

A *Kangaroo* still hopping around in our minds

Lawrence's weeks in Australia; what he saw, what he brought, and what he produced

*Kangaroo*¹ has a unique place in our literature. D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda visited Australia briefly in 1922. They had a fortnight in the west, then came to the east coast. After a couple of days in Sydney they settled in Thirroul, thirty miles to the south, for about six weeks more. Lawrence began his new book at Thirroul; he added the last chapter of what is now *Kangaroo* in New Mexico, U.S.A., after he left, and the work was published in 1923. It's never been regarded as one of Lawrence's major works but some Australian readers and commentators have thought highly of it, especially those taking part in the decades-long discussion of Australia's identity, or its spirit of place, on which matter Lawrence certainly had something to say.

I first read it many years ago, and was fascinated by his comments on the nature of Australia, while regarding most of the book as a shambolic mixture of various thises and thats. I was fascinated by the long chapter about Lawrence's experiences in England during World War 1, but wondered what on earth had led him to stuff it into a book about something else. Kangaroos, it seemed to me, belonged in Australia, not in a Cornwall where people were either crazy about spies or so busy with harvesting

that warfare was beyond their ken. Funny people, the English: Australians, as Lawrence perceptively observed, were different. Or so I thought. Rereading the book recently has been quite an experience, and I shall use this essay to try to make something coherent of how it seemed to me, fifty years on.

The title first. It has a double meaning, referring to the well-known animal and by extension the country at large, but also to a character known mostly by his nickname, who is one of the leaders of a formidable if nebulous organization of ex-soldiers who have political aims of a sort. Believing they saved their society, they have an ill-defined passion for what it must – or more precisely, *mustn't* – become. More of that anon.

Lawrence is everywhere in this book, calling himself Richard Lovat Somers; Frieda has become Harriet. They know only a handful of people and for the most part they prefer to be alone, hence their stay at Thirroul. Lawrence, or Lovat, finds the new country fascinating, English-derived but having turned itself into something different. This is partly because it's in the southern hemisphere and the skies, the ocean, light and warmth are different, and it's partly because this new civilisation has only sprinkled itself, so far, on a land that's alien to the European mind.

The European mind! It occurred to me, soon after I began my recent re-reading, that the locale for the book was Australia – *kangaroo* country – but the issues of the book were European, in that remarkable way by which travellers find that although their

observations are of the places they're visiting, their thinking is concentrated for much of the time on the place they've left behind: their *home!* I've found this on my own travels and recognised it in the pages of brooding which intersperse Lawrence's reactions to the country he was visiting back in 1922, when it was new to him and somewhat different even for modern Australian readers. Much of what we now take to be our history – World War 2, the dominance of America, the rise of Asia, our country's liberation of itself from the European hegemony, the acceptance of 'the economy' as a new form of faith – hadn't happened, and was largely unforeseen. To read Willie Struthers' speech in Chapter 16, about what workers want, and being *mates*, is to be reminded of an almost forgotten political discourse. In one of Lawrence's most electrifying moments, Kangaroo's men count Struthers out. One! Two! They get to Eight! and then a brawl breaks out, three men are killed, the meeting is broken up, police arrive, and so on. The book's climax has been reached and its end is in sight.

My edition of the book has an introduction by Richard Aldington, presumably for the first Penguin edition of 1950, in which he warns readers 'that some of these Australian characters and the scenes between people are wholly imagined or imaginatively transported from the outside world.' What we read about the spirit (or appearance) of the place or people going about their everyday lives is real, he says, but goes on to ask:

Where did he get the vivid scenes of political contest between the Diggers and the socialists? Not from his favourite periodical, *The Sunday Bulletin*, for at that time no such political violence occurred in Australia. Probably

they were a transference to the Australian scene of the bitter contests between fascists and communists Lawrence had seen in Italy in 1920-22.

Later writers have questioned this, arguing that Lawrence, whether on ship to Australia or in conversation in Sydney, had picked up some knowledge of the movement later to come to the eyes of the public as the New Guard, best remembered today for the ribbon-cutting incident at the opening of the Harbour Bridge. Being in no position to comment on this, I will simply say that one of the book's themes is Lovat's attraction to becoming involved in the political life of his day – as a *man*, always as a man; men's politics create, and take place in, a world from which women can be excluded – and an even stronger revulsion from such involvement. Lawrence is a novelist, and it is flattering to his novelistic alter ego, Lovat, to be seen as an acquisition by the ex-soldiers Jack Caldicott and Kangaroo, the man Jack looks up to. Caldicott, I think, wants Lovat to join the movement because he will be a valuable, indeed an *emblematic* acquisition, while Kangaroo has a desire, revolting to this reader, discomfiting for Lovat himself, and ridiculous to Harriet, to possess Lovat by causing him to tell Kangaroo that he loves him.

Loves him? Lovat refuses, even though Kangaroo says that this refusal will cause him to die. He is already dying from an injury inflicted on the night of the political meeting, and die he does. Lovat refuses to say that he loves Kangaroo, just as he refuses to do almost anything else that's put before him. He refuses to enlist for World War 1, and he goes to some lengths to tell the Cornish people

surrounding him why he feels this way, when it would be more prudent to be quiet. A consumptive, he knows there's no chance of him being forced to fight, but he wants to make a stand over his refusal, he does so, and he has a wretched war.

This makes peaceful Australia all the more attractive, when he encounters it. He loves it, and he expresses this love eloquently, many times:

No, no, the flimsy hills of Australia were like a new world, and the frail *inconspicuousness* of the landscape, that was still so clear and clean, clean of all fogginess or confusion: but the frail, aloof, inconspicuous clarity of the landscape was like a sort of heaven – bungalows, shacks, corrugated iron and all. No wonder Australians love Australia. It is the land that as yet has made no great mistake, humanly. The horrible human mistakes of Europe. And, probably, the even worse human mistakes of America.

It's worth noting the word 'bungalows' in that passage. It may be the most-used word in the book. Bungalows are everywhere, especially in the early chapters. Lawrence uses the word not so much for an architectural style, although his bungalows are all free-standing houses, as for a feeling they give him of being lightly dropped on the earth, here and there, somehow embodying the casualness which he finds everywhere in Australia². He is also very amused by the names people give their bungalows – Wyewurk, Torestin (to rest in), and more. Lawrence loves being near the ocean and he goes down to it as often as he can; there simply aren't many people, in Australia, in proportion to nature – fern gullies, the tor that overlooks the house they're renting, the Pacific outside their

front door, and the huge skies that colour at the beginning and end of day. Man is small in Australia, and it's something Lawrence returns to over and again.

It is said that man is the chief environment of man. That, for Richard, was not true in Australia. Man was there, but unnoticeable. You said a few words to a neighbour or an acquaintance, but it was merely for the sake of making a sound of some sort. Just a sound. There was nothing really to be said. The vast continent is really void of speech.

Lawrence finds this quality of the place both liberating and disconcerting:

And with it all, toiling on with civilisation. But it felt like a clock that was running down. It had been wound up in Europe, and was running down, running right down, here in Australia. Men were mining, farming, making roads, shouting politics. But with all that basic indifference which dare not acknowledge *how* indifferent it is, lest it should drop everything and lapse into a blank. But a basic indifference, with a spurt of excitement over a horse-race, and an occasional joy in a row.

And yet, despite this fascination with indifference, with a passionless existence, with taking things as easily as the Australians appear to do, Lawrence is tempted to join Kangaroo and Jack in their mysteriously shrouded political movement. They press him to join. They want him. Jack imagines he might be useful, but Kangaroo wants his soul. As stated earlier, Lovat resists. He is, after all, a writer, and giving himself to a social cause doesn't come easily. It's

somehow unnatural. This pulling on the part of those who want him, his enjoyment at being wanted and the resistance he feels to being part of something directed by others, provides a recurring theme in *Kangaroo*. Jack and Kangaroo want him as part of a man's movement, and this is where Lawrence/Lovat is vulnerable. Men, in Lawrence's view of things, are mystical creatures. They are the natural focus of the human race and it's women's role to support them, to be their interlocutors perhaps, because it does happen that men don't always know their minds until they're challenged, and I think we have to say that women bring up in men – *man* – a phallic power that surges into them from that dark and unconscious region which Lawrence endlessly refers to as the dark God. This god has nothing to do with the object of Christian worship. Occasional references to Christianity suggest that Lawrence sees it as an overlay which has covered large areas of Europe, whereas his sympathies – his intuitive connections, I think I mean – are with the mysterious and persistent forces that the Celts reached out for in their worship. Lawrence has an off-putting (for me) sympathy for blood sacrifice. It's not something that he instinctively pulls back from; quite the reverse. For a mind influenced by Christianity, this being drawn to dark gods and blood sacrifices is like creeping to the edge of a pit and looking down in fascination to see what will reveal itself, but Lawrence has things the other way around. The Christian, in his view, appears to be fearful, somehow bloodless and half-hearted because s/he won't face up to the forces that are present in man.

Man. One of Lawrence's qualities as a writer is that he doesn't come from the English ruling classes, doesn't possess their fully-

protective set of ideas, and is willing to look elsewhere. He doesn't, in my view, have a very analytic mind, so he uses ideas over and over, changing them as the context suits, repeating words that please him even as he changes them to suit his changing moods. Kangaroo challenges him in an early discussion by asking Lovat 'The phallic you, my dear young friend, what is that but love?' Lovat/Lawrence is ready for this.

'No,' he said, in a slow, remote voice. 'I know your love, Kangaroo. Working everything from the spirit, from the head. You work the lower self as an instrument of the spirit. Now it is time for the spirit to leave us again; it is time for the Son of Man to depart, and leave us dark, in front of the unspoken God: who is just beyond the dark threshold of the lower self, my lower self. There is a great God on the threshold of my lower self, whom I fear while he is my glory. And the spirit goes out like a spent candle.'

You may think this mystical mumbo-jumbo, but it is some sort of reversal of the Christian thinking of his day, or perhaps of centuries. It was something that separated Lawrence from most other writers of his day, and it's linked with that openness of mind which made him a receptive traveller. He was curious. He didn't possess what is today called an establishment view ...

... and yet he was as obsessed as any other European and he knows it, and this is why he finds himself fascinated by Australia. The place simply won't participate in the argument that's roaring in his mind. It's why he's attracted to Kangaroo, Jack, and the ideas, derived from wartime experience, which they long to embody in the peace that's followed the laying down of arms. The violence of war,

and the simplicity of being in a chain of command receiving orders which, even though fatal, must be obeyed, is attractive to them. It's attractive to Lawrence/Lovat too, but it isn't an exact fit with his equally nebulous ideas of obeying the dark god in himself ...

... which, of course, is male, which, of course, means that he and Harriet are forever in or close to conflict. Richard Aldington's introduction sums this up well.

Lawrence himself was greatly interested in the nature of power, and many pages and scenes of *Kangaroo* will show the strange battle of wills between himself and his wife when, after nearly ten years of marriage, he laboured and battled unavailingly to prove to her that the basis of marriage is not perfect love, but perfect submission of the wife to the husband.

Lawrence does indeed give pages to this theme. Chapter 9, 'Harriet and Lovat at Sea in Marriage' is full of it. It does not occur to Lovat/Lawrence that women, too, embody something at least equivalent to the dark majesty/fearful god who enters men from below, the lower doors, as Lawrence puts it. Harriet has her revenge when a wind blows Lovat's hat into the ocean, and he has to dive into the waves to retrieve it. He was talking about aristocracy when this occurred and she gives him aristocracy as fiercely as she can when he has the sodden hat in his hands, standing in the surf with his wet trousers: aristocracy!

'Mr Dionysus and Mr Hermes and Mr Thinks-himself-grand. I've got one thing to tell you. Without me you'd be nowhere, you'd be nothing, you'd not be *that*,' and she snapped her fingers under his nose, a movement he particularly disliked.

Lawrence is fair-minded enough to report this to us, but on the next page he's back on the mysticism of the male, the altar of the great Hermes, and the impossibility of having two masters for one ship. Et cetera.

We may reasonably ask at this point what all this has to do with Australia. What answer can I give? Nothing much, nothing special, quite a lot? The modern feminist might say that the only thing that distinguishes Lawrence from other men – Australian men – is his capacity to articulate what's going on, both inside himself and in the conflict between Harriet and Lovat. Yet there is something distinctive about the battle of the sexes, as Lawrence gives it to us, and it is in the mystery – something he loved, and was always at home with – of the setting. Lovat and Harriet are fighting a battle they've been fighting for years, but this time they're fighting in a new place which Lawrence/Lovat finds strangely quiescent. The landscape doesn't give a hoot! The birds, the sea-birds, even the cows wandering onto the roads, aren't interested. The ferns are untouched. The gum trees stretch their branches, and their sometimes miserable canopies into that clear air that Lawrence loved without the slightest consciousness of these human arguments. The arguments – and how like Lawrence I am being by repeating a word, one use coming hot on the heels of an earlier one – come from somewhere else, they've been carried to these shores by European minds like Harriet's and Lovat's, and they sound differently in their ears because the resonances, the echoes that come back from these new surroundings, are different.

Lawrence's descriptions of Australia are wonderful, quite breath-taking at times, but his real understanding of Australia, his finest achievement in *Kangaroo*, I think, is in the way he makes those old arguments sound a little different when they're located in this world we know so well, by now, but which was wonderfully new to him, back in 1922.

Do we, here in Australia today, have our land under more control than those bungalow-owners did, in 1922? The country's more built-up, more built-over, than it was then, but do the same resonances hold, today? Are Lawrence's observations, his feelings, still true?

These are not easy questions. For my part, I think that we today are a little more at home in/on the land than the bungalow-dwellers of Lawrence's time. We've had eighty-seven more years to learn, we've had more bushfires, floods and droughts to teach us, and of course we've allowed ourselves to open up quite considerably the many meanings, implications for ourselves, of the ways of aboriginal Australia. ('aboriginal' – I use the lower case – was another of those words Lawrence often reached for, in his way of letting certain words become reference points for the changing ideas he had of what they suggested to him.) Even so, I feel, with Lawrence, that the land, the bush – the weather, the climate, all those things the Europeans found strange – are still the testing point for the quality of the ideas we use. Having been brought up in a farming family I am aware of the way that those who work the land know the insignificance of ideas – faiths, religions, creeds, et cetera – before a place which makes no accommodation of itself for

intruding man. Those who lived here before the European invasion adapted themselves to the land, and their control over it – burning, controlling the movement of fish – was modest.

I've said almost nothing so far about 'The Nightmare', the longest chapter in *Kangaroo*. If the landscape of Australia, its presence, provides the resonance of and for the book, 'The Nightmare' is the beaten drum which causes the landscape to resonate. It underlies everything else in *Kangaroo*; it is, in a way, the dark god of the other chapters, forcing its way to the surface when the book is well advanced. The strength of this chapter comes from the anger burning in it. Lawrence is seething. He's not a conscientious objector; he knows that many, many men are volunteering for the front, but he resists.

He would not enter the army because his profoundest instinct was against it. Yet he had no conscientious objection to war. It was the whole spirit of the war, the vast mob-spirit, which he could never acquiesce in. The terrible, terrible war, made so fearful because in every country practically every man lost his head, and lost his own centrality, his own manly isolation in his own integrity, which alone keeps life real.

I'll take the risk of saying that Lawrence's strongest objection to war was that delivering one's soul into the hands of the army would have made it impossible for him to write. What he describes as 'centrality' is, in my view, his idea of the precondition for writing. He wouldn't surrender it, he couldn't surrender it, and he fought not to do so, even though his physical condition meant that he wouldn't be forced into fighting. He didn't want to be anywhere

near the fighting forces. He makes much the same point a little differently on the very next page – something that is very much a part of his way of writing.

Awful years – '16, '17, '18, '19 – the years when the damage was done. The years when the world lost its real manhood. Not for lack of courage to face death. Plenty of superb courage to face death. But no courage in any man to face his own isolated soul, and abide by its decision. Easier to sacrifice oneself. So much easier!

His objection, then, is to the mob spirit; he blames this on 'the stay-at-home bullies who governed the country during those years'. He says, somewhere in the outburst of this long chapter, that what he's experiencing is the death of the *old* England, though he doesn't, for once, go on to explain this. Other writers, however, have said it for him. The young men who left their rural work, their mining and their lowly manufacturing jobs, the men who left their ships, their ferries and jobs raising and lowering the lochs on the canals and waterways of England, took with them the spirit of an earlier, more rural, less centralised way of life, and when they died at the front, or suffered and returned, that aura of the land's spirit which they'd taken with them didn't come back. England the nation had consolidated, solidified, that little bit more. Its expression would thenceforth come from its capitals, from the financial heart of its empire, rather than from the constituent vestiges of its past. Lawrence, self-obsessed as ever, doesn't say this but I feel that he senses enough of it to express it, even if a little indirectly, in his descriptions of losing himself in the farm work he does in Cornwall,

even in the odd incident where he, Ann and John Thomas drive into town and Thomas keeps them waiting before he turns up for the drive home. Where's he been? Pub? No reference is made to the smell of his breath. With an accommodating lady? Lawrence doesn't suggest it. Is he just being provocative? We're not told. Lawrence doesn't want to probe John Thomas too deeply because he represents the virtues of an older England, and the newer version is maddening, because it's caught up in the craze of war. Interestingly, some of the doctors and most of the policemen in this angry chapter are regarded as decent because upholding the old values. It's the new craze that's to blame. Interestingly too, Cornwall, with its Celtic past and its 'pale-grey granite masses, so ancient and Druidical, suggesting blood sacrifice' finds easy acceptance in his mind. He's not at war with the landscape or even its ancient practices, he's at war with war, because ...

... it won't let him be himself. He feels comfortable with himself in the Cornish landscape, which helps to explain why he stays there when quite a few people have set out to make him unwelcome, something that he's both determined, and contrary enough, to resist. He'll stay because he likes the place!

He didn't stay long in Australia, but he certainly liked it. He started writing soon after he reached the east coast:

Poor Richard Lovat wearied himself to death struggling with the problem of himself and calling it Australia. There was no actual need for him to struggle with Australia: he must have done it in the hedonistic sense, to please himself. But it wore him to rags.

By the end of the book, however, after the outburst of anger which fills 'The Nightmare', he calms, and the appreciation of Australia's difference, which was always there, even at the beginning, has become an outpouring of a different sort.

There it is, laid all over the world, the heavy established European way of life. Like their huge ponderous cathedrals and factories and cities, enormous encumbrances of stone and steel and brick, weighing on the surface of the earth.

He goes on. 'They say Australia is free, and it is. Even the flimsy, foundationless bungalows.' (So at last, with the end of the book just around the corner, he tells us what it is about the bungalows – they stand off the earth on stumps of brick or wood; they're not built on foundations of stone sunk into the earth, as buildings are in Europe!) He goes on, comparing the bungalows to Japanese paper-houses. It's the insubstantiality of everything that attracts him. There is an escape from Europe, from being European. Yet Richard and Harriet board their ship, they sail down the great harbour and out the heads, into the water beyond. He doesn't call it 'the Pacific', because that would remind us of the water pounding the beach at Cooe, the home they had at Thirroul. No, he says, the sea – the sea! – seemed dark and cold and inhospitable. Australia is behind him.

It was a remarkable visit the Lawrences made. I don't know if he ever referred to Australia again in later writings, but the book he gave the readers of our country offers a wonderful guide to something we should know better than he did, but it may be, as

most readers of *Kangaroo* will suspect, that it took an outsider to do the job we should have done, and will always need to do, for ourselves.

1. *Kangaroo*, by D.H.Lawrence, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1954
2. For a description of the house that Lawrence and Frieda lived in at Thirroul, see *D.H.Lawrence at Thirroul*, by Joseph Davis, Imprint (Collins), Sydney, 1989, especially Chapter 3, 'Architectural Carte Blanche'.