

Queer Classics

Denton Welch

BY ERNIE MCLEOD

It's never possible to entirely separate an artist's life from his work, but, for some artists, their life clearly is their work. This was certainly true of Denton Welch (1915-1948), a British artist and writer who, after a devastating accident, transformed his short life into exquisitely rendered journals and autobiographical fiction, many of which—lucky for us—have been handsomely reissued in paperback by Exact Change over the past decade.

Young writers are often told to "write what you know," and there is perhaps no purer example of this than Welch's collected works. The fact that his supreme self-awareness extended to his sexuality—in an era when this was hardly the norm—makes his writings a special gem for queer readers.

Denton Welch was born in Shanghai, where his family had business interests, and lived a rather privileged childhood filled with travel. His mother, to whom he was very close, died when he was only eleven. Eventually, after being shuttled back and forth between China and boarding schools in England, he enrolled in art school, where he developed his talents as a painter and illustrator.

Welch's life was forever altered at twenty when he was struck by a passing motorist while bicycling to his uncle's for the weekend. Though his condition gradually improved after a long convalescence, his spine and kidneys were permanently injured, preventing full recovery. For the next thirteen years, he endured a series of increasingly severe complications, including high fevers and terrible headaches, which finally made even writing physically painful. The last four years of Welch's life were spent in the care of a handsome "hearty land-boy" named Eric Oliver, their initially bumpy relationship blossoming into one of great love and sensitivity.

I left Archer to go to the cloak-room, but he followed and stood beside me in the next china niche, while the water flushed and gushed importantly in the polished copper tubes, and an interesting, curious smell came from the wire basket which held some strange disinfectant crystals. Archer stood so quietly and guardingly beside me there that I had to say: Do I look queer?

No, you don't look queer; you look nice, he said simply.

For I realized, even then, that everything in my daydreams had been invented for my pleasure. . . . Everything was made in my image, and I was a sort of small god, keeping carefully within his own territory.

I first encountered Welch's work in "The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction." His wonderfully understated yet open story of youthful innocence and desire, "When I Was Thirteen," was my favorite in the whole massive anthology. From there, I was led to his last and most fully-realized novel, "A Voice Through a Cloud," which chronicles the nightmarish aftermath of his accident with clarity and bitter eloquence. Welch's journals (edited by Michael De-la-Noy and charmingly illustrated by Denton himself) and his wickedly horny and funny novel of adolescent self-discovery, "In Youth Is Pleasure," provide the most direct view into his sexuality, but pretty much any Denton paragraph offers up a heaping spoonful of gay sensibility. In other words, no single work is The Classic; it's all about the voice.

It's telling that William Burroughs cites Welch as the writer who most directly influenced his own work. On the surface the two would seem from

other planets, Burroughs's hallucinatory fantasias having little in common with Welch's mundane miniature musings. Burroughs puts it this way in the foreword to "In Youth is Pleasure": "I postulate that the function of art and all creative thinking is to make people aware of what they know and don't know that they know Denton Welch makes the reader aware of the magic that is right under his eyes." Welch's lunches, unlike Burroughs's, are neither naked nor narcotized, but possess a tantalizing magic all their own.

Some might accuse Welch of being an overly precious writer, which, in fact, he is. He's the kind of obsessive queen for whom the perfect teacup, jam and biscuits are infinitely more important than, say, world peace. But beneath the preciousness is the fertile grit of humanness. Welch's self-awareness rarely slips into self-indulgence because

He stuck out his tongue and made devil faces in the glass; then he turned away and started to change for dinner. When he had undressed, he absent-mindedly rouged his nipples until they were like two squashed strawberries. He looked down at them vaguely and then began to rouge all the extremities of his body the finger-tips, the toes, the earlobes. Next, he made gashes and spots all over his body until he seemed entirely dressed in the crimson marks.

his pointed observational powers dissect everything and everyone in his path, narrow as it was. He was a literary psychologist with an equally keen eye for damaged china and hypocrisy.

They say when someone is deprived of one sense, the others become sharper to compensate. While Denton Welch's accident deprived him of a physically adventurous existence, it undoubtedly sharpened his pen over the restricted life that remained. Preciousness doesn't come any more unrestricted or cutting-edge.

Quotable Denton

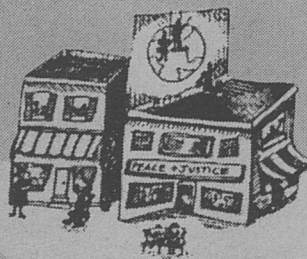
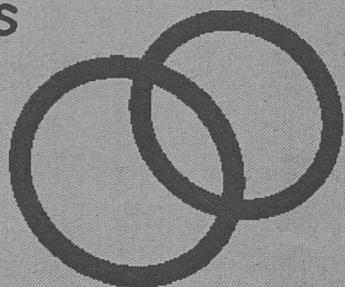


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