

The Canonization of Two Underground Classics: Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*

MARGERY FEE

Canonization is invariably an institutional project, and usually requires the support of most of the following: the writer; the writer's family and friends; those working in the same literary mode; agents; financial institutions that support writers; publishers; and the critical institution, including reviewers, teachers of literature, and scholars.¹ In 1939, when *Tay John* was published, the Canadian literary institution was not highly developed; although the 1920s had seen some rapid development, the Depression had taken its toll. Further, *Tay John* was published abroad, and was not promoted well. Still, when compared even to another underground classic, Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, its canonization was exceptionally slow until 1974, and then, exceptionally fast. Although tracing the history of the reception and canonization of one work cannot answer all questions about the canonization process in a particular literary institution, an attempt to account for the 35-year neglect of *Tay John* in Canada, and its subsequent "discovery," does cast light on several of the many variables that play a part in the construction of the Canadian literary tradition. Perhaps the most interesting question to ask is why the novel was uniformly praised abroad and damned at home, at least for the first 35 years of its history.

Howard O'Hagan's novel *Tay John* was first published in London, in 1939, by a small firm called Laidlaw and Laidlaw. A slightly revised edition was published in 1960, in New York, by Clarkson N. Potter. Not until D.G. Jones mentioned the novel in *Butterfly on Rock* (1970), however, did it come to the attention of the Canadian literary institution in any positive sense. In 1974, Malcolm Ross published the first

McClelland and Stewart New Canadian Library Series reprint of *Tay John*. In the same year, George Woodcock reviewed the novel favourably in *Maclean's*, and Michael Ondaatje published an article on it in *Canadian Literature*. Margaret Atwood considered the novel at length in a lecture delivered at Harvard in 1976, a lecture published the following year in *The Canadian Imagination*, edited by David Staines.² All of this attention contributed to the appearance of *Tay John* as number 76 on the list of the most "important" works of fiction chosen by a group of Canadian teachers and critics in 1978 (Steele 153). In the eight years since Jones's discussion, *Tay John* had transcended a state of virtual oblivion, achieved a fairly secure place in the canon of Canadian fictional, and received the praise of some of the most important writers and critics in the country. O'Hagan had been made an honorary member of the Writers' Union of Canada, had been granted a Canada Council Senior Arts Bursary to write his memoirs, and had been given a honorary doctorate by McGill University. Several Canadian writers had supported the granting of these awards to O'Hagan, including Margaret Atwood, Gary Geddes, Robert Harlow, Margaret Laurence, Ken Mitchell, Michael Ondaatje, P.K. Page, and George Woodcock.

Although there is no evidence that the novel sold particularly well in England or the United States, *Tay John* had earlier been reviewed positively in all the right publications in both countries. In London in 1939, *Tay John* was reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement*; the 200-word review concluded with the statement, "This is an odd, compelling story and one that is likely to live on in the mind." Frank Swinnerton of the London *Observer* praised the novel in his weekly column, "New Novels." Shortly afterwards (on 26 March), an advertisement appeared in the *Observer* quoting from the review and bearing the heading "A Novel of the Grey Owl Country." Grey Owl, whose name had been made with the publication of *Pilgrims of the Wild* (1935), had recently completed a reading tour of England, which culminated in an appearance before the royal family in April 1938. Both reviewers read *Tay John* in the context of Grey Owl's nature stories, Swinnerton remarking that the novel stirred "romantic longings," and the *TLS* reviewer accounting for the novel's disjunctions by reading it as a backwoods tale, "a mixture of the credible and the incredible."

In 1960 in the United States, the novel was reviewed in *Booklist*, the *Library Journal*, and in the *Sunday New York Times Book Review*. Richard Ohmann notes, in "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction,

1960-75," that "[t]he single most important boost a novel could get was a prominent review in the *Sunday New York Times* — better a favorable one than an unfavorable one, but better an unfavorable one than none at all" (380). O'Hagan received a favourable review of 450 words.

In Canada, the novel was also reviewed in the journals whose readers were most likely to be interested in it. In 1939, the *Canadian Forum* devoted 69 words to *Tay John*, remarking that "One seems to have read it all many times before." Given this magazine's modernist leanings, its reviewers were unlikely to be entranced by anything that resembled a latter-day *Wacousta*, filled with the kind of melodrama and romance that critics were still trying to purge from the fictional canon. Nor would the Grey Owl angle appeal, since the animal story was, in Canada at least, old hat. For the *University of Toronto Quarterly's* reviewer, J.R. MacGillivray, the two important Canadian novels of 1939 were both realist: Frederick Niven's *The Story of Their Days* and Frederick Philip Grove's *Two Generations*. MacGillivray took 40 words to conclude that *Tay John*, which he classed as a romance, was "confused and confusing in development and undistinguished in characterization."

In 1961, F.W. Watt devoted slightly less than twice as many words to saying much the same thing in the same place, the *University of Toronto Quarterly*. George Robertson, in *Canadian Literature*, did rather better, devoting 750 words to the novel. Robertson criticized O'Hagan for his "artifice," for "the strain, the consciousness of verbal elaboration [which] is an irritating presence between ourselves and the story . . . in the end we are always brought around to the author saying 'Here is myth in the making'" (65). The narrator, Jackie Denham, is seen as an "unsatisfactory pivot for the story," who seems to exist "to throw *Tay John* out of focus" (66). Robertson succinctly outlines all the features the contemporary poststructuralist critic likes, but damns them. He is unprepared to see Denham as a parodic version of Conrad's Marlow, whose role is to demonstrate that no one sees *Tay John* clearly. "Legend," Robertson declares, "whatever the mystery it enshrines, is never dim" (66). Contrast this with Stuart Keate's conclusion in the *New York Times*: "If *Tay John* emerges as a shadowy figure, it is all of a piece with the author's philosophy."

Another reason that only scant support was offered to O'Hagan is that the literary institution is generally national, rather than international. When O'Hagan published in England in 1939, he was unknown

there; he wrote the novel in Berkeley, California and, in the summers, on the West Coast of Canada. His literary connections were mainly formed while he was at McGill University and in Berkeley. In 1960, when the novel was published in New York, the O'Hagans were on Vancouver Island. When the novel was reprinted in Toronto in 1974, O'Hagan had been in Italy for 10 years, and he only heard that it had been reprinted after his return. Canadian writers have succeeded in the United States and Great Britain. However, such success is not likely if a writer's literary connections with the place where his or her work is published are nonexistent, and if the subject matter of that work is emphatically Canadian. Any success *Tay John* did have seems to have come despite its author's inability to foster it.

In accounting for the uneasy and lukewarm reception of O'Hagan's *Tay John* in Canada between 1939 and 1970, a comparison with Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947), also an underground classic, seems helpful, even inevitable. Lowry and O'Hagan were strikingly similar. Both wrote avant-garde works that rejected the bourgeois status quo. Indeed, both writers were extremely well educated, led Bohemian lives, and thus may also have been rejecting the expectations of their professional fathers. Both married beautiful artists they met in California; both lived and wrote on the West Coast of Canada. Indeed, in the late 1930s, both may well have been thrown out of the same bars in Mexico. Both lived in British Columbia, on the fringes of the universe in relation to the literary centres of New York, London, and even Toronto. At their one meeting, they did not get along. O'Hagan described the meeting to Kevin Roberts:

He and I and A.J.M. Smith had a drink together. He wanted to talk about how wonderful it was to be a seaman. Very boring. I'd been a seaman and it's dull. Just chipping rust and painting and looking at the damn sea all the time. . . . [Lowry was] very patronizing. He said I had some nice descriptive pieces in *Tay John* and I said he had some pleasant descriptive pieces in *The Volcano*. (Roberts 47)

O'Hagan then ended the competition by quoting a descriptive passage from *War and Peace*, the canonical novel.

Despite all the similarities between the two authors, Lowry's novel was discovered much sooner and has done much better than O'Hagan's.

William H. New, in his introduction to *Malcolm Lowry: A Reference Guide* (1978), notes that "*Under the Volcano* won immediate response — enthusiastic in the United States, disparaging in England, and somewhat puzzled in Canada . . . (xiv)." He goes on to point out that, despite its underground status, it was a Book of the Month Club Choice, and was on the American best-seller lists for some time. In fact, one suspects that the label "underground" appealed to those readers who flaunted their tastes as antibourgeois; they were likely to uphold the label long after it was really outdated, if only to confirm the exclusivity of their taste. Indeed, by 1966, a reception study had been written tracing the novel's shift from underground to classic (Black), a shift confirmed by the increasing numbers of theses, dissertations, and books devoted to Lowry and his most famous novel. A simple explanation for the different receptions of O'Hagan and Lowry might be that Lowry wrote a better novel. But what is "better"? Nowadays, we cannot be quite so naïve about the constitution of the canon: as Pierre Bourdieu remarks, "a cultural product . . . is a constituted taste . . ." (231).

A close comparison of these novels' relation to the literary institutions of Great Britain, Canada, and the United States reveals some more specific reasons for the differences in the ways they were received. Lowry was fortunate to be taken on by the publishers Reynal and Hitchcock and Jonathan Cape, who published his novel in 1947, and O'Hagan emphatically was not lucky in this regard. *Tay John* was first published in 1939 in London, with a firm that published at least seven interesting works, including Ezra Pound's memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska and Edna O'Brien's *So I Went to Prison*, before disappearing. Clarkson N. Potter of New York printed 4,000 copies of the novel in 1960. This edition was reviewed at least six times, in three Canadian and three American publications. The firm apparently remaindered it without notifying O'Hagan, although they may have tried to reach him. In 1964, O'Hagan followed his wife, Margaret Peterson, to Italy. Supported by a Canada Council grant, she had gone to Italy to continue her work in mosaic.

Generally, authors have to promote their own careers, although a trustworthy agent can help. It also helps to have a spouse whose sole interest is one's career. Without Margerie Bonner Lowry, or someone like her, Lowry would have published little or nothing. Margaret Peterson O'Hagan was a well-established artist and a professor at Berkeley when she met O'Hagan, and quite justifiably saw her own artistic career as at least as important as his. Each thought highly of the

other's abilities; she certainly supported him financially to some degree, and her paintings appear on the covers of those of O'Hagan's works that were published by Talonbooks. Neither, however, made much money from their art. Certainly Peterson was too busy to be the full-time literary support that Margerie Lowry was to her husband. Living in Italy from 1964 to 1974, O'Hagan was in no position to keep track of what was happening to his novel's royalties, let alone orchestrate its canonization.

Lowry obviously tied his novel to a world tradition, rather than to a Canadian one. (Although *Under the Volcano* is set in Mexico, its main characters are English or European.) Thus, once he was discovered, a wide audience was opened up for him. *Tay John* was obviously, even aggressively, Canadian. Unfortunately, Canadian critics who saw it as a wilderness novel would be likely to dismiss it as old-fashioned; those who tried to read it in the contemporary realist tradition dominated by Frederick Philip Grove and Morley Callaghan would be frustrated by its romantic and satiric elements. (Significantly, O'Hagan comments of Callaghan in a 1975 letter to George Woodcock: "That fellow, when I have tried to read him, leaves me with a sullen ache in the *posterior fundum*" [O'Hagan, Letter].)

Further, Lowry embraced the persona of the avant-garde writer and intellectual, while O'Hagan explicitly rejected it. When he received a Canada Council Senior Arts Bursary in 1976, his recorded comment was "not bad for an old horse handler." Margaret O'Hagan interjected, "Come on, Howard, You were a lawyer" (Roberts 45). Neither, typically, is quite telling the truth. One is reminded of Alice Munro's story "Material," in which the divorced wife of a writer mocks a blurb that appears on his short story collection:

But listen to the lies, the half-lies, the absurdities. *He lives on the side of a mountain above Vancouver*. It sounds as if he lives in a wilderness cabin, and all it means, I'm willing to bet, is that he lives in an ordinary comfortable house in North or West Vancouver, which now stretch far up the mountain. . . . You would think he came out of the bush now and then to fling them scraps of wisdom. . . . (29-30)

Although O'Hagan's claim to being "an old horse handler" was certainly legitimate, it wasn't the whole story. Until Gary Geddes's 1977

article "The Writer That CanLit Forgot" was published, the only biographical material a reader would most likely encounter on O'Hagan was that recorded in Harvey Fergusson's introduction to the 1960 edition of *Tay John*, reprinted in 1974, and in the similar jacket copy of the 1958 Doubleday edition of *Wilderness Men*, and in neither case did the writer let on that O'Hagan had even entered public school.

Fergusson, a friend of O'Hagan's and the author of a mountain-man novel called *Wolf Song* (1927),³ writes in the introduction:

He was born near the Crow's Nest Pass and grew up north of there on Yellowhead Lake, both in the Canadian Rockies, one of the last great wilderness areas in North America. From an early age he felt the power of the mountains. By the time he was sixteen he was working as an axe-man on survey parties. Later he became a guide and packer for the Fred Brewster Outfit, Jasper, Alberta. In the fall, the summer's routine with horses ended, he travelled the trails alone or with a companion, a pack on his back and a two-and-a-half pound axe his only tool and weapon.

This, of course, is the kind of stuff that sells books. And it is all true, it just leaves rather a lot out. Although critics should be immune to such things, the evocation of a colourful authorial persona does affect a reader's response. Michael Ondaatje entitled his 1974 article on the novel "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle"; it is an excellent article — indeed the only one published on *Tay John* for many years, but the title may create a false impression if a reader infers from it that Jackie Denham's description of the typical backwoods tale as a "rough-edged chronicle" can serve as a good description of O'Hagan's novel itself. In *A Reader's Guide to Canadian Literature* (1981), John Moss called O'Hagan a "naïve visionary," and said that "O'Hagan is a creative writer as primitive, or 'natural,' as any published in Canada this century. His unconventional novel reminds one vaguely of a painting on which Marc Chagall and Grandma Moses have collaborated" (221); Moss retained this judgement in the second edition of his guide, which appeared in 1987.

O'Hagan really did pack, survey, and guide in the mountains, but he also received a law degree from McGill University, where he studied under, among others, Stephen Leacock. He was the associate editor of the *McGill Daily* in 1921-22, its editor in chief in 1923-24, and its

president in 1924-25. That year, he served as vice president of the Student Council and president of the Literary and Debating Society. Clearly he was not someone who communicated only in grunts, despite his excellent wilderness skills. Further, while he was writing for the *Daily*, so was A.J.M. Smith, a longtime friend and a key figure in the introduction of modernism to Canada. Smith wrote "The Dilettante" column for the *Daily* in 1923-24, and the following year became, of course, a leading light in the production of the *Daily's* literary supplement. In other words, O'Hagan was ideally located, in Canadian terms, to pick up the latest news of both English and American avant-garde writing.⁴ In addition, during the period he was working on *Tay John*, between 1934 and 1939, O'Hagan was living in Berkeley, California, and became closely associated with both the artistic and university communities there. Yet he can almost be blamed for engineering his own misreading.

Again, a comparison with Lowry is instructive. *Under the Volcano* quickly establishes itself as an avant-garde text. Its protagonist, Firmin, struggles with his fall, attempts to write, and sees himself as Dr. Faustus, damned by a too-inquiring intellect. Another character, M. Laruelle, an avant-garde artist, is described as "carrying at the back of his mind the notion of making in France a modern film version of the Faustus story with some such character as Trotsky for its protagonist . . ." (27-28). Firmin and Laruelle clearly belong to the group of intellectuals and artistic producers who, as Bourdieu points out, set themselves up against the bourgeoisie by engaging in "symbolic provocations" (316). Jackie Denham however, seldom speaks of his past, "over which loomed the shadow of a great white house in the north of Ireland, in the county of Tyrone" (75-76). All Lowry's characters plan to return to Europe; Denham is content to drink up his remittance in Edmonton and return to the mountains. Jackie does not write, he speaks, and he speaks not of a lost culture, or of the old days, but of a culture in the making. Lowry peppers his text with the names of writers, musicians, film directors, and artists from the West's classic and avant-garde canons:

How, in a flash, that had brought back the old days of the cinema . . . the days of the Student of Prague, and Wiene and Werner Krauss and Karl Grüne, the Ufa days when a defeated Germany was winning the respect of the cultured world by the pictures she was making. (24)

O'Hagan, on the other hand, buries his allusions to Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, and other canonical writers under a naïve, even a vulgar or popular surface. Thus the novel's final image of Tay John towing Ardith Aeriola's body on a toboggan contains not only allusions to the mythic descent of the vegetation deity so popular among modernists such as T.S. Eliot and A.J.M. Smith, but also to a sentimental poem by Duncan Campbell Scott of the sort emphatically rejected by modernists ("On the Way to the Mission"), and, most disturbingly for a Canadian reader, to the doggerel of Robert Service's "The Cremation of Sam McGee," quite firmly rejected by almost everybody, except, of course, the ordinary reader. (The narrator of Service's poem, "horror-driven," hastens through a "land of death" with a corpse "lashed to a sleigh" [63].)

Anyone who does not know O'Hagan's background might feel alarmed by such a grotesque conjunction of clashing allusions, and conclude that O'Hagan was simply unable to control his material. Terry Eagleton argues that

[e]very literary text is built out of a sense of its potential audience, includes an image of whom it is written *for*: every work encodes within itself what Iser calls an "implied reader," intimates in its every gesture the kind of "addressee" it anticipates. (84)

If Eagleton is correct, perhaps we should assume that O'Hagan was ultimately more interested in finding readers in his own mountain territory, in establishing himself as a true mountain man, than in reaching out to an audience that would appreciate the sophistication of his novel.

NOTES

¹ A version of this paper was delivered at the Association for Canadian and Quebec Literatures Conference in Hamilton, Ontario, in May 1987. I thank the ACQL for travel funds. I also thank Brian Trehearne, Department of English, McGill University, for helping me with material on A.J.M. Smith, the *McGill Daily*, and the *McGill Fortnightly Review*.

² For publication information and a description of these three works, see Richard Arnold's "Howard O'Hagan: An Annotated Bibliography," in this volume (Woodcock D12; Ondaatje C9; Atwood C10).

³ Harvey Fergusson's career and writing are described in the biography by Robert Gish, which also contains a photograph of, and a few fleeting references to, O'Hagan.

⁴ Smith's discovery of T.S. Eliot most likely took place in 1924 or 1925, shortly before O'Hagan graduated (Trehearne 337n). Whether Smith and O'Hagan ever discussed Eliot or modernism is not clear. However, they were in touch during O'Hagan's California days; Smith's papers, held by the University of Toronto, contain several manuscripts by O'Hagan, including one with a Berkeley address.

O'Hagan was on the editorial board of the *McGill Daily* when a financial dispute between the editorial board of the *Daily* and Smith and F.R. Scott, editors of the *McGill Daily Literary Supplement*, ended the *Supplement's* publication run. This rift led to the founding of the *McGill Fortnightly Review* in late 1925 by Smith, Scott, and Leon Edel. Scott and Edel tended to lay the blame for the rift on the insensitivity of an editor of the *Daily*. If that editor was O'Hagan, it seems to have made no difference to the friendship between him and Smith. Edel's versions of the events surrounding the founding of the *McGill Fortnightly Review* can be found in several of his writings: "The *McGill Fortnightly Review*: A Casual Reminiscence," "When McGill Modernized Canadian Literature: Literary Revolution — The 'Montreal Group,'" and "The Young Warrior in the Twenties." In Gary Geddes's "The Writer That CanLit Forgot," O'Hagan tells an anecdote about Smith that may be relevant:

[Smith] was writing poetry even then [when O'Hagan was on the editorial board of the *Daily*]. I remember him coming in with this poem about a girl's breasts being like ripe plums. "Arthur," I said, "think of the Dean of Women, Miss Hurlbatt. There's no way we can print this." I think he damn near wept. (86)

WORKS CITED

- Black, Paul J. "Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*: A Critical Reception Study." MA thesis. U of Windsor, 1966.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983.
- Edel, Leon. "The *McGill Fortnightly Review*: A Casual Reminiscence." *McGill News* 21.1 (1939): 19+.

- . "When McGill Modernized Canadian Literature: Literary Revolution — The 'Montreal Group.'" *The McGill You Knew: An Anthology of Memories, 1920-1960*. Ed. Edgar Andrew Collard. Don Mills, ON: Longmans, 1975. 112-22.
- . "The Young Warrior in the Twenties." *On F.R. Scott*. Ed. Sandra Djwa and R. St. John Macdonald. Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1983. 6-16.
- Fergusson, Harvey. Introduction. *Tay John*. By Howard O'Hagan. 1960. New Canadian Library 105. Toronto: McClelland, 1974. N. pag.
- Geddes, Gary. "The Writer That CanLit Forgot." *Saturday Night* Nov. 1977: 84-92.
- Gish, Robert. *Frontier's End: The Life and Literature of Harvey Fergusson*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988.
- Keate, Stuart. "Intruder in the Wilderness." Rev. of *Tay John*, by Howard O'Hagan. *New York Times Book Review* 13 Mar. 1960: 34.
- Lowry, Malcolm. *Under the Volcano*. New York: Reynal, 1947.
- MacGillivray, J.R. "Letters in Canada: Fiction." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 9 (1939-40): 239.
- Moss, John. *A Reader's Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: McClelland, 1981.
- Munro, Alice. "Material." *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1974. 22-44.
- New, William H. Introduction. *Malcolm Lowry: A Reference Guide*. A Reference Guide in Literature. By New. Boston: Hall, 1978. ix-xix.
- O'Hagan, Howard. Letter to George Woodcock. 1 July 1975. George Woodcock Papers. Queen's University, Kingston.
- . *Tay John*. London: Laidlaw, 1939.
- Ohmann, Richard. "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-75." *Canons*. Ed. Robert von Hallberg. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984. 377-401.
- Roberts, Kevin. "Talking to Howard O'Hagan." *Event* 5.3 (1976): 41-48.
- Robertson, George. "Mountain Man Mythology." Rev. of *Tay John*, by Howard O'Hagan. *Canadian Literature* 9 (1961): 65-66.
- Service, Robert. "The Cremation of Sam McGee." *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Poetry in English*. Ed. Margaret Atwood. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1982. 62-64.
- Steele, Charles, ed. *Taking Stock: The Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel*. Proc. of a Conference. 16-18 Feb. 1978. Downsview, ON: ECW, 1982.
- Swinnerton, Frank. "New Novels." *Observer* [London] 19 Mar. 1939: 6.
- Rev. of *Tay John*, by Howard O'Hagan. *Times Literary Supplement* 18 Mar. 1939: 166.
- Rev. of *Tay John*, by Howard O'Hagan. *Canadian Forum* 19 Sept. 1939: 199.

Trehearne, Brian. *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists: Aspects of a Poetic Influence*. Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989.

Watt, F.W. "Letters in Canada: Fiction." Rev. of *Tay John*, by Howard O'Hagan. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 30 (1961): 414-15.