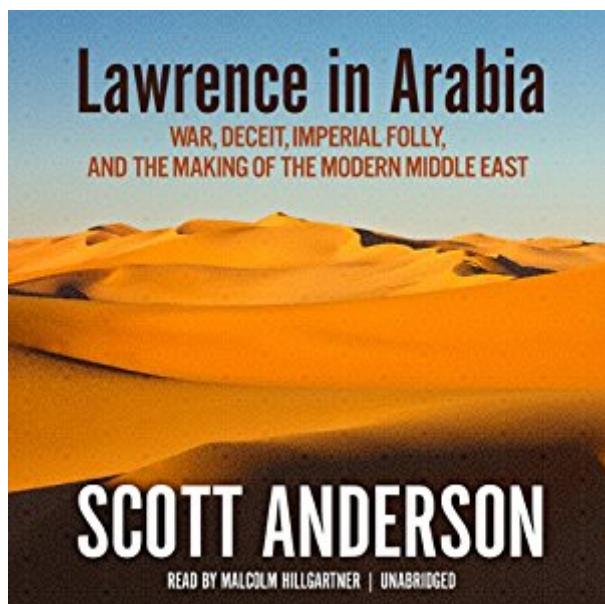


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Lawrence In Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly, And The Making Of The Modern Middle East



Synopsis

A thrilling and revelatory narrative of one of the most epic and consequential periods in 20th-century history: the Arab Revolt and the secret game to control the Middle East. The Arab revolt against the Turks in World War I was, in the words of T. E. Lawrence, "a sideshow of a sideshow". As a result, the conflict was shaped to a remarkable degree by a small handful of adventurers and low-level officers far removed from the corridors of power. Curt PrÆfer was an academic attached to the German embassy in Cairo whose clandestine role was to foment jihad against British rule. Aaron Aaronsohn was a renowned agronomist and committed Zionist who gained the trust of the Ottoman governor of Palestine even as he built an elaborate anti-Ottoman spy ring. William Yale was a fallen scion of the American aristocracy who traveled the Ottoman Empire on behalf of Standard Oil, dissembling to the Turks in order to gain valuable oil concessions. At the center of it all was Lawrence. In early 1914 he was an archaeologist digging ruins in Syria; by 1917 he was riding into legend at the head of an Arab army, as he fought a rear guard action against his own government and its imperial ambitions. Based on four years of intensive primary document research, Lawrence in Arabia definitively overturns received wisdom on how the modern Middle East was formed. Sweeping in its action, keen in its portraiture, acid in its condemnation of the destruction wrought by European colonial plots, this is a book that brilliantly captures the way in which the folly of the past creates the anguish of the present.

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Customer Reviews

They tell us to never judge a book by its cover, but surely with some books it is the title or cover art that draws us in and gives us an inkling of what to expect. Now and again there are books that somehow were mistitled, or at the very least the author could have done better. Scott Anderson's *Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Doubleday) falls into this latter bin. The main title is a clever twist on the usual reference to T.E. Lawrence, the very famous Lawrence of Arabia. And truly, the book does center primarily on Lawrence and his exploits in and for Arabia, but it is also so much more given the long list of characters in this very well crafted, written and researched book. First of all the book should have been titled *With Lawrence in Arabia* but the famous Lowell Thomas had already claimed that title in the first biography of Lawrence (actually it all began as *With the Turks in Palestine* by Alex Aaronsohn in 1917, and Thomas's *With Allenby in Palestine* and *With Lawrence in Arabia* published in 1924-and finally with Thomas in Salt Lake City in 1973, with this writer). While Lawrence and his exploits are front stage here, the additional cast of characters and new details about World War I in the Middle East is quite elaborate and enlightening. The list of players includes German agents Curt Prüfer and Max von Oppenheim, William Yale of Standard Oil and Socony, British agent and Zionist activist Aaron Aaronsohn (and Sarah Aaronsohn), Lawrence's Carchemish companion and later British intelligence officer Leonard Woolley, British intelligence commander Stewart Newcombe, the ruling Ottoman triumvirate: Enver Pasha, Talaat Pasha, and Djemal Pasha, General Edmund Allenby, and a host of others. One might ask why another Lawrence biography (Jeremy Wilson is definitive so far, and Michael Korda recently gave us one of the best recent volumes)? Oddly, there is still much to learn, for instance, Anderson gives new detail to the years before the Aqaba adventure and the war itself, and there is so much said about other crucial personalities and their vital role in the war in the desert, especially Aaronsohn, Yale, and Prüfer, indeed so many figures that were with Lawrence in Arabia. But clearly it is Lawrence who is at the center of the sand storm, and Anderson never loses sight of this. This is a very readable and engaging volume that is really hard to put down at times. And yes, there is new ground covered here to warrant another ride with Lawrence, this time with an array of equally colorful players with Lawrence in Arabia.

"Lawrence in Arabia" is an important work that delves into the history of how World War I was fought

in the Middle East. Though it was listed as optional reading in the 'Demystifying The Modern Middle East' course that I'm taking at Stanford University, I felt that a more thorough understanding of T.E. Lawrence's role in the struggle for Arab independence is important to understanding how the Middle East was shaped. The book is painstakingly researched and filled with places and names that soon become rather overwhelming. I felt like I need to take notes as I went along, and I did indeed highlight many sections in my Kindle. I'm sort of wishing for a "Cliff's Notes" type of summary now that I've finished the book. A few maps, charts and graphs would have been very welcome. Perhaps the author or publisher could consider hyperlinks to a companion website with maps and illustrations to make the subject more approachable and memorable (particularly since such graphics don't render well in the Kindle format). There are only 2 maps, as well as photographs at the end of the book. Other than that, it's chapter after very long chapter of dense text. I noticed that I was only 65% through the Kindle book, and the end of WWI was very near; it was only then that I discovered that nearly 30% of the book is dedicated to Acknowledgments, Bibliography, Index, A Note About the Author, and Illustrations. This would have been easier to detect in the printed book, and is a reminder to look at the table of contents before plunging into the ebook. As Anderson wrote in the introduction, "historians have never quite decided what to make of the young, bashful Oxford scholar who rode into battle at the head of an Arab army and changed history." I'm not sure that Anderson's book has changed the way historians will think about Lawrence, though he certainly did reveal how conflicted Lawrence was about his contribution to history, particularly after he left and returned to Britain. Lawrence was so disturbed about his time in Arabia that he refused the honor of Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Oddly, Anderson doesn't spend any time discussing Lawrence's family or upbringing, though he does discuss his career after he left the Middle East up until his untimely death at the age of 46. Though it's not an easy read, I'm glad I finished the book. It certainly helps to put into perspective the ongoing struggles in the Middle East and has added immeasurably to my understanding of this pivotal time in history.

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