

# UNDER SEYMOUR MOUNTAIN

*George Woodcock*

**M**ALCOLM LOWRY was born in England in 1909. He died there in 1957. And during the restless life that stretched between those poles of destiny he wandered over a great portion of the earth—the Far East, the United States, much of Europe, and, of course, Mexico, the setting of his now belatedly celebrated novel, *Under the Volcano*. But almost a third of his life—and the most productive third so far as his writing was concerned—he spent in Canada. He came to Vancouver just before the war, in 1939, and the next year settled in a squatter's cabin on the foreshore of Burrard Inlet at Dollarton, a settlement under the shadow of the mountains, a few miles east of Vancouver. There, with time off for trips back to Mexico and Europe and Eastern Canada, he lived until 1954, when he left for Sicily and, finally, England.

It was at Dollarton, and at Niagara-on-the-Lake, that Lowry finished the last, published version of *Under the Volcano*. It was at Dollarton also that he wrote the stories which are now being published as the first new volume of his work to appear since his death—*Hear Us Oh Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*.<sup>1</sup> He worked at the same time on at least two novels about Mexico, *La Mordida* and *Dark as the Grave*, of which, so far as I know, only fragments remain among the great mass of manuscript material that has recently been assembled at the University of British Columbia.<sup>2</sup> Among that material is also—apart from enough poems to make a considerable volume—the almost completed manuscript of a novel, *October Ferry to Gabriola*, which is set in British Columbia, and which also will be published as soon as the editing is complete.

<sup>1</sup> *Hear Us Oh Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. Longmans, Green. \$4.50.

<sup>2</sup> This is now being edited by Malcolm Lowry's widow, Margerie Bonner Lowry, and Earle Birney, whose assistance in preparing this issue of *Canadian Literature* I wish at this point gratefully to acknowledge.

I do not think there is much doubt that Lowry has one foot well in the realm that is appropriate to *Canadian Literature*. It is not merely that on Canadian soil he produced the final, magnificent version of what many critics regard as the best novel written in our land; nor is it merely that much of his later work was set in Canada. We do not, after all, regard D. H. Lawrence as anything but an English writer, though he wrote many of his books abroad and set them in foreign countries. Try as he might to escape from his past, Lawrence remained the travelling Englishman, refracting all he saw through a personal and alien eye; his best writing on other lands was prompted by the lyrical observations of an outsider, and when he tried to enter into the heart of Mexico and portray it from within, he produced that literary monstrosity, *The Plumed Serpent*.

Lowry's relationship to his adopted home was quite different. We read the poems he wrote on Burrard Inlet; we read the three Canadian stories in *Hear Us Oh Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*—"The Bravest Boat", "Gin and Golden Rod", and particularly "The Forest Path to the Spring". And we realise that he is not in fact writing about Canada as a transient outsider. He is writing about it as a man who over fifteen years lived himself into the environment that centred upon his fragile home where the Pacific tides lapped and sucked under the floorboards, and who identified himself with that environment—despite trials of flesh and spirit—as passionately as those other strangers who have rendered so well the essence of their particular corners of Canada, Grove and Haig-Brown. If Mexico stirred him through that combination of antagonism and attraction which so many Europeans feel there, Canada—or at least that fragment of it which stretches out from Burrard Inlet to embrace the Gulf of Georgia—stirred him through a sympathy that led towards total involvement.

It is for this reason, perhaps, that in his Canadian stories the Websterian hell of *Under the Volcano* never comes to view, though one gets a whiff of the sulphur in "Gin and Goldenrod". No man goes down to destruction under Seymour Mountain, and along the beaches of Dollarton the phantoms with death's-head faces do not sing in the voices of demons as they did for Consul Firmin. On the contrary, here, in this closely and lovingly described land-and-inletscape, there is a sense of redemption; in "The Forest Path to the Spring" the mountain lion who sits in a tree over the path and embodies destruction runs away from the narrator's steady eye, and what the latter remembers about his trips to the spring—what he remembers most vividly—is the almost mystical experience of joy that at times seemed to carry him in a rhapsodic instant from the life-giving source back to the door of his cabin. Here, as in *Under the Volcano*, the self is immersed.

But in the novel it drowns in the whirlpool of self-negation, whereas in "The Forest Path to the Spring" it bathes in a universal calm, the calm of a world of nature as sympathetic as ever Wordsworth wrote of, with which it identifies and from which it returns with joy enriched. It seems to me that it is in this almost rhapsodic identification with place that we find our best reason to claim much of what Lowry wrote for the literature of Canada. For it is not a sense of place that derives from mere observation, like that conveyed by a sensitive and competent travel writer; it is rather the sense of place that derives from a mental naturalisation which adds to a native's sense of identity the wonder of newness a native can never experience fully after childhood.

The stories in *Hear Us Oh Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* are all worth reading for themselves; some of the non-Canadian examples, while they do not attain the intensity of feeling of "The Forest Path to the Spring", are interesting for their experimental exploration of the problems of conveying multiple levels of meaning. "Through the Panama" is an example; the narrator, a transmuted Lowry figure, voyages to Europe by freighter, but his journey is also that of a modern Ancient Mariner, with the albatross of literary creation and its attendant curse hung around his neck as he considers his novels about novelists who are his own mirror images. For Lowry belonged in the early twentieth century cosmopolitan tradition that seemed to reach an end about the time of his death—the tradition of Proust and Gide, which came to the conclusion, inevitable after a century of introspection, that the proper study of the writer is the writer's mind.

But all these stories are also part of a great continuum, a vast Work in Progress that filled Lowry's life and was never completed—perhaps never could be completed. In this sense Lowry was of the Proustian rather than of the Gidian tradition. The Gidians write many separate studies of experience, all related, but each self-contained; when one novel is finished a phase of investigation is ended, its record is terminated as quickly as possible, and then the writer is on to the next experience and the next novel. But the Proustians, and Lowry among them, conceive all their work as one great inter-related pattern on whose parts they work continuously and simultaneously. Proust could never leave the one great work of his life alone; he worked backwards and forwards over his manuscript, and only publication ever gave a final form to any of its parts; only death, one can be sure, put a period to the work itself, coming by coincidence at the point when Proust had reached the end of his original plan. So it was with Lowry. He worked on several novels, on stories and poems, all at the same time, and his

revisions were multiple to the point of Flaubertian obsession. For this reason he spent many years over each novel, writing on others at the same time; his actually completed works are few out of all proportion to those he sketched out and started. Another decade of work might—and equally well might not—have presented us with a masterpiece in its own very different way rivalling *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, perhaps even in one direction exceeding it, since Lowry possessed no cork-lined room and revised and added to his Work in Progress as the result, not of remembering a past now dead, but of experiencing and incorporating a lived present.

As it is, when *October Ferry to Gabriola* is published and the devoted labours of Lowry's editors have salvaged all that is publishable in fragmentary form from the other portions of the great cycle, we shall perhaps begin to see, at least in massive outlines, the modern Divine Comedy of which *Under the Volcano*, for all its portentous self-sufficiency, was intended only as a part.

