

"THE TALENTED INTRUDER"

Wyndham Lewis in Canada, 1939-1945

Catharine M. MASTIN

with essays by:

Robert STACEY and Thomas

DILWORTH

Art Gallery of Windsor, 1992

200 pp., 20 col., 150 b/w illus., \$25.00

This remarkable book-catalogue from the comprehensive 1992-93 exhibition of Wyndham Lewis's Canadian paintings will, among other things, rekindle the controversy over what Liz Wylie, writing in *The Journal of Canadian Art History* (XIV/2, 1991), referred to as "the machinery of the myth of the north" in Canadian art and the apotheosis of the Group of Seven it implied. Lewis, Canadian-born and self-exiled in Canada during World War II, is shown in "The Talented Intruder" to have been an enthusiast of both the "myth" and the Group. Indeed he wrote of the two with the sort of forthrightness that had made him far more enemies than friends back in Britain after his first eruption on the art scene there as Vorticism-in-chief in 1914.

Sadly Lewis's salute to the myth, the Group and especially A.Y. Jackson, though written in Canada, was not published until the year after his return to England and then in the BBC's *Listener* magazine (August 29, 1946) suitably recast for foreign consumption. But it is a classic eulogy, eclipsing much of the carping Lewis did at Canada's expense and exemplifying (so this catalogue quotes him on p.62 as privately writing) "the publicity value to Canadians of their



zero-land." Yet Lewis already noted an anti-Group reaction setting in, which he linked to the process of Canada - then as now - "de-Canadianizing" itself. He himself made no sweeping claims for the Seven as painters of world significance. But, by his stringent standards of criticism, he displayed striking admiration for Jackson, in particular:

His vision is as austere as his subject-matter, which is precisely the hard puritanic land in which he always has lived: with no frills, with all its dismal solitary grandeur and bleak beauty, its bad side deliberately selected rather than its chilly relents....There is something of Ahab in him: the long white contours of the Laurentian Mountains in mid-winter are his elusive leviathan. (p.62)

With their celebrated excess of collective modesty, Canadians can be expected to feel abashed at such magniloquent reflections concerning their country by a prominent outsider and there are signs of

such embarrassment in "*The Talented Intruder*" (a title based on an ironic self-reference by Lewis). For someone like Liz Wylie, who advocates "a more pluralistic, regionally-rooted expression" of Canada, Lewis's notions about the north and its seven pictorial acolytes would doubtless be an anathema, indicating just how relevant to latter-day debates about Canadian art history the several essays in this extensively illustrated catalogue turn out to be. Moreover the painting Lewis did during his sometimes bitter sojourns in Toronto and Windsor is presented in the context of Canadian art of the period - Varley, Comfort, Schaefer, Milne, etc. - although to such an extent that at times one thinks uneasily of the integration into "Can. Lit." of another maverick expatriate from Britain, Malcolm Lowry. And while due weight is given to Lewis's complaints of suffering neglect in "the most parochial nationette on earth," it is sternly emphasized that he was not alone in this among painters resident in Canada at the time and, what is more, did not try to better his position by joining in such uplifting activities as the 1941 Kingston Conference of Canadian Artists.

Making these points in one of the four essays included in the catalogue, exhibition organizer Catharine M. Mastin states (p.61):

Despite the bleak picture Lewis drew of cultural conditions in Toronto, he was actually positioned at the centre of a fairly vibrant and progressive community of artists and writers, at least until early 1943, when many of their number joined the armed services and went overseas....That Le-

wis found Toronto as unpalatable as he did had as much to do with his personality as it did with the city itself....

True, and such needs to be said in the spirit of intellectual balance pervading this book as a whole. But Canadians, perhaps inclined to be over-defensive, should still take cognizance of the strictures (and the occasional compliment) voiced about their country by this redoubtable observer. They should make allowance in his pronouncements too for an element they don't always find congenial wherever it is found, that of humour. And it should be borne in mind that the unflattering perspective on Canada in Lewis's novel of exile, *Self Condemned*, represents in part the reactions of a character, Professor René Harding, who is the "condemned self" of the title. A major point of the novel is precisely that the unpalatability of the Canadian city where Harding perforce resided had, in Mastin's words, "as much to do with his personality as it did with the city itself." Since *Self Condemned* is a highly autobiographical work, this might be taken to constitute a corrective reflection by Lewis - of which the spirit of balance also demands recognition - on his own anti-Canadian outbursts as on his satirical stance in general during his previous forty years of writing.

But this catalogue, involving the work of three Canadian scholars, is a milestone in Lewis research. This is now an international industry which has spawned half-a-dozen books in the last two years, including the excellent catalogue by Paul Edwards for the 1992 British exhibition of Lewis's war paintings at the Imperial War Museum, London. For one thing,

Mastin and Robert Stacey have unearthed a wealth of new information on a period in the painter-writer's life which had previously been little explored and, in any case, was undervalued. By the forties, Lewis's sight was beginning to fail and, accordingly, a slackness becomes evident in some of the picture-making of this one-time master of the whiplash line. But he nevertheless produced, as the catalogue vividly illustrates, a number of imaginative drawings which merit inclusion among the most interesting works of this strange and constantly surprising artist. Scale meant nothing to Lewis and these modestly proportioned designs on paper are packed with meaning which is at once metaphysical and purely visual. Mastin and Stacey do them greater justice than they have ever received.

With both flair and learning, Mastin confronts the highly-charged and enigmatic drawings which mark for Lewis (paradoxically, given his personal plight and that of the Allied war cause in 1941) something of an *annus mirabilis*. We have "creation myths" redolent of interplanetary as well as phallo-uterine generation; crucifixions startling in their unconventionality and in one case resembling some burgeoning sacred tree out of Sir James Frazer, whose anthropological flights Lewis knew well; a thundering Jehovah, like some wrathful deity of Japanese inspiration; mysterious fertility emblems in blazing reds and fecund greens; gaunt solemnizations of war and personal anguish; and much else. For his part, Robert Stacey concentrates on the inspirations and circumstances which culminated, by way of numerous marine and bath-

ing compositions, in the 1942 oil *The Island*. Detailing this genesis, Stacey tracks down a bizarre sequence of stimuli extending from the tycoon Sir James Dunn to the painters Etty and Böcklin. And although the climactic oil is a good less impressive, Stacey notwithstanding, than the consummate Lewis drawings along the way, the essay is a *tour de force* of rich, suggestive art history.

The mass of fresh facts marshalled by Mastin and Stacey in their separate contributions and a joint introduction illuminate not only Lewis's tangled relationships and desperate quests for money in North America but also intriguing facets of his French- and English-Canadian ancestry and the intimation of Huron blood. The histories, often stormy, of the public portraits that Lewis produced in Canada and the U.S. are set out here. Fortunately much space is also given to the domestic portraiture and still-lives which serve as pictorial counterpoints to the Canadian hotel-room scenes of *Self Condemned*. These portraits - particularly the sombre studies of Lewis's perennial model, his wife Froanna - are more consistently worthy of the artist than the depictions of outside personalities. The stiltedness of the latter in some cases betrays, along with failing visual powers, the fact that the hard-up painter was motivated solely by financial need. His great portraits of the past - Sitwell, Pound, Eliot - had, after all, been spurred by the admiration and/or fascination aroused in the artist by his subjects.

In the case of Thomas Dilworth's catalogue essay on Lewis's North American writings, a sort of critical stiltedness ma-

nifests itself, betraying an underlying lack of empathy with Lewis's work in general. The enthusiasm that elsewhere informs Dilworth's incisive appraisals of another writer-painter, David Jones, is assuredly missing here. This is a pity since the short shrift thus vouchsafed to the literary side, apart from an apparent desire to emphasize the rebel Lewis's respect for Catholicism, means that an important aspect of the years in Canada goes without the focus it deserves in this otherwise wide-ranging volume. The catalogue as a whole is marred by suprisingly few slips for a production this elaborate. One of them concerns a Lewis gibe in a letter to T.S. Eliot about university English teachers in Michigan, which is misconstrued as aimed also at his host college in Windsor.

The reproductions in this book, particularly the colour renderings of the imaginative pictures and the best of the oil portraits, are in themselves effective advertisements for the work Lewis managed to do despite the trials of his Canadian residency. It is appropriate that the cover bears a detail from that haunting Lewis testimonial to his twin talents, *The Mind of the Artist, About to Make a Picture*, painted in Toronto in 1942. It is fascinating to read of this prophet of the Global Village whose book *America and Cosmic Man* was begun in Windsor, declaiming in French on the CBC against any fragmentation of Canada. Finally there is something almost poignant about one of the trail-blazers of twentieth-century art traversing the wilds of New Brunswick - "I have never seen so lonely looking an inhabited place as Bathurst" - or earnestly

lecturing about beauty at the Rankin Hotel in Chatham, Ontario.

C. J. FOX
London, England