

Army Penguins
May 1940

LETTER FROM NEW GUINEA

Dear John,

To-day is one of those perfect tropic days; it only needs Dorothy Lamour to make it seem finally unreal. But even the tropic weather carries "the seeds of its own destruction" inside of it. By to-night it will be raining. The sun is too hot to last; the breeze which provides temporary relief always brings up storm-clouds; the rain is too violent so that in an hour it is over. But just now the scene is conventionally perfect—my tent is on the brow of a hill, overlooking a stretch of jungle, and then a mathematical coconut plantation leading right onto the sea. The regularity of the plantation looks out of place; its only a superficial one. Without squads of men to keep it in order, underneath the healthy spaced rows of palms, the bushes, creepers and Kunai, in a matter of weeks or even days, destroy what little order the planters could create. It seems as if only by physical detachment is it possible to discipline the jungle. Living in and with it, the only feeling is of its hostility; by looking down on it from a distance, you can dominate it mentally in a way as compensation for the inability to conquer it physically.

Gauguin seems almost photographic after seeing the real thing in tropical landscape and atmosphere. There is that same blinding vividness of colour, the sense of enclosure, even that curious flat, or, rather, stereoscopic perspective that he has. It is a trick of the atmosphere, especially noticeable just before an electric storm, when the whole vision is of a dull but pervasive yellow, that makes the trees, the mountains and the tents seem artificially imposed on one another, as if seen through a stereoscope. Rousseau, I think was wrong, if he was trying to prove a thesis—there is no order in his country, but only a tangled mass of growth and conflict, and a hostility to any attempt to control it.

Reading is very scarce in New Guinea, and what there is, is all solid, conservative stuff—mostly of the Marie Corelli type and era. Music is even rarer. The Army Education Service seems to take a deliberate delight in mangling what few musical memories I have, by playing one movement of this, and half a part of that, interspersed with Gallienci singing "Your Tiny Hand is Frozen", and a wealth of redundant comments.

Occasionally I read inadequate reports in the dailies or futile and biased reviews by Norman Lindsay in the Bulletin that remind me that there is still plenty going on in Melbourne. And, strangely, it still seems important that it should continue. I expected that after so long in the Army my evaluations would gradually change until they reversed themselves, but it just hasn't happened.

IAN TURNER.