

## **Re-placing Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World (and Back Again)**

Dr Helen Tookey, Liverpool John Moores University

### **Abstract**

This article focuses on a group project the author has been involved with since its inception in 2009, centring on the Merseyside-born writer Malcolm Lowry (1909–1957). The article outlines the background to the project, how it developed and what it has involved, and the ways in which it sits within the context of an arts centre and a university. It focuses on the importance of *place*, both in relation to the project's aims and in relation to Lowry's own writing. The overall aim of the project can be stated in terms of 're-placing' Lowry: raising his profile on Merseyside (and more widely) as a writer for whom Merseyside remained a significant imaginative resource, making his life and works accessible to new audiences/readerships through a wide range of activities, and establishing Merseyside as a centre for an ongoing programme of work, ideas and events related to Lowry.

### **Keywords**

Malcolm Lowry, Merseyside, place, psychogeography, arts, public engagement

### **Introduction**

This article will focus on a group project I have been involved with since its inception in 2009, centring on the Merseyside-born writer Malcolm Lowry (1909–1957). I shall outline the background to the project, how it developed and what it has involved, and the ways in which it sits within the context of an arts centre and a university. I shall also focus on the importance of *place*, both in relation to the project's aims and in relation to Lowry's own writing. The overall aim of the project can be stated in terms of 're-placing' Lowry: to raise his profile on Merseyside (and more widely) as a writer for whom Merseyside remained a significant imaginative resource, to make his life and works accessible to new audiences/readerships through a wide range of activities, and to establish Merseyside as a centre for an ongoing programme of work, ideas and events related to Lowry.

### **'The least-known British literary genius'**

Why the need to 're-place' Lowry at all? In his excellent biography *Pursued by Furies*, Gordon Bowker writes, 'Almost certainly Lowry is the least-known British literary genius of the twentieth century' (Bowker 1994: 612). There are a number of reasons why he is not a more prominent literary figure, among them the fact that *Under the Volcano* is widely thought to be his only wholly successful book, and that even this, his masterpiece, did not achieve widespread critical recognition for many years.

Lowry's status as a *British* (let alone a 'Merseyside' or 'Liverpool') writer was obscured by the circumstances of his life. Born in July 1909 in New Brighton on the Wirral peninsula (across the Mersey from Liverpool), Lowry left England in his early twenties and did not

return, even briefly, until 1955, just two years before his death. His life was one of restless voyages. Before going to Cambridge to study for his degree in English he sailed to the Far East as a deckhand, a voyage that would form the basis for his first novel *Ultramarine*, published in 1932. In 1930, he sailed from Preston to Norway and managed to meet one of his literary heroes, the Norwegian author Nordahl Grieg; this voyage would feed into his novel *In Ballast to the White Sea*, which was unpublished in Lowry's lifetime and which I shall discuss in detail later. He moved to the US in 1934 with his American wife Jan Gabriel; and in 1936 they travelled to Cuernavaca in Mexico, which became the setting for *Under the Volcano*, written over a ten-year period and published in 1947. In 1939 Lowry and Jan divorced and he married another American, novelist Margerie Bonner. They moved to Canada and in 1940 settled in a hand-built squatter's shack on Burrard Inlet near Vancouver, where they lived until 1954 and where most of the work on *Under the Volcano* was done. As Bowker notes, when the novel was first published in the UK, 'it was barely acknowledged. Most critics thought Lowry a Canadian or American' (Bowker 2009: 143). Lowry's papers are archived at the University of British Columbia and academic study of his work has been dominated by Canadian scholars, institutions and presses.<sup>1</sup> On Merseyside, Lowry is all but invisible: no blue plaques indicate the houses he lived in, nothing is named after him; most people, if asked to name writers from Liverpool or Wirral, will not mention Lowry. The centenary of his birth in 2009 offered an opportunity to try to change that.

### Getting started: the Lowry centenary, 2009

Our project of 're-placing' Malcolm Lowry began in 2009, when Bryan Biggs, artistic director at the Bluecoat, Liverpool's centre for the contemporary arts, decided to curate both a gallery exhibition and an accompanying programme of events to celebrate Lowry's centenary. Biggs knew of an exhibition related to Lowry that had been held in Switzerland,<sup>2</sup> and had seen *Waterlog* in East Anglia in 2007, referencing the work and digressive style of W.G. Sebald.<sup>3</sup> These shows inspired him to think about how an exhibition and series of events in Liverpool around Lowry's life and work might be conceptualised. In particular, Biggs conceived the exhibition as moving backwards and forwards in time, including both new work and work created during Lowry's lifetime; and as moving geographically, mirroring Lowry's own travels:

The exhibition is intended to reflect Lowry's continuing inspiration for artists today, and to explore what Malcolm Bradbury has described as Lowry's 'curious internationalism'. Indeed the artists echo some of the writer's journeys, which took him from Merseyside to the Far East, Europe, USA, Mexico, Canada and finally back to England [...] Whilst the exhibition reflects Lowry's creative compass, works are not arranged chronologically or geographically and the exploration of themes moves away from simply a literal reading of the subject. (Bluecoat 2009a: n.p.)

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, *The Malcolm Lowry Review* (originally the *Malcolm Lowry Newsletter*) was published from Wilfred Laurier University (1977–2002), the Malcolm Lowry Centenary Conference was held at the University of British Columbia in July 2009, and most of the high-profile Lowry scholars, such as Sherrill Grace (UBC), Miguel Mota (also UBC) and Paul Tiessen (Wilfrid Laurier University) are based in Canada.

<sup>2</sup> *Quauhnahuac: Die Gerade ist eine Utopie*, Kunsthalle, Basel, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> *Waterlog* was conceived and developed by Film and Video Umbrella, in collaboration with Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery; The Collection, Lincoln; and the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia.

The exhibition featured work by artists Ross Birrell and David Harding, Paul Rooney, Adrian Henri, Julian Cooper, Cian Quayle, Pete Flowers, Jorge Martínez García, Edward Burra, Cisco Jiménez, Ray Lowry and Brian O'Toole, as well as various documentary pieces. Importantly, it also included what the exhibition brochure described as rare and previously unseen items relating to Lowry's Merseyside, collated by Wirral-based writer and artist Colin Dilnot, including a set of telegrams from American detectives employed by Lowry's father to keep an eye on him, sent to Arthur Lowry's Liverpool solicitors and now held at the Liverpool Record Office (Figure 1). Thus while the exhibition demonstrated, and reflected, Lowry's international reach, it also emphasised the relevance of his Merseyside upbringing, drawing on local research by Dilnot.

### **Lucid meanderings, sharp-eyed driftings: Lowry, place and psychogeography**

This dual (local/international) emphasis was captured in the title Biggs and I came up with for the book we edited as part of the centenary programme, *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World*, published by Liverpool University Press. The book featured many of the artworks from the exhibition alongside new writing about Lowry, both critical and creative, from a range of writers based in the UK, France, Mexico, Canada and the US, some of whom we already knew, others of whom had contacted us on discovering that we were planning a series of events around Lowry's centenary. It was structured as twelve chapters (plus introduction) to echo the twelve-chapter, single-day structure of *Under the Volcano*. At the centre of the book, providing the key theoretical underpinning, was the chapter by Mark Goodall (a lecturer in the School of Media, Design and Technology at the University of Bradford), which explored the notions of psychogeography and the Situationist *dérive* in relation to Lowry. Goodall emphasised the way in which Lowry used place in his work both literally and symbolically to create a multi-layered effect:

Why do a psychogeography of Malcolm Lowry? [...] Perhaps [...] Lowry answers the question himself in one of his early letters (to his mentor Conrad Aiken) when he orders himself: 'I must [...] identify a finer scene: I must in other words give an imaginary scene identity through an immediate sensation of actual experience'. That scene is psychogeographical. (Goodall 2009: 81–82)

Reviewing the book in *Canadian Literature* 208 (2011), Lowry scholar Paul Tiessen summarised elegantly the principles of structure and selection that had governed our editing:

The editors and over twenty other contributors provide a lucid meandering – a sharp-eyed 'drifting,' both meditative and documentary, through space and from place to place – that resonates with Lowry's resistances to rigidly linear narrative lines and revels in his investigations of spatial depths and circular structures. [...] They adapt his method of weaving together place and subjectivity to explore life and work along a spatio-aesthetic 'Lowrytrek' haunted by the originary bifurcated space of the Wirral and Liverpool [...] (Tiessen 2011: 135)

Tiessen picks up here precisely the aspects that have governed our work on Lowry from the outset: the imbrication of place and subjectivity (perfectly captured in the term 'psychogeography'), and the notion of the Wirral/Liverpool setting as an 'originary' topography that continues to resonate throughout Lowry's life and work. Many of the contributors to the book explored these themes from a variety of angles and with a focus on

different locations on Lowry's 'compass' – from the Wirral of his birth, via the Isle of Man of his childhood holidays, to New York, Cuernavaca, British Columbia, and finally and poignantly to Ripe in Sussex, where Lowry died and is buried. Several of the chapters explored in detail the ways in which Tiessen's 'originary space' echoed in Lowry's writing. Michele Gemelos, writing about the novella *Lunar Caustic*, focused on the way in which the text sets Liverpool and New York in parallel as 'gateways to empires, [...], transitional or liminal places, or frontiers' (Gemelos 2009: 58). Annick Drösdal-Levillain's chapter demonstrates the presence of Merseyside at many levels throughout Lowry's collection of short stories *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*: she notes that 'Liverpool is mentioned at some point in each story', and suggests that '[in] spite of Lowry's "flight" away from Liverpool and the Wirral, images and impressions followed him, so that wherever he travelled, Liverpool surfaced in his prose' (Drösdal-Levillain 2009: 107). In 'The Forest Path to the Spring', the collection's final story, Lowry memorably describes Liverpool as 'that terrible city whose main street is the ocean' (Lowry 1991: 226). Liverpool in many ways comes to stand for the squalor and horror of modernity, and the rural idyll 'across the water' as a kind of paradise, as Lowry 'transmutes the geography of Liverpool/Wirral into a symbolic structure that recurs throughout his writing' (Biggs and Tookey 2009: 12). As Drösdal-Levillain shows, the Merseyside topography was to be strikingly mirrored by that of Dollarton on the Burrard Inlet (Figure 2) – enabling Lowry to develop, especially in 'Forest Path', the symbolic structure of paradise and hell facing each other across the water. As always with Lowry, the territory was both actual and symbolic.

### Public events and partnerships

Alongside the exhibition and the book, the third strand of the 2009 activities was a programme of public events, as shown in Figure 3. The programme included talks, film screenings, a poetry reading, a dance piece and a performance, with public interaction, of a specially commissioned song cycle written and performed by poet Ian McMillan (who also contributed a chapter to the book), musician Luke Carver Goss, and Liverpool-based Sense of Sound community choir. To celebrate the Mexican Day of the Dead festival (central in *Under the Volcano*), Mexican artist Javier Calderon created an altar in the Bluecoat's central foyer space (see Figures 4 and 5) to which members of the public were encouraged to contribute, and hosted a range of related activities including the making of typical Day of the Dead food. The most ambitious activity was 'The Voyage that Never Ends', a 'psychogeographical day' visiting key Lowry-related sites on the Wirral, conceived primarily by Mark Goodall. The event drew on the combination of Goodall's theorising of Lowry's work as inherently psychogeographical and Colin Dilnot's knowledge of the territory and Lowry's relations to it. They jointly produced sets of postcards featuring archival images together with quotations from Lowry and other sources, which were given out to participants at the various staging-points throughout the day (Figure 6). As Goodall comments in his chapter, 'The trick [of a psychogeographical outing] is to import some aspects of the text (fragments, poetry, illustrations, lists, images) with you into the landscape' (Goodall 2009: 82).

The multimedia or multidisciplinary nature of the events programme (including film, dance, poetry, music, walks, 'memorialising' and even baking) was inspired or enabled to some extent by the wide range of Lowry's own influences. He was notably influenced by film (especially German Expressionist film), and by jazz music; there are frequent references to specific films, musical compositions and jazz musicians throughout his work. He himself

thought of his masterpiece *Under the Volcano* in this kind of multimedia way, writing to his publisher Jonathan Cape in 1946:

It can be regarded as a kind of symphony, or in another way as a kind of opera [...] It is hot music, a poem, a song, a comedy, a farce, and so forth. [...] It is a prophecy, a political warning, a cryptogram, a preposterous movie, and a writing on the wall.  
(Lowry 1985: 66)

As the programme listing (Figure 3) shows, a number of the events were produced or hosted in association with existing Bluecoat cultural programmes or those run by other organisations: for example, the talk by Gordon Bowker was part of the Chapter & Verse literature festival, the reading of the poetry of Nordahl Grieg was part of the NICE (Nordic Intercultural Creative Events) festival, and the informal discussion of *Under the Volcano* was run by the Literature in Pubs group. In other words, Biggs was able to use the Lowry theme to connect a whole range of events that involved both public participation and working in partnership with other cultural organisations and programmes. The Lowry centenary events in 2009 provided a template or model that would feed into the Bluecoat's more explicit formulation of its goals and methodologies, and I shall come back to this later. The Bluecoat's internal evaluation of the events was positive, recording 20,474 visits to the exhibition (including many repeat visits) and total audience figures of 966 for the events programme. The evaluation report noted that visitors 'enjoyed the range of art displayed, the way Lowry's biography wove through the show, and the "brave" curatorial and installation decisions', and that "'hardcore" Lowry fans were augmented by [a] much broader audience who managed to find [their] way into Lowry mainly through the exhibition'; 'several visitors were inspired to read *Under the Volcano* and some then returned to see the show again' (Bluecoat 2009b: n.p.).

### **Continuing the project: the Lowry Lounge and *The Firminist***

The exhibition, the accompanying events, and the book served to create a core group of people who would continue the Merseyside-based Lowry project after 2009: Bryan Biggs, Colin Dilnot, Mark Goodall, myself, poet Robert Sheppard and short-story writer Ailsa Cox (both lecturers in the Department of English and History at Edge Hill University). We decided to organise an annual Lowry-focused day, using the Bluecoat as a base, to be held on a Saturday as close to the Day of the Dead as possible. After some debate we settled on the name 'the Lowry Lounge' for these events – chosen not only for its alliteration but also because we particularly wanted the event to sound informal (avoiding, for instance, the academic connotations of 'symposium' or 'seminar'), welcoming, and entertaining. 'Lounge' has connotations of a bar or nightclub and implies the presence of music and alcohol, both of which have indeed featured at the events. (An image frequently used on our publicity [Figure 7] shows a shirtless Lowry 'lounging' on a deck chair or similar outside his shack at Dollarton.) We also decided to start an annual publication, edited by Mark Goodall, titled *The Firminist* after Geoffrey Firmin, the alcoholic hero of *Under the Volcano* (<https://thefirminist.wordpress.com>).

The Lounge events and *The Firminist* have provided opportunities for the various members of the group both to create new work themselves and to commission new work from other people. For instance, for the 2012 Lounge I created a short performance piece based on postcards written by members of the public and deposited in a special 'postbox' in the

Bluecoat; and for the 2014 Lounge I wrote a sequence of collage poems titled 'Bellevue Sonnets', derived from the text of Lowry's *Lunar Caustic* (and published in issue 4 of *The Firminist*). The Lounge events have featured talks, readings, music and film screenings, with films ranging from the 1967 BBC documentary *Rough Passage* to Eisenstein's *¡Que Viva México!*. The 2011, 2012 and 2014 events also featured guided walks led by Colin Dilnot, exploring Liverpool with reference to Lowry's life and writings. As I shall show in the following sections, Dilnot's contributions have played a particularly significant role in enabling our project, specifically through its local focus, to contribute to and become part of the wider world of Lowry studies.

## Research 'on the ground'

As Dilnot explains in the introduction to his chapter in the 2009 book, he began to take a particular interest in 'the topography of [Lowry's] life and work' (Dilnot 2009: 27) following his own move to Lowry's birthplace, New Brighton on the Wirral, in the mid-1980s. Combining observation on the ground, research using sources such as electoral registers and Ordnance Survey maps, and readings of Lowry's published texts and unpublished manuscripts and papers, Dilnot investigated Lowry's references to, and uses of, Wirral locations. The chapter in the 2009 book, as he puts it, 'gives a flavour' of this research, focusing on the identification and location of the house Lowry was born in, the first prep school he attended, and the home of the 'Taskerson' family in chapter 1 of *Under the Volcano*. In each case, being physically 'on the spot', together with access to local records, enabled Dilnot to clarify points that previous writers on Lowry had been unable to investigate. For instance, his search for 'Braeside', the prep school Lowry attended between 1914 and 1916, initially led him to a street in West Kirby named Kirby Park, since that was the address for the school given in internet sources. Unable to get any further, he resorted to more old-fashioned research methods:

I decided to knock on a few doors and see whether any local people had any knowledge of the school. I struck lucky with my first call, finding a woman who had lived in the area for many years and who took me to the right house. At some point in the 1900s, or perhaps earlier, the road the school was in was renamed Devonshire Road, which accounted for my inability to find the school in Kirby Park. (Dilnot 2009: 29)

His guide took him to meet the current occupant of 'Braeside', who told him that 'she had found graffiti carved into woodwork on the stairs from the building's time as a school' (Dilnot 2009: 31).

It was after reading this chapter that New Zealand-based Lowry scholar Chris Ackerley contacted Dilnot to ask whether he could help him with his own Lowry researches. Ackerley was engaged in compiling the (extremely detailed) annotations for the forthcoming scholarly edition of *In Ballast to the White Sea*, set mostly in Liverpool and Preston, and recognised that Dilnot, with the local knowledge that Ackerley lacked, could be a great help to him in this. Dilnot worked with Ackerley over several years to help investigate the locations, sources and background knowledge that went into Lowry's text. They combined research trips 'on the ground' with the use of reference material such as maps, guidebooks and directories to garner information about the specific sites, streets and buildings described by Lowry, especially those which had been altered or lost altogether since the 1930s. What emerged from this

research and from the rediscovered text of *In Ballast* itself was a fascinatingly new angle on Lowry – as a writer not only using his knowledge of Merseyside and Lancashire to provide the setting for his novel, but using that setting specifically to address the political situation of the 1930s in a much more visible way than in his previously published works.

### ***In Ballast to the White Sea: Lowry, Liverpool, and politics***

The publication of *In Ballast* is of particular interest to scholars and readers of Lowry for a number of reasons. The first concerns the history of the manuscript itself. ‘Who ever thought they would one day be able to read Malcolm Lowry’s fabled novel of the 1930s and 40s, *In Ballast to the White Sea*? Lord knows, I didn’t’, writes Michael Hofmann in his *TLS* review (Hoffman 2015: n.p.). Lowry had been working intermittently on drafts of the book since the early 1930s, but the manuscripts were destroyed when his and Margerie’s shack burned down in June 1944, leaving only a few fragments of the text: ‘two small notebooks with preliminary notes [...], the first two pages of a 1936 typescript, an notebook with an earlier draft of Chapters I and II, and several small, circular pieces of charred paper from a handwritten draft and another typescript, both otherwise lost’ (McCarthy 2014: xix). Lowry never subsequently attempted to rewrite the novel; ‘instead,’ as the book’s editor Patrick McCarthy puts it, ‘he mourned its loss and, in time, romanticized it as a (potentially) great book, its destruction one of the central tragedies of his life’ (McCarthy 2014: xix). In typical Lowry fashion, the book’s dramatic loss is worked into another of his (autobiographical) fictions, *Dark is the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* (published posthumously in 1969), where *In Ballast* becomes the lost work of his writer-protagonist Sigbjørn Wilderness.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, though, there was another copy of the manuscript, entrusted in 1936 by Lowry and his first wife Jan Gabriel to Jan’s mother for safekeeping. The publication of Gabriel’s memoir *Inside the Volcano* in 2000 raised hopes that an almost complete draft of *In Ballast* thus did in fact still exist. As McCarthy explains in his introduction to the scholarly edition, the textual situation turned out to be more complex and less satisfactory than that: of the 1936 draft only a few photocopied chapters remained, and Gabriel had not only retyped Lowry’s text but made corrections and revisions to it at later dates (McCarthy 2014: xxv–xlv). The text is incomplete, with the last three projected chapters existing only as notes. Thus, the published version of *In Ballast to the White Sea* can only be viewed as a work in progress, a version of what would no doubt have become a very different novel had Lowry completed and revised it for publication. Nonetheless, as Hofmann’s comment above shows, its publication is exciting for scholars and readers of Lowry and provides a new perspective on his work overall.

In his review, Hofmann notes that *In Ballast* gives us, as readers, ‘a shift of focus to things that were never central in any of Lowry’s previously published books, but which he probably knew better than anything in them: England in the 1920s and 30s, Liverpool where he hailed from, Cambridge where he went to school and university’ (Hofmann 2015: n.p.). It is interesting that Hofmann doesn’t include in this list the political dimension, which is certainly more to the fore in *In Ballast* than in Lowry’s other works.

---

<sup>4</sup> ‘Their bags were full of all kinds of paraphernalia, even junk, you would never expect to make use of on a short vacation. [...] in addition to what few clothes Primrose had brought, there were fragments of manuscript, piles of it [...] even the burned remnants of the manuscript of *In Ballast to the White Sea* in there [...] four almost perfect circles of page fragments, upon each of which, in the faded typescript of the text, appeared, terrifyingly enough, the word “fire”’ (Lowry 1972: 51).

As with more or less all of Lowry's writing, the protagonist of *In Ballast*, Sigbjørn Hansen-Tarnmoor, is a version of Lowry himself. Here he is the son of a Liverpool shipping-line owner, a Cambridge undergraduate, trying to become a writer. Sigbjørn and his twin brother, Tor, are struggling with guilt over their family's responsibility for the recent sinkings of two of the company's ships: the text implies that there may have been some deliberate attempt to cut costs and make more money for the shareholders. The first three chapters are set in Cambridge; the fourth chapter consists of a series of letters written by Sigbjørn, and leads us to the understanding that Tor has committed suicide. In Chapter V, Sigbjørn is back in Liverpool, walking with his father around the city, both tormented by guilt. This chapter depicts the economic depression in Liverpool and the consequent protests:

Suddenly, rounding a corner near Gladstone Place where the Sailors' Institute stood and out-of-work seamen and firemen hung about in little groups, [...] they found themselves held up in a crowd. A heavy smell of cloth, as warmly damp as the interior of a laundry, was penetrating their nostrils. Suddenly: shouts, the ringing of hooves, chaos. [...] For a second Sigbjørn suspected they had been recognized and some demonstration was being made against his father. But they soon realized it was a mass workers' meeting in process of being broken up by the police. (Lowry 2014: 64)

The walk around Liverpool confronts Sigbjørn and his father with a grim picture of working-class suffering and alienation: 'These men walked down to the sea with the faltering steps of people who had been monstrously deceived. Who had deceived them? Whither that grey emptiness in the eyes of the unemployed?' (Lowry 2014: 69). On Mount Pleasant, they drift into the 'Century Theatre, the Home of Unusual Films' (66), which is showing Pudovkin's *The End of St Petersburg*: 'The Winter Palace was captured before their eyes. St Petersburg was declared Leningrad. The workers slowly filed into the palace, the strike leader's wife following after, carrying a pail of potatoes' (67). Coming out of the cinema, discussing with his father whether Communism can offer a way forward, Sigbjørn sees Liverpool as a kind of Leningrad-in-waiting: 'As they moved down Lime Street down past the Washington Hotel to the isthmus of Manchester Street, a vision of Leningrad was still superimposed upon Liverpool in his mind's eye' (69). We see here Lowry using the Liverpool setting, his own detailed knowledge of the city, and of course his own background as the son of a wealthy cotton broker who had 'gone up in the world' (from Toxteth to the far more genteel New Brighton and then affluent Caldy) to explore the fraught social and political situation of the time.<sup>5</sup>

The publication of *In Ballast to the White Sea* has been particularly exciting for our project in a number of ways. The text itself provides a new and much more explicit demonstration of Lowry as a Merseyside writer. That is, although his previously published works – as shown above – all contain allusions to, echoes and resonances of, Liverpool and Wirral, *In Ballast* is unique in having large sections actually set in Liverpool and Lancashire. As described above, Colin Dilnot's local knowledge enabled him to play a crucial role in the process of investigating and annotating the edition – thus creating a strong link between our ongoing project and the wider world of Lowry studies, particularly in Canada. In turn, the combination of Lowry's text and Dilnot's researches with Ackerley have enabled us to

---

<sup>5</sup> Patrick McCarthy is probably right to speculate that this may be one reason why Lowry later preferred to romanticise the novel as irretrievably lost rather than attempting to revise or rewrite it: 'since *In Ballast* was shaped by the politics of mid-1930s Europe it would have required considerable rewriting to accommodate the very different world situation of the mid-1940s' (McCarthy 2014: xxi).



programme a number of *In Ballast* guided walks, following the circular walk around Liverpool city centre made by Sigbjørn and his father in Lowry's text. These have included readings from Lowry's chapter alongside historical documentation. For example, the Century cinema on Mount Pleasant is no longer extant (the site is now occupied by a multi-storey car park), but Dilnot has been able to show participants on the walks photographs of the building (Figure 8) and to describe its history, alongside reading Lowry's evocative description – literally re-placing Lowry and his writing on the Liverpool streets he is describing.

Finally, we were extremely pleased to host, as part of the 2014 Lowry Lounge event, the only official launch event for the book, and to welcome the book's editor Patrick McCarthy, along with Vik Doyen, who had edited the 2013 critical edition of Lowry's *Swinging the Maelstrom* for the University of Ottawa Press.<sup>6</sup> Lara Mainville, the director of UOP, sent a statement by email which was read out at the event by Bryan Biggs, noting the appropriateness of holding the launch in Liverpool: 'It is only fitting that a novel penned in Canada by an English expat should be launched in his homeland' (Mainville 2014: n.p.). All of us who had been involved since 2009 in the project of 're-placing' Lowry on Merseyside felt that this event was genuine confirmation of the success of our project.<sup>7</sup>

## **Organisational frameworks**

In December 2011 Mary Cloake, the former Director of Arts Council Ireland, was appointed Chief Executive at the Bluecoat. Cloake suggested to Bryan Biggs that it would be useful to make explicit, in written form, the principles that were already implicitly underpinning the curatorial and engagement activities of the Bluecoat, and this resulted in the formulation of a set of 'Lines of Enquiry':

### **Lines of Enquiry for the Bluecoat**

We have identified five lines of enquiry that reflect the Bluecoat's commitment, firstly, to developing artistic and curatorial practice, and, secondly, to broadening our engagement with audiences.

#### **1 Reflection on practice**

Revisit, recontextualise and reinvigorate earlier work of our artistic alumni and other artists, as well as own curatorial practice.

#### **2 Examining modernism**

Revisit modernism as a continuing productive line of enquiry, particularly through interdisciplinary work and through the digital.

#### **3 Arts engagement with society**

---

<sup>6</sup> A version of this novella, put together from various draft versions by Earle Birney and Margerie Bonner Lowry, was published under the title *Lunar Caustic* in 1963. The UOP scholarly edition disaggregates Lowry's different versions of the text and provides a detailed scholarly apparatus explaining the textual history.

<sup>7</sup> Also a highlight of the 2014 Lounge was the participation of Iain Sinclair, who gave a talk about his own interest in Lowry and his presence in Sinclair's 2013 travelogue *American Smoke*. Again, the fact that we were able to attract such a high-profile literary figure to our event was not only gratifying in itself but is also something we can build on for future events. Another highlight was the presence, for the first time at any of our events, of two members of Lowry's family, descendants of his brother Wilfred.

Explore art in a broader cultural and social framework through the agency of the arts centre as civic space and the blurred territory between ‘high’ art and ‘popular’ culture.

#### **4 Cultural diversity**

Reflect artists’ engagement with identity in the broader context of an evolving multiculturalism, and the diversity and equality environment, particularly in relation to Liverpool’s population and its history.

#### **5 Heritage**

Interrogate and reinvigorate histories – including the Bluecoat’s and Liverpool’s – from contemporary perspectives, using multiple art forms and accessible arts and heritage pathways, including digital. (Bluecoat 2014: n.p.)

The Lowry project can be clearly seen to reflect a number of the key points here. Most obviously, it reflects the focus on modernism (Line of Enquiry 2) not (just) as a historical phenomenon but (also) as a continually productive context. One of the emphases of the 2009 exhibition and equally of the 2009 book was the richness of Lowry’s work as an ongoing source for new creative work. The post-2009 Lowry Lounge events have provided a continuing context for the generation of new work inspired by Lowry. The project has been interdisciplinary (Line of Enquiry 2) from the outset, encompassing recognisable artistic genres such as painting, writing and filmmaking, alongside activities (such as psychogeographical walks) less easily framed within a traditional genre perspective.

The project has consistently aimed to promote the engagement of arts and the broader society (Line of Enquiry 2), with a focus on participatory events such as guided walks and a deliberately informal, non-academic ‘feel’ to the Lowry Lounge days. Lowry’s work itself incorporates many references what could be seen as ‘popular culture’ or ‘low’ artforms – jazz, popular song lyrics, cinema, advertising, golf – and this has enabled us to present the author of what could be seen as a forbiddingly ‘difficult’ modernist novel in accessible and engaging ways. (As discussed above, the name ‘Lowry Lounge’ was deliberately chosen to sound informal and entertaining.)

Finally, the project has a clear local-historical aspect (Line of Enquiry 5). It has sought not only to boost local awareness of Lowry as an important twentieth-century writer hailing from Merseyside, but to demonstrate the very deep and detailed presence of Merseyside in his writing. Alongside that, it has offered opportunities for audiences and participants to engage with local history.

This is, of course, not coincidental. The process of articulating and formulating the Lines of Enquiry involved reflecting on the principles already implicit in the Bluecoat’s projects and practices. Bryan Biggs suggested in conversation with me that the Lowry project, more than any other, had helped him and Mary Cloake to articulate the Lines of Enquiry, in many ways providing a template and an example of best practice for them to build on with other work (Biggs pers. comm., July 2015).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> However, the Lines of Enquiry extend beyond the scope of the Lowry project in at least two important aspects, those described in Line of Enquiry 1 (reflection on practice) and Line of Enquiry 4 (cultural diversity); my point is not that the Lowry project fulfils or reflects every one of the Lines of Enquiry, only that it was a key project in the process of their articulation.

Since January 2015, I have been employed as Lecturer/Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Liverpool John Moores University, and this has provided another institutional context within which our Lowry project has ongoing relevance. LJMU promotes itself as a ‘modern civic university’, expanding on this in its 2012–2017 Strategic Plan as follows: ‘We are a university that sits with great pride in the city and region of Liverpool, a true city of the world. Our clear aim is to be recognised globally as a modern civic university which, whilst being outward looking, supports our students and partners in the sense of place that is our city and our region’ (Liverpool John Moores University 2012: 2). The term ‘sense of place’ is also used on the webpage focusing on LJMU’s cultural partnerships: ‘LJMU is a modern civic university embedded within the cultural landscape of Liverpool and our partnerships support our vision to make learning and culture more accessible to our students and the people of Liverpool, supporting them in their sense of place in the city’ (<https://ljmu.ac.uk/about-us/cultural-partnerships>, accessed 15/07/2015). LJMU’s cultural partners include Tate Liverpool, the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, and the Everyman and Playhouse theatres, among others, and the further development of such partnerships and external engagement work with cultural organisations in Liverpool is an important strand of the university’s strategy of positioning itself as the leading Merseyside HEI in this regard. The Lowry project represents an excellent means by which to develop partnership work with the Bluecoat and other organisations and acts as a focus for an ongoing, imaginative programme of public events.

## **Conclusion: looking forward**

As noted above, the 2014 Lowry Lounge, with the launch of *In Ballast to the White Sea* and the presence of notable Lowry scholars, alongside Iain Sinclair and even members of Lowry’s family, marked a significant milestone in our project. Our aims now are to build on this success, and we have the following ideas as work-in-progress.

- A conference in 2017, hosted jointly by LJMU and the Bluecoat, to commemorate 70 years since the publication of Lowry’s major work, *Under the Volcano* and 60 years since his death. 2017 is also the 300th anniversary year for the Bluecoat, the building dating from 1717 as a charity school. In being co-hosted by LJMU and the Bluecoat, and involving both academic and creative/artistic aspects, this would represent a partnership activity between HEI and arts centre, to the benefit of both. We envisage the event itself forming part of a programme of public events such as readings from Lowry’s work in various Liverpool and Wirral locations, again emphasising the idea of making Lowry’s work available, in accessible ways, to wider audiences/readerships.
- The development of a small archive or research collection, to be hosted by LJMU. This would not be a rival to the main scholarly Lowry archives at the University of British Columbia, but would provide useful resources for anyone interested in Lowry. We have accumulated various editions of Lowry’s works, books about him, documentation of events, related ephemera, and material relating to Dilnot and Ackerley’s research for *In Ballast*.
- A more visible outward-facing presence for our project, such as a website. At the moment the project exists only as a series of discrete events and their documentation; we are considering whether it would be beneficial to develop a more cohesive identity and visibility for the project.

It seems accurate to say that we have made considerable progress in our aim of ‘re-placing’ Malcolm Lowry on Merseyside, and creating a ‘centre of gravity’ for work, ideas and events relating to him, which can balance and complement the existing ‘centre’ in British Columbia. The project has generated new work across a number of media and genres. It has acted as a focus for participatory public events of various kinds. It has contributed to the elucidation and formalising of the principles governing the work of a major arts centre. It is enabling partnership work connecting various institutions. Most fundamentally, it is enabling an ongoing exploration of the many different ways in which place is central to the work of arguably ‘the least-known British literary genius of the twentieth century’.

## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Bryan Biggs and Colin Dilnot for their help in the preparation of this article. I am also grateful to Kate Aughterson, Mary Anne Francis and Jess Moriarty, for giving me the opportunity to present a paper on ‘Re-placing Malcolm Lowry’ at the Brighton Writes Place-Based Arts conference, University of Brighton, 29 May 2015.

## References

- Biggs, Bryan, and Tookey, Helen (eds.), 2009, *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Bluecoat, 2009a, *Under the Volcano: An Exhibition for Malcolm Lowry, 1909–1957*, exhibition guide.
- Bluecoat, 2009b, ‘Malcolm Lowry Season 2009: Evaluation’, unpublished document (provided by Bryan Biggs).
- Bluecoat, 2014: ‘Lines of Enquiry for the Bluecoat’, unpublished document (provided by Bryan Biggs).
- Bowker, Gordon, 1994, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry*, London: Flamingo.
- Bowker, Gordon, 2009, ‘Malcolm Lowry: Neglected Genius’, in Biggs and Tookey (eds.) 2009: 143–149.
- Dilnot, Colin, 2009, ‘Lowry’s Wirral’, in Biggs and Tookey (eds.) 2009: 27–36.
- Drösdal-Levillain, Annick, 2009, “‘Eridanus, Liverpool’: Echoes and Transformations at the Edge of Eternity’, in Biggs and Tookey (eds.) 2009: 103–10.
- Gemelos, Michele, 2009, ‘Lunatic City: Lowry’s *Lunar Caustic* and New York’, in Biggs and Tookey (eds.) 2009: 57–64.
- Goodall, Mark, 2009, “‘Lowrytrek’: Towards a Psychogeography of Malcolm Lowry’s Wirral’, in Biggs and Tookey (eds.) 2009, 81–89.
- Hofmann, Michael, 2015, ‘Set Up and Put Off’ (review of Lowry 2014), *Times Literary Supplement* 23 April (n.p.).
- Liverpool John Moores University, 2012, *2012–2017 Strategic Plan*, Liverpool: Liverpool John Moores University.
- Lowry, Malcolm, 1972, *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Lowry, Malcolm, 1985, *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Lowry, Malcolm, 1991, *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* and *Lunar Caustic*, London: Picador.

Lowry, Malcolm, 2014, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. and intro. Patrick A. McCarthy, annotations Chris Ackerley, foreword Vik Doyen, Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.

Mainville, Lara, 2014, email to Bryan Biggs, 25 October.

McCarthy, Patrick A., 2014, 'Introduction', in Lowry 2014: xix–lii.

Tiessen, Paul, 2011, 'Celebrating Lowry' (review of Biggs and Tookey (eds.) 2009), *Canadian Literature* 208 (Spring): 134–35.

[image captions/credits]

Figure 1 Telegram from US agents to Arthur Lowry's Liverpool solicitors, 1939. Courtesy Liverpool Record Office.

Figure 2 Dollarton, Burrard Inlet, British Columbia. Photograph by Bryan Biggs.

Figure 3 Diary of events accompanying the 2009 Malcolm Lowry centenary exhibition. Courtesy the Bluecoat.

Figure 4 Javier Calderon's Day of the Dead altar, the Bluecoat foyer, November 2009. Photograph by Bryan Biggs.

Figure 5 Javier Calderon helping members of the public to Day of the Dead food, the Bluecoat foyer, November 2009. Photograph by Bryan Biggs.

Figure 6 Advertisement for the Liverpool Museum of Anatomy (to which Lowry refers in *Ultramarine*), used by Goodall and Dilnot for one of the postcards handed out during 'The Voyage that Never Ends' event, 31 October 2009. On the back of the postcard was a quotation from Jean-Paul Richter: 'The earlier in life the first fright occurs, the more dangerous it is'.

Figure 7 Flyer for the first Lowry Lounge event, 2010. Courtesy the Bluecoat.

Figure 8 The Century cinema building, Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, probably 1950s. After the cinema had closed, the building was used for a variety of purposes, such as auction rooms. Courtesy Colin Dilnot.