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Errors and omissions:

Reference:

A note on the [stars](#) that Lowry claimed to have seen on his October ferry ride to Gabriola.

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Malcolm Lowry on Gabriola

—the October Ferry, 1946

by Phyllis Reeve



Malcolm Lowry on the Gabriola ferry, October, 1946.

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Malcolm Lowry boarded the Gabriola ferry, *Atrevida*, on October 7, 1946, fretting under the weight of two enormous worries. After ten years of anguished writing and rewriting, he was about to see the first galley proofs of *Under the Volcano*, which could be one of the great novels of the twentieth or any century. Also, he and his wife Margerie

were threatened with eviction from their shack at Dollarton, a small community on the north shore of Burrard Inlet at the mouth of Indian Arm. Like innumerable other visitors to Gabriola, they were house-hunting.

They knew of an old house that might still be for sale, and possibly within their means. There was a lot, certainly affordable, but requiring building from scratch with all the implied hassle and delay. The dilemma, so familiar to Islanders, puzzled the Lowrys, as it puzzled Ethan and Jacqueline Llewelyn, characters soon to be created as protagonists of a novel entitled, *October Ferry to Gabriola*.

“Gabriola! Ah, if it should prove the right place... the dreamed-of place...” Jacqueline envisioned, as the ferry edged away from Nanaimo.¹ We know just how she felt.

The Lowrys heard about Gabriola from their former landlady in Vancouver, Mrs. J.D. Smith, whose daughter Angela had married a Nanaimo restaurateur, Alfred McKee. The McKees owned a cottage on Gabriola, and could show and tell the wonders of the island. In those days before BC Ferries, Malcolm and Margerie travelled from Vancouver to Victoria by the BC Coast Steamship Service (CPR), then from Victoria to Nanaimo by bus, and finally to

¹ Malcolm Lowry, *October Ferry to Gabriola*, p.5, New York: World Publishing Co., 1970.

Gabriola by a privately run ferry. A taxi took them to Anderson Lodge, now Surf Lodge,² about a mile from the McKee cabin. They stayed three or four days, then returned from Nanaimo to Vancouver by the CPR ferry.

Sheryl Salloum documented the Gabriola excursion in *Malcolm Lowry; Vancouver Days*,³ an invaluable resource for the British Columbia part of the Lowry saga. She included a charming interview with Alfred McKee; and sketch maps of the boat routes, Nanaimo harbour and the downtown area, and of Gabriola, with most points of interest at the North End in the Berry Point/ Taylor Bay area. The only South End site marked is the Roman Catholic Church, known to Islanders as the Log Church. The Lowrys almost certainly did not visit the South End, but one of the chapters in *October Ferry* recounts an encounter between Ethan and a priest who invited him to visit his “pretty little chapel”.

The eviction from Dollarton did not happen. Malcolm and Margerie did not move to Gabriola. They took away with them their usual accumulation of notes on scenes, characters, and vignettes to be worked up into fiction. But Malcolm was slipping hopelessly into the throes of his fatal alcohol addiction. He did not drink while on Gabriola, McKee testified, but such abstinence could not at that point be more than temporary. The last great co-ordinated efforts of his genius went into the corrections of the *Volcano* proofs.

He did turn the notes into a story, then a novel that was supposed to be *October Ferry*, but he had lost the capacity to sink himself and his work into the layers upon

layers of meticulously crafted narrative and metaphor which make *Volcano* great, and which he intended for the new novel. By the time of his death in 1957, he still had not shown his publishers a draft that they could accept.

Margerie did what she could with the manuscript, without changing or polishing more than was absolutely necessary, and in 1970, World Publishing brought out *October Ferry to Gabriola*, edited by Margerie Lowry. Later editions came from Penguin (with a striking cover appropriately using Frederick Varley’s painting *Night Ferry, Vancouver*), Viking, and Douglas & McIntyre. Long out-of-print, it turns up occasionally in second-hand bookshops and at Page’s Resort on Gabriola.

As a bookseller, I faced two frequent questions. Is it about Gabriola? No, it’s more about coming to Gabriola, about what brings people to the islands, and what they are seeking. The book ends with the ferry nearing the dock; none of the narrative takes place on Gabriola itself.

The second question is more difficult. Is it any good? If the questioner does not know Lowry’s works, the question is unanswerable, and, if they are looking for light reading, they should be discouraged from wasting their money and taking away one of the few remaining copies. If they do know Lowry, or if they really want to know, the answer has to be “...yes”. And “...no”. Some passages are wrenchingly beautiful and powerful. Others are as banal as anything in the mystery-romance novels that Margerie sometimes wrote. It remains a work-in-progress.

And that brings us to *The Voyage that Never Ends*.

² Joyce White, *Surf Lodge*, pp.40–2, *SHALE* 8, June 2004.

³ Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 1987.

Douglas Day⁴ and Gordon Bowker,⁵ in their large biographies of Lowry, have little to say about the facts of the Gabriola interlude, although Bowker calls it, “a fateful trip, the beginning of a voyage into a creative image from which Lowry was never able to extricate himself”, and examines the personal anguish which went into the attempted novel.

At the end of his life, Lowry was contemplating a huge and complicated connecting of his life’s work, including the novels, into a sequence that would be called *The Voyage that Never Ends*.⁶ For readers as well as writers, the voyage never ends. Some of us on Gabriola decided to take an in-depth look at our Lowry connection and organized *A Gabriola Tribute to Malcolm Lowry* at the Sandstone Studio at Page’s Resort, on October (of course) 29, 1994. About thirty readers, writers, scholars, and friends of Lowry and/or Gabriola gathered to share thoughts and memorabilia, art, and music, and to take a new look at Our Island as a Creative Image. We published the day’s proceedings as the chapbook: *Malcolm Lowry’s October Ferry; a Gabriola Island Tribute*.⁷

⁴ Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry; a Biography*. New York: Laurel, 1975.

⁵ Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies; a Life of Malcolm Lowry*, pp.381 *et passim*, Toronto: Random House, 1993.

⁶ Elizabeth Lowry, “Tooloose-Lowrytrek”, review of *The Voyage that Never Ends: Malcolm Lowry in His Own Words*, edited by Michael Hofmann, 2007, *London Review of Books* November 1, 2007. Elizabeth Lowry disclaims any relationship to Malcolm, but allows “there was definitely some mischief” in the *London Review of Books*’ asking her to review Hofmann’s book.

⁷ Edited by Phyllis Reeve, Gabriola and Victoria: The Sandstone Studio and Reference West, 1996.

Dr. Patricia Merivale of the University of British Columbia peeled away some of the layers which constitute *October Ferry*, despite its unfinished state. A spiritual autobiography, somewhere between autobiography and fiction, it is also a travelogue, in which the bus journey from Victoria to Nanaimo becomes an evocation of our West Coast as a pastoral idyll. Beneath the autobiographical modernist surface, she showed us a Gothic quest romance: the bus as the Greyhound of Heaven, the Nanaimo bastion as castle, the *Atrevida* as Charon’s ferry to the Underworld, the Log Church as the Perilous Chapel. And the Holy Grail is Gabriola itself, “the place-towards-which, the ideal of the heart, the home to which ‘you can’t go home again’, and that is why Ethan can’t get to it within the fiction of this story”.

Writer and broadcaster Norman Newton led us into a Nanaimo waterfront beer parlour, which Lowry called the Ocean Spray and which Salloum identified as the Hotel Plaza, later the Villa Hotel, on Front Street. Lowry’s rich imagination endows the unattractive denizens of this sordid bar with a magic mysticism, a parallel with characters and situations in William Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.

It seemed that Malcolm Lowry had given a symbolic structure not only to his fiction, but also to our reality. As the day progressed, we made another discovery.

Our symposium confirmed Malcolm Lowry’s famous capacity for infectious sociability. Poet Earle Birney called him “a great writer and the most lovable of men”. So neighbours, other writers from Birney’s circle, landladies, and chance acquaintances became his friends and, like Hilda and Phil Thomas and Norman Newton, were quick to rescue him from his self-inflicted mishaps.

West Coast writers feel Lowry to be one of themselves, and they continue to write about real or imagined encounters, as Gabriolan Sandy Frances Duncan did in her story, "Was that Malcolm Lowry?" which she read at the symposium.⁸ In her essay for our published proceedings, she evoked the peculiar camaraderie, nostalgia, and

recognition, even among previous strangers, which pervaded the Gabriola event.⁹

And so it is that Canadian Literature and Gabriola lay claim to Malcolm Lowry, even though he was born and died in England, and spent only 14 of his 48 years in Canada, and a couple of days on Gabriola. ◇

From the final chapter, *Uberrimae Fides*.

... "There," Ethan said suddenly. "Now you can see it all. There's Gabriola for you."

The island lay before them in the last of the sunset light, a long dark shape, spiked with pines against the fading sky. There was no splendour of gold and scarlet maples, it was the splendour of blackness, of darkness. And as they approached, there seemed no beach, just the high, foolhardy cliffs dropping straight into the sea. Behind Nanaimo, the sky turned a sullen smouldering red; the mountains on the mainland melted into the twilight. Then the last light was gone and Gabriola too lay in the immense shadow. The wind blew sharp and salt and cold.

Gabriola... Ah, how wild and lonely and primeval and forbidding it looked! Not a light glimmered, not a house shone through the trees, there was nothing but cliffs, so high the trees on top seemed dwarfed, mere broken bottles guarding the rim, the cliffs, and the uproar of the black sea at their base.

Ethan and Jacqueline stood close together, staring at Gabriola.

Abruptly the little ferry rounded the jutting headland; at the same moment there burst forth a shattering din and everyone clapped their hands to their ears. It was the ferry, blasting on its siren with a deep, protracted chord of mournful triumph. In the sky some stars came out. Capella, Fomalhaut, in the south, low over the sea, then Algol and Mira.

And now through the twilight as the echoes died away Jacqueline and Ethan distinguished the outlines of a sheltered valley that sloped down to a silent, calm harbour. Deep in the dark forest behind was the glow of a fire with red sparks ascending like a fiery fountain; yes, someone was burning the tree stumps to clear his land. The sound of lowing cattle was borne to them and they could see a lantern swinging along close to the ground. A voice called out, clear, across the water. And now they saw the dock, with silhouetted figures moving against a few lights that gleamed in the dusk....

The END

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⁸ Anthologized in *Vancouver Short Stories*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985.

⁹ *Malcolm Lowry on Gabriola: a Retrospective from February, 1996*, in *Malcolm Lowry's October Ferry; a Gabriola Island Tribute*.