

## D. H. LAWRENCE AT THIRROUL

"One of the great things about *Kangaroo*," writes Joseph Davis in *D. H. Lawrence at Thirroul*, "is that it contains something for practically everybody." Genially, Davis gives the game away. The novel that Lawrence wrote in six weeks in 1922 at Thirroul, near Wollongong, has been persistently plundered for extra-literary material and seriously misinterpreted in literary terms. Davis seeks to right both wrongs in a book that also has something for everyone: "personal reminiscence, a little geography, some intensive local history, bits of general and political history, as well as bursts of political sleuthing and some sustained literary criticism . . . ."

One part of *Kangaroo* is evidently autobiographical - the long chapter called "The Nightmare", which recalls Lawrence's harassment by military authorities during his sojourn in Cornwall in 1917. It was Robert Darrock's *D. H. Lawrence in Australia* (1981) which contended that there was a factual basis for the contacts of Somers - hero of the novel - with a secret army in Australia; that Lawrence had himself made the acquaintance of leaders of such an army. Much of the work of Davis's book is a courteous dismantling of Darrock's argumentative manoeuvres.

While he admits "a possibility that Darrock's thesis might well be partially correct", Davis insists that Darrock's persistent "use of fiction to substantiate fact . . . particularly when it is unsupported by anything more than circumstantial corroborative detail, is not evidence". Instead, Davis argues that Lawrence's experience of fascist/socialist conflicts in Italy, together with what he learned of the Australian postwar political scene on shipboard and in Western Australia, influenced the depiction of local politics in *Kangaroo*. He believes that the contacts

with Lawrence made in Thirroul - perhaps with the Irish doctor Francis Crosslé - are bound to have been more influential than any supposedly made in Sydney in the few short visits that Lawrence paid there. Nevertheless, Davis frankly concedes the difficulties of dealing with the "kaleidoscopic mass of circumstantial detail" which his book ably reviews.

Davis wants also to direct readers' interest to aspects of the novel which he thinks are more compelling than its politics. Like Somers/Lawrence, he wills the politics away, preferring to thing of *Kangaroo* as a "pastoral of solitude", a novel pre-eminently of place. There lies a familiar trap for the novel's interpreters. Sometimes lauded as a miraculous apprehension of Australian landscapes, one beyond the intuitive faculties of the nativeborn, *Kangaroo* treats of the bush vaguely and portentously. Somers thinks of the bush "biding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness", finds in it "An old, saurian torpor". That his expressionistic account has been regarded gratefully by some Australians as realistic appraisal is a sorry token of cultural dependence. None the less, Davis properly asserts Lawrence's perspicuity when describing such details of the natural setting as wattle-bloom, or blue-bottles washed up on the beach at Thirroul. Lawrence rises to the challenge of the particulars of this place.

A native of Thirroul, Davis adds as an enterprising appendix to his book "a parish pump history of Thirroul 1900-1920". Throughout his investigation of Lawrence's presence there, Davis is more keen to establish a sense of the context in which the author lived and wrote, than to venture conjectures to satisfy the conspiratorial. In one of the jokey chapter titles to which he's drawn, Davis announces how "The Barber, The Life-saver, The Real-Estate Agent and the Shit-Carter meet D. H. Lawrence". If Davis's account of his own intimacy with Thirroul as the site of his childhood is occasionally in the *faux naïf* manner, and if slang is his too frequent recourse as a device of ingratiation, he has still written a most valuable book. Its cardinal qualities are a receptivity to place, such as he prizes in *Kangaroo* and an openness to incomplete, frustrating evidence, of whose importance he's rightly convinced. It's a cause for gratitude, also, that *D. H. Lawrence at Thirroul* has been complemented by a corrected edition (from the Thomas Selzer, New York edition) of the novel, with a foreword by Raymond Southall.

*Kangaroo* will continue to plague our literary history and entice those with a desire for all loose ends in an author's life to be connected. Davis has translated both kinds of discussion into a more equitable climate. He has also shown how much eclectic yet unpretentious responses to a cultural artifact as he employs, can illuminate but not exhaust *Kangaroo*.

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