

RECOLLECTIONS OF MALCOLM LOWRY

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ON MAY 14th, 1927, Malcolm Lowry was 17 years old. On that day the Liverpool Correspondent for the *London Evening News* interviewed him just before he sailed on the cargo steamer PYRRHUS as a deckhand at 50/- per month. He told the Correspondent: "No silk-cushion youth for me. I want to see the world and rub shoulders with its oddities, and get some experience of life before I go back to Cambridge University." The Correspondent interviewed his rich cotton broker father and his mother, too, but only her comments are on record: "He is bent on a literary career, and his short story writing is all to him," said Mrs. Lowry, when the ship had left.

On his return from Port Said, Shanghai and Yokohama Lowry was again interviewed, this time by *The Daily Mail*. With characteristic candour he announced he didn't intend to go to sea again, since a fourteen hour day, chipping paint, scrubbing decks and polishing brass was not to his liking. He said he intended to go on to university, compose fox-trots and write fiction.

One of his intentions was realised, as we know, for Malcolm Lowry wrote, among many other works, one of the great novels of the twentieth century, *Under the Volcano*. Despite the early experience of his four month voyage as deckhand, he returned to sea, travelling to every ocean, beachcombed in the South Seas, settled for troubled spates in Mexico, Haiti, Germany, until he finally found, again close to the sea, a waterfront shack at Dollarton, ten miles from Vancouver, where he could write and live in his own peculiar, uneasy peace.

It was during this last period of his life that I met Malcolm and his wife, Margerie, (who published many fictional works under her maiden name, Margerie Bonner). It was at a cocktail party at the Caulfield home of Alan Crawley. A. J. M. Smith and the American poet, Theodore Roethke, had persuaded Malcolm to attend. He was pathologically shy and any group of more than four

usually caused perspiration to drip from his face, but on this occasion there was no shyness. It was a gathering of writers, of like beings, of natural and mutual acceptance. He hated literary people; to the same degree he accepted and loved those he felt were dedicated to literature. Quite often this blind acceptance caused him self-hurt and disappointment, but more often it created deep friendship.

Physically, Lowry was a powerful man: short, broad-shouldered, with a tremendous chest. His gait was rolling, whether as accommodation to his bulk or the result of years at sea, or simply the acquisition of an imagined habit, I don't know. He was fair-headed, with muscular arms and small feet. Most impressive of all were his intense blue eyes which looked into and through your own, which gazed into the distance, which altered in hue as his mood varied.

Most of his life from the time he left university until he discovered Dollarton was spent in physical activity in odd corners of the globe, but, like the scattered notes which he wrote on bus transfers, cigarette papers or any other chance piece of paper, all of his life was lived for metamorphosis into short story, poem or novel. He could discard nothing and, consequently, writing to him was not the usual casting for idea, figure of speech, or character portrayal, but rather a painful, tortuous process of selection and arrangement.

He had that rare (and rather frightening) gift of near total recall. I saw him sometimes after intervals of several months. For the first five minutes he would stare contemplatively across Burrard Inlet at the evening outline of Burnaby Mountain, then reflectively at a gull sweeping low over the water, then finally at me. Out of the air with magic, it seemed to one like myself who had little memory whatever, he would recount word-perfect an argument we had had on our previous meeting. He would review exactly what each of us had said, then quietly announce that he had been (or I had been, it doesn't matter) in error in a particular statement. Accuracy, even on trivial matters, was an obsession.

This accuracy was one of the strengthening qualities of his writing. By exact physical depiction, razor-edged characterization, evocation of mood, he had some alchemy which would make each line true in detail, yet with layers of meaning which could be peeled off by the reader without the onion becoming smaller. In his great novel, *Under the Volcano*, this is revealed in many pages. For example, I recall Malcolm describing to me how, when a young man in Wales, he had come across an amusing insertion in a Visitors' Book in a hotel. He described it on several occasions, each time not really adding anything, yet casting a different spell over the event on each telling. Consider my delight, then, when I encountered it in another guise on page 181 :

"Climbed the Parson's Nose," one had written, in the visitors' book at the little Welsh rock-climbing hotel, "in twenty minutes. Found the rocks very easy." "Came down the Parson's Nose," some immortal wag had added a day later, "in twenty seconds. Found the rocks very hard." . . . So now, as I approach the second half of my life, unheralded, unsung, and without a guitar, I am going back to sea again: perhaps these days of waiting are more like that droll descent, to be survived in order to repeat the climb. At the top of the Parson's Nose you could walk home to tea over the hills if you wished, just as the actor in the Passion Play can get off his cross and go home to his hotel for a Pilsener.

We walked along the beach one late afternoon—a warm afternoon when the tide was full, the salt-chuck quiet as if it had been fed to satiety and didn't want the never-changing chore of accommodating itself to the tug of the moon. We were having one of those intense and enjoyable silences which can cement each to the other without any mortar of words. We came across the oil encrusted corpse of a seagull. I knew, of course, how passionately fond of birds Malcolm was (a well-marked pocket-size volume of Peterson's *Field Guide* was usually beside him) and I made some remark about someone's criminality in dumping bunker oil in the harbour. Malcolm nodded, then pointed without a word to the flares of the oil refineries on the other shore, his hand sweeping even further to indicate the smog which sawmills in Vancouver's False Creek were emitting to soot the landscape. Later, when we had doubled back up the hillside and through the evergreen forest, his fingers felt the new sharp green needles of the young hemlocks and he contemplatively dug with his toe at the dropped needles which had contributed to the forest loam. A deep observer, he believed nothing was or could be wasted in nature and that death itself was necessary for creation.

Was this knowledge, perhaps, the reason for Lowry's bouts of alcoholism? Unlike most of his friends I never saw him during such times. He did discuss everything but the reason for them with me candidly and simply (there was no false pride, no pantomiming of excuse, but simple direct statement). On several occasions I know his fear of groups triggered him off. Once he arrived at an august tea party staggering and all but speechless, wanting to hammer ragtime on the piano instead of being listened to with respect and awe. There were other occasions when he was alone and his loneliness simply could not be borne. I suspect that sometimes the creativity which constantly welled up from within himself could not be channelled as he wished it and had to be deadened by some anodyne. He didn't possess the routine and familiar antidotes with which the majority of us are equipped. During these frightening periods his understanding and devoted wife and the few friends, such as Einar and Muriel Neilson of Bowen Island, to whom he turned like a child, carried him through and, more important, beyond,

during the even more bitter period of contriteness.

He told me one day that during the long months when he had written *Under the Volcano* he had not taken a drink even of wine, though he had been staying with a friend who had vineyards and made wine while he wrote. I mentioned earlier how every tag end of event was of importance to him, and somehow incorporated into his writing. This was true even of his attempts at forgetfulness, his wild occasional descents to escape the unbidden imagery he could not momentarily harness. He describes just such a period experienced by the Consul:

. Why then should he be sitting in the bathroom? Was he asleep? dead? passed out? Was he in the bathroom now or half an hour ago? Was it night? Where were the others? But now he heard some of the others' voices on the porch. Some of the others? It was just Hugh and Yvonne, of course, for the doctor had gone. Yet for a moment he could have sworn the house had been full of people; why it was still this morning, or barely afternoon, only 12:15 in fact by his watch. At eleven he'd been talking to Mr. Quincey. "Oh Oh." The Consul groaned aloud It came to him he was supposed to be getting ready to go to Tomalin. But how had he managed to persuade anyone he was sober enough to go to Tomalin? And why, anyhow, Tomalin?

A procession of thoughts like little elderly animals filed through the Consul's mind, and in his mind too he was steadily crossing the porch again, as he had done an hour ago, immediately after he'd seen the insect flying away out of the cat's mouth.

Unlike most of us, Malcolm had not lost the wise-eyed innocence of childhood. In fact, many of the incidents of his childhood remained in his mind vivid as current events. He told us on several occasions, for example, of a nurse his wealthy family employed when he was very young. She had loved his older brother and to his horror hated him. Once she had wheeled his cart along the cliff-edge, high above the rolling sea. He described with quiet exactitude her features as she leaned over with a blanket to smother him, how he screamed (the exact key), and then the saving running footsteps of his favoured older brother which interrupted the scene.

I used to steal glances at my seven year old son when Malcolm and Margerie visited the cottage by the lake in which we were then living. His features were as mobile as Malcolm's when Malcolm was talking, as intent, and as unspoiled by conditioned attitudes. Those two instinctively understood what each other was feeling as well as taking in the surface articulation.

Don't let me suggest that Malcolm was sombre. He had a huge Rabelaisian sense of humour and, oh rare quality, could laugh with gusto at himself. One afternoon we were visiting Malcolm and Margerie at their shack. It was several months after he had injured his leg badly when he fell from his wharf on to lowtide rocks

(preoccupied with dialogue, so he said, dialogue to finish off a discussion he, Margerie, my wife and myself had had months before). He described the horror of the Catholic hospital where he had been taken (the cowled nuns, for some reason, were the opposite to Sisters of Charity to his pain-wracked mind) and the even greater horror of later visiting his orthopædic specialist who sat examining his leg and remarking he might lose it. Malcolm graphically detailed the whole room, his utterances of despair that he might lose the leg, then the aseptic smile of the doctor who casually remarked, as he reached behind and brought out a new nickel shining artificial limb and stroked it, that it was as good as a natural one for the classical case of amputation on another patient he had. Desultory talk followed this devilish recount, then Malcolm, who was always fascinated by the law, asked me whether I had had any interesting law cases recently. I was young in my profession then and, perhaps over enthusiastically, I described a Motor Manslaughter case I had defended. I described the difficulties. The accused was on the wrong side of a straight road, he had spent the afternoon drinking beer in a pub, and the police had found a half-finished bottle of whiskey in his truck after the accident. In recounting all the evidence against my client, then finally the jury's acquittal verdict, I gleefully remarked, "It was a classical case!" I looked up and there was Malcolm stroking an imaginary artificial steel limb, murmuring 'classical case', then he erupted into roars of gargantuan laughter. His interesting thesis of 'never trust an expert' probably had some merit.

Malcolm personally knew a number of great writers who admired his work and communicated their admiration to him. I think, from recalling our conversation, one of his special friends was Conrad Aiken. Aiken recognised his genius long before the public success of *Under the Volcano*. While still at Cambridge some of Lowry's short stories were published in America, and in 1932 his first novel *Ultramarine* received a rather indifferent public response. It was during this period, as I recall, that Aiken encouraged and stimulated him.

He had known well, while in England, Dylan Thomas. Upon the occasion when Thomas first came to Vancouver for a public poetry reading, Malcolm, the shyest man I have ever known, remarked laconically that Dylan Thomas for all his flamboyant public personality, was really a very shy person. After Dylan Thomas' reading a reception was arranged to which the Lowrys and ourselves were invited. Despite Malcolm's dislike of people in groups ('individuals lose their most precious possession—their identity') and his antipathy towards 'literary people' ('they don't write, they talk aseptically about it as if there were no bloody birth pangs and the work emerges well-scrubbed') he wanted to meet Dylan. In

the many-roomed converted old house where the reception was held both were for a long time in separate rooms, both being lionized and hating it. At length friends managed to bring them together. They warmly clasped hands and Malcolm said simply: "Hullo, Dylan," while Dylan Thomas replied with equal shyness, "Hullo, Malcolm." In retrospect I feel similar inner fires were burning in each because they could not render the whole of their experience into a creative mould.

In Malcolm's relaxed periods he strummed a huge repertoire of songs, chancies and tunes he had composed (including a lively national anthem) on a battered ukulele, and he was never so happy as when he was immersed in this music of his own making, whether bawdy Spanish tunes picked up in some waterfront bistro in North Africa, or plaintive Chinese rise and fall he had heard in Singapore. Hours would pass delightfully, for he took it for granted you shared his happiness.

After the publication of *Under the Volcano* Malcolm and his wife travelled for a year, visiting Haiti, England and the Continent. With his habitual generosity he shared his royalties with the many he encountered who claimed to be able to put words onto paper. When he returned to his beloved shack at Dollarton there were periods of acute financial want and it was during one of these periods there occurred a minor event which highlighted two of his characteristics—naïveté and the ability to laugh at himself.

About this time one of our popular national magazines printed, as an advertisement for a bank, a single-page short story headed: "We Printed This Because We Liked It". At its conclusion there was an invitation to other writers to make submissions.

Many months later Malcolm laughingly told me of his submission. It started off as a well-planned anecdote but somehow it became longer and longer. Feverish weeks were spent as the anecdote dilated and expanded into the eventually completed whole—a piece of work which would have required ten issues of the whole magazine instead of a single page. He had waited patiently for weeks to receive the bank's cheque before he gradually realized the violent sea-change his creativity had caused. Fortunately, about this time royalties from some of the translated editions of *Under the Volcano* began trickling in.

Many are generous, as he was, with material possessions, but few extend the intellectual generosity he was capable of. It mattered not to Malcolm whether someone was famous or unknown, skilled in the craft of writing or a fumbling tyro. He, who knew how difficult it was to piece together common words so they sang and wreathed in rich meaning, gave consideration, time, advice (but never

didactically, always subjectively) and encouragement to all who asked for it. He not only loved language and the individual warp and woof rendered by a writer, but revered it. He, a master, considered himself a tyro and anyone who tackled the same task with love he viewed as a potential genius.

Malcolm's relationship with his wife was far more than the customary one. They were partners in everything they did, sharing the successes or the periods of actual want with equal zest. He was proud of her attractive gaiety and her theatrical (she had been an actress) manner. More important, he was as concerned with her writing as he was with his own—and as proud of it. Margerie's opinion was constantly sought and considered. Equally, her concern and consideration for his welfare, her honest and penetrating appraisals of his work supplied Malcolm with a reserve of strength and stimulation which always carried him through the bleak non-productive periods every writer encounters. Margerie possessed that rare quality—intellectual honesty and forthrightness. They admired and respected as well as loved each other.

I recall Malcolm's delight when I introduced him to T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. I was a bit taken aback at his enthusiasm until I realised that Lawrence had a similar quality in his writing (not often encountered), that of concern with metaphysics. "I must write to him," he told me. I reminded him that Lawrence had been dead for decades. Malcolm ignored this, for to him a writer never died. He accepted it on the surface, of course, so improvised long verbal letters instead which enlivened our walks. The symbolism in Lowry's work is not confined to the work itself. It was part of his daily life. His world was peopled with black and white forces. His daily swim (even when light skim ice scummed the surface of the deep North Arm) was not merely a swim but a metaphysical experience. I've mentioned the gas flares at the cracking plant. For hours he would discuss them, not as hot crackling oil flames spurting into the evening's darkness, but as living sentient forces which peopled his world. In the same way the Consul, towards the end of *Under the Volcano*, symbolically invests a calendar.

He saw again in his mind's eye that extraordinary picture on Laruelle's wall, Los Borrachones, only now it took on a somewhat different aspect. Mightn't it have another meaning, that picture, unintentional as its humour, beyond the symbolically obvious? He saw those people like spirits appearing to grow more free, more separate, their distinctive noble faces more distinctive, more noble the higher they ascended into the light; those florid people resembling huddled fiends, becoming more like each other, more joined together, more as one fiend, the further down they hurled into the darkness.

His last novel (unfortunately the middle section was taken out and never replaced) was typical of this. For several years there had been recurrent rumours that the waterfront shacks, including his own, were to be bulldozed and the occupant squatters forced out of the beach strip. This had a terrible effect upon him. Here, as I said, he had found his uneasy peace. For a month he and Margerie had searched the Gulf Islands and Vancouver Island for an alternate home. The novel was, on the surface, about the search for a home and dispossession, but the recurrent symbolism of many facets raced through it contrapuntally. Just as *Under the Volcano* had been written and rewritten four times (once completely rewritten in a month when the previous draft had perished in a fire), so did this final and tremendous work undergo many changes and alterations.

One afternoon—early, about 2:30—he started to read the first draft of his last novel to myself, Margerie and my wife. The typescript was interlineated with his spidery written additions and changes. He would finish a page and, without dropping a word, walk into the bedroom to pick up a scrap of waste paper on which was an inserted paragraph. We had brought a bottle of gin. As it was a festive and important occasion he had bought two himself. Margerie, my wife and I had several drinks, but were spellbound after that by his resonant voice and the wonder of his prose. He read on and on, drinking in sips straight gin, without slurring a syllable or slighting a word. Finally, at 2:30 in the morning, he finished the last paragraph, the three bottles empty. My wife and I were terribly exhausted, but elated. When we got up to leave Malcolm was immersed in a paragraph he wanted to rewrite again, but rose to light our way up the trail with warmth and thanks, as if it had been we who had performed the favour. “God bless you,” he would always say, instead of “Goodbye”. This is the Malcolm we’ll remember, and the one to be seen in his verse and prose.

Last month we drove by on the cliff road overlooking the former Dollarton shacks. Bulldozers were matting the underbrush to make way for a park. The squatters’ shacks, Malcolm’s included, had long since disappeared. We were sad and spoke retrospectively, then brightened, remembering the seagull dead from oil, the dropped needles which made the forest floor. He surpassed all of these, Malcolm did, for during his lifetime, not after it, he created life from his own.