

Gilbert Noon & Aaron Sisson

I'm starting with an image from World War I: its relevance will in the end become clear.



For years, I've been trying to find out more about Lawrence's friend with the distinctive name Gilbert Noon. But I'm also interested in another man Lawrence knew – Aaron Sisson: two real-life persons vanishing (so far as most of us are concerned) into works of fiction.

Facts before counter-factuals. Sisson was born in Eastwood in 1882 and worked for a Health Insurance Committee. A 'fluent linguist', according to his obituary, he travelled 'throughout . . . Canada, Switzerland, and France'. Lawrence and he were both at the wedding of Mabel Cooper, daughter of flautist Tom Cooper, who lived next to the Lawrences in Eastwood: Sisson was a witness, Lawrence was best man. Sisson joined up on 1 October 1914, in the

Sherwood Foresters; he was killed near Hooge in the Ypres Salient in 1915 and is buried in Belgium's Sanctuary Wood cemetery, but many have taken the stone in Eastwood to be his tombstone. It was in 1917 that Lawrence started the novel in which that striking name appears: I'm sure he knew Sisson was dead.



Gilbert Noon was born in 1886; Lawrence went through pupil-teacher time in Ilkeston and teacher-training in Nottingham with him. With the War, Noon only joined up when he had to, in 1916; in 1917 he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps and became observer (meaning machine-gunner) in a Bristol F2B. This is a publicity shot, all smiles,



to get you to join the Australian air force. The real thing was much grimmer: the observer standing up to use his gun, exposing himself to slipstream and enemy fire. Noon's career ended within four weeks of his first mission. He and



his pilot of just three-weeks' combat experience, Ernest Clark, were shot down on 29 November 1917; they were buried behind German lines near where their aircraft

crashed into Houthulst Forest. This is an aircraft wreck there: not Clark and Noon's, but a later one.



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Cartomania

After the war, like all identifiable British dead in the area, Lieutenants Clark and Noon were reburied in an official cemetery: Tyne Cot. They are buried in adjoining, unnamed but now, thanks to the Clark family, at last identified graves.



Arriving before me, Clark's relatives gave the grave on the right a poppy: but they gave the other grave a flower, too. One is the grave of Gilbert Noon.

Lawrence was starting to use Noon's name for *Mr Noon* around the time of the re-burial. I'm sure he knew that his friend was dead.

The fact that Noon and Sisson are appropriated names is not my only reason for interest in Gilbert Noon and Aaron Sisson. Sometimes Lawrence just appropriated names: his most ruthless appropriation was surely the name Constance Chatterley, elder daughter of George Chatterley, Chief Accountant at Barber Walker: she died, unmarried, in 1951. Some lives Lawrence re-worked without their names: the early life of Eastwood's Flossie Cullen matches that of Alvina Houghton in *The Lost Girl*, but whereas Alvina falls for Ciccio, and goes to Italy, Flossie Cullen married a local man called George Hodgkinson.

Lawrence clearly enjoyed developing alternative lives for real individuals, giving them new fictional lives anything between 'somewhat' and 'quite' different from their originals. He demonstrates an imagination fascinated by counter-factuals as in the *OED* definition: 'Pertaining to, or expressing, what has not in fact happened, but might, could, or would, in different conditions'.

Lawrence treated himself in just that way, arguably because he believed his experience representative: Paul Morel, Rupert Birkin, Rawdon Lilly and Richard Lovatt Somers might, could and would experience what Lawrence

did, but – as potentially exemplary individuals – their thinking and their behaviour are dynamic.

Both Noon and Sisson had been near to Lawrence's personal knowledge: both had been violently killed and buried far from home – once, indeed, 'proximate', now 'distant', in our theme's language. But, away from England, and post-war, Lawrence's fiction awards them not just new but sometimes desperate leases of fictional life. In a novel whose comic mode constantly ridicules him, Noon discovers what losing Johanna would mean: 'the soul must bleed to death, not whole, and not quite sane' (AR 231). What David Eder termed *War-Shock* in 1917 fills Sisson's experiences: he finds his wife 'murderous', her good-will 'poison gas' (25): Josephine Ford he feels 'perhaps killed me' (90) while the Marchesa will find killing him a 'just climax' (273) – and both, Sisson fears, believe him 'carrion' (93, 273): dead meat, like his dream of skin in human form stuffed with meat (286).

The new leases of life which such counter-factuals bring to individuals – in reality recently killed – can often be considered desperate.

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