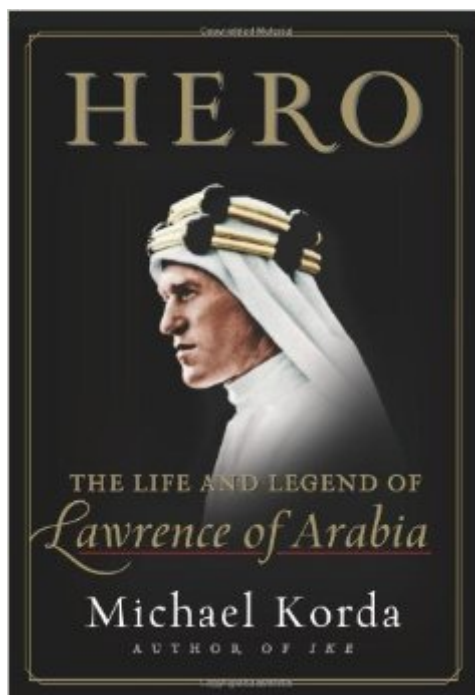


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Hero: The Life And Legend Of Lawrence Of Arabia



Synopsis

Michael Korda's *Hero* is the story of an epic life on a grand scale: a revealing, in-depth, and gripping biography of the extraordinary, mysterious, and dynamic Englishman whose daring exploits and romantic profile—including his blond, sun-burnished good looks and flowing white robes—made him an object of intense fascination, still famous the world over as "Lawrence of Arabia." An Oxford scholar and archaeologist, one of five illegitimate sons of a British aristocrat who ran away with his daughters' governess, Lawrence was sent to Cairo as a young intelligence officer in 1916. He vanished into the desert in 1917 only to emerge later as one of the greatest—and certainly most colorful—figures of World War One. Though a foreigner, he played a leading and courageous part in uniting the Arab tribes to defeat the Turks, and eventually capture Damascus, transforming himself into a world-famous hero, hailed as "the Uncrowned King of Arabia." In illuminating Lawrence's achievements, Korda digs further than anyone before him to expose the flesh-and-blood man and his contradictory nature. Here was a born leader who was utterly fearless and seemingly impervious to pain, thirst, fatigue, and danger, yet who remained shy, sensitive, modest, and retiring; a hero who turned down every honor and decoration offered to him, and was racked by moral guilt and doubt; a scholar and an aesthete who was also a bold and ruthless warrior; a writer of genius—the author of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, one of the greatest books ever written about war—who was the virtual inventor of modern insurgency and guerrilla warfare; a man who at the same time sought and fled the limelight, and who found in friendships, with everyone from Winston Churchill to George Bernard and Charlotte Shaw, from Nancy Astor to Noël Coward, a substitute for sexual feelings that he rigorously—even brutally and systematically—repressed in himself. As Korda shows in his brilliantly readable and formidably authoritative biography, Lawrence was not only a man of his times; he was a visionary whose accomplishments—farsighted diplomat and kingmaker, military strategist of genius, perhaps the first modern "media celebrity" (and one of the first victims of it), and an acclaimed writer—transcended his era. Korda examines Lawrence's vision for the modern Middle East—plans that, had they been carried through, might have prevented the hatred and bloodshed that have become ubiquitous in the region. Ultimately, as this magisterial work demonstrates, Lawrence remains one of the most unique and fascinating figures of modern times, the arch-hero whose life is at once a triumph and a sacrifice and whose capacity to astonish still remains undimmed.

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Customer Reviews

We live in an age of celebrity as created by an immense media industry. Lawrence of Arabia embodied the word celebrity; in fact he may have been the 20th century's first real celebrity as Lindberg came after him. This book cries out to be read by a readership that understands that heroes do in fact exist. This word hero has been much misused in modern day America to apply to people that the word was never intended for. Lawrence was very much a hero, as well as many other things. He was a military genius on a level with Napoleon. He also possessed a genius for guerilla warfare and his techniques are taught at West Point as we speak. Possessing a talent for writing, his Seven Pillars of Wisdom is considered a literary masterpiece. His direct actions changed the entire map of the Middle East, and the inability of politicians to adjust to the realities of this region that Lawrence saw so vividly have led to the chaos that we see in the Middle East today. Sheikh Hamoud had it right when he wrote so many years ago of Lawrence: My heart was iron, but his was steel. If you love great, gifted, writing on an immense topic describing a man that truly impacted and changed the world that he saw, then Michael Korda's biography of Lawrence of Arabia is for you. This is a 700 page narrative before footnotes and biography. The quality of the paper used in the book is fabulous, and this is due to Korda's lifetime in the publishing industry. The selection of the font and the feel of the book left nothing to chance. Korda thought through every aspect of this project and brought it off with flair, and panache.

The title HERO references Michael Korda's contention that T. E. Lawrence (T. E. Shaw, Lawrence of Arabia) wanted to become a hero and had the opportunity to become one and succeeded beyond his expectations. Thus he became one of the 20th Centuries first "celebrities" mostly due to the promotion of Lowell Thomas's highly successful lectures, films and book. Korda maintains that Lawrence was the Princes Diana of his time. (This comparison being a good way to provide today's reader with an idea of the impact Lawrence had on the media culture of his own time.) Despite the book being a bit uneven I found HERO a wonderful read. The first part through page 114 is a rather dry telling of Lawrence's major accomplishment in World War One. It covers Lawrence's meeting with Prince Feisal the background of the Arab revolt against the Turks and the Arab taking the port city of Aqaba. (The actual events are significantly different than shown in the great David Lean film.) This early flashback section contains important information and sets the tone for what follows but I doubt many will find it to be page turning reading. But keep going and don't give up. Because then the book takes off and is quite an enjoyable ride as Korda goes back in time to Lawrence's childhood, family, education (at Oxford), and his interest in archeology, the middle east, and crusader castles. Korda frames all this so we can see how Lawrence swept himself along with heroic self images (and many self doubts). As if Lawrence knew he was preparing himself for something big for he became one of a few who understood the Middle East. (In fact after the war Lawrence had Middle East solutions that if implemented may have minimized many of the events we see today.

By necessity consisting in large part of countless lengthy quotations from Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom, the author nevertheless fills in with a wealth of information and insight which I have never before seen, despite having read and re-read the work of Lawrence and many of his biographers almost religiously for many years now. The Preface is remarkable in that it points precisely to Lawrence's unique appeal, that he was "a hero not by accident, or even by singular act of heroism, but ... made himself a hero by design ... [and] became the victim of his own fame." The closing pages of Chapter 12 provide a touching account of Lawrence's funeral and the gifted description of his friend Robert Storrs of the moment the casket was closed. The collection of photographs is, to me at least, by far the best I have yet seen and is well-placed in the text. The clue to the full name of "S.A.", to whom Seven Pillars was dedicated, always and still assumed to be Dahoum, is something I have not previously noticed. One of Lawrence's many deadpan remarks which I have seen in passing before, but which struck me as particularly stinging and even more true today, was his cynical observation that America had a "particular combination of idealism and

commerce." That style is so very like many statements made by Feisal and directed at France. Of course anyone who has ever had the misfortune of working with a Frenchman is automatically an admirer of all things for which T.E. Lawrence fought. On Iraq, Lawrence, 90 years ago, "saw very clearly that the object should never be to invade or occupy territory with troops -- a waste of time, manpower, and money -- ... but to threaten punishment from the air, and only when necessary, carry it out.

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