

# A SCHOLAR'S LETTERS

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Dr Tim Beaglehole, 80, has been enjoying the company of his father: the internationally recognised scholar, historian, professor, writer and critic Dr John Cawte Beaglehole (1901–1971). No, there's nothing supernatural going on here. Tim, an historian and formerly a professor and the chancellor of Victoria University of Wellington, has spent the better part of 10 years researching and writing first a biography of his father then an anthology of his letters. "It feels like I've been spending time with him," he admits. Indeed, Tim has devoted much of his eighth decade to his father – a decade of life that John lost to heart failure.

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With his avuncular air, Tim welcomes me into the family home in Karori, where he grew up, where his parents grew old, and where he lives with wife Helen, a children's author. His "wonky leg" (cause unknown) has him limping a little, but this former marathon runner is no frail pensioner. He ushers me into his study, where his father once hunched over his desk until midnight, fountain pen in hand. Bookshelves bear thick volumes, many

ing than most fiction, and just as literary, with all their evocative figures of speech and other literary devices. John, who considered himself a writer, could seamlessly adapt tone and style to different genres including history books, poems, articles and reviews. Had he pursued literature or travel writing, he could have been the Hemingway of his generation. "His prose dances off the page," says Tim, who has a theory about why his father spent incalculable hours writing letters. "As a child he

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owned by or written by his father. John's edited journals of Captain James Cook and Joseph Banks take pride of place. On a table is the first advance copy of *'I think I am becoming a New Zealander': Letters of J.C. Beaglehole* (VUP, \$80), just retrieved from the mailbox.

This anthology of letters is anything but a dry, dull tome. Introduced by Tim's foreword and a list of correspondents, the letters are more fascinat-

stuttered very badly, and he almost said 'to hell with it, I'll put it on paper'. He got over the stutter at university, but letters were how he expressed himself best."

When John died in 1971, he was completing the final revisions of his magnum opus: *The Life of Captain James Cook*, which became the definitive biography of the explorer. Tim prepared it for publication. Nearly 30 years later, after writing about his







father for the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, he tackled his dad's biography. "His story needed telling and I thought I was well-placed to do it." *A Life of J.C. Beaglehole: New Zealand Scholar* was shortlisted for a 2007 Montana Book Award.

While researching the biography, he found some of his father's letters. They were so good he tracked down more. "Lots of people had kept them because they thought they were something special. I used the odd phrase from the letters in the biography, but I was very impressed with what a remarkable letter writer he was. I didn't want them lost to history, so I thought: 'Why not do a volume of letters?'" Victoria University Press said yes – if Tim could get well over a million words worth of letters down to 200,000.

It wasn't easy to decide on the longlist, the shortlist or the chosen ones.

"I chose complete letters," Tim says, meaning letters that needed minimal editing and few omissions; he added explanatory footnotes where necessary. "They're letters which reveal an essential part of John's gifts as a letter writer. Letters that show how good a letter can be."

Making the case for letters as a literary form, John's missives

Did his mother? "I don't know. I think she must have." The affair ended when Paul married, but they remained friends and the letters continued. Tim has included 39 of his father's 500 letters to Paul, simply because of their quality. He included just six of the 81 letters John wrote to his parents as a London Ph.D. student, at an average length of 4000 words. "They were written with the knowledge they'd be passed around to the wider family," says Tim, who mourns the demise of letter-writing. "Emails aren't quite the same – they lose something to the technology. Letters are much more personal and digressive." Certainly John's letters have incredibly tangential flights of fancy (about the skies and stars) and extraordinary detail (describing, for example, a port in Egypt). The question of whether his letters are true accounts or literary artifices is a thorny one. "One decides how one wants to look to different people," Tim points out.

Of course, Tim ended up reading about himself – and was amused by passages about young "Timothy's" imperfect pronouns and thirst for somersaults. He's included six letters from his father to him: giving advice, telling funny anecdotes and discussing their shared interests. "He was much more talkative on paper than in person. As a father he was relatively

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fizz with life and liveliness, humour and humanity, intellect and imagination, wit and warmth, affection and adventure, forthrightness and fun, sympathy and spirit. Any writer would envy his gift for observation and his ability to entertain.

The chosen letters represent John's various stages of life in chapters entitled Student, Depression Years, Lecturer and Public Servant, Starting on Cooks and Banks, Scholar and Public Figure. They represent his wide range of correspondents (friends, family, colleagues, collaborators, fiancée, wife, sons, niece, nephew, just for starters). They demonstrate the broad range of his knowledge, interests and involvements. Letters to newspaper editors, for instance, highlight the then-radical left-wing views that would leave him jobless and cash-strapped for many years. Tim left out letters that contained comments which could offend others or their relatives. "Dad had his foibles and could be very sharp and acerbic. But sometimes you have to forgive what people say and do, and if you know them really well it's easier to do that."

While researching the biography, Tim discovered that his father, while married to his mother, had an affair of perhaps two or three years with Janet Paul (nee Wilkinson), John's colleague and friend. "My [two] brothers and I hadn't known that."

silent, partly because he was preoccupied by his writing." Though John wasn't emotionally expressive with his children, Tim thinks that's a generational thing.

As a child, Tim wanted to be a yacht designer, and later considered diplomacy, but like his father he was drawn to history. As a historian, John's focus was writing books, while Tim's focus was teaching students. Since "retiring" in 1996, Tim served on the university council for three years then as chancellor for five years. "Retirement is a great opportunity to do other things, not to stop doing things." He's also served on various historical and art organisations, and currently sits on the New Zealand Press Council. But as his ninth decade begins, his main assignment is enjoying life. He and Helen have circumnavigated New Zealand on their yacht, sail every summer, and delight in their six grandchildren, who all live in Karori.

Family comes first, and Tim's glad he's told his father's story – and shared his father's stories. "I'm very lucky because, as they get older, many people wish they knew more about a parent, but they never had or took the chance. I've got to know Dad far more fully – and got to appreciate even more what a remarkable man he was." ■