

T.E. Lawrence

British archaeological scholar, adventurer, military strategist, and the writer of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1927), an ambitious work, which combines a detailed account of the Arab revolt against the Turks and the author's own spiritual autobiography. T.E. Lawrence's (1888-1935) enigmatic personality still fascinates biographers and his legend has survived many attempts to discredit his achievements.

T.E. Lawrence was better known in his lifetime as 'Lawrence of Arabia' because of the dashing role he played in helping the Arabs against the Turks during World War I. At 31 Lawrence was an international celebrity but, embittered by his country's Middle East policies, he chose a life of obscurity and died at the age of 46 after a motorcycle accident.

"Many men would take the death-sentence without a whimper to escape the life-sentence which fate carries in her other hand." (from *The Mint*, 1955)

Lawrence was born in Tremadoc, Caernarvonshire, Wales, the illegitimate son of Thomas Chapman. His father left his wife, who had refused to allow a divorce. He set up a new home with Sarah Junner, a woman who had been governess in his household. Lawrence was the third son of this union.

By the age of four Lawrence started to read books and newspapers. He was educated at Oxford High School and subsequently won a Welsh scholarship to Jesus College, Oxford. In the summer of 1909 he began a walking tour in Syria, Palestine, and parts of Turkey.

By September he had covered some 1,100 miles. Lawrence visited 36 crusader castles, made careful notes and then wrote a thesis on 'The Influence of the Crusades on European Military Architecture - to the End of the XIIIth Century'. In 1910 Lawrence obtained a first class degree in history and was awarded a research fellowship for travel by Magdalen College.

In 1911 Lawrence was in Syria and participated on an archaeological expedition excavating the Hittite site of Carchemish on Euphrates. He worked in Egypt under Sir Flinders Petrie, in Carchemish, the classic Hittite site north of Damascus, and took part in a survey in Palestine. In Carchemish he became a friend of the site's 14-year-old water boy, Dahoum and taught him to read and write (and to whom he later dedicated *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*).

Their friendship raised eyebrows but Jeremy Wilson has stated in his authorized biography of T. E. Lawrence (1990) that rumours of a physical relationship have led many astray. During these years Lawrence acquired the knowledge of the language and customs of the Arab people. After the outbreak of World War I, he was assigned to intelligence as an Arabian expert. In 1916 he joined the forces of the Arabian sheik Feisal al Husayn. In *The Seven Pillars* Lawrence describes his first meeting with Feisal:

"I felt at first glance that this was the man I had come to Arabia to seek - the leader who would bring the Arab Revolt to full glory. Feisal looked very tall and pillar like, very slender, in his long white silk robes and his brown head cloth... His eyelids were dropped; and his black beard and colourless face were like a mask against the strange, still watchfulness of his body."

Taking on Arab costume himself, he began to work with Feisal to launch a full-scale revolt of the tribes. In 1916 he was captured and subjected to beatings and homosexual rape by the Turkish governor of Deraa, "an ardent pederast" (Lawrence's own term). Though he escaped, Lawrence was shattered by the experience. "I gave away the only possession we are born into the world with - our bodily integrity," he later wrote.

Lawrence soon became an influential figure in the Arab forces. In particular his guerrilla warfare proved successful in undermining Germany's Ottoman ally. Lawrence was wounded several times in his campaigns - he suffered dozens of bullet and shrapnel wounds. He took the port of Akaba in July 1917, and led his Arab forces into the desert, distracting the Turks when the British army began its invasion of Palestine and Syria.

However, Lawrence's military victories were overshadowed by the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which promised Syria to the French and undermined the idea of an Arab homeland in Syria. These years Lawrence later described in his work *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. A new national hero was born when the American journalist Lowell Thomas lectured in London on Sir Edmund Allenby's invasion of Syria and in particular Lawrence's exploits with the Arabs.

After the war Lawrence accompanied the Arab delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, initially as Feisal's adjutant. He was a research fellow at Oxford and served at the invitation of Winston Churchill as a political adviser to the Middle East Department in the Colonial Office (1921-22).

At the height of his fame Lawrence resigned disgusted from his post and enlisted with the Royal Air Force under the name of John Hume Ross. When his identity was discovered, he joined the Royal Tank Corps under the name of Thomas Edward Shaw.

In 1925 he returned to the Air Force as Shaw, serving in England and in India for ten years. Supplementing his meagre income, Lawrence translated *The Odyssey* for an American publisher and wrote a book about his experiences in the RAF. He left the service in 1935 and moved to Moreton, Dorsetshire. He bought a little cottage named Clouds Hill. "I imagine leaves must feel like this after they have fallen from their tree and until they die", Lawrence wrote in a letter.

In the last 12 years of his life, Lawrence owned seven motorcycles manufactured by George Brough. They were the fastest in the U.K. On May 13, 1935, Lawrence was in an accident near his home - he tried to avoid two boys on bicycles, lost control of his motorcycle and slammed into the ground. He died at Bovington Camp Hospital without regaining consciousness on May 19. Lawrence's monument was later erected in the old Anglo-Saxon church of St. Martin at Wareham in Dorset.