

D. H. Lawrence around the World: South African Perspectives
(eds. Jim Phelps and Nigel Bell)

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Reviewed by Andrew Harrison

This new volume of essays commemorates the particular and distinctive contribution of South Africa to D. H. Lawrence studies. In their editorial Introduction, Jim Phelps and Nigel Bell explain their motivation for undertaking the project. Jim, who will be familiar to participants at recent international Lawrence conferences, felt that "there was really very little contemporary sense of South Africa's contribution to the study of Lawrence" – a point driven home by the country's lack of representation in Takeo Iida's excellent book, *The Reception of D. H. Lawrence Around the World* (1999). The reasons for this oversight are evidently rather complex, though the editors cite South Africa's "previous isolation" from the international community, together with "the lack of significant and recent international publication, and attendance by South Africans at ... conferences" (xv).

The volume addresses this regrettable situation thoroughly and admirably. It reprints essays which are past landmarks in D. H. Lawrence criticism in South Africa; it collects reminiscences from critics who first encountered Lawrence in South Africa (including H. M. Daleski, Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Christopher Heywood); it contains reflections on the teaching of Lawrence in the country's various universities; and it also includes new essays from a current generation of South African Lawrence scholars. There is even a listing of articles on Lawrence in South African journals, and a

checklist of postgraduate theses written on Lawrence and submitted to South African universities between 1948 and 1999.

The first of the book's five parts ('Retrospect') brings together the historically important essays and the reminiscences. Given the colonial links with Britain it is perhaps no surprise to find that the historical articles on Lawrence in South Africa reflect trends in the British academy. Indeed, the central article in this section, J. C. F. Littlewood's 1955 essay 'Lawrence, Last of the English', is tied in various ways to the Leavisite approach to Lawrence. Littlewood was educated under Leavis at Downing College, Cambridge, before briefly occupying a post in the English department at the University of Stellenbosch in the mid-1950s. His essay's treatment of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and that novel's diagnosis of the loss of a certain relationship to history and English culture, is indebted to Leavis for both its informing values and its critical vocabulary. Referencing Leavis, the casual speech in the novel is said to be "pregnant with profound diagnostic significances" (19), and the famous description of Connie's car journey through Tevershall "is essential human, not only essential English history" (15). Littlewood's essay was first published in the University of Natal's journal *Theoria*, and the editors also reprint the ensuing exchange of letters between Littlewood and Christina van Heyningen. The exchange is lively, if rather predictable: van Heyningen stresses the need to confront Lawrence's ideological over-insistence and his propensity for jargon, while Littlewood defends the author's strong characterisation and emphasises Lawrence's ability to inhabit a variety of human perspectives and to identify with nature.

The discussion of the teaching of Lawrence in South Africa reinforces a depressing sense that Lawrence's heyday there was – as in Britain – the 1950s and 1960s. In a judicious but engagingly opinionated analysis of 'Lawrence in a South African Classroom, 1950-1990', W. H. Bizley laments the loss of "the séance-like 'prac. crit.' session" (73), but he also criticises that pedagogical paradigm for its reliance on emotional empathy at the cost of a more detached sense of literature's relation to cultural and historical

contexts. Interestingly, Bizley takes particular issue with the Littlewood essay reprinted in this volume, which he views as lacking sufficient detachment, reflecting "a wearily familiar patriotism", and reproducing "buzzwords" and "an all-too-familiar rhetoric against industrialism" (76). He goes on to describe the fall of Lawrence criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, precipitated by the fall of literary studies more generally, and by a widespread belief that the study of literature had hitherto ignored its own conditions of existence, remaining "defiantly innocent of its own historic or social presuppositions" (79). This sense of literary studies as under threat in South Africa is reiterated in the various accounts of the situation at the universities today. Jim Phelps reports that, due to the post-2001 restructuring of higher education towards more career-focused courses in South Africa, study of the humanities is in decline. As a consequence of this, the teaching of Lawrence's texts at the University of Zululand has "virtually disappeared" (84). Peter Titlestad and Idette Noomé report a similar situation at the University of Pretoria, and Annette Combrink reveals that Lawrence's presence on the curriculum at Potchefstroom University is now limited to "the odd poem ... in the first-year course on poetry" (90).

Part Two ('Reprinted Articles') offsets this sense of decline by reprinting a series of articles on Lawrence first published between 1969 and 2000, all written by scholars with South African connections. There are essays by F. H. Langman, Trevor Whittock, Jim Phelps, Mark Kinkead-Weekes, Christopher Heywood, Peter Wilhelm, and Brian Green. F. H. Langman's piece on 'Dramatic Form in Lawrence's Poetry', the earliest of the essays, sensibly and forcefully argues against the view espoused by R. P. Blackmur and others that Lawrence's verse falls victim to an emotional and structureless "expressive form"; Langman counters such criticism by suggesting that Lawrence's more successful poetry "depends on his ability to give the material a dramatic structure, and thus to distance it" (100). In 'Re-placing the Imagination: D. H. Lawrence and Bessie Head', Mark Kinkead-Weekes takes up a postcolonial

theme: he reflects on what happens when writers whose imaginations are intimately tied to a native region move away from it and engage with some new geographical homelands. In comparing the cases of Lawrence (Nottinghamshire and New Mexico) and Bessie Head (South Africa and Botswana), Kinkead-Weekes shows how Bessie Head came to engage with (and even to possess) the history and culture of her adopted community in a way that Lawrence never did. Although Lawrence could respond with extraordinary sensitivity to the historical and geographical situation in New Mexico, "for all the power that his exile generated ... [he] never stayed long enough anywhere to [re-place his imagination]" (144).

The 'New Essays' in Part Three reflect the range of approaches taken to Lawrence in the modern academy, from a study of the metaphysics (Dawid de Villiers), to treatments of Lawrence in the contexts of ethics (Francois Hugo), primitivism (Jim Phelps), travel writing (Peter Merrington) and literary critical assimilation (Christopher Thurman). There is a real breadth of focus here, and the essays by de Villiers and Phelps in particular draw Lawrence's writings into dialogue with an eclectic and original range of sources; the former draws comparisons between Lawrence and Oswald Spengler, adopting terminology from George Bataille, while the latter draws on a range of anthropological, ethnological and mythological materials in tracing Lawrence's complex concern with "the physical substance of consciousness" (226). Peter Merrington's essay on 'Lawrence, the Jutas, and the "Mediterranean" Cape' covers several topics relating to the European response to Africa at the start of the twentieth century. Firstly, it notes how European writings from around 1870 to the start of the Second World War tend to compare the South African Cape to the "numinous and archaic Mediterranean", and especially to Egypt, Greece and Italy (249). Secondly, it describes Lawrence's friendship with the South African artist Jan Juta and his sister, the writer René Juta, showing how the Jutas were influenced by Lawrence's travel writing, and particularly by *Sea and Sardinia* (for

which Jan Juta provided illustrations). Finally, it explains an earlier tendency for European anthropologists and archaeologists like the German Carl Peters to connect African antiquities with lost Egyptian or European civilisations, producing “a form of literary colonialism” (259). Although Lawrence shares with the Jutas “a late colonial modernist-primitivist set of interests”, his primary concern with selfhood “to some degree transcends the primitivist stereotyping”, while the Jutas’ later travel writings, though revealing a strong Lawrentian influence, express “the Western colonial mindset” (258-9, 263). As this brief synopsis may suggest, Merrington’s essay is heavily researched and highly suggestive, but its shifting focus is in places disconcerting.

Part Four contains poems by Norman Morrissey and Jim Phelps, each declaring a particular indebtedness to Lawrence, and Part Five (‘Addenda’) brings together lists of articles, letters and reviews on Lawrence in South African journals, plus the list of postgraduate theses, and a rather moving tribute to Christina van Heyningen by J. A. Berthoud and C. O. Gardner.

The book is extremely well edited and scholarly, and the enthusiasm of the editors for their subject is everywhere evident. It will have an obvious appeal for those who have links with South Africa, or South African academia, but it will also be of real interest to the wider Lawrence community. It contains some strong work on Lawrence, old and new, and its account of the rise and fall of the teaching of Lawrence in South Africa casts a vivid and telling light on similar developments in British academia. It places South Africa back on the map of Lawrence studies.