

Sherrill E. Grace, ed. *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry: Volume II, 1947-1957*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997. Pp. xx, 1000. \$60.00.

In a review of Volume I of *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, a critic aptly points out that in reading these letters and the thorough annotations by editor Sherrill Grace, we in effect become "partial biographers of the best writer in English to live and work in Canada during the first half of this century."<sup>1</sup> There may not be universal acceptance of this encomium, but there is no question that as we work our way through the 270 letters of Volume I and the close to 500 in Volume II, we continue to shape and change our own version of this remarkable writer. And because we are afflicted with hindsight and a full knowledge of Lowry's final failures, we read these letters with a sadness and sense of frustration that perhaps only the more percipient of his original correspondents might have experienced. For them, we like to think, there must have been the hope, if not always the belief, that Lowry's repeated assertions about what he was working on would eventually culminate in another book, something to match his masterpiece *Under the Volcano*.

But of course this was not to be, and in a sense, all of Lowry's post-*Under the Volcano* letters are haunted by that masterpiece, as Grace makes clear in her introduction to this volume. And praise must be given here to Grace, who has so thoroughly documented everything that has any bearing on the Lowry letters: their provenance, their publication history, their present status. She has clearly identified every Lowry correspondent, and has provided detailed explanations for virtually anything in the bodies of the letters that could be considered obscure or ambiguous. I found only one or two minor errors in her notes, one of them (152 n.3) for the simple reason that I am considerably older than Grace and remember well when the original Vancouver Public Library was not on Robson Street, as she assumes, but at the corner of Hastings and Main, very close, indeed, to Gore Street and its pubs, which Lowry of course found very convenient. Lowry scholars owe an enormous debt to Grace for meticulous work in these two volumes, and unless further letters are discovered, they will stand for years as indispensable texts in Lowry scholarship.

What might be required some day is a volume containing the correspondents' letters to Lowry, much as Cynthia Sugars has done with the Lowry-Aiken correspondence. Two or three of such letters are contained in this present volume, while about a dozen are included in the 1965 *Selected Letters*, but it would be fascinating to read more of the correspondence that must have flowed from Lowry's editors to himself over the years.

But there is richness in what we have, and in letter after letter we become privy to many sides of Malcolm Lowry: his generosity and kind-

ness to other writers, his vast erudition, his critical insights, his unflagging optimism and sense of humour, his phenomenal memory of what others have written. In April 1957, for example, deep in drink and despair, and only weeks from the end of his life, he could write a gracious letter of thanks to Ralph Gustafson for offering to include him in a Penguin anthology of poetry. "Did you not once write a story about someone climbing a building, printed by Martha Foley 1948—horribly good. I can still feel it. If you didn't write it, please take it as a compliment that I thought you did" (901).

And his sense of humour quite likely helped Lowry get money from a number of people, though he was by no means reticent about asking. "I hate to break a long silence in this way," he writes to his editor Albert Erskine in 1951, "but can you somehow lend us \$200 immediately? (I was always taught to begin a short story like this.)" (327). And in July 1950 he asks his agent Harold Matson if Matson can possibly send him \$200, then slyly adds, "if by the time you have finished this letter you feel you could advance us three hundred it would be better still" (267). Matson compromised and sent him \$250. Micawber-like, Lowry was always predicting something would turn up, either from his father's estate in England, or from foreign translations of *Under the Volcano*, or from stories he would be selling but had not quite finished yet. As late as December 1956, he announced to Erskine that he was "working like a demon possessed on a reborn Gabriola," and though he was "taking a long time to deliver . . . it will be done well" (867).

But haunted by *Under the Volcano*, he never did get any of his ambitious works finished, and he lived to see only two stories published, as well as a half dozen foreign translations of *Under the Volcano*. He did receive a contract from Random House in 1952 on the strength of his proposals for his monumentally conceived *Voyage That Never Ends*, which was to include such novels as *La Mordida*, *Dark as the Grave*, *October Ferry to Gabriola*. But he failed to deliver the required instalments on time, so early in 1954 Random House suspended its payments, and this letter came as a shock to Lowry, even though he had recommended a similar arrangement in a letter posted two days before Random House's, which they had not received. (Just one of the "accidents" that followed Lowry all his life.) That letter from Random House seems to mark the beginning of Lowry's final decline and in a May 1954 letter to Erskine, he gives voice to his growing despair. "It would simply be an impossibility for me now," he writes, "under these changed and changing circumstances, to attempt to itemize what I think I can or can't do or in what order . . . and I don't want to make any more promises I can't keep" (734). And in the same letter, he announces their plans to move—temporarily, he thought—out of Dolartan, for their paradise of Eridanus is now threatened. "We are now completely surrounded—the aspens all, all are felled, save in our little oasis of greenwood and sea—by sub-section and oil-refinery" (733).

As these letters show, Lowry was always a conservationist, long before it was fashionable to be one, and if he were alive today he would feel very much at home in British Columbia. "I hate to see trees cut down & pulp mills go up in their place," he wrote to his French translator in 1952, "no matter how inevitable the latter. . . . And moreover, big business these days seems to have all the say" (613). He describes the political crisis in 1952-53 as "comic opera Marxism, comic opera fascism" (662), and when Social Credit wins a subsequent election, he tells David Markson that "we have a fascist government: books are burned in the libraries, or are threatened to be, and they have banned the Wild One, why is all too obvious: McCarthy is their hero" (715). He made a prophecy about Communism to his Vancouver friend Downie Kirk in 1950, the accuracy of which we now recognize: "by its very nature," he said, "it contains within it the seeds of its own destruction, so by 1989, say, everything ought to be hunky dory, all of which certainly doesn't make it any easier to live in 1950" (307).

About his position in Canadian letters he was ambivalent, though very proud of the fact that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica Yearbook* for 1948-49 praised him as a Canadian presaging "a major movement among the younger writers of fiction" (138), and in a letter to an editor at McClelland and Stewart shortly after *Under the Volcano* was published, he conceded that he was "certainly as Canadian as Louis Hemon ever was" (25). But he never took out Canadian citizenship, and in a 1953 letter to Albert Erskine, he states that "all in all, it seems to me British Columbia is a hell of a paradoxical place to ask any Englishman to give up his passport in, with all that means, no matter how one might believe in or love Canada per se. It's almost a contradiction in terms; & so hence is my position on this score" (662).

Lowry's 1949 apology to his mother-in-law that he was "an atrocious correspondent" (162) must of course be taken with a grain of salt, for these two volumes of letters illustrate what a remarkable and prolific correspondent he really was. As Grace points out, Lowry might have written more fiction if he had not spent so much time on his letters, but we are enriched by what he has done. It is appropriate that Grace concludes this edition with an undated, unsigned Lowry letter to God, where he pretty accurately sets out his artistic credo: "I earnestly pray You to help me order this work . . . fulfilling the highest canons of art, yet breaking new ground, &, where necessary old rules: it must be tumultuous, stormy, full of thunder . . . pronouncing hope for man, yet it must also be balanced, grave, full of tenderness & compassion, & humour" (968).

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ted Whittaker. "Epistles & Espiders." *Books in Canada* Dec. 1995: 17.
- <sup>2</sup> The dust cover of this edition erroneously gives the dates 1946-1957, rather than 1947-1957.