

THE WILKINSONS REVISITED

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It gave me great pleasure to re-read the Wilkinson diaries (published by John Turner in the *D. H. Lawrence Review*)¹ for the first time in over forty years. How I came to read them at that time may be of some interest.

I got my first job in 1957 as an Administrative Assistant in the Extra-Mural Department of Leeds University, and immediately began a part-time PhD on Lawrence in the English Department. Two years later I became WEA resident tutor in N. E. Derbyshire, which, with the incredible luck which has attended all my dealings concerning Lawrence, brought me (living in Chesterfield) within half an hour of the Lawrence country.

In 1960 Vivian de Sola Pinto staged the first major Lawrence exhibition and conference at Nottingham University—‘D. H. Lawrence After Thirty Years’. I attended almost every session. In the extensive exhibition were six previously unknown photographs of the Lawrences by Arthur Gair Wilkinson.² One of them is still my favourite—Lawrence sitting in his shirt-sleeves under an olive tree near the Villa Mirinda. I wanted some photographs for my thesis, and that had to be one, for the chapter on *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. I asked Nottingham University if they could provide a copy. They said I would need the permission of the owner, a Miss Frances Gair Wilkinson. Lawrence’s review of Walter Wilkinson’s *The Peep Show* was in *Phoenix*, but at that time nothing was known of his relationship with the rest of the Wilkinson family beyond a mention in one of his first letters from the Villa Mirinda:

There’s only one family of foreigners near – Wilkinsons – sort of village arty people who went round with a puppet show – quite nice, and not at all intrusive. (5L 453)

I later discovered that Frances was the daughter of Arthur Gair and Lilian, both of whom had died in 1957. Since her brother William (Pino) had been killed in the war, she was the only survivor of the family Lawrence had known affectionately as ‘the Wilkeses’. I wrote to her, and in reply she told me that the material in the Nottingham exhibition represented only a tiny proportion of her entire collection—letters, postcards, diaries, photographs—which she had offered to Nottingham University for a token amount. Apparently Pinto had replied that the university would be delighted to receive the collection as a gift. She was not a wealthy woman, and could not afford to give away one of her few assets. She had nevertheless lent half a dozen letters and the photographs for the exhibition.

I asked if I could visit her, and within a week was installed in her lovely cottage at Kingston St. Mary, looking out over the Quantock hills, transcribing the forty or so Lawrence letters and postcards, and extracts from the extensive Wilkinson family diaries. Arthur and Lilian had taken turns to keep the diaries, with several pages to the day, and they recorded, often verbatim, daily meetings with the Lawrences when they were in residence at the *Mirenda*. This material seemed to me to provide us with a fuller picture of the ordinary day-to-day lives of the Lawrences than any other source.

This was, of course, before the time of portable photocopiers. The transcribing took me two days. I had been given a desk to work at upstairs. When at last I had finished my long stint, I staggered downstairs to find that Frances had spread out on the dining table about a dozen large watercolours of the *Villa Mirenda* by her father. She told me to take my pick. The one I chose is on the wall above me as I type.

In the intervals of my work, Frances had reminisced about Lawrence and her teenage years at the *Villa Poggi*, a hundred yards from the *Mirenda*. She fired my desire to go there as soon as possible. When I told her of my plans to go the following summer, she drew me a map of the route from the tram terminus at Vingone,

past the pagoda and the *due cipressi*. She told me to take chicken sandwiches and eat them by the stream in the pine-woods beyond the villas, and to be sure to save the bones to be picked over from my fingers by the freshwater crabs in the stream.

In the event it was all even more idyllic than she had described. In the painting I had chosen there is a little red cart drawn by two white oxen on the path in front of the villa. When the Mirenda came in sight for the first time, there in front of it, in exactly the same position, was a little red cart drawn by two white oxen—and I have a photograph to prove it!

‘Lawrence and the Wilkinsons’ was the first piece I ever published on Lawrence.³ I chose to offer it to the *Review of English Literature* partly because the editor was Professor A. N. Jeffares, Head of the English Department at Leeds, and partly because it had recently published Lawrence’s letters to Blanche Jennings. My relationship with Jeffares had previously been prickly, but my offer of this piece changed all that. I was suddenly *persona grata*, if not quite blue-eyed boy. Instead of being kept coldly on the threshold it was ‘Come in. Pull up an armchair. Have a sherry’.

Several years later, when the Cambridge Edition of Lawrence’s letters was launched, and I had acquired a portable photocopier, I thought I had better return to Somerset and get a more accurate record of the letters. Frances had, in the meantime, become Mrs Miller, and moved to a neighbouring village. Again I received the kindest hospitality. They seemed a perfectly contented couple. As I was about to leave, Frances asked if I had ever met her Uncle Walter. Walter had been a frequent visitor to the Villa Poggi, and had got to know Lawrence, who reviewed his book on puppeteering, *The Peep Show*, in the spring of 1927. It had never occurred to me that he could still be alive, but apparently he was living not far away at Selworthy, with his wife Winifred, who, at eighty, had just published her first novel, *God in Hell*. Frances telephoned them, and they invited me to tea. As I said goodbye she gave me a copy of *The Lost Girl* inscribed by Lawrence, and a napkin ring painted by him.

Walter and Winifred were equally charming and hospitable. At one point Walter disappeared upstairs and returned wearing a grubby, well-worn, once-white silk jacket. He told me that he had arrived at the Poggi from England one very hot day wearing his English worsted suit. "For goodness sake, Walter, change into something more comfortable", said Lawrence. "I can't", said Walter, "my trunk is in Florence; I've only what I'm wearing". "Here", said Lawrence, taking off his white jacket, "keep it; it's time I had a new one". It is probably the jacket Lawrence had worn throughout his years in America, and is wearing in most of the Arthur Wilkinson photographs. As I was leaving, Walter thrust it into my hands: "Here, it's more use to you than to me". Christopher Miles was later to borrow it to have a replica made, which Ian McKellen wore in *The Priest of Love*.

Shortly after this visit I learned that Mr Miller had died. Frances did not long survive him, dying in 1976.

¹ John Turner, 'D. H. Lawrence in the Wilkinson Diaries', *D. H. Lawrence Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 5-63.

² John Turner found only one of these photographs in the surviving Wilkinson collection. One was reproduced in the exhibition catalogue; three others were in Harry T. Moore's *D. H. Lawrence and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966); a fifth was reproduced in the 1985 issue of *The Journal of the D. H. Lawrence Society*. The sixth is, to the best of my knowledge, published here (on the front cover) for the first time.

³ Keith Sagar, 'Lawrence and the Wilkinsons', *Review of English Literature*, 3 (October 1962), 62-75.