugees. Thus, she explains, in recent years New Zealand has begun a regional emphasis, bringing in more refugees from fewer regions in the hopes of creating the "critical mass" required for healthy, successful settlement. This chapter also briefly discusses the national discussion around Māori responses to immigrants and refugees, as well as the (slow and late) rise of government run specialist refugee settlement services.

Refuge New Zealand is well-organized, clearly written, and highly approachable for lay people while simultaneously making a cohesive contribution to expert discussions on the topic of refugees in New Zealand. I believe this book will be of interest to those working in government and community based refugee services, academics, researchers, historians and refugees themselves who might want to know more about the system that facilitated their entry into New Zealand and helped shape their life here. Readers will find their eyebrows rising as they read interesting, unknown tidbits about this aspect of New Zealand's history. At times I found myself furiously scribbling into the margins of the book, realizing the links between contemporary realities for immigrants and refugees in relation to the historical context presented by Beaglehole.

So, is New Zealand's good reputation for its handling of refugees justified? Beaglehole writes that the picture is vastly more complex than just a "humanitarian and compassionate impulse" (188). Looking back, it is clear that there are some instances where New Zealand cannot claim kudos for generosity whatsoever, this is particularly true of its handling of Jewish refugees around WWII: "the fact that New Zealanders and New Zealand government were well aware of the atrocities is significant in the light of this country's restrictive postwar Jewish immigration policy" (p37). Alternatively, beginning in the late 1950's, New Zealand's leadership in accepting "handicapped" refugees as family units was a powerful manifestation of the altruistic "ideal at the heart of refugee assistance" (116) and an example of how a small country has positively influenced international action. This movement was followed by the opening of the Nansen Home for elderly Russian refugees and then the acceptance of 88 Old Believers (Russian Christians from China) who were considered particularly "needy" in their poverty, illiteracy and 17th century way of life (112). Beaglehole writes that from the 1970's, New Zealand's selection of refugees has included those that "no one else wants," who are considered "hard to settle, for whatever reason" (113, 114). Thus, in many cases, New Zealand has absolutely earned its reputation for compassionate response to refugees. But reading between the lines, as Beaglehole helps us do, frequently reveals the more complex and varied public reaction to these newcomers as well as the self-serving motives and the political and economic considerations that have been just as instrumental in New Zealand's approach to refugees.