

THE LAST DAYS OF D. H. LAWRENCE: FOUR NEW LETTERS

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In January 1930 D. H. Lawrence was living in Bandol, a fishing village in the south of France. One of the people to visit him there was Dr Andrew Morland. Morland was a prominent TB specialist who worked at the Mundesley sanatorium in Norfolk and he had been urged to go to Bandol by Mark Gertler (a former patient) and by one of Lawrence's oldest friends, S. S. Kotliansky. He was travelling with his wife in France and together the Morlands made a social call on the Lawrences on 19 January. The following morning Morland examined Lawrence and found him in a dangerously emaciated state. The only hope seemed to lie in a rest cure under expert medical supervision and, after some prospecting, Morland suggested the Ad Astra sanatorium in Vence, only ten or so miles from Nice. Lawrence had always been resistant to the idea of a sanatorium but, when his condition failed to improve, he made the necessary arrangements and moved to the Ad Astra in early February.

Up until now, material with any direct relevance to this episode has been relatively sparse. In the Cambridge Edition of Lawrence's letters, the only one to Morland was clearly written in response to his recommendation of the Ad Astra. Lawrence thanks him for his advice, promises to send him a signed first edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and asks for the address of his wife "in Mentone" (7L 630-31). This letter first appeared in the 1954 edition of the biography of Lawrence by Harry T. Moore, and Moore also published there an account by Morland of his contacts with Lawrence, the full text of which can be found in Volume 3 of Edward Nehls' *D. H. Lawrence: A Composite Biography*.¹ In 1968, in what was the first number of the *D. H. Lawrence Review*, George

J. Zytaruk published three letters by Morland to Koteliansky, and one to Gertler, all of which are in the British Library.² These were written in February and March 1930, after Morland had returned from France, and contain brief reports on Lawrence's state and regret that he been able to do so little to improve it.

There is enough in these documents to allow those interested to build up a general picture, especially when the information they contain is supplemented by other letters Lawrence wrote at this time and the memoirs of people such as his wife Frieda, his American friends the Brewsters, or his step-daughter Barbara Weekley. Yet their number is sufficiently small to make the previously unpublished items which have been lying unregarded in the Nottinghamshire archives seem like a treasure trove. These consist of four letters by Lawrence – two to Morland and two to his wife Dorothy; a brief note from Frieda to Morland written shortly after her husband's death; a letter to Morland from one of the two doctors in charge at the Ad Astra, describing Lawrence's condition; and a short typed account by Dorothy Morland of her contacts with Lawrence which usefully complements the one by her husband in Nehls. Although only the Lawrence letters are reproduced in the contribution from James T. Boulton at the beginning of this journal, all the items are of interest.

The first of Lawrence's letters (5468a) was sent to Morland while he was still in England. The reference in it to the Morlands 'stopping off' in Bandol confirms that they were on their way elsewhere. In 1968 Dorothy Morland told George Zytaruk that at the time of her meeting with Lawrence she had TB herself.³ Her typed account in the Nottinghamshire Archives shows that she was heading for Menton and that, after her husband had settled her in there, he returned to his work at the Mundesley. The 'Beau Rivage' mentioned in the letter was the Bandol hotel where the Lawrences stayed in the winter of 1929 before he decided to rent a small house. He recommended it to all his visitors, and settled the bills of the poorer ones. When he and Frieda travelled they often made do with one room but for a long time his own preference had been for

two, which is perhaps why he makes sure to ask Morland what *he* prefers. The final remark shows that although the weather can be fine in the Mediterranean in winter, it can also feel cold, especially for someone of 5'9" or 10" who at this late stage weighed around 45 kilos.

Lawrence's second letter to Morland (5518a) is more interesting than the first. Its tone is of a man who fears encroaching powerlessness and attempts to retain his dignity and independence by refusing to go down to meals, or have any more camphor oil injections. These last were a common palliative, given for example to Chekhov in his final days, but it is interesting that, in Lawrence's case at least, they went directly into the legs ("I want my legs back again", he had written to his niece Margaret King, on 2 February just before going to Vence [7L 636]). Interesting also is that he was prescribed codeine for the pain associated with his breathing difficulties and persistent cough. This was the weakest of the three, opium-derived drugs administered to those in Lawrence's condition. Next in strength was morphine, which he only seems to have had on the last day of his life, and then heroin. In the general handbook for the treatment of tuberculosis which he published in 1932 Morland would insist that, in the final stages of the disease, there was "no drug to equal heroin".⁴

Choosing to interpret as lack of alarm in the doctors at the Ad Astra what may have been a recognition that they could do little for him, Lawrence expresses surprise in his second letter at the paucity of the treatment on offer (not even the usual insistence on milk), but he is conscious also that anything more might well have annoyed him. Morland had strongly advised "absolute rest" and told Lawrence he "must do *no* work, see *no* people, and not even think" (7L 626); yet it was in the Ad Astra that Lawrence began writing a review of Eric Gill's *Art-Nonsense and Other Essays*, presumably after his assurance here that he would "behave". Frieda claimed to have persuaded him to abandon this work but then, as the second letter makes clearer than any other previous document, it was in large part because of her that Lawrence had agreed to go to the Ad

Astra. She was later to reproach herself for the pressure she put on him, and feel that she had helped to make his last days more miserable than they might have been.

The surviving envelope of the third letter (5521a) shows that it was addressed to Mrs Morland at the Hotel du Louvre, Menton, Lawrence by this time having realised that he did not need the extra “e”. (In her account of meeting him, Dorothy Morland explains that she had planned to stay in Menton with some friends “after my husband had returned to England”). Its date indicates that it was written during what was still Lawrence’s honeymoon period at the Ad Astra. The weather was always an important determinant of how Lawrence felt. In his second letter to Morland he mentions the rain twice but now it is clearly fine again and the mimosa which we know from other sources he could see from his balcony reminds him of his time in Australia. The view he mentions was towards Cagnes-sur-Mer and he may have attributed the quality of the air he was breathing to the fact that Vence is about 325 metres above sea level. Good as he felt the air was, there remained the problem of those steep stairs and his inability to walk: when he first arrived at the Ad Astra he had had to be carried in by a friend of his step-daughter. There is a suggestion in this letter that, in addition to his physical sufferings, his necessary isolation made him also feel a lack of company; but what is certain is that he was still dreaming of returning to New Mexico. This is what he told Morland he wanted to do after being examined by him but “quite apart from the immigration difficulties”, Morland told Moore, “he was so ill I did not think he would survive the journey”.⁵ Recent American legislation aimed at preventing those with tuberculosis from emigrating to the United States would almost certainly have made his return there impossible, but sometime in February Barbara Weekley went to Nice to enquire about visas for her mother, step-father and herself.⁶

The fourth letter in the Nottinghamshire Archives (5530a) was written a fortnight after the third when Lawrence’s feelings about the Ad Astra had undergone a sea change. Dorothy Morland

described it in her account as “desperate”. Her husband told Moore that Lawrence had developed pleurisy but that may have only been a way of saying that the complication of his various illnesses had entered its final stage. What might explain the reference in the letter to the Pension Cagnard is Dorothy Morland’s statement that when she saw the Lawrences in Bandol they invited her to come and see them in Vence, once they were settled in. The fourth letter is one of a batch written around the same time in which Lawrence deplores his condition and blames its worsening on his new surroundings. The day before he had written a note to Maria Huxley with the resonant postscript “This place no good” (7L 651) and he uses the same phrase in writing to Dorothy Morland. What this new letter does reveal, however, is the difficulty of making arrangements. We know that eventually Frieda was able to rent a villa in Vence itself and, with what might have been information Morland had given her, hire an English nurse in Nice. Lawrence was moved into this villa on 1 March but died the following day. In the note she wrote to Morland after the death of the husband whom she calls “a great and plucky soul”, Frieda says that Dorothy Morland had sent Lawrence the last flowers he saw.

Although new material is useful to biographers in obliging them to recognise the provisional nature of most of what they think they know about the past, there is always a tendency to overestimate its importance simply because it is new. If the four previously unpublished letters were by Shakespeare, the implications would be stupendous; but when they are from a writer whose published correspondence runs to eight volumes the difference they make is hardly likely to be crucial, slightly altering the picture we already have rather than changing it radically. Yet they do nonetheless have the effect of making us see old, familiar material in a new light. This is also true of the three other items: Frieda’s note, the report to Morland from the Ad Astra doctor, and Dorothy Morland’s account. It is evident from this last that the Morlands must have stayed in Bandol more than one night. She talks of “a few days”

and there was clearly time enough for her and her husband to persuade one of the locals to tether his goat in the garden of Lawrence's house so that he could have fresh milk. "In those days", she says, "fresh milk was very hard to come by in the South of France". Frieda took Morland out on "one or two expeditions" but, she explains, "I was also a TB patient and the journey had tired me very much so I stayed at the villa with Lawrence". "The fact that we were both suffering from the same complaint", she adds, "was a big bond between us". Proof that she had not deceived herself about this bond lies in the Lawrences' desire to see her in Vence. His first letter to her made her feel that her husband had been misled about the degree and nature of medical care available at the Ad Astra and regret that there was nothing to be done now he had gone back to England. The news of Lawrence's death shocked her. "I had only known him for a few days", she writes, "but he was someone who made immediate contact cutting through the usual slow preliminaries of forming a friendship. I felt his death quite deeply".

Dorothy Morland says that a bond was created between herself and Lawrence because they were both suffering from tuberculosis, but would he have recognised the situation in those terms? This is a question which bears directly on the problem of Lawrence's 'character', of what he was like. Part of the impact of his writing, especially in his early work, derived from the courage which allowed him to identify in himself feelings which in most of his readers lay ignored or repressed. It has therefore seemed significant that in his dealings with his illness he appears to exhibit all the signs of what it is fashionable to call denial. The story begins in New Mexico in 1924 when he began spitting blood the colour of which seemed to Dorothy Brett, who had nursed Katherine Mansfield, an obvious indication of pulmonary tuberculosis. But the local doctor reassured the Lawrences by saying that the lungs were strong and what had caused the haemorrhage had been bronchial trouble. This was a diagnosis which Lawrence clung to for the rest of his life. In 1925, when he was very ill in Mexico City, he had a sputum test and x-rays. The doctor then told Frieda

that her husband had tuberculosis. Lawrence overheard this judgement but refused to accept its implications, repeatedly telling friends in the years which followed that there was nothing seriously wrong with his lungs, and that his bouts of illness were a form of bronchitis. Even in November 1929, when he was writing to Koteliansky about the possibility of Morland's visit, he said there was not much point in seeing a doctor who would want to talk about lungs "when the trouble is bronchials"; and a month later he told Mark Gertler, "My bronchials are really awful. It's not the lungs" (7L 575, 605). Statements such as this are so frequent in his correspondence that they have tended to give the impression of someone who protests far too much.

As I said, new material prompts a fresh look at the old. In the summer of 1929 Lawrence was in Baden-Baden, on a visit to his mother-in-law, and arranged to see a doctor there. The doctor says, he reported to his friend Orioli on 7 August, that "the lung is better", and three days later he told the same correspondent that "my lung is healed, but my bronchials and asthma only a little better", asthma being the term he had settled on for his constant breathlessness (7L 410, 416). Here at least is an indirect admission that there had once been something wrong with his lungs. When he was in the Ad Astra his chest was x-rayed and on 12 February he told Maria Huxley that "It is as I say – the lung has moved very little since Mexico, in five years". On 14 February his message to one of his publishers was, "There is a slight tubercular trouble, but the x-ray shows that that would not trouble me at all, if only we could get the bronchial-asthmatic condition better" (7L 645, 648). As far as I know, this is the first (and only) time Lawrence describes himself as tubercular but if he was in a position to compare his present state with how he had been five years previously, he must in some sense have accepted the results of the Mexico City x-ray and may even have carried a copy or report with him. The form his 'denial' took, or the form into which it evolved, would therefore be to say that yes, he had had some trouble with his lungs (sufficient perhaps to establish a 'bond' with Dorothy

Morland), but it was not that, not tuberculosis, which continued to make him so ill.

There remains however the question of whether ‘denial’ is really the right word here. In her account, Dorothy Morland says that, after examining Lawrence, her husband told her that he was ill “not so much from TB although he did have some but from the effect of continuous bronchitis and general debilitation”. In the letter which Dr Madinier of the Ad Astra sent to Morland, and which is dated 22 February, he refers to Lawrence’s lack of appetite, his emaciation, frequent coughing, and *grosse expectoration*; and he describes his general condition as *très médiocre*. He also includes a sketch of Lawrence’s lungs, a *schéma radioscopique*, which shows that both had a lesion or cavity at the apex. The only hope, Madinier concluded, lay in the possibility of the lesions being old (a question which could not be decided from an x-ray alone). It must have been after receiving this letter that on 25 February Morland told Gertler that the news about Lawrence was not good: “Both lungs appear to be affected with moderate severity”.⁷ When, however, Morland came to write his report for Moore, he said that the x-ray which had been sent to him confirmed his impression of a “remarkable resistance. There was a very extensive scarring but only one tiny cavity”.⁸ This may mean that, twenty-two years later, Morland was misremembering what the Ad Astra doctor had told him or that, after Lawrence’s death, he had received from Madinier additional material which has not survived. This latter case would enable us to say that Lawrence was after all never in quite such ‘denial’ as we have tended to suppose, and that his frequent claim to know the workings of his own body better than most doctors has some foundation. It might even lead us to suggest that he was not wholly wrong when he wrote to Henry Savage in September 1913, “my lungs are crocky, but I’m not consumptive, the type, as they say. I am not really afraid of consumption, I don’t know why – I don’t think I shall ever die of *that*” (2L 72-73). And yet if D. H. Lawrence did not die of consumption, it can hardly have helped.

¹ Edward Nehls, *D. H. Lawrence: A Composite Biography*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957-59), 3, 423-25.

² George J. Zytaruk, 'The Last Days of D. H. Lawrence: Hitherto Unpublished Letters of Dr Andrew Morland', *D. H. Lawrence Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1968), 44-50.

³ Zytaruk, 'The Last Days of D. H. Lawrence', 46.

⁴ Andrew Morland, *Pulmonary Tuberculosis in General Practice* (London: John Bale, sons and Danielson, Ltd., 1932), 69.

⁵ Nehls, *Composite Biography*, 3, 424.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 435.

⁷ Zytaruk, 'The Last Days of D. H. Lawrence', 47.

⁸ Nehls, *Composite Biography*, 3, 425.