

**Under my skin**

DORIS LESSING

UNDER MY SKIN



*Volume One of  
my Autobiography, to 1949*



HarperCollins *Publishers*

HarperCollinsPublishers  
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,  
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

Published by HarperCollinsPublishers 1994

5 7 8 6 4

Copyright © Doris Lessing 1994

The Author asserts the moral right to  
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is  
available from the British Library

ISBN 0 00 255545 X

Photoset in Linotron Bembo by  
Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

Printed in Great Britain by  
HarperCollinsManufacturing Glasgow

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,  
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,  
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior  
permission of the publishers.



Doris Lessing aged fourteen.

I've got you under my skin  
I've got you deep in the heart of me  
So deep in my heart you're really a part of me,  
I've got you under my skin.  
I've tried so not to give in . . .

COLE PORTER

The individual, and groupings of people, have to learn that they cannot reform society in reality, nor deal with others as reasonable people, unless the individual has learned to locate and allow for the various patterns of coercive institutions, formal and also informal, which rule him. No matter what his reason says, he will always relapse into obedience to the coercive agency while its pattern is within him.

IDRIES SHAH, *Caravan of Dreams*

No matter where one looks on the face of the earth, wherever there are people, they can be observed syncing when music is played. There is popular misconception about music. Because there is a beat to music, the generally accepted belief is that the rhythm originates in the music, not that music is a highly specialized release of rhythms already in the individual. Otherwise how can one explain the close fit between ethnicity and music?

Rhythm patterns may turn out to be one of the most basic personality traits that differentiates one individual from another.

. . . when people converse . . . their brain waves even lock into a single unified sequence. When we talk to each other our central nervous systems mesh like two gears in a transmission.

The power of rhythmic message within the group is as strong as anything I know. It is . . . a hidden force, like gravity, that holds groups together.

I can remember being quite overwhelmed when I first made cinematographic recordings of groups of people in public. Not only were small groups in sync, but there were times when it seemed that all were part of a larger rhythm.

EDWARD T. HALL, *The Dance of Life*

## *A Note on Population*

It is believed that when the whites arrived in the area that later became Southern Rhodesia, there were a quarter of a million black people. By about 1924 there were half a million. When I left the country in 1949 there were one and a half million. In 1982 the estimate was nine or ten million. In 1993 they think there are twelve to thirteen million. Some demographers believe there will be thirty million by 2010. Now, in 1993, ninety per cent of the population are under the age of fifteen.

It is currently thought by most experts that the continual increase of population since the whites arrived is because the Portuguese introduced maize which is easily grown, abundant, easily stored and nourishing.



## Acknowledgements

The author and publisher are grateful to the proprietors listed below for permission to quote extracts from the following material:

(p. ix) *Coercive Agencies*. Reprinted by permission from *Caravan of Dreams* by Idries Shah (The Octagon Press Ltd); (p. ix) *The Dance of Life* by Edward T. Hall. Copyright © 1983 by Edward T. Hall. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.; (p. ix) *Cold Warrior* by Tom Mangold. Copyright © Tom Mangold 1991. Reprinted with permission of Simon & Schuster Ltd.; (p. 360–1) 'The Age' from Osip Mandelstam: *Selected Poems* translated by Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin (OUP 1973). pp. 44–45. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press; (p. vii & p. 204) 'I've Got You Under My Skin' (Porter), (p. 205) 'Cheek to Cheek' (Berlin), (p. 211) 'Swinging On A Star' (Van Heusen/Burke), (p. 272) 'Dancing With Tears In My Eyes' (Burke/Dubin), (p. 273) 'It's A Sin to Tell A Lie' (Mayhew), (p. 283) 'Brother Can You Spare A Dime?' (Gorney/Harburg), (p. 303) 'Night and Day' (Porter), (p. 303 & 359) 'Man I Love' (Gershwin), (p. 359) 'Somebody Loves Me' (DeSylva/Macdonald) and (p. 376) 'There's A Small Hotel' (Rodgers/Hart) © Warner Chappell Music Ltd, London W1Y 3FA. Reproduced by permission of International Music Publications Ltd; (p. 122) 'Blue Skies' © 1927, Irving Berlin, USA, reproduced by permission of Francis Day and Hunter Ltd, London WC2H 0EA; (p. 122) 'Red Sails in the Sunset' (music by Hugh Williams and words by Jimmy Kennedy) © 1935, reproduced by permission of Peter Maurice Music Co. Ltd, London WC2H 0EA; (p. 273) 'Goodbye-ee' (words and music by R. P. Weston and Bert Lee) © 1917, reproduced by permission of Francis Day and Hunter Ltd, London WC2H 0EA; (p. 273) 'We'll Meet Again' (Ross Parker/Hughie Charles) copyright © 1939 by Dash Music Co Ltd, 8–9 Frith Street, London W1V 5TZ. Used by permission. All rights reserved; (p. 359) 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' (Otto Harbach/Jerome Kern) © Reproduced by kind permission of Polygram Music Publishing Ltd, 347–353 Chiswick High Road, London W4 4HS; (p. 359) lyric reproduction of 'Somebody Loves Me' (Buddy DeSylva and Ballard Macdonald) by kind permission of Redwood Music Ltd, UK administrator.

And with thanks to my researcher, Elizabeth Murray, two of whose nutshell biographies I have quoted.



## Glossary

<i>assegai</i>	a spear
<i>biltong</i>	dried meat
<i>gymkhana</i>	a day of sporting events, with all kinds of games and competitions, but with the emphasis on horse racing and horse jumping
<i>kaross</i>	a coverlet or blanket made of animal hide
<i>kopje</i>	a hill
<i>kraal</i>	an enclosure of cattle or other animals; or a village, as in 'Are you going home to your kraal to visit your family?'
<i>the lands</i>	where did this manorial phrase come from?
<i>mombies</i>	Shona word for cattle
<i>piccanin</i>	a small black child
<i>rimpi</i>	a strip of cured hide
<i>sjambok</i>	a rhinoceros hide whip
<i>skellum</i>	someone or something mischievous or wicked
<i>rondaavel</i>	a round brick or mud-and-pole hut, usually thatched
<i>veldschoen</i>	shoes made of cow hide
<i>vlei</i>	a valley, usually with a watercourse running through it



‘SHE WAS VERY PRETTY but all she cared about was horses and dancing.’

This refrain tinkled through my mother’s tales of her childhood, and it was years before it occurred to me, ‘Wait a minute, that’s her mother she’s talking about.’ She never used any other words than those, and they could not have been her words, since she did not remember her mother. No, this was what she had heard from the servants, for she unconsciously put on a kitchen face, with a condemning look about her mouth, and she always gave a disapproving sniff. That little sniff evoked for me a downstairs world as exotic as the people in it would have found tales of cannibals and the heathen. Servants and nursemaids brought the little children up, after the frivolous Emily McVeagh died, in childbed, of peritonitis, with her third, when her first, my mother, was still only three. There is not even a photograph of Emily. She is Nobody. She is nothing at all. John William McVeagh would not talk about his first wife. What can she have done? – I asked myself. After all, to be light-minded is not a crime. At last it came to me. Emily Flower was common, that must have been it.

Then a researcher was invited to throw light into those distant places and she came up with a mass of material that would do very well as a basis for one of those Victorian novels, by Trollope perhaps, where the chapter about Emily Flower, called ‘What Can Have Been Her Fault?’, could only be a short one, if the saddest.

‘The information on the Flower family was got through birth, marriage and death certificates, parish records, census records, apprentice records, barge owners’ records, lightermen and watermen records, local history and wills,’ says the researcher, evoking Dickens’ England in a sentence.

There was a Henry Flower who in 1827 was described as Mariner, and in the 1851 census as a Victualler. He was born in

Somerset and his wife Eleanor was born in Limehouse. Their son, George James Flower, delinquent Emily's father, was apprenticed to a John Flower, presumably a relative. The Flower family were barge owners, and on Emily's birth certificate her father was described as lighterman.

The Flower clan lived in and around Flower Terrace, now demolished, and George James and his wife Eliza Miller lived at Number 3 Flower Terrace. This was in Poplar, near what is now Canary Wharf. There were four children. Eliza was widowed, aged thirty-five, and the closeness and mutual helpfulness of the clan is shown by how, although women did not do this then, the lightermen and watermen allowed her to be a barge owner and take apprentices. She made her son Edward an apprentice and he later became lighterman and barge owner in her place. Her children did well, and she ended in a pleasant house, with an annuity. Emily was the youngest child and she married John William McVeagh in 1883.

My mother described the house she was brought up in as tall, narrow, cold, dark, depressing, and her father as a disciplinarian, strict, frightening, always ready with moral exhortations.

The well-off working class had a good life in late Victorian times, with jaunts to the races, all kinds of parties and celebrations. They most heartily ate and drank. Nothing dreary or cold about Flower Terrace and its companion streets, full of relatives and friends. Emily came from this warm clan life into the doubtless ardent arms of John William McVeagh – he must have been very much in love to marry her – but she was expected to match herself to his ambitions, to the frightful snobberies of a man fighting to leave the working class behind. I imagine her running back home when she could to her common family, for dances, good times and going to the races. She must have lived in her husband's house under a cold drizzle of disapproval, from which, or so I see it, she died, aged thirty-two.

My mother never mentioned her grandfather, John William's father, and that meant John William did not talk about him any more than he did about Emily.

'The information for this family,' says the researcher, 'comes from births, deaths and marriages, the clerical directory, the Public Record Office, army records and books on the Charge of the Light Brigade, census reports, wills and local directories. John McVeagh's date of birth and place of birth conflict in the records. Army records

of birth and occupation are frequently incorrect as men enlisting, for reasons of their own, gave wrong information, and it would have been difficult to check up in the pre-1837 registration time. In any case, recruiting stations were not particular in the army of the nineteenth century.'

John McVeagh was born in Portugal, and his father was a soldier. He was in the 4th Light Dragoons, and was a Hospital Sergeant Major when he left the army in 1861. He was in the Crimea and East Turkey and in the Charge of the Light Brigade – he really was, for soldiers made that claim who had no right to it. But why did they want to have been part of such carnage? John McVeagh's conduct as a soldier was exemplary. When his horse was shot under him in the Charge he continued to tend the wounded though wounded himself. He received various medals. Here is an entry for March 1st 1862, the *United Service Gazette*:

4th (Queen's) Hussars – Cahir. On Friday the 21st ult. Serjt-Major J. McVeagh late of this regiment, now Yeoman Warder of the Tower, was presented by the officers of his late corps with a purse containing 20 guineas, a silver snuff box beautifully engraved, showing his former services. Few men have been more honoured for their good conduct than Serjt-Major McVeagh on leaving his regiment, then at the Curragh, a few months back, to take his new appointment after 24 years service. The non-commissioned officers and privates presented him with a splendid tea service with the following inscription: 'To Hospital Serjt-Major John McVeagh, as a token of respect for his general kindness.' During the Crimean War he was at all times with his regiment in the field, attending both sick and wounded, and for such distinguished conduct received a medal, with an annuity of £20, besides a Turkish and a Crimean one with 4 clasps.

His wife was Martha Snewin, and her father was a bootmaker. She was born in Kent. She travelled all around the country with her husband when he was an army recruiter. That is all we know about her. He saw to it the children had a good education. Their daughter Martha, who looked after him when his wife died, was left well provided-for, but she is one of the invisible women of history.

My grandfather John William was the youngest son. First he was a clerk in the Meteorological Office, and by 1881 he was a bank clerk. Then he became a bank manager, in the Barking Road, but he died in Blackheath. He bettered himself, house by house, as he



moved, and this son of a common soldier married his second wife, Emily's successor, in St George's, Hanover Square. This stepmother was not, as I imagined – because of her elegant beaked face – Jewish, but was the daughter of a dissenting cleric, who later became a priest in the Anglican church. She came from a middle-class family. Her name was Maria Martyn. My mother described her, with dislike, as a typical stepmother, cold, dutiful and correct, unable to be loving or even affectionate with the three children. They preferred life downstairs with the servants for as long as it was allowed, but my mother and her brother John became snobbishly, not to say obsessively middle-class, while the third child, Muriel, married back into the working class. Although my mother kept tenuous contact with her, the father would have nothing to do with her. It was her mother coming out in her, the servants said.

So he was disappointed in both his daughters. When my mother decided to be a nurse, instead of going to university – John William was ambitious for her – she was similarly cut off from his approval. Until, that is, she did well, but it was too late, the bonds had snapped. Never, ever, did my mother speak of her father with affection. Respect, yes, and gratitude that he did well by her, for he made sure they were given everything proper for middle-class children. She went to a good school, and was taught music, where she did so well the examiners told her she could have a career as a concert pianist.

The chapter heading for my mother in this saga would be a sad one, and the older I get, the more sorrowful her life seems. She did not love her parents. My father did not love his. It took me years to take in that fact, perhaps because it was always a joke when he said he left home the moment he could and went off as far as possible from them, as a bank clerk in Luton.

My paternal great-grandfather, a James Tayler, appears in the 1851 census as a farmer with 130 acres, employing five men, at East Bergholt. He went in for melancholy and philosophical verse, which is perhaps why he was not successful. He married a Matilda Cornish. The Tayler family worked in various capacities in banks, were civil servants, minor literary figures, often farmers, all over Suffolk and Norfolk. During the migrations of the nineteenth century they went off to Australia and to Canada, where many live still. But my grandfather Alfred decided not to be a farmer. He

was a bank clerk in Colchester. His wife was Caroline May Batley.

This was the woman my father disliked so much – his mother.

The picture he presented of his father, Alfred Tayler, was of a dreaming unambitious man who spent his spare time playing the organ in the village church, driving his ambitious wife mad with frustration. But by the time I heard this my father was also a dreaming unambitious man who drove his poor wife mad with frustration. And the fact was, my grandfather Alfred ended up as manager of the London County Westminster Bank, Huntingdon, but whether he went on playing the organ in the local church I do not know. When Caroline May died he at once married again, in the very same year, a woman much younger than he was, Marian Wolfe, thirty-seven to his seventy-four. She, too, was the daughter of a minister of religion.

Ministers of religion and bank managers, there they are, in the records on both sides of the family.

Caroline May Batley, my father's mother, is almost as much of a shadow as poor Emily. The only pleasant thing my father remembered about her was that she cooked the delicious, if solid, food described by Mrs Beeton. The tale he told, and retold, and with relish shared by my mother, was how his mother came to the Royal Free Hospital to confront the newly engaged pair, both of them rather ill, to tell him that if he married that battleaxe Sister McVeagh he would always regret it. But I daresay Caroline May would have something to say for herself, if asked. It is probable she was related to Constable the painter. I like to think so.

My mother's childhood and girlhood were spent doing well in everything, because she had to please her stern father. She excelled in school, she played hockey and tennis and lacrosse well, she bicycled, she went to the theatre and music hall and musical evenings. Her energy was phenomenal. And she read all kinds of advanced books, and was determined her children would not have the cold and arid upbringing she did. She studied Montessori and Ruskin, and H. G. Wells, particularly *Joan and Peter*, with its ridicule of how children were deformed by upbringing. She told me all her contemporaries read *Joan and Peter* and were determined to do better. Strange how once influential books disappear. Kipling's 'Baa, Baa, Black Sheep' made her cry because of her own childhood.

Then she became a nurse, and had to live on the pay, which was



so little she was often hungry and could not buy herself gloves and handkerchiefs or a nice blouse. The World War started, the first one, and my badly wounded father arrived in the ward where she was Sister McVeagh. He was there for over a year, and during that time her heart was well and truly broken, for the young doctor she loved and who loved her was drowned in a ship sunk by a torpedo.

While my mother was being an exemplary Victorian and then Edwardian girl, the pattern of a modern young woman, my father was enjoying a country childhood, for he spent every minute out of school (which he hated, unlike my mother, for she loved school where she did so well) with the farmers' children around Colchester. His parents beat him – spare the rod, spoil the child – and until he died he would talk with horror about the Sundays, when there were two church services and Sunday school. He dreaded Sundays all week, and would not go near a church for years. Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* – that was what his childhood was like, he said, but luckily he could always escape into the fields. He wanted to be a farmer, always, but the moment he left school put distance between himself and his parents, went into the bank, which he hated, but worked hard there, for people did work harder then than now, and above all, played hard. He loved every kind of sport, played cricket and billiards for his county, rode, and danced, walked miles to and from a dance in another village or town. If when my mother talked about her youth it sounded like *Ann Veronica* or the New Women of Shaw, my father's reminiscences were like D. H. Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers*, or *The White Peacock*, young people in emotional and self-conscious literary friendships, improving themselves by talk and shared books. He used to say that from the moment he got away from his parents and was independent he had a wonderful time, he enjoyed every minute of it, no one could have had a better life than he had for ten years. He was twenty-eight when the war began. He was lucky twice, he said, once when he was sent out of the Trenches because of a bad appendix, thus missing the Battle of the Somme when all his company was killed, and then, having a shell land on his leg a couple of weeks before Passchendaele, when, again, no one was left of his company.

He was very ill, not only because of his amputated leg, but because he was suffering from what was then called shell shock. He was in fact depressed, the real depression which was like – so

he said – being inside a cold, dark room with no way out, and where no one could come in to help him. The ‘nice doctor man’ he was sent to said he had to stick it out, there was nothing medicine could do for him, but the anguish would pass. The ‘horrible things’ that my father’s mind was assailed by were not as uncommon as he seemed to think: horrible things were in everybody’s mind, but the war had made them worse, that was all. But my father remembered and spoke often about the soldiers who, ‘shell-shocked’ or unable to get themselves out of their mud holes to face the enemy, might be shot for cowardice. ‘It could have been me,’ he might say, all his life. ‘It was just luck it wasn’t.’

So there he was, in my mother’s ward in the old Royal Free Hospital in East London. He saw her unhappiness when her great love was drowned, he knew she had been offered the matronship of St George’s, a famous teaching hospital, an honour, for usually this job was offered to older women. But they decided to get married, and there was no conflict in it for him, though there was for her, because later she said so. He said, often, that he owed her his sanity, owed her everything, for without her devoted nursing he would not have come through that year of illness. Marriages for affection were best, he might add. As for her, she enjoyed her efficiency and her success, and knew she would make a wonderful matron of a great teaching hospital. But she wanted children, to make up to them what she had suffered as a child. So she put it.

My father was not the only soldier never, ever, to forgive his country for what he saw as promises made but betrayed: for these soldiers were many, in Britain, in France and in Germany, Old Soldiers who kept that bitterness till they died. They were an idealistic and innocent lot, those men: they actually believed it was a war to end war. And my father had been given a white feather in London by women he described as dreadful harridans – and that was when he already had his wooden leg under his trouser leg, and his ‘shell shock’ making him wonder if it was worth staying alive. He never forgot that white feather, speaking of it as yet another symptom of the world’s ineradicable and inevitable and hopeless insanity.

He had to leave England, for he could not bear England now, and he got his bank to send him out to the Imperial Bank of Persia, to Kermanshah. Now I use the name Imperial Bank of . . . to watch the reaction, which is incredulity, and then a laugh, for so

much of that time now seems as delightfully absurd as – well, as something or other we now take for granted will seem to our children.

My mother was having a breakdown, I think because of the difficulties of that choice, marriage or the career where she was doing so well. And because of her lost love, whom she never forgot. And because she had worked so very hard during the war, and because of the many men she had watched die and because . . . it was 1919, the year when 29 million people died of the flu epidemic which for some reason gets left out of the histories of that time. Ten million were killed in the Great War, mostly in the Trenches, a statistic we remember now on the 11th November of every year, but 29 million people died of the flu, sometimes called the Spanish Lady.

My father was still in breakdown, though the worst of the depression he had suffered from was over. They had been advised by the doctors not to have a child yet. They joked my mother must have got pregnant on the first night. In those days people actually often did wait until the first night of marriage. But there is another thing. In 1919 my mother was thirty-five and in those days it was considered late to have a first baby. And as a nurse she must have been aware of the dangers of waiting. Perhaps a part of my mother's mind she did not know about was making sure she got pregnant then.

And so they arrived, the two of them, both ill, in the great stone house on a plateau surrounded by snowtopped mountains, in that ancient trading town, Kermanshah – which was much damaged, parts of it bombed into dust, during the war between Iraq and Iran in the 1980s.

And there I was born on the 22nd October 1919. My mother had a bad time. It was a forceps birth. My face was scarred purple for days. Do I believe this difficult birth scarred me – that is to say, my nature? Who knows. I do know that to be born in the year 1919 when half of Europe was a graveyard, and people were dying in millions all over the world – that was important. How could it not be? Unless you believe that every little human being's mind is quite separate from every other, separate from the common human mind. An unlikely thing, surely.

(That war does not become less important to me as time passes, on the contrary. In 1990, the year I began to write this book, I was