Comments about Ngaio Marsh mysteries set in New Zealand

Ngaio Marsh set in her native New Zealand four of her more-than-thirty Roderick Alleyn mysteries. (Alleyn is a gentleman Scotland Yard detective. His name is pronounced, simply, “Allen.” Marsh borrowed the outré spelling from the Elizabethan stage – to the confusion of many book-on-tape readers.) Though all are solid mystery stories, Marsh take the opportunity to evoke, sometimes quite vividly, both the landscape of New Zealand and the culture of the Maoris.

*Vintage Murder* (1937): Marsh here combines two of her great loves – her country and the stage. (Marsh became a “Dame” not for her writing but for her work in supporting and contributing to the theater in New Zealand.) Alleyn has hitched a ride with a British theatrical group as they travel through New Zealand. The mystery is so-so – but on Alleyn’s first trip to the Antipodes, he pays a lot of attention to the landscape and also has a long encounter with a distinguished Maori elder.

*Colour Scheme* (1943):* Though parts of this mystery are a bit strained, the setting is fascinating: a hot-springs resort in New Zealand during the second world war. A murder leads to interactions with a nearby Maori community, caught between traditional and modern impulses. Given the setting, the least interesting part of the story involves espionage. Alleyn’s interactions with another Maori chief allow Marsh to discuss important themes in the life of her homeland.

*Died in the Wool* (1944): I find this one of the most interesting of all Marsh’s stories, because of the neat way she merges a New Zealand setting with a gruesome murder. The action is centered on a large upland sheep farm (lovely descriptions evoke the surrounding landscape) – which also becomes the location of the murder. All the violence in the story takes place around the livestock barns which seems quite appropriate. Marsh introduces some strong New Zealand characters, from different classes – and we get perhaps the sharpest view of white-settler society.

*Photo-Finish* (1980): Marsh’s penultimate novel. It’s set on a private island off the coast of New Zealand, to which Alleyn has brought his wife, the painter, Agatha Troy. With a visiting diva (who some say was modeled on Maria Callas) and many other musical visitors, the presence of New Zealand is less strong than the atmosphere of a traditional English Country House mystery – albeit plunked down in an exotic setting.

*Audiobook Notes:* A large number of Alleyn mysteries are fortunate to have one absolutely terrific reader, James Saxon. He captures the wackiness and whimsy of the characters, shows the humanity within the apparently dull Alleyn, has a great ear for accents and a marvelous sense of pacing. Saxon died prematurely, at the age of 49, before he’d finished his performances of Marsh’s books. BBC Audio chose Ric Jerrom as their alternate reader and I find him far less satisfactory. His cadences are repetitive, his accents awkward. It’s possible that my appreciation for *Colour Scheme* suffers because I’ve only listened to Jerrom’s performance: the book probably reads better on the page. Fortunately the other three New Zealand titles are read by Saxon so their audiobooks are wonderful.

Commentary by Tom Looker for the *Classics Book Club*, June 2018