

The Life of D.H.Lawrence

K.Sagar

August 21-24, 2020

From my teens I knew of D.H.Lawrence as a somewhat disreputable author whom I knew to stay away from. I once watched in television an adaptation of one of his short stories. At home there was a copy of "Lady Chatterley's Lover" with a gaudy suggestive cover, and which seems to have been lost. I must have read that infamous book in the fall of 1972 and on a flight to California just before Christmas that year I was sitting next to a young Oriental woman who was reading another novel by him, and for the first time I became aware that he had written other novels (not just short stories) as well. On my train ride back from Vancouver to Montreal in the late summer of 1974 I had brought along a pile of books, and one of them was a thin Penguin collection of short stories by Lawrence, appropriately titled "Love among the Haystacks", one story of which "The Man who loved Islands" stuck out in my mind. After my trip to Mexico and Guatemala with my wife in 74/75 I started reading "The Plumed Serpent" whose description of the Mexican people struck me both as eerily accurate and a bit frighteningly offensive (some twenty odd years later I tried to read it again but was bogged down). In the fall of 1976 I was taken to the movie version of "Women in Love" and found it quite sensuous, when I later watched it with my wife, she was not amused. Anyway a month or so later we were separated and divorced. The following year I would read the book itself, along with "The Trespasser" (I have a vague memory of the latter in connection with a rail pass visit to Brussels) and in the early 1980's on a trip to England "Sons and Lovers" which may have made the deepest impression on me. By that time I had acquired a fair number of his books and would later read "The White Peacock" and "The Rainbow". I was attracted to his style, insistent and repetitive with a strange seductive rhythm. In particular I appreciated his description of nature and was in a vague sympathy with his diatribes against modern mechanical life without being impressed with the degree of coherency with which those were presented (neither was Lawrence himself). The deepest impression though was made by his mystical view of the union of sexes, such a contrast to the matter-of-fact and eminently reasonable view held by my wife. After the initial infatuation it would take some time before I read a novel of him again, that was in 1994 on a trip up to a conference in Tromsø in northern Norway, when I read through "Kangaroo" written during a brief interlude in Australia. Since then I have not read anything by him.

The present book is in the nature of a scrap-book. Profusely illustrated, mostly by photos of low technical quality and indifferent artistic merits, as well with generous quotes. In the middle there is a color section of some of Lawrence paintings. In particular at the end of his life he fled into painting with the innocence and enthusiasm of a true amateur. The paintings are fairly crude and technically deficient showing little of any natural inborn talent as opposed to sincerity of execution; they are the paintings of a child, although not necessarily dealing with infantile subjects. He loved his paintings very much, as people

tend to do with works for which their talents do not match their enthusiasm¹.

You get the background of a family where the mother, with ambitions, was dominant and everybody were taught to despise their illiterate father, and unfairly so it is indicated. Lawrence as a younger child in the brood got the opportunity to get an education qualifying him as a teacher, a profession to which he brought enthusiasm and unusual skill and devotion, yet he did not savor it particularly, complaining of the unruliness of the children and the prohibitions of using a cane, at least too freely. Already as a twenty year old he had some poems published locally and in his early manhood years he got in contact with a literary editor - Garnett, which opened up opportunities for him, and pretty soon he was introduced to the smart literary circles hobnobbing with the likes of Lady Ottoline, Bertrand Russell and upcoming stars, all congregating at Garsington Manor. He had among others a correspondence with Russell who was initially taken by him and his fervent visions of a new more spiritual and natural society, but eventually tired of him, after having been verbally abused to a degree he was not used to. Lawrence, not surprisingly tried out a number of young women finding satisfaction in none; that elusive combination of carnal and spiritual satisfaction would eventually be met through the elopement with Frieda, a married woman stemming out of German aristocracy. She was six years older than him and something of a nymphomaniac, having had a number of affairs before she met Lawrence in 1912, and would continue to do so after she met him throughout their marriage and into her prolonged widowhood. To judge from the pictures of her, she was in no way a beauty nor obviously eroticized in her appearance; more like a solid piece of buxomy maternal flesh. The relationship was tempestuous, with constant quarrels, loss of tempers, culminating in physical fights, and intermittent separations, but they would always come back together.

Lawrence took a pacifist stand during the First World War and having a German wife did not help matters with the authorities. They were short on funds and lived frugally, Lawrence doing most of the cooking and household chores, something to which his spouse clearly was not used. They were holed up at different locations in Cornwall during the War and Lawrence dream of going to far away places, not just France, Germany and Italy, could not take fruition until a few years after the war was ended. He had dreams about starting a commune - Ramanin - of like-minded individuals leading, not unlike in a monastery, a good spiritual life; but it was hard to find those individuals among his friends, as he demanded loyalty and submission to his will, not unlike a Jesus character. But the dream sustained him for many years but sustained frustrations eventually eroded it. But finally there were travels which eventually would carry him (and Frieda) round the world. Heading east to Ceylon, then to Australia, Tahiti, before arriving in California, going on to New Mexico, where he would make a home close to Tao on the invitation of an American woman and admirer. Further on there would be prolonged sojourns in Mexico, which he liked very much, still the situation was politically unstable and dangerous, train rides always required armed escorts. Lawrence professed a hatred of England, but exposures to exotic lands tended to be anti-climactic and foster a nostalgia for the England he had left in disgust.

One becomes privy to his working discipline, always being busy and writing and

¹ One is reminded of Goethe who felt very protective of his "Farbenlehre"

rewriting whenever not straddled with household duties, gardening and social interactions. He had friends of course but often put unrealistic demands on them. He was not the one for small talk, that he hated, as well as empty brilliancy in sophisticated conversations. If he talked he only talked on matters which deeply affected him, and his intensity and concomitant warmth were strong enough to captivate and engage. His earnest friendliness could make up for his bad temperament and viciousness in human interchange, especially epistolary such, thus maintaining ties well beyond what one would deem possible.

While he met with initial success and making it on the scene, his classical novels were met with disparaging reviews and open hostility, which of course may eventually have contributed to his popularity as infamy is prone to do. Towards the end of his life money started to come in, but by then it was too late.

Lawrence was never in the best of health, but that did not stop him in his youth to go on extended walks, as was not unusual at that time. He walked from Bavaria down through Switzerland with its snow clad Alps down to Italy the arrival to which starts off his "Twilight in Italy". But in the twenties he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and his health was further undermined by bouts of malaria. His eventual lack of fitness would become first a nuisance and then a definite problem in the 1920's. At the end of the decade medical authority claimed that there was not much that could be done for him, his lungs were in such a sorry condition that it was a miracle that he still was alive.

Slowly one light after the other were extinguished; friends never to be seen again, countries never to be visited again. He left England for good, although not necessarily realizing that, a few years before his death. He died in southern France in the spring of 1930 and his ashes were buried in a specially erected chapel by the ranch in Tao, where he had professed to have felt most at home and ease.

August 24, 2020 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*