

Proposal for a Thesis  
in the Field of History  
in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
the Master of Liberal Arts Degree

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# I

I propose to title my thesis “The Quest for T. E. Lawrence: The Enduring Appeal and the Enigma of Lawrence of Arabia.”

# II.

## Research Problem

World War I is becoming increasingly distant and remote. Although the conflict on the Western Front in Europe was one of the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century, few would be able to offer more than a sentence about major military leaders: Foch, Haig, Ludendorff, Pershing. In all likelihood, people know best the common foot soldier Paul Baumer, the fictional protagonist of Erich Marie Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Yet in the Middle East, in a conflict of the British with the Turks often disparaged as a sideshow, emerged a leader internationally known: Thomas Edward Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia. In 1919, the American journalist and entrepreneur Lowell Thomas opened “With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia,” a theatrical presentation of lecture, film, and photographs eventually seen by some four million people, including an array of British military and political leaders and Lawrence himself. The interest has continued unabated to the present day, with Michael Korda’s 2010 biography *Hero: The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia*<sup>1</sup> holding a place on best-seller lists for weeks.

Why has there been such a sustained interest in Lawrence? More specifically, how has the focus of these works varied over the decades? What features of Lawrence

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Korda, *Hero: The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

and the Arab Revolt have offered fresh material to each succeeding generation of biographers and historians? How has an array of specialists, from a distinguished military historian to a psychoanalyst on the Harvard faculty, brought fresh insight to seemingly familiar territory? How have controversy and uncertainty about facts sparked further inquiry? Has the opening of formerly secret British files answered old questions, and if so, how? How has detailed research into Lawrence's earlier life yielded insight into his actions in Arabia? How have world events over nearly a century repeatedly turned attention back to Lawrence and the events of 1916-1918? In short, what has kept the conversation going, and in what directions?

My hypothesis is that studies of Lawrence are propelled by an exceptionally intense interplay of the individual and history. Lawrence himself was unusually complex, distinguished by a wide range of abilities and accomplishments combined with an enigmatic personality. Moreover, Lawrence tended to leave tantalizing clues in some circumstances but conceal information in others. Biographers keep coming back, seeking to turn the prism in some new way to yield fresh insight. At the same time, events of the last century have produced a stunning reconfiguration of the relationship between the West and the Arab world. This reconfiguration has stimulated a sustained examination of the sources of modern conflict in the Middle East. The studies themselves have evolved mainly because of the passing of the first generation, with its professional and personal loyalties to Lawrence, and because the emergence of personal testimony, family papers, and previously secret government documents has permitted fresh interpretation.

My sources will be mainly those that contributed the most to shaping images of Lawrence: books, photography, film, and a lecture tour. The portrayals of Lawrence and

his influence fall into three fairly distinct stages. The first stage begins with the 1919 illustrated lecture tour by Lowell Thomas initiating the legend of “Lawrence of Arabia.” This early period also includes Lawrence’s own account<sup>2</sup> of his role in the Arab Revolt and several distinctly sympathetic accounts by those who knew Lawrence personally, one even entitled *T.E. Lawrence by His Friends*.<sup>3</sup> The second stage begins dramatically in 1955 with Richard Aldington’s *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Inquiry*,<sup>4</sup> openly challenging the hagiography of earlier portrayals and widely regarded as acerbic and hostile in tone. Yet Aldington was, for example, the first to reveal Lawrence’s illegitimate birth, a key feature in later studies. The dominant work of this middle period is David Lean’s 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*,<sup>5</sup> which defined the image of Lawrence for a generation much as Thomas’s lecture had for the generation of the Great War. The most recent stage is characterized especially by Jeremy Wilson’s authorized biography,<sup>6</sup> which benefits from both fastidious scholarship and the release of family documents and previously classified government files. Providing a frame for my analysis is Michael Korda’s *Hero*, a more careful, nuanced assessment of the very issues that Lowell Thomas raised in the portrayal that initially brought Lawrence to the attention of the world.

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<sup>2</sup> T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (New York: Random, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> A. W. Lawrence, ed., *T. E. Lawrence by His Friends* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Inquiry* (Harmondsworth, [Eng.]: Penguin, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> *Lawrence of Arabia*, directed by David Lean (Columbia/Horizon Pictures, 1962), DVD.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1990).

The research is significant in at least two respects. First, the hundred years of public documents display a remarkable transition from Lawrence as an object of public spectacle, a figure whose image was cast largely in the traditions of popular entertainments of the day, to Lawrence as a subject worthy of close scholarly scrutiny. Only in this passage of time has the complexity of Lawrence emerged, but the development has been turbulent. Almost an embodiment of Heraclitus' "You can't step in the same river twice," studies of Lawrence offer a highly varied portrait of their subject, often relying on incomplete evidence or questionable interpretation. An historical record of studies of Lawrence is a record of struggles with uncertainty and even seemingly self-contradictory behavior and claims. Secondly, the region now commonly referred to as the Middle East figures daily in major political events, and the roots of many of the tensions in the region trace back to World War I and its immediate aftermath. Debate continues about the nature and extent of Lawrence's involvement in the Arab Revolt, and that debate itself is often a proxy for larger questions about self-determination in the Arab regions.

### III.

#### Definition of Terms

*Arab Revolt.* Earlier strains of Arab nationalism broke out in 1916 as the Arab Revolt. Initiated by Sharif Hussein bin Ali and supported by substantial funding from both French and British governments, the conflict was intended to wrest Arab independence from the Ottoman Empire. Hussein's son, Faisal bin Hussein, was joined by Colonel T. E. Lawrence, who sought to coordinate Hussein's actions with those of British forces.

*Asymmetric warfare.* Asymmetric warfare is conflict between belligerents dramatically unequal in scale, particularly with respect to resources, resulting in at least one side resorting to unconventional tactics. In the modern era, this conflict may manifest itself as terrorism, deliberately targeting civilian populations. In Lawrence's case, the tactics come closer to what is generally known as guerilla warfare, in which small, highly mobile bands attack larger, conventionally structured forces, disrupt rather than obliterate their opponent, and withdraw quickly.

*Hejaz.* The Hejaz region stretches from the Gulf of Aqaba in the north (directly across from the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula) to the northern border of modern-day Yemen. This mountainous coastal region, with the Red Sea to the west and desert to the east, includes the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina and the seaport city of Jeddah. The region was ruled by the Hashemite clan, although in the early nineteenth century the fundamentalist Wahhabi Muslims had seized control of Mecca and Medina. The Hejaz region fell under the control of the Ottoman Empire from 1845 onward.

*Hejaz Railway.* From 1900 to 1908, the Turks built a railway from Damascus to Medina designed to unify the region. The railway, had it been completed, would have provided transport for the annual Islamic pilgrims all the way to Mecca. Ending in Medina, 210 miles (340 km.) short of Mecca, it still provided economic and political linkage to Constantinople and a means of military transport. The Hejaz railway would become a primary target of Lawrence and the Arabs during the early stages of the revolt. Its great

length of 820 miles (1320 kilometers) allowed Lawrence to dissipate the Ottoman forces with unpredictable attacks along the route.

*Sharif (or sherif).* A descendent of the prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima (and his son-in-law Ali); an Arab prince. The grand sharif, Hussein bin Ali, who initiated the Arab Revolt, had ruled since 1908 as Sharif of Mecca.

#### IV.

##### Background

In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, his account of his role in the Arab Revolt, Lawrence uses the phrase “a sideshow of a sideshow,” precisely echoing the disparaging remarks of those who felt that the real action of World War I (and, one supposes by extension, the real crucible of manhood) was the conflict on the Western Front. Such casual dismissal of the conflict is almost unimaginable now, and has been for most of the last century, as the West has become increasingly dependent on Middle East oil. The paradigm shift began early. The arms race between England and Germany prior to World War I manifested itself most dramatically in naval design, notably in the gigantic battleships known collectively as dreadnoughts. To gain a small but decisive increment in speed, Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, ordered the switch from coal, which was abundant in England, to oil, which was not. Britain’s vulnerability in the Middle East would emerge again in 1956 in an international crisis following Egyptian President Nassar’s decision to nationalize the Suez Canal. America’s strained relations with Arab countries began most visibly with the 1973 Arab oil embargo, a response to U.S. support

of the Israeli military during the Yom Kippur War. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, disruptions in the Middle East immediately become headlines in the West. A sideshow no longer, relations with the Arabs cause analysts to examine the roots of the modern relationship in those crucial years when Lawrence participated in the Arab Revolt.

Lawrence has also attracted attention because so much of modern warfare has changed. In the period following the Cold War, Western powers are repeatedly involved in conflicts where the massive industrialized might of 20<sup>th</sup>-century forces may not provide solutions. This is an era of asymmetrical warfare, and Lawrence's work with the Arabs, with small bands stretching the resources of the Ottoman Empire, marks a beginning of modern guerilla warfare.

In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence wrote of his campaign, both theoretically and in detail, demonstrating (or not, depending on one's sources) his flexibility and inventiveness as a military leader. Lawrence's interest in combat in the Middle East extends back to his youth, including *Crusader Castles*, the published version of his senior thesis at Oxford, and his work at Carchemish, Syria, on an archaeological dig for the British Museum. Thus emerges the portrait of Lawrence as the scholar-warrior, the thinking man of action.

Closely linked are those presentations of Lawrence that portray him as a pivotal historical figure, that is, arguing that historical events can pivot on the participation of a single irreplaceable individual. In fact, Lawrence first emerged in widespread public view in Lowell Thomas's extravagant 1919 theatrical production, "With Lawrence in Arabia," in which Thomas advertised Lawrence as the Uncrowned King of Arabia. Thomas's

deliberate myth-making established many elements of the narrative that later writers, including Lawrence himself, would struggle to refashion.

So from the outset, Lawrence was presented in a heroic mold. Thomas himself, who had first sought to film his propaganda piece in Europe, was not alone in finding irresistible this image of the solitary figure sweeping across a vast landscape, an invigorating contrast to the modern, impersonal, mechanized stalemate that conflict on the Western Front had become. Moreover, that landscape is not itself a *tabula rasa*, but rather the very terrain on which the Crusades were fought. Constantly emerging in the narratives of Lawrence are still older narratives of the European crusader returning to the Holy Land and modern variants of Western man arriving to set things straight along the frontiers of empire. Thus, the story of Lawrence becomes a narrative with a theme. The question, of course, still alive after nearly a century, is, How must the entire campaign be re-conceptualized or inconvenient evidence be suppressed to retain this bold outline of the hero?

In addition, Lawrence the individual was such a complex, enigmatic, eccentric figure that storybook characterizations of Lawrence as hero would prove enticing to construct but slippery to hold on to. Especially given the near-hagiographic tone of the earliest accounts of Lawrence, studies of Lawrence are often explorations of what kind of hero—or protagonist—we are talking about.

I have mentioned the hero as scholar-warrior above, but England has an even more specialized category of deep-thinking, brilliant eccentrics who are also men of action, especially in exotic landscapes. Lawrence fits rather neatly, along with Sir Richard Francis Burton, as exceptional men who were divergent thinkers following

interests relatively alien to—and even uncomfortable to or distasteful to—those of their countrymen. (The classic British scorn toward those who “go native” comes close to this idea of not honoring conventional boundaries and perhaps drifting too close to sympathy for those regarded as The Other, to use Edward Said’s expression.)

Similarly irresistible are those features of Lawrence that invite his characterization as the flawed hero. Some of the more striking events would emerge after 1918, and thus outside the range of this thesis, but key events, including Lawrence’s illegitimacy and his captivity at Deraa, are anchored here.

Finally we have the image of Lawrence as outsider. As a youth he did not participate in the team sports so much a part of traditional English upbringing, but he regularly undertook grueling bicycle trips in his exploration of medieval castles. As an adult, he showed disdain for his uniform and, on occasion, for the expected protocol for greeting superior officers. Most tellingly, he seemed to ally himself more closely with the Arabs than with his own countrymen. As in other ways regarding Lawrence, the protagonist as outsider provokes both political and psychological inquiry, and the range of assessments has been vast. Both English and American writers have used outsiders, such as Dickens’ Pip in *Great Expectations*, or Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, for a perspective offering a profound criticism of mainstream society. In particular, Lawrence won both respect and scathing criticism for his words and actions that cut across the grain of European imperialism. These tensions were also internalized by Lawrence, who faced in Arabia the dilemma of seeming to serve two masters. Here and elsewhere, the inner world of Lawrence has been subjected to intense scrutiny, particularly in the last fifty years. In 1955, one writer finally publicly revealed Lawrence’s illegitimacy, and this and

other revelations have seemed to reveal the inner source of public actions, and the range of responses, from sympathetic to hostile, has been as extreme in our day as it was in Lawrence's.

In conclusion, as historical events have kept alive interest in Lawrence's actions, the complexities and enigmas of the character of Lawrence have provided fertile ground for continued research and discussion. One may well argue that the decades of exploration have produced a subtler, more complex, but still provocative image of Lawrence.

## V.

### Research Methods

A study of Lawrence in World War I is fundamentally different from a study of Winston Churchill in World War II. Many of Churchill's most historic actions took place in the public eye, whether in his actions as prime minister, in his radio broadcasts, or walking the streets of a devastated London. Lawrence's actions of 1916-1918 took place in remote stretches of the Arabian desert, far from public view, and had been entirely concluded by the time of Lowell Thomas's 1919 lectures, themselves deliberately sensational and designed for profit. Initial publications were written by Lawrence himself and those who knew him. An array of books and David Lean's 1962 film followed, but not until the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could a professional historian combine research with recently declassified government documents. Thus, public entertainments, memoirs, and biographies must all be included in a study of the evolving images of Lawrence.

The following texts will be the basis of my research. They represent those that have had the most profound effect on the image of Lawrence and those that represent important transitions in the interpretation of Lawrence and his influence.

- 1919 Lowell Thomas, “With Lawrence in Arabia” (illustrated lecture).
- 1922 Thomas Edward Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (Privately printed edition).
- 1924 Lowell Thomas, *With Lawrence in Arabia*.
- 1927 Robert Graves, *Lawrence and the Arabs*.
- 1934 Basil Liddell Hart, *T. E. Lawrence: In Arabia and After*.
- 1935 Thomas Edward Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*. (First edition for public. Posthumously published. Lawrence died 19 May 1935).
- 1937 Reginald Storrs, *Orientations*.
- 1937 A. W. Lawrence, ed., *T.E. Lawrence by His Friends*.
- 1955 Richard Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia, A Biographical Inquiry*.
- 1962 David Lean, director, *Lawrence of Arabia* (film).
- 1966 Sulieman Mousa, *T. E. Lawrence: An Arab View*.
- 1969 Philip Knightley and Colin Simpson, *The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia*.
- 1976 John E. Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T. E. Lawrence*.
- 1989 Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence*.
- 2008 James Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain’s Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918*.
- 2010 Michael Korda, *Hero: The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia*.

## VI

### Research Limitations

There will be two principal limitations of the research. The first is that the thesis will be focused on, and will use exclusively, English-language sources. In particular, Ottoman, Arabic, and French sources will not be used, with the exception of the English language translation of Suleiman Mousa's *T. E. Lawrence: An Arab View*. Mousa's work is widely available in the English language-speaking world, and, significantly, is the only work in English presenting an Arab point of view of the revolt in the desert. Its significance in the thesis will be primarily in its presentation of a broader view of the Arab revolt for independence from the Turks. French-language sources, although abundant, are most relevant for their discussions of postwar negotiations about the Middle East, a period that lies outside the scope of this thesis.

The second limitation of the thesis is that of constraining the discussion to events occurring before the end of World War I. The postwar negotiations are an enormous topic in themselves, particularly the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, which determined the fate of much of the Middle East. The one striking exception will be the inclusion of a discussion of the secret Sikes-Picot agreement between France and England, concluded in 1916, defining postwar spheres of influence. In particular, this agreement would award the government of Syria not to Prince Faisal and the Arabs but to France, largely because of France's role on the Western Front in Europe. The existence of this secret agreement during the time of Lawrence's activities in the revolt in the desert would raise for the

Arabs and for Lawrence's biographers questions of divided loyalties for Lawrence. Did Lawrence deceive the Arabs?

### Tentative Schedule

Submission of first draft of proposal .....	February 1, 2026
First draft returned for revisions.....	March 1, 2026
Submission of second draft of proposal.....	April 1, 2026
Second draft returned for revisions.....	April 15, 2026
Submission of third draft of proposal .....	April 30, 2026
Proposal accepted by research advisor.....	May 1, 2026
Thesis director agrees to serve.....	June 1, 2026
Registration for thesis completed.....	June 15, 2026
First draft of key chapters completed and sent to thesis director.....	September 15, 2026
Thesis director returns corrected first draft.....	October 15, 2026
Second draft completed and sent to thesis director.....	November 15, 2026
Thesis director returns corrected second draft.....	December 15, 2026
Third draft completed and sent to thesis director .....	January 15, 2027
Thesis director returns corrected third draft .....	February 15, 2027
Final text submitted to thesis director and research advisor.....	March 1, 2027
Format review process completed .....	April 14, 2027
Thesis uploaded to Electronic Thesis Database .....	April 15, 2027
Graduation .....	May 2027

## VIII.

### Bibliography

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Caton, Steven C. *Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. Caton, who is Professor of Contemporary Arab Studies in the Department of Anthropology Program at Harvard University, provides not only a cultural analysis of Lean's film but also a study of the way in which understanding of the film evolved over three decades. His detailed analysis of specific sequences is unusually probing.

Crawford, Fred C. *Richard Aldington and Lawrence of Arabia: A Cautionary Tale*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998. This "cautionary tale" documents the efforts of Liddell Hart, Robert Graves, and A. W. Lawrence (T. E.'s brother) to pressure the publisher to alter Aldington's biography or even to suppress its publication.

Meyers, Jeffrey. *The Wounded Spirit: T. E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. New York: St. Martin's, 1989. Meyers is not a historian but a prolific biographer, member of the Royal Society of Literature and recipient of both Guggenheim and Fullbright grants. His study was published shortly after the 1970 re-release of the David Lean film. Meyers takes the unique approach of analyzing Lawrence's work as literature, with a deep reading that extracts new insight based on existing texts.

## Works to Be Consulted

Dalrymple, William. *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India*. London: HarperCollins, 2002.

*Lawrence of Arabia: The Battle for the Arab World*. Directed by James Hawes. 1 hr. 52 min. PBS, 2003. DVD.

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