

FILM REVIEW

***Lawrence of Arabia: The Battle for the Arab World.* Produced by Lion Television in association with PBS and Devllier Donegan Enterprises. Written, produced, and directed by James Hawes. UK, 2003; color and black and white; 112 minutes. VHS, DVD \$24.98 ShopPBS.com; VHS \$54.95 ShopPBS.com/teacher.**

As the United States attempts to install a new government in present-day Iraq, this PBS documentary about T.E. Lawrence and Arab nationalism raises some eerie echoes. Winston Churchill called Lawrence "one of history's greatest men." Lawrence himself certainly tried to live up to that description with his pretentious *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), while the American journalist Lowell Thomas created "Lawrence of Arabia," that dashing and romantic figure of the desert. (In 1920s America Arabs were viewed by the general public as foreign and exotic, not as today when the image is one of the fanatical terrorist.) The entire Lawrence mythos was capped by David Lean's spectacular film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), starring the young and handsome Peter O'Toole playing a steely-eyed and intense Lawrence, although O'Toole is actually much taller than the rather short of stature Lawrence. Getting a bead on this enigmatic, psychologically, and sexually troubled figure has never been easy. Was he the daring and dashing figure who dressed as an Arab and wanted to promote Arab nationalism but was betrayed by the British government and agonized his whole life over that betrayal? Was he at heart just an officer in the British army where his loyalty ultimately rested? Or was he a masochistic poseur who straddled two worlds—the Arab and the British Empire—but found solace in neither as he hurdled toward his fatal motorcycle accident in 1935?

There have been numerous biographies of T.E. Lawrence, including Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia, The Authorized Biography of T.E. Lawrence* (1990), John Mack, the Harvard psychiatrist who wrote *A Prince of Our Disorder* (1976), and Michael Yardley who produced two Lawrence biographies, *Backing into the Limelight* (1986) and *T.E. Lawrence* (2000). Not surprisingly, both Mack and Yardley serve as "talking head" experts in the documentary. Director James Hawes also employed as historical consultants Malcolm Brown, author of the new biography *T.E. Lawrence* (2003), and Sulieman Mousa, who wrote *T.E. Lawrence: An Arab View* (1966). So if the figure of T.E. Lawrence is well known, if not completely understood, by both scholars and laymen, then what does this film tell about him that is new? James Hawes in an interview responded to just that question: "It provides a unique perspective of Lawrence from the Arab point of view We interview Arab men whose fathers fought beside Lawrence against the Turks, and Arab scholars that have studied him for years. These are people for whom this is not distant history, or something familiar only from a Hollywood movie, but their history." And Hawes does indeed try to present an Arab perspective through the use of such commentators as Youssef Choueiri, author of *Arab Nationalism*, Kamel Abu Jaber, ex-foreign minister of Jordan, Senator Alia Abu-Tayeh of Jordan, the great-granddaughter of Auda, who fought with Lawrence,

two other members of the Abu-Tayeh clan identified as "tribal historians," and a number of Arab informants who are old enough to have some sort of hazy memories of Lawrence and his time. For the serious scholar there is nothing new here and some of the interviews come off as too staged. But for average students at American universities or high schools the strong articulation of an Arab nationalism that sees the current state of Israel as part of a seamless web of European imperialism that goes back to the First World War may be revelatory. And the conclusion that Choueiri reaches in terms of Lawrence's loyalty sets the right tone: "The Arabs were his mistress, but he was married to the British Empire."

The film quite adequately dramatizes the strange career of T.E. Lawrence, beginning with his illegitimate birth in Wales in 1888, his student days, his growing fascination with the Middle East, his time as a British officer, "Lawrence of Arabia" fame, and then his enlistment in the RAF as an ordinary sergeant, and ending with the motorcycle accident that took his life. Director Hawes also deals quite explicitly with Lawrence's love affair with a young Arab man, his supposed lashing by the Turks that gave him sexual pleasure (Michael Yardley opines that Lawrence made the entire incident up), his suppressed homosexuality, and his masochistic tendencies toward self-mutilation. The documentary was filmed in Syria, Jordan, and the United Kingdom in many of the same places Lawrence had in fact been. The actor George Pagliero's Lawrence, dressed in turns in kaffiyeh and British military attire, will not be mistaken for Peter O'Toole's Lawrence. The film is done in the standard PBS mode of voice-over narration, "talking heads," archival footage, and reenactments, usually on a very limited scale, giving an amateurish impression. But there is only so much a director can do with this genre of documentary film without pushing out into the domain of large-scale cinematography.

Some reviewers have not been kind to this film, and this reviewer certainly agrees that some interviews seemed forced, that reenactments can become cloying after a time, and too much emphasis is placed upon Lawrence's psychological problems as an explanation for his actions. But still the film presents a reasonably sophisticated account of a complicated, troubled man in the context of Arab nationalism. While the serious historian of the Middle East might find the documentary lacking in content and analysis, the film can be deployed successfully as a teaching aid at the undergraduate and high-school level where many of these ideas will be new to students.

For better or worse, Lawrence was there when the maps of the Middle East were being drawn with profound implications for today. Without Lawrence, who convinced then Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill that the Hashemite dynasty enjoyed support in Mesopotamia, it would never have come to power in Jordan and Iraq. Indeed without Churchill and Lawrence backing the Hashemites, there would have been no modern Iraq. And the rest as they say is history.