HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF D. H. LAWRENCE'S "KANGAROO"

It is well recognised that Lawrence's "Kangaroo," whatever its quality as a novel, is a work of shrewd and perceptive observation of Australian life in general, with a special significance for Illawarra. Therefore when a new study purports to show that the curiously vague plot is based upon the reality of a Digger movement of the early 1920s (akin to the New Guard of the Great Depression years), a new perspective could be opening on our local history. Such a book is that of Robert Darroch, "D. H. Lawrence in Australia" (MacMillan, Sydney, 1981, available on special from Mary Martin Bookshop at $5.00: a very good buy).

Admittedly, the book is a summary of argument, a precursor of what promises to be a longer treatise; and generous illustrations cut down the text further. It starts impressively with recounting the success of some literary detective work in identifying people and places known to Lawrence in Sydney (there has never been any secret about the Western Australian or South Coast associations). Thus the Callcott of the novel is seen to be a Captain W. J. R. Scott, and Cooley ("Kangaroo") is stated to be the famous Major-General Sir Charles Rosenthal. Superficially at least, these identifications are plausible enough, but from then on difficulties arise.

The trouble seems to be that Darroch, having propounded a theory, does not properly substantiate it from independent and quoted sources. It is not his fault that Lawrence's diary provides no clues (p. 107); but it does seem strange that the many letters he wrote at the time are rejected as an accurate record of what the novelist was doing in Thirroul and Sydney (p. 83). Consequently Darroch fills in many details of his theory by adopting information supplied by the novel. For instance, on pp. 100-1 Darroch speaks (on unstated authority) of a meeting between Lawrence and Scott which "almost certainly" took place, though exactly what happened is not of course known. Thereupon the missing information is supplied from the novel and drafts of it, as a result of which part of the fiction is incorporated into a reconstruction of what is thus supposed to have happened. In other words, fiction is used to establish fact. This is unsatisfying to a critical mind, so that the superficial attractiveness of the theory is not sustained. Darroch, one fears, has been enticed by his theory from true objectivity.

Two comments remain to be made, from the point of view of local history. The alleged Digger movement is not shown to have had any force in Illawarra. Of local identities, only one, Dr. Francis Crossle, of Bulli, receives a mention, and even that is tentative. Dr. Crossle was himself a novelist, but unfortunately, although the two novelists met, there is no record of the meeting, so that even this reference is tentative.

The second comment is that nothing that has been said detracts from the status of "Kangaroo" as a most valuable commentary, sociologically and descriptively, of Illawarra in the early 1920s. And it is to be doubted if there have ever been more sensitive depictions
of our bush than were achieved by that short-term visitor to our shores and our locality. However, for any convincing proof of the deep "Digger" plot we will have to wait, if we ever get it.

Postscript:

As this note was about to go to press, I managed to contact Dr. Crossle's widow, who kindly gave what information she could.

One would think that Lawrence might well have welcomed a meeting with at least one intellectual equal, for although the Doctor's cultural interests, which were both wide and deep, embraced music, they embraced literature and art too; and of course Lawrence was an artist as well as a writer. The Doctor knew that he was dealing with an unusual man when Lawrence came to him as a patient; and if the latter did not know he was dealing with a most unusual medical practitioner, he would soon have discovered the fact, and that his doctor was anything but hidebound, since he was a thinker and experimenter in life's ways as much as Lawrence was. The two men had a broad field of common interest. But no: the relationship remained professional, and the fault was not Dr. Crossle's. Lawrence remained aloof, and communicated with his cultivated and brilliant doctor no more than he did with other locals. Which makes one wonder how intimate, if at all, was Lawrence's experience with the Australian ethos. Undoubtedly he could get the spirit of place with memorable success; but the spirit of its people may have had to rest more upon chance.

Incidentally, Dr. Crossle is so interesting a subject that he is well worth a note in a later Bulletin.

—Edgar Beale.

"YOUR MOST OBEDIENT SERVANT, J. S. SPEARING"

II: THE INDEPENDENT CONTRACTOR

[Quotations from original letters and documents in the State Archives are published by permission of the Archives Authority of New South Wales]

On 1st May 1830 William Brown, "per Asia, assigned servant to Mr. Spearing," came before Lieut. Sleeman, the commandant at Wollongong, and being duly sworn set his mark to a deposition which, if true, revealed a very curious and irregular arrangement. According to Brown he had been assigned to Spearing in August 1828, and for most of the time since had worked on his own account as a sawyer, being "allowed his time to himself by paying Mr. Spearing for his Rations, and allowing him 10/- and 12/6 a week for his liberty." (The old practice of expressing depositions in the third person was apt to cause trouble with pronouns). The deposition continued: "Deponent has paid 9d. per lb. for sugar, 5/- per lb. for tea, 6d. per lb. for Beef, 1/- per lb. for Pork and that himself and three others have drawn thirty pounds of Beef weekly from Mr. Spearing." During his time with Spearing he had earned about 30/- a week by cutting cedar on "Paulsgrove" and on Crown land.