LAWRENCE OF ARABIA AND THE WESTERN IMAGINATION OF THE ORIENT

Christoph Houswitschka
(Bamberg)
SHORT BIOGRAPHY

- 16 August **1888**: Born at Tremadoc, North Wales
- **1896**: Family settles in Oxford
- **1910**: Travels to the Middle East; Lebanon, learning Arabic;
- **1911-14**: Various Excavations
- **1914-1916, March - May 1916**: Intelligence Officer in Egypt on special duty in Mesopotamia
THE WAR YEARS

- **5 June 1916** Arab Revolt begins.
- **23 October** first meeting with Emir Feisal.
- **1916-18** attached as liaison officer to Arab forces
- **18 January 1917** Feisal's army leaves Yenbo en route for Wejh
- **6 July 1917** seizure of Akaba
- **July 1917** Lawrence's first meeting with General Sir Edmund Allenby; promoted Major.
- **20 November** capture and rape (?) at Deraa
- **11 December** Lawrence present at Allenby’s entry into Jerusalem
**NEGOTIATING THE OUTCOME OF THE WAR**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19 September 1918</td>
<td>Allenby launches offensive against Turkish forces in Palestine with Feisal's Arabs acting as right wing in the desert.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 October</td>
<td>arrival at Damascus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 October</td>
<td>departure of Lawrence for Cairo and London.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October-November</td>
<td>Lawrence present at Eastern Committee of War Cabinet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919 Jan. –Oct.</td>
<td>delegate at the Peace Conference in Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1919:</td>
<td>Lowell Thomas's Middle Eastern entertainment opens in London</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1922
August: Joins Royal Air Force as John Hume Ross
27 December discovered by the press
1923
January: discharged following disclosure of his identity
Subscribers’ edition of Seven Pillars of Wisdom completed
1927-29
in India: Revolt in the Desert (popular abridgement of Seven Pillars) published, later withdrawn; The Mint completed; work begun on translation of Odyssey; formally adopts the surname Shaw by deed poll
26 February 1935:
Lawrence leaves Royal Air Force.
13 May:
accident on motorcycle near Clouds Hill.
19 May:
Dies in Bovington Military Hospital.
21 May:
Funeral at Moreton, Dorset
All men dream: but nor equally, Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible. This I did. I meant to make a new nation, to restore! a lost influence, to give twenty millions of Semites the foundations on which to build an inspired dream-palace of their national thoughts.
In a letter to an old friend he explained his feeling that what was going on around him was unreal:

It's a kind of foreign stage on which one plays day and night, in fancy dress, in a strange language, with the price of failure on one's head if the part is not well filled . . . Whether we are going to win or lose, when we do strike, I cannot ever persuade myself. The whole thing is such a play, and one cannot put conviction into one's day dreams . . . Achievement, if it comes, will be a great disillusionment, but not great enough to wake one up.

(Lawrence to Richards, 15. July 1918)
LAWRENCE’S NOTORIOUS RESTLESSNESS

- He also described the intense feeling of listlessness that inclined him to be awkward:

- I change my abode every day, and my job every two days, and my language every three days, and still remain always unsatisfied. I hate being in front, and I hate being back and I don't like responsibility, and I don't obey orders. Altogether no good just now. A long quiet like a purge, and then a contemplation and decision of future roads, that is what to look forward to.
Letter to Curtis:

I lie in bed night after night with this cat-calling carnality seething up and down the hut; fed by streams of fresh matter from twenty lecherous mouths, ... and my mind aches with the rawness of it ... We are all guilty alike, you know. You wouldn’t exist, I wouldn’t exist, without this carnality. Everything with flesh in its mixture is the achievement of a moment when the lusty thought of Hut 12 has passed to action and conceived; and isn’t it true that the fault of birth rests somewhat on the child? I believe it’s we who led our parents on to hear us, and it’s our unborn children who make our flesh itch.
I had had one craving all my life--for the power of self-expression in some imaginative form--but had been too diffuse ever to acquire a technique. At last accident, with perverted humour, in casting me as a man of action had given me place in the Arab Revolt, a theme ready and epic to a direct eye and hand, thus offering me an outlet in literature, the technique-less art. [...] Memory gave me no clue to the heroic, so that I could not feel such men as Auda in myself. He seemed fantastic as the hills of Rumm, old as Mallory.

Reading Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur* (ca. 1469):
... after two or three comfortable days in Khartum, resting and reading the *Morte D'Arthur* in the hospitable palace, I went down towards Cairo.*

Some of the evil of my tale may have been inherent in our circumstances. For years we lived anyhow with one another in the naked desert, under the indifferent heaven. By day the hot sun fermented us; and we were dizzied by the beating wind. At night we were stained by dew, and shamed into pettiness by the innumerable silences of stars. We were a self-centred army without parade or gesture, devoted to freedom, the second of man’s creeds, a purpose so ravenous that it devoured all our strength, a hope so transcendent that our earlier ambitions faded in its glare.
The Arab was by nature continent; and the use of universal marriage had nearlyabolished irregular courses in his tribes. The public women of the rare settlements we encountered in our months of wandering would have been nothing to our numbers, even had their raddled meat been palatable to a man of healthy parts. In horror of such sordid commerce our youths began indifferently to slake one another's few needs in their own clean bodies—a cold convenience that, by comparison, seemed sexless and even pure. Later, some began to justify this sterile process, and swore that friends quivering together in the yielding sand with intimate hot limbs in supreme embrace, found there hidden in the darkness a sensual co-efficient of the mental passion which was welding our souls and spirits in one flaming effort. Several, thirsting to punish appetites they could not wholly prevent, took a savage pride in degrading the body, and offered themselves fiercely in any habit which promised physical pain or filth.
A STRANGER AMONG ARABS

• I was sent to these Arabs as a stranger, unable to think their thoughts or subscribe their beliefs, but charged by duty to lead them forward and to develop to the highest any movement of theirs profitable to England in her war. If I could not assume their character, I could at least conceal my own, and pass among them without evident friction, neither a discord nor a critic but an unnoticed influence.
... the Arab appealed to my imagination. It is the old, old civilisation, which has refined itself clear of household gods, and half the trappings which ours hastens to assume. The gospel of bareness in materials is a good one, and it involves apparently a sort of moral bareness too. They think for the moment, and endeavour to slip through life without turning corners or climbing hills. In part it is a mental and moral fatigue, a race trained out, and to avoid difficulties they have to jettison so much that we think honorable and grave: and yet without in any way sharing their point of view, I think I can understand it enough to look at myself and other foreigners from their direction, and without condemning it. I know I am a stranger to them, and always will be; but I cannot believe them worse, any more than I could change to their ways. (The Letters of T.E. Lawrence of Arabia, ed. David Garnett, 1938; rpt. London: Spring Books, 1964, 244)
In my case, the effort for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me. At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin: it was an affectation only. Easily was a man made an infidel, but hardly might he be converted to another faith. I had dropped one form and not taken on the other...

Sometimes these selves would converse in the void; and then madness was very near, as I believe it would be near the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments.

Escaping one‘s own split of personality
How many thousand years this state of things has lasted [namely, that Arabs live in "a state of war"], those who shall read the earliest records of the inner desert will tell us, for it goes back to the first of them, but in all the centuries the Arab has bought no wisdom from experience. He is never safe, and yet he behaves as though security were his daily bread.  

To which, as a gloss, we should add her further observation, this time about life in Damascus:

I begin to see dimly what the civilisation of a great Eastern city means, how they live, what they think; and I have got on to terms with them. I believe the fact of my being English is a great help. . . . We have gone up in the world since five years ago. The difference is very marked. I think it is due to the success of our government in Egypt to a great extent.
In such statements as these, we note immediately that "the Arab" or "Arabs" have an aura of apartness, definiteness, and collective self-consistency such as to wipe out any traces of individual Arabs with narratable life histories. What appealed to Lawrence's imagination was the clarity of the Arab, both as an image and as a supposed philosophy (or attitude) towards life: in both cases what Lawrence fastens on is the Arab as if seen from the cleansing perspective of one not an Arab, and one for whom such un-self-conscious primitive simplicity as the Arab possesses is something defined by the observer, in this case the White Man. (Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin, 1978, 2003, 229f.)
The enormous age of Arab civilization has thus served to refine the Arab down to his quintessential attributes, and to tire him out morally in the process. What we are left with is Bell's Arab: centuries of experience and no wisdom. As a collective entity, then, the Arab accumulates no existential or even semantical thickness. He remains the same, except for the exhausting refinements mentioned by Lawrence, from one end to the other of "the records of the inner desert." We are to assume that if an Arab feels joy, if he is sad at the death of his child or parent, if he has a sense of the injustices of political tyranny, then those experiences are necessarily subordinate to the sheer, unadorned, and persistent fact of being an Arab.
VIOLENCE AND ESTRANGEMENT

• Blood was always on our hands: we were licensed to it. Wounding and killing seemed ephemeral pains, so very brief and sore was life with us. With the sorrow of living so great, the sorrow of punishment had to be pitiless. We lived for the day and died for it.

• Bedouin ways were hard even for those brought up to them, and for strangers terrible: a death in life. [...] In my notes, the cruel rather than the beautiful found place. We no doubt enjoyed more the rare moments of peace and forgetfulness; but I remember more the agony, the terrors, and the mistakes. Our life is not summed up in what I have written (there are things not to be repeated in cold blood for very shame); but what I have written was in and of our life.

• A man who gives himself to be a possession of aliens leads a Yahoo life, having bartered his soul to a brute-master. He is not of them.
THE ARABS AND THE WEST
A STORY OF BETRAYAL
We pay for these things too much in honour and in innocent lives. I went up the Tigris with one hundred Devon Territorials, young, clean, delightful fellows, full of the power of happiness and of making women and children glad. By them one saw vividly how great it was to be their kin, and English. And we were casting them by thousands into the fire to the worst of deaths, not to win the war but that the corn and rice and oil of Mesopotamia might be ours. The only need was to defeat our enemies (Turkey among them), and this was at last done in the wisdom of Allenby with less than four hundred killed, by turning to our uses the hands of the oppressed in Turkey. I am proudest of my thirty fights in that I did not have any of our own blood shed. All our subject provinces to me were not worth one dead Englishman.
It is accordingly understood between the French and British governments:

- That France and Great Britain are prepared to recognize and protect an independent Arab states or a confederation of Arab states (a) and (b) marked on the annexed map, under the suzerainty of an Arab chief. That in area (a) France, and in area (b) Great Britain, shall have priority of right of enterprise and local loans. That in area (a) France, and in area (b) Great Britain, shall alone supply advisers or foreign functionaries at the request of the Arab state or confederation of Arab states.
AGREEMENT FOR THE PARTITION OF THE MIDDLE EAST

THE SYKES–PICOT AGREEMENT OF 1916 FOR THE PARTITION OF THE MIDDLE EAST
Then there was the imaginative advocate of unconvincing world-movements, Mark Sykes: also a bundle of prejudices, intuitions, half-sciences. His ideas were of the outside; and he lacked patience to test his materials before choosing his style of building. He would take an aspect of the truth, detach it from its circumstances, inflate it, twist and model it, until its old likeness and its new unlikeness together drew a laugh; and laughs were his triumphs. His instincts lay in parody: by choice he was a caricaturist rather than an artist, even in statesmanship. He saw the odd in everything, and missed the even. He would sketch out in a few dashes a new world, all out of scale, but vivid as a vision of some sides of the thing we hoped. His help did us good and harm. For this his last week in Paris tried to atone. He had returned from a period of political duty in Syria, after his awful realization of the true shape of his dreams, to say gallantly, I was wrong: here is the truth! His former friends would not see his new earnestness, and thought him fickle and in error; and very soon he died. It was a tragedy of tragedies, for the Arab sake.
The Arab Revolt had begun on false pretences. To gain the Sherif's help our Cabinet had offered, through Sir Henry McMahon, to support the establishment of native governments in parts of Syria and Mesopotamia, 'saving the interests of our ally, France'. The last modest clause concealed a treaty (kept secret, till too late, from McMahon, and therefore from the Sherif) by which France, England and Russia agreed to annex some of these promised areas, and to establish their respective spheres of influence over all the rest.

Rumours of the fraud reached Arab ears, from Turkey. In the East persons were more trusted than institutions. So the Arabs, having tested my friendliness and sincerity under fire, asked me, as a free agent, to endorse the promises of the British Government. I had had no previous or inner knowledge of the McMahon pledges and the Sykes-Picot treaty, which were both framed by war-time branches of the Foreign Office. But, not being a perfect fool, I could see that if we won the war the promises to the Arabs were dead paper. Had I been an honourable adviser I would have sent my men home, and not let them risk their lives for such stuff. Yet the Arab inspiration was our main tool in winning the Eastern war. So I assured them that England kept her word in letter and spirit. In this comfort they performed their fine things: but, of course, instead of being proud of what we did together, I was continually and bitterly ashamed.
Feisal's position was hazardous in the extreme. [...] He had to live as the guest of Jemal Pasha, in Damascus, rubbing up his military knowledge; for his brother Ali was raising the troops in Hejaz on the pretext that he and Feisal would lead them against the Suez Canal to help the Turks. So Feisal, as a good Ottoman and officer in the Turkish service, had to live at headquarters, and endure acquiescingly the insults and indignities heaped upon his race by the bully Jemal in his cups.
Enver Pasha, the Generalissimo, was on his way to the province, [...]. Feisal had planned to raise his father's crimson banner as soon as he arrived in Medina, and so to take the Turks unawares; and here he was going to be saddled with two uninvited guests to whom, by the Arab law of hospitality, he could do no harm, and who would probably delay his action so long that the whole secret of the revolt would be in jeopardy!

[...] Enver, Jemal and Feisal watched the troops wheeling and turning in the dusty plain outside the city gate, rushing up and down in mimic camel-battle, [...]. 'And are all these volunteers for the Holy War?' asked Enver at last, turning to Feisal. 'Yes,' said Feisal. Willing to fight to the death against the enemies of the faithful?' Yes,' said Feisal again; and then the Arab chiefs [...] drew him aside whispering, 'My Lord, shall we kill them now?' and Feisal said, 'No, they are our guests.'

The sheikhs protested further; for they believed that so they could finish off the war in two blows. They were determined to force Feisal's hand; and he had to go among them, [...] and plead for the lives of the Turkish dictators.
The Turks' beginning of bombing had been enough to disquiet the irregulars who were our eyes and ears. Soon they would break up and go home, and our usefulness be ended [...] 

Clearly our first duty was to get air reinforcement from Allenby [...] I went across to see if my bodyguard could do it with me on our way to Azrak. 

Something was wrong. They were red-eyed, hesitant, trembling: at last I understood that while I was away in the morning the Zaagi, Abdulla and their other chiefs had gone mercilessly through the tally of those who flinched at Nisib. 

[...] 

The demolition of that night was a fantastic muddle. We moved at sunset to an open valley, three easy miles from the railway. Trouble might threaten from Mafrak station. My armoured car, with Junor attendant in his Ford, would guard that side against hostile advance. The Egyptians would move direct to the line, and fire their charges.
The Bey cursed me with horrible threats: and made the man holding me tear my clothes away, bit by bit. His eyes rounded at the half-healed places where the bullets had flicked through my skin a little while ago. Finally he lumbered to his feet, with a glitter in his look, and began to paw me over. I bore it for a little, till he got too beastly; and then jerked my knee into him.

He staggered to his bed, squeezing himself together and groaning with pain, while the soldier shouted for the corporal and the other three men to grip me hand and foot. As soon as I was helpless the Governor regained courage, and spat at me, swearing he would make me ask pardon. He took off his slipper, and hit me repeatedly with it in the face, while the corporal braced my head back by the hair to receive the blows. He leaned forward, fixed his teeth in my neck and bit till the blood came. Then he kissed me.
I remembered the corporal kicking with his nailed boot to get me up; and this was true, for next day my right side was dark and lacerated, and a damaged rib made each breath stab me sharply. I remembered smiling idly at him, for a delicious warmth, probably sexual, was swelling through me: and then that he flung up his arm and hacked with the full length of his whip into my groin. This doubled me half-over, screaming, or, rather, trying impotently to scream, only shuddering through my open mouth. One giggled with amusement. A voice cried, 'Shame, you've killed him'. Another slash followed. A roaring, and my eyes went black: while within me the core of Me seemed to heave slowly up through the rending nerves, expelled from its body by this last indescribable pang.
Writing *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* gave Lawrence an opportunity to indulge his secret predilection but also left him with a dilemma, as he explained to Shaw. Referring to the section on Deera, he wrote:

“Working on it always makes me sick. The two impulses fight so upon it. Self-respect would close it: self-expression seeks to open it. It's a case in which you can't let yourself write as well as you could.”

At first Lawrence gave self-expression free rein, describing how “a delicious warmth, probably sexual” swelled through him after the whipping was over. Though this sentence survived his editing, a second admission that the incident had left him with 'a fascination and terror and morbid desire, lascivious and vicious perhaps, but like the striving of a moth towards its flame', he eventually excised.
Covering him with his pistol, Lawrence shouted for the other Arabs, who clustered round the pair. Hamed admitted shooting the Ageyli following an argument, leaving Lawrence with a terrible dilemma. To do nothing raised the risk of a blood-feud escalating between the Ageyli and the Moroccans once they were back at Wajh. The alternative - in line with tribal justice - was to kill Hamed. Shooing the Moroccan into a dank gully in the side of the wadi, Lawrence gingerly shot him once, twice, a third time before he finally stopped moving. In his notes he drew a rough map, marking the gully with a heavily incised and the word 'Death-crack' and a terse label:

Camped here.
Awful night.
Shot.
THE PRESS: INVENTING A MYTH

Lawrence of Arabia; PBS from 2:19
LAWRENCE‘S AFTERLIFE

- Film
- Literature
- Biography
HIS MYTH IN FILM

Lowell Thomas
*With Lawrence in Arabia* (1924)

[Revolt in the Desert (1927/1934)]
Director and Producer Alexander Korda
Film never finished
Screenplay recently discovered

*Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)
Director David Lean
Screenplay Robert Bolt
NOVELS, LITERARY BIOGRAPHIES AND PLAYS ABOUT T.E. LAWRENCE

Lawrence and the Arabs.
London: Jonathan Cape, 1927.

Winston S. Churchill,
“Lawrence of Arabia.” In:
Great Contemporaries. New
York: Putnam’s Sons, 1937,
S. 129-140.

Terence Rattigan. Ross (1960)
Matthew Eden The Murder of Lawrence of Arabia (1979)
David Stevens The Waters of Babylon: A Novel about Lawrence after Arabia (2000)
Frontis. portrait by Augustus John, 17 illus., 9 maps, index; 454 pp. orig. cloth, 2nd impression, Jonathan Cape, 1934.


“The legend of Lawrence has been built up by nearly all those writers who have taken Lawrence as their subject, whether for a fullscale biography or for a three-page reminiscence. The edifice shows a fairly solid front to the uncritical reader but once it has been examined it is shown to be an inverted pyramid at the base of which stands Lawrence himself on whom the legend rests. My book is therefore a criticism of those writings which have fostered the Lawrence legend. The truth about the man was harder to come by, as no one crack in the edifice revealed the whole truth.” (13)