

THESE MEN FOUND US

Dr. Beaglehole brings the Past to Life

The Discovery of New Zealand: By J. C. Beaglehole. Centennial Surveys, No. 2. Printed by Whitcombe and Tombs. Published by the Department of Internal Affairs.

AT the 300th anniversary of Edinburgh University a French delegate apologised for speaking in his own tongue. He had three hundred reasons for this, he explained, each one stronger than the first: and the first was that he had no other tongue.

Dr. Beaglehole, one feels, found himself in the same position when he began to write this history, "The Discovery of New Zealand." He had a hundred reasons for not writing it in prose, and the first was that he had no prose. When he looked back across the years, from Cook to Tasman, and from Tasman far back to Kupe, his heart leapt up, his pen took fire, and all his prose left him. He calls it an essay, but it is a poem.

Nor is it surprising that, like all poets, he is the victim occasionally of his own emotions; even, once or twice, of his own words.

Here is his opening:

Kupe or Maui—which was it who, first of heroes, came breasting in his canoe the surge of the deep Pacific, riding for many days the dark waves of ocean—*Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa*, the great ocean of Kiwa—till on the horizon, beyond the thin veil of spray as it drove before the wind, he saw faintly rising the line of *Aotearoa*, the Long White Cloud, which men to-day call New Zealand?

Here his close:

Such the elegant disquisition of philosophy; yet philosophy, it may be, might take an even wider sweep of vision and brood thereon, looking in the course of mortality beyond cities and ships and academies, turning to look beyond D'Urville, beyond Cook, beyond brown Toi and Kupe—to where, millenia blotted out, the future is with the past, and over a silent land hangs a sky unseen of human kind, supported by peaks whose whiteness dazzles no eye; where the green bush once more advances to the sea and giant trees pillar the obscurity of their own leaves; where moonlit thunderous waves break forever on a long and untrodden shore; a land of unheard musical torrents, of bays and sounds returned to quietude, reflecting only the shape of their own hills, the colour of blossom ageless and unnamed, the stars by which no navigators sail.

The first paragraph means something, though it has to be read twice to be taken in. The second is eloquent. It is beautiful. Gibbon

might have written it. But what does it mean? Can philosophers philosophise in a vacuum? Poets may brood on the destruction of worlds by cataclysm, or of life by drought and cold. Do philosophers brood on worlds in which there is vegetable life and no animal?

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But if Dr. Beaglehole has not put the future to death he has brought the past to life. Cook no doubt lives without him. But to how many of us before this book appeared was Tasman a real man, or Kupe even a live legend? Now they are as real as Marsden and the Wakefields—Tasman a great discoverer but a pathetic little man, Kupe taking rank with "the great voyagers of history."

The only dubious piece of resuscitation is the account of Cook's visit by Te Horeta Taniwha. Without Dr. Beaglehole's encouragement few readers would treat it seriously. But since he does others must.

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Not only has he brought the discoverers to life. He has told the story of each one of them—a completely satisfying story—in a little over a hundred pages. If you think that easy, try telling in a hundred words the story of your journey to work this morning by tram.

There were six of them—Kupe, Tasman, Cook, De Surville, du Fresne, Dumont D'Urville; six for certain, and some possibles to be glanced at as he passed. But he never loses his way, gets his proportions wrong, or leaves us wondering if we have been fobbed off with hearsay. We see and are satisfied.

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Is there then nothing that can be said in dispraise of this book but the fact that it is poetry and not prose?

Nothing that amounts to anything.

The worst one can say is that there are a few, a very few creaking sentences—some mere slips, some deliberate tricks.

This no doubt is a slip:

Before leaving Pickersgill Harbour, seeds were strewn in the clearings, etc.

And this:

The flat country round about was verdurous and wood-covered; the rounded promontory at the seaward foot of the mountain was also called after the excellent First Lord.



Spencer Digby, photograph
DR. J. C. BEAGLEHOLE

But is this?

He showed insight psychological as well as geographical.

Or this?

On top of this hill, before returning, he raised a pile of stones, as he had done on the eastern side, with a piece of an old pennant flying on top, and inside it a silver coin and some musket balls and beads.

Or this?

In the afternoon Cook and one of his lieutenants, Pickersgill, went in search of a better anchorage; both were successful, but Cook preferring the lieutenant's, next morning the ship was warped into the little cove on the southern shore of the sound called Pickersgill harbour, and moored to the shore with her yards among the branches of the great trees, and a natural gangway in shape of one inclined trunk from ship to shore.

Or this?

Rock-founded in the far ocean, on the perimeter of things, yet, as western man stretched out his avid arms, it [New Zealand] came within his reach and in his inevitable power.

Spots on the sun, of course, all of them, and most of them signs that one star influences another. But remember the "most small fault" that show'd so ugly in Cordelia.

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Well there is not much space left, but there is one thing yet to be said. Though this book contains Tasman's Chart, a "very careful dimensional drawing" of the Endeavour, Cook's Charts of New Zealand and of Dusky Bay, an admirable index, and a six-page Note on the Sources; though the printing, binding, and dust-cover set a new standard in New Zealand book-production; though it is a centennial production which will one day have a scarcity value, the cost of it is five shillings!

—O.D.

NOTE:—One of these Surveys will appear each month. Unless special circumstances make this impossible, each will be reviewed at length in "The Listener."