

A.W. - The Last Lawrence

By [Michiel Hegener](#)

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[A.W. - De laatste Lawrence](#)

Some events are recorded on a layer of memory from where they can hardly ever be erased. My walk from the railway station in Biggleswade, Bedfordshire, to the nearby village of Langford on November 21st 1985 falls into that category. The weather wasn't very special, nor was the landscape - but my thoughts were.

The question which occupied my mind had its origin in my fourteen months of military service, six years earlier. As a mental support while going through the inconveniences of barrack life, I had bought a copy of The Mint, the book T.E. Lawrence (1888-1935) wrote about his experiences as a private in the Tank Corps and the Royal Air Force. The story hardly needs retelling: after his unparalleled successes as a British liaison officer at, and later on as one of the leaders of the Arab revolt against the Turks in 1916-1918, and a few years as a diplomat to finish his self imposed task, Colonel Lawrence adopted a false name, had himself recruited as a private, and kept that job for more than twelve years. Before doing so, he had already written Seven Pillars of Wisdom, which was later to become the most widely read book about the First World War, had a reputation which was to make him the second best known Briton of his generation (after Churchill) and could - had he wanted to - have become a cabinet minister or say High Commissioner in

Egypt.

The exercises and chores which constitute a Dutch conscript's life, turned my copy of The Mint into a rag as I had kept it at hand most of the time. After my release it was soon to be supported on my bookshelf by better kept volumes by and about T.E.: his letters, Seven Pillars of Wisdom, and part of the dozens of biographies which have been written about him.

Both books by T.E. were introduced by his brother A.W. Lawrence. Would he still be alive? I knew that at the end of 1962 a letter of his about historical inaccuracies in the film Lawrence of Arabia had appeared in The Times, and that he had cooperated closely with the American psychiatrist John Mack who wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography about T.E., A Prince of our Disorder (1976).

The question lingered on till two months before the 50-th anniversary of T.E.'s death, when I decided to write a long piece about him for a Dutch newspaper. I consulted Who's Who in Britain, and there he was:

LAWRENCE, Arnold Walter, Professor of Archaeology University College of Ghana 1951-1957 (...) Professor of Classical Archaeology Cambridge University, 1944-1951 (...) born 2 May 1900 (...) Military Intelligence Middle East 1940 (...) Literary Executor of T.E. Lawrence (...). Then there followed a long list of publications, including Later Greek Sculpture and its Influence (1927), Classical Sculpture (1929), Greek Architecture (Pelican History of Art, 1957,

1967, 1974), Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa (1963), Greek and Roman Sculpture (1972) and Greek Aims in Fortification (1980). Recreation: going to and fro in the earth and walking up and down in it.

At the end an address was mentioned: a bank in London - a clear discouragement to would be letter writers, though it failed to keep this one at bay. Hardly expecting any answer to my request for an interview about T.E., my year was made two weeks later when I got a letter from the brother of Lawrence of Arabia, featuring mijnheer, Dutch for mister, before my name, written in a somewhat shaky hand. No interview, however - "especially now when my hearing and memory are failing from old age", as A.W. wrote. But he did give short comments on some of the subjects which I would have liked to discuss with him. Among other things, he stated that in his view T.E.'s life was void of any real mysteries or enigma's. "Attempts to find any seem to me to have only this effect (and conceivably purpose) to om den tuin leiden, or is that an obsolete idiom?" - om den tuin leiden being an obsolete Dutch idiom indeed for to throw dust in the eyes.

Hoping for more lines to brighten up my article about T.E., I wrote another letter the same day. And again an answer came. Each bit of information was followed, between brackets, by the underlined title of the book where I could have found the answer myself. "I apologize for inflicting this manuscript letter on you; my typewriter is out of order and I have already taken too long for thinking what to say",

A.W. wrote at the end.

One thing was certain: any successful continuation of our correspondence had to do without T.E. Of course I sent him a copy of my article, including a translation of the parts containing quotes by him, but the accompanying letter focused on the activities of early Dutch and English explorers in Africa, a subject he had raised in his second letter. In his third he thanked me for the article and the translation (which had been unnecessary as he could read Dutch fairly easily), wrote some more about the exploration of Africa, and invited me to pay him and his wife a visit "when next in London."

For whom was I heading, I wondered when walking to A.W.'s house two months later. For him or for the brother of T.E.? Would 'just professor Lawrence' have induced me to write just as diligently, and to set half a day aside? I suppressed the answer to the best of my abilities, decided firmly not to mention T.E., and rang at the door of a modest, newly built house, not a minute too late or too soon.

Greeting me with Dutch for 'good afternoon Mr Hegener', A.W. opened a dialogue which was to last for some dozens of hours, spread out over a period of five years and two months. With big light blue eyes, a long face, and a high forehead, he bore no slight resemblance to photographs of T.E., and given his 85 years of age, his movements were quick and easy. His wife Barbara, to whom he had been

married for 60 years, noticed that my hands were cold, as indeed was the weather outside. Only much later I heard that she could hardly see, and while Lawrence and I talked, preparing some coffee took her considerable time.

A.W. appeared to share my intent to leave T.E. unmentioned. The first thing he did was to show me a picture he took of a nineteenth century Dutch graveslab in what is now Ghana, with a poem in old-Dutch which he couldn't quite translate. He also showed me a series of pictures he took in the fifties of trade castles of the Dutch West India chartered company along the shores of the former Goldcoast. I could have them all, if I wanted to.

In fact A.W. was a free lancer all his life, and his work in the Goldcoast fits that image. "He did just as the spirit moved him", someone who knew him for many decades said to me recently. In the Goldcoast he founded a Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, established an archaeological museum, and collected material for one of his standardworks, Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa which, in spite of all the research done after him, to this day is a kind of Bible concerning the physical remnants of the slave trade.

That first meeting in Langford lasted for two hours. At variance with the reasons he had given in his first letter for not granting an interview, his memory appeared to be working well, as was his hearing aid. The real excuse was a far more serious one: from 1920 or so onwards T.E.'s fame as Lawrence of Arabia had led countless people to regard A.W.

as just the brother of someone else. That became even worse after 1935, when T.E. died as a result of a motorcycle accident. "Your brother's name will live in history", King George wrote to A.W.. That was putting the insult mildly: in 1985 A.W. stated in a BBC documentary about T.E. that the reverence for his brother was in fact a religion. "I had great difficulty in not allowing myself to be used as the St Paul of it."

One other of the five Lawrence brothers survived T.E. (two had died in France in 1915), but he hardly shared the fate of A.W. Robert Lawrence (1885-1972) never managed to break away from his dominating mother Sarah (1861-1959) and lived under one roof with her for most of his life. Together they spent many years in China doing missionary work.

A.W. was altogether different: a man of the world, a (moderate) drinker, highly intellectual, very well read, and better informed about the lifestory of T.E. - of whom he was very fond - than most T.E.-biographers. Nothing remained of his hyper Christian upbringing. He regarded organized religion as one of the great plagues of humanity. To A.W., Jesus' outcry on the cross why God had forsaken him, was proof that 'the poor chap' had only then realized that it had been an illusion all along. And his 'recreation', as mentioned in Who's Who, was, according to the Old Testament, Satan's answer when asked where he came from.

Having written all this, it should be stressed that A.W. almost lived like a monk in material respects, and that he was a most disciplined worker all through his life. He gave

away almost everything he did not need - just like T.E. had always done. And he was utterly uninterested in peoples appearances and the way they were dressed, himself sporting somewhat shabby trousers and a simple sweater on all occasions when I saw him.

All these characteristics more or less furthered his unsolicited popularity as T.E.'s main representative on earth after 1935, and hence the tragedy: Englands greatest expert on the inheritance-in-stone of the ancient Greeks hardly received any recognition as such, other than in the scientific community, and even there he had to bear his burden.

Reynold Higgings, acting keeper of Greek and Roman antiquities in the British Museum till 1977, qualifies Lawrence as 'second to none' in his field. "Nowadays everyone specializes, but he had that overall view. Classical Sculpture, later on rewritten as Greek and Roman Sculpture, was required reading for anyone concerned with the subject. One of his strengths was that he never overestimated the Greeks, also having a sharp eye for their weaknesses."

To Professor Robert Cook, one of Lawrences successors in Cambridge, he was Englands greatest expert on Hellenistic sculpture, and the second greatest (after W.B. Dinsmoor) on Greek architecture. Lawrences book on Greek fortifications - which, he told me, took him fifty years of interrupted research - is, according to Higgins, still the ultimate study regarding that subject. "As I remember him, he was

always very helpful and friendly, provided you didn't mention his brother. In the Second World War they sent him to the Middle East to do intelligence work, expecting him to become a second T.E., which he didn't. That has haunted him for a long time."

Without T.E., a biography about A.W. would have been written long ago. But anyone wanting to write one now will have to do without most of his letters: in the summer of 1985, when he moved from Yorkshire to Langford, he made a bonfire of almost all his personal correspondence - including letters by people like George Bernhard Shaw, Robert Graves, Winston Churchill and others who had corresponded with him about T.E., as well as all the letters he had received from the author Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), one of his best personal friends. Having seen so many inaccurate, unbalanced books about his brother, he wanted to make a book about himself next to impossible, should anyone want to write one. Whatever he thought worth keeping was stuffed into a box which was stolen during the transfer: probably by someone who supposed it contained belongings of T.E.

During that afternoon in Langford, T.E. wasn't mentioned by either of us, but A.W. did say something about The Seven Pillars, as he called the book. During his life T.E. had decided that after his death, his youngest brother would be his literary executor, while the royalties of Seven Pillars

of Wisdom would go to a charity fund. At times, though, A.W. had ideas of his own about how to spend the money. In 1936 the unique complex of prehistoric monuments around Avebury, Wiltshire, was threatened by a miserable building scheme: some dozens of new houses were to be constructed on a low hill in the middle of it all. A.W. told me he had approached the civil servants in charge, and had changed their minds. My surprise about their willingness to do so, was dispelled by his revelation that he "had bribed them with 3000 pounds of Seven Pillars-royalties".

It was only one out of a long series of widely varied subjects. He also leaked part of the contents of his talks with Ghana's first president Nkrumah when the latter was looking for a name for the new state. Because of the Volta river, Lawrence had suggested to call the country Voltania. Talking about Nkrumah, Lawrence was ready to agree that the man had a lot of charisma. "though later on he became half mad and thought he had been appointed by God, though I'm not sure by which one."

Back in Holland I wrote a piece about trade forts in West Africa, including some pictures and quotes by Lawrence, mailed him a copy, but didn't receive an answer.

One and a half years later, I tried again, writing him that I was due to visit England shortly. I got an answer quite soon, informing me in quite unsteady writing that his wife had died in November 1986, "the day after a heart attack. I am well but increasingly crippled and generally rather

bored."

I learned only much later on that Lawrence was at that time preparing for his own ending. He saw very few people. His only child, Jane, had died many years before, though his two grandchildren came to see him when they could. He was just slipping away till an old friend came to his aid: at 75, the archaeologist Peggy Guido, whom he had met for the first time in Avebury in 1936, and who was living in a delightful 16th century house in Devizes, decided to take care of him, which soon resulted in what was to be the last move of the last Lawrence. And for both of them it resulted in a beautiful Indian Summer, which I was privileged to witness for ten days during five stays.

After spending his first weeks in Devizes sleeping 22 hours a day, A.W. took up an old plan. Back in his schooldays he had decided that he "wanted to know everything about all peoples of antiquity", which had, almost inevitably, led him to Herodotus (about 485-425 BC) whose Histories reveal a similar ambition. Lawrence made a thorough revision of an existing translation (he could read Greek almost as fast as English) and furnished it with lengthy and often rather bizarre notes. Lawrence's luxuriously bound Herodotus, featuring highly intricate typesetting, was published in 1936 in a limited edition of 650 copies, which fetch some 300 pounds today.

While Peggy was polishing up the manuscript of part two of her standard work about Iron Age, Roman and Anglo Saxon glass beads, Lawrence was busy in another room, revising his

Herodotus-notes: in the new edition he wanted them arranged according to subject instead of being printed alongside the text. Another concern was making the new book comply with the results of all the Herodotus-research done after the original edition came out: in fact an almost unsurmountable task, in spite of assistance offered by some younger scholars.

Sitting in his big armchair, he daily spent a couple of hours with a magnifying glass and a pencil, filling sheets of paper and old envelopes (economy) with his expertise about antiquity. "I wish I still were in my old form", he once sighed - a reference to one year before, when his working day was an average half hour longer. Completely in vain I tried to explain to him about the blessings of using a word processor; and hiring a secretary, which he could easily have afforded, was considered an unnecessary luxury.

The bizarre, the strange and most of all the hilarious tended to dominate most of what he told. In the Andes he had once discovered that the inhabitants of certain valleys had one more fontanel than their neighbors in other valleys: he had a possible explanation for it, but wasn't quite sure and maybe, he suggested, I could uncover the true reason and publish it.

Once I ventured to suggest that Herodotus had written down quite a bit of nonsense here and there, mentioning book 3 paragraph 113 as an example, where Herodotus describes sheep with such long tails that their shepherds - who also were

good carpenters, fortunately - had to make special carts for the tails to prevent wounds. "But such sheep exist!", A.W. exclaimed as if I had lost my mind.

Once Peggy, when returning late in the evening from a concert and finding us having discussions at the kitchen table, wanted to know: "What have you been talking about? T.E.?" - "Everything except T.E.", A.W. answered cheerfully. Instead he had told me that in the twenties he had known a military commander in China who had become a Christian and then had had his entire battalion baptized with a firehose. Another characteristic tale was about his stay, around 1926, in a sanatorium because he had contracted tuberculosis: "It was the best thing which could have happened to me!", he told, going on to explain how it had temporarily freed him of academic grandiloquence while bringing him in contact with ordinary people.

T.E.-adepts continued to chase him till the end. The board of the T.E.-Lawrence Society made the mistake of asking him permission to see to the upkeep of T.E.'s well kept grave. They got a letter back telling them that T.E. wouldn't have minded if his resting place were "smothered in weeds".

While visiting friends, together with Peggy, a lady was led into the room who was eager to show him a piece she had written about T.E., apparently presuming that A.W. would be delighted to see it. He didn't throw a glance at the text, punishing her with a loud "Vomit! Vomit! Vomit!".

In Devizes only four or five people were allowed to know

whose brother was living in their town, and when in 1989 A.W. was to go to a hospital in Bath to get a pacemaker, he was in tears: not because of the operation or the clinic, but out of fear "that they will find out about my relation". When Peggy collected him a few days later, she gathered that in the ward he had kept spirits high with critical remarks about modern medical care: "Those buggering shits of doctors" had been responsible for an infection which he didn't have when being admitted, and while an allochtone nurse was passing by he observed: "There goes that black woman again, scooping up some drinking water for us from the puddle." To this it should be added that one of his native assistants in the museum in Ghana was mentioned, along with T.E. and Siegfried Sassoon, in the dedication for his new Herodotus as one of the people who had had a lasting influence on his life.

On other occasions the T.E. burden seemed to be less pressing. He honored a request to write an introduction to a catalogue for an exhibition in the Bodleian Library celebrating the 100th anniversary of T.E.'s birth, and in january 1991 he spoke to a journalist from The Guardian who wanted to know what T.E. would have thought about the Gulf War.

Only two or three times I indirectly brought up The Subject. What he thought of the T.E. Lawrence Society for instance. "Don't those people have any intuition?", he wondered. "T.E. wouldn't have found the society a good idea?", I asked, not having much doubt about either brothers answer. "No", A.W.

said firmly.

Without my asking, A.W. once told me with a broad smile that there were certain things he knew about T.E. which he had never divulged to anyone. And that he had only once asked T.E. a question about the Arab revolt, namely whether any miracles had ever occurred. The answer had been negative.

When I remarked that the english habit of writing dozens of biographies about one very famous person, thus making him or her very famous indeed, was quite unknown in Holland - where a maximum of four or five is considered to be quite sufficient - he wholeheartedly agreed.

T.E., A.W. used to maintain, was "just an ordinary chap". He was in good company, as T.E. himself wrote at the end of his life in a letter that his fellow servicemen considered the Lawrence of Arabia legend a huge joke. "If it hadn't been my legend, I would do the same."

One of the few with a manifest interest in T.E. who got access to A.W. during his last years, was Malcolm Brown. As a BBC-producer he was closely involved in making two tv-documentaries about T.E. (1962 and 1985). He clearly remembers his first meeting with A.W.: "It was very daunting. I and my scriptwriter came along at the time the film Lawrence of Arabia came out. He was deeply suspicious. I convinced him that we wanted to do something serious like

the documentaries we had done before, about De Gaulle and Nehru, with which he was familiar. Outside, there was thunder in the air. We had the experience of sitting in the room, while it went more and more sinister, and there came flashes of lightning. Normally I would chat, and then the other would begin to answer back. But A.W. just looked at us. After long talks he would say, yes, or that's not a good idea, and he continued to look at me. I found myself uh ... uh ... uh ... uh. It was as if T.E. was there and said to A.W.: Don't touch him. Don't."

After ample consideration, A.W. agreed, but the same problem arose when Brown approached him more than twenty years later. "He refused again. Then I wrote a letter, asking for maybe just a token contribution. My letter got a good reply: he would prepare a piece and learn it by heart. We went there, and Barbara met us. In a corner of the room A.W. was learning his piece, like an actor.

After this statement - which was a bit wooden - was recorded, Julia Cave, who 'interviewed' him, had the guts to continue to talk to him - and he began to answer. Once he relaxed, he was very good indeed. It took a couple of hours, all together."

All who saw A.W. during those last years, agree that meeting him always was an event: he had a presence, a radiation and above all a unique and original mind. But one was never sure how much was due to the magic which was flowing from that other source, and which, in fact, always interfered

adversely. When I once ventured a comparison between the two brothers, Peggy cut me short: "Oh no, this Lawrence is a much greater man than T.E., though T.E. was much more famous of course." And when I suggested, half jokingly, to Jeremy Wilson that after finishing his T.E.-biography, he might consider writing his next book about A.W., he reacted with surprising seriousness: "That would probably be much more interesting."

On January 31st last year, Lawrence suddenly looked me in the eye during lunch: "I'm afraid that I won't be able to finish my Herodotus before I die", he said. When I was leaving the next morning, he was still lying in bed, and told a couple of dirty jokes, not suitable for print, which he must have learned some eighty years ago. It was the last thing I heard of him: two months later, on March 31st, he suddenly collapsed and died instantly later.

Long obituaries appeared in all major newspapers, some of them devoting half the space to his relation with T.E. The Times wrote: "Lawrence never willingly subscribed to orthodoxies, and behind the professor there always lurked the schoolboy with a catapult."

To end with words of his own: asked whether he had any hobbies, Lawrence answered: "I think."

MICHIEL HEGENER