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Book Review

Joel C. Hodson:Lawrence *of Arabia and American Culture: The Making of a Transatlantic Legend.* 1995, xvi + 195 pages. Available from: Greenwood Press, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881, USA.

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This study by Joel C. Hodson attempts to examine, as its title indicates, the emergence of the legend of Lawrence of Arabia (Thomas Edward Lawrence, 1888-1935) in American culture, and the dynamics of its unfading impact on the present. According to the author, "this study is neither a biography nor a critical examination of a specific aspect of Lawrence's life or works . . . the figure of Lawrence of Arabia is used . . . to illustrate Anglo-American cultural interplay, the power of popular culture machinery, and the way myths are made and propagated" (10).

The first three chapters (Chapter 1: "Lowell Thomas and the Origins of the Popular Legend of Lawrence of Arabia" ; Chapter 2: "Backstage at the Theatre"; Chapter 3: "Propaganda and Propagation," 11-58) investigate the role of the American journalist Lowell Thomas in the early propagation of the Lawrence legend in the United States, Britain and other English-speaking countries between 1919 and 1928. Hodson states that Thomas's role in the propagation of the Lawrence legend in the United States as well as in Britain was much more important than biographers of Lawrence have recognized. Hodson also stresses that Lawrence, being in a close relationship with Thomas until 1923, was aware of this creation of the myth about himself and even tolerated it. Discussing the motives of Lawrence's winking at this creation of the legend (Chapter 4: "Diffusion of the Legend, 1920-1940: The Cases of Colonels Lawrence and Lindbergh," 59-78), the author suggests that Lawrence, particularly during the period of the Paris Peace Conference and until 1921, committed himself to the Hashemite Arab bid for independence, while Thomas's legend-creating activities served him as a means for promoting the Arab cause.

Analyzing the possible reasons for the great appeal of the Lawrence legend to the British people and the Americans, Hodson suggests that for the British, the hero-figure of Lawrence could help them overcome the trauma of the war and the shabby

realities of post-war Europe. But as the author points out, it was not very obvious why Lawrence would appeal to Americans, who had sent their own soldiers to the European front and had their own cultural traditions of heroism.

Hodson tries to give four reasons to explain this phenomenon. First of all, the "special relationship" between the United States and Britain, "a natural affinity of the English-speaking peoples," made it easier for Americans to celebrate Lawrence. The representation of the Arab revolt as a fight for self-determination similar to the American war of independence, where Lawrence appeared as "a Lafayette figure" or even a "George Washington of Arabia," also helped Americans to sympathize with the Hashemite cause. Furthermore, the fact that the United States could produce only a few outstanding heroes during World War I, who were to lose their influence due to the circumstances of the immediate postwar years, increased the need for a hero the Americans could celebrate. Also, the Hollywood film productions in the 1920s, where desert sheikhs were appearing as romantic heroes, further facilitated the perpetuation of this legend. Hodson then describes the consequences and personal costs of being publicly admired, using the case of Charles Lindbergh as an example.

Chapter 5 ("Redefinition and Literary Reception, 1920-1940," 95-105) deals with Lawrence's literary activities from the 1920s until his death in 1935, as well as with the reception of his literary works in Britain and the United States. It emerges that Lawrence was in close touch with American avant-garde literary circles. Interestingly, his main literary *work,Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), first became publicly available in America. The following chapter, Chapter 6, ("Interlude,1940-1960: Lawrence and Hemingway," 95-105) discusses the literary influence Lawrence exerted on Ernest Hemingway, and on war literature from 1940 to 1960. Here Hodson comes to the conclusion that Hemingway probably used *Seven Pillars* to a great extent for the description of guerilla warfare in his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). Commercialization of the Lawrence legend, and production conditions of the 1962 Hollywood film *Lawrence of Arabia,* including controversies concerning the screenplay, are examined in Chapter 7 ("Commercialization of the Legend, 1960-Present: Lawrence and Hollywood," 107-129). The last chapter, Chapter 8, ("Assaying the Legends," 131-142) attempts to determine Lawrence's place as a heroic figure, as a writer, and as an individual exemplifying an anti-heroic existential figure. Though Lawrence played important political roles in the shaping of the Middle East during and shortly after World War I, his actual reputation is due to his confessional *Seven Pillars* as well as to his rejection of fame and social conformity. Hodson concludes that Lawrence's hope "to be better remembered as a man of letters than as a man of action" has been nearly fulfilled (82,135). An appendix (143-147) gives information about the published and unpublished sources concerning Thomas.

As stated in the introduction of the book, Hodson's study is in fact an illustration of the "Anglo-American cultural interplay, the power of popular culture machinery,

and the way myths are made and propagated," in relation to the person of Lawrence. Yet, one would have expected a more analytical and theoretical approach to this considerably fruitful research area.

This book is a more or less descriptive study dealing with the mechanisms of the creation of a heroic personality and its commercialization. From the viewpoint of the dominant thematic approach to the subject as well as to the sources, this book clearly consists of two parts. The main theme of the first three chapters is the relationship between Lawrence and Thomas, stressing the crucial role of the latter in the propagation of the legend of the former. I think that these three chapters constitute the most interesting and perhaps the most original part of the book. Here the author has used the heretofore mainly unused manuscripts of Thomas, concentrating on the material conditions of Thomas's public activities in London and New York during 1919-1928, and thus forming a kind of social-historical study at micro-level. The remaining five chapters constitute on the whole a cultural study of the reception of Lawrence as a hero in the American literature and film industries, and in various areas of popular culture from the 1920s until the present time. The reader feels a certain discontinuity between these two parts, insofar as the treatment of the subject is concerned. In the second part the stress is on the cultural products of the legend of Lawrence, but with little integration of the changing social and historical conditions in Britain and in particular in the United States during this lengthy period of more than sixty years.

Some of the arguments put forward by the author should also be considered more carefully. When Hodson discusses the possible reasons for the development of the strong popularity of the legendary figure T. E. Lawrence in America (Chapter 4, 61-65), on the top of the list he puts Winston Churchill's political-strategic notion that America and Great Britain have "a special relationship" as "the English-speaking peoples." Historically, a linguistic affinity between two countries does not necessarily lead to the emergence of a strong cultural interchange; and if it appears to be so, then it is probably due to factors more essential than the linguistic ones. As the second reason, the author rightly emphasizes that the American cultural-historical tradition was easily able to identify itself with the Arab national cause of independence. Within the context of this argument, one should also point out that in the late 19th and early 20th century European and American presses, the Ottoman Empire was largely portrayed as a corrupt despotic empire where Christians were tortured by heathen tormentors.The reports sent by American Protestant missionaries in Anatolia to the American press, in relation to the Armenian massacres in particular, strengthened the feeling that those populations under the "Turkish yoke" should be liberated. An observation made by Hodson concerning the literary interests of Lawrence is that, while during the last ten years of his life he closely followed recent American literature and formed a collection of the most important American literary works, two of Stephen Crane's works were absent from Lawrence's collection (the other ten titles of the author were present in Lawrence's library). One of theseActive *Service* (1899), is a novel based on Crane's

experiences in the Greco-Turkish war of 1897, and the other, *War Is* Kind(1899), a collection of poetry (Chapter 5, 88). One is tempted to ask whether Lawrence, in later life, perhaps tried to remain distant from the memories of the Ottoman Empire and World War I. Hodson's argument that Lawrence renounced everything that had to do with the war (Chapter 8, 139), strengthens this possibility.

Hodson's study of Lawrence of Arabia and his emergence as a transatlantic legend is a work which consists of two parts weakly integrated with each other. I think that, from a historical viewpoint, the first three chapters constitute the most important contribution to scholarly literature on Lawrence. This book is primarily directed to audiences interested in 20th century British and American cultural history, American popular culture, and in the biography of Lawrence between the years 1918 and 1935.