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Ruth Ross

New Zealand Scholar / Treaty Scholar

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History at Massey University

Rachael Bell

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ ii

ABBREVIATIONS ................................................................................................................ iii

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER I: A Model for Post-war History ........................................................................ 16

CHAPTER II: The Introduction to the Facsimiles ................................................................. 32

CHAPTER III: 'Texts and Translations' .............................................................................. 50

CHAPTER IV: Tradition ........................................................................................................ 65

CONCLUSION ....................................................................................................................... 88

BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................................................................................... 94
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In 1954 Ruth Ross wrote of balancing research with the needs of a young family: 'I go like mad for about six weeks, then I find the weeds are shoulder high, no one has any whole garments, and I've had it in more ways than one..."1 To two people who know this process better than many I give my special thanks: to my children, Tom and Helen, for their patience, flexibility, humour and endless good faith.

1 Ross to Dora and Graham Bagnall, 16 November 1954, MS 1442 90:2, AR.
### ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>AR</td>
<td>Auckland Museum and Institute Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>CMS</td>
<td>Church Missionary Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>DNZB</td>
<td>Dictionary of New Zealand Biography</td>
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<tr>
<td>NZJH</td>
<td>New Zealand Journal of History</td>
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<tr>
<td>WMS</td>
<td>Wesleyan Missionary Society</td>
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INTRODUCTION

In 1972 Ruth Ross presented an analysis of the Treaty of Waitangi that was to underpin interpretations of the Treaty for the next thirty years. Its purpose was threefold: to untangle the various instructions and translations that contributed to the drafting of the Treaty in 1840; to determine the intentions and understandings of the Treaty partners, Maori and Pakeha; to historicise the signing of the Treaty, thus returning an element of objectivity and distance to an event whose symbolism, she believed, had come to outstrip both scholarly understanding and documentary evidence. From 'Pakeha self-righteousness' to 'Maori disillusionment', she concluded, the Treaty of Waitangi had come to say 'whatever we want it to say'.

The impact of her paper was considerable. It was first presented as a seminar, then published in an expanded form as 'Te Tiriti o Waitangi: Texts and Translations' in the New Zealand Journal of History. Its fine-grained analysis won the respect of the scholarly community and has gone on to inform a number of influential works, including those of Ranginui Walker and Claudia Orange. After more than thirty years in the Treaty debate it is still regarded as the 'most penetrating critique in recent times of the events surrounding the drafting and signing of the Treaty'. The article also captured attention at the broader social level. At a time when, willingly or otherwise, an understanding of the Treaty of Waitangi was becoming increasingly requisite, Ross challenged New Zealanders' view of their past. With its provocative wording, her outspoken conclusion became a catchphrase in the argument over the role of the Treaty in New Zealand.

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Ross' article was in many ways a turning point in Treaty scholarship. It insisted on the text in Maori as being the Treaty of Waitangi. This moved the focus from the Colonial Office, which had dominated earlier studies, and asked instead what the Treaty had meant here, in New Zealand, a country still only sparsely populated by non-Maori inhabitants. In its criticism of the documentary sources, emphasis on a New Zealand perspective and sceptical view of previous interpretations of the Treaty, the article was a fine example of the scholarship of the 'post-war' generation of New Zealand historians: historians who, in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, through their academic training and methodological consciousness, saw themselves as challenging the orthodox view of New Zealand history.

J.C. Beaglehole was a teacher and mentor of this generation. In his lectures and essays he presented a vision for the role of history in New Zealand society. Beaglehole was an empiricist. Like others in his group, he had learnt methods for the critical evaluation of documents while studying abroad and sought, on his return, to introduce them to New Zealand. With his interest in national consciousness and the emergence of a New Zealand tradition, he was also a nationalist. He envisaged an empirical history put to a national purpose. He sought to engage New Zealanders more closely with the past of their own country, to build a firm foundation from which they could move forward, confidently, to determine their future. Beaglehole saw his own generation of inter-war historians as being on the cusp of this change. It was the next generation, his students, Ross and others, who would carry it to fruition.

This thesis explores the relationship between this mode of nationalist empiricist history in post-war New Zealand and the formation of Ross' ideas on the Treaty of Waitangi. It posits the three decades between 1940 and 1970 as being a particular era in New Zealand historiography, something of a watershed between the amateur / journalistic histories that had preceded it
and the more complex interpretations of post-colonialism and post-modernism that followed. It was an era which retained a certain confidence in the attainability of historical 'truth' and a sense of moral obligation to 'set the record straight'. Ross' article, 'Texts and Translations', was the culmination of almost twenty years of scholarly development in this direction.

Beaglehole was a spokesman for the historical issues confronting post-war New Zealand. He was a close personal friend and a mentor to Ross. His essays have been drawn on in this thesis to form a model from which to view her methodology. The elements in the model were complementary, but also, to a certain extent, contradictory. On the one side there was empirical, or 'scientific' historical analysis, with its twin elements of heuristic and hermeneutic: the collation, critical analysis, and logical interpretation of documentary records. On the other was 'tradition', Beaglehole's term for the cultivation of a new historical understanding at the level of a 'felt' national consciousness. Empiricist history informed the tradition but needed in itself to be transformed in the process. The balance between these two elements could be adjusted according to the historical medium and the intended audience.

Ruth Ross' work on the Treaty of Waitangi fell into three distinct phases. The first was between 1954 and 1957 when she was preparing an introduction for a reissue of the Treaty facsimiles for the Government Printer. The second was writing on the Treaty at a popular level, first in a Primary School Bulletin in 1958 and later in an article for Northland, a small local magazine, in 1963. The third was the seminar paper presented at Victoria University in February 1972 and her article 'Te Tiriti o Waitangi: Texts and Translations,' published later that year. Viewed collectively these pieces are an example of Beaglehole's model in practice. An examination of each of these phases in relation to a particular aspect of the model forms the structure of this thesis.
Chapter One examines the model itself and the interrelationship that Beaglehole envisaged between empiricist history and a national tradition. It then places Ross in relation to Beaglehole, and considers the ways in which some of her early work under his influence at the Historical Branch of Internal Affairs impacted on her later Treaty scholarship.

Chapter Two deals with Ross’ first project on the Treaty, the introduction to the facsimile edition in 1954. Preparing material for the introduction involved a great deal of documentary research, locating and collating primary sources on the Treaty. The government archive was not sufficiently organised in the 1950s to support Ross at this level, which caused her eventually to call the project off. Her experiences on the facsimile introduction represented some of the issues around access to documentary sources that confronted empiricist historians in the post-war period. Her work at this time is discussed, therefore, in relation to the first element of empiricism in Beaglehole’s model, the heuristic.

By the early 1970s, significant improvements to research facilities meant that many issues of heuristic had been resolved. In the highly charged social and political atmosphere surrounding the Treaty, however, understanding the meaning of the Treaty documents became a priority. Chapter Three examines the writing of Ross’ seminar and article in 1972, with regard to the second element of empiricism, analytical and interpretative operations or hermeneutic. It uses the classic empiricist manual, *Introduction to the Study of History*, to trace the way in which Ross conducted her analysis of the Treaty text and which lead her to confront many of the popular beliefs about the Treaty.4

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The thesis concludes by considering the implications of Ross’ research for the national tradition. The principal requirement of post-war history as Beaglehole presented it was that it should impact on the ‘unconscious’ level of national life, that people might benefit from a sense of heritage and belonging without being actively aware of its presence. It was important that the history that informed the national tradition should be, as much as was possible, empirically grounded, reliable. Chapter Four returns to Ross’ pieces on the Treaty written for School Publications and *Northland* magazine. It examines the ways in which she incorporated her research findings into narratives for popular consumption that were engaging, but also challenging to the orthodox view of the Treaty. While some of these techniques were also apparent in ‘Texts and Translations,’ the article addressed the misconceptions surrounding the Treaty more directly, even aggressively. The final section of the chapter looks at the extent to which ‘Texts and Translations’ refuted the Treaty myth and the vehicles Ross used for conveying her findings to the general public.

This study of Ross has been informed by a number of sources. Foremost has been the personal correspondence of Ross herself, now housed in the Ruth Ross Papers at the Auckland Museum and Institute. These ninety boxes of research material and ten of personal correspondence are a remarkable historiographical resource. Many of her correspondents, such as Beaglehole, Charles Brasch, Michael Standish, Graham Bagnall, Michael Turnbull, Janet and Blackwood Paul, and Keith Sinclair set the historical and intellectual tenor of New Zealand in the post-war decades. The letters of others, such as James K. Baxter, Sir Howard Kippenberger and Rear Admiral John Ross are interesting for the alternative perspectives they bring to well known New Zealand identities or public figures. This thesis is, it would appear, the first

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5 Ruth Ross Papers, MSS1442 and 94 / 23, AR.
historical foray into these letters. The direction of its inquiry is only one of any number open to researchers using this material in the future.

Of secondary sources, the principal work to date on the relationship between the writing of New Zealand history and national consciousness is Peter Gibbons' essay, 'Non Fiction', in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*. Following from this has been the historiographical work of Chris Hilliard in his MA thesis, 'Island Stories', subsequent articles, and his review of government sponsored histories in the early to mid-20th century. In his essay, 'A Prehistory of Public History: Monuments, Explanations and Promotions, 1900 – 1970', Hilliard discusses Ross' work on the Centennial Atlas while at the Historical Branch in the early 1940s. He notes the extent to which it pushed at the boundaries of academic history as they were at that time. Parts of this thesis complement and expand Hilliard's observations in this respect. In addition, this thesis complements Grant Young's work on the relationship between the writing of New Zealand history and the development of research services in the post-war era.

Several historiographical essays have dealt with J.C. Beaglehole's work as a model for history in post-war New Zealand. The Beaglehole Memorial Lecture

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at the conferences of the New Zealand Historical Association has prompted both W.L. Renwick and Jock Phillips to use Beaglehole's 1954 lecture, 'The New Zealand Scholar', as a starting point for their own addresses. Their comments on Beaglehole have been incorporated into the discussion of his model in Chapter One. Renwick's essay, "Show Us These Islands and Ourselves... Give Us a Home in Thought," has taken the matter further and addressed Beaglehole's work directly in relation to Ross. Renwick establishes Ross as representative of the post-war generation and examines the ways in which her essay, 'The Autochthonous New Zealand Soil', brought issues of historical interpretation into a bicultural perspective. Renwick's piece on Ross is a direct precursor to this thesis and has influenced its direction. Hilliard's work views Ross at the beginning of the post-war era, Renwick's at the end. This thesis addresses the years of her scholarship in between.

The principal methodological work that informs the thesis is the 1898 text *Introduction to the Study of History*, by Charles Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos of the Sorbonne. It has been used to provide the empiricist framework for Beaglehole's model and as a means of examining Ross' method of critical analysis of the Treaty texts. Although obviously dated by the time Ross published her article in 1972, there are a number of reasons for using this text. Firstly, it was seminal in its time as a 'manifesto' of empiricism, 'promoting the authority of historians and stating how descriptions of the past

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should be written’. It ran to a number of editions and was still used as recommended reading for university history courses at the time that Ross attended in 1939. In choosing a textual approach to her work on the Treaty, Ross was deliberately returning to the standards and methods of this style of empiricism.

Secondly, the methodology set out in Introduction to the Study of History was one which Beaglehole, as a young lecturer returning from England in the 1930s, subscribed to. Its techniques were similar to those he taught in his papers, and echoed in his call for those who would ‘learn to think historically’, meaning critically. Beaglehole endorsed the text in his own post-primary bulletin, How History is Written, when he quoted it directly: ‘No documents, no history’. It can be assumed, therefore, that the Introduction to the Study of History formed part of the grounding in empiricism that Ross received from Beaglehole and the ‘scholarly standards he set [her] to aspire to’.

Thirdly, as a manual of instruction, Langlois and Seignobos provided a detailed breakdown of empiricist technique: particularly hermeneutic, and the individual steps to be followed. It is a useful template of the methodology and

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14 J.C. Beaglehole, How History is Written, Post-Primary School Bulletin 1:8, Wellington: Hutcheson, Bowman & Stewart Ltd. for School Publications Branch, Department of Education, 1947, p. 119; although he qualified and extended his case to include also material remains; original quote, Langlois and Seignobos, p. 17.

15 Ross to Elsie Beaglehole, 11 October 1971, MS 1442, 98:2, AR.
the critical groundwork which Ross felt New Zealanders, in their haste to apply
the Treaty to their current situation, had failed to pursue. *Introduction to the
Study of History* is a fascinating text and read completely it provides a
valuable insight into the historical attitudes and assumptions of its era.

Works providing Maori perspectives on the Treaty and the colonising
processes have included those by Sir Apirana Ngata, I.L.G. Sutherland,
Ranginui Walker, Donna Awatere Huata and Linda Tuhiwai Smith.¹⁶

As this thesis is the study of a particular era of historical writing it has been
couched, as much as possible, in the terms used by the historians of the time:
Ross, Beaglehole and their colleagues. Not only is this important in
establishing the argument and atmosphere of the work, but it also aids
continuity between the referenced material and the discussion. For example,
Beaglehole's gendered pronoun has been continued in the commentary to
avoid disrupting modes of expression. Some of the terms that underwrite
Beaglehole's model, however, were used in opposing ways, or in ways that
are contradictory to their historical usage today. Some explanation, therefore,
is required.

Beaglehole used the word 'conscious' in two ways with regard to historical
thought in post-war New Zealand. Firstly he used it in the manner of a broad
sense of identity on a national level, in the way of 'national consciousness'.
Paradoxically, this form of awareness was, he believed, most effective when
operating at what we would probably regard now as the 'subconscious', but
which he termed 'unconscious', level. Secondly, he used it in relation to

¹⁶ Apirana Ngata, *The Treaty of Waitangi, an Explanation / Te Tiriti o Waitangi,* trans. M.R. Jones,
New Zealand: Pegasus Press for the Maori Purposes Fund, 1922; Donna Awatere Huata, *My Journey,*
New Zealand: Seaview Press, 1996; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies, Research and
empirical method in the sense of historians' awareness of the historical process, a 'methodological consciousness'. In this respect the two usages were almost opposite, the one broad and subjective, the other focused and objective.

A second somewhat ambiguous term was 'criticism'. Criticism, in the sense of the analytical processes aimed at disassociating the historian from existing beliefs and objectively evaluating documentary sources, was the cornerstone of empirical method. Langlois and Seignobos spoke of the 'extreme complexity and absolute necessity of Historical Criticism'. Beaglehole also referred to the need for conscious and deliberate objectivity: 'Our history must be unfolded by the trained – let me say it once more – the critical mind, and by great labour.' However, post-war historians were also often critical, in the sense of censorious judgements of earlier more subjective histories. Ross was no exception in her propensity to criticise.

A third term in the model in contradictory usage is the term 'text'. When Ross used this term she was referring to the particular contemporary documents from which she was deriving her account of the past. She was not engaging with current concerns that all history is textual and all texts historical. Historical terms can thus change between generations and between contesting branches of the discipline.

One term that carried a particular loading in the post-war era, and has in many ways been problematic to this thesis, was that of 'professional historian'. History can be defined to mean 'writing about the past which claims factual

17 Langlois and Seignobos, p. 67.
instead of or as well as, artistic ‘truth’.\textsuperscript{19} The term ‘professional historian’ could reasonably be applied, therefore, to anyone who wrote history for a living, including the amateur journalistic styled historians. More likely, however, ‘professional historians’ were seen as those operating within the universities or a government department, the Historical or War Histories Branch or National Archives, and who aimed in their work to supersede amateurs and journalists. The term ‘professional’ came to be synonymous with ‘academically trained’.

It was, however, as Hilliard has suggested, a term ‘best kept in quotation marks’.\textsuperscript{20} In her work at the Historical Branch, Ross encountered many amateur and family historians whose research skills she felt matched those of her colleagues. Conversely, there were untrained historians in professional positions within government institutions, such as Sir Howard Kippenberger, whose technical capacities she severely doubted. It was ‘still sometimes difficult in New Zealand to tell,’ she noted while at the Branch, ‘where one branch of the species ends and the other begins’.\textsuperscript{21} For women historians such as Ross terms such as ‘professional’ were particularly problematic. Balancing their research with family commitments meant that much of their historical work was carried on outside professional institutions. Yet, as Mary Boyd has noted, the quality was often ‘outstanding’, and a bibliography of their collective contribution would ‘run to many pages’.\textsuperscript{22}

For Ross, the term ‘academically trained’ historian was more problematic still, as she transferred to the Historical Branch before finishing her degree and, in

\textsuperscript{19} Hilliard, ‘Island Stories’, p. 7.

\textsuperscript{20} Hilliard, ‘A Prehistory of Public History’, p. 34.

\textsuperscript{21} Memo, Guscott [Ross] to Heenan, ‘Gisborne Trip’, 18 March, Historical Atlas Material, MS 230, folder 8, WTU.

the manner discussed in Chapter One, honed her research skills on the
government archive rather than on postgraduate research. Her standards and
knowledge, however, were formidable. Those challenging either were left in
little doubt of her capacity for detail and analysis. What linked the post-war
group of historians, irrespective of their professional status, was their
commitment to empirical technique and its application to New Zealand history.
For this reason the terms 'empirical' and 'empiricist' have been used to
describe and differentiate them in this thesis.

This thesis is not a biography. It is rather, to borrow a phrase from C.E. Beeby,
the 'biography of an idea'. Few aspects of Ross' personal life have been
included other than those that impacted on her Treaty scholarship. The path
of Ross' life was an interesting one, however, and to set the scene for her
approach to the Treaty, a brief sketch is provided here.

Ruth Ross was born Ruth Miriam Guscott in Wanganui, on New Years Day,
1920. She attended, and was head prefect of, Wanganui Girls' College. Her
father was a stock buyer and while accompanying him on his trips into the
Wanganui hinterland, she balanced her urban upbringing with a feel for the
bush and rural life. Based on these early experiences, Ross strongly refuted
Beaglehole's view that New Zealanders were dislocated, belonging neither
fully to Britain nor New Zealand, as he expressed in his essay 'The New
Zealand Scholar'.

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23 See for example, Ross to Keith Sinclair, 10 August 1956, MS 1442, 91:1; Keith Sinclair to Ross, 17
August 1956, MS 1442, 91:1, AR.
25 Ross to Beaglehole, 22 September 1954, MS 1442, 24:5, AR.
Although not from 'what you would call a very intellectual household' she arrived at Victoria University College (VUC) in 1939, stylish, confident and as she later joked, 'obnoxiously' self-conscious. She attended university until 1941. In 1942, without having graduated, she joined as a researcher at the Centennial, later the Historical, Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs. In 1945 she transferred briefly to the newly formed War History Branch where she met and married Ian Ross. Ian had been a journalist but retrained as a primary school teacher following the war. Ruth and Ian had two sons. After living for some years in Auckland, Ian transferred to the Maori School Service and the family moved to Motukiore on the Hokianga Harbour in May of 1955.

Ruth was very happy in the largely Maori community at Motukiore. While she felt that as a family they were 'treading on egg shells' for their first year there, writing later of that time she said: '[A]ll four of us, I discovered ... look back on those years at Motukiore as a golden age. There was a grim side, a depressing side. But the people and the place, we all loved them.' The years at Motukiore were also a particularly rich time for Ruth's scholarship. Most of her work on the introduction to the facsimile edition of the Treaty, and her School Publications work, including the bulletin Te Tiriti o Waitangi, was written there. Her essay, 'The Autochthonous New Zealand Soil' (1969), was a reminiscence of this time.

In 1960 the family moved to Rangitane School at Puoto, then to Oakura in Taranaki before returning to Auckland in 1964. In 1959 Ruth joined the Northland Committee of the Historic Places Trust. Over the many years of her association on local and national levels, she produced a number of small but

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26 Ross to Beaglehole, 25 February 1955, MS 1442, 24:5, AR.
28 Ross to Alan Mulgan, 23 June 1957, MS 1442, 91:1; Ross to Beaglehole, 22 November 1969, MS 1442, 96:3, AR.
meticulously researched publications for the Trust. Her work in this area could provide a rich basis for the study of another form of historical expression and of national tradition. From 1976 to '79, Ruth was the Arts Faculty Senior Research Fellow at University of Auckland. She died in 1982, survived by Ian and her two sons.

I would like to end this introduction on a personal note. Although the brief biography above must suffice for this thesis, the use of Ross' personal correspondence as the primary material for much of its argument makes it inevitable that her personality will shine through. As a scholar, Ross was principled and courageous. Indications are that she also was in her personal life - that it was a life well lived and one which she found rich and rewarding. "Minor riches and small rewards perhaps," she wrote, "but I find them worthwhile and satisfying." To give one's papers over to public scrutiny is in itself a courageous act. Many of the issues discussed in this thesis were matters on which Ross felt particularly strongly. She dealt with them in her forthright manner, but not without humour or compassion. In as much as she issued criticism, she was prepared in equal part to receive it, usually with honesty and good grace. These elements of humour, compassion, honesty and grace are aspects of Ruth Ross that I hope to have conveyed in my text, and that some subsequent historian, as her biographer, will expose to a greater degree.

It is not easy to write about a strong and exacting personality: 'What with the vision of you standing over me supervising every note I write for Capt. Cook,' Beaglehole joked with her of his own work, 'and E. H. McCormick standing over me supervising every sentence of English prose, I lead a pretty miserable life.' Writing this thesis has been a far from miserable experience,

29 Ross to Beaglehole, 25 February 1955, MS 1442, 24:5, AR.
30 Beaglehole to Ross, 19 May 1957, MS 1442, 91:1, AR.
but in my own way I too have wrestled with Ruth Ross at my shoulder. I hope the picture that has emerged is of a person for whom, while I have not always agreed with her, I have great respect. That has been my intention.