‘The Lad I Knew So Well’

Transcription of presentation at the 2025 Lowry Lounge by Bryan Biggs and Helen Tookey

Our annual celebration of Malcolm Lowry focuses this year on his early years. Our presentation will include rarely seen photographs from his childhood home in Caldy and is followed this afternoon by a coach and walking tour of the Wirral, visiting some of the places in the photographs: where he lived, his haunts - places that appear in his writing, both real and fictionalised.

We’d like to thank Sarah Lowry for permission to use a set of images from two photo albums that depict life at the large family house, ‘Inglewood’, in Caldy, and summer holiday trips. We’d also like to thank Denis Moran for the loan of the original deeds to the house where Malc was born in 1909, which we are also going to talk about. A special thanks should also go to Colin Dilnot, foremost Lowry Wirral scholar whose research is published in the book we edited, *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World* and which also informs our talk today.

The stimulus for this talk was the family photo albums that Sarah revealed to us, one at last year’s Lounge, the other on a visit to the Isle of Man as part of Alan Dunn’s creative research project we’ve just heard about, *Hear Us O Lord…* These photos are accompanied in many instances by captions written by one of Lowry’s older brothers, Russell, and these are included on some of the slides. A few pictures have been reproduced in biographies and volumes of critical essays on Lowry, but most have never been seen beyond the family. They are a remarkable document of a well-to-do family on the Wirral in the early decades of the twentieth century.

As well as allowing us a glimpse into this black and white world from a century ago, we think the photos can add to and enrich our understanding of Malcolm’s early years and perhaps challenge his own mythologisation about his ‘unhappy’ childhood, his ‘perpetual suffering’, as Russell recalled Malcolm saying when asked by his father, on his twenty-first birthday, to say what he recalled from childhood (Gordon Bowker, p. 111). Russell’s captions do have a

dig at his younger brother's perceived hypochondria and sense of victimhood but, equally, he also remembers 'The lad I knew so well' with fondness.

The belief that, in later life, Malcolm had no time for his family (nor they for him) seems to be in stark contrast to his infant and teenage years revealed in these photos. We'll explore the 'caring' Lowry, the Lowry we see in his short story 'Elephant and Colosseum', and as expressed in letters written regularly to his mother. He may have shunned the business ethos of his father and brothers, yet we see in these images an ease with this domestic West Wirral environment, a comfortable existence before wars in Europe and Lowry's own inner demons turned the world upside down.

And we will examine what 'home' meant for Lowry; and how 'imagined' was his idyll, wherever that might be: the dunes and golf courses of Wirral, boats and beaches on the Isle of Man, the garden in Cuernavaca from which he feared expulsion, and Dollarton's waterside Eden, living in a shack with Margerie.

With Liverpool conceptualised as 'the terrible city', it was the Wirral that was Lowry's world, the place he knew so well and would weave into his literature – unlike the more celebrated Wirralian poet. Wilfred Owen.

Though he did not write about the house where he was born, New Brighton remained important for Lowry, within the topography of the Wirral, where the river meets the sea. The town is referenced most clearly in his first novel, *Ultramarine,* where Lowry in the guise of deckhand Dana Hilliott experiences harsh treatment at the hands of the rest of the crew who resent this privileged boy's presence on this, his maiden voyage. New Brighton's lighthouse is one of several on the Wirral that the young Lowry would have known, a symbol that appears metaphorically in his work, from the lighthouse that 'invites the storm' to the farolito when the Consul meets his end in *Under the Volcano.*

Today, the town recognises its famous literary son with a blue plaque strategically placed on the prom, looking out to sea, where 'the smoke of freighters outward bound from Liverpool hung low on the horizon'.

As this chronology of Lowry's early years shows, he lived in two houses on the Wirral and, after a local preparatory school, attended two boarding schools in other parts of the country. So, for much of his youth he was away from home, returning only during holidays. Colin Dilnot managed to trace the whereabouts of his prep school, Braeside, in 2008

Let's look at the home where he was born. Lowry's parents were both born in the 'respectable lower-middle-class district of Toxteth Park' in Liverpool. At 15, Arthur started work as office boy with a shipping company; by 19 he was an accountant with the cotton brokers A.J. Buston & Co, and by 21 he was a junior partner. (He eventually rose to be in charge of the company, with his sons Stuart and Wilfrid as partners.) Arthur and Evelyn were married in June 1894 and six months later moved from Toxteth to Wallasey. They moved around a lot, in what Bowker calls 'a flight from origins': Stuart was born in 1895 at Churchill Grove in Liscard; Wilfrid in 1900 in Sandrock Road; and Russell in 1905 and Malcolm in 1909 at 'Warren Crest', 13 North Drive. Here is an image of a visit we made to the house - opposite where we are standing - for a previous Lounge.

Quite a few puzzles surround Lowry's birthplace. His older brother Russell, in an article in the *Malcolm Lowry Review* in 1987, claimed that the house 'isn't there anymore. Wallasey suffered heavy bomb damage during WW2. I understand the site has been redeveloped'. This is puzzling because Colin's researches using OS maps and electoral registers showed that the house numbers on the 'odd' (inland) side of the road haven't changed since 1909, none of them were bombed, and that the Lowrys were definitely living at no. 13, named Warren Crest, in 1909.

More recently, we've unearthed another puzzle due to the generosity of Denis Moran, who until recently was living at 13 North Drive (in the top flat - the house has been divided into two flats for several decades) and met up with us to lend us the deeds to the house. What was interesting was that the Lowrys weren't mentioned anywhere in the deeds - they clearly never owned 13 North Drive. The plot had been sold by Sir Ford North and Frederic North, who'd inherited it from their father, to the German-born, Wirral-based developer David Benno Rappart, who'd sold it on to the builder William Bellis, who'd built the house and sold

it to a Joseph Brown, all of which was regularised with a legal deed in 1906, making Joseph Brown the owner of 13 North Drive.

Subsequent deeds showed the house passing to other owners, but the Lowrys are never mentioned. So, it's possible that they were renting the house. This is perhaps made more likely because Rappart (as we'll go on to talk about) was the developer who had bought the Caldy Manor Estate and was developing it as a 'des res' area for affluent local businessmen. What confuses things, though, is a plan attached to the 1906 deeds, showing clearly outlined the site of 13 North Drive and with the Lowry name attached to a different house, two doors down. Does this suggest that the Lowrys' house was actually what is now 17, and that maybe the numbers on the road did change at some point? We aren't sure. (It maybe makes it all the better that the blue plaque is on the seafront and not on the house!)

Although the Lowrys moved from New Brighton to Caldy when Malcolm was only two, the place where the River Mersey meets and mingles with the Irish Sea would always retain its symbolic significance in Lowry's writing and thinking. It's that mingling of river and sea that would be echoed at Dollarton, the little community of shack-dwellers on the Burrard Inlet, near Vancouver, where Malcolm and his second wife Margerie lived from 1940 until 1954, and which would be the setting for most of his later writing. And it's remarkable, if you go to Dollarton, just how it does echo the landscape here, the way you're looking out over the water to the hills - and the oil refinery - on the other side.

Lowry wrote beautifully of the tidal inlet at Dollarton, for instance in his lovely novella 'The Forest Path to the Spring': 'But here in the inlet there was neither sea nor river, but something compounded of both, in eternal movement, and eternal flux and change'. But his affinity with that landscape was deeply grounded in what Paul Tiessen calls his 'originary topography': the Wirral peninsula and the two rivers, the Mersey and the Dee, flowing out into the Irish Sea.

Whatever the facts about North Drive, at some point Arthur made the acquaintance of David Benno Rappart and was impressed with his plans for Caldy. He bought a parcel of land, hired a builder, and 'Inglewood' was built: the Lowrys moved in on 6 September 1911, Russell's

sixth birthday; Malcolm was two. 'Inglewood' would be the family home he knew and grew up in, and the landscape of Caldy and views across the Dee would find their ways into his writing.

This is especially true of the novel he worked on in the early 1930s, but which wasn't published until long after his death, *In Ballast to the White Sea*. In this novel, the protagonist is the student son of a shipping-line owner whose family home is in Caldy, complete with chauffeur and tennis-court - modelled exactly on Inglewood. There are beautiful descriptions of the view out across the Dee as the protagonist, Sigbjorn, and his father play golf at Caldy and walk along the beach. Later, in *Under the Volcano,* Lowry would set a crucial part of the backstory further up the coast, using elements of West Kirby, Hoylake and Meols, and the Royal Liverpool golf course, to create a composite location, which he calls 'Leasowe'. But in *In Ballast to the White Sea,* we see a very accurate depiction of the Caldy that was Lowry's childhood home.

The images from the family albums show life at 'Inglewood', photos of Malcolm - young an innocent - dressed in a fashionable sailor's top, with his Dad, playing in the garden. One has to remember that, when some of these early photos were taken, Britain was at war, and one wonders to what extent the young Malcolm was aware of this conflict. We see no toy soldiers, but evidence instead of halcyon days, of a carefree life 'making hay', and Malc always smiling

And there is an overriding sense of a sporting life, in which all the family participated: cricket, swimming, sailing and golf – Arthur was both a golfing and a swimming champion, Wilfrid played rugby for Birkenhead Park and England, and Malcolm too recorded his own sporting achievement in golf.

Those of you who came on the 'golf tour' we did in 2015 will know how important golf was in Lowry's writing, and that started - as these photos show - very early in his life. Golf was 'built in' to Caldy: as part of the development, Rappart wanted a golf course, so he commissioned Jack Morris, the head professional at the Royal Liverpool, to design a nine-hole course. The course was opened in 1907, and the original clubhouse was built in

1908. Arthur became the club's first official captain in 1920 (when we contacted the club, they confirmed that A.C. Lowry is present on their 'Captains' Board' and in their 'Past Captains' framed portraits!).

In *In Ballast to the White Sea*, Lowry has his protagonist Sigbjorn play a round of golf with his father at Caldy; the chapter describes the round, and the course, in absolutely accurate detail. He even mentions that the course is in the process of expanding from a nine-hole to an eighteen-hole course, which did indeed happen in 1930; so, the course now extends onto the other side of the railway line, and the clubhouse is at the far side of the course.

Golf features - both literally and as a metaphor for life - in almost all of Lowry's writing and shows how significant it was for him, even though he gave up playing, having been a very promising junior golfer (as we'll see later, on the tour). In *Under the Volcano* when Geoffrey is at Jacques' house looking out over the town, watching people play golf in the distance, there's a beautiful passage which starts 'It was as if they were standing on a lofty golf-tee somewhere', and ends 'what strange fairways could be contrived, crossed by lone railway lines, humming with telegraph poles, glistening with crazy lies on embankments, over the hills and far away, like youth, like life itself' - we can clearly see the Caldy landscape in this.

Arthur ensured that all his boys swam, a passion that stayed with Malcolm throughout his life. Sailing too was a feature especially during summer holidays as we will see when we look at more holiday snaps.

Mostly, even on holiday, the boys are in their Sunday best when photographed. Malcolm is in short trousers but, as we shall see in the later photos, he too dons long ones as he prepares to fly the nest. In his captions, Russell pays great attention to the uniforms the boys are wearing, partly to help identify the year the photographs were taken. After Braeside, Malcolm followed his brothers to two boarding schools, Caldicott and The Leys. The first of these is referenced in one of the family albums: one postcard from Caldicott School to Lowry's mother informs her that Malcolm's jersey was too small and is being replaced, and that he is very 'well and jolly'. For the group photo on the reverse, Russell identifies himself and possibly Malcolm.

It's lovely to see the images of family holidays on the Isle of Man, because the island is particularly important in Lowry's later writing, so, again, he's drawing on an aspect of his childhood. When Malcolm and Margerie were living in the shack in Dollarton, one of their shack-dwelling neighbours was a Manxman, a boatbuilder named Jimmy Craige. Their friendship with Craige fused with Lowry's own childhood memories of the island to become an important strand in the short stories he was working on, posthumously published as *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. 'Hear Us O Lord…' is a Manx fisherman's hymn, and it becomes the framework for the stories, printed at the beginning, an appeal to God's mercy in our tempest tossed lives: 'When loud the storm and furious is the gale, Strong is Thine arm, our little barks are frail'.

The character of the Manx boatbuilder recurs throughout the stories as a kind of spiritual guide for the little community of fishermen and shack-dwellers, and Lowry beautifully invokes him: 'Sometimes when it was stormy, in the later days, we used to sit in his shack strewn with a litter-like neatness, with bradawls and hacksaws, frows and nailsets and driftbolts, and drink tea, or when we had any, whisky, and sing the old Manx fishermen's hymn while the tempest howled across the inlet' ('Forest Path', p. 221)

One of the stories in particular, 'Elephant and Colosseum', not only draws the most strongly on Lowry's Isle of Man connections, it's also the place in which - through his fictional protagonist - he works through the emotions surrounding the death of his mother. The prevailing narrative (e.g. from Bowker) is that Evelyn Lowry was quite cold and distant and that the boys weren't close to her, but Sherrill Grace, in her notes to the *Collected Letters*, questions this. She notes that most of Lowry's letters to Evelyn haven't survived, but that 'it's clear that Malcolm wrote regularly to his mother and that many of these letters have been lost', adding 'The precise quality and nature of her relationship with her youngest "boy" may never be confirmed, but that they communicated in later years with humour and affection seems clear' (*Letters, II,* p. 174).

In 'Elephant and Colosseum', the protagonist is a writer from the Isle of Man who's in Rome attempting to meet the publisher of a translation of his book, but what he's also doing is

trying to come to terms with the death of his mother. It's a very moving depiction of this loss and grief, and what's particularly interesting in the story is Cosnahan's sense of sadness that his parents didn't live to see his literary success. He reflects: 'Ah, this was what hurt, that his "making good" had come too late; his father was dead, his mother was dead'. Arthur had died in 1945, and Evelyn died, unexpectedly, at the end of 1950; it was during the following year that Malcolm worked on 'Elephant and Colosseum' and you can really see this sense of loss in the story.

There's also a particularly interesting letter written by Malcolm to his eldest brother Stuart in October 1950, so just a few weeks before Evelyn's death (although he obviously didn't know that when he was writing). It's a classic Lowry letter - basically he's asking Stuart for money, but he frames it in a highly entertaining way, dramatically describing all his and Margie's trials and tribulations. But what is really interesting is that at one point he quotes, or slightly misquotes, a famous line from a poem by Robert Frost: 'I begin even to think', he writes, 'of the saying, "Home is the place where, when they have to, they take you in". But where indeed is that, unless here? Margerie's mother lives 4000 miles away in America, mine 10000'. It's intriguing because, on the one hand, he's saying that 'home' can only be where they actually are, in Dollarton; but on the other hand, he's appealing to Stuart using the idea of 'home' as the place you're from - and in a way, the place where your mother is. Later in the letter he suggests that he might even write directly to Evelyn asking for help, and he says with characteristic Lowry humour 'Damn it, I shall always remember she once gave me a three-penny bit'.

He also says something very revealing about his father, in a letter to David Markson a few months later, describing Arthur as 'by way of being a capitalist on the grand scale - good man though he was'. And he adds 'I often felt myself a kind of item on the business agenda'. It's clear that he felt he didn't fit in with Arthur's businessman's values, but it's also clear that he thought of him as a 'good man' and one who had tried to do his best, just as he clearly also had an emotional attachment to his mother. So, I think it's lovely to see in these photos a slightly different side to the story that's often told, and even to the story that Lowry himself sometimes told, of alienation and a childhood of 'perpetual suffering'.

Other holiday destinations are featured in the albums including Stonehenge. And Guernsey, where Lowry delights in catching lobsters and Russell remarks, in one of his captions, on his brother's knees, injured in a cycling accident in Caldy, hence possibly his subsequent use of a walking stick; and, again, using a walking stick, at Budleigh Salterton in Devon. Russell explains in one caption that 'after 1924 there were no more family holidays [presumably he means to the Isle of Man]. But this particular year we went to Budleigh Salterton … the Minerva is seen with Arthur peering from behind Barclay's Bank, on the look out for cigarette smoke - or worse! Malcolm is 15. This is the year in which he was supposed to win the schoolboy Golf Championship'. The family car features a lot throughout the albums and cycling too was the boys' favoured mode of transport.

The final images feature Malcolm as a young man, having left the Leys and on his way to Cambridge, pipe-smoking and confident. We see, too, Russell attempting to play Lowry's ukulele which Malcolm christened his 'taropatch'. The image on the left does not appear in the two family albums we have drawn from in this presentation. It was reproduced in Douglas Day's biography of Lowry, but the source is not indicated, so there may be another album of photographs yet to be identified.

At the back of one of the albums, in a small envelope, we discovered a walnut tree leaf - presumably from the garden at 'Inglewood'.

After the deaths of Arthur and Evelyn, it fell to the four brothers to sell 'Inglewood'. Lowry describes this process in a letter to his close friend and editor, Albert Erskine, in March 1951, in characteristically humorous terms that at the same time manage to suggest the complicated emotional relationship he felt himself to have with his family and his family home:

> 'I'm still waiting to hear further word from England. My brothers are selling the family estate and the old homestead but according to the terms of my father's will - since my old man wanted to keep the house in the family if possible - it could not be sold without agreement between all four brothers and the other three having declined - how to keep it up? - it fell to me. By a strange coincidence the letter asking my ratification by cable was delayed 3 weeks during which time [...] they'd had an

> offer [...] Actually I delayed only two hours before sending the cable, enjoying therein the strange sensation, as it were, of technically being the owner, for those two hours, of Wuthering Heights. I must say that it had occurred to me that if one couldn't keep up the house no one could stop me putting up a shack on the grounds, but Margie persuaded me this was impractical.' (*Letters, II*, p. 340)

We will finish where we started, with the young Malcolm sitting outdoors at his desk in 1914: in a way, he had already created his shack there, outside the summer house in the garden at 'Inglewood'.