

# History

**LAWRENCE:**

*The Uncrowned King of Arabia.*

By Michael Asher. Overlook Press.

418 pp. \$35

Myth and reality were forever at war in the life of T. E. Lawrence (1888–1935). To detractor-in-chief Richard Aldington, author of a hugely controversial 1955 biography, the soldier-scholar who strove for immortality in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935) was “an impudent mythomaniac.” To Winston Churchill, though, *The Seven Pillars* is among “the greatest books ever written in the English language.”

Eighty years after the Arab Revolt, it is probably fair to say that the abiding view of Lawrence the aesthete and champion of Arab independence is kept alive not by the epic prose of his memoir—one of those classics that are nowadays more read about than read—but by David Lean’s spectacular 1962 film. As they used to say in the old movie trailers: Peter O’Toole is Lawrence of Arabia. There is a certain irony in that appropriation of Lawrence’s image. “Other than stars of the screen,” writes Asher, “Lawrence was perhaps the first international megastar of the century, and ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ was created by its first major publicity campaign.”

Newspaper correspondents who interviewed the young Army colonel on his return from Palestine in 1918 were intrigued by his “unassuming” exterior, unaware that he had long used his apparent aloofness and modesty to enhance his personal mystique. (One of his admirers, the military historian Basil Liddell Hart, described Lawrence’s personality as that of “a woman wearing the veil while exposing the bosom.”) Lawrence made shrewd use of an American journalist, Lowell Thomas, who subsequently delivered an immensely popular series of illustrated lectures that did much to set in stone the achievements of the “Prince of Mecca.” Though Lawrence affected embarrassment at seeing his name trumpeted, he was often to be found in the audience at the talks. No wonder cynical souls accused him of backing into the limelight.

Arriving a decade after Jeremy Wilson’s authorized biography, Asher’s book is part portrait, part travelogue. A seasoned Arabist and

explorer, Asher has previously published a biography of the explorer and author Wilfred Thesiger and a study of Lawrence’s adopted brothers, the Bedu. Determined to retrace his subject’s footsteps, Asher roams through the Sinai Desert, Jidda, and beyond, constantly testing Lawrence’s account of his journeyings against the known documentation and his own experiences. Did Lawrence really carry out the execution of his servant, Hamed? Was he really raped, as he claimed, after being captured by the Turks at Dara’a in 1917? Asher at least casts doubt on Lawrence’s own words, whether in *The Seven Pillars* or in letters to friends.

Curiously, though, the flaws and paradoxes that emerge render Lawrence more sympathetic, not less. Asher depicts a self-made man of action prone to bouts of homoerotic masochism. Shrinking from danger at first, he consciously forced himself to confront violence, all the while laying the ground rules for modern guerrilla warfare—summarized in his own words as the art of deploying “the smallest force in the quickest time at the furthest place.”

Asher quickly outlines the final years. Lawrence, seemingly desperate for anonymity, used pseudonyms to enlist in the army and the Royal Air Force, then went out of his way to advertise the fact among his VIP friends and acquaintances. His death in a motorcycle accident, aged only 46, can be seen almost as a release for a man who once described himself as a clock whose spring had run down.

—Clive Davis

**THE PALLADIUM OF JUSTICE:**

*Origins of Trial by Jury.*

By Leonard W. Levy.

Ivan R. Dee. 114 pp. \$18.95

“The jury trial is at best the apotheosis of the amateur,” Harvard Law School dean Erwin Griswold once declared. “Why should anyone think that 12 persons brought in from the street, selected in various ways for their lack of general ability, should have any special capacity for deciding controversies between persons?” These days, the jury system’s perceived shortcomings and outrages are legion: the acquittals of O.J. Simpson (after nine months