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Reviewed by Terry Gifford

When I first visited Keith Sagar at his home in 1972 he disappeared for a moment and returned wearing the white silk jacket which Lawrence had been wearing in the photographs of him, painfully thin, that I had been left looking at. It was a moment at once breathtaking, funny and sad. The man who gave the jacket to Keith was given it by Lawrence. It is easy to forget how close it was possible to get to Lawrence’s acquaintances if you decided to specialise in Lawrence for your PhD in 1957, although, actually, this gift took place as a consequence of research for the Cambridge Edition of the Letters. But the original contact with the Wilkinson family from whom the jacket came, who were neighbours of Lawrence when he lived at the Villa Mirenda and are the subject of the first essay in this collection, came about because Sagar, early in his career as a Lawrence scholar, went the extra mile (or hundred) to follow up Arthur Wilkinson’s photographs shown at an exhibition by Vivian de Sola Pinto at the University of Nottingham. Again, when Sagar first visited Eastwood, he was given directions to the four Lawrence houses by the widow of Willie Hopkin, Lawrence’s Eastwood mentor.

This, Keith Sagar said, would be his last book on Lawrence and it is structured as a valedictory, each essay being put in its context in terms of his life in Lawrence studies, the fascinating story of which is told in the ‘Introduction’. The book is concluded by a full list of Sagar’s nearly 50 publications on Lawrence. The first of
these, ‘Lawrence and the Wilkinsons’ from 1962, opens the collection, which ends with the 2008 D. H. Lawrence Festival lecture in Cossall Church on ‘Lawrence’s God’. In between are examples of Sagar’s early scholarship: on Lawrence’s first meeting Frieda and ‘The Strange History of The Daughter-in-Law’; Introductions to Selected Poems, Sons and Lovers and the later short novels; and more recent scholarship on The Escaped Cock and the ‘Shame’ chapter of The Rainbow. But what stand out are three overviews of Lawrence’s life and works: ‘Beyond D. H. Lawrence’ (1980), ‘D. H. Lawrence: The Man and the Artist’ (1987), and ‘How to Live? The End of Lawrence’s Quest’ (2005).

The first of these reflections considers why Lawrence might not connect with later generations of students, asking what Lawrence “left out of account” and how much he himself “put his thumb in the balance” (95). In Lawrence’s defence, Sagar argues for Lawrence’s “optimistic metaphysic”, for a vision of the world as it could be, beyond “what has traditionally been regarded as tragic experience” (96): “In Lawrence the call always produces the comer (in the form of a Polish widow, a Ministry Inspector, an Italian circus-rider, a Mexican general, a gipsy, a gamekeeper, a Priestess of Isis) and Nature is always right on cue” (95). If the suggestion here is that such “right on cue” optimism might be suspect for some readers, Sagar concludes by suggesting that we do Lawrence a disservice if we read and teach his work as if he “had all the answers”: “He believed that he was participating in a process of evolving human consciousness, and that future explorers would go much further” (100).

Actually, Sagar muses in this essay as to whether “the answers he had to the wants of his day are as relevant now as they were then” (100). The third overview essay, published 25 years later in 2005, on ‘Lawrence’s Quest’, offers a reply by suggesting that the reading and teaching of Lawrence’s work has contributed to “the convergence of so many creeds and disciplines towards deep ecology” and the current fight to prevent “the extinction of the rose of life” (198). But it is the second overview essay from 1987, that
explicitly intends a positive response to the doubts of the first, which provides the key evidence and arguments for Sagar’s vision of Lawrence – essential for understanding the shifting elusiveness of the images and ideas in ‘Lawrence’s God’. Briefly, the dualities of spirit and consciousness, desire and thought, can be resolved in a lived, sensuous, bodily contact with the cosmos and its cycles through its smallest embodiments in nature – a two-way, ongoing, mutuality of “pure attention”. If nothing else, this essay should have drawn any hesitant members of the D. H. Lawrence Society to Keith Sagar’s planned Etruscan tour of June 2014.

Of course, there will be caveats for each reader. One would like to know if “decisive evidence” has yet emerged since 1976 to resolve the debate about whether Lawrence first met Frieda before 1912. All subsequent biographers regard “March 1912” as acceptable, as does Sagar himself elsewhere in this collection. Birkin’s “star-equilibrium” in Women in Love is mocked as his attempt to “have his cake and eat it” (181), yet the utopia described in Etruscan Places is allowed to be “a state to strive for” (194). Might this not be the case with “star-equilibrium”? (After I had written this review I raised this point in conversation with Keith. “In Birkin”, he told me, “Lawrence rehearses all his mistaken abstract views up to the point of writing”.) In Sagar’s critical vocabulary “atonement” and “redemption” seem to be required, not just of the human species, but of all individuals, which seems to come close to returning to the Puritan guilt that Sagar argues Lawrence had needed to throw off. But these are examples of the ways in which this book makes the reader want to return to Lawrence’s texts with more questions. As ever, Keith Sagar’s wonderfully readable, direct, clear prose brings the reader closer to the deepest aspects of Lawrence’s work. We can now read his last book as characteristic of his own life’s completed work.