The Restless Wanderer

Fraser Sutherland. *Lost Passport: The Life and Words of Edward Lacey.* Toronto: BookLand, 2011. 455 pp.

Like Scott Symons, Edward Lacey occupies an uncommon place in Canadian letters, being as renowned for his sex life and travels as for his writings. Born to upper middle-class parents of Irish Catholic and French Canadian stock in Lindsay, Ontario, in 1937, Lacey is usually considered Canada's first openly gay poet. He spent most of his adult life outside Canada, a country against whose climate and culture he often fulminated, and which he forsook for a series of sun countries, from Mexico and Brazil to Morocco and Thailand. Yet his native land is very much present in the four collections of poetry he published between 1965 and 1994. In fact, a major concern throughout his writings is the national question; more precisely, why Canada seems devoid of an idea of itself. As Lacey writes from Brazil in 1969, "All I would wish is to have the same consciousness of my national identity as a Bolivian or Ecuadorian has. What have these countries got that Canada has lost or never had?" (*Magic Prison* 49). Considering that Lacey is one of the most alienated of modern writers, one cannot help but wonder if there is a direct link between his nationality and his utter sense of disaffection. Unfortunately, Fraser Sutherland's biography of Lacey does not shed much light on his inner journey, since it is surprisingly disengaged from its subject's sundry encounters with world writing.

Sutherland would have seemed to be the ideal biographer for Lacey. A long-time friend of Lacey, as well as his executor, Sutherland is an established poet with a worldly outlook. He also has been quite active in disseminating Lacey's work, notably by editing his *Collected Poems and [Poetic] Translations* and by reprinting his best known criticism, along with some unpublished letters (Lacey, "Documents"). However, in his biography he appears to be considerably more interested in Lacey's travels and sexual adventures than in his writings. *Lost Passport: The Life and Words of Edward Lacey*, which derives its title from Lacey's proclivity to lose his passports, to the point that "the Canadian government refused to issue him a new one because they suspect him of selling them on the black market" (Beissel 11), is a frustrating book. On the one hand, it is copiously researched, including interviews with several of Lacey's friends who are now dead. Yet, on the other hand, it not only has no photographs of its subject but also bears no index or bibliography. The complete absence of references, in particular, will necessitate that future Lacey scholars travel to

McMaster University's William Ready Archives in order to be able to locate many of the texts to which Sutherland alludes, often rather obliquely, and thus to contextualize them.

Another problematic aspect of *Lost Passport* is its authorial voice, as it is not always possible to determine whether Sutherland has written some passages or glossed Lacey. In his Acknowledgments, Sutherland states that his "greatest debt is to the words of Edward Lacey that I have quoted or paraphrased in this book" (n. pag.). But anyone who is not intimately familiar with Lacey's archival material will find it a challenge to discern whether certain lines were produced by Lacey or by his biographer. For example, along with his Lindsay childhood and youth, one of the most traumatic times in Lacey's life was the "sepulchral year" he spent teaching German at the University of Alberta in the early 1960s (Sutherland, Introduction vi). Lacey simply loathed his experience in "Deadmonton, Dullberta" (89), a view to which he is obviously entitled. However, what is questionable is Sutherland's assessment of Lacey's sojourn in Wild Rose country. Sutherland writes that one of the reasons Lacey did not feel at home in Edmonton in general and at the University of Alberta in particular was that "[t]he university was new" (92), which is a curious statement to make about an institution founded in 1908. Similarly, while it is difficult to dispute that Edmonton suffers from "suburban sprawl" (92), it is hardly true that "[m]iles and miles of flat land lay about" (93). After all, while Edmonton is a prairie city, its most cherished feature is the canyon-like River Valley that divides the city in half and which the University of Alberta campus overlooks. My suspicion is that Sutherland is merely echoing Lacey's sentiments here but, given that he does not use quotation marks, one cannot be certain when he is writing and when he is paraphrasing. Moreover, this practice is evident throughout the text. Thus when Sutherland describes Lacey's relationship with the former Brazilian President Juscelino Kubitschek, to whom Lacey taught English and came to perceive as a father figure, he writes that "since he lost the presidency, everything had gone wrong" (148). But the words turn out not to be Sutherland's, as one can see when one compares them to a letter that Lacey wrote to his life-long friend Henry Beissel and his family: "Since Kubitschek left the presidency in 1960, everything has seemed to go wrong" (*Magic Prison* 51). In short, parts of *Lost Passport* appear to be less a biography of Lacey than an autobiography.

Sutherland does not evade the matters of Lacey's alcoholism, drug abuse, and especially his sexual predilections. He ultimately seems to accept Lacey's self-evaluation (typically without identifying the source

text) that although "he himself was not a 'pedophile,' he was 'definitely a pederast; boys and young men in the age range of 13-14 to 24-25, and esp. between 15 and 19, are my passion, and I can't live without them'" (246). Needless to say, the question of whether Lacey was a pederast or a pedophile remains opens. He certainly made little effort to camouflage his sexual interest in boys who had little else to trade beyond their own bodies. Whatever else Lacey may have been, he was clearly a modern-day Peter Pan or Dorian Gray, someone with a pathological fear of ceasing to be young and thus of becoming unattractive to his prospective sexual partners.

That being said, he was never merely a sex tourist. Almost anyone who knew Lacey has commented on his "phenomenal abilities as a linguist" (Beissel 9). Lacey not only was blessed with a remarkable facility with languages but also was endlessly curious about the literary cultures of the countries where he lived. This led him to produce a variety of translations, which invariably entailed little pay and sometimes "backbreaking" labour, since "typing makes the nape of my neck ache" (*Magic Prison* 146). After noting that Lacey had become a regular translator for San Francisco's Gay Sunshine Press, Sutherland states that "translation wasn't the niche that he hoped life would craft for him" (373). While that may be true, there is no question of his commitment to translation. This is quite evident in his reasons for rendering into English Adolfo Caminha's *Bom-Crioulo,* an 1895 naturalist novel about life in the Brazilian Navy, particularly a homosexual affair between a runaway slave and a teenaged blond boy. Lacey was not pleased with the marketing of novel, not the least the fact it came wrapped in one of those "sexy covers that seem to promise a porno novel," but was philosophical about the situation, for "the publisher explains that he has to use them to sell the book" (*Magic Prison* 146). Still, he underlines, "I translated *Bom-Crioulo* because I thot it was an amazing book for its time and place, an interestingly literary-historical curiosity, and deserved to enter [...] the mainstream of world literature and be better known" (*Magic Prison* 147). Characteristically, Sutherland describes this minor classic as "*Bom Criolo* [sic]: *The Black Man and the Cabin Boy*, by the nineteenth-century Brazilian novelist, Adolfo Caminho [sic], which told a tragic tale of a sailor's romantic obsession" (356). Not surprisingly, he fails to gauge both the novel's significance and that of Lacey's translation.

Sutherland is more sensitive about Lacey's existential alienation, suggesting that it may have been not so much national as planetary, something that the poet himself senses. In fact, Sutherland (twice) quotes Lacey's account of an exchange he had with John Robert Colombo and his wife

Ruth, in which Colombo observes, "'The problem for Edward, I think, is not whether he feels he's Canadian, but to define for himself whether he's really human at all'" (244 and 189; see also Lacey, "Documents [III]" 139). Yet even then he tends not to explore the links between Lacey's writings and his sense of estrangement. For instance, one of Lacey's most fascinating poems is "The Lindsayite," which is worth reproducing in total:

> For many years I lived in Lindsay.
> Most important, I was born in Lindsay.
> That's why I'm cold and proud: I am made of snow.
> Ninety percent snow on the streets and houses.
> Eighty percent snow within the souls.
> And that distance from everything warm and communicative in life.
>
> The desire to love, which paralyzes all my efforts,
> comes from Lindsay, from its sleepless nights, womanless and without horizons.
>
> And the custom of suffering, which I find so entertaining,
> is the sweet inheritance of Lindsay.
> I have brought presents from Lindsay and now I offer them to you:
> this jade of crucifix, which contains a holy-water font;
> this painting of a snowbound farm in winter, hanging by the window;
> this pride, these lowered eyes . . .
>
> I had houses, I had lands, I had possessions.
> Now I am a rentier and live in Rio de Janeiro.
> Lindsay is only a picture on the wall.
> But how it hurts!
>
> (*Collected Poems* 144-45)

"The Lindsayite" would appear to be an unconditional condemnation of the poet's hometown and, by extension, of his homeland, "the snow-country" he abandoned for a "country of the sun" like his beloved Brazil (*Collected Poems* 57). However, one has to question that interpretation when one realizes that "The Lindsayite" is what Lacey terms "*an imitation*" of Carlos Drummond de Andrade's "Confidência do Itabirano" (*Collected Poems* 144), or "Confidences of an Itabirano," as it is translated by another Canadian poet, R.A.D. Ford (33). Considering that Drummond de Andrade's poem is about growing up in a stultifying Brazilian town, Itabira, it is evident that Canada does not have a monopoly when it comes to

repressing its citizens (Braz 72-73). Even so-called countries of the sun seem prone to it.

To be fair to Sutherland, he does not discount the fact that Lacey was assailed by demons beyond his native land's cold climate and lack of a national consciousness; he points out that, while an undergraduate, Lacey was "consigned to the psychiatric wing of Toronto Western Hospital" because of what his doctors diagnosed as his "schizoid tendencies" (40). Still, for someone writing a biography of arguably the most cosmopolitan of Canadian writers, he seems surprisingly uninterested in how Lacey is affected by his first-hand encounters with world literature. At one point in *Lost Passport*, Sutherland states that Lacey once autographed a copy of his first book, *Forms of Loss*, with the following inscription: "'Every author, however obscure, needs a biographer'" (192). While the globetrotting traveller and sexual explorer Edward Lacey may have found his Boswell, the author (and translator) Edward Lacey is still waiting.

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Albert Braz