

T.E. Lawrence, *Reader's report, 1929*

Special Collections featured item for April 2006 by
Brian Ryder, Archives Assistant

Lawrence, T.E. 1888-1935. *Reader's report, 1929*, for the publisher George Allen & Unwin on the manuscript *The legend of Lijman* by H. Stj. B. Philby

Item held in the George Allen & Unwin archive, Reading University Library

Reader's reports are commissioned by publishers to provide the first assessments of manuscripts submitted for publication. They are written in the main by in-house readers, or by regular outworkers with general or specific fields of expertise. Occasionally an unexpected name lies behind a report as is the case with this one dating from 1929, handwritten on seven sheets of government notepaper, and signed T.E. Shaw, the name adopted in 1923, and used for the rest of his life, by T.E. Lawrence, otherwise known as Lawrence of Arabia.



Thomas Edward Lawrence was born in Wales in 1888, one of five illegitimate sons of an Anglo-Irish landowner and his mistress. In his youth he developed a keen interest in the crusades which both helped him to earn a first in history from Jesus College, Oxford and to spend the last few years before World War One on archaeological excavations in the Middle East. His resulting knowledge of the Arab language and way of life made him useful to military intelligence in the area when he enlisted in the army in 1914. (Lawrence often dressed in Arab clothes as in the picture, *left*, reproduced by courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.) In 1916, by now a Lieutenant-Colonel, he took part in the Arab Revolt against their Turkish masters and is credited with improving the tactics and morale of the local forces which brought a successful outcome to their campaign. After the war he was prominent in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and later became

an adviser to the Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill. In 1922, apparently seeking obscurity, he enlisted once again, this time in the ranks and under an assumed name

His reader's report of 1929 is headed "For the publisher, only" and consists of three pages of comment (*reproduced below*) and four of notes on the text. It starts with Lawrence's acknowledgement that he knows the author of the manuscript under review, the Colonial civil servant and Arabist Harry St John Bridger Philby (1885-1960).

For the publisher, only.

I was once rash enough to benefit Philby, by making him governor of Transjordan: and he is not the man to forgive an obligation. So he is jealous of me, and would deeply resent my sitting on his book. Please do not mention me.

Philby is very capable, and I like him. He is also embittered, for some reason, and full of animosities. He pursues people he dislikes with a hatchet, and is a Corsican in his hates. A queer fish. His writing is the weakest part of him, & it fails because he is not sympathetic towards human beings.

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The official title of the post held by Philby in the Trans-Jordan (now the Kingdom of Jordan) was Chief British Representative and although it was clearly not in Lawrence's gift he did occupy the post temporarily himself and, when tired of it, asked to be relieved, suggesting Philby as his successor.

In his autobiography Philby speaks highly of Lawrence's abilities although the two were in disagreement over who should become ruler of the Arabs. Lawrence successfully promoted the cause of Faisal Husain (1885-1933) (*see picture, right*) against Philby's persistent preference for Ibn Sa'ud; with the benefit of hindsight many commentators consider Philby to have been right.

Lawrence next turns his attention to the book, *The legend of Lijman*, a biography of Gerard Evelyn Leachman (1880-1920), like Lawrence a soldier who made his name - but not the enduring legend for which his family hoped - through his actions in support of the Arab Revolt.



This book I expected to be very bad: ~~but~~ and its beginning satisfied my expectations: but its speed increased as the pages went on, and the last sketch of the chaos and red rebellion & frenetic efforts of Leachman to retain control are magnificent. Much the best pages Philby ever did. It would be a great pity to wash the book out: and a great pity to ~~hobble~~ hobble the good end with the wearisome, conventional beginning. Do make him re-write the first chapter, and use many more of Leachman's actual letters, in extenso, or in large quotes. These snippets are aggravating to read: too many inverted commas → throughout Chaps I. 2. + 3. make a page itch: and the writing hasn't enough heat and devil in it.

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The publisher did make an edited, typed, transcript of the report and, on sending it to Philby, respected Lawrence's wish not to be revealed as its author. Finally, Lawrence comes to the subject of the book, Leachman himself, a man shot in the back as he tried to escape while on an impossibly dangerous mission of his own devising.

You ^{said that you} were disappointed with the quality of Leachman, as revealed in the book. He was a ruffian, actually: a long lean, ugly jinking man, with deliberately bad manners, a yellow, jaundiced eye, harsh-tempered, screaming and ~~the~~ violent. He was always lifting his hand to hit. He came to our side of the desert, as Philby says: but not for a holiday with Mark Sykes. He was to have joined our show, he being fed up with Mesopotamia. In five days he had twice beaten his servant, a poor worm he had brought with him from Bagdad. We couldn't afford those sort of morals in our camp. So off he went. A very savage was Leachman. I suppose all conquerors have to be of that ~~the~~ rather hard grain. He had no conception that beauty existed. His passion was for mastery, and for activity, sane

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Sir Mark Sykes (1879-1919). Co-author of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 which defined British, French and Russian spheres of influence after the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire

This book sufficiently shows that vice of his for hitting and hurting his inferiors. It also shows his unparalleled courage. He took the most barefaced awful risks, and got through them by sheer ~~audacity~~ audacity — also, often, by the compunction of his opponents, who would not ~~demean~~ demean themselves by being so barbarous as himself. I think that most civilised people (and many of his Mesopotamia victims were civilised) would rather be eaten by wild beasts than ^{descend to} play the wild beast in self-defence. So Leachman had a long run for his brutality.

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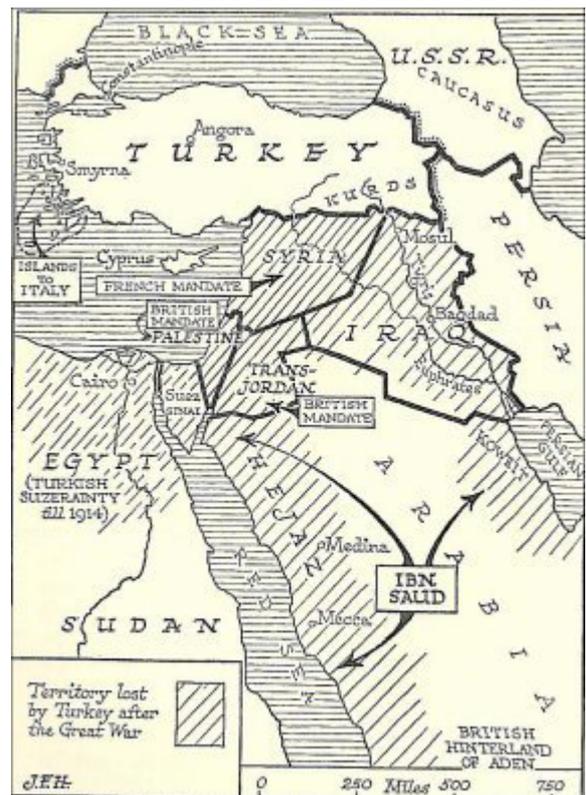
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I met Dhari, his murderer, ^{by night, in 1921, in the desert} ~~in the desert~~. He was flitting uneasily from ^{tribal} camp to camp ~~in the desert~~, a red-headed man, shunned by all the free people. The law of hospitality extends even to a temporary house, and Dhari had sinned against it: no one would betray him to the British, but no one would countenance him openly. Dhari was not brutal or dangerous: a feeble slow-witted creature. He pleaded that he could not but shoot, as Leachman had spat in his face before his own son & servants, and that L. was hit in the back because he was at the moment trying to escape. I had to explain that I was

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In his report Lawrence uses the old name for Iraq, Mesopotamia. Map from *An atlas of current affairs* by J.F. Horrabin (London: Victor Gollancz, a division of the Orion Publishing Group, 1937)



I haven't altered the opening page of Chapter IV, Section 1, where Philby links Leachman + myself as more or less kindred ~~souls~~ souls: only marked, in notes, some inconsistencies in the comparison. It gave me a shiver of horror, because I've tried so hard, in all my times of responsibility, to avoid the Leachman methods + manners and certainty. He never had a doubt, all through, of his rightness. I think his life is a very eloquent sermon, to empirics, of what to try to avoid in dealing with brown races. To think yourself so much better than mankind is surely to be so much worse? He made me a little ashamed of being (nominally) English.

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All this is rather by the way. I attach some rough notes on the details of the book. Philby knows my handwriting, so please type any extracts you may send him.

I hope you will persevere with the book. It will ultimately be worth while. Such an example (for good + evil) as Leachman's must not be lost. Its harshness will help sell it. He was ~~very~~ much wondered at by all the army in Mesopotamia. I do not think it needs an introduction by anyone. Leachman reveals himself so plainly: and will be plainer still, if Philby will quote more freely + write less, as I have suggested in detail.

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Yours

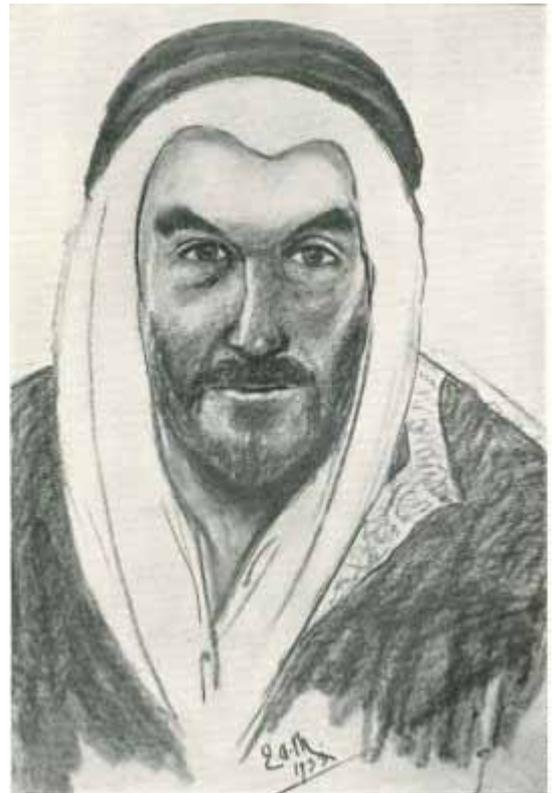
T.E. Shaw

The report was written shortly after Lawrence, then serving with the RAF in India, was despatched back to England after the publication of a bogus report which claimed that he had been involved in espionage along the border with Afghanistan; it may have been the publicity in the press at the time that gave Allen & Unwin the thought to approach Lawrence with the idea that he report for them on Philby's book. Unfortunately the correspondence with Lawrence which would have surrounded his report has been lost, either thrown out when the files were drastically pruned in the 1940s, or taken by the publisher Stanley Unwin, a collector – and shrewd seller – of autograph letters. Apart from the report itself we only have a note in the ledger in which submitted texts, and their fates, were recorded. This shows that this report was written by A/C (aircraftsman) Shaw (for which a fee of two guineas - £2.10 - was paid) and that another – initialled G.M (an unidentified reader) – was obtained.

Philby explains in his autobiography that he was asked by Leachman's family to write the book but that he 'disappointed them by failing to inject into it any element of romance' a quality he was intended to conjure up, one imagines, from affairs of war, not of the heart. Subsequently he consented to hand over the task to N.N.E. Bray whose book *Paladin of Arabia: the biography of G.E. Leachman* was published shortly after Lawrence's death (London: John Heritage, 1936). Philby was not impressed by Bray's effort and echoed Lawrence's criticism of his own manuscript, that Leachman and Lawrence were not to be compared. Lawrence did not need a biographer to establish his legend, being capable of promoting it himself through his books *Seven pillars of wisdom* and *The mint* which are both constantly in print.

In 1941 Philby's manuscript, still held by the publisher and perhaps found in one of their infrequent purges of the safe used for that purpose, was again considered for publication; the firm had lost most of their stock in a fire at the binder's warehouse during the blitz and new titles were urgently needed to satisfy the upturn in reading brought about by the war. The files show that at that date they could not lay their hands on the reader's reports from 1929, nor could they raise any response from Philby; in any event his right to make use of Leachman's papers would have lapsed. Lawrence's reader's report, but not that of G.M., was only found when the Allen & Unwin archive was catalogued in 1997.

All three men - Lawrence, Philby and Leachman - took to wearing Arab dress as a response to the treacherous climate but there is no doubt that it was Philby who embraced the Arab way of life with most enthusiasm. (Drawing, *right*, by EA Montgomery, 1933) Raised in the Christian faith he converted to Islam and had the title Sheik Abdullah conferred upon him. Although it is not thought that he received monetary reward for his services to the Arab cause he did accept, when sixty years of age, the gift from Ibn Sa'ud of a sixteen-year-old wife by whom he had a further two children to add to the four born to his long-suffering, but not abandoned, English spouse Dora.



The George Allen & Unwin archive spans the years from its founding by Stanley Unwin in 1914 - when he acquired John Ruskin's publisher George Allen Ltd from the receiver - through until his death in 1968. It contains over twelve hundred boxes of correspondence, more than two hundred letter books, ledgers and other volumes concerned with the administration of company business, and nearly twenty thousand readers' reports.

Other T.E. Lawrence material held in the archives at Reading University is to be found in the Nancy Astor and Jonathan Cape collections (permission is required for access to the latter).

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