The virtual completion of Kangaroo, a novel of some 150,000 words, in the space of seven or eight weeks, whilst the novelist and his wife were staying in New South Wales, represents a tour de force in rapid composition; at the same time, bearing in mind the brevity of his stay and the highly limited contact he apparently had with Australians, we are inevitably encouraged to speculate about sources of information and imaginative stimulus utilised by Lawrence to supplement his own limited experiences in Australia.¹

It has been interestingly suggested that reports in the Sydney Morning Herald of local disturbances in May 1921, the year prior to Lawrence’s arrival, may have informed both the novelist’s awareness of political feeling and unrest in contemporary Australia, and his imaginative use of them during the latter part of the novel.² Kangaroo itself makes reference to the Sydney Sun, the Sydney Daily Telegraph and, most important, the Sydney Bulletin, in whose pages the central figure of Somers finds much more than ‘mere anecdote. It was the sheer momentaneous life of the continent’ (K, p. 300). A variety of quotations from the Bulletin are reproduced with the novel (K, pp. 297–9, 307, 354), in a different order from that in which they originally appeared, but otherwise unchanged except for correction of a spelling-error and minor changes, primarily in punctuation. Quite widely spread through the later part of the novel and consisting of eleven separate quotations in all, they create the impression of coming from a cross-section of numbers of the magazine: and it is interesting to learn that in fact they are all but one taken from six pages of one number of the Bulletin – the one for 22 June 1922 (pp. 16–22) – from the two regular sections entitled ‘Society Section’ and ‘Aboriginalities’. The remaining quotation, referring to the behaviour of the Christianised Melanesians (K, p. 354), is taken from a longer note by a correspondent.
calling himself ‘Friday Island’, included in the ‘Society Section’ of the next but one issue of the Bulletin (for 6 July 1922). ‘Friday Island’s’ note in the Bulletin is on the general subject of ‘civilisation’ as a ‘thin veneer over a pre-historic impulse to sadism’, a fact of some relevance to our reading of Kangaroo, since it is in the same chapter of the novel that refers us to this article (ch. 16) that we find the idea clearly and dramatically portrayed – in the murderous and explicitly sadistic revenge exacted by the Australian character Jack Callcott for the shooting of his leader, Kangaroo (‘Having a woman’s something, isn’t it? But it’s a flea-bite, nothing, compared to killing your man when your blood comes up’ – K, p. 352). The note signed ‘Globe’ from the earlier number of the Bulletin about twenty bullocks following in each other’s footsteps and stupidly drowning in the same waterhole (K, p. 307) sets Somers thinking about ‘herd-unity, equality, domestication and civilization’, thoughts which lead directly on to his lengthy conjectures in subsequent pages about the mob spirit, the urge to anarchy, and which are contrasted to his ideas about the marvellous communication of whale herds and the gesture of recoil – all details significantly framing the later stages of the novel. Thus, in the instances of the notes by ‘Friday Island’ and ‘Globe’, Lawrence’s use of, and allusion to, the Bulletin relates closely to developments in his novel and may very well have partly prompted them.

This leads us on to more general inquiries about the extent to which elsewhere in Kangaroo we find such an apparently derivative type of allusiveness in operation, and about how far Lawrence was aware of using such a process; and, when, in the course of Somers’s meditations about the instinctiveness of whales in chapter 16, we find an implicit allusion to the climax and conclusion of Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, such questions become of considerable importance. In that chapter Somers compares the instinctive and unifying urge amongst men to revolt against old, irrelevant ideals with the ‘whales which suddenly charge upon the ship which tortures them’ (K, pp. 331–2). In the last of his brilliant, idiosyncratic essays on Moby Dick, Lawrence describes the Pequod as a ‘symbol of this civilised world of ours’ and associates the White Whale with the forces of ‘blood consciousness’ and the gesture of instinctive, unreasoning recoil against the false idealism prevalent in Western culture since the Renaissance. Thus, when Somers, who clearly provides a thin disguise for the expression of Lawrence’s current anxieties about the future of Western civilisation, fearfully foresees the masses in Australia (and throughout the West, as Lawrence’s novel rather vaguely implies) like whales about to ‘burst