

Lawrence of Arabia and the Tides of Men

Thomas Edward Lawrence, who later changed his name to TE Shaw, is best remembered as “Lawrence of Arabia”, the hero of the Arab Revolt of 1916-18. His heroic image was created in some part by the famous American journalist, Lowell Thomas, whose syndicated reports of the war in the Middle East sensationalized both the Arab Revolt and Lawrence’s role in it. Lawrence is also remembered as the author of “*The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*”.

There are a myriad of photos, portraits, drawings and even movies of Lawrence, but one of my favourites is a study by the famous English artist MS Tuke of Lawrence as a youth about to take a swim with a friend, one of the many glowing studies of boys and young men and water for which Tuke was so famous...



Lawrence was born in Tremadoc, Caernarfonshire, North Wales, on August 16, 1888 and died, aged 46 in a motor-bike accident (which many say was suicide) on May 19, 1935. His father was a prominent member of the Irish aristocracy who deserted his wife to live with Lawrence’s mother, an English governess. Lawrence grew up in Oxford and later was educated at Jesus College where he gained First Class Honours for a brilliant thesis the title of which was *The influence of the Crusades on European Military Architecture – to the end of the 12th century*. In 1910 he started post-graduate studies, doing research into medieval pottery, but left this to go to the Middle East as an archeologist. He studied Arabic for a time before moving on to a dig-site

being conducted by the British Museum at Carchemish near to Jerablus in the northern part of Syria. While at Carchemish, he actually worked for a time with the famous English archeologist, Leonard Woolley.

World War I brought an end to these excavations and Lawrence returned to England where he waited for an opportunity to enlist and put his knowledge of Arabic and the Arab world to practical use in the war effort. What he did in the next few years is, of course, well known....

What is not so well-known is his relationship during his Carchemish years with a young Arab man originally hired as a water-boy but whom Lawrence singled out to train as his photographic assistant. The relationship was not one-sided, the young man helped Lawrence improve his Arabic while Lawrence taught him to read and write. Generally known as Dahoum, the young man's real name was Salim Ahmed, and on the initials of his name has rested a mystery which has fascinated academics and historians since Lawrence wrote a poem called "To S.A." as the dedication of his masterpiece, "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom".

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...*

Exactly what the relationship between Dahoum and Lawrence was has been a matter for speculation ever since their first meeting. Arab workers on the site at Carchemish were reported as being "tolerantly scandalized" by what they saw of the two men together, especially when, in 1913, they began actually living together and were seen to wear each other's clothes. Lawrence even carved a nude sculpture of Dahoum and placed it on their roof. Although this looks probably homosexual to our eyes, many

critics claim Lawrence realized how things looked but actually encouraged the gossip out of a sense of amusement. Others also point out that “homoaffectional” friendships were fashionable at that time in Western Europe (as in Waugh’s novel, “Brideshead Re-visited”) and were customary among Arabs. That Lawrence loved Dahoum however, is not disputed.

In the summer of 1913 Lawrence took Dahoum and the foreman of the dig, Sheik Hamoudi, whom he had become friends, back to Oxford with him. The three men attracted a lot of attention, as Hamoudi recalled long after the other two were dead:

"When Dahoum and I went to Oxford many wished to photograph us as we sat with him in our customary Arab clothes. After they took a picture, they would come and speak to him and always he would say 'No, No.' One day I asked him why he was always saying 'No, No,' and he laughed and said 'I will tell you. These people wish to give you money. But for me you would now be rich.' And he smiled again. Then I grew angry. Indeed, I could not believe I heard right. 'Do you call yourself my friend,' I cried to him, 'and say thus calmly that you keep me from riches?' And the angrier I grew the more he laughed and I was very wrath at this treachery. At last he said when I had turned away and would no longer look at him, 'Yes, you might have been rich, richer than any in Jerablus. And I - what should I have been?' and he paused watching my face with his eyes. 'I should have been the showman of two monkeys.' And suddenly all my anger died down within me."

Dahoum died in 1918 from typhus and Lawrence seems to have mourned him for the rest of his life. Whether Dahoum — Salim Ahmed — was the person to whom the dedicatory poem was intended has been the matter of considerable debate. Without going into it all here, I would like to pick some of what seem to me to be the most interesting parts of the evidence that Dahoum was indeed the person to whom the “Seven Pillars of Wisdom” was dedicated, as assembled in 2002 by Japanese scholar, Yagitani Ryôko¹ who writes:

First of all, let us examine Lawrence's own evidence. He left a penciled note on the flyleaf at the back of a book *The Singing Caravan*, written by Sir Robert Vansittart (1881-1957), TE's second cousin which is now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. It reads:

I wrought for him freedom to lighten his sad eyes: but he had died waiting for me. So I threw my gift away and now not anywhere will I

¹ http://homepage3.nifty.com/yagitani/tpc_en12.htm#note01a

find rest and peace. Written between Paris and Lyons in Handley Page.

This note, written in the aeroplane on his way to Cairo in 1919, was first printed in the biography written by Phillip Knightley and Colin Simpson, *The Sunday Times* journalists [Lives, Panther ed., pp.188-89]. They and Jeremy Wilson, the authorised biographer regard it as the earliest surviving outline of 'S.A.'.

In November 1919, discussing his motives in the Arab affair, TE wrote to G. J. Kidston, a Foreign Office official that: '*(i) Personal. I liked a particular Arab very much, and I thought that freedom for the race would be an acceptable present.*' Though, when they took Damascus, '*I found had died some weeks before: so my fight was wasted, and my future doings indifferent on that count.*' [MB, p.169]

This account perfectly echoes the epilogue of *Seven Pillars* [Penguin ed., p.684]:

The strongest motive throughout had been a personal one, not mentioned here, but present to me, I think, every hour of these two years. Active pains and joys might fling up, like towers, among my days: but, refluant as air, this hidden urge re-formed, to be the persisting element of life, till near the end. It was dead, before we reached Damascus.

One of the most interesting features of these quotes from Lawrence himself is the suggestion that his love for Dahoum was one of the underlying and sustaining motives for the huge and heroic effort Lawrence made during his campaigns in the Middle East and that his rejection of the fame his exploits had earned was not caused only by his sense of betrayal by the Allies in their carving up of the Arab lands after the war ended, but perhaps more importantly, that Dahoum had died before he could enjoy Lawrence's gift of independence to him.

Yagitani also quotes from a letter to R. V. Buxton, dated September 1923, where Lawrence wrote that: '*S.A. was a person, now dead, regard for whom lay beneath my labour for the Arabic peoples.*' [DG, p.431]

And from another, this time to his RAF friend, R. A. M. Guy in which Lawrence wrote in December 1923: '*...People aren't friends till they have said all they can say, and are able to sit together, at work or rest, hour-long without speaking. / We never got quite to that, but were nearer it daily... and since S.A. died I haven't experienced any risk of that's happening.*' [MB, p.253]

In later years, Lawrence seems to have attempted to camouflage the intimacy of his relationship with Dahoum and to mislead those questioning him as to the identity of the mysterious “S.A.” in his dedication saying things, like his explanation to his friend and biographer, Robert Graves that '*S.A., the subject of the dedication, is rather an idea than person.*' [ibid., p.55].

Perhaps by then, his memory of Dahoum was indeed more idea than person, just as Lawrence is to us now.