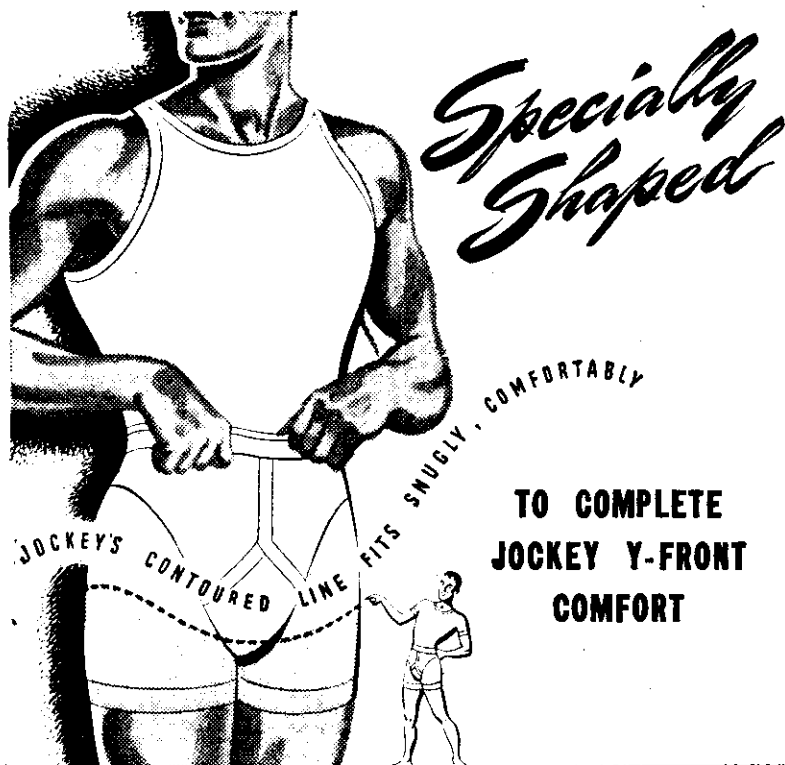




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## BOOKS

# ISLAND STORY

MAN ALONE, by John Mulgan; Paul's Book Arcade, Ltd., Hamilton; 10/6.

(Reviewed by James Bertram)

THIS novel of New Zealand between the wars was first published in England ten years ago. Not many copies of the first edition had reached this country before 1940, when the plates and remaining stocks of *Man Alone* were destroyed in London by enemy action. On every count, then, this new edition is welcome: it reflects credit on the Literary Fund Committee for its supporting grant, on the publisher for his faith in the book, and on the printers for the good clean job they have made of the reprint.

How does *Man Alone* stand up as a novel, ten years after it was written? John Mulgan's place in New Zealand letters is already secured by certain unforgettable passages in his *Report on Experience*, that fragmentary but classical record of war years in the desert and amid the mountains of Thessaly. The man himself, to those who knew him, will always be remembered as someone gentler and more enigmatic than the books he has left behind, but in the long run, it is probably upon this first novel that his literary reputation in his own country will rest. For the stories live on when the war books are forgotten.

*Man Alone* is the story of Johnson, a demobilised English infantryman who comes out to Auckland at the end of the first world war. He finds work on a dairy farm in the Waikato, has a go at share-farming, turns it in, and moves north to become a deckhand on a coastal scow. These are the "easy years" before the slump; in the bad years that follow, Johnson drifts from casual railway labouring into an unemployment relief camp. He gets mixed up in the Auckland riots of 1932, resists arrest, and escapes to a lonely bush farm in the King Country where he works for a sour, fanatical boss with a bored and mischievous half-caste Maori wife. In the inevitable intrigue that follows the jealous husband gets shot; Johnson takes to the hills to avoid the man-hunt. After a desperate struggle through the long winter he succeeds in crossing the backbone of the North Island, finds friends to help smuggle him out of the country to England.

This is a bare outline of the narrative, and its lack of balance is immediately apparent. The early years are lightly treated; the depression arrives as casually as a polio epidemic; and the first "big scene," the Queen Street riots, is deliberately played down. With a shift to Stenning's lonely farm the narrative suddenly stiffens into one of those muscle-bound farm triangles—as self-contained as an Arctic expedition—of which dominions fiction has been so prolific in the past. The gathering intensity of this situation is shattered by the death of Stenning; there follows the interlude, again complete in itself, of Johnson's trek

across the Kaimanawas. It is these chapters that contain the most carefully-written descriptive passages about the hills, the desert and the bush; though this is still our own country, parts of it seem right off the map—as remote and timeless as Robinson Crusoe or the travels of Marco Polo. When Johnson comes out on the other side, we are back with the easy male camaraderie of the earlier chapters. The tension has relaxed (though Johnson's final escape is skilfully enough contrived) and it does not gather again before the book's carefully unheroic epilogue.

CLEARLY there is enough material here for half-a-dozen novels, with a range of twenty years and historical points of reference as significant as the Great War, the great depression, and the International Brigade in Spain. *Man Alone* is a short book, but even in its 200-odd pages it manages to suggest at least four distinct approaches to its subject: the picaresque-reported narrative, the realistic earthy farm-drama, the outlaw's struggle for survival, and a snatch of twentieth-century thriller in the American manner. The character of the protagonist is not very interesting—Johnson is *l'homme moyen sensuel* with few distinguishing marks and absolutely no graces; we never know how his mind works, or what books he reads at night in his bunk. And yet—the book is a whole as so other New Zealand novel that I know is a whole. It is mature, poised, humanely objective; and leaves a total impression of verisimilitude and strong feeling well under control.

One reason, perhaps, is that it is so little derivative. Style and treatment, on the surface, owe much to Hemingway—more, beneath this, to a familiarity with Greek, with Old English poetry, and with the Icelandic sagas. But all the toughness, matter-of-factness, and ironic understatement are pretty completely assimilated into a manner that, before long, is recognisably Mulgan's own. It is a manner that is much less self-conscious than the word-patterns of Katherine Mansfield



JOHN MULGAN  
"An affirmation of faith"

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 26, 1949.