

John Mulgan, Pitcairn Island, and his Passage to the United Kingdom on the RMS *Ruahine*¹

J.S. Ryan

ABSTRACT: This article echoes some themes addressed in Jøn, Ward and Ryan's 'To Pitcairn and Beyond', exploring John Mulgan, Pitcairn Island, and his passage to the United Kingdom on the RMS 'Ruahine'. The Ruahine heaving to there, and he then proceeding duly to Merton College, in the University of Oxford, - and his then giving an address (in a long lost text) on the meaning—to him—of this historic and so isolated place.

KEYWORDS: John Mulgan, Pitcairn Island, Ruahine, Merton College, Oxford University.

For the readers of the works of this fine New Zealand born writer, John Mulgan (1913-1945)—and a man so soon to be a fine scholar whose own New Zealand writings of almost allegorical fiction, and his then various commissioned scholarly works for the Oxford University Press were, respectively, to be so powerfully reflective of the mental and political climates of both his native land and of pre-war time England—this place, Pitcairn, was to be a highly significant one. For he was writing of his first land fall after leaving New Zealand, the lonely island of Pitcairn.

And there was a heaving to there of his ship at the commencement of his entry on greater national and wartime stages, as well as going to his destiny in England, to his secret commando service with the Greek resistance group, Force 133, MEF, and then, and ultimately, to his tragic death by suicide which would occur less than twelve years later, in Cairo, on the evening of Anzac Day, 1945.

*

*

The brilliant leftist New Zealand writer, John Mulgan—who was born as John Alan Edward Mulgan on 31 December, 1911—was of Northern

¹ This article was submitted to *Australian Folklore* following: A. Asbjørn Jøn, Philip Ward and J.S. Ryan, 'To Pitcairn and Beyond' *Australian Folklore*, 31 (2016); to provide another account of the memory of visits to/ past Pitcairn Island among Oxford-trained and New Zealand born academics.

Ireland descent but of a family long domiciled in New Zealand, the nearly as well-known reflective writer, his father, being Alan Mulgan, someone best known today as for his book, *A Pilgrim's Way in New Zealand* (1935), a fine and almost metaphysical work treating of the country as it might well appear to someone visiting it for the first time. In this book, the father had attempted to explain his own country to the stranger, dispensing with the detailed information of a guide-book, but describing the temper and style of the whole society, interpreting the life and thought of this new nation to a visitor from the old mother country, England ; and thus he, Alan Mulgan, had written of the pioneer struggles which had gone into the making of the greater social justice of his ever more socialist and socially concerned new home country, New Zealand.

In due course, his son, John Alan Edward Mulgan, and a man with equally significant and leftist missions in his all too short adult life, was to be born in Auckland, and he would attend primary school there. In 1925, this John had begun secondary school , boarding for a time at Wellington College in the national capital, but returning to Auckland to the Auckland Grammar School, duly enrolling at Auckland University College in February 1930, and, momentarily, in addition to his studies in English language and literature, he had taken a first year course in Greek, and quite soon then was being nominated while an undergraduate – and in only his second year—for candidature for a/ the Rhodes Scholarship in 1931, as an unusual and obviously outstanding scholar and student leader, while not yet a graduate of the university; but, having failed to win this prestigious award, he had sailed for England on 10th October, 1933, having borrowed from his father the funds to cover his fees for his academic studies and to support his living while in Oxford.

There he would be a member of the ancient Merton College, one much favoured by New Zealanders for advancing their original New Zealand studies further in the humanities, law and the social sciences, this being a trend both in the 1930s and continuing subsequently. In the University of Oxford he would enroll in the School of English in the Honours School, Course Three (i.e. concerned with the thought, texts and language usages and style of the various more Modern Periods), and he would have hoped to complete this degree requirements after this various final examinations in the summer of 1935.

Technically he should have taken three years to qualify for the residence part of the Oxford degree, since he had not completed the colonial (New Zealand) first degree—the which would have normally given him ‘advanced standing’, and so shortened his qualifying time for residence prior to final examinations—but he was to be powerfully tutored by the poet Edmund Blunden, and he had much impressed many academic figures; and thus, finally, he was deemed to have the equivalent/ appropriate period of candidature for someone who had done a full degree

elsewhere; and so, in 1935, he was to be qualified to take the Oxford degree finals, then to be awarded a First Class Honours degree,² and, soon after, gain a much prized editorial post with the Oxford University Press, largely in Oxford.

And so, very a soon after this, he was to be serving at the mind and heart of thinking England, and of the British Empire; and so, almost immediately, becoming responsible for commissioning more modern and incisive and reformist texts in both the humanities and in the social sciences.³

*

*

His arrival in England, in that late November, had meant that he had commenced his degree studies some seven weeks late, a timing which would mean, officially, that he could not complete the residential requirements for a degree with Advanced Status [i.e. allowed a year off the term of study for the Bachelor of Arts degree] after the normally set written and oral examinations which he had taken in June—July of 1935. The complex matter of his somewhat awkward status and subsequently obtaining a brilliant First Class Honours degree, not least due to his being so finely tutored by the Merton academic and poet, Edmund Blunden, are not germane to the present biographic and nuanced perspective piece, but they are certainly symbolic of his ability to do what his English peers might well have styled in both wartime and like army contexts, as ‘crashing through’.

*

*

This present short and largely biographic/ contextual note⁴ is one focussed on the immediate period of his first leaving New Zealand, and then, as customary, voyaging to England, the mother country and to experience there all that it stood for, the humane and the class-ruined and hierarchical society, as it was to be observed in later 1933. And thus we are now concerned with his own outside encounter—as for all those departing the native land—with that first land landfall place, the so solitary Pitcairn Island, and also with the notion/ symbolic meaning of Pitcairn⁵ in Pacific and British naval history, and this to be caught now as far as

2 The degree is not listed in some records, but it was thought by him that he had completed all the requirements, as is indicated in his letters.

3 A list of some of those known to have been handled by him is given at the end of this paper.

4 All quotations and references are drawn from *A Good Mail: Letters of John Mulgan*, Selected and edited by Peter Whitefold, and published in Wellington, New Zealand, by the Victoria University Press, 2011. [The present writer is also a Mertonian, having joined the College from New Zealand in late September 1954, some twenty one years after Mulgan, but taking the English School, Course I, in the early language and like periods’ texts.]

5 See further ahead in this essay.

possible, as told in his own succinct words to his mother, as when he could put pen to paper:

‘To Marguerita Mulgan—October 22nd, 1933:

‘Ruahine’

Dear Mother,

I am writing on Sunday morning, two weeks out⁶ – the first letter that I have written. We were unable to send a mail from Pitcairn, the ‘Rangatiki’⁷ got there a day before us. I hope that you got my wireless. I thought that I should like to send some message as it will be some time before you get this.

I felt very torn up and homesick when I left you all and the ship started heading down the harbour. Went down to the cabin...

After straightening up my things went on deck to see the last of New Zealand. The sun was setting as we went out between Coromandel and the Barrier. (p. 17)

My day runs more or less like this... After breakfast I usually retire with a book somewhere. The ship being so empty there is any amount of quiet to be found ... With a cool wind blowing it is very nice there...

Then afternoon tea at five, which I usually have with my Scottish friend.. a cigarette and a walk on deck and I change into flannels for a game at five.

...I am feeling better than I have for years—the routine suits me and I am getting just enough hard exercise to keep fit. I read Byron for the first few days—it seems to suit myself and the blue Pacific... parts of ‘Childe Harold’ & ‘Don Juan’ are magnificent. (p. 18)

The weather was dull and grey after we left New Zealand with occasional rain until Pitcairn but no bad weather, and even in the swell that we sometimes have the old ship is so loaded down, and such a good sea-boat, that one cannot really feel anything...

It has not yet got really hot—a strong trade wind blowing against us keeps the ship very cool. The only disadvantage is that the seas coming slightly on the port side are apt to splash into my port- hole. (p. 20)

⁶ Mulgan’s ship had left Auckland on October 10th, 1933.

⁷ This companion ship of the New Zealand Shipping line was homeward bound for New Zealand, after coming through the Panama Canal, and proceeding on a southwesterly arc towards the North Island of New Zealand. All the ships in the fleet of mixed or cargo liners had Maori names of tribal and/ or chiefly significance, and so of much potency and protection, or *mana*. [Editors. Maoridictionary.co.nz translates *mana* as: 'prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, charisma'.]

*

*

As this just cited edition of his letters makes clear, after his return from school in Wellington to his home and so to further and university study in the Auckland University College, he was desperately eager for the broadening experience of the greater world, one earlier so well known to his immigrant to New Zealand and Ulster-born grandfather. In the biographic record of John Mulgan, there are but few letters extant from the period just before his departure, but these are remarkable for the evocation of the New Zealand landscape, and the now distinctively formed white New Zealander character, something which would mark both his later novel, *Man Alone*, and be indicative—even within days of sailing from Auckland Harbour—of his preference for regular hard mental and physical exercise, despite the leisurely nature of the shipboard travel itself.

When he finally reached Oxford, he was soon to be caught up in his studies and the rich English cultural traditions, but he had remained more than conscious, too, of its educational and intellectual challenges and of its seemingly so gracious life style being only one aspect, and that so very deceptively, of that Depression era's so very bitterly divided national society. And it was a deep desire to in some way remedy this social separateness of the people—into the so generously endowed, and the rest—that explains in some way the almost frenzied style of what he had sought to achieve in the following period when he was working in the Clarendon Press as both an editor and a commissioner of appropriate modernising and explicatory texts in the humanities and in the so significant and desperately needed for political reform, namely the powerful 'Modern Greats', as in the much more insightful social sciences retort to the much esteemed classical/ revered Graeco-Roman humanities.

*

*

We may now turn to his abroad letters, as presented in this cited edition

October 29th.

Here again a week later—due Panama early tomorrow morning. Life on board ship seems to go slowly hour by hour but the days go by...

The weather kept cool until about two days ago: a most remarkable voyage—the officers have only just gone into white to-day, three weeks out. We crossed the line last week in perfect weather. We are to arrive in Panama tomorrow early and will have a few hours ashore, and then go through the Canal in the afternoon. After that we go to Curacao for oil, and then we will be off on the last lap. (pp. 21-22)

Other material is variously given, and there follow excerpts from his letter to his father (pp.20–21) -

To Alan Mulgan—October 29th, 1933
‘Ruahine’

Dear Father,

I write on Sunday three weeks out. I have added a short note to-day to a letter to Mother which I wrote last week and will post both in Panama tomorrow. I am sorry to have kept you so long without letters but we were unable to send letters from Pitcairn.

I have thoroughly enjoyed the voyage so far, as you can imagine. She is a good old ship—steady as a rock— if rather slow. You can guess how quiet it is with only nineteen passengers of whom three are children... I read most of this morning and a great deal of the afternoon.

I find that I can mix with people here, and knowing exactly what I want I can usually get it. I don't worry much about Oxford...

You can imagine better than I can describe, life on board. The monotony doesn't worry me—the sea is really scenery enough. Pitcairn is a most romantic spot. We came on it late one afternoon—a rather rainy day. It stands up out of the sea, as if it had got there by mistake—a fairly high rocky island about two miles long. For sheer loneliness it would be hard to beat it. The islanders are a dirty lot—very much intermarried, and run to seed, all the worst traits of the souvenir-seller. But I couldn't help feeling stirred when we left them. It was just getting dark—a cloud over the top of the island and they set out to row back in their little boats, singing hymns tunelessly, sometimes going quite out of sight in the long swell. It's a fitting end to the 'Bounty' story. (p. 21)

We are north of the line now and of the sun also – a strange feeling to find the days growing short again. This is my first taste of hot weather, this last day or two. (p. 21)

*

*

The other interesting Pitcairn linked piece in this dense volume of letters (these running down to 17th April 1945, not long before his death on the following Anzac Day,) occurs in an early home letter to his parents, one dated May 29, 1934, and so in his third term of residence in Merton College, in which he talks of cricket, the interesting visit of the Bradman team to play an early tour match in Oxford, and of a College Bump Supper—a dinner celebrating success in the rowing eights—and how he had also met and spent 'an hour or two talking to Ronald Syme' [the

outstanding Oxford scholar of Roman history, and an Aucklander by extraction and early studies], and he then observing

He is coming to Auckland by the *Rangitane* (? I think that is right, anyway leaving here in June by one of those boats) and returning on the same trip... he is very nice and rather interesting. If you get a chance to see him, do...

He is rather a famous man here the local authority on Roman history... honoured by being asked to write chapters for the *Cambridge Ancient History* now appearing... (p. 44).

Of course, the significance of this passage lies in the fact that it refers, albeit very indirectly, to Mulgan's having, and quite exceptionally, taken courses in demotic Greek in his very much incomplete degree studies at the University of Auckland, his speaking Modern Greek colloquially and so fluent linguistic skill thereby leading to his eminent suitability as a guerilla leader for the Allied supported Greek partisan resistance to the German troops of occupation in Greece in 1943-1944.

*

*

John Mulgan took his (perhaps reflective) Moments at Pitcairn to an Intellectual Group at Merton College, Oxford

The letter just cited then continues with this amusing Pitcairn concept anecdote:

There is one exclusive club in Merton, The Bodley Club limited to 24 members and devoted to being clever— amusing rather than deep. The principal is that to be elected one has to be taken along by somebody as a guest to one of their fortnightly meetings, where somebody reads a paper on some out of the way subject.

To qualify for election one has to make a witty remark—if the club approves and there is a vacancy you are elected otherwise not. I had been asked to go along to their meeting on Friday last and the day before I found out that the paper which was called the 'Forgotten Island' was about Pitcairn. Now as I am certainly the only man in the college who has seen it, the coincidence is curious.

In the actual event, Mulgan had fudged his evidence persuasively, using some personal/ family photographs from home in Auckland as authentic evidence of someone he had styled as 'King Christian' and of Pitcairn, and then was to be concluding his typewritten letter of some 1500 words thus:

It was all rather funny, they are quite mad, but cleverly so. I made my few remarks at times and was elected and so to bed. (p. 44)

*

*

The value of this tale both for the present day, for the somewhat pretentious members of the Bodley Club, and for John Mulgan's parents, is that Pitcairn Island is one of those remarkable tiny spots where time has stood still, about which all the well-read and historically reflective are curious, and where a minor event in real terms has become pivotal in the colonization and occupation by Europeans of so many island realms of the today so romanticised South Pacific Ocean.

Appropriately, however, one of the social and political in rebels in New Zealand and in British political and social thought in the 1930s had paused to reflect on a notorious protest and heroic defiance of 'the system' which had so crushed and repressed the little people, notable the crews of British ships of the line, wherein Fletcher Christian had served. Pleasingly, we may now elect to link [Colonel] John Mulgan (1913–1945) with our reflections on the life and meaning of the famous and defiant Master of the *Bounty*, the first Fletcher Christian, when we would savour the associations of that solitary oceanic rock—that quirkishly recalled tiny atoll—with war and peace, and both the acceptance of repression and its rejection by those who dared to be different, and outspoken, then so finally defiant of the customary heedless, and egularly brutal treatment of the serving individual, in both the eighteenth and the mid twentieth centuries.

*

*

References

- Jøn, A. Asbjørn, Philip Ward and J.S. Ryan, 'To Pitcairn and Beyond'
Australian Folklore, 31 (2016), 192-204.
- Mulgan, Alan, *A Pilgrim's Way in New Zealand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935).
- Mulgan, John, *Man Alone* (Penguin Books, 1939).
- Whitefold, Peter, *A Good Mail: Letters of John Mulgan* (Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press, 2011).

*

*

*