

## Reviews

*Mason: The Life of R.A.K. Mason.* By Rachel Barrowman. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2003. 455 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-86473-463-8; *Picking up the Traces: The Making of a New Zealand Literary Culture 1932–1945.* By Lawrence Jones. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2003. 520 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-86473-455-7; *Dance of the Peacocks: New Zealanders in Exile in the Time of Hitler and Mao Tse-Tung.* By James McNeish. Vintage, Auckland, 2003. 478 pp. NZ price: \$36.95. ISBN 1-86941-564-7; *Long Journey to the Border: A Life of John Mulgan.* By Vincent O'Sullivan. Penguin Books, Auckland, 2003. 368 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-14-301871-X.

THE 1930s ARE ALSO 'THE 1930s', a problem as well as a period. Hence the subtitle of Stuart Murray's 1998 study *Never a Soul at Home: 'New Zealand Literary Nationalism and' — not 'in' — 'the 1930s'*. Murray's book emphasized how the literary nationalism of *Phoenix*, the Caxton Press, and so on, was entangled with the questions of art and political commitment that 'the 1930s' meant in Britain and continental Europe. It is nicely emblematic that Eric Cook, who wrote those much-quoted words, 'We are hungry for the words that shall show us these islands and ourselves; that shall give us a home in thought', was a communist, and that a few years after writing these lines in *Canta* he was living in London and involved with *Left Review*, the central forum of the literary Popular Front in Britain. All four books under review deal in one way or another with the interface between New Zealand literary life and the questions of 'the 1930s'. Two are biographies of important figures; one is a general study of the literary culture of the thirties and the war years; and the fourth revolves around the choices and challenges of expatriated male writers and scholars during this time.

This last book, James McNeish's *Dance of the Peacocks*, is the least satisfying of the four. It is in some respects a collective biography of James Bertram, John Mulgan, Ian Milner, Geoffrey Cox and Dan Davin, but it also fans out to discuss others (all men, typically left-leaning) who left New Zealand for Oxford and London in the 1930s and afterwards. It reads like a New Zealand version of the innumerable British literary biographies that court those 'general readers' presumed to be eager for a taste of the glamour of élite schools, Oxbridge, and the exciting lives of clever people. McNeish's prose aspires to a slickness that is ingratiating at best and at its worst leads to comments like this: 'He [John Mulgan] edited the Auckland University College journal and (*of course*, since he was half-Irish) he could write' (p.35; McNeish's italics).

McNeish's understanding of the political and social challenges and responses of the period and of the workings of Oxford is passable, but he seldom asks the kinds of questions or draws the kinds of connections that someone writing about these subjects should. His handling of Victor Gollancz illustrates the point. Geoffrey Cox's 1937 *Defence of Madrid* was published by Gollancz, who initially demanded that Cox 'remove a passage describing Franco supporters being led from a Madrid prison and driven off, presumably to be shot' (p.109). McNeish does not mention that Gollancz had two imprints: Victor Gollancz Ltd, and the Left Book Club. *Defence of Madrid* was published as a Victor Gollancz Ltd book rather than under the imprint of the Left Book Club. Why? It was a highly topical book, and had it been issued as an LBC choice it would have gone out to a huge and to some extent guaranteed audience. Had the club's other selectors, John Strachey for instance, vetoed *Defence of Madrid* for taking an unacceptable 'line'? McNeish also lets it pass without comment (unlike Vincent O'Sullivan in *Long Journey to the Border*) that Mulgan's anthology *Poems of Freedom* was published by the Left

Book Club. Being published by Gollancz put one close to the heart of Popular Front culture, but McNeish does not capitalize on the research opportunities here. There are also mistakes about the British social context. To take just one example, I doubt very much that the average English public school boy going up to Oxford had 'probably never been abroad or seen a foreigner' (p.59).

These failings would be easily forgivable if *Dance of the Peacocks* unearthed a wealth of new material. But it does not. While it is packed with interesting details, a lot of them come from the published autobiographies of the subjects; and with O'Sullivan's Mulgan and Keith Ovenden's Davin biographies available, McNeish's book does not pay its way as a study of the so-called New Zealand mafia at Oxford — at least, not until the post-1945 period. The post-war chapters are better — they are written less melodramatically than those on the thirties and the war, and the subject-matter is fresher and based more on original research. Davin said that after one's twenties, life was 'a fighting withdrawal'. McNeish's book is, in a way, a book about young men that is nevertheless interested in the fighting withdrawal of later life — in the ways memories and desires tied up with New Zealand haunted the careers of successful expatriates.

But these later chapters do not add up to a historically grounded meditation on expatriation. The book loses its focus as more and more distinguished expats are hurried onto the stage and then bundled off just as quickly. The paragraphs allotted to Ronald Syme (pp.363–4) are taken up by obituary platitudes and a 'kiwi' anecdote. Given the subject of McNeish's book, it is extraordinary that he does not mention Syme's research interest in colonials and provincials coming to the Roman imperial centre. The idea of 'exile' attracted some attention in early reviews of *Dance of the Peacocks*, but it is not argued through in any depth. McNeish is a little too accepting of Davin's belief that there was 'no choice but [continued] expatriation' for New Zealand men of his ilk (p.364). A convincing investigation of this subject would have to look seriously at counter-examples, such as E.H. McCormick or J.C. Beaglehole, who had distinguished careers back in New Zealand (and who, it is worth pointing out, enrolled as postgraduate research students at Cambridge and London respectively, whereas the Rhodes scholars typically took a second undergraduate degree). D.F. McKenzie gets some adulatory paragraphs (pp.362–3), but McNeish is chiefly concerned with the story of McKenzie's appointment to Oxford in 1986: how he managed to revolutionize bibliography while based at Victoria University goes unaddressed, and even McKenzie's sense of the competing professional and emotional claims that Britain and New Zealand made on him is not mentioned. Too often, *Dance of the Peacocks* deals with the trappings of successful careers at the expense of the intellectual and institutional structures and processes they involve.

Though it focuses on a single figure, Vincent O'Sullivan's *Long Journey to the Border* deals with many of the same concerns as McNeish's book, and a good deal of the same material. It does so with acuity and sensitivity. John Mulgan was, of course, the author of *Man Alone*, a graduate of Auckland and Oxford, a publisher at Oxford University Press, and an accomplished soldier in Greece in the Second World War. He was also the son of a leading New Zealand 'man of letters', a husband, a father, a friend to many and an acquaintance of a huge number of people. So varied and crowded a life creates corresponding challenges for the biographer. O'Sullivan handles the different aspects of Mulgan's career with consistent authority and no awkwardness of register. One would expect this in the treatment of Mulgan as a student, writer and publisher, but O'Sullivan treats Mulgan's military career with equal confidence and fluency. He writes vividly not only about combat, but also about the empty time that the Second World War imposed on many in the British army. (Mulgan's postings in Northern Ireland, with their gas-warfare courses and sometimes numbing tactical exercises, are strangely close to those drolly related in Anthony Powell's *The Valley of Bones*.)

The war chapters take up more than a third of the book. By contrast, there is not much

literary criticism in *Long Journey to the Border*. What there is is acute and illuminating. But O'Sullivan's Mulgan is not simply, not even primarily, 'the author of *Man Alone*'. O'Sullivan quotes a number of letters that suggest that Mulgan saw his fiction as a minor part of his career, and did not necessarily even see the aggregate of fiction, journalism and publishing as a defining part of his self. He was more concerned with finding some viable way of being a man of action — Mulgan might have smiled at the phrase but he would not have winced — in a time of ideological crisis. And his concern with what it meant to be a New Zealander or English turned not just on the classic distance-looks-our-way and home-versus-'Home' questions explored by so many New Zealand nationalists and anglophiles, but also on political questions that the era of the Popular Front and the Second World War made desperately urgent. Could anything be salvaged from the Liberalism in which Mulgan's father Alan placed so much faith? Mulgan leaned to the left but he had no faith in redemption through communism. Such signs of political hope as Mulgan could find tended to come from 'character' rather than systems: qualities he discerned in some of the Greeks he fought alongside, and in those New Zealanders he saw as intelligent but unpretentious and outdoorsy — most of them men, but also his family friend Mary Scott. Commitment and ambivalence may seem like opposites, but in Mulgan they were intertwined. O'Sullivan describes him thus, when in 1943 Mulgan realizes that transferring from the British army to the New Zealand forces will not solve his problems as a soldier: 'neither a New Zealander quite, nor an Englishman either . . . avid to read widely and expecting to earn his living in peacetime from the making of books, but deeply, increasingly suspicious of those for whom education seemed to matter too much; committed to a socialist form of democracy, and yet convinced that victory in war would mean the entrenchment of so much that had allowed decent political values to erode' (p.254). *Long Journey to the Border*, then, is the story of the making and unmaking of a New Zealander — someone whose significance for New Zealand culture is not confined to an iconic novel but for the problems of politics, masculinity and the definition of a worthwhile life that he wrestled with.

Perhaps the most unexpected delight of the book is its portrait of life in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Auckland, a subject for which there is not much secondary literature to speak of. Alan and Marguerita Mulgan came from noticeably different backgrounds, and O'Sullivan registers the social as well as the personal dynamics of their marriage with great sensitivity. The social and intellectual life of Auckland University College when John Mulgan was a student in the early 1930s, the ebb and flow between the campus and pubs and flats — and, on 14 April 1932, Queen Street — is also captured with flair and empirical richness.

Rachel Barrowman's biography of R.A.K. Mason also evokes Auckland's literary and intellectual milieu — the university, the journalistic haunts of Percy Crisp's *Auckland Sun* as well as the *Star* on which Alan Mulgan worked. Mason's involvement in left causes, adult education and trade union work, as well as poetry, drama and editing, means that he, like John Mulgan, needs to be fitted into an array of different contexts. Barrowman knows more than anyone else about 'culture' and the left in 1930s and 1940s New Zealand and in her writings on the left and also her history of the Turnbull Library she has shown how adept she is at the difficult task of writing the history of networks of people and associations. Again, in *Mason*, she makes it look easy. She also submits Mason's poetry to searching critical readings that show, among other things, how much his prosody was shaped by Latin verse. Mason was central to an emergent mythology of New Zealand literature, but he fitted awkwardly into its narrative. Writing of M.H. Holcroft's discussion of Mason in *The Waiting Hills* (1943), Barrowman remarks, 'Knowing that much of Mason's poetry had been written in the 1920s while fitting him into what quickly came to be identified as the "thirties generation" would remain a critical challenge' (p.277).

Mason could be awkward personally too — as a friend, partner or colleague. He would

not reply to letters; he did not take up some of the enviable opportunities that Harold Monro of London's Poetry Bookshop extended to him; and he missed chances to apply for scholarships. More than one friend 'would see here not just one instance in a pattern of missed opportunities, but something more troubling, perverse: opportunities that were perhaps wilfully missed' (p.137). Late in life Mason was diagnosed as 'manic depressive', but the signs, Barrowman writes, 'were always there. . . . In the seeming contradictions: between the gentleness of his character, the fierceness of his politics and the control of his poems; between his sardonic toughness and his nervousness; his quick, biting humour and his sombre intensity' (p.15). Barrowman is more willing to speculate on Mason's inner life than O'Sullivan is with Mulgan, but she does so with great discipline. The authorial presence is sympathetic but unobtrusive, the book moving but not sentimental. Barrowman also handles perfectly the problem of addressing 'general' and 'specialist' readers together. She writes in a way that imparts necessary information without taxing the patience of readers with more background knowledge of one or another aspect of its subject-matter. This is a most accomplished biography.

There are many points of connection between *Mason* and Lawrence Jones's *Picking up the Traces*, but since the making of books plays no small part in all the works under review, I hope it will not be thought superficial if the common factor I emphasize here is the beautiful job of typography and book design that Victoria University Press has done for both the Barrowman and Jones volumes. *Picking up the Traces* is a comprehensive history of the literary culture forged by 'the first generation of Provincial writers, the *Phoenix*-Caxton group' from the beginning of the 1930s to the end of the Second World War. As the use of the term 'Provincial' suggests, Jones is developing the periodization of New Zealand literary history that he used in his section on the novel in the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, building on his own earlier formulations and those of Peter Simpson and (ultimately) Allen Curnow. To write about *Phoenix*, *Canta*, *Oriflamme* and *Tomorrow*, about the Caxton Press, about Denis Glover and A.R.D. Fairburn's attacks on older literary figures and women poets, about 'Provincial' visions of New Zealand society, about the making of Curnow's 1945 anthology, is hardly to deal with fresh material, but Jones examines these subjects with such erudition and perspicacity, breadth and depth, that historians (and history students) as well as literary critics will be in his debt for a long time.

In *Picking up the Traces*, Jones devotes less space to extended discussions of individual texts than to tracing affinities and contrasts between different texts and authors, literary influences, journals in which authors published, and other ties of affiliation. He makes these connections on the basis of an extensive reading of the published work of the period's writers, thorough periodical research — combing through *National Education* as well as *Tomorrow* — and diligent archival work. In the process, Jones complicates any neat sorting of Pakeha writers into this or that camp ('Georgian' or 'modernist', for instance), but he always advances an argument, never throwing up his hands and saying that reality is so complex that no traces can be picked up.

Jones begins by examining the formation of this Provincial literary culture through its little magazines and presses, and through its definitional struggles against literary opponents. There is an excellent chapter on the repudiation of the values of the older critical establishment represented by C.A. Marris and Alan Mulgan. (Both O'Sullivan and Jones provide welcome nuanced appraisals of Alan Mulgan's career. Jones makes the perceptive point that after all the satires against 'Mulgan, Marris, Schroder' in the 1930s, as Mulgan grew older 'and as the *Phoenix*-Caxton writers grew more established themselves, Mulgan ceased to be cast in oppositional terms and came to be accepted more as a part of New Zealand literary history, with his qualities recognised' [p.77].) Jones then discusses the *Phoenix*-Caxton writers' 'anti-myth' of New Zealand (dealing with the landscape, 'puritanism' and 'progress', for instance) and their responses to the

Depression, fascism, war and the centennial celebrations. One of Jones's most valuable contributions is to recapture the importance of the international politics of the 1930s for these writers — a concern that has washed out in the anthologizing process: the poetry of the songless, 'unsettled' land endures, but more 'topical' writing becomes a product of its time. This applies less to the question of the Depression than it does to that of fascism and war: 'While many texts about the Depression have also been expunged [from anthologies and individual authors' selected-works volumes], the standing literary record still contains much to express the responses to that "grey and ghastly visitor to the house" (in John Mulgan's expression) . . . the anti-myth that Curnow and those following him have put forward as the dominant structure of the period was able to absorb and use much of the Depression material. It did not so readily absorb the crisis writings' (p. 333).

Together with earlier books such as Rachel Barrowman's *A Popular Vision* and the accumulating scholarly literature on Robin Hyde, the books reviewed here make the 1930s and the war years the most developed terrain in New Zealand intellectual history. Few aspects of the left-leaning and nationalist cultural circles of the thirties now seem glaringly understudied (one exception is Mason's friend, the photographer, socialist and concrete heir Clifton Firth). If 'the 1930s' have been 'done', there are many other aspects of the literary and cultural history of the decade, minus the quotation marks, that still need examination. The social conservatives, literary populists and women other than Hyde await.

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*The Trial of the Cannibal Dog: Captain Cook in the South Seas.* By Anne Salmond. Penguin, London, 2003. 506 pp. NZ price: \$59.95. ISBN 0-7139-9661-7.

THIS BOOK EXHIBITS the strengths we have come to expect of Anne Salmond's histories of the South Seas: unrivalled knowledge of Polynesian sources (especially Maori ones) combined with extensive research in European and settler archives. Side by side we can read of the Maori priest Toiroa's prophecy of the coming of the red and white stranger to Aotearoa/New Zealand, and of the enmity boiling up about the same time between James Cook and his lieutenant John Gore. As Salmond observes at the end of her book, the history of Cook's voyages can be understood only by deploying a two-sided ethnography that gives due weight to the pressures shaping events from either side of the encounters. On the Polynesian side was an overarching cosmogony that rendered human relations intelligible in terms of genealogy, while on the European side structures of identity and obligation depended more and more upon the inviolability of private property. Although the mana of a chief might well be mirrored in the self-confidence of a young aristocrat such as Joseph Banks, a broad gulf existed between these two world systems, leading to a series of tensions, misunderstandings, solecisms and violence that culminated in the major crises of Poverty Bay, where Cook, Banks and Solander gunned down defenceless Maori; Grass Cove, where the crew of the *Adventure's* cutter were slain and partly consumed by Maori; and Kealakekua Bay, where Cook was killed by Hawaiians enraged at his attempt to take hostage a senior chief.

But across this divide cross-cultural triumphs were possible. The Raiatean priest Tupaia was an astute observer of European as well as Polynesian customs, some of which he depicted in drawings that have only recently been ascribed to him. In New Zealand he enjoyed huge prestige as a tohunga, and was remembered long after his death. It is clear in the course of Salmond's narrative that the anthropological curiosity evinced by Tupaia, and the veneration he received in places no Raiatean had ever visited, was increasingly