

Malcolm Lowry



An epitaph traditionally comes at the end of a story, yet most people do not get to pen their own...

“Here lies Malcolm Lowry, late of the Bowery, whose prose was flowery, and often glowery. He lived nightly, and drank daily, and died playing the ukulele.”

His epitaph sadly, did not appear upon his headstone.

Clarence Malcolm Lowry was born in New Brighton, overlooking Liverpool, source of his father’s fortune as a cotton broker, he recalled it as “that terrible city with the ocean as its main street”...

His rural idyll was to be found in the lanes, heaths and golf courses of sleepy Wirral.

“His parents who were strict Methodists, sent him to the Leys School, Cambridge, where he wrote for the school magazine, discovered jazz and alcohol, and began composing witty popular songs. A gifted, quirky eccentric boy, he believed that alcohol was a source of creative inspiration. He feared his autocratic father and despised his socially pretentious mother. They in turn, began to fear their increasingly drunken unpredictable son” (1.)



A young Lowry pictured on the five-acre lawn of 'Inglewood', his second Wirral home in the luxury development of Caldy.

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He and schoolmate Ronnie Hill enjoyed some measure of success as budding songwriters.

For Lowry, the sea equalled escape, and inspired by his love of the works of Conrad, Melville and Knut Hamsun, he became a sailor.

He signed on for a trip aboard the Blue Funnel S.S. Pyhrrus in 1927 as a deckhand and spent most of his time on the voyage to the Far-East dodging his colleagues' persiflage and making tea.

The seafaring expedition was to provide material for his first forays into the literary world with "Ultramarine"--describing the young protagonist's attempts to connect with his shipmates in the fairly standard seafaring fashion of course-- unpublished until 1933. This youthful novel was in no small part influenced by his literary hero and mentor, American poet Conrad Aiken, who nicknamed it, somewhat uncharitably, "Purple Passages".

Lowry was later plagued by fears of unoriginality relating to this novel, in fact, he was a man beset by thoughts of inadequacy in both literary and more basic masculine terms—in that he had a very undersized manhood.

Perhaps that, coupled with having had overbearing religious parents goes some way to explaining his prodigious alcoholism?



Lowry who rejected the strict work ethic of his Methodist father could be considered one of the earliest British pioneers of what became known as the counter culture. He was at the very least, anti-fascist, though also on the face of it, anti-Soviet, concerned with the plight of humanity crushed by the wheels of industry, given to animal rights sympathies and of proto-environmentalist sensibilities. Call him simply a very thirsty, kind-hearted anti-authoritarian with a wild streak if you like. As an author of modern fiction, he was writing fully in the spirit of James Joyce.

One might be forgiven for imagining that having grown up just seven miles from the birthplace of Lowry, that I may have been well aware of the writer and his oeuvre? Not at all. The English masters at my Alma Mater were almost exclusively ignorant of his existence, and perhaps the two who were, had been 'warned off'?

"Under the Volcano", Lowry's most important work is a cult novel, (what a dreadful expression). 'Firminists' upon occasion, myself included, are sometimes given to bouts of exuberant evangelism, however, it is a difficult read for some people, the first chapter in particular. If I might simply say that the prose and syntax are convoluted, I leave it to you, dear reader, to decode the rest.

It concerns an ex-Vice Consul, battling through alcoholism, a sense of loss, and his struggle for dignity in the face of an indifferent cosmos.

Clearly "Volcano" is in many senses autobiographical, and in many ways details Fermin's (the Consul's) attempts to escape a world that he no longer understands.

The twin peaks of the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl and the depths of the 'barrancas'—ravines doubling as open sewers-- coupled with the Farolito—dive bar, dangerous and filthy, but dispensing the life-giving, and death-dealing Mezcal-- provide the overriding and ominous symbolism for a Day of the Dead celebration to remember.



Lowry aged 27, with his first wife Jan Gabriel, Mexico 1936.



The Lowrys' villa 62 Calle Humboldt, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

Much of the work on the re-writing of “Volcano” was completed in a squatter’s shack in Dollarton, Vancouver, B.C. Canada with his second wife Margerie’s help and encouragement. Lowry, it seems could never meet a woman without sizing up her abilities as a typist and proof-reader. He built a swimming jetty, swam, drank, wrote and was often the recipient of buckets of crabs, courtesy of the local fishermen. At night, across the Burrard Inlet, the flares of the oil refinery burned high into the darkness, and the illuminated sign with one letter broken spelled out the word “HELL”.

In 1944, the shack was lost to a mysterious fire, reducing to ashes the manuscript for another Lowry novel, “In Ballast to the White Sea.” Lowry was quite badly burned but managed to rescue a copy of the then unpublished “Volcano.”



Lowry at his waterside jetty which locals nicknamed "the crazy wonder",
Lazy Bay, Dollarton, B.C. Canada

Again, in another blow shortly before "Volcano's" acceptance Charles Jackson's "The Lost Weekend", also about an inebriant debauchee, broke into print and stole his thunder. It is today however widely accepted that "Under the Volcano" is the better book.

Despite bad luck, setbacks, 12 rejections by publishers and re-writes, in 1947 the book was finally published.

After the literary success of "Volcano", Lowry and Margerie travelled Europe, but attention and excitement did not suit his artistic temperament and he longed for tranquillity of the sort that he and his wife had known in Dollarton.



Somewhere in Europe, America or the Caribbean, early 1950s

In 1956 Margerie rented the White Cottage in the Sussex village of Ripe. Lowry who had undergone alcohol aversion therapy was able to commence writing again for the first time in three years. To Lowry's surprise, his improvement did not thrill Margerie, and she began drinking more heavily. Finally, she was admitted to the County Lunatic Asylum, later renamed Hellingly Hospital. Before entering the hospital Margerie confided to her friend Dorothy Templeton that she had had enough, and was putting aside money in order to leave Lowry when the opportunity arose. Templeton was apparently shocked by her callousness. In fact, Templeton wrote to her companion Harvey Burt in 1956, "Her idea of love is not mine, or the average woman's".



Blue plaque, the White Cottage, Ripe.

During Margerie's stay in hospital, Lowry wrote her letters about how happy he was in Ripe; of working steadily again; of how he was the object of competition between the landlady and the Vicar's wife, who brought him meals. He knew that these letters did not make Margerie smile, indeed speculating that she felt "robbed of an in-a-sense nursable object". He did not know what to do about it, yet perhaps the novelist in him simply wanted to observe it? (2.)

Lowry's final burst of inspiration—his pages written in Ripe, largely written without Margerie which perhaps marked a creative renewal for him, produced fascinating additions to his final "bolus" as he termed his body of work.

In the additions to "October Ferry to Gabriola", he began to examine what he called the "alcoholocaust" of his life, and the way in which his drinking habits had affected him. None of this ambitious work was finished, but pointed to a novel very different from those which Lowry had written before. One that might have taken him not "Under the Volcano", but beyond it.

A few months after the Lowrys arrived in Ripe, the landlord of the Lamb Inn banned them due to Lowry's unruly behaviour. In fact he was described by a village resident with whom he had met, as "a drunken job".

Lowry died in mysterious circumstances on June 26 or early in the morning June 27 1956. By the time the police arrived at the White Cottage on the morning of the 27th, he had likely been dead for hours. He lay on his back by the side of Margerie's bed, the rug rumpled beneath him. According to the coroner's report there was "a quantity of sliced cold cooked meat" next to Lowry's arm. On the other side of the bed there lay a broken orange-squash bottle and a broken gin bottle. There were glass splinters on Lowry's chest and blood on his left palm. Two chairs had been thrown: an easy chair lay on its side by the window; a kitchen chair had been smashed to pieces.

After Margerie found the body, Con. W. Lord of Selmeston took a statement from both her and Mrs. Winnie Mason, the landlady.

Margerie also spoke to their friend Douglas Day of the events of the previous evening. Lowry, she said, had once again fallen off the wagon. With the Lamb Inn out of bounds, they had walked to the Yew Tree Inn, Chalvington

where they drank beer. Apparently the barman recalled Margerie crying and Lowry, over her objections, buying a bottle of gin, saying that it would cheer her up-- he told the barman that she was sad over their lost Dollarton home—and they headed back down the lane to the White Cottage. They listened to a BBC radio concert—Leopold Stowolski conducting Stravinsky, and whether inspired by the music or other inflammatory factors, Lowry began drinking from the bottle, getting wilder, “raving”. He turned up the volume and Margerie who was in the kitchen preparing supper, came up and turned it down, not wanting to disturb Winnie Mason next door.

According to Margerie’s police statement, Lowry hit her and she grabbed the gin bottle and broke it to prevent his further consumption. Lowry then brandished the broken bottle and chased Margerie downstairs. She recalled to Douglas Day that her husband had a “fiendish look on his face”. She took refuge in Mason’s house next door. She told Day that she then took a sleeping pill—she did not explain how she came to have one with her—and went to sleep. (Both she and Lowry were heavy users of sleeping pills; Lowry called them his “pink things”). They both had prescriptions for the powerful hypnotic sedative sodium amytal.

Lowry’s demise made the Evening Argus with the headline “SHE BROKE GIN BOTTLE—FOUND HUSBAND DEAD.” All the same, Sussex Constabulary did not press an investigation. Lowry had no connections locally to speak of and was in fact disliked by some locals. Essentially, nobody was aware of who he was. English editions of his books were out of print, the Argus called him “Clarence Lowry” and no other British paper recorded his death.

The inquest was routine: Con. Lord told the coroner what he saw. Mrs. Mason, giving evidence, recalled Margerie arriving at her door, distraught, and claimed that Margerie had retired to a camp bed and had remained at the house for the rest of the night. If she had left at any time, Mason insisted, “I would most certainly have heard her, being a light sleeper, and also my dog would have barked.” (3.)

Margerie at first told friends that there had been a suicide note but then said that there wasn't. The lack of a note surprised them. Alcohol would hardly have stopped his pen—he wrote whilst drunk all the time. Self-destruction would have practically demanded documentation.

The coroner did not call Lowry's psychiatrist, Dr .Raymond, who far from considering Lowry “incurable” as Margerie told the police, thought he was getting better. He also thought that Lowry's spiritual beliefs precluded suicide. The coroner also failed to call any of Lowry's three older brothers. Had he done so, they might have told him that they were suspicious of Margerie; in an unpublished reminiscence, one of the brothers, perhaps Russell, his wit as dry as fino Sherry, called her “the very material Margerie,” adding that the Lowrys, (sober, correct, haut-bourgeois, Methodist) thought that she wore too much jewellery and referred to her as ‘Bangles’. Nor did the coroner speak to Dorothy Templeton and Harvey Burt, the couple who knew the Lowrys best. Lowry had confided to Templeton that in Sicily, Margerie had complained until he named her as his sole beneficiary, undoubtedly knowing that when Lowry's father had died in 1945 he had left an estate worth in today's terms well in excess of ten million US Dollars.

In a letter, Templeton wrote of the couple. “I'm sure if she knew he would never write again she would hope for

widowhood.” In another letter, she recalled watching them argue one night in Taormina, when “all of a sudden Marg turned into a ferocious maniac” and beat the enormous, cowering, incapacitated Lowry. On another occasion, she wrote, Margerie broke his nose in a fight in “the *corso*, with hundreds looking on.”

“They think I murdered him,” Margerie told Burt and Templeton when they came to Ripe to help her, shortly after Lowry’s death. Fairly or not, Burt and Templeton began to suspect Margerie too. Publicly she seemed devastated, but they found her oddly energised in private.

In 2004, the *Times Literary Supplement* published a provocative article by Gordon Bowker, Lowry’s definitive biographer entitled “Foul play at the White Cottage” How trustworthy was the coroner’s verdict of “death by misadventure,” or Margerie’s insistence that her husband had committed suicide? Why would Lowry, in good spirits and finally writing again, kill himself? “Volcano” was about to be reissued as a Vintage Classics paperback. Directors were awakening to the book’s cinematic potential, José Quintero in particular. Jan Gabriel, Lowry’s first wife, told an interviewer shortly before her death in 2001, “Malcolm’s death to me, isn’t quite explained.”

In England, coroners’ inquest reports are usually sealed for seventy-five years. Bowker had however persuaded the Sussex coroner to give him Lowry’s. The document contained some news: after Lowry’s death, Margerie could not at first find the bottle which had contained the pills that Lowry had swallowed, and only produced it for the police several hours later. The bottle had been concealed in one of the bedroom’s chest of drawers. The report also

recorded Margerie's claim that she found the bottle with its top screwed on—meticulous behaviour for a man as legendarily unfastidious as Lowry. Even at the time of his death, friends had speculated as to Lowry's capability of meeting the challenge of *unscrewing* a pill bottle top. Harvey Burt, in a letter written four months after Lowry died, expressed doubt that he could have done it: "I can't understand... His powers of coordination at such times were very low."(4.)

Winnie Mason's house was directly adjacent to the White Cottage, and as such, Margerie could easily have fled and then returned home later for a sleeping pill. Perhaps as she searched for the sodium amytal, a decade of frustration caught up with her?

In his article, Bowker noted Margerie's habit of dosing Lowry with vitamin pills. He then offered a speculation: Lowry would not have noticed if what she fed him that night were not vitamins but in fact, sodium amytal, the soporific which helped kill him. He suggested further that Margerie had developed a crush on a writer friend, Peter Churchill, a Viscount and recent widower. Finally, Bowker laid his cards on the table. "Margerie had the motive, (hankering after Churchill), the means, (the pill-feeding ritual) and the opportunity (the cottage after dark)."

Bowker also reported that Margerie and Winnie Mason, the landlady, both testified to the police that they had spent the evening chatting in Mason's cottage, next door. Later, however, they both said that Margerie had been home with Lowry. Margerie made this claim in a letter to Lowry's French translator, as did Mrs. Mason in a 1966 BBC

interview. To Bowker's mind, these statements suggested collusion.

We are therefore left with a number of unanswered questions, which I shall attempt to address, or at least discuss now.

According to Douglas Day, Margerie stated that Lowry began "drinking from the bottle once they had returned home, yet the distance from the Yew Tree Inn to the White Cottage is one mile. In the pitch dark--and I would infer from the barman's description of Margerie having been tearful—in a state of some intoxication, this journey would have taken anywhere up to twenty minutes on foot. I find it somewhat difficult to believe that during this journey of, say, twenty minutes, such seasoned drinkers as these would not have been tempted to open the bottle of gin. 'One for the road', so to speak... Margerie in her Police statement, and that which she gave to the Coroner's inquest maintained that she had broken the bottle against the bedroom wall to prevent Lowry from drinking any more. Sadly, it is quite impossible for any concrete evidence to be established regarding the amount—if any—of gin remaining in the bottle.

Next, dear reader, we must address the inconsistencies in Margerie's varied narratives, to wit: the pill bottle, at first missing, and then 'found in a drawer' two days later. The suicide note, which was subsequently found to be non-existent. Perhaps there was a note of some description? She had told Day that she had taken a sleeping pill--yet having had escaped the clutches of a "raving" violent drunkard, one may be forgiven for imagining that she had left in something of a hurry—(both she and Winnie Mason

stated, she did not return to the White Cottage until the discovery of the corpse the next morning) one must consider how she might have been in possession of this hypnotic pharmaceutical tablet.

In her police statement Margerie described Lowry as “incurable” yet his psychiatrist Dr. Raymond of course disagreed, and it seems quite incongruous that he was not called to give evidence.

The fact that Margerie was named as Lowry’s sole beneficiary in a share of his father’s substantial estate only bolsters Bowker’s already established potential motive.

Dorothy Templeton felt moved to remark upon Margerie’s perceived “callousness” towards Lowry.

Why would Lowry have wanted to kill himself? What possible motivation did he have? Things were looking up. This evening aside, he *had* seemingly curtailed his dreadfully self-destructive boozing and was once more trying to rekindle his creative spark, perhaps fostered by the calm atmosphere of the village of Ripe, flat, reminiscent in some way of a sheet of green writing paper, interspersed with the evidences of humanity that he so adored.

The pill bottle, lid screwed tightly on, by a man intending to leap into that final, deepest barranca, or bottle of Mezcal, or soar with the eagles above the smoking mountain and the sleeping woman?

Church Lane is a quiet and secluded place and it is perplexing that Winnie Mason did not report hearing any sort of commotion at that late hour. The very able Mr. Bowker has suggested some sort of collusion between her and Margerie. Mason insisted at the inquest with great certainty that both she and her dog would have awoken had Margerie left her house, yet such speculation is quite meaningless in the context of an inquest in a coroner’s, or

for that matter, any court of law. The inquest does seem to have been conducted in a very superficial fashion, with little in the way of given to rigour, both in terms of cross-examination, or forensic investigation. One aspect which is particularly unsettling is that of the bottle which Lowry allegedly “brandished”. Fingerprint technology had existed in the days of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and yet it seems that no processes of simple deduction had been employed. Lowry referred to his sleeping pills as his “pink things”. Eli Lilly & Co. seem to contradict the idea of his having been referring to sodium amytal however. These are surely “blue things”.

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This angle could perhaps provide further avenues of investigation to the truly dedicated sleuth, but of course as time passes, so the windows of opportunity are closed.

In his “Selected Letters” published posthumously in 1965, Lowry wrote: “Sometimes I am possessed by a most powerful feeling, a despairing bewildered jealousy which, when deepened by drink, turns into a desire to destroy; myself by my own imagination.” Perhaps the Consul’s death in “Under the Volcano” was for Lowry—as it is for the reader—a kind of catharsis. Geoffrey Firmin perished, but the impact of his intellect survived.

Malcolm Lowry was buried next to the grave of a kindly shopkeeper in the churchyard of St. John the Baptist in Ripe, but “Under the Volcano” lives to this day.



Citations:

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Additional resources:

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