

**THE LAUGHING HORSE**  
**A HORSE LAUGH AT THE UNIVERSITY**

*William M. Roberts*

IN APRIL 1922 *The Laughing Horse* appeared on the scene in Berkeley “wherein the first laughs are awarded the University of California.”<sup>1</sup> The Apologia gives the views of the editors.

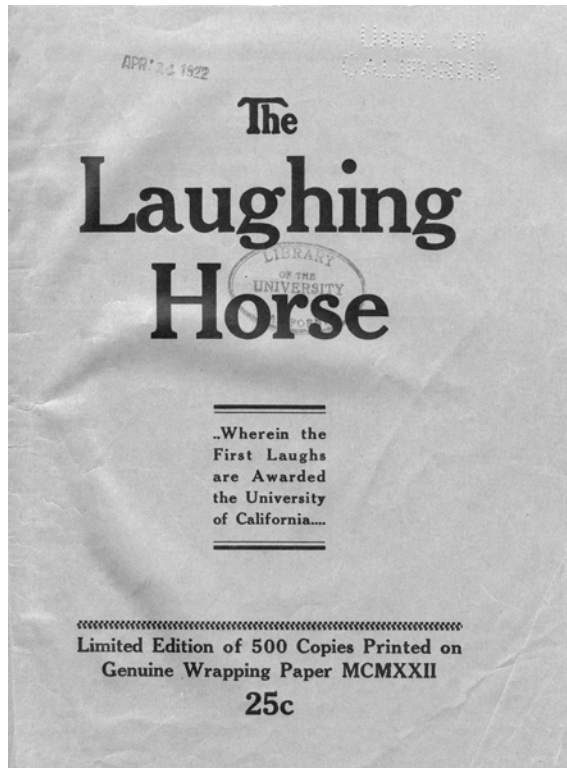
Herewith is presented “The Laughing Horse,” a magazine of polemics, phillippics [sic], satire, burlesque and all around destructive criticism, edited, written and financed by four more or less like-minded young persons, who find education as it is perpetrated in America, and especially at California, a somewhat gaudy farce with lachrymose overtones, but withal a spectacle par excellence.<sup>2</sup>

Claiming that the magazine is a healthful reaction to the “vacillating conservative spirit” prevalent at the time, the editors seek a robust skepticism to counteract what they perceived as the stultifying education received in universities, obviously including the University of California, in which standardization seemed to be the order of the day.

The editors were identified as Jane Cavendish, Noel Jason, Bill Murphy, and L13, pseudonyms all, adopted in order to afford full freedom to criticize:

We are not reformers; we are not architects. We are the wrecking gang, hurlers of brickbats, shooters of barbs, tossers of custard pies. We are not bitter; we are not ill-natured; we are not soreheads. We are simply tired of the incessant bleating of professorial poloniuses and their spineless imitators, the blather of campus politicians, the palpable tosh of Cal. and Pelly and Occident editorials, the silly chatter of our half-baked Hobsons, Bryans and Orison Swett Mardens.<sup>3</sup>

In reality the editors were Willard (“Spud”) Johnson, Roy Chanslor and James Van Rensselaer, Jr., which they revealed in issue number four, and it was this issue that caused them some difficulty, especially for Chanslor, the only one of the three still actually enrolled at



Berkeley by that time. The issue included a contribution by D. H. Lawrence, solicited by Johnson who by this time was living in Taos, New Mexico, and excerpts of Upton Sinclair's new book, *The Goose-step: A Study of American Education* (Pasadena, 1923).

The latter was a scathing attack on American higher education, and *The Laughing Horse* reprinted five chapters from the book in which Sinclair addressed the problems he perceived at the University of California. The titles themselves of the five chapters suggest the nature of the criticism: "The University of the Black Hand," "The Fortress of Medievalism," "The Dean of Imperialism," "The Mob of Little Haters," and "The Drill Sergeant on the Campus."

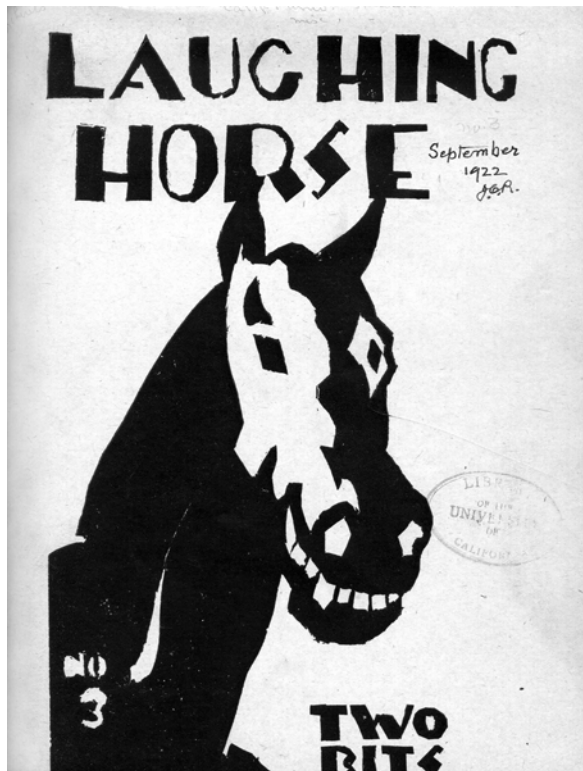
Sinclair's criticism was aimed at the Board of Regents and at Presidents Benjamin Ide Wheeler and David Prescott Barrows. The regents are portrayed as powerful—both politically and financially—heads of corporations who use the university to further their own aims. They are accused of supporting the Better America Federation, which worked to suppress any form of liberal thought. Harry Haldeman, president of the federation, refers to what Sinclair called a "spy-system" in the university:

Through the children of the best business families throughout the land, who are attending universities, we are having students of radical tendencies watched. We are receiving reports of what is going on, both as to students and teachers that uphold radical doctrines and views.<sup>4</sup>

After dismissing Wheeler as an elitist, with regard only for the rich and powerful and none for his prominent faculty, especially those in the sciences, Sinclair levels most of his attack on Barrows in his "Dean of Imperialism" and "Drill Sergeant on Campus" chapters. Referring to Barrows's experiences with the American Expeditionary Forces in Siberia, Sinclair characterizes him as "a real, red-blooded, two-fisted man of action," who advocates that "Bolsheviki should be stood against the wall and shot."<sup>5</sup>

Sinclair takes great exception to what he perceives as a militarization of the university:

President Wheeler having been intimate with the German kaiser and ardent in his defense, the interlocking regents wanted somebody else to attend to their interests in war-time. What more natural than to turn to their Dean of Imperialism? They made him president, and he put "ginger" into the system of military training. Twelve thousand students get a free education, but must pay for it by taking two years of military training, fifty-five



hours a year. A part of this training consists in learning to plunge a bayonet into an imitation human body, and you must growl savagely while you do this, and one student found it so realistic that he fainted and was dismissed from the university.<sup>6</sup>

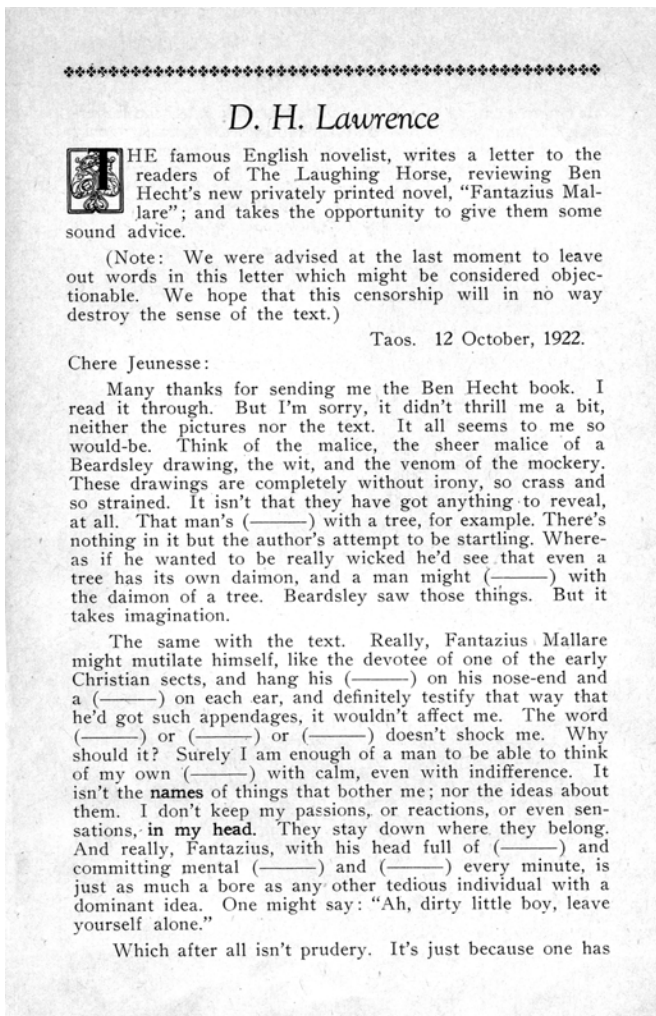
Sinclair perhaps unfairly singles out Barrows for this policy of military training, which was a long-standing one, but he also includes in the same vein the athletic side of the university, commenting that under Barrows the “one beauty spot available for nature lovers” was taken for a stadium and that one advantage of a big university is the large number of students available for selection for athletic teams:

In other parts of the world, when you hear of the “classics,” you think of Homer and Virgil; but in California the “classics” are the annual Stanford-California foot-ball game, and the intercollegiate track-meet, and the Pacific Coast tennis doubles.<sup>7</sup>

The D. H. Lawrence contribution to issue number four of *The Laughing Horse* was a harsh review of Ben Hecht’s *Fantazius Mallare*, in the form of a letter address to “Chere

Jeunesse.” Hecht, journalist and writer, published in 1922 his work, which prompted the federal government to charge him with obscenity. Hecht was later known for his play *The Front Page* (1928), a classic which depicted the raucous world of Chicago journalism, but his earlier work was an iconoclastic and literary assault against conventional American morality. In his condemning review of the Hecht work, Lawrence did not hesitate to use a full vocabulary of words which might be deemed of questionable taste. Indeed, the editors substituted long dashes for these words: “We were advised at the last moment to leave out words in this letter which might be considered objectionable. We hope that this censorship will in no way destroy the sense of the text.”<sup>8</sup>

One might think that the university administration would be more disturbed by the Upton Sinclair diatribe, but in fact it was the Lawrence article that administrators seized upon in its attack on the magazine, charging that it



had printed obscene matter in its fourth issue. The Undergraduate Student Affairs Committee found Chanslor guilty of the charge and recommended expulsion from the university, which recommendation was carried out by President Barrows in December 1922.

Chanslor immediately wrote Barrows a defense which first denies the charge, based upon the critical acceptance of Lawrence's work, and then proceeds to claim that this was only a pretext for the real objection to the contents of this issue of *The Laughing Horse*.

The truth seems to be that I have been expelled on the veriest pretext, that the Lawrence letter has been siezed [sic] upon as a convenient excuse for expelling me from the University, that my real crime is that I have dared to print in the "Laughing Horse" articles which ridiculed and criticized policies of the University and of yourself which could not bear criticism. In brief, that I am being expelled from the largest university in the world for daring to express my own honest opinions and for providing an organ so that others might express their opinions.

The University of California apparently has no place for men who wish to speak out, to broadcast their ideas. There is no place there for men who insist upon their right to express themselves freely and without restraint. If there is a member of the faculty or student body . . . who has any ideas that are different from the accepted ideas, he has kept them to himself. Opinion and inquiry must be correct, must be respectable, must be approved. "Radicals," that is those who seek to pierce through the layers of hokum and bunk and downright lies to something resembling the truth, are not wanted. May I ask then, what a university is for? Is it a colossal sausage-mill, grinding out stupid, conventional, tenth-rate imitations of the typical one-hundred-percent "go-getter"? What encouragement, may I ask, does the University of California give to creative artists, to fearless questioners, to challengers? The answer is, NONE!<sup>9</sup>

B. M. Woods, then dean of summer sessions in Los Angeles, wrote to Barrows that he had seen a copy of *The Laughing Horse* and that he appreciates the "moderation" that Barrows showed towards those involved in the publication. Commenting on Sinclair's "perversion of truth," he continues:

Particularly illmannered [sic] on the part of the author of the article and on the part of the editor of the magazine is the publication of material which in my opinion can result almost exclusively in harm to the University and to the ideals which it represents.<sup>10</sup>

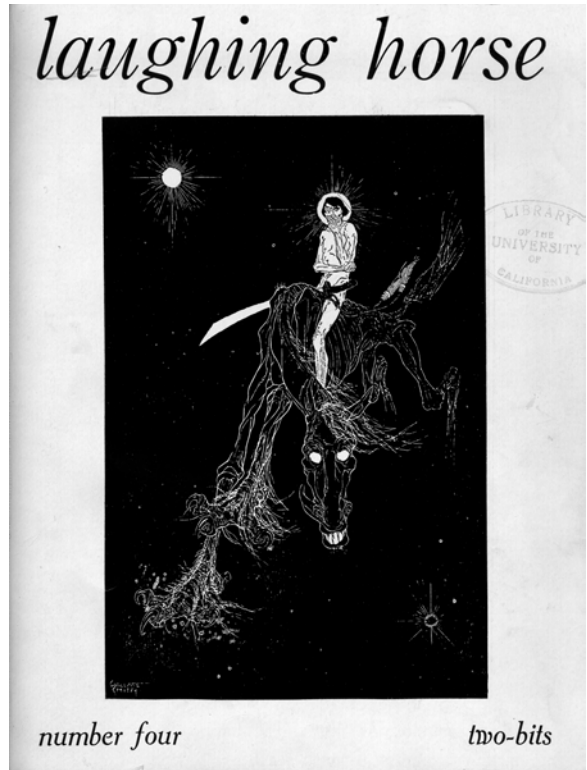
Chanslor's letter, in addition to pointing out that the "ridiculous" charge of obscenity was dismissed by a police court in less than a minute, states that *The Laughing Horse* "has tried, in its small way, to let in a breath of air, a shaft of light to this campus."

Issue number five reprinted a lengthy letter from Upton Sinclair to President Barrows, dated December 14, 1922, in which he chastises Barrows for his treatment of Chanslor and reiterates his objections to Barrows's administration and policies.

I do not ask the students of the University of California to "defend" my "article." I only ask them to read it, and consider it, and investigate its statements—which means that they should demand of the president of the

University of California that he either disprove the charges, or else stand convicted before the people of this state as a henchman of organized greed, instead of a servant of truth and social justice.<sup>11</sup>

The *Laughing Horse* continued to be published in Berkeley for two more numbers, although not claiming any relationship to the university. With issue number eight, it moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where Willard Johnson had already established himself and had forged a connection with Witter Bynner. Further issues changed the scope of the publication entirely, relying on contributions from the Santa Fe and Taos literati, especially from Witter Bynner, Mabel Dodge Luhan and D. H. Lawrence. The *Laughing Horse* continued its influential literary output until 1930, with one further issue in 1938, when Johnson turned to other interests.<sup>12</sup>



## ENDNOTES

- 1 *The Laughing Horse*, no.1, April 1922, cover.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Upton Sinclair, *The Goose-step*, 130; quoted from the *San Francisco Call*, January 20, 1922.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 139.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *The Laughing Horse*, no. 4, [November 1922], 17.
- 9 Roy Chanslor, letter to David P. Barrows, December 11, 1922. President's records, CU-5 Series 2, 1922:137-58. University Archives, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Chanslor's letter is reprinted in full in an extensive article in the *Oakland Tribune*, December 12, 1922.
- 10 B.M. Woods, letter to Barrows, December 20, 1922. President's records, CU-5 Series 2, 1922:137-58.
- 11 *The Laughing Horse*, no. 5, January 1923, 9. The original letter may be found in President's records, CU-5 Series 2, 1922:1596.
- 12 For an account of Johnson and *The Laughing Horse*, see Sharyn Udall, *Spud Johnson and Laughing Horse* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).



Sather Gate, circa 1935. *University Archives (UARC PIC 4:345).*