

## **'Write about things you actually know...'**

Barbara Kearns (Independent Scholar, Australia)

Lawrence gave Mollie Skinner, much advice about her writing, both while he was in WA, and later by letter. 'Like an old hand giving advice' is how he described it.<sup>1</sup> Write 'about things you actually know, which you don't have to invent out of the ink-bottle' he told her. 'Take real persons and things to build up on.' That, he said, is what he did.<sup>2</sup> But what did Lawrence mean by 'take real persons and things'? Are we to understand that *Kangaroo*'s characters and plot must have sprung from real-life encounters with members of a secret army in the immediacy of NSW, and that their supposed leaders Rosenthal (for Cooley) and Scott, (for Calcott) 'gave Lawrence's eighth major novel its political plot', as the Darrochs continue to insist?<sup>3</sup> Lawrence's own statement that he was writing a 'thought adventure' indicates not (4L 353).

The dispute is significant however, since next year marks the centenary of Lawrence's visit to Australia, and Robert Darroch's own elaborate thought adventure continues to colour the literary landscape.<sup>4</sup> My research over the past eighteen months has looked at which 'real persons and things' *actually* underpinned the thought adventure that Lawrence compiled largely in 45 days, during three months seclusion in coastal NSW.

Scholars have already explored *Kangaroo* as Lawrence's response to the works of Dostoevsky and Whitman. I won't venture there. I am not a literary scholar. I'm a historian. Nevertheless, as one of Lawrence's *dear readers*, and an Australian to boot, I feel justified in reporting my own idiosyncratic reading of this novel. It is a reading I had largely arrived at before reading Douglas Goldring's propaganda novel *The Black Curtain*.

Goldring dedicated this novel to Lawrence in 1920. The pair had been introduced at Kot's house the previous summer and Goldring, already a keen admirer, had then devoted himself to securing publishers for Lawrence's work. When Lawrence eventually came to read *Black Curtain*, however, he didn't like it. He who believed 'Fusty, fuzzy peace-crankers and lovers of humanity are the devil', (L3 49) was unlikely to admire the kind of post-war, Christian, pacifist propaganda that proclaimed:

The inconsolable could become divinely consoled; and in their victory God once again would make manifest His own Divinity, even as He made it manifest through Jesus Christ nineteen centuries gone by.<sup>5</sup>

'I got *The Black Curtain*, which we read and which is interesting. But ugh, how I hate the war – even a suggestion of it', Lawrence politely informed Goldring (3L 531). Just *how* interesting he found it can be seen in his response to it in *Kangaroo*. We are reminded of what he once told Helen Corke, 'I always feel, when you give me an idea, how much better I could work it out myself!'<sup>6</sup>

*The Black Curtain* features a cast of representational characters. The protagonist, Philip, is a writer on a hero's journey from conscript to pacifist revolutionary. His wife, an idealist and

---

<sup>1</sup> D H Lawrence, 'Preface to Black Swans' in Paul Eggert, ed., *The Boy in the Bush*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 377.

<sup>2</sup> M. L. Skinner 'D H Lawrence and the Boy in the Bush' *Papers of Mollie Skinner*, (Battye Library).

<sup>3</sup> DHLNSA Newsletter, March 2020, <https://english.unm.edu/dhlsna/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, Nicolas Rothwell's Introduction to the 2018 'Text Classics' Melbourne edition of *Kangaroo*.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Goldring, *The Black Curtain*, (Chapman & Hall, 1920), 232.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Nehls, ed., *D H Lawrence: A Composite Biography*, vol. 1 (Madison, WI U Wisconsin P, 1957), 136.

Christianity. Capitalism is represented by Philip's father, a jingoistic patriot; and the Revolutionary alternative to the status quo is represented by a Kot-inspired Russian, named Smirnoff.

Goldring's narrative reaches its dramatic peak when a 'motley crowd of Australian soldiery and miscellaneous roughs' storms a meeting on *Capitalism or World Brotherhood?* that Philip is attending in a church hall in North East London.<sup>7</sup> The model for this event was an actual riot that occurred in North East London in July 1917, a month after a massive *Labour and Socialist Convention* in Leeds resolved to 'follow Russia'.<sup>8</sup> Numerous meetings to establish *Soldiers' and Workers' Councils*, that would facilitate this end, had been held across the country. Many were violently disrupted. The most famous instance was a meeting convened by the *Christian Brotherhood Union*, which Goldring attended at the Brotherhood Church, Hackney, on 28 July 1917.<sup>9</sup> As Goldring reported in his autobiography, this meeting was 'stormed by a party of intoxicated Australian soldiers.'<sup>10</sup> Several of Lawrence's associates were caught up in the fray. Francis Meynell received a head wound, but Bertrand Russell, as the brother of an Earl, managed to escape unharmed.<sup>11</sup> This was neither the first, nor the only attack on pacifists that occurred during the war. Violent disruption of pro-soviet meetings was commonplace. The incident in the Brotherhood church was repeated three months later, and on this occasion the pulpit was set on fire.<sup>12</sup>

In *Kangaroo*, we find Goldring's morality tale inverted. Somers, the anti-hero, is on a voyage of transformation, thanks to Australia's *Spirit of Place*, from a writer on democracy - engaged in addressing political issues - to one who ceases to care. Counterpoise to Goldring's idealistic wife is Somers' pragmatic and somewhat cynical wife, Harriet. The eponymous Kangaroo (aka Benjamin Cooley) represents the Judaeo-Christian religion, exercising an *almost* irresistible attraction for Somers, who toys briefly with being contained in the warm embrace of this oh so loving, yet strangely fascist lawgiver. This attraction Somers soon overcomes, rejecting it as a denial of his individuality: 'Damn his love. He wants to FORCE me' (*K* 208). Cooley takes his characteristics from Kot, Eder, and Bertrand Russell, as has long been established (*K* 375).

For Cooley's Lieutenant (God's right hand man) we have Jack Calcott (JC) representing Jesus Christ, willing to lay down his life for Somers, much to Somers' disgust. We can see that Jack is representational of Christ in Lawrence's response, echoing Jesus' words to the disciples in the gospel of St John, 'Greater love hath no man...' (*K* 106) Of course, Jack is also comprised of numerous other fragments of friends and acquaintances, including Denis Forrester whom Lawrence met on the boat; Jack Skinner (as Paul Eggert noted some time ago); Jack Murry, Lawrence's neighbour in Cornwall, (here the Somers' neighbour in Sydney); Jack White, whom Lawrence damned as 'wanting to be loved' and who eventually hit back – as does Jack Calcott in *Kangaroo*. In fact innumerable fragments of ideas and experiences are mined for this novel. And in this we witness Lawrence's extraordinary creative process in action: the process he describes in *Studies in American Literature* as being 'like somnambulism or dreaming' (*SCL* 170).

His comment, for instance, that Jack Calcott is someone 'whom Harriett quite liked, but whom she would never have taken seriously' (*K* 175) is an allusion to Frieda's known attitude to Christ, as Lawrence reported to Arthur McLeod in 1913, 'Frieda is reading the bible, and suddenly announces "I rather like Christ".' (*IL* 506) Such allusions would have been unknowable to the

---

<sup>7</sup> *Black Curtain*, 183

<sup>8</sup> Stephen White, 'Soviets in Britain: The Leeds Convention of 1917', *International Review of Social History*, 19.2 (1974), 165–193.

<sup>9</sup> 'Pacifist Meeting Broken Up: East-End Church Wrecked', *The Times*, 30 July, 1917.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Goldring, *Odd Man Out*, (London, Chapman & Hall, 1936) 271.

<sup>11</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography* (Routledge, 2009). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203864999>, 240-241.

<sup>12</sup> 'Pacifist Meeting Broken Up: Uproar and fire in a London church', *The Times*, 8 October, 1917.

contemporary reader. Indeed, many of the subconscious allusions peppering his work were knowable only to himself.

In *Kangaroo*, Labour and its 'Red' solution are represented by the Unionist Willie Struthers, and an alternative to the status quo, as has long been understood, is provided by William James (Jaz), who, as a Cornishman in touch with pre-Christian forces, represents Lawrence's dark gods. *Kangaroo* also reaches its dramatic peak when a group of Australian soldiers violently disperses a Socialist meeting.

The original riot had been provoked via *Daily Express* pamphlets distributed throughout the Hackney pubs, inciting locals and colonial soldiers, both Australian and Canadian, to lead the attack, promising, 'Scores of old Soldiers and others are going to march to the Canal Bridge to show these TRAITORS What they think of them.'<sup>13</sup>

The irony of the *Christian Brotherhood Union* being viciously attacked in the *Brotherhood Church* whilst extolling pacifism evidently resonated with Lawrence, who gave the event a wicked twist in *Kangaroo*. Instead of using the riot to eulogise pacifism, he used it to kill off the Bertrand Russell figure *Kangaroo*, thereby, allegorically, bringing about the death of God and making way for dark gods of his own.

It can be seen, then, that the *digger* unrest and anti-socialist violence that Lawrence located in Sydney in 1922, was actually a translocation of political activities that had occurred in another time and place. They are not indicative of insider knowledge of fascist unrest in Australia. The suppression of nascent socialist organisations by reactionary governments and their agents was commonplace at that time. In fact a War Office photographer had conveniently been on hand to film the storming of the Brotherhood church, and the incident was reported nationally. As Steven White has pointed out, 'Not the least remarkable aspect of the proceedings was the fact the police had "looked on calmly" while damage to person and property was being committed.'<sup>14</sup> Questions were asked about this lack of intervention, in the parliament, and the Home Secretary responded:

'He said, without hesitation that the police did their very utmost to prevent riot and protect the persons and property attacked. The House would require much better evidence than had been adduced before they would believe a word against Canadian and Australian soldiers.'<sup>15</sup>

Readers can assess the validity of this claim for themselves, by viewing the War Office footage of the storming of the church, in *War Office Official Topical Budget 310-1*, made available by the Imperial War Museum here (at 3:33 minutes):

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060005419>.

---

<sup>13</sup> 'Riot at the Brotherhood Church' *Workers Dreadnought*, 4 July 1917.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen White, 'Soviets in Britain: The Leeds Convention of 1917', 190.

<sup>15</sup> 'An Omnibus Debate' *Northern Whig*, 31 July 1917.