

## D. H. Lawrence's *Pansies* and the State, 1929

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With the opening of the Home Office file on Lawrence's *Pansies* under the 70-year rule – the original intention had been to close it for 100 years – we can more authoritatively piece together the history of a book which achieved some notoriety in 1929. The first part of the story, beginning in January 1929, is familiar to some extent from Lawrence's letters though even here light is shed in dusky corners; the second part is entirely new.<sup>1</sup>

Lawrence broke the news to his correspondents on 21 January that the two carbon typescript copies of his poems had been seized in the mail on their way to his literary agent in London, Laurence Pollinger. 'Have they any right over MSS, the swine?', he demanded, 'How sickening this dirty hypocrisy' (vii. 147). To Curtis Brown, head of the literary agency, he gave further important details: 'There are two copies of the poems, *Pansies*, sent to Pollinger on Jan. 7th from Bandol, registered, as *papiers d'affaires*, No. 587' (vii. 148). As will become plain later, these facts about the postal arrangements assume crucial significance. Curtis Brown was asked to 'make the proper enquiries' to locate the typescripts. 'Then if Scotland Yard or anyone else continues to detain them, I can take the proper steps, make the proper publicity, and bring an action if necessary. After all, Scotland Yard does not rule the country, and mustn't be allowed to.' But the police were not powerless. Pollinger told Lawrence on 23 January of a visit from two Scotland Yard officers who said that they were acting on Home Office instructions in detaining the poems which were considered 'obscene and indecent'; in addition, as Pollinger warned, 'All our letters are apparently being intercepted and read by the

Police' (vii. 149 n.1). Furthermore, to register a parcel provided no security: it was quite obvious, said Pollinger, that another registered package from Lawrence 'had been opened and sealed up again'. 'My poor *Pansies*, pawed even before they are printed', Lawrence lamented; 'We must do something about it' (vii. 150).

In late January or early February Curtis Brown's solicitors, Field Roscoe & Co., tried to do something about it; their letters are in the Home Office file. They wrote to the Head Postmaster in New Oxford Street requesting that the 'registered parcel' from Lawrence be delivered to the addressee, Curtis Brown Ltd. They were informed on 9 February that 'the packet in question was intercepted in the course of transmission through the post and detained on account of its alleged indecent nature'. Field Roscoe persisted; they challenged the allegation on 25 February, repeating their request that the offending parcel be delivered; and, on 4 March, having been ignored by the Postmaster, addressed the same request to the Postmaster General (Sir William Mitchell-Thomson). The change of tactic was a consequence of the debate in Parliament on 28 February.

Indirectly it was Aldous Huxley who provoked the debate. Huxley alerted the barrister St John Hutchinson to the seizure of the *Pansies* typescripts in the belief that he would persuade Oswald Moseley, then Labour M.P. for Smethwick, to put a question to a Government Minister in the House (vii. 161). In the event Moseley did not participate in the debate on 28 February; it was initiated by a question from Frederick Pethick-Lawrence (Labour, West Leicester) on behalf of Ellen Wilkinson (Labour, Middlesbrough East) who was unavoidably absent: namely whether the Home Secretary (Sir William Joynson-Hicks, popularly known as 'Jix') 'gave instructions for a manuscript of poems sent by Mr. D. H. Lawrence to his literary agent to be seized before any question of publication arose'. In reply, the Home Secretary

first tackled a general question and insisted that he was not empowered to 'exercise a literary censorship' but simply to take appropriate action when any 'obscene document' was brought to his notice. On the specific matter of *Pansies* he answered that the Postmaster General was bound not 'to take part in the conveyance of any indecent matter' and

In this case the typescripts were sent through the open book post [i.e. *unsealed*, *unregistered*] from abroad and were detected in the course of the examination to which a proportion of such packets are subjected for the purpose of detecting whether letters or other matter not conveyed at that rate are contained in the packet. The typescripts were sent to the Home Office and by my directions were then forwarded to the Director of Public Prosecutions. I am advised that there is no possible doubt whatever that these contain indecent matter and, as such, are liable to seizure. I have, however, given instructions that they shall be detained for two months to enable the author to establish the contrary if he desires to do so.

In answer to a supplementary question from Charles Ammon (Labour, North Camberwell) Joynson-Hicks declared that 'no official of the State can open a sealed packet without the direct warrant of the Secretary of State'. It was to this very point that much attention was directed: whether the packet sent by Lawrence *was* sealed and registered as he claimed, and therefore who authorised it to be opened and examined. Who authorised its detention is clear: the same person who had decided to confiscate six copies of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the mail a mere two days before the seizure of *Pansies*: Joynson-Hicks.

Regrettably the Home Office file leaves matters still obscure in some regards. What is clear is that Field Roscoe's letter of 4 March was forwarded by a Senior Staff Officer in



the GPO, R. W. Hatswell, to C. B. McAlpine, Private Secretary to Sir John Anderson, Under-Secretary at the Home Office; Hatswell sought guidance on how to respond to the solicitors. McAlpine offered the following guidance in a minute dated 13 March:

The manuscript is with the Private Sec[retar]y, awaiting inspection by Mr Pethick-Lawrence, M. P., to whom S[ecretary] of S[tate] has promised to show it. I have held this p[ostal] p[acket] up pending his visit, but I think a reply should no longer be delayed. The Solicitors deny that the packet is of an indecent nature, and ask for its delivery. In the Reply in the House, S. of S. said the packet would be detained for 2 months to enable the author to establish that it does not contain indecent matter. As the packet is held under G. P. O. Regulations, this must be a matter for the P[ost] M[aster] G[eneral]. Say that as the packet is detained in pursuance of the P. M. G's Regulations the exact terms of the reply must be for the P. M. G. to determine in consultation with the Sol[icitor] to the Dept, but we presume that the request will be refused.

A further letter from Field Roscoe protesting at the stalemate was sent in mid March; it was discussed in interdepartmental memoranda; but the guidance given by McAlpine provided the bland response. No attempt was made to confront the central issue: why was a registered, sealed package opened in the first place and on whose authority? It was simply ignored.

Field Roscoe's only recourse was to go public. This they did on 13 March, seizing the opportunity created by a statement in the London weekly, *The Truth*, to the effect that, as Joynson-Hicks had implied in the Commons,

the seizure [of *Pansies*] was due primarily to the author's economical use of the open book post for

the transmission of the manuscript, and the Post Office sorter, when examining the packet for letters or other matter chargeable at a higher rate, saw that the packet contained what he regarded as indecent poems, and very properly referred them to his superior officers.

Field Roscoe's reply – printed in *Truth* – was firm and succinct: 'Neither statement is correct.' They continued with a direct challenge to officialdom:

Mr. Lawrence's poems were sent in a sealed packet by registered post under the identifying No. 587. No discovery was made by an unsuspecting sorter. Mr. Lawrence's correspondence was on this, as on other occasions, deliberately opened and searched. Whether this form of postal censorship is new we do not know, but many people may regard tampering with registered packets as obnoxious.

The existence of this rejoinder with its implied accusation of blatant dishonesty on the part of the Home Secretary was known to his officials; a copy of the extract quoted is contained in the file and is heavily sidelined. No reaction to it is recorded.

As for Lawrence himself, he acknowledged on 9 March that the parliamentary 'fussing' was not 'getting anywhere': 'They are a lot of muffs and ninnies - and now I am past caring' (vii. 214). He surrendered to Pollinger's advice that a legal action against the Home Office was pointless, 'but Jix needs a thorough showing up. He opened my sealed registered letter, and that should be fixed on him, absolutely' (vii. 221). Lawrence kept hoping that Moseley would 'expose the old skunk as a liar' (vii. 227), but eventually frustration and anger gave way to exhaustion and he wrote to Pollinger on 18 April:

You are right, neither Field Roscoe nor Jack Hutchinson got any further than was already got – curse the law, and those that have it at their disposal – we'll drop it now, the Pansies business, for it's clearly no good struggling with a machine when the mechanic is against you (vii. 257).

With evident relief Pollinger added a marginal note: 'Glory be!' The machine of State had secured its pyrrhic victory.

The Home Office's interest in Lawrence and *Pansies* was revived in August 1929 in a way that has hitherto been unknown to editors and biographers alike. It is this that gives the newly-released file special piquancy. A cutting from the *Daily Express*, 15 August, was filed on 17 by a vigilant Assistant Principal in the Home Office, R.L. Bicknell. Under the heading 'BANNED BOOK SOLD' the *Express* announced that, following Martin Secker's expurgated *Pansies*, an unexpurgated edition had been published including 'eleven poems which caused the original banning of this book, which was stopped by Scotland-yard and not allowed to pass through the post'. This edition of 500 copies was published nominally by P.R. Stephensen, actually by the radical bookseller Charles Lahr; according to the colophon it was a private publication intended 'for Subscribers only'. As for Lawrence, he felt it prudent 'to keep quiet about it as the police are getting fierce because I defy them' (vii. 428); he believed that Lahr's edition had been issued 'sub rosa' and feared that any copy sent through the post would be confiscated (vii. 440-1). What he did not know was that officers of the Crown were already investigating the possibility of a prosecution.

Alerted to the existence of the unexpurgated version, the Post Office was then on the *qui vive*. Only four days after Bicknell filed the newspaper cutting he received a letter from Hatswell at the GPO:

You should perhaps see the accompanying open packet addressed to Burtons, Ltd., 1243 St. Catherine Street, West, Montreal, purporting to be sent by Wm Jackson, 18 Took's Court, E. C. 4, and containing three copies of the unexpurgated edition of D. H. Lawrence's 'Pansies'.

Perhaps you will let us know what action, if any, you desire us to take in the matter.

As it later became evident, this was not the first time that the book exporters, Jackson & Co. Ltd, had come to the attention of the Home Office. In April and May 1928 they had placed a bulk order for copies of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, then cancelled it on the grounds that the work was 'of a thoroughly obscene and disgusting nature...anyone found handling the book will get into serious trouble' (vi. 518 n.3). By some means, officials at the Home Office were clearly aware of the sinner who had repented.

At once on receiving Hatswell's letter Bicknell wrote a memo for the Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Archibald Henry Boddin, advising him of the parcel of three *Pansies* 'corresponding with the description given in the newspaper-cutting'. The memo continues:

This is an 'open' packet and has been stopped in pursuance of the Post Office Regulations, in view of the indecent matter contained in the 11 poems marked \* in the index.

The sending of these volumes through the post invokes an offence under Sec. 63 (1) of the Post Office Act, 1908, and there may be a case for prosecution of the sender. Jacksons have come under notice before; but the impression gained is that they do not deliberately handle indecencies.

The question may also arise whether Stephensen has laid himself open to indictment for the misdemeanour of publishing an obscene book. It is not clear whether



the production of a limited edition furnished only to subscribers would be held to amount to publication: &, in any case, I doubt whether it wd be advisable to pursue the matter so far as he is concerned.

The Director's opinion would be valuable; & he will no doubt make such enquiries into Jackson's action as he thinks right.

The indefatigable Bodkin did not delegate the matter to one of his assistants but responded himself, having obviously looked at a copy of *Pansies* with some care. He directed his (undated) reply to the Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office. In view of the insights given into the mind and values of a senior officer of the Crown, a leading criminal lawyer of great experience who took his responsibilities with immense seriousness, it is worth quoting his judgement in full.

*re 'Pansies'*

I have written to Messrs. W. Jackson (Books) Ltd, and have received from their Solicitors, Messrs. Spottiswoode & Co., 6 New Court, Lincoln's Inn, a reply, written 'without prejudice', in which they state that their clients, in the ordinary way of trade, were supplied with copies of the book by Stevensen, of 41 Museum Street, W. C., and that they acted as forwarding agents only, being told by Stevensen that the books were for private subscribers only; by which I understand that Jackson (Books) Ltd. forwarded the volumes instead of Stevensen himself doing so, – the reason for this not being very clear. They attached to their letter a list of persons to whom thirty-nine copies of the book had been sent. In that list was the parcel of three copies addressed to Messrs. Burtons of Montreal, the subject of Mr. Hatswell's letter of 21 / 8 / 29. The great majority of the addressees were in the United States, one other in Canada, one in New Zealand, and one in the Argentine. At an interview

with Mr. Crapper [a Principal in the Home Office] today I suggested that it might be well to cable to the appropriate Authority in New York to be on the look-out for parcels containing these volumes, – if it be not too late. I have written to Messrs. Spottiswoode for some further information, particularly by what means the other parcels were sent; it is curious that out of so many packages, all of which were probably labelled as that to Messrs. Burtons, only one was stopped in the post.

Messrs. Spottiswoode refer to, and take great credit for, their clients' action in regard to 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' in August of last year. I have suitably acknowledged their action in that case but have remarked that as 'Pansies' was by the same author and was the subject, in February 1929, of some very 'direct' observations by the Home Secretary in the House of Commons, they might have been a little more careful when asked to handle 'Pansies'. However, so far as Jacksons are concerned I have little doubt that they will decline to assist in the distribution of this book further.

There comes, then, the question which is mentioned in the minute in 540,600/25, if any steps should be taken in regard to Stevensen. 'Pansies' is a very mixed production, and so far as I have read it there are eleven so-called poems only, to which exception could be taken, and they are of the nauseous and disgusting kind rather than of the corrupting and immoral kind. The book has recently been extolled in a review, and if it be correct that the present edition was for private circulation to subscribers, the case stands differently from a book which is on every bookstall for indiscriminate publication. Probably by



this time a good many 'subscribers' have had their copies, and much good may they do them!

As the book appears to be one to which, when found, the Post Office regulations apply, I am inclined to think that it is better to keep a strict look-out for those going through the post than it would be to make application to a Magistrate for a search warrant under the Obscene Publications Act, 1857, with the consequential advertisement. I am not entirely satisfied if, notwithstanding the eleven starred poems, a Magistrate would consider the publication of the book by private subscription to be a misdemeanour 'and proper to be prosecuted as such'.

Should any further information come to me in regard to the method of despatch of the thirty-nine books by Messrs. Jackson which might assist the Central Authorities in America, Canada, etc. I will send a further minute.

Bodkin was justified in considering *Pansies* 'a very mixed production'; his other observations on the poems vindicate Christmas Humphreys' remark about him in the *Dictionary of National Biography*: 'his understanding of contemporary thought and habit may have been narrowed by the limited range of his own private life'. Nevertheless it was Bodkin's overall judgement which saved Stephensen and Lawrence from further formal proceedings. It did not, however, signal the end of covert action.

Bicknell arranged for telegrams to be sent on 6 September to the Commissioner of Police in Wellington, New Zealand; the Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Ottawa; and the Solicitor, Post Office Department, Washington, concerning the addresses to which 'Pansies' by D.H. Lawrence containing indecent matter' had been sent by Jackson Ltd. Each telegram concluded: 'Please watch.' The American Post Office Solicitor in reply assured D Divi-

sion in the Home Office that 'appropriate instructions' had been given to the New York postmaster with the request that he inform 'the Customs authorities concerning the matter'.

Following another letter from Wm Jackson explaining that the thirty-nine copies of *Pansies* were posted to customers 'who desire to obtain "a copy of everything published by D.H. Lawrence," ' on 10 September the DPP reiterated his surprise that out of thirty-nine consignments only one had been intercepted. This was conveyed to the Home Office Principal, A. Crapper, in a scarcely veiled warning that his Department should be more alert in future. Bicknell's letter to Hatswell the next day was doubtless similarly prompted by the DPP's exhortation; it drew the GPO's attention to the same lapse of vigilance.

The file concludes with an exchange of letters about the existence of the *Pansies* edition, in early October, between Bicknell and W.O. Colyer, a Senior Executive Officer in Customs and Excise. A sentence in Bicknell's letter brings the story full circle: 'The manuscript of these poems was intercepted in the post early this year and was detained, with our concurrence, on account of its indecent nature.' The file proved to be a very efficient means of keeping the official memory fresh.

Lawrence and his publishers appear to have been ignorant of the high-level and painstaking official enquiries which were being secretly mounted into the distribution of his poems – and mounted by people who unquestioningly accepted the description of the volume as 'indecent'. There are hints, but no more, in only two of Lawrence's letters to Lahr that he was aware of the Home Office interest in Jackson's exporting activities. 'What a damned fool that Jackson – he seems a prize one. I do hope the thing will go no further', Lawrence wrote on 14 September (vii. 483). And on 9 October he enquired: 'Was there anything further with Jackson and the authorities, or did it end there?' (vii. 517) Some

knowledge of the situation is revealed here, yet at best it was sketchy, incomplete and out of date: the DPP's investigation of Jackson & Co., and their solicitors, had been conducted and his (seemingly reluctant) decision against prosecution taken before even the earlier of the two remarks. Within four months of his death Lawrence never knew how narrowly he had escaped more public harassment, more evidence of 'the malignant power of the mob-like authorities' which he described in *Kangaroo* and had personally suffered for well over a decade.

### Endnotes

1. All documents mentioned are contained in the Home Office file No. 144/20642/343382 (now in the PRO). There are two exceptions: extracts from Lawrence's letters are from *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. James T. Boulton *et al*, Cambridge, 1979-1993, and identified in the text simply by volume and page numbers; quotations from the Parliamentary debate on 28 February 1929 are taken from *D. H. Lawrence: a Composite Biography*, ed. E. Nehls (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1959), iii. 308-12.

### *Lady Chatterley's Unlikely Bedfellow: George Robey and the Language of Lawrence's Last Novel*

George Hyde

The 'bitsy' narrative style that Lawrence went in for in his late period (a sort of objective correlative for the complex sensations of resentment the writer felt in an age of journalistic superficiality) is shaped into a barbed satirical weapon in (for example) *St. Mawr*,<sup>1</sup> the chapter of *Kangaroo* called 'Bits',<sup>2</sup> and especially *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, where it forms a strange compound with elements drawn from the work of V.V. Rozanov, whom Lawrence admired in his last years and (misleadingly) called 'the first Russian writer who has said anything to me'.<sup>3</sup> 'Bitsiness' forms a deliberate, integral part of the comprehensive critique of language in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The *Chatterley* narrator embarks on his bitty, improvised narrative with an unsettling string of *ad hoc* aphorisms, knowing gestures towards his audience (addressed as 'we'), and clichés ('the war had brought the roof down over her head'<sup>4</sup>), in order to introduce the assertively untragic tale of Sir Clifford 'shipped over to England....more or less in bits'<sup>5</sup> at the end of the Great War. A Modernist aesthetic of fragments (a collage, improvised effect) is coupled to an angular, gestural recitation-manner which encompasses both Sir Clifford's pain and the direct, uncensored engagement with 'this sex thing',<sup>6</sup> especially (at this stage of the narrative) the 'sex-thrill'<sup>7</sup> which threatens to 'overpower' (!) women if they are not careful. Maybe there are three battlefields in the book: the one that wrecked Sir Clifford's life, the sexual minefield for which the novel is notorious, and Lawrence's battle with the Protean forms of language, his struggle to find a viable modern narrative among the post-war debris, the 'bits'<sup>8</sup> left over.