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978-0-521-43772-1 - D. H. Lawrence: The Early Years 1885–1912

John Worthen

Excerpt

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# D. H. LAWRENCE

1885–1912

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PART ONE



*Eastwood  
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## CHAPTER ONE



1815–1883

## ANTECEDENTS

## I. The Legacy of Eastwood

Our first image of D. H. Lawrence comes from October 1885, a month after his birth in the small Midlands mining town of Eastwood. Willie Hopkin – local shopkeeper and intellectual – recalled seeing Lawrence’s mother Lydia ‘coming out of Victoria Street wheeling the baby in a three-wheeled pram; two wheels being wood and the rims iron. You could hear them coming a long way off. Mrs Lawrence was neatly dressed in black, with a little black bonnet that was always a feature of her attire’.<sup>1</sup> Respectable, always in black, ‘tiny and pleasant and restrained’, keeping herself to herself except when out with a noisy pram: that was the Lydia Lawrence whom Eastwood knew. Hopkin asked how the new baby was, Lawrence being ‘a snuffly-nosed little beggar, seldom without a cold’. Mrs Lawrence

uncovered his face and I marvelled at the frail little specimen of humanity. I saw that Mrs. Lawrence seemed very concerned, and she said that she sometimes wondered if she would be able to raise him. It was at my tongue’s end to remark to Mrs. Lawrence that he did not resemble his father, either in appearance or frame, but when I saw her worried face, I pulled myself up and said nothing.<sup>2</sup>

A photograph from a little later of the baby in his pram survives (see Illustration 4): though he may have had an ear infection at 10 months,<sup>3</sup> he hardly looks frail, though (as in other early photographs) his mouth is open: a sign of that ‘snuffly-nose’. But the baby clothes are remarkable: probably supplied by Lydia Lawrence’s better-off sisters, the white hat, lace collar and lace-frilled pelisse (probably velvet) would have contrasted sharply with the black of his mother’s clothes and the grime of the mining town. Lawrence’s division between his parents had already begun: the sickly baby, dressed up so splendidly, was also the son of Arthur John Lawrence, a miner who worked underground for more than fifty years, and who was immensely tough. No wonder Hopkin was surprised.

For it was the healthy who survived best in Eastwood. There were regular epidemics: measles, diphtheria, diarrhoea, scarlet fever and whooping cough; in the late nineteenth century, respiratory diseases (tuberculosis and bronchitis) accounted for 17% of deaths in the area. The writer who died of

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pleurisy and tuberculosis in 1930, at the age of 44, remarked just before he died that ‘I have had bronchitis since I was a fortnight old.’<sup>4</sup> But many families suffered worse than the Lawrences. The Cooper family with their five daughters would be next-door neighbours in Lynn Croft in the 1900s, and Tom Cooper the Lawrences’ landlord. The mother, Thirza Cooper, died of ‘Pulmonary tuberculosis & cardiac failure’ in July 1904 at the age of 55: and all five daughters suffered from tuberculosis. Ethel died of ‘Phthisis/Pulmonalis/Exhaustion’ early in 1905, when she was 17; Mabel Hannah Cooper Marson died of ‘Pulmonary Tuberculosis’ at the age of 34, in February 1916; Francis (‘Frankie’) died of ‘Pulmonary Tuberculosis and Exhaustion’, also at 34, in December 1918; Florence Cooper Wilson died of ‘Laryngeal Tuberculosis’ in July 1924, at 43; and Gertrude (‘Gertie’) – also suffering from tuberculosis, and living with Lawrence’s sister Ada in nearby Ripley from 1919 – had a lung removed in 1926, when she was 41.<sup>5</sup> Gertrude was the only one of the sisters to live beyond her mid-forties: she died at the age of 57. What is significant, of course, is that Lawrence’s infection did not develop into tuberculosis for many years; he was simply a boy – and an adult – with a ‘weak chest’, subject to colds and coughs and ‘flu’.

But he carried away with him, as a legacy of his Eastwood childhood, his weak chest – and the tubercle itself: the family doctor apparently told his mother in 1901 that her son was tubercular. And although he physically left Eastwood, and spiritually and intellectually moved away from its attitudes, attachments and beliefs – shortly before he died his sister Ada remarked that ‘He hates it. It makes him ill whenever he sees it’<sup>6</sup> – yet he also remained extraordinarily close to it. He belonged to it even when it seemed inevitable that he should stop belonging; he carried the experience of Eastwood with him like the lungs which were the relics of his childhood there.

## II Lawrences

The house at 8a, Victoria Street, Eastwood, where Lawrence was born (see Illustration 10), still has a shop-window; Lydia Lawrence had a small draper’s shop there for a few years. Its possibility as a shop was probably among the reasons why, late in 1883, the Lawrence family (then of New Cross, Sutton-in-Ashfield, 5 miles away) took the house.

But only one of the reasons. At the bottom of Victoria Street ran Princes Street, where Arthur’s youngest brother Walter and his family lived at no. 9; less than a mile away, in Brinsley, lived Arthur’s brother George and his family, as well as the family of Mary Ellen (known as Polly) Lawrence, the widow of his third brother James. Both George and Walter had been

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working at Brinsley when James Lawrence had been killed there in 1880; and it had been in Brinsley that Arthur himself had worked as a miner, first as a child, and then again in the mid 1870s. Arthur Lawrence's two married sisters and his parents also lived in Brinsley; the latter had occupied Quarry Cottage – the house where all their children had been born – since the late 1840s. So when the New Cross Lawrences came to Eastwood, they returned to the centre of Arthur Lawrence's family. D. H. Lawrence was to be born into a family in which, on his father's side, none lived farther from each other than a mile and half, and some nearer than 60 yards. This gives the first clue to one of the crucial differences between Lydia and her husband, during their years in Eastwood: the contrast between her isolation, resulting from her separation from her own family, and his involvement in and closeness to the community surrounding the old family centre.

The man who was most probably D. H. Lawrence's great-grandfather, William Lawrence, was however not from Brinsley.\* He had worked in the metal industry in and around the growing town of Birmingham at the turn of the eighteenth century; and late in 1815, his wife Sarah had given birth to their son John in Deritend, a suburb of Birmingham: John had been christened on Christmas Day 1815, and was reputedly 'brought up as a tiny baby in some military hospital – or home'.<sup>7</sup> The Lawrences had a story that they had French ancestors; that John's father had been a refugee from the French Revolution who 'fought against Napoleon in Waterloo' (iii. 282) and who married an English barmaid, or – in another version – that John had been found as a child wandering on the battlefield of Waterloo. It was also said – and this is the only real possibility – that John's father had been killed at Waterloo. That might explain the baby's military upbringing; the father had certainly died before 1837, when his wife Sarah married again. But all these stories were probably invented, with John's birth in the magic year '1815' helping them along. The newspapers of the 1880s continued to record the deaths of soldiers who had fought at the battle, as the romance of Waterloo threw in the popular imagination; at least one cottage in East-

\* Paul Lawrence, Framesmith, appears as 'Father' when John Lawrence (born in Birmingham) got married in 1838, and therefore appears to be the family great-grandfather, rather than William. But Sarah Lawrence, John's mother, had married a tailor (George Dooley) the previous year, and since Paul was a witness to the marriage, unless there was a divorce in the family (which is extremely unlikely) John's actual father must have been dead by 1837. Nor can Paul Lawrence's name be found in the surviving Birmingham parish records between 1809 and 1829; while we know that John Lawrence was born in Birmingham (Census 1841, 1851, 1861, etc.). It is more likely that Paul Lawrence was a male relation – perhaps an uncle – and that he stood in for the deceased 'Father'. The only 'John Lawrence' whose christening appears in the (incomplete) Birmingham records around 1815–17, however, is also the only boy with a mother called Sarah; and his father is William Lawrence.

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wood had been built for a Waterloo veteran, in Three Tunns Road; the father of William Whitehead, Lawrence's headmaster at Beauvale School, had been a Waterloo hero; a sword reputedly from Waterloo had hung in Quarry Cottage.<sup>8</sup> But if the Lawrences' origins had originally been with a French Laurens family, such origins are now lost in obscurity:\* all that can be said is that they had Birmingham origins early in the nineteenth century. It is possible that there was French blood on the other side of the family: in 1838, John Lawrence married Louisa Antoinette Parsons; and though she came from a traditionally nonconformist family living in Hinckley in Leicestershire, she was the daughter of Antoinette Egginton. The name certainly suggests French sympathies, if not actual connections.

By 1837 Sarah Lawrence had remarried; she and her husband George Dooley moved to Brinsley. They were probably responsible for Brinsley becoming the Lawrence family centre. Her son John had grown up apprenticed to a tailor, quite possibly his future stepfather George Dooley; he also settled in Brinsley after his marriage the following year, and worked there as a tailor: he may once have been a military tailor (iii. 282). But his reputation was as a rower, wrestler, boxer and dancer: 'He was famous in South Notts as the best dancer and the best boxer' (iii. 282). Tall and powerful, according to family legend he once met Ben Caunt in an informal fight and beat him; Caunt became 'Champion of England' in 1840 after winning a 101 round fight. John Lawrence in the 1890s was remembered by his granddaughter Ada as 'a big, shambling, generous-hearted man whose waistcoat front was always powdered with snuff'; his grandson D. H. Lawrence saw him as 'a tall, silent, strange man' (iii. 282). He was reputed to weigh twenty stone, but was nevertheless a dandy; his grandson never forgot the snuffbox he carried.<sup>9</sup> By the 1890s, he had grown 'very deaf and didn't talk much', but his grandchildren remembered him as always kind and never forgetting to ask '“Would you like some apples, my duckies?”' At our nods he would shuffle into the garden and fill our pockets with Keswicks from the old tree'. Another story of his gentleness (and his wife's fierceness) is linked to the same tree; D. H. Lawrence's elder brother George remembered how

I was once up an apple tree and along comes grandfather, spots me up the tree, you know, reaches his long arms, caught me round the middle, set me down on the [hesitation] . . . and bent down and he said 'Are your pockets full, ducky?' And I

\* When DHL chose the family surname 'Morel' in his autobiographical novel *Sons and Lovers*, he was again suggesting the French connection: uncommon in England (although there was a firm of Nottingham photographers called Morel), the name was and is common in France. 'Morel' is also the dark nightshade, the bitter (morello) cherry and an edible, dusky fungus: a sense of darkness is conveyed by them all.



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nodded, I couldn't speak; he taps me on the behind, you know, and said 'Then run, Granny's comin'.' He wouldn't lay a finger on a child. Granny would.

'Granny' – Louisa Lawrence – was also notorious for her 'sharp, querulous' tongue.<sup>10</sup>

John Lawrence worked much of his life as a company tailor for the Eastwood firm of Barber Walker & Co., which ran Brinsley pit: 'In those days the company supplied the men with thick flannel vests, or singlets, and the moleskin trousers lined at the top with flannel, in which the colliers worked'.<sup>11</sup> After the company stopped providing clothing, John Lawrence stayed in Brinsley as a tailor and shared the shop with his wife, who sold haberdashery. He still made and sold miners' clothing; his grandson remembered 'the great rolls of coarse flannel and pit-cloth which stood in the corner of my grandfather's shop when I was a small boy, and the big, strange old sewing-machine, like nothing else on earth, which sewed the massive pit-trousers'. Every week, Louisa Lawrence 'travelled in the carrier's cart to the Nottingham warehouses where she bought her small stock'; when Lydia Lawrence started her shop in Eastwood, she was thus following her mother-in-law's trade, though by the 1890s Louisa Lawrence's once flourishing business in Brinsley 'had declined sadly', which probably contributed to her short temperedness: 'Many of the boxes on the shelves were empty and there were only a few red handkerchiefs, shoulder shawls, aprons and cotton odds and ends in the others'.<sup>12</sup>

The four male children of John and Louisa Lawrence all worked as colliers, and may well have started at Brinsley colliery, only 200 yards away – though with the region dotted with collieries, large and small, there can be no certainty about which first took them on. They all eventually had jobs at Brinsley. The Lawrences' elder daughter Emma married a miner, George Foster, and after his death she married another miner, William Saxton, four years younger than herself. Her sister Sarah was the only member of the family not to be linked with the mining industry; she married James Swain, the sexton at Brinsley church (where the young Arthur Lawrence had sung in the choir), and reportedly felt superior. Her nieces and nephews were not fond of visiting her, though they enjoyed going to see aunt Emma, widowed for the second time by the 1890s, and whose generosity 'was as boundless as her "superior" sister's was confined'. 'At her home we were sure of a whole-hearted reception, and as we hurried through her garden, among the madonna lilies, red-hot pokers and golden rod we could hear her voice, telling whoever happened to be within hearing distance, that her darlings were arriving, and expecting her listeners to be astonished about it'.<sup>13</sup> That suggests the warmth of Brinsley, and of the Lawrence relations there.

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In the Brinsley of the 1850s and 1860s, the Lawrences and their web of close connections with the colliery were not unusual; the 1861 Census shows house after house of colliers, mine officials and railway workers. The Midland Railway Company had been set up in 1832, and its railways were opening from the 1840s; the movement of large quantities of coal, hitherto dependent upon canal transport, had become possible. The mines of Barber Walker & Co., like those of its competitors, developed simultaneously with the network of railway lines; there had been coal mined at Brinsley since at least the late seventeenth century, but in 1843 the main shaft had been purchased by Barber Walker, and over the next twelve years it was deepened and extended. Lawrence would describe at the start of *Sons and Lovers* how the six Barber Walker Eastwood pits were 'like black studs on the countryside, linked by a loop of fine chain, the railway'.<sup>14</sup> That was the colliery (or 'mineral') railway: one loop going east, to Moorgreen, High Park and Watnall pits, the other coming down to Brinsley from Underwood; together they joined the railway line at Langley Mill; coal wagons from Eastwood could be seen all over the country. When Lawrence came to use material about his own family, in *Sons and Lovers*, he did not start with an account of incompatible personalities, or even of family history: he began with the history of mining in the region, for that was the significant history of most of the families there, including the Brinsley Lawrences.\*

Arthur Lawrence, born in 1846, the eldest son of John and Louisa Lawrence, remembered starting work at the pit at the age of 7.<sup>15</sup> This would not have been unusual; the 1861 Census records his 11-year-old brother James as 'Coal Miner', and although children were not supposed to work underground before they were 10, the same Census reveals some 8-year-olds similarly employed. Thomas Renshaw, for example, whose sister Polly married James Lawrence, was 8 years old and 'Coal Miner' in the 1861 Census, along with his 10- and 11-year-old brothers; they probably worked sorting coal. By the age of 7, Arthur had had some infant schooling from Miss Eyte of Brinsley; the Sunday schools run by all the local chapels and churches, which he continued to attend, included writing and reading classes. A local schoolmaster had commented in 1842 that 'the collier children are more tired on the whole than others, but equally anxious to learn'; the

\* I make frequent reference to the persons and action of *Sons and Lovers*. It should be emphasised that the novel is used only sparingly for illustrations of events in the Lawrence household: it has not been drawn upon except when other evidence confirms its versions of life. Many things in the novel are not true of real life; many things from real life do not appear in the novel; and a novel – even an autobiographical one – is not an appropriate source for the events of real life. See below, 'The Use of Sources'.