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T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

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Abstract

This paper explores the origin, writing, and publication of T.E. Lawrence's 1926 book, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*. The book represented Lawrence's attempt to provide a personal narrative of his role in a revolt of Arab tribes against Ottoman rule in Arabia during World War One. It is argued that the nature of Lawrence's engagement with the Arab revolt was shaped by aspects of his own personal character and history, notably a romantic interest in ancient and mediaeval society and literature and a fascination with ascetism and the experience of suffering in liminal situations, as well as a desire to promote the Arab cause in postwar peace negotiations. The writing of the *Seven Pillars* reflected Lawrence's ambition to write a work of epic literature, while the seven years that elapsed between the production of the first draft and the book's eventual publication testified to Lawrence's conflicted attitude to celebrity, as he simultaneously decried the quality of the *Seven Pillars* as a failed literary endeavour whilst sending manuscript versions to leading authors and publishers and proceeding with plans for a sumptuous illustrated edition. As such the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is shown to occupy a central place in the mythical life of Lawrence of Arabia.

Extracting the real Thomas Edward Lawrence from the mythical Lawrence of Arabia has been a flourishing academic industry since at least 1955, when Richard Aldington published his iconoclastic *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry* – which set out to debunk the numerous legends that had coalesced around Lawrence's name since his death in a motorcycle accident in 1935.¹ Accident did I say? Or was it a political assassination? That is a live question, just one of countless others. Lawrence the man was fertile in myths enough. His very name was mythical. As a young man he

¹ Richard Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry* (Collins, London, 1955).

went by Thomas Edward Lawrence. When he died as Thomas Edward Shaw. In between he was known as John Hume Ross. But none of these was his birth name, which was Thomas Edward Chapman. Lawrence was the illegitimate son of Sir Thomas Chapman, an Anglo-Irish landowner who fled his ancestral home due to a liaison with his children's governess, Sarah Lawrence. So Thomas was given his mother's surname name: ironically, since her *actual* surname was not Lawrence but Junner. She only acquired the name Lawrence because her mother, who was a servant in the house of a Mr Lawrence in Sunderland, had been made pregnant by her employer's son and gave that son's surname to her daughter. Lawrence was thus the product of two generations of illegitimate unions and his given surname of Lawrence derived from an accountant in Sunderland. This tangled family history also explains why Lawrence was technically Welsh, since after fleeing Ireland his parents lived in Wales, where Lawrence was born in 1888. This had one significant consequence, for it explains why he later attended Jesus College, Oxford, which had historic ties to Wales and Welsh students.

The convoluted threads of Lawrence's parentage prefigure the complex and often obscure paths his life would follow. And if Lawrence's existence tended towards the mythological, it comes as no surprise that this is no less true of his great book, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*, which appeared in 1926 – it would be too strong a word to say 'published'. Lawrence was something of a myth factory. He had a quirky, awkward, personality and relished making an impression. As a child he was known for peddling his bicycle up the steepest hills and then pushing it down the ensuing slope. When a teenager he moved out of his family home in North Oxford to live in a purpose-built hut in the garden with special sound-proofed walls. He later claimed that, at the age of 17, he ran away from home and joined the army – only to be extracted by his parents. No evidence exists for this in the army records. Such a man, setting down to write a history of his own exploits, couldn't help but produce a book in which fact and fiction mingled and which fed the very legendary status of his life which he on other occasions so lamented. It is said of Lawrence that he was someone who 'backed into the limelight' and no phrase, I think, better sums him up. And in the *Seven Pillars* he backed into a light he did all he could to fuel.

So what is the book about? First, the title. The phrase 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom' derives from the Biblical book of Proverbs, where it states: 'Wisdom hath builded a house: She hath hewn out her seven pillars.' There are no pillars of wisdom in Lawrence's book and the title bears no relation to the contents. Lawrence had come upon the text as a young man and in 1910 had planned to use it for a travel book about seven cities of the Middle East – Damascus, Jerusalem, and so on. This book was never written: instead, he took the title and applied it to the book he *did* write. This book is an account of Lawrence's personal role in a revolt among Arab tribes against Turkish rule in Arabia in World War One. Arabia was, when the war began, part of the

Ottoman Empire. The Empire had included Egypt too, but this had been seized by the British in the 1880s. Turkey was allied to Germany in the war and so was at war with Britain, and the British hatched the idea of encouraging an Arab revolt against Turkish rule as a means of weakening Turkish power and possibly opening up a Middle Eastern front against the central European powers. Lawrence was drawn into this scheme since he was, in the years prior to the war, working as an archaeologist in Carchemish in northern Syria, and as a result knew Arabic. When the war began he joined the army and was employed in military intelligence in Cairo, Egypt, spying on the Turks and liaising with the Arabs.



Lawrence (on the left) at Carchemish in 1912 with the archaeologist Leonard Woolley

Thus it came about that, when the plan to spark an Arab uprising was activated, Lawrence was one of those sent into Arabia to make contact with Arab leaders and help direct their operations. The nominal leader of the revolt was the Emir Hussain of Mecca. But he was elderly and active operations were led by his four sons. It was one of these, Faisal, whom Lawrence met at Wadi Safra in 1916. Lawrence recounted the meeting in the *Seven Pillars*. 'And how', Faisal asked, 'you like our place here at Wadi Safra?' To which Lawrence, who was eager to push Arab claims and conquer as much of Turkish territories as possible, replied: 'Well; but it is far from Damascus.'



Faisal I bin Al-Hussein (1885-1933)

To encourage the Arabs Lawrence, on behalf of the British government, promised them that if the Turks were vanquished then the Arabs could replace them as rulers of Arabia. Yet this was duplicitous, for the British had already agreed in the Sykes-Picot treaty with the French, who were jealous of Britain's intrigues in the region, that the Turkish territories would be portioned between them when the war was over and that the French would acquire Syria. Lawrence knew this, but first there was a war to win against the Germans and Turks, and second, he always believed in the concept of an Arab nation and held the conviction that the more land the Arabs could liberate themselves from Turkish rule the more they could stake a claim to territory once the war was over. Indeed, one of his motives in writing the *Seven Pillars* shortly after the war was to emphasise the Arab role in the defeat of the Turks so as to advance their cause: though it also served the purpose of absolving him of the sense of guilt he felt at having misled them regarding British intentions.

What the *Seven Pillars* does, then, is narrate Lawrence's personal involvement in the Arab revolt, culminating in the capture of Damascus by Arab forces in October 1918, just as the war ended. Of the military history of the campaign I shall not write. What I wish to focus on is the book *as a book*.

To understand the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* one needs to understand Lawrence the person. He was, to begin with, highly intellectual and introspective. As a young man he was fascinated by Mediaeval history: he was the kind of person who read the *Morte d'Arthur* and who cycled about country churches making brass rubbings. Such young people don't really exist today, but in late Victorian England they were a familiar type – one thinks of William Morris, a hero of Lawrence's and someone Lawrence planned

to emulate by setting up a hand-printing press as Morris had done. Lawrence's family already lived in Oxford, and he attended the university, studying history. He was a fine scholar, but even at this point he had a restless and daring spirit about him. He excelled in the old Oxford pastime of roof climbing. He apparently steered a canoe along an underground stream that ran beneath the city. And for his BA thesis he embarked in 1910 on an audacious visit to Syria and Palestine, travelling hundreds of miles alone and on foot taking pictures and sketching castles built in the middle east by the Crusading knights. As a romantic, Lawrence was drawn to medieval chivalry and tales of the Knights Templar. From this one can see why the chance to be involved in a revolt in Arabia was like Manna in the desert for Lawrence. For he discovered that the Arab Bedouin lived in ways that had barely changed since the mediaeval ages he so loved. They journeyed through the desert on camels and horses, raiding their neighbours' lands and stealing and trading camels, led by charismatic warriors, the greatest of whom, Auda Abu Tayi, Lawrence immortalised in the *Seven Pillars*.



Auda Abu Tayi (1874-1924) as depicted in the *Seven Pillars*

Lawrence was dazzled. By accident, he had stumbled upon a world he had only read about in *The Iliad* and tales of Richard the Lion Heart. That past was, in the deserts of Arabia, a living present, and Lawrence was at the centre of it. Unsurprisingly he soon discarded western clothes and dressed as an Arab, complete with dagger. For an introverted young man who had dwelt mentally in gorgeous ancient lands it was a fantasy become real. He admitted as much in the later suppressed first chapter:

All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act out their dream with open eyes, to make it possible. This I did.¹



T.E. Lawrence in Arab dress

Another of Lawrence's mediaeval attributes was a hankering after asceticism. Lawrence shunned pleasure, ease, and luxury. He liked to push himself, to live in spartan conditions, to suffer. Remember how he walked down-hill with his bike, how he set off on foot through Syria while beset by Malaria to draw castles? He was asexual, apparently never having a boy or girl friend. Later in life he demonstrated masochistic tendencies and paid a soldier to whip him whilst tied to a bed. All this made him highly receptive to the hard, unforgiving life of the Bedouin, who travelled long distances through the desert beneath burning sun with little in the way of food or creature comforts. It was a world, too, without women, which Lawrence found congenial. As he wrote in the first chapter:

The body was too coarse to feel the utmost of our sorrows and of our joys. Therefore, we abandoned it as rubbish: we left it below us to march forward ... Blood was always on our hands: we were licensed to it. Wounding and killing seemed ephemeral pains, so very brief and sore was life with us. With the sorrow of living so great, the sorrow of punishment had to be pitiless. We lived for the day and died for it. When there was reason and desire to punish we wrote our lesson with gun or whip immediately in the sullen flesh of the sufferer,

¹ T.E. Lawrence, *Oriental Assembly* (Williams and Norgate, London, 1939), p. 143.

and the case was beyond appeal ... Bedouin ways were hard even for those brought up to them, and for strangers terrible: a death in life.¹

The next thing one must grasp to properly appraise the *Seven Pillars* is that Lawrence yearned to be a great writer. In his youth he had been immersed in literature – one of his legends was that he had read 50,000 books by the age of 21 – and he wanted to emulate those writers he most admired. He had been projecting various books before the war and now, by chance, he had stumbled upon a subject almost too magnificent to be real: a first-hand account of a revolt in the desert. It was a tale that unfolded amidst dramatic and exotic scenery, a land of vast sand-dunes, towering cliffs of coloured rock, of ruined civilisations and brilliant sunsets. One thinks, for example, of his descriptions of his most favourite of places – the immense valley of Wadi Ramm:

The crags were capped in nests of domes, less hotly red than the body of the hill; rather grey and shallow. They gave the finishing semblance of Byzantine architecture to this irresistible place: this processional way greater than imagination. The Arab armies would have been lost in the length and breadth of it, and within the walls a squadron of aeroplanes could have wheeled in formation. Our little caravan grew self-conscious, and fell dead quiet, afraid and ashamed to flaunt its smallness in the presence of the stupendous hills. Landscapes, in childhood's dream, were so vast and silent.²



Wadi Ramm

¹ T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1935), p. 31.

² *Ibid.*, p. 351.

It had, too, a cast of ready-made characters who appeared to have stepped from the pages of the Arabian Nights and narrated the epic story of an unprecedented and ultimately successful campaign, full of daring, heroism, and disaster. And Lawrence was the only British person to witness much of it first-hand – which meant, of course, that he had license to tell the story as he saw it, as he wanted to say it, and to structure the account around his own perceptions and feelings, giving vent to his own ego. It was gifted to him to write his own modern-day *Iliad* or *Odyssey* (and Lawrence later did his own English translation of the *Odyssey*), with himself cast as the character of Achilles or Odysseus. It was too good to be true, and for an aspiring writer who confessed to wishing to write a book on the scale of *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Moby Dick*, it was irresistible.

The result was the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* – a self-consciously literary endeavour to evoke the world of the Arabs and Lawrence's part within it. Realising that he had incredible material for a book he began, almost from day one, to keep detailed notes of events and scenes, many having no military bearing. By 1919 he had fixed upon the idea of producing an epic account of the Arab revolt. A friend to whom he confided his plan in Cairo commented that Lawrence would 'some day be able to write a unique book. Generally, the kind of men capable of these adventures lack the pen and wit to record them adequately. Luckily Lawrence is specially gifted in both.'¹

Lawrence began writing the book whilst attending the Paris peace conference in 1919, where he was a member of the Arab delegation.



Lawrence (third from the right) in Paris, with Faisal (centre)

During those five months in Paris he wrote 160,000 words – roughly six books. Then disaster struck: whilst changing trains at Reading on a trip to Oxford he somehow

¹ Quoted in Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorised Biography of T.E. Lawrence* (Heinemann, London, 1989), p. 435.

managed to leave his bag containing the manuscript in the waiting room. When he telephoned back on arriving at Oxford the station staff could find no trace of it. It was lost and never recovered, as well as the photographs and notes the bag also contained. Whether this really happened must be questioned – it seems decidedly odd that Lawrence would mislay something so vital to him and make no personal attempt to locate it. Though in a highly distressed state, the projected book was too important to be abandoned, so he set down to write it again. By now Lawrence was a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, but complaining that he couldn't settle down to write in Oxford he moved into the upstairs rooms of the office of the architect of New Delhi, Sir Hebert Baker, at 14 Barton Street in London. The spartan setting suited Lawrence: there was no heating, washing, or cooking facilities, so sitting in a padded RAF pilot's coat and subsisting only on sandwiches, he sat at a desk and wrote out the whole book from memory, writing for hours at a stretch. To make up for missing details he emphasised the physical drama of the Arabian scene. By April a complete draft of 400,000 words was complete.



The offices in Barton Street where Lawrence completed the first draft of the *Seven Pillars*

Over the next two years Lawrence, who was by then employed by Winston Churchill as his adviser on Middle Eastern affairs, returned off and on to the book, cutting the text down to 330,000 words. Wanting to make it a masterpiece, he studied the writing techniques of modern authors he admired. He also began to commission a large series of portraits of leading figures in the revolt, notably by the artist and sculptor, Eric Kennington. It was typical of Lawrence to combine ambition and egotism with timidity and self-abasement, and he continually lamented the book's inadequacies and his

inability to make it right. 'The real trouble', he wrote to Kennington, 'is about my book, which is not good: not good enough to come out.'¹ This at the same time as he was spending large sums paying for works of art to adorn its pages – hardly the action of someone seriously doubting whether the book was good enough to see the light of day.

Whatever his misgivings, Lawrence decided to have the revised manuscript, which he had completed by May 1922, set up in type at the printing works of the *Oxford Mail* newspaper. The result was the Oxford Text of 1922, of which the first three bound volumes were complete by August 1922 – by which time Lawrence had made his peculiar decision to enlist in the RAF as a private under the name of Ross. The volume contained the opening dedicatory poem to someone designated 'SA', which began:

I loved you, so I drew these tides of men into my hands, and wrote my will
across the sky in stars
To gain you Freedom, the seven-pillared worthy house, that your eyes might
be shining for me
When I came.
Death was my servant on the road, till we were near
And saw you waiting:
When you smiled, and in sorrowful envy he outran me,
And took you apart
Into his quietness.

There has been much speculation as to who SA was, but it is generally accepted that it was his old Arab friend Dahoum, whom Lawrence had known in Syria before the war and who he had brought on a visit to Oxford, but who had died during the war.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 664.



Lawrence and Dahoum pictured before the war

By now over 30 portraits and landscape pictures had been commissioned for the volume. Yet despite all the cost, effort, and time, Lawrence still complained that it was inadequate and not worthy of publication. He wrote to the artist Paul Nash:

I wrote a book about Arabia. To publish it would involve me in as many libels as there are characters ... Also it is not good enough to publish – but it is good enough for me to make better, till it can be published in the course of years.¹

By August 1922 Lawrence was receiving the first of an eventual eight printed volumes from the *Oxford Mail* press. He sent one to George Bernard Shaw, then Britain's leading playwright. Another was sent to the writer and publisher Edward Garnett, to whom Lawrence claimed that he had no ambition to publish the book and wrote it just for himself. But after Garnett replied in effusive terms about the text, Lawrence wrote:

Confession is in the air. Do you remember my telling you once that I collected a shelf of 'titanic' books (those distinguished by greatness of spirit, 'sublimity' as Longinus would call it): and that they were *The Karamazovs*, *Zarathustra*, and *Moby Dick*. Well, my ambition was to make an English fourth. You will observe that modesty comes out more in the performance than in the aim! I had hopes all the while that it was going to be a big thing, and wrote myself nearly blind in the effort. Then it was finished and I sent to the printer, and when it came back in fresh shape I saw that it was no good.²

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 675.

² *Ibid.*, p. 677.

Garnett offered to do an abridgement of the book of about 150,000 words, the plan being to sell the abridgement in the United States to raise money to cover the expenses of the actual *Seven Pillars* – which Lawrence, now just a regular soldier, could hardly afford. But Lawrence hesitated: George Bernard Shaw was strong against the plan, pressing Lawrence to publish the entire manuscript as it stood. Instead, in 1923, Lawrence floated the idea of publishing the *Seven Pillars* as a privately printed limited edition of 2,000 copies to be sold by subscription. Garnett's publishers, Jonathan Cape, agreed to the plan, but still Lawrence dithered, continuing to doubt the merits of the book whilst remaining fixated upon it and admitting privately that it was a great work. He deposited the original manuscript in the Bodleian library at Oxford, again covering the egoism of the gesture with a veneer of self-deprecation: 'In giving my Manuscript to the Bodleian I acted perhaps unhumorously, taking myself a little too seriously as a classic ... Whether [the library] has a treasure or not the next century can tell. It rids me of a bulky weighty volume.'¹

Copies of the Oxford Text continued to circulate and Lawrence (who was now in the Army Tank corps) relished the praise it received – whilst continuing to deprecate its quality. Though, he wrote in May 1923, 'I can see no good of my book, yet I am glad when others praise it. I hate it and like it by turns, and know that it's a good bit of writing, and often wish it wasn't. If I had aimed less high I'd have hit my mark squarer, and made a better little thing of it. As it stands it's a great failure.'² The eventual plan was to print 120 copies at a price of £25 each (which would be about £1000 in modern values), which would yield £3000. But Lawrence was embarrassed at the thought that he might profit personally from the venture, so he stated that he would receive no royalties: the sum raised was to cover the costs of printing only, including the large number of sumptuous illustrations. He began to plan the format of the book. Lawrence had a great interest in the technical aspects of book production, and by the end of 1923 he had settled on a large quarto format to accommodate the paintings, consisting of 230,000 words over 430 pages, set in Caslon 11-point font. Yet still his plans changed: by December 1923 he had resolved on a print run of 100 copies to be sold to subscriber at 30 guineas apiece and a total of 330,000 words.

By January 1924 12 subscribers had signed up, including Earl Grey, the Foreign Secretary at the time of Britain's entry into the war, and the Peter Pan author J.M. Barrie. Lawrence was happy: 'It will be rather a fine volume, and unless I'm wrong, a celebrated one some day.'³ The problem was that, when Lawrence re-visited the manuscript, he became increasingly dissatisfied with its style. It had been written in a high, elaborate, and complex prose, more typical of the Edwardian age, and as Lawrence studied modernist writers like Eliot and Joyce he began to favour a simpler,

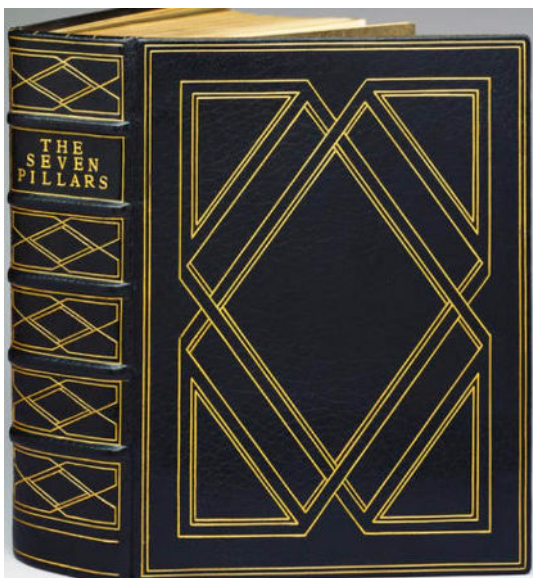
¹ *Ibid.*, p. 711.

² *Ibid.*, p.717.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 733.

more direct and less affected way of writing. A long letter from E.M. Forster criticising Lawrence's over-elaborate and obscure sentences only confirmed this assessment. Thus, by 1924, Lawrence had become less optimistic about the book. Not only was the style wrong, but he had only 26 subscribers and costs were mounting. He set to work to cut the book and tighten the writing, planning to reduce the length by 10 per cent. By September he had 80 subscribers. It was now that George Bernard Shaw finally read the manuscript and replied with more advice, especially regarding punctuation, and recommending the suppression of the first chapter. Problems still mounted. Only three of the eleven books had been set up in type and by December 1924 it was apparent that even the subscriber edition would make a loss of £1000. To make good the short-fall Lawrence took up again the idea of a popular 125,000 words abridgement. Jonathan Cape agreed and offered Lawrence £3,000 for the projected volume, which was to be called *Revolt in the Desert* and appear in 1927 – one year after the full version. Flush with more funds Lawrence proceeded to commission yet more pictures!

During 1925 progress accelerated and by mid-1925 the subscribers' version was largely complete. The final printing went ahead in 1926 – though the General Strike of that year slowed things down again. But by December 1926 the printed version of the *Seven Pillars* was complete and being dispatched to the subscribers, the first copy being gifted to the Royal library at Windsor Castle.



The Subscribers' Edition of the *Seven Pillars* presented to King George V

By this point Lawrence had re-enlisted in the RAF under the name of Shaw and was serving in India, and it was at Karachi that Lawrence received the first letters of thanks and acclaim from those who had subscribed to the volume. The following year *The Revolt in the Desert* appeared, the plan being to sell most copies in America where

the volume would do least damage to the reputation of Lawrence and the *Seven Pillars*.



T.E. Lawrence in the RAF in Karachi, India

Thus did the subscribers' edition of the *Seven Pillars* emerge. Lawrence had intended to reduce the Oxford Text by 10 per cent; in fact he reduced it by 25 per cent, and some chapters were cut much more, especially towards the end of the book. Book Seven was cut by 29 per cent; Book Nine by 32 per cent, and Book Eight by 47 per cent. The volume came in at 250,579 words, compared to the Oxford Text's 334,566 words.

It is generally believed that the cutting was a mistake. Lawrence cut more than he needed and he cut erratically, cutting more and more as the book went on, believing erroneously that he had not cut enough in the early stages. The style shifted also as Lawrence sought a simpler, less expansive, style – which may have been good for literary purposes but left some of the sentences and narrative unclear. He also became increasingly fussy about the printed form of the text: for example, he tried to ensure that each page began with a new paragraph and that each paragraph end at the end of a line.

Notwithstanding these minor obsessions, the book was rich with brilliant and arresting passages. One thinks, for example, of the famous Chapter 13, where Lawrence related how, sick and confined to his tent with a fever, he sketched out in his mind a theory of the Arab revolt, reflecting upon how the mobile but numerically small Arab forces could best challenge the regular armies of the Turks – in the process formulating what remains one of the key texts of guerilla warfare:

My wits, hostile to the abstract, took refuge in Arabia again. Translated into Arabic, the algebraic factor would first take practical account of the area we wish to deliver, and I began idly to calculate how many square miles: sixty: eighty: one hundred: perhaps one hundred and forty thousand square miles. And how would the Turks defend all that? No doubt by a trench line across the bottom, if we came like an army with banners; but suppose we were (as we might be) an influence, an idea, a thing intangible, invulnerable, without front or back, drifting about like a gas? Armies were like plants, immobile, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head. We might be a vapour, blowing where we listed. Our kingdoms lay in each man's mind; and as we wanted nothing material to live on, so we might offer nothing material to the killing.¹

The most disputed part of the book was Lawrence's account of his capture by the Turks in the town of Deraa, which caused him to be led naked before the Governor of the town, Hacim Bey, who, after Lawrence resisted his sexual advances, ordered that he be whipped and beaten. Lawrence described in detail the beating he received, with repeated lashes of a whip:

Always for the first of every new series, my head would be pulled round, to see how a hard white ridge, like a railway, darkening slowly into crimson, leaped over my skin at the instant of each stroke, with a bead of blood where two ridges crossed. As the punishment proceeded the whip fell more and more upon existing wheels, biting blacker or more wet, till my flesh quivered with accumulated pain, and with terror of the next blow coming. They soon conquered my determination not to cry, but while my will ruled my lips I used only Arabic, and before the end a merciful sickness choked my utterance.²

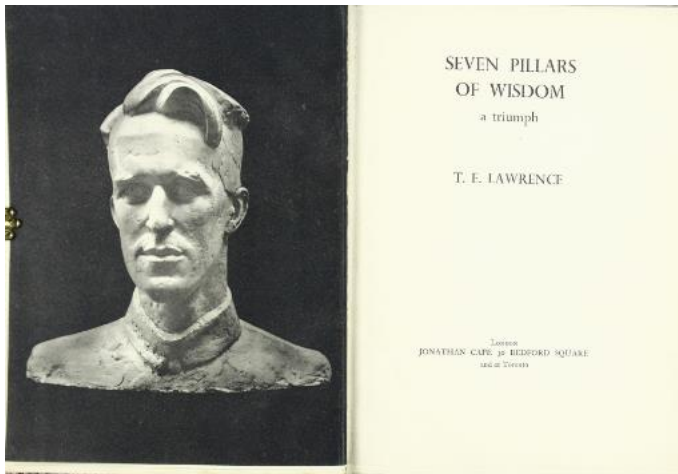
Considerable ingenuity, by a series of biographers, has been devoted to resolving whether such a beating actually happened. Much has been found to discount the idea: the fact that the Turkish governor was known to be heterosexual and made no reference to Lawrence in his diaries; the curious fact that Lawrence was able to escape; that his wounds soon healed; and that the timing of the visit to Deraa cannot be made to fit with his other known movements.³ This has led many to conclude, either that the incident happened at some other time and was transposed to Deraa, or that it never happened at all and rather gave expression to Lawrence's known taste for masochistic punishment. It is another of those episodes that draws an aura of mystery around Lawrence's life.

¹ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, p. 192.

² *Ibid.*, p. 444.

³ C.f. Phillip Knightley and Colin Simpson, *The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia* (Thomas Nelson, London, 1969), pp. 213-217; Michael Yardley, *Backing into the Limelight: A Biography of T.E. Lawrence* (Harrap, London, 1985), pp. 110-113.

This was the text that circulated in Lawrence's life-time, the Oxford Text remaining unpublished. When Lawrence died in a motorcycle accident in May 1935 it was subscribers' edition that was rushed into print in just six weeks. 100,000 copies were sold within six months. Only sixty-two years later was an edition of the 1922 Oxford Text published, overseen by Jeremy Wilson. It is this text, rather than the 1935 edition, which is probably best read by those wishing for the fullest and most comprehensible account of Lawrence's role in the Arab revolt.



The 1935 Edition of the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

Conclusion

From this account of the writing and printing of the *Seven Pillars* it is easy to see why the book became yet another element in the myth that is Lawrence of Arabia. It must be one of the most tortuously generated books in history: from the initial decision to write it and the quick production of the first draft; the loss of that draft in Reading railway station, never to be seen again; the second draft written in a cold and frugal architect's office in London; the printing of the second draft in just eight copies by the *Oxford Mail*; the protracted wrangling over whether the book should be published at all and in what form; and finally the decision to produce a privately printed version reduced in length by 25 per cent. Then there was the shifting purpose of the book, which was at once a vehicle for Lawrence's ego regarding his role in the Arab revolt and a text designed to exaggerate the part played by the Arabs in their own liberation as part of a campaign to assert their claims to territory after the war. And all the while there was Lawrence's basic ambition to produce a book that was not only aesthetically beautiful but which would take its place among the classics of world literature. That it eventually did, but only after Lawrence's death in a motorcycle accident which allowed the work to finally be made available to a wide and international audience. And then there were the controversies contained within its pages, above all his account of being captured by the Turks and subjected to a sadistic homosexual

assault which left him repulsed and excited – which several historians believe never happened at all. What this amounts to is to say that the *Seven Pillars* is a great work in every sense of the word. It is great in size and publication values, with numerous illustrations and careful attention to printed style. It has for its subject matter a dramatic story set among Bedouin tribes amidst the fantastic scenery of the Arabian desert. As a work of literature it is replete with vivid descriptions, anguished introspection, and arresting prose. And at its centre is a great man: namely T.E. Lawrence, AKA Chapman, AKA Shaw, AKA Ross – a complex, contradictory compound of scholar and man of action, half hero half attention seeking charlatan, inspiring, frustrating, and absurd by turns. Only a person so tortured could have produced a text so tensely wrought. But in so doing Lawrence immortalised his persona as Lawrence of Arabia – the only one among the millions of combatants in World War One who is remembered for his military deeds. Lawrence, in the title of John Mack's biography, is *A Prince of Our Disorders*, and as a testament to the struggle of a highly educated and self-absorbed literary scholar, shaped by the neuroses of an Edwardian English culture, to maintain an identity amid the storm centres of war, empire, and nationalism within a Middle Eastern world at once so familiar and yet so alien, it stands as a twentieth century classic. In this at least it vindicated Lawrence's subtitle: *A Triumph*.



T.E. Lawrence in 1931