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The Letters of D. H. Lawrence

By H. E. BATES

THE eagerly-awaited volume of Lawrence's letters opens with a few short and formal letters relating to *The White Peacock* in 1909 and closes with some brief staccato notes from Vence, where he died in 1930. "I'm rather worse here," he writes from Vence, "such bad nights, and cough, and heart, and pain decidedly worse here—and miserable."

At the top of this, the last letter, there is no date, only the day, Friday, and there is a postscript which might have been his description not merely of Vence but the world he was leaving: "This place is no good."

There are some curious things to be noted about the book. First, it is very long, too long; there are many letters that are worthless. Second, many letters from interesting people are not included, letters to people such as Richard Aldington, Koteliansky, Lawrence's own sisters, Charles Laher, the well-known bookseller, Frederick Carter, the artist. Good as the volume is, it is not complete.

But perhaps the most remarkable thing about this book is the preface to it, a tribute to Lawrence by a man who was the antithesis of him in nearly every way, in his philosophy, beliefs, hopes, position, antecedents, mode of living, and as an artist and a man.

Huxley, at heart, is a scientist, and "all scientists," declared Lawrence, "are liars." Nothing would shake that conviction.

"I remember in particular," writes Huxley, "one long and violent argument on evolution, in the reality of which Lawrence always passionately disbelieved." "But look at the evidence, Lawrence," I insisted, "look at all the evidence." His answer was characteristic. "But I don't care about evidence. Evidence doesn't mean anything to me. I don't feel it here." And he pressed his two hands on his solar plexus.

Here then is a man who is inescapably a scientist writing of a man who was—in Huxley's own words—inescapably an artist. It is perhaps vain to hope for the ideal exposition of Lawrence's art and philosophy, but in its coolness, detachment, intelligence, sympathy, and its utter lack of hysteria or superiority this essay comes very near it.

It is not perfect, nor is it the final word on Lawrence, but all Lawrence-lovers will be grateful for its calm understanding and dispassionate analysis of a man who was not easy to understand or analyse. It may very well lead to a more general calmness about Lawrence and perhaps also to a wider tolerance of him. It can hardly fail to lead to a better understanding.

As for the letters themselves—how does one criticise the letters of a dead man? Does one criticise them at all? These pages are not pages of conscious artistic creation, though very many of them reveal the artist vividly, but the daily scribbles of a man to his friends and acquaintances, pages showing "us Lawrence as he was in his daily living." They are, therefore, not to be criticised, but to be accepted or rejected, enjoyed or disliked, just as we must accept or

reject Lawrence himself, the man and not the artist.

During his early career Lawrence was a prolific correspondent. There are, for instance, scores of rich, long, intimate letters to Edward Garnett, mostly from the younger Lawrence. But as he grew older the letters became shorter, more infrequent, and very often, like his books and the laughter of which Aldous Huxley speaks, bitter. "How tragically the splendid curve of the letters droops, at the end, towards the darkness! . . . Beautiful and absorbingly interesting in themselves, the letters

which follow are also of the highest importance as biographical documents. In them Lawrence has written his life and painted his portrait. Few men have given more of themselves in their letters." These letters, indeed, in their beauty, richness and intimacy, may stand side by side with the letters of Keats.

Through them all runs the stream of Lawrence's own personality, rich, burning, passionate, childish, childlike, generous, conceited, hysterical, courageous, savage, mocking, everlastingly sincere.

There are a few scattered references, among the letters to the Etruscans, to whom Lawrence was greatly attracted during his last years. Turning with disappointment from Mexico in his vain search for his colony of escape he even thought that he had found what he was looking for in the lost Kingdom of the Etruscans. He began to visit Italian museums in search of Etruscan remains, and then the lost cities and burial-grounds of Etruria itself, interested especially in the painted tombs of Tarquinia, Cerveteri, Vulci and Volterra.

The book he planned was to have been longer than *Etruscan Places*, as we now have it; but it could scarcely have been more interesting or delightful. The descriptions of his journeys, the peasants, the painted tombs and the flowers are gay and charming; his theories about the lost Etruscans are wholly fresh and interesting, whether one agrees with them or not. One will set this book, with its many beautiful illustrations, side by side with *Twilight in Italy and Sea and Sardinia*. It is as vivid and alive as anything he ever wrote.

Lawrence's poems, originally collected in two volumes, are now available in one at a reasonable price. Always prolific, Lawrence wrote hundreds of poems, rhyming and unrhyming, many about flowers which he loved so passionately and described so vividly, and almost as many about winter, the atmosphere of which he could recreate so perfectly.

In his preface to the poems he writes of that demon in him which hounded many of these poems out of him, and of that struggle "to say something which it takes a man twenty years to say." And once, as he does so often in the letters, he puts his finger on the vital spot: "many of the poems are so personal that, in their fragmentary fashion, they make up a biography of an emotional and inner life." In them, indeed, Lawrence not merely painted his portrait but revealed his heart and soul.

THE LETTERS OF D. H. LAWRENCE.
With a Preface by Aldous Huxley.
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