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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 29 (Mar., 1936), pp. 63-67

Published by: [Australian Institute of Policy and Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20629302>

Accessed: 21/12/2011 07:49

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Lawrence of Arabia

By C. KAEPPPEL.

In a most interesting passage Captain Liddell Hart tells how his book came to take the form in which it has appeared. Originally the military historian of the Encyclopedia Britannica intended to write a sketch of the Arab revolt and to place that revolt in perspective with regard to the main campaigns in Sinai and Palestine under Sir Archibald Murray and Lord Allenby. In such a work Lawrence must necessarily have figured largely. But as the work progressed the space Lawrence filled became larger and larger because "the events that had significance were seen to have their source in his action and still more in his conception." So the book was recast and, though it contains an historical introduction to the Arab revolt, an account of the campaign that followed and also of the main operations, it becomes largely a study of him.

Further, the recent death of Lawrence has led to the publication of appreciations by many who knew him in his Oxford days, and his epic, the "Seven Pillars," has been published in unabridged form; so that, though a full biography is yet to come, it is possible to form some estimate of one who is a national hero and already something of a legend.

When Lawrence landed at Jidda in October '16 his military experience was nil. But he had had an extraordinarily good training for all that was to come, though only a most exceptional mind could use that training to the full. Captain Liddell Hart very rightly stresses the importance of his archaeological work in the near East and of the influence of the late Dr. Hogarth, scholar, archaeologist, historian and traveller, upon him. Still more important were his studies at Oxford. We learn from a fellow student that from his earliest years he dreamed of freeing the Arab from the Turkish yoke and with this in view learned Arabic. (Dr. Hogarth first discovered Lawrence by looking over his shoulder in the Bodleian and finding him reading an Arab text). And even more important was his profound study of military history and military theory and we know from another friend that he spent many vacations tramping Syria and thinking out the campaigns of Saladin. How this

THE AUSTRALIAN QUARTERLY

training stood him in good stead is best told in his own words. In a letter to Captain Liddell Hart, which the latter reprints, he writes:—

“I was not an instinctive soldier, automatic with intuitions and happy ideas. When I took a decision or adopted an alternative it was after doing my best to study every relevant—and many an irrelevant—factor. Geography, tribal structure, religion, social customs, language, appetities, standards were at my finger-ends. The enemy I knew almost like my own side . . . The same with tactics. If I used a weapon well, it was because I could handle it. . . . I put myself under instructors for Lewis, Vickers and Hotchkiss. . . . To use aircraft I flew. To use armoured cars I learned to drive and fight them. I became a bad gunner at need, and could doctor and judge a camel. . . . Behind me there were some years of military reading, and even in the little that I have written about it you may be able to trace the allusions and quotations, the conscious analogies.”

After Turkey had joined the Central Powers, the British Government set itself to enlist the help of the Arabs against its new enemies. But it was faced with two alternatives. Were its new allies to be the Eastern Arabs, the Wahhabis, under Ibn Saud or the Arabs of the West under Faisal, Sharif of Mecca? On the advice of Sir Reginald Wingate, the latter were chosen. Millions of pounds, in money, stores, ammunition and equipment were poured into Jidda and there too came Mr. (now Sir Ronald) Storrs and with him came the man destined to be the real leader of the Hejaz forces, T. E. Lawrence.

In “Seven Pillars of Wisdom” Lawrence has told his epic, giving in splendid language, a picture of Bedouin warfare, the first from the pen of a European.

“It was very dark, with a wind beating in great gusts from the south and east. Every field and valley had its Turks stumbling blindly northward. Our men were clinging on. The fall of night had made them bolder, and they were now closing with the enemy. Each village, as the fight rolled to it, took up the work; and the black icy wind was wild with rifle-fire, shoutings, volleys from the Turks, and the rush of gallops, as small parties of either side crashed frantically together.

LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

"The enemy had tried to halt and camp at sunset, but Khalid had shaken them again into movement. They had lost order and coherence, and were drifting through the blast in lorn packets."

Leaving Faisal in Wejh (he was a mere figurehead), Lawrence rode in the mid-summer of 1917 a thousand miles into the northern desert. There he raised a horde of Bedouins and swooped down on the Turkish stronghold of Akaba. Then, containing in Medina the main Turkish Hejaz army by means of a force under the Sharif Abdulla, he began harassing the enemy lines of communication on the borders of Syria and Palestine. He held his forces together by the example of his intrepid courage, his tireless activity, by his endurance with them of hunger and thirst, of heat and cold; and so did he impress the British commanders in Palestine that he obtained supplies and equipment for the army Faisal and his advisers were organizing at Akaba. Finally, with his Arabs, by General Allenby's order, he entered Damascus ahead of the British Desert Mounted Corps.

But the "Seven Pillars" is more than the story of a brilliant campaign, inset with vivid portraits of Englishmen and Arabs and with arresting descriptions of scenes and places. It is also, perhaps mainly, the portrait, the revelation, of the author. In this it resembles another mighty work on Arabia—Doughty's "Arabia Deserta." If we are to pick out Lawrence's outstanding characteristics, we shall find them, I think, not in his courage, ability or endurance, but in his asceticism and in a conscience so unfortunate that it seldom allowed him mental peace. His overmastering purpose was to keep his mind in absolute control of his body. His power of physical self-control may be illustrated by an incident. A stranger whose car had come to a standstill asked him to crank it. Just as Lawrence was swinging the handle, the driver advanced the spark. The engine backfired and broke Lawrence's wrist, but somehow the engine started. The driver thanked him and drove on and Lawrence never allowed him to know what his carelessness had done. Lawrence's nature was opposed to compromise on all big issues. He wore himself out trying to discharge responsibilities, often conflicting, between two countries. Herein may lie the explanation of the "mystery" of his later days.

As all know, after Damascus his active life was over. Taking the name of Shaw, he became an air force mechanic and later lived in partial seclusion as a country civilian. Why this abdication, per-

THE AUSTRALIAN QUARTERLY

haps the most striking in history? It was not from thwarted personal ambition. Lawrence could have had any temporal dignities he chose. At one time, he tells us, he did desire to be a general and knighted, but ambition died early in the absorption of doing. Still less was it due to any unworthy motive.

Perhaps when we can read Lawrence's last book, still in manuscript and not to be published till 1955, we shall know all his reasons; in the meantime the following seems the only feasible explanation: Towards the end of his book he speaks of a "hidden urge," of a wish to do something for England, of a longing to feel himself "the node of a national movement," of a dream of hustling into form a New Asia. This was to take the form of a great Arabian empire under the hegemony of the Sharifian dynasty. But to-day, writes Mr. St. John Philby,* "there is indeed little left of that dream." Faisal, after a series of disappointments, died in 1933 after a twelve years' reign as King of Iraq, and was succeeded by his youthful son on a throne still unstable. His father had died shortly before him in exile after a short and turbulent reign in the Hejaz. And his eldest brother Ali, who had held the same throne for a brief period (1924-5), has recently followed him to the grave. Another brother Abdulla, holds by the grace of Great Britain the Amirate of Trans-Jordan; while Zaid, the youngest and richest, has retired to enjoy the estates inherited from his mother in Greece.

In short, in backing the Sharifian dynasty as the protagonist of Arabian independence Lawrence and the British Government backed the wrong horse. The aim of Faisal's Syrians, Iraqis, and Hejaz townsmen was the independence of their several countries; that of the Bedouins was loot. Lawrence could hold them together and make of them an entity; but they fell to pieces when he was no longer in control and in control he could not permanently remain.

Mention has been made of Ibn Saud. Of this remarkable man, whom Mr. Philby hails as the greatest Arabia has produced in the five thousand years of her history, there is not space to write

*Probably no living man has a knowledge of Arabia equalling that of Mr. Philby. Sent out with a British mission to Wahhabite territory in 1917, he has been in Arabia ever since; for the last ten years in unofficial capacity as the friend of Ibn Saud. His great book "The Heart of Arabia" (Constable: 2 vols. 63s.) is one of the finest and most valuable narratives in existence. It records his crossing of the Central "desert core" of Arabia—a feat accomplished by no Christian since the misty pre-Islamic days of the Kinda folk.

LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

at length. In early youth an exile with his father at Kuwait on the Persian Gulf, by 1904 he was again chieftain of the Wahhabis ruling in the capital Riyadh (almost in Central Arabia). His friendship with Britain was never questioned; but the Foreign Office, as we have seen, rather cold-shouldered him, giving him but a small subsidy and no equipment or arms. Lawrence himself never realized Ibn's greatness; he mentions him but twice and then along with some petty Bedouin chieftains. It was the one great mistake Lawrence made.

After the War Ibn Saud set about his great purpose—the union of all Arabia. Only scant details of his brilliant operations have appeared out here, nor is this the place to give them. Suffice to state that in fifteen years he has consolidated under his rule more than two-thirds of the Peninsula. It is good to know his rise has not meant disaster. Britain is better off than had the Sharifian family succeeded. She has no truer friend. He has clung to the ideal of British friendship. "Wherever I go," he writes, "I find them (the British) my neighbours by land and sea. And they are the greatest of nations. Their friendship is essential to me. To secure this friendship is the keynote of my policy."

No, the rise of Ibn Saud is no disaster for Britain, but it was otherwise with Lawrence. We have already spoken of his sense of integrity, of his relentless conscience. He felt he had made promises that had not been, in fact could not have been, fulfilled. "I began to wonder," he writes, "if all established reputations were founded like mine, on fraud." Such was the feeling, we are convinced, that sent into retirement a man of the greatest courage, ability and honour.

Thus, part of Lawrence's work was permanent, part was not. He had a large share in winning the War, he did not contribute permanently to the settlement of the Arabian question. It does not matter. The importance of Lawrence is his own story. It was that which enhanced the prestige of England in the East with probable consequences for the world that can hardly be assessed too highly.