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REVIEW ESSAY

**“PAZZI INGLESII, DAVVERO!
SUCH COMBUSTIBLE PEOPLE!”:
RINA SECKER’S LETTERS ABOUT THE VILLA
BERNARDA**

NICK CERAMELLA

Richard Owen, *Lady Chatterley’s Villa. D. H. Lawrence on the Italian Riviera.*

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I feel privileged to write this review near Punta Ala on the Tuscan Coast in the midst of olive trees and vineyards full of beautifully hanging grapes and olives: a most inspiring and fitting place to do my job, with the Riviera only two hours north in the neighbouring region of Liguria. Let alone the warm invitation that accompanied the handsome review copy: “Nick, this is an appropriate task for you as one of Lawrence’s ‘sunny children’”. Indeed it was and for many reasons.

Villa is a splendidly produced book that tracks Lawrence’s infatuation for Italy, in his search for sun, health and serenity, starting from the arrival, with Frieda, on Lake Garda in 1912, and focusing on the months spent in Spotorno between November 1925 and April 1926. On reading, my interest increased rapidly, not only because the book shares a similar theme with my own recent contribution to Lawrence studies – *Lake Garda: Gateway to D. H. Lawrence’s Voyage to the Sun* (2013) – but also because although I had never heard of Richard Owen as a Lawrence scholar, I had known him as the Rome correspondent for the *Times*. In an interview, at the Italian Institute of Culture in London on 8 July

2014, he declared that Lawrence had long been one of his favourite writers and “the big brother of [his] life”. However, he was prompted to write his Lawrence book only after retiring from the *Times* in 2010, when, as he explains, he “was offered access to the unpublished letters of Rina Secker, with their vivid eyewitness descriptions of Lawrence’s stay in the Riviera seaside town of Spotorno” (1).

It was thanks to the role so discreetly played by Rina (née Capellero, the wife of Martin Secker, Lawrence’s London publisher) that the Lawrences went to Spotorno. Perhaps we first learnt about that from Harry T. Moore’s biography *The Priest of Love: A Life of D. H. Lawrence* (1954) which says they met Angelo Ravagli, the dashing “bersaglieri” officer, following Rina’s suggestion to rent Villa Bernarda from Ravagli’s wife Serafina Astengo. But reading Rina’s diary for Wednesday 18 November 1925 offers such a vivid picture that it feels as if we were there too when “Tenente Ravagli called about Villa Bernarda – left A. [her son Adrian] with Mamma and went with L. and T. R. to see the Villa” (83). Next day she wrote:

Very delightful – Ls very pleased – and decide to take it for the winter ... We have at last found an ideal place – a semi rustic little house in the shadow of Spot castle with vineyards and olive groves all around it and the most marvellous view. The Ls are very pleased with it, and they are paying £25 for the whole time they will be here. (83)

In turn Lawrence wrote a letter to Martin Secker saying:

We’ve taken this villa, move in on Monday. It’s just under the castle – the garden goes to the castle itself. It’s nice – only hope it won’t be cold. – I’ve got a cold, motoring in beastly Switzerland, and feel cross ... Rina’s got a little cold too – the boy flourishes. It’s been chilly and windy – thank heaven the sun is here again. (5L 340–1)

The *Villa* of the book's title is Villa Bernarda in Spotorno. Owen draws the reader's attention to the place that he sets as the scene for the events that led Lawrence to write his most controversial novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). However, if the critics agree that the characters Connie and Mellors are based on Frieda and Ravagli in real life, they have differing opinions about the timing of their sexual relationship. There are those, like John Worthen, who think that gratification was deferred: "It sounds as if [Frieda] fell for [Ravagli], while initially his feelings were rather less strong ... but it seems certain that they eventually became lovers over the last three or four years of Lawrence's life".¹ On the other hand, Owen brings into play Alberto Bevilacqua, the Italian novelist, whose intriguing novel, *Attraverso il tuo corpo* [*Through Your Body*, 2002] drew on the long conversations he had with Angelo Ravagli in May–July 1970 when the "bersagliere" had returned for good from the USA. Bevilacqua quotes Ravagli's words: "Frieda and I broke the ice airily between us. It happened a few days after our meeting at Villa Bernarda".² In this account, "it" was a "coup de foudre".

It seems that Lawrence pushed Frieda to meet their landlord at the villa, while Rina set up their meeting. This circumstance is confirmed in Rina's diary, which recalls that it was a "wonderful afternoon of sunshine" and while Rina and Lawrence, who both had bad colds, had tea at the Hotel Ligure, Frieda was left in the capable hands of the "bersagliere". Ravagli recounted his vivid memory of that day to Bevilacqua:

I showed her around the villa, perhaps on too careful a tour. She walked ahead of me, with well-calculated movements of her body: I was trying to work out whether she was just giving herself foolish airs or whether she was trying to provoke me ... As I roamed round the room, I felt as if she wanted to tell me, but in a very cold way: "Come on, take me. Because I don't know what to do to get you to take me" ... I obeyed the lure of her eyes. I was conquered by the emotion expressed in her face.³

No wonder Frieda hinted in a letter to Dorothy Brett that she was instantly infatuated by Ravagli: “We have a nice little Bersaglieri officer to whom the villa belongs I am thrilled by his cockfeathers he is almost as nice as the feathers!” (5L 350).

Though we might suppose that Frieda felt an immediate attraction for Angelino, as she called him, critics like Brenda Maddox and Robert Lucas believe Lady Chatterley’s love story began on a later occasion, when – following the arrival of his sister Ada with her friend Lizzie Booth, which coincided with a visit from Frieda’s daughters Barbara (Barby) and Elsa – a highly strung and helpless Lawrence confessed to William Hawk: “I feel absolutely swamped out, must go away by myself for a bit, or I shall give up the ghost” (5L 394).⁴ Meanwhile, Rina, in a letter to her husband, reported that Frieda was “becoming very agitated about the arrival of her many guests”, and that since the Villa was in a terrible state, Rina offered to help: “I am longing to show her how to really clean up that place and make it tidy”. She also remarked that there were:

dried orange and tangerine peels everywhere – but *old* ones, you know, quite black with age – and cigarette ends all over the furniture – not on trays but just anyhow – and the chaos! ... heaps of all sorts of heterogeneous substances and things on the beds, on the chairs, on the window-sills, on the night-table – everywhere! I am longing to have a go at it all. (112)

This presents to me a visual image of the deteriorating relationship between the Lawrence couple, as confirmed also by Barby, who reported devastating rows. One morning, she was woken up by “loud bumping noises overhead” and rushed upstairs where “Frieda, her neck scratched, was in tears”.⁵ Yet that was just the beginning of worse things to come. Rina wrote to her husband: “Bad weather here – DHL laid up with ’flu – Frieda depressed” (114). No wonder Frieda, who did not get on at all with Ada, decided to move with her daughters to the Hotel Ligure. At that point, the situation was so bad that Lawrence left the Villa and went

to Montecarlo with his sister. By 27 February 1926, he had joined his friends the Brewsters at Capri. Then, between 10–22 April, he spent a few days in Ravello with Dorothy Brett, turning her down with the famous phrase “Your boobs are all wrong” during a sexual encounter she described as “a hopeless horrible failure”.⁶

According to Bevilacqua, Ravagli reported that during those days “when Lawrence, in March [April], was away from Spotorno, I was completely free. You can imagine, what a feast, but it lasted only one week”.⁷ At the same time, Rina wrote that “There are terrific happenings at the Villa Bernarda. His sister [Lawrence’s sister, Ada] and her friend arrived last Wednesday”, while later she mentioned hearing “the most amazing tales” from Ada’s friend, Mrs Booth (114). As Owen says, Rina diplomatically did not take sides, but was sympathetic with Ada for her sense of order, and thus described the situation at the Villa: “They are all such combustible people! ... Good heavens, but the Villa B really will go off one of these days with noise of a hundred bombs” (116). Apart from the slovenly housekeeping noted earlier, we might well wonder what the “terrific happenings” were. A possible answer to this burning question may come from Ravagli himself. Owen comments:

Looking back in old age, Ravagli told Bevilacqua that Frieda stimulated Lawrence’s imagination – and hence his fiction – at Spotorno by telling him what she and her lover got up to both at the villa and in the nearby bushes, olive groves and vineyards. There was certainly complicity between Lawrence and Frieda at Scandicci, where he read *Lady Chatterley* to her as he wrote it. (140)

We know that these readings sometimes shocked her and prompted her to say: “Lorenzo you cannot say that”.⁸ But *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, as Lawrence wrote to Martin Secker, “is frankly a novel about sex, direct sex” (6L 295).

To conclude the discussion about the timing of the relationship, I should add that critics of the calibre of Worthen believe the affair

between Frieda and Angelino began only after the Lawrences moved to Villa Mirinda at Scandicci, near Florence, on 6 May 1926. Be that as it may, we can yet deduce that the groundwork for the novel took place at Villa Bernarda in the tempestuous, and sometimes violent, marital scenes, which fired Lawrence's imagination and creativity, resulting in a very fruitful period of writing. It was here that he wrote *The Virgin and the Gipsy*, a transitional work anticipating *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in which Yvette (based on Frieda's daughter Barby) has sex with a gipsy, a man far beneath her social position. Like the later novel, then, the novella concerns the emotional and sexual awakening of a young woman by an earthy elemental kind of man.

'Sun', another story written at Villa Bernarda, also prefigures *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Juliet, the story's protagonist, suffers a nervous breakdown; rather like Rina, who frequently described herself using the term "neurasthenia", perhaps due to dissatisfaction with her married life. As Lawrence reported to Martin:

Rina usually comes with Adrian in the afternoon. She is much better now, was very *nervosa* at first, and a bit trying, no doubt, to her parents ... When Rina can leave the boy for a few hours with her mother, and get a good walk in the hills with us all, she'll be perfectly all right. (5L 394)

In March 1930 Rina herself wrote to Martin Secker: "Of course I am looking forward to your seeing Adrian, but otherwise I am really rather sad!" (151).

It is evident that Lawrence perceived her unhappiness, so that Rina provided inspiration for Juliet, a young and attractive American mother, who was moody and anxious. Martin Secker lived most of the time in London, while Rina was on her own with their child in Spotorno; this caused a growing sense of estrangement from her husband, and, according to local rumours, she had a series of affairs – another similarity with Connie Chatterley. In 'Sun', Juliet's son is called the "boy" as Lawrence

used to call him in his letters, until his father arrives unexpectedly from New York and calls him Johnny. So the child was inspired by Adrian, while Juliet's husband, Maurice, a typical city man, is based on Martin Secker.

It is odd that Rina talks about other stories, but never refers to 'Sun' in her letters, though, I believe, she was aware of her influence. Owen, describes her as "vibrant, observant, mischievous, flirtatious and coquettishly aware of her charm", adding that "this is strikingly similar to Lawrence's description of the 'feminine' and 'womanly' Connie Chatterley, with the 'growing restlessness' and sense of 'disconnexion' which drives her into the arms of Mellors" (63-4). Although, to quote Worthen, "It had long been Lawrence's practice to take what he chose of real-life people and recreate them in forms he wanted", Owen nonetheless makes a valid point about the characteristics of Connie Chatterley that Lawrence based on Rina.⁹ After all, Frieda told her in her typical straightforward way at a London party: "Rrrrina, my dear, Lady Chatterley, is you" (3). She even suggested to a Swiss film producer, J. E. Siebenhaar, when she sold the film rights to *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the 1930s, that either Rina or Barby could play Connie. Frieda wrote to Rina, encouragingly, "You go and try! If you can't be Lady C you might have another part to begin with" (62).

Finally, it is worth recalling that the Lawrences enjoyed a closer and closer friendship with Rina, sharing long walks and days together, during most of their stay in Spotorno. Indeed, as testified by several letters, they missed her so much when they moved to Scandicci that they kept inviting her, but she resisted, almost as if she was afraid of having become too intimate with them.

By way of conclusion to what has turned out to be a short essay rather than a review, I would like to stress that, despite the many books and articles that have been written about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Owen's *Villa* makes an original and fresh contribution thanks to Rina Secker's diaries and correspondence with Frieda and Lawrence. There is no doubt that the result makes for pleasant and particularly appealing reading, which is enriched further by the

various references to Bevilacqua’s *Attraverso il tuo corpo*, where pieces of Ravagli’s account sometimes fit together with Rina’s letters like a jigsaw puzzle. Therefore, I believe it would be useful and timely to translate Bevilacqua’s novel into English, so that any Lawrentian could easily read it. Indeed, Bevilacqua wrote me a letter where he entrusted me to do just that: a project I have half completed and perhaps now the time has come to pursue and accomplish it. Ideally, this might entail some sort of “joint venture” with Richard Owen, in which we could share the experience of having met Bevilacqua and provide a complement to *Villa* that Lawrentian scholars and enthusiasts alike could also enjoy.

¹ John Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 336.

² Alberto Bevilacqua, *Attraverso il tuo corpo* [*Through Your Body*] (Milano: Mondadori, 2002). All the passages quoted from this novel have been translated from Italian by myself. For further readings of the Bevilacqua/Ravagli connection see my essays: ‘Everything you wanted to know about the background to *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and never even dreamt as possible’, in *Rivista di Letterature Moderne e Comparate*, vol. LXII (2010); and ‘Lawrence’s lifelong fascination with the *bersagliere* figure’, in *Etudes Lawrenciennes*, no. 32 (2005).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Brenda Maddox, *D. H. Lawrence: The Story of a Marriage* (London: W. W. Norton, 1996); Robert Lucas, *Frieda von Richthofen: Ihr Leben mit D. H. Lawrence* [*Frieda von Richthofen: Her Life with D. H. Lawrence*] (Munich: Kindler Verlag, 1972).

⁵ Edward Nehls, *D. H. Lawrence. A Composite Biography*, vol. iii (London: Madison, 1957), 21.

⁶ John Manchester, ‘Epilogue’, in Dorothy Brett, *Lawrence and Brett: A Friendship* (Santa Fé: Sunstone, 2006), III.

⁷ Bevilacqua, *Attraverso il tuo corpo* [*Through Your Body*], my translation.

⁸ Enid Hilton Hopkin, *More Than One Life: A Nottinghamshire Childhood with D. H. Lawrence*, (1993), 53.

⁹ Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider*, 214.