

NOTES

D.H. LAWRENCE AND AUSTRALIA

AMONGST THE PAPERS that were read at the Annual Conference of the Society in Melbourne in September 1980 was 'Damp feathers; or, the slow ascent of a *Phoenix*', by Bruce Steele. It was an examination of the publishing history of the posthumous works of D.H. Lawrence. After he had presented his paper, Professor Steele was questioned on Lawrence's reputation in Australia and the availability of his works in this country during the 1930s. I was employed in that period by a Melbourne bookseller who distributed most of Lawrence's works of fiction and I remained in the bookselling world for 51 years; thus I was in a position to throw a little light on the subject.

When I joined Robertson and Mullens early in 1928, they still conducted a vast wholesale business throughout Australia and New Zealand. This was additional to a substantial retail connection, all efficiently departmentalised. There were agents in each mainland State as well as in New Zealand. The whole operation stemmed from the Victorian Gold Rush days of 1852 and after. Two seniors who were there in my time had joined the firm in the 1870s; one of them, from Robertson's, retired in 1938, the other, from Mullen's, a year later¹. There was no superannuation in those days. In the store-room I had noticed ten or twelve packing cases, each full of Lawrence's less-popular novels. The cases, designed in England specially for the 'colonial' trade, were still being made and used a century later, until superseded by cartons. The cases had the titles and quantities marked on them; each held an average of 205 crown octavo volumes.

My employers held the marketing rights for these and other publications, including works of non-fiction. This meant negotiating with publishers before publication, and usually before the book had been printed, through the firm's London office which had been opened back in 1857. When, after an exchange of cables and letters, the price and quantity had been agreed upon, the particulars would be passed on to agents and travellers, who would then book orders from booksellers throughout Australasia. The bigger houses refused to sell their publications in this manner, preferring to supply the booksellers direct. To the struggling publisher, however, the arrangement was a godsend, as he could be sure of selling at least 1000 copies and possibly 3000-4000. There would be repeat orders if a book proved to be popular. Thus the publisher would often be in a position to cover his entire production costs through one sale. It meant a lot to Lawrence's publisher, Martin Secker, a man with expert literary judgment but lacking in business acumen. He also lacked the capital needed to run a publishing house. When my firm marketed P.C. Wren's *Beau Geste* in the 1920s, they sold 110,000 copies in five years. This was their outstanding achievement in this sphere. It was published by John Murray.

The first D.H. Lawrence work that they distributed was *Kangaroo*, in 1923.

It was an immediate success and had to be re-ordered. They also handled *Aaron's Rod* in the same year. When it had been published in 1922, it had not been well received. Slowly the tide turned and a reprint was called for in 1924. *The Boy in the Bush*, written in collaboration with Mary Louisa Skinner of Perth, was also successful when published in 1924. Other Lawrence works, none of which was a financial success, were *The Ladybird* (1923), *St. Mawr* (1925), *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) and *The Woman Who Rode Away* (1928). The death of Lawrence coincided with the advent of the Depression, so there were no further writings of his that were suitable for distribution. The Depression affected rates of exchange, making it uneconomic for New Zealand booksellers to buy British books from Australia. They were much cheaper if bought in Britain, so a good outlet was lost.

Only the two novels with an Australian background enjoyed wide sales. Writings such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* were never considered by my principals as suitable material for marketing. They wished neither to go to gaol as martyrs nor to destroy the firm's good name. Either or both these dire things might have happened in those grim and narrow times. Some other Secker publications that were marketed included *Memoirs of the Foreign Legion*, by 'M.M.' (Maurice Magnus). It was fairly successful in 1924. It contained a long and interesting Introduction by Lawrence. *The Case of Sergeant Grischa*, by Arnold Zweig, was a brilliant success in 1929. Ludwig Renn's *War* was popular in 1930.

The ten or twelve cases sat in the store until 1935, when their contents (*St. Mawr*, *Aaron's Rod*) were put out in a sale. They had originally been sold here at six shillings, but barely moved when reduced to 2s.6d. In another sale conducted three years later, they were all cleared at one shilling. The ailing Secker business was bought in 1936 by Fredric Warburg, late of Routledge and Kegan Paul. With new management and a fresh injection of capital, it developed into a leading publishing house. British and American publishers have since opened their own warehouses in Australia, thus ending the kind of marketing described here. It had received a setback during the Second World War, when publishers could sell every available copy without having to slash the price in order to make a large sale.

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¹ George Robertson's business was established in 1852, Samuel Mullen's in 1859. They were amalgamated in 1921.

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