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978-0-521-08166-5 - In Our Infancy: An Autobiography Part 1, 1882-1912

Helen Corke

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Other books by Helen Corke

The Class Books of World History, Oxford University Press, 1927–30

A Book of Ancient Peoples, The Clarendon Press, 1931

A Book of Modern Peoples, The Clarendon Press, 1933

Lawrence and 'Apocalypse', Heinemann, 1933

Neutral Ground (novel), Arthur Barker, 1933

Towards Economic Freedom, Methuen, 1937

D. H. Lawrence's 'Princess': A Memoir of Jessie Chambers, The Merle Press, 1951

Songs of Autumn (poems), Texas University Press, 1960

D. H. Lawrence: the Croydon Years, Texas University Press, 1964

The Light of Common Day: An Autobiography Part II (in preparation)

TELEVISION: In July 1967, Helen Corke was interviewed by Malcolm Muggeridge (whom she once taught) for the BBC-2 colour television programme, *D. H. Lawrence and The Dreaming Woman*, produced by Don Taylor. The programme – which also included a dramatised excerpt from *The Trespasser*, filmed in the Isle of Wight, and readings of several of Lawrence's 'Helen' poems – was first shown in June 1968 and was repeated in July 1969 and August 1973; the script appeared in *The Listener* in July 1968.

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An Autobiography

Part I: 1882–1912

HELEN CORKE

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PREFACE

That life should produce some clear evidence of sanity, purpose, intention – it is the ultimate human demand. Perhaps this was never more obvious than during the autumn of the year 1939. Those of us who had, during the First World War, learned to discount the false heroics that ushered it in, faced the coming of a Second World War without illusions.

September 1939 found me in the neighbourhood of the old Suffolk town, Bury St Edmunds, and, like it, disposed rather to look back into the past than to contemplate a dubious future. The ancient borough drowsed in sunshine these calm autumn days, re-living its memories – so would I... Beyond my window the East Anglian slopes carried a gently waving harvest of Suffolk wheat... I looked down through the harvest of my own half-century and found its major impressions clear and sharp, even retaining their original emotional atmosphere. Was I wasting my time, or might the record induce readers to recall half-forgotten but still significant knowledge of their own childhood and youth? Mothers and teachers tend to accept what passes as ‘child-study’ at second hand, from professional psychiatrists’ primers and lectures. Or they treat children as dwarf adults, and dress their minds, as in former centuries their bodies, in clothing of adult design, unsuited to the new identity. Put aside on my recall to school organisation during the war, the autobiography was resumed during the ’50s and the first writing finished in ’68. Incidental revision has taken place since. The present volume covers the first half of the story, dealing with the period 1882–1912.

I found it fascinating to trace, in the being that was myself in the teens and twenties, the interplay of heredity and

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environment. How fully might a new, strong influence, personal or eventual, defeat or subdue the legacy of my fore-fathers? What part of my birth-right persisted within the ultimate, adult Me? Biographers tend to present their subject as a unique creation, owing little or nothing to the myriad influences, exerted both by human contacts and the movement of events, throughout the formative years.

In my own case, from birth to the seventh year, the direct personal influence of my parents was unchallenged, and the quiet, ordered monotony of my days varied only by those attacks of childish illness – bronchitis, whooping cough, chicken-pox – then regarded as the normal experience of children. Influence exerted by book-images began with the Bible, and these remained paramount throughout early childhood, though illustrated toy books, featuring animals, were not lacking...From my father I inherited a love of poetry and literature of marked rhythm, from my mother some sense of drama. My father kept, regularly, a personal diary, but I am not aware that any other member of his family wrote, either as a hobby or professionally. I began to write stories for children in my ninth year, but these were shown to no one, and the last, a long story of school life, set in a romantic old castle, was discounted and destroyed in my early teens. During subsequent years until the end of teacher training, my pen was harnessed to the required syllabus. The entry of David Herbert Lawrence into my world gave a new impetus to my urge to write. He came to Croydon as qualified teacher in the autumn of 1908.

It may be interesting to compare the conditions of D.H.L.'s infancy with my own. He was born in 1885, three years later than me – his age being that of the elder of my two brothers. The conditions of his childhood in the small mining town of Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, were remote from mine. The relations between his father and mother were unhappy to a degree – a stormy household expressed

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its affections and antagonisms freely. There was no assurance of peace, since the mother marshalled the feelings of the children against the father. But outside the home there were similarities between D.H.L.'s early influences and my own. In both cases religious teaching stemmed from the nonconformity of a Congregational chapel and Sunday School – its moral code based on the Jewish Ten Commandments and the Christian Sermon on the Mount. To that code both our communities did lip service. Similarly, we absorbed and loved the rich symbolism of the Bible in its Authorised Version.

Jessie Chambers, in her *Personal Record*, lists books – mostly obtained from local public libraries – which Lawrence had absorbed and wished her to read. Many of them were favourites of mine, to be classed among early influences. They included Longfellow's poems, Tennyson's *Maud* and *Morte d'Arthur*, *Locksley Hall* and *The Lady of Shalott*, Scott's novels, Rider Haggard's *She*, and Dickens – especially *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*. American writers on both our lists began with Louisa M. Alcott and Fenimore Cooper. Two writers whose influence on me was deep and lasting, Olive Schreiner and George MacDonald, seem to have had no place during Lawrence's formative years. Roughly, the lists apply to our more influential reading between the ages of seven and seventeen. There is one further coincidence – for each of us a performance of *Hamlet* provided the entry to the study of tragedy.

But if we consider the immediate influence of local environment upon awakening minds we may expect to find a marked difference between D.H.L.'s development and my own. For him in childhood the life of a small mining community within which the coal industry was replacing farm and woodland by a broken countryside, its personnel the dependent servants of an underworld. For me the warmer, non-industrial, easier-going South of wealthy land-owners served by obsequious Trade. Does one, it has

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been asked, grow grapes from thorns or figs from thistles? Or, one might enquire, can the soil in which the pine-cone germinates nourish also the palm?

Yet, despite differences, and on account of common sympathies, David Lawrence and I walked together for the three years 1909–12.

This autobiography is not a collection of interesting or amusing episodes and anecdotes. It is a record, as faithful as memory can render it, of the awakening of an individual consciousness, and its subsequent expansion through a long life. It is an attempt to indicate the supreme miracle – the mystery of being and becoming, of perceiving and knowing, repeated with infinite variations in every generation. For those who remain blind to the wonder of this miracle the record can have no interest, and for the professional psychologist accustomed only to the measuring rod of the classic theories it will perhaps prove disappointing. The writer offers it, in all humility, to the reader who is content to explore, as impersonally and patiently as the geologist his rock levels, a small tract within the vast field of human sensory and extra-sensory awareness.

H.C.

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My paternal grandfather was a Kentishman; his ancestors, according to the record of the tombstones in St Nicholas's churchyard, Sevenoaks, had lived in that parish for at least two centuries. The family was prolific, church-going, and strongly Liberal. It provided the town with several generations of tradesmen and minor professionals, more or less closely interested in the affairs of the great house Knole, seat of the Sackville West family. Its prevailing respectability was varied by a strain of vagabondage which appeared in Great-uncle Ben, cattle driver, and Uncle Gambier, whose inherent distaste for work no privation could overcome. Another variant was my Great-uncle Silas, who in the 1850s entertained the local lecture societies with experiments illustrating the possibilities of electric power.

At the date of his marriage my grandfather was a salesman in the local drapery store. But he discovered a vocation for religious ministry, and in his thirties became a London City missionary, and struggled through lean years on less than a curate's stipend. Ultimately he came back to Sevenoaks and the drapery; my little grandmother, whose brown eyes, netted ringlets and gentle voice disguised her strength of character, probably decreed his return in the interests of her five sons.

My father, Alfred, born 1851, was the second son. From boyhood he was a book-lover with a placid imagination. He respected his father and accepted, with certain private reservations, the ruling of his mother; his conformity hid a questing spirit, with a measure of independence. It enabled him, as a young man, to escape from his mother's dominance. The other sons all remained unmarried; three

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of them lived in the home of their parents until the death of my grandmother at the age of eighty.

During his City mission years my grandfather and his family lived in Southgate, where the sons attended a private school. It enjoyed considerable endowments, and must have been an exceptionally good school for its period and kind; my father spoke of it always with enthusiasm. He owed to it his fine, firm, copper-plate handwriting, his introduction to English literature, and his imaginative appreciation of history and geography. It opened a door to the newly popularised wonders of invention, and stressed the opportunities of youth. It awarded prizes generously, and as his 'leaving prize' Alfred received a heavy volume in cloth gilt entitled *The Steady Aim*, containing biographies of successful and famous men, all of whom had begun life at the bottom of Fortune's ladder. He read and re-read the book and kept it to the end of his life. I believe it fixed upon his mind the impression received at school – the road might be hard and the journey long, but integrity and determination led ultimately to fame and competence. Those who failed must recognise in themselves the cause of failure, some personal weakness or lack of driving power.

When the family returned to Sevenoaks, Alfred was ready for apprenticeship. His mother was well satisfied that he should begin work in the old-established country business to which my grandfather had reverted. But Alfred preferred the grocery department – his undisclosed reason being that it was agreeable to contemplate and dispense food; meals at home left the growing lad hungry. Apprenticeship over, he entered as salesman a similar store in the village of Seal, where he lodged in his employer's house. At that time he was a solitary youth, who loved the natural beauty of the Kentish countryside, and all that territory of romance opened to him by the English poets. His employer, a strict Baptist, forbade the reading within his house of any book but the Bible, with which Alfred was already very familiar, so most of the young man's reading was done

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out of doors. While on his routine order and delivery rounds he absorbed the whole of Scott's novels; the old horse, ambling along the lanes he knew so well, needed no direction, and the driver could safely pursue his book. A local chess club was the resort of many winter evenings... Probably the most exciting event of the period was, for him, the invention of the 'bone-shaker'; Alfred managed to acquire one of these primitive cycles, and gained a temporary notoriety by riding it on the high road where this descended steep River Hill.

My mother, born in 1849 at Hastings, was descended from a family of fishermen, who had beached their tough little boats upon its shingle generations before the first row of holiday-makers' boarding houses faced the sea. Adopted in infancy by a childless aunt and uncle living in Newhaven, she remained with them until her marriage at the age of twenty-nine. Her uncle's position as harbour-master was locally important, and established her as belonging to the well-to-do of the townlet. Except for an occasional shopping excursion to Lewes or Brighton its boundaries marked the limit of her orbit for the twenty-eight years. It provided her with ample scope for emotional satisfactions; she had a single-minded interest in the lives of her relations and friends, and these included the majority of the Newhaven people. Drama, and indeed melodrama, for which she had a strong instinct, she found in plenty; it was her absorption. She had no intellectual preoccupations, and accepted without question the religion, logic, social values and moral standards of her circle. Her school was the private establishment of Ma'am Brown, which specialised in sloping, Victorian hand-writing, ornate cross-stitch samplers, and the use of the back-board for the correction of round shoulders; she left school at the age of twelve, and was thereafter thoroughly tutored in household management by her aunt. My great-aunt Harriet was tiny and frail, but of exceeding tenacity. Her demands upon her niece increased with the years, but this my mother

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did not resent; the feeling that she was indispensable added, indeed, to her *amour propre*. Louisa's aunt played a prominent part on that stage where Louisa saw herself moving, a desired and necessary presence, a dominant influence, among the lives of her friends.

She was good-looking, with a white skin and smooth dark hair, parted on the crown of her head and drawn back from an oval face. She had large grey eyes and well-shaped nose and chin. She dressed in current fashion – her dress allowance being generous – and Sundays saw her at chapel in ribboned and frilled silks and satins of chaste grey or mauve, with fine kid lavender gloves carefully pressed and scented. She never missed a wedding, a funeral, or any other social function, and her unfailing interest in the jots and tittles of their lives endeared her to the women of the neighbourhood. The small-town life of the sixties and seventies was probably less narrow than it seems to us with our greater radius: it provided both opportunity and depth lacking today. If my mother needed anything essential to a full and satisfying existence she was unaware of it. A Puritan self-sufficiency permeated place and period. Familiarity with the literal text of the Bible was literary education enough; in comparison with the profundities of the Book, history, geography and the arts were ornamental frippery. Louisa's geographical range did not exceed a dozen miles, but she had only to step into the street to lift her eyes to the hills, 'from whence cometh my help', and to remember 'my help cometh from the Lord which hath made heaven and earth'. Standing by the window of her bedroom at the top of the tall house in Meeching Road she watched with fascination 'this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts' – but she took no pleasure in the sight, associating it rather with those tragic family tales of seafaring misadventure common in the local records.

From early childhood she attended regularly the morning and evening services of the ugly Congregational

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chapel, without a suspicion of its ugliness. She was there, singing in the choir when a young Kentishman, recently installed at Bannister's general store, first saw her, and fell romantically in love. It happened when Louisa, at the age of twenty-seven, was concerned with a difficult decision. Suitors had not been lacking, but they were not welcomed by Aunt Harriet, whose will was set to keep her adopted daughter. Louisa was none the less determined not to be stigmatised as 'old maid', and at this point was seriously considering the proposal of a distant cousin with banking employment in Paris. She was not in love with John, and did not want to go to Paris, but the marriage would be a good match, and her age was beginning to worry her. This dilemma made my father's wooing easier; he was not only an eligible and desirable young man with whom she readily fell in love – he was also a way of escape from the frightening possibility of going abroad. They could marry and settle in Newhaven.

But the shy suitor with the grey-blue eyes that were difficult to meet, revealed, on better knowledge, other intentions. Alfred was easy-going on the surface, and generally acceded to Louisa's wishes, but on one point the steadiness of his aim was unquestionable – he meant to be his own master. He would have a shop of his own, and soon. To open one in Newhaven, in opposition to Bannister's, would be courting failure. He saved, he sought; he even, when the chance to buy came, borrowed a small sum from the harbour-master, who liked him. In 1879 he married Louisa and took her to the Sussex village of West Hoathley, where he had bought the goodwill of an old-established general store from its retiring owner. At the moment the village had an inflated population; Irish navvies were laying a railway line to connect Horsham and Lewes, and lived in huts there. The men spent freely at the store, and within a year Alfred had repaid his debt.

Louisa enjoyed the excitement of her wedding (which her aunt refused to attend) and the seven-mile drive from

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Lewes to her new home. The month was June, the weather perfect, and the little old house picturesque. But before the end of the autumn she was moping like a plant transferred to unsuitable soil. Small-town society had provided the spring and zest of her life; she pined for the give and take, the gossip, and the sense of 'belonging' which had always been hers, at home in Newhaven. West Hoathley was foreign, and its few, scattered inhabitants strangers. They did not want her or she them. Most West Hoathley folk were church-goers; the minority who attended the little chapel looked upon Louisa's Sunday dresses with patent disapproval. The small, low-ceilinged house was dim and depressing. She was accustomed to spending most of her days indoors; the Sunday constitutional to the sea-front or up the Brighton road had sufficed her and her friends for exercise. Neither reading nor sewing gave her any pleasure. After her first conception she clung to her husband pathetically; he seemed so resourceful, so cheerful, so strong. He did his best to help and divert her; lured her out for short walks, tried to interest her in the flower-garden – she knew nothing of flower cultivation – and read aloud to her from his shelf of classics, trying Dickens, Scott, Shakespeare and Milton. (The volume of Milton was indeed her own – he had given it to her in their courtship days, when impressed by the facility with which she quoted dramatic passages from the Bible, learned through years of Sunday repetition. She never read Milton herself.) Alfred even, though reluctantly, permitted her to serve behind the counter of the shop, since she brightened after chat with customers. He looked forward to the child's birth with mixed hope and dread. It was born in the autumn of 1880, and lived only a few hours.

An easy-going cousin, bringing the small-town atmosphere, came to stay, and probably saved my mother's reason; but she was still white-faced, with eyes 'like two burnt holes in a blanket' when the great snowfall of January 1881 descended upon Sussex. West Hoathley was

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literally buried, and my father dug his way out of the cottage with great difficulty. When the road to Lewes was cleared sufficiently to permit transport of food and mails, a wall of snow ten feet high stood on either side of the single track. Louisa was terrified, and this experience completed her revulsion against the place; she declared she should die if they did not leave it. Alfred, unused to hysteria, felt that the matter was serious, and promised to lose no time in finding another home.

They were living in Hastings when I was born, in January 1882. My conjecture is that Louisa's homing instinct, her longing for the friendly, communal life, was the decisive factor in taking them there. Hastings was not Newhaven; the former was, indeed, a strange town to my mother, whose link with it had been broken in infancy. But relations, near and distant, lived there, and in particular one cousin widowed under tragic circumstances, left to support a young family; to her story Louisa responded with her usual affinity for drama. Louisa and Cousin Helen became intimate friends, and after Cousin Helen I was named.

I think my father made the move to Hastings against his better judgment and in denial of his own wishes. The shop available was one of a row of cheap new shops, built with a view to catching the custom of the increasing number of summer holiday visitors. Its trade was of the predatory, competitive kind. Hitherto competition had entered little into his business dealings; his experience had been gained in stores of the old, firmly established country type, where a regular turnover ensured a moderate unfluctuating profit average over the years. Such a business he had hoped to maintain in West Hoathley. But my mother's happiness came first. Then, and thereafter until the end of his life, he would place her interests before his own.

Three years of married life were more than enough to convince him that the woman to whom he had called did not exist. He had dressed Louisa in the stuff of his romantic

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imagination. The real woman who had answered his call should never suffer on that account. It was no fault of hers, he felt, that she did not share his deeper experiences, or his tastes, and could not follow the ways of his mind. Henceforward he accepted her limitations and made no further attempts to extend her range. His early tendency to inhibit his thoughts and feelings became a fixed habit; all that was foreign to his wife's mind was denied expression.

During the winter of 1882, while maternity absorbed my mother, my father sat by his desk in the empty shop, reading Gibbon, whom he had discovered in the local library. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* diverted his mind from the declining condition of his fortunes. He read attentively, with little interruption from customers. Against the great stage of the decaying Empire his own affairs shrank to manageable proportions, and he was able to make a decision. He must leave Hastings as soon as the summer trade had temporarily fortified his small savings...The decision held, though, when it had to be communicated to Louisa, the proportions of the matter expanded to fill earth and heaven. She cried bitterly, and her mouth set in tight and tragic lines. Nevertheless, when she realised that the compulsion was one of income, her practical sense accepted the situation. Hence, at the age of eighteen months, I was taken to live in Tunbridge Wells, and the impressions registered in my mind for the first eight years of my life (with the single exception of the earliest recorded) are connected with that town and Newhaven.