

FOUNDATIONAL TEXTS

## Re-Reading T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

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While I was in the 2019 Middle East Studies Association (MESA) meeting book exhibit in New Orleans looking at the hundreds of new and exciting books on display, I started to doubt the thesis of this essay. Was it really correct to argue that re-reading a book written decades ago that led me to pursue a career as a historian of the Middle East would be worthwhile, especially given that my subsequent scholarship was the opposite of much that was in the book? Could I recommend other scholars re-read their formative book or books? Would it not be better to read new works with new approaches? Given the pressing time constraints each of us has to grapple with every day, should our attention be taken away from new research in our own fields? The vast expansion of high-quality scholarship in Middle Eastern studies since I attended the first MESA meeting in Chicago in 1967 has contributed mightily to our knowledge, but it has also placed a burden on those who try to keep up with reading in the field. In my own case, as the author of a textbook I have had even more of a problem over the years because I felt it necessary to read broadly, a task that entailed attention not only to new works on the history of the Middle East, but also to new publications in allied fields such as political science.<sup>1</sup>

Despite all these factors, re-reading the classic work that was most influential in bringing me into the study of the Middle East turned out to be highly rewarding, even while it reminded me of how strongly I had reacted against many of the book's ideas, themes, and approaches. The book in question was T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Edward Lawrence (1888–1935), known as Lawrence of Arabia, served in the British Army in World War I as an adviser to the Hashemite sharifs of Mecca who led the 1916 Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. Lawrence worked closely with Fayṣal ibn Ḥusayn (1885–1933; King of Syria, 1920; King of Iraq, 1921–33). Lawrence gained hero status in Britain and the United States, even as his actions drew much criticism from Arabs and Turks. He has continued to be the subject of a wide variety of interpretations and commentaries, as seen in voluminous biographies and a specialized British publication, *The Journal of the T. E. Lawrence Society*.<sup>3</sup>

*Seven Pillars of Wisdom* appealed to me initially as an undergraduate for several reasons: it is full of gripping drama; it is beautifully written with an unusual and appealing style; and it is a first-person narrative that conveys a vivid picture of people, society, and geography. On the other hand, as a graduate student, I ultimately disagreed with many aspects of the book. For scholars, the book raises numerous important issues, including questions of cultural appropriation and identity, matters of which I was unaware when I first read the book. When foreigners make themselves the central actors in events in the Middle East are they being exploitative? Should Westerners preferably read accounts of events written by people from the Middle East rather than those written by foreigners?

Identity formation is central to *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, particularly in regard to the debatable origins of Arab nationalism.<sup>4</sup> While historical aspects of gender, material culture, environmental change, comparative world history, and other subjects have preoccupied recent scholars, nationalism has re-emerged

<sup>1</sup>William Ochsenwald and Sydney Nettleton Fisher, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., *The Middle East: A History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

<sup>2</sup>T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1935). While other versions of the text are available, this publication has been the most widely-read edition. I first saw the extremely popular 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia* directed by David Lean, which has been the subject of much critical attention, and then read the book.

<sup>3</sup>The T. E. Lawrence Society website, accessed 18 February 2020, <https://telsociety.org.uk>.

<sup>4</sup>The origins of Arab nationalism have been widely studied, though their implications for the post-Arab Spring 2011 situation have not yet been addressed. My own now outdated contributions include William W. Haddad and William L. Ochsenwald, eds., *Nationalism in a Non-National State: The Dissolution of the Ottoman Empire* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press,

in the 2010s in a populist form as a major challenge to transnational globalization. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* discusses tribal identity, personal loyalty to a leader, ethnicity, nationalism, and national identity, making it a salient work for the world of the 2020s.

Lawrence argued that Arab nationalism in greater Syria would be based on Arabic as a common language, the heritage of the Qur'an, and the memory of the Caliphate, but Arab nationalist rule, like others, would have to be imposed upon Syrians (p. 336). For Lawrence the foundation of Arab nationalism could not be Islam; instead, it would be based on a leader, an idea, and a hatred of Ottoman Turkish rule. With British backing, a large Arab state or alliance of states led by Hashemite princes could be created. Lawrence believed he could gain the sympathy of the British command in Cairo for the Arab movement and the creation of such states (p. 102). Hashemite-led pan-Arabism in Transjordan, Iraq, and Greater Syria did in fact become important for a time, despite the loss of the dynasty's original base in the Hijaz to the Saudis in the 1920s. The revisionist work of scholars like C. Ernest Dawn would later show problems in Lawrence's understanding of the origins of Arab nationalism.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Lawrence was curiously blind to the crucial role of the urban bourgeoisie in forming national identity.

The continuing importance of Mecca and the Hijaz as symbolic centers for Islamic identity and unity still resonates a century after the Hashemites proclaimed there the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. The current Saudi rulers of Mecca and the Hijaz are using their religious prestige as they attempt to become the leaders of Sunni Islam against what they perceive as a dangerous Shi'i revival.

At the personal level, Lawrence was very aware of some of the problems related to identity that preoccupy many scholars today. He viewed himself as being in two worlds at once: he strove to identify with the Bedouins but at the same time he believed he was losing his own English values (pp. 31–32). He felt he was a fraud, using false pretenses to keep the Arabs in revolt against the Ottomans (p. 378). He acknowledged “the incongruity of an alien's advocating national liberty” for another people (pp. 449, 502). His actions formed part of a British betrayal of Arab nationalist aspirations after the end of World War I, when the ambiguous promises made to Sharif Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī of Mecca (1853–1931) became enmeshed with conflicting British commitments to France and Zionists.<sup>6</sup>

While these issues are of considerable importance to scholars, it is Lawrence's vivid style and immediacy as well as the film “Lawrence of Arabia” that most draw both general and specialist readers into the book. It was his gripping style that first persuaded me to read the book more than fifty-five years ago and his style still retains its appeal upon re-reading. When Lawrence arrived in Jiddah, the port of Mecca, he experienced “the heat of Arabia [that] came out like a drawn sword and struck us speechless” (p. 65). On the way to capture Aqaba, in what is now southern Jordan, he described the scene as follows: “In the breathless air of these evenings in the hills, after the long days of summer, everything struck very acutely on the senses: and when marching in a great column, as we were, the front camels kicked up the aromatic dust-laden branches of the shrubs, whose scent-particles rose into the air and hung in a long mist, making fragrant the road of those behind” (p. 300). Even though some of his descriptions reinforce Orientalist tropes, others are lyrical and without such overtones. “The rains of December had been abundant, and the warm sun after them had deceived the earth into believing it was spring” (p. 140). Lawrence wrote while going toward Ma'an that the air “told us of perfect loneliness, dried grass, and the sun on burning flints” (p. 377). His recounting of the numbing cold, freezing snow, and terrible winds in the mountains of south Jordan when he and his camel fell on the frozen mud should permanently dispel Western readers' misapprehension of perpetual heat in the region (pp. 492–98).

*Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is full of stories centered on Lawrence's larger-than-life figure, but he nevertheless recognized the importance of the “un-named rank and file” (p. 6). He depicts his failures and shameful deeds as well as the rarer victories in war. The reader seems to be with Lawrence as he describes a failed raid on a bridge of the Hijaz Railway (pp. 419–24). Adding to the appeal of the book is the stark contrast between the small-scale fighting and raiding of the Arab Revolt versus the enormous battles in

1977), and William Ochsenwald, “Ironic Origins: Arab Nationalism in the Hijaz, 1882–1914,” pp. 189–203, in Rashid Khalidi, et al., eds., *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>C. Ernest Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism: Essays on the Origins of Arab Nationalism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

<sup>6</sup>William Ochsenwald, “Ḥusayn b. 'Alī”, accepted for publication in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Third Edition*.

the muddy European trenches. Lawrence took part in the public ceremony when British General Edmund Allenby celebrated success in ousting Ottoman forces as he triumphantly entered the Jaffa gate of Jerusalem on 11 December 1917. For Lawrence this was “the supreme moment of the war” (p. 453).

These depictions encouraged me when I first read the book to want more information, to gain more understanding of what Lawrence saw and who he met, and perhaps to emulate his travels and travails, even as I strongly reacted against some of the author’s values. In short, this work persuaded me and perhaps others to study the history of the Middle East. Re-reading the book brought back to me the original enthusiasm, excitement, and engagement that helped me choose to become a specialist in this subject. At the same time, re-reading the book reminded me of why I spent most of my subsequent scholarly career reacting against it.

Another favorable aspect of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is that it goes beyond warfare to include an aspect of life not usually discussed until recently in histories of the Middle East—male homosexual behavior.<sup>7</sup> While re-reading this book, I was impressed by Lawrence’s openness in writing approvingly about behavior that was criminalized and widely condemned in the Britain of his day. He outlined gay sexual practices and attributed them to homosociality and the absence of women with whom Bedouin soldiers could have sex, but also as innate in some instances (p. 30). A pair of young soldiers, Farraj and Da’ud, who were lovers, became personal attendants to Lawrence. They are presented by him as admirable in their love for each other. When Da’ud died, Farraj became desolate after “the openness and honesty of perfect love” (p. 508). Farraj sought death in battle at the hands of the Ottomans and was fatally wounded. In an incredibly wrenching account Lawrence tells how he personally delivered the mercy shot that killed Farraj (pp. 516–17).

The sexual identity of T. E. Lawrence has been the subject of much speculation by his biographers, but to the reader of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in the 2020s there can be little doubt that he was interested in and sympathetic to homosexual behavior, with a possible personal predilection for masochism. In his dedication of the book to a person known only by the initials S. A., almost certainly a male, Lawrence wrote: “I loved you, so I drew these tides of men into my hands ... Love, the way-weary, groped to your body, our brief wage ours for the moment ...” (p. 5). Most of the numerous Lawrence biographers viewed him as masochistic, while the incident when Lawrence was perhaps raped by an Ottoman official meant that “the citadel of my integrity has been irrevocably lost” (p. 447).

Guerrilla fighters in the present century could draw many lessons from *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* on how to fight a war with the backing of a foreign power. Those fighting such a war sometimes faced terrible problems in enforcing discipline, as happened to Lawrence who had to execute a confessed murderer, yet at the same time there could not be European-army style discipline for volunteers who could freely leave (pp. 181–82, 190–96, 339). Lawrence was well aware of the ironies and cruelty of war, the unleashing of the temptation to extend violence, and the recoil of feelings after battle (pp. 482–83).

Re-reading *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* also brings to light Lawrence’s nuanced views on imperialism. Despite serving in the British army, Lawrence was ambivalent about British goals in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. He hoped the Arab Movement would prevent the creation “in Western Asia of unduly ‘colonial’ schemes of exploitation” (p. 132). On the other hand, his actions in fact contributed to the extension of British imperial control or influence in the Hijaz and greater Syria.

Re-reading *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* reminded me also of serious flaws in the book, including gross characterizations, overemphasis on the Bedouins, neglect of the roles of women, and exaggeration of Lawrence’s own importance. The gravity of these flaws has become clearer in light of advances in historical research and perspective that have transpired in the century since the events discussed in the book took place.

Gross generalizations and deplorable ethnic slurs abound. Some examples include the characterization of Beirut as almost “bastard French in feeling as in language” (p. 333). The peoples of Syria were “self-satisfied ... and so lazy in mind as to be habitually superficial” (p. 335). Semites “were a dogmatic people,

<sup>7</sup>Two of the many important works on this subject are Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), and Anjali R. Arondekar and Howard Chiang, eds., *The Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History* (Farmington Hills, MI: Charles Scribner and Sons, 2019).

despising doubt ...” (p. 38), who “hovered between lust and self-denial” (p. 42). “The Arab respected force a little: he respected craft more ...” (p. 408). Lawrence often implied that Westerners have agency, while Arabs mostly did not. On race, Lawrence claimed that “Arabs had little colour-feeling against Africans: it was the Indian who evoked their race-dislike” (p. 117). This seemed to show a sensitivity against prejudice, but later in the book he seems to regard “negroes” as lower than whites and similar to animals (p. 171). On the other hand, English men assumed they were chosen beings, inimitable, and not to be copied, as compared to the French who encouraged imitation but felt it could never be totally successful (pp. 346–47). He was particularly harsh about the enemy Ottoman Turks. Lawrence condemned Turks because they had repressed Arabs, but also because the Turks were supposedly a “child-like people,” with their soldiers having “unnaturally acquired venereal disease.” (pp. 44, 55, 56). In sum, “Turkey was rotten” (p. 57).

While Lawrence was well aware of the differences among the various Arab nomadic groups he met, he nevertheless often described the Bedouins as far more admirable and virtuous than the suppressed villagers and the even worse effete townspeople. Some semi-settled Bedouins were “not pure enough nomads to hold the nomadic code of honour or to obey the desert law in spirit” (p. 403).

There is little in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* about women. Lawrence often commented on the prejudices shown by the men he met, but he simply relays to the reader without comment misogynistic statements about women. Occasionally a woman speaks, as when Bedouin men celebrate military triumphs in front of women. Male Bedouins considered women’s work to be shameful (p. 271). Lawrence hired women to provide cover as he visited Ottoman-held Amman. More often, however, women are unfortunately entirely missing from the narrative. Lawrence himself sees women in the Mediterranean area as being accorded the world of the home, but this is based on “denying equality of sex” so that “love, companionship and friendliness [were] impossible between man and woman” (p. 508).

The dramatic but small-scale fighting in the Arab Revolt was naturally the center of Lawrence’s attention, but he acknowledged the decisive battles in the region were fought at Gaza and elsewhere in Palestine, not in the Hijaz or the area that later became Jordan. Indeed, the importance of the whole battle zone in the central Middle East paled by comparison with the crucial battles grinding on in Europe. The Arab Revolt was thus a sideshow of a sideshow. And Lawrence’s excessive enthusiasm for the Hashemites of Mecca helped ensure poor judgements. This misjudgment was combined with Lawrence’s own odd mixture of ambition, shyness, and egotism that led him to exaggerate his importance in the Arab Revolt.

The current trend in scholarship on the history of the Arabian Peninsula is to change Lawrence’s focus on the Ottomans and Greater Syria to an emphasis on the importance of India and, more broadly, the Indian Ocean. New cities based on petro-wealth have replaced the desert as the center of attention, not only in the present, but also for earlier periods, as the historical gaze has shifted from the Hijaz to the Persian/Arabian Gulf and connections with India. This change in emphasis has decreased the importance of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, but has resulted in many exciting new works and a productive scholarly association.<sup>8</sup>

While it was Lawrence’s book that captivated me, I actually undertook a revisionist approach in monographs and articles, concentrating on the opposite of what Lawrence espoused. In opposition to the destruction of World War I, I wrote my dissertation which became my first book on the history of technology: an account of the Ottoman-built Hijaz Railroad that Lawrence had so often attacked.<sup>9</sup> While I was initially fascinated with pan-Arab nationalism, I later became far more concerned with pan-Islam, Islamic reform, and Salafism. In addition to the history of the Hashemites, I pursued historical research on the Ottomans and, more recently, on the Saudi dynasty and its role in the history of the Hijaz. Instead of making Europeans and foreign interventions the center of my attention I sought to examine Arab

<sup>8</sup>Authors who emphasize the role of India in the history of the Arabian Peninsula include, among many others, Fahad Bishara, Ulrike Freitag, Nile Green, Engseng Ho, Michael Christopher Low, Philippe Pétriat, John Slight, and John M. Willis. The Association for Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies is a relatively new scholarly group. See its web site [www.agaps.org](http://www.agaps.org), accessed March 4, 2020.

<sup>9</sup>William Ochsenswald, *The Hijaz Railroad* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1980), now superseded by several works including Murat Özyüksel, *Hicaz Demiryolu* (Istanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, 2000). Also see William Ochsenswald, “Hijaz Railway,” in *Oxford Bibliographies in Islamic Studies*, ed. John O. Voll. (New York: Oxford University Press), accessed April 16, 2020.

agency, looking primarily at internal matters such as religion, social change, and education. Some of these views also carried over to my history textbook, where I revised Sydney Fisher's influential original volume by including in later editions a great deal on social, economic, gender, and cultural history.

Re-reading *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* raised again in my own mind how and why I made these choices and what their consequences have been. To some degree re-reading this classic work that influenced me so strongly was an exercise in personal nostalgia, as it might well be for others who re-read a book that strongly affected them. However, re-reading *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* also provided a welcome opportunity to reflect upon the general direction of scholarship in historical research during the last half-century as well as the specific issues raised by T. E. Lawrence in his still influential and important book. I encourage others to embark upon a similar re-reading of a work that helped bring them into the study of the Middle East.

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