

LAWRENCE, MADAME DOUILLET AND THE HOTEL BEAU RIVAGE

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Madame Douillet, proprietress of the Hotel Beau Rivage in Bandol, was not a significant figure in Lawrence's life. His acquaintance with her was confined to two short periods when he stayed at the Beau Rivage: from November 1928 until March 1929 and again from September 1929 until his death in March 1930, when he stayed briefly at the hotel and then corresponded with her after he moved to the Villa Beau Soleil in October 1929. Of this acquaintanceship and of Madame Douillet herself we know very little. David Ellis mentions her by name only once in *Dying Game*, the final volume of the Cambridge biography; she appears only half a dozen times in the index to the final volume of Nehls's *Composite Biography*; and there are not many more references to her in the seventh volume of Lawrence's collected letters. We do not even know her first name.

She was, in truth, one of those people who are part of all our lives: individuals who for shorter or longer periods play a role in the practical or business-like aspects of our day-to-day existence, with whom a cordial relationship develops, and yet of whom no record survives suggesting a connection that needs to be explored or assessed biographically. Although Lawrence's life is so fully documented, someone like Madame Douillet can fade out of sight. Even as assiduous a correspondent as Lawrence was unlikely to write to someone he saw every day during his periods of residence at the Beau Rivage, and any such letters would doubtless have been brief queries about hotel matters, disposable once dealt with.

Yet, largely because of the events of the last six months of Lawrence's life, Madame Douillet has not entirely disappeared from view. The references to her in Nehls's volume, taken from the

reminiscences of those close to Lawrence who saw him at the Beau Rivage, and the survival of two letters, written in French,¹ from Lawrence to Madame Douillet suggest that their acquaintanceship moved beyond the business-like in a way that tells us something about how Lawrence related to those he met in such circumstances and the ways in which they responded to him. In particular, the two letters to Madame Douillet offer insights into how Lawrence conducted the everyday business of life, and particularly how he did so in the weeks leading up to his death. Letter 5483a is published in this number of the *JDHLS* for the first time. Letter 5437a was first published in the 1932 Huxley edition of Lawrence's letters with the date unaccountably omitted and with some slight changes,² and that text was adopted in the Cambridge Edition (7L 590). The emergence of these letters in manuscript has led us to reflect on the role played by this brief acquaintance in the larger story of the last fifteen months of Lawrence's life.

Lawrence and Frieda began their first stay at the Hotel Beau Rivage on 17 November 1928 and remained there until 11 March 1929. They had travelled to Bandol from Port-Cros, that "poky" Mediterranean island (7L 18) off the coast from Hyères, which lies to the east of Toulon. Lawrence was rather irritated by the inconveniences of Port-Cros – there were no shops and supplies had to be brought from Hyères, two hours away by boat – and, as he told several correspondents, he did not really enjoy living on an island. Bandol represented a welcome return to the mainland and to greater comfort, increasingly important for a man in failing health.

Katherine Mansfield had stayed at the Beau Rivage twice during the war. In December 1915 she told S. S. Kotliansky that Bandol was "so beautiful and the sun shines – or it doesn't – There is the sea and a wild beautiful coast – and behind the village there are woods and mountains".³ The young novelist Rhys Davies, who visited Lawrence three times in Bandol, remembered that in 1928 Bandol was "not much more than a village, and the Beau Rivage Hotel drowsy and placidly-run". Davies stayed in Mansfield's

room, a “larger corner room with a sofa for siesta and a view of the lazy little harbour and front. The Lawrences occupied two small communicating rooms down the corridor”.⁴

Lawrence agreed with Davies that the hotel was “quiet and very pleasant,” and he was pleased that “the people are all very nice” (7L 41). No doubt those nice people included Madame Douillet and the staff of the Beau Rivage. The hotel was comfortable as well as inexpensive. Lawrence liked the hotel food and ate “all his meals good enough” (7L 205). He enjoyed the sunshine and got on with some writing – mostly newspaper articles, short prose pieces and the *Pansies* poems. He kept up his correspondence with family and friends and renewed lapsed correspondences – notably with Thomas Seltzer and Martin Secker.

The Lawrences had expected to stay in Bandol for only two weeks before leaving for Italy, where Lawrence hoped to complete his tour of Etruscan sites. But by early December, when he had planned to travel to Florence, he was telling Martin Secker that he was “a bit scared of tombs in winter” (7L 40). The sunny weather lasted into December and, although it was cold, Lawrence felt that the climate of Bandol was preferable to that of Florence, which he knew would be very wet and where colds and other infections were rife. He spoke of Capri or Spain; or as he told Mabel Dodge Luhan, “we’ll have to see what breeze will blow into our sails, to start us on a new move” (7L 71).

In the event, the Lawrences stayed in their “quite pleasant little hotel by the sea” (7L 80) until the middle of March 1929. Among their numerous visitors who also stayed at the Beau Rivage were Rhys Davies, P. R. Stephenson, Julian and Juliette Huxley, Barbara Weekley, Brewster Ghiselin, Aldous and Maria Huxley and Ada Clarke, some of whom visited more than once. The regularity of these visits established the pattern that Lawrence would repeat after he had moved to the Villa Beau Soleil in the last weeks of his life.

Lawrence mentions Madame Douillet three times in letters during February 1929. On 7 February he tells the Brewsters that

Tonight is the Bandol philharmonic concert, so of course we've got to go – and Madame says we shall be enchanté, so let's hope so. I only hope we shan't be enrhumé [given a cold] into the bargain. (7L 171)

Did Madame Douillet patronise the symphony herself (probably not) or was she simply informing her cultivated guest about an event that she thought would interest him?

Ten days later, in a letter to Maria Huxley, Lawrence remarks that “*all the palm trees and eucalyptus trees of Bandol are dead* – frozen dead. They look funny and dry and whitish, desiccated – but I can't believe they'll not put forth. But Madame says the gardeners say no, they are all killed” (7L 183). The next day he repeated the sad news to Rhys Davies: “all Bandol's palm trees are frozen dead – so Madame says – which grieves me” (7L 185). Lawrence would naturally have addressed the hotel proprietress as “Madame”, and his references to her in these letters also suggest that his friends would know about whom he was speaking without further explanation. Clearly Madame Douillet was also an informant about life in Bandol, a channel of communication between her distinguished, interested guest and the life of the town. (Always glad to be of service, Madame would give the Huxleys “some advice about the local property scene” after Lawrence's death, leading to their purchase of a house where they stayed on and off “for the next seven years”).⁵

Lawrence certainly remained conscious of Madame Douillet after he left Bandol. In the summer of 1929 Catherine Carswell told Lawrence that she liked his paintings, which she had seen at the Warren Gallery before the police raid on 5 July. In Lawrence's response to Carswell on 12 August 1929, he cites Madame, along with peasants at the Villa Mirenda and the postman in Kesselmatte, as examples of ordinary, non-intellectual people who genuinely liked his paintings because it “never occurred to any of them to be shocked. Yet people who called themselves my dear friends were not only shocked but *mortally offended* by them. But they were just

bourgeois" (7L 418-19). And in mid-September 1929 he wrote to John Cournos, who was now in Bandol: "Glad you are safely in Europe. – Remember me to Madame Douillet in the Beau Rivage" (7L 483).

On 14 September 1929 Lawrence wrote to Achsah Brewster from Rottach-am-Tegernsee in the Bavarian Alps about the Lawrences' imminent return to Bandol, where he had been "so well and so cheerful ... last winter" (7L 482). The Brewsters were also travelling to Bandol in order to be near Lawrence and Frieda. Lawrence recommended the Hotel Beau Rivage: "It is very nice, cheap, we liked it". The Lawrences and Brewsters could "arrange a nice neighbourly winter" in Bandol, which "has its ugly side – the French make their places ugly – but somehow the little port is so friendly and nice – I was happy there" (7L 482-83).

On 23 September 1929, Lawrence and Frieda returned for their final brief stay at the Beau Rivage. Over the next few days he wrote to a number of correspondents saying how happy he was to be back by the Mediterranean, in Bandol and at the Beau Rivage, and expressed his regret that he would soon be leaving the hotel for the Villa Beau Soleil (7L 490ff). Madame Douillet had her own regrets about her guests' imminent departure, as he told Maria Huxley in a letter written on 29 September, two or three days before their move: "Madame, in the hotel, loves us and is almost bitter that we are leaving her" (7L 501).

This removal, however, did not mark the end of Lawrence's connection with the Beau Rivage and its proprietress. During the last few months of his life, he paid for his friends to stay at the hotel, where they would be well looked after by Madame. Frederick Carter stayed there in November; the Brewsters enjoyed an extended stay there; and the di Chiaras were also guests. On 17 December the Lawrences had lunch at the hotel with both couples as well as Harwood Brewster, visiting her parents from school in England, and Ida Rauh: "quite a colony". Lawrence returned to the Beau Soleil with "a headache after, drinking Chablis, I suppose, so I shan't go again" (7L 604).

By then Madame Douillet was well-acquainted with Lawrence's American painter friends the Brewsters. She was fascinated by what she regarded as their odd lifestyle, as he discovered when she visited him at the Beau Soleil on 19 November:

Yesterday Madame Douillet and her daughter – from the Beau Rivage – came to tea, and she talked of Earl and Achsah, in all respect, but it was rather funny. Pourquoi, Monsieur, pourquoi mangent-ils comme ça? – It was a serious problem to her. And when I said: Voyez-vous, ils sont Bouddhistes, les dévotés du dieu Bouddha, de l'Inde – she was all the more astonished and mystified. Can't get it at all. She brought us a pretty little palm tree in a pot, saying: J'ai pensé à Monsieur – and she is going to send us some little *gold-fish* – alive and swimming: also for Monsieur, I suppose. I'm afraid Monsieur Mickey Beau Soleil, le chat jaune, la trouvera fort à son gout. (7L 570).

Something of Madame Douillet's personality shines through this delightful description of the tea party: something down-to-earth and aware of the pleasures of the appetite. Her kindness and thoughtfulness towards Lawrence are also evident – “J'ai pensé à Monsieur”. Why else would she have brought him a potted palm after his dismay over the death of Bandol's palm trees? Also notice Lawrence's ease and seeming pleasure in quoting Madame in her original French to his German correspondent, Max Mohr. Madame Douillet also remembered some other goldfish, as Lawrence had reported to Brewster Ghiselin on 3 November: “Do you remember the little fishes you painted here? Madame at the *Beau Rivage* recalled them and said what bijoux they were” (7L 553).

A bowl of goldfish wasn't the only thing that Madame Douillet promised Lawrence on this occasion. The Lawrences had been dissatisfied with the flour in Bandol and the bread baked from it, which they found somewhat bitter. Madame Douillet said that she would send them some *farine de seigle*, a rye flour, which

Lawrence identified with *Roggenmehl*, “but I hope it won’t be”, he told Mohr, “because that is so difficult to bake” (7L 571). But the new flour proved to be very satisfactory, as he told Madame Douillet in a letter of thanks for both the flour and the goldfish: “Je préfère beaucoup ce pain seigle au pain du village, qui est quelquefois un peu aigre” (5437a).

This letter, dated 2 December, is the first of the two that have recently emerged. It was published, with the date unaccountably omitted, and with a few minor corrections of Lawrence’s French, in the Huxley 1932 collection, and the text was adopted in the Cambridge Edition (7L 590). Apart from its remarks concerning the bread, it also acknowledges the arrival of the two goldfish, delivered by Madame Douillet’s mother, which Lawrence found both beautiful and fascinating: “ils sont si jolis, comme un petit soleil couchant et une petite lune levante dans leur ciel courbé. Je les regarde pendant des heures, s’agrandir et se diminuer comme par magie, et toujours en mouvement, toujours” (5437a). Lawrence characteristically offers to pay for the bread and the goldfish, which surely were intended as gifts. His only anxiety concerns the threat to the fish from Monsieur Mickey Beau Soleil, the ginger cat in residence in the Lawrences’ new home. The story of these goldfish continues in the second, previously unpublished, letter to Madame Douillet, which can be dated to 17 January 1930. By this time, Lawrence’s forebodings had been proved true: Monsieur Mickey had indeed regarded them as food, and seems to have consumed one and wounded the other, which nevertheless, as Lawrence puts it, “vit gaiment, toujours un peu cicatrisé” (5483a).

If 5437a is primarily a thank you note, the letter of 17 January (5483a) is mainly concerned with business. Lawrence, with little more than six weeks to live, continues to be actively involved in making arrangements for friends and business associates to visit him and for them to stay, at his expense, at the Hotel Beau Rivage. Lawrence seems to take delight in all this planning. It offered him a sort of life-line at a time when he desperately needed one. He was spending his days lying quietly on the sofa, no longer wanting to

“walk or move about”, hoping that that desire would “come back” (7L 622). In 5483a Lawrence reports to Madame that Anna di Chiara had rented a villa in Cagnes for three months. Lawrence would be dead well before Anna di Chiara’s lease had expired.

One of the reasons that Lawrence had been so happy to return to Bandol in September 1929 was that during the summer he had “felt perfectly miserable in Germany, and ill, and couldn’t do a thing”. He hoped that, living by the Mediterranean, his “*élan* or whatever it is will come back” (7L 505). In Germany he had “felt so ill I saw myself entering the New Jerusalem: in handcuffs”. He vowed never to “go north of Lyon again: the north kills me dead” (7L 513). But soon enough he had realised that his poor health could not be blamed on the northern climate and northern “tension” (7L 491). In mid-October he confessed to Douglas Goldring that his health was “devilish bad. If only I knew what to do about it. – Am miserable” (7L 529). Lamentations about his health are a regular feature of Lawrence’s letters to his friends during these months. His description of his illness in a letter to Mabel Dodge Luhan on 29 October is especially poignant and expressive:

I feel perfectly well and all right, *in myself*. Yet there is this beastly torturing chest superimposed on me, and it’s as if there was a demon lived there, triumphing, and extraneous to me. I do feel it extraneous to me. I feel perfectly well, even perfectly healthy – till the devil starts scratching and squeezing and I feel perfectly awful. (7L 546)

The dire state of Lawrence’s health adds an interesting context to his two surviving letters to Madame Douillet. Lawrence must have thought of Madame primarily as an amiable provider of services, not a friend. She was a local acquaintance for whom he felt a genuine fondness. In the circumstances there must have been something liberating about an acquaintanceship in which he could banter about palm trees, goldfish and bitter bread. The letters to

Madame communicate an escape from the misery of his health to a kind of imaginary normality. Writing – and also speaking – to Madame Douillet in French was another part of that illusory escape for the Englishman.

Five days before he wrote to Madame to thank her for the goldfish, he had told his sister Ada that his health was “better, but not very good – and I simply don’t want to do anything on earth, not even read” (7L 579). We do not know whether Dr and Mrs Morland got the twin-bedded first-floor room that Lawrence requested for them, but we do know that the doctor thought that Lawrence should go into a sanatorium and that meanwhile he should “rest absolutely, lie out on the balcony, do nothing, say nothing and above all, see no people” (7L 626). We don’t want to press the point too hard, but it seems that in the face of his rapidly deteriorating health his relationship with Madame Douillet allowed Lawrence to feel like the real “me”, “perfectly well, even perfectly happy”, whom he described in his letter to Mabel Dodge Luhan.

This friendly, everyday relationship also allowed Lawrence to believe – or at least hope – that his life would go on. So did his pleasure in working out arrangements for his many visitors and putting them up at the Beau Rivage with its amiable Madame Douillet. He relished the opportunity to play the gracious host, sending friends to the inexpensive, comfortable, well-run hotel that he had himself so much enjoyed. He also would have been glad to be supplying Madame with a stream of customers. Of course Lawrence’s many visitors came to see him because they feared that he was close to death. The two letters to Madame Douillet reinforce the conclusion that this warm-hearted Frenchwoman helped Lawrence stay connected to life in the difficult months of his dying.

¹ Lawrence studied French at both school and university. He gave French lessons to Jessie Chambers and wrote his fiancée Louie Burrows several letters and postcards in French. Ginette Roy characterises his French in the two letters to Madame Douillet as “perfectly understandable and functional” while “not really idiomatic”. The letters contain spelling

mistakes, elementary errors of conjugation and problems with the use of articles, “yet, curiously enough, [in 5437a] he remembers a complex grammatical construction like the inversion after “aussi” when placed at the beginning of a sentence”. In 5437a the “comparison of the fish moving up and down in their round bowl to a setting sun and a rising moon – already a little far-fetched in English – sounds all the more improbable and naïve as the French is faulty, but the poetry is perceptible” [Ginette Roy, letter to Keith Cushman, 20 October 2007]. Roy’s ‘D. H. Lawrence and “That Beastly France”’, *DHLR*, 23:2-3, 143-56, is the classic study of Lawrence’s attitude toward France, the French language and French culture.

² *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Aldous Huxley (London: Heinemann, 1932), 838-39.

³ *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. Vincent O’Sullivan and Margaret Scott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), I, 238.

⁴ Rhys Davies, *Print of a Hare’s Foot: An Autobiographical Beginning* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1969), 137.

⁵ Nicholas Murray, *Aldous Huxley: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002), 232.