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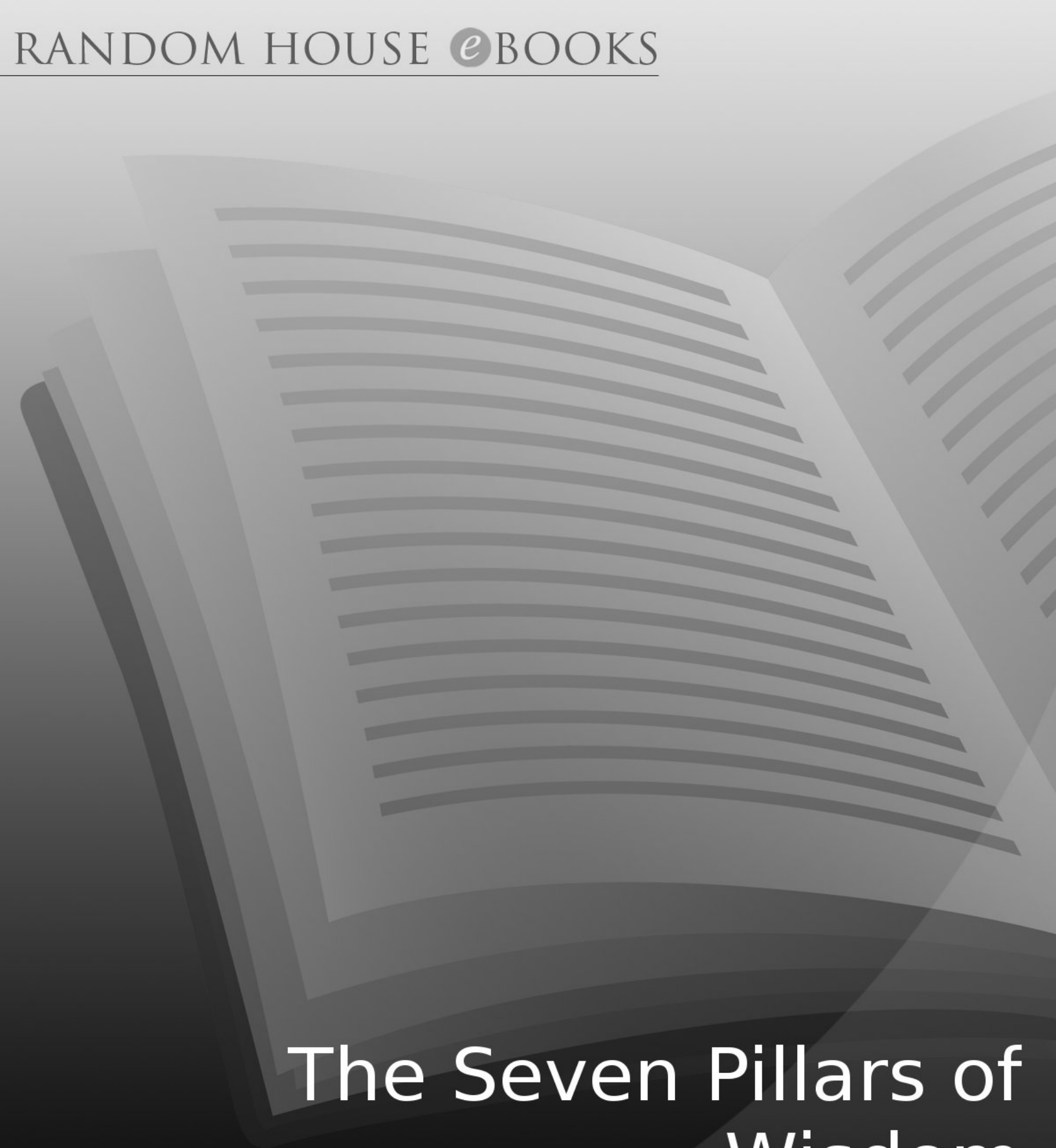

The Seven Pillars of Wisdom

T.E. Lawrence

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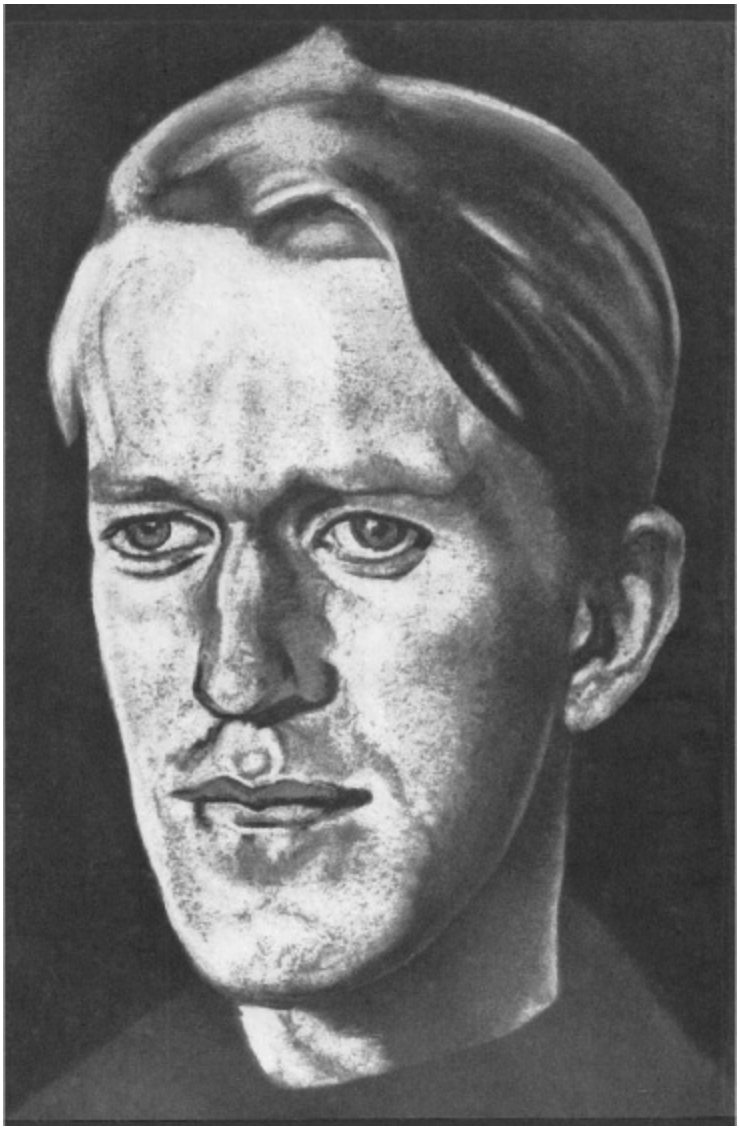

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About the Author

Thomas Edward Lawrence was born on 16 August 1888 in Tremadoc in Wales. He attended Jesus College, Oxford where he became interested in the Middle East. He studied Arabic and between 1910 and 1914 worked for the British Museum on an archaeological excavation of Carchemish on the Euphrates. During the First World War he worked for the British Intelligence Service and his activities while fighting alongside the Arab forces earned him the nickname ‘Lawrence of Arabia’. After the war he worked as an adviser to the Colonial Office until his resignation in 1922. He enlisted in the RAF the same year under a pseudonym in order to escape his celebrity. He later changed his name by deed poll to T.E. Shaw. The first manuscript of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was lost at Reading train station in 1919 and Lawrence was forced to rewrite it from memory. It was initially published in a private edition in 1926 and only became widely available in 1935. An abridged version, *Revolt in the Desert* was published in 1927. Lawrence died in a motorcycle accident near his home in Dorset on 19 May 1935. His final book, *The Mint*, was published posthumously.

OTHER WORKS BY T.E. LAWRENCE

Revolt in the Desert
The Odyssey of Homer
Crusader Castles
The Mint

Introduction

No wonder *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* – indeed, all of T. E. Lawrence's work – now tops the reading list of almost every senior US officer in Iraq. Long after his legend was established in Arabia and Damascus and at the Versailles Treaty negotiations – almost 90 years after he realised that his promises to his Arab allies were to be broken by Britain's adherence to the Balfour declaration – Lawrence's wisdom is now serving to guide (and no doubt misguide) the Americans who have walked into the hell-disaster of Iraq with no idea of how to retreat. If only, I say to myself each time I arrive in Baghdad, the Americans had read Lawrence *before* they invaded.

It's not just Lawrence's experience of betrayal that is of importance. His promise of independence to the Arabs who had promised to fight the Ottoman Turks as allies of Britain proved as false as the US pledges to bring freedom, security and democracy to Iraqis. If recent research has revealed that Lawrence was partial to Zionism, he never failed to reflect on the treachery which he had unwittingly committed against the Arabs. Britain's support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine was a promise made at the height of the 1914–18 war, when Britain was desperate for Jewish support. And Lawrence's promise of freedom to the Arabs was made when the United Kingdom was desperate for Arab support against the Turks. And promises are meant to be kept. Lawrence's, of course, were not.

There is something painfully self-absorbed about Lawrence of Arabia. His obsessive wearing of Arab gowns – his preparedness to be photographed as an Arab – and his constant identification of himself with Arabs, suggest a man

whose politics had taken on a distinctly personal, almost theatrical role. Even at Versailles – and we have only to look at the photograph of him as he stands next to the Arab delegation in Paris – he chose to wear an Arab 'kuffiah' headdress. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is an epic of literature but it is also the story of a deeply distressed man whose depression eventually turned him into a cynical figure who tried to hide his identity (not very successfully, it is true) among the humble aircraftmen of the RAF.

Yet his wisdom did not desert him after the 1914–18 war. When insurgents staged a rebellion against the post-war British occupation of Iraq in 1920, Lawrence dispensed advice in the pages of London newspapers which the Americans – and the departing British – should have read before they staged their illegal invasion of the same country in March of 2003. Although on a far smaller scale, the 1920 insurgency was an almost fingerprint-perfect forerunner of the present Iraqi conflict. British troops who were assured they would be greeted as liberators found that their supposed beneficiaries were far from happy to see them; Arab-Ottoman soldiers who waited to join the Allied side were abused in prison camps. When the first British officer was killed outside Baghdad, the British army besieged with field guns the Sunni city of Fallujah and later surrounded the Shia city of Najaf, demanding the surrender of a militant Shia cleric. British intelligence in Baghdad informed the war department in London that insurgents were crossing the border into Iraq from Syria. And Lloyd George, the British prime minister, assured the House of Commons – at a time when the British were tired of sacrificing their soldiers in Mesopotamia – that if UK and Empire forces were to withdraw from Iraq, there would be civil war.

Lawrence had much to say about this now familiar scenario, not least about the casualties inflicted by the occupying forces. In 1920, he estimated that the British had

killed ‘about ten thousand Arabs in this rising. We cannot hope to maintain such an average.’[1]

As a result, the British turned to air power to suppress the insurgents. Lawrence wrote a letter to the *Observer*[2], describing how ‘these risings take a regular course. There is a preliminary Arab success, then British reinforcements go out as a punitive force. They fight their way (our losses are slight, the Arab losses heavy) to their objective, which is meanwhile bombarded by artillery, aeroplanes or gunboats.’ But Lawrence had an irritating cynicism bordering on black humour – its initial appearance can be faintly observed in *Seven Pillars* – which could make him appear not just unattractive but positively sadistic. ‘It is odd that we do not use poison gas on these occasions,’ he wrote in the same letter. ‘Bombing the houses is a patchy way of getting the women and children, and our infantry always incur losses in shooting down the Arab men. By gas attacks the whole population of offending districts could be wiped out neatly.’

If this was sarcasm, it was cruelly inappropriate, although after a war in which the major powers of Europe had all used mustard and chlorine gas in the trenches of France – and, though few realise it, in the Palestine campaign against the Turks as well – this may not have appeared as vicious a tactic as it does to us today.

Far more acerbic were his later comments in 1929 in an article he submitted under the entry of ‘Guerrilla’ in the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Writing of Arab resistance to Turkish occupation in the 1914–18 war, he asks of the insurgents, some of whom he led ‘. . . suppose they were an influence, a thing invulnerable, intangible, without front or back, drifting about like a gas? Armies were like plants, immobile as a whole, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head. The Arabs might be a vapour.’ Lawrence uses the horror of gas warfare here as a metaphor for insurgency, but who can disagree with his conclusions? To control the land they occupied, the Turks

‘would have need of a fortified post every four square miles, and a post could not be less than 20 men. The Turks would need 600,000 men to meet the combined ill will of the local Arab people. They had 100,000 men available.’ The ‘fortified posts’, of course, prefigure George W. Bush’s ‘surge’ when they needed 600,000 men to meet the combined ill will of the Iraqi people and had only 150,000 available.

Accurately predicting al-Qaida’s modern-day use of the internet, Lawrence wrote that ‘the printing press is the greatest weapon in the armoury of the modern [guerrilla] commander.’ For insurgents, ‘battles were a mistake . . . Napoleon had spoken in angry reaction against the excessive finesse of the 18th century, when most men almost forgot that war gave licence to murder.’ And Lawrence, realising in his canny way that he was right, continued with these frightening predictions: ‘Rebellion must have an unassailable base . . . in the minds of men converted to its creed. It must have a sophisticated alien enemy, in the form of a disciplined army of occupation too small to fulfil the doctrine of acreage: too few to adjust number to space, in order to dominate the area effectively from fortified posts. It [the insurgency] must have a friendly population, not actively friendly, but sympathetic to the point of not betraying rebel movements to the enemy. Rebellions can be made by 2 per cent active in a striking force, and 98 per cent passively sympathetic . . . Granted mobility, security . . . time, and doctrine . . . victory will rest with the insurgents, for the algebraical factors are in the end decisive, and against them perfections of means and spirit struggle quite in vain.’

If insurgents represent a ‘vapour’ more powerful than that which comes from the mouths of politicians – I suppose the ‘fortified posts’ would represent Donald Rumsfeld’s useless military ‘lily pads’ in the Iraqi desert – then the Anglo-American invasion force should have known in 2003 that

Lawrence's prophecy doomed them the moment a serious military resistance movement opposed its occupation. In the *Sunday Times*[3] in 1920, Lawrence might have been addressing his words to President George W. Bush or British prime minister Tony Blair. 'The people of England have been led in Mesopotamia into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honour,' he wrote. 'They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information. The Baghdad communiqués are belated, insincere, incomplete. Things have been far worse than we have been told, our administration more bloody and inefficient than the public knows . . . We are today not far from a disaster.'

One is left gasping at the prescience of such words. For is this not exactly what has happened to us in Iraq since 2003; the lies, the insincerity, the false claims of 'mission accomplished' and success when we are trapped in the sands of Iraq, our 'statesmen' all the while withholding information while they pretend we can retreat with honour? 'The Arabs,' Lawrence wrote in another letter in 1920 – this time to *The Times*[4] – 'rebelled against the Turks during the war not because the Turk government was notably bad, but because they wanted independence. They did not risk their lives in battle to change masters, to become British subjects . . . but to win a show of their own. Whether they are fit for independence or not remains to be tried. Merit is no qualification for freedom.'

By 1930, a totally dispirited Lawrence, poorly disguising himself as an RAF dogsbody, was writing to an American anthropologist who wanted to meet him to discuss the Arab world with a pitiful sense of humour and a mock-schoolboy touch that showed just how far his spirit had deteriorated since the 1920s.[5]

> Dear Mr. Field,
> I hope you are colossally rich, so that the cost of coming all the way to this misery of Plymouth (the last or first town of England, according to your hemisphere) will mean nothing to you. I'm a fraud as regards both the

> Middle East and archeology. Years ago I haunted both, and got fairly expert but the war overdosed me, and nine years ago I relapsed comfortably into the ranks of our Air Force, and have had no interests outside it since. Nine years is long enough to make me out of date but not long enough to make my views quaint and interestingly archaic. I have forgotten all I knew, too.

I have seen this letter in Lawrence's own hand and thought at first that he described himself as a 'friend' of the Middle East, but alas – for ever demeaning himself – he did indeed write 'fraud' and his letter goes on to advise Mr. Field how to recognise him at Plymouth station. 'Look out for a small and aged creature in a slaty-blue uniform with brass buttons: like an RAC scout or tram driver, perhaps, only smaller and shabbier.'

It is perhaps as well, reading *Seven Pillars*, to remember that this wonderful, imaginative, brave man could, in just a decade, reduce himself to such penury and self-destruction. Only his beloved motorbike remained to him. And that, of course, was his final nemesis.

Robert Fisk, 2008

To S.A

I loved you, so I drew these tides of men into my hands and
wrote my will across the sky in stars
To earn you Freedom, the seven pillared worthy house, that
your eyes might be shining for me
When we came.

Death seemed my servant on the road, till we were near
and saw you waiting:
When you smiled, and in sorrowful envy he outran me and
took you apart:
Into his quietness.

Love, the way-weary, groped to your body, our brief wage
ours for the moment
Before earth’s soft hand explored your shape, and the blind
worms grew fat upon
Your substance.

Men prayed me that I set our work, the inviolate house, as a
memory of you.
But for fit monument I shattered it, unfinished: and now
The little things creep out to patch themselves hovels in the
marred shadow
Of your gift.

Mr. Geoffrey Dawson persuaded All Souls College to give me leisure, in 1919–1920, to write about the Arab Revolt. Sir Herbert Baker let me live and work in his Westminster houses.

The book so written passed in 1921 into proof: where it was fortunate in the friends who criticized it. Particularly it owes its thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Shaw for countless suggestions of great value and diversity: and for all the present semicolons.

It does not pretend to be impartial. I was fighting for my hand, upon my own midden. Please take it as a personal narrative pieced out of memory. I could not make proper notes: indeed it would have been a breach of my duty to the Arabs if I had picked such flowers while they fought. My superior officers, Wilson, Joyce, Dawnay, Newcombe and Davenport could each tell a like tale. The same is true of Stirling, Young, Lloyd and Maynard: of Buxton and Winterton: of Ross, Stent and Siddons: of Peake, Hornby, Scott-Higgins and Garland: of Wordie, Bennett and MacIndoe: of Bassett, Scott, Goslett, Wood and Gray: of Hinde, Spence and Bright: of Brodie and Pascoe, Gilman and Grisenthwaite, Greenhill, Dowsett and Wade: of Henderson, Leeson, Makins and Nunan.

And there were many other leaders or lonely fighters to whom this self-regardant picture is not fair. It is still less fair, of course, like all war-stories, to the un-named rank and file: who miss their share of credit, as they must do, until they can write the despatches.

T. E. S.

Cranwell, 15.8.26

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SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM

A Triumph

T.E. Lawrence

VINTAGE BOOKS

London

PREFACE BY A. W. LAWRENCE

THE seven pillars of wisdom are first mentioned in the Bible, in the Book of Proverbs (ix. I).

‘Wisdom hath builded a house: she hath hewn out her seven pillars’.

The title was originally applied by the author to a book of his about seven cities. He decided not to publish this early book because he considered it immature, but he transferred the title as a memento.

A four-page leaflet entitled SOME NOTES ON THE WRITING OF THE SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM BY T. E. SHAW was issued by my brother to those who bought or were presented with copies of the 1926 edition. It contains the following information:

MANUSCRIPTS

Text I

I WROTE Books 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 10 in Paris between February and June of 1919. The Introduction was written between Paris and Egypt on my way out to Cairo by Handley-Page in July and August 1919. Afterwards in England I wrote Book 1: and then lost all but the Introduction and drafts of Books 9 and 10 at Reading Station, while changing trains. This was about Christmas, 1919.

Text I, if completed, would have been about 250,000 words, a little less than the privately printed *Seven Pillars* as subscribers received it. My war-time notes, on which it was largely constructed, were destroyed as each section was finished. Only three people read much of it before I lost it.

Text II

A month or so later I began, in London, to scribble out what I remembered of the first text. The original Introduction was of course still available. The other ten Books I completed in less than three months, by doing many thousand words at a time, in long sittings. Thus Book VI was written entire between sunrise and sunrise. Naturally the style was careless: and so Text II (though it introduced a few new episodes) came to over 400,000 words. I corrected it at intervals throughout 1920, checking it with the files of the *Arab Bulletin*, and with two diaries and some of my surviving field-notes. Though hopelessly bad as a text, it became substantially complete and accurate. All but one page of this text was burned by me in 1922.

Text III

With Text II available on the table, Text III was begun in London, and worked on there, in Jeddah, and in Amman during 1921, and again in London till February 1922. It was composed with great care. This manuscript still exists. It is nearly 330,000 words long.

PRIVATELY PRINTED TEXTS

Oxford 1922

THOUGH the story, as completed in Text III, appeared to me still diffuse and unsatisfactory, yet for security's sake it was set up and printed textually, in sheets, at Oxford in the first quarter of 1922, by care of the *Oxford Times* staff. Since eight copies were required, and the book was very large, printing was preferred to typewriting. Five copies (bound in book form, for the convenience of those former members of the Hejaz Expeditionary Force who undertook to read it critically for me) have not yet (April 1927) been destroyed.

Subscribers' Text 1. xii. 26

This text, as issued to subscribers in December 1926 and January 1927, was a recension of the Oxford sheets of 1922. They were condensed (the single canon of change being literary) during 1923 and 1924 (Royal Tank Corps) and 1925 and 1926 (Royal Air Force) in my spare evenings. Beginners in literature are inclined to fumble with a handful of adjectives round the outline of what they want to describe: but by 1924 I had learnt my first lessons in writing, and was often able to combine two or three of my 1921 phrases into one.

There were four exceptions to the rule of condensation:

i) An incident, of less than a page, was cut out because two seniors of our party thought it unpleasantly unnecessary.

ii) Two characters of Englishmen were modified: one into nothing, because the worm no longer seemed worth treading on: the other into plain praise, because what I had innocently written as complaint was read ambiguously by an authority well able to judge.

iii) One chapter of the Introduction was omitted. My best critic told me it was much inferior to the rest.

iv) Book VIII, intended as a ‘flat’, to interpose between the comparative excitements of Book VII and the final advance on Damascus, was shortened of an abortive reconnaissance, some 10,000 words long. Several of those who read the Oxford text complained of the inordinate boredom of the ‘flat’, and upon reflection I agreed with them that it was perhaps too successful.

By thus excising 3 per cent and condensing the rest of the Oxford text a total reduction of 15 per cent was achieved, and the length of the subscribers’ text brought down to some 280,000 words. It is swifter and more pungent than the Oxford text; and it would have been improved yet more if I had had leisure to carry the process of revision further.

The *Seven Pillars* was so printed and assembled that nobody but myself knew how many copies were produced. I

proposed to keep this knowledge to myself. Newspaper statements of 107 copies can be easily disproved, for there were more than 107 subscribers: and in addition I gave away, not perhaps as many copies as I owed, but as many as my bankers could afford, to those who had shared with me in the Arab effort, or in the actual production of the volume.

PUBLISHED TEXTS

New York Text

A PROOF of the subscribers' text was sent to New York, and reprinted there by the George Doran Publishing Company. This was necessary to ensure U.S.A. copyright of the *Seven Pillars*. Ten copies are offered for sale, at a price high enough to prevent their ever being sold.

No further issue of the *Seven Pillars* will be made in my lifetime.

Revolt in the Desert

This abridgement of the *Seven Pillars* contains about 130,000 words. It was made by myself in 1926, with the minimum of necessary adjustment (perhaps three new paragraphs in all) to preserve sense and continuity. Parts of it appeared serially in the *Daily Telegraph* in December 1926. The whole was published in England by Jonathan Cape, and in U.S.A. by Doran in March 1927.

T. E. SHAW

To bring the information up to date, I add that the remaining copies of the Oxford printed Text of 1922 are still in existence, but will not be made public for at least ten years, and then only in a limited edition. *Revolt in the Desert* will not be printed again, at least during the remainder of the legal term of copyright.

The text of the present edition is identical with that of the thirty-guinea edition of 1926, except for the following omissions and alterations. The omissions are necessary to save hurting the feelings of persons still living; they come on pages 61, 62, and 329 where gaps of the same length are left in the present text. The 1926 edition contains no Chapter XI; the chapters have now been renumbered to remove this anomaly. On p. 300 (line 7) the phrase ‘halts to breath’ has been changed to ‘halts to breathe’ in agreement with the corresponding passage in the Oxford Text of 1922, ‘we let the camels breathe a little.’ On p. 398 (line 14) the word ‘Humber’ has been printed in italics instead of Roman type, to make the sense clearer; in 1926 the names of some other ships were similarly italicized.

The spelling of Arabic names varies greatly in all editions, and I have made no alterations. It should be explained that only three vowels are recognized in Arabic, and that some of the consonants have no equivalents in English. The general practice of orientalists in recent years has been to adopt one of the various sets of conventional signs for the letters and vowel marks of the Arabic alphabet, transliterating Mohamed as Muhammad, muezzin as mu‘edhdhin, and Koran as Qur‘an or Kur‘an. This method is useful to those who know what it means, but this book follows the old fashion of writing the best phonetic approximations according to ordinary English spelling. The same place-name will be found spelt in several different ways, not only because the sound of many Arabic words can legitimately be represented in English in a variety of ways, but also because the natives of a district often differ as to the pronunciation of any place-name which has not already become famous or fixed by literary usage. (For example a locality near Akaba is called Abu Lissan, Aba el Lissan or Abu Lissal.) A reference by the author to his views on this matter occurs on page 664. I reprint here a series of

questions by the publisher and answers by the author concerning the printing of *Revolt in the Desert*.

Q.

attach a list of queries raised by F. who is reading the proofs. He finds these very clean, but full of inconsistencies in the spelling of proper names, a point which reviewers often take up. Will you annotate it in the margin, so that I can get the proofs straightened?

Slip 1. Jeddah and Jidda used impartially throughout. Intentional?

Slip 16. Bir Wahei*da*, was Bir Wahei*di*.

Slip 20. Nuri, Emir of the Ruwalla, belongs to the ‘chief family of the Rualla’. On Slip 23 ‘Rualla horse’, and Slip 38, ‘killed one Rueli’. In all later slips ‘Rualla’.

Slip 28. The Bisaita is also spelt Biseita.

Slip 47. Jedha, the she-camel, was Jedhah on Slip 40.

Slip 53. ‘Meleager, the immoral poet’. I have put ‘immortal’ poet, but the author may mean immoral after all.

Slip 65. Author is addressed ‘Ya Auruns’, but on Slip 56 was ‘Aurans’.

Slip 78. Sherif Abd el Mayin of Slip 68 becomes el Main, el Mayein, el Muein, el Mayin, and el Muyein.

A.

Annotated: not very helpfully perhaps. Arabic names won’t go into English, exactly, for their consonants are not the same as ours, and their vowels, like ours, vary from