

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77799-5 - The Selected Letters of D. H. Lawrence

Edited by James T. Boulton

Excerpt

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I
THE FORMATIVE YEARS,
1885–1913

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11 September 1885	Lawrence born at Eastwood, Nottinghamshire
1889–98	Attends Beauvale Board School
September 1898–July 1901	Attends Nottingham High School
September–December 1901	Clerk with J. H. Haywood Ltd, Nottingham
October 1902–July 1905	Pupil-teacher at British School, Eastwood
October 1906–June 1908	Student at University College, Nottingham
7 December 1907	‘A Prelude’ in <i>Nottinghamshire Guardian</i>
11 October 1908	To Croydon: teacher at Davidson Road School
November 1909	Four poems in the <i>English Review</i>
1 August 1910	Breaks ‘betrothal of six years standing’ to Jessie Chambers
3 December 1910	Becomes engaged to Louie Burrows
9 December 1910	Mother, Lydia Lawrence, dies
19 January 1911	<i>The White Peacock</i> (Duffield, New York)
19 November 1911–4 January 1912	Pneumonia, followed by convalescence in Bournemouth till 3 February
4 February 1912	Breaks engagement to Louie Burrows
28 February 1912	Resigns teaching post
March 1912	Meets Frieda Weekley
3 May 1912	Leaves England with Frieda for Germany
23 May 1912	<i>The Trespasser</i> (Duckworth)
25 May–1 June 1912	‘Honeymoon’ at Beuerberg
18 September 1912–2 April 1913	Villa Igea, near Gargnano, Lago di Garda, Italy
February 1913	<i>Love Poems and Others</i> (Duckworth)
29 May 1913	<i>Sons and Lovers</i> (Duckworth)

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I THE FORMATIVE YEARS, 1885–1913

D. H. Lawrence's youth and early manhood took him from being a school-boy and, briefly, a junior clerk in a surgical appliances factory, to a post as a pupil-teacher, a college student – all in the region of Eastwood and Nottingham – and finally to an appointment in 1908, at the age of 23, as a teacher in Croydon, south of London. It was an arduous route to intellectual and financial independence. Emotional independence was even harder to achieve. Dominating his home and emotional life until her death in December 1910 was his mother, Lydia Lawrence; competing for his affection were younger women especially Jessie Chambers and, his fiancée for fourteen months, Louie Burrows; but Lawrence's emotional maturity and sexual liberation undoubtedly resulted from the fortuitous meeting in March 1912, with Frieda Weekley (née von Richthofen). Six years his senior, married to a professor who had taught him at College, and mother of three children, Frieda was – and remained – for Lawrence, 'the most wonderful woman in all England'. The transforming influence of that meeting, on both of them, was proclaimed by their departure together for the continent two months later.

Shortly after a serious attack of pneumonia following his 'sick year' of 1911, Lawrence abandoned his teaching career and ended his engagement to Louie Burrows. He had already made his entry into the literary circles of the capital. Of special importance was his introduction to the man dubbed by Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford) as 'London's literary – if Nonconformist – Pope', Edward Garnett, from whose advice he both benefited and suffered. Lawrence's poems and short stories, reviews and essays gradually made their appearance in magazines and newspapers; *The White Peacock* and *The Trespasser* were published and, coinciding with the last letter in this section, so was *Sons and Lovers*, the novel which confirmed his emergence as a major writer. Even the truncated form (devised by Garnett) in which it was first issued, justified Lawrence's claim that he had 'written a great book ... the tragedy of thousands of young men in England'.

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To J. H. Haywood Ltd, September? 1901

[3 Walker Street, Eastwood]
 [September? 1901]

Gentlemen,

In reply to your ad. in today's *G[uardian]* for a junior clerk, I beg to place my services at your disposal. I am sixteen years of age, and have just completed three years' course at the Nottingham High School. Although I have not had any business experience in accounts yet, I studied book-keeping and obtained two prizes for Mathematics, as well as one for French and German.

If desired, I shall be pleased to furnish you with the highest references as to character and ability, both from my late masters and the Minister in this town.

Should you favour me with the appointment I would always endeavour to merit the confidence you place in me.

Trusting to receive your favourable reply, I beg to remain, Gentlemen,
 Yours obediently, D. H. Lawrence

To Louie Burrows, 20 October 1907

Lynn Croft, Eastwood, Notts.
 20 Oct. 07

Dear Louie,

I have a request to make. Perhaps you know that the *Nottm. Guardian* asks for three Christmas stories, and offers a prize of £3 for each.¹ I have written two just for fun, and because Alan and J[essie] asked me why I didn't, and so put me upon doing it to show I could. I may write a third.

They ask for an Amusing Adventure, a Legend, and an Enjoyable Christmas. But one person may not send in more than one story. So will you send in the Amusing in your name?² They say 'In sending a story each person undertakes it is his or her original work and property which has

¹ Details of the competition appeared in the *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 8 October 1907. Prizes were offered for 'the best story of the Most Enjoyable Christmas', 'the most amusing Christmas story' and 'the best Legend of Some Historic Building within the four counties' (of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire). The scenes and actions of all stories had to be located in these four counties; competitors, restricted to residents in that area, were required to use a nom-de-plume. Manuscripts were required by 9 November.

² Louie Burrows submitted 'The White Stocking' on DHL's behalf; it was later rewritten. DHL himself submitted the 'Legend' (using Beauvale Abbey as the 'Historic Building'), which later became 'A Fragment of Stained Glass'. Both these stories were included in *The Prussian Officer and Other Stories* (1914). The 'Enjoyable Christmas' story, apparently written last, was 'A Prelude'; sent in by Jessie Chambers using the pseudonym 'Rosalind', it won a

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The Formative Years, 1885–1913

never been published.’ That is rather a sneezer, but I don’t see that it matters, for I make the story your property, and you will write it out again according to your taste – will you?

It is the Amusing I want you to send, because it is the only one that is cast in its final form. I want you to write it out again in your style, because mine would be recognised. Indeed you may treat it just as you like. I am sorry to take up your time – but would you mind? If not I will bring you the story and give full instructions. The legend you shall read when you come and see us, which will be next Saturday if you please, or the foll. Sat if you prefer.

If you have scruples do not hesitate to say so. The story, if published, bears a *nom-de-plume*, and I am pretty nearly certain that the Amusing will not be accepted, though the Legend may. So you would be fairly safe in sending it, and I see no wrong. However, that you must decide.

I have not seen J this week end owing to the atrocity of the weather. But I will post your note to her.

I await your reply.

and am Yrs. DHL

To Reverend Robert Reid, 3 December 1907

Lynn Croft, Eastwood, Notts.

3rd Dec 1907.

Dear Mr Reid,

I send you my heartfelt thanks for the books – the ‘Antidotes’ as Ada, punning, calls them. During the Christmas holiday I will read them scrupulously.

As you say, violent, blatant writers against Christianity do not affect me – I could not read *God and My Neighbour*¹ with patience. It is this way. By nature I am emotional, perhaps mystical; also I am naturally introspective, a somewhat keen and critical student of myself. I have been brought up to believe in the absolute necessity for a sudden spiritual conversion; I believed for many years that the Holy Ghost descended and took conscious possession of the ‘elect’ – the converted one; I thought all conversions were, to a greater or less degree, like that of Paul’s. Naturally I yearned for the same, something the same. That desire was most keen a year ago, and during the year before that, when I had to fight bitterly for my authority in

prize and was printed, with Jessie Chambers named as the author, in the *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 7 December 1907.

¹ (1903) by Robert Blatchford (1851–1943).

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school. Through all that time I was constantly making the appeals we are urged to make, constantly bewildering myself as to what I should surrender – ‘Give yourself’ you say. I was constantly endeavouring to give myself, but Sir, to this day I do not understand what this ‘giving’ consists in, embodies, and includes. I have been moved by Mr. Lane, by Ritchie’s¹ dramatic fascination, by your earnest and less intoxicating appeal. Yet in the moments of deepest emotion myself has watched myself and seen that all the tumult has risen like a little storm, to die away again without great result. And I have watched for the coming of something from without; – it has never come. You will not say ‘Because you watched’; you will not talk about the ‘Lord’s good time’ – then was the need, *now* it is much less, and grows smaller. Now I do not believe in conversion, such conversion. I believe that a man is converted when first he hears the low, vast murmur of life, of human life, troubling his hitherto unconscious self. I believe a man is born first unto himself – for the happy developing of himself, while the world is a nursery, and the pretty things are to be snatched for, and pleasant things tasted; some people seem to exist thus right to the end. But most are born again on entering manhood; then they are born to humanity, to a consciousness of all the laughing, and the never-ceasing murmur of pain and sorrow that comes from the terrible multitudes of brothers. Then, it appears to me, a man gradually formulates his religion, be it what it may. A man has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one’s religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification. So I contend that true Socialism is religion; that honest, fervent politics are religion; that whatever a man will labour for earnestly and in some measure unselfishly is religion.

I have now only to state my position with regard to Christianity. At the present moment I do not, cannot believe in the divinity of Jesus. There are only the old doubts in the way, the old questions. I went through the lowest parts of Sneinton to Emily’s to dinner when she lived in Nottingham – it had a profound influence on me. ‘It cannot be’ – I said to myself ‘that a pitiful, *omnipotent* Christ died *nineteen hundred* years ago to save these people from this and yet they are here.’ Women, with child – so many are in that condition in the slums – bruised, drunk, with breasts half bare. It is not compatible with the idea of an *Omnipotent*, pitying Divine. And how, too, shall I reconcile it to a belief in a *personal* God. I cannot be a materialist –

¹ Probably James Lane, a pharmacist and a member of Radford Congregational Mission in Nottingham, who underwent a spectacular conversion in 1903, became an unofficial lay preacher and regularly testified to his experience; Rev. David Lakie Ritchie (1864–1951), Principal of Nottingham Theological Institute, 1904–19.

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but Oh, how is it possible that a God who speaks to all hearts can let Belgravia go laughing to a vicious luxury, and Whitechapel cursing to a filthy debauchery – such suffering, such dreadful suffering – and shall the short years of Christ’s mission atone for it all? I do not want them to be punished after death – what good then, when it is all irremediably done? ‘God can touch their hearts,’ you say, giving me examples, as Mr Henderson¹ did, ‘of the terrible, wild and blasphemous man who was saved at last.’ Then why not touch these people at once, and save this enormity, this horror? ‘His ways are inscrutable’ – you say – what comfort can I draw from an unknowable. ‘Faith’ – you say. ‘And faith is,’ you might continue, ‘belief in a hypothesis that cannot be proved.’ – But sir, there must at least be harmony of facts before a hypothesis can be framed. Cosmic harmony there is – a Cosmic God I can therefore believe in. But where is the human harmony, where the balance, the order, the ‘indestructibility of matter’ in humanity? And where is the *personal, human* God? Men – some – seem to be born and ruthlessly destroyed; the bacteria are created and nurtured on Man, to his horrible suffering. Oh, for a God-idea I must have harmony – unity of design. Such design there may be for the race – but for the individual, the often wretched individual?

I care not for Blatchford or anybody. I do not wage any war against Christianity – I do not hate it – but these questions will not be answered, and for the present my religion is the lessening, in some pitiful moiety, the great human discrepancies.

I have tried to write to you honestly – this is the first time I have ever revealed myself. Of course I know there is much of the wilfulness of youth in it all – some little arrogance perhaps that you will pardon me. I thought it fair that you should have some explanation of myself from me – but it is a subject I can never discuss. I wish to thank you for your late sermon – and sermons. There seems some hope in a religion which will not answer one with fiat and decrees.

Again, I ask your pardon for all this incoherent display
and am Yours very Sincerely D. H. Lawrence

¹ Rev. Alexander Roy Henderson (1862–1950), Minister of Castle Gate Congregational Church, Nottingham, 1902–19.

June 1908

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To Jessie Chambers, 28 January 1908

[97 Lynn Croft, Eastwood]
 [28 January 1908]

When I look at you, what I see is not the kissable and embraceable part of you, although it is so fine to look at, with the silken toss of hair curling over your ears. What I see is the deep spirit within. That I love and can go on loving all my life. . . . Look, you are a nun, I give you what I would give a holy nun. So you must let me marry a woman I can kiss and embrace and make the mother of my children. . . . The anguish that impinges so cruelly upon you now comes only from your association with me. Once you have passed out of my orbit life holds nothing but sunshine for you, of that I am convinced.

To Blanche Jennings, 25 June 1908

Eastwood
 25 June 1908

As a disciple of the 'Love-thyself' school, you will forgive me that I write you in pencil. I am so lazy; having just gathered some gooseberries for a pudding, and picked them out here on our little mat of grass, sitting in the united shade of an elder and a lilac bush, I am disinclined to go indoors to the table, I am unwilling to leave this deck-chair; I refuse to swot; let me write to you then, me lounging here on the grass, where the still warm air is full of the scent of pinks, spicy and sweet, and a stack of big red lilies a few yards away impresses me with a sense of hot, bright sunshine. Now the vivid potentillas just move in a little breeze that brings hot breath of hay across the permanent spice of pinks. From the field at the bottom of the garden I hear the 'chack' and jingle of a horse-rake; the horse is neighing; there, they come into sight between the high larkspur and the currant bushes!; the man sits like a charioteer; his bare arm glistens in the sun as he stretches forward to pull up the tines; they have gone again. It is a true mid-summer day. There is a languorous grey mist over the distance; Shipley woods, and Heanor with its solid church are hidden today; no, I can just see a dense mark in the mist, which is Heanor; but Crich is gone entirely. The haze just falls on Eastwood; the church is blue, and seems fast asleep, the very chimes are languid. Only the bees are busy, nuzzling into some wide white flowers; – and I am busy too, of course.

This all sounds very idyllic; does it not? Well, we will leave it so, eh? Pity

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to hunt out the ugly side of the picture when nature has given you an eye for the pretty, and a soul for flowers, and for lounging in the lozenge lighted shade of a lilac tree.

I am very sorry you have been dipped so deeply into the blues. Let me drowse you out a little sermon, will you? I will labour it out like the church clock slowly lets fall the long hour. It has just struck twelve. I wonder if I can keep awake. I think, you know, Hedonism won't wear. I think life is only a joke when you are sure it's most serious and right; when you know the great procession is marching, on the whole, in the right direction, then, to be sure, the creatures in the menagerie are comical, and their capers are too funny. But before you can see the fun you must be earnestly certain of the wonder of this eternal progression – The little lozenge lights are sliding round my pencil quaintly; but the sun they come from is keeping on in its grand course. (If I write a bit canting, it is because I am almost dreaming.) My poor little philosophy is like that. I think there is a great purpose which keeps the menagerie moving onward to better places, while the animals snap and rattle by the way. So I laugh when I see their grimaces, if these do not hinder the march. I am sure I can help the march if I like. It is a valuable assurance.

But the folks who see the funny side of things suffer horribly at times from loneliness. It is a sad thing to be the only spectator at a farce. So religion is a most comforting companion; it is absolutely necessary to many who would drop and never recover without it; then love is next precious, love of man for a woman; one should feel in it the force that keeps the menagerie on the move (you may read that as narrowly as you like, since you're not a poetess); lastly, a passionate attachment to some work which will help the procession somehow is a safety against the loneliness of not wanting to laugh at the farce, and of having no one with whom to weep.

You will see from what it pleases me to call my 'philosophy', that I have still some religion left; I would give a great deal to fall in love; it would be a magnificent thing for me to fall in love; meanwhile, I keep up my confidence, writing this, that, and the other, cultivating my soul, sure that it can give good help sometime to the march of the procession. How do you manage? When you turn your face to the wall, is everything quite blank? That is very triste. When I turn my face to the wall I laugh, seeing my own grimaces. I am never utterly navré, desolate.

A lady-bird has settled on my hand, black, with six scarlet spots. She is so gay in her little trotting that she wakes me from my preaching dream. Now she has gone – for a moment I saw her spread wings glitter. My preaching dream has gone too. Aren't you glad?

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A girl has just come to our neighbour, asking him to go and take a swarm of bees 'off the corran bushes, again' the gate.' Listening to her has quite roused me. Am I answering your letter?

Laetitia,¹ damn her, you shall have her. I wish I might never hear of her again. But you will not dare to laugh too much – I shall threaten you with Victorine Cow. Mrs Dax² read that tale to me, and I promised faithfully never to tell you. I laughed, of course – who could help it? – but the thing was tragic, never-the-less. Mrs Dax didn't see it – and I didn't want to preach. But that a girl should be so sapped by civilisation and society as to act as did that Cow of a girl – why, it is terrible. For it is possible, is it not, to find a girl such a beast? I don't think I know one such, for there is something different in Eastwood air.

My exams are on – they continue till July 4th. Today and tomorrow, however, are holidays. I ought to be swotting, but I don't want, therefore I will not. I am scandalously unprepared; I cannot rouse myself to study things I am not interested in; consequently, I cannot have anything but a poor result. It does not trouble me – exams are among the grimaces that I will laugh at. I have not got a job – I will not write for any more – I cannot bear to advertise myself. They will give me a place at Nottm. when there is one.

Sarah Bernhardt was wonderful and terrible.³ She opened up the covered tragedy that works the grimaces of this wonderful dime show. Oh, to see her, and to hear her, a wild creature, a gazelle with a beautiful panther's fascination and fury, laughing in musical French, screaming with true panther cry, sobbing and sighing like a deer sobs, wounded to death, and all the time with the sheen of silk, the glitter of diamonds, the moving of men's handsomely groomed figures about her! She is not pretty – her voice is not sweet – but there she is, the incarnation of wild emotion which we share with all live things, but which is gathered in us in all complexity and inscrutable fury. She represents the primeval passions of woman, and she is fascinating to an extraordinary degree. I could love such a woman myself, love her to madness; all for the pure, wild passion of it. Intellect is shed as flowers shed their petals. Take care about going to see Bernhardt. Unless you are very sound, do not go. When I think of her now I can still feel the

¹ The title of the first two versions of *The White Peacock*.

² Alice Mary Dax (1878–1959), former colleague of Blanche Jennings in Liverpool Post Office; socialist and suffragist; active in local Eastwood affairs after her marriage (1905) to Henry Richard Dax (1873–1962), pharmacist. Later claimed that she 'gave Bert [DHL] sex'.

³ She played Marguérite Gautier in Dumas's *La Dame aux Camélias*, at the Theatre Royal, Nottingham, on 15 June 1908. (DHL believed, incorrectly, that Dumas's novel was based on *Manon Lescaut* (1731) by l'Abbé Prévost.)