

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13543-6 - A Memoir of D. H. Lawrence
G. H. Neville
Excerpt
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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Lawrence: the biographical problem

It is commonly supposed that a great deal is known about the young D. H. Lawrence and his home background in Eastwood near Nottingham; and by comparison with many other writers, there are very full records. Many of his friends wrote memoirs or were interviewed for their reminiscences; a number of letters have survived; and Lawrence himself, in *The White Peacock* and principally in *Sons and Lovers*, has given versions of his early life. But these abundant materials can still leave readers with a puzzled sense that no coherent shape of a personality and life emerges from them. The psychology of the young man remains a mystery for which no convincing account has yet been given. The present volume cannot solve that mystery, which could only be tackled in a full-scale biography, but it offers some new leads towards a solution.

The White Peacock, as the first in a series of works of art very directly engaged in the interpretation of their author's life, might be expected to give a cross-section, at a valuably early stage, of Lawrence's inner life. Readers of this first novel are often struck by the strange complexity of the author's character, which is intimated through prose that, whatever aspect of it one looks at – whether its narrative, its descriptions, its tones, its characters – expresses extraordinarily complicated and varied inner pressures. This sense of the bafflingness of Lawrence's literary products was gestured at in a variety of ways by his earliest critics and reviewers, as when, for example, some reviewers thought that *The White Peacock* was written by a woman. It is so baffling in its intimation of its author's character that we realise that any fresh help in making sense of his psychology is welcome.

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The works by Lawrence most widely read are his four outstanding novels, *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. I suggest that it has become a critical challenge worth taking up, to understand whether and in what ways these very different novels are exploring the same fundamental material as *The White Peacock*. The biographical challenge, distinct from but related to the critical one, is to establish whether in essence all Lawrence's main problems were present before he ever put pen to paper. In other words, although at different periods of his writing life he draws upon immediate or recent experiences, we need to ascertain whether nevertheless some possibilities of his personality and relationships might not have been fixed already, before he began to write, and before he met the people who could later fill out those basic predispositions. It seems to me that *The White Peacock* expresses pressures, needs and psychological patterning in imaginative form in direct line with his later handling of those same patternings when realities and experiences had taken the place of needs and fantasies.

These suggestions are hypotheses only; but so much writing about Lawrence takes for granted that his life consisted of very different phases, that the possibility of an underlying fixity needs raising. While it is to the greatest focal points of artistic truth in Lawrence's writing that we should look for the controlling elements from which to establish the shape of his inner life, even so a would-be biographer of his early life needs to make sense not only of *Sons and Lovers*, but also of *The White Peacock*, because in its curious way it is a more spontaneous, expressive work.

Whatever sense one has of the way in which *The White Peacock* relates to the later writings, it does convince one of the desirability of unearthing as much as possible about Lawrence's early life and environment. This is where G. H. Neville's Memoir is important. For, although it is a modest effort and nothing like so well written as Jessie Chambers's minor classic *D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Record*¹ – and indeed there are some bad misjudgements of taste in it, such as the excruciatingly sentimental verses of his own that Neville places at the end – nevertheless it does offer much that is new. First, it provides some facts that are not in the other life-records. Second, it is a

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conscious and sustained effort by someone who knew Lawrence well in his youth to interpret that life for us. Third, it exposes for our contemplation the character of Neville himself, who was one of the two main male friends of Lawrence's youth. And finally it is important because Neville's own life-story and personality can now be clearly seen to have constituted significant raw material for Lawrence's art.

Neville's life and character

George Henry Neville was born just over a year after Lawrence, on 7 October 1886, in Eastwood. His family was a little more affluent than Lawrence's, as is illustrated by their move, when Neville was seven, to 43 Lynn Croft. It took the Lawrence family two moves and fifteen years to reach Lynn Croft, with its 'handsome' bay-windowed houses.

Neville's father, James Neville, was a miner who later became a dairyman; he in turn was the son of another James Neville, a miner. It was this first James Neville who had moved from Staffordshire to Eastwood. Neville's father first married Sarah Ellen Baker, a widow of about thirty with three children, and after her death in 1918 he married another widow, also with a family. James Neville and Sarah Ellen had five sons of their own in addition, of whom George Henry was the second. The Nevilles became a numerous family in Eastwood, and it is not uncommon for people who crop up once or twice as minor figures in the Lawrence life-records to be more or less distantly related to them. Later on, the Nevilles became a well-known family in Eastwood; from 1924 they ran the garage and taxi service, and owned the ambulance and the fire-engine in the days before the Town Council had its own fire-engine.

Little is known about Neville's father, but members of the family describe him as a man whose domineering nature could on occasion run to cruelty towards his family, even to Neville's mother. His sister, Hannah, lived with them and he treated her as a servant. It may be of importance, in considering G. H. Neville's attitude to women, that for his father they were very definitely second-class citizens.

Another important figure in Neville's immediate family was his one elder brother, William Baker Neville. His remarkable

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career, which is very similar to that which Lawrence's elder brother Ernest once seemed to be launched upon, can best be expressed in the words of the obituary in the *Eastwood and Kimberley Advertiser* for 23 April 1948, which provides some flavour of the outlook and career prospects available to young men of G. H. Neville's and Lawrence's age and circumstances:

From pit-boy to general manager of the London Co-operative Society briefly records the remarkable life's story of the Eastwood boy, Mr R. William Baker Neville, J.P., who passed away . . . at his Buckhurst Hill (London) home, at the age of 63.

Son of a miner (the late Mr James Neville) of Eastwood, the elder member of a large family, he commenced his working career in practically the only available industry in the district in those days, and became a ganger at High Park Colliery, but following an early accident underground, he was found employment as an office boy on the surface. Being of a studious nature and withal ambitious, he continued his studies under his old schoolmaster, Mr William Whitehead, and secured a position on the clerical staff of the Langley Mill and Aldercar Co-operative Society, where he attained a position of some responsibility. In 1912, he obtained an important post with the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society, London, where his unusual capabilities were quickly recognised, and in a few years he was appointed secretary and chief executive officer of that important concern. In 1937 the Greater London Co-operative Society claimed his services, and at the head of that big concern – the world's largest retail Co-operative Society – he saw in ten years the sales raised from £14,000,000 a year to £25,000,000 . . .

He was elected President of the Co-operative Congress at Margate in 1939, and was a permanent magistrate for London County. He served on many important Government Committees . . .

From his earliest days Mr Neville was a Bible Student and very devout in his religious beliefs. He was always deeply attached to the Beauvale Methodist Church, where he became organist and Sunday School teacher, and served on the local preachers' plan . . .

The funeral service was [attended by, amongst many others] the Right Hon. A. V. Alexander, M.P., P.C., Minister of Defence . . .

G. H. Neville himself took in 1899 the alternative route to

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self-betterment of a scholarship from the local school at Beauvale to Nottingham High School. There an excellent staff was led by the headmaster James Gow, a Doctor of Literature and former Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, whose next headship was of Westminster School, and who also acted as chairman of the Headmasters' Conference (i.e. the association of public school headmasters). For both Neville and Lawrence attendance at Nottingham High School meant the temporary immersion in a socially superior world.

At that time, at the turn of the century, bright working-class boys who had won scholarships to schools such as Nottingham High School had very little opportunity for taking responsible jobs in the professions because of the prohibitive cost of higher education. So, just as Lawrence had to find himself work as a clerk at a Nottingham factory, Neville worked briefly for a local tailor. But both managed to ensure themselves some further educational qualifications by becoming pupil, or 'uncertificated', teachers at local schools, Lawrence at the British School, Albert Street, Neville at the Gilt Hill School; and by attending, one day a week, a teachers' training centre near Eastwood, at Ilkeston. But in 1905, at the end of that training, whereas Lawrence succeeded in winning one of the twelve scholarships awarded throughout England which enabled him to go to University College, Nottingham to take the Certificate in Education, Neville had to find a teaching job. He worked for a short time as a certificated teacher at the Gilt Hill School, before moving in 1907 to a better post about fifty miles to the south-west at Amblecote, Stourbridge, on the western outskirts of Birmingham in Staffordshire. In 1908, Lawrence went to a teaching post in Croydon.

Despite this separation their friendship continued, and they went on holiday together every year until Lawrence left for the continent in 1912. Neville had married in 1911, and from the beginning of 1912 he and his newly formed family lived at Armitage, Rugeley, Staffordshire, moving once or twice within Armitage before settling in mid 1914 in the house in which they remained until Neville's death in 1959.

George Neville's later career can be summarised briefly. He left teaching in 1916 and took employment with the rationing department of the Food Office. After the war, he joined Henry

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Boot and Sons, Sheffield, acting as an agent for council-house construction work. In 1924 he attempted to form his own company, Building Supplies, Birmingham, Ltd, but the venture collapsed within a few years. After this Neville took employment with Coralite Construction Ltd in Manchester. This employment kept him away from home all week travelling, and sometimes for two continuous weeks; a lifestyle which lasted for about a year. Meanwhile he had two sidelines: one was travelling round to public houses selling cut-price whisky, and the other was journalism. He wrote a series of articles in the *Staffordshire Advertiser* from 1919 (with breaks) to 1929. In the mid 1930s Neville hauled whey, at first with his eldest son as driver, and later using a hired coal lorry; and in the latter part of the decade, he did accounting work. Finally in 1939, his brother William Baker Neville succeeded, through the good offices of his politician friend A. V. Alexander, in finding Neville a post as a regional disposals officer.

The character sketch of G. H. Neville given by his relatives shows a man of considerable energy and many talents, but also of a domineering and authoritarian temperament.

His house was always overflowing with books, and he wrote poems, plays and sketches as well as a great many newspaper articles. He played the violin and was a good enough singer to give solo recitals of the kind noted in the *Staffordshire Advertiser* for 20 September 1919, when at a dinner for returned soldiers and sailors given during the Peace Celebrations in Armitage which he had helped to organise, 'Mr G. H. Neville rendered "The Perfect Day" as a closing item, and by request gave "Because" as an *encore* . . .' He was a moderately accomplished painter, and an enthusiastic gardener, especially knowledgeable about herbs. He was an active sportsman, playing both football and cricket, and a very keen angler; he owned two guns and was a fair shot. He was a regular supporter of the Parish Church of St John the Baptist where he painted and lettered the rolls of honour which were installed in the church, and he was a respected member of his community to whom people turned for counsel, and for help in such matters as accounts and tax-returns.

There is, however, general agreement among members of his family that he was a regular drinker, visiting his local pub every

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night; that he was not infrequently involved in relationships with women; and that he had a tendency to violence. For example, one Sunday lunchtime when he had been drinking he struck and scarred his twenty-one-year-old son with a carving knife. He caused one or two scandals in his village over women. After one such entanglement a young schoolteacher had to be shipped off to Canada and her irate father, an army major, horse-whipped Neville all the way from church to home; but Neville was strong enough or proud enough – or both – to walk the quarter of a mile ignoring the blows.

The same fierce pride was evident in his generosity towards his family, to whom he liked to give handsome presents despite, or perhaps because of, the help they occasionally had to give him in his lasting financial difficulties, which continued even after he had secured a good job in 1939. His family also report that he could be argumentative and dogmatic, and it may be that it was a tendency to be outspoken in his opinions that led to his series in the *Staffordshire Advertiser* being abruptly terminated in 1929 by its editor, who wrote a curt note to him saying that his articles had given offence in some quarters and he was no longer welcome as a contributor.

Neville and Lawrence

Neville's newspaper articles have the added interest in the present context that he sometimes worked into them fragments of autobiography. They were mostly lengthy interviews with local farmers giving detailed descriptions of their farms, and they incidentally reveal that Neville had a good deal of miscellaneous knowledge not only of agriculture but of poetry, architecture and local and general history. In his personal reminiscences he very occasionally mentioned Lawrence, as when, writing on 24 November 1928, on the dissolution of the manors in his locality, he begins:

Today I have been living in a land of enchantment. I remember many years ago, when I was out on a long tramp with my boyhood chum, now D. H. Lawrence the novelist, and, coming upon a beautiful ruin, I started rhapsodising as usual. Lawrence stood it for a while, and then, turning to me, he said, 'You are a sentimental little beggar, you know.' He had the advantage

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of me in age by a matter of two years [actually one], and spoke from the lofty pinnacle on which that placed him. Incidentally, if you would like to know more of both of us, read his first novel *The White Peacock*. If to love these old world things . . . is to be a sentimentalist, then I thank God for it.

When Neville described the young Lawrence as his special friend, he was not exaggerating. It is a very striking feature of the surviving records how much of Lawrence's youth was spent in the company of girls. Professor Jonathan David Chambers spoke for all the memoirists when he said, 'Lawrence had flocks of girls around him wherever he went: he went shopping with them and helped them to choose their hats and frocks.'² Neville himself and Alan, the elder brother of Jessie and J. D. Chambers, were the marked exceptions, and the two chief male friends of Lawrence's youth. In a letter of 30 July 1908, Lawrence appears to have been defending himself against a charge that all his friends were girls, and, in a context in which he takes pains to stress his physical strength, he says: 'Do not suppose I have no men friends. I could show you two men who claim me as their heart's best brother; there is another, home for the vacation, who has been with me every available moment – till I am tired, I confess . . . I have worked a long fortnight in the hay, with my friends, men, three men, whom I really love, in varying degrees.'³ These three men were Alan Chambers, George Neville and probably Richard Pogmore.

In this same letter Lawrence describes, in a brief narrative vignette, how he and his friends slept out one night under a haystack and were disturbed by a tramp. Lawrence says of Neville: 'It took all my friend's excellent English and refined accent to convince him that we were not of the great fraternity.' Later, Lawrence used the incident as background material for the short story 'Love Among the Haystacks'. Neville also refers briefly to this event in his Memoir.⁴

Three months later, in October 1908, Lawrence left Eastwood for his first serious teaching job in Croydon. The friendship Neville and Lawrence had developed at Beauvale School, Nottingham High School and Ilkeston Teacher Training Centre was continued by correspondence, and particularly by their summer holiday trips together for the next three years. Unfortunately, not a single letter from either one to the other

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has survived, but their activities can be pieced together from references in Lawrence's letters to other people and from memoirs.

In the summer of 1909 a holiday party was formed, comprising Lawrence, his mother and his sister Ada, Alice Hall and her father and mother, Frances and Gertrude Cooper, and Neville. They went for a fortnight to Shanklin, on the Isle of Wight. Neville gives some reminiscences of this holiday in his Memoir.⁵ It was also the holiday that gave Lawrence the knowledge of the Isle of Wight which a year or two later he could draw on when recreating and interpreting in *The Trespasser* the experiences that Helen Corke and her music master, H. B. Macartney, suffered there together – by an odd chance – in the same summer.

A year later Neville was on holiday again with Lawrence. This time they went alone to Blackpool, to a large, high-quality boarding-house near the north pier, kept by a relative of Neville's, Mrs Kate Swarbrick. This is the holiday which Lawrence recast in *Sons and Lovers* – characteristically he has sought accuracy in atmosphere and character but tinkered with details of times and names:

At Whitsuntide he said he would go to Blackpool for four days with his friend Newton. The latter was a big, jolly fellow, with a touch of the bounder about him. Paul said his mother must go to Sheffield to stay a week with Annie, who lived there . . .

The two young men set off gaily for Blackpool . . . Four days were clear – not an anxiety, not a thought. The two young men simply enjoyed themselves. Paul was like another man . . . He was having a good time, as young fellows will in a place like Blackpool.⁶

In his Memoir, Neville has left an account of their holiday: the violinist who entertained them, the various girls who were there, the young Yorkshire widow Clara, who made a dead-set at Lawrence.⁷ By chance, we can fill out the record here, for William Baker Neville's brother-in-law, Ernest Wilson, wrote a recollection of Lawrence, part of which reads:

Most of us leaving school at the age of thirteen years started work in the local collieries for economic reasons, but those with outstanding ability and good home circumstances could carry on their education. This is what happened to Bert who went to Ilkeston Teachers' Training Centre. He travelled

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there by train from Eastwood. It was at this centre that he struck up a friendship with another local boy George Henry Neville who also lived on Lynn Croft.

The remarkable nature of this friendship was that whilst Bert Lawrence was so shy and retiring, George Neville was a lively and mischievous boy. Could it have been that Bert Lawrence found in George Neville an outlet for his subdued boyishness? Or did George Neville have an influence on Bert in bringing him out of his retiring nature? The latter I feel is possible, for their friendship lasted many years.

As young men they came to stay for a holiday in the same boarding-house as my wife and I were staying. This was at 77 Talbot Street, Blackpool. Bert was now a man of twenty years of age [actually in 1910 he was twenty-five] and not at all shy and retiring. In fact he was as lively in his associations as George Neville although he still was a man of long lean appearance, hollow cheeks and untidy hair-style.

I also noticed that his temperate habits which his mother had tried to foster in him, had almost gone . . . Just prior to leaving the boarding-house, D.H. drew figures of men firstly very thin and secondly corpulent with appropriate words on the food they had enjoyed.⁸

Lawrence returned to discover that his mother had fallen fatally ill with cancer at the home of her sister and brother-in-law, Ada and Fritz Krenkow, in Leicester. Although Mrs Lawrence's death in December 1910 signalled the break-up of Lawrence's youthful world, the gradual confirmation of that break-up – Lawrence's leaving the teaching profession, determining to live by his pen, and the crucial decision to go abroad and stay abroad – was still some way in the future.

So again in the summer of 1911 a holiday party formed itself, and again Neville was there. The party went to Prestatyn, in North Wales, from where Lawrence wrote to his Croydon schoolmaster friend, A. W. McLeod:

I've been out bathing both mornings – alone – 'on a wide wide shore' – amid a disagreeable peevish pack of seagulls – felt quite primeval and near to Nature: and swallowed a most ghastly mouthful of deadly brine: the sea is very choppy.

This is quite as good as a Charles Garvice novel – hope you appreciate it. What are you doing? Vale . . .

The 'love', à la Garvice, shall come later.⁹