

Michael Squires and Lynn K. Talbot, *Living at the Edge: a Biography of D.H. Lawrence and Frieda von Richthofen*, London: Robert Hale, 2002. Pp. xv + 501, hardback, ISBN 0 7090 5725 3, £35

*Clive Leivers*

Yet another biography? The authors justify their production on two counts: Squires and Talbot have been collecting the letters of Frieda Lawrence for several years and now have around sixteen hundred in their collection. They claim that their biography 'takes its direction from the rich material found therein'. From this basis they set out 'to write a biography that valued understanding above all ... to share the inside story of an extraordinary couple ... to clarify and even celebrate Frieda's life'.

Secondly, they believe 'that the Lawrences could best be understood not by a single person, but by a couple who could probe, from inside a marriage, the emotional dynamics they constructed', which perhaps suggests some lack of understanding of marital dynamics by those individual authors who happen to be married! Overall, the authors contend that 'Often modifying what has been said before, our book reshapes the space between Lawrence's life and art.'

These are fairly bold claims which are perhaps best judged by one of the many academics specialising in Lawrence studies – but this review comes from a Lawrence enthusiast approaching the book from a non-academic background. Whilst some of the authors' claims for uniqueness seem doubtful, they have produced a book which provides a comprehensive account of the marriage of Lawrence and Frieda and a valuable report of Frieda's life after Lawrence's death. Brenda Maddox and Richard Lucas have of course gone over the same ground but it is almost thirty years since the Lucas biography, and the new material in Frieda's letters

does provide some fresh insights into her life after 1930, with the accounts of her stays in Hollywood and the fate of the manuscripts in her possession being of particular interest.

Conversely, there seemed no striking insights emerging through the dynamics of joint authorship, and there are a number of minor irritations. The authors' grasp of English geography is occasionally suspect: Nottingham is said to be 'just a brief train ride from Croydon' (33) – perhaps so when viewed from an American perspective but hardly the case in practical terms at the beginning of the twentieth century; Ross on Wye is placed in Hertfordshire rather than Herefordshire (194); and the visit to Wingfield Manor is said to have started at Pye Bridge station rather than Alfreton (14).

There are two inaccuracies relating to the Chambers family – Alan is included among Lawrence's fellow apprentice teachers (14) and Jessie's husband, Jack Wood, is described as a farmer (75). Whilst from a farming background he was a teacher when he met Jessie and continued in that profession after his service in the Great War.

Occasionally some of the writing jars: Lawrence at Bandal is described as 'still pained by the entrails of infidelity that curled in the sunny days like offal' (349); at other times the authors seem to strain after significance – the claim that Ravagli's name pronounced backwards (el-lav-ar) converts to Oliver (Parkin/Mellors) and is thus a coded reference to the 'emotional realignment' to which the Lawrences moved after Bert's failed lovemaking with Brett and Frieda's growing attraction to the Italian soldier, seems almost too far-fetched.

The illustrations are well judged and include several that are relatively unfamiliar, although the reproduction of Bert's passport photograph of 1919 used on the dust jacket is in mirror image. But these caveats should not detract from a general appreciation of the book which is overall a welcome addition to the Lawrence biographies.