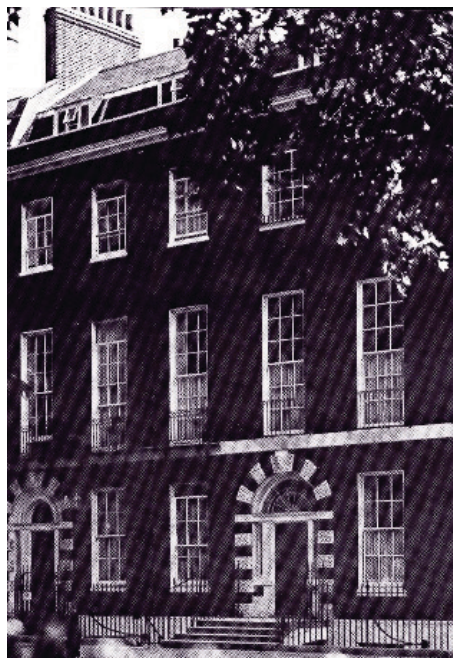


**NUMBER 44 BEDFORD SQUARE, WHERE LADY OTTOLINE MORRELL
INTRODUCED LAWRENCE TO LONDON'S LITERARY
AND ARTISTIC SOCIETY**

Talk delivered by SANDRA J. DARROCH at the 14th International D.H.
Lawrence Conference , London, July 2017



THAT this conference is being held in Bedford Square is historically appropriate because, across the Square from where we are sitting today, is number 44, where its owner, Lady Ottoline Morrell, the half-sister of the 6th Duke of Portland, first opened her green front door to D.H. Lawrence, and launched him on to literary and artistic London.

But it was not their first meeting. More than four months earlier, Lawrence, recently back from Italy and Germany, and just starting to make a literary name for himself, had attended a dinner party in H.G. Wells's house in Chelsea, where Ottoline was also a guest. Although they were no doubt introduced, there was no follow-up at that stage.

Some months later, the novelist Gilbert Cannon sent Ottoline Lawrence's recently-published book of short stories, *The Prussian Officer*. (He may also have sent, or recommended, several of Lawrence's earlier works, such as *The White Peacock* and *Sons and Lovers*.)

In her first letter to Lawrence in late December or early January, Ottoline praised *The Prussian Officer* and invited him to visit her. On January 3 (in the first of the 79 letters he was to write to Ottoline) Lawrence took up her invitation and on January 21 Lawrence and Frieda came to lunch at 44 Bedford Square.

The lunch must have been a success, for Ottoline asked them to return later for dinner that evening, where she sat Lawrence next to E.M. Forster, asking him to also stay on even later for one of her famous Thursday-evening salons.

There he was introduced to a number of London literary and artistic identities, including members of the Bloomsbury Group, one of whom, the artist Duncan Grant, invited the Lawrences to come to his studio the following morning.

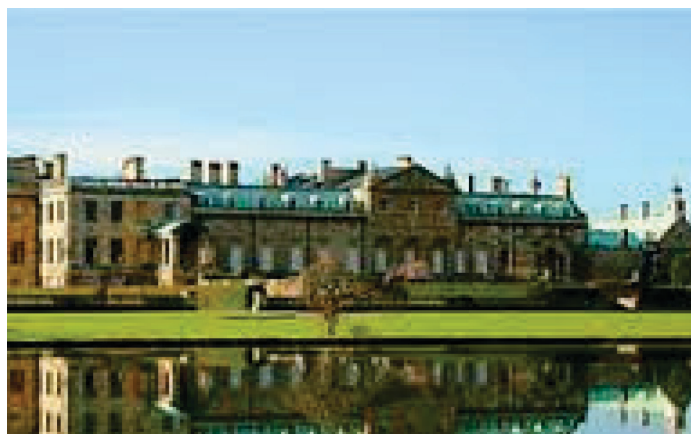
No pictures of Lawrence at Bedford Square exist, but here is one of him at

Garsington shortly after Ottoline moved there in May 1915.



In Lawrence's early works Ottoline saw the world of her childhood brought vividly to life, even though her aristocratic upbringing had been in a different world to his. She had grown up at Welbeck Abbey, the Cavendish-Bentinck ancestral home, set in its vast estate in Nottinghamshire. (There has even been a suggestion that Lawrence had flirted with one of the below-stairs maids at Welbeck.)

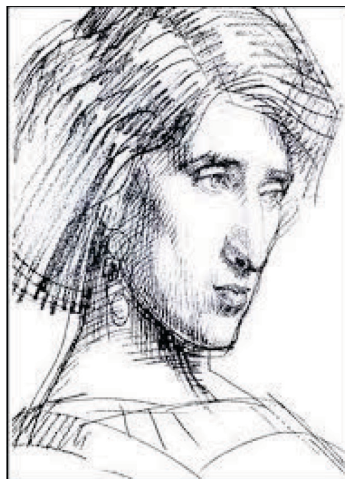
Lawrence was very impressed with the "Great Lady of Bedford Square".



Ottoline was a striking figure. She was over six feet tall with vivid auburn hair and a regal bearing. She dressed extravagantly, as this portrait by one of her lovers, Augustus John, captured.



And here is a portrait by another of her lovers, Henry Lamb.



Lord David Cecil told me how, as an undergraduate, he first saw Ottoline in the High in Oxford, sailing through a crowd of people, wearing a dress of canary-coloured silk with a long skirt that swept the pavement, stately and upright and dreamlike.



Yet as a young girl growing up at Welbeck, she was shy and gawky, yet from an early age she attracted the attentions of older men.

One of the first was the Archbishop of York, William Maclagan, who took a fatherly interest in the lonely, deeply-religious, young girl who had turned her back on the aristocratic world of huntin', shootin' and fishn' to devote her time to her Bible.

A little later, another older man - the future Prime Minister Asquith - became a frequent visitor to Ottoline's boudoir when she and her mother moved from Welbeck Abbey to a house in London.



However, at this stage in her life the most remarkable “older man” in her life was the satyr-like figure of Axel Munthe, who lured her, a virgin of 25, to his villa San Michele on the island of Capri, where she succumbed to his advances.



Soon afterwards she married lawyer Philip Morrell, who later became a Liberal member of parliament.

Meanwhile, another frequent visitor to her boudoir was the walrus-moustached John Adam Cramb, whom she encountered in the foyer of a concert hall.



Cramb, an academic who also wrote fiction under the name J.A. Revmort, was the first writer to portray Ottoline in a novel. His heroine in *Cuthbert Learmont*, Mary

Fotheringham, was very much like Ottoline, yearning to escape from a conventional marriage. (Cramb very probably had an affair with Ottoline.)

In 1910 Ottoline and Philip moved to 44 Bedford Square where, soon after, she launched her Thursday-evening salons.

An early guest was Henry James, who one evening stood at the head of the stairs as a group of artists and poets came down the hallway. "Look down upon them, great Lady, but do not go down among them," he counselled her.

But Ottoline disdained his advice: "I disobeyed," she said. "I was already too far down the stairs to turn back."

Soon literary and artistic London was beating a path to Ottoline's green front door to attend her Thursday-evening salons.

Yet she was not a mere salonniere. She wanted to involved herself in their lives and promote their artistic careers.

Lawrence interested her particularly. Some time after their first meeting, Ottoline described her first impression of him. He was *"a slight man, lithe and delicately-built, his pale face rather overshadowed by his beard and his red hair falling over his forehead, his eyes blue and his hands delicate and very competent. He gave one the impression of someone who had been undernourished in youth, making his body fragile and his mind too active."*

Lawrence had a profound respect for the aristocracy, and found in Ottoline a lady who was even more aristocratic than Frieda.

He told Ottoline in an early letter: *"It is rather splendid that you are a great Lady. Don't abrogate one jot or tittle of your high birth: it is too valuable in this commercially-minded mean world...I really do honour your birth. Let us do justice to its nobility: it is not mere accident. I would have given a great deal to have been born an aristocrat."*

Ottoline visited Lawrence and Frieda where they were staying in a cottage at Greatham in Sussex. They exchanged letters about his plans to establish his escape from the world, his Rananim.

Ottoline soon decided that her long-time lover, Bertrand Russell, and Lawrence should meet. In February 1915 Ottoline took Russell down to Greatham, a prospect that daunted Lawrence: *"I am a bit scared of Mr Russell – I feel as if I should stutter."*

At that first meeting Russell was immensely impressed with Lawrence, and confessed to Ottoline: *"He is amazing, he sees through and through one...he is infallible. He sees everything and is always right."*

Russell was just as impressed with Lawrence. *"He can give me a vivifying dose of unreason,"* he told Ottoline.

The two worked together on a series of lectures before breaking off their friendship when they could no longer find common ground.

Meanwhile, Ottoline was preparing to move to Garsington and offered Lawrence and Frieda accommodation in an out-building there. Lawrence responded with enthusiasm, but suggested all kinds of renovations.

Philip Morrell wrote to him outlining their cost, and Lawrence responded by saying they would be happy with just three rooms in the gardener's cottage.

Lawrence was an early guest when Ottoline moved into the beautiful Tudor manor outside Oxford and started renovating it. He and Russell helped repaint the drawing-room oak panelling in vivid colours, with Lawrence carefully outlining the panels with gilt. Frieda did nothing to help, but sat on a table swinging her legs, and mocking the others.

Lawrence came to Garsington several times that summer, mostly without Frieda, however.

On one visit, he helped Ottoline plant iris bulbs around the pond. He also built a small summer-house in the garden.

He was now planning to go to America to establish his Rananim in Florida, and invited Ottoline to accompany him and Frieda. She declined, but sent him £15 towards the cost of the voyage.

In the event, Lawrence was denied a visa and he and Frieda decided instead to go to remote Cornwall, where they were soon joined by Middleton Murry and Katherine Mansfield, and where a traumatic time was endured by all.

Ottoline sent Lawrence gifts to help him set up house. One was a counterpane she had embroidered. He wrote back saying that he and Frieda would often lie on it and discuss its colourful design.

Little did Ottoline realise however that, as they lay on her counterpane, what in fact he and Frieda were discussing was his latest novel, which was to be called *Women in Love*, and in which Ottoline would feature as a hideous caricature of herself - the bitter snake-goddess, Hermione Roddice.

Lawrence finally confessed to Ottoline: *"I have begun a new novel: a thing that is a stranger to me even as I write it. I don't know what the end will be."*

Actually, this "new novel" had been gestating for some time, beginning in March-April 1913 - long before he met Ottoline.

However, when Lawrence's American poet friend Hilda Doolittle sent Ottoline a copy of the manuscript (at her request), it confirmed Ottoline's suspicions that she had been caricatured in the book.

Indeed, Lawrence's description of Hermione shows how closely he had observed Ottoline. Hermione *"drifted forward as if scarcely conscious, her long blanched face lifted up, not to see the world...she drifted along with a peculiar fixity of the hips, a strange unwilling motion."*

Physically there were some differences. Hermione's hair was not Ottoline's dark-auburn, but fair; she was in her 20s not her 40s; and there were other dissimilarities. Nevertheless, Ottoline could hardly have avoided seeing herself in Lawrence's verbal portrait.

Lawrence gave Hermione Ottoline's bizarre taste in clothes. Hermione wears ostrich feather hats; cloaks of greenish cloth lined with fur; dresses of prune-coloured silk; and shawls *"blotched with great embroidered flowers"*.

Yet, if this were all he had done, Ottoline might perhaps not have minded so much. What roused her to a fever-pitch of anger and indignation was the character Lawrence chose to put into that shell (and thus, by association, imposed on her).

Lawrence set the tone early in the novel, describing Hermione as: *"macabre...repulsive. She seemed almost drugged, as if a strange mass of thoughts coiled in the darkness within her, and she was never allowed to escape."*

Lawrence proceeded to build up Hermione's tormented, twisted character. Hermione is incapable of decent passion and instincts. She uses her will to dominate others.

In her *Memoirs* Ottoline recalled her feelings at the time: *"I read it and found myself going pale with horror, for nothing could have been more vile and obviously spiteful and contemptuous...I was called every name from an 'old hag' obsessed with sex mania, to a corrupt sapphist...in another scene I had attempted to make indecent advances to the heroine, who was a glorified Frieda."*

What also upset her was that Lawrence had not only satirised her, but her family and friends. She wrote: *"Oh, I read, chapter after chapter, scene after scene all written, as far*

as I could tell, in order to humiliate me."

Why did Lawrence turn on his first major patron and benefactor, twisting her into a character apparently so venomously drawn that even people with little sympathy for Ottoline felt sorry for her?

The answer is that Lawrence almost certainly had no intention of doing anything of the sort. As inexplicable as it may seem, it did not occur to him that Ottoline would see herself in Hermione.

It seems that all he intended to do was to use certain aspects of Ottoline's appearance and character to make a point about a certain type of woman - the civilised, unspontaneous, "sex-in-the-head" priestess archetype which Lawrence regarded as the opposite to the earthy, intuitive, "mother goddess" archetype.

When Lawrence began rewriting the novel, then called "The Sisters" in late 1915, the representative of the "priestess" archetype was called Ethel, and was probably based on Jessie Chambers, Lawrence's first love, whom he had portrayed as Miriam in *Sons and Lovers*.

In his first rewrite of "The Sisters", Ethel became Hermione, but this early Hermione still bears more relation to Jessie Chambers than to Ottoline.

It is only when Lawrence started his third rewrite, around March 1916, that Hermione becomes more overtly based on Ottoline.

Perhaps Lawrence decided Ottoline was a far more vivid example of this type of woman.

Yet it was not Lawrence whom Ottoline initially blamed for the Hermione caricature - but Frieda. After she finished reading the typescript, Ottoline said (in her *Memoirs*): "*The only assuagement to the shock was that all the worst parts were written in Frieda's handwriting.*"

Ottoline's daughter, Julian, showed me a first edition of *Women in Love* in which her mother had noted in the margins such comments as: "Frieda!" "surely Frieda," and "Frieda again!"

Most Lawrence scholars today reject the idea that Frieda had any part in the composition of Lawrence's novel. It seems the most likely explanation for Ottoline's misapprehension is that Frieda helped transcribe and correct the typescript [TS1b] that Hilda Doolittle forwarded to Ottoline.

(Indeed, Lawrence is unlikely to have been influenced by any other human being when he was composing his literary works. He himself appeared to believe - see his *Fantasia of the Unconscious* - that when he was writing creatively, he was "possessed" by a *daemon* who helped steer his pen.)

Yet, with Hermione, Lawrence created a memorable character in one of the great novels of the 20th century. Ottoline, admittedly unwillingly, had participated in the creation of a major work of art. And though Lawrence was creating a figure of fiction, in choosing Ottoline for part of his inspiration, he was saying something significant about her.

The portrait contains some truth (Lawrence was a superb observer). Hermione is possessive; so, to some extent, was Ottoline. Hermione is not earthy; neither was Ottoline. Hermione overflows with almost electrical energy; as did Ottoline. Hermione disdained the vulgarity of sex and regarded it as a weapon to be used to ensnare Birkin; Ottoline's use of sex to ensnare men was not dissimilar.

After reading the typescript, a furious Ottoline wrote to Lawrence, threatening to sue. His only reply was that "Hermione was a very fine woman".

In the end, she didn't sue, but Ottoline's reaction to *Women in Love* killed off her

friendship with Lawrence, at least for some considerable time.

Lawrence's own reaction was anger: *"Really, the world has gone completely dotty! Hermione is not much more like Ottoline Morrell than Queen Victoria, the house they claim as theirs is a Georgian house in Derbyshire I know very well – etc. Ottoline flatters herself. There is a hint of her in the character of Hermione: but so there is a hint of a million women, if it comes to that. Anyway, they could make libel cases for ever, they haven't half a leg to stand on."*

Unable to get the book published by mainstream publishers, Lawrence toyed with having the novel published privately. Gertler asked him how Ottoline would take this. Lawrence replied: *"As for the ott – why should I bother about the old carrion? If I can publish, I shall publish. But ten to one I can't, and I don't care a straw either way."*

Shortly after this, however, Lawrence was reduced to such a state of poverty that Koteliensky suggested some of his troubles might be relieved if he tried to make it up with Ottoline. Lawrence replied: *"I got your letter. Yes, I know the Ot. is very nice, somewhere. I once was very fond of her – and I am still, in a way. But she is like someone who has died: and I cannot wish to call her from the grave."*

It is interesting to note that Lawrence referred to Murry and Katherine in similar terms, after they left Higher Tregerthen in Cornwall. He had also portrayed aspects of both of them in *Women in Love*. As with Ottoline, he was sloughing them off, having used them. He wrote: *"I have done with the Murries both, for ever – so help me god. So I have with Lady Ottoline and all the rest. And now I am glad and free."*

For many years afterwards, Ottoline's anger over what Lawrence had done remained, and they never saw one another again.

But in 1918 he asked Gertler to ask Ottoline to send back some of his manuscripts that had been stored at Garsington. He wrote to her on April 1 to thank her for returning them, saying: *"perhaps we shall meet in some sort of afterwards, when the laugh is on a new side"*.

In 1922 he wrote again, returning the £15 Ottoline had lent him – and saying how grateful he had been for her help. She did not reply.

However, in 1928 after hearing that Ottoline was seriously ill, Lawrence wrote to her saying: *"I trust we shall meet again one day, you and I, because I'm sure we're quite fond of one another really through all this long lapse."*

This time Ottoline replied in friendly terms, saying she was feeling depressed and feared that her life had been largely wasted. *"Don't feel you're not important,"* he wrote back. *"You've been an important influence in lots of lives, as you have in mine: through being fundamentally generous, and through being Ottoline."*

He then went on to make what can be interpreted – and what he probably meant Ottoline to take – as an apology for Hermione Roddice: *"It doesn't matter what sort of vision comes out of a man's imagination, his vision of Ottoline. Any more than a photograph of me is me, or even 'like' me. The so-called portraits of Ottoline can't possibly be Ottoline – no one knows that better than an artist."*

A year later, after Lawrence's exhibition of paintings at Dorothy Warren's gallery was raided by the police, Ottoline swept into the courtroom, and, pointing a long finger at the magistrate, intoned: *"He ought to be burned."*

Ottoline and Lawrence continued to correspond, swapping details of their various ailments, until he died in 1930.

Ottoline wrote in her *Memoirs* that three great friendships had dominated her life – those with Lytton Strachey, Bertrand Russell, and D.H. Lawrence. Although there were many other friendships and love affairs, the high intellectual and spiritual moments of her life centred on those three men. Each gave her something unique.

With Russell, she had access to a great mind and an intense passion. He had wanted to marry her.

Lytton had given her the most fun. In sessions in her boudoir he would dress up in her high heels amid a flurry of witticisms, or they'd play tennis together in Bedford Square, their shrieks of laughter drawing a crowd to watch them.

With Lawrence, she had deep communion with a genius who shared her intuitive love of life and nature. And it was Lawrence who had got to the root of Ottoline's unique contribution to creators of literature and art. As he said: *"After all, there's only one Ottoline. And she has moved one's imagination."*

- END