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The importance of T. E. Lawrence

by David Fromkin

On the legacy of T. E. Lawrence.

In 1988, on the centenary of Thomas Edward ("T. E.") Lawrence, the *Economist* observed that he "remains—in the curious company of James Dean—the most widely publicized folk-hero of the century." Especially in Great Britain, but in the United States and Europe as well, books about him continue to flood the market. The bbc, which broadcast a television documentary about him in the 1960s, broadcast another in 1986; and the haunting David Lean film *Lawrence of Arabia* was re-released recently, in a fuller version, to continuing acclaim. A new selection of Lawrence's letters was published in 1988. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, his partly fictional account of the Arab Revolt and his role in it, continues to sell in bookstores more than a half century after its first publication, and is said to be one of the most widely read books in the English language. A massive authorized biography of him published in 1988 did not succeed in saying the final word, although it was intended to do so; yet another biography —perhaps the fortieth to be published in English or French—appeared the following year.1

The puzzles he set, and the ambiguities of his life and thought, continue to fascinate and to baffle. They are likely to do so well beyond his second centenary. In a slim volume of scholarly essays2 that appeared in 1989, he was compared to Homer, Xenophon, Rousseau, Kipling, Lord Byron, Goethe, Rimbaud, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot. Liddell Hart, theorist of military strategy, compared him to the Great Captains: a select group that, most would say, includes only Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, and no more than a handful of others.

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So important was his prestige to that of the British Empire that when a book exposing some of his personal secrets was about to appear two decades after his death, there was a movement to stop it; the artist Eric Kennington wrote to Sir Ronald Storrs, "Would not publication . . . do great harm to Great Britain (and the white races) .

. . among friend & enemies, & weaken our prestige & power with all dark-skinned races?"

He was idolized. The novelist John Buchan, who ought to have known that some of Lawrence's tales were fabrications, wrote: "I am not much of a hero-worshiper . . . but I would have followed Lawrence over the edge of the world." The historian James Shotwell, an American delegate to the Peace Conference (1919), called Lawrence the "successor of Muhammad." An Anglican clergyman, conducting Oxford services for T. E., said he was making no direct comparison, but did so anyway: he claimed that in life and work, Lawrence was another Jesus Christ. Who was Lawrence? What made him so important?

Lawrence, as the world now knows, was not Lawrence. The illegitimate child of an illegitimate child, he was the son of Thomas Chapman, later to become Sir Thomas Chapman, the seventh Baronet of his line. The Chapmans were Protestant squires in Ireland, where they had acquired their first lands centuries before through the patronage of their kinsman Sir Walter Raleigh. Chapman, who already had a wife and daughters, ran away with Sarah, the family governess. The offspring out of wedlock of a Norwegian father and an English mother, she was a woman as powerful and almost as fiercely religious as his wife. Thomas and Sarah took the surname "Lawrence" and had five sons together, of whom the second was T. E., born in 1888.

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Unlike his brothers, who grew up in ignorance of the deception, T. E. learned at some point during his boyhood that his outwardly respectable churchgoing parents, despite all his mother's puritanical religious sermonizing, were living in sin, using assumed names, and acting out a lie. Aspects of T. E.'s behavior often have been explained as an outgrowth of this: of his knowledge that his parents were frauds, and of his having to play a false role himself by answering to the name Lawrence. Decades later he tried calling himself by other names—Ross and Shaw—but they seemed wrong, too. Writing of himself in the third person, he said: "The friends of his manhood called him 'T. E.' for convenience and to show him that they recognized how his adopted surnames—Lawrence, Ross, Shaw, whatever they were—did not belong."

He was a born double agent. He loved deceptions, puzzles, and disguises. But so did others in the England of his time. It was the age of Frederick Rolfe, who passed himself off as Baron Corvo and wrote an autobiographical fantasy in which he became Pope Hadrian the Seventh. When Lawrence was a child, impersonation took its timelessly bestselling form in Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894).

All his life, Lawrence told tales, passing off his inventions or exaggerations as the truth. But so did a surprising number of his noted contemporaries. It is notoriously difficult to find a completely true sentence in the multi-volume memoirs of David Lloyd George, the Prime Minister

under whom Lawrence served. Ford Madox Ford, who was central to London's literary set when Lawrence tried his hand at writing, bragged of friendships with people he did not know, and described encounters that never took place. Harold J. Laski, theoretician of the Socialist Left, friend and correspondent of Justice Holmes, did the same thing.

In fabricating stories, Lawrence cheated as a child cheats, with no essential dishonesty, meaning no harm, but passionately desiring the attention and recognition that the achievements bragged of will bring. He sought the approval of adults. As a boy, he was the perfect Scout (though the Scout movement had not yet started), disciplining himself to learn stealth, craft, and all sorts of survival skills that he was unlikely to be called upon to use in his home town of Oxford. He taught himself self-denial and endurance, gave up eating meat for years, practiced going without sleep, built muscles, and rode a bicycle one hundred miles a day. Later he learned to be a crack shot.

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With a head disproportionately large, he looked shorter than his five feet four inches. With his puckish grin, his impish love of teasing, and his irreverence, the shortness made him look like a boy who never grew up. Indeed he was in some ways a case of arrested development. Emotionally he never reached puberty; typically, his lifelong attitude toward the opposite sex was that of a twelve-year-old who thinks that including girls in activities spoils the fun.

Perpetual boyhood was a theme that ran strongly through the British imagination in his time (and afterward). It found its full expression in Barrie's *Peter Pan*, which appeared in 1904, when Lawrence was in his teens. Adult Britons lingered, in continuing fascination, in the world of their childhood, as witness the enormous hold on public attention exercised by Kipling's tale of school days, *Stalky & Co.*, and by Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Lawrence's contemporaries P. G. Wodehouse and A. A. Milne (creator of Winnie-the-Pooh) were like him in refusing to become adults; and like him, too, in creating imaginary worlds—for the Arabian desert portrayed by Lawrence is a work of art—into which the schoolboy in every reader can escape. So T. E. Lawrence's strong appeal to the imagination of Englishmen, at least in part, may well have been due—may still be due—to his having tapped this powerful vein of sentiment buried beneath the surface of British life.

The heroines in Wodehouse's novels win approval only if they are good sports: one of the lads. Lawrence's tastes ran in similar directions. As a very young man, without preliminaries, he proposed marriage to a girl he knew only slightly; what seems to have been distinctive about her was that she was a tomboy.

It is not that he was homosexual, at least in the usual sense, although he often appeared to be, perhaps unconsciously, flirting in that direction. Vyvyan Richards, a friend of his young manhood

who felt a homosexual passion for him, later wrote: ". . . for me it was love at first sight. He had neither flesh nor carnality of any kind; he just did not understand. He received my affection, my sacrifice, in fact, eventually my total subservience, as though it was his due. He never gave the slightest sign that he understood my motives or fathomed my desires." Of sex with other men, Lawrence said: "I couldn't ever do it, I believe: the impulse strong enough to make me touch another creature has not yet been born in me." Of sex with women, "I haven't ever: and don't much want to." Concern with "our comic reproductive processes" should not be "a main business of life," he wrote; but it bothered him a lot, and, in army days, he found the coarse sex talk in the barracks more than upsetting: to him it was maddening.

His sexual puritanism was not dissimilar to that of his religious mother—which is ironic, for he directed his life toward freeing himself from her. Even in the last phase of his life, he spoke bitterly of how she tried "to break into the circle" of his "integrity." He wrote her: "You talk of 'sharing my life' . . . but that I won't allow." He wrote of her: "I have a terror of her knowing anything about my feelings, or convictions, or way of life. If she knew they would be damaged: violated: no longer mine . . . Knowledge of her will prevent my ever making any woman a mother . . ." But at last, because she survived him, she won; above his dead body she placed a tombstone with a text from the Bible—her holy book, not his.[3] All his life he had fought to free himself of her, but at the end of it he found himself entombed forever beneath his mother's pieties.

At university—Jesus College, Oxford— Lawrence found a mentor in David Hogarth, Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, who led him to a career as an archeologist in the Middle East. When the First World War broke out, Lawrence became a junior officer and was sent out to Cairo as an interpreter and mapmaker—and Hogarth appeared as Lt.-Commander in the Royal Navy and a key figure in British intelligence in the Middle East, who later was assigned to head the Arab Bureau, the special unit established to deal with the Arab Middle East. As such Hogarth worked under Gilbert Clayton, who in the autumn of 1914 was made head of all British civilian and military intelligence in Egypt, and alongside Ronald Storrs, a Foreign Office official who held the especial confidence of Lord Kitchener, England's proconsul in Egypt, "temporarily" in London as War Minister.

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Though destined for eventual independence, Egypt was then a British protectorate. It was at the front line in the war that had broken out against the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish sultanate which then ruled the Arab Middle East as well as the lands now called Turkey and Israel.

Cairo seethed with intrigue. Arab exiles from Syria and elsewhere dangled alluring possibilities of action behind enemy lines before British intelligence officials who were credulous and ill-informed. The Turks had extensive spy networks behind British lines, but the English had none behind theirs: the British commanding general in Egypt confessed to Kitchener that "I can get

no information . . . —our agents cannot get through—those we had on the other side have been bagged."

It was from the Cairene world of schemes and dreams, in which things were rarely what British officialdom believed them to be, that tiny young T. E. Lawrence began his rise to world fame.

Lawrence did not come in at the beginning of what he called "the show"; he came in at the middle. To understand what he achieved, and why his government found the exploits he invented as useful as those he actually accomplished, one must know what had come before.

There was no good reason for England to be embroiled in a war with the Ottoman Empire, which had been her ally and protégé for a century. The war against Germany and Austro-Hungary had broken out in Europe, between Europeans, and had no connection to the Ottoman Sultan or his domains. It was an accident, the details of which need not be gone into here, that brought the Empire into collision with the Allies—who had no quarrel with the Sultan, and no desire to fight him.

Britain underestimated the Ottoman Empire, and regarded the Sultan's war against England as a nuisance rather than a danger. Britain's War Minister, Lord Kitchener, was determined not to allow the Middle East to distract attention from the real war: the war that raged in Europe. All forces would be concentrated on the western front. Only when Germany and Austria surrendered would the Allies send troops to the Middle East.

Kitchener and his lieutenants in Egypt, who were Lawrence's mentors, had grown up in the service of the Great Game, the century-long conflict that pitted Britain against her rivals France and Russia in the Middle East. In the 1914 war, France and Russia were England's allies; but Kitchener and his followers looked ahead to the postwar world, in which the Middle Eastern rivalry with Russia and France would resume. It was in this context that Kitchener in 1914 initiated a secret correspondence with Hussein ibn Ali, the Turkish-appointed Emir of Mecca. As Emir, Hussein was the protector of the Holy Places of the Mohammedan religion located in the Hejaz, a province in the west of what is now Saudi Arabia, then governed by the Ottoman Empire.

Anticipating that, when the war was over, Russia would seize control of Islam by setting up a puppet Turkish Sultan as Caliph of the Faithful, Kitchener schemed to set up the Emir Hussein as a rival, Arabian, Caliph who would be Britain's puppet—a sort of anti-Pope, to be used as French monarchs once employed the Pontiffs ofAvignon.

This madcap scheme had to be kept secret, for in India, Britain ruled the largest Moslem population in the world, and were it to be known that the English were meddling in their religion, Mohammedans there and everywhere might rise in rage against Britain.

To his dying day, Lawrence kept the secret. In the introductory sentence to *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, he wrote that "some Englishmen, of whom Lord Kitchener was chief, believed that a rebellion of Arabs against Turks would enable England, while fighting Germany, simultaneously to defeat her

ally Turkey." On the contrary, Kitchener's was the strategy of not fighting the two simultaneously, but of defeating Germany first. For most of his tenure at the War Office, he was not interested in pitting Arabs against Turks but in pitting Britain's Moslems against Russia's Moslems. He did not believe in Arab nationalism.

Kitchener and his followers believed that in the Middle East religion was everything. But—and here, though misleading, Lawrence's introductory sentence is literally accurate—from the autumn of 1915 until the summer of 1916, they were tricked into believing otherwise. Retelling the details of it would take too long; suffice it to say that British officials in Cairo now believed—for about nine or ten months, until they realized that they had been deceived—that a vast nationalist Arab network existed behind Ottoman lines, including several hundred thousand Arab-speaking Ottoman troops (perhaps as much as half the Ottoman army); and that they would rebel against the Ottoman Empire and come over to the Allied side of the war at the call of the same Hussein of the Hejaz whom Kitchener had imagined to be a religious leader. Moreover Hussein was willing to do it; unbeknown to the British, he had discovered that the Ottoman government planned to depose him, so he had no choice but to rebel while he could.

In June 1916, supported by Abdullah, Feisal, and his other sons, Hussein proclaimed the Arab Revolt. It proved to be a dud. Hussein, it turned out, had no following at all. Moslems did not respond to his call, nor did Arabs. Under his banner—or rather, the one that a British official designed for him—those who rallied were closer to one thousand than to one hundred thousand, and they were tribesmen, not soldiers.

The Arab Revolt was supposed to rescue Britain, but instead Britain had to rescue it. Kitchener died before he could be blamed; but the reputation of Clayton, Storrs, and its other British sponsors in Cairo plummeted. In the autumn of 1916, Storrs journeyed to the Hejaz to see what could be salvaged from it. Clayton apparently wanted Lawrence—who was far more enterprising than Storrs—to go along, but could not get official permission; so Lawrence took his accumulated leave time, and traveled with Storrs as a vacationer. He had never been to Arabia before.

In the two years that followed, Lawrence was to be instrumental in keeping Hussein's movement alive and in directing it along lines that proved helpful—though not of any vital importance—to the Allied war effort. It was creditable service that, however, had no material effect on the conduct or outcome of the war. It was rather in shaping the peace that T. E. and the Hejaz movement that he inspired made their mark. Britain's new Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, wanted to take the whole of the Arab Middle East for the British Empire in the postwar world; and it was here that Lawrence, with a gift for self-glorification that served his country's purposes, was to prove so useful. Lawrence's real achievement in his two years with the Arabians in the World War was to invent a role for the Emir Hussein's small band: a role so visible, that commanded so much attention and proved so easy to exaggerate, that, when the war was over, Britain could make claims on Hussein's behalf, could pretend that she could not honor her promise to deliver Syria to France, because Hussein (said the British, lying outrageously) had won Syria in the war. Hussein

was Britain's man; in pushing Hussein's claims, Lawrence was advancing Britain's.

At October 16, 1916, the vessel bringing Storrs and Lawrence from Egypt docked at the port of Jeddah on the coast of Arabia. Lawrence—his own master, for he was on leave—made it his business to go upcountry to meet the sons of the Emir Hussein. Having done so, he became convinced that Feisal was the son who should lead the Arab cause. Lawrence also was converted to the views of the then-commander of Hussein's forces—a former officer in the Ottoman army, brought in by the British to try to make soldiers out of Hussein's tribesmen—that the bedouin of the Hejaz would be better employed in fighting a guerrilla war than in trying to fight a conventional one.

On his return from Arabia, Lawrence persuaded his superiors of these views. Consequently Prince Feisal became the Arab field commander; at Feisal's request, Lawrence was assigned to be British liaison officer with him; and the campaign they waged was a guerrilla one. Their object was to take the city of Medina, which lay to the north of them and blocked the Hejaz forces from riding north to Palestine, where the Middle East war was to be fought. To force Medina's surrender, Feisal's forces raided the single-track railway from Transjordanian Palestine that was Medina's sole source of reinforcements and supply. A British officer named Herbert Garland taught the Arabs how to dynamite the railroad, and Garland and other officers (including Lawrence, who later received most of the credit for it) went on to dynamite it repeatedly.

But the campaign failed. The Turks repaired the railway after each attack, and kept it running. Medina never fell to the Arabs or the Allies; its garrison held out until the end of the war, blocking the land road to Palestine.

So Lawrence thought of another plan. Since Feisal could not take Medina, he would go around it. Like others, Lawrence had noted the importance of Aqaba, the sleepy fishing port at the southern tip of Palestine. But Lawrence, who had seen aerial photographs of it, was alone in realizing that it could only be taken from behind: from the land, not the sea. Lawrence therefore purchased the support of a bedouin sheik—a desert raider of local renown—who executed the plan. When Aqaba fell to the sheik's war band, Lawrence, who rode with them, performed feats of endurance and courage in crossing enemy-held Palestine and Sinai to report the news to the new British commanding general, Edmund Allenby.

Now that the Arabs had a port in Palestine, the Royal Navy could bring Feisal and his followers to it by sea. Feisal no longer had to keep trying to fight his way there by land—which was a good thing, because Medina continued to stand in Feisal's way, and had Lawrence not thought of a way around it—the sea road—the Hejaz movement would have remained bottled up in the Hejaz for the rest of the war. As it was, Allenby, at Lawrence's request, sent ships to bring Feisal and about a thousand followers to Aqaba. There they were fleshed out by about twenty-five hundred Arab deserters from the Ottoman army to form a camel-cavalry corps that harassed the Turkish flank when Allenby's Egypt-based army invaded Palestine and marched on Syria.

The camel corps contributed something to the campaign, but much more to the pretense that Syria was liberated by the Arabs themselves. Pretense indeed: there were a million British troops fighting in the Middle East in 1918, and only thirty-five hundred Arabs, so on the face of it, it was Britain's war. In part to dramatize the role of the Arabs, Allenby's headquarters ordered the Australian and New Zealand (Anzac) cavalry spearheading the Allied advance to go around Damascus, the metropolis of Syria, not through it, so as to let Feisal take the city. But the plan miscarried. The Ottoman armies fled Damascus, and local Arabs unfriendly to Feisal took possession of it. Then Anzac units, unaware of orders or ignoring them, rode into the city and occupied it. The Allies now had it. Feisal and his cavalry were still three days away, while Lawrence, who had been transferred to the staff of the Australian commander, went and had to drive into the Allied-occupied city in his battered Rolls-Royce to find out what was going on.

A few days later, Feisal and a few hundred followers arrived in Damascus and staged a media event: a triumphal camelback entry into the city. Out of this material and some inspired lies, Lawrence fabricated the liberation of Damascus by Feisal and himself, in anonymous dispatches to the London *Times*, and in the several books written by him or with his help. Lawrence's account was backed up by the personal secretariat of Prime Minister David Lloyd George, whose instructions in briefing the press were to emphasize that the cities of Syria had been liberated by Feisal's forces, which were largely made up of Syrians; so that Syria had freed herself, and in conscience Britain could not turn her over to France.

Sour grapes, distilled in the imagination of T. E. Lawrence, became an intoxicating brew for the twentieth century. The more Lawrence thought about his failure to destroy the Hejaz railroad or to take Medina, the more he realized he was better off not having done so. He had diverted Turkish resources, and had tied down tens of thousands of enemy troops, who had to be on the alert at all times because they did not know when or where he would attack.

Lawrence, working with the military thinker Liddell Hart, developed what became one of the most influential strategic theories of our time in a magazine essay that was later made into an article for the 1929 edition of the *Britannica*. To a world coming out of a senseless European trench war in which battles had been little more than mass butchery, Lawrence offered an attractive alternative strategy of warfare without battles. Instead of attacking enemies, he wrote, you go around them, immobilizing and isolating them, wearing them down as their sentries peer into the darkness searching for attackers who might or might not be lurking in the night.

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Lawrence skirted the question of why Allenby's campaigns rather than his own had won the Middle Eastern war. He wrote that Allenby's "too-greatness deprived the Arab revolt of the opportunity" of defeating Turkey. In fact, Aqaba aside, the bedouins with whom Lawrence rode were never able to defeat the Turks at all; it took

a million-man British army to deliver a knockout blow to the Ottoman Empire—a blow the hit-and-run bedouins were not remotely capable of delivering themselves.

It was to a different kind of war that Lawrence's strategy applied. Lawrence did not know how to destroy or even defeat an enemy, so that his strategy was of no use against a country fighting for survival: a country that will not or cannot give up or surrender and has to be crushed by force. Lawrence taught how to wear down an opponent: a strategy that will win only against an enemy that will surrender if tired, an enemy, therefore, fighting to hold on to something it can afford to give up. In situations to which it applies, the advantage of Lawrence's strategy of attrition is that it permits a smaller, weaker force to sap the resources—and therefore the will to continue fighting—of a Great Power that cannot be defeated face-to-face in the field.

So Lawrence's strategy suits the particular needs of rebels against colonial powers; and his writings have stimulated the thinking of revolutionary strategists throughout the century and are studied alongside the works of Mao Zedong, the campaigns of Vo Nguyen Giap, and the theories of Che Guevara. It is an aspect of Lawrence's special genius to have created a theory that would be so relevant in the years to come. And it is a typical paradox of his career that he, the hero of British imperialism, should have become an inspirer of the Third World's revolt against the imperial West.

It was an ambitious young American showman and jack-of-all-trades, Lowell Thomas, who invented "Lawrence of Arabia" and made him into one of the world's first film stars. Thomas was about twenty-five at the end of 1917, when he raised enough money to send himself and a cameraman to the Middle East in search of a story with romance and local color that he could sell. He had been pointed toward the Middle East by Britain's information director, John Buchan, author of the novel *Greenmantle* (1916), in which a young Oxford scholar in native turban leads a Moslem uprising against the Ottoman Empire.

Almost immediately on arriving in the Middle East, Thomas found his man. At first even Thomas questioned the far-fetched tales that Lawrence told him, but (according to Thomas) T. E. "would laugh with glee and reply: 'History isn't made up of truth, anyhow, so why worry?'" Later, Lawrence was to remark: "On the whole I prefer lies to truth, particularly where they concern me." Lawrence claimed that the fictions he passed off as accounts of his adventures satisfied his "craving for self-expression in some imaginative form"; and when a friend objected, he countered with "What does it matter? History is but a series ofaccepted lies."

Lawrence, with his romantic fantasies, and Lowell Thomas, with his hyperbole and ballyhoo, together concocted a story that took the world by storm. Using the photos as lantern slides as he narrated, Thomas created a show that toured the globe and broke entertainment-business records. In London alone, a million people came to see it.

To an audience sickened for years by the sordid grime and hopeless slaughter of trench warfare on the western front, Lowell Thomas brought a hero in gleaming white robes who rode to victory. Thomas's story of a young Oxonian in native garb becoming a warrior-prince of the desert, to some

extent prefigured in *Greenmantle* and A. E. W. Mason's *Four Feathers*, struck a deeply responsive chord, much like that struck by Edgar Rice Burroughs in *Tarzan*. It was as though the story had been there all along, waiting to be told; and the role of Oxford's desert prince was there, too, waiting for Lawrence to play it.

But the story was false fundamentally. Neither T. E. nor any of his colleagues could have passed for Arab in the Middle East. As Lawrence admitted in 1927 to his biographer, the poet Robert Graves, "I've never heard an Englishman speak Arabic well enough to be taken for a native of any part of the Arabic-speaking world, for five minutes."

Mrs. George Bernard Shaw, a confidante of Lawrence's, to whom he confessed much that was false, once exclaimed in exasperation that "he is such an *infernal* liar!"; but her husband disagreed. T. E. "was a born and incorrigible actor," wrote Bernard Shaw. "He was not a liar. He was an actor."

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The celebrity brought about by Lowell Thomas's "Lawrence of Arabia" show propelled T. E. into the political limelight. Long before George Murphy became a Senator or Ronald Reagan became America's President, Lawrence was a sort of actor in politics. He threw himself into his roles wholeheartedly. Dressed in the uniform of a British officer, he spoke cynically of how he would manipulate the peoples of the Middle East, but wearing his native robes, he was the only prominent Englishman in favor of genuine independence for the Arabs.

In 1919 Lawrence was Feisal's confederate at the Peace Conference, maneuvering to get Hussein's son the crown of an independent Syria and causing some on the British side to wonder whose team he was on. In 1920, T. E. became a public critic of Britain's Middle East policy. Attacking the central justification of imperialism—that native peoples are incapable of self-rule—he wrote to the *Times* that "Merit is no qualification for freedom." Of the Arabs in Syria and what is now Iraq, he wrote that "They did not risk their lives in battle to change masters, to become British subjects or French citizens, but to win a show of their own."

In 1921-22, Lawrence was called back into public service, despite objections that he was unconventional, chronically insubordinate, and not a team player. Appointed an assistant by the new Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill, Lawrence helped Churchill to turn around the government's approach and devise a changed Middle East policy that gave Feisal the newly created kingdom of Iraq and gave Transjordanian Palestine (now Jordan) to Feisal's brother Abdullah. Lawrence was proud of the settlement, and admired Churchill for making it possible; he remarked repeatedly that the Arabs now had been given what they had been promised—and more.

But while his public life prospered, his private life disintegrated. He was overcome by guilt. One can only guess at the reasons. Guessing was what he wanted us to do; he only flirted at telling. He confessed frequently, variously, and inconsistently. In this he was much like a ballerina widely known in New York City during the 1940s, who required the services of a particular psychiatrist because he was the best, but dared not tell him about herself because he was a notorious gossip. Her solution was to tell the doctor invented stories of what she had done: things that, to her way of thinking, were exactly as sick or as bad as what she had actually done, so that the doctor's analysis of her fictional behavior would apply equally well to her real behavior. That is more or less what Lawrence did, providing enough employment to psychohistorians to last well beyond the turn of the next century.

Whatever the reason, Lawrence discovered a need to be physically beaten. His descent into the sexual underworld of sado-masochism was dizzyingly dangerous. While still very much in the public eye as a Middle East peacemaker, he took to attending flagellation parties in Chelsea organized by a German panderer who went by the name of Bluebeard. Soon Bluebeard was offering his confessions for publication, and Lawrence was driven to use government connections to stop him.

Seemingly driven by inner forces, T. E. made a sudden turn in life. He had been a romantic, writing of the peoples of the Middle East as though he were an artist and they, his work; seeking to make them in some sense an extension of his personality. But in 1922-23, he turned his back on such nineteenth-century aspirations, in favor of yearnings more appropriate to the eleventh or twelfth centuries. His aim—or at least so he wished his public to believe—was to annihilate his individuality: to merge his personality, as medieval man had done, in collective efforts. In that quest, under assumed names to achieve anonymity, he cloistered himself as a simple trooper in the Tank Corps, and later, in the airforce. But whereas monks of the church had been capable of mortifying the flesh without assistance, Lawrence brought along with him a hired hand whose duties were to beat him—in accordance with letters from a fictitious relative, produced by Lawrence, detailing his latest sins and prescribing punishments for them.

The public knew nothing of this. What the public knew was that he was pursuing a life inspired by some vague and undenominational spiritualism—the sort of thing the twentieth century finds immensely appealing. Moreover his attempts to avoid publicity, journalists, and photographers—like the similar efforts in later years of Greta Garbo and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis—kept him constantly in the news.

Though he wrote a distinctive novel, *The Mint*, and an ever-popular prose translation of the *Odyssey*, the work in which Lawrence made his bid for immortality was one in which he told of his wartime adventures: *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. He wrote it—confusingly, since it dealt with real events—as a novel, intending it (he told Edward Garnett) "to make an English fourth" to an exclusive bookshelf that contained only *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *Moby-Dick*. In writing to E. M. Forster, he lengthened his bookshelf, omitting *Zarathustra*, but adding *War*

and Peace, *Leaves of Grass*, *Don Quixote*, and Rabelais.

It has been greatly praised. "It ranks with the greatest books ever written in the English language," said Winston Churchill, who was not alone in that view. But if it ranks so high, it can only be because it was written in a century in which its flaws increasingly are regarded as virtues.

It is the work of an author unwilling to tell which of his statements are fact and which fiction, and unable to decide what story, whether fact or fiction, he wants to tell. So he outlines several stories, but they contradict one another.

The title is from a quotation that Lawrence loved and long had wanted to use as a title for something. But it did not suit this book. "Seven Pillars of Wisdom" refers to the achievement of wisdom: wisdom made complete and perfect. But the book of which it is the title tells no such tale. So the title tells one story, the text, another.

Lawrence prefaces the book with a poem that Robert Graves helped him write and that tells a story of its own. In the poem, the hero strives to win a victory for the sake of someone or something he loves, does in fact win, but finds the victory hollow because the someone or something for whom it was won has died. An afternote repeats this account.

But that story, too, is inconsistent with those told in the text. In the original first chapter of the text, deleted at the suggestion of Bernard Shaw, but subsequently published, Lawrence told two more stories, which were mutually inconsistent. In one of them, the Arabs had been used as pawns by the British during the war, and he was guilty of acting for his government in this, and of making promises to the Arabs that he knew his government had no intention of keeping. In the second story, he was not guilty; his government had duped him as well as the Arabs. The idealistic young men of whom he was one, he wrote, had won a bright triumph, but then "the old men came out again and took our victory."

In a later chapter he amplified this second story. The Arabs, he wrote, "had begun to dream of liberty," and a small group of Englishmen ("We were not many; and nearly all of us rallied around Clayton . . .") had determined to help them achieve it. In addition to Gilbert Clayton, he listed Aubrey Herbert, Sir Mark Sykes, David Hogarth, and several others associated with the Arab Bureau in Cairo—"all of the creed," he wrote. He claimed that "we meant to break into the accepted halls of English foreign policy, and build a new people in the East."

That was factually false; that was not their creed. Apart from Lawrence himself, none of them believed in an Arab nation or in Arab independence. Aubrey Herbert was pro-Ottoman Empire and happy with the notion of Arabs being ruled by Turks. Sir Mark Sykes was an author of the Sykes-Picot-Sazanov Agreement, the treaty that Lawrence regarded as a betrayal of the Arabs and the promises made to them. Hogarth and Clayton both believed that Arabs could not govern themselves and ought to be ruled by Europeans.

Lawrence was equally muddled about his own role. At different places in the book he makes three claims: that he secretly intended, when the moment came, to keep faith with the Arabs by defeating his own government's machinations; that, on the contrary, he had lost his soul in the greed for victory and did not intend to keep faith with the Arabs; and that, again on the contrary, betraying the Arabs was justified by the overriding need to win the war. In other words: he did not betray the Arabs, and that was good; he did betray the Arabs, and that was bad; and he did betray the Arabs, and that was good.

In reality the issue was false. Hussein had never trusted Britain, and therefore had not been deceived; he never relied on the heavily qualified phrases in which British officials suggested they would do great things for the Arab peoples after the war. Feisal knew of the secret treaty in which Britain supposedly betrayed the Arabs to France; Lawrence had told him of it. Each on his own (for they betrayed one another, too), Hussein and Feisal had negotiated to betray the Allies and go back to the Ottoman side. T. E. told Liddell Hart that "Feisal was definitely 'selling' us"; so he knew his one-sided story of betrayal was fiction.

In any event, the story had become moot. Since the events recounted in *Seven Pillars*, Churchill, with Lawrence's help, had negotiated new arrangements for the Middle East that T. E. believed provided full justice for the Arab claims. So in the end there was no betrayal, and *Seven Pillars*—a cry of political guilt—was politically out of date long before it was published.

But as literature it broke new ground. In the *Ashenden* stories, Somerset Maugham took up Lawrence's theme that the role of an intelligence agent, even for our side, is morally tarnished. Others then took it up, too, in a line that leads to the novels of John Le Carré. Similarly Lawrence's story of officers in the field (such as himself) acting in good faith, but then discovering that their own political or military or intelligence leaders are at least as cynical and immoral as the enemy's, is one recounted time and again in American popular literature and films of the past few decades. The exploration of the moral ambiguity, or even moral guilt, of our own side, a province taken as his domain by Graham Greene, can be traced to *Seven Pillars*.

Lawrence's obsession with guilt as a personal theme runs parallel to the political one throughout *Seven Pillars*, which begins in a Nietzschean spirit with the author's observation that in the extreme circumstances of the desert war he and his companions were driven to actions that in normal circumstances would be immoral. Did their exceptional circumstances license them to transcend the moral code? The author—it is his essential weakness that he will never commit himself—gives no clear answer.

The emotional center of the book is a story that Lawrence began telling in 1919, giving several different accounts of it, that explained why he had whip marks on his body. Lawrence claimed that, unknown to others, he had been taken prisoner for a time on the night of November 21-22, 1917, in a place called Deraa, and was homosexually assaulted, bayoneted, and beaten by command of a sadistic Turkish commander. Lawrence told it in several versions, admitting that some of them were untrue; and there has always been a strong case that the whole tale was false.

That case is strengthened by the apparent discovery of documentary evidence detailed in the Lawrence James biography of Lawrence. It seems that the official War Diary kept by a British army unit shows that Lawrence and a fellow officer, Colonel Joyce, were in Aqaba, some four hundred miles away from Deraa, on November 21 and 22; and that the memory of a Lieutenant Samuel Brodie, who met Lawrence and Joyce in Aqaba then, confirms this.

Does it matter if the Deraa story is fantasy? or that Lawrence misrepresents the politics of his characters? or that the three reasons he gives to deny that the Anzacs liberated Damascus are—all of them—false as well as inconsistent?

If *Seven Pillars* is indeed a novel, it is disqualified from greatness because its author fails to pay the price of admission: he refuses to run the risk of saying who he is or what he believes or what story he is telling. As history, it lies and distorts; T. E. knew that, but somehow did not feel guilty—here, where he should have felt it—for giving his Arabs credit for what the Australian/New Zealand cavalry in fact had accomplished.

Nietzsche, an intellectual hero of Lawrence's who taught that history consists of myths rather than facts, provided a link with André Malraux, who placed Lawrence, the writer and thinker, beside the exemplary twentieth-century hero, the Arab nationalist, and the guerrilla strategist. Malraux, who seems to have known about Lawrence since 1920, modeled himself after Lawrence and wrote of himself as T. E.'s spiritual son.

> He had a genius for taking the road we would want to follow.

Malraux became obsessed by Lawrence. The parallel ran closer than Malraux knew, for, believing Lawrence's lies, Malraux himself lied by claiming to have accomplished similar feats. Malraux falsely claimed to have been a leader of the Chinese revolution, in Canton in 1925 and in Shanghai in 1927, although (other than a trip to Hong Kong) he had never been in China at all. Just as Lawrence sat down to write a novel about his leadership of the illusory Arab revolt as a "fourth" to *Karamazov*, *Zarathustra*, and *Moby-Dick*, so Malraux sat down to write a masterpiece flowing from his claimed participation in the Chinese revolution, *Man's Fate*, as a "fifth gospel" to Lawrence and the other three. Like Lawrence, Malraux did perform acts of valor, but also claimed to have performed others that he had not.

Lawrence's boyhood dream—doing great things both "active and reflective," as he told Liddell Hart—became Malraux's adult creed of the intellectual committed to action, a creed that also informed the works of Ernest Hemingway (if in somewhat debased form), and of which Lawrence was at once the inspirer and the exemplar. Liddell Hart, while writing that "the perfect balance may be unattainable," claimed of T. E. that "no man has come so close to equal greatness in action and reflection." In the world of the 1920s and 1930s, as fascism, Nazism, and Communism rose from the embers of a Europe ravaged by war, social strife, and depression, Malraux portrayed

Lawrence as the last liberal hero of the West.

In the first chapter of a book he was writing about T. E.—a book, the existence of which has been doubted for years, but which is now scheduled for publication—Malraux quotes Lawrence as saying "somewhere there is an absolute, that's the only thing that counts; and I haven't succeeded in finding it. Hence this pointless existence." That is the great theme that Malraux wanted to explore: Lawrence's quest for meaning in a universe in which, as Nietzsche's Zarathustra proclaimed, "*God is dead!*" In this conception, Lawrence became an existentialist hero; and both Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are said to have been fascinated by him.

T. E. died, like Albert Camus, to whom he bore resemblances, in a traffic accident. Speeding as usual, he veered on his motorbike to avoid hitting two children, and was thrown over the handlebars to his death. It was 1935; parliamentary regimes all over Europe were falling to men on horseback whose military dictatorships promised national greatness; and there were forces interested in using T. E. as their figurehead in coming to power. So there were rumors that he had been murdered, and others that—tempted by the immortality that fame as a dictator would bring, but unwilling to compromise his democratic ideals—Lawrence had crashed deliberately, committing suicide.

A few years later, Liddell Hart wrote of Lawrence: "Not long ago the young men were talking, the young poets writing, of him in a Messianic strain—as the man who could, if he would, be a light to lead stumbling humanity out of its troubles. . . . [I]t is difficult to see any way, compatible with his philosophy, in which he could have played such a role. . . . But at least I can say that, so far as I knew him, he seemed to come nearer than any man to fitness for such power—in a state that I would care to live in."

In the one meeting he claimed to have had with T. E.—but which it now seems Malraux invented—Malraux provides a clue as to Lawrence's enduring interest and appeal. "He was extraordinarily elegant. With an elegance of today, not of his own time. A roll-neck sweater, for example, a kind of non-chalance and distance."

It was his special quality: he does not age or date. He belongs to today. Even his theory of strategy is as current as this morning's headlines. He had a genius for taking the road we would want to follow. His attitudes and interests anticipated those of the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s; and so did his style. He was casual. He was cool. He never stopped being young. He shared the modern crazes: motorbikes; speed; celebrity.

Like public figures of today, he was launched by the news media and the entertainment industry, now so intertwined and pervasive. In writing fiction in which real characters make an appearance, he looked ahead to the popularity in our time of novels, television series, and films that are situated on the frontier between fact and fiction; in some ways *Seven Pillars* is like a Costa-Gavras movie—a setting of apparent historical truth into which untruths are inserted without being labeled as such.

As a citizen of the twentieth century, Lawrence valued history little and entertainment a great deal. Fiction is stranger than truth, and T. E. found it more fun: due to him, there are those who believe that Damascus was liberated in 1918 by a band of Arabs led by someone who looked like Peter O'Toole.

Though he wrote and read a great deal, his imagination was more graphic than literary, more concerned with images than with words: that too is a hallmark of this part of the twentieth century. He was at least as much concerned about the design of a book as about its contents, and as a young man planned to found a private press. A sometime vegetarian; self-exiled, and engaged in a vaguely spiritual quest; like the generations beginning with 1960, he wanted to rediscover artisanry, craftsmanship, handmade work.

His themes were those popular with today's readers: confusion of sexual orientation; illicit sex practices; and identity crisis. He was an intelligence agent—and we adore spy stories. When he sped to his death, he left behind the sort of ending that most intrigues the twentieth century—the officially denied conspiracy—and, as with President Kennedy's assassination, there were troubling details that did not fit with the official account.

Bernard Shaw wrote that "through an accident in his teens Lawrence never grew up. He looked like a boy. His great abilities and interests were those of a highly gifted boy. He died, not as a great thinker, but as a boy tearing along on a motorcycle at miles an hour." Only a fine line separates an existentialist hero from what the London press has taken to calling "a crazy, mixed-up kid"; and T. E. was so much of his century that he could be said to be on either side of the line.

Lawrence could not have been further from the towering figures of his time. The great men of the century—Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle—were creatures of another age, born out of time. The awe they inspired, and their ability to impose themselves, derived in large part from qualities and resources they brought with them from the past.

T. E., in contrast, was of his time and ours. Of all the public figures of the twentieth century, across a wide range of interests, issues, and attitudes, he best expresses the century, and it is best studied through him. He is a prism through which the spectrum of twentieth-century tastes, fads, foibles, insights, and outlooks can be sorted out. If his life were a work of art, some collector a thousand years hence might take it down from its shelf, saying: "Now here is a pure example of twentieth century—a perfect specimen!" For that, if for nothing else, T. E. Lawrence is, and will remain, important.

It is the answer to his prayer. Lawrence was haunted by the knowledge that life is ephemeral. Insofar as anything endures, he believed, it is the art of a Dostoevsky or the fame of an Alexander, and he aspired to both; indeed he wanted them so much that he cheated to get them. *Seven Pillars* is a cheat either as a novel—for a novelist's job is to decide what he wants to say, but T. E. would not run the risk of doing that—or as history, for it does not tell the truth; and the campaigns of Lawrence of Arabia were a cheat because T. E. fabricated them. So it may not be for his works or

deeds, considerable though their influence has been, that he will be known in distant ages.

It is as a voice of our time that he is certain to be heard. As other men lust for power or wealth or women, he craved to be noticed and to be remembered—and he was and he is, and he will be.

1. _ *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T.E. Lawrence*, by Jeremy Wilson; Atheneum, 1,188 pages, $35. *The Golden Warrior: The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia*, by Lawrence James; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 404 pages, $19.50.
2. _ *T.E. Lawrence: Soldier, Writer, Legend*, edited by Jeffrey Meyers; St. Martin's Press, 220 pages, $39.95.
3. _ An observation made in 1977 in *T.E. Lawrence*, by Desmond Stewart; Harper & Row, 352 pages, $15

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