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► **To cite this version:**

Shirley Bricout. Making (Non)Sense of the Sea, Sand and Self in The Boy in the Bush by D.H. Lawrence and M.L. Skinner. *Études Lawrenciennes*, 2023, D. H. Lawrence an Islander and the Sea, 55, 10.4000/lawrence.3593 . hal-04386869

HAL Id: hal-04386869

<https://univ-montpellier3-paul-valery.hal.science/hal-04386869>

Submitted on 23 Feb 2024

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/lawrence/3593>

DOI: 10.4000/lawrence.3593

ISSN: 2272-4001

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre

Brought to you by Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3



Electronic reference

Shirley Bricout, "Making (Non)Sense of the Sea, Sand and Self in *The Boy in the Bush* by D.H. Lawrence and M.L. Skinner", *Études Lawrenciennes* [Online], 55 | 2023, Online since 18 October 2023, connection on 23 February 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lawrence/3593> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/lawrence.3593>

This text was automatically generated on November 22, 2023.



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- ¹ *The Boy in the Bush*, set in the early 1880s, resulted from Lawrence's collaboration with the Australian nurse and writer Mollie Skinner (1876-1955), whose manuscript originally titled *House of Ellis* he substantially revised for publication in 1924. Its opening chapters focus on Jack Grant, the titular *Boy*, arriving in Freemantle, Australia, where he has been sent from England by his parents after being expelled from school. Somewhat akin to a novel of education, *The Boy in the Bush* tells the story of the teenager who comes to dwell with his mother's numerous Australian relatives on a farm and who, after an initiatory trip into the back country, finds his identity as a man.
- ² Paradigms of discovery merge with the confrontation with alterity in the opening chapters, which clearly posit the sea-port where Jack lands as a liminal space. Much like the shore described by Margaret Cohen in "The Chronotopes of the Sea," the port is a plural place, characterized by an inherent instability as a boundary zone, where the character looks both back to his homeland and forward to his new life (661-663). Moreover, the port's related maritime features, *i. e.* sand and oysters, reputed to be pervasive topographically in the Swan River area where Freemantle is located, are textually pervasive throughout the opening chapters of *The Boy in the Bush*, where repetitive descriptions reach a climax with a reference to Lewis Carroll's so-called nonsense poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter" from *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). The poem tells the story of a walrus and a carpenter, who lure oysters into walking on the shore with them. Once the oysters have been tricked into joining them, the walrus and the carpenter eat them all up. Tweedledee recites the poem to Alice, who is then asked which of the two out of the walrus or the carpenter was the most at fault. In *The Boy in the Bush*, looking at the sand beyond the Swan River, Jack remarks "It must have been here that the Carpenter wept" (16) to which Mr. George, the colonial relative who meets him at the steamer and who happens to have a walrus moustache, replies "like

anything to see such quantities of sand,” both of them obviously referring to the fourth stanza of the poem,

The Walrus and the Carpenter
 Were walking close at hand;
 They wept like anything to see
 Such quantities of sand.
 “If this were only cleared away,”
 They said, “it would be grand!” (Carroll 1999, 184)

- 3 Interestingly, Mollie Skinner quotes the poem in her own unfinished memoirs titled *The Fifth Sparrow* in order to describe the area: “It was just like that,” she remarks (22).
- 4 In the light of these echoes, I argue that Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books, and this poem in particular, can read as subtexts that contribute to building nodes of nonsense in the opening chapters of *The Boy in the Bush*. A working definition of “nonsense” is suggested in *Nonsense Literature for Children*, where Anderson and Apseloff posit that “nonsense is not the absence of sense, but a clever subversion of it that heightens rather than destroys meaning” (5). Placing similar stress on the irrepressible relationship between nonsense and common sense in *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, Susan Stewart shows that “nonsense is [...] an activity by which the world is disorganized and reorganized” (vii). Disorganizing the established coherence and order so as to reorganize them is key to the behaviour and language of the characters that Alice meets in Wonderland and in the reversed world of *Through the Looking-glass*; similarly, Jack tries to come to terms with the disruptions he faces on the island-continent to which he has been sent, all the more so as his own identity is destabilized.
- 5 First, a consideration of the maritime features of the Swan River coastal area will show how Lawrence and Skinner’s first two chapters, themselves a literary threshold leading into the narrative, subvert geography and chronology, creating their own nonsense “chronotope,” here a useful Bakhtinian concept for the qualification of this liminal setting. Then, a discussion of the instability of sand and its link to sin in the opening chapters will suggest how sand can be read as a trope for shifting identities. Finally, an examination of the motif of the double, a prominent feature of the nonsense mode, will highlight how it is played out both in the narrative and in the competing voices of Skinner and Lawrence.

A nonsense chronotope

- 6 To the Australian characters, the sea is a constant reminder of their interaction with the British Isles and the legacy of the Swan River colony established in 1829. The sea itself is “empty” (BB 24, 44); it is measured in the number of weeks the crossing takes (six) and Britain is still called “Home” (BB 34, 392). This imperial common history is very vivid in the memories of the locals when Jack arrives, since they have just celebrated the half-centenary of the settlement on the Swan River. Mollie Skinner recalls in her memoirs how Lawrence had encouraged her not to write about the settlers in the earlier colony but “from the time when [she] became aware of what went on in this empty country” (114).¹
- 7 Jack’s knowledge of the colony’s history comes from two sources. One source of information is a report he read during the voyage, that Paul Eggert identifies in his Cambridge edition of *The Boy in the Bush* as *The Handbook of Western Australia*, published

in 1880 (BB 9, 385). The other, and first source of information is his mother Katie, who told him about their relatives and other families living there. Much of the information provided by Jack's mother is close to what Skinner writes about in her memoirs when she names settlers to whom she was related and the ships that brought them to the colony (Skinner 1). Both sources are clearly identified in the fiction, but their interweaving sets on a par an official record of History with a filial transmission within the family history.

- 8 As a contribution to the building of a shared communal chronotope, families belonging to the first settlement left their own testimonies of their life on the coast, among them diaries, letters and paintings by women. A panoramic watercolour of the coast comprising five panels, painted in 1831-1832 by Jane Eliza Currie, is particularly striking (See figure below). Jane Currie sailed from England to the Swan River Colony in 1829 with her newlywed husband who had been appointed first Harbour Master at Freemantle. She sailed on the *Parmelia*, which Mollie Skinner mentions in *The Fifth Sparrow* (1). Like Jane Currie's moving watercolour, the details given by Jack's mother fashion a more intimate portrait of the colony.

Currie, second panel (public domain) Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.



- 9 Consequently, Jack's family story and his own personal one are positioned in a wider communal set of events based on a specific time and place. Such precise interweaving of History and histories creates a sense of belonging to the community, and turns the shore, as a liminal space, into a chronotope carrying shared conventional meanings. But one can wonder how Jack, as a migrant, relates to it.
- 10 Actually, the tension between belonging and alienation unsettles the narrative from the start. After the first few hours there, Jack, like Alice in Wonderland, feels "he had fallen *overhead* into Australia, instead of arriving naturally" (BB 14, my emphasis). The phrasing which evokes Alice falling down the rabbit hole also points to her imagining herself asking, on eventually landing somewhere, "Please Please, Ma'am, is this New Zealand or Australia?" (Carroll 1999,14). The reader of *The Boy in the Bush* is caught up in the same unsettling experience, doubt being cast from the outset by an unidentified first person narrator. The first line of the narrative reads: "He stepped ashore, looking like a lamb. Far be it from me to say he was the lamb he looked" (BB 7). Like what happens in Wonderland, things are not what they seem; language unsettles certainties to convey alienation.
- 11 Also reinforcing alienation, in the opening lines of *The Boy in the Bush* the first-person narrator resorts to the semantics of tales, thereby destabilizing the communal chronotope and attracting attention to language. Jack is said to have "stepped ashore in

the newest of new colonies” (BB 7). The superlative emphasized through reiteration of the adjective seems quite uncharacteristic of Lawrence and could be linked to Skinner’s own literary background, to her probable reading of Kipling’s *Just So Stories* (1902), where phrases comprising superlatives are common, for instance “the wildest of all the wild animals was the Cat” (Kipling 127). As Skinner’s memoirs frequently reveal, her use of the semantics of tales conveys emotions and impressions, as when she describes her own arrival in Australia in 1900: “We tied up at Freemantle and there lay my *fairyland in reality*” (22, my emphasis).

- 12 In addition, the subversion of geography and chronology is enhanced accordingly as the reader of *The Boy in the Bush* becomes aware of the anachronism and anageography of the setting. The extensive notes in Paul Eggert’s Cambridge edition of the novel point out such incongruities. For instance, Jack’s arrival at Freemantle (rather than Albany) is improbable (BB 383), both anachronistic and anageographic, since Freemantle proved to be unsuitable as a safe harbour because of a rock bar at the mouth of the Swan. This, writes Eggert, “was not remedied until 1897, most overseas cargo and passenger ships calling instead at Albany” (BB 367). Similarly, Mr. George’s own story of his ties with Britain – he went there to study – is shown to be flawed, the dates being wrong by a year or two (BB 22, 389). Moreover, the characteristic onomastic features of Australian places evoke a fairyland world, with names like “the back of beyond” and also “the Never-Never.” “The back of beyond” is identified by Eggert as a possible “linguistic anachronism, “*The Dictionary of Australianisms on Historical Principles*, “giving its first printed source as 1888” (BB 383). Even the reference to Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter” appears to be anachronistic. Indeed, Eggert specifies that Jack’s mother had left Australia before the poem was written in 1871 so she could not have known about how Western Australians used it in a local joke (BB 387).
- 13 Finally, “The Walrus and the Carpenter” is itself an animal fable seemingly offering a moral warning against following seductive strangers although the poem has lent itself to many readings. In Stanza 4, the titular walrus and carpenter are crying at the amount of sand they see and think the setting would be significantly improved if the sand were removed. This has given rise to some imperialist interpretations conjuring up the idea that settlers transform the lands they colonize according to their own needs and profit, rather than according to those of the aboriginal inhabitants represented by the oysters.
- 14 The multiplicity of meanings of the poem, or even lack of meaning, promotes disruption as well as creativity, a duality that gains in relevance in the liminal space of the shore. Thus, in *The Boy in the Bush*, stepping ashore implies crossing a threshold into a nonsense world where the titular character has to establish new relationships. In the same way, the reader crosses the boundary of the novel into a seemingly unreliable narrative. By way of consequence, what I have called “a nonsense chronotope” becomes the place where identity is destabilized and shifts like sand.

A shifting identity

- 15 Another name for the setting of the opening chapters of the novel is “Groperland” (BB 16), “Sandgroppers” being, Eggert tells us, “a disparaging Australianism for Western Australians” (BB 388). Both terms qualify sand as a pervasive feature, as shown in the

watercolour by Currie, but they came into written usage after 1896, introducing another linguistic anachronism in the novel which starts in 1882.

- 16 Sand meets Jack's eye as soon as he lands. It insinuates itself increasingly into the narrative, as pervasive geographically as textually, the term "sand" becoming conspicuous in several passages (BB 16, 17, 23). Moreover, the conversation in which the poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is quoted ends with "Sorrow, Sin, and Sand" (BB 16). The character, named Mr. Bell, is referring to the saying according to which Western Australia was "A Land of Sand, Sin, and Sorrow" because of ophthalmia, an eye disease "caused, it was [then] believed, by the sand and its glare" (BB 387). It affected many convicts, but the ailment is also reported in the early memoirs of the first women settlers. Indeed in her diary, Jane Currie movingly worries about her baby suffering from it (17). Ironically, also linking topographical features with Carroll's poem, the sand paths in Freemantle were actually garnished with oyster shells to give pedestrians a firmer footing (the practice is still common in areas all over the world where oysters are produced). Sand, a topographical feature, turns into a useful trope for shifts, for instability, and in particular for Jack's shifting identity.
- 17 Like the term "sand," the word "sin" and its derivatives "sinner" and "sinful" are frequently repeated in a long passage (BB 10-11), but contrary to sand, this occurs in an interior monologue. Sin, in the historical context of Western Australia, conjures up the convicts and the penal colony. But Jack applies the term to himself, having heard it over and over when his nannies and aunts called him "a little sinner." Since his childhood, Jack has always believed that he is a sinner, deriving this conclusion from a solipsism. He has been told that, if he wants to be like his father, he must be good. However, because he is not at all like his father, he believes he has not been good (BB 11). The solipsism will raise the issue of identity, that comes to a crisis in the liminal space of the shore where Jack is confronted with alterity. In an article which addresses the whole novel, Terry Gifford and Izabel Brandão read Jack's identity as being "hybrid, fragmented, and never 'complete,' in the sense used by Homi Bhabha," noting how "this finds its expression through his many names – John, Jack, Bow – marking the multiplicity of social identities adopted by him" (165). However, I wonder whether he readily adopts these identities; instead, on this geographical and personal threshold, like Alice, Jack must also come to terms with the double meaning of the jokes made at his expense. Indeed, as Bhabha also puts it "the demand of identification – that is to be for an Other – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness" (64, italics in the original). Thanks to the jokes, this takes place on the level of language.
- 18 Jack's nickname "Beau," spelt in French, derives from one of his twin cousins' exclamation "Oh, isn't he *beau*!" (BB 28). Hardly is the sentence pronounced that it is disorganized and reorganized as "he is Beau" by the twin cousin Monica, who decontextualizes the verb "be" by turning the adjective into a first name. "John's too stiff and Jack's too common," claims Mr. George, later adding an aural pun to the name Beau now spelt "b-o-w": "Bow by name, and Bow by nature. And well set up, with three strings to his Bow already" (31). Another meaning in English of the French adjective is conjured up in "You'll be somebody or other's beau before very long" (29). The accumulation of puns fashions Jack's new identity, without him taking part in the process which remains linguistic at this stage of the novel. In Bhabha's terms, this

refashioning of identity is “a return to the performance of identity as iteration, the re-creation of the self in the world of travel” (12).

The double

- 19 In the context of this liminal space, language is reorganized to set double meanings to work in the text. The double is traditionally related to the Roman God Janus, who is the god of ends and beginnings in the liminal space of the threshold. Interestingly, according to Stewart’s inventory of “the procedures of nonsense,” the double pertains to “simultaneity,” a feature of nonsense to be found in puns (146-70). In the nonsense world, conversation is “continually halted by puns,” by what Stewart terms “the splitting of discourse” (161). In *The Boy in the Bush*, what takes place on the level of language is epitomized by the pairs of characters that Jack meets. Indeed, the first people Jack is introduced to come by twos: he shakes hands with two men, called Mr. Bell and Mr. Swallow, who are “giggling at the same time to one another in a suppressed manner” (BB 13), recalling Tweedledee and Tweedledum in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. Like Alice, Jack tries to respond politely, minding his manners despite his puzzlement. Two other men he observes are Wolf and Hider whom Mr. George describes by facetiously quoting a Psalm, “Mercy and truth have met together: righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (BB 13), which only increases Mr. Bell and Mr. Swallow’s laughter. Jack also meets his twin cousins Monica and Grace and later there are more twins who appear in the story. Thus, because of the tension between belonging and alienation, Jack, in Bhabha’s terms, is “faced with a dimension of doubling” (71). The tension is reinforced in the opening of the second chapter with the image of the glass reminiscent of Alice’s looking-glass and her dream:

Jack was tired and a little land-sick, after the long voyage. He felt dazed and rather unhappy, and saw as through a glass, darkly. For he could not yet get used to the fixed land under his feet, after the long weeks on the steamer. And these people went on as if they were wound up, curiously oblivious of him and his feelings. *A dream world, with a dark glass between his eyes and it. An uneasy dream.* (BB 24, my emphasis)

- 20 The motif of the double is played out on another level in the competing voices of this powerful novel, that of the Australian Mollie Skinner writing in the romantic tradition of bush adventures also illustrated by Katharine Prichard’s writings, and that of D.H. Lawrence, the Britisher who infuses the narrative with his own vision of “the spirit of place.” The two voices create a tension between the Australian Nationalist novel and the Modernist one. The amount of re-writing that Skinner’s original manuscript underwent is still debated and may remain so since her text has not survived. Skinner estimated that Lawrence had actually revised around one third of her manuscript (BB xlvi-xlvi) and indeed some passages, especially those concerned with Jack’s response to the bush, clearly resonate with the wording of Lawrence’s other depictions of the outback, namely in his novel *Kangaroo*. To somewhat tease out the voices in the novel, it is relevant to discuss Skinner’s original vision against the backdrop of the development of Australian literature.
- 21 Long before Mollie Skinner went back to Australia in 1900, a colonial literary tradition had blossomed in its own right. At first, since books imported from Britain to the colonies remained in high demand, the colonials were abreast of recent publications (among which Lewis Carroll’s Alice stories, advertised in local newspapers within three

months of their publication in Britain). However, in the second half of the century, settlers in Australia, including women, reversed the trend by writing about life on the island continent for a British readership. The specific features of the Outback, together with the moral and physical hardships faced by convicts and farmers, supplied accounts within the contours of a growing Australian “national character,” the “romantic and triumphalist mode” of such accounts celebrating the pioneering spirit of the settlers (Goldsworthy 105, 108). Like Katharine Susannah Prichard’s first novel *The Pioneers* (1915) for instance, Mollie Skinner’s writings belong to this mode, which conceptualizes the Australian landscape as part of a national and cultural identity. Besides, in her memoirs (162), Skinner acknowledges a longstanding friendship with Prichard who later lamented, writing in the Australian periodical *The Bulletin*, that John Middleton Murry did not even mention co-author Skinner in his book *D.H. Lawrence: Son of Woman* (Eggert 5). Skinner’s specific interest lies in alienation when she attempts to capture the arrival of a British boy in Freemantle. Indeed, Jack is not a colonial coming back to Australia. Considered as a troublesome child in Britain, he has been sent away. That’s why, in *The Boy in the Bush*, the nodes of nonsense frame a threshold between two worlds.

- 22 Lawrence’s first appreciation of Skinner’s manuscript was expressed in terms related to the sea: the MS, he writes, is “tangled, gasping, and forever going under the sea of incoherence. Such a queer, magical bird of imagination, always drowning itself” (BB 377). In his view, the romantic and triumphalist mode of the manuscript, which looked effusively to the colonial legacy, did not engage enough with the regenerative forces of the spirit of place that he perceived in Australia, and that David Game convincingly highlights in *D.H. Lawrence’s Australia: Anxiety at the Edge of Empire*. In fact, the manuscript became a place for Lawrence to explore his own ambivalence towards the model set by Western society, and articulate his new vision, namely of marriage, challenging the social and moral codes of his time. Therefore nonsense features of the opening chapters of the novel reorganize the threshold into a fictional time and space where new possibilities can unfold, where alternatives to an order can be articulated. Eventually, a confrontation is played out between two concepts of the hero: a conventional romantic one and an alternative Modernist one free from the constraints of model-setting. Indeed, Jack remains a visionary outcast challenging norms, as signified when he turns to bigamy in an intriguing ending that upset co-author Mollie Skinner. In this respect, the final lines of the novel symbolically reaffirm the displacement from childhood to manhood, from Romance to Modernism when Jack rides inland “away from the sea. At the last ridge he turned and saw the pale blue ocean full of light. Then he rode over the crest and down the silent grey bush, in which he had once been lost” (BB 347).
- 23 This reassessment of the opening chapters of *The Boy in the Bush* attributes the nodes of nonsense which have been sighted by Mollie Skinner, whose memoirs frequently borrow images from Lewis Carroll’s stories. She relies on the allusions to convey emotions and wonder, as when she was invited to a garden party at Buckingham Palace where “everything was like the world of Alice Through the Looking Glass” (140). Lawrence’s references to Carroll’s works are fewer and less sustained. In a letter dated 10 July 1908, he tells Louie Burrows “I remember Saturday – it is as good as Alice in Wonderland” (*Letters i.* 61) and three years later he quotes from “Jabberwocky” to describe her “imaginings” (*Letters i.* 269). The only direct reference to Carroll’s works in

Lawrence's fiction can be found in *The Lost Girl* when, invited to tea, Alvina marvels at how "strange it all was, like Alice in Wonderland [...] a most curious tea-party" (64).

- 24 As has been shown, in the opening chapters of *The Boy in the Bush*, Alice's adventures can be read as a subtext that opens up alternatives to social order and codes. Lawrence did not write off these disruptive segments when he revised Skinner's text; on the contrary, he may even have expanded them to linguistically and imaginatively pave the way for his own fictional experiment.

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NOTES

1. Skinner is quoting Lawrence, who also uses the idea of an empty country, of an empty landscape in *Kangaroo* (40, 204, 227). The “empty sea” found in *The Boy in the Bush* could resonate with Lewis Carroll’s other nonsense poem *The Hunting of the Snark* where, on the Captain’s map, the sea is “a perfect and absolute blank” (16). I am indebted to Dawid W. de Villers for suggesting this literary parallel with Carroll’s poem.

ABSTRACTS

In this paper, I discuss how Lewis Carroll’s Alice narratives, and in particular his so-called nonsense poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter” (from *Through the Looking-Glass*, 1871), can read as subtexts to the opening chapters of *The Boy in the Bush* by D.H. Lawrence and M.L. Skinner.

First I consider how the dialogue with Lewis Carroll’s texts conveys both Freemantle’s geographic features and its unfamiliarity to new arrivals and how, as a result, Lawrence and Skinner’s narrative subverts geography and chronology creating its own (nonsense) chronotope, a useful Bakhtinian concept to examine anachronisms and anageography.

I show how language is reorganized to assert national identity thanks to puns, Australianisms and syllogisms which often re-echo Alice’s experiences in Wonderland or the other side of the looking-glass. Besides these linguistic games, I highlight how the competing voices in this powerful novel, that of the Australian, Mollie Skinner, writing in the romantic tradition of bush adventures also illustrated by Katharine Prichard’s novels, and that of D.H. Lawrence, the Britisher, who infuses the narrative with his own vision of “the spirit of place,” create a tension that nonsense may resolve.

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Keywords: nonsense, chronotope, colonial legacy, modernism, identity

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Shirley Bricout's field of research is D.H. Lawrence and the Bible. The translation into English of her first book was released in 2015 under the title *Politics and the Bible in D.H. Lawrence's Leadership Novels* at the Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée.

She has guest-edited a special issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English* devoted to Lawrence. She has contributed articles and book reviews to *Études Lawrenciennes* (Paris Nanterre), *Études britanniques contemporaines* (Montpellier III) and to *The Journal of D.H. Lawrence Studies* (Nottingham, UK).