***Circulating Genius: John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield and D. H. Lawrence*, by Sydney Janet Kaplan, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh (ISBN 978 0 7486 6486 3), 2012, £19.99**

In this groundbreaking study, Sydney Janet Kaplan investigates the triangular relationship between John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield and D. H. Lawrence, centring her attention on Murry and his underrated, previously marginalised place in the development of literary modernism in Britain. The book is not, however, just an innovative study of Murry as writer and critic but discusses these roles via an examination of the intersections between his life and that of the lives and writings of Mansfield and Lawrence. The ten chapters offer an analysis of Murry's first novel *Still Life*; a comparison of *Still Life* with Lawrence's *Women in Love* and then Mansfield's 'Bliss'; Bloomsbury social and literary politics; Mansfield and Murry as authors in the marketplace and Lawrence's attack on them; an analysis of Murry's second and final novel *The Things We Are*; and the three final chapters take each author in turn, revealing how they circulated perceptions of themselves, and how their ideas were circulated—and to some extent their lives recreated—by the other two in the triangle.

The relationship between Murry and Lawrence was challenging to say the least—occasionally intimate and companionable, more frequently difficult and emotionally complex, sometimes angry and steeped in misunderstanding and confrontation. Surprisingly little has been written about this relationship, given its importance within the annals of early-twentieth-century literature, and, until Kaplan's book, no full-length study had been written.[1] Yet, after reading this fascinating study, one can only wonder why it has taken so long for someone to tackle the subject. In addition, Kaplan discusses the relationship each man had with Mansfield, who was Murry's partner and eventual wife. Kaplan is well qualified to take on this task. Her critical book *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* (1991) remains one of the most important and frequently cited works on Mansfield, according her a significant place in the canon of literary modernism at a time when male critics were not mentioning her at all in their assessments of the modernist era. In this earlier work Kaplan wrote:

> By importing symbolist devices into realistic fiction, Mansfield exemplifies how the male-bonded nineteenth-century aesthetes became absorbed into the twentieth-century feminist consciousness. Some of her brilliance lies in her realization that the symbolism of the aesthetes could be joined, as well, to a twentieth-century epistemology—partially Freudian, partially feminist.[2]

Prior to this assessment, the common view was that of Mansfield as minor modernist writer, dealing in a delicate, feminine way with the domestic aspects of life—the literary equivalent of painters such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt with whom her work is often compared. By contrast, Kaplan marks Mansfield out as an innovator, a modernist and a feminist, and a great writer. For some revisionary critics of modernism, Mansfield remains a marginalised writer of short stories, virtually eliminated from the history of the movement. In Michael Levenson's first edition of the *Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (1999), she merits only the briefest of mentions, though accorded a little more prominence in the later revised edition (2011). This original oversight demonstrates how short-story writers are frequently marginalised. For Kaplan, however, Mansfield belongs, with Woolf, at the heart of British modernism.

So, a book which deals not only with the relationship between Murry and Lawrence but which also gives prominence to Mansfield's relationship with both of *them*, is a rare literary gem. In Kaplan's capable hands much can be learnt about all three writers, including valuable insights into their complex relationships with each other and, more importantly, how the events of their daily lives fed into their fiction. For one of the real highlights of this book is Kaplan's assessment of Murry's fictional output, which has never been addressed in any meaningful way before, revealing significant biographical detail overlooked by previous critics and biographers of all three writers.

Unusually, and perhaps most importantly, Murry is placed at the apex of this literary triangle:

> My concern here is rather to pay attention to the ways that modernist literary history looks different when Murry is at its centre. Murry interacted, both professionally and emotionally, with so many figures of importance in modernism: Mansfield, of course, and Lawrence, but also significantly with Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Aldous Huxley. Therefore, when I suggest putting him at the centre, it is not to imply that he is 'major' in some hierarchical order of modernists, but instead to investigate how much more we can learn about the dynamics of early twentieth-century literary relations when Murry is used as its fulcrum. I am interested in how both his love and his friendship were complicated by his intersecting relations with Bloomsbury and by the dynamics of literary politics and personal competition. (10)

When Murry came down from Oxford in 1911, aged just 22, having abandoned his degree, and co-founded the little magazine *Rhythm*, 'Pound and Eliot were virtually unknown, James Joyce had published no fiction, D. H. Lawrence had not written *Sons and Lovers*, nor Virginia Woolf her first novel'.[3] His subsequent editorships

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[1] For a rare article on the subject, see Ernest G. Griffin, 'The Circular and the Linear: The Middleton-Murry–D. H. Lawrence Affair', *D. H. Lawrence Review*, Vol. II, No. 1 (1969), 76–92.

[2] Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* (Ithica: Cornell UP, 1991), 64.

[3] *The Letters of John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield*, ed. Cherry A. Hankin (London: Constable, 1983), 4.

of the *Athenaeum* and later the *Adelphi* placed him at the vanguard of literary London in the early twentieth century. This did not of course always make him a popular figure—Woolf famously referred to him in a letter as 'the one vile man I have ever known' (*Letters*, no.2352, 15 April 1931), a sentiment echoed by many of her contemporaries. What on earth made her comment in quite such a vituperative way? Kaplan offers some answers via an assessment of Murry's character, while at the same time occasionally surprising the reader with a more generous and sympathetic reading of his personality and abilities than has previously been the case.

As mentioned above, Kaplan's book centres in part on a mainly biographical reading of two of Murry's three novels: *Still Life* (1916) and *The Things We Are* (1922), incorporating Mansfield and Lawrence into her understanding of both stories' genesis and development. Murry was no novelist: '*Still Life*, published in 1916, was considered a failure by friends and critics alike. Lawrence complained that it was the "kind of wriggling self-abuse I can't make head or tail of"'. Indeed, Murry himself recognised that his talents lay elsewhere, that novel writing was 'merely my blundering way of learning—as always by hard experience—that I was not a novelist' (13). And yet, within its 464 densely written pages about two very modern couples, their affairs and their rather tortuous psychological ramblings, Murry's treatment of the various sexual urges of the protagonists—not all of them heterosexual—clearly reveals the influence of Lawrence and Mansfield, though with no visionary conclusion: 'It reveals instead a typically modernist fracturing of any notion of "community". Its characters remain self-enclosed, in self-imposed isolation' (39).

Kaplan reveals the novel's parallels with Lawrence's *Women in Love*—these were written at roughly the same time, including a period when the Lawrences lived next-door to Murry and Mansfield—thereby absorbing 'a great deal of the emotional conflict, subliminal sexual desires and intellectual concerns' of the intense periods spent in each others' company (44). She also makes a fascinating case for similarities between *Still Life* and Mansfield's possibly most famous story, 'Bliss' (1918), echoing Cherry Hankin's assertion that the story centres on Mansfield's and Murry's relationship with Ottoline Morrell, whose Garsington circle they were introduced to, and tentatively became a part of, during the period 1915–16.[4] Murry had spent Christmas at Garsington in 1915, while Mansfield remained in Bandol:

> That visit to Garsington gave Murry his first full exposure to the atmosphere of Bloomsbury, and as he remarked to Mansfield in his letter on 26 December, it made him feel as if he had 'been knocked suddenly tumbling into a different world'. He was finding it 'so strange to go for long walks with people like Lytton Strachey & Clive Bell, and spend the whole time talking about everything under the sun, just for the sake of talking. ... though they are rather a close corporation—most of them have known each other for ten years or more, they are a fairly decent lot, fantastic and fin de siècle, perhaps, but pretty good underneath'. (66)

By the end of the book, Kaplan shows just how far Murry's opinion would be reversed. Lawrence, of course, had already been to Garsington, and indeed Ottoline Morrell had been visiting him since early 1915. Kaplan cites his letter to Ottoline of 23 February 1915, in which he enthusiastically calls Murry '"one of the men of the future" and tells her that his novel in progress is "*very* good": "At present he is my partner—the only man who quite simply is with me—One day he'll be ahead of me. Because he'll build up the temple if I carve out the way"' (65). The path was long and tortuous that led from this encouraging and friendly report to his calling Murry in 1920 'a dirty little mud worm' three times, telling him to 'deposit your dirty bit of venom where you like' (131). This outburst followed Murry's rejection, as editor of the *Athenaeum*, of some articles Lawrence had sent him. Relations between the two men would never be the same again. Murry's condemnatory review later that year of Lawrence's *The Lost Girl* was entitled 'The Decay of Mr D. H. Lawrence', and firmly marked out the battle lines. Woolf's own review of the same book, published anonymously in the *TLS*, had been much more favourable, claiming that 'this novel, which is "probably better than any that will appear for the next six months", might be "a stepping stone in a writer's progress"' (134).

Murry's second novel, *The Things We Are*, was written in 1921 in Menton and then in Switzerland. He was no longer editor of the *Athenaeum*, having resigned in February 1921. Kaplan notes that this departure signalled the end of his relationship with Bloomsbury: 'For, without Murry's influence as editor to consider, Woolf and her friends had no need to pretend interest in him and their barely submerged hostility need no longer be held in check' (137). During the writing of the book, a modernist *Bildungsroman* based on his own formative experiences, Eliot-like in its description of sordid cityscapes, Murry read *Women in Love* and published a damning review, with the participation of Mansfield, in the *Nation and Athenaeum*, calling the book 'obscene', with its characters groping 'in their own slime' (138). And yet there are traces of Lawrence's work to be found here:

> Although Murry's relationship with Lawrence is not the subject of his novel, that relationship seems to leave its trace, nonetheless, in an emotional undertow, a contrary libidinal energy that once had been so damaging to their friendship ... Greatly diminished, no doubt, but at some level of awareness—perhaps not fully acknowledged—Murry lets it intrude. (141)

At the same time, Mansfield was writing 'At the Bay' (1921), a personal magnificat to her New Zealand

[4] C. A. Hankin, *Katherine Mansfield and Her Confessional Stories* (New York: St Martin's Press,1983), 142.

childhood, resurrected once more through the eyes of her young self via the character of Kezia, and a far cry from the seedy cityscapes of Bettington, Murry's Baudelairian, *flâneur* protagonist in *The Things We Are*. Kaplan speculates: 'Did she and Murry talk about their childhoods again in those long evenings at the Chalet, unwinding from their mutually intense hours at their separate writing tables? ... he knew well that Mansfield's perception of her childhood was complex and ambivalent, full of the dualities that were a constant feature of her personality' (149). Woolf disliked Murry's novel intensely. Echoing a phrase from it in which a woman is seen 'pegging out washing in a dank and mildewed garden' (147), Woolf picks up the notion of 'mildew' in a letter to Ottoline Morrell: '"If Murry lives next door to you, I assure you the mildew will sprout in every room". She had just mentioned that she "had dropped The Things We Are, half paralysed with disgust and boredom"' (155). There were evidently not many takers for Murry's novels either in or out of Bloomsbury.

In the final three chapters of the book, entitled 'Circulating Mansfield', 'Circulating Lawrence' and 'Circulating Murry', Kaplan offers a fascinating account of the way the lives of the three authors remained intertwined even after their deaths—Mansfield and Lawrence from tuberculosis in 1923 and 1930, and Murry outliving them by several decades, dying in 1957. His longer life span enabled him to 'circulate' his memories of Mansfield and Lawrence in several books and endless articles. Kaplan, in her intensely detailed study of Murry's personal papers and journals, notes 'the persistent presence of Mansfield and Lawrence' (211). A year before his death, Murry wrote:

> My concern has always been that of a moralist, and I have never been sufficient of the artist to be diverted from it. ... my 'concern' was shared in the old days by Lawrence & by Katherine ... That distinguished us, absolutely from the Bloomsburies. ... We were all socially outsiders, quite without the social and domestic tradition which the Bloomsburies, Aldous Huxley, and expatriate—*plus royaliste que le roi*—Eliot inherited. And, I think, experience came more naked and direct to us than to the others. To us, there was a sense in which they were all 'phoneys' ... Love meant more to us: we needed it more. (211)

Overall, then, Kaplan reveals how Murry's narrative practice never attained the accomplishments of his critical theory: he ultimately 'lacked "the artistic gift" that might enable him to imagine a new structure for his fiction' (123). Much is made in the book of the sexual tensions between Murry and Lawrence, especially Murry's belief that Lawrence was almost certainly homosexual. Indeed, an exploration of the homosocial relationship between both men assists Kaplan to redefine their complex friendship, with Murry constantly asserting that he only ever sought from Lawrence 'the warmth and security of personal affection' (38). The relationship of all three to Bloomsbury leads them ultimately to a position of 'defensive outsidership' (66). Although not a biography of Murry as such, nevertheless this book offers a radical reappraisal of the life and work of a man, who by the 1930s was considered 'the most despised literary figure of the time' (206), a tag which hardly seems justifiable once one has finished reading this excellent study.

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