

Hallelujah! Leonard Cohen Whole

Sylvie Simmons. *I'm Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2012. 570 pp.

Alan Light. *The Holy or the Broken: Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley, and the Unlikely Ascent of "Hallelujah."* New York: Atria, 2012. xxxii + 254 pp.

Sylvie Simmons is possessed of an entertaining style and of Leonard Cohen whole, and occasionally of an ironic wit almost to match Cohen's. Her impressive knowledge and intelligence can be appreciated in her timely deployment of Cohen lines and verses to comment ironically on her subject's doings and sayings, without flourish or mockery. Her exhaustive work and very good prose make this biography a must-have for Cohen's admirers and anyone interested in twentieth-century Canadian literature, especially of the mid-century, or late-Modern poetry. Simmons' Cohen emerges fully fleshed and fascinating, richly so, to a degree as could make him the only subject necessary for anyone set on a career in cultural studies of the past half-century. *I'm Your Man* is the definitive biography of Leonard Cohen.

Canadian Poetry readers will be satisfied to hear that Simmons gives good value for Cohen's development within the mid twentieth-century Montreal milieu, though this will also likely be the area in which some would have liked more of a good thing. That said, "development" may not do justice to the author's detailing of the nurturing and inspiration that the young poet received from the examples and instructions of A.M. Klein, F.R. Scott, and especially Irving Layton. Not that the courteous and generous Cohen himself has ever been anything but forthcoming, even eager with respect to Layton, in acknowledging his indebtedness to his Montreal mentors—his exceeding good fortune, if famously and facetiously tagged "neurotic" by Cohen—for encouraging his talent and teaching him to hone his craft during that poetically pyrotechnic Montreal scene of the 1950s. But the multiplying American accounts of Cohen, the (now) Golden Old Man and ever more celebrated troubadour, do give short shrift to that nurturing scene (which was bolstered by the new Canada Council for the Arts) which, as 1920s-to-1960s Montreal, may well have been the liveliest and most important in our literary history (*pace* the Ottawa and Fredericton of the late nineteenth century, and the Vancouver and Toronto of the 1960s). That's quite a run for any Modern metropolis as cultural centre, and can begin to explain the fortuitous genius who is Leonard Cohen. Cohen's

songs are distinguished from Bob Dylan's and their few comparators' because Cohen really is a poet—those exponentially rewarding lyrics—not just a felicitous rhymester, and he learned to be a poet among those great Montreal poets.

It is highly unlikely indeed that a better biography of Cohen will appear in present readers' lifetimes, nor could one fairly be wished for. On page one an adoring mother brings newborn Leonard home from the hospital to his swank Westmount home (which houses servants), and by the end of this chronological, detailed 570-page biography he is celebrating his 78th birthday—still touring and writing with what would be unhealthy compulsiveness in lesser artists. He had a strong mother and a weak father, both loving, which seems to be a parental configuration shared by many great writers. So the biography and Cohen himself constitute a complete and near-completed life (live longer, Leonard).

Certainly Cohen had a charmed childhood and, despite recurrent bouts of depression, continues to lead an apparently delightful life of romance and adventure and fame and fortune. The early Montreal setting is realized very well, receiving full value for the freedom and variety it and his family provided the ever self-conscious Cohen sensibility (like one of his poetic heroes, Yeats, he seems never to have distinguished art from life), as well as security from the effects of the Great Depression and World War Two. Some especially impressive events include his secret handling of daddy's rifle from the Great War (connecting, for this reviewer, to Cohen's continuing odd militaristic inclination), the adolescent Leonard meeting a Spaniard guitar player in the local park and cadging lessons that deeply structure his early songs, his clumsy hypnotizing of the maid and having her strip (yes, the event in *The Favourite Game* seems to have had real correspondence in adolescent Cohen's life), his best friendships (forecasting a life-long talent for lasting relationships with older men, such as Layton and Buddhist guru Roshi; oddly, Roshi sometimes behaved as Cohen's Yoko, sitting in on recording sessions, though there's no suggestion that he offered inexpert advice).

What else, in so much life? Cohen grew up in the gift of great personal and career-choice freedom, and throughout his life whenever he felt his freedom compromised, whether by women or weather, he flew away. He seems never to have met a woman he didn't bed, or who bedded him, and his romantic style has won him the hearts and help of many women. Judy Collins launched him as a singer-songwriter, and some of his most successful early songs are tributes to female muses. Most of these woman retain only fond and respectful memories of Cohen. Marianne ("So Long")

remains something of a Nordic saint (remember that photo of “the tallest and the blondest girl” on the back cover of Cohen’s second album, *Songs From a Room*, sitting at Leonard’s typewriter on the Greek island of Hydra in only a towel—oi the memories; and lament what’s lost in the disc-driven shift from big album cover art and, while you’re at it, gentlemen and ladies, of our youth). Contrarily, the original of “Suzanne” comes across as currently loony; and Cohen’s astro-radar failed him badly with the manager-lover, Kelly Lynch (no relation, if an unfortunate surname to have repeated so unfavourably in the darkest days of the master’s professional life), who cheated him into the much publicized bankruptcy that forced his septuagenarian return to touring. Yet anyone who has attended a recent Cohen concert must also pay tribute to Fortuna and say, “Merci, Lynch.”

Like many a popular musician, if surprising still for the always reserved Cohen, he indulged in a drug-fuelled couple of decades from the 1960s onward. And it’s worth being reminded that Cohen was already in his thirties by the middle of that toking and snorting decade. He must also be understood as someone who turned his back on official late-Modern poetry and threw his lot in with the popular likes of Dylan and the Beats. The decade of the ’60s was also when the over-thirty yet trusty Leonard found his whitewashed house on Hydra, where he composed some of his most enduring works of literature and music, and where he seems to have enjoyed rare years of peace with Marianne and her son, and fellowship with a community of artists. In the 1960s—remarkable, amazing even, to conjure—Cohen jammed on “Suzanne” with Jimi Hendrix in a small New York club. Of course Hendrix could play anything (only one day after the release of *Sergeant Pepper* Paul McCartney hurried to hear him playing it in a small London club), and Cohen himself reports that Jimi was “very gentle” (161) with his most famous blue ballad. Equally interesting, if alarming, are the recording sessions for *Death of Ladies’ Man* in the mid-1970s with a gun-wielding Phil Spector. At one point the now-jailed Spector put his loaded revolver’s barrel against Leonard’s neck, cocked the trigger, and told Cohen he loved him: “‘I hope you do, Phil,’ Leonard replied” (304; McCartney’s co-creator, Lennon, had the same sort of experience with Spector on the sessions for *Rock ‘n’ Roll*).

Only two complaints respecting this great biography. Although Simmons has been repeatedly quoted as insisting that this is no hagiography, to some extent it is that, if seldom troublesomely so for the Cohen admirer. Nonetheless, according to Simmons, amateur hypnotist Cohen could mesmerize rowdy concert crowds into quiescence and—echoes of delusional fat Elvis and the acid-tripping Lennon—miraculously heal sick cats. And

this: in “Death of a Ladies’ Man,” Cohen sings of an uneducated man who is “not a woman yet.” Going from Simmons’ occasional portrayals, readers might conclude that Leonard has made much headway to that desired goal. Excuse the stereotypical sexism in my catalogue, but in Simmons’ depictions (and I would stress the possessive, for of course we are never encountering the real Leonard Cohen, which only he knows), Cohen is often looking longingly and lengthily into the eyes of the latest romantic partner/target, or those of the next partner while still in a relationship; he is fussy about his suits, or meticulous in his dress; obsessive about his weight to the point of fasting on Fridays when he feels the belt tighten; etc. Or perhaps it is more revealing to view such a suggestively effeminate Cohen as Simmons’ (and many another’s) dream man: a man with a woman’s soul (and neuroses), which may help account for the poet-troubadour’s enduring popularity with women and men (apart of course from his genius). In fact, much as Cohen self-styles in “I’m Your Man.” So Simmons must be commended highly indeed for apprehending so wholly such an enduringly tricky subject.

This review now turns briefly to the other book listed above, Alan Light’s *The Holy or the Broken: Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley, and the Unlikely Ascent of “Hallelujah.”* In a time when publishing is more than ever an economic gamble, an exhaustive book on the history of Cohen’s “Hallelujah” seems a decidedly dicey venture, a book most likely published straight to the remainder bins. But New York publisher Atria must have had a better vision, and so we have *The Holy or the Broken*. “Hallelujah”—if a “hymn” as it’s often tagged, then a hymn to upper-case Irony, the mode that eludes Americans and baffles the emo crowd—was first recorded by Cohen on his album of 1984, *Various Positions*, which, ironically, Columbia Records refused to release in the U.S.A. until its Cohen box set of 1990 (it also includes “Dance Me to the End of Love” and “If It Be Your Will”); Columbia head honcho Walter Yetnikoff justified his decision to Cohen thusly: “Leonard, we know you’re great, we just don’t know if you’re any good”). Then eight years later, in 1992, John Cale recorded and released a much less ironic version with different verses also written by Cohen (whose marathon composition process testifies to exceptional devotion to his art). Then in 1994 Jeff Buckley covered the Cale cover in a performance far too sentimental for any true Cohen admirer. But among the lesser many, Buckley’s version soared, and with it Cohen’s name and fame. After Buckley’s “Hallelujah,” the song was recorded by a lot of singers and performed regularly on TV talent competitions and by numerous

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choirs following natural and other disasters. That is all you need to know about this book.

To conclude repetitively: Sylvie Simmons' *I'm Your Man* is both highly rewarding reading and the definitive biography of Leonard Cohen. Of course, the real-life Leonard might still have something to say or sing about defining Cohen and his career, being very much still with us, and maybe even defacing a toilet tile somewhere:

Rebecca
please find me
I am almost 80.

Gerald Lynch