

**JOHN HUGH MARSHALL BEATTIE  
1915-1990**

**MEMORIAL ADDRESS**

JOHN BEATTIE enjoyed a long and distinguished academic career. He possessed a number of attractive qualities and an endearing personality that radiated warmth and kindness. A number of friends and acquaintances from different walks of life, not least students of social anthropology and sociology, were irresistibly drawn to him and influenced by his ideas and way of thinking. We in this commemorative gathering are here really to celebrate John Beattie's life, which had many facets to it; and the richness of which, in a profound sense, became accessible to a wide variety of individuals.

John Beattie was born in 1915 in County Wicklow in Ireland. The sudden death of his father when John was hardly two and a half years old perhaps gave him a sense of insecurity. He had, however, a highly developed sense of his Irish identity that he carefully but unobtrusively nurtured in later life with frequent visits to Ireland. Despite his high academic achievement at school, he was a relatively late developer; his initial interest in theology when he first entered Trinity College, Dublin, subsequently gave way to a more sustained engagement with philosophy.

As a student he felt attracted to the work of Immanuel Kant. He was deeply impressed by Kant's concept of the categorical imperative, and perhaps also by the fact that Kant was one of the few philosophers to show an awareness of anthropology as an academic field of inquiry. It would be fair to say that throughout his career as a social anthropologist John Beattie bore the mark of the early influence exercised on his mind by Kant. His undergraduate career was highly successful, culminating in the award, for his work in mental and moral

Text of an address delivered at the Memorial Service for John Beattie held at St Cross Church, Oxford on Saturday, 7th July 1990. All John Beattie's publications mentioned specifically here are included in the Select Bibliography provided below.

philosophy, of the only gold medal of the year given to an honours graduate in philosophy.

John's choice of career had a vocational aspect to it. After he obtained his honours degree, it was open to him to compete for either the Indian Civil Service or the Colonial Civil Service. In the event, it was the Colonial Civil Service that he decided to take up. It was not going to be just a career as far as he was concerned. It was in some vague, as yet undefined sense, a kind of dedication. His approach to it was whole-hearted, imbued with the liberal spirit in the finest sense of the term; the humanitarian appeal of serving in Africa far outweighed the administrative attractions of exercising authority and control over the lives of remote peoples.

On his selection to the Colonial Civil Service, John—along with several others who, like him, were to branch out in subsequent decades into an academic career in social anthropological studies—joined the Colonial Administrative Service. (This was just before the outbreak of the Second World War.) His philosophical bent of mind, influenced as we have already noted by his Kantian interests, was for the first time exposed, during the training provided by the Colonial Administrative Service course at Oxford, to lectures in the discipline of social anthropology given to the Colonial Civil Service cadets by Radcliffe-Brown and Meyer Fortes.

Of the majestic theoretical sweep that Radcliffe-Brown brought to the subject and the rigorous and 'dense ethnographic texture' of Fortes's material derived from his researches among the Tallensi, John felt the attractions of the latter to be novel in character and immediately relevant to the task of understanding the peoples among whom he was going to work. It would be reasonable to guess that during this brief exposure to applied social anthropology John grasped the equal importance of theory and fieldwork in social anthropology and the need to link them together in order to provide a rich and reliable understanding of any society.

The year 1939-40 at Oxford was also remarkable for another development. It was during that year that John met Honor, his future wife; his relationship with her was to become the fulcrum of his life. Her musical interests—she was a highly respected musician and had a distinguished career teaching the cello—stimulated his cultural interests. Their relationship remained very close indeed until Honor's sudden and tragic death twelve years ago.

John returned from Tanganyika in 1946 to marry Honor. Until then he had served in the Lake Province (in Sukumaland) in various administrative capacities. Returning to Tanganyika with Honor, he worked in Tunduru in the Southern Province. The first phase of what promised to be a very successful career indeed ended with a posting in the Secretariat in Dar es Salaam where he assumed some of the departmental duties in the sphere of 'African Affairs'. He thus became aware of Tanganyika's budding nationalist movement and the aspirations of the rising Tanganyikan élite.

It is worth remembering, however, that both Honor and John belonged to a rare breed of European civil servant. In their personal conduct with ordinary African people they treated them with dignity and respect without ever imposing

themselves on them. In fact, they were self-effacing to the highest extent possible, given the high-profile exposure to which John was inevitably subjected as a white colonial administrator. There were a number of incidents in which John's fundamental respect for African people was evident. On one occasion, a zealous African subordinate came to see him (John was the District Officer) to report that a group of men were having a marijuana-smoking party in the village and to seek orders as to what should be done about it. It was entirely in keeping with John's attitude of 'live and let live' that he apparently said, 'No, they're not making trouble; so I think we can safely leave them to get on with it.'

During his first Dar es Salaam stint, John Beattie was also asked to assume the clerkship of the Legislative and Executive Councils. This post carried considerable prestige and responsibility. It also held great potential for promotion. However, during the first long overseas leave accumulated after his marriage, John sought permission to attend a full year's course (1949-50) at Oxford reading social anthropology. The department was buzzing with intellectual activity, and its young members' research interests reached out to the field in numerous far-flung lands.

A year devoted to study in Oxford also catered for Honor's professional interests. At the time, Oxford happened to be a place very much to her liking in an emotional, personal sense. It thus provided a most agreeable setting in which John imbibed the discipline in stimulating company and ventured forth to take a look at the wider theoretical shores of the discipline as it then was. Thus, he even referred to Lévi-Strauss's work on kinship in one of his examination answers.

Not surprisingly, a fruitful year in Oxford led to a decision to resign from the Colonial Civil Service in order to pursue further research in social anthropology at Oxford under the guidance of Professor Evans-Pritchard. In subsequent years, John Beattie and Professor Evans-Pritchard became very intimately associated in the teaching and research work of the department, though from different and independent inter-disciplinary positions of strength.

John did his fieldwork among the Nyoro people in Bunyoro in Uganda. As in his marriage, so too in the intellectual sphere, he gave throughout his career constancy of devotion, respect, concern and loyalty to the people whom he chose to study. About Nyoro society, John wrote a number of research papers (some of them highly distinguished); a non-specialist book giving a general introduction to the society, entitled *Bunyoro: An African Kingdom*; a teaching text entitled *Understanding an African Kingdom: Bunyoro*; and an important anthropological treatise on *The Nyoro State* that was to be followed by two further treatises, one on Nyoro law and the other on Nyoro culture, neither of which, sadly, have seen the light of day.

His general orientation to the subject was as significant as the weight and quality of his published contributions. His work among the Bunyoro as an anthropologist, as indeed his administrative career among the Tanganyikan peoples, was motivated by two considerations that were linked together into a unified methodology in his work as a whole. He had a firmly rooted belief in a common humanity and in the importance of reason in understanding human problems; at the

same time, he had the conviction that when it comes to explaining why so-called 'primitive' peoples are animated by beliefs and rituals that seem extraordinary to us, we ought to understand these activities as in no way a kind of mistaken science attributable to their stupidity or irrationality, but rather as activities comparable to art, music or drama in our own 'complex' society, activities performed for their own sake and not for any immediate result that might be expected to accrue.

This viewpoint is clearly stated in a celebrated essay of his published in *Man* in 1966 entitled 'Ritual and Social Change'. Perhaps it is worth pointing out that John's philosophical training and identification with the Kantian world-view led him, as a fieldworker, to look for the 'universal' in the 'local' and, in particular, to look for local expressions of universally comparable capacities of human experience. He believed that it made more sense to see 'ritual' as 'art' rather than 'science', because in this way we are able to emphasize the idea of a common humanity. By the same token, he was not concerned to force his understanding of the Nyoro society into some purely abstract theoretical mould; rather, his aim was to comprehend as fully as possible the complexity of Nyoro culture by focusing on a variety of aspects of it—the richness of Nyoro proverbs and the ambiguities of belief implied in the Nyoro spirit possession cult, to cite only two examples.

One of John's great academic strengths lay in his capacity to communicate his understanding of society in a lucid, direct and well-crafted manner. He attached equal importance to research and to teaching, to doing his own research and to guiding the research of postgraduate students. He greatly enjoyed teaching undergraduates and had the capacity to pitch his lectures at a level that kept up the interest of bright students without losing those who were not so bright. His *Other Cultures* achieved considerable success as a textbook for undergraduates; it has been translated into numerous languages in different parts of the world and has been re-published several times and continues to this day to be an excellent introduction to comparative social anthropology. John's skill as a communicator also enabled him to take part, in an effective way, in the anthropological debate on how we should understand ritual. He contributed several articles in this area, dealing with complex arguments in a subtle manner.

John was an excellent person to work with. He was gentle and warm, entirely without aggression, always ready to be more than fair to his adversary, and generous to a fault in his dealings with others; nor did he push his views at the expense of those of others. He brought out the best in his research students and greatly enjoyed his tutorial relationships, in which he stressed the importance of keeping ethnographic evidence always in focus. He attracted a large number of research students even in retirement, and guided the research work of many African students, some of whom have written extremely perceptive studies on East African topics.

John's students and colleagues not only respected him but also developed a real affection towards him. He lectured in the Institute of Social Anthropology for twenty years before taking up the Chair of African Studies at the University of

Leiden in 1971. Throughout his career he was much sought after as a visiting professor and visiting scholar by many universities and institutes of advanced study in Africa, North America, Europe and Israel. He was also in great demand as an external examiner for degrees from undergraduate to doctoral level, in Britain as well as abroad, a task to which he invariably brought a nice combination of fairness and sympathy.

Events following the military coup in Uganda in 1971 made it difficult for him to keep in touch with his East African friends (especially those in Bunyoro and those with whom he had worked closely during his brief directorship of the East African Institute of Social Research in the early 1950s). This was a matter of great sadness to him. By the time political tensions began to ease in the mid-1980s (from 1986 to be precise), physical decline had already begun to set in and he was in no position to contemplate a journey to East Africa.

John's passions were by no means restricted to the academic sphere. He developed a deep personal commitment to the people of Bunyoro and to the cause of the 'Lost Kingdom', which received a rough deal from the colonial over-rulers and the neighbouring kingdom of Buganda alike. He showed his concern for the younger generation of the Banyoro by taking a keen interest in the education and welfare of a number of Banyoro children to which he contributed in a spirit of quiet generosity. He would invariably request those friends of his who visited Bunyoro to take something for the young people there in whose welfare he was interested and to bring back news of their educational and personal progress.

John had a number of interests other than his interest in books and ideas. Endowed with a robust constitution, he loved to walk and to go on mountaineering expeditions in East Africa. In his retirement he walked a few times in the Yorkshire dales, but he walked and climbed regularly in the hills of his own native land of County Wicklow. His love of Ireland did not prevent his realising that he could not make it his permanent home, even as his reservations about life in England did not prevent him from making it his home either. In true Irish spirit he loved Irish literature, and especially poetry. He was fond of W. B. Yeats's poems, many of which he knew by heart. The ambivalence that he felt about England and Ireland was reflected in his preference for the great poet's outpourings about the tension of being an Irishman in England. John was particularly fond of Yeats's poem 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', which contains the lines: 'Those that I fight I do not hate, / Those that I guard I do not love'.

John's distinguishing characteristic was his gentle and unobtrusive personality. He never raised his profile in any controversy, though he always stood his ground with intelligence and tenacity. He had a finely balanced nature, combining the Apollonian with the Dionysian elements of his make-up in amusing and intelligent ways. Yet, on balance, he was a Dionysian at heart. He enjoyed the pleasures of life, if sometimes in a quiet and recessive manner, always delighting in sharing his joys with friends. His hospitality was always freely given and he was frequently visited by scholars from different continents. He was a sociable, energetic, kindly, humorous, sensitive and intelligent person. At his best, he reached out to others

in his own generous manner. He loved to paint, and could have made a decent living at it if he had chosen to become an artist. His oils and watercolours have a professional flair about them. He had a mordant sense of humour, which he expressed through the vehicle of caricature; a number of 'outlandishly amusing and bizarre' cartoons are extant in the collections of his friends. I remember him drawing some of these extremely complicated pictures on the backs of cigarillo packets to great effect at conferences, often to relieve the tedium of having to listen to boring and mediocre papers.

John never fully recovered from Honor's death. He did try to return to normal teaching and guidance of research, but it did not last for more than five or six years. He could not complete his agenda of publication for the two volumes on Nyoro culture and Nyoro law for which the ethnographic material was ready. This will remain a loss to the literature on East Africa.

When the end came it was swift. At last, on Good Friday 1990, John Beattie 'drifted out of harbour on a silent tide', a peaceful end to a distinguished and dignified but quiet career: 'The curtain of your life was drawn / Sometime between despair and dawn.' A rich and sociable life, lived at a number of different levels in a number of different places over an extremely interesting span of history reflecting the destinies of colonizing and colonized countries, thus came to an end.

We are here to pay tribute to a 'good, honourable, and gentle' scholar who will be remembered for a long time as 'a thinker of the middle way', and above all to a beloved and much missed friend, parent and relative whose passing has impoverished our lives.

T. V. SATHYAMURTHY

## J. H. M. BEATTIE: A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Compiled by Hugh Beattie and Jeremy Coote

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### **J. H. M. BEATTIE AND THE OUAS**

Professor Beattie's long association with anthropology at Oxford, as described by Dr Sathyamurthy in his Memorial Address above, is well reflected in the record of his involvement with the University's Anthropological Society. He served as its President twice: from 1961 to 1962 (and thereafter as an active, though occasionally apologetic member of the Society's committee) and then for a two-year period from 1979 to 1981.

Surprisingly, he addressed the Society only once, at its 519th meeting on 17 November 1954 in the University Museum, when he took as his subject 'Spirit Possession in Bunyoro', a topic to which he was to return time and again in his academic publications. According to the minutes of the meeting, John's 'vivid analysis'—as it was described by John Peristiany, who led 'a lively discussion' that followed—was received with acclamation.

During his second stint as President, John presided over a renaissance in the Society's activities, after a rather moribund phase it had gone through in the 1970s. This period in the Society's history will be remembered with pleasure by all who attended its meetings at the time. John's good nature and humour saw the Society through a remarkable series of technical mishaps with tape recorders and slide and film projectors; indeed, anything that could go wrong did go wrong. His hospitality ensured, however, that even on the most wintry of evenings (and even on those summery ones when Oxford offers many other attractions) a large audience turned up at the Pitt Rivers Museum's green hut and later at the Linacre College lecture room, for the fortnightly meeting. Looking back over the records of that time one is struck by the variety of speakers and topics that John organized for our entertainment. It was, perhaps, never knowing quite what to expect—apart from technical mishaps—that made those meetings so popular.

With Professor Beattie's death the Society has lost one of its most senior members. It takes this opportunity of joining with John's many friends and colleagues, both here and abroad, in conveying its condolences to his family.

JEREMY COOTE  
Hon. Sec., OUAS, 1980-1981