The Collected Works of Pat Lowther
edited by Christine Wiesenthal

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Canada consistently fails to honour its dead poets, and NeWest Press should be greatly lauded for the publication of this collection. It features a great many of Pat Lowther’s poems, including previously unpublished material, and it does not do so in what appears to be a quick money-making scheme, as is too often the case with works of this nature. This volume truly honours the deceased. Christine Wiesenthal provides a well-written introduction to the poet, lays out her work in chronological order, and then follows it with extensive notes and three indices.

So who was Pat Lowther? Before answering that question, there is perhaps a moral issue to consider in works of this nature. Wiesenthal sets out two sections of uncollected and unpublished work, early and late. Questions arise with regard to the publication of this work, as it can never be known whether the deceased would have chosen to have these poems see the light of day. One feels like a peeping tom peering through a window into a hidden room – one intended to remain private. On the other hand, there is the argument that the early unpublished work of a well-known poet might benefit those coming after even though the body lying in rest should be viewed free of blemishes.

The excellent introduction gives a brief overview of the life of Pat Lowther:

. . . this body of work traces the development of one of the briefest but most compelling literary careers in modern Canadian poetry. As a high school drop-out in the post-war, working-class milieu of North Vancouver, Lowther, born Patricia Louise Tinmouth in 1935, began an unlikely literary apprenticeship that unfolded against the demands (and financial strains) of an early first marriage and early motherhood, both at age eighteen. In 1957, with her second child, Katharine, barely a year old, she enrolled in an adult-education creative writing class, and began submitting her poems . . . (13)
The introduction provides a wealth of information regarding Pat Lowther’s life and poetic career. Wiesenthal understandably doesn’t mention the reason why Lowther’s career was cut short, wanting the reader to focus instead on the poetry. However, the veiled allusion serves to pique the reader’s interest, and Wiesenthal might have been better off stating at the outset that Pat Lowther was shot and killed by her husband as a result of an imagined infidelity.

Now to the poetry. The first poems the reader encounters are those early ones that were neither collected nor published. They serve the purpose of showing Lowther’s development towards being a published poet. Perhaps the best example is “Before the Wreckers Come”:

Before the wreckers come,
Uproot the lily
From the hard angle of earth
By the house. (40)

Lowther would come to use a variety of structures in which to trellis her words, one of them the short line, here alternated with a longer one. She eventually abandoned the practice of starting each line with a capital, which tends to appear antiquated (although some contemporary poets are coming to use this device again, in special circumstances). This poem is undated and there is no mention of it in Wiesenthal’s extensive endnotes. Wiesenthal has numbered each of the poems and it is to these numbers (not, as is the more common practice, the page numbers) that the endnotes refer.

We are then taken to Lowther’s first book, This Difficult Flowering, published in 1968. A variety of structures are used to frame the poems. For example, “Remembering How” has a very conventional frame:

Remembering how
in the first luscious heat of sex
he was his own hothouse,
grew sensitivities
envied by all his friends
his pen a green burdock
tickling the legs of passers-by, (59)
Is “pen” a metaphor? Compare “Spin Spun,” where the frame is dramatically different:

spin

spun

spiral tree

apple tree (63)

This is an emotive “sound” poem with the triple -ine spacing and the indentions attempting to capture the aspect of wind blowing in an open field. Intriguingly, it is not the wind that Lowther sets as the protagonist but the “pink petals,” as if they compel the wind to move.

In the section titled “from Infinite Mirror Trip: a Multi-Media Experience,” Wiesenthal says:

Elaborately collaborative and technical in its conception, the “experimental programme” of Infinite Mirror Trip signalled one of Lowther’s first major forays into realms of both performance art and the sciences that most intrigued her, notably astrophysics and evolutionary cosmology. (17)

The material in this section was thought to have been lost until Wiesenthal discovered it; hence the “from” in what is otherwise purported to be a “collected.” Because this is intended to be a multi-media performance art experience, the words themselves cannot convey the entirety of the experience.

There is a great deal more to follow. It is a pleasant surprise to find a Canadian publisher doing justice posthumously to a prominent Canadian poet, and readers should revel in the experience of discovering Pat Lowther for themselves.
John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *Malahat Review, Arc, Antigonish Review, Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the U.S. for *Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

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