T.E. LAWRENCE: A GREAT WAR MEMOIR OF AN AMBIVALENT HERO

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Resumo: Este artigo aborda tanto o homem T.E. Lawrence como suas memórias de guerra, *Os sete pilares da sabedoria* (1935). Lawrence era um homem ambivalente em seu trabalho, suas habilidades militares e diplomáticas, em seu papel na independência árabe e em sua sexualidade. Sua clássica obra de memórias sobre a campanha britânica contra a Turquia na Arábia é, dentre tantas outras coisas, um manual de guerrilha que visa apresentar-se como um registro fatual de uma campanha militar e também como uma narrativa heroica de discernimento, coragem e determinação.
Palavras-chave: Lawrence da Arábia; Memória de Guerra; Primeira Guerra Mundial; Guerra no Oriente Médio.

Abstract: This article discusses both the man T.E. Lawrence and his war memoir, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935). Lawrence was a man who was ambivalent in his life work, in his military and diplomatic skills, in his role in Arab independence, and in his sexuality. His classic memoir of the British campaign against Turkey in Arabia is, among many other things, a handbook of guerrilla warfare that attempts to present itself as both a factual record of a military campaign and a heroic tale: of insight, courage, and determination.
Keywords: Lawrence of Arabia; War memoir; First World War; Middle Eastern war.

T(homas) E(dward) Lawrence was one of those versatile men, like the Elizabethan soldier, courtier, explorer, and man-of-letters Walter Raleigh, or the nineteenth century explorer-scholar Richard Burton, who from time to time emerged full-fledged from British culture. Lawrence was the soldier-scholar-adventurer known to the public as "Lawrence of Arabia." As a soldier, he was a pioneer in the development of guerrilla warfare, and as a scholar he was a classicist (he published a translation of Homer's *Odyssey*) and a learned student of Arab culture. Along with these apparently incompatible attributes, Lawrence's personality often seems to defy analysis. On one hand, he is a man who sought and gained notoriety - he became a legend in the British Army - and, on the other, he is man who took refuge in anonymity: in 1922, after his exploits in the First World War, he joined the Royal Air Force under an assumed name. In his military adventures in Arabia, he became both a sincere ally of Arab independence and at the same time was aware that his work helped further the aims of the British Empire. As an admirer of Arab culture, he could be regarded as an example of what Edward Said much later called "Orientalism," and yet, in his comparative analyses of east and west, also an early advocate of anti-colonialism. In short, Lawrence was a highly ambivalent hero.

Even his major literary work, the World War I memoir *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which I shall be discussing here, is not without its own ambivalence. The original manuscript, he tells us in the preface, was written in 1919-1920, but this first draft was lost. After a much-abridged edition under the title *Revolt in the Desert* (1926), the full-length text was published only in 1935, with a new edition in 1940 and reprintings nearly every year afterwards for more than a decade - a modern classic, in other words. This book was no doubt intended to spread his fame to a larger public, and, in this respect, Lawrence as self-promoter is very much a man of our own time.

The text itself is also ambivalent about its aims and methods. On one hand, it reads like a work of fiction, with the Arabs as the good guys and the Turks the bad guys, a heroic narrative of failures and successes with an eventual triumph. On the other hand, it is presented by the author as a war memoir, that is, an autobiographical work about a specific period of his life, although it is nothing like the disillusioned accounts from the western front with which readers of the British literature of the First World War are familiar. As if to further the claim of factuality, the author attaches to the appendices the names of the British members of military units and a table of positions with place-names and dates, but this editorial apparatus turns out to be entirely gratuitous, since none of these men figure by name in his account, and he even admits to having changed the names of participants. The list seems to be a device to bolster the status of the work as factual.

Lawrence's work is notable for its difference from other well-known narratives of the western front. His characters, galloping across the desert, show mobility and courage that is not often displayed in the miserable life of infantry troops in the trenches in narratives about what is regarded as the main locus of World War I. As Samuel Hynes puts it:

> Lawrence made that desert sideshow an epic narrative - the only one to come of the war. Like other epics, it is a great adventure story, full of action and excitement and brave individual deeds - told, as such epics are - with a kind of nostalgia for that world of action, the heroic past." (HYNES, 1977, p. 79)

The contradictory aspects of unstructured memoir vs. planned heroic narrative do not stop here, however. In a Forward, the author begs the reader to take his book "as a personal narrative pieced out of memory," since circumstances of the military campaign forbade him "to make proper notes" (LAWRENCE, n.p.n.).[1] Contrary to this claim of a book written "on the march," however, the precise details of topography, event, and the balanced cadences of the prose itself constitute a teleological narrative, a polished work, intended, as the author himself admits, to narrate "a designed procession of Arab freedom from Mecca to Damascus" (LAWRENCE, 1935, p. 21). He seems to change his tack on the very next page, however, with the significant admission that his personal history is, after all, "not of the Arab movement, but of *me* in it" (p. 22), and then, as if this sounds too presumptuous, he claims that his own part in the movement is only "a mock primacy," even though his narrative constantly shows him at the center of events and in close collaboration with the principal leaders. The text is structured like a work of fiction to show how "natural" and "inevitable" the narrated events were.

The author was also politically ambivalent. By his own claim and, more importantly, by a proven native trust in his person, Lawrence was a sincere believer in Arab independence - in 1919, he would be a appointed as a delegate to the peace conference in Paris, where he tried earnestly but unsuccessfully to achieve independence for the Arabs. Despite the colonialist policies of the British and French, he believed that the "vigor of the Arab Movement would prevent the creation in Western Asia of unduly 'colonial' schemes of exploitation" (p. 136). Yet, at the same time, he ruefully admits to being an unwilling agent of such schemes, since the Arabs saw him as "a free agent of the British Government," and demanded that he personally endorse its written promises, for "Arabs believe in persons, not in institutions" (p. 224). Under these circumstances, he admits that he had to "join the conspiracy" of the British to make the Arabs think they would be rewarded in the end for their help in defeating the Turks: "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." (p. 283).

Lawrence had spent time as a student traveling in Syria, which was then part of the Turkish Empire, where he learned fluent colloquial Arabic, and on an archeology expedition and other explorations in the company of Arabs, he learned to earn their trust. During the war, the British under Kitchener's leadership thought that an Arab rebellion would be in the interest of the Allies in their struggle against the Axis. Familiar with the geography and language of the region, Lawrence was, accordingly, sent to the Arab Bureau of British Intelligence in Egypt as a liaison officer with the Arabs, who were seeking independence from the Turks.

He was adroit enough in dealing with hierarchical stupidity in his own army to get himself involved directly in the revolt. After evaluating the several sons of the aged Sharif of Mecca, he joined the Arab rebels under Feisal (or Faisal), a shrewd and patient leader (whom he would later help become king of Iraq), who impressed him as the man able to achieve Arab independence. He in turn impressed Feisal enough to get permission to go

1 In the text following the Forward of the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, page numbers do appear and will be cited hereafter in parenthesis without the author's name.

inland to appraise the situation of the Arabs who had been repulsed from Medina, even though as a Christian there would be resistance to his presence. One of the understated themes of Lawrence's account is his constant success throughout in making himself understood and accepted as a shrewd advisor and a well-meaning friend.

In his account of the beginning of the revolt, he tells how secret societies of Arab officers in the Turkish army were conspiring to turn their military skills and powers against their masters. In his analysis of the situation, the Turks wanted Arab aid in their objective of a pan-Islamic *jihad* and revival of the Ottoman Empire, which, according to him, was in frank decay and would in any case end after the war. This master plan, along with German hopes for Islamic cooperation in their own plan for world domination, was dashed, Lawrence says, once the flag of Arab revolt was raised. The idea of nationality for these people, he argued

> was the independence of clans and villages, and their ideal of national union was episodic combined resistance to an intruder. Constructive politics, an organized state, an extended empire, were not so much beyond their sight as hateful in it. They were fighting to get rid of Empire, not to win it. (LAWRENCE, 1935, p. 103).

By the same token, this anti-imperial way of thinking often made it difficult to mobilize such men to wage a war for more than purely local motives. Lawrence realized that the Bedouin tribesmen, who were independent peoples fighting only for booty, the control of a piece of territory, or to settle blood feuds (for which they often fought one another), were militarily undisciplined and therefore useless as a unified force of attack or defense. Their "mobility, toughness, self-assurance, knowledge of the country, intelligent courage" (p. 231), however, were assets in a mobile war of attack and withdrawal, in which large concentrations of better armed and equipped Turks had to be avoided. Such virtues, it may be noted, have been those of guerilla-fighters everywhere, such as the Vietcong in the American war in Vietnam.

As accepted liaison officer with the Arabs, Lawrence was able to help secure arms for Faisal's forces and, together with them, move northward to attack the Hejaz railroad and Turkish concentrations along the Red Sea coast. These were harassing tactics, meant to disrupt enemy operations and transport, forcing the Turks to spread their line over a greater length of territory than they would be able to defend. Lawrence himself becomes a leader in the expeditions into northern Arabia. In these actions, he never tries to impose his will on the Arabs, but works through suggestion and advice, showing himself to be as wily as his fellow fighters, a race he claims is well-known for its craftiness and peculiarly suited for the kind of warfare in which isolated fighting is more of a strain on the soldier: "Irregular war was far more intellectual than a bayonet charge, far more exhausting than service in the comfortable imitative obedience of an ordered army." (p. 348).

Although Lawrence confesses to be an amateur at war, his work can take its place as a textbook on the art of guerrilla war. He had read military theory at Oxford, he writes, but the irregular nature of this war seemed to confound the theories of "modern, scientific war," in which the objective was to exterminate the enemy, or at least reduce them to ineffectiveness. At one point, while lying in his tent suffering from a fever, he tried to

rethink the received strategic ideas to fit the present campaign. He perceived almost immediately, however, that the Hejaz war had in fact already been won, that Medina did not have to be reconquered after all but simply cut off, for in the present case the traditional aims of war, as described in the texts of European generals, simply did not apply. The aim of the Arabs was not conquest but "to extrude the Turk from all Arabic-speaking lands in Asia" (p. 196), in which the usual primary task of destroying the enemy was only a necessary evil if they could not be removed any other way. Freedom, after all, could be enjoyed only by men who remained alive. To drive out the Turks, therefore, the Arabs should not fight a war of battles, where the Turks would enjoy conventional superiority, but a "war of detachment," only disclosing themselves when they attacked, since their "cards were speed and time, not hitting power," and "in Arabia range was more than force, space greater than the power of armies" (p. 202).

Lawrence was therefore able to perceive, in the time-honored fashion of successful guerrilla leaders, that one's limitations could be turned into strength and the enemy's strength neutralized by not meeting him on his own grounds, while movements could be made secure by a Maoist "fish-in-the-water" strategy of dependence on a sympathetic local population:

> It seemed to be proven that our rebellion has an unassailable base, guarded not only from attack, but from the fear of attack. It had a sophisticated alien enemy, disposed as an army of occupation in an area greater than could be dominated effectively from fortified posts. It had a friendly population, of which some two in the hundred were active, and the rest quietly sympathetic to the point of not betraying the movements of the minority (LAWRENCE, 1935, p. 202).[2]

Despite these insights, Lawrence's work is a conventional war memoir, that is, a history from an individual's point-of-view. In this mode, he offers a straightforward chronological narrative of the revolt, beginning with its background and early difficulties, followed by the harsh realities of the march, the Arabs' military successes and occasional reversals, and their eventual triumph. Lawrence was uniquely placed to tell this story, given his favored status with the Arabs and his own intellectual and scholarly distinction, and as a result his work is a good deal more than a military memoir, for he also offers sympathetic, yet balanced observations of the culture of the Arabian peoples, with careful descriptions of dwellings, living arrangements, manners and customs, religion, and ways of thought.

This cultural preoccupation works in both directions, for he claims that his years with the Arabs brought a transformation in his own way of thinking and behaving: "…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" (p. 30). He is, for example, able to understand, and show, what seems to the western eye to be an overvalued emphasis on kinship to a culture for which blood relations are the only guarantee of collective security.

2 These observations could, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied to the situation of the Vietnamese revolutionary forces in the Vietnam War, with the Americans playing the role of the Turks.

The ethnographical detail is to be expected in an account written by a western observer about an "exotic," non-European culture, but it could be argued that such detail is also necessary in a war-narrative of a military "side-show," far from the much more familiar landscape and events of the Western Front. Lawrence's war was indeed irregular by that standard: 1) a mobile and volatile campaign, while the trenches of France were static and stalemated; 2) a hodge-podge of regular troops from Egypt and irregular tribesmen of Arabia, as opposed to the regular, uniformed and highly organized units of the European theater; 3) the primacy of transport animals like camels and mules rather than trucks and trains; 4) the irregular nature of weapons supply; the shortage of food and difficulties of transport, with the consequent need to live off the land or the hospitality of friendly tribes; and, most importantly, 5) the hostility of the desert environment to any human endeavor - the searing heat that would blister the skin and make the eyes ache; the lack of any physical comfort. "Bedouin ways were hard even for those brought up to them," he wrote, "and for strangers terrible: a death in life." (29).

And yet, there are passages of humor and beauty in Lawrence's work as well, since he was able to perceive the eerie beauties of the desert as well as the virtues of his companions and the solidity of their culture - their stoicism in enduring pain, their enjoyment of jokes and play, but also their appreciation of beautiful expression in language, their rich oral poetry and elaborate rituals of food and hospitality, and, despite their hierarchies of blood, their instinctual democracy:

> Among the Arabs there were no distinctions, traditional or natural, except the unconscious power given a famous sheikh by virtue of his accomplishments; and they taught me that no man could be their leader except he ate the ranks' food, wore their clothes, lived level with them, and yet appeared better in himself (LAWRENCE, 1935, p. 161).

One is struck here by the very different accounts written about leaders of the British army and its absurd rituals of hierarchy, as in those of the British poets Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon.

As for his own countrymen in the Middle East, Lawrence divided them into two distinct types: there was the "subtle and insinuating" type, who assimilated the ways of the local people and directed them "secretly," that is, men, although he does not say so, like Lawrence himself. The other type was the "John Bull of the books," who "became more rampantly English the longer he was away from England," who "invented an Old Country for himself, a home of all remembered virtues" (pp. 354-355). In contemporary terms, I would say that Lawrence is describing the "orientalist," on one hand, and the colonialist, on the other. While Lawrence's work, with its frequent generalizations on the culture of the Middle East from the western point of view, may be classified as a work of "orientalism," it can also, through the author's "insider" familiarity and sympathy with the culture of his hosts, as well as his frequent critiques of his own country's actions and attitudes, be read as an early text of anti-colonialism.

As a way of conclusion, I might note Lawrence's representation of himself in writing in contrast to certain popular notions of his character. In the cinema, David Lean's spectacular

biopic *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), which is probably the source of most people's knowledge of the man, presented him as vain and ambitious. These qualities, which may be read into his character, are understandably submerged in the autobiographical text of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*: what is evident there is the author's intelligence and determination.

The film also portrays Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) as sexually ambiguous, with sado-masochistic tendencies. Although this aspect may be intended to make Lawrence, and the film, more dramatically interesting, it has to be admitted that even the understated text offers scope for speculation on the subject. Of the sexual continence of his companions, Lawrence writes at one point, in a language at once "hygienic" (in the language of the day) and casually off-hand: "In horror of such sordid commerce [the poor prostitutes encountered by the men in settlements] 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 pure" (p. 28). He also talks about the two "young and clean" camel-boys, Daud and his love-companion, Farraj, "a beautiful, soft-framed, girlish creature" (p. 244), both of whom he takes as his personal servants, although the film builds this mere hint into an affair with one of them.

Lean's film also represents Lawrence as sadomasochistic, when he admits that he "enjoyed" executing his special friend after it is discovered the young man was a traitor, and he seems to welcome capture and torture by the Turks, when, at one point in the campaign, he is arrested while scouting a Turkish-held town for a subsequent attack. In the text, the account is rather more subdued but still bizarre. Once he is caught, he seems destined as a supposed Arab to be drafted into Turkish military service. In the film, when he is taken to the Turkish Bey (José Ferrar), this man laments being surrounded by uncultured louts and the Lawrence character pretends not to understand him. The Bey expresses his desire to possess him sexually, promising him protection and favors; he resists the man's advances and is ordered to be brutally beaten. In his memoir, the episode is played down but still revealing. After being kicked in the ribs with a corporal's hob-nailed boot to get him up and moving, Lawrence writes: "I remember smiling idly at him, for a delicious warmth, probably sexual, was swelling through me." (p. 454). When the Bey, at this point, rejects his body as too damaged to give satisfaction, the soldiers let him escape, the corporal in charge confiding in him that the men had to obey the wishes of their officers by beating him or pay for it with even greater suffering.

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