

Nottingham Canal and *The Rainbow*

Ronald Morris

One of the delights of studying the life and works of D.H. Lawrence is that of being able to visit the settings of those very things – his life and works. So many of them are as described by the writer that his volumes come to life more richly than those of others whose creations are similarly bound to place and time. Printed guides abound, with directions and maps to ensure that nothing will be missed. Lawrence himself wrote a 'tour guide'. His well-known letter to Ralph Gardiner (1926) tells exactly where to stand in order to view what he called 'the country of my heart', panning from left to right. Today Crich is obscured by a grassed-over hill, an immense spoil heap of rock removed to get at the seams of coal far beneath your feet. Everything else is in order. But this is mere sightseeing. For his emotional responses one has, of course, to prefer the fictional to the factual. Almost by definition the medium of fiction allows for a broader canvas, a larger palette and an infinity of brush strokes, from a line barely perceptible to a sweep of colour as arresting as something by Van Gogh in his rage to put his vision onto canvas before it was too late.

The purpose of an art of whatever form is not to render the visible but to render visible, the difference being illustrated by the example of a courier, who deals in facts, taking a coach-load of tourists on a tour of Lawrence country – 'This is where the Brangwens of *The Rainbow* lived' – and the writer's perception of the same country that drew them there in the first place.

The yearning for the factual is not to be dismissed. To walk in the footsteps of Lawrence is to lay oneself open to the possibility of new perceptions, as if a photographer imaged a

room of fine furniture and did it well so that his prints added distinction to distinction.

A new perception might be gained from the questioning of a detail presented as if factual, for example the clock in the church tower at Cossethay – real life Cossall. In Chapter 3 of *The Rainbow*¹ Will looks out of the window of Church Cottage and comments on it. The tourist finds cottage, garden, wall, yew trees and church as described, but no clock. Lawrence has got his 'facts' wrong. It would appear to be the same with the canal of the book. Lawrence writes that 'in 1840 a canal was constructed across the meadows of Marsh Farm'. This is Nottingham Canal, built at a cost of £80,000 and opened for traffic in 1796. It, or its remnants, runs for nearly 15 miles to its junction with the Cromford-Erewash Canal at Langley Mill. A map by C&J Greenwood dated 1826 shows the canal making a loop to the east of the houses where the road running north out of Cossall meets the Awsworth-Ilkeston road. It then passes north of Marsh Farm. Much later an embankment was built to by-pass the loop. It remains, with two ugly concrete bridges where once there was a brick construction.

Lawrence elevates the canal to a major element in the story that unfolds around three generations of Brangwens whose home is the house at Marsh Farm. For the author to be detained by facts would be to diminish a drama that is epic in scale. In the opening paragraphs, biblical in their cadences, we are told that a Brangwen, if he had lifted his head from his work, would see 'the church-tower at Ilkeston in the empty sky'. It is one of the most powerful images in the entire book, properly so for there is hardly an approach to the town that is not dominated by it. The Brangwens are introduced – blond and blue-eyed, slow-speaking, thrifty, hard-working – their lives and thoughts utterly in tune with the earth and with the animals in their care. At one point there is a change in key from the biblical to the Homeric.

The men 'mounted their horses, and held life between the grip of their knees, they harnessed their horses at the wagon, and, with hand on the bridle-rings, drew the heaving of the horses after their will'. It has the ring of chariots at the gates of Troy.

The embankment is engineered in place, monumental in size and has power to overshadow those who dwell at its foot. It cuts them off from the town and the houses 'climbing assiduously up to it'. The Brangwens begin to think of themselves as living on 'the safe side of civilisation', but ever reminded of what weighed on their senses before the embankment intervened. They can still hear the rhythmic run of pit winding engines, the shrill whistle of trains, the clink-clink-clink of empty trucks being shunted, all overlaid by the sulphurous smell of pit-refuse burning. The farmers would still venture into Ilkeston if only to shop and sell their produce, but as they drove home they met 'the blackened colliers trooping from the pit mouth'.

The canal in its new form was used to separate societies. On one side, the Ilkeston side, the clock ruled life. Miners worked shifts round the clock and the trains that took their product to market had also to work shifts to keep up with them. There was more than the clink of empty trucks to listen to. Nights could be a cacophony of railway noises. Steam engines pulling away with heavy loads could be heard for miles.

On the farm side, life was ruled by the seasons – spring's early promise, summer's fulfilment, autumn's mellow harvest and stark winter that ends the cycle and yet begins another. The animals also had their seasons that the farmer could regulate to some extent if only to know when lambs, calves and piglets were due. His fields and animals yielded product and profit seasonally and thus he was at the mercy of forces beyond his control. The mine owner expected his mines to

give up their product at whatever time he sent his workmen to get at it, and for the most part he was in control.

Both societies – that of the clock and that of the seasons – and the people of which they were comprised, were the stuff of Lawrence's writing life, but here he seems determined to focus on one group. For him the canal sitting on top of its embankment is his Jordan, on one side the gritty world he hated, ugly, noisy, destructive, hellish – it even smelled like hell with its sulphurous fumes – on the other a 'promised land' with the makings of an idyll. It is a line on the map and in the mind of the writer that has consequences for all the characters portrayed, and ultimately for the reader.

The bridge taking the road to Ilkeston under the canal is used to dramatic effect in Chapter 4, 'The Girlhood of Anna Brangwen'. Will, who is courting Anna, visits the farm from his lodgings in Ilkeston. It is at a time when he is engaged in carving a panel in low relief, for a church. He carves 'With trembling passion', his figures invested with life – Adam 'asleep as if suffering'; God 'stretching forth His unveiled hand'; Angels at either end 'covering their faces with their wings'. He approaches the bridge:

As he went to the Marsh in the twilight, he felt that the angels, with covered faces, were standing back as he went by. The darkness was of their shadows and the covering of their faces. When he went through the Canal bridge, the evening glowed in its last deep colours, the sky was dark blue, the stars glittered from afar, very remote and approaching above the darkening cluster of the farm, above the paths of crystal along the edge of the heavens.

The sentence that follows is like something out of the Old Testament, freighted with meaning.

She waited for him like the glow of light, and as if his face were covered. And he dared not lift his face to look at her.

The bridge becomes a proscenium arch through which we see the drama of angels, the illuminating stars and the girl waiting. There is drama of another kind in the writing itself. Will is breathless with adoration of the celestial when Anna is sprung on the reader and she too is gathered up in it.

Some find 'The Child', Chapter 8, deeply disturbing. In the early stages it is rapturously beautiful in its account of the growing relationship between Will and his daughter Ursula. It comes close to being a guide to first-time fathers on how to relate to an infant, detailing the play and the interplay between parent and child that can enrich both. Predictably, the relationship is put under strain as Ursula becomes assertive. She can irritate by withholding her compliance: 'I'll break your obstinate little face', shouts her father. She discovers malevolence and she learns that 'even her adored father was part of this malevolence'. The intensity of the relationship deepens, and when she is about six or seven he takes her swimming in the canal. He seems bent on seeing how far he can push the child, who will go along with anything he suggests, riding naked on his back when he leaps into the water. There is a suggestion of appalling risk when they are described as launching themselves from the parapet of the canal bridge: 'He leapt and down they went'. If the bridge was the aqueduct next to Marsh Farm it meant running the risk of falling onto the road below if they tumbled the wrong way. It has to be a viaduct, a road bridge, where to fall off the parapet would be to fall onto a road in one direction – painful but not life threatening – or into the water below. So one has to ask whether or not this was the bridge of the book. Once again fact is not allowed to get in the way of fiction. A writer's duty is to the story, not to the reader. The duty fulfilled, the reader is carried along with it in any case.

To many readers the high point in *The Rainbow* focusing on the canal is the breach of the embankment above the farm. In *Triumph To Exile* Professor Kinkead-Weekes writes: 'The flood actually happened, remembered by Louie's mother (Anna Burrows) with fear, and made real by Lawrence's imagination.'² Tom, Lydia's husband, is making his way home from Nottingham where he has been drinking at the *Angel*. It is raining heavily, indeed it has been raining for days and the land is saturated. The horse is virtually left to find its way home. Tom is capable enough in spite of his drunken state to untackle the mare, hang up the shafts and take the gig lamp to light his way to the house. He collapses in the water pouring down from the canal and fights for his life, but at last is overwhelmed:

The unconscious, drowning body was washed along in the black, swirling darkness, passively.

A striking phrase, that last. There is nothing more passive than a dead body.

Bernard Chell, author of *Nottingham's Lost Canal*,³ is certain that there was no breach of the embankment. If there had been, the cascading water would have scoured the embankment from top to bottom and then gouged out the ground to leave a scar at right angles to the direction of the canal. A cloudburst onto the already saturated land was a more likely cause. However, it is important to the story that the flood happened and we are borne along by the conviction with which it is told.

The gap in fiction between the actual experience of a writer and what is put on paper is seldom narrower than that to be found in the work of D.H. Lawrence. It is part of his charm as a writer, but one must be cautious about 'facts' and facts. The literary must not be taken too literally.

Endnotes

1. I will refer throughout to D.H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, London: Penguin, 1981.
2. Mark Kinkead-Weekes, *Triumph To Exile*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 179.
3. Bernard Chell, *Nottingham's Lost Canal*, Walk & Wright Ltd, 1999.

Suave Loins, Venison Pasties, and Other Tasty Nonsense: The Unacceptable Face of Lawrence¹

George Hyde

When I write about literature these days I tend to imitate the sundial and count the bright hours only: that is, I do not spend too much time turning the pages of critics with whom I disagree, or fielding hostile commentaries on my author or myself. However, a recent article by Professor John Worthen² has raised, in a new form, some interesting objections to certain kinds of writing in the 'definitive' version of Lawrence's *Women in Love* (the one we grew up with, first published in the U.S.A. in 1920, and in the U.K. in 1921), and it merits a reply. In his piece, Worthen compares this 'authorized' version of the novel unfavourably with the earlier, 1916 version, which remained unpublished in Lawrence's lifetime, finally appearing only in 1998 in the Cambridge University Press volume edited by Professor Worthen and Lindeth Vasey.³ Worthen's main objection is to certain sorts of language.

Professor Worthen has done his homework and identified some sources of the offending material, but what he is objecting to has actually been objected to often enough before. It consists more or less in a sort of mystical body-language, prominently displayed in Chapter 23, called 'Excuse', where it involves repeated references to 'the dark flood of electric passion' that flows from the 'rounded body of his [Birkin's] loins', and the 'marvelous fullness of immediate gratification' from the 'source of the deepest life-force at the back and base of the loins'. The effect of this is to endow Birkin with the charisma of 'the sons of God who were in the beginning'. The fountains that flow from the 'smitten rock of the man's body, from the strange and marvelous flanks and thighs', go deeper than 'the phallic source', bringing with them 'floods of ineffable darkness and ineffable riches'.⁴