

## R. A. K. Mason, 1905 – 1971

*Rachel Barrowman*

The story of how R. A. K. Mason threw two hundred copies of his first book, *The Beggar*, into Auckland harbour in the late 1920s, in disgust or despair because no one would buy it, is a legend in New Zealand literary history. It may be apocryphal, but it is compelling as myth, symbolising a time – the 1920s and 1930s – when a true, vital, native literature struggled to be read or heard in a provincial and puritanical country. The publication in 1924 of *The Beggar*, the poet and critic Allen Curnow was later to write, marked the emergence of New Zealand's 'first wholly original, unmistakably gifted poet'. Mason occupies a seminal place in New Zealand literature, but also a curious one. His tough, knotty, elusive poems – finely-formed sonnets, sardonic love poems, grim meditations on death and betrayal – do not lend themselves easily to simple or literal readings, about either time or place. Moreover, they were few. Almost all of the poems on which Mason's reputation is based were written before he was thirty, and contained in a handful of slim volumes. He wrote little poetry, and published virtually none, in the second half of his life. Theatre, politics and trade union work occupied him in those years. His increasing involvement in left-wing politics from the 1930s, and his attempt to reconcile this with his writing is, however, only part of the answer to the puzzle of why he wrote so little.

Ronald Allison Kells Mason (who was known to his family as John) was born at Penrose, Auckland, on 10 January 1905, the second son of Francis (Frank) Mason, a perfumer, and his wife, Jessie Forbes Kells. When he was seven he was sent to live with his aunt, Jessie's unmarried sister, Isabella Foster Kells, at Lichfield, a tiny rural settlement in southern Waikato. He lived there and attended Lichfield School, where his Aunt Foster was the teacher, for four years, going home to Auckland for the holidays, a day's journey by buggy and train. He was in Lichfield when, on 25 April 1913, Frank Mason died from an overdose of opium, which he had taken in the form of laudanum. The coroner ruled the death to have been accidental. How much Mason was told, then or later, of the circumstances of his father's death is not known; the family never spoke of it. But death would be a pervasive presence in his poetry.

Back in Auckland, Mason attended Panmure District School in 1916 and Auckland Grammar School from 1917 to 1922. An unexplained absence for the last term of 1919 caused him to repeat his fifth-form year, and it was in

that year that he made the closest friendship of his youth, and of his life, with another future poet, Rex (A. R. D.) Fairburn. They shared not only an interest in literature, but also a sense of difference that would develop over the following years into a fierce disdain for what they saw as the smug, narrow-minded, materialistic and conservative, middle-class culture in which they had been brought up. In his final year at Grammar, Mason excelled in the university entrance scholarship examinations in English, French and Latin, but failed abysmally, for the second time, at maths, thereby failing matriculation. During the second term of that year he had astonished his Latin master with his translation of an ode by Horace, 'O Fons Bandusiae', which had been set as a class exercise. Mason's 'O Fons Bandusiae' was elegant, jaunty and precocious, exhibiting the mixture of strength and lightness, formal mastery and colloquial feel, and sure handling of rhythm that would distinguish his maturer work. It was the earliest poem that he would include in his first published collection two years later.

At the end of 1922 Mason went down to Lichfield to work on the nearby farms for several weeks harvesting, as he would do for most of the next several summers. He had left school with ambitions for a career in journalism, but the first contribution he sent to the *New Zealand Herald* was turned down. Back in Auckland – living with his mother and brother Dan in Ellerslie, where they had moved in 1920 – he was employed for a few months as a relieving teacher at Mt Albert Grammar School, and then briefly in a surveyors' office. In May 1924 he found a part-time job as a Latin tutor at the University Coaching College, a job that he would do, unhappily, for the next six years.

Meanwhile, he wrote. In the late spring of 1923 he made two copies – both of which were subsequently lost – of a collection of poems entitled 'In the Manner of Men', which he described as 'a small part of the unaided literary labour of almost exactly a year on the part of a youth of 18'. He sent them to two members of the Grafton Shakespeare and Dramatic Society (for which his friend Fairburn played juvenile lead). Neither man offered him the £5 he had hoped for, but the young poet was not deterred. In the winter of 1924 he published at his own expense through Whitcombe & Tombs his first book proper, *The Beggar*, 'a small waistcoat-pocket volume' containing eighteen poems. He sold it for a shilling a copy.

The themes of *The Beggar* were not unusual preoccupations for a sensitive, troubled eighteen- or nineteen-year-old: death, fate, the loneliness of the outcast – epitomised by the 'sight-striving' beggar of the title poem – and the failure of belief. What was unusual was the poems' intensity and

maturity, their harshness of tone and technical sureness. In *The Beggar* the defining characteristics of Mason's verse are already clear. His poems are typically dramatic, a quality they share with Latin verse. They succeed, and disconcert, by their structural ambiguity, by swift, subtle underminings of the rhetorical gesture and shifts of tone, and through their casual intermingling of past and present, classical and colloquial, as in 'Wayfarers', where the poet claims companionship with a cast of the defeated and outcast:

And I in Lichfield frequently have been  
 Chatterton's accessory in suicide  
 have Gaius Marius in Minturnae seen  
 for many hours by Waitemata's tide ...

Mason's Latin learning remained a deep influence on his poetry: in its rhythms, vocabulary and word-order, its temper, its characters, and sometimes in more direct literary associations, with Horace and Catullus especially. From English literature the strongest influence was A.E. Housman, with his delight in the sensual world and preoccupation with death, and his Horatian taste for irony. Housman, Mason was to write a few years later – the 'modern stoic', with his 'sombre power, and strange wayward beauty and the exquisite, relentless rise and fall of his language' – would be his desert-island poet, 'perhaps rather than all the rest of English poetry put together'.

*The Beggar* was a remarkable literary debut, and it was strikingly different from the Māoriland epics, the sentimental Victorian lyrics, and pale Georgianism that characterised the New Zealand verse that had gone before. It was not totally ignored, as the legend implies. It received a brief but encouraging notice in the *Auckland Star*, as did the *Penny Broadsheet*, a single folded sheet of card containing five new poems which Mason had commercially printed a few months later and sold on Auckland's Queen Street. He had also taken the initiative of sending fifty copies of *The Beggar* to Harold Monro of the Poetry Bookshop in London, who included two of the poems in the 1924 edition of his *Chapbook*. Yet curiously, Mason did not reply to Monro's enthusiastic and sympathetic correspondence, either out of negligence, or some failure of confidence or will. Both would be characteristic.

In 1926 Mason enrolled at Auckland University College in Latin, French and English, having passed the matriculation exam in mathematics at his third attempt. He was an erratic student over the next six years, periodically not sitting his finals or failing terms, and was not eventually to complete his Bachelor of Arts degree until 1939. It was in those years, in the late 1920s,

that he began to develop the strong left-wing political views that he would retain all his life, at first through reading and conversation with like-minded friends like Fairburn, and through coming into contact in 1927, through university friends, with members of the Communist Party of New Zealand. He wrote little poetry in these years: a handful of poems were published in the *Auckland Star* and *Sun*, in which Fairburn was a regular contributor. In December 1928 the *Sun* printed the first proper review of Mason's poems, and in August 1929 the *New Zealand Artists' Annual* published an article about him by Fairburn, who cast Mason as an antipodean Housman, 'one of the "lean and swarthy poets of despair"', emphasising, as had the *Sun* review, his 'smouldering pessimism'. Here Fairburn gave the first account of the watery end of *The Beggar*, and blamed the public's neglect of that book for the poet having written almost nothing for five years.

In December 1929 two of Mason's poems from *The Beggar* were published in the Chatto & Windus anthology *Twentieth Century Poetry*, edited by Harold Monro, who wrote apologetically to Mason explaining that he had not had time to seek his permission. Again, it seems that Mason did not reply.

In the final examinations in 1929 Mason gained the top mark in New Zealand in Latin, and easily qualified for a senior scholarship. He was unable to take it up, however, for, not having gained terms in History, he was not awarded his degree. Perhaps on the expectation of the scholarship, or simply because he was sick of it, he had resigned from his tutoring job. He spent four months working in Lichfield at the beginning of 1930. But despite the circumstances this was a happy and a productive summer, during which he wrote several of the poems that were to appear in his next published collection, including probably his best known, 'On the Swag'. This was a deceptively simple poem, 'somewhat in the slangy style beloved of Australian bush-bards', as he described it to a friend, on a theme which he more often treated sardonically: the fate of Christ as outcast and everyman.

In 1930 he enrolled at university again, planning to complete his degree and get a postgraduate travelling scholarship the following year. A family crisis, however, effectively put an end to this dream: his brother Dan, a lawyer, was suspended from practice for gross professional misconduct involving the misuse of his clients' funds. This disgrace, and the debts that Dan had incurred, burdened the family for years. Demoralised, Mason did not sit most of his exams that year. A further blow was the cancellation, for reasons of economy as the Depression deepened, of an assistant lectureship in the Classics Department that he had had hopes of securing. The promise

and then loss of an academic position was a disappointment he was to feel acutely in years to come.

In the New Year of 1931 Mason spent ten weeks in Samoa. He was planning to undertake a study of 'Polynesian racial problems', having become interested in island affairs through tutoring the daughter of the exiled leader of the Samoan nationalist movement, the Mau. Instead he spent much of his time in Samoa editing the memoirs of George Westbrook, 'an old trader in the South Seas', as he titled the work which he completed over the next eighteen months. It would never be published, however. He was also working by this time on a novel, partly autobiographical and never finished, a collection of short stories, and one of plays. Three of the stories, along with a few poems, were published in the Auckland student press between 1931 and 1933. They show the influence of early James Joyce, and, in one, of the social realism of the American fiction Mason was also reading at that time. The rest have not survived.

The Depression had a lasting and embittering impact on Mason. It deepened his awareness of the injustice and inhumanity of capitalism, and strengthened his political convictions. In 1933 he joined the Communist Party (or possibly the Young Communist League). Although he appears not to have been a member for long, he remained closely associated with the Party for many years. His politics left little trace in his poetry. His 'revolutionary' poem, 'Youth at the Dance', published in the annual student literary review *Kiwi* in 1932, was an exception. It did, however, strongly mark the two issues of *Phoenix*, the new magazine of the college literary society, which he edited in 1933. *Phoenix* had been founded in 1932 explicitly on the model of John Middleton Murry and D. H. Lawrence's *New Adelphi*, with high-minded intentions of stimulating and setting the standards of a new national culture. Mason turned it sharply to the left, printing articles on Soviet cinema and Marxism and art, and in his notes issuing a strident call to arms in the coming battle of communism against fascism, although the literary content of his two issues was no more political than that of the first: his own contributions were 'In Manus Tuas Domine', not a revolutionary poem like 'Youth at the Dance', but in its foreboding no less an expression of the times, and the beautiful love poem 'Amores VI' ('Be swift o sun'). The literary society and the Students' Association took fright nevertheless. It was not in the end Mason's politics, however, that brought about the demise of *Phoenix* at the end of 1933, but the irresponsibility and lack of business sense of its gifted young typographer, Robert Lowry.

Incongruously, while he was scandalising the university and the tabloid press with his communism, Mason was employed, from 1932 to 1935, as company secretary to several obscure business enterprises in which his brother, who was by then working as a sharebroker, was also involved. Mason's literary and student friends were not sure exactly what the two brothers' business was, but suspected that it was something shady. One of the companies was believed to be an illegal lottery franchise. Mason had taken this work reluctantly; he can hardly have felt comfortable participating in some possibly dodgy capitalist enterprise. But there were Dan's debts to pay, their mother to support, and the income he received from a few hours private tutoring a week was small and insecure.

In 1934 he became involved in business of a more congenial kind, setting himself up in partnership with Lowry and another friend and budding typographer as Spearhead Publishers. One of the first things they produced was Mason's third collection of poems, *No New Thing*. This had been languishing since 1932, when he had sent it to Fairburn who was in England seeking his own literary fortune. It was turned down by Chatto & Windus, the Hogarth Press, and by the Atlantic Monthly Press. The printing was very nearly a fiasco, and only a handful of the planned edition of 120 copies were completed and released. But *No New Thing* would be critically regarded as Mason's best volume. It was subtitled, misleadingly, 'Poems 1924-29' – some of the twenty-five poems were certainly written slightly later. As is only to be expected of a larger collection written over a period of five or more years, *No New Thing* displays a greater technical assurance than *The Beggar* and *Penny Broadsheet*, and a wider range of subject matter and tone, but the poetic voice is instantly recognisable. The opening two verses – titled 'Preface to the Book of Pessimism' when they had appeared in the *Sun* in 1928 – established both the tone and frame of reference:

If the drink that satisfied  
 the son of Mary when he died  
 has not the right smack for you  
 leave it for a kindlier brew.

For my bitter verses are  
 sponges steeped in vinegar  
 useless to the happy-eyed  
 but handy for the crucified.

In a brief afterword he listed his 'main influences: Beddoes, Catullus, Housman, Milton, Baudelaire, roughly in that order of time and (decreasing)



Mason turned his attention to theatre, a medium he saw as more appropriate for the times and consistent with his political ideals. He told Glover that he hoped in the future to publish 'some reasonably decent proletarian stuff'.

At the end of 1936 he took a leading role in the formation of the Auckland People's Theatre. The group's programme over the next four years was drawn largely from the standard repertoire of the international left theatre movement: Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* and *Till the Day I Die* were its first major productions. The smaller amount of local material was written almost entirely by Mason. This included short, usually comic, topical sketches, and dramatic monologues or 'mass recitations': 'Skull on Silence', written for Armistice Day; 'Service for the Fallen', performed at a memorial service for those who had died fighting with International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War; and 'This Dark Will Lighten', written just after the Second World War was declared. 'Simple plays for special purposes', Mason himself described this material. It was rhetorical literature, intended not to be read but to be seen and heard. Of a different quality was the dramatic monologue *Squire Speaks*, a 'play for radio' that he had apparently first written in 1928 and then revised, which was published in 1938 by the Caxton Press. *Squire Speaks* was set on an English country estate at the time of the 1926 general strike; the squire's faithful butler stages a one-man socialist revolution. It has similarities with the political dramas of W. H. Auden and the early propagandist poetry of C. Day Lewis. But Mason was developing here an interest in combining poetry and drama that expressed not only his immediate political concerns and the influence of the young British left-wing poets of the 1930s, and which would be an enduring theme. The literary models he would later refer to were W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, and the popular tradition in Scottish literature.

The People's Theatre folded in April 1940, a casualty of the war, and also in part of the inherent tension within any such movement between political and cultural interests. For Mason too, politics was diverging from art. For two to three years from 1937 he had been employed as a relief worker with the Public Works Department, stacking railway lines. He used the pseudonym 'P. W. D.' when he contributed articles and reviews regularly to the Communist Party newspaper, the *Workers' Weekly* and then the *People's Voice*, in 1938-39, and wrote a short history of the New Zealand Company, entitled 'Cheaper Labourers'. He would return to this project, and his interest in telling the history of New Zealand 'from the scientific marxian viewpoint', later in his life, but it would not be published. From September 1941 until July 1943 he edited the weekly *In Print* which replaced the banned *People's Voice*, and stayed on for a time as co-editor when the latter was restored.

While Mason devoted himself to politics and journalism, in 1941 the Caxton Press published *This Dark Will Lighten*, a selection of about half of his previously published poems, to the disappointment of Glover, who had been hoping it would be a more comprehensive volume. Mason was always a rigorous self-critic. He included only one of his five poems from Caxton's 1941 mini-anthology, *Recent Poems*, and one new one, 'Prelude', which appears to repudiate his previous work and proffers a Blakean vision of a new, post-revolutionary dawn; as usual, however, the tone is confused.

The publication of *This Dark Will Lighten* made Mason's poems accessible to a much larger reading public than ever before, larger than just those who had happened across a rare copy of *The Beggar* or *No New Thing*, or had read his few poems in *Kiwi* and *Phoenix*. He also began to receive some serious critical attention: most importantly from Allen Curnow, who, in two reviews and an essay in the Caxton miscellany *Book* (May 1941), considered how Mason might be regarded as a 'native poet' despite his verse being 'almost entirely lacking in explicit reference to the New Zealand scene and people'; and in E. H. McCormick's centennial survey *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (1941), and M. H. Holcroft's essays *The Deepening Stream* (1940) and *The Waiting Hills* (1943). The occasion of the nation's centennial, combined with an awareness of the invigorating effect on its young writers, especially its poets, of the Depression, had stimulated a serious critical literature, one concerned with finding the beginning and defining the character of an authentic New Zealand literature. In 1945, in the introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923–45*, a seminal anthology and essay, Curnow worked Mason more securely into his nationalist thesis. His point of beginning, 1923, was the year that Mason had put together his first collection, 'In the Manner of Men': Mason, along with W. D'Arcy Cresswell, were his two founding fathers of New Zealand verse. Although Mason's attention to the local scene and the contemporary world was, as he had observed in 1941, 'often more significant for its obliquity', yet this was poetry that could not have been written anywhere else. Curnow found in the final lines of his 'Sonnet of Brotherhood' (from *The Beggar*) – 'here in this far-pitched perilous hostile place/ this solitary hard-assaulted spot/ fixed at the friendless outer edge of space' – the purest expression of the New Zealander's unique sense of isolation and alienation, which defined the country's literary imagination. In England, meanwhile, William Plomer, in an article on New Zealand literature in *Folios of New Writing* (1941), less concerned with this project, memorably and succinctly described Mason's verse as '[g]loomy, sexy and sardonic'.

Mason was deeply sensitive to criticism, and would become more so over time. In particular he objected to the appropriation of his poetry to a nationalist critical argument, when his concern, he protested, had always been with the whole of humanity. Even more strongly he resented most critics' disinterest in and occasionally cruel disparagement of his dramatic writing. They had, he believed, simply not understood his purpose.

In 1945 he joined the newly-formed New Theatre Group, whose inaugural performance in October included his poem *China*, written for a dance-drama choreographed by the theatre's founder, Margaret Barr, and celebrating Chinese resistance to Japanese aggression, and a one-act play, *Refugee*, telling of the migration to New Zealand of various peoples escaping from oppression. The New Theatre Group had an even shorter life than the People's Theatre. This was its only production, and it represented Mason's last active involvement in theatre for nearly twenty years, although he joined in the public debate in the second half of the 1940s on the subject of a national theatre. In an article in the journal *Landfall*, and two public lectures at the University of Otago in 1948, he argued for a state-funded national theatre and defined the value of theatre as a popular and social art: 'The drama, more than any other art,' he wrote, 'calls for popular stimulation, for co-operation between artists, technicians, audience and the whole community, perpetually re-creating a centre of energy, which is at once a recipient and source of social stimulus.'

From about 1945 until the mid-1950s Mason worked for the Auckland General Labourers' Union as assistant-secretary and editor of its monthly journal, *Challenge*. In this capacity he wrote *Frontier Forsaken*, a short history of the Cook Islands, published by the union in 1947. In 1950-51 he edited *Congress News* for the New Zealand Trade Union Council, of which he was the Auckland district secretary, and through which the Auckland General Labourers' Union, on the militant left wing of a sharply divided labour movement, took a major role in events leading up to and during the 1951 waterfront lockout, the longest and bitterest industrial dispute in New Zealand's history. During these years Mason wrote neither poetry nor plays, save for a few satirical pieces for the union and Party press, and the powerful anti-war 'Sonnet to MacArthur's Eyes', which was printed in the *People's Voice* in September 1950. This was the last poem that would be included twelve years later in his *Collected Poems*.

The years in the union were difficult ones. Mason's health, both physical and psychological, suffered. He was deeply shaken by his mother's death in

1949. In 1953 he suffered a more serious breakdown, lasting a year, brought on by the stresses of the 1951 waterfront dispute and its aftermath, in particular the bitter conflict between the Communist Party and the General Labourers' Union, which left Mason ostracised by his comrades and friends, his loyalties divided. He had another breakdown in 1955, precipitated this time by his worries about the financial affairs of the union. It was discovered later that the secretary, Mason's long-time colleague and friend, had been embezzling the union funds. It was this that caused Mason finally to leave the union in 1956, when he set himself up in business as a landscape gardener. Gardening, especially the cultivation of native plants, was a life-long love. His poor physical health, however, would eventually force him to give up this work. From the early 1950s he suffered from often-painful heart disease and angina.

It was partly to 'rescue' Mason from his deep depression, and to give him a new focus for his political concerns that he was invited to become chairman of the fledgling New Zealand-China Friendship Association in 1954. He applied himself to this role with enthusiasm, in 1958 being elected president of the renamed New Zealand China Society at its inaugural national conference. In 1957 he led a five-person delegation on a month-long visit to China. Among the delegation were the film-makers Rudall and Ramai Hayward, who made three documentary films during the trip, while Mason spent much of his time visiting gardens and nurseries and investigating China's reforestation programme. China inspired Mason. On his return he embarked on a biography of the expatriate New Zealander and founder of the Gung Ho movement, Rewi Alley, which would remain a work-in-progress for several years. And he began to think seriously about returning to writing. After suffering a serious bout of pneumonia in the winter of 1961, and worried about his future as a gardener, he applied for a grant from the State Literary Fund and for the recently established Burns Fellowship at the University of Otago for 1962. He was awarded both.

Mason made many literary plans for his Burns Fellowship year, but achieved little. Undoubtedly the highlight of the year was the launch in July 1962 of his *Collected Poems*, which Glover had first suggested to him in 1947 and begun planning in 1956. It contained, in addition to Mason's published poems, only a handful recovered from manuscript, from 1924-29. Reviews of the volume were almost all good, weighing Mason's reputation against his complete, although small, oeuvre – seventy-odd poems – and finding that it was still deserved. A notable exception was Roger Savage's review in *Landfall* in September 1963; by contrast, C. K. Stead's in *Comment* (July

1963) remains one of the most important critical essays on his work. Although the nationalist critical orthodoxy established in the 1940s had been vigorously challenged over the previous decade, Mason's position, as 'the first of few', as one review put it, on the whole was not. In Britain, the *Times Literary Supplement* (4 January 1963) rated him a 'major minor in English poetry', strongly influenced by but 'a better poet than' Housman.

Within the literary community, by his friends, and by Mason himself the Burns Fellowship was seen as his chance of a comeback after his silence for so long. But the pressure of expectation proved too much. In August he was admitted to Dunedin Hospital suffering from depression. What Mason had once described to a friend (in 1933) as his 'abominable psychological difficulties' – the 'absurd alternations between impotence and omnipotence ... heaven and hell, ecstasy and despair' that he had struggled with all his life – was diagnosed as manic-depressive illness. After two to three weeks and treatment with anti-depressive drugs he was released into the care of his long-time companion, Dorothea Beyda. They had met at a Workers' Educational Association summer school in 1937 and had lived together intermittently since. The day after his discharge from hospital, on 27 August 1962, they were married at the Dunedin Registry Office.

Despite the difficulties of his Burns year, Mason decided to stay on in Dunedin. He made a small income during 1963 editing and presenting the weekly poetry programme on national radio, in which he took as his main theme the conflict between popular and 'cloistered' poetry, and the 'close connection between poetry, singing and music', with particular reference to Scottish literature. Mason had come to love Dunedin, the city that its founders had thought of as the 'Edinburgh of the south', for its smallness, its friendliness, and its Scottishness. Since the 1930s he had emphasised his Scottish and Irish ancestry as the basis of both his poetry and his political beliefs, but from the late 1950s this became a more insistent, even obsessive, theme. He had joined the Auckland Burns Association in 1959, and been made an honorary member of the Dunedin Burns Club. The main literary product of his Dunedin years was the play he wrote during 1963, *Strait is the Gate*, a five-act verse play in Scottish dialect, set in Dunedin and on the Otago goldfields in the 1860s. Subtitled 'a Scottish morality', it told of a young woman's love for a charismatic and puritanical minister. After the minister spurns her she takes her own life, and he is tormented by the conflict between his unacknowledged love for her and his love for his god. It was not the poetry people had been hoping for. The university dramatic society staged a reading of the play, but decided against a major production. Mason also wrote some

lyric poetry in Dunedin, and three poems were published in the university literary *Review* in 1962. They lacked, however, the power and tension, the imprint of struggle, of his earlier work.

In the winter of 1964 he was again admitted to Dunedin Hospital with depression, for two to three months this time. He returned with Dorothea to Auckland in May 1965. He lived for his remaining years in Takapuna on the North Shore, surviving impecuniously on the Social Security age benefit, supplemented by some part-time Latin teaching. He continued to be treated for manic depression and was hospitalised once again, in 1969. The writer Frank Sargeson, in these years a close friend and neighbour, endeavoured to stage a production of *Strait is the Gate*, without success, but a shorter radio version was broadcast in January 1968. Despite this success, Mason's last years were clouded by disappointment and regret, about his failure to start writing again, and about the career in classical scholarship that might have but never had been. Still, he continued to make literary plans: in 1970 and 1971 he applied for several literary awards. His last published piece of writing was an essay on Edward Gibbon Wakefield, architect of the New Zealand Company's scheme of planned colonisation, for the popular encyclopaedia *New Zealand's Heritage*. Friends and supporters began a private campaign to persuade the government to award him a special pension, eventually, it seems, with success, but it was too late. R. A. K. Mason died from a heart attack in the early hours of 13 July 1971, aged 66. He was survived by Dorothea; there had been no children.

## LINKS

[New Zealand Book Council](#)

[New Zealand Literature File University of Auckland](#)

[Sculpture of Mason by Tony Stones](#)

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

## BOOKS

*The Beggar*. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1924.

*Penny Broadsheet*. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1924.

*No New Thing*. Auckland: Spearhead Publishers, 1934.

*End of Day*. Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1936.

*Squire Speaks*. Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1938.

*This Dark Will Lighten*. Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1941.

*China*. Auckland: [Printed for the *Times* Printing Works], 1943.

*Help Russia – or Help Hitler!* Auckland: Aid to Russia Committee, 1943.

*Frontier Forsaken*. Auckland: Challenge Publications, 1947.

*China Dances*. Dunedin: John McIndoe, 1962.

*Collected Poems*. Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1962.  
*Rex Fairburn*. Dunedin: Press Room, University of Otago, 1963.

### BIOGRAPHY

Barrowman, Rachel. *Mason: the Life of R. A. K. Mason*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003.

### REFERENCES

- Doyle, Charles. *R. A. K. Mason*. New York: Twayne, 1970.
- Curnow, Allen. *A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923-45*. Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1945.
- . *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*. London: Penguin, 1960.
- . 'The Poetry of R. A. K. Mason'. *Book*, 2 (May 1941).
- Murray, Stuart. *Never a Soul at Home: New Zealand Literary Nationalism and the 1930s*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1998.
- 'R. A. K. Mason 1905-1971: some tributes'. *Landfall*, 99: 25: 3 (September 1971): 222-42.
- R. A. K. Mason at Twenty-five*. Christchurch: Nag's Head Press, 1986.
- Stead, C. K. 'R. A. K. Mason's poetry: some random observations'. *Comment*, 16: 4: 4 (July 1963): 34-39.
- Weir, J. E. *R. A. K. Mason*. Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1977.

### PAPERS

The main collection of Mason's manuscripts and correspondence is in the Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.