



WAS LAWRENCE GAY? – THE EVIDENCE OF THE RED WOODEN HEART



The wrestling scene from Ken Russell's film Women in Love (cf. Footnote #3 below)

LAWRENCE called his 1923 Australian novel *Kangaroo* “a queer show”¹. To Lawrence, the word “queer” implied something unusual, out of the ordinary (he used the term 55 times² in the novel). He did not use the word in today’s literary context of queer theory.³ Therefore it is something of an irony that hidden in the text of *Kangaroo* – what Lawrence himself called his “queer novel”⁴ – is a hitherto unrecognised homoerotic encounter that could tell us, perhaps uniquely, where on the gender continuum Lawrence should be placed.

Lawrence literature is littered with insinuations of a homoerotic nature, even perhaps of Lawrence being a “closet homosexual”⁵. Various scholars and writers have pointed to incidents in his life – and fiction – that, they say, give rise to suspicions that Lawrence had, if not actual homosexual liaisons, then homosexual proclivities. In his

¹ *Letters* #2542 in the CUP *Letters of DHL* [to Brewster]

² eg, “a queer young man”; “something queer, unknown”; “queer, light grey eyes”; “awfully queer”; “a queer old copper bowl”, etc

³ the complexities of queer readings of Lawrence texts can be appreciated in, for example, Erwin Rosinberg’s “Wrestling with the Future in D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*” (*Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 59 no. 1, spring 2013, pp. 1-25)

⁴ *Letters* #2537 [to Mabel Dodge] (where he used the word in the sense of “weird”, that being the term he had used in a similarly-dated letter to his mother-in-law [*Letters* #2534])

⁵ I am aware of the peril today of using the binary term “homosexual”. I now know something of the pioneering work of the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on queer theory. In this article, however, I am using the terms homosexual & homoerotic in their historical context, acknowledging that the world has moved on from there.

1994 *New York Times* review of Brenda Maddox's *DH LAWRENCE The Story of a Marriage*, Fordham University Professor Walter Kendrick said that Lawrence's fiction "abounds with overheated evocations of male beauty and male bonding". He cited the rubdown sequence in *The White Peacock* and the wrestling scene in *Women in Love* as evidence of Lawrence's ambivalent sexuality, together with Rupert's confession to Ursula: "I wanted eternal union with a man, too: another kind of love".⁶ Maddox alleges that Lawrence had sex with a young Cornish farmer.⁷ Lawrence himself said that his only "perfect love" was with a young coalminer in Eastwood⁸. Lawrence's later involvement with Maurice Magnus, who was openly homosexual, has been seen by many as suspicious, as has his close relationship with John Middleton Murry in wartime Cornwall.⁹

I believe that the question of Lawrence's homoeroticism – his "queerness" – can be illuminated by an episode in his 1923 novel, *Kangaroo*. I call this episode "The Curious Incident of the Red Wooden Heart".¹⁰ The curious incident occurs at the beginning of chapter 8, "Volcanic Evidence". In it the Lawrence character Somers sends a red wooden heart to his recent Australian acquaintance, Benjamin Cooley (whom I believe in real-life was the Australian architect/soldier Major-General Sir Charles Rosenthal, the leader of the secret army Lawrence stumbled on in Sydney in 1922¹¹). Here I quote the text of *Kangaroo* (Harriet is obviously Frieda, just as Somers is clearly Lawrence):

Harriet had on her dressing-table tray a painted wooden heart, painted red with dots round it, a Black Forest trifle which she had bought in Baden-Baden for a penny. [K p150¹²]

Inscribed or painted on the red wooden heart is a German adage: *Dem Mutigen gehort die Welt*, which Lawrence translates, first as "*The world belongs to the courageous*", then as "*The world belongs to the manly brave*". With the posted heart Somers sends a note addressed to Cooley (*ie* Rosenthal, I believe), which, according to the text, read:

I send you my red heart with its motto. I hope you will accept it, after all my annoying behaviour¹³. It is not the love, but the Mut that I believe in, and join you in. Love may be an ingredient in Mut, so you have it all your own way.

⁶ *Women in Love* [CUP] p481

⁷ Brenda Maddox *The Married Man* [Reed London 1994] p243 (the young farmer was William Henry Hocking)

⁸ his "love" had no sexual (*ie*, physical intercourse) aspect to it

⁹ *ibid* p203 ("[Lawrence] could not hide from himself his attraction to Murry's neat, trim body...& dark eyes")

¹⁰ see the "Curious Incident" *Appendix 1* in my *Lawrence's 99 Days in Australia* (The Svengali Press [Sydney 2018], & which can be viewed on our DHLA website, <http://www.dhlawrencesocietyaustralia.com.au/>)

¹¹ The first person to identify Rosenthal as Cooley was the Australian political scientist Don Rawson. In a 1968 article ("Political Violence in Australia" *Dissent* [autumn, pp 18-27]), he said Lawrence might have derived his fictional secret army from a Sydney-based patriotic organisation called the King & Empire Alliance, & that the Alliance's leader Charles Rosenthal might have been the inspiration for Benjamin Cooley in *Kangaroo*. In 1976, in the course of my own research into Lawrence's time in Australia, I came across the Alliance (independently of Rawson) & its leader Rosenthal, who physically matched Lawrence's description of Cooley in *Kangaroo* (see in particular my Research-Diary entries* dated 8/4/76, 12/10/76, & 6/11/76). In my 1981 book, *DH Lawrence in Australia*, I outlined what became known as "the Darroch Thesis", which argued that Lawrence had based *Kangaroo* on his contact with Rosenthal & his Janus-faced Alliance (mirroring the dual "Diggers" & the "Maggies" organisation in *Kangaroo*). In 1987 I specifically named Rosenthal as Cooley (see "The Man Who Was Kangaroo" [*Quadrant*, Sydney, September 1987]). Although this identification was rejected by Bruce Steel in his 1994 CUP edition of *Kangaroo*, it has been supported by Australia's leading secret army historian Dr Andrew Moore (see chapter ii of his *The Secret Army and the Premier* [UNSW Press, Sydney 1989]). The extensive evidence for it is also outlined in the Introduction to my *Lawrence's 99 Days in Australia* (*op cit*). Indicatively, Lawrence went on to portray Rosenthal again in *The Virgin and the Gypsy* as Major Charles Eastwood, who physically resembles Rosenthal & Cooley (& was also Danish, as was Rosenthal). [*relevant Research-Diary "Notes" are to be found in my *Lawrence's 99 Days in Australia* & also on our DHLA website (see above)]

¹² all quotations from the text of *Kangaroo* are paginated as in the CUP edition, though the actual text is from the 1923 Secker edition

¹³ See Footnote #24 below re what this "behaviour" might have involved

Anyhow, I send you my red motto-heart, and if you don't want it you can send it back--I will be your follower, in reverence for your virtue--Virtus. And you may command me. [K ibid]

There are in fact a number of curious things about this incident. But before we address them, we should ask what a cheap red wooden heart – what Lawrence calls “a Black Forest trifle” – was doing on Frieda’s dressing-table, among her womanly accessories, particularly one with such a patently male-chauvinist inscription.

The likelihood is that Lawrence bought it for Frieda in Germany in May 1912 when she was staying with her German family at Metz in Alsace-Lorraine. By then, Lawrence had travelled further south to Waldbröl in the Rhineland, where his aunt Ada and her German husband lived. There for more than a week he cooled his heels, waiting for Frieda to make up her mind about their future. They exchanged almost daily letters, Lawrence urging her to be resolute, abandon her husband and children, and run away with him. In one letter he enclosed a poem, agonisingly entitled “Mutilation”, which read in part:

*To-night I have left her alone.
They would have it I have left her for ever.
Oh my God, how it aches Where she is cut off from
me!
Perhaps she will go back to England. Perhaps she will go
back
Perhaps we are parted for ever.*

To press his suit, he endeavoured to make Frieda jealous by taunting her that he was flirting with his cousin Hannah in Waldbröl. She responded by telling him that she was enjoying the company of an old flame, Captain Uno von Henning. Lawrence countered this return-taunt by attempting to belittle Henning’s masculinity, describing him as “*babified*”, and likening him to a character in a Guy de Maupassant story who is breast-fed on a train.¹⁴

May in the Rhineland is a time of village fairs and other bucolic festivities. (Lawrence attended a local fair the day he arrived in Waldbröl.¹⁵) It is likely he acquired the red wooden heart at one of these fairs and sent it to Frieda as a token of his love, and an earnest of his manliness. So we can now, I believe, deduce where the red wooden heart came from, and the sentimental reasons that Frieda kept it on her dressing-table. But why did Somers (*ie* Lawrence) send it to Cooley (*ie* Rosenthal)? He did so almost certainly because on it was the name of the place it originally came from – the village of Rosenthal, about 300km north of Waldbröl in the Black Forest (whence it no doubt had made its way south by sale and resale to a village fair in the Rhineland, where Lawrence saw and bought it).¹⁶

It is here, however, where the incident gets curiousier and curiousier. Ten years later in Australia, on the morning of Saturday June 17, Lawrence and Frieda travelled up from *Wyewurk*, their cottage in Thirroul, to spend the weekend in Sydney. That evening the Lawrence character Somers had dinner, alone, with Cooley (*ie* Rosenthal) in his apartment in town. On the following Monday, Lawrence and Frieda returned to Thirroul, probably by the afternoon train. Almost immediate after they got back to *Wyewurk*, Lawrence did something most peculiar – he stripped off his clothes and

¹⁴ in a Lawrence letter to Frieda on May 17, 1912 [Letter #447] (the de Maupassant story was “The Idyll”)

¹⁵ in part ii of *Mr Noon*, which is (like *Kangaroo*) a largely-autobiographical account of this period of his life, Lawrence describes going for “long walks” in the countryside around Waldbröl; visiting a local fair; & buying pastry-shaped hearts there [*Mr Noon*, CUP p187]

¹⁶ see my article “In the Valley of the Roses” (*Rananim* vol 4, no 2-3 [December 1996]) re my visit to the Black Forest village of Rosenthal (*Rananim* can also be accessed at <http://www.dhlawrencesocietyaustralia.com.au/>)

plunged, naked, into the icy winter surf below *Wyewurk*¹⁷, after which he and Frieda had sex...

[he] went into the little wash-place and under the shower, to wash off the sticky, strong Pacific. Harriet came along with the towel, and he put his hand to her face and nodded to her. She knew what he meant, and went wondering, and when he had rubbed the wet off himself he came to her. [K p146]

This is the famous¹⁸ “sex scene” in *Kangaroo*. We can assume that, following it, the couple remained on amicable terms. This harmony would have surely continued into the next day, Tuesday June 20. But around 3pm that afternoon this happy state of affairs was shattered by the mother of all rows. We are fortunate to have independent evidence of this mega-row. An executive of one of Australia’s largest companies¹⁹, who was living in Thirroul, heard a story of a telegram-delivery boy who had to stop at the gate of *Wyewurk* for fear of venturing in, so ferocious was the rumpus inside. And in *Kangaroo* itself, Lawrence describes just such a row. He wrote:

...they had another ferocious battle, Somers and Harriet; they stood opposite to one another in such fury one against the other that they nearly annihilated one another. He couldn't stay near her, so started walking off into the country. [K p177]

He hiked up the steep slope of Bulli Pass – a strenuous effort for anyone, let alone for someone with Lawrence’s fragile physique – and sat on the edge of the Sublime Point lookout, gazing down on the village of Thirroul below, where soon the lamps were being lit, and he could probably pick out the lights of *Wyewurk*. After an absence of an hour or so, he got up and made his way back down the now darkened pass to where he could have anticipated finding at *Wyewurk* a still-irate Frieda, whom he could expect to have immediately resumed berating him.

But before he gets there, I think we can also deduce what caused that almighty row. It was no doubt ignited by Frieda’s discovery that her treasured red wooden heart – which to her was probably the equivalent of an engagement ring (for why else would she keep it on her dressing-table tray?) – was missing. Moreover, she would have extracted from a guilty Lawrence what he had done with it: sent it up to the secret army leader Rosenthal²⁰ (whose name was on it) in Sydney. Little wonder she flew into a rage. Yet soon after he walked through the door of *Wyewurk*, the tirade abruptly ceased, and Lawrence was apparently forgiven – and not just forgiven, but they made love again...

He went home again, and had forgotten the quarrel...Harriet was waiting for him rather wistful, and loving him rather quiveringly. And yet even in the quiver of her passion... [K p179]

¹⁷ as if he wanted to cleanse himself of something (for he could hardly have gone for a swim – at that time of day, in those inclement conditions – just because he fancied a dip in the briny before dinner). In fact, Lawrence in his text confirms this “cleansing” interpretation [K p146]: “Somers turned indoors, and suddenly began taking off his clothes. In a minute he was running naked in the rain which fell with lovely freshness on his skin. Ah, he felt so stuffy after that sort of emotional heat in town. Harriet in amazement saw him whitely disappearing over the edge of the low cliff-bank, and came to the edge to look.” [my emphasis]

¹⁸ an incident depicted by such Australian artists as Sidney Nolan, Brett Whiteley, Paul Delprat & Garry Shead (see photo-insert in my *Lawrence’s 99 Days in Australia*)

¹⁹ here I quote from my Research-Diary [op cit 14/11/76]: “Shan Benson (ABC producer) to dinner last night. Said Bill Fancourt, PR [public relations] staffer at BHP (Broken Hill Proprietary – Australia’s biggest company), lived in Thirroul & heard a rumour that messenger boys had to stop at the gates of *Wyewurk* because of the virulence of the rows inside between Lawrence & Frieda.”

²⁰ a “sacrifice” which indicates how important it was for Lawrence (in that he would risk Frieda’s wrath) to set up an appointment to see Rosenthal again

Now, this is not just curious, it is well-nigh incomprehensible. Only a few hours ago they were going at each other hammer and tongs, to the extent that he had to flee, leave her and the house, and trek all the way up steep Bulli Pass. So virulent was the row that a messenger-boy delivering a telegram²¹ was afraid to knock on the door. So ferocious was “*the quarrel*” that its violence was to be remembered in Thirroul for decades to come. What could have caused this astonishing turn-around?

For that we must go back to where Lawrence had been dangling his legs over the escarpment, racking his mind for what he could say to defuse Frieda’s incandescent anger, and allow him to return to *Wyewurk* and the amicable state of their relationship, *pre-bellum*. It must have been an exceedingly good explanation, for in the event it not only defused the situation, but led to further love-making. (Sex twice in three days would have been most uncharacteristic – indeed, extraordinary – in their marriage. Sex was infrequent at this time in their lives. They usually slept in separate rooms. No – this is very curious behaviour indeed.) So what was the explanation he came back with, which Frieda not only accepted with something exceeding alacrity, but which led to further intercourse?

He decided to tell her the truth. He told her the real reason why he sent the red wooden heart to Rosenthal. Now he revealed to her what had actually happened during his encounter with Rosenthal the previous Saturday. He told her that the “bear-like” secret army leader had “made a pass” at him, and that some sort of homosexual incident had taken place.²² He explained to Frieda that, somehow, he had managed to give Rosenthal the (he would have assured her the mistaken) impression that he – Lawrence – was a “*she-man*”²³, and might be receptive to a homosexual approach. (At their first meeting, a week earlier, Cooley had said to Somers: “*We are birds of the same feather, aren’t we?*” At which Somers – Lawrence – replied: “*Yes, in some ways I think we are.*”) As David Ellis and other Lawrence scholars have pointed out, Lawrence’s several descriptions of this encounter²⁴ – where there is a lot of touching and feeling – carry clear homosexual implications.

Yet Lawrence was not, as I believe I can now show, in the historical sense, homosexual. Rather he had been foolishly, recklessly, stringing Rosenthal along, agreeing to have dinner alone with him in his apartment – in effect flirting with him – in the hope of extracting more information from him to help advance his stalled narrative (which had been “stuck” for nigh on a week). Nevertheless, despite his “annoying behaviour” on Saturday, it was imperative for him to maintain contact with the leader of the Diggers and the Maggies. So that was the reason, he now assured Frieda, why he had posted the red wooden heart to Rosenthal – with the intention of setting up

²¹ *Wyewurk* did not have a telephone, so Rosenthal’s presumed response to Lawrence’s “*wooden heart*” note earlier in the week – no doubt requesting another meeting – would have to have been sent by telegram (& delivered by the “messenger boy” who was afraid to knock on the door)

²² for more about this incident, see Footnote #24 below

²³ see K p291 (*ie*, in contrast to Jack Callcott’s “*he-man*”)

²⁴ Lawrence made three and perhaps four – or even five – attempts to say what had happened that Saturday night in Rosenthal’s apartment. The first is the holograph or Thirroul account in chapter 7, “The Battle of Tongues”, written three days later. The second is his revision of this text made more than three months later in Taos. The third is the addition to the account he later interpolated into chapter 11, “Willie Struthers and Kangaroo” (when, lacking anything else, he needed to “pad out” that chapter). The fourth was possibly his false start to chapter 9, “Harriet and Lovat at Sea in Marriage” (see my *Lawrence’s 99 Days in Australia* re this snippet of text). The fifth was probably in the missing chapter Lawrence cut out of the holograph on June 19 or 20 (whose stubs indicate text that they mentioned Cooley). The first three versions are replete with homoerotic innuendo (see my *Appendix 1*) & homosexual implications (*viz*: “*many [men] have been alone a long time*”; “*Should not a man know the whole range [of love]?*”; “*in the sacred dark men meet and touch, and it is a great communion*”; “*Somers would have given him heart and soul and body, for the asking, and damn all consequences. He longed to do it.*”; “*I love you so. I love you so.*”; “*Richard’s hand was almost drawn...to touch the other man’s body. He had deliberately to refrain because automatically his hand would have lifted*”; “*he was helplessly attracted to him*”; “*Suddenly, with a great massive movement [he] caught the other man to his breast.*”; “*you have the most loveable eyes I have ever known...I have never loved a man as I love you*” [holograph text]; “*In those few moments when he was clasped to the warm, passionate body of Kangaroo, Somers’ mind flew with swift thought. Damn his love. He wants to FORCE me.*”; &, of course, “*We are birds of the same feather, aren’t we?*”) [take particular note of Lawrence’s word, in upper-case, “*FORCE*”]

another meeting the following Saturday (via his accompanying “*Mut*” note).

Of course, his intention had been that Rosenthal would read the adage inscribed on the “Black Forest trifle” and taken it as a testament of his heterosexuality, reinforced by the enclosed note about his “*Mut*”, his manliness. When back in 1912 he had sent the same red wooden heart to Frieda, the message he was sending to her then was a declaration of his masculinity, to counter the supposed attentions of the effeminate Henning. Now, 10 years later, she would have accepted, readily, that this was the message he had just sent to Rosenthal. This explanation apparently reassured her sufficiently to overlook the loss of her dressing-table “trifle”... and to seal her forgiveness with a kiss. Unfortunately for Lawrence, however, it would not be the *Mut* inscription on the red wooden heart that Rosenthal’s eyes would have alighted on; but rather the object itself, the heart, the traditional symbol of love. Lawrence – naively, incredibly – had overlooked this (to him now) secondary or subsidiary connotation.

So when, around 6pm on the following Saturday night, Lawrence turned up at Rosenthal’s apartment for their scheduled *à deux* dinner, the secret army leader would have been looking forward to a very pleasant evening. Imagine his horror then when he became aware, probably while sipping a pre-dinner *aperitif*²⁵, that his prospective “toy-boy” was not interested in an encore sexual encounter; but had come, he now realised, to try to extract more secret army information from him, and that what he had thought was Lawrence’s affection for him was no more a ruse to fool, deceive, and dupe him. It was then, as Lawrence so vividly describes in chapter xi in *Kangaroo*, that Cooley/Rosenthal was transformed into a monster (and threatens to have him killed if he reveals anything about their secret army of Diggers and Maggies).²⁶ This encounter in Sydney on Saturday night June 22 – probably the worst day in Lawrence’s life²⁷ – sparked “The Nightmare” chapter in *Kangaroo*,²⁸ and provides dramatic confirmation of Lawrence’s repudiation, when push came to shove, of physical homosexual behaviour.

They were not birds of the same feather, after all.²⁹

²⁵ which was presumably when Lawrence revealed (see *K* p205) that earlier in the day – that very morning – he had been to see “Jock” Garden, the Communist leader of the union movement in NSW, & the “*bête rouge*” of Rosenthal’s secret army (which revelation launched Rosenthal’s subsequent tirade)

²⁶ There can be little doubt about the virulence & violence of Rosenthal’s reaction. Lawrence describes [*K* pp 210-11] what happened: “*He had become again hideous, with a long yellowish face and black eyes close together, and a cold, mindless, dangerous hulk to his shoulders. For a moment Somers was afraid of him, as of some great ugly idol that might strike. He felt the intense hatred of the man coming at him in cold waves. He stood up in a kind of horror, in front of the great close-eyed horrible thing that was now Kangaroo. Yes, a thing, not a whole man. A great Thing, a horror.*”

²⁷ Lawrence called it “*this memorable day*” [*K* p205]

²⁸ see my *Appendix 1* (in *99 Days*) in which I postulate that Lawrence’s confrontation with Rosenthal ignited a magna chamber of repressed memory in his unconscious mind, whose pyroclastic volcanic flow then fuelled “The Nightmare” chapter (Lawrence had been having mini-nightmares for several weeks previously – one on the previous Saturday night, after he returned from seeing Rosenthal)

²⁹ So where on the queer scale does that leave Lawrence? There doesn’t seem much doubt that Lawrence had a homoerotic streak in his complex makeup (as pointed out by many). I believe, however, that this was essentially part of his more general erotic nature – what he called “*the dark god that enters from below*” – & coexisted with his more dominant heterosexual side, as the red wooden heart episode demonstrates. (Lawrence uses the term “dark god” in only one novel, & that is *Kangaroo*, where it appears 25 times. Indicatively, I would argue, it appears first in chapter 7 “The Battle of Tongues” – more than a third of a way through the text – when Lawrence describes the Saturday-evening confrontation with Cooley [*ie*, Rosenthal].)