

Johnson Goes Bush: Geography and Fiction in *Man Alone*

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Few New Zealanders would not have heard of the “Desert Road”, that thirty-three mile¹ section of State Highway One which runs generally from north to south, past the eastern slopes of Mounts Ruapehu, Ngauruhoe and Tongariro, on the volcanic plateau of the central North Island. For many travelling along that highway, the magnificent peaks to the west are a pleasant reminder of vacations and weekends enjoyed skiing, climbing, hiking, fishing or just relaxing, supported by chair-lifts, huts, lodges, trails and camping grounds, that are established mainly on the western and southern slopes.

To the east of the road, however, the country is not so well known. There appear to be range after range of mountains, not as high as those of the National Park, but snow-capped in winter, dissected by gorges that channel major rivers in every direction towards distant coasts. For forty miles eastwards, this is a region devoid of human habitation, until one reaches the province of Hawkes Bay. Huts are few and access is difficult. The Kaimanawa and Kaweka ranges constitute an extensive wilderness. Unlike the National Park side, to the traveller this is unknown territory.

Not totally unknown, however. For some may recall that it was here, in the Kaimanawas, that the fictional character Johnson, chief protagonist of John Mulgan’s seminal novel, *Man Alone*, went into hiding, before he emerged three months later in Hawkes Bay.² Here, to the west beside the road, is obviously the Rangipo desert; there, the shoulder of Ruapehu. Recognising the location of Johnson’s journey down to the road may entice some to wonder about the rest of his route, eastward through the unknown ranges. Did Mulgan keep close to the facts there too? How “accurate” is that account?

The purpose of this paper is to ascertain the extent to which the account of Johnson’s journey is based on actual geography. Details from the text will be related to what is known about the region, and some conclusions will be suggested about Mulgan’s life and fiction. (The accompanying map provides a suggested route.)

¹ Measures in this article are imperial rather than metric, reflecting Mulgan’s use.

² Mulgan, John. *Man Alone*. First published 1939. Reprinted eighteen times between 1960 and 1985, reflecting its widespread use in schools and universities. Page references in this article are to the Penguin edition, 1990.

Johnson's Journey, on the Map

After the death of Stenning, Johnson decided to evade the Law by hiding out for a few months in the mountainous region east of the "coach road", intending to come out in the Hawkes Bay district, and to seek a ship by which to leave New Zealand.

Stenning's farm was located off the edge of the plain that ran to the foot of Ruapehu (75), and one-and-a-half miles off the cream-lorry route (77) that ran west through the 1920s' bush-fire country (74) from a little dairy town (72). The description of this fictional little town suggests the actual town of Raetihi, where indeed Mulgan had stayed (O'Sullivan).

It was May (131), and Johnson had worked at Stenning's for more than a year (106).

Johnson commenced his journey, on horseback, at midnight. He got through the little town in the dark, and headed back along the road he had earlier walked from Ohakune Junction (69), towards the railway and the mountain. He was making for the Kaimanawas, beyond Ruapehu and across the tussock plains. However, in order to have shelter in daylight rather than be caught in the open, he turned off up a side-road and ten miles of bush-track, which led up the mountain (131). Above the bush-line he reached a corrugated-iron hut built for mountaineers (132). The description of this hut matches that of Blyth Hut, in which Mulgan had also stayed.

After resting till noon, he dismissed the horse and made his way "where there was no track" (133),³ eastward round the mountainside, planning to come down when he had passed the eastern ridge. In the late afternoon he saw Girdlestone Peak above him, so that he was able to "get his line" on that ridge, which descended to the summit of the coach-road. He made his way down to the edge of the tussock, where he dug himself a shelter for the night, the second of his journey.

The second day and third night were spent in the Rangipo Desert, in a storm.

On his third day, Johnson emerged from the sand to tussock, reaching the coach-road (which matches the "Desert Road" of the 1930s) at midday. After the service car had passed he crossed the road and, feeling concealed by the falling rain, went eastward over the plain (137).

For Mulgan's account to be consistent with actual geography, the place where Johnson would have emerged from sand into tussock would be at the north-east corner of the Rangipo desert, where today the Bullock track leads up

³ In fact there is (and probably was) a poled track around the mountain, linking huts including Waihohonu Hut further north-east, where Mulgan had stayed.

to the Tukino skifield. He would have crossed the road at its highest point. (He hid in a ditch, not a culvert.)

There is a problem, however, with “eastward over the plain”. Unless the more-or-less level ground further south is meant, which would conflict with the reference to the “eastern ridge”, the only “plain” to which this can refer runs *north-east*, from this crossing-place to the bush edge at the Waipahihi stream, which flows north-west to the upper Waikato. However, eastward it was. In the late afternoon, Johnson saw that his goal, the Kaimanawas, was further than he had hoped. He spent the fourth night in the rain, still in the tussock.

Late in the morning of his fourth day he came to the edge of the bush and the rain stopped. He rested, made a fire, cooked a meal, and stayed the night (his fifth). This camp at the bush-edge was the equivalent of one day’s walk from the road-crossing.

“This was real bush” (“deep...matted...a tangle of ferns and bushlawyer” (138)), through which it was difficult to go forward. He “followed the path of a bush creek which wound its way through the bottom of the valley into the heart of the range” (139). This suggests the upper Waikato, which leads north-east down to the Waipahihi River (not to be confused with the Waipahihi stream), which he followed upstream. He followed this route for five days, making eight to ten miles per day.

Then he had to climb “to get over the first heights of the range that ran up six thousand feet high, and he did this after two weeks of journeying” (139). Here the reader may sense some ambiguity in the description. Did Johnson *start* to climb after two weeks, did he *complete* this climb when he had been two weeks on his journey (that is in four days, as the previous ten days have been accounted for above), or, indeed, did it take two weeks to cross these “first heights”?

Johnson crossed the range and, just before it snowed, descended 2,000 feet to a great valley. There he decided “that if he were to endure through the next three months he must have warmth and shelter”, which he made for himself in a cave by the river (140).

At this stage, Johnson had been “on the run” for at least two weeks.

“When the third full moon, from the day when he had left the farm, began to wane” (142), i.e. about twelve weeks after leaving Stenning’s, early in August, Johnson left his rock shelter, to follow down the course of the river, judging it to flow south then east towards Hawkes Bay.

“Journeying in the darkness of the bush he could not tell what progress he was making and seldom the direction that he travelled.” He followed the river “for days that lengthened into weeks” (143). The skyline of the hills seemed to be endless, and the river’s course always south, not east (144).

After falling into the river and losing his rifle, he left the banks and, sidling towards the eastern side, observed, from near the ridge, that the river did curve eastward further downstream. Next day he caught sight of a hut, far below on the western side of the valley, a good five miles or a day's journey away. He returned to the river, crossed over in the morning, later became lost and desperate, but at the end of the day, in the darkness, he staggered upon the hut, and its occupant, Crawley.

Johnson convalesced with Crawley for about three weeks, until late September, as he judged it (155). Crawley then had to walk out for supplies, which took a week altogether, as the end of the road was thirty miles, a two-days' walk, from his hut (158).

Johnson's subsequent departure commenced about midday on a day early in October. He and Crawley were on horseback. The track through the bush was a good one, as it had been made by surveyors. Four or five hours later they came to upland tussock, on a pumice plateau. Cattle were feeding at the edge of the bush. Here they camped.

Early next morning they came through half-burnt bush-country to the edge of Waite's farm, and the first fence. From there it was two miles to the homestead and the road, said Crawley, five more miles to the store and post office at Wakanui, and then ten further miles to a "better road" (162).

After waiting out the day alone, Johnson walked twenty miles that night, and came out onto the main road. Then, walking only by night, two nights later he reached Waiapapa (163), with its hotel and garage, where he shaved.

Next day he walked to a small farm where a woman gave him work, food and clothing. He slept in a culvert.

He reached a major road the following day, got lifts, first to a "fair-sized town" (167, the location suggests Napier) and then on a lorry which took him north, on a route which suggests via Taupo, through steep bush country with views of Ruapehu away to the south. Eventually, after crossing familiar dairy plains, this lift of two hundred miles ended in Hamilton (168).

Geographical Divergences in Johnson's Route

It is evident from the above that Johnson's route relates quite closely to factual geography. Divergence of any consequence occurs in only two places.

The first instance is the direction taken by Johnson after crossing the Desert Road, as discussed above.

The second divergence relates to the river valley in which he shelters, finds Crawley's hut, and eventually treks out to the road. The text at first suggests the Rangitikei River; however, later development of the story does not fit the course of that river or the landscape through which it flows.

Viewed from the head of the Waipakihi, on Junction Top (5265 ft), this river is indeed two thousand feet directly below. It is bush-covered and impenetrable and continues like that for about thirty-five miles downstream, emerging from the hills just north of the main road.

Eventually, however, the Rangitikei swings right, not left, several miles south of the road bridge, and flows not to Hawkes Bay but to the West Coast near Wanganui. Moreover in the Rangitikei north of the main road there are no upland tussock plains, fence-lines, homesteads or side-roads.

These are actual features of the country further east, the pumice plains of Ngamatea Station. Ngamatea's homestead is at the end of a private road which runs seven miles north from the Napier-Taihape road at a point approximately six miles west of the bridge over the Taruarau River and many miles east of the Rangitikei bridge.

The fictitious "Wakanui" was situated like Ngamatea on a side-road to the north of the main road. Waite's farm was five miles north of Wakanui at the end of a further road, and thus was fifteen miles from the main road. However there were no settlements with post office and store on this high-country road, consequently nothing that can be matched with "Wakanui" except the road access.

On the other hand Johnson's "Waiapapa" suggests actual Kuripapango, with its hotel and garage, about fifteen miles from the Ngamatea Station turn-off, eastwards, in the direction of Hawkes Bay. It could be reached after two nights of walking from the turn-off, (including the climb up the "Gentle Annie" incline!)

The relevance of Ngamatea Station to the map of Johnson's Kaimanawas is particularly limited by the fact that to its north, between the pumice plains and the mountains, there was very little bush, and no river of any significance from which Johnson and Crawley might emerge.

There was the Ngaruroro River, however, which did flow south then east, into Hawkes Bay (the road crosses it at Kuripapango). It was bush-covered and tortuous for a length greater than the Rangitikei. However, while (as in the Rangitikei) this characteristic continues right to the main road, unlike the Rangitikei the Ngaruroro's first stage flows through open tussock valleys.

It would have been possible for Johnson to reach the Ngaruroro from the saddle above the Waipakihi, by turning north-east over Ngapuketuru (4977 ft) and descending to the bush valleys of the upper Tauranga Taupo River (which flows north-west into Lake Taupo), and turning south-east up the Cascade stream and over the saddle to the Wai-o-Tupuritia stream, which is the north arm of the Ngaruroro. But for the next ten miles he would have been in open tussock, before the river entered its gorge.

To sum up: three essential features of the environment in which Johnson journeyed after crossing the mountains cannot be identified together in any one actual region. Each feature is true of a different place. The impenetrably forested river deep below the mountains may refer to the Rangitikei. At the same time, since it eventually flows eastward, only the Ngaruroro qualifies. And the upland pumice plain, with cattle, fences, homestead, pack-tracks and roads suggests the Ngamatea plateau.

Mulgan's knowledge of the Kaimanawas

I am indebted to Vincent O'Sullivan for the information that Mulgan was a keen trumper, and knew well the Tongariro National Park area, having stayed in at least four huts (Blyth, Waihohonu, Mangatepopo, and Whakapapa), and at Raetihi. He had a strong commitment to tramping, which was evident in a poem and an article he wrote for the Auckland University College student newspaper *Craccum*, when a friend was killed in a party of students who were caught in a blizzard in 1932. His sister, Dorothea Turner, has described how, on her only trip with him to Ruapehu, he took over very competently in an emergency. He was self-reliant and pragmatic. He would want to be accurate in anything he did.

Mulgan's account of the terrain and weather (135) west of the Desert Road reflects his knowledge and attention to detail, and would be accepted by anyone who is familiar with that region.

As far as the Kaimanawas is concerned, there is no record of Mulgan's ever having been there. There were at this time several musterers' and hunters' huts, but no records of occupants were kept. (According to Masters (6), hut logbooks first appeared in this region in the 1950s.)

However, Mulgan might have met others who could tell of that experience, for instance at Waihohonu Hut, which faced east towards those ranges from the slopes of Ngauruhoe. These National Park huts were visited by tramping parties from the Waipakihi River, who could, for instance, have described the view from Junction Top, especially the steep drop directly ahead into the formidable Rangitikei.

According to his widow Gabrielle Day, Mulgan, while writing the novel in England, spent some time "poring over a large map of the central North Island" (Day, 20). To achieve with the Kaimanawas the level of verisimilitude that characterises his account of the Ruapehu area, he would have needed a large-scale topographical map (or four, on the 1:50,000 scale that is required by trampers today). There are no further records about his map, but either he knew already, or his map showed him, how, with detail sourced from fellow

trampers, he could integrate the features of three different areas into one fictitious but plausible setting.

“Plausible”? or somewhat enhanced?

As one would expect, the climax of Johnson’s travail occurs in the setting that was least familiar both to the author and to his readers. By taking liberties with geographic accuracy, Mulgan is able to give heroic stature to his protagonist. And he further enhances Johnson’s experience in two ways: by exaggerating the factors of time and distance, and by romanticising the “wilderness” aspect of the setting.

Time and Distance

The actual length of the Waipakihi River is approximately twenty miles, not the more-than forty miles experienced by Johnson, (who spent five days there, progressing at the rate of eight to ten miles per day). Similarly, there is some exaggeration in the case of the Rangitikei/Ngaruroro. There the bush-bound thirty-five miles or so took him “days that lengthened into weeks” to traverse (143) – about three weeks, to calculate from the text.

Out in the open, walking was at a pace that seems to be more realistic. Crawley walked from his hut thirty-five miles to Wakanui in two days; Johnson walked from the fence-line twenty miles to the main road, in one night.

Romanticising the Wilderness

What were the Kaimanawas really like in 1933?

It is likely that the region was less of a “wilderness” then than it is today. Large tracts of the areas now conserved in the Kaimanawa and Kaweka Forest Parks were grazed by sheep and cattle for the first sixty years of the twentieth century. The upper Ngaruroro, the Mangamingi and the Mangamaire valleys and the flanks and tops of Mount Dowden and of Makorako (highest point, 5666 ft) itself, for example, were annually mustered by the shepherds of Ngamatea Station (Lethbridge, 48). There were tracks for teams of packhorses, musterers’ huts, rudimentary wire fences, and even stock routes cut through the sub-alpine beech forest in strategic places. (Lethbridge 51; in March 2001 a colleague and I searched in vain for this stock route up through the beech onto the Mangamingi saddle. The overgrown and obscure track was found the following year.)

Moreover, the vegetation had been subjected to decades of infestation by deer and rabbits (Department of Conservation, 21). Hunting was the main

pastime of the numerous back-country workers of those times, whether for pure sport, for profit, or to feed their dogs.

Less of a wilderness than today, the region was also just becoming known to the outside world of city-dwellers.

Recreational tramping was in its very early days. While the Auckland Tramping Club (founded 1925) and the Auckland University T.C. (founded 1932) were active in the Ruapehu area, there are no records of these clubs visiting the Kaimanawas before 1945. The Heretaunga T.C. of Hawkes Bay was formed in 1935 and built the first club hut, at Kaweka, in 1936.

Earlier in the 'thirties there were individual trampers in these ranges; for instance N. L. Elder, who commenced his botanical survey of the region in 1931. The only club to visit the Kaimanawas before 1933, however, appears to have been the Wellington-based Tararua Tramping Club. In 1928 G. B. Wilson and W. K. Watson went in from Waiouru. Travelling for eight days with a packhorse through tussock and beech they were unable to reach the Rangitikei headwaters "owing to thick weather" (Greig, 52). In 1930-31, with N. L. Elder and A. H. Hines, they crossed from Puketitiri in Hawkes Bay to Waiouru in seven days, including three days traversing the north Kawekas, an ascent of Makorako and a waist-deep wading of the Rangitikei. A somewhat similar but more northerly trip in reverse in January 1933 went from Waiouru via the Waipakihi River across to Puketitiri in seven-and-a-half days' travelling time.

At Christmas 1932, a large party under A. H. Hines changed over from the old survey and Wilson's camp in the Waipatiki to Waihohonu Hut, climbing Ngaruahoe, Tongariro and Ruapehu before returning to the Kaimanawas.

Trampers of course would have been outnumbered by hunters, and visited the region mainly in summer (unlike Johnson). The Tararua Club records show, however, not only that the Kaimanawas were known outside the district, but that they were explored and reported on (in their club newsletters) and probably talked about.

While there is no record that Mulgan was present, for instance, to meet the Hines party at Waihohonu Hut (the records are incomplete), he must have absorbed, through his contacts and reading, enough information about the Kaimanawas to enable him to create a seemingly authentic setting for Johnson's ordeal, which he made more heroic by exaggerating its size, its "wilderness" character, and the time required to traverse it.

Information about the eastern ranges must have generated interest amongst National Park regulars, including Mulgan and his friends, and the young members of the fledgling University Club. The Kaimanawas would have appealed especially to the most adventurous of the young men who travelled on the night train to National Park or Ohakune Junction. Ignoring or unmindful

of the less-ideal manifestations of economic development, for them this seemed like virgin territory, known only to the select few. Perhaps they saw it as an exciting wilderness, waiting to challenge their route-finding and survival skills and even their very powers of perseverance.

Years later, and thousands of miles from New Zealand, Mulgan was eventually in a position to test these things in real life – route-finding, survival, perseverance – as a partisan leader behind the German lines, and later in a billet in Cairo.

In Johnson's Kaimanawas, he had already explored some of this territory.

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