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BOOK REVIEW / Demons under the volcano: A new life of Malcolm Lowry shows the 'internal romance' of the boozy, bragging drifter

By MARTIN AMIS

DIPSOMANIACS are either born that way, or they just end up that way. Vastly distinguished in the sphere of dipsomania, Malcolm Lowry, it seems, actually planned to be that way, from childhood. The gift was not inherited. In an early short story the narrator records his (Methodist) father's disapproval of a local lawyer, who lacked 'self-discipline'. 'He did not know,' Lowry wrote, 'that secretly I had decided that I would be a drunkard when I grew up.' While most schoolboys dreamt of becoming engine-drivers or cattle-punchers, little Malcolm dreamt of becoming an alcoholic. And the dream came true. Excluding a few dry-outs, in hospitals and prisons, and the very occasional self-imposed prohibition, Malcolm Lowry was shitfaced for 35 years.

How much do we need to know about a writer, personally? The answer is that it doesn't matter. Nothing or everything is equally satisfactory. Who cares, in the end? As Northrop Frye has said, the only evidence we have of Shakespeare's existence, apart from the poems and plays, is the portrait of a man who was clearly an idiot. Biography is there for the curious; and curiosity gives out where boredom begins. Certainly we think that scholarly investigation has gone too far when it starts offering us monographs on, say, the laundry lists of Shackerley Marmion or the tram tickets of Lascelles Abercrombie. But the author of *Under the Volcano* is a special case. His addiction becomes our addiction. Anyway, *The Bar Tabs* of Malcolm Lowry would tell most of the story, and it would be no shorter than Gordon Bowker's 600 pages. The biography is thorough, and thoroughly engaged; it is both gripped and gripping. It won't have to be done again.

To make a real success of being an alcoholic, to go all the way with it, you need to be other things too: shifty, unfastidious, solipsistic, insecure and indefatigable. Lowry was additionally equipped with an extra-small penis, which really seemed to help. He was of course a prodigious self-mythologiser, or a braggart and a liar, if you prefer. A playground scar on his knee he passed off as a bullet-wound sustained in crossfire during the Chinese Civil War. Jailed for one of his solo riots in Mexico, he listed his torments in a letter to a friend: 'They tried to castrate me too, one fine night, unsuccessfully I regret (sometimes) to report.'

That hardy 'one fine night' acts as a kind of semaphore of mendacity. In 1939 he used the outbreak of war, and his own entirely hollow vow of immediate enlistment, in a number of self-interested ways, including this bold strophe in a letter to his sweetheart: 'If you truly love me as I love you greet me as one come back from a long journey & who must go again, as I must'. That last heroic cadence bespeaks both congenital insincerity and a delighted self-loathing. Lowry was a world-class liar. Even his commas and colons were lies.

Like Isherwood and others, Lowry was the kind of Englishman who had to get out of England, and sooner rather than

later. His parents were ordinary products of their time and place but it was their very ordinariness that haunted him. When imagination comes up against no-imagination, then no-imagination wins every time. So you have to get out. At 17 he sailed east to China, as a dockhand; a year later he sailed west to America, as a passenger, on a literary pilgrimage. North and south, though, turned out to be the significant points on his personal compass. The south meant Mexico, the scene of his most shameful rampages. The north started out meaning Scandinavia but ended up meaning Vancouver and a two-room shack in the frozen wilds; here, and here only, he could write; everywhere else he just went on word-binges, or word-blinders. Lowry was the kind of man the Russians call a walrus: he responded to the asceticism of long winters, sub-zero swims, the cobalt-blue skies. He tried very hard, but he couldn't make it as one of nature's geckoes, able to wallow in the ooze and booze beneath Popocatepetl.

Before his long exile could begin (nothing would tempt him back to England except free health care) Lowry had to lurch and barf his way through university and then spend a couple of years crashing around Fitzrovia with a succession of manqué poets and brawling book-reviewers. His erotic interests, like his literary interests, were vital to his sense of himself - to the internal romance - but nothing deflected him from his dedication to alcohol. Of a make-out session with a famous Cambridge vamp, Lowry wrote: 'Charlotte . . . has offered me her body . . . I drank a lot of whisky . . . and was nearly sick into her mouth when I was kissing her. She says she loves me.'

His talent was a precocious one: even in his early twenties, not content with the usual debauches and disappearances, he was already experimenting with paranoid hallucinations involving salamanders and male nurses. By the time he got to Mexico (aged 26) he was downing any liquid that came his way on the off-chance that it might contain alcohol: he once drank 'a whole bottle of olive oil thinking it was hair tonic'.

So the years of Lowry's maturity unfold: binnings, bannings, arrests, ejections, screams in the night, expired visas and lost passports, together with a lengthening rap sheet of domestic arson, larceny and GBH. In 1938 his first wife Jan 'rationed' him to a quart of liquor a day, but he hoarded his allowance to buy 'fortified wines costing only fifty cents a gallon'. In 1947 his second wife, Margerie, noticed that Lowry, after a period of abstinence, had started enjoying a cocktail before lunch - 'and pre-dinner cocktails started as early as 3pm'. In 1949 he was averaging three litres of red wine per day topped up by two litres of rum. His varicose veins stretched from groin to ankle. One morning he collapsed and started 'vomiting black blood'. We then duly witness the straitjacket, the padded cell, and the serious discussion, with wife and doctors present, on the pros and cons of lobotomy.

Towards the end, even Lowry's freak accidents and cluster catastrophes are assuming an air of the dankest monotony. An average hour, it seems, would include a jeroboam of Windowlene or Optrex, a sanguinary mishap with a chainsaw or a cement-mixer, and a routinely bungled attempt to guillotine his wife. Around Malcolm and Margerie, everything that could go wrong would go wrong. He falls in the bath and breaks a blood-vessel: 'She tried calling the hospital but the phone was out of order; she rushed out into the elevator and got stuck between floors.' He falls on a country path and shatters his leg: she runs to the local store and is 'severely mauled' by the neighbour's dog. Certain friends of theirs always kept packed suitcases by the front door so that they could claim to be off on vacation if the Lowrys horribly appeared, hoping to stay. Her psychology was one of self-immolation in the dread face of genius ('I feared he'd hurt me badly and feel so awful the next day'). As for Malcolm, he was plain incorrigible, resolved - unto death - on making the same old mistakes.

The biographical context, as usual, turns out to be the least congenial setting for any consideration of the work. Of course we learn a thing or two about Lowry's 'working habits', which included habitual plagiarism on a surprising scale. Plagiarism is the perfect crime for the masochist: dross can change hands freely, but anything worth stealing carries its own guarantee of detection and exposure. Lowry was exposed, many times. The book is called *Pursued by Furies*, but Lowry's path, in fact, was smoothed by mercies: a small private income, devoted women, talent. It was all laid out before him. Nevertheless you would not wish for a sharpening of Mr Bowker's appalled, but generally lenient, tone. The furies were internal. There was nothing to be done about them.

What of the fiction - ie, what of *Under the Volcano*, which is pretty well all it amounted to? Writing both compelled and mortified Lowry. Peering back through the viscous shards of his life, you wonder how he ever wrote anything - how he ever signed a cheque or left a note for the milkman. The only thing that worked was the shack on the water, and its extreme simplicities. Drunkenness recollected in sobriety: surrounded by the celestial clarity of the north, he could recreate the sweat and corruption of the south. I remember *Under the Volcano* as chaotically confessional, as a torrent

of consciousness. Now it feels formal, literary, even mandarin in its intonations (the word 'pub' is daintily sequestered by inverted commas). It is what Lowry could never be: it is lucid and logical; it is well-behaved.

'Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry' by Gordon Bowker is published by HarperCollins at pounds 25

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