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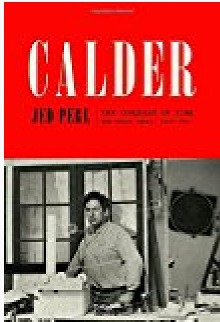
Superstorm Sandy

by Karen Wilkin

A review of Calder: The Conquest of Time: The Early Years: 1898-1940 by Jed Perl.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Jed Perl

Calder: The Conquest of Time: The Early Years: 1898-1940

Knopf, 704 pages, $55.00

Alexander Calder's name is synonymous with air-borne, witty constructions of crisp planes and lines, pared down to essentials and delicately balanced. The same cannot be said of Calder: The Conquest of Time, a biography by Jed Perl.1 It's a hefty six hundred, intensely serious pages (not counting notes and back-matter) and packed with detail. Ample biographies are common enough, but Perl's bulky book, subtitled "The Early Years: 1898–1940," accounts for only the first forty-two years of Calder's life—he died aged seventy-eight in 1976. It's worth noting that Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan dealt brilliantly with the whole of Willem de Kooning's ninety-three-year-long life and career in a book the same size as the Calder tome, while Hilary Spurling's exemplary two volumes on Henri Matisse—who died at eighty-four and, it can be argued, was a far more significant figure than Calder—are together only half again as long as Perl's behemoth. Yes, there are John Richardson's multiple volumes on Pablo Picasso. But even the most dedicated Calder fan would have to admit that there is an enormous difference in the importance and influence of the two artists.

The Conquest of Time traces Calder's history essentially from conception to the years when both his reputation and what we consider to be his mature style were largely established. His connections to the vernacular, to Surrealism, and to purist abstraction, along with his innovative originality and his

resistance to labels, are anatomized. We are also offered a substantial back-story: a great deal about Calder's Francophile artist parents and somewhat less about his artist grandfather. His mother, Nanette Lederer Calder, was a portrait painter; his father, A. Stirling Calder, like his own father, Alexander Milne Calder, was a well-known, fairly academic sculptor. The grandfather is probably most celebrated for the statue of William Penn atop Philadelphia's City Hall, while the father is best known to New Yorkers for his figure of George Washington as president on the arch in Washington Square and to Philadelphians for his Swann Memorial Fountain. The family had roots in Philadelphia—Calder was born near the city and spent his earliest years there—but his childhood, we learn, was peripatetic. Because of Stirling Calder's health, the family spent extended periods in rural Arizona, before it became a state, and in Pasadena, California, returning to the East Coast in 1909, when Calder was eleven, and settling in Croton-on-Hudson, north of New York City. They returned to California in 1913, moving to San Francisco when Stirling Calder became Acting Chief of Sculpture, designing and supervising works for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, the 1915 extravaganza celebrating both the opening of the Panama Canal and the recovery of San Francisco from the devastating earthquake of 1906. Back east again, at seventeen Calder entered the Stevens Institute of Technology, in New Jersey, to study engineering.

Perl has clearly had access to an immense supply of material and has done a heroic amount of research. He has read a mass of correspondence and, among other things, combed through the books in Calder's library. He has also drawn heavily, it appears, on Calder's own, admittedly casual autobiographical recollections, published in 1966, and on Calder's sister's *Three Alexander Calders: A Family Memoir*, written and published after her brother's death. The sheer amount of information is impressive, yet Perl's efforts to trace everything that he believes could possibly have had an effect on what he calls "Sandy's young, impressionable imagination"—from the part-Native-American children he played with in Arizona, to his parents' artist friends, to the Arts and Crafts interiors he encountered in Pasadena, and more—all but disappear in a welter of not-always-relevant detail and extraneous information. Do we really need to know what Calder's sister weighed at birth? On the plus side, we learn of Calder's early fascination with making things, his precocious virtuosity with combinations of wire and found objects, and his dedication to the workshops his parents provided for him throughout the years he was growing up. Perl also, less convincingly, connects the possibility that the seven-year-old Calder posed as a clown for a family friend's illustrations of a book of children's poems with the multi-part *Cirque Calder* (1926–1931), beloved by visitors to the Whitney Museum, with its movable performers and animals. But of what earthly significance is the fact that Picasso completed his well-known, wistful painting of *saltimbanques*, now in the National Gallery, Washington, D.C., the same year that the extremely obscure poems were published? There's a lot of this sort of thing, which helps explain those six hundred pages.

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Calder, we discover, despite his early delight in making wire jewelry for his sister's dolls and metal animals as presents for his parents, didn't start making art until after he spent some restless years traveling, in pursuit of unpromising jobs, upon receiving his degree from the Stevens Institute. Eventually settling in New York, he enrolled at the Art Students League in 1923 and began painting. At this point, *The Conquest of Time* starts to become an ambitious period history, with substantial digressions about many of the artists and figures associated with the art world of the time, including Calder's teachers John Sloan and George Luks, and his fellow student John Graham. As for Calder's own evolution, we're shown nothing in his paintings of the early 1920s—which are indebted to the Ashcan School—to suggest the artist he would become, although Perl relates the later work in wire to the fluent, schematic drawings the fledgling painter was doing as picture essays for *The National Police Gazette* and for a book on "animal drawing."

We follow Calder to Paris, where he arrived in July 1926, calling attention to himself with flamboyant clothing and performances of the Cirque Calder, which he began assembling almost as soon as he arrived. Initially, only the few people invited to Calder's studio saw these odd displays of miniature trapeze artists, a sword swallower, acrobats, and equestrians, among other "acts," mechanically manipulated by their maker to recorded music, but the young American seems to have had a knack for meeting and charming influential people, fellow artists, and intellectuals, most of whom are extensively and exhaustively described. There's also a long disquisition on the circus, puppetry, marionette shows, and the like, ostensibly to contextualize the Cirque Calder and its reputation. Perl also expends a good deal of effort on the unflattering portrayal of Calder the circus manipulator as Mr. Piggy Logan in Thomas Wolfe's novel You Can't Go Home Again, along with discussions of Wolfe and the models for other characters in the book. (Given Wolfe's notoriety for presenting his long-suffering editors with manuscripts of impossible length, which they struggled to reduce to something the size of—say—War and Peace, Perl may feel a certain sympathy with Wolfe; more about editing, later.)

About 1926, following the suggestion of a friend, Calder began making works entirely of wire, rather than combining materials, as he had done in the personages of the *Cirque Calder*. He soon captured a good deal of attention in Paris with his wire portraits and full-length figures, such as a leggy, standing Josephine Baker, evoked by coils, spirals, and barely sketched limbs, which survives only in photographs. Both the wit and the implied mobility of these works set them apart; the minimally indicated images not only vividly evoked their subjects, but also quivered at the least touch. The wire sculptures strengthened Calder's reputation in Paris, but in the fall of 1927 he returned to New York for about a year, partly because he had managed to schedule what we are told he always regarded as his first significant exhibit, at Weyhe Gallery, the celebrated bookstore-cum-exhibition space. The two-person exhibition, which included prints by Emil Ganso, introduced New York to Calder's all-wire sculptures. Few of the caricature-like portraits and figures sold, prompting a brief return to wood carving, but back in Paris, in the fall of 1928, Calder once again worked in wire, increasingly simplifying his "drawing" to achieve more expressive, less cartoon-like forms. Over the next few years,

Calder became known as "*le roi du fil de fer*"—the wire king. Yet his work was evolving away from cursive drawing with wire towards pared-down, mutable, geometric abstract constructions—"objects," according to Calder's preferred word. Spheres and discs deployed on fragile arcs and stems of wire were moved in constantly changing relationships by small motors.

In 1931, while still based in France, Calder returned to the United States to marry Louisa James, moving back to Paris with his new wife in time for the first exhibition of his new abstract sculpture in a smart Right Bank gallery. The exhibit, titled "Alexander Calder: Volumes—Vecteurs—Densités/Dessins—Portraits," included a row of the playful wire portrait heads, perhaps as insurance, but it was the minimal abstract work that firmly established the youthful American as a serious member of the avant garde. The couple lived in France, with occasional visits to the United States, where Calder convinced the pioneering dealer Julien Levy to exhibit his work, until 1933. As the political situation in Europe grew more dire, they decided to return to the States, settling permanently in Connecticut, but eventually establishing a second home in the French countryside. True to form, once back in the United States, the ambitious, persistent Calder persuaded Pierre Matisse to show his objects in his highly regarded gallery. As the 1930s progressed, Calder was increasingly acclaimed, exhibiting in both the States and Europe. As early as 1929, he had been commissioned to create a "mobile" for the newly opened Museum of Modern Art, but what was perhaps more important, in 1936 he was one of the few Americans included in the museum's enormous, definitive exhibition, "Cubism and Abstract Art."

Although we learn about Calder's connections with important vanguard figures such as the composer Edgard Varèse, the architect Frederick Kiesler, and Marcel Duchamp, who named Calder's suspended objects "mobiles"—Jean Arp named the static ones "stabiles"—the deepest friendship Calder established in Paris seems to have been with Joan Miró, a connection that lasted for the rest of his life. Like the short, persistently Spanish Picasso and the tall, very French Braque, Miró, the small, elegant Catalan, and Calder, the burly, rumpled American, were physically and culturally very different. But Perl suggests they were "united in their passion for Paris, for artistic experimentation, and for the play of the independent imagination." There are unmistakable parallels between the elements in Calder's works from the 1930s, delicately balanced on wires, and the ambiguous shapes, often connected by fragile lines, in Miró's paintings from the 1920s— affinities that have been illuminatingly underscored in several museum exhibitions. Yet Perl downplays this relationship, stressing instead the personal connection between the two men. Great emphasis is placed on the effect of a visit to Piet Mondrian's studio on Calder; by his own account, the refined, expressive geometry of both Mondrian's environment and his work were profound stimuli to the sculptor's move towards abstraction.

The Conquest of Time is filled with lengthy digressions about almost anyone Calder encountered between the time he began studying at the Art Students League in 1923 and his return to the United States almost a decade later, after his long sojourn in Europe. (The one exception is a mention of Calder's caricature of "a man by the name of George Seldes"; Perl seems unaware that Seldes, a former foreign correspondent, was an important leftist political writer and the author of, among many other

books, the first exposé of Mussolini. In the 1940s and 1950s, until J. Edgar Hoover closed him down, Seldes published the newsletter *In Fact*. Supplied with inside information by his newspaper colleagues, he called attention to such things as the tobacco lobby's suppression, even then, of information about the link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer.) The result is less a portrait of Calder than of the hectic gaiety of the 1920s and the shift in mood brought about by the social and political upheavals of the 1930s, larded with a remarkable amount of superfluous detail. (Why tell us that when the Calders left New York for Barcelona in 1932 "they both had touches of poison ivy on their faces"?) More engaging is the evocation of the community of artists, art world figures, writers, and the like in the Calders' part of Connecticut—a sort of bucolic, inland version of the Hamptons.

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The strongest aspect of the book is the discussion of Calder's work and working methods. Perl's admiration for Calder's art animates his account of the shift from motorized works to those responsive to air currents or—in the more permissive 1930s—the touch of a hand. He correlates Calder's growing interest in unpredictable, organic shapes and poised, suspended elements—in contrast to his first, more rigid abstractions—with the establishment of his Connecticut studio, amid fields and trees, and vividly describes the results. We meet the critics and curators who championed Calder's work, including such legendary figures as the Museum of Modern Art curator, later the director of the Guggenheim Museum, James Johnson Sweeney, and MOMA's Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Both had insightful observations about the tension between abstraction and reference, between the geometric and the organic, that characterizes Calder's efforts. (Typically, however, we are also told Sweeney's brother's nickname.) There's interesting information about the political and aesthetic complexities of the (pre-Franco era) Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 International Exposition in Paris, for which Miró executed an enormous mural and Picasso conceived *Guernica*. Calder was called in, last minute, to design a fountain playing not water but mercury for the pavilion, utilizing an existing pump mechanism; another mercury fountain, designed for an earlier exposition and thriftily intended for re-use, had been deemed incompatible with José Luis Sert's modernist building, so the ingenious American was recruited, despite his nationality.

The biggest problem with The Conquest of Time is what might be called Perl's free-association approach. The book is studded with quotations from everyone from Charles Baudelaire to Friedrich Nietzsche that Perl finds apposite to whatever Calder was doing at the time, along with discussions of these comments and their authors, although, as Perl admits, there's usually no evidence that Calder had any knowledge of or interest in the source. We're obviously meant to be

impressed by Perl's well-furnished mind, but it's unclear just how this display of tangential observations enhances our understanding of Calder's achievement. A good editor might have reduced the amount of ostentatious padding, but there's little evidence of oversight. There's frequent repetition of the redundant construction "we cannot help but," while in at least two places, Perl says what I cannot help assuming (or can but assume) is the opposite of what he means. Witness "the impact of their experimental spirit on Sandy's young, impressionable imagination cannot be underestimated." And while I'm at it, in discussing the ballet Parade, Perl notes Picasso's "elaborate Cubist costumes that transformed the dancers into kinetic sculptures." But the Managers in the elaborate Cubist costumes didn't dance—they could barely walk; the dancers were in more conventional attire. The best of The Conquest of Time are the quotations from Calder himself, as concise and wry as the book is overwrought. This great American original deserves better—and less.

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1 *Calder: The Conquest of Time, The Early Years: 1898–1940*, by Jed Perl; Knopf, 687 pages, $55.

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