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IN SEARCH OF LAWRENCE'S VILLA IN TAORMINA

By Michael Lester



Michael and Jill Lester

It is my destiny to wander (Lawrence)

IN LATE November 2015 Jill and I set out to visit the “Villa Fontana Vecchia” and locales frequented by Lawrence and Frieda during their eighteen month stay in Taormina, Sicily from February 1920. Ours alas, is a tale of frustration and disappointment, not unlike Lawrence’s own deep frustrations and often anger with his restless peripatetic travels in search of freedom and meaning....

I particularly enjoy visiting the many places and haunts that the ever-restless Lawrence had visited, lived and written in. We have been to the two cabins he rented on the Del Monte ranch house in the hills outside Taos, New Mexico, where Frieda buried his ashes. We have also visited Zennor, the tiny Cornish village that was the scene of his harassment as a supposed ‘spy’ for the Germans. We live in Cremorne, Sydney just round the corner from where Lawrence visited Mosman Bay and Neutral Bay where he stayed visiting local contacts that provided the material for his Australian novel, *Kangaroo* written in 1922. These visits and familiarity with the places in which he

It is lined with the predominantly gently tinted white limestone buildings of the many ages and cultures that have invaded the island. Classical, medieval, renaissance and even baroque, styles constitute a virtual encyclopedia of architecture through the ages. The heritage is immaculately maintained, and actively in use for small businesses and commerce, while the streets and piazzas are proudly festooned and garlanded with a colourful array of flowers. It is a sheer delight that these days unfortunately endures and it must be said, prospers, from the inevitable over-commercialization of mass tourism. They all came, they saw, they paid...and then they left.

We sat in the warm late autumn evenings on our terracotta paved terrace high above the wonderful sparkling waters of Castellamare Bay with its dazzling aquamarine hues, under a vast pellucid sky, sipping on our aperitifs of orange coloured and flavoured Aperol Spritz and rose wine, and munching on the delicious local salamis, olives and cheeses. It is easy to fall under a certain spell of enchantment. Looming high above us to our far right was the smoking cone of Mount Etna the highest active volcano in Europe, immediately above us lay the medieval, crenellated walls of Castellamare, while behind and to our left nestled the wondrous remains of the Greco-Roman theatre possessed of surely the finest setting ever for such a venue. Immediately below lay the terraced public garden Giardini-Naxos with its sweeping views over the sun-bathed water and to a delightful design of topiary, flowers, trees, ponds and follies. Sometimes called the Trevelyan Gardens it was laid out in the English style in the late nineteenth century complete with small ‘follies’.

spent time and on which he drew in his writing adds to an understanding and appreciation of his writing; Lawrence indeed coined the phrase ‘spirit of place’. Many have remarked upon Lawrence’s remarkable genius among writers to ‘inhabit a place at a glance’ and the remarkable simplicity of his apparently app-arently ‘effortless reportage’. Yet he always moved on...

‘Sicily is not Italy’

‘Sicily is not Italy’ declare the tourism guides and posters as we made our way around this triangular-shaped and very mountainous Italian island, the second largest island in the Mediterranean, on a car touring holiday for five weeks. The island’s symbol is the ‘Trinacria’ a three-corned figure, a Gorgon head Medea with snakes for hair. Sicily lies off the coast of southern Italy, across the legendary Straits of Messina, and between the stunningly blue waters of the Ionian and Tyrrhenian Seas. Importantly in its history it also lies only one hundred miles north of the African coast.

Due to its strategic location in the Mediterranean Sicily has a unique and culturally diverse history even when set against the standards of its Italian mainland. It has been successively invaded and occupied by the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Swabian Germans, French, Spanish and Italians. Despite its tumultuous history it has a timeless and unchanging character captured so vividly by its native son Giuseppe del Lampedusa (1896-1957) in his classic novel ‘The leopard’ set in the turbulent nineteenth century of the ‘Risorgimento’ (Unification of Italy). They all came... and then they eventually left.

Taormina is like a ‘node’ in Lawrence’s travels alongside Taos and Villa Mirinda outside Florence. In the immediate post-war years Lawrence had a pattern of travel in Europe that would find him spending nine months a year in Italy until it just became too hot for him. He lived in Italy from November 1919, when he left England, until February 1922, when he sailed for Ceylon; he remained outside Italy for three and a half years, returning in November 1925. His ‘dash’ to Sardinia while living in Taormina inspired his wonderful ‘The sea and Sardinia’ and sits alongside his ‘Etruscan Places’, ‘Twilight in Italy’ and a number of shorter ‘Italian essays’ as further testament to his remarkable powers of evocative and innovative benchmark contributions to the genre of travel writing. They stand alongside Goethe’s classic “Italian Journey”(1816) and his description of Sicily as ‘a little patch of paradise’.



Limestone buildings

Lawrence wrote in *Sea and Sardinia*: “Etna, like a white queen, or a white witch, standing there in the sky; so magically beautiful, but I think wicked”. When he arrived in 1920 he read and was enchanted by the writings of the preeminent novelist of the region, the realist writer, Giovanni Verga (1840-1922) and fascinated by his spare and concise language. He set to translating Verga’s works while in Taormina. Verga provided brutal details of local peasant lives dominated by toil and poverty but redeemed by spontaneous vitality, themes shared in Lawrence’s own works.

‘a glossy sheen of glamour’

Taormina is proud of its artistic and literary heritage as a famous watering hole for visiting European and American celebrities over the decades. There are signs at various locations displaying photos of many of them in the haunts they frequented. The brochures sparkle with celebrity names, from the days of the European ‘grand tour’ in the late nineteenth century when Taormina was ‘discovered’ by the glitterati of the day, including, Goethe, Dumas, Wilde, Wagner, Brahms, Klimt... Latterly came the Hollywood stars, directors, writers and jet set, including Capote, Hemmingway, Tennessee Williams, Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, Marcello Mastroianni, Ingmar Bergman, Cary Grant, Francis Ford Coppola, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Federico Fellini, Woody Allen....

Taormina has always had about it that ‘glossy sheen of glamour’ that reflected the epithet ‘the pearl of the Mediterranean’. There is a large café plastered with photos and names of celebrity visitors. The grandest hotel in town, perched on a high point overlooking the sea at the far end of



The main Square

'so magically beautiful'

The picturesque setting of Taormina was a source of immediate attraction to Lawrence despite his abhorrence of its evident poverty and squalor. He wrote *Lady Chatterley* while living there on the north east coast of the island, just down from the Straits of Messina that separate the island from the toe of the mainland, the province of Calabria and the poor regions of southern Italy. It is a beautiful tourist 'hill top' village set on a rocky and steep promontory overlooking the Ionian Sea. We based ourselves there for a week and it was on our agenda to seek out and visit the house called Villa Fontana Vecchia that he and Frieda rented.

The main street Corso Umberto wends its way over a few hundred metres merging into the equally lovely Via Teatro Greci, adhering to a single contour of the towering hills with picturesque piazzas and inviting laneways, above and below.

the town and next to the Greco-Roman theatre site, closed for the off season when we were there, is marketed as the place for the in-crowd and is redolent with luxury viewed even from the outside. In season Taormina hosts a dazzling array of cultural festivals, such as, film festival held for the past 60 years in the Greco-Roman theatre each June, the literary Tao Book festival each September, and the annual Tao Arte.

'A nice big house at some distance above the sea'

Jill and I confidently set out on another bright sunny morning to find Villa Fontana Vecchia. Having read Lawrence's description our expectations were fuelled : 'a nice big house, with fine rooms and a handy kitchen, set in a big garden, mostly vegetables, green with almond trees, on a steep slope at some distance above the sea. It is beautiful, and green, green and full of flowers'.

We were armed with a local tourist map that to our delight showed a clearly marked Via David Herbert Lawrence further on up the hill just outside the old town walls. Surprisingly however, the map, which marked the locations of houses lived in by visiting celebrities and writers, carried no indication of Lawrence's house. In any event, this promised to be a lot easier an assignment than trying to track down the farm outside Taos which we did find in due course, obligingly signposted by the University of New Mexico that now owns it; or his cottage in the small Cornish village of Zennor which eluded us completely; or indeed his rented house 'Wyewurk' on the clifftops above the beach at Thirroul on the south coast out of Sydney, that we did

[continued over page](#)

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Rananim

In Search of Lawrence's Villa in Taormina *(continued from page 1)*

Page 2

eventually track down though not able to enter because privately owned.

Suspicion and grubbiness

We decided anyway to enquire at the Tourist Office located within the town walls on the first floor of the beautiful predominantly 15th century Palazzo Corvajo, in a Renaissance courtyard, off the lovely Piazza Santa Caterina . I approached the counter attended by three ladies busily engaged in a lively discussion. After a while one of them disengaged and smiling asked me how she could be of assistance.



The Tourist Centre

Pointing at my little map and at the Via Lawrence I enquired whether they could direct us to the location of Fontana Vecchia the Lawrence house? Consternation ensued as she consulted her colleagues and it became evident that they had no knowledge of Lawrence, despite the street, let alone of the villa. After further exchanges the best they could suggest was that we try the Fontana Vecchia 'bed and breakfast' establishment. I thanked them and we departed.

On reflection, this less than helpful experience seemed to confirm our feeling in moving around Sicily that the local people are inherently

Our closer inspection was disappointing; the house looked neither old nor impressive enough, nor did it have a view of the sea or a large terraced garden filled with olive trees as we had read. After all, we had read, too, about how Lawrence would observe the frolics of a local lady with a donkey-driving farm worker in the olive grove terraces below the house...or was that Freida herself? Had this been an inspiration for the character of Constance Chatterley? But, hadn't we read also, in researching our visit that Lawrence's villa had indeed been converted in recent times to a small and welcoming bed and breakfast place? Our attempts to arouse a resident by repeated knocking on the door at the B&B entrance and calling out were to no avail; the whole place looked sleepy and shut down in this off-season. We were lost and confused in welter of conflicting and seemingly unanswerable questions.



The B&B

Blissfully unaware, the road wound ahead of us steeply in the growing heat of the day, and we inspected in great expectation a couple of the more substantial free standing houses along the way, especially those on the downhill side of the street but to no

suspicious of strangers and unforthcoming, that is, at least until they get to know you and feel they can trust you. Their first reaction in response to a question is to deny any knowledge. No doubt this trait is one of self-preservation in the face of a history of conquests and a culture of organized crime so richly evoked in 'Midnight in Sicily' by Peter Robb. Once you penetrate this natural wariness they are delightful and generous, proud to share with you their rich culture.

Immediately you walk beyond the town walls through the Porta Messina heading for via Lawrence the town takes on a less salubrious air, transitioning from the clean, historic and well maintained tourist center to the decidedly more grubby and considerably less aesthetically pleasing streets and apartments of the regular town dwellers. Sad to say, that driving round Sicily we were struck in a number of regions by the frequent disparity between the idyllic if often rugged scenery of the island and the grubbiness of its contemporary man-made locales and habitations; there is a widespread disregard for public amenity and cleanliness exemplified by numerous roadside garbage dumps, scavenged by birds, vermin and local dogs, of the most putrid household waste that appeared to be collected infrequently, at best, if at all. Might this we wondered be put down to a deep-seated history of poverty, a condition that persists to this day in Sicily.

I was now having trouble reconciling this part of the scene with the picturesque setting I had conjured in my mind for Villa Vecchia based on Lawrence's descriptions of the house, the neighbourhood and the scenic pastoral walks he was accustomed daily to take. I can only conjecture that much has changed and for the worse since he visited here nearly one hundred years ago. Perhaps not surprisingly the population has grown considerably and the modern, cheap and unsightly apartment blocks have probably filled the many green large plots of land upon which must have stood the original and grander villas such as Villa Vecchia on the slopes outside town. Mind you, it was also proving difficult to find many such examples.

Encountering disappointment

To our relief and growing sense of excitement after a few minutes meandering around we came across via Lawrence. The street sign was clear enough, mounted on a post at the bottom of the road heading up hill but alas in keeping with the

avail. Expectantly we would gaze up at the walls half hoping to find a sign or a plaque, like those wonderful blue circular plaques they use in London to denote residences of past famous inhabitants, or the similar historic marker signs used on Paris dwellings, but not a sign was to be seen. No one appeared in the sleepy street whom we might ask for information, not that at this stage we would have expected anyone we had encountered to know or care the first thing about Lawrence or his house, or indeed willing to respond to our questions.

'I am tired of it'

There was nothing for it but to admit defeat, a defeat particularly frustrating having so readily and tantalizingly found Via Lawrence that had so raised our expectations. Perhaps inevitably and on a philosophical note, as Ruskin has implied, we are doomed to never be able to fully appreciate and satisfy our perception of place, and possess it for ourselves.



Via David Herbert Lawrence

Thus the tale of our thwarted quest for the Lawrence house in Taormina made more bitter by the subsequent realization that it was there all the time but marked as Capote's residence. Why did the Tourist office and the map not inform us of Lawrence? I seek some consolation in our feeling in our disappointment an echo of the continual sense of frustration with place that drove the lifelong peripatetic journeys of Lawrence. He was evidently in search of something, 'his insatiable hunger for meaning' which to his anger he could never find in the physical world, despite his genius for capturing

general look of the neighborhood it was in a rusty and unkempt condition. Still, a promising discovery buttressed by our seeing nearby a small fountain in the middle of the cross road with the Via Vecchia; might this be the Fontana Vecchia echoing the name of Lawrence's villa which surely must lie close at hand, or did we recall reading that the fountain was in the grounds of the villa itself? At this stage our eyes alighted upon a sign on a nearby three storey, yellow stucco building called Fontana Vecchia 'bed and breakfast'; could this be the house we were looking for?



Fountain with B&B in background

the fullness of the physical reality of place in the written word 'instantaneously and without effort'. Clive James sees in this the great pathos of Lawrence's 'extraterrestrial un-belonging'.

Lawrence, after 18 months in Taormina came to the conclusion that 'the Taormina natives are as mean and creeping as ever.....one must have done with Italy...I have been hating Taormina but one hates everywhere in fits and starts'. And with his restless spirit in search of the spiritual he inevitably decided to move on and left in February 1922 for New Mexico via Ceylon and on to Australia where in writing *Kangaroo* he once again showed his mastery of quickly capturing a spiritual sense of place. Reacting too against the growing fascist mood he wrote as he left Italy: "...the country is sickening ...I am tired of it."

How fleeting too is the local fame of the visiting celebrity even in a town that takes pride in and promotes its artistic and literary heritage. Literary tastes and fashions come and go and it seems that at this juncture, in Sicily at least Lawrence is not a writer in vogue.

What does stay with me despite the disappointment is the spirit of place, of the very beautiful landscape of Sicily, of its difficult history and of its hardy people and of the charms of the old town of Taormina which initially so enchanted Lawrence and Frieda. And as for literary pilgrimages and the quest for places visited and lived in by Lawrence I remain as committed as ever. Such itineraries not only add to an appreciation of his work and character, but also serve to introduce us to wonderful new places, cultures, and experiences, initially through the eyes of Lawrence. My next call may be to visit Eastwood in Nottingham in search of his birthplace and other homes there, or Metz among his first places, or Scandicci or Venice his last places, or.....

"You need a change of soul rather than a change of climate" (Seneca)

