

Janet Byrne. *A Genius for Living: The Life of Frieda Lawrence.* New York: HarperCollins, 1995. vii + 504 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-06-019001-9.



Reviewed by John Woodrow Presley

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A Genius for Living and Brenda Maddox's *D. H. Lawrence: The Story of a Marriage* (1994) are part of a "third wave" of Lawrence biographies; after "memoirs" by friends came the first scholarly biographies such as Harry T. Moore's *The Intelligent Heart*. Both Byrne and Maddox exploit new sources, such as collections of Frieda's letters to her lovers, and though both biographies share at least the aim to reclaim the character of Frieda Lawrence by revealing her complexity, as Maddox had done previously with the character of Nora Joyce in *Nora* (1988), the aims of the two biographies are entirely different, as their subtitles indicate.

It is ironic--though predictable, given prior assumptions of male scholars and Lawrence's friends--that the first two waves of Lawrence biographies presented Frieda as a plodding earth-mother to Lawrence's genius. In fact she was a headstrong, well-educated daughter of the aristocratic von Richtofens. By the time Frieda chose Lawrence as her escape from her dull first husband, she was a sophisticated veteran of many affairs, both on the Continent and in Nottingham.

New information about one of these affairs, with Otto Gross, places Frieda's relationship to Lawrence's work in new light. In 1907, still married to Ernest Weekley, Frieda took her sister's place as Gross's lover. Gross, Freud's most brilliant student, advocated overthrow of all sexual inhibition, in a return to the worship of Magna Mater and pre-patriarchal pagan life. Frieda was a passionate follower of Nietzsche, and Gross linked Nietzsche to the then barely known ideas of Freud, particularly at Gross's retreat for his followers at Ascona. Frieda was the link, passing these ideas to D. H. Lawrence.

Byrne, unlike the more self-consciously scholarly Maddox, does not attempt to explain the Lawrences' constant wandering and fighting (unlike every other Lawrence biographer, none of whom could resist theorizing). In describing details of the marriage, Byrne reveals that Frieda was not only an inspiration for characters and ideas in Lawrence's works; she was frequently his first reader and critic, sometimes even an editor. In fact, in both these biographies we learn that, in addition to her own memoirs and correspondence, Frieda was a translator and editor in her own right. Her anti-intellectualism frequently

mistaken for stupidity, Frieda Lawrence as presented by Byrne is no passive *lumpenfrau*. Byrne's Frieda introduced Lawrence to free-thinking eroticism, and later managed both his literary reputation and estate very successfully.

Weaknesses of *A Genius for Living* are few: it offers less interpretation than does the Maddox biography, and like all Lawrence biographies, unfortunately, it treats Frieda's life after Lawrence's death too briefly (twenty-five years rush by in three perfunctory chapters).

Byrne's biography will appeal to casual and scholarly readers interested in the "new woman," in the transference of the ideas of Freud and the erotic philosophy of Gross to the banned but popular works of D. H. Lawrence, and of course to those interested in the compelling story of Frieda Lawrence herself, who challenged virtually every notion then current concerning the roles of women.

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