

## “An Approaching Storm”



# The Private Volcano of Malcolm Lowry

Besides being a visionary, drunkard, champion athlete, carpenter of his own wilderness cabin, and author of one of the great novels of his time, Malcolm Lowry was also a letter-writer. Perhaps, in this telephone age, the last of the great letter-writers. His most remarkable letter was written from Mexico in 1946 to an English publisher who was showing signs of rejecting the masterpiece Lowry had just spent ten years writing, *Under the Volcano*.

The letter runs 31 pages. Writing it took Lowry two weeks' time, a drinking bout, and a suicide attempt. In it he defends the novel, chapter by chapter, at times almost page by page. It is a curiously naive document, for Lowry assumes (as he apparently did towards everyone) that the publisher was full of good will, and also that he had care-

fully read the book. But I suspect that, like so many people who encounter this dense and bewildering novel for the first time, the publisher had given up. Yes, Lowry wrote, his book is slow-starting, but then so are *The Possessed*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Moby Dick*. The extraordinary feature of Lowry's letter is that despite his near-poverty and total obscurity his only published book was a mediocre and forgotten first novel of 13 years earlier he *knew* he had written a great book.

Today it is easy to agree. Lowry's letter convinced the wavering publisher, and the *Volcano* came out the next year. Critics everywhere praised it, but by his triumph Lowry was undone. Reluctantly he journeyed to New York for the mandatory round of literary cocktail parties. In the receiv-

ing line of one large reception he was so overwhelmed by fright he never opened his mouth at all for several hours. From Manhattan he fled back to the almost hermit-like existence he had been living in the forests of British Columbia. Then his compulsive drinking began again; the last ten years of his life saw him in and out of psychiatric hospitals in Canada, France, Italy, England, and Haiti. He was deported from Mexico; he wrote endlessly, finished nothing; he fell off a pier while drunk and broke his back, and, a few years later, his leg. He began suffering a writing block that was literally a *writing* block: he could not hold a pen and could only write by dictating, standing up for eight hours a day, leaning against a table in a special position that gave him calluses on his knuckles and varicose veins so

by Adam Hochschild

severe they had to be operated on. Finally Lowry fled Canada, made a last attempt to find refuge from himself in a Sussex village, then brought it all to an end with a fatal combination of alcohol and sleeping pills. When he was buried in the village churchyard in 1957, none of his works were in print in English.

The eclipse has ended; now everybody wants him. Literary historians have claimed Lowry as an Englishman, a Canadian, and an American. The first is most accurate, though it is hard to place a man who was born in England, lived most of his adult life in Canada, found his largest audience in the United States, and, for the setting of his one great novel, chose Mexico.

*Under the Volcano* takes place on a single day in 1938, the Day of the Dead, when the dead are supposed to commune with the living. It was a strange twilight time: Dunkirk and the blitzkrieg of Poland were only a year away; Mexico's left-wing government had just nationalized foreign oil companies and the British had broken diplomatic relations; scores of Nazi and Spanish Fascist agents had infiltrated the Army and the police, and a powerful right wing simmered in near-rebellion.

The book's hero is the now out-of-work British Consul in Cuernavaca, a man of brilliance, wide literary reading and travel, a mystic and Cabalist, and a hopeless alcoholic. He begins the day in a bar, found there by his estranged wife, who has returned to Mexico to attempt a reconciliation. Together with the Consul's half-brother, the two of them visit a French film-maker friend, go to a bullfight, eat, argue, and separate. Throughout the day their paths are stalked by vultures, legless beggars, scorpions, spiders, deformed pariah dogs and laughing dwarves.

Spurred on by marvelous rationalizing (having a drink to reward himself for abstaining a few minutes earlier), the Consul drinks more and more. By evening he is drinking alone in a bar across the street from a military police barracks, known headquarters of the local Fascists. Policemen have been following him all day,

thinking he is a Communist spy. Their suspicions are seemingly confirmed when they check his pockets, for the half-brother had been wearing the Consul's coat. The brother is a British newspaper correspondent about to leave to fight in the Spanish Civil War; he had left in a pocket his membership card in the Spanish anarchist party and a press cable in a telegraphic shorthand, which of course, looks like some sort of code. "You are de espider, and we shoota de espiders in Mexico," the policemen say. They take the Consul outside and kill him.

The *Volcano's* readers are divided into two kinds: those who find it (as I do) the greatest novel in English of the last 30 years, and those who find it (as I did, on my first reading) exasperating, tortuous, thick with heavy-handed symbolism and minor characters who never come alive. Both views are true, and when you come to love the book it is as you love *King Lear*: a work great in spite of itself, with faults so monstrous they take on a certain grandeur of their own.

Despite its exotic setting, *Under the Volcano's* greatness is an inner, psychological one. For me the heart of it is the way Lowry gets so totally inside the head of a man who exquisitely, almost victoriously, *knows* he is destroying himself. Destroying himself through his drinking, and through his lingering at the bar that gradually fills with sinister policemen, directed by a silent Spaniard. The bar's musician, under the cover of fiddling a gay tune next to the Consul's ear, whispers a warning in broken English to leave before it is too late. But the Consul stays.

Everything is seen through the Consul's drunken perceptions: the street which rises to hit him in the face, the sudden apparition of phantom animals, an amusement park with its malevolent machines out to destroy him. Perhaps most dazzling is a conversation near the end where the Consul is arguing politics with his brother and wife. The talk flows back and forth; the Consul responds to his brother with a long and devastating discourse, filled with wit and insight and classical allusions and all the intellectual weaponry of a man of broadest education, and then only at the end realizes he has not spoken at all.

Lowry's strange and sad life story at last has gotten the attention it deserves in a new biography, *Malcolm Lowry*, by Douglas Day. (From Oxford University Press at a shocking \$10—wait and buy the paperback). It is a good book: compassionate, clear, thorough without being academic, psychoanalytic without pretending to explain it all, totally devoid of the artful ambiguities which befuddle so much contemporary literary criticism. Lowry was no easy subject: like Hemingway (alas, not blessed with so good a biographer) he spun many tall tales about himself. Day carefully separates them from the life that Lowry really led.

And what a life. The first word that comes to mind for Lowry is helpless. And not only helpless in his disastrous drinking. Apparently he was one of those people incapable of doing simple things like buying a plane ticket. Lowry never quite knew where he was in foreign cities, wore shirts inside out, forgot to put on socks before shoes, lost his manuscripts. For most of his life he lived on a meager allowance from his wealthy parents; even when he was 30 his father didn't send it to him directly, hiring lawyers in whatever country Lowry was in to dole it out to him month by month and to keep an eye on him.

He was equally helpless in his work. Although he wrote voluminously for nearly 30 years, his youthful first novel and *Under the Volcano* were all he ever finished. The other books he could not control. A short story for a contest with a 1000-word limit grew to 80 pages; an unfinished letter to the editor of a British newspaper, to over 100. A filmscript he and his wife did of Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* was studded with critical comments on film theory and would have run six hours on the screen. He wrote vast prospectuses of all his work, optimistic letters to publishers, charts, outlines, diagrams, master-plans that would unite the great muddle of uncompleted manuscripts. That he finished anything at all was largely because of his second wife, Marjorie. A writer herself, she was his nurse, protector, best critic, and at times almost co-author.

Yet this most helpless of men lived a physically more self-sufficient life

than any writer since Thoreau. Lowry hated cities, and in 1939 he and his wife moved to British Columbia. But theirs was no one-year fling on a communal farm: for most of the next 15 years they lived in a series of squatters' shacks built over some tideflats near Vancouver. I visited the spot a few months ago. It is a beach of smooth pebbles, looking across a fjord-like inlet at mountains that shoot steeply down to the water. Fir trees cover the middle slopes, and on the day I was there misty clouds ringed them, making their peaks look disembodied and still higher. They are snow-capped even in summer. Lowry dove off his porch into the freezing water every day.

One of the shacks the Lowrys built themselves. They gardened, cut their own wood, drew water from a spring, and heard the sea water swirl directly under their living room at high-tide, worrying that tree trunks torn loose by spring floods would crash against the pilings and bring the house down. Through the cold Canadian winters they wrote with gloved hands the great epic of a sun-baked day in Mexico. Their best friends were the fishermen and boat-builders who were their neighbors, and who today treasure their relics. When he was drunk Lowry could be terrible (he twice tried to murder his wife), but when he was sober he was a good man, as kind as any writer since Chekhov, as generous as he was possessed, and people loved him.

Lowry described this period of his life in the short lyrical novel *The Forest Path to the Spring*, one of the few of his other works worth reading besides *Under the Volcano*. It is a gentle story, perhaps the work of a man who knew he did not have long to live, almost rhapsodic in its description of the world he could see from his shack: not just the water and the stars and the mountains, but the ships, the train on the inlet's opposite bank, the red flares of an oil refinery at night. It is filled with a sense of gratitude: for his marriage, for his wilderness idyll, for the few years of happy and sober writing on his great book.

The *Volcano* saved him while he was working on it; finished, he began to drink again. He spent a few more years in Canada, but civilization was

creeping up: the local government was threatening to evict the squatters. There were troubles with publishers when he could not deliver promised books. Finally, he and his wife left for their last disastrous trip to Europe. A letter he wrote a few years earlier gives a picture of what it felt like inside his own private alcoholic volcano:

*Dear old Albert . . . I have to confess . . . that in spite of this comparatively lucid burst of correspondence, that I am going steadily & even beautifully downhill: my memory misses beats at every moment, & my mornings are on all fours. Turning the whole business round in a nutshell I am only sober or merry in a whiskey bottle, & since whiskey is impossible to procure you can imagine how merry I am, & lucid, & by Christ I am lucid. And merry. But Jesus. The trouble is, apart from Self, that part (which) used to be called: consciousness. I have now reached a position where every night I write 5 novels in imagination, have total recall . . . but am unable to write a word. I cannot explain in human terms the incredible effort it has cost me to write even this silly little note, in a Breughel garden with dogs & barrels & vin kegs & chickens & sunsets & mornings glory with an approaching storm & bottle of half wine.*

*And now the rain! Let it come, seated as I am on Breughel barrel by a dog's grave crowned with dead irises. . . . And I have been kind to in a way I do not deserve. I have to write pretty fast. . . . Please wire [me] if we can meet each other again, leaving quite out of account whether I can do the same for myself. A night dove has started to hoot & says incessantly the word "dream, dream." A bright idea. I remember always your kindness and generosity. . . . Malcolm.*

**W**hen you love a writer you sometimes want to claim him. Tolstoy's love of the peasants was really a kind of pre-Communism; why, if he had lived past 1917 he would have . . . Or: Solzhenitsyn's work really shows how any revolution must invariably betray itself; and so on. But the claimers are always wrong, since no great writer's work is that simple, even when he himself (Tolstoy, for instance) thinks it is.

One thing I like about Douglas Day's biography is that he isn't trying to claim Lowry for anybody. There is a growing Lowry cult now, and some of the people trying to claim him are the mystics: A whole book has been written proving how *Under the Volcano* is based upon the Cabala. Psychedelic zealots claim Lowry as their precursor. And all this is true: he was fascinated by the Cabala, and he also was under the delusion that mescal, the Mexican liquor with which the Consul drinks himself to death in the *Volcano*, had the hallucinogenic properties of mescaline. And Lowry was a complex and almost religious mystic, an unmatched poet of the inner psychic landscape. Yet he did not close the door there.

Without doing anything so crass as trying to claim Lowry for the Left, I'd like to talk a little about the political dimension in his work. You cannot claim, as William Gass does in an otherwise perceptive *New York Review* article, that "he had no politics." (Anybody who seriously thinks this should compare Lowry's vision of Mexico with the radically different one of Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, a novel set in almost exactly the same time and place.) No novel whose hero is murdered by Fascist policemen is non-political.

A refrain runs through *Under the Volcano*: "They are losing the battle of the Ebro." It is in the mind of Hugh, the Consul's naively leftist half-brother, who apparently represented one side of Lowry himself. Like a distant recurring chord, Spain is always there. When the band at a bullfight strikes up the tune Guadalajara, Hugh softly repeats the word to himself, and you realize that he is thinking of the battle. It is Hugh's ID in the Consul's pockets, remember, which causes the Consul to be shot at the end.

The Consul maintains he is above politics, but he is not. He does not choose sides himself, so in the end his enemies choose for him. In this sense he is the Consul not only of England, but of all the Western nations which wore blinders then. Infused through the whole novel is a sense of the political world, of the rising tide of fascism, slowly, quietly, closing in on him. In a way *Under the Volcano* stands in relation to World War II as *Death in*

*Venice* does to World War I. The sense of coming holocaust grows throughout the book, quickening when the Consul sees, at the side of the road, the body of an Indian messenger of the Revolutionary government's land reform bank, murdered by the same policemen who will kill him. (Lowry had a good sense of the class warfare going on in Mexico at the time.) The novel's political dimension reaches its peak in the stupendous final chapter. As the Consul stands drinking in the wretched cantina that slowly fills with policemen, you feel like shouting: for Christ sake, do something, these people want to kill you! And when they finally do, the very end of the long vision of mountain climbing the Consul has as he dies expands to make him stand for a whole world on the brink of war:

*Opening his eyes, he looked down, expecting to see, below him, the magnificent jungle, the heights, Pico de Orizaba, Malinche, Cofre de Perote, like those peaks of his life conquered one after another before this greatest ascent of all. . . . But there was nothing there: no peaks, no life, no climb. Nor was this summit a summit exactly: it had no substance, no firm base. It was crumbling too, whatever it was, collapsing, while he was falling, falling into the volcano, he must have climbed it after all, though now there was this noise of foisting lava in his ears, horribly, it was in eruption, yet no, it wasn't the volcano, the world itself was bursting, bursting into black spouts of villages catapulted into space, with himself falling through it all, through the inconceivable pandemonium of a million tanks, through the blazing of ten million burning bodies, falling, into a forest, falling—*

Enough. I'm not trying to make Lowry into the socialist he was not, but merely to persuade you to read him. And to make clear that one of the rewards of doing so is the multi-layered richness of his book, one level of which is a sense of the social and political world that frames his characters' individual torments.

**A** risk in praising any novel is sounding too much an auctioneer: the writer has this skill, that, the other; beware you don't miss them. But Lowry's greatness is not that he could create fine metaphors, or

sometimes leap beyond the dictionary to find the right word. Words are cheap; a lot of writers can learn to use them well. But putting them to Lowry's ends is much harder. Here is William Gass again, in a different essay, and this time he is right:

*Although Under the Volcano has many flaws, it is strong where most recent novels are weak: it has no fear of feeling. Our finest contemporary work—that of Beckett and Borges and Barth, for instance—as conscious of metaphoric form as it is, with every part internally and wonderfully related; subtle sometimes as Lowry seldom is; scrupulous to maintain a figurative distance between author, work, and reader . . . has achieved many morose, acid, and comic effects. . . . yet they've been led too far toward fancy, as Coleridge called it, neglecting, somewhat, . . . the full responsive reach of their readers.*

What Gass is talking about—and he is more charitable than I would be—is a whole stream of contemporary writing that relies too much on extended verbal playfulness. It is a stream where the crossword puzzle lurks never far in the background, where English professors wait eagerly for the chance to publish annotated editions. Lowry is a bulwark against that current; that is why he will last.

In his essay on Dickens, Orwell says:

*When one reads any strongly individual piece of writing, one has the impression of seeing a face somewhere behind the page. It is not necessarily the actual face of the writer. I feel this very strongly with Swift, with Defoe, with Fielding . . . though in several cases I do not know what these people looked like and do not want to know. What one sees is the face that the writer ought to have.*

Take someone like Nabokov, for instance. Perhaps in the end a better writer than Lowry, certainly one who produced a more substantial corpus of books. But when I imagine him, I don't see his face: I see his study, his dictionaries, his encyclopedias, his thesaurus, his hands clapping with pleasure as he thinks of a pun in four languages, which I will be too ignorant to get.

But with Lowry I see the face—and Orwell is right, it is not the way he

really looked; none of the pictures of him look like the man who could have written *Under the Volcano*. He is not in his study but in a bar, with a look of helplessness and terror and eagerness for the next drink. For even when you do not know his life, you have the eerie feeling when reading *Under the Volcano*, that the author has been there. There is no shred of that playfulness, no sense of the writer in his study. Lowry's would-be biographer, Conrad Knickerbocker (who must have shared some of his subject's troubles, for he committed suicide in the middle of his research) once wrote: "Lowry could not perform the vital surgery of separating himself from his characters. He suspected at times that he was not a writer so much as being written, and with panic he realized that self-identity was as elusive as ever."

Writing can be like psychoanalysis, or like confession: you grapple with your pain, you relive your experiences, you express them, and then you are shriven. But for Lowry it did not work that way. Writing the *Volcano* protected him from his demons while he worked on it, but the novel could not banish them. After he finished it, his life was a downward curve that ended with his destroying himself as his Consul had done. Though it took him ten years beyond the one to live out the other, in the end his book was his life. From a writer you can ask no more.



# Film Notes

by Nick Rabkin

Many of the most interesting movies made you are never likely to hear of. For two reasons: Either they come from small film companies which cannot afford to publicize the film (it costs, for example, over \$75,000 to "open" a major film in New York—promotion, advertising, free tickets, parties, gala premiere, and so on); or they come from still smaller groups of independent filmmakers, and are never shown in commercial theaters at all. Many of these little-known films deserve far more attention than the gaudy blather which fills the screens of most movie houses, and that is the purpose of this column.

There is one recent such film which you *can* find in commercial theaters, though you have to look hard for it, and you won't find its stars on the Johnny Carson Show: *The Harder They Come*. It is unusual for a Third World film to receive commercial distribution in the United States. *The Harder They Come* has gotten some and deserves more (see RAMPARTS, June '73).

Jimmy Cliff, Jamaica's most popular reggae singer, plays a rural Jamaican who comes to the big city to become a star. Cliff wants to cut a record. He records a song called "The Harder They Come," a beautiful but naive song of self-affirmation. But the record company cheats him out of any profit, and he has to become a dope dealer to survive. He kills a policeman and has to go underground—and everywhere he goes people have transistors to their ears, playing his song, now a big hit. He tries to swim out to a freighter bound for Cuba, but is wounded from another shoot-out and can't make it. As he turns back towards the beach and his probable death, the movie fades into a fantasy of his slaying scores of policemen, guns blazing—a fantasy based on a Clint Eastwood western he has recently seen.

*The Harder They Come* is a highly original look at the popular culture of

the Third World, and its corruption by our own. In showing the destructiveness of the American success myth transplanted to the Caribbean it takes a bold political stance, but does so with extraordinary sensitivity. Its musical score may be the best, at least the most lyrical, of any recent film. Don't miss it.

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In the 70 years of movie history, there have been two major political film movements in America. The first began in the Thirties and was eventually absorbed by the Works Project Administration of the New Deal. The second started a few years ago. Today there are collectives, non-profit companies, and loose groups of filmmakers scattered around the country making films of protest and social criticism. If you are a school-teacher or a member of a campus group that has film showings, you can rent these films at reasonable cost, and, occasionally, for free. Here are some of the more interesting recent ones:

**Work:** 15 minutes; color; directed by Fred Wardenburg; USA; distributed by Tricontinental.

Take the name: how many commercial movies can you remember ever seeing that seriously dealt with how people experience daily work? One only wishes *Work* were as good a film as its subject is important. It is a picture about life on a Detroit assembly line. But as an indictment of work under capitalism, *Work* is only half good. Though beautifully photographed, it is too self-conscious of itself as film—occasionally turning hard, dangerous work into spellbinding fireworks. Its Marxism is a little academic—quotes from Marx accompany the picture but are sometimes inappropriate. And a scene contrasting work in a custom body shop to the assembly line is barking up a romantic, rather than political, tree. It suggests a return to the artisan-entrepreneur as an alternative to mass production.

But in spite of its faults, *Work* is a worthwhile movie: it refuses to reduce the alienation it describes to a question of wages or safety, but presents a picture of the theft of workers' time and vitality.

**Tupamaros:** 50 minutes; color; directed by Jan Linqvist; Uruguay Sweden; distributed by Tricontinental.

**Campamento:** 29 minutes; color; directed by Tom Cohen and Richard Pearce; Chile/U.S.; distributed by Tricontinental and Associated Sterling (for the Maryknoll Free Film Library).

**The Traitors:** 157 minutes; color; Argentina; distributed by Tricontinental.

If you were moved by *State of Siege*, you'll want to see these films: They are all about the new revolutionary Left in Latin America—and present an implicit critique of the Old Left parliamentary Communist parties. And one of the films, *Tupamaros*, is an actual documentary about the organization *State of Siege* was based upon.

*Tupamaros* is a long interview with a guerrilla, in silhouette only, interspersed with segments showing Uruguay's slums, unemployment and the vast gap between rich and poor. To make its point about Uruguayan dependence on American investment, the film follows a cow through the entire butchering process, in an American-owned plant.

There are also interviews with high government officials in the Tupamaros' "people's prison," and with the parents of an underground Tupamaro, whose home has been fire-bombed three times by the national police death squad. Finally, there is an animated re-creation of the recent escape of over 100 political prisoners from an "escape-proof" prison.

*Campamento* is the story of the seizure of a parcel of land on the outskirts of Santiago, Chile, by a group of peasants led by the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR). Shortly after, Salvador Allende was elected President of Chile and the peasants were allowed to keep the land and build a town to their own specifications. The film was made before the coup, and sheds a certain haunting light on why Allende could be so quickly deposed.

Most of the film is concerned with the development of a political community in the *campamento*: their struggles to develop democratic self-government and educate their children. The film touches—and this is its