

## Biography of Malcolm Lowry

# Analysis of Canadian writer lacks insight

Malcolm Lowry (1909-1957): A biography by Douglas Day

Reviewed by J.B.M. Falconer

The literature of the twentieth century has proven itself quite adept at articulating visions of hell which can be compared to the terrifying locales of Bosch or Dante.

Perhaps this is a reflection on the especially venal and deranged nature of modern political life, where even Clausewitz seems like a pre-eminent voice of reason. Or, perhaps, as George Steiner remarks, there is an impulse in Western civilization which facilitates an understanding of hell more clearly and readily than one of heaven.

These modern dystopias gather under their writers as diverse as Frank Kafka and William Burroughs. And generally, one also finds that the best among this group seems to generate an intimation of hope.

It is in this same group that one finds Malcolm Lowry (British-born, immigrated to Canada in 1939).

While his only complete novel, *Under the Volcano*, dealt with the hellish implications of alcoholism, his work as a whole kept the paradiso in sight, if occasionally threatened.

The humid and crippling oppressiveness of Lowry's Mexico is constantly relieved and cooled by descriptions of British Columbia which evoke a serene, northern paradise, cleansed by the harmonious cycles of the tides, the seasons, and by the concordant virtues of love and fellowship.

### AUTHORIZED VERSION

One almost wishes a similar relief would come to the growing corpus of specialized criticism (such as Perle Epstein's idiotic analysis of *Under the Volcano* in terms of the Cabbala) and quaint reminiscence which is festering around Lowry's work. The end was almost in sight, until the recent publication of an authorized biography by Douglas Day, who has worked with Lowry's widow in preparing unfinished manuscripts for publication.

Lowry, unlike any other writer since Proust, called into serious consideration the relationship of the author to his work.

He subjected his experience, in toto, to intense scrutiny, sometimes even to the point where the load of detailed observation in the prose modulates it closer to poetry. This is particularly true in the final three chapters of *Under the Volcano*, where one can detect a tone of such intensity that it seems both to elude normal language, and yet thoroughly permeate it.

The result of all this is a collapse of the dis-

inction between autobiography and fiction. As a corollary, biography itself comes into question; more often than not, it is forced into the absurd position which Nabokov delineated so hilariously in *Pale Fire*.

This brings us to Mr. Day's biography. For anyone familiar with Lowry's work, or perhaps, studying it, this biography is both an indispensable godsend and a bore. One is never precisely sure whether Day means simply to present the circumstances of Lowry's life, or to offer an analysis of it.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEW

One recognizes here the problem raised by Leon Edel about biographies; that is, he feels that modern psychology has irrevocably altered the demands on the biographer.

Thus, a critical or aesthetic approach becomes limited by virtue of not being comprehensive enough. The same thing happens to a biography which intends to treat only the occurrence and chronology of an author's life.

For what a biographer must now do is approach the writer's 'soul' by the avenues opened by psychology. One must attempt to reach the psychic core of the creative work, and at least, to define the contours of the writer's unconscious motives.

Day is best in the objective realm, limited in his critical appraisal, and frankly embarrassingly poor in his use of psychology, derived chiefly from Jung and Freud. Indeed, the interpretative passages employing psychology seem ill-suited, as though they were being detained under house arrest.

As a consequence, Days' biography becomes a piece of informed journalism valuable only because he had privileged access to previously unavailable information. The relationship of Day to Lowry reminds one of Zeitblom in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (which, ironically, Lowry read and used when he was working on *Under the Volcano*): an example of what happens when a dowdy scholar attempts to write meaningfully about an infinitely more complex and subtle intelligence.

For example, Day uses an otherwise interesting method of arrangement (a direct mimic of the temporal displacement of chapter one in *Volcano*) and treats the final days of Lowry's life before turning to the beginning of it. It's clever, but more appropriate to *Reader's Digest*.

### USEFUL DIVIDENDS

This is not to deny that the biography, eminently readable despite the tonnage of factual detail, does not provide brief moments of

insight. We learn, for instance, that it was mainly by developing shorter version of later works, by 'layering' levels of meaning over them, and by amplifying detail and incident throughout the work, that Lowry created his imagistic resonance.

Day also usefully traces certain key events and persistent pre-occupations during Lowry's life, which later found prominence in the novels. Foremost among these is a passage about his first wife, Jan, whose character contributed to the composite Yvonne in *Volcano*.

Day also, in what seems a fatuous attempt at objectivity, recounts the endless binges Lowry went on, the appalling cruelty to others of which he was capable, and the great personal charm of the man and his fascination. In fact, it is clear that despite the colossal excesses in his personal life, Lowry never lacked for friends or supporters.

Unfortunately, Day does not seem capable of discovering what made these elements coherent: all that is accomplished is a long, often repetitious, catalogue of pros and cons.

### VALUABLE LIST

Probably, a more important contribution is the correct sequence of novels and works which were to comprise Lowry's projected opus, *The Voyage That Never Ends*, plus some explanation of the purposes behind each of the novels in it. Day, however, asserts that Lowry was so bad-

ly ravaged by alcoholism and a deeper psychic damage that it is not likely he would have been capable of realizing the opus even had he lived.

Day goes on to suggest that the works of his final years (primarily *October Ferry to Gabriola* and *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*) indicate a measurable decline in abilities.

I think Day errs here, and that he flatly contradicts himself with regard to Lowry's later achievements. I say this because Day himself, near the close of the biography, states that Lowry was gradually, despite the deterioration of body and soul, clarifying a new mode of fiction understood as 'an act of devotion'. Day does not amplify this point beyond making tenuous connections to Rilke's understanding of human life.

For those who are Lowry freaks already, I would recommend Days' biography only with severe qualifications; for those who are not so familiar with Lowry's work, it would probably be of greater import to read the novels and stories, from which a better sense of the man can be obtained.

One might add that, on the basis of the gross sensibility displayed in his biography, Douglas Day removes himself from serious consideration as a leading Lowry 'scholar'. When I finished the book, I was left feeling that Day could do nothing more than talk around his subject and that he simply could not treat it directly.

## Canadian film handbook lays groundwork for individual study

By WARREN CLEMENTS

Eleanor Beattie's *Handbook of Canadian Film*, published by Take One magazine through Peter Martin Associates, is a teaser of a book.

Calling itself "a kind of dictionary, an open-ended listing", the book lists most Canadian directors and cameramen, some Canadian screenwriters, and no Canadian actors. But it has a meticulous index of where to find articles expanding on any of these subjects.

Periodicals, film catalogues, archives, festivals and technical services are tacked up in neat sections with the necessary addresses and information; and filmographies are attached to the film-makers' names, with a list of connected

magazine and newspaper features.

The book, necessarily curt and skeletal, offers a bird's eye view of the unexpectedly large Canadian film world (I never thought our film-makers could fill 150 pages), and a fair sampling of relevant photographs (though not nearly enough).

For the film buff, the book provides a nice supplement to Leslie Halliwell's *Filmgoers Companion*, which seems to list film-makers from all countries except Canada. Names like Paul Almond, John Vernon, Don Shebib, George Kaczmarek, Don Owen and Allan King all escape Halliwell's notice, but are down in Beattie's book.

The softcover edition sells for \$2.95.

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