“Morris was a giant”:
the Quest of T.E. Lawrence

Geoffrey Syer

Superficially, two more different figures can hardly be imagined than Morris and T.E. Lawrence, yet Morris had a great, if somewhat unrecognised, influence upon the latter during the whole of his life.1

Born and educated in Oxford, that most medieval of English cities, Lawrence was early drawn to Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites who had done so much to popularise the medieval period in the nineteenth century. Much of his boyhood was spent cycling in the area inspecting and recording churches, houses and castles. Later he widened his wanderings to the rest of the country and the France. His interest in Morris quickened when he took drawing lessons from E.H. New, the illustrator for Mackail’s biography of Morris. He began to soak himself in Morris’s writings; *Sigurd the Volsung*, he declared, was the best poem he knew.2 A great day came for him when he and a friend cycled out to C.R. Ashbee’s house in the Cotswolds and saw Morris’s own press and a collection of Kelmscott books.3 Particularly he wondered at the Chaucer; later when he possessed a copy he was to say of it that it was a marvellous possession and “very good to read”.4

From the reading of great books – he claimed, or someone claimed for him, that he had read every book in the Oxford Union Library – Lawrence turned, as Morris had turned, to a desire to make them. In the years before the First World War he planned, with a friend, to buy a windmill on a headland washed by the sea. Here on the lowest storey he would install his private press; above would be the living rooms. The limited editions of the classics would be bound in vellum stained with Tyrian dye or in accordance with the wishes of the individual purchasers. That all this was something of a fantasy which came to nothing was not because Lawrence was ignorant of the technicalities (although in all probability he was) but rather because of his restless nature at the time and his lack of a commercial instinct. The technicalities would have caused him little trouble for, rather surprisingly, he had a great aptitude for, and understanding of, mechanical things. It was, though, a long-lasting dream. Even when he had come back, greatly changed, from the war, he made the last payment on a property on the edge of Epping Forest (can he have had the early years of Morris in mind?) where, with Vyvyan Richards, he was to set up his press. Nothing came of this either, but he retained his intense interest in private-press books. At his rooms at All Souls he amassed a large collection of such volumes, including a near-complete set of the Kelmscott Press.5

In the years before the war Lawrence, pursuing his medieval interests, travelled in what was then Palestine and Syria, studying the Crusader castles. He travelled rough and not without considerable danger, being severely beaten up on one occasion. In this way he was able to pick up a wide knowledge of the Arabs. When war came he was working as an archaeologist under Leonard Woolley, but soon was recruited into
the Arab Bureau in Cairo where he was rather disliked for his unmilitary ways but respected for his knowledge of the desert and its tribes. He was a natural choice when it was decided to find someone to foment a revolt of the Arabs against their Turkish masters.

The proposed revolt was the latest manifestation of the Eastern Question, which had preoccupied British foreign policy in the area for the past half-century, as it had the policy of other European nations. Britain particularly did not want to see Russia, with its expansionist policies and constant desire for warm-water ports, meddling in the Ottoman empire as it decayed and disintegrated. A Russian occupation of Constantinople (Istanbul) would threaten the route to India, that lifeline of the British Empire. Disraeli's foreign policy was designed to ensure the safety of that route, but the Turkish repression of its subject peoples, Bulgarians, Arabs and later Armenians, alienated the liberals and radicals of the day. Morris took up the anti-Disraeli, anti-Turkish cause, becoming Treasurer of the Eastern Question Association. It was on this subject that he began to speak on political platforms and wrote his first political pamphlet. It was his first step along the road which led him to socialism, a road along which Lawrence could not wholeheartedly follow him.

The Turkish Empire was an unconscionable time a-dying, and in 1914 the question was still alive. Although the Russians and the British were now fighting on the same side there was still concern over the Suez canal and the route to India. The main purpose of the Arab revolt from the British point of view was to take Turkish pressure off the canal and other fronts (which it successfully did), but if the British and their Arab allies could get to Constantinople before the Russians then so much the better. Lawrence, with his love of the customs and arts of the then unspoilt Arab tribes, his dislike of the repressive Turks and his patriotic desire to see the Germans beaten was willingly drawn into the Arab revolt, so continuing Morris's earlier struggle.

There was also a deep personal motive behind his involvement as he revealed in his record of his exploits, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, both in the text and more cryptically in the dedicatory poem. But probably there was not a single motive but a bundle of several. We may make a guess that the unease with himself, everywhere apparent in the book, sprang from a number of causes: from his knowledge of his illegitimacy - far more important in his day than in ours; from uncertainty of his life's purpose; from the need to test his will and courage; from the need to come to terms with his sexual orientation, first indicated to him perhaps in the beating he received in his Crusader Castle days, later confirmed in the horrifying incident at Deraa. Perhaps we shall never know for certain what moved this complex man - not at least until psychology becomes an exact science. For every one of his numerous biographies there seems to be a different theory.

Whatever the reasons for it, his travail in the desert was some kind of quest or, as Jeffrey Meyers puts it, a search for spiritual self-redemption. This heroic quest is the thread which runs through Morris's later prose romances. Some critics have seen these as unimportant escapist trifles, but they are far from that. They are instances of a traditional genre which stretches from classical and medieval times to Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, even to - for the most part in a rather debased form - Western films and books. By pitting himself against difficulties and dangers the hero finds strength and opportunities to arrive at his desired end, at material or sexual success, at, in the more subtle instances, spiritual enlightenment. The genre finds many readers of all degrees.
of intelligence, experience and sophistication. That Lawrence knew Morris's romances well is shown by his frequent references to them in his correspondence. Even in the desert he remembered them, as he shows in a letter, written during a brief respite, to Vyvyan Richards: "...I'm always trying to blow up railway trains and bridges instead of looking for the Well at the World's End". Superficially and in the eyes of the world, his capture, with his Arab allies, of Damascus was a resounding success and made a significant contribution towards the winning of the war. But at a deeper level his quest had failed, for he came to feel that he had betrayed his Arab friends. The Sykes-Picot Treaty (of which he was well aware) divided up the Arab lands between the British and the French. The military victory, to which he had contributed, merely ended in a carve-up, in the good old nineteenth century way, between two great powers wishing to extend their empires or spheres of influence. He had handed over the desert tribes to another set of masters, less tyrannical and bloodthirsty than the Turks, perhaps, but masters nonetheless. They were industrialised masters whose standardising ways would ultimately destroy the customs, arts and independence of peoples for whom, whatever their weaknesses, Lawrence had great respect. Like Morris he disliked the dehumanising effects of industrialism. One of the reasons why he rather disliked India was that it was being forcibly adjusted to Western conditions. He did not foresee that the discovery of oil would do more to destroy Arab ways of living than would the British and French.

With his characteristic ambivalence Lawrence both welcomed and rejected the fame and success he had achieved. As one writer has aptly put it, he was forever "backing into the limelight". Yet he knew at bottom he had failed. In betraying his friends, the citadel of his integrity had been breached. The sub-title of Seven Pillars, A Triumph, as a close reading of the book will make clear, is meant as ironical. Perhaps his service in the ranks of the Tank Corps and the R.A.F. with its self-abnegation, asceticism and desire to associate with ordinary men was a last and somewhat forlorn attempt to continue his life in the desert.

If indeed he had failed his Morrisian quest, the influence of Morris was still strong with him. When he was in the R.A.F. much of his time was spent repairing and modifying motor launches, tasks for which he had considerable talent. For all his dislike of industrialism he loved the gadgets industrialism brought. It was, of course, through a gadget, a motorcycle, that he met his death in an accident in 1935. The motor launches provided him with opportunities to practise his abilities as a craftsman, as weaving and printing did for Morris.

Two other sides of Morris now inspired him, poetry and typography. In the desert he had thought of both: "My heaven might have been a lonely, soft arm-chair, a book-rest, and the complete poets, set in Caslon, printed on tough paper: but ..." Although nothing came of his projected private press he took a strong interest in the printing and binding of all he wrote for publication. To raise money for his press in 1926 he published in a limited edition his magnificent Seven Pillars of Wisdom. The title was originally meant for a book of travels which would be a companion volume to Ruskin's Seven Lamps of Architecture but, nothing coming of the project, he transferred the title, somewhat irrelevantly, to his account of his experiences in the war. Although he did not print it himself he supervised the details of its production. He would not have photographs, thinking they would spoil the appearance of the typeface (Caslon). Instead he commissioned Eric Kennington and others to produce line-drawings. The
result was a book of considerable distinction, although some of his friends (not including Bernard and Charlotte Shaw, who were his consistent supporters) did not much care for it. Its distinction has filtered down to modern editions, which are usually rather above the normal run of book-making today.

In his translation of Homer's *Odyssey* Lawrence came nearest to Morris. That they should both choose the *Odyssey* to translate and not the more static *Iliad* is significant. For both it was the heroic quest which attracted them. In his foreword to his own translation Lawrence complained that Morris's was "too literary". There is some justice in this remark. Thus "bane" and "fain" in the following passage are archaisms which verge on the dead poetic diction against which Wordsworth had so forcefully argued. On the other hand it can be said that Homer was not writing of his own times but of a society of some six hundred years before and that archaisms were not out of place. Lawrence found fault with practically all the previous translations. Perhaps the only really satisfactory translation of a work in another language is the one you make yourself.

Here is Morris's version of the opening lines:

Now all the other heroes, who forth from the warfare passed  
And fled from sheer destruction and 'scape'd each man his bane,  
Saved from the sea and the battle, at home they sat full fain;  
But him alone, Odysseus, sore yearning after the strife  
To get him back to his homestead, sore yearning for his wife,  
Did the noble nymph Calypso, the Godhead's glory hoard  
In the hollow rocky places; for she longed for him for Ayt,  
Yea and e'en when the circling seasons had brought the year to hand,  
Wherein the Gods had doomed it that he should teach his land,  
E'en Ithaca his homestead, not even then was he,  
Though amidst his kin and his people, of heavy trouble free.

And here Lawrence's prose version of the same passage:

By now the other warriors, those that had escaped headlong ruin by sea or in battle,  
were safely home. Only Odysseus tarried, shut up by Lady Calypso, a nymph and very Goddess, in her hewn-out caves. She craved him for her bed-mate: while he was longing for his house and his wife. Of a truth the rolling seasons had at last brought up the year marked by the Gods for his return to Ithaca; but not even there among his loved things would he escape further conflict.

It was in the production of the book too that Lawrence came near to Morris's typographical ideals. In collaboration with Emery Walker, Morris's old friend and helper, he chose the typeface, ink, paper and appearance. The result was another fine example of book production, although one rather more appreciated in the United States than in Britain.

Lawrence's life had been so full that we tend to forget that he was still a comparatively young man, only 46, when he died. Various people, notably Henry Williamson with his right-wing sympathies, were trying to bring him back into politics, but it is unlikely that they would have succeeded. Neither Morris's socialism nor Williamson's near-fascism would have been likely to tempt him. On the other
hand, had he lived a few years longer (he died in 1935) he might have helped his
country in the Second World War, but probably as an administrator rather than
politician or military man. His disillusion with politics was almost total after the
Versailles Treaty.

There remained poetry, above all Morris’s poetry. In a personal anthology (“Good
poems by small poets or small poems by good poets”) published later as *Minorities*
(1971) under the editorship of J.M. Wilson, there are ten poems by Morris. Although
he did not think that all Morris’s verse was of equal merit, Morris was “unquestionably
Lawrence’s favourite author”, as Wilson wrote. Had he lived Lawrence would have
carried on, vigorously, Morris’s traditions. “Morris,” as he wrote to Edward Garnett
in 1928, “was a giant”.

NOTES

1 Most of the facts about Lawrence in this article come from Jeremy Wilson, *The
Authorised Biography of T.E. Lawrence*, 1989. Although reliable as to fact, this
biography, like all the others, has some debatable conclusions and interpretations.
2 In Jeffrey Meyers, *The Wounded Spirit: A Study of ‘Seven Pillars of Wisdom’*,
1973, p.86.
3 Wilson, op. cit., pp.54–5.
1938, p.827.
5 Wilson op. cit., p.635.
6 The poem and the book are dedicated to “S.A.”. Various interpretations have been
given, but the most likely is that “S.A.” are the initials of a young Arab friend who
died of typhus in the war. C. Day Lewis in his preface to *Minorities* suggests (p.28)
that the initials represent a combination of a place, a village in Syria, and a person,
Dahoum Achmed, both important
7 Meyers, op. cit., p.80.
8 Quoted in Richard Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry*, 1969,
p.50.
9 In a letter to Fareedah el Akle, July 28, 1927 in Malcolm Brown, ed. *Letters of