

T. E. LAWRENCE

PORTRAIT OF AN ENGLISHMAN

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NOT without reason has the Lawrence legend fired the imagination and stimulated the spirit of youth. The story of the Arab Revolt, written by its chief performer, will endure while men love adventure and there exists a taste for English prose.

Lawrence was forty-seven years old when he died in a motorcycle accident five years ago. Picture a rather stocky figure, carelessly dressed, fair-haired, hatless, a long square reddish face, humorous mouth, an excessive chin, soft but penetrating blue eyes brimming with intelligence; a sudden unforgettable grin with an impishness darting from the eyes—an adult boy chafing at his physical envelope of maturity. Growing old was not to his liking; in fact he seemed to age more mischievously than gracefully. His tragic death in 1935 probably happened as he would have wished.

What was this little man, to arouse the wonder and awe of his contemporaries?

At heart a scholar, Lawrence possessed a very demon of curiosity. When he was twelve years old he taught himself Icelandic, simply because he had seen and heard a few words of that language that fascinated him. Always an omnivorous reader, T.E. read rapidly but retentively. Literature captivated him, and his mental thirst led him to read deeply in art, history, geology, archaeology and mediaeval architecture. It has been said that he read every book in the Bodleian Library! Well, he read a lot of them. He had no use for organized games, but kept his body in perfect condition as an instrument of his will, with enjoyment, subjecting himself to tests of physical endurance. He ate carelessly and very little. He accustomed himself to doing with a minimum of sleep. Tobacco and spirits simply didn't interest him. He once said to a friend: "Chesterton's drink is beer, Belloc's wine, and mine water."

As a youth he had read and re-read C. M. Doughty's travel classic, *Arabia Deserta*. This book undoubtedly influenced him to visit and study the Near and Middle East. Doughty's great prose work remained a favourite book throughout his

life, and indeed served usefully as a text many times during the Arab campaign.

In search of material for his Oxford thesis on *Crusaders' Castles*, Lawrence travelled on foot through Syria and Palestine, stoically suffering great hardship, but toughening his body and acquiring a knowledge of the country and peoples of inestimable value to him later. His father had given him a modest sum for expenses, but Lawrence characteristically "splurged" it all on an expensive camera. For months he travelled virtually penniless. He was attacked by Kurds and suffered from dysentery and fainting spells, but his indomitable will urged him on. He never mentioned sickness in his letters home, for fear of worrying his parents. He was then quite slight, but extraordinarily wiry and muscular for his size. He took an irrational delight in urging his body on to fresh accomplishments of endurance.

Lawrence was twenty-six when the Great War broke out. He obtained a commission in the map department of the General Staff Geographical Section, and was almost immediately switched to map officer in the new Department of Intelligence in Egypt. In his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence wrote: "Some Englishmen, of whom Kitchener was chief, believed that a rebellion of Arabs against Turkey would enable England, while fighting Germany, simultaneously to defeat her ally, Turkey." This was the scheme he nourished to a final triumph.

His mental energy, knowledge of the Arabs and infectious enthusiasm, soon won him the unofficial lead in the plan to foment a revolt. He negotiated with Abdullah and Feisal, sons of King Hussein, Sheriff of Mecca, and in Feisal found a kindred spirit in the cause of Arab freedom from Turkish dominance. Lawrence now levelled his full powers at the goal of Turkish defeat. The enterprise took on an almost religious fervor. He wrote: "It felt like morning, and the freshness of the world-to-be intoxicated us." He longed "pugnaciously" for an Allied victory over Germany and had always wanted, as he stated, "to feel myself the node of a national movement." His will was his "sure guide from purpose to achievement."

Lawrence's prodigious reading had even included the military science of Napoleon, Clausewitz, Caemmerer and Moltke. He lived with the Arabs as one of them, and earned their wondering admiration by his endurance, marksmanship, brilliant strategy and natural leadership.

The Arab movement became the important right flank of the British in Egypt. Lawrence used guerilla tactics with

increasing success against Turkish outposts, and kept the Medina railway in a constant state of disrepair by dynamiting. The history of the campaign is superbly told in the *Seven Pillars*. The march on Akaba is magnificently described. Akaba fell, and ended the Hejaz war. With the Arabs relieving his right wing, General Allenby took Jerusalem. The campaign ended victoriously in the unopposed entry into Damascus, after the Allenby-Lawrence team had routed the Turkish armies.

In *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, edited by David Garnett, the editor describes the immediate post-war years as "Dog-fight in Downing Street" and the following period as "The Years of Hide and Seek." Lawrence was bitterly disappointed at the Versailles treatment of the Arabs, the French having insisted on a Syrian mandate. Convinced the Arabs had been betrayed, he refused all honors and recognition of his achievement. But in 1922, under Mr. Winston Churchill, a satisfactory Middle East settlement was made. Despite French opposition, Feisal was crowned King of Iraq and Abdullah was entrusted with the government of Trans-Jordania. T.E.'s gift copy of the *Seven Pillars* was inscribed: "Winston Churchill, who made a happy ending to this show."

The "Years of Hide and Seek" were painful to Lawrence. He sought rest for his jaded mind and body, but was constantly pestered by public curiosity. He had always greatly admired the Royal Air Force, and finally sought sanctuary there as T.E. Shaw, Aircraftsman, second class. Soon his real identity became known, and to his grief he was discharged. He joined the Royal Tank Corps, but later, with the assistance of John Buchan, who represented his case to Stanley Baldwin, Lawrence was permitted to re-enter the R.A.F. There he found asylum for his restless spirit, and grew proud of his humble station in the youngest of the services. To a friend he wrote: "I grew suddenly on fire with the glory that the air should be, and set to work full-steam to make others vibrate to it, like myself."

He may well have envisaged the heroic role the R.A.F. was to play in later years. "We are not earth-bound", he wrote proudly.

In February, 1935, he rather sadly left the R.A.F. to spend his few remaining months in his little cottage at Cloud's Hill, where were his beloved books and collection of classical recordings.

Lawrence's great powers may have reached a peak during the Arab days; yet, to the end, the impact of his personality

exercised an almost electric influence on his many friends. He had friendships and correspondence with men in the Tank Corps, in the R.A.F., in Parliament, in literary, theatrical and academic spheres. Conversation with T.E. was a breathless experience, like a fast train ride through lovely, varied country. His speech was precise and softly modulated, and he treated everyone with perfect equality. Small talk was boredom, yet in the proper mood he could talk nonsense delightfully. With strangers he was reserved until the talk became interesting. He was shy rather than modest, and was always "conscious of the bundled powers and entities within me." His very presence was exhilarating. His intensity was contagious; by example he challenged his listeners to sharpen their faculties and awaken their sluggish abilities.

As the years thieved away his precious youth, Lawrence's understanding and tolerance broadened. His was a sort of creedless religion; foremost among its values was absolute integrity of spirit and mind. Men and affairs were measured to his exacting standard. Money, material possessions, social position, were things of indifference to him. He had a deep affection for his England, the winding roads, green hills, quiet villages, hedged fields, and lovely cathedrals.

Friendship was precious to him, but he feared to endanger it by intimacy. Women as individuals he liked, but as a sex he avoided them. The theory that he shunned women was recently challenged. Some say that Sara Aaronsohn, a British agent in Jerusalem, is the "S.A." to whom the poem prefacing the *Seven Pillars* was dedicated. She is alleged to have committed suicide rather than betray Lawrence's identity to the Germans.

Lawrence's vast reading and diversity of interests furnished him with an astonishing array of knowledge on subjects ranging from Diesel engines and motor boats to Hellenic sculpture and poetry. Soldier, archaeologist, scholar and historian, he was, in addition a first-class mechanic, electrician and photographer. His Brough motor bike was his pride and joy. On this bike were ten improvements of his own invention. It is said that speed was his only lust. He did splendid work on motor boats with the R.A.F. Working with delicately adjusted mechanism was a delight to him; he thought there was something "exquisite" about them. In everything to which he put his hand he sought perfection, then restlessly turned to something new. He was very popular with his comrades in the R.A.F. They loved to get him talking, and in their discussions and arguments they would invariably defer to him for a decision or the last word.

T.E. detested snobbery, cant and officiousness. One time a General wrote, inviting T.E. to visit him. Lawrence arrived just as the General was stepping out of his car, saluted smartly and said: "Excuse me, sir, but are you General So-and-So?" The General glared at him and snapped: "Who are you?—damn you!" T.E. snapped back: "I'm T.E. Lawrence—and damn you!" Then saluted smartly, and jauntily walked away.

Lawrence was a prolific writer of letters. Among his correspondents were G. B. Shaw, Lady Astor, Winston Churchill, Lionel Curtis, John Buchan, Noel Coward and Robert Graves. His notes to children of his friends were charming and whimsical. With old people he was gentle, courteous, full of tact and consideration. On Doughty's eightieth birthday, T.E. thoughtfully wrote congratulations, and after mentioning Doughty's books, said: "It sounds to me like a satisfactory eighty years in retrospect; at least I'd be content to look back so." The Thomas Hardy's were his friends; he described Hardy as "so pale, so quiet, so refined into an essence." Lawrence's letter to Mrs. Hardy, after learning of her husband's death, was beautiful in its sympathy and understanding.

The *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, is surely one of the greatest prose epics in our language. H. G. Wells thought it the best English prose in the last hundred and fifty years. Lawrence's translation of Homer's *Odyssey* is fresh and vivid, almost breezy. His published letters are enchanting reading, running the full range of mood and emotion, sprinkled with puckish humour, shrewd comment on books, people and things. He loved literature, and dealt with words like a happy craftsman. He advised a Tank Corps corporal, with literary aspirations, to "read plenty of Swift and some Shakespeare every day—he's sheer music. Write as if you were using the last drop of ink and the last sheet of paper in the world." For another friend, he scribbled on a menu card: "Knit your sentences by original metaphor and sparkling examples. Create your own style, don't copy. Avoid like the plague clichés, tautologous phrasing, repetition of instances, using the same words in a sentence or paragraph, superlatives, trite and banal references, exaggeration and hyperbole." He thought the five greatest books were the *Old Testament*, *Don Quixote*, *War and Peace*, *Moby Dick* and *Arabia Deserta*. Some favourite authors were William Morris, D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, G. B. Shaw, and E. M. Forster. Flaubert's *Salambo*, he thought "a miracle of style." His literary luggage during the Arab campaign were Malory's

Morte' D'Arthur, Aristophanes's Plays, and the *Oxford Book of English Verse*.

Lawrence had dealings with many outstanding political figures. He had forcefully argued the Arab cause with such antagonists as Lord Curzon and "Tiger" Clemenceau. For Winston Churchill he had the greatest admiration. The two men were much alike in sheer intellectual vigour, capacity for action, erudition, contempt for red tape, precision of speech, speed in grasping essentials, and moral courage. When Churchill was made Chancellor of the Exchequer, T.E. giggled to a friend: "Winston got the Exchequer!—there'll be fireworks soon, you'll see. When I saw him, he was strutting about with a large cigar in his mouth, saying, "'I'll make the blighters save! I'll make 'em save!'"

On May 13, 1935, riding to Cloud's Hill on his motor bike, Lawrence swerved violently to avoid two errand boys on bicycles, and crashed. Five days later he died. It is to be regretted that T.E. did not live to undertake some great task for England in her present war and for his friend Churchill. How Lawrence would have welcomed a second, supreme test of his quality! It is said of this Englishman that he saw life through many windows, and on them there was no dust. Winston Churchill wrote: "Lawrence had a full measure of the versatility of genius. He held one of those master-keys, which unlock the doors of many kinds of treasure-house."