

Introduction: Oscar Mamen

It is with great joy that I introduce this piece of work by a Norwegian traveler to Mongolia, enabled through a collaboration between the Institute of Mongol Studies at the National University of Mongolia and the Museum of Cultural History in Norway. The author, Oscar Mamen, tried to publish this manuscript in Norway in 1939, but he did not succeed.¹ This is why it is with particular satisfaction to see the manuscript in print, roughly 85 years after it was written. It is especially joyous that the place of publication is where the story unfolds, which is Mongolia.

At first glance, it might seem like a coincidence that Oscar Mamen would spend nearly half of his adult life in Mongolia. He was born in 1885 at his parents' farm, Norby Vestre, just outside of the Norwegian capital Kristiania as the holder of the farm allodial rights.² Norby Vestre was the biggest farm in his home county, covering 537 crop acres, 200 acres of agricultural land and 1334 acres of forest.³ He spent his first years as the privileged son of a landowner. Everything was laid out for him to inherit and run Norby Vestre farm.

However, in 1909, his parents sold the farm.⁴ Oscar Mamen tried to assert his allodial rights in a mediation court the same year, and later in court. After one year of negotiations, he eventually lost the farm the 23rd of August 1911.⁵ Meeting up with his cousin, Alfred Rustad, two weeks after he lost the court case, he readily accepted the offer to go to China to sell cigarettes for the British American Tobacco Company. Only two weeks later, on the 20th of September 1911, he waved goodbye to his friends and relatives on the deck of *Eskimo* at the Kristiania harbor. His destination was Urga, today's Ulaanbaatar.⁶

At the same time, there are two things in particular that made Oscar Mamen's life in Mongolia possible to him. Firstly, he was born in Norway at a time when distances had shrunk both demographically and socially. Industrialization and the advancement of infrastructure made the capital Kristiania available and attractive to people from the surrounding counties. Instead of assuming the same job as your parent, which in Norby consisted mostly of farming, a young man or woman had greater mobility in taking part in the work force in Kristiania. Novel political waves brought about democratic institutions, labor unions and reforms to Oscar Mamen's home county. School reforms introduced new subjects like history and geography to the young Norwegian pupils, from a sole focus on reading, writing and Christianity.⁷ In 1895, when Oscar Mamen was

ten years old, his geography teaching included lessons about “Africa, Asia, Australia and a couple of European countries”.⁸ The world came closer to Norway through new knowledge and means of transportation, and a new set of opportunities was offered to Oscar Mamen’s generation. Travelling from Kristiania to the Far East was not only possible via modern ships and railways, it was also a journey of only four weeks.⁹ Viewed in this context, Oscar Mamen’s travel to Mongolia was a part of a larger trend of increased world contact.

Secondly, Oscar Mamen had scientific interests even from his childhood days in Norby. His parents’ spacious farm property hosted fourteen ancient Viking graves. From an early age, he would play around them, imagining he was a Viking himself, wanting to dig inside them to see what was beneath the piles of soil. He disliked school, but he was of a curious nature.¹⁰ In a letter to Roy Andrew Chapman, written at age 35, Oscar Mamen explains his desires to be a scientist: “I ought to have taken another course in life, should have specialized as a Zoologist and left business to the world and I would have been far better off in every respect, except perhaps for cash.”¹¹ From his departure from Kristiania in 1911 and in all the following years in Mongolia, China and Russia, he kept detailed day-to-day diaries. His diaries were later written up in longer diary excerpts, and then reworked to form texts like the manuscript that constitutes this publication. Often, he would read other accounts from Mongolia, and write detailed objections to things he disagreed with. He wondered if, for instance, the Swedish missionary Franz August Larson, who published *Larson, the Duke of Mongolia* in 1930, actually was able to write a book about Mongolia when he had not kept a steady diary.¹² Throughout his texts, Oscar Mamen strove towards being as detailed and objective as possible. He clearly worked from his scientific aspirations from the moment he arrived in Urga, the 26th of October 1911.

The first three chapters describe the journey from Kristiania to Urga. Yet when Oscar Mamen comfortably sat in his train wagon through the Siberian steppes, political upheaval in China resulted in the fall of the Qing dynasty. Mongolia soon ceased to have the opportunity to claim national independence. Oscar Mamen had departed for China, but he arrived in Mongolia.¹³ In Urga, he got the chance to witness the political events from the first row.

As a cigarette salesman, Oscar Mamen quickly noted that few people paid much interest to his product. Mongolians favored their pipe tobacco.¹⁴ His extra time was

therefore spent documenting the ongoing events in photography and writing. The emerging distrustfulness of the Manchu government in Urga culminated into an independence revolution and later a full-on war with China.¹⁵ On some occasions, he would find himself in the midst of the political events, as described in chapter six. Through his friend Franz August Larson, who was the negotiator for the Chinese government to Urga, he occasionally served as both translator and mediator between different negotiating parts. Other acquaintances with Mongolian nobles, lamas and princes provided him with insight into the events that made up a seminal period of Mongolian history.¹⁶ The revolution, the war with China, the negotiations with both Russia and China, and finally, the Kiachta peace treaty are the subjects of Chapters five to eight.

After two years in Urga, Oscar Mamen went to Norway on leave in 1915. He married Karen Oulie Hansen, who came with him to Mongolia in November the same year.¹⁷ Their first son Oscar was born in 1916, and their second son Odd in 1921.¹⁸ Karen took care of the boys, while Oscar Mamen travelled most of the year in China, Mongolia and Russia.¹⁹ In 1917, he left the British American Tobacco company, and engaged in fur trade.²⁰ In 1924, his marriage dissolved and Karen moved back to Norway with their sons.²¹ Mamen continued his enterprise in Mongolia.

In 1929, Oscar Mamen was engaged as a local guide for the Swedish-American anthropologist at Cambridge Ethel Lindgren. She was in Mongolia and then Northwestern Manchuria to conduct fieldwork for her PhD thesis in anthropology.²² They fell in love and married in 1930, their son John Lindgren was born later the same year. While John lived with relatives in America, Oscar and Ethel went back to Mongolia on further field work trips. From this period, the Oscar Mamen collection is composed of detailed ethnographic descriptions of ethnic groups in Manchuria, among them, the Ewenki nomads.²³

After about four years, the marriage between Mamen and Lindgren ended. Oscar Mamen settled in Vettakollen hotel in Kristiania in 1933, from 1925 called Oslo, where he rewrote and reworked his diaries and ethnographic excerpts into longer texts, and among them, this manuscript.²⁴ His observations from 20 years of Mongolian festivities and everyday life are the subjects of the final four chapters. Chapter nine describes Tsagaan Tsar, and Chapter ten considers the two religious festivals Maiter and Tsam.

Sports and festivals are the subject of Chapter eleven about Nadaam, while Yurt (Ger) life is explored in Chapter twelve.

Oscar Mamen returned to Mongolia in 1937, though this time on a mission to collect Mongolian artifacts for the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo.²⁵ Again, it was a time of political turmoil, but this time Japanese forces pressured from the north.²⁶ In 1938, Oscar Mamen decided to leave Mongolia for good. It was “harder than leaving home”, as he wrote to the Museum Director in Oslo, Ole Solberg.²⁷ On the 22nd of December 1938, Mamen sailed to Tanganyika, today's Tanzania. About these years, Oscar Mamen's son, John Lindgren, writes: “After a few years working for the Tanganyika game department, he joined the Geita Gold Mining company, managing the local labour. Then, because of his renowned language skills, he was called in early 1943 by British intelligence to go to India and then on to China. In late 1944 he was parachuted into Mongolia from where he reported on the efforts of the guerillas fighting the Japanese. During this time he was able to further his knowledge of Mongol culture. After the war, he returned to Geita Gold Mine, and then joined Williamson's Diamond Mine, 100 miles south of Lake Victoria, in charge of the large labour force. He was joined by his first wife Karen, and eldest son Oscar.”²⁸ In Africa, Oscar Mamen continued with his ethnographic writings and the collecting of local artifacts.²⁹

In September 1955, Oscar Mamen went on holiday to the capital of Tanganyika, Dar-Es-Salaam. His car was hit by a truck and Oscar Mamen died instantly. His wife, Karen, was badly injured, but survived.³⁰ Oscar Mamen was buried in Dar-Es-Salaam.³¹ His Norwegian family resettled in Kolbotn, Norway, close to Norby farm where Oscar Mamen grew up. John Lindgren, “visited his father in 1950, and spent almost all his working life in Africa as an oil company executive, retiring to England”.³² The writings and pictures from Oscar Mamen's extended travels were donated for research purposes to the museum of Cultural History in Norway in 2016. I am grateful to the Mamen/Lindgren family for the collaboration and help throughout the work with the Oscar Mamen collection, including comments on this introduction.

I would also like to thank Professor Lkhagvademchig Jadamba and the Institute of Mongol Studies at the National University of Mongolia for the work they have carried out to translate and publish this manuscript. In my work with the Oscar Mamen collection, it is of uttermost importance to make the museum material from Mongolia available to the Mongolian population. Oscar Mamen arrived in Urga at a seminal point

of time in the history of Mongolia. The number of photos he took (8000), the detailed and descriptive notes he wrote in this particular time and space is what makes the Oscar Mamen collection exciting, and hopefully this manuscript can be of interest and value to the Mongolian reader.

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¹³ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mongolia/Independence-and-revolution>

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¹⁷ Photo 187.7: 76-78. Registration: 187/1916.

¹⁸ Photo 187.9: 71. Registration: 187/1916, photo 188.16: 30. Registration: 188/1921.

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²² I thank John Lindgren for corrections. Email. John Lindgren to Maria Kartveit 4 July 2021.

²³ Anderson et al 2019, 309-314.

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