

D H LAWRENCE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA: The origins of Victoria Callcott in *Kangaroo*

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Despite the work of scholars and researchers over the past three-quarters of a century... in spite of the publication of the recent CUP editions of *Kangaroo* and *The Boy in the Bush* and also despite the publication earlier this year of the third volume of the CUP biography of Lawrence - the volume that records Lawrence's visit to Australia in May, June, July and August 1922 - there remain a number of unanswered questions about his Australian period.

This paper begins with one of these unanswered questions, and seeks in doing so to reveal some new insights into a significant aspect of Lawrence's first exposure to the New World of the antipodes - the two weeks he spent in Western Australia before going on to Sydney and Thirroul, where he wrote his main Australian novel, *Kangaroo*.

This particular unanswered question cropped up when I visited Perth four years ago, in 1994. My husband Robert Darroch and I, both journalists, had been sent to Western Australia to work with a local publishing company. Being both students of Lawrence's time in Australia, we were keen to spend some of our

time seeing if there was anything new to be discovered about Lawrence's visit to Perth seventy-two years earlier.

Having more time, I undertook most of the research, initially in the Batty Library, which has some important research materials touching on Lawrence's contact with Western Australia (including his letters to Mollie Skinner, and her papers, including the unpublished manuscript of *Eve in the Land of Nod*, which Lawrence virtually co-authored with Miss Skinner).

My first task, however, was to examine the newspapers of the period - c. May 4 to May 18, 1922 - to establish some contemporary picture of the Perth he visited and to see in particular if his stay there made any public or media impact.

Almost immediately, a minor mystery surfaced.

Lawrence arrived at Fremantle, the port of Perth, on May 4, 1922, aboard the liner Orsova. Prior to his arrival he had told a number of his correspondents what his plans were. He was going to "try the West" and stay there for a while if he could, but if not he would go on to Sydney to where he had steamer tickets, and from where he could catch a boat to America, his ultimate destination. He told several correspondents that if he chose to stay in Western Australia he would cable them one message, but if he decided to move on, he would send another one.

Yet immediately he arrived - and without any experience of Perth or of "trying the West" - he decided not to stay. On the day he arrived he wrote from the Savoy Hotel in Perth to Mabel Dodge Stern in Taos saying that he would catch the next available boat to Sydney, the Malwa, which left in a fortnight.

The suddenness of this decision has long been a puzzle. If Lawrence had intended only a short visit to Perth, he might have deceived his Western Australian contact, Mrs Jenkins, the shipboard acquaintance who had invited him to Perth, by politely entertaining the possibility of a longer stay.

But he would not have gone to the considerable bother of having his trunks and other non-cabin luggage - including the side of a Sicilian cart - unloaded, when it could have been more conveniently and less expensively sent on to Sydney, had his intention been merely a brief stopover. Nor would he have equivocated to his various correspondents.

It was my journalistic training - unexpectedly - that helped solve this minor mystery, but more particularly then led me on to answer a number of other important questions, both old and new, about Lawrence's time in "the West", and in Australia generally.

For as a young reporter on a Sydney newspaper in the 1960s I used to do what was called 'the shipping round'. This entailed going out in a small boat to meet incoming liners and interview

their illustrious passengers before they disembarked. It was, in those days of scarce news and expensive air travel, a prime source of news stories and personality features.

And so it was - no doubt even more so - in Perth and Fremantle in May, 1922. There the shipping round for one of the local papers - the Perth Daily News - was done (at least the day the Lawrences arrived) by a local "stringer", a Mrs Zabel.

This is a name many Lawrence scholars will recognise. She is mentioned in Nehls's *Composite Biography* (and elsewhere) as the American lady who ran the Booklover's Library in Perth which Lawrence frequented while he was in Western Australia. She certainly would have known who Lawrence was, and was thus an ideal person to interview him after she made the precarious climb up the Orsova's ladder as the boat entered the Swan River.

Now, one of the interesting things about the item she wrote for the Daily News about Lawrence was that she quoted him as saying that his intention was to "remain in the State for a little while" and that it was "quite likely" he would visit the fruit-growing country in the south-west.

This clearly was a reference to the fact that Mrs Jenkins, probably while she was chatting over meals on the Osterley between Naples and Colombo, had extolled the undeniable beauty of "the apple-growing regions" south of Perth, for Lawrence had

already mentioned to several correspondents the possibility of going down there, and even of finding somewhere to stay for a time.

So the minor mystery was: what could possibly have happened between Mrs Zabel interviewing Lawrence as the Orsova docked at Fremantle and his writing a letter to Mabel Dodge later the same day - a matter of hours later - that induced him to change his plans and intentions so suddenly and unexpectedly (and even impolitely)?

The answer, I discovered, was on the wharf at Fremantle. For waiting for the Lawrences to disembark was Mrs Jenkins, with her family's chauffeur-driven car, and a bundle of letters for Lawrence.

Lawrence had given Mrs Jenkins and her residence, the palatial Strawberry Hill in Perth's main street, Adelaide Terrace, as the forwarding address for his mail. Almost certainly one of the letters waiting for him was the reason for his change of plans.

As my husband Robert Darroch had earlier pointed out in an article in our *Rananim* journal ("Letters of Introduction", *Rananim*, October 1993), had Lawrence entertained - as he did - the possibility of going on to Sydney rather than staying in Perth; and had he met on the Osterley also someone from Sydney - as he did, a Mr Gerald Hum, whose name he recorded in his address book - and had he written from Ceylon - as he had to Mrs Jenkins -

exploring the logistics of a Sydney stay, then the first reply he could have expected (given the forty days the mails would have taken between Ceylon and Sydney) would have been waiting with Mrs Jenkins as she met Lawrence that May 4 morning on the dock at Fremantle.

There is no direct evidence that Lawrence did get such a letter reiterating or confirming some hypothetical invitation from Hum to come on to Sydney. However, such a letter and invitation is the only credible explanation for what happened on Lawrence's arrival in Western Australia, for his apparent sudden change of mind and plans. My newspaper research at the Battye Library helped confirm this.

However, this was just the first fruit of my research into Perth and the tight-knit, upper-middle-class society in which Lawrence found himself in May 1922. A journalistic eye, especially if it is focussed, can often uncover things an orthodox scholar can miss. In particular it was my training as a journalist - and also in researching letters and papers for my biography of Lady Ottoline Morrell - that led me eventually to solve one of the major mysteries about Lawrence and Australia - the identity of the main Australian female character in *Kangaroo*: Victoria Callcott, who, despite her apparent Sydney connections, turns out to be based on someone Lawrence met in Western Australia.

But first, and for those who are not familiar with the west of Australia, let me give you some significant background about the place Lawrence and Frieda arrived in on May 4, 1922.

The first thing to be appreciated about Australia and especially Western Australia is their size. They are both big places. Overall, Australia is about the same size as America, but there the similarities end. Unlike the U.S., Australia has no fertile interior, and its population even today is less than a tenth of America's. In 1922, it was around five million, and Western Australia, which takes up a third of Australia, had less than 350,000 people. The capital, Perth, had only 160,000 people when Lawrence was there.

In 1922 Perth prided itself on the fact that, unlike the older cities of Sydney and Melbourne, which were convict settlements, it was founded by free pioneering families who regarded themselves as a cut above their distant - Perth is a very remote place, almost closer to Singapore than Sydney - Eastern rivals. Then, as indeed now, Perth and Western Australian society was dominated by these pioneering families - people like the Burts, Leakes, Hares, Waldecks and Duracks.

It was also a very British society, as it still essentially is today. Many of the leading families sent their children "home" to England to be educated. As Mollie Skinner, Lawrence's Western Australian landlady, said: "As people of a free settlement founded

for the most part by members of the British landed gentry and respectable farmers, they had no great desire to associate with a mixed bag of jumped up t'other-siders."

And it was among these gentrified, but proudly independent families that Lawrence moved during those crucial - and productive - two weeks he was in Perth and nearby Darlington. His first contact was, as mentioned, with Mrs Jenkins whom he met on the Osterley between Naples and Colombo.

Concerning Mrs Jenkins, I must - for this is the journalist's duty - make a few corrections to what has been published hitherto. In his *Dying Game*, CUP biographer David Ellis calls her Anna Jenkins. This is incorrect. As her birth certificate showed - and her family confirms - she was christened and called Annie Jenkins. Ellis also calls her "a wealthy widow". This is also incorrect - and it serves to explain two other small mysteries: why Mrs Jenkins was travelling second class on the Osterley, and why she did not invite the Lawrences to stay with her at Strawberry Hill.

Annie Jenkins did come from a wealthy family - the Burts - who have provided Western Australia with many of its leading citizens. Annie, whom the family called 'Pussy', was the granddaughter of Sir Archibald Paul Burt, the colony's first chiefjustice. Her father, Septimus Burt, was the State's first Attorney-General.

She herself had married well, her husband being the son of Sir George Jenkins, Clerk of the Victorian Legislative Assembly.

But latterly, Pussy had fallen on hard times, as her great niece, Mary Brazier (née Burt), told me when I interviewed her in Leake Avenue, Perth. And though her address was the Burt mansion Strawberry Hill, and she had access to the family's limousine, she lived in a small shed in the garden, hence her inability to put the Lawrences up.

In her youth Pussy had been a fine amateur pianist, a friend of the great Percy Grainger, and the shed - called "the Dugout" - had been constructed in the backyard so she could practice till her heart's content. She had wanted to be a concert pianist, but Burts didn't go on the stage, so in 1895 she was married off to a lawyer, Arthur Jenkins, who set up practice in the Western Australia gold-mining town of Coolgardie.

But the marriage failed and, according to Mary Brazier's brother, Sir Francis Burt, until recently Lieutenant-Governor of Western Australia, Mr Jenkins mysteriously disappeared, and Pussy returned to Perth to live in straitened circumstances in the Dugout.

Yet there was still enough money to send her son to a posh English public school and to finance Pussy's regular trips to London with the Australian cricket team, of which she became the

unofficial mascot. It was returning from one of these London visits that Pussy met the Lawrences in the second-class dining room of the Osterley.

When she issued her original invitation, she had no doubt given Lawrence the impression that she could arrange accommodation for them either in Perth or in the apple country to the south, and it was on this understanding that Lawrence came. But there was no free accommodation at Strawberry Hill, so Pussy had booked rooms at the rather exclusive Savoy Hotel in Hay Street (opposite the Booklover's Library), and it was to there that they repaired in the chauffeured Burt car that fine, warm morning on May 4.

Had Lawrence's original idea to stay in the West for a while still been intact, they no doubt would have spent the next day or so exploring the possibilities of a cottage south of Perth. But Lawrence's plans were now altered, and he was set on catching the Malwa to Sydney on May 18. This meant - given that the Savoy "was the most expensive hotel" he had ever stayed in - urgently finding cheap interim accommodation.

So the next day, May 5, Pussy again borrowed the Burt limo and, picking up a friend of hers, Eva May Gawler (a Waldeck, but now widowed and running a millinery shop in Perth), they drove out to Darlington, an upper-class hill retreat about 15 miles east of Perth. There Pussy ensconced the Lawrence's in a guesthouse,

Liethdale, run by Mollie Skinner, whose mother was a pioneering Leake family member. The Lawrences could stay here reasonably pleasantly and inexpensively for the next fortnight, and indeed they moved there the following day.

At Leithdale, which is (for it is still there) a huge, rambling bungalow set on the side of a hill with a view of Perth in the distance, Mollie Skinner sat the Lawrences at table with a young couple, the Cohens, who were on their honeymoon, though the wife Maudie was in fact recovering from a broken leg incurred when she fell down a lift shaft in Perth a day or so before her wedding. She was a Brazier, and so her relative Mary Brazier, née Burt, was able to direct me to Maudie's son, Gresley Cohen, who told me her unusual but highly significant story.

You might recall that in *Kangaroo* there is a passage early in the novel where the Lawrence figure, Richard Lovatt Somers, talks to Victoria Callcott who is waiting on a verandah for her husband to return from town. "Was your home in Sydney? he asks the newly-married Victoria. She replies: 'No, on the South Coast - dairy farming. No, my father was a surveyor, so was his father before him.'" Then Victoria speaks about her mother: "She came from Somerset. Yes, she died about five years ago. Then I was mother of the family... I am the eldest except Alfred."

This detailed biography had always seemed likely to have been borrowed from reality, and the reference to the "South

Coast" has hitherto been taken as referring to the South Coast of New South Wales, around Thirroul, where Lawrence stayed while writing *Kangaroo*. A search for someone in New South Wales with such or similar biographical background has, however, proved elusive.

Which is no wonder, for we all had been focusing on the wrong South Coast. As I learned from Gresley Cohen, his mother's family came from the South Coast of Western Australia. Her father, Major Noel Brazier, had been a surveyor in Victoria, who gave it up to establish a dairy farm in Western Australia. Maudie's mother, Edith Hardwick came from Somerset and Maudie was the eldest of nine children.

So the outward guise of Victoria Callcott in *Kangaroo* is unquestionably Maudie Cohen, whom Lawrence no doubt encountered one evening on the verandah of Leithdale, waiting for Eustace to return from Perth on his motor bike, and who poured out her family history to her fellow guest.

However, perhaps the most far-reaching piece of research I undertook in Perth concerns the time Pussy Jenkins spent in Coolgardie, before returning to live in the Dugout at Strawberry Hill. Coolgardie around the turn of the century when Pussy was there was a large and relatively cosmopolitan town, and one with a thriving musical scene. Pussy, with her deep interest in music, would have been active in the various local musical groups,

including the Coolgardie Liedertafel, the town's main choral society. Her talents as an accompanist would have been in demand for the society's songsters, including the resident basso, a young architect from Melbourne, Charles Rosenthal.

Some twenty or so years later, Major-General Sir Charles Rosenthal was the leader of a secret army in Sydney, and is almost certainly the model for the eponymous Benjamin Cooley, the Kangaroo of the novel's title.

Indeed, the greatest puzzle of all about Lawrence's time in Australia until now has been how and where Lawrence might have gained the information for his secret army plot of *Kangaroo*, and how he could have run across such figures as Charles Rosenthal.

It may well be that Pussy Jenkins remembered that she, too, had an acquaintance in Sydney whom Lawrence could look up when he arrived there. She might even have provided a letter of introduction. These are questions that remain unanswered. Certainly Lawrence left Western Australia with some promising material for the "romance" he was to start a week or so later.

His leaving was duly recorded in the Perth Daily News by the industrious Mrs Zabel. She wrote: "Mr Lawrence has a very attractive and interesting personality. He is a brilliant conversationalist and at the same time extremely modest, disliking limelight and publicity. He is 36 years of age, and

considered by the London critics to be one of the coming men in the world of literature." And the item concluded: "Mrs Lawrence... is a foreigner."

Perth was a snooty place then. Fortunately for my research, it is a much more friendly place now, and I thank the Burts, Leakes, Waldecks and Braziers for helping me uncover some more of the truth about Lawrence's visit to the New Worlds of Western Australia and New South Wales.