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# "ALWAYS A NEW ZEALANDER"

## A Tribute To John Mulgan

By MARY SCOTT

OF the most gifted of the younger men every war takes its toll—men of outstanding brains and character, of rare imagination and powers of expression, of innate capacity for leadership, and of that indefinable thing called personality. Some fall on the very threshold of life, with all their music in them. Others live just long enough to show their powers and to make the world grieve all the more by reason of that fuller view of what might have been. Freedom must be served by the brightest and best, who love her with wisdom as well as passion, otherwise she would not survive, but when military victory has been won and the struggle is transferred to the civic field, she misses sadly the swords of those who have fallen. John Mulgan, of New Zealand, who died recently in the Middle East, was one of these, and it is because he belonged to this gallant and shining company, and because of what he did and was, that this tribute is written.

It has been said that in John Mulgan New Zealand lost yet another of its brilliant younger men. Brilliant? One almost hesitates to use the word of him, since, wrongly perhaps, it is inclined to suggest something a trifle incalculable, possibly unstable, even unreliable. And John Mulgan was none of these things. First and foremost he was normal, sane, kindly, a veritable rock. Yet, his brain



LT.-COL. JOHN MULGAN

was brilliant, and New Zealand was justified in expecting for him a brilliant future.

I say New Zealand, since he was always a New Zealander, despite the fact that he left this country at the age of 22 and did not return to it. But his thoughts turned perpetually here and, but for the war, he would have come back to revisit the land where he belonged. He had come through many dangers; he had fought for the freedom in which he so passionately believed, which he so sanely understood and practised. Freedom was in sight. The end of the war was near. He had fought for Greece, and after liberation had returned there to help her in peace. It was known that this job was about finished. Then word came of his death.

BORN in Christchurch in 1911, John Mulgan was educated at Wellington College, Auckland Grammar School, where he was senior prefect and vice-captain of the first fifteen, and Auckland University College. Then he went to Merton College, Oxford, where he took First-class Honours in English. He had Edmund Blunden, the poet, for tutor. He was straightway appointed to the editorial staff of the Clarendon Press (Oxford University Press). Among the things he did at the Oxford Press was to help with the launching of that notable and popular series, *Oxford Pamphlets on World Affairs*. Early in 1939 he was offered the charge of the United States branch of the Oxford University Press, the most famous publishing house in the world. But he felt that he could not leave England at that moment. "I must wait till we know what Hitler intends to do," he wrote, with a characteristic absence of either heroics or sentimentality. When war broke out he was a Territorial officer in the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and went to Northern Ireland with his regiment. In 1942 he went to the Middle East as major in the Royal West Kents and fought beside the New Zealanders at El Alamein.

Later he joined a unit specially trained for work in Axis-occupied territory and

was one of that gallant band of British officers who worked with the Greek Patriots before the liberation. It was good to remember that, ever since he studied Greek as an undergraduate, he had longed to see that land—not the Greece of the antiquarian, but the living countryside, its green hills and mountain paths. In these surroundings he spent the last part of his life. Before he left New Zealand he wrote a poem, "Odysseus," which is remembered with poignancy to-day.

*There shall be neither sleep nor death  
Out there beyond the wine-dark sea,  
But quiet and the honeyed breath*

*Of far-off lands and flowers blown free,*

*Out there beyond the border of the wine-dark sea.*

He himself was to cross Homer's "wine-dark sea" thousands of feet above it, and see the "rosy-fingered dawn" creep over the Aegean.

The work was hazardous enough. He landed by parachute and worked in an area important because through it ran two main railways. His work was sabotage, derailment, the prevention of reinforcements from travelling south during the invasion of Italy. One of its most important sides was the establishment of friendly relations with the Greek Patriots. In this he was particularly successful, for his personality was one that inspired confidence at all times. He liked the Greeks, with all their faults, found them amusing and lovable, seldom argued or grew angry, "smiled and got his way." It was natural to him to see the best in his fellow-men. After the liberation he spent a short time in Cairo at office work, but, because of his knowledge of the language and the people, was asked to go to Athens to assist with the work of compensating those who had suffered for their association with the British. The letters of the last weeks of his life are rich in comments on the tangled situation there.

IT is good to know that John Mulgan (Lieutenant-Colonel Mulgan before his death) left behind him not merely a memory and an example, but something tangible. He was that not common combination—a man of thought and a man of action. It is significant that, when he edited an anthology, it should be of *Poems of Freedom*, and a very excellent anthology it remains. It is strange that he, the most sane and steady of men, should choose for a hero in his novel a wanderer and a rebel. This book, *Man Alone*, is considered by many the best New Zealand novel; certainly it showed great promise; it is short, vivid, provocative, in the best modern style. He compels your interest in his "hero," for he always had a deep sympathy for the under-dog; never a maudlin or a sentimental one; sympathy was always combined with fine and temperate judgment.

Although he belonged to that unfortunate generation that spent its early years waiting for war, and its best years fighting it, he was incapable of becoming embittered by the muddles and mistakes of his time. He was certainly

(continued on next page)

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