Few Women and Less Dogs—Lawrence's Arabia

Seven Pillars of Wisdom[1] is a marvellous adventure book, complete with the Boys' Own explosive kit and instructions on how to fly a model plane. The desert descriptions are beautiful, the desert a giant obstacle course chock full of physical endurance—hunger, thirst, and lice—and recreations —camel racing, horseback riding, and robbing birds' nests (ostriches). As in all good boys' books, the women are not missed, and the dogs, who might be, are successfully replaced by exotica: gazelles, jerboa, ibis, oryx, and snakes.

And if you are not a big boy, the book may be attractive as a mine of children's stories: "the little engine that could," chugging bravely along the tracks until Lawrence blows it up; the loyal camel, foodless and waterless but valiantly racing into battle until Lawrence shoots it in the head (aiming at a Turk); the trusty little donkey carrying a machine gun that is too heavy for it. Maybe the book is too sad for children.

How about the women and the dogs? The first group of the latter (page 275, but see also page 414), tries to steal part of the tail end of a feast, mopping up after the children who are mopping up after the men—*except* for the greyhound who is hand-fed (no information about the eating habits of the women, incidentally). On page 370 there is the curious incident of the dog(s) in the night (*per memoria,* the dogs do nothing in the night). Of course, these are Turkish dogs, which in an earlier epoch (as some scholars may recall) were habitually circumcised, an operation which may have also affected their vocal chords. Lawrence, more poet than zoologist, does not add to our information, but perhaps the habit had already been abandoned (as per pages 407 and 415), thanks to the efforts of the notorious Arabian general, Ibn Othello, who was particularly proud of smiting all circumcised canines, thus discouraging the continuation of this barbaric animal torture.

As we read on, we see that *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is not a boys' book after all, but a serious discussion of warfare and strategy in one of the outlying areas of World War I. For example, a point in which Lawrence is sporadically at loggerheads with the British staff—with some exceptions, like Allenby and Clayton—is Lawrence's commitment to weld the multifarious clans and manipulate the shifting tribal loyalties into an Arabian Fighting Force. One thinks of Saint Joan—and, in fact, T.E. has not a little in common with the Maid, not only in his ambition to awake the national consciousness of a people, but also in small intangibles: a love of transvestism, for example, where Lawrence outstrips the French girl by his infinite variety of costumes—one day an Arab, the next a Syrian peasant woman (see Aldington, page 96).[2]

To return to strategic considerations, Lawrence's plan is not to land a division of Tommies at Akaba, Medina or wherever, but to encourage the target population to pick up the gun, an idea long resisted by the Empire builders

(see Kipling or Somerset Maugham) in favor of the white hunter solution: send in the white hunter to kill the tiger, but do not—repeat, do not—ever leave the gun in the village to help the locals help themselves, i.e. shoot their own tiger. Imperfect local comprehension of the idea of fair play may end in the primitive mind confusing white hunter and hungry tiger, thereby shooting the former instead of the latter. So Colonel Newcombe wants to send in a brigade of Bobbies—or Tommies—to take Medina, partly because he is a stodgy old stick-in-the-mud, and partly because he remembers the battle for Wejh, won by the British tar because Lawrence and Feisal got there only after it was all over (Feisal's tribe had taken a long coffee break). Some Bedouins were in fact present, but refused to help with the attack and only galloped in afterwards to plunder—to the disgust of the Wejhians who became more pro-Turk than ever. A balls up. One could say a "boils up" if one wanted to, because shortly afterwards, Lawrence got boils (and dysentery), went out into the desert, and had a vision that he shouldn't take Medina—up until then one of his goals—but let it die of attrition.

Lawrence often communicates that without him nothing at all would have happened out there in the desert. On page 318, for example, he is crouching "in my atom of shadow, too wearied of these men (whose minds all wore my livery) to care who regulated their febrile impulses." It's the boring Bedouin again who want to shoot some eager-to-surrender Turks: "I held no great brief for them [the Turks], but it was better they be not killed, if only to spare us the pain of seeing it" (see also page 467: "For me it was a holiday, with not an Arab near, before whom I must play out my tedious part"). We understand that Lawrence gets fed-up with the whole expedition sometimes, and we like him the more for this human touch in his glorious image; everyone remembers Lawrence's Arabia, not Aldington's or the British Staff's, Clayton's or Allenby's.

And what about the women? They don't fit in with the Boys' Own adventure story slant that we mentioned at the beginning of this essay, but Lawrence does see them every now and then, out of the corner of his eye, more than the dogs, for example. Today, in the drag-end of the twentieth century, we *know* the women were there and we know that he knew; we know that he knew that we would know, and so he does mention them. On page 356, we find Lawrence walking into Auda Abu Tayi's tent unannounced to find him "feeding ... on boiled bread with his latest wife who is a 'jolly girl' dyed blue with the indigo of her new smock." Do his words evoke an artistic games mistress? She immediately whisks herself away "like a rabbit," leaving Lawrence to twit Auda on regarding "our comic reproductive processes not as an unhygienic pleasure, but as a main business of life." Women for procreation, boys for recreation, and melons for sheer delight, as the Persians said (and we all know what happened to them). This is the second woman with whom Lawrence establishes eye contact; after one of the feasts, he mentions the women grouping behind the tent flap to listen to the post prandial stories (no eye contact), and from time to time, he mentions some of their functions—necessary (pounding food

in rock hollows) and, in one instance, admirable: Lawrence is full of praise for the solitary wife who can not only put up a seven pole tent by herself, but can take it down again while her husband sleeps, without waking him, so that she can leave before dawn and have the tent in place for his arrival at the next camping ground that night. We would like to know how the wife gets the tent (and herself) to the next camping ground, but Lawrence does not tell us; perhaps she loads it on the donkey carrying the machine gun.

The first woman with whom Lawrence makes eye contact is, unlike Auda's jolly wife, old: a very old woman who has the right to comment to the men, or who takes the right, and is unfavorably impressed with our author's white skin and blue eyes. Aldington, Lawrence's petulant biographer, doesn't like this coloring either, and says that Lawrence looked like an Englishman dressed up as an Arab (as of course he was, so why not?). The old woman, for her part, metaphorizes about Lawrence's blue eyes that look to her like the blue sky seen through the empty eye sockets of a skull. Go ask the poets, wrote Freud, and, wrote Alice Walker a little later, the women are the mute poets of oppressed peoples. That old Arab woman really hit something on the head, for the white man's skull is still lying in the desert in the Middle East—waiting for the locals to bury it.

One might close the book with the deduction that if the British and French and Germans had confined themselves just to the European battlefields, the Turks would have got tired of bribing the Bedouin not to cut their supply lines and might have eventually gone home to prepare themselves for their future air-shuttle to Germany, while the Arabs would have re-atomized themselves into the primitive communism that Lawrence describes as congenial to them; Balfour would never have declared, thus unimplanting the 1948 time bomb, and, and, and ... what would happen if there was a war and nobody came?

Notes

[1] T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom. A Triumph* (London: Cape, 1946).
[2] Richard Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia. A Biographical Enquiry* (London: Collins, 1955).

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