

**“A NEW CONTINENT OF THE SOUL”:
D. H. LAWRENCE, PORTHCOTHAN AND THE
NECESSARY FICTION OF CORNWALL**

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My subject here is Lawrence’s responsiveness to Cornwall, primarily during the two months he spent living in J. D. Beresford’s large holiday house in Porthcothan, near Padstow, from 30 December 1915 to 28 February 1916, before he left for the Tinner’s Arms in Zennor and then settled at Higher Tregerthen. Lawrence secured the house at Porthcothan with the help of John Middleton Murry, who had stayed in it for a short time in the early autumn of 1914. On 19 December 1915 Murry spoke to Beresford about the possibility of lending it to his penurious friend. Beresford, who had recently expressed willingness to support a protest over the prosecution of *The Rainbow*, readily agreed.¹ A week and a half later, on Wednesday 29 December, Lawrence travelled south from his sister Ada’s house in Ripley, breaking the journey with an overnight stay in London at the home of David and Edith Eder. He set out in a characteristically assertive and upbeat New Year mood. It was to be “the first move to Florida” (2L 491), leaving behind war-time London and their rented flat in Hampstead and striking out for the realisation of the Rananim dream he had created in Buckinghamshire exactly one year earlier.

Excerpts from three short letters which Lawrence wrote shortly after his arrival in Porthcothan on 30 December capture his determinedly optimistic and forward-looking mood:

Here already one feels a good peace and a good silence, and a freedom to love and to create a new life. (To S. S. Koteliansky, 2L 491)

This is my first move outwards, to a new life. One must be free to love, only to love and create, and to be happy. (To Lady Cynthia Asquith, 2L 491)

We must all leave that complex, disintegrating life – London, England. Here one stands on tiptoe, ready to leap off. (To Edith Eder, 2L 492)

On this very first day in Cornwall, and during the following week, Lawrence wrote ecstatically to friends that he had discovered somewhere special: it was on the edge, outside England, away from the War, untouched – or only grazed – by the mean, self-destructive, perverse spirit of modern England. Then began his eulogising of the place as a pre-Christian, Celtic land of legend: “It seems as if the truth were still living here, growing like the sea holly, and love like Tristan, and old reality like King Arthur, none of this horrible last phase of irritable reduction” (2L 492). Less than a week into his stay he told Beresford that it was “still something like King Arthur and Tristan. It has never taken the Anglo Saxon civilisation, the Anglo Saxon sort of Christianity”. It was “like the *Mabinogion* – not like *Beowulf* and the ridiculous Malory, with his Grails and his chivalries” (2L 495).

What are we to make of the strength of Lawrence’s immediate reaction to the landscape and atmosphere of Porthcothan? A letter Lawrence wrote to Louie Burrows on 19 December 1910 – when he was considering applying for a teaching post on the north coast of Cornwall – already reveals his tendency to romanticise the area.² It is easy to view his later reaction to it as revealing an instinctive and deep sympathy with “spirit of place”: with what is, after all, an extraordinary landscape. So, for example, Michael Squires and Lynn K. Talbot write that “The potency of Cornwall’s presence awed the Lawrences”; they closely paraphrase the case made in Lawrence’s letters by noting that “Cornwall was settled by the Celts and Saxons, who left behind a brooding past that appealed to Lawrence’s love of elemental mystery”.³ But it is surely wrong to ignore the fact that

Lawrence *needed* Cornwall to be a place set apart: a pre-Christian place outside the pale – a place of peace, love and creativity. In January 1916 he felt “pushed to the brink of existence” and feared that he might “fall off into oblivion, or ... give in, and accept the ruck” (2L 500). His response was to discover in his place of exile a desired retreat. Just as at New Year 1915 Rananim had been a compensatory fantasy created and sustained through talk and correspondence with an inner circle of friends, so now “Cornwall” was a fantasy created out of mythology, nurtured through his selective reading of pre-Christian historical and literary sources, and indulged time and again in his letters.

A good deal of Lawrence’s reading in Porthcothan seems to have embellished this fantasy of Cornwall as a pre-Christian place by allowing him to imaginatively explore ancient Egyptian, Greek and Assyrian civilisations. Ottoline Morrell sent on a number of books to him, including H. R. Hall’s *The Ancient History of the Near East* (1913), G. G. Coulton’s *From St Francis to Dante: A Translation of All That is of Primary Interest in the Chronicle of the Franciscan Salimbene* (1906), Gilbert Murray’s *Four Stages of Greek Religion* (1912), a French book on Egypt by Sir Gaston Camille Charles Maspéro, and the works of Hesiod, Homer, Petronius, and Virgil.⁴ At the Tinner’s Arms he received a copy of Lord Robert Curzon’s *Visits to Monasteries in the Levant* (1849; 1916).⁵ His frequently-quoted line to Ottoline about historical sources – asking her to send him “a book not too big, because I like to fill it in myself, and the contentions of learned men are so irritating” (2L 529) – gives us some indication of the manner in which he approached the material she acquired for him. For example, he found Hall’s very substantial history of the Near East “a very bad little book”, but noted:

something in me lights up and understands these old, dead peoples, and I love it: Babylon, Nineveh, Ashiburnipal, how one somehow, suddenly understands it. And I cannot tell you the joy of ranging far back there seeing the hordes surge out of Arabia, or over the edge of the Iranian plateau. (2L 528)

This reading would continue well into Lawrence's time at Higher Treggerthen, and his "understanding" would in due course be put to good use, for example in the description of Rupert Birkin's reading of Thucydides in *Women in Love* – the fall of ancient Greece being tacitly compared with the collapse of modern Western civilisation in the Great War. Birkin uses his copy of *History of the Peloponnesian War* to protect his head from the murderous blows of Hermione Roddice's lapis lazuli paperweight (*FWL* 94; *WL* 105). But in Porthcothan Lawrence's reading was used to shore up the necessary fiction of Cornwall, and it was deployed in a less considered and enlightening way when the Cornish people proved especially irritating or recalcitrant. Who could forget Lawrence's wish (expressed in an extraordinary letter to Beresford) that he and his landlord could "exterminate all the natives and ... possess the land. The barbarian conquerors were wisest, really. There are very many people, like insects, who await extermination" (*2L* 552).

"Cornwall" was one of Lawrence's most sustained fictional creations at a moment of crisis when he was insisting that England in war-time was an unreal place which must be supplanted by the imagination. In the summer of 1915, Lawrence had suggested to Bertrand Russell that London was only a "fact", not a truth; it had no imaginative reality. In a letter to Ottoline Morrell of 17 July 1915, Russell reflected on the conversations he had had with Lawrence the day before:

He [Lawrence] is undisciplined in thought, and mistakes his wishes for facts. He is also muddle-headed. He says 'facts' are quite unimportant, only 'truths' matter. London is a 'fact' not a 'truth'. But he wants London pulled down. I tried to make him see that that would be absurd if London were unimportant, but he kept reiterating that London doesn't really exist, and that he could easily make people see it doesn't, and then they would pull it down. He was so confident of his powers of persuasion that I challenged him to come to Trafalgar Square at once and begin

preaching. That brought him to earth and he began to shuffle ... When one gets a glimmer of the facts into his head, as I did at last, he gets discouraged, and says he will go to the South Sea Islands, and bask in the sun with 6 native wives.⁶

Lawrence's line of reasoning as it is reported by Russell is wholly consistent with his later response to Cornwall. If "London" was an untruth which could be destroyed by a collective realignment of thinking, so "Cornwall" could be constructed as a truth by sheer force of persuasion. And Lawrence could be very persuasive indeed in his construction of Cornwall, as his letters show: "it belongs still to the days before Christianity, the days of Druids, or of desolate Celtic magic and conjuring" (2L 493); "It isn't really England, nor Christendom. It has another quality: of King Arthur's days, that flicker of Celtic consciousness before it was swamped under Norman and Teutonic waves" (2L 505).

As is so often the case, Lawrence has to a certain extent defined the terms in which we understand his residence in Cornwall and his relationship to the area. I think it is important to break that spell and to insert some perspective into things if we want to understand how desperately important the *idea* of Cornwall was to Lawrence early in 1916. The single-minded intensity of the letters Lawrence wrote about Cornwall during his stay in Porthcothan is such that it is easy to see his period of residence there as planned, inevitable and symbolic rather than simply contingent: a determined move to the edge of England rather than a mere consequence of Murry's intercession with Beresford on his behalf (just as Buckinghamshire had come about because of Gilbert Cannan, and Greatham because of Viola Meynell). We would do well to remember that as late as mid-December 1915 Lawrence planned to take "a farm-house on the Berkshire downs" (2L 478) – perhaps Dollie Radford's Chapel Farm Cottage in Hermitage, where he would live on and off with Frieda between December 1917 and November 1919, with Garsington as a second option. And in early February 1916 (just one month after his arrival) Lawrence briefly considered moving from Porthcothan to

Philip Heseltine's mother's house in Herefordshire or else to Wales.⁷ He initially thought of Cornwall as a first step on the way to Florida, and as he corrected proofs in Porthcothan of his volume of Italian travel writings – finally published as *Twilight in Italy* (1916) – his surroundings actually made him think of Fiascherino: “another such a small rocky bay looking west” (2L 497).

If it was “another world” (2L 498) that he wanted to find in Cornwall, it was to be a world created on his own terms and shared with acolytes and (his own word) “co-believers” (2L 550): people like Heseltine, Murry and Katherine Mansfield. Creating a unanimity of purpose – and having friends believe in him – was understandably important for a man who felt “pushed to the brink of existence” (2L 500): persecuted by war-time England and shunned by literary London, living in poverty. Heseltine was certainly an important friend and supporter of Lawrence during his time in Porthcothan. He was someone who took Lawrence seriously as a man and a writer, and who also had a deep interest in Cornish magic and Cornwall's Celtic past. In the seven weeks that Heseltine stayed with Lawrence (from 1 January 1916) they would have spoken about these things, with Heseltine encouraging Lawrence as much as he encouraged Heseltine. They enjoyed co-writing a now-lost play about Heseltine's relationship problems (his pregnant lover, Minnie Lucie Channing – known as “Puma” – even came to stay with them for a time), and together they dreamt up “The Rainbow Books and Music” scheme to publish the work of Lawrence and his friends by private subscription. Initially Lawrence planned that Heseltine would join him and Frieda in Zennor and form a small community with Murry and Mansfield, but the offence Heseltine took at Lawrence's intrusion into his private life put paid to that.⁸

Heseltine had been centrally involved in Lawrence's plan to settle in Florida. As Jonathan Long has argued, the limerick which Lawrence inserted into a copy of *The Rainbow* – concluding with the comical line “Give me a ticket to Florida” – seems likely to have been written for Heseltine.⁹ The sense of Cornwall as a makeshift America – a new found land – is uppermost in Lawrence's imploring

letters to Murry and Mansfield. He told them: “when we set out to walk to Newquay, and when I looked down at Zennor, I knew it was the Promised Land, and that a new heaven and a new earth would take place” (2L 550). Lawrence was so desperately persuasive that he overcame their very serious reservations, bringing them from a happy and relatively settled creative period in Bandol, in the south of France, to what turned out to be a damp and uncongenial cottage at Higher Tregrethen. They soon realised, of course, where their own truth and reality lay – and it was certainly not consistent with the truth and reality which had been so seductive and convincing in Lawrence’s letters, and it could not be the “union in the unconsciousness” that Lawrence dreamt of (2L 482).

We can sometimes sense in Lawrence’s letters the fragility of his Cornish fantasy. In a letter to Beresford of 1 February 1916 he notes: “The Cornish people still attract me. They have become detestable, I think, and yet they *aren’t* detestable” (2L 520). He puts this down to their “strictly *anti-social* and unchristian” selves and the collapse of “the aristocratic principle and the principle of magic, to which they belonged”, but then adds (in a comically bathetic new paragraph): “Not that I’ve seen very much of them ... But going out, in the motor and so on, one sees them and feels them and knows what they are like”. It is hard to ignore the impression that Lawrence was seeing what he wanted to see in Porthcothan. As he put it himself, he felt like “a Columbus” when he first experienced Zennor, seeing “a shadowy America before him”: Cornwall was for him not “merely territory”, but “a new continent of the soul” (2L 556) – a projection of his own deepest needs and desires.

The insistent and persuasive Lawrence must have been hard work to be around in Porthcothan. Heseltine – hardly an impartial judge, but nevertheless someone who lived with, and for, Lawrence in Porthcothan – told Frederick Delius on 6 January that he was “hard and autocratic in his views and outlook”,¹⁰ on 8 March, after falling out with Lawrence, Heseltine informed Robert Nichols that he had “no real sympathy. All he likes in one is the potential convert to his own reactionary creed” (2L 569 n. 1). These comments are consistent

with Russell's earlier feeling that Lawrence regarded all his "attempts to make him acknowledge facts as mere timidity, lack of courage to think boldly, self-indulgence in pessimism" and Mansfield's later complaint that when he was "contradicted about *anything*" he went "into a frenzy".¹¹ Dikran Kouyoumdjian (the author Michael Arlen), who also stayed with Lawrence in Porthcothan and did not get on at all well with him, subsequently sent him up in the *New Age* as "a Brilliant Author with a Red Beard and Spiritual Eyes", who had "found his Sub-Conscious Self in the middle of the night, right in the midst of the Great Cosmic Materialism, which he affirmed was on its last legs": Kouyoumdjian referred to Lawrence's "Great Philosophy", which was "too Good to be Published".¹²

That is a reference, of course, to 'Goats and Compasses', the lost philosophical essay which was among the creative work he did in Beresford's house alongside an unfinished short story,¹³ the co-written play with Heseltine, and the compiling of the *Amores* poetry collection from old notebooks (the manuscript being typed by Heseltine). We should not be surprised that Lawrence turned back to his philosophy during these months. Here he could articulate – and by articulating, affirm – his own understanding of the contemporary world, circulating this understanding to friends without having to engage with a wider world. Lawrence understood well enough by 1916 how his discursive writing could alienate even his closest friends and supporters. Heseltine may have been a convert, sharing his ideas and his philosophy as he wrote, but when he sent 'Goats and Compasses' to Ottoline, who – by sending him so many books – had also in a way nurtured his understanding and his isolation, she considered it "deplorable tosh, a volume of words, reiteration, perverted and self-contradictory" (2L 558 n. 4). And other friends forced him to realise how absurd his schemes and ideas could seem to those outside his immediate orbit. For example, in a letter to Eddie Marsh Lawrence apologises if he has ever abused his friend over their disagreement about the war and freely states "I'm ten times more ridiculous" (2L 535); in a letter to Murry and Mansfield in

France, addressing their misgivings about “The Rainbow Books and Music” scheme, he admits that “Heseltine was mad to begin it ... I felt, you don’t know how much, sick and done. And it was rather fine that he believed and was so generously enthusiastic” (2L 548); and in the almost apologetic letter he wrote to Beatrice Beresford about the Cornish he concedes that his denigration of them was produced “in a fit of irritation” (2L 559).

Ultimately, of course, *Women in Love* supplanted Cornwall as the supreme fiction in which Lawrence could believe. On 3 October 1916, he wrote to Ottoline: “I know it is true, the book. And it is another world, in which I can live apart from this foul world which I will not accept or acknowledge or even enter. The world of my novel is big and fearless – yes, I love it, and love it passionately” (2L 659). He might have said the same thing about Cornwall in January 1916. It too had been a truth he constructed, and another big and fearless world in which he lived (or wished to live) “apart from this foul world”. In *Women in Love*, Lawrence drew on his friends, and the things he had known and heard, and made them meaningful on his own terms, but he also incorporated the understanding he had gleaned of his own absurdity, making it a part of his portrait of Rupert Birkin. And, crucially, he showed Ursula Brangwen’s suspicion of Birkin’s words and their capacity to seduce people into believing things against their will: “Ursula looked out of the window. In her soul she began to wrestle, and she was frightened. She was always frightened of words, because she knew that mere word-force could always make her believe what she did not believe” (FWL 403, WL 437). “Mere” seems a problematic word to place before “word-force” when thinking about Lawrence’s writing in 1916. His letters of the time reveal this word-force at its seductive peak of intensity, but in his novel Lawrence simultaneously constructs and critiques a world, drawing us into it while also exposing its structure and limitations. It was an extraordinary achievement: to realise and articulate in his exploratory art the very processes he had lived through in Porthcothan.

¹ In a letter to Herbert Thring of 13 November 1915, Lawrence included Beresford's name among a list of authors willing to sign a letter of protest about the fate of *The Rainbow*. The protest was to have been sent to the newspapers, but nothing came of it. See 2L 435 and n. 1. For details of Murry's meeting with Beresford, see John Middleton Murry, *Between Two Worlds: An Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), 380.

² See 1L 207: "Think of us, by the brawling ocean in a land of Cornish foreigners blowing out our lonely candle as the clock quavers ten".

³ Michael Squires and Lynn K. Talbot, *Living at the Edge: A Biography of D. H. Lawrence and Frieda von Richthofen* (London: Robert Hale, 2002), 138.

⁴ For Lawrence's references to the specific titles mentioned here, see 2L 528, 538, 556, and 521.

⁵ See 2L 572.

⁶ *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, vol. II (1914–1944), (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968), 53.

⁷ See 2L 523.

⁸ For a detailed account of Lawrence's interactions with Heseltine, see James T. Boulton, *D. H. Lawrence, Philip Heseltine and Three Unpublished Letters* (Birmingham: Institute for Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences, University of Birmingham, 2001).

⁹ See Jonathan Long, 'The Rainbow: A Miscellany', *JDHLS*, vol. 4. 1 (2015), 15–18: "There was a young man in the corridor / Whose conduct got horrid and horrid; / He lit a cigar / And said 'Europe is bar,' / Give me a ticket to Florida".

¹⁰ Barry Smith, *Peter Warlock: The Life of Philip Heseltine* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 85.

¹¹ *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, vol. II, 53; Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott, eds, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 263.

¹² S. Dik-Cunningham [Dikran Kouyoumdjian], 'Preface and Synopsis', *New Age*, 2 March 1916, 428–9. John Turner first discovered this satirical article; see John Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 171 and 458 n. 9.

¹³ Lawrence referred in a letter of 9 January 1916 to having "written the first part of a short story"; it may have been the "mid-winter story of oblivion" he was hoping to start on 31 December. See 2L 501 and 493. Mark Kinkead-Weekes has suggested that the story was 'The Prodigal Husband'

(an early version of ‘Samson and Delilah’), but John Worthen argues that it is more likely to have been ‘The Miracle’ (an early version of ‘The Horse-Dealer’s Daughter’). See Mark Kinkead-Weekes, *D. H. Lawrence: Triumph to Exile, 1912–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 297 and 818 n. 30, and John Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider*, 170 and 458 n. 5.