

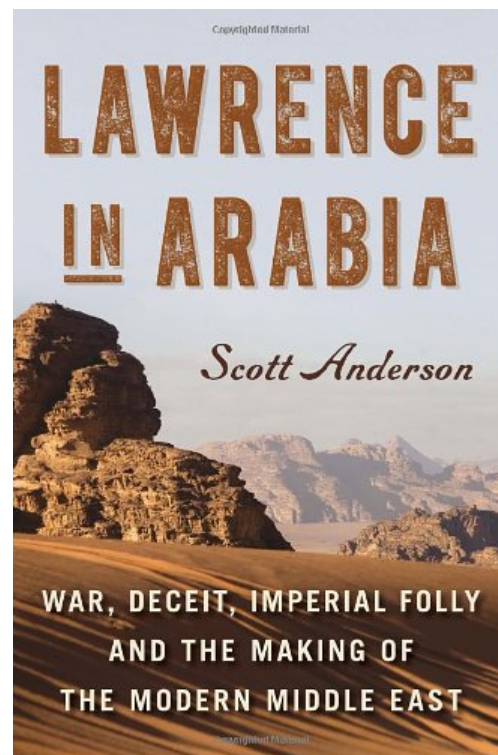
Irreverence

By

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Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East by Scott Anderson 505 pp. Doubleday (2013)

At the Great War's outset in 1914, much of the world was oddly parsed. Colonialism, imperialism, racial supremacy, and religious duty ensured it. As a political matter, the British, French, Dutch, Russians, Germans, and the Ottoman Turks had "empires" or spheres of influence in Africa, the Near and Far East, and the Arabian Peninsula. The effect was boundary lines that bore little relationship to the culture or tribes or geographic imperatives that tempered a people or a region. The lines were about natural resources, commerce, and labor exploitation that served the military and financial power and self-image of those nations that ruled. The oddly parsed lines in Africa still haunt the world today. It took a second world war and the fall of the Soviet Union to begin to make sense of Europe and non-China Asia, even then with ugly effects in India, Pakistan, Indo-China, and Czechoslovakia. When the British, French, and Russians (and later, the United States) allied against the Turks, Germans, and Austria-Hungary in 1914, the British controlled the western coastline of the Red Sea—Egypt and the Sudan and, through them, the Suez Canal. One geographic area that remained only marginally set by



boundaries was the Ottoman controlled eastern coastline and interior, the Arabian Peninsula—about everywhere southeast of present day Turkey.

Enter Thomas Edward Lawrence. Twenty-six when he joined the General Staff's Geographical Section in London as a civilian cartographer. It was November 1914. By December he was transferred to Cairo, now a Second

Lieutenant, into the newly formed military intelligence unit of the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force. He'd arrived, though not for the first time.

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To understand T.E. Lawrence requires foremost an understanding of the British comfort with geographical thinking, the duty of the geographer to ensure its integrity, and its practical relationship to acquiring and using intelligence.

The North entered the American Civil War without documented geographical knowledge of the South—especially accurate maps—even though the prospect of war was known and understood among political and military leaders and the United States was seventy-five years old. "At the root of the trouble," British military historian John Keegan wrote, "lay the cartographic backwardness of the United States....It was a strange blind spot in the American attitude to their magnificent country." When British explorer Richard Francis Burton, who'd already achieved notoriety for entering Mecca undetected as a non-Muslim, visited the United States just prior to the Civil War the only serious effort at map making he noted and contributed to occurred in the West. What the British understood as a commonplace essential to governing in the remotest parts of the world, the United States hadn't grasped within its own boundaries as if the lesson of Lewis and Clark could be emulated only west of the Mississippi. Even then, most map making was to find a route, not to understand topography and its interrelated meaning for culture,

governance, or war.¹

Burton exemplified the British imperative about geographical thinking at its best. You need go no further than his field notes when John Hanning Speke and he sought the source of the Nile in 1857 and 1858. With meticulous care he noted elevation, temperature, rainfall, plant life, watercourses, birds and wildlife, geologic formations, archeological ruins, maladies and local cures, and tribes and villages—their physical and cultural characteristics, religious beliefs, geographic location, and hostile and friendly intent. Peril was constant. He spoke dozens of languages including the three that allowed him to go from London to Mecca and return—Hindustani, Persian, and Arabic. Geographical thinking required multiple skills, a keen eye, and a comfort with writing and drawing.

Institutionally, the Royal Geographical Society of London, founded in 1830, encouraged, chronicled, financed, and defined the meaning of "geographical," including at times through affirmative support for intelligence gathering and governance. Burton, Speke, David Livingstone, Henry Stanley, Robert Falcon Scott, and a famed contemporary of Lawrence, Ernest Shackleton, were among its Fellows or awardees. From 1911 to 1915, Lord George Curzon, formerly Viceroy of India and member of the British cabinet, was elected President. He remained until he rejoined the government at the outbreak of the War. Map-making wasn't about just boundary lines and roads. It was about iterations of courage, imagination under pressure, geographical thinking, intelligence, and scientific and generational duty.

Lawrence was distinctly within this cultural thread. During a summer recess from Oxford High School for Boys, Lawrence bicycled through northwestern France, “an almost thousand mile trek that took him to every notable castle... in the Normandy region.” He was eighteen. He chronicled his findings on the influence of Eastern and Western architectural styles, and melded them with his knowledge of medieval knights, tales, and literature, the study of the “siege operations to which castles gave rise, then to the campaigns of which they formed a part,” and the geography and battles in the Holy Lands.

Within Oxford, he visited and began to work at the Ashmolean Museum, whose director was a Near East scholar (which meant hands-on archeologist, in the British geographical tradition), David Hogarth. Lawrence entered Jesus College at Oxford (Oxford’s chancellor was Lord Curzon) to study medieval history. He took a second, solitary trip across all of France in pursuit of refined and expanded iterations of his recognized Eastern and Western architectural scholarship, and ended it at the edge of the Mediterranean. “I bathed today in the sea,” he wrote home, “the greatest in the world...I felt that at last I had reached the way to the south, and all the glorious East.”²

For his next exploration Lawrence intended to travel through a major portion of Syria on his own, walking, in the 120-degree heat of summer, amid people with little regard for Europeans. He turned to Hogarth and others. He was apprised of the risks. He made the journey.

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The specific locations and nature of his geographical methodology are important. The Pacific and Orient steamship *Mongolia* carried him by Gibraltar, through the Mediterranean, to Port Said, Jaffa, and Beirut. From there he traveled mostly on foot. South to Sidon, southeast to Baniyas and Safed, south to the Sea of Galilee, west to Nazareth, then across Carmel to the coast. He visited Damascus. He walked north to Haifa, Acre, and Tyre. Later he walked north into northern Syria through Antioch, Aleppo, and the edge of the Euphrates River. He relied on annotated maps from colleagues, often noting his own findings. He stayed with native families, usually poor ones, each sharing their modest dwelling and food; he observed the nature of Ottoman rule—currency manipulation, police intimidation and local resentment; and he began to learn elements of the language and custom.

Underpinning his conduct was the geographical thread that influenced him and that he was now strengthening. “[H]is longing to explore the lands of the Middle East, the places where Western civilization originated,” one observer wrote, “went much deeper....[T]he lectures of the Egyptologist Flinders Petrie at Oxford had stimulated it.... [H]is developing attachment to David Hogarth influenced his desire to go himself....On

this trip Lawrence [also] became exposed...to a radically different culture...[He] already shows...a remarkable ability to adapt to the ways of life of the Arab cultures, to live, even then, ‘as an Arab with the Arabs.’” Also telling was the evolution of a more nuanced cultural if not ideological perspective that rattled his British peers: “He was always attracted more to the Bedouins and the renunciation of civilization than to the town Arabs, whose settled lives resembled too much what he wished to reject in bourgeois English society.” The British, French, and Americans, Lawrence wrote, “come out here always to teach, whereas they had much better learn.”³

Unexpectedly, Lawrence was invited along with another young archeologist, Leonard Woolley, to join Hogarth in the reopening of British archeology digs at Carchemish, Syria, deep in the Ottoman Empire. They traveled by rail to get there, through Der’a, Damascus, and Aleppo. He lived out doors most of the time, perfected his language skills and customary subtleties, and developed lasting friendships—including with the later, iconic Dahoum—and a solid reputation for trustworthiness among the Arabs with whom he worked and traveled. He came to appreciate with more certainty Arab values and choices, the condescending conduct of the Turk and German nationals who visited the region, and the comfort in his distance from the Victorian strictures of England. Virtually all of these interactions were with men, who defined the Ottoman and Arab culture and social mores. His political views also surfaced: “As for Turkey, down with the Turks!” he wrote to a friend in England when it was antithetical to British policy. “But I am

afraid there is not life but stickiness in them yet. Their disappearance would mean a chance for the Arabs, who were at any rate once not incapable of good government.”⁴

In January 1914, Lawrence and Woolley were invited to engage in a two-month survey for artifacts in eastern Sinai (the Bible’s Wilderness of Zen), an area that included Aqaba. Their sponsor was the Palestine Exploration Fund but in reality it was British Intelligence, engaged there and elsewhere in the region in map-making. He was aware fully of the survey’s purpose. The foresight of geographical thinking was at play.

When in December 1914, Lawrence embarked in Cairo to join the intelligence department of the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force he did so at the request of the department’s new director, David Hogarth, and in collaboration with his former colleague in Carchemish and eastern Sinai, Leonard Woolley. He was certainly prepared. All that was needed was the Arab revolt.

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Scott Anderson’s *Lawrence in Arabia*, unlike the singular focus of most of Lawrence’s biographers, creates a much broader Middle Eastern tapestry within which Lawrence weaves his own thread during the War. It’s an engaging departure for first time Lawrence readers and refreshing for those who’d welcome a new perspective that comes closer to appreciating the poignancy of the era—and Lawrence’s role—for today. Anderson does it through three individuals whose conduct reflected, albeit with the imperfections that shroud the region’s history, the major forces that

tempered the fate of the Middle East—the machinations involved in establishing a Jewish State (Aaron Aaronsohn, who developed the Jewish intelligence network in Ottoman controlled Syria and Palestine), the corporate and nation driven imperative to find, control, and exploit the power of oil (William Yale, yes related to that Yale, who represented Standard Oil and the United States Department of State), and the cunning, at times persuasive financial and logistical role of Turkey’s ally, Germany (Curt Prufer, a strategist and intelligence officer). Lawrence interacted with each of these individuals tangentially, with the forces they reflect unavoidably.⁵

The first of these—the Jewish State—was the most delicate for Lawrence. Having to work with King Hussein and Prince Feisal, the most trusted of the Arab leaders, to ensure that their credibility among Arabian tribes was not undermined by Britain (with whom they had allied to gain independence), which embraced the creation of a Jewish State in a region they’d claimed as Arabia. This force takes on additional meaning, which Anderson explores but not as thoroughly as other biographers did, during the Paris Peace Conference and the 1921 Cairo conference, when the British divided its portion of Arabia among the Arabs and the Jewish State was further legitimized territorially.⁶

The second of these forces—oil—is the most presciently crafted by Anderson. Standard Oil manipulating facts and loyalties to gain control over broad swaths of land, providing war materials to both sides until the British embargoed Turkey, and Yale serving as the American intelligence officer to the British while being paid by Standard. It

was an early episode of the ease with which "American" oil companies manipulated their duty as "citizens" of the United States to ensure domestic financial subsidy, protection, and political access without moral compunction to ensure profit, a malignancy irrefutably exposed during the Arab Oil Embargo in the 1970s, and learned well by Libya and Saudi Arabia particularly to their advantage. Put differently, it was just a matter of time and education before the people of Arabia came to understand that the oil was theirs and the United States came to understand how expediently corporations defined “citizenship” in the absence of law’s constraint.

The third force—Germany—was the most provocative, not only for the reasons that Anderson explores thoroughly through Prufer (German support for railroad lines and infrastructure, fermenting Arab nationalism and jihad against the British, and displaying the arrogant world view that evolved, in short order, into Nazism) but those implicit in his story. Germany fought the Russians with such ferocity that the Czar, already unpopular and exploitive, was overthrown in March 1917, and then, with considerable cunning and adroitness, the Germans transported Vladimir Ilyich Lenin into the country to ignite a revolution in October of unparalleled historical consequence, taking Russia out of the War and causing untold apprehension in the West including in the United States. The fate of Arabia—who could gain and hold the allegiance of the Arabs—was elevated in Berlin, London, and British-controlled India.

The effect of Anderson’s approach is laudatory; he neither

diminishes nor elevates Lawrence—a quite impossible task in 2013—but actually demonstrates the range and complexity of forces Lawrence had to calculate when advising and leading Arab forces and thinking through how to ensure the outcome they, and he, wanted at the War’s conclusion.

“Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake up in the day to find it was vanity, but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dreams with open eyes, to make it possible.” Lawrence already had attained his fame for courage and strategic daring in the harshness of Arabia when, in 1926, those words were published in his memoir, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. He had, in fact, long begun his withdrawal from public view.

The American journalist Lowell Thomas ensured Lawrence’s reputation with his “Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia” film show in 1919, as did a public insatiable for uplifting news from a European war so full of daily slaughter sanctioned by Generals worthy mostly of court-martial and moral opprobrium and from the revelatory adventure they now witnessed in the previously under-reported “Arabian” theater of the War. Others, especially General Allenby, had encouraged Thomas to know and report Lawrence’s accomplishments and Lawrence acquiesced readily. He had taken Aqaba, “one of the most audacious and celebrated military exploits of World War I,” Anderson rightly calls it, *without* British approval, and had entered historically iconic Damascus, positioning the Hashemite Arabs lead by Feisal—

geographically—for the post War peace conference. He was thirty years old. Thomas and others elevated and exploited the glamour of it.⁷

By the time the film show reached London, the Paris Peace Conference was in progress. Lawrence sought unsuccessfully to have Thomas stop it, disquieted by the invasive scrutiny the show caused into matters too personal, and the distortion it cast upon whom credit rested and the future of Arabia relied.

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In Paris he continued to deal with mostly men, older, experienced, tempered by precise, rough imperatives of greed and having to justify the deeds that disabled a generation. France had power not geographically but with Britain. They wanted greater Syria (today, including Lebanon), holding tightly to a mystical embrace of the failure of the Crusades and the certainty only harsh cruelty would keep the Arabs in place. The British acquiesced in the greed. Lawrence and Feisal were marginalized although not without flair, an embittering fight, and an insistence that fairness and history were on their side. Changes of consequence more favorable to the Hashemite Arabs came in 1921, in Cairo, when Winston Churchill brought Lawrence back as an adviser. It was no less a harsh, frustrating lesson in

realpolitik—this parsing up of someone else’s land—that only caused Lawrence to further recognize his emotional dissipation.

By late 1922, as Anderson summarized, Lawrence had reached a self-proclaimed state of mental and purpose-driven exhaustion, aware “that men who fought and died at his side were almost certain to be betrayed in the end.[A]fter Arabia he never wanted to be in a position of responsibility again.” He needed to withdraw. He was thirty-four.

What Lawrence’s words in *Seven Pillars* fed—when combined with the candor in his subsequent correspondence—was the insatiable inquiry for motive: Why, more than how, had he accomplish such unique and spectacular feats of culture, geography, and war making?⁹ And, at what personal cost?⁹ His unsuccessful effort to seek anonymity including re-enlisting under a false name and serving in Afghanistan, and his early death in 1935 at forty-six from a motorcycle accident, only added to the inquiry’s intensity. Virtually every Lawrence biography written in the last fifty years finds its rationale for being, in part, in the same premise: Lawrence was enigmatic. Although the sometimes prurient inquires and sensational assertions have been debunked soundly, the written colloquy ultimately made his temperament more touchable and his accomplishments more exceptional. Fortunately, Scott Anderson, although referencing the same premise at the outset doesn’t analyze or explore it beyond his critical and proportional analyses of what others had written, and largely in footnotes and parenthetically. He dwells effectively, at times intricately, on *how* Lawrence earned such an

enduring reputation.⁸

Lawrence was, however, within another thread: The “dangerous” man he self-declared, which others understood, feared, despised, or tried to harness. Irreverence was at its core. It’s Lawrence’s singular characteristic—distinctive in its embedded and perilous nature and grating, life changing effects—that resonates today.

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The imperialism and colonialism that guided British policy and its social mentality made Lawrence’s irreverent imperatives and manner, as it often did Burton’s, not readily or easily embraced in governing circles. Anderson alludes implicitly to this central characteristic then undervalues its meaning, incorrectly conflating Lawrence’s inner misgivings with British failures during and after the War.

Lawrence displayed it in melding intellectual curiosity, practical life, and political perspective long before the War in manner and content contrary to British cultural sensibilities. He displayed it on the battlefield, rejecting British tactics used failingly against the Turks, defining guerrilla warfare, and in crafting written guidance for British field officers in Arabia, all of which have resonated in western military circles in the past twenty years, among eastern revolutionaries in jungle warfare long before that: “He who commands the sea is at great liberty, and may take as much or as little of the war as he will,” he wrote in *Seven Pillars*. “And we command the desert.” Tactically, “Camel raiding parties [have] unhindered retreat into their desert-element....Our tactics should be tip and run:....We should use the smallest force in the

quickest time at the farthest place....On [camels] we were independent of supply for six weeks[,]which gave us capacity for a thousand miles out and home....Our diversity threw the enemy intelligence off the track.”⁹

He displayed irreverence during the Paris Peace Conference, declining *during* the ceremony King George’s attempt to invest him with decorations for valor because, as became widely circulated, “he had pledged his word to Feisal, and that now the British Government was about to let down the Arabs.” And, confronted by British and French intransigence at truth telling, he exposed publically British written commitments during the War to Feisal and Hussein concerning Arab independence. Critical elements of these episodes of irreverence and the discomfort they caused are portrayed thoughtfully in the properly acclaimed BBC’s “Lawrence After Arabia.” And Lawrence displayed it again at the 1921 Cairo conference, successfully getting territorial recognition for the Hashemite Arabs—Feisal and his brother Abdulla in present day Iraq and Jordan—while much of the remainder of the Peninsula, over Lawrence’s objection, was given to Hussein’s rival and British-India’s surrogate, ibn-Saud, with horrific global consequences for terrorism into the Twenty-First century. It was Lawrence, not the British, who had the foresight of geographical thinking.¹⁰

In this context, David Lean’s “Lawrence of Arabia” (1962, restored in 2012) and its storied history beginning when Lawrence was still alive warrants special recognition. Lean captured Lawrence’s irreverence in manner and in perspective, certainly evoking the

inquisitiveness of a generation in the Arabian Peninsula and the notion of guerrilla warfare, already studied and understood by our adversaries in Vietnam. The movie’s modest factual inaccuracies pale under Lean’s ability to meld insightful dialogue and evocative music that elevates Lawrence and those around him into the rough horror of desert warfare. See the restored version, especially after reading Anderson’s account and “Our Weapons” in *Seven Pillars*.¹¹

If there was an enigmatic element in Lawrence’s temperament, it may be found in his imagination under pressure, his intuitive skill at melding geographical and military thinking, and the decisiveness of his choices in giving his imagination life. He saw the moment. They were accurate and monumental choices. Aqaba! Damascus! Understanding the historical consequence of what the Arabs and he accomplished, and insisting on writing that history before others in the West wrote it to serve purposes—imperialism, colonialism, French revisionism—he abhorred and were antithetical to the Hashemite Arab cause. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* became the empirical and literary base for all that followed.

When it was time he withdrew to seek equilibrium and calm, perhaps to see if renewal was possible, to rethink and search again for an identity that once gave him solace before the War. He had set in motion a big force, too big for him to handle correctly any longer except that the Arabs could mold their future now on terms, and with power, they didn’t have before.

He’d made his contribution.

¹ John Keegan, *Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al-Qaeda*. Knopf: New York (2003), 75-76; Sir Richard Francis Burton, *The City of the Saints, Among the Mormons and Across the Rocky Mountains to California*. Longman, Green, Longman: London (1861); and, Randolph Marcy (United States Army), edited with notes by Richard F. Burton, *The Prairie Traveller, A Handbook for Overland Expeditions*. Trunber & Company: London (1863).

² Scott Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia*. Doubleday: New York (2013), 17; Dr. John Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder, The Life of T.E. Lawrence*. Little Brown: Boston (1976), 53.

³ Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder*, 68-70; Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia*, 34; British historian Basil Liddell Hart made this observation in his *Colonel Lawrence, The Man Behind the*

Legend, Dodd, Mead & Company: New York (1934), 5, written with Lawrence's collaboration: "The theme of the Crusades caught his imagination, although his sympathies were attracted by the opponents of the Crusades."

⁴ Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder*, 104-105.

⁵ Aaronsohn and Yale are mentioned in passing in Michael Korda, *Hero, The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia*, Harper: New York (2010), 328-329 (Aaronsohn), in Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, Macmillian: New York (1989), 1115(Yale), 443-443(Aaronsohn); and, Aaronsohn more substantially in David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace, Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914-1922*. Holt: New York (1989), 211,278-279,308-309.

⁶ A broader perspective is provided by Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, and Margaret MacMillian's *Paris 1919, Six Months That Change the World*. Random House: New York (2002).

⁷ See also Lowell Thomas, *With Lawrence in Arabia*. Doubleday: Garden City, New York,

1967 ed. (original in 1924); Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia*, photo-caption opposite 338.



⁸ Two such books—Richard Aldington's *Lawrence of Arabia, A Biographical Inquiry*. Regnery: Chicago (1955), and Michael Asher, *Lawrence, The Uncrowned King of Arabia*, Overlook Press: London (1998)—received solidly reasoned, excoriating treatment by Dr. John Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder*, 3,10-11, Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 8-9 ("Sense and Nonsense"), and Michael Korda, *Hero*, 687-690. Mack's work was the most methodical psychological treatment of Lawrence. Many of the personal matters in his life (including his acknowledged sexual attack by a Turkish officer in Der'a), Lawrence raised openly in *Seven Pillars*, in early biographical works by Robert Graves in *Lawrence and the Arabs*, Cape: London (1927), and Basil Liddle Hart, *Colonel Lawrence*, and in his subsequent correspondence, now all publicly available. Underappreciated was Lawrence's childhood illness that left him bedridden for a prolonged period, and where the intensity of his reading and imagination took hold. Liddle Hart, *Colonel Lawrence*, 6.

⁹ Lawrence especially eschewed concentrated battle formations and the alleged virtue of discipline: "The Arab war should react against this....The efficiency of our forces was the personal efficiency of the individual man." *Seven Pillars*, 339; and "Twenty Seven Articles" relied upon in British and, later, American military thinking. Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia*, 346-347 ("Articles" used in Afghanistan); Liddell Hart,

Colonel Lawrence, 142-147; Mack, A Prince of Our Disorder, 463-467.

¹⁰ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia, 577*; Ralph Fiennes stars as Lawrence in “A Dangerous Man: Lawrence After Arabia” (1992, released in 2004). Abdulla’s successor retains the monarchy in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia, 165-166*, on Wahhabist leader ibn-Saud and Lawrence’s prediction of his “medievalist...fanaticism:” The Saudi royal family “would survive by essentially paying-off” Wahhabists, who directed their “jihadist efforts abroad. The most famous ...was to be...Osama bin Laden.”

¹¹ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom, A Triumph*, Deluxe Ed., Garden City Publishing Co.: Garden City, New York (1936), 333-340. “Lawrence of Arabia,” screenplay by Michael Wilson, Robert Bolt, and David Lean; music by Maurice Jarre. See, Kevin Brownlow, *David Lean, A Biography*. St. Martin Press: New York (1996), 406. The “most persistent of those wanting to put the Lawrence legend on film was Alexander Korda,” starring Leslie Howard. Lawrence convinced Korda not to do it. Other stars seeking the role included Alan Ladd, who bore a resemblance to Lawrence. Alexander Korda’s nephew, Michael Korda, also discusses this history in *Hero*, 690-694. Lowell Thomas was critical of the film (1967 ed., vii), Scott Anderson only selectively, *Lawrence in Arabia, 314,318,366*. See also, for example, *The Economist* (Oct. 13, 2013) on the death of North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap (“...Lawrence of Arabia, whose ‘Seven Pillars of Wisdom’ General Giap was seldom without.”).

