



PROJECT MUSE®

D. H. Lawrence Letter-Writer

Hugh Stevens

The Cambridge Quarterly, Volume 35, Number 1, 2006, pp. 82-88 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/206543>

D. H. Lawrence Letter-Writer

Hugh Stevens

The Letters of D. H. Lawrence, 8 volumes, paperback edition. Cambridge University Press, 2002. Complete set: £250

Volume i: *September 1901–May 1913* edited by James T. Boulton. 635 pp. £38. ISBN 0521006910

Volume ii: *June 1913–October 1916* edited by George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton. 735 pp. £40. ISBN 0521006929

Volume iii: *October 1916–June 1921, Parts 1 and 2* edited by James T. Boulton and Andrew Robertson. 806 pp. £40. ISBN 0521006945

Volume iv: *June 1921–March 1924* edited by Warren Roberts, James T. Boulton and Elizabeth Mansfield. 671 pp. £40. ISBN 0521006953

Volume v: *March 1924–March 1927* edited by James T. Boulton and Lindeth Vasey. 746 pp. £40. ISBN 0521006961

Volume vi: *March 1927–November 1928* edited by James T. Boulton and Margaret H. Boulton, with Gerald M. Lacy. 695 pp. £40. ISBN 0521006988

Volume vii: *November 1928–February 1930* edited by Keith Sagar and James T. Boulton. 729 pp. £40. ISBN 0521006996

Volume viii: *Previously Uncollected Letters and General Index* edited and compiled by James T. Boulton. 436 pp. £27. ISBN 0521007003

AS EARLY AS 1913, aged only 27, D. H. Lawrence wrote: 'I seem to have had several lives, when I think back. This is all so different from anything I have known before. And now I feel a different person. ... Life unsaddles one so often' (i. 544). Before he died at the age of 44 he went on to live several more lives, all of which are well represented in Cambridge University Press's edition of his correspondence, originally published between 1979 and 2000. Here are the letters again, in a fine paperback edition, and modernist scholars and readers of twentieth-century literature will be grateful to Cambridge University Press for keeping them in print and bringing

down the price. At £40 for most of the volumes, or £250 for the whole set, they still remain beyond the reach of all but specialist readers, however, and as most university libraries will already have purchased the hardback edition, one wonders who will purchase these volumes. James Boulton's *Selected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, also from Cambridge University Press, at £16.99, would be the natural choice for most readers.

Time, as much as money, might dissuade readers from appreciating these eight volumes, which run collectively to 5,453 pages and contain 5,684 letters. The editors have published every letter they can find, although there are, inevitably, sorely regretted absences. Only one of Lawrence's letters to Lydia, his mother, remains. Jessie Chambers destroyed the letters she wrote to him, and the editors rely for these on the extracts she gave from them in her memoir, *D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Record* (1935). He wrote few letters to Frieda, as their lives were mainly spent together after they met. These inevitable lacunae do not detract from the authority and convincing comprehensiveness of this collection. Reading all the letters in succession is a formidable task, but they are wonderful to dip into (though Lawrence's many letters to publishers and agents are less enjoyable than his personal letters). The scholarly apparatus supporting them is admirable, and this edition is as definitive as we can hope for. Each volume contains a judicious introduction, a chronology of the years covered, maps to help the reader trace Lawrence's movements, and a series of well-chosen illustrations. The 286-page general index in the eighth volume enables the reader to follow particular strands through the labyrinth, whether these be Lawrence's correspondence with particular individuals or his views on topics including communism, socialism, fascism, democracy, conflict, war, travel, religion, industry, labour, sexuality, love, marriage, friendship, birds, flowers, animals or insects. (If one misses some topics – such as class, race, domesticity, leadership, or coal – the index is still a supremely helpful guide.) Forty pages are given to the entry on Lawrence himself, which meticulously traces all references to his works. And the annotations given each letter are supremely informative and intelligent, so that these volumes offer a wonderfully intimate encounter not only with Lawrence's life on a day-by-day basis, but also with the cultural history of England in the early decades of the twentieth century. The reader of Lawrence's letters gains insights into politics, personal relationships, views on race, ethnicity and nationality, and the complexities of gender in the private and public spheres. Lawrence's voice has many qualities: it can be intelligent, passionate, and affectionate, but also hateful, bigoted, strident, overbearing, hectoring, and at worst disgustingly offensive.

Lawrence himself gives us some help on the question of how we might interpret his letters. How are we to account for the volatile changes of

mind, the swings between affection and vituperation, between love and hate? In one of his most famous letters, to Edward Garnett, he advises:

You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character. There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognisable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically-unchanged element. (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure single element of carbon. The ordinary novel would trace the history of the diamond – but I say 'diamond, what! This is carbon.' And my diamond might be coal or soot, and my theme is carbon.) (ii. 183)

Lawrence's metaphor eloquently recalls his coalmining background, while suggesting possibilities of transformation. The transformations in his life are remarkable. The young Lawrence is often preciously literary, as when he writes to Blanche Jennings in 1909 that 'Every time I have been poured from the bowl of circumstance and environment into a fresh vessel, then have the clouds come up from the bottom of me, and for some time the sunshine can find no road in me', and that he 'should have been far happier and better as a farm-labourer than as anything out on the choppy seas of social life'; he also has the ability to criticise himself, noting of his novel 'Laetitia' (which was to become *The White Peacock*) that he is 'astonished to find how maudlin' it is. 'I am a fearful, sickly sentimentalist', he comments (i. 106). This apologetic, self-deprecating voice was soon to disappear.

The trajectory traced by these letters is breathtaking. The deferential working-class 16-year-old boy who writes in 1901 'I beg to place my services at your disposal' to J. H. Haywood Ltd, manufacturer of 'Surgical, Athletic, Veterinary and Magnetic Appliances' in Nottingham (i. 21), is a different being from the writer who, eight years later in September 1909, meets Ford Madox Hueffer, and builds up an acquaintance including Edward Garnett, John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield, Bertrand Russell, E. M. Forster, Lady Cynthia Asquith and Lady Ottoline Morrell. This story, though well known, still has the power to surprise. Lawrence's writing was the means by which he moved out of provincial working-class life into metropolitan artistic, intellectual and social elite circles, and the letters themselves convincingly demonstrate why his writing made him so interesting to the powerful and the influential. Again and again, fresh, spontaneous writing gives vivid impressions of Lawrence's strong personality, his radically independent thought, his experiences, and his physical environment. The landscapes of England, Germany, Austria, Italy, Australia, Mexico and New Mexico emerge from the page with startling freshness: one feels as if one is witnessing the paint dry on the canvas, or, better, one

imagines one is there. The letters are a gift to their original recipients, re-creating for them an intensely sensual world; they are a gift that can be given again to us, with no loss of intensity.

Many letters could be cited to illustrate Lawrence's creative powers. Here he is describing Beuerberg:

about 40 kilometres from Munich, up the Isar, near the Alps. This is the Bavarian Tyrol. ... In the morning we used to have breakfast under the thick horse-chestnut trees, and the red and white flowers fell on us. The garden was on a ledge, high over the river, above the weir, where the timber rafts floated down. The Loisach – that's the river – is pale jade green, because it comes from glaciers. It is fearfully cold and swift. The people were all such queer Bavarians. Across from the inn, across a square full of horsechestnut trees, was the church and the convent, so peaceful, all whitewashed, except for the minaret of the church, which has a black hat. Everyday, we went out for a long, long time. There are flowers so many they would make you cry for joy – alpine flowers. – By the river, great hosts of globe flowers, that we call bachelor's buttons – pale gold great bubbles – then primulas, like mauve cowslips, somewhat – and queer marsh violets, and orchids, and lots of bell-flowers, like large, tangled, dark-purple harebells, and stuff like larkspur, very rich, and lucerne, so pink, and in the woods, lilies of the valley – oh, flowers, great wild mad profusion of them, everywhere. (i. 413)

The prose here is like spontaneous poetry (and shares many of the qualities of his best poems): exquisitely cadenced, playfully alliterated ('bachelor's buttons ... bubbles', 'great ... globe ... gold great'), specific, exact and exuberant at once, it gathers the alpine flowers into its own flowing, tangled rich syntax; Lawrence's last sentence is itself a great wild mad profusion of flowers by the pale jade-green river. Phrases connected by dashes characteristically gather in intensity, as when he elsewhere describes Beuerberg as 'a white, tiny village, with a great church, white-washed outside, with a white minaret and a black small bulb – half renaissance, half moorish – brought back from the Turkish wars, a reminiscence – but inside, baroque, gilded, pictures, gaudy, wild, savagely religious' (i. 418). Here the thrice-repeated 'white' provides a startling relief for the transplanted Turkish black bulb, and the mention of the Turkish wars anticipates the 'savagely religious' quality of German religious art, suggesting a violence rather than a piety in this Bavarian Christian community. People, domestic life and everyday routines are observed, captured and transmitted with the same loving care, as when he writes with joy about his Italian kitchen with its 'great open fireplace, then two little things called fornelli – charcoal braziers – and we've got lots of lovely copper pans, so bright', or the Italian

men at Lago di Garda who ‘lounge about in the little square where the boats come up and the nets are mended, like kings’, or an Italian family ‘having supper. [The father] brings me red wine to another table, then sits down again, and the mother ladles him soup from the bowl. He has his shirt sleeves rolled up and his shirt collar open. Then he nods and “click-clicks” to the small baby, that the mother, young and proud, is feeding with soup from a big spoon. ... It reminds me so of home when I was a boy. They are all so warm with life’ (i. 460).

These letters give us the qualities we associate with Lawrence – immediacy, sensuousness, acute appreciation of the physical world, of what Leavis called ‘felt life’ – in a spontaneous flowing prose which is the perfect medium for what it describes. Often, however, we are exposed to verbal violence and psychic *malaises*, in prose which seems to fall apart, just as its author is torn apart by anger, disgust, rage. In 1910 it appears that Lawrence will move from his working-class origins into an identity of literary respectability, but he is violently ‘unsaddled’ or knocked from this path. In March 1912 he meets Frieda Weekley, writing to her soon after: ‘You are the most wonderful woman in England’ (i. 376). A month later they are planning to elope to Germany together; in May he writes to Ernest Weekley, her husband, ‘You will know by now the extent of the trouble’ (i. 392). The letters at this point are eloquent in their silence and brevity, and we can only imagine the violent upheavals moving Lawrence from respectability to notoriety. After he has met Frieda we notice a new confidence and directness in his voice, which is never to leave him. He can still be obsequious, particularly in his dealings with Ottoline Morrell, but he becomes unhesitatingly outspoken, laying out his views with aggressive vigour (if not with consistency; like Walt Whitman, Lawrence contradicts himself, he is large, he contains multitudes). The difficulties experienced when he elopes with Frieda – occasioned by Ernest Weekley’s reluctance to divorce his wife – cause the first expressions of an anger resembling a violent, physical force. Here is an early expression of this rage, in July 1912, after Weekley has urged Frieda to come back to her husband and children:

Curse the blasted, jelly-boned swines, the slimy, the belly-wriggling invertebrates, the miserable sodding rotters, the flaming sods, the snivelling, dribbling, dithering palsied pulse-less lot that make up England today. They’ve got white of egg in their veins, and their spunk is that watery it’s a marvel they can breed. They *can* nothing but frog-spawn – the gibberers! God, how I hate them! God curse them, funkens. God blast them, wish-wash. Exterminate them, slime. (i. 422)

This excoriation of England continues throughout his life: ‘I loathe the idea of England, and its enervation and misty miserable modernness’

(i. 427); England 'nauseates my soul, nauseates my spirit and my body ... this banquet of vomit' (ii. 500). Lawrence's experience of state authority during the war – his examinations by medical authorities who declared him unfit for combat; the censorship of *The Rainbow* and the subsequent difficulty of publishing *Women in Love*; the poverty caused by censorship, which depleted his income from book sales; the experiences of being treated as a spy, having his movements controlled, and being denied a passport when he wanted to leave England – move his temperature to boiling-point. Rage is the dominant note in these years, during which a 'radically-unchanging element' of strength holds him together. He might claim (in September 1913) to have the 'good old English habit of shutting my rages of trouble well inside my belly, so that they play havoc with my innards' (ii. 73), but the letters show the rage being let out. Only rarely does he sound the note of defeat, as in a letter to Murry in January 1916, where he writes, 'I must own to you, that I am beaten – knocked out entirely' (ii. 500). By 1929, when copies of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and the typescript of *Pansies* are seized by the police, as well as his paintings, exhibited at the Warren Gallery in London, one admires Lawrence's continuing spirit of resistance: '*Ma questi Inglesi sono scimmie, bruciano il proprio gallo che non canti più. Ebbene, non farà nemmeno alba laggiù. Paese di scimmie senza palli, che finisca nel fango! Basta!*' ('But these English are apes, they burn their own cock so it crows no more. Well, there won't even be dawn over there. Country of apes without balls, that will end up in the mud! Enough!'; vii. 413–14). In the end only illness saps his vitality.

During the First World War his hatred for England becomes a hatred of modern nationality: 'Everything that is done, *nationally*, in any sense, is now vile and stinking, whether it is England or Germany. ... I hate the whole concern of the nation' (ii. 597, 18 April 1916). 'All this war, this talk of nationality, to me is false. I *feel* no nationality, not fundamentally' (ii. 626, 9 July 1916). The letters show a man desperate to change the world, but unable to do so. Lawrence is in the end too solitary and alienated to work effectively for political change, though it is interesting to see him formulating his political ideals, above all in dialogue with Bertrand Russell. In February 1915 he tells Russell that 'There must be a revolution in the state. It shall begin by the nationalising of all ... industries and means of communication, and of the land – in one fell blow' (ii. 282). 'Every man shall have his wage till the day of his death, whether he work or not, so long as he works when he is fit. Every woman shall have her wage till the day of her death, whether she work or not, so long as she works when she is fit – keeps her house or rears her children' (ii. 286). In July of the same year, however, he tells Russell: 'You must drop all your democracy. You must not believe in "the people". ... There must be an aristocracy of people who have wisdom, and there must be a Ruler: a Kaiser: no Presidents or democracies' (ii. 364).

Lawrence wavers between a 'new constructive idea of a new state' in which 'the highest understanding must dictate for the lower understandings' (ii. 366) and a passionate individualism which resists national formations altogether. Having no faith in the people, he wants his select individuals either to take control of the state or to flee to form a new society. Yet most citizens, one feels, would not gain entry into Lawrence's kingdom. Russell is dismissed in a letter telling him he is 'The enemy of all mankind, you are, full of the lust of enmity. It is *not* the hatred of falsehood which inspires you. It is the hatred of people, of flesh and blood. It is a perverted, mental blood-lust' (ii. 392). Murry and Mansfield would be unlikely to want to join Lawrence in *Rananim* after he hears that Lawrence considers him 'a dirty little worm' (ii. 467) and she is told: 'I loathe you, you revolt me stewing in your consumption' (ii. 470). These shocking instances of verbal violence directed against particular individuals are matched by often offensive views on race. Lawrence's frequent anti-Semitic outbursts are particularly shocking (despite his warm friendship with the translator Samuel Solomonovich Koteliansky). Problems with agents and publishers are often blamed on their Jewishness, as when he tells Robert Mountsier: 'quite approve of your opening the Seltzer letter. I hate Jews and I want to learn to be more *wary* of them all' (iii. 678). Indians are also frequently the victims of Lawrence's racist invective: in one typical remark, they are represented in 1910 as 'extraordinarily interesting to watch – like lithe beasts from the jungle: but one cannot help feeling how alien they are ... a terrier dog is much nearer kin to us than those men with their wild laughter and rolling eyes' (i. 214). Lawrence may have wanted to reform human society, but it seems he didn't like human beings enough to do so. This verbal viciousness sits oddly with his many loving letters (his letters to Frieda's mother are heart-warming outpourings of epistolary affection and care). We certainly cannot look to Lawrence's letters for a stable ego. Rather they give evidence of the enormous contradictions in his views, his writing, and his political life, which partisan accounts of Lawrence – celebrations and attacks alike – have consistently failed to do justice to.