

John Mulgan and the Greek Left: A Regrettably Intimate Acquaintance.

By C.-Dimitris Gounelas, Ruth Parkin-Gounelas.

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Reviewed by Peter Whiteford.

In May 2021, I attended the Featherston Booktown Festival with Vincent O’Sullivan to talk about John Mulgan and *Man Alone*, which had just been re-published in a corrected edition. The large audience was clearly interested in and knowledgeable about Mulgan’s only novel, and equally interested in its enigmatic author. Mulgan had died in Cairo seventy-six years earlier as the Second World War was drawing to a close. His death was the result of an overdose of morphine, in the words of the inquest report “taken intentionally by the deceased while the balance of his mind was disturbed”. It was, and remains still, a disputed decision – so much so that even in 2021 people approached me after the event keen to discuss and to challenge the verdict of suicide.

I open with this reflection because the circumstances of Mulgan’s death have, in the words of Richard Mulgan that preface the latest edition of *Report on Experience*, “continued to haunt his reputation” and must inevitably loom large in any book that concentrates, as this very fine work does, on his final time in Greece and Cairo. But it would be unfortunate if the uncertainty about Mulgan’s death should dominate discussion of this book, for while it does certainly offer some new points about that debate, it provides very much more in its rich and detailed treatment of the complex political situation within which Mulgan spent the last years of his life. It is, as Vincent O’Sullivan remarks, “essential to a fuller understanding of Mulgan”.

The authors carefully identify the challenge they face “when exploring Mulgan’s thoughts and activities at this time” (p. 3) – a challenge of trying “to reconcile the widely varying accounts of the different political and military aims” (p. 3), or more starkly, the challenge of trying to reconcile the significant differences between British and Greek versions of what happened in Greece between 1943 and 1945 – differences between what the British and Greeks say about what the British and Greeks did. What becomes very clear from their thorough and detailed analysis is just how determinedly partial the traditional Anglophone narrative has been and how unwilling to voice criticism of Churchill’s imperatives. It is a major achievement of this work to offer alternative narratives that reflect Greek voices, in all their own richly conflicting detail. *John Mulgan and the Greek Left* takes its place as one of a number of works that offer more nuanced readings of the partisan liberation movements and the activities of the Greek left, itself both informed by and contributing to revisionist histories of the period.

But writing a revisionist history is not the primary aim of C-Dimitris Gounelas and Ruth Parkin-Gounelas. The introduction to the book very clearly sets out its own ambitions: to trace the ways in which Mulgan increasingly came to identify with the local fighters he worked with in Greece; to explore how that identification led him to a position that was at odds with changing British policy; and to demonstrate how his closeness to the Greek partisans marked him as something of an exception among the SOE operatives. These ambitions are magnificently realised. The John Mulgan who emerges from these pages is nicely described as working with great care and caution from within a “bi-focal perspective” – retaining close working relationships with his Greek comrades but having to do so within a set of British policies that he could not comfortably agree with but could not openly challenge. It is his unparalleled success in walking that very fine line that leads the authors to describe his achievements in terms of his collaborations as “unique in the country”.

The book begins with what are essentially background chapters, but it would be ungracious to dismiss them as such, for they serve to reveal much of Mulgan's own political thinking as he observed the changing face of European Socialism, and equally to reveal much of the enormously complicated situation, in political and military terms, that preceded the war in Greece, and that characterised the first years of Axis occupation. It was into that situation that Mulgan dropped, quite literally, when he parachuted into western Thessaly in September 1943, and analysis of his daily activities there form the bulk of the second section of the book. The third section then opens with what the authors describe as "the central chapter in that it attempts a reading of *Report on Experience* as what we are calling its bi-focal exposition of the Greek crisis" (p. 13).

Report on Experience is a fascinating text, both for its content and for its context, for the background story of its composition and dispatch to New Zealand, its partial suppression when first published, and for the tragic circumstance of Mulgan's death so soon after having sent it home. But it is not an easy text, and as these authors so convincingly demonstrate it is a text which operates by a rhetoric of evasion. There was, for all the political reasons hinted at, much that Mulgan had to leave unsaid, although he was prepared to be forthright in his criticisms of some of the commanding officers that he served under before joining the SOE. Rather different from the overt (and scathing) criticism of those officers is the much subtler expression of doubts about British policy, and particularly about the ways in which British policy and post-war intentions seemed at odds with Greek aspirations for freedom and independence. As the authors tell us, "we need to listen carefully" if we are to detect Mulgan's true voice and his true thoughts behind the various rhetorical strategies that he adopts. Listen carefully. Read attentively.

It may seem all too simple to say that the Gounelases so convincingly achieve their ambitions by the basic application of close reading, but in many ways that is at the heart of their approach, and it emerges very forcefully and very convincingly in their interpretation of *Report*. It is very fine literary analysis, building upon – indeed, requiring – the detailed and scrupulous political and historical analysis that precedes it. That same careful attentive reading can be seen in their exploration of all Mulgan's work, whether his wartime diaries, or the "Behind the Cables" articles that he shared with Geoffrey Cox, or the letters that he wrote home, or the careful report he wrote for J.V. Wilson as well as the better-known *Report* and *Man Alone*. Scrupulous scholarship and nuanced close reading in combination here make for a very fine analysis, a compelling narrative, and an essential work in our thinking about John Mulgan.

The final chapters of the book, as the authors also alert us to in their introduction "open out to posthumous and more speculative issues" (p. 13), dealing with the last days of Mulgan's life when "gaps in the story loom large" (p. 264). If, as they assert, there is a degree of speculation here, I think it is entirely justified – earned by the hard work that has gone before. Speculation that arises from such scholarship, such detail, such magisterial handling of sources, seems wholly valid, and I find the identification of Christine Atherton in Chapter ten utterly convincing. Indeed, in the nature of the kind of work the SOE undertook, that identification is somehow the more convincing for not being wholly provable.

And so to the very last chapter which deals (if that is the right word) with Mulgan's death. I noted above that the sometimes-contested verdict of suicide should not dominate discussion of the book, but it is worth attending to the range of ideas that are presented at the end, ideas that, if they cannot solve the mystery of Mulgan's death, insist that it is still mysterious and difficult to account for. Perhaps it might be fully explained if Mulgan's correspondence with Julian

Dolbey (the commanding officer of SOE operations in the Aegean) were made available to researchers, but those and other documents remain closed files. It is difficult for that not to create some suspicion about what those documents might contain that must still remain a secret eighty years after they were written. In a recent article in the *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, Martyn Brown concludes that the verdict of suicide is the more plausible, and many will agree with that conclusion. But this new book makes clear that “more plausible” is not quite the same as “beyond reasonable doubt”.

In a note that appears at the front of this book, Dougal McNeil reflects that each generation of New Zealanders seems to discover its own John Mulgan, to find its own ways of engaging with and debating his novel and his complex legacy. That is certainly true, but one feels there is less such engagement with that complex legacy in recent years. Sadly, Mulgan has become, for some, just a little unfashionable, even a little passé, with the unwelcome result that this excellent work of scholarship may not receive the attention it so richly deserves. It is a marvellous achievement and an important contribution to how we understand the figure of John Mulgan. C-Dimitris Gounelas and Ruth Parkin-Gounelas deserve our thanks and our congratulations.