

The 'Weather-Vane Soul' of Henry Williamson

Fred D. Crawford

In her two-part *'The Genius of Friendship'* Anne Williamson¹ focused on Henry Williamson's divided loyalties between two friends when one, T.E. Lawrence of Arabia, became the subject of a biography by the other, Richard Aldington,² which by its nature, was considered hostile. Even before the biography appeared, HW found himself caught between Aldington and the group that Aldington excoriated as the 'Lawrence Bureau'. During his research, Aldington, recognizing HW's loyalty to TEL, was reluctant to trust him fully. The 'Lawrence Bureau' later rejected HW for supporting Aldington both publicly and privately. HW, something of a fool among knaves, believed that he could ingratiate himself with both sides. He learned otherwise.

Aldington had decided to write TEL's life in November 1949, but HW did not learn about the project until mid-1950. He lent Aldington various out-of-print books (including his own *Genius of Friendship*) and offered first-hand views of TEL, assuming (as Aldington did at the time) that the book would be a popular and favourable treatment of TEL. From November 1949 through December 1950, Aldington's researches had not provided much, aside from frustration, with contradictory statements by TEL and others and a growing awareness, as he wrote to Alister Kershaw on 27 July 1950, that 'TE is the treasured possession of a clique and much essential information is withheld'.³ However, by January 1951, Aldington had made three important breakthroughs that gave new direction to his investigation.

First, by 2 January 1951, Aldington had learned directly from Lowell Thomas that, despite TEL's disavowals, TEL had helped Thomas extensively in the preparation of the 1919 film-lecture and the 1924 *With Lawrence in Arabia* that made TEL world-famous. Second, by 5 January, as the result of letters sent by intermediaries, Aldington had convincing evidence that TEL had lied when he claimed to have been offered the post of High Commissioner of Egypt. Third, Sir Ronald Storrs' indiscreet statement in the *Dictionary of National Biography* that TEL's father's real name was Chapman provided the basis for researches into TEL's ancestry. As the result of these breakthroughs, Aldington became certain that TEL was a self-serving and vainglorious liar whose reputation rested solely on his exaggerations of his exploits. For some time, HW remained unaware of Aldington's altered view of TEL. Between January and March, pursuing his new leads, Aldington sought information from HW without confiding the new context which gave the information different import. Knowing HW's affection and admiration for TEL, Aldington did not explain the new relevance of HW's answers to various inquiries.

In a letter that HW dated 'circa 25 July 1950', he had drawn Aldington's attention to the mystery of TEL's ancestry: 'Do you want particulars about TEL's parentage? The executors keep it very hush-hush.'⁴ After TEL's death, HW had heard rumours about TEL's irregular origins, but the details that he offered were an odd mixture of fact and fiction, as Aldington realized when he compared HW's theories with the Chapman lead he had found in Storrs' entry on TEL in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Writing to Aldington on 17 January 1951, HW referred to 'the Irish baronet, with five (four) daughters on one side, and several sons on the other,' who 'had left his other family,' which was true enough, but he also mistakenly connected TEL with the Nugent family, based on what he had heard from his close

friend, Dick de la Mare, and from the publisher Geoffrey Faber. He sent a magazine photograph of a purported cousin of TEL, Sir Terence Nugent, so that Aldington could compare for himself, adding, 'I heard only the Nugent name ... in May 1935, just after TEL's funeral.'

Aldington, who felt that his investigation had taken him beyond HW's knowledge of TEL, emphatically rejected the Nugent connection in his letter of 22 January:

YET, I still agree with you that there is some mystery, although I think the story you got is bull-dust, distorted on the way. Extensive researches are now under way, and something may or may not be discovered ... Meanwhile, do let me beg you not to put that Nugent rumour into writing again or even to tell it to anyone ... The Nugent story is a criminal libel (or slander) on Mrs. L. and on the two surviving L. boys. So perpend!

On 26 January, and again on 29 January, he informed HW that 'there is some evidence that TE's father's real name was Thomas Robert Chapman,' but added that 'This 'Chapman' may be a blind.' He added, 'I'll keep you informed, but please treat as confidential.'

Convinced that TEL had fabricated much of his own legend, Aldington became curious about TEL's entries in *Who's Who*. Aldington requested HW's help on 22 January:

Now, if you have time and willingness, there is something you can do to check on facts for me. You probably know that TE's entries in Who's Who, starting 1920, are varied and contradictory! I have the whole lot typed out here, and the alterations are curious and revealing. BUT...[sic] Is it possible that the first entry was made without his knowledge? My own recollection is that they sent me a form to fill up, but it's so long ago that I've forgotten (I now chuck them in the w.p.b. [waste-paper basket] unread), but it may be they forced TE to give them information by putting him in anyway. Now directly I approach somebody they know it is a biographer and are cagey or busy. Could you write them a quiet friendly letter – as an old friend of the late Col L. – you noticed recently in your Club that the entries in Who's Who vary greatly from 1920 to 1923 especially. Have they still the TEL files? Can they tell you if the first entry was from information supplied by him or was it compiled in the office? Is it possible for anyone to get into Who's Who without filling up their original form? Much apologies for troubling, matter of considerable interest to you personally, etc. Yours bulldustily, H.W.

That might get what I want ... Don't tell them but what I'm getting at is (a) the change he wanted made in his public effigy so-to-speak when he became a ranker, and (b) was the original his own picture of himself or did they take it from the Times and other publicity sources?

On 26 January, HW began his letter 'I am going to London next week and will call at the WHO'S WHO offices and see the great owl and try to get your answer', and ended with the handwritten note, 'I will write to you as soon as I find out from Who's Who – 'the greatest work of fiction published during the year.' However, instead of visiting the offices, he wrote to *Who's Who* on 28 January:

I wonder if you would be so good as to help me in a matter concerning a friend of mine, the late 'T.E.Lawrence' of Arabia. Looking in Who's Who of 1920, at the

Lawrence entry, I wonder if Lawrence himself wrote this? I know that generally the entries are contributed by the subjects themselves – as in the case of my own entry – but could it have occurred that the 1920 T.E. Lawrence entry was supplied by someone other than himself? I would be so grateful if you would be so good as to tell me.⁵

A. & C. Black, publishers of *Who's Who*, responded to HW on 31 January:

In reply to your letter received today we have to say that T.E. Lawrence apparently did not himself complete our form for the first entry to appear under his name, in Who's Who 1920. He did however himself amplify the entry for the 1921 edition and frequently modified it in subsequent years either on our annual proof or by personal calls at our office here.

Aldington wrote to HW on 5 February.

Good lad! That was what I am looking for – fact. It is a minor point, but one which has been raised and debated. Nobody else apparently thought of trying to find the truth before discussing the point. Indeed, one of the many very fatiguing aspects of this biography is that Lawrence's friends persist in giving forth opinions without any supporting facts.

Aldington did not stress the importance of the statement that TEL 'did however himself amplify' the 1921 entry, which included claims that TEL elsewhere repudiated. Had HW visited the *Who's Who* offices, Aldington would have had only HW's word for this statement, which *Who's Who* later tried to deny.

Aldington had concluded that TEL was a liar. On 4 January, Aldington had complained to HW that TEL had given 'contradictory accounts of the same event or motive' and that TEL's 'friends contradict him and each other. I sometimes feel that it would be easier to prove that he was the invention of a powerful clique than to discover what really happened.' HW's letter of 26 January reinforced Aldington's view: 'Now: Can it be that TEL was, as I suspected, as I know myself, a bit of a romancer? Surely that is all? He did tell me once that if he had a drink of any kind (alco[h]ol) he 'simply babbled any rot.'

Aldington regarded TEL's lying as far beyond mere romancing. On 10 February, Aldington had informed Kershaw that TEL was:

A fearful liar. I think he invented that battle despatch for which he got the D.S.O., and then got frightened and pretended it was 'a bitter parody'. Parody my arse. I believe the malaria caught at Aigues Mortes in 1908 destroyed him, and he developed just the same awful depression and bull-shitting that Roy [Campbell] has. Of course his war experiences developed it frightfully. It is a terrible and pathetic story, however you look at it.

Without revealing the specific reasons for his interest, Aldington asked HW on 27 February, 'Do you know if he always had recurrent attacks of malaria?' HW, as he replied on 4 March, did not know. However, a handwritten note in the margin of the first page of HW's letter of 8 March suggested a connection between TEL's posturing and his mother that reinforced Aldington's own views:

I suspect that something twisted TEL when still young. Was it too strong a mother?

It is awful, too, for a boy-genius to graft to himself an Idea. It kills him in the end. DHL [D.H. Lawrence] could see himself by writing. TE couldn't, truly. He had grafted Frankenstein to himself. Like Hitler, like so many others, including me. I know exactly when I started, & how, & why: and I still dread to face it. It was the start of PRÉTENTIOUSNESS – the pretender. TEL is supreme example of a boy-youth deviated from his real self.

Aldington had pursued another theory in his letter to HW on 27 February:

Also may I have a brief statement from you (and permission to quote) giving the world the true story about that note on Lady Chatterley? It is both interesting and important. Now that I know his mind and work better I should suspect the statement on purely internal evidence as not his.

Months earlier, Aldington had learned from David Garnett that HW had claimed authorship of a short critical comment about *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that Garnett had identified in *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence* as a note by TEL. Garnett had written to Aldington on 27 June 1950.

Williamson claims that that letter from T.E.L. to him about D.H.L. was from him to T.E.L. But the original was checked by A.W. Lawrence & (I believe) by E.M. Forster. And I cannot believe that A.W.L. could have made the mistake over T.E.'s handwriting. It is a peculiar thing. But I think that Henry Williamson is probably wrong.

Eight months passed before Aldington asked HW, who thought that Aldington simply wanted to clear up a simple factual detail. However, Aldington had become interested in this question of authorship only after he saw its connection with an implication that HW would have repudiated. As Aldington had written to Kershaw on 2 January 1951,

There is some unresolved mystery about [TEL], which has many aspects, one of which I am sure is homosexuality. You will be staggered when you see my collections of his anti-hetero and pro-homo statements. The only exception is that Lady C. one, which I now feel sure Henry did write.

Aldington obviously thought that since the *Lady Chatterley* note was conspicuously at odds with TEL's 'anti-hetero and pro-homo statements', showing that HW had written it would support Aldington's contention that TEL was a practicing homosexual.

Not knowing why Aldington thought the matter important, HW responded at length on 4 March:

About the 'Lady Chatterley' passages. This happened. When DHL died I wrote out a scrap, meaning to send it to the Daily Express, for whom I had written articles off and on since 1920. But I did not send it. Somehow it got into my bundle of letters from TEL and when he died, and the Trustees were asking for letters of TEL, I sent on the bundle, unaware that my DHL 'scrap' was among them. Later, the bundle came back, having been, I suppose, copied. I did not open it, beyond cutting the top of the envelope. Some time later, when I bought the D. Garnett-edited LETTERS OF T E Lawrence, I found to my surprise that DHL reference among the printed letters. It

seemed familiar; but I could not recall TEL writing it to me. I did nothing for some time; then, turning out the letters, I think about 1938 or 1939, I found my scrap among them and at once looked to the originals of the letters and found it printed there.

It so happened that I mentioned this to the Features Editor of the Daily Express when next in London, and a columnist named Tom Driberg ('William Hickey' of the Express column) was there. He asked me to write a certain sentence on a piece of paper. I did so. The next day in his column I saw a photograph of a line of TEL's writing, and my duplicate beside it. The writing seemed to be identical. This seemed to be the explanation of why my DHL 'scrap,' by accident among the TEL Letters, was taken to be the handwriting of TEL.

HW enclosed the original 'scrap' and added, 'Please quote anything of mine in this letter, or in the book *Devon Holiday*, sent separately, that you wish.'

Aldington acknowledged receipt on 7 March and then commented,

I think we ought to have the document photographed, and (with your permission) I shall do my best to get it into the book ... Not only is it obviously your handwriting but the sentiment and thought are wholly alien to TEL's, for he told that Armenian pansy Altounyan – is it? – that Lady C. 'lifts the lid off – nothing.' It is also entirely at variance with all the other pronouncements on sex scattered through his letters and writings.

Ultimately, Aldington's book did not quote the 'scrap' but discussed its authorship in a long note, summarizing the details as HW had outlined them.

HW had also provided a different type of help on 4 March, when he sent Aldington not only copies of several letters from TEL to HW, but also two original TEL letters. In his TEL book, Aldington drew from TEL's previously unpublished 2 April 1928 letter to HW:

In an unpublished letter to Henry Williamson, Lawrence apologised for typing: which he says he hated as he claimed that his long experience with print had taught him to respect it. He should have said that his experience was not with print but of talking about printing, for all he ever did as a printer was to have one book set up by the 'Monotype' process. (RA TEL, p. 52).

Due to editorial oversight, he drew from the same letter to make the same point in stronger terms some pages later (RA TEL, p. 321).

On 10 March, Aldington asked HW about the telegram that TEL sent to HW minutes before TEL's accident from which he never recovered. Clarification was necessary because HW's accounts differed considerably. His actual letter to TEL, dated 10 May 1935, had asked whether TEL wanted to see the typescript of Victor Yeates's posthumous *Family Life*. His *T.E. Lawrence by His Friends* essay (1937) referred to a letter expressing hope that TEL and Hitler could meet in the interests 'of an Anglo-German friendship, the beginning of the pacification of Europe.' In *Genius of Friendship* (1941), 'With Lawrence of Arabia's name to gather a meeting of ex-Service men in the Albert Hall,' there might be 'a whirlwind campaign which would end the old fearful thought of Europe (usury-based) for ever... He [HW] must go at once to Egdon Heath and tell the only man in England who could bring it about.'⁷

Aldington asked HW, 'What possible result of a practical nature could come from

the meeting between a megalomaniac dictator of an Achtzigmillionenvolk and an ex-Aircraftman with thirty bob a week and a melodramatic past?' Aldington's scepticism was justified. As Anne Williamson has pointed out, 'nowhere in the correspondence between [TEL and HW], nor in HW's diaries, or private papers have we found any mention of fascism or Adolf Hitler in connection with T.E. Lawrence' and 'there is no evidence that HW had any association with the BUF until late 1937, over two years after TEL's death.'⁸

On 14 March, HW sent his response, yet another variant. He told Aldington the Albert Hall meeting story but referred to wanting TEL to see not the typescript of Yeates's book, but proofs of his own *Devon Holiday* (mentioned in the 10 May 1935 letter in a different context). His comments should have made Aldington more wary:

Later, when he was dead, His brother wrote, 'There is no trace of him having received your letter about an Albert Hall meeting.' 'Are you sure you sent it?' Then he wrote (I have lost his letters, with many more, on the farm-ruin), 'Do you really [mean] to liken him to Hitler?' I may have thereupon modified in proof my article for the book on TEL by his Friends. I can't be sure. But about this time I had moved to Norfolk, in a frantic condition...

Aldington found HW's story at odds with other evidence, as he wrote to Kershaw on 16 March:

Did I say Henry sent along all his unpublished TEL letters? Not a word of politics, in spite of [A.S] Frere's dark hints that TE and Lloyd were planning some fascist coup, and Mosley stole a march on them. Don't believe it. Don't believe TE had any ambition but to live very quietly and die easily. Partly the malaria. He had awful fits of post malarial depression, like Roy's.

Aldington wrote to Kershaw on 21 March.

Henry baffles me with multitudinous letters and copies of his old books profusely annotated. His logic also baffles me. He says he hoped for 'peace,' not from poor harmless Chamberlain, but from a screeching maniacal war-monger whose position was based on denial of a military defeat which I myself witnessed, and whose entire policy was devoted to destroying the treaty of Versailles by armed force. Whereof we have seen the sequel.

HW sent Aldington even more reason for caution on 27 March: 'Now A W Lawrence wrote to me and said that there was no trace of TEL having had the letter I mentioned sending to him just before he died. 'None was found in the cottage. Are you sure you sent it?' He had made it clear that he was not entirely certain himself, that he might not have mailed the letter, and that no documentary evidence had surfaced.

Despite his reasons for scepticism, Aldington included HW's story in the book: 'Strangely enough, Lawrence's sudden death was directly involved in this toying with the idea of Fascist dictatorship. A friend had written to him suggesting a meeting between Lawrence and Hitler.' Aldington then emphasized the absurdity of such a meeting – 'The snag about this was, that while Hitler certainly commanded Germany, Lawrence didn't command anything' – treating such inflated views of TEL's importance as absurd (RA TEL, pp. 386-87).

Aldington, aware of HW's affection for the memory of TEL, had not been as forthcoming about his findings with HW as with Kershaw, to whom he wrote on 21 March, 'Henry seems to me a mixture of a nature-faker, our motoring correspondent, and a neurotic loon. If I am unjust, correct me.' However, HW had begun to wonder about Aldington's treatment of TEL's shortcomings. After Aldington's letter of 10 March referred to Liddell Hart as 'the 'penny-a-Maginot-liner,' ' HW wanted to know on 14 March, 'Why are you so derisive about Liddell Hart? Is he a naughty man? He does not blather, does he? I don't know him. I think you are chucking balls at a cocoanut [sic].' Aldington's letter of 20 March had commented that, in *The Mint*, TEL had drawn 'such a pathetic picture of himself starving and cadging lunches at his Club!' HW asked on 27 March,

Do you hate TE Lawrence? Odd feelings come out of some of your paragraphs. I suppose your idea is to put all on a basis of reality, without bunk, self-deception, misrepresentation, and romantic bunk. That is good. But the word cadge is a pretty strong word. It makes me wonder.

On 31 March, HW wrote to remind Aldington of the importance of mitigating his tone. He cautioned Aldington that 'you give a pat, to you it is a pat, but to others it is a terrific blow.' He urged, 'Don't call him a romantic, a homosexual, a braggart, a phoney, a guttersnipe (as that ass Storrs did; the class-conscious ninny...), a hero, or this or that... Now please do us a book of your wonderful characterisation and descriptions, and forget right or wrong, won't you?' He ended, 'You will write a fine book, Richard. A pearl from the irritation. If you do get dreadfully in a fix, I'll come out and see you through it. No one need know.' HW's suggestions were not effective. Aldington wrote to Kershaw on 12 April, 'Henry is absolutely furious with me, partly because I won't accept his sentimental tosh about TEL.'

Aldington's 30 August letter to Kershaw summarized his views:

You must remember that since we got that go-ahead from [Raymond] Savage I have found out the whole secret of TE's birth, almost overwhelming proofs of his homosexuality, his written admission that he did not stick it out at Deraa but yielded to stop the flogging, and a whole set of unpublished letters [to Charlotte Shaw] at the B.M. [British Museum] which prove his bastardy and the fact that 'one of the three or four reasons' for his joining the RAF was to get away from his mother. Also I am forced time and again to bring together conflicting testimony which leaves one no option but to admit that he was lying...

Apparently Aldington did not mention the project to HW for a while, for on 3 February 1952, HW asked, 'Have you done with the biography and now [gone] on with your novels?' Aldington replied on 6 February to bring him up to date: 'I am quoting as little as possible from unpublished material, for obvious reasons. The Lady Chatterley document I want to reproduce as it is important to a chain of evidence.' By 25 March, however, Aldington wrote that he had 'had to cut the page about Lady C. scrap, and so there will be little point in reproducing it.' On 4 April, he hinted at a connection between the 'scrap' and TEL's sexual practices:

I have finally put the story of the Lady C. piece as a long end footnote to a brief chapter on Lawrence's sex life. Obviously, I couldn't pass over so important a topic in silence, but I have pointed out that there are no known love affairs in his life and no evidence of his sex habits. I have therefore done no more than bring together a number

of his most striking pronouncements on sex – either carefully studied as in Seven Pillars or thrown off on the spur of the moment in Letters – and ‘leave it at that’. If there is any judgment to be formed, the reader must do it for himself... The footnote then goes on to explain the accident about the Lady C. note. It is important to get this clear because the note is so different from any pronouncement made by T.E.L.

However, after Aldington finished his manuscript and then returned the letters and ‘scrap’ to HW on 21 April, HW’s acknowledging letter of 29 April indicates that he had overlooked the hint. HW referred to the ‘TEL book, which you say is unexceptionable and the truth. I know it is...’ At this point, HW was still ignorant that he had played an important if unwitting role in supplying important evidence for conclusions that he himself rejected.

Aldington sent off his manuscript for typing during the first week of April 1952, but his publisher, William Collins, did not receive a copy until the end of July. From then through the end of 1953, Aldington found himself subject to pressures from Collins’s libel and copyright lawyers, Joynson-Hicks, as well as to numerous ‘editorial’ suggestions to revise his manuscript in TEL’s favour. This made him even more suspicious of attempts to suppress him and hardened his already staunch resistance. His distrust of TEL’s partisans, among whom he numbered HW as well as his own publisher, increased.

On 26 November 1952, months after the manuscript had gone to the publisher, Aldington wrote to Kershaw, ‘I once thought of asking Henry about the Vansittart’s [sic] and the land, but desisted, knowing that if he found anything he would instantly publish in the Daily Express.’ HW, to the contrary, had fully honoured Aldington’s request for confidentiality. However, because HW persisted in his view of TEL as a hero, Aldington wrote to Kershaw on 9 March 1953 to include HW among those not to review the book:

In case you haven’t it, this is my main list of bars: Prof [A. W.] Lawrence, David Garnett, Liddell Hart, Robert Graves, Vyvyan Richards, Storrs, Henry, Sitwells, Raymond Mortimer. What I would like is a set of really impartial and competent reviewers, but where are they to be found?

That Aldington was debunking TEL became public knowledge on Tuesday, 19 January 1954, when the ‘London Diary’ column of the *Evening Standard* announced.

The reputation and integrity of Lawrence of Arabia are about to come under the most devastating attack ever launched upon them. A book is due for publication in May or June which the publishers claim will ‘erase Lawrence from the pages of history, except as the creator of a myth that was too readily believed by a credulous world.’

The column reported Aldington’s rejection of TEL’s claim that he had been offered the post of High Commissioner of Egypt, reported that Aldington ‘dismissed’ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as ‘a work of quasi-fiction’, and added that Aldington had never met TEL. This announcement alerted the ‘Lawrence Bureau’, which immediately began to bring pressure on Aldington’s publisher to suppress the book and then investigated courses of legal action. It also made HW aware that his dual loyalties to TEL and to Aldington would land him in the midst of heated controversy.

HW learned from the *Evening Standard* that Aldington’s book was hostile to TEL and that Collins was Aldington’s publisher, which was also unsettling. Collins had treated him shabbily. He had written to Aldington in March 1950 that ‘I got the

biggest advance in my life for [an unwritten novel] – £500 down & £500 when done...’ However, Collins demanded five rewrites and then decided to abandon publication. Even so, Collins demanded that he return £150 of the £500 paid when he had sent the manuscript, as he told Aldington on 17 January 1951. Meanwhile, Aldington had shifted from Evans Brothers to Collins in October 1950, but he did not mention this to HW. When HW wanted to know why the TEL biography was not on the Evans Brothers list of forthcoming books, Aldington wrote on 18 December 1952: ‘Gist is – Evans paid advance of 1750 pounds. Alister after reading book discoursed of it to another publisher who at once offered 4500 pounds. Evans most generously agreed to pass it on. Transfer took much time.’ On 22 December, HW wrote to congratulate Aldington’s ‘Splendid news!’ and, on 30 December, added, ‘I am still glowing with your success over your TEL biography. I know what you have done; I saw you working, I knew your form, the rest (WORK) made it inevitable.’

Months later, on 14 September 1953, Aldington wrote to HW to deprecate the amount of the payment of such a large publisher’s advance:

My big advance on the TEL is due to the fact that he is the only figure of [World] War I still remembered, that I am the only person who has taken the trouble to examine every bit of evidence available, and so discover a lot which had passed unnoticed, and put it down in a more or less readable way. It is an exception. ... I’m sure it now goes by the individual book, and not as of old, by author’s general reputation.

Even then, Aldington did not identify the generous publisher as Collins.

Within a few weeks of the *Evening Standard* announcement of 19 January 1954, various ‘Lawrence Bureau’ members, despite Aldington’s repeated insistence to Collins on confidentiality, had access to proofs of Aldington’s book. Some, including Eric Kennington and Basil Liddell Hart, saw the entire book at Bumpus’s bookshop. Others, such as Ronald Storrs, saw those pages relating to themselves at Collins’s offices. Still others, including David Garnett, saw substantial extracts that Liddell Hart had copied for distribution among his wide circle. In the proofs, the ‘Lawrence Bureau’ found much to suggest that HW had been Aldington’s witting and willing accomplice – the explanation of the *Lady Chatterley* ‘scrap,’ references to TEL’s unpublished letters to HW, the association of Hitler with TEL’s final telegram, and even an acknowledgement of HW’s permission (instead of the publisher’s) to quote *Genius of Friendship*. Since Aldington cited the 31 January 1951 letter from *Who’s Who* without naming HW as the recipient, the ‘Lawrence Bureau’ was not immediately aware that HW had been Aldington’s go-between with A. & C. Black.

On 15 February, Aldington complained to HW about the *Evening Standard*’s misrepresentation of the book, which he called ‘not altogether just to three years of struggle to get at facts which too often elude one, and are so recorded.’ Aldington also took ‘strong issue with’ HW’s suggestion that Aldington debate Lowell Thomas publicly:

No doubt that is what the newspaper public would enjoy, and it is one of the many devices invented to stop a man getting on with his work. But my book is complete in itself and is not a matter for debate in the sense that the facts recorded can hardly be disputed, least of all by Thomas. What can be disputed is the interpretation, but that is endless, and the argument is best left to those who have not spent weary months

laboriously digging out and anxiously pondering the evidence. Moreover, it is surely absurd for people and papers to offer opinions on a book they have not seen!

Aldington wrote to Alan Bird about HW's suggestion on 19 February, linking HW specifically with the 'Lawrence Bureau'.

Henry Williamson, in true Bureau style, writes suggesting a radio debate between me and Lowell Thomas! In other words I, who have always refused to go on the air, am to meet an American expert in double-talk and bull-dust on the medium he abuses daily! Merci. But you see how careful I must be. The newspapers, of course, want to see a dog-fight; and I am not going to fight.⁹

When Aldington wrote to HW on 22 February, he provided fuller explanation of his position:

Lowell Thomas – an exceedingly clever and gifted public mountebank, an excellent extempore speaker. It would be ludicrous and unfair for me to meet him on that ground. When he has to do is to examine the facts. Collins have misrepresented me by their sensational 'erasing from history', which I never said and don't believe. I delve into sources everyone else has neglected (or hadn't available), try to get at the facts, state pro and con, and leave the reader to judge. Sometimes the evidence seems conclusive (but might be explained away) [;] usually, it is doubtful... I am sure when you get the book you'll see I've leaned over backwards to be fair. But there's an awful, awful lot which needs explaining.

He then offered 'a hint – if you have any TEL stuff, SELL IT NOW; Compris?'

Before the *Evening Standard* announcement, HW had arranged to publish his two-part 'Threnos for T.E. Lawrence' in the May and June numbers of the *European*.¹⁰ In the first part, he reprinted a good deal of what he had written in *Genius of Friendship*, but first he commented on Aldington's forthcoming TEL biography. He recalled Aldington's early perplexity with contradictory statements by and about TEL:

In the end, he declared, he would have to put down the facts, and the findings, and let them speak for themselves.

But this I will declare now: Even if the much-publicised (by others) and mortifying (to 'T.E.') Arabian Adventure turns out to be moonshine or mirage, it will make no difference to my feeling about 'T.E.' himself, as I knew him and perceived what he truly was, a wonderful man. (p. 48)

Such public tolerance of Aldington was anathema to the 'Lawrence Bureau,' which was desperately seeking any information that might discredit Aldington. After 'Threnos-I' appeared in early May, Eric Kennington approached HW to learn more about Aldington, and HW was able to provide information about Aldington's impressive advance for the book. Kennington jotted a note dated 20 May to record that he had told Liddell Hart that 'Coll. pd. £4500 to R.A. (news from Williamson) & asked The Daily Exp. £10000 for [serial] rights. (from the editor).'¹¹ Liddell Hart passed this information to several of the 'Lawrence Bureau,' which frequently referred to Aldington's having written an abusive biography of TEL solely for money.

'Threnos-II,' which HW had been writing on 31 January, appeared in June. HW

reiterated that 'I have seen neither proofs nor copy of Aldington's biography. [Not published at that time.] But I do know some of the contradictions which have, apparently, been checked and cross-checked by the biographer...' (p. 59). HW addressed TEL in a way that would have bothered both Aldington and the 'Lawrence Bureau,' for different reasons:

Were you conscious underneath your dither, despite the Arab robes, of that name of convenience, 'Lawrence'? Is that the real reason why you refused all decorations? Were you afraid that one day one of those newspapers, making money by sensation, might risk an action for libel, and print a photograph of your birth certificate? Did you, in fear, instinctively use words to conceal your true self, which was the quality of gold beaten so fine that it quivers in stillest air and is near-transparent? Did you blurt out startling 'facts' to break a constriction with unclear people? Was it fun, Irish blarney, to embroider a tale you did not really want to tell, always because of the haunting need to conceal the 'reality' of Ned Lawrence who, with no real glee and certainly with dread, had become the Lowell Thomasian Uncrowned King of Arabia?...

...And you, I think, would be the last person to blame any biographer who accepted a contract job and then did his best to say what happened... (p. 60)

However, by the time this appeared in June, HW had already altered his position considerably. He indicated his change of heart in a letter to Kennington on 5 June:

I have got the Home Letters for review in John O'London's Weekly. A glance at them shows that T.E. was built on truth, instinctively... These letters prove, if no other evidence were required, that such a man ... could and never would need to establish himself by lies and charlatanism... I just wanted you to know that I fully realize what rot my Threnos is:... any page of Home Letters by T.E. shows the reality in words. You need fear no more for T.E. being slandered. What Churchill has said will be the verdict of posterity. [i.e. 'A rare beast, does not breed in captivity']

In the same letter, HW attributed this change in outlook partly to something he had learned about Aldington and partly to unpublished letters by TEL that Kennington had shown to him:

I saw a very old friend of Aldington yesterday, and learned that he had a gentle, easy father, and a will-to-power mother whom the son hated... Thank you for asking me to read those letters you have -.

How I wish that R.A. could have seen them years ago, or have known their truth - he needed, and he needs, so desperately to be believed, to be warmed, to feel the warm kindness of his own people from whom his mother's pathetic condition alienated the little boy.

Even while HW was distancing himself from Aldington, Aldington was trying to soften the blow of his book for HW. In his 'Introductory Letter to Alistair Kershaw,' Aldington had stated, 'You will recollect that a friend of ours who had known Lawrence neither wisely nor very well hinted strongly to us of a family scandal, and that I refused at first to believe it.' He wrote to Kershaw on 27 August,

I am writing to Henry to thank him for the article I haven't read and shan't read.

Talking of which since we are being Bonamparted into so much kindness to all and sundry, will you turn to page 12, lines 10-9 from foot, and cut the words 'who had known Lawrence neither wisely nor very well.' This though absolutely true, is a crack we might spare the old Henry.

The 'crack' did not appear in the published version (RA TEL, p. 2).

The November issue of the *European* included HW's review of *The Home Letters of T.E. Lawrence and His Brothers*, in which he repudiated his earlier misgivings about TEL and thus withdrew his support of Aldington:

Recently I wrote about [TEL's] possible fiction-life; his Irish blarney in embroidering his tale, inventing adventures, exaggerating his exploits from a sense of fun, self-scorn, or un-easiness. Since I wrote my Threnos in the May and June numbers of The European, I have been shown papers and letters which dispel all doubt. He was entirely truthful; and the records will eventually prove it. If there were occasional small discrepancies, when writing of details years later in letters, they were those of a man, sometimes savagely self-deprecatory, writing too many letters to too many people.¹²

Kennington wrote to Liddell Hart on about 25 November that 'Current European (Nov.) shows Williamson has changed back – with sincerity.'

In a handwritten letter dated 10 December, his only 1954 letter to Aldington known to have survived, HW made a futile attempt to put Kennington into Aldington's good graces:

Erik [sic] Kennington writes that the Ypres part [of HW's Fox Under the Cloak] is the best that he has ever read of the 1914-18 war: & should be, after 40 years of meditation & shearing-off of angry moods of a personal nature. He says, incidentally, that your Hero [RA's 1929 novel Death of a] is all true, and that he does not forget that you & he are brothers of the Tin Hat.

(Aldington, more likely to put Kennington in the brotherhood of the Tin Head, could not have welcomed the association.) HW then claimed that in the TEL controversy, he could sympathize with both sides:

Having said that, I beg to be excused all buffets & counter-buffets concerning another subject! You will [be], & are, also excused. I have heard & seen many letters, papers, etc & have kept my own feelings in water-tight compartments. I can run with the hare, sympathise with the hounds, know the huntsman's mind, the whippers-in, the Master's, the Committee's, the rabbit's, the foxes', & all the lot – Noli me tanger – a proper whoremaster maybe, but there 'tis – a whoreson collector of varying ideas and opinions & why they are what they are.

Aldington was not appreciative of that point of view, which he regarded as intellectually dishonest.

A week after his book had appeared, Aldington responded on 7 February 1955 to a letter from HW (now lost):

I thought you wouldn't write to me again, but then I see you haven't read the book. Your stories of childish lies don't excuse him. He was a phoney, a liar and a praiser of pederasts, and that's that. If you, like Storrs,... didn't know it, more fool you...

I now sit back, and leave England to judge. The evidence is before a very large public. No fact of the slightest importance in the book has been or can be disproved. If T.E. Lawrence remains England's hero, that's up to England.

On 12 February, Aldington offered some sound advice: 'Keep out of it, Henry. never mind which side. It is a very dirty business, and I wish I had never got mixed up in that gang of jerks and worse.'

At the same time, HW was trying to placate members of the 'Lawrence Bureau,' but with little success. Kennington expressed his lack of confidence in HW's ability to maintain his stance in a note to Liddell Hart dated February 1955: 'I have much evidence re Williamson's weather-vane soul. R.A. redirected him. Then I re-directed him, but expect him to swing again.'

HW also felt belated qualms of conscience regarding the *Lady Chatterley* 'scrap' because he had never troubled to inform Garnett of the circumstances. When he had written to Aldington on 27 March 1951, he had commented, 'As I never wrote to David Garnett in the matter (so far as I remember) I expect D.G. assumed I had said that to Driberg' (that is, had identified the *Lady Chatterley* 'scrap' as a letter from HW to TEL). Because the nonexistent letter could not possibly surface in TEL's papers, 'D.G. as a careful editor would naturally think that HW was possibly unreliable in his 'facts'. So if he wrote to that effect to you, then I suggest his letter was a reasonable one, at least in that matter.' HW's later letters show an increasing absorption with Garnett's claim that HW was factually unreliable, ostensibly reported by Aldington, but Garnett's letter to Aldington had merely said 'But I think that Williamson is probably wrong', nor had Aldington attributed the 'factually unreliable' statement to Garnett. The charge that HW found troublesome had originated in his own guilty surmise.

On 8 February, 1955 HW wrote a long letter to David Garnett in which he complimented Garnett's hostile review of Aldington's book that had appeared in the *New Statesman and Nation* on 5 February 1955, claimed that he had 'begged [Aldington] not to write like that about TEL', misquoted Aldington as having said 'sell your letters, Henry, while the going is good - TEL's a fake', and then focused on the matter of Garnett's earlier correspondence with Aldington, the *Lady Chatterley* 'scrap', and the letter about 'the TEL-Hitler meeting' (which existed solely in HW's imagination):

I heard (I hope I'm not being too unfriendly to RA) that you considered me to be 'unreliable' as regards TEL in the early years of the projected biography when you wrote to RA.

I think I see entirely what was meant: the DH-TEL 'fake' (As I thought you'd regard it) and the letter about the TEL-Hitler meeting... was written: and I thought posted: although hundreds, perhaps thousands of letters, in envelopes, stamped and addressed, have, during the years, been thrown aside in books, cupboards, etc. etc. after the 'brainstorm' has passed...¹³

Garnett apparently did not answer this letter.

In the meantime, HW's help to Aldington by writing to *Who's Who* became clear to the 'Lawrence Bureau'. On 7 February, J.D. Newth of A. & C. Black sent to S.F. Newcombe some extracts from the correspondence between Ronald J. Politzer (Collins's publicity man) and the publishers of *Who's Who*. Newth complained that 'The reference in Aldington's book, particularly on p. 94, to Lawrence's entries in *Who's Who* takes no account of the explanations we gave to his publishers, and

certainly misrepresents what actually happened.' On 17 November 1953, Politzer had written to *Who's Who* to ask whether TEL had written the original *Who's Who* entry for 1920, whether Lawrence had ever asked to delete the listing of his ostensibly repudiated CB and DSO, and whether Lawrence had claimed the title 'Prince of Mecca' in his 1921 entry. Politzer was merely trying to verify the information that HW had received in response to his earlier inquiry. A. & C. Black's reply of 18 November contradicted what *Who's Who* had written to HW nearly three years earlier: 'In reply to your letter of the 17th November we have to say that T.E. Lawrence at no time supplied the details which appeared under his name in *Who's Who*.' Writing again on 20 November, Politzer identified discrepancies between A. & C. Black's letter to him and the earlier letter to HW, concluding that 'in the light of your letter to Henry Williamson, the statement in our book is fully justified...'

A. & C. Black tried to reconcile the contradictions on 20 November, but Politzer did not find the attempt convincing, as he indicated to A. & C. Black on 24 November. A & C. Black tried again on 25 November, stating that since *Who's Who* did not keep proofs 'for as long as thirty years... we have no documentary evidence to support the view that he did not ask us to omit his honours or the title Prince of Mecca.' A. & C. Black added, 'we regret that our letter to Mr. Williamson of 31st January 1951 was perhaps somewhat careless', but insisted that 'it is quite clear that no support for the accusation to which you refer can be adduced from the *Who's Who* entries in view of the absence of records regarding the source of changes in these.'

A. & C. Black had thought the matter ended, but Politzer summarized the *Who's Who* correspondence to Aldington, who replied emphatically on 18 December:

Who's Who is evading. In 30 years no alteration has been in my record without being made by me at their request – as you know they send out an annual questionnaire. It is incredible to me that Who's Who could make all those changes without Lawrence's collaboration.

As a result, the publisher allowed Aldington to print that TEL had listed the bogus title 'Prince of Mecca', his CB and DSO, and other disputable claims in post-1920 *Who's Who* entries (RA TEL, pp. 293-94) and to cite 'Letter from Messrs. A. & C. Black, 31st January, 1951' (RA TEL, p. 414n63).

Newcombe forwarded the extracts to Liddell Hart on 8 February 1955, and in response to Liddell Hart's request, Newth wrote on 14 February:

I think it well to send you copies of all the correspondence we have had with Aldington's representatives regarding Lawrence's entries in Who's Who. As you will see, the correspondence started off over four years ago with Henry Williamson, though his letter gave no indication that the information was required for a book.

(This is only partly true. Among the copies sent by Newth was a note that HW had written to A. & C. Black on 1 February 1951: 'So many thanks for your information which I have passed on to the biographer of 'T.E.L.'') Newth's letter provided Liddell Hart's first inkling that HW had been Aldington's intermediary. In the postscript to his 18 February letter to Ronald Storrs, Liddell Hart referred to the *Who's Who* correspondence and the 'curious part' of HW.

Aldington had sent HW a copy of the TEL book by express on 12 February. HW's response has not survived, but Aldington's reply to HW on 21 February is terse:

Herewith a reply to your letter. Please return this carbon as soon as possible, as I am sending it out to a few people who are more interested in truth than their own self-importance as friends and hangers-on of the great Lowell Thomas spoof.

Aldington wrote to Kershaw on 23 February, 'Henry has read the book and is very cross. My dear boy, I am 'malicious' and I do not know how to write in the bel canto style of Williamson. 'I destroy the illusion.' This did not end their correspondence by any means. On 4 January 1956, HW sent 'a thumping big apology' for his antagonistic response to the TEL book and added, no doubt recalling his letters to Garnett and to Kennington, 'Furthermore, I was guilty of turning on you... Disgraceful!' When Aldington responded on 9 January, he waved aside HW's apology in one sentence - 'You say far more than is needed, and are too hard on yourself' - before moving on to other matters.

HW had not received such gracious treatment from the 'Lawrence Bureau'. As he wrote to Aldington on 10 February, he had suffered affronts from two 'Lawrence Bureau' members:

I personally disliked a hell of a lot of things about various people, almost without exception: and one said to me, 'Who's [sic] side are you on?' when I defended a certain aspect, or individual. Another was rude to me; he is dead now; he was also rude to TEL years ago, tho perhaps he didn't know he was being rude. Lack of what you French call sensibilité.

Much later, on 11 October 1960, HW described the same incidents in more detail. On one occasion, HW informed Aldington, he had written to Kennington:

'Your acct of TEL with the RAF boys in his cottage - TEL's attitude to you when you arrived - seems to me to indicate not a homosexual, but a masturbator - shaky, guilty, all to pieces'. That shocked E.K. & he said 'Whose side are you on? Aldington's or TEL'.... Same with R. Storrs whom I met at the R.L.S. rooms & the following brief dialogue took place.

'My name is Williamson. May I talk to you about TEL. I'm a friend of Aldington's, but I don't exactly--'

'Then I don't congratulate [you] on your choice of friends. & he turned away. It is only just to add that he was worn-out, fat, & at the end of resistance: he died soon afterwards [on 1 November 1955].

In their subsequent correspondence, which ended only with Aldington's death in July 1962. HW and Aldington continued to refer to TEL, neither altering his point of view. HW wrote to Aldington on 10 February 1956 that he had not only received 'facts' in confidence (obviously from the 'Lawrence Bureau') but also, like Liddell Hart, Kennington, and others, had seen Aldington's proofs before publication:

When I see you I will tell you things I know to be true; I could not tell you while the book was being written, or rather altered in proof (I saw an original proof copy) because I was given certain facts in confidence; but I will tell you when I see you, now that the matter has passed away from the immediate front.

In response to HW's letter of 20 February, in which he continued to defend TEL, Aldington wrote on 22 February,

I'm not going to argue about TEL. I know him infinitely better than do you, who were simply one of his many dupes. Of course 'A Triumph' is ironical; it should have been 'A Pack of Lies for Suckers.' I'm right. I know I'm right. The extra evidence I have from many sources shows it... But keep your hero, my dear boy, you're welcome to him. Every nation gets the heroes it deserves, but even I don't think as harshly of England as that. Of course it is practically impossible to succeed there in the upper class unless one is a bugger. Norman [Douglas] was a bugger, TEL was a bugger – and Auden has been made professor of poetry at Oxford. [Guy] Burgess is a bugger – and it was one of the fraternity who tipped him off. And he now sends his insolent 'Advice' from Moscow. Why was DHL persecuted? Think it out.

...Keep your hero, my dear boy. You don't deserve him, for you are genuine.

In subsequent letters, the two frequently commented on TEL, usually when something brought the subject to the fore, as when Aldington sent extracts from books by Meinertzhagen and by Vansittart that bolstered his case. Aldington wrote to HW on 25 September 1956,

You know of course that Terence Rattigan and some London producer planned a 'hero' film about your friend the bogus prince of Mecca. Rattigan has finished his script, but owing to events in the Middle East the film will not be shot and the idea is abandoned. As I say, a clear case of Suecide.

Their arguments about TEL did not interfere with their genuine regard and affection for one another. HW wrote to Aldington on 3 September 1957 that John Middleton Murry 'grew in stature (for me, as a personality) after his death. He was as kind & considerate to me as Richard Aldington has been. More I cannot say!' There were still a few barbs, as when HW wrote to RA on 13 March 1958 about Malcolm Elwin as a reviewer: 'Where I thought he was phoney was in praising your debunk of TEL, while knowing nothing of the subject.'

On 11 September 1960, Aldington wrote,

What psychologists will have to explain is how this self-confessed fraud managed to deceive practically everybody (including himself at times!) and still has a large following. Of course, now he is a vested interest, worth money and publicity to his not unwilling dupes, so they'll play him to the last card...

...Obviously, as L. deliberately intended, no one will ever get at the real truth about him ... and one can only be sure that ALL his stories are to his own honour and glory, and if not downright lies, then exaggerations. It is a dirty little episode in history, and the Brits are very far from having heard the last of it. I should like to see that bust taken out of the crypt of St Paul's where it insults the ashes of Nelson and Wellington...[sic]

In November 1962, a few months after Aldington's death, an interview with HW was part of the BBC television documentary *T.E. Lawrence 1888-1935*, which referred to TEL denigrators in general but did not refer to Aldington by name. The only implication by Aldington that HW opposed during his interview was the view that TEL was homosexual. During their TEL-related correspondence and in other comments, HW never complained that Aldington had kept him in the dark about the real nature of his book although to all intents and purposes, he would have had justification for so doing.

Notes:

1. See Anne Williamson, 'The Genius of Friendship – Part I: T.E. Lawrence' and 'The Genius of Friendship – Part II: Richard Aldington' *Henry Williamson Society Journal* Nos. 27, March 1993, pp 18-35, 28, September 1993, pp. 7-21).
2. Richard Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry* (London: Collins, 1955), p. 339n. Subsequent references to RA TEL appear parenthetically.
3. Letters from Richard Aldington to Alister Kershaw and to Ronald Politzer, and letters from Henry Williamson and David Garnett to Aldington, are at the Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois.
4. Letters from Richard Aldington to Henry Williamson are at the HW Literary Estate.
5. Letters from HW to A. & C. Black and to Eric Kennington, from A. & C. Black to HW and to Ronald J. Politzer, from Politzer to A. & C. Black, from J. D. Newth to S. F. Newcombe and to B. H. Liddell Hart, from Eric Kennington to Liddell Hart, from S. F. Newcombe to Liddell Hart, and from Liddell Hart to Sir Ronald Storrs are at The Liddell Hart centre for Military Archives, King's College, London, LH 9/13/44.
6. Garnett published the 'scrap' as letter '411: To Henry Williamson' (dated 25 March 1930) in *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence* (London: Cape, 1938; New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1939), p. 687. Anne Williamson reproduces the original handwritten 'scrap' in 'The Genius of Friendship – Part II,' p. 17.
7. Anne Williamson, 'The Genius of Friendship – Part I,' pp. 32-33; *T.E. Lawrence by His Friends*, ed. A. W. Lawrence (London: Cape, 1937), p. 455; Henry Williamson, *Genius of Friendship: 'T. E. Lawrence'* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941), p. 75.
8. Anne Williamson, 'The Genius of Friendship – Part I,' pp. 29, 30.
9. *A Passionate Prodigality: Letters to Alan Bird from Richard Aldington 1949-1962*, ed. Miriam J. Benkovitz (New York: Reader, 1975), p. 110.
10. Henry Williamson, 'Threnos for T.E. Lawrence: I' and 'Threnos for T.E. Lawrence: II,' *European* Nos 15/16 (May/June 1954): pp 44-61; 43-60. Subsequent references appear parenthetically as page numbers.
11. Kennington's note is in the Phillip Knightley, *T.E. Lawrence Papers* 69/48/3, Imperial War Museum.
12. Henry Williamson, Review of *The Home Letters of T.E. Lawrence and His Brothers*, *European* 21 (November 1954), pp. 50-51.
13. Anne Williamson, 'The Genius of Friendship – Part II,' p. 16.

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