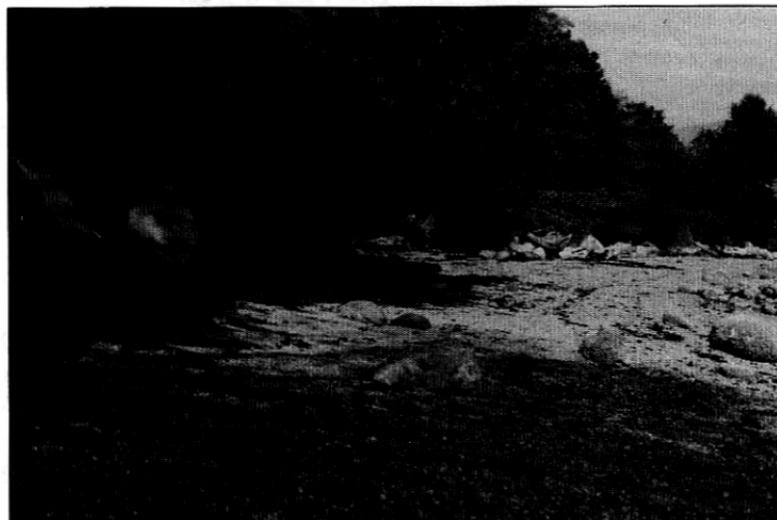


# Landscape's Narrative: Doing the Malcolm Lowry Walk

NORMAN RAVVIN



*Dollarton Flats, Site of Malcolm Lowry's Shack*

**I**N OUR AGE of manuscripts composed on computers it is increasingly difficult to follow the path of abandoned, rejected, and revised drafts to the "finished" object we take off our shelf and hold in our hands. Every book trails its phantom early versions that go unread, fated to be published in heaven, a writer may vainly hope, but denied a readership on earth. In Malcolm Lowry's day, handwritten and typed manuscripts began as sketches in a notepad or on a napkin, which were transformed into successive drafts that were then set aside, lost, or intentionally destroyed before the final handful of pages was chosen that became a book. If we could recover all the different versions of *Under the Volcano*, place them on the floor of a mammoth Museum of Lost Narratives, and read from the first jottings to the final printed sheet of the published book, would we necessarily choose to keep the final edited pages? A book is like a carefully planned landscape, like the elegantly crafted grid of Manhattan's Central Park or the paths on Montreal's Mountain. Like

these sites, a book triumphs over all its earlier, phantom versions — its hidden, wilder pathways, and buried ghosts.

### The Garden

In a lifetime of often fretful, but more or less constant writing, Lowry allowed himself to stop revising two books of fiction, *Ultramarine* and *Under the Volcano*. The narratives called *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid*, *La Mordida*, and “The Forest Path to the Spring” burgeoned and grew wildly like the lush B.C. landscape. Drafts and notes for *Dark as the Grave* were 730 pages long in 1952 when Lowry stowed them in a safety deposit box (*Sursum* 592); a year and a half later he wrote of 2000 pages “reposing” in a bank vault, over and above the work he’d completed on his major projects (*Sursum* 704). *Under the Volcano* — substantially rewritten numerous times, rejected by publishers in a variety of forms — found its final shape while Lowry and his wife Margerie Bonner lived in a squatter’s shack on the foreshore of Burrard Inlet, across the water from Vancouver.

The longer Lowry lived at Dollarton, the more complex his fictional ruminations on the landscape became. A great deal of his work is dedicated to rethinking his personal and literary challenges against the backdrop of the inlet and the larger sweep of coastal history and story it presented. The landscape was for Lowry, to use the words of American historian Simon Schama, “a text on which” he wrote his “recurring obsessions” (12). And this habit, according to W.H. New in his recent study *Land Sliding*, is part of a tradition as old as European settlement in North America:

Canadians ... have long thought of themselves in connection with the land. As scores of writings indicate, they are fascinated by distance and scenery, park and farm, property and region, river system and mountain range, “cottage country,” religious codes involving nature, and the staples they can produce from the land and use in trade. (17)

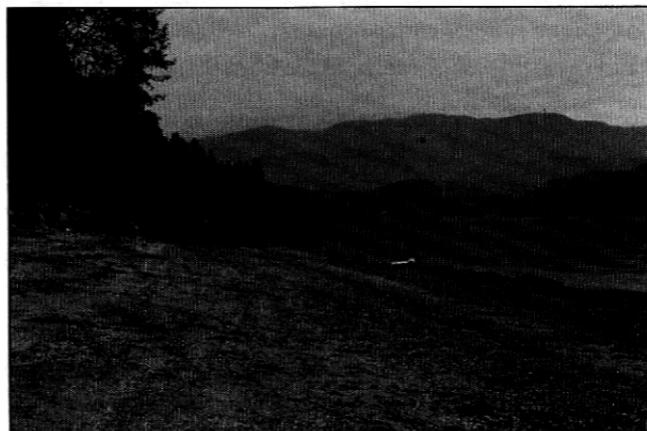
In this paper I will enact an excavation, not only of Lowry’s version of Dollarton, but an excavation “below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface” of the place (Schama 14). Just as novels and stories come trailing their phantom early drafts that are forgotten or abandoned, so the shores of Burrard Inlet have their hidden early versions, which have been largely written out of the final narrative of the landscape.

In a 1945 letter Lowry describes his shack and its neighbours along the Dollarton Flats as “the last example of such pioneer activity on the Vancouver waterfront” (*Selected* 50). This sense of Dollarton as a place

to begin anew in an unspoiled world returns again and again in Lowry's fiction. "The Forest Path to the Spring," a story he worked on until late in his life, includes a kind of psalm to the unfettered, solitary existence that could be led at Dollarton. Upon first arriving on the beach, Lowry's narrator finds summering city folk baking clams, and the remnants of an oil slick loosed from a tanker, but the narrator and his wife recognize the promise of "absolute emptiness and solitude" on this tidal-flat "covered with huge barnacled rocks ... and exoskeletons of crabs" (227-28). There is something primordial and benignly inhuman about the place, with its stinking tidal wash and ancient stones. For the narrator in "The Forest Path to the Spring," Dollarton is at first a people-less landscape. "For the greater part of the year," he tells us, calling his home by the mythic name Lowry gives it in his fiction, "we were often almost alone in Eridanus ... we were quite alone the whole winter" (216). The narrator imagines that his beach house and its surroundings exist outside history, or, at least, as part of a prehistory forgotten by modern men and women. He describes the wooden piles that support his shack as being

like a strange huge cage where some amphibious animal might have lived ... when often at low tide, resetting a cross-brace, amidst the seaweed smells, I felt as if I were down in the first slime ... I delighted in the simplicity of the stresses of the foundations I was looking at ... [which] were of course above ground, as in the most primitive of all houses. ("Forest" 232)

In *Under the Volcano* this forest life, outside the rush of world history, appears as a figment of the Consul's imagination and as an antidote to personal collapse:



*Dollarton Flats*  
Looking toward  
Deep Cove

I seem to see now, between mescals, this path, and beyond it strange vistas, like visions of a new life ... I seem to see us living in some northern country, of mountains and hills and blue water; our house is built on an inlet and one evening we are standing, happy in one another ... looking over the water. (36-37)

## Myth

When Lowry arrived at Dollarton in 1940 there were two important established communities in the area — one of which interested him greatly and entered the version of the landscape he would tell in his fiction; the other remained more or less out of his view and invisible to his readers. Lowry came to know and love the little community of deep-sea fishermen who had built many of the shacks that lined the Dollarton flats. A number of these men were transplanted Britishers like Lowry, and his respect for them seems to have been partly founded on a sentimental attachment to his roots and his own seafaring youth. In “The Forest Path to the Spring” Lowry depicts this fishing community as a “sort of town, by the sawmill round the northward point,” where “two hamlets” — one made up of shacks with names and another of houses without names — could be found. The owners of houses with names like “Hangover” and “Wywurk” were “town-dwellers earning good salaries” who came to their beach shacks “for the week end in summer, or for a summer holiday of a week or two” (“Forest” 220-21). Lowry viewed such people as interlopers who passed time on the beach until they could afford to buy ritzier summer cottages.

In the unnamed houses dwelt fishermen who Lowry says were accorded some kind of “foreshore rights” because of their trade. In “The Forest Path to the Spring” Lowry’s narrator watches their departure in early summer as if they are journeymen in an unsung Canadian epic: “these fishermen,” he writes, “went away, sometimes singly, sometimes in pairs, sometimes three or four boats joined together ... newly painted fishing boats with their tall gear would be seen going round the point” (222). Around Labour Day, just as the weekenders went back to the city, these men would reappear to reconstitute what Lowry describes as a kind of sacred tribe:

The unmarried fisherman often lent their shacks to their friends in the summer, but they were sacrosanct when they returned.... The attitude of the solitary fisherman toward his shack, and his boat, was not dissimilar. In effect his love for the one was like his love for the other.

... their little cabins were shrines of their own integrity and independence, something that this type of human being, who seems almost to have disappeared, realizes can only be preserved without the evil of gossip. And actually each man's life was in essence a mystery.

("Forest" 245)

The shacks of these men are like monkish retreats, as integral to their surroundings as a "Shinto temple is [to] the Japanese landscape" ("Forest" 232). The fishermen of Dollarton are honourable, in Lowry's view, for being removed from all modern coastal developments. It is their outsider status that marks them as endangered apostles of a truer existence. In the story "The Bravest Boat" Lowry describes their shacks as

the only human dwellings visible on this side of the water that had any air of belonging ... some dark and tumbledown, others freshly and prettily painted ... all standing, even the most somber, with their fluted tin chimneys smoking here and there like toy tramp steamers, as though in defiance of the town, before eternity. (17)

Among the urban vulgarians, the devotees of Mammon, the lives of these men represent an "indefinable goodness, even a kind of greatness" ("Forest" 232).

Here Lowry revises his view of the landscape; it is no longer seen to be an archaic, people-less site, but instead, hallowed ground where monks perform their honest work and the sunset, cloud, and mountain behind the cedars take on the silhouette of a "blaze behind the pinnacles of a Gothic cathedral" ("Forest" 228). In one of the ecstatic and meditative sections of "The Forest Path to the Spring," Lowry's narrator describes himself "getting water, like some poverty-stricken priest pacing in the aisles of a great cathedral at dusk ... counting his beads and reciting his paternoster" (251). In *Under the Volcano* the characters daydream about a Canadian coastal idyll where dwellers turn toward the northeast like devotees in a vast prayer house whose only canopy is the "white white distant alabaster thunderclouds beyond the mountains, the thunderless gold lightning in the blue evening, unearthly" (37). In contrast with the hellish Mexican landscape, the inlets of British Columbia are adorned like the inner sanctum of some holy of holies, washed in imperial gold and purple, the sky a vaulted ceiling covered in a fresco of sculpted clouds worthy of Michelangelo.

The mythic reference points Lowry uses to imbue the Dollarton landscape with meaning are heterodox and haphazard. Shortly after ex-

perceiving his ecstatic, saintly moment in the forest, the narrator of "The Forest Path to the Spring" is told by a fellow wanderer that the path he walks on is named for Proteus, the shape-shifting sea god who served Poseidon (255). And into the inlet's sky-view, which seems to imitate the great Catholic cathedrals, Lowry welcomes a mist that looks like "a huge family wash, the property of Titans, hanging out to dry between the folds of their lower hills. At other times all was chaos, and Valkyries of storm-drift drove across them out of the ever reclouding heavens" ("Forest" 215). In contrast with this forest sanctuary, Lowry fixates on the fleshpots and ash heaps of Vancouver, a short ride across the inlet, strangely demonizing a city that appears, to almost every visitor's eye, to be the most benign of urban enclaves.

### Burial

In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama tells us that the idea of "the healing wilderness" is "as much the product of culture's craving and culture's framing as any other imagined garden" (7). For Dollarton to be framed in these terms its human history had to be carefully rewritten. The fishermen are raised to the status of mythic figures — timeless symbols of a sacred bond with the landscape. The other long-established community in the area — that of the Squamish First Nation — is more or less edited out of the ideal; in the process the landscape that was the work of the Squamish imagination is rendered invisible to Lowry's readers. Well into the late nineteenth century there were substantial Squamish settlements on both sides of the Burrard Inlet. On the north shore the largest village, called *Homulcheson*, was just east of where the Lion's Gate now sets its iron footprint on the land. Further east, near the centre of what is now North Vancouver, was *Ustlawn*. Today these sites would be no more than 20 minutes from Dollarton by car. Back across the inlet was *Snaug*, where the foot of the Burrard Bridge is now; *A-yuo-shun* at English Bay; *Chay-Hoos* at Prospect Point; and *E-yal-mough* where the Jericho beach and sailing centre is now (Matthews 40). At the spot we call Lumberman's Arch in Stanley Park there was a large and ancient village known as *Whoi-Whoi*. When Captain Vancouver sailed into Burrard Inlet in 1792 he saw huge cedar slab meeting houses there. Of his early morning sail through the inlet he wrote:

we were met by about fifty Indians in canoes, who conducted themselves with great decorum and civility, presenting us with several fish cooked and undressed of a sort resembling smelt. (qtd. in Matthews 204)

Though Vancouver and his men were mesmerized by the canoes full of Squamish who greeted their arrival, his journal reports that as he passed through the inlet he saw no villages on either shore. Since the Squamish villages were set back from the beaches, hidden by the towering forest that grew almost to the shore's edge, they went unremarked.

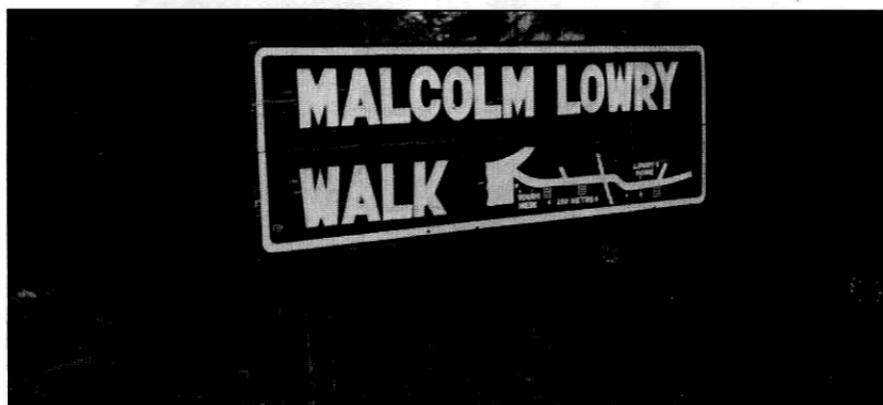
The Squamish are invisible in Lowry's version of Dollarton. By the time he arrives on the beach most of their villages and cemeteries had been uprooted and much of the native population had been gathered onto the reserves that dot the North Shore. In the thousands of pages Lowry wrote during his years at Dollarton, references to native culture are remarkably rare. In "The Forest Path to the Spring" he draws an analogy between his narrator's awareness of a wrathful world he feels closing in on him and the "dreadful Wendigo, the avenging, man-hating spirit of the wilderness, the fire-tortured forest, that the Indians feared and believed in still" (243). And without acknowledging the replacement of Squamish villages by a burgeoning European-settled cosmopolis, Lowry does note that the pace of subdivision around Dollarton was slowed as developers found themselves "baffled by the Indian reserve" ("Forest" 276). The Squamish coastal landscape, with its network of villages, its massive cedar plank meeting houses, and its busy canoe traffic did not exist for Lowry; its markings on the coast had been so thoroughly forgotten, rubbed out, they were rendered unreadable.

But it might be argued that much of Lowry's response to the Dollarton landscape was a project, not of recovery, but of forgetting. The yearning most commonly expressed in both his fiction and his correspondence is for a life outside of history. "How easy it is for people," says one of his notably autobiographical narrators, "to talk about the benefits of civilization, who've never known the far greater benefits of not having anything to do with it at all!" ("Gin" 207). In his stunning portraits of Dollarton, Lowry's aim is not to place his characters within what Vancouver architect Richard Henriquez calls a "theatre of memory," which is built of narratives that "resonate with the history of a specific place; a history which includes both the built and the natural world, real and fictional pasts" (Shubert 44). Lowry's narrators pursue a loss of memory and of self; they resort to myth and ecstatic wilderness meditations in an effort to merge with the mysterious "eternal flux and change" they recognize in the tidal waters ("Forest" 234). And they enter at Eridanus a magical, even sacred time, which they hope will kick them clear of the suffering and unpredictability of daily life. For the couple at the centre of Lowry's *October Ferry to Gabriola*, the house they fear losing on the Burrard Inlet is "a gift of grace." It presents the

very immediacy of the eternities ... antiquity of mountains, forest, and sea, conspired on every hand to reassure and protect them, as with the qualities of their own seeming permanence ... Eridanus, with its eternal fishermen and net-festooned cabins bordering that inlet of the same name, whose ceaseless wandering yet ordered motions were like eternity. (79)

### Monument

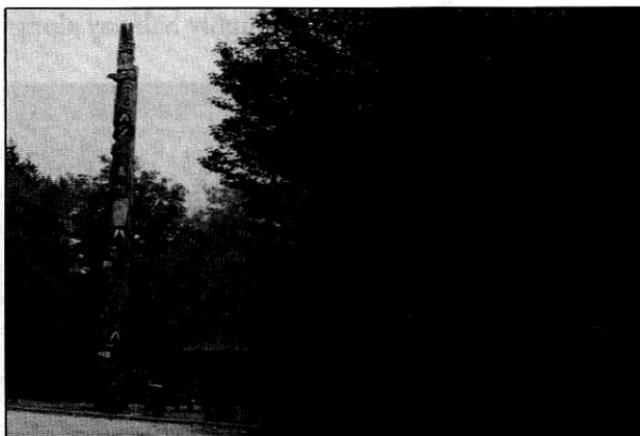
For more than thirty years after the Lowrys abandoned their shack, Malcolm Lowry's presence on the Dollarton landscape went unmarked. The Dollarton beach was cleaned up to the liking of the local rate payers, and the forest — renamed Cates Park after a local pioneering family — was reshaped, partially cleared for a more suburban look. Pine trees were planted to replace the scattering of blackberry bushes, and grass replaced the untidy forest floor. Then, in the late 1980s, in what might be the strangest development of all, the city of North Vancouver reclaimed Lowry as one of its own after hounding him off its beaches with numerous eviction notices. A commemorative plaque was erected in honour of the years he spent working at Dollarton. A path through the forest was named The Malcolm Lowry Walk, and roughly halfway along it a set of



steps leading down to a wood platform on the beach was built to mark what is supposed to have been the site of Lowry's shack. The Malcolm Lowry Walk is the most recent addition to a weird array of objects gathered on the grassy hills of Cates Park. Among these is an old anchor donated by the Cates family. There is a pockmarked cement sculpture of a seal. There is a brick concession stand and a parking lot. Two weathered



totem poles seem to grow out of the grass, and inside a cedar and mesh structure the size of a large garage sits a war canoe, circa 1920, which was carved by the Squamish Chief Peter George. Lowry's fictions of Dollarton's past belong among the exhibits of this haphazard "memory theatre."



The totems, the seal, the anchor, the platform that rather decorously recalls the squatters, offer us a variety of markers we can use to situate ourselves within the history of the area, for the inlet "is a line of time as well as a space." Its scenery is "built up as much from strata of memory" as from layers of rock, and cedar, and tidal deposit (Schama 5, 7). Like Lowry, we cannot imagine all the buried landscapes that haunt the shore, hidden from sight and edited out of the final narrative like the first scratch of an author's pen as he begins, then changes his mind, then begins again.

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End of Lowry Walk (marking site of Dollarton shacks)