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# TOM BROOKING: A PEOPLE'S HISTORIAN

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When I started working at Toitū Otago Settlers Museum in 1988, it was still called the Otago Early Settlers Museum and Tom had just published *Milestones: Turning Points in New Zealand History*.<sup>1</sup> It was one of those still relatively rare publications, an academic historian reaching out to a popular audience with an easy-to-read and well-illustrated overview of key events in our past. It followed from his previous effort, the superbly readable biographical essay on Captain William Cargill, *And Captain of Their Souls*, published locally by George Griffith's Otago Heritage Books.<sup>2</sup> I remember listening to Tom being interviewed on National Radio (now Radio New Zealand National) about *Milestones*, having just secured my job but before moving to Dunedin. I wondered whether we might end up having something to do with each other as I knew that he was married to one of my cousins, a branch of the family I was looking forward to connecting with once I moved south.

It didn't take long for the family link to blossom: Tom's mother-in-law, the late Peg Cadigan (a Brosnahan through her grandfather 'Hughie the Pub'), quickly became one of my favourite people, and a delightful supporter of my work at the museum and in public talks. I became her second-favourite Dunedin historian, with Tom in prime position and not to be dislodged, but both of us sharing the warmth of Peg's enthusiasm for all of our public endeavours. Tom proved equally generous, encouraging my engagement with Otago history and my efforts to add an Irish strand to the established historiography. We presented together at the 1989 New Zealand Society of Genealogists national conference, held in Dunedin and titled 'The Tartan and The Gold'. Tom set out an overview of Scottish migration to southern New Zealand, while I did something similar with the Irish. It was the first of numerous conferences where we would add to public perceptions of Celtic connections in the south.

I mention these aspects of Tom's work because they are an important reminder of his commitment to public history and to sharing the fruits of his research and writing with wide popular audiences. He was not alone in this—Erik Olssen, Dot Page and Barbara Brookes also spring to mind as Otago faculty members of that

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1 Tom Brooking and Paul Enright, *Milestones: Turning Points in New Zealand History* (Lower Hutt: Mills, 1988).

2 Tom Brooking, *And Captain of Their Souls: An Interpretative Essay on the Life and Times of Captain William Cargill* (Dunedin: Otago Heritage Books, 1994).

era committed to a similar type of public engagement—but he was particularly enthusiastic about taking his work beyond the academy. Not every university historian at that time shared Tom’s appreciation for genealogists, for example, but Tom perceived the benefits that might accrue from raising the standard of family history research and aligning academic and popular approaches to migration history in particular. It made him a regular speaker at public talks that brought no advantage to his professional career but were simply motivated by his desire to share his insights more widely.

Tom was also a great supporter of the museum, particularly as it segued from its old ‘early settler’ focus to a more inclusive role as the social history museum for all the people of Otago. He was always a willing participant in our public programs and an expert ‘talking head’ in more recent times for our documentary work as audiovisual interpretation became a key part of the Toitū display environment. Tom’s popularity as a teacher also became clear as his students undertook internships at the museum as winners of the Otago Settlers Association’s History Prize (for the best second-year history student at Otago) and routinely described him as their favourite lecturer. Generations of history graduates passed through Tom’s courses and absorbed the passion and enthusiasm he had for the local as well as the international, the micro story as well as the big picture.

That dual focus led of course to some excellent biographical studies of key figures in New Zealand’s history. I’ve already mentioned his Cargill biography, a marvellous exploration of pioneer Dunedin that restored the old Captain, a hitherto curiously overlooked figure, to his central place in the story of the Otago settlement. It was a long haul before his next effort, the John McKenzie biography,<sup>3</sup> hit the presses, its long gestation a running joke among Tom’s friends as I recall, but it was well worth the wait when it arrived. More recently, Tom tackled the challenging figure of King Dick Seddon, his masterful ‘rebunking’ of the myths surrounding New Zealand’s longest serving prime minister, an appropriate bookend to his academic resumé: the popular historian’s take on the populist politician.<sup>4</sup> That Tom nearly replicated his subject’s fate when he collapsed with a heart attack shortly after his retirement—more of a shock with the trim and dapper Dunedin historian than the oversized Lancastrian—gave all his friends pause.

The final aspect of Tom’s character that I want to touch on is his personal warmth and charm. How many visiting lecturers to Otago must have benefited from Tom’s presence in their audiences? He always seemed to have a handle on the historiography of their specialist topic and be able to serve up some erudite questions at the end

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3 Tom Brooking, *Lands for the People? The Highland Clearances and the Colonisation of New Zealand: A Biography of John McKenzie* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1996).

4 Tom Brooking, *Richard Seddon: King of God’s Own. The Life and Times of New Zealand’s Longest-serving Prime Minister* (Auckland: Penguin, 2014).

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to enliven sometimes dull and dreary presentations. Tom's contributions always tempered my disappointment with the more disappointing guest lectures and heightened my appreciation for those who had genuinely given us something worth hearing. But in either case, it was a relief to have Tom in the audience, a sure-fire source of 'questions' to break the uncomfortable silence when no one else had anything to say. Likewise, his kindness and encouragement to all those 'average' students whose dissertations he supervised over the years, as well as the budding academics whose potential he fostered.

So, as it turned out, I did get to have quite a bit to do with Tom Brooking. That shared whakapapa link, Tom's entanglement with my South Island Irish-Catholic clan's sprawling network of descendants, always seemed to give him particular joy as a counterbalance to his own North Island Protestant settler heritage. He was always happy to claim me as family anyway. I'm currently engaged on a project to enliven our interpretation of settler origins at Toitū, with a special focus on the Scottish backgrounds of Otago's pioneers. This is, of course, Tom's core territory and, naturally, he is again one of the 'talking heads' we have called on to add some academic rigour to the enterprise. As usual, he brings enthusiasm and erudition to the project, sharing our commitment to make the stories of ordinary people of the past more accessible. His health restored, I hope Tom enjoys a long and happy retirement and I look forward to many more years of shared endeavour.

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