A Lament for Imperial Adventure: Lawrence of Arabia in the Post-Colonial World

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Abstract
The Lawrence of Arabia legend has proved to be one of the enduring myths of military masculinity in twentieth-century Western culture. The famous story of the British intelligence officer who lived among Bedouin Arabs, became a commander of their guerrilla army, and led them to freedom from Ottoman tyranny during the latter part of the First World War, has been told and retold in an abundance of forms since its original narration (as ‘the Greatest Romance of Real Life’) by Lowell Thomas over seventy-five years ago. Subsequent versions include T.E. Lawrence’s own Seven Pillars of Wisdom, numerous biographies and - the most popular vehicle of all - the David Lean and Robert Bolt feature film, Lawrence of Arabia, first released in 1962 and re-issued (in a painstakingly restored version) in 1988, to ‘extraordinary attention’ and critical acclaim. These retellings, far from being simple reproductions of essentially the ‘same’ story, offer widely discrepant representations of their hero and his exploits.
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The Lawrence of Arabia legend has proved to be one of the enduring myths of military masculinity in twentieth-century Western culture. The famous story of the British intelligence officer who lived among Bedouin Arabs, became a commander of their guerrilla army, and led them to freedom from Ottoman tyranny during the latter part of the First World War, has been told and retold in an abundance of forms since its original narration (as 'the Greatest Romance of Real Life') by Lowell Thomas over seventy-five years ago. Subsequent versions include T.E. Lawrence’s own Seven Pillars of Wisdom, numerous biographies and – the most popular vehicle of all – the David Lean and Robert Bolt feature film, Lawrence of Arabia, first released in 1962 and re-issued (in a painstakingly restored version) in 1988, to ‘extraordinary attention’ and critical acclaim. These retellings, far from being simple reproductions of essentially the ‘same’ story, offer widely discrepant representations of their hero and his exploits. Indeed, since the 1950s, Lawrence has become a fiercely contested cultural icon. In these conflicts over the Lawrence legend, it is possible to trace a history of imaginative investment in an ideal form of imperial masculinity and its increasing disturbance and eventual breakdown on entering the post-colonial world. Close reading of the shifts and transformations evident in these texts can provide insight into the process whereby the gendered narratives of imperialism have been reinterpreted and rewritten under pressure from anti-colonial resistance and critique.

Lowell Thomas’s original ‘Lawrence of Arabia’, produced in his 1919 film show and subsequent biography, met a popular desire to see the virtues of heroic imperial masculinity reasserted (albeit in a suitably ‘modern’ form) in response to the Great War and its immediate aftermath. In narrating ‘the strange story of Colonel Lawrence’ as an adventure, Thomas clearly utilized the idealizing conventions of chivalric romance to incorporate Lawrence’s evident differences from the soldier heroes of Victorian and Edwardian tradition. His Lawrence might be youthful where they were elderly; he might be a scruffy and
irregular lover of native customs where they were impeccable, pukka White Men; he might suggest a troubling sexual ambivalence, even femininity, turned out as the ‘blond Bedouin’ in flowing robes and smooth-shaven face. But he could whip the Turks, out-Arab the Arabs, and generally demonstrate that effortless, omnipotent superiority of ‘the Englishman in foreign parts’ which had long been the hallmark of the imperial adventure hero.

Despite his own deeply ambivalent relationship to Thomas’s heroic fantasy and the proliferating public legend rooted in it, Lawrence remained England’s ‘most famous adventurer’ into the 1930s. At the time of his death in 1935, his ‘mysterious power’ had become the focus for right-wing nationalist and fascist fantasies of a British ‘political saviour’; as witnessed, for example, in Basil Liddell Hart’s biography of 1934 (which immediately ran to many printings):

I am told that the young men are talking, the young poets writing, of him [Lawrence] in a Messianic strain – as the man who could, if he would, be a light to lead stumbling humanity out of its troubles – he seems to come nearer than any man to fitness for such power – in a state that I would care to live in ...

... He is the Spirit of Freedom come incarnate to a world in fetters.

Constructed by Thomas as, in effect, a man who could do anything, T.E. Lawrence remained closely identified with these intensely idealized fantasies of imperial authority and omnipotent power during the rest of his own lifetime and beyond.

From the mid-1950s, a very different kind of biography emerged to challenge the Lawrence legend, in which idealization is replaced by its psychic opposite, denigration. Renewed interest in his ‘perverse’ psycho-sexual make-up – stimulated by Lawrence’s own Seven Pillars of Wisdom, but flattening out its complexities and contradictions – is utilized in a full-scale debunking of the hero, in which sado-masochism and his alleged homosexuality are linked with charges of self-glorification and dishonesty. Richard Aldington, in his pioneering Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry (1955), interprets the key to Lawrence’s personality as ‘an abnormal vanity’ and its ‘identical opposite – abnormal self-deprecation’; finding the sources of these traits in his early life, especially his difficult relationship with a strict and domineering mother, his discovery of the family’s guilty secret that his parents were not married, and his own consequent illegitimacy. In Lawrence of Arabia: The Man and the Motive (1961), Anthony Nutting’s interpretation of the infamous Deraa incident (the pivotal episode in Lawrence’s Seven Pillars, where he describes his sexual violation and brutal whipping at the hands of Turkish soldiers) imagines Lawrence learning that he was a ‘rabid masochist, whose happy endurance of pain disclosed a perversion of the flesh rather than a triumph of the spirit. Thus exposed to himself and mocked by his
tormentors he broke down and submitted to their pleasure’.  
Subsequently, even writers attracted or sympathetic to Lawrence have had to take seriously this psychological critique of the hero. The psychiatrist, John Mack, for example, argued in 1976 that:

[Lawrence’s] illegitimacy caused him problems of self-esteem; he created an idealized mediaeval self and suffered greatly when he failed to measure up to impossible standards. In *Seven Pillars*, he tried to create such an ideal self-image but could not sustain it and relapsed into frequent self-depreciation, sometimes exaggerating his deeds when his awareness of failure was greatest.

Developing the project begun in *Seven Pillars* itself, the popular adventure story of Lawrence of Arabia is complicated in these biographies by modernist fragmentation and disturbance: a dark antithesis to the idealized adventure hero is exposed in order to be explained by psychological interpretation. Yet, in thus undercutting the heroic image, this kind of psychological biography also works to over-individualize the Lawrence legend, obscuring its conditions of existence as a product of the popular communications media sustained by continuing public interest; and thus robbing it of any wider cultural resonance and meaning. The ‘impossible standards’ and ‘ideal self-image’ identified by Mack were not wholly peculiar to the individual Lawrence, but were culturally available forms of British masculinity. Lawrence’s perceived failure to ‘measure up to’ and ‘sustain’ these ideals can be read as a personal failure to assume a desired masculine identity, of the kind that Thomas imagined him as embodying. But these shifting assessments of Lawrence are also the product of wider cultural conflict over the very standards and ideals themselves.

The crucial context for this conflict, and for the debunking Lawrence biographies which are contemporaneous with it, is the collapse of British imperial power, and the consequent and far-reaching transformation of the national imaginary, after the Second World War. Heralded by the Boer War of 1899-1902, and well underway by 1918, the waning of imperial might had gained momentum throughout the 1920s and 1930s, under the impact of the Irish War of Independence, the strength of Indian nationalism, and new relationships with the Dominions. This twentieth-century ‘story of decline’ had been arrested temporarily by the establishment of that new empire in the Middle East to which Lawrence (with his conception of ‘our first brown dominion’) had contributed. But even there, the discovery of oil in Iraq in 1920 coincided with a full-scale, popular rebellion ‘which cost Britain more than she had spent on all her wartime operations in the middle east to put down, and more than 400 soldiers’ lives besides’. Although Britain emerged from the 1939-45 war with its empire intact, the dismantling of the Indian Raj in 1947, coupled with its weakened position in a world order now polarized between the American and Soviet superpowers,
fundamentally undermined imperial authority. A plethora of anti-colonial movements of national liberation began to contest it with increasing confidence and, where they were resisted, with armed force. Riots in the Gold Coast produced a Black government under a British governor in 1950 and the independent state of Ghana by 1957. The Sudan and Malaya also won independence in the 1950s, the latter after a major colonial war (1948-58): a spectacle that was repeated in Kenya (1952-56) and Cyprus (1954-59), to the discomfiture of sections of the British public.  

Above all, it was the Suez crisis of 1956 that brought home the realities of Britain's new position. Gamal Abdel Nasser's revolutionary nationalist movement had seized power in Egypt in 1952, and within a few years had forced Britain to give up its military bases on Egyptian territory, sending anti-imperialist shock-waves through the Arab world and 'effectively ending British suzerainty in the Middle East'. When in 1956 Nasser seized control of the Suez Canal and nationalized the company which ran it, Britain joined with France and Israel to restore control by military invasion, only to withdraw the invasion force under the combined threats of Soviet missiles on London, the U.S. refusal to support the pound, and implacably hostile world opinion. If the Suez debacle exacerbated a prevalent sense of 'waste, unfairness and helplessness' among pro-imperialists at the demise of imperial power, it also exposed the hollowness of imperialist claims to moral purpose:  

The ethos of Empire, as of war, was acceptable to the British when it was backed by convictions of honour – by the belief, false or misguided, that the British were acting rightly, for the good of themselves and the world. Fair play! In most of their wars the British had been so convinced. ... Now, in Port Said, 1956, there was only pretence – a sham virility, a dubious cause, a nation divided.  

Besides generating intense conflict within the British imperial imaginary, Suez is linked in many accounts of the 1950s with a more pervasive cultural crisis of British values and identity. Robert Hewison has described how the work of the younger generation of artists and writers was characterized by 'a criticism of the cultural values that had been passed on to postwar society'; by 'the hostility of the new writers of the 1950s to both aesthetic and social attitudes of the 1930s'; by (as Doris Lessing put it) 'a confusion of standards and the uncertainty of values'. The decline of Empire contributed to this crisis, even among what Alan Sinfield calls 'the dissident middle class intelligentsia [who] were constituted in opposition to the empire-building middle class'. One of its effects was the calling-in-question of traditional masculine authority and identity. In an often-quoted speech from John Osborne's Look Back in Anger (1956), Jimmy Porter articulates a particularly masculine malaise:
I suppose people of our generation aren’t able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the Thirties and Forties, when we were still kids. *(In his familiar, semi-serious mood).* There aren’t any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed, it won’t be in aid of the old-fashioned grand design. It’ll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus.¹²

The ‘people’ referred to here, of course, are men, while the causes mentioned in the play include the imperial mission and the Second World War (itself complexly bound up with Empire). The crisis of the new generation of men is being registered here in terms of a widespread de-cathecting (or de-energizing) of heroic adventure as a public narrative inviting identification and active participation. By 1960 National Service had been abolished, marking a significant break in the transmission of masculine ideals and standards as forms to identify the self with (or against); and a range of rebellious masculine styles such as the teddy boy and the beatnik had emerged. The ‘generation gap’, that became such a marked feature of the later 1950s and 1960s, was lived out in cross-generational misrecognitions between traditionally dominant and newly oppositional forms of masculinity, the stake being the maintenance of a masculine authority that was once rooted in imperial imaginings. ‘One cannot imagine Jimmy Porter’, wrote Kenneth Tynan in a famous review of Osborne’s play, ‘listening with a straight face to speeches about our inalienable right to flog Cypriot schoolboys’.¹³

Lawrence became one of the figures registering the impact of the loss of Empire upon British masculinity. The debunking, Aldington-type biographies are symptomatic of a more generalized reckoning with the values, standards and ideals of a pre-1939 imperialism. Aldington’s own re-assessment of Lawrence’s heroic reputation struck at the heart of idealized Englishness. Sir Ronald Storrs, with whom Lawrence had first arrived in Arabia in 1916, and who had gone on to become Governor of Cyprus, denounced Aldington in a BBC broadcast for maligning a hero who was ‘a touchstone and a standard of reality’, demanding: ‘To what purpose has this been done? ... What can be the gratification in attempting to destroy a famous name – an inspiration to youth all over the free world?’¹⁴ Here as ever, the Lawrence heroic image proved contradictory. While Storrs claimed him as an establishment figure, Nutting, a Foreign Office minister outspokenly supportive of the Eden Government’s hard-line stance on Suez who went on to resign over its capitulation, sought to dissociate Lawrence from imperialist values. Lawrence himself had always been uncomfortably resistant to any such alignment: as Aldington put it, ‘he differed entirely from the pukka sahib or Blimp-type’ in ‘not [sharing] their Wog and Gippo attitudes to Arabs’. In this, Aldington might well
have been aligning Lawrence’s own ambivalent relationship to traditional authority with the questionings of the new, postwar generation. Instead, and in common with Nutting, he berates Lawrence for ‘favouring Arab rather than British interests’ (a claim that, in its linking of ‘pathological’ sexuality and treachery to the state, offers an imperialist variant on the contemporaneous Cold War association of homosexuality with ‘evil’). For the Arab historian, Suleiman Mousa, on the other hand, Lawrence is ‘a cold-blooded imperialist agent who cared nothing for the Arabs and sought only to advance British interests’. 

Clearly, by the early 1960s Thomas’s fantasy of the powerful British hero leading the subject races to freedom was generally regarded with deep suspicion, its imagined integration of interests and identities fragmenting along a realigned and differently charged axis of power. Indeed, these conflicting representations of Lawrence are characterized by their extreme splitting of the hero into sharply polarized aspects, each charged with the projected psychic qualities of either idealization or denigration – from Thomas’s omnipotent and virtuous ‘blond Bedouin’ to Nutting’s ‘almost demonic suicidal sado-masochist who uses the Arabs to fulfil his own lust for revenge’. Always a locus of the unconscious phantasies of imperialist culture, after 1956 the Lawrence of Arabia story had become deeply embroiled in the psychic aftermath of Suez. This is the necessary context in which to place the 1962 feature film, directed by David Lean from a screenplay by Robert Bolt; titled, simply, Lawrence of Arabia.

Unsurprisingly, Lawrence of Arabia proved to be ‘an unusually controversial picture’, being widely read on its release as an oppositional, anti-imperialist text. A bitter row about its politics and characterization developed, with the Estate of T.E. Lawrence refusing permission to call the film Seven Pillars of Wisdom, Lady Allenby objecting to its alleged slander of her husband (the Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian expeditionary force against the Turks), and accusations that screen-writer Robert Bolt’s CND sympathies had influenced his portrait of Lawrence. At its first press screening, one critic acclaimed it as British cinema’s first ‘queer epic’, rhapsodizing over its treatment of Lawrence’s young admirers, Farraj and Daud, and the relationship with his Arab friend and rival, Sharif Ali.

The film’s stance towards imperialism, however, might more accurately be described as ambivalent. Incorporating elements drawn from both the popular adventure story and modernist psycho-biography, Lawrence of Arabia refuses to take one side or another in the conflict over the Lawrence heroic image, but instead explores the relation between them. Seven Pillars is clearly a primary source, but the film includes material absent from Lawrence’s account, as well as offering a filmic interpretation of some of its key episodes. It is
informed by a detailed awareness both of Thomas and of subsequent, more critical biographies: Sir Anthony Nutting served as principal adviser to the producer, Sam Spiegel. If, as Spiegel declared, ‘we did not set out to solve the legend of Lawrence of Arabia, we tried to perpetuate it’, the film proved remarkably successful. For Robert Bolt, on the other hand, the film had a more serious focus:

Here was a man [Lawrence], physically insignificant, born a bastard, conscious of special powers. An awkward man, deliberately so. He finds acceptance not among his own but among an alien people, in borrowed robes, and not as one man among others, but as a god-sent Leader. He is alone. He can do what he wants. Is that a privilege or an intolerable burden?

The film’s dramatic energy derives from its use of this question as a springboard for an explicit investigation of the Lawrence legend and its contemporary relevance. Lowell Thomas’s myth-making is subjected to ironic scrutiny, while at the same time the film retains something of the wonder and excitement of Thomas’s legendary narrative. Imaginative investment and critical distance are held together in a powerful, dramatic tension. Most interestingly, the subjective dimensions of this dichotomy are explored by the juxtaposition of the adventure hero with its dark inverse, located as a psychic conflict within Lawrence himself.

Following Thomas and Seven Pillars, the narrative focuses on Lawrence’s involvement in the Arab Revolt: from his leaving the Cairo Map Department en route for Arabia to the moment when he leaves Damascus, his quest at an end, following its capture by the Allied and Arab armies. In the first part of the film Lawrence undergoes a Thomas-like transformation, in the course of two epic journeys that take him from Cairo to the Arab leader, Feisal, and on to the capture of Akaba. Initially establishing Lawrence as a clumsy clown, dismissed as worthless by his C.O. in Cairo, the film transports him (and the viewer) into an epic desert landscape in which he makes himself anew. Unlike Thomas’s romantic Arabia, Lean’s strange and unknown landscape is dangerous. The long camel-rides are monotonous and arduous. The heat kills: on one occasion Lawrence and the Bedouin have to cross overnight a waterless expanse of desert, known as ‘the sun’s anvil’, before sunrise the following day, or perish. In adopting Bedouin customs and enduring the desert’s hardships and dangers, Lawrence discovers a new dignity and courage. His growth in stature is dramatized by the foregrounding of a minor episode in Seven Pillars, where Lawrence returns alone to rescue a man lost in the desert during the night. The Arab leader, Sharif Ali, rewards Lawrence’s courage by burning his shabby British Army clothes and dressing him in white Sharifian robes, as an Arab.

Lawrence’s triumphal return and recognition as a Bedouin hero marks the onset of phantasies of omnipotence, first explored in a debate
with Ali, whose interpretation of the episode as an expression of the will of God is countered by Lawrence’s insistence that success is dependent only on human will-power. This refusal to accept the limits set by divine law causes the Bedouin to salute Lawrence as a saviour of life and a man uniquely in command of his own destiny. Lawrence comes to imagine himself as a contemporary prophet imbued with quasi-divine powers, who seeks inspiration under a thorn tree and claims to be able to ‘work miracles’ – to lead the Arab people to their freedom. All this is shown to stand in explicit contrast to the humility and faith of his Muslim allies, like Ali, who pray for God’s help in braving the dangers of the desert. When Ali objects to Lawrence’s intention to cross Sinai en route for Cairo, protesting the difficulty, Lawrence retorts: ‘Why not? Moses did it’. The omnipotent, wish-fulfilling hero is shown to be one of Lawrence’s own identifications, as he himself comes to believe in the reality of his own fantastic power.

The film understands this assertion of unlimited human will to be a deeply transgressive, Faustian act that puts the self at risk. Lawrence’s imaginative investment in heroism undergoes a sudden and dramatic reversal into its opposite – a man taken over by fear and self-hatred – under the impact of psychic disturbances which increasingly obtrude into the narrative. Chief among these is Lawrence’s self-identification as a destroyer of life. Called upon to perform the ritual execution of a murderer, required by Arab law to avoid a blood feud, Lawrence is confronted with the implication that omnipotent power over life also involves omnipotent destructive power. The hero has met his demon; and on the film’s third, gruelling journey across Sinai, accompanied by the two young admirers in his care, Farraj and Daud, the demon returns to haunt him. Lawrence’s failure to save Daud from death by quicksand is a trauma that plunges him into a haunted abstractedness. Destructive phantasies of omnipotent responsibility here produce a depressive scenario of horror and guilt, in which Lawrence punishes himself by refusing to ride, and instead walks grim-faced and dirty beside Farraj on the sole remaining camel.

Lawrence’s ensuing crisis of identity is played out for the first time on his reappearance in Cairo, which completes a three-stage circular journey and brings to a close the first part of the film. If, in Thomas, this return is a moment of recognition for Lawrence as a hero, in Lawrence of Arabia it is the occasion of competing and incompatible (mis)recognitions that pull him apart. Religious transgression of desert law is replaced here by racial transgression of colonial apartheid. Marching up the imposing marble steps into Army HQ with the Arab boy, Lawrence is first misrecognized as ‘a dirty little Arab’ by the guards, who seek to prohibit them from entering this citadel of power; and then encounters the hostile silence of the officers’ mess where he takes Farraj for refreshment. Visually, Lawrence (and the viewer) is at
this moment identified with the Arabs and against the tight-buttoned military smartness of the racist British messroom. At the same time, the dirtying of Lawrence’s white robes in the Sinai desert marks his psychic descent from god-like inspiration to demonic denigration and self-punishment: the icon sullied. These visual connotations of a morally ‘fallen’ Lawrence complicate identification with him, and function as a figure of the confused and divided self who appears before Allenby. Unlike the benevolent and authoritative father-figure of Thomas and Seven Pillars, Allenby is imagined here as a manipulative flatterer who plays upon Lawrence’s messianic phantasies in order to ensure his return to Arabia and continuing usefulness. Allenby’s positive recognition of Lawrence rekindles a manic excitement (‘I’ll have Arabia in chaos’), helps him to (temporarily) overcome his trauma, and offers an authoritative (if also temporary) resolution to Lawrence’s conflicting identifications in fostering the belief that Arab interests and British interests are at one. Lawrence’s own mania is shown to be decisively underpinned and made ‘realizable’ by the imperial authority of British High Command.

In the second part of the film, Lawrence appears as a man torn by psychic conflict between two dichotomous identifications, that constitute a deeply and irrevocably split masculinity. His rapid oscillations between the depressive and the triumphal, the ordinary and the extraordinary, are connected to the unifying or splitting of his identifications with the British and the Arabs. The resolution offered by Allenby initiates a sequence of events in which Lawrence repeats the conflictual scenarios in an increasingly destructive spiral. Restored to his idealized self and clad again all in white, Lawrence is next seen revelling in an adventurous attack on a Turkish train, only for depressive deflation to return after he again has had to kill. His capture whilst spying in Deraa stems from courting danger by flaunting himself in the town, protected only by an omnipotent sense of magical invulnerability (‘I’m invisible’). Misrecognized as a fair-skinned Circassian subject of the Ottoman Empire, and thus exchanging colonial omnipotence for the vulnerability of the colonized, Lawrence is forced by physical and sexual violation to confront his own ordinariness: he has ‘a body like other men’, whatever his will to the contrary.

Lawrence’s abandoning of omnipotent phantasy is also equated here with the further forced recognition of his own racial identity: “Look Ali, look”. (Pinching his skin). “That’s me. What colour is it? That’s me. And there’s nothing I can do about it. ... I’m not the Arab Revolt, Ali, I’m not even an Arab’’. Phantasies of omnipotence founder on the incommensurable difference of race. However, the inescapability of colonial relations, and the necessity of finding some place to occupy within them, makes this return to ordinariness yet another unrealizable fantasy. At his next appearance back in Cairo, Lawrence has resumed
his Army uniform and reverted to the awkward clown trying to belong, amid talk of 'squash-courts' and 'wogs'. By contrast, Allenby's unscrupulous desire to have Lawrence back in the field at the head of an Arab army, and his ability to bring this about by the deployment of British imperial resources, makes the only alternative fantasy seem the more realizable.

'Tm going to give them Damascus!': for the last time, Lawrence attempts to square the circle by returning to Arabia, only to re-enact in its most damaging form in the film his psychic oscillation from omnipotent triumphalism to depressive anxiety. At the village of Tafas, the Arab army discovers a Turkish massacre of men, women and children. Instead of internalizing his horror at yet another spectacle of death in an experience of psychic conflict and self-punishment, on this occasion Lawrence identifies fully with the exhilaration of violent release as he takes up the Arab call for 'No prisoners' and leads their charge on the retreating Turkish column. The result is an orgy of killing and destruction: the film's most powerful invocation of the horrors of war, both as a literal statement and as a metaphor for the hell of a psyche overcome by phantasies of its own omnipotent destructiveness. Discovered in shock after the attack, his white robes stained bright red, Lawrence has assumed the most feared shape of his imagined other, more 'cruel and barbarous' than the Arabs he had earlier condemned as such.

The Tafas massacre is the decisive episode in Lawrence of Arabia because it is here that Lawrence's messianic dream of nobly leading a people to freedom is finally destroyed, and his quest brought to an end. As in Seven Pillars, the narrative closes hollowly after the capture of Damascus, where Lawrence's efforts to place control of the city under the authority of the Arab Council fail due to the Arabs' lack of 'modern' experience and know-how. Allenby waits patiently until chaos breaks out, and then steps in to restore order. In Seven Pillars the depressive image of Lawrence leaving Damascus in exhausted sadness - a man 'so stained in estimation that afterward nothing in the world would make him feel clean' - is to some extent held in check by the image of a benevolent Allenby assuming control and setting Lawrence free from his burden of responsibility. In Lawrence of Arabia there is no such countervailing image. Allenby is presented in a wholly cynical light as the chief representative of a realpolitik which is shown to have defeated Lawrence, destroying him and his dream. Lawrence is driven away from Damascus in a car past Arabs on camel-back who no longer recognize him, to whom he can no longer speak, with whom he will never again ride. 'Well Sir, going home?', asks the driver (the film's final words); but 'home' no longer exists for Lawrence. The film ends fascinated with failure, evoking an intense yearning for what is being left behind.
The powerful elegiac quality of this ending can be explained in terms of Lawrence of Arabia's contradictory positioning of the viewer in relation to the romance of Lawrence's adventure. The film certainly subjects this narrative to critique, in terms of the messianic excess of Lawrence's motivating fantasy. It also highlights the paradox in his own relation to the Arabs: his fascination with the otherness of the 'traditional' and authentic Arab way of life, and his frustration at their lack of modern qualities and understanding. His third epic camel ride across Sinai, for example, is in one sense made necessary and in another enabled by the destruction of the telephone by Arab looters. The film suggests that Lawrence needs the Arabs to remain 'traditional' in order to sustain his own investments in them and to guarantee his own epic opportunities; even though the outcome of his political ambitions — 'Arabia for the Arabs now' — depends on Arab ability to create a free and independent modern state. Modernization is precisely what the Arab leaders themselves are shown to desire: Feisal's own wish is to acquire the technology of a modern, mechanized army to fight the Turks, while Sharif Ali desires an education in the working of modern, democratic institutions. Furthermore, Feisal explicitly identifies as a projective investment 'the great hunger for desolate places' of the 'desert-loving English'; and he accuses Lawrence of being 'a Gordon of Khartoum', exposing the acquisitive romanticism of Western Orientalist fantasies and their risk to the romantic imaginer. These scenes introduce moments of possible self-consciousness for Western audiences about their own relation to this filmic Arabia.

On the other hand, the viewer is also invited in the earlier sequences to make powerful, imaginative investments in Lawrence, in 'Arabia' and in the film as such. The chief vehicle for this is the cinematography of the desert. This is breath-takingly beautiful. Shot on seventy-millimeter film that provides added depth of focus and sharpness of detail for the wider screen of cinemascope, it captures the vastness of space, the richness of colour, the subtlety and clarity of light that gives way to a mesmeric shimmering of heat haze. From the first sunrise shot, the camera dwells lovingly and at length on these visual properties of a landscape wherein human beings are reduced to the tiniest of dots moving beneath the massive grandeur of towering rock formations and the perfect curves of the big dunes. This cinematography constructs 'the Arabian desert' of the film (actually shot in Jordan and Morocco) as a visual feast, a veritable landscape of the imagination. Supported by Jarre's score, this visual dimension intensifies the emotional pitch of the film to epic heights, implicitly endorsing Lawrence's sense of growth into new and superior modes of being. By these means the film actively organizes the viewer's investment in the Lawrence legend and they are never fully displaced or undermined by the narrative's subsequent dramatization of conflict,
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nor by its ironic scrutiny of the very myth-making process that makes such investments possible in the first place. They remain residual but active, and determine the intense sadness and sense of loss with which the film ends.

For *Lawrence of Arabia* is ultimately a lament for the lost romance of Empire, overturned by a wholly modern power-politics represented by both Feisal and Allenby, who are shown to have cynically manipulated Lawrence for their own ends throughout. Lawrence, it appears, was never ‘in control’, and his failure was always inevitable. But the film narrative endorses Lawrence in this moment of failure through the exhilaration with which it tells of his attempt to make a new world. What is most memorable about *Lawrence of Arabia* is the epic uplift and expansiveness in its treatment of those first journeys in the desert and Lawrence’s heroic mastery of this environment. The film suggests that the forces which destroy Lawrence as a romantic adventure hero destroy, too, the very possibility of such a hero as an energizing myth. In its ending, it laments the loss of Empire as a possible location where adventure romance could continue to be imagined. It laments the loss of the romantic periphery itself, with its ‘traditional’ way of life, under the pressure to modernize, and to contest imperial power not with swords and camels, but with artillery, aeroplanes and engineers. And it laments the relinquishing of the imperial adventure hero as a particular form of masculine transcendence and imagined release from the pressures of difference, psychic conflict and contradiction.

This loss was registered in 1962, at a precise moment of reckoning with the emerging features of a post-colonial world. Since 1962, Western audiences have watched on their television screens the working-out of the mischief sown by British and French imperialists through their settlement in the Middle East after 1918. The Six-Day War and Israeli annexation of the Occupied Territories, the emergence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the invasion of Lebanon and the shattering of Beirut, the Palestinian Intifada, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the war to force Iraqi withdrawal, and the brutal Baathist reprisals against Shi-ite and Kurdish rebellions: all of these events can trace their origins back to the imperialist carve-up of the southern Ottoman Empire. A film like *Lawrence of Arabia* could not be newly made today, and its re-issue in 1988 was a profoundly nostalgic moment, for a world in which it was still possible to feel sad about the failure of the imperial mission.

The re-issue was a great success, with Eighties’ film reviewers generally waxing lyrical about its aesthetic qualities. Yet their political evaluations reproduced the ambiguities (and ignorances) that are evident throughout the story of the Lawrence legend. One review, noting that ‘Lawrence has sometimes been condemned as a piece of jingoism’, reflected that ‘it is hard to imagine many Western films
treat ing an Islamic War of Independence [which the Arab Revolt decidedly was not] with quite such sympathy today, and the British characters are on the whole treated far more sardonically than the Arabs'. An American critic, on the other hand, suggested that 'Lawrence offers the kick of empire – it is a profoundly conservative movie that will doubtless be upvalued in the current cultural climate'. These contradictions, and the uncertainties that underpin them, are well summed up by a review in The Guardian: 'Lawrence of Arabia was always one of the cinema’s greatest adventure films. Now, with these scenes and bits of scenes restored, it emerges as one of the greatest and most disillusioned studies of British colonialism ever made'. Since the adventure tradition has worked precisely to energize British colonialism, this assessment is a contradiction in terms: the film’s adventure narrative is qualified and then undermined by the colonial disillusionment, which is in turn limited in impact by the adventure. As a definition of the narrative’s ambivalence, however, it is perfect.

The reappearance of Lawrence as a political reference point, at public meetings and in television histories during the Persian Gulf War of 1991, suggests that his story nevertheless retains its centrality within the British imaginary of Arabia and the Middle East. To this day, it remains among the most likely sources of popular knowledge about the region and its people, thus helping to reproduce Anglocentric assumptions and perspectives, and to transmit into the present the imagined relations of power from a bygone colonial era that are inscribed in them. This continuing potential of the Lawrence story, to organize British imaginings of who ‘we’ are and how we are related to others, is an exemplary lesson that it is not simply the historical form of adventure that matters, but the active psychic investments made in it; which bring it alive, and to which it gives a cultural form. Forms of identification and recognition are at stake in current conflicts as in earlier ones, and at heightened moments of tension and anxiety such as the war against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the traditional defensive repertoire derived from colonial imaginaries remain available for reactivation. If, by contrast to the turmoil of the contemporary Middle East, the Lawrence legend as recounted in the Lean/Bolt film bears the hallmark of nostalgia for simpler, more innocent days, it is important to insist that the British imperial adventure in the Middle East was, from its inception, a far from innocent story. Nor, as Lawrence himself knew only too well, was the masculine adventure hero at its centre entirely free of guilt.
NOTES

1. This article is derived from a longer analysis of the Lawrence legend in Part Three of my book, G. Dawson, Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 165-230 (especially Chapter 8).


6. Aldington cited in Images, pp. 52-5; Nutting ibid., p. 61.


17. See note 2. The quotations below are transcribed from a video recording of the film.


21. For Thomas's romance, see Dawson, pp. 175-80.

22. See Seven Pillars, pp. 260-3, p. 129, for these two separate episodes.

23. For the Kleinian 'depressive position', see Dawson, pp. 35-43.

24. Seven Pillars, pp. 682-83; for Thomas, see Dawson, pp. 182-83.

25. Seven Pillars, p. 682.

