
Further into the Labyrinth: Letters between Robert Graves and Basil Liddell-Hart in the 1930s

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The death of the military hero of the 1914-18 War T. E. Lawrence in May 1935 from a motor cycle accident began a series of letters between Robert Graves, who had written about Lawrence in his 1927 book *Lawrence and the Arabs*,¹ and Basil Liddell-Hart, the military historian and strategist who had also written about the same man. Richard Percival Graves tells how after the accident and while Lawrence was critically ill, Graves was approached by a news agency in London to write an article on Lawrence, which he wrote overnight, basing much of it on a letter he had received from Lawrence in February 1935.² The subsequent article, published under the strikingly misleading title, 'Myself – by Lawrence: How this Document was Written', appeared on first column of the front page of the *London Evening Standard* and was sold to several other newspapers in England and the US making Graves nearly £200.³

Unfortunately, Graves had used quotations from Lawrence's letter without clearing copyright with the estate and as R. P. Graves remarks, it was some time before he was able to settle the consequent dispute with them. Graves's *Evening Standard* article immediately led to an exchange of letters with Liddell-Hart, who had also written about Lawrence and to an eventual collaboration between the two authors.

In this essay I want to discuss the problems Graves encountered in writing about Lawrence and in particular obtaining permission to publish Lawrence's letters from the Trustees of the Lawrence Estate. I will show how Graves and Liddell-Hart communicated with each other after their friend's death and subsequently battled

with literary agents and executors to wrest the content of letters they had written and received into the public domain to complete their unique double portraits of the man they knew. And since every labyrinth should have a minotaur, one will emerge towards the end of the story.

Graves had come to the attention of the Lawrence family after writing the *Evening Standard* article. Lawrence's brother Arnold ('Arnie') and other members of the family objected to the sensational nature of Graves's and the newspaper's coverage of the manner of Lawrence's death. News of their displeasure had filtered back to Graves who had been living in Mallorca. In his own defence, Graves took the robust view that the Lawrence family had been egged-on by society figures who had befriended them in their time of grief and had encouraged them to think that he was not a suitable person to write any future biographies of their relative. Liddell-Hart, in response to a quotation from an unnamed writer as 'having no critical service in my regard' wrote Graves a 'friendly note' asking if it was his name that had been deleted from the quotation'.⁴

Miranda Seymour says Liddell-Hart's note had the desired effect of cornering Graves and extracting an admission from him that this was so and that he had included the quotation without attribution to make himself sound superior. She relates that Graves was mortified to learn in a subsequent letter that Lawrence had spoken in equally disparaging terms about him to Liddell-Hart, and that Liddell-Hart had been recommended by Lawrence to Alexander Korda as a potential screenplay writer. While neither showed much concern when they learned that Arnie wanted to use Siegfried Sassoon as a screenwriter for a film that was planned about the life of Lawrence, Seymour remarks that Graves's only comment was that this was the Lawrence Estate's funeral not theirs. It seems that the two men had come to an early understanding about their subject and his circle.

Never one to shirk a challenge, Graves contacted Liddell-Hart again with a view to writing a biography of Lawrence and they

soon agreed to write joint biographies of Lawrence – ‘T.E’ as they called him. In December 1935 Liddell-Hart wrote an eighteen-point letter on Lawrence’s reasons for concealing facts. ‘Often I am extremely doubtful what his real reasons were and at other times the apparent reasons were not reasonable’, he remarks with asperity.⁵

In early February 1936, Graves gave his opinion on a suggestion made by Liddell-Hart that the joint book be called ‘Sides and Asides’. He says that this ‘title [has a] too popular ring, like a book about an actor–manager’, suggesting that he would prefer ‘Journey Through Lawrence-Land with Gun and Camera’, and then admits he is joking.⁶

But by the end of March, Liddell-Hart had written to warn Graves about a ‘cryptic’ note he had received from the publisher Jonathan Cape to say that Raymond Savage, acting as agent for the Trustees of the Lawrence Estate, claimed there would be difficulties over the use of Lawrence’s letters.⁷ He mentions that he had received a phone call from Arnie to say the Trustees had wanted to give a definite negative (to the use of the letters), but they were now considering some sort of compromise. He adds that he had been informed they should hear from T. S. Eliot in due course (though what Eliot’s role might be is never discussed). And he concludes that the Trustees’ original negativity can be attributed to the explanatory comments that he and Graves had made in their initial writings about Lawrence.

Graves’s reply of 5 April 1936 is blunter. Noting that the proposed American publisher Doubleday had made an offer that was ‘all right, the royalty is what matters most and that is very good, I thought. [...] Another thing is, what exactly are [sic] Doubleday going to get for its money?’ Graves goes on to assert, ‘It’s that snake Savage at the bottom of all this, I believe as the Committee like all committees has a standard of gentlemaness [sic] before it – as it is the H(ighest) C(ommon) F(actor) of the comprising members’.⁸

And in an extraordinary sentence Graves asserts, ‘a committee is extended behind itself and unless one of us had been present at this deliberation and introduced a personal rather than a general point of view this was more or less what was bound to happen’. He continues to say, ‘the fact is that the committee is more or less passive but can have its gentlemanly service made use of by an active voice such as Savage’ who, he claims, is ‘jealous of Watt [their literary agent]. Depend on it – Savage is our active adversary’. Graves concludes the letter by imagining a conversation between himself and Savage in Mallorca where, over a coffee, he asks Savage directly to name his price.

At the end of April, Graves writes asking if there is any news about the book from the committee and reports on the peaceful situation in Mallorca, contrasting it with ‘the usual European gloom’ reported by the newspapers. ‘Patience, what can we do about it?’, as they say here’.⁹

Liddell-Hart takes control of the situation in his reply, admitting that while he has not yet had time to clarify his reactions, he proposes an alternative to swallowing the conditions by (a) tackling the Trustees personally and severally (b) to publish their material minus the letters if the publisher will take it in this curtailed form, while at the same time withholding their own letters from the proposed publication of Lawrence’s collected letters by the Trustees. If they were to decide on (b) it would confront the Trustees with their resolve, pointing out the defects of the Trustees’ position and could produce a modification of attitude. He ends by agreeing that he can see the hand of Savage and the ‘rather legalistic mind’ of Eliot in the conditions as presently framed.¹⁰

By 7 May, Graves begins by saying he admires the restraint of Liddell-Hart’s last letter. His own feelings are less manageable: ‘Arnie has no right to let us get on with the job and then get behind a committee’.¹¹ He thinks it is useless to tackle the Trustees severally; to publish the material minus the letters would make for a poor book and the Trustees would not let them publish

that much without a lien on the letters. He calls the Trustees' suggestions 'insulting', particularly their request to see Graves's letters: 'I should not in any case consent to giving the Trustees [my] original letters because they contain references to people who I respect that I don't propose to broadcast. Delay would also doom the book. 'The book would be born dead if published a year after this'. There is fact, he concludes, 'deadlock'.

He goes on to make suggestions as to what Liddell-Hart could do and offers what he wants to do. He believes they should agree to pirated editions of the book in the US – where the copyright laws were very different to those in the UK and Europe. He recommends the use of a copyright expert, a barrister Bill (W. A.) Fuller at a chambers in Middle Temple in London, who can be used to solve any problems they might encounter because 'he works for the Society of Authors and know everything there is to be known'. There is an emotional side to these suggestions. Graves wants to publish the book in its present form in the US, 'just to put on record that [he] is not accustomed to being tricked and stamped on'. And while he knows he is not in any position to anticipate Liddell-Hart's feelings on the matter, he cautiously concludes, 'You ought not care to be involved in any such business even if you were quite sure you were safe from legal action'.

Liddell-Hart replies on the 21 May 1936, apologising for the delay in his writing. He points out that there are some ambiguities in Savage's letter on behalf of the Trustees about whether the Trustees intend to stop them from quoting from all of Lawrence's letters or only the parts where he refers to him or Graves.¹² In another aside, Liddell-Hart seems to find a certain humour in Savage's talk of the 'decision of the Trustees', for he understood that there has never been a meeting of them. He claims that one of the Trustees, Alan Dawnay, a retired army colonel who had known Lawrence in the Great War, had never been consulted since he was appointed, and others have not been either, and 'you suggest the Trustees are merely being used as a convenient

screen for sidestepping'. Liddell-Hart concludes, 'That the real source of the decision is Savage influencing Arnie, and with some contribution perhaps from Eliot's legal mind'.

And Liddell-Hart is perhaps getting to the crux of the matter when he considers why the Committee of the Trustees had raised an objection to Graves's part in the proposed biography and reveals that his own involvement may have influenced Savage against them both. As his former literary agent, Savage had deceived him over an abortive film about Lawrence, Liddell-Hart claims. And knowing that Savage was aware of it, and aware, too, that he was unlikely to get any of Liddell-Hart's work again, it 'would only be in accord with human nature' that Savage was inclined 'to put the spoke in because of the business aspect'.

In an interesting second part of this letter sent to Arnie through A. Watt, Liddell-Hart says he sees no 'true value in' in any attempts that merely embalm a memory. 'The best way to serve a memory is to make it a living thing and not a dead one. To give people as true a picture of [Lawrence] as possible and to use his own words as a better guide to him [than] any interpretation of him by another can be'. He adds that since he had seen Graves's material he had 'come to realise more fully the value of publishing the two lots of data in conjunction, as a check on each other as well as a supplement to each other'. He declares any money he might make in writing his side of the biography would go towards the type 'of research that Lawrence suggested'. He concludes sympathetically by stating that Graves has always regarded writing novels as a means of generating money to give him time to do what he [Graves] regards as his 'real work, poetry', adding that he knew Lawrence regarded it one of his duties to enable Graves to do his 'unprofitable but worthy work'.¹³

On the 26 May, Liddell-Hart wrote to Colonel Dawnay offering the Trustees a copy of what he and Graves had written so far to decide whether to allow them to use the resource of Lawrence's letters for their book. Ultimately, he said, the decision would have to be taken in conjunction with Jonathan Cape the publisher

whose opinion would be sought on whether their book would jeopardise the sales of the soon-to-be-published official edition of Lawrence's collected letters. Cape, he concludes, is the best judge of this question, because he is the proposed publisher of both books and is far too shrewd a businessman to endanger his big profit for the sake of a small one.¹⁴

Graves's response is more succinct. He sends a telegram on the 31 May saying: LIMITED EDITION. MY ONLY HONOURABLE ALTERNATIVE ROBERT.¹⁵

Liddell-Hart replied in early June to say that Graves's telegram did not disappoint but that he was somewhat puzzled by it – as well he might have been – and so awaits a letter presumably for further clarification. He is still unclear about the reasoning by which Graves had reached his decision that the only alternative had been reached. And he then sets out what his attitude would be to small and large omissions from the letters.¹⁶

Graves answered the next day, 4 June, reflecting on the supposed objections raised by the Trustees 'or' as he says 'friends of the Trustees'.¹⁷ He regards these as 'only a smokescreen for their real objection which is an "emotional objection" to his obituary in the *Evening Standard*, which had led them to impose 'crippling penalties' to discourage him. He agrees, however, with Liddell-Hart that small omissions can be tolerated for the sake of reasonableness.

Whatever the thoughts of the two men at this time about the whole enterprise they must have been relieved by Cape's verdict, conveyed in a letter to Watt, composed on the same day. Cape proposed going ahead with a limited edition, which would make it more sought after and would not compete with any collected edition of the Lawrence letters which the Trustees may have in mind.¹⁸

Terms the Trustees quoted in a letter via A. P. Watt to Graves abruptly brought the two authors back to earth.¹⁹ Graves enthusiastically annotated his copy of the letter in reply to Liddell-Hart on 11 August, in which he also describes returning to

Waterloo station in an empty railway carriage after his evacuation from Mallorca, along with his companion Laura Riding.²⁰ Writing c/o his publishers Constable in London he tells of 'being taken off the island and to Valencia by the arrival a British destroyer and travel by third Class railway carriage for six days to get to London and now being 'a refugee and without money'.²¹ Again in another annotation to this letter Graves says he believes Riding 'very much wants to see [you]'. Liddell-Hart received an undated letter from Riding from their temporary address at 25 Marlborough House Osnaburgh Street NW1 extending an invitation to meet: 'will you have lunch with us or something?', she asks, in the spirit of sweetness and light.²²

But Savage was not through with them. As promised earlier, the minotaur (or, as Graves knew him, the snake) finally emerged from his lair in September 1936. Graves received a scorching letter from him as agent for the Trustees concerning the legal rather than the moral implications that Graves had outlined to him (in a letter that is so mild I have not included it here). In his response, dated 3 September 1936, Savage acknowledges Graves's letter of 29 August, and explains that as the representative of the Executors of the T. E. Lawrence Estate, his loyalty is due to them. He then characterizes Graves's requests for a personal explanation of his advice to them as 'impudent' and declines 'in any way' to discuss the affairs of his clients. Warming to his subject, he adds, 'I note, however, with not the slightest degree of surprise, the veiled insinuations in your letter and I am gratified that you have put your intentions in writing. I am not Mr [E. M.] Forster's agent and I have no interest in his affairs and the issue is, up to a point, between you and him.'²³ Forster had been asked to oversee the collecting of Lawrence's letters with a view to publication by the Trustees but had declined due to health reasons.

Savage then concludes his letter in a remarkably contumelious tone, apparently pricked by a comment Graves made regarding his hostility. 'With regards to your postscript, I wish to assure that

there has never been any personal “hostility” towards you on my part. I think you flatter yourself unduly to suggest that I have sufficiently thought of you to ever consider being “hostile” to you’.

Along with this letter, Savage enclosed a second letter he’d written to Graves earlier, on 27 August, but had not sent. Perhaps he had thought better of it. Making comments concerning Forster he would repeat only a week later, Savage writes:

As however, you have chosen to write such a ridiculously pompous letter and you have asked me my personal feelings. I will give it to you but emphasise the fact in no way whatsoever does my private opinion reflect that either of the Trustees or the late T. E. [Lawrence] family. First of all I would only say that I had no desire whatsoever to get in touch with you personally. Secondly, that your claim that we were friends in 1927 is untrue. Thirdly, if I really let myself go I might overstep the mark. The appearance of the article on the *Evening Standard* about T. E.’s [death] may be sufficient guide to you as to my feelings.²⁴

Clearly Graves had trod on the tail of the minotaur too hard and this was meant as his comeuppance. If Graves troubled to reply to such a badly-conceived letter no evidence has survived. Perhaps the existence of the dual biography, published in 1938 in an edition of 1,000 copies (500 in England, 500 in the US), including copies of Lawrence’s letters, suggests Graves chose to be politic.²⁵

In a letter Graves wrote to Kathleen, Liddell-Hart’s widow, after his death, dated 2 February 1970, Graves says ‘we never had the least argument while we were working on the Lawrence book did we? Or on any other occasion [he] THOUGHT’ (emphasis in the original).²⁶ In a marginal note, Beryl Graves wrote: ‘RG’s memory failing!!’

Now old soldiers may forget, but on reflection, and having read over this correspondence in its entirety, I am in agreement with

Graves. There does not seem to have been any real arguments between the two authors – their disagreements were at most a difference of strategies to reach a common goal.

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NOTES

¹ Robert Graves, *Lawrence and the Arabs* (London: Cape, 1927).

² Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura 1926-40* (London: Weidenfeld Nicolson, 1990), p. 230.

³ Robert Graves, 'Myself – by Lawrence: How this Document was Written', *Evening Standard* (London), 20 May 1935, p. 1.

⁴ Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), pp. 232-33.

⁵ Letter from Liddell-Hart to Robert Graves, 24 December 1935, Liddell-Hart Library, Kings College, University of London, LH 9/13/14. (All correspondence cited here will be found in LH/9/13/14.)

⁶ RG to LH, 2 February 1935.

⁷ LH to RG, 31 March 1936.

⁸ RG to LH, 5 April 1936.

⁹ RG to LH, 23 April 1936.

¹⁰ LH to RG 5 May 1936.

¹¹ RH to LH 7 May 1936.

¹² LH to RG 2 May 1936 part 1.

¹³ Liddell-Hart to A. Lawrence, 21 May 1936. part 2.

¹⁴ LH to Col Alan Dawnay, 26 May 1936 part 2.

¹⁵ Telegram from RG to LH, 31 May 1936 part 2.

¹⁶ LH to RG 3 June 1936, LH 9/13/14, Part 3.

¹⁷ RG to LH 4 June 1936, LH 9/13/14, Part 3.

¹⁸ Jonathan Cape to A.W. Watt, 4 June 1936.

- ¹⁹ Raymond Savage to A. P. Watt, 7 August 1936.
- ²⁰ A. P. Watt to RG, 11 August 1936 (copy).
- ²¹ RG to LH, 8 August 1936.
- ²² Laura Riding to LH, undated.
- ²³ Raymond Savage to RG (via Constable), 3 September 1936.
- ²⁴ Raymond Savage to RG, 27 August 1936 (copy).
- ²⁵ Robert Graves and Basil Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence to His Biographer* (New York: Doubleday, 1938).
- ²⁶ RG to Kathleen Liddell-Hart, 2 February 1970, annotated.