

Rowland Smith

Review Article

The Lonely Old Volcano in the Ice-Box: Wyndham Lewis in Wartime Canada

"The Talented Intruder": Wyndham Lewis in Canada, 1939-1945. By Catharine M. Mastin, Robert Stacey and Thomas Dilworth. Windsor, ON: Art Gallery of Windsor, 1992. Pp. 199. \$25.00.

"The Talented Intruder": Wyndham Lewis in Canada 1939-1945 is a handsome, extensively illustrated catalogue to an exhibition of some one hundred paintings, drawings and sketches Wyndham Lewis produced while living in Canada during the Second World War. Its title is taken from an over-enthusiastic comment Lewis made about his Canadian prospects in a letter written at the end of 1940: "There are no closed doors here, and there are a dozen which I have not even approached as yet—They are very cut off from the States and England, and welcome the talented intruder" (quoted 186). Lewis was later to complain bitterly that few doors were in fact opened to him, but his implicit sneer in this early comment about the "cut off" nature of Canadian cultural life was to typify his uneasy relations with wartime Ontario.

While living in Toronto from late 1940 to 1943, and in Windsor (with trips to the USA) from 1943 to 1945, Lewis painted portraits on commission, did sketches of his friends and acquaintances, constantly drew his wife in the claustrophobic confines of their Canadian "room," and created imaginative pictures of sensual scenes, vegetative energies

and abstract designs. The exhibition offers a comprehensive collection of all this work.

The catalogue itself, as well as the exhibition, are significant contributions to an understanding of Wyndham Lewis's career, the facts of his Canadian sojourn, and the nature of the pictures he created while in North American exile.

Lewis went totally blind in 1951, and this Canadian period of artistic creativity is one of his last. He went on writing until his death in 1957. The last period of prose production, after his return to England in 1945, has been regarded as one of his most significant, and in 1954 he published the novel growing out of his Canadian experiences, *Self Condemned*. That work, regarded by many as one of his three finest novels, together with the socio-political essays he produced in wartime North America, has been the focus of most critical discussion about Lewis's Canadian years.

This catalogue and exhibition attempt to redress the balance. The extensive collection of Canadian pictures offers, for the first time, an opportunity to assess the varied types of pictorial work done by Lewis in "exile," and to have a sense of their range. The catalogue itself produces many new facts about Lewis in Canada, and provides a wide-ranging context for discussion of his Canadian pictures and his own view of their relation to the general state of Canadian art in the early 1940s.

First, the catalogue. "*The Talented Intruder*" has a significance far beyond that of its ostensible purpose—to accompany the exhibition. It is an invaluable source of information and argument for anyone interested in Lewis, the Canadian art scene during the war, and twentieth-century portraiture. It consists of three essays and an Introduction. Thomas Dilworth's essay on Lewis's North American writing is not as valuable as the essays on art since it lacks the sense of context so extensively set up in the studies of Lewis's pictures and his relations with patrons and other painters. Dilworth's essay is a short, evaluative run through Lewis's written work of the period, uncluttered with a sense of the scholarly debate about texts as varied as *Anglosaxony: A League That Works*—about which there is very little comment—and a celebrated novel (whether that view is justified or not) like *Self Condemned*. Since Lewis's writings are in any case more familiar than his pictures, an *ab ovo* approach to his North American prose runs the risk of appearing facile.

In the Introduction, written by both Catharine M. Mastin and Robert Stacey, and in Mastin's long, central essay on Lewis's Canadian period there is a wealth of new facts and details as well as an enlightening assessment of the conditions affecting comparable Canadian artists at the time. The tracing of Lewis's Canadian roots and ancestors is fascinatingly fresh as is the detail with which so many of his Canadian experiences in the art world are described. Robert Stacey's essay on Lewis's Canadian pictures includes a revealing description of an abortive visit by the pathetically eager Lewis—hot on the trail of a big portrait commission—to Sir James Dunn's secluded, rural retreat in Bathurst, New Brunswick.

There are reproductions of portraits by Canadian artists Frederick H. Varley, Barker Fairley, Charles F. Comfort, and Prudence Heward with which to compare Lewis's portraits of the same period. And the paucity of portrait commissions by those artists during the 1940s is demonstrated in relation to Lewis's complaint that his "neglect" in Canada was the result of provincial jealousy and pique.

There is a note of defensiveness in Catharine Mastin's depiction of the active Canadian art and art-gallery scene at the time, in contrast with Lewis's occasional descriptions, in both unpublished and published writing, of a provincial wasteland. Coupled with this protective tone is an assessment of Lewis's earnings in Ontario, and a conversion of those sums into contemporary figures, which seeks to illustrate that he was neither as hard up as he complained nor anywhere near as hard up as most other Canadian artists.

The rather comfortable sum produced by these calculations is not convincing, even if Lewis's anguished comments on the restricted nature of his domestic life are not to be taken entirely at face value. And the photograph of the Tudor Hotel depicts an edifice quite similar in appearance to the seedy Hotel Blundell of *Self Condemned*. One of the coups of "*The Talented Intruder*" is a photograph reproduced from the *Toronto Daily Star* (15 Feb. 1943) of the actual Tudor Hotel fire, the model for the fire in *Self Condemned*.

Lewis was an exceptionally cantankerous individual who quarrelled with almost all his benefactors and patrons, and who could be paranoid about the hostility of any "Establishment" towards his isolated genius. His comments on Canada are part of this persona, which since the postwar

years (1918 war, that is) had been built on the image of the "Enemy" outside society who commented on its follies. Furthermore, as a caricaturist, both in graphic art and in his prose he constantly exaggerated the absurd, mechanical, awkward, irrational elements in the subjects he depicted. Toronto/Ontario/Canada was no exception, but even in his most anguished moments in Canada—and his anguish often translated into condescension or disdain—he tried to be fair about the basically unsympathetic society in which he found himself during a world war which preoccupied its descendants of colonists. To him, of course, they were colonials.

Robert Stacey is most interesting in his discussion of the influence of Etty, the mid-nineteenth-century British nudist, on Lewis in his Canadian period. Walter Michel has suggested that Lewis's inward-looking pictures of the early 1940s, with their bathing and playing nudes, were inspired by a collection of Etty pictures in the possession of a Toronto industrialist. "Homage to Etty" is one of Lewis's imaginative, sensual pictures painted in the Toronto days. Using clear colors and clean lines, the sensual works depict naked bathers and lovers in stylized and idealized natural settings.

Stacey points out that Sir James Dunn had a collection of Etty pictures (purchased in the 1930s when Etty was in obscurity) which Lewis could have seen either on his visit to Bathurst or in Toronto, and that Lewis's interest in the sensual depiction of the naked female form in his Canadian doodles owes much more to Etty than is suggested in the single title, "Homage to Etty." Dunn's Etty paintings are now in the Beaverbrook Gallery in Fredericton, and the reproduction of four of them in *"The Talented Intruder"* provides convincing evidence for their influence on Lewis at the time. And yet the differences are also striking. Stacey is at his best in discussing the relationship between the two kinds of nude:

The closest of the affinities between Etty and Lewis lies in their joint fixation on the infinite variety of the forms, shapes and tones of the human body (for preference, the female) in its naked, unadorned state, whether in action or repose—and also on their shared affinity with the sea. . . . Both were "externalists," interested in the physical appearance of things and little concerned with the inner workings of the corpus. Accordingly, both had perfected a mode of rendering the flesh that emphasised externality, sheen and reflectivity . . . the principal difference

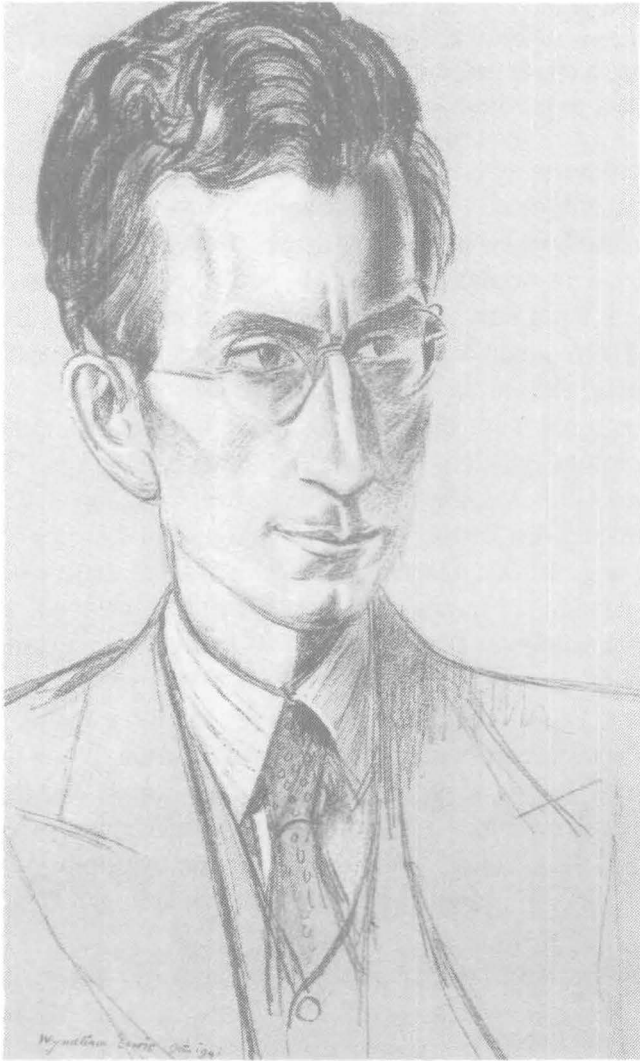
in their treatments being that Etty's take on his subject matter was "hot" and Lewis's "cold." . . . Both were obsessed by the "oceanic," and found fertile ground in the implicit conflict or concert between the littoral figure (solitary or grouped) and the wave-plied foreshore. (114)

The perceptiveness of these comments is even more marked when one is viewing the originals of Lewis's imaginative works than when seeing them in reproduction in the catalogue. The nude figures are more mechanistic in the original. Whereas the colors seem to soften outlines in reproduction, those outlines appear harder and more firmly fixed in the originals. There is still a hint of the human puppet underneath Lewis's newly-flowing lines in the imagined erotic/sensuous scenes.

Stacey is less convincing in his extended argument about the "point" of the allusion to Böcklin's allegorical picture of the 1880s, "The Island of the Dead," *Die Toteninsel*, in Lewis's own painting of the Toronto period entitled "The Island." In the background of Lewis's work is an island bearing a resemblance to Böcklin's. This "reminiscence" of Böcklin's island in Lewis's picture had been pointed out by Walter Michel in the edition of *Blast No. 3* (1984) in which the picture was first reproduced in color. Stacey goes through a labyrinthine argument to indicate why Lewis would consciously incorporate a feature from the work of a "sentimental," late-nineteenth-century artist. While the need to argue at such length is not established, the contextual understanding provided by reproductions of Böcklin's two island pictures (of life and of the dead) and the examples given of other artists' allusions to Böcklin in their own works is typical of the insights offered by "*The Talented Intruder*."

The exhibition is less constantly rewarding. It opened in the Art Gallery of Windsor, which organized the show and produced the "*The Talented Intruder*." After showing in Windsor from 21 November 1992 to 24 January 1993, it moved to the Owens Art Gallery at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, only a few miles from Amherst, Nova Scotia, the small town off which Lewis had been born—in his father's yacht—in 1882. The exhibition was in Sackville from 29 July to 7 September 1993, and then moved to the Art Gallery of Ontario from 23 September until 28 November 1993.

The tireless Lewis scholar and promoter, C. J. Fox, describes the exhibition opening in this way:



Portrait of Dr. Lorne Pierce
[Beth Pierce Robinson, Kingston, Ontario]

Wyndham Lewis himself could not have suggested a more appropriate venue than Windsor, Ontario, across the river from Detroit, for the launch of the exhibition of his Canadian paintings. . . . Not only was the exiled Lewis afforded a measure of haven in Windsor between 1943 and 1945 but the spectacle of transpontine Detroit, whatever the extent of the recent breakup behind the heroic skyscraping facade, recalls the power-thrust of the republic celebrated almost half a century ago in *America and Cosmic Man*. Moreover, as remembered consciously or unconsciously from its Forties heyday, that vista may have been an inspiration for some topographical features of *The Human Age* a decade later. ("Report from Windsor," *Enemy News* 36 [Summer 1993]: 13)

The view of Detroit from the Canadian ice-box clearly struck an instant note of recognition from Lewis scholars gathering for the opening. Fox quotes Walter Michel, the art critic-editor of the standard work on Lewis's paintings and drawings, as exclaiming, "'Why, that's the Magnetic City!' . . . as we took in the 'staggering externals' of Detroit from his Windsor hotel room" (14).

Yet despite all the excitement of a memorable event, the exhibition is not totally satisfying. The oil paintings are, by and large, much less impressive than the sketches, drawings and imaginative, "fantasy"-pictures. The two major oil paintings, the recently rediscovered "The Island," and "A Canadian War Factory," on loan from the Tate, are disappointing in the original. There is a murkiness in the "Canadian War Factory"—no doubt in keeping with its Hadean overtones—that one had hoped the original colors would dispel; and the non-human, surface-glaze of the "The Island" is strangely alienating.

The commissioned portraits are not as wooden in the original as they are in reproduction, but with the exception of the portrait of J. S. McLean, not really impressive. And they are much less interesting than the drawings of heads in various forms. This group divides into two categories: drawings of "public" figures Lewis had met, like Lorne Pierce, Malcolm MacDonald (the British High Commissioner), Douglas LePan and Marshall McLuhan; domestic sketches of people—particularly his wife Anne—with whom Lewis lived in his hotel and apartment "exile." The heads of Pierce, MacDonald, LePan and McLuhan are excellent, but—inevitably—they do not have the anguish of the drawings of the "artist's wife"—even the drawing entitled "Hands" is painful—and her

daily, pathetically limited clutter of knitting-wool, tea tray and tea things, drawn as still life assertions of domestic order in a spiritual and material void.

To me, the domestic drawings of real people—and the still life sketches attendant on them—are the most moving pictures from Lewis's Canadian period. Most critics prefer the fantasy or imaginative pictures from the same period, and they are wonderfully arresting when seen en masse. With their combinations of abstract and anthropomorphic or vegetable forms, they are strikingly fluid in the original; and the colors are more vivid in original than in reproduction. The various colored papers Lewis used to draw on in his poverty are part of the total effect in many of these pictures. The drug store blue paper is particularly strikingly blended into the general use of color in the pictures in which it is used.

With the exhibition over, the catalogue remains. Inevitably the reproduction of pictures is less satisfying than the sight of them for real, but *"The Talented Intruder"* comes as close as such a publication can to offering its readers, viewers or owners a permanent exhibition of the graphic output of a remarkable twentieth-century figure who spent most of the Second World War unhappily in Canada. His response to that unhappiness and dislocation was in its own way quintessentially "Canadian," and the catalogue—quite apart from its illustrations—documents the facts of his Canadian experience with remarkable thoroughness.