

MALCOLM LOWRY CENTENARY EVENTS DIARY

OCTOBER

Tuesday 6 / 6.30 – 7.30pm
the Bluecoat, FREE
Artist's talk: Bellevue: Lowry and New York
with Paul Rooney

Wednesday 7 / 6.30pm
FACT, Tickets £7/£5.50/£5
Film: Under the Volcano (15) *Dir. John Huston, 1984*
introduced by Mark Goodall

Saturday 10 / 8 – 9.30pm
the Bluecoat, Tickets £5
Dance: A Lining of Bees
Angus Balbernie

Wednesday 14 / 6 – 7.15pm
the Bluecoat, Tickets £3/£2
Talk: Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry
with Gordon Bowker (Part of Chapter & Verse literature festival)

Thursday 15 / 1 – 2.30pm
the Bluecoat, FREE
Discussion: Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*
led by Literature in Pubs

Saturday 17 / 12 – 1pm
the Bluecoat, FREE
Exhibition tour: The Lighthouse Invites the Storm
with Bryan Biggs

Tuesday 20 / 6.30 – 7.30pm
the Bluecoat, FREE
Artists' talk: Lowry and *Under the Volcano*
Ross Birrell, David Harding, Julian Cooper

Saturday 31 / 9am – 9pm
Wirral/Liverpool/the Bluecoat
Tickets to be announced
Psychogeographical Day: The Voyage That Never Ends
Hosted by the Firminists
(ferry/bus tour, walking, films, talk, live music)

NOVEMBER

Sunday 1 / 1 – 4pm
the Bluecoat, FREE
Interactive installation: Malcolm Lowry Day of the Dead Altar
Javier Calderon & participants

Tuesday 3 / 6.30 – 7.30pm
the Bluecoat, FREE
Artists' talk: Lowry, the Isle of Man and the Day of the Dead
Cian Quayle, Pete Flowers

Tuesday 10 / 7.30 – 8.45pm
the Bluecoat, FREE
Talk: Malcolm Lowry's Merseyside
with Colin Dilnot

Tuesday 17 / 6.30pm
FACT, Tickets £7/£5.50/£5
Film: The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (U) *Dir. Robert Weine, 1920*

Thursday 19 – Sunday 22
Please check for times
the Bluecoat, FREE
Poetry reading The Poetry of Nordahl Grieg
Part of NICE Nordic festival

Saturday 21 / 8 – 9.30pm
the Bluecoat, Tickets £5
Song cycle: The Re-entry of Malcolm Lowry into Liverpool
Ian McMillan, Luke Carver Goss, Sense of Sound

Every Saturday / 2pm
the Bluecoat, FREE
Exhibition Tours: Under the Volcano

the Bluecoat, School Lane, Liverpool L1 3BX.
www.thebluecoat.org.uk Tickets and Information 0151 702 5324

at the Bluecoat.

UNDER THE VOLCANO

AN EXHIBITION FOR
MALCOLM LOWRY
1909 – 1957



25 SEPTEMBER – 22 NOVEMBER 2009
OPEN DAILY / 10.00AM – 6.00PM / FREE

EXHIBITION GUIDE

at the Bluecoat.

INTRODUCTION

The Bluecoat's celebration of the centenary of writer Malcolm Lowry (born New Brighton, 1909) includes this special exhibition alongside a programme of performances and events. The exhibition takes its title from his best-known work, *Under the Volcano*, published in 1947. Set in Mexico, it is considered one of the most significant novels of the 20th century. Gabriel García Márquez described it as '*probably the novel that I have read the most times in my life. I would like not to have to read it any more but that would be impossible, for I shall not rest until I have discovered where its hidden magic lies*'.

Lowry has influenced not just writers, but artists working across the creative spectrum - painters, filmmakers, choreographers and musicians. This exhibition brings together contemporary visual artists from the UK and Latin America, who each respond to Lowry in different ways through painting, film, printmaking, sculpture, photography, drawing and installation. Much of the work relates to *Under the Volcano*, but other books and aspects of Lowry's life also provide the impetus.

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, and many points in between. 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. Like Lowry's own writing, much of the work here is multi-layered and can be read on several levels. Finding contemporary resonance in his work, the artists demonstrate that Malcolm Lowry is a writer very much for today.

Some of the works have been made especially for the exhibition, others selected from artists with a longstanding interest in Lowry. Others still, such as the paintings by Edward Burra, were created during Lowry's lifetime.

It is appropriate that the exhibition is taking place on Merseyside where Lowry was born a hundred years ago. He described Liverpool as '*that terrible city whose main street is the ocean*', and though he never returned, Liverpool and the Wirral peninsular where he grew up continued to haunt him, and local references appear often in his writing. The exhibition includes a timeline tracing key moments in Lowry's colourful life, which ended in 1957 in mysterious circumstances in a village in Sussex.

UNDER THE VOLCANO



Under the Volcano beats a drum for a civilisation teetering on the edge

John Hadley Williams, *The Guardian*, 26 June, 2007

Lowry's literary masterpiece, *Under the Volcano*, published in 1947, was conceived in Mexico and completed on the West coast of Canada where Lowry lived in a squatter's shack in Dollarton, near Vancouver. Set on the Mexican Day of the Dead in the town of Quauhnahuac (the ancient name for Cuernavaca), on the eve of the Second World War, *Under the Volcano* takes place in the shadow of the two volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, on the final day in the life of Geoffrey Firmin, an alcoholic ex-British consul.

The book is heavily autobiographical, with Lowry identifiable as the Consul who drinks to escape the modern world and its inhumanity, as well as his own sense of failure. Its central themes of guilt, remorse, self-destruction, eviction and endless struggle are universal but are imbued with Lowry's particular sense of place and his own inner world, rendered through his incandescent prose. Highly symbolic, with its allegory of the Garden of Eden, the novel - partly written in stream of consciousness - is influenced by James Joyce and earlier novelists such as Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad. Lowry himself saw the Consul as symbolising mankind's 'drunkenness' in the lead up to and during the war. In a letter about the book to publisher Jonathan Cape (January, 1946), he advises: '*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 superficial, profound, entertaining, and boring, according to taste. It is a prophecy, a political warning, a cryptogram, a preposterous movie*'.



THE EXHIBITION



Ross Birrell and David Harding: *Cuernavaca: A Journey in Search of Malcolm Lowry* (2006), film and installation. Courtesy the artists
Commissioned by Kunsthalle Basel for the exhibition, QUAUHNAHUAC: Die Gerade ist eine Utopie, 1 October - 12 November 2006

Ross Birrell and David Harding's *Cuernavaca: A Journey in Search of Malcolm Lowry* chases Lowry's ghost through the Mexican town that inspired his novel. Their film and installation is in two parts. In the upstairs gallery, surrounded by a lawn, a wall text is the Consul's mistranslation of a sign he encounters in a public garden next to his own. It should read 'Do you like this garden, which is yours? Make sure your children don't destroy it!' but instead it reflects Lowry's fear of being evicted, of being cast out from the Eden he had found at Dollarton.

The text in Spanish, repeated at the end of the book, provided the source for Birrell and Harding's installation, whose film, shown here in the Vide space outside the gallery entrance, revisits the final footsteps of the ex-Consul. It includes readings from Octavio Paz and Lowry, the painting of a mural/text from the novel, interviews with local people who claim to have met the author, a journey to the peaks of Popocatepetl and a ritual in which a spiritualist communicates with Lowry's tormented soul.

The artists describe how 'the mescal-infused poetic symbolism drawn from Dante to the Caballa, which informed the writing of *Under the Volcano*, was the inspiration for the composition of *Cuernavaca* – where the editing attempts to mirror Lowry's intoxicated syntax'.



Paul Rooney: *Bellevue* (2009), HD video. Co-commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella with the Bluecoat, in association with Harewood House, Leeds and Spacex, Exeter.

Paul Rooney's film *Bellevue* draws on Lowry's time in a psychiatric ward at New York's Bellevue Hospital in 1935, which informed his novella *Lunar Caustic*. Published posthumously in 1958, the book focuses on a failed English musician who befriends two other patients. Rooney was interested in the book's 'study of the disorientation of addiction and intoxication, but also in the idea of Lowry's voluntary attendance at *Bellevue* (he could check out when he liked), which parallels the privileged position that art has in relation to real life: it is always easier to visit desperate places when you know that you can leave at any time'.

In the film a man, 'Bill', is taking part in an advertising agency's focus group meeting, which is using the conference facilities of a beautiful English stately home. The focus group is discussing an ad campaign for US city break holidays. But Bill also appears to be acting out scenarios set in a 1930s New York psychiatric institution, in which he takes on the character of a failed jazz musician recovering from alcohol abuse. Eventually, this 1930s world, and the shadow it casts over the present, entirely disrupts the proceedings.

The artist says '*Bellevue* extends my interest in the artifice of narrative construction, and how this artifice is all we have to make sense of the world. I have adapted a pre-existing "found" text, and re-written and repositioned it in a new context. I am interested in language play, how differing "voices" – such as contemporary marketing speak or mid-20th century literary modernism – can be deliberately disrupted through collision to emphasise both their deceit and their formal delight'.



Adrian Henri: *The Day of the Dead, Hope Street* (1998), acrylic on canvas. Estate of Adrian Henri.

In his series of paintings and drawings, **Adrian Henri** (1932–2000) sets the Mexican Day of the Dead in contemporary Liverpool, populating Hope Street with a crowd including artists and writers William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Frida Kahlo, Ed Kienholz and Henri's Liverpool painter friend, Sam Walsh. In the main painting shown here the white suited, pipe-smoking figure on the far left is Malcolm Lowry.

Henri's partner Catherine Marcangeli describes his interest in the writer: *'He went to see the Day of the Dead exhibition at the Museum of Mankind, a visit that had immediate echoes with Lowry. He bought lots of paper-lace patterns, sweets in the shapes of skulls, and all manner of folkloric artifacts... when he painted the Day of the Dead years later those echoes were also mixed with a host of other references, the most important and obvious one being his own earlier painting, Entry of Christ into Liverpool, of which The Day of the Dead, Hope Street is a kind of new version, except that the "friends and heroes" are dead ones here.'*

There are other echoes, of a visit Henri made to a graveyard in Lorraine on the Day of the Toussaint (All Saints' Day in France, when people take flowers to the graves of dead friends or relatives), and of the eerie and sinister masks at the Basle Carnival.



Julian Cooper: *Bella Vista Hotel*, (1982), oil on canvas. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

The three paintings by **Julian Cooper** are from a series of seven completed in the 1980s entitled *Under the Volcano*. The novel was instrumental in the artist's search to develop a kind of abstract painting using figurative methods, one capable of taking on contemporary experience in the way that Lowry's novel does, with its intricate symbolism and a vivid representational surface. For Cooper the book *'had everything. It was set in a landscape, it was outer narrative and inner narrative as well, it had lots of references to literature and cabbalistic religion – it had all the complexity of a Renaissance painting.'*

Douglas Day's biography of Lowry in particular, linking the writer's life to his fiction, provided Cooper with a *'layering of myth and reality... I see the novel now as quite prophetic in the way that its leading metaphor applies as much to an "economic growth" as to an alcohol addiction'*.

Like Lowry's writing, the paintings are meticulously detailed and create a real sense of place and time, an evocation of Mexico and the book's setting. Each takes a particular episode from the book chosen for its self-sufficiency and symbolic power. They avoid being simply illustrative however, the structure and execution of the paintings echoing the complex layering of meaning found in Lowry's masterpiece. Despite the specific references, the paintings are autonomous, requiring no prior knowledge of the book.



Cian Quayle: *The Manx Arms – Photographs of Everyone I Have Ever Met with a Three Legs Tattoo* (1998, ongoing), C-type photograph. From the installation *The Voyage that Never Ends*.

Cian Quayle's film and photographs interrogate Lowry's fascination with the Isle of Man, which he visited as a child, the island being a popular holiday destination from Liverpool. Lowry also befriended a Manx boat builder, Jimmie Craige, when he lived at Dollarton. Craige was indispensable as carpenter and all round handyman, helping the Lowrys survive the harsh conditions. He also helped fuel Lowry's interest in Manx folklore.

Quayle, himself from the Isle of Man, '*first encountered Malcolm Lowry on the bookshelves of my father, and my interest in his life and writing is concerned with the way that fact and fiction, myth, folklore and history are interwoven in narratives of exile and return. His affinity with the sea, and the idea of the journey, are pertinent in my own work and wider research.*'

The installation here comprises a looped film taken on the ferry journey from Liverpool to Douglas, the island's capital, and a series of photographs of locations and other references made to the island in Lowry's writing, principally in the short story *Elephant and Colosseum*.



Pete Flowers: *Skulls and Flowers – Las Calaveras y las Flores*, (2008), oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

Pete Flowers' interest in Mexico was awakened by reading *Under the Volcano*. It introduced him to the Day of the Dead, which has become a life-long fascination. Flowers sees parallels between his work and Lowry's, for instance the way – as suggested by Michael Schmidt in the introduction to the book's current edition – that the writer's '*imagination exaggerates and distorts, forces connections and recurrences*'. Like Lowry's fiction, Flowers' paintings use montage technique and are worked over and over again, becoming dense and complex in the process. Like Lowry, he is also drawn to the spiritual, referencing Eastern beliefs and religions.

Of the paintings here, two refer directly to the book, interwoven with Flowers' experiences visiting Mexico, where '*you very quickly become aware of the fact that you are always under the volcano*'. *A Prayer for the Consul* is a memory of being mistaken for Christ in a cantina by a beggar who pinned two medallions of the virgin under his lapel. The idea for this painting and *A Prayer for Malcolm*, came from a votive candle of the Virgin of Guadalupe that Flowers' wife bought him. On the back of this is a prayer for those involved in the abuse of drugs and alcohol, although '*she claims not to have read the prayer when she bought it*'.



Jorge Martínez García: *Espiritus Del Mezcal* (2006), etching and intaglio on zinc, super alfa paper.
Courtesy of Craig Scott Gallery, Toronto.

Described as a 'Neo-Baroque' printmaker and painter, **Jorge Martínez García** has read and re-read Lowry's writings since first discovering *Under the Volcano* in Quito, Ecuador. Inspired by Lowry's famous letter to Jonathan Cape, in which he proposed there were at least five levels at which the book could be read, the writer has been a constant point of reference for the artist. The series of intaglio prints shown here demonstrates the way that Martínez interacts with Lowry in diverse and layered ways, each print being both compositionally and thematically complex. Many familiar elements from *Under the Volcano* are evident: the Consul, the volcano, an 'eternal' cantina, the ever present bottle of mescal, all rendered through Martínez's exquisite printmaking technique.

Martínez seeks to illuminate or, in a more metaphorical sense, circumnavigate Lowry's 'heraldic universe' (Lawrence Durrell) according to Martínez's own life experience and his own existential reading of Lowry's writings. Lowry has also motivated Martínez, an artist living and working in Chile, to reflect on Latin American realities in terms of what he calls 'our existence as culture and cosmivision'. Like D.H. Lawrence, Lowry represents for Martínez 'the outsider who is able to perceive other worlds with a universal sensibility'.



Edward Burra: *Skeleton Party* (circa 1952-54), watercolour on paper support.
The Estate of Edward Burra, courtesy Lefevre Fine Art, London.

Edward Burra (1905-1976) occupies a particular place in 20th century British art: represented in major collections yet remaining, like Malcolm Lowry, something of an outsider. He is best known for his satirical, often macabre paintings of 1920s and 1930s urban life, particularly its seedier side. He flirted with Surrealism and his allegorical works share some of its characteristics. Working mainly in watercolour, he imbued his art with 'a feeling of tawdriness and the meretricious and yet, at the same time, (created) such convincing beauty' (George Melly).

Despite constant ill health, Burra traveled widely, visiting Lowry in Cuernavaca in 1937, together with Lowry's early mentor and their mutual friend, the American writer Conrad Aiken. On his return to England Burra painted *Mexican Church*, its composition based on two postcards of churches he'd visited, the cathedral at Taxco and Santa Catarina, Mexico City. Burra and Lowry did not get on, however both shared an interest in Mexican culture.

Burra was influenced particularly by the Mexican muralists and the prints of José Guadalupe Posada (1851-1913), whose depictions of lively skeletons had a profound effect, contributing to his interest in representations of death. *Under the Volcano*'s Day of the Dead theme is echoed in Burra's other two paintings shown here. *Dancing Skeletons*, painted after a visit to Spain, anticipates his Mexican journey and immersion in the iconography of death. In *Skeleton Party*, completed nearly 20 years later, Burra returns to this earlier theme. Whilst the pyramid shapes on the horizon have been identified as slag heaps in an industrial landscape, they could equally suggest the twin peaks of Lowry's Mexican volcanoes.



Cisco Jiménez: *Peddler* (1998), metal structure, carved wood heads, acrylic on wood and antique frame paintings. Collection of Cisco Jiménez.

For **Cisco Jiménez**, a native of Cuernavaca where *Under the Volcano* is set, Lowry's book and his life continue to provide – 70 years after he stayed there – a barometer for measuring the expectations and failures of this Mexican town. For Jiménez the paradox portrayed in the novel repeats: the clash of the popular against the contemporary, tradition under threat from global changes and impositions, and the failure of utopianism (colonial utopias, the social experiments of the 1960s, the neoliberal policies in the 1990s).

Jiménez's mixed media sculptures make playful reference to Lowry's life: his drinking (*Two Atoms Connected*), golfing prowess (*Necklace*), and in *Peddler* the imagery and folkloric aspects of *Under the Volcano*, whilst *AK47 Barroca* is indicative of the artist's concern with the contradictions and violence of the everyday in Mexico.

'Cuernavaca is no longer what it used to be. What remains are tourism and opportunistic "clichés" of the quiet and colonial past – multiple thematic hotels and restaurants for wealthy foreigners and visitors from Mexico City, and real estate speculation. Nature has been covered over with tons of concrete, and the last old mansions with their majestic gardens are slowly falling down, giving way to massive condominiums (which we call "condemoniums"). You face such disaster every day'.

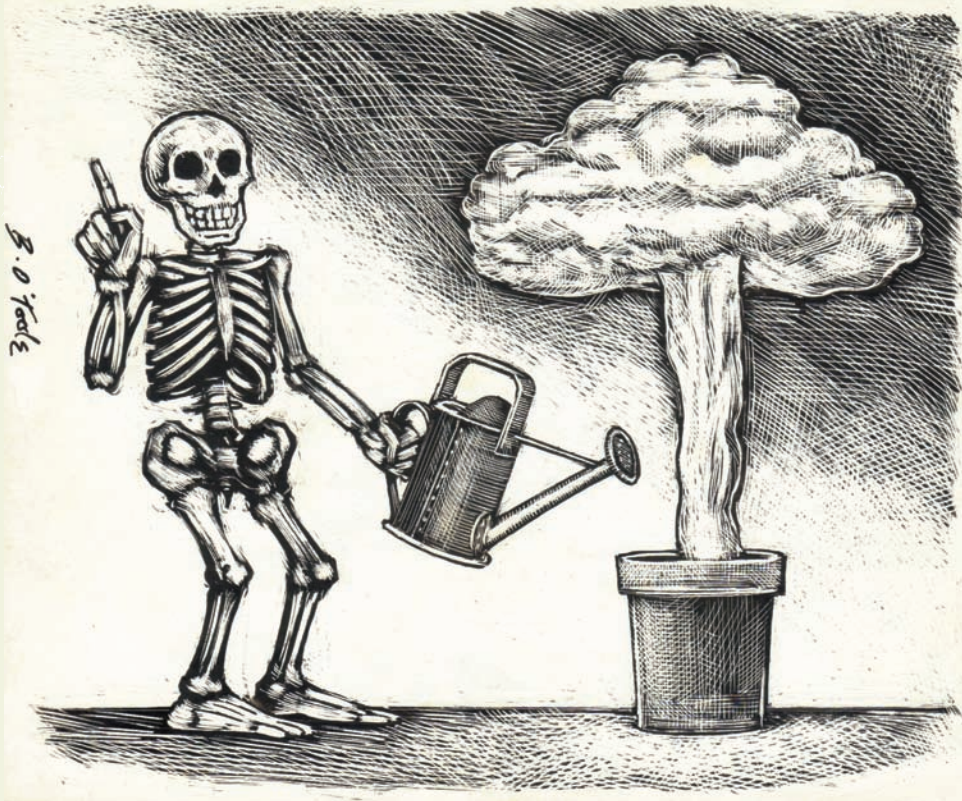


Ray Lowry: *Untitled (Under the Volcano)* (undated), acrylic on paper. Courtesy See Gallery and Sam Lowry.

Associated principally with punk through his weekly cartoons for the *New Musical Express* and artwork for the Clash, **Ray Lowry** (1944–2008) was drawn increasingly to his literary namesake and fellow North Westerner. Like the alluring and tragic figures of his heroes, rock'n'rollers Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran, Ray found a kindred spirit in Malcolm Lowry. And just before he died, he created a series of colourful, expressive paintings on paper inspired by *Under the Volcano*.

Freer than anything else Ray completed, these final paintings are almost abstract. Though little is known about them, episodes from the book are discernible: the Mexican Indian dying by the roadside, the Consul's alcoholic bliss, his encounter with fascists accusing him of being a spy ('spider'), and the final indignity as a dead dog is thrown after his corpse into the ravine.

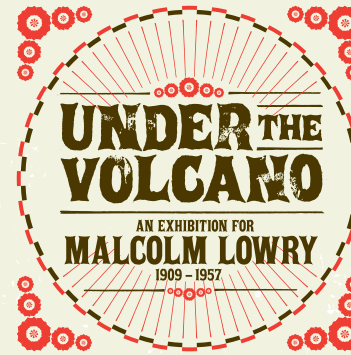
The single large painting entitled *Under the Volcano*, is more enigmatic, suggesting a baked landscape and parched vegetation. But despite the painting's title, it is not Mexico that is its subject, but Iraq, and the time is the present, as toy soldiers play out a war in a part of the world that, as Mesopotamia, was considered the 'cradle of civilization' – a reminder of one of the book's underlying themes, that of man's folly, with the world heading towards war.



Brian O'Toole: *Untitled cartoon* (undated), scraperboard. Courtesy of Bernadette Bartley.

Unlike Malcolm Lowry, **Brian O'Toole** (1946–2001) spent most of his life in his native Liverpool, apart from art school training in Newcastle and London and regular stays in Dublin, producing cartoons, portraits of Irish writers and absorbing himself in the labyrinthine world of James Joyce. Frighteningly well-read, literature informed O'Toole's art and he admired Lowry, whose complex prose, references to other literature, rich thematic layering and Merseyside origins appealed to him.

O'Toole's darkly humorous, surreal pen and ink drawings appeared in a range of publications, on posters and in exhibitions, and the ones selected here echo the dancing cadavers of Mexican artist Posada, whose Day of the Dead prints were a particular influence. O'Toole's drawings, with their combination of the familiar and the absurd however can also be seen in a particularly British tradition of caricature and satire, stretching from George Cruikshank to Steve Bell.



Providing historical context, the exhibition is completed by archival and documentary material. Rare and previously unseen items relating to Malcolm Lowry's Merseyside, collated by Wirral-based writer and artist Colin Dilnot, includes a guidebook from the Anatomy Museum in Paradise Street that so horrified the young Lowry. A selection of telegrams sent from agents employed by Lowry's father to his solicitors in Liverpool provides a fascinating snapshot of the writer's at times desperate adventures moving from Mexico to the US to Canada between 1938 and 1940.

The Oscar-nominated National Film Board of Canada documentary *Volcano: An Inquiry into the Life and Death of Malcolm Lowry* is an evocative and compelling television film from 1976, directed by **Donald Brittain** and **John Kramer**. Opening with the inquest into Lowry's 'death by misadventure', it moves back in time to trace his life, with selections from his writing read by Richard Burton amid images shot in Mexico, the US, Canada and England.

Lowry's more recent creative legacy in Canada is reflected in the *Malcolm Lowry Room*, a nightclub set up in Vancouver in 1993 by writer **Michael Turner** and adorned with blown up photos from Lowry's time at Dollarton between 1940 and 1954. Posters documenting the acts who performed during the club's four years' existence are reproduced in the exhibition to give a flavour of the venue, Turner's goal for which was 'to open Lowry's work to the public, but in an unstable environment – fear being a good way to heighten one's senses'.

There is also a book to accompany the exhibition, *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World*, edited by Bryan Biggs and Helen Tookey and published by Liverpool University Press and the Bluecoat. It explores Lowry through twelve new essays, including one by Lowry's biographer Gordon Bowker, and includes many images of works in this exhibition.

Bryan Biggs, *Artistic Director* at the Bluecoat



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SPACE X

Thanks to the City of Liverpool for its financial support.