

Emeritus Professor John Cawte Beaglehole

Emeritus Professor John Cawte Beaglehole was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by the Deputy Chancellor at a special meeting of Senate held on 15 April 1970.

Citation

Presented by the Vice-Chancellor:

Mr Deputy Chancellor, we honour today a distinguished man of letters John Cawte Beaglehole. Emeritus Professor Beaglehole was educated at Wellington College and the Victoria University College, New Zealand.

He was Assistant in History at Victoria University College from 1924-26; and Post-graduate Travelling Scholar from 1926-29, during which time he did a Doctorate at the University of London. He returned to New Zealand and was WEA Tutor-organiser from 1930-31, and lecturer in History at Auckland University College, 1932. He then spent three years on what he describes as "odd jobs" before becoming lecturer in History at Victoria University College, Wellington, in 1936. He remained there for the rest of his active academic life, becoming Professor of British Commonwealth History in 1963.

That his University waited until he had reached the ripe age of 62 to make him a Professor indicates a surprising degree of caution. Looking at him now in his Emeritus state, it may be that he looked too young before. I understand, however, that on the recommendation of the University, the Government agreed over ten years earlier that as an exceptional case he should be paid as a Professor, his senior lecturer status notwithstanding. Given the level of academic salaries in New Zealand, he may well have preferred it to be that way round. At any rate, on one occasion when his salary was 1300 pounds sterling per annum and the Vice-Chancellor announced a rise in salaries by 200 pounds stg., he broke in and said: "Excuse me, Mr Vice-Chancellor. Is that per month?"

This morning, Deputy Chancellor, you told me that to New Zealanders, Rugby is not an interest but a religion, and a way New Zealanders assure themselves that they really count in the wide world of international affairs. Professor Beaglehole does not need such re-assurance. He is in the very first rank of historians of Pacific discovery and exploration. It is always a delight to read his works which combine fine historical analysis with great literary skill and urbane and penetrating judgements on men and affairs. I read his "Exploration of the Pacific" when I was very young, and still remember his summing up of Cook's first voyage: "His achievement, soberly estimated, was already after this one voyage the greatest which the history of discovery could record. True, he had not set out blindly into the void: he was endowed with advantages that were unknown to most of his predecessors; he had fellow-workers of a talent at least uncommon; he was faced with a definite task. But the greatest of his advantages was himself."

His best known publications are: "The Exploration of the Pacific", his histories of New Zealand, and his editions of "The 'Endeavour' Journals of Joseph Banks" and "The Journals of Captain Cook". His distinction in scholarship was recognised by the University of Oxford in 1966, when it conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters. Last month Her Majesty invested Professor Beaglehole with the insignia of the Order of Merit - a rare honour, for membership is limited to 24.

Professor Beaglehole is pre-eminent among Cook scholars, and in the very first rank of historians of Pacific discovery and exploration.

We are delighted to have this opportunity to express our appreciation and admiration.

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