

Alan Mulgan, 1881 –1962

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Journalist, poet, novelist and critic, Alan Mulgan was a significant force in the world of New Zealand letters in the first half of the twentieth century. Though his work is now little read, it remains historically significant, for it expresses very clearly certain cultural concerns that characterized the period.

Alan Mulgan was born in Katikati in the Bay of Plenty of Protestant Irish parents. Life in Katikati, as he later noted in his autobiographical work *The Making of a New Zealander*, was 'very simple'; it was marked, in particular, by a firm conviction that England was Home. Mulgan inherited this belief, and he spent the rest of his life, like many in his generation, attempting to reconcile it with the fact that he was a New Zealander living half a world away from England. The sense that he belonged to two worlds marks nearly all Mulgan's writing, and forms the leitmotiv of his thought.

Educated initially in Katikati, Mulgan went with his family to Auckland in the early 1890s. In 1892, thanks to a special scholarship, he entered Auckland Grammar School, where he stayed till 1899. Though able, Mulgan did not do particularly well academically. Unable to go to university, and prevented from making teaching a career by a speech impediment, he chose instead to become a journalist, joining the *Auckland Star* as a cadet reporter in 1900. In 1904 he moved to Christchurch, where he worked as a reporter and editor for *The Press*. In 1916, by now married and a father, he returned to the *Star* as chief leader writer; he also worked as a columnist under the pseudonym 'Cyrano' and ran the newspaper's literary pages, publishing the writings of Robin Hyde and A. R. D. Fairburn among others. From 1924 he lectured in journalism at Auckland University College. Journalism, he later recorded, taught him the importance of accuracy. It also gave him a privileged vantage point during the terrible years of the First World War. The carnage in Gallipoli and northern France, Mulgan later observed, made New Zealanders 'grow up at a jump' and encouraged a new sense of nationalism.

Little of this new nationalism can be detected in Mulgan's first book, a co-authored production titled *The New Zealand Citizen: an elementary account of the citizen's rights and duties and the work of government*, which placed New Zealand firmly in within the British Empire. More original were Mulgan's *Three Plays of New Zealand*, published in 1922. Though slight, these pieces

possess a definite sense of local atmosphere. The best, 'The Daughter,' deals with a mother's frustrated hopes. Educated for a life of the mind, Mrs. Bailey, a dairy farmer's wife, finds herself exiled in the rural backblocks. An old friend from university days arrives, and declares his love, but as he and Mrs. Bailey recognise, it is too late. 'What's the good of wishing?' says Mrs. Bailey sadly. The setting is authentically New Zealand, the tone rather Chekhovian.

Three years later Mulgan published *The English of the Line and Other Verses*, the main poem of which extolled the fighting abilities of the English infantry regiments. The rather sentimental view of the English soldier that marks this piece was an omen of things to come, for in 1927, after a trip to England which he described as a 'joyous pilgrimage', Mulgan published *Home: a New Zealander's Adventure*. Inspired by the sight of the English coast as his ship moved up the Channel, Mulgan's book is an encomium on England and the English (not, it should be noted, on Britain and the British – despite his Irish background, Mulgan felt little interest in the Celtic nations, whose importance he felt had been overstated). England, as Mulgan portrays it to his colonial reader, is a picture postcard landscape of quaint villages and mellow countryside. London, the imperial capital, lives up to every expectation:

Day after day you come upon in reality, types and things you have read about – policemen and flower girls, Phil Mag's eccentrics, deferential waiters, haughty young ladies and long waits in tea shops, names of businesses and streets with which you had been familiar all your life.

Even the industrial Midlands and North, which Mulgan dutifully visited, turn out to be less awful than he had feared, while the unrest caused by the General Strike of 1926, which was underway while Mulgan was in England, was managed, he thought, with typically English good nature. As he sailed away, Mulgan recorded with satisfaction that he had 'lived among the old beauty of my dreams.' He returned to New Zealand, he later stated, 'a fuller, wiser man.'

Home's naïve adulation of England and all things English reads embarrassingly today, but the book was well received and went through three editions. Mulgan had established himself as a journalist and writer of non-fiction, but his next published work was not prose but poetry – his *Golden Wedding*, which appeared in 1932. Written in rhyming couplets and modelled on the verse of Goldsmith and Crabbe, this lengthy poem centres on the

wedding celebrations of an old pioneering couple, describing along the way the landscape they live in and the local characters (retired general, MP, vicar), who live or work nearby. Eileen Duggan, in an introduction to a later edition of *Golden Wedding*, stated that the poem was a ‘touchstone against false national values,’ opining that it glorified ‘the gnarled and homely virtues of the land.’ Mulgan’s piece, though sentimental, conveys something of the atmosphere of the rural landscape the old couple inhabits; it casts, too, a gently satirical eye on human nature (of the local MP, Mulgan writes that he is ‘himself his true magnetic north, his star/His mounting vote in each triennial war.’).

Successful as it is as verse, *Golden Wedding* is a conventional piece by a conventional poet, one whose conception of poetry seems to have been rather limited (its main function, apparently, was to provide appropriate quotes at moments of feeling). Mulgan had little sympathy with experimental verse and ‘modern’ writing in general, describing its purpose as the ‘dethronement of nobility.’ This conventional, old-fashioned view of literature informed Mulgan’s next work, a novel called *Spur of Morning*, published in 1934.

Written during the Depression, the book betrays little sense of the period; even its author admitted in a prefatory note that it belonged to ‘another age.’ The story follows the lives of two Auckland school friends, Mark Bryan, a fiery rebel of Irish descent who sees himself unequivocally as a New Zealander, and Philip Armitage, a quieter, more introspective character who worships everything English. The storyline is conventional: love triumphs at the end, with the right man getting the right woman. Thematically, however, *Spur of Morning* is significant, for in it Sylvia Feldon, the heroine, comes to the realization that England, while it may be Home, is not ‘home’ – ‘and there was a difference.’ At the end of the novel Sylvia breaks off her engagement to an upper-class English soldier and admits her love for the rough, independent New Zealander Bryan. It is a symbolic act. Mulgan seems to be suggesting that European New Zealanders, while properly conscious of their English heritage, must start forging their own New Zealand identity.

Spur of Morning was followed by *A Pilgrim’s Way in New Zealand* (1935), which painted a picture postcard view of New Zealand in the same way that *Home* had painted a picture postcard view of England. In the same year Mulgan left the *Star* and moved to Wellington to work in the new medium of radio as Supervisor of Talks for the New Zealand Broadcasting Board. The change of career was illuminating: for the first time, Mulgan noted, he was the object of criticism rather than a critic. Mulgan liked Wellington (‘the intellectual

centre of New Zealand') and later wrote a history of the city and its province, a job he deemed the toughest he ever did.

In 1937, while working for radio, Mulgan published a second collection of poetry, *Aldebaran and Other Verses*. In 'Aldebaran', a long, rambling piece in *Hiawatha*-style octosyllables, Mulgan contrasts the age of the stars with the briefness of man's life. He then makes a list of English and New Zealand plant names, suggesting the coming together in New Zealand of two hitherto separate worlds. More successful is 'Success', a 'modern' piece in blank verse about the funeral of a local worthy which contains some sharp observation (as in Mulgan's description of a 'pert little bungalow' being 'all eyebrows and eyes').

As an editor, broadcaster and writer, Mulgan was naturally interested in the history and progress of New Zealand letters, and in 1943 he published *Literature and Authorship in New Zealand*. The book begins with an historical survey: Edward Maning's *Old New Zealand* is 'an indubitable classic', while William Pember Reeves is lauded for striking 'a definite New Zealand note.' Mulgan's greatest praise for past New Zealand writers is reserved for Jessie Mackay, whom he describes as being able to 'draw with the clarity of an etcher and hit with the force of a boxer.' Mulgan is generous to contemporaries such as Robin Hyde, whose death in 1939 he deemed a serious blow to New Zealand literature; he also notes critical praise for John Mulgan's *Man Alone*, even though the sombre, Depression-haunted country his son had portrayed in that novel differed radically from the one he had written about in *Spur of Morning* and *A Pilgrim's Way in New Zealand*. Modern poets 'of the revolt school' such as R. A. K. Mason and A. R. D. Fairburn receive guarded approval (Mason's terseness reminded Mulgan of Houseman). More to Mulgan's taste, however, is Eileen Duggan ('a strong traditionalist') whose 'shining achievement' it was to have written about New Zealand subjects with natural ease. 'She has given universality to the local', wrote Mulgan, judging that this was 'the mark of high art.' Mulgan's verdicts in *Literature and Authorship in New Zealand* are generally predictable, and his critical analysis scarcely profound, but the book had a role in forming New Zealand literary taste during the war years.

Mulgan retired from broadcasting in 1946. He continued to write for the newspapers, and co-edited an anthology of Australian and New Zealand verse, which appeared in 1950. The major work of his last years, however, was his autobiography, *The Making of a New Zealander*, originally given as a series of radio talks and published as a book in 1958. In it, Mulgan gives a

relaxed, readable account of his life, digressing widely on subjects such as poetry ('a great stand-by in life'), the New Zealand character, journalism, the place of Māori in New Zealand, and New Zealand's future (the country had to develop a new, more intellectual identity, he opined, based on 'fundamental brain stuff.'). Detailed as Mulgan's book is, it is emotionally rather reticent – the suicide of his son John in 1945, for example, is passed over in silence, though Mulgan does at one point mention a 'shadow of personal loss' which may be an allusion to this event. Mulgan ends his book with a description of himself as a 'Liberal with leftist leanings.' A self-confessed advocate of the Humanities, he detests totalitarianism and all its works, he states, and wishes New Zealanders above all to cultivate 'an open mind.'

The Making of a New Zealander was well received. In its review of 28 November 1958 the *Auckland Star* judged it Mulgan's most important work, praising the 'versatility' of his mind and the 'virility' of his prose, while in an article of 19 December the *New Zealand Listener* thought Mulgan's life-story 'original', 'striking' and written in prose that displayed 'the old-fashioned virtues of simplicity, clarity and logical sequence.'

In 1961 Mulgan and his wife Marguerita were attacked by an intruder in their Wellington home. Mulgan never properly recovered, but survived till 1962. That year saw the publication of *Great Days in New Zealand Writing*, an expansion of the discussion of New Zealand letters that he had initiated with *Literature and Authorship in New Zealand*. While Mulgan's critical judgments had not fundamentally changed – his admiration for Eileen Duggan, for example, remained undimmed – they were presented this time in more detail, and with the benefit of some 20 years of national literary development. Katherine Mansfield is described as a 'passionately dedicated artist,' whose genius joined 'this new world land of ours with the culture of the old world.' Jane Mander's *Story of a New Zealand River* is judged 'an epic' that 'set New Zealand on the road to naturalism in talk.' Of interest is the discussion of Frank Sargeson, who according to Mulgan had 'loosened up New Zealand prose'. In stories that focused on ordinary men and women and which eschewed conventional romanticism in favour of a 'more assiduous and detailed probing into motives.'

Mulgan died in August 1962, at the age of 81. The *Evening Post* obituary of 30 August noted Mulgan's 'lifetime dedication to literature' and judged that his influence on New Zealand writing would be felt for a long time. *Golden Wedding, and Other Poems*, a collection of 17 pieces of varying length, some previously published, appeared posthumously in 1964.

Alan Mulgan's reputation has been overshadowed – perhaps inevitably – by that of his son John. Critics, too (notably McEldowney) have viewed his work with reserve, taxing him, among other things, with having written too much too quickly. He remains, however, an historically interesting figure, one who expressed clearly and engagingly some of the major cultural concerns of his period.

LINKS

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