



Tom Newnham: An Educationalist Who Dared to Differ and Made a Difference (1926-2010)

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Tom Newnham died on December 15th, 2010 aged 84. His memorial service, on the 21st of December, was at the Mt Eden Memorial Hall over the road from his home in Dominion Road, Auckland. It was, as expected, a full hall, in spite of



its proximity to Xmas. There were contributions covering his whole life detailing how he changed the world. From his entry in a plain pine coffin to the karanga from Hilda Halkyard-Harawira, and former pupils at Hilary College, the whole ceremony was a celebration. Big names in the social movements like Hone Harawira, Geoff Chapple, Don McGlashan, John Minto, Maire Leadbeater, George Armstrong, Jim Anderton, David Williams, Jim Consedine, Chinese Consul General and his family all contributed. Theirs was a celebration of this remarkable man's ability to bring about social change. His method was simple: just persistence, getting people involved and working together, continually writing letters, and showing

unfailing courage in the belief that change for social justice was always possible. From the position of hindsight, it was clear that Tom Newnham was at the front of much change. As Chris Trotter wrote in a poetry tribute:

You were thirty-seven, Tom,
When Peter, Paul and Mary
Made *If I had a Hammer* a hit.

Old enough to know, in 1963,
How brave it was to sing
So fervently about
Justice Freedom, Love.

Chris Trotter (2010)

Tom was also an educationalist above all. His whole career was about giving and teaching, and believing in the power of knowledge. Known as a crusader for social justice he became the infamous face that Muldoon hated throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Tom Newnham, and the Citizens Association for Racial Equality (CARE), was the major voice opposing racism in New Zealand and elsewhere, promoting dreams that our society could be better. While at the same time, the other part of his life was his engagement in developing and changing New Zealand education. His autobiography, *Interesting Times: A Kiwi Chronicle* (T. Newnham, 2003), while focused largely on the public campaigns, is underpinned by the story of an educationalist with ideals. Here was the teacher whose life was a vocation in the true sense of the word, but he also shows how education in New Zealand has developed. It is a confluence of people's energy, enthusiasm and belief in possibility that creates more opportunity: advocacy and expectation.

Tom's lessons on activism began as a child, but from early on this working class boy desperately wanted to be a teacher. Though he followed many unconventional paths, his career shows how he always was able to seize or create opportunities. Because he was too young to start teachers college, he first enrolled in university undertaking the first year of a science degree before starting training as a primary teacher in 1944. He was quickly able to get a scholarship to enable him a third year specialisation in Agriculture, all the better to complete his science degree and teach at the secondary level. He eventually completed both a BA and BSc. He began his teaching career formally at Southbridge District High School (just out of Christchurch) as a secondary agriculture teacher. He brought together the benefits of primary training and an accompanying strong content base. He was always a man ahead of his time! He thus entered the wonderful environment of the District High Schools (DHS) which gave a great deal of autonomy in terms of the curriculum. At that time, curriculum in the secondary DHS was related to the community's needs as a matter of policy, as long as it fitted within the prescribed subject syllabus, a document of about one page of topics.

Through the combination of historical accident and recognition of teaching skills, Newnham was that year given the chance to become the Acting Agriculture Advisor for Canterbury where he found he required such iconic cultural knowledge as calf club judging (T. Newnham, 2003, p. 57). It was at this time that he met his life-long companion and political comrade, Kath Munro – Ngapuhi, Ngati Wai – school dental nurse from Wellsford who was running the dental clinic circuit of Leeston, Southbridge and Dunsandel. In typical Tom fashion, he invited her to join him on the back of his motorbike for a Labour Party meeting 40 miles away. An interesting idea for a first date!

Then in 1950 Tom began an extended period of 'OE', working his way round the world with his mates. Travel was first interspersed with teaching jobs in New South Wales and West Australia. They experienced the world. They went via the ship *Cameronia* from Freemantle to Indonesia as deck hands, taking the Dutch back to Holland. The next stop was London on the way back to the *Cameronia's* home port of Glasgow. In England, Newnham experienced the trials and tribulations of being a supply teacher in the secondary modern system before grabbing the opportunity of becoming part of the early staff of Ottershaw School in Surrey.

Ottershaw School had been recently established in 1948 by Surrey County Council (SCC) as a boarding school for boys of 12 to 18 years of age. One of the possibilities made available by the 1944 *Butler Education Act*, it was the first of its kind in the country. A boarding school run by a Local Education Authority, it was a non fee-paying school for Surrey boys from a real cross-section of society. Thus, pupils chosen by the headmaster came from families broken by the war or other circumstances, or from environments not thought conducive to academic or personal development (T. Newnham, 2003, p. 83). This experience in 1951 provided Newnham an opportunity to live through what an elite education provided free for everyone could be like. Ottershaw School closed in 1981 as a result of local body cost cutting and the pressures of emerging Thatcherism.

However, Newnham's world tour was to continue on in 1952. This time it was via Canada and teaching in a sole charge school in the freezing North of Northern Ontario. Once again, as Newnham says (p. 95), his New Zealand experience came to his aid because he had experienced a section in a sole charge school. Newnham then returned to New Zealand via Vancouver, to meet up again with Kath Munro.

The energetic educationalist's next tour stop was Hong Kong, where he became Head of Biology at Queen's College. During this time Newnham learned both Cantonese and Mandarin, passing the requisite exams very well. I am sure these language skills were helped by being immersed in the Quaker/ Communist community, that is, outside the usual ex-pat English teacher community. Kath came up to join him in 1954 becoming herself an English teacher.

Returning to New Zealand in 1956 Newnham decided to move out of teaching and create *Kiwi Crisps*, somewhat ahead of the New Zealand market for potato crisps. Always a man ahead of his time was Tom. This venture though was unsuccessful: NZ potato chips were served with battered fish at that time and were definitely not thin crisps. Not a good venture for a beginning family, and so the next opportunity was sought for a school with a provided house: country service. This was Rerekohu Maori District High School at Te Araroa (in the 'wop wops' as he called it) off the East Cape, teaching as a secondary assistant initially under Frank (Scotty) Macpherson. When Scotty left to go to Auckland, then Newnham himself became the Senior Secondary Assistant. At Te Araroa, Newnham's publishing career began, providing his contribution to the New Zealand Geography and Social Studies curriculum. Initially he developed reproducible material supporting local geography teaching and giving material for school certificate revision. This was followed by local material for science and social studies teaching. This home-based production, that became Graphic Publications, paved the way for the explosion in teacher support booklets that was to come for others in the 1970s. In fact, much of that later New Zealand curriculum material reflects Tom Newnham's belief that New Zealand children should think about concepts relevant to an identity in their own country by using up-to-date material.

At the end of 1959, the Newnhams (now with two children, Anne and Rewi) moved to Wellsford to Kath's Dad's place when Tom became the science teacher at Warkworth District High School. It was here that his involvement deepened in the movement to stop the 1960s All Black tour: the No Maori: No Tour campaign. Grabbing an opportunity for a Position of Responsibility and a

departmental house, after a term, they moved to Wellsford District High School where Tom became Head of Geography and Social Studies. He was also able to start teaching Chinese language as a 'club activity' (T. Newnham, 2003, p. 133).

It was from there that he gained a 3 month UNESCO travelling scholarship for the 'Mutual Appreciation Of Eastern And Western Cultural Values'. The purpose was three months living at villages in Burma, West Pakistan, India, Thailand, Cambodia, South Vietnam and Malaysia to gather material for a textbook for Form five. Thus, he wrote *Asia: The Monsoon Lands* (Kennedy & Newnham, 1966) as well as some other social studies booklets and activity projects about Asian village life. These developed in time for the new syllabus in Geography, which finally had a section on Asia. New Zealand was in the process becoming a part of the Asia-Pacific region. There are now



thousands of New Zealanders who learned about Asia via these Tom Newnham texts. Tom is continually remembered for this teaching and service to education.

As HOD at Henderson High School, Tom was part of PPTA who at that time were developing curriculum as the professional arm of teachers (Munro, 1969). Curriculum advisory groups to the Department of Education were set up through PPTA with social studies strongly influenced by theories of curriculum and pedagogy paralleling Bruner's *Man: A Course of Study*. The success of Tom's booklets on Asian village life led to an invitation to go to China for a month. This provided opportunities for more publishing, developing more teaching material and deepening his understanding of Cantonese and Mandarin. Then seizing another opportunity in 1968, Tom became a contract lecturer in geography and social studies at Auckland Secondary Teachers' College (STC). His energy for life was amazing. At STC he supported newly graduated Geography and Social Studies teachers coming to grips with ways for developing conceptual understandings and teacher developed curriculum, particularly for multicultural communities and schools. The important belief was that social studies, in contributing to citizenship, requires both strong advocacy and wonderful pedagogy.

Developing conceptual understandings using relevant issues brings curriculum into collision with traditional views that portrays curriculum as watered down topics of objective history, geography or science, and sees values as about established religions (McGeorge, 1975). Tom was next to combine a part-time job at STC with a position as educational editor for Whitcombe and Tombs, helping colleagues create more teacher curriculum material as books.

Importantly, alongside all this was his work in Citizens Association for Racial Equality (CARE) where he was secretary for seven years. CARE, through the media and Tom's endless letters to the editor, tackled many issues head on: discrimination against Pacific Islanders, racially-weighted insurance, compulsory pregnancy tests on immigrant Samoan women, and covert bans on employing Maori in banks. Tom worked with his Teachers College colleagues to organise an inquiry centre for new migrants that evolved into the national chain of Citizens Advice Bureaux. He also became secretary of the Race Relations Council organising the nation's first observation of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Following an eight month trip to England in 1974 Tom joined the staff of Hillary College, as HOD Geography. He worked there under the wise leadership of Garfield Johnson and then Brian Watson, for the next 16 years. Here he was an old hand for other educational pathfinders such as Ian Mitchell, Jill Amos, Warren Lindberg, Tom Roa, Bill Tawhai, Bernie Gadd and Chris Chittenden, Paul Chalmers and Gabriel Brett Kelly. Hillary College, one of the secondary schools which sprang up in the 1960s dormitory post-war suburbs, became a pathfinder school for multicultural education. Here, Tom demonstrated to younger colleagues what it meant to really value the cultures that learners brought with them. He helped them create units of work using current events to raise students' interest and involvement, and organised events which could generate even more learning and questioning. He sought the very best for and from his students.

It was Hillary College which pioneered the Maori and Pacific Island Secondary Schools Cultural Festival that has now become the giant Auckland Polyfest. Tom also encouraged teachers to value their own created worksheets and to get these and their students' work published, as Dal McGuirk explains in a post-funeral Tribute to Tom Newnham (A. Newnham, 2011).

His geographical skills, publishing and activism continued through many campaigns: Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Peace Squadron's opposition to nuclear warships, and supporting New Zealand's links with China. They are documented in the books he wrote to provide both a record and fundraiser. For the 1981 Opposition to the Rugby Tour he produced what was called the 'Protestors' Handbook'. Remember Tom was in his 50s by now. For this booklet he collated detailed diagrams of each of the grounds where the Springboks would play, showing where the stands were and what type of fences surrounded the grounds. The manual included other information such as transport options and contact details for local activists – in John Minto's words, anything a civil disobedience protestor would need to know when following the Springboks (Minto, 2011, in A. Newnham, 2011).

While in 1989 in the midst of the Tomorrow's Schools protests, Tom was not only taking part in the campaign but also developing formal qualifications for Sixth Form Certificate and Bursary at Auckland Girls Grammar School. Meanwhile he was also organising voluntary English lessons for Chinese immigrants in Potters Park, next to his house.

Tom demonstrated that teaching is a moral act, and that goodness should be expressed not only to family, friends and neighbours, but to all of humanity. Tom was awarded the Queen's Service Order in 1988 and is remembered as a champion of racial equality and human rights. However, he must also be remembered for his enormous contributions to creating teachers and schools which then create change for all of their students.



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