

## Chapter 10

### *Horan of Arabia*

It was at an Oxford soiree where Robert Graves, the British poet and classicist, first met T. E. Lawrence. The year was 1920, and Lawrence had won a fellowship to All Souls' College to complete *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Graves vividly describes the scene in his own memoir, *Good-bye to All That*:

"Lawrence's eyes immediately held me. . . . [They] flickered up and down as though making an inventory of clothes and limbs. . . . Lawrence, talking to the Regius Professor of Divinity about the influence of the Syrian Greek philosophers on early Christianity, and especially of the importance of the University of Gadara close to the Lake of Galilee, mentioned that St. James had quoted one of the Gadarene philosophers (I think, Mnasalcas) in his *Epistle*." Lawrence then "went on to speak of Meleager, and the other Syrian-Greek contributors to the Greek Anthology, whose poems he intended to publish in English translation. I joined in the conversation and mentioned a morning-star image which Meleager once used in rather an un-Greek way. Lawrence turned to me. 'You must be Graves the poet? I read a book of yours in Egypt in 1917, and thought it pretty good.' "

Graves and Lawrence became fast friends. Initially Graves did not speak to Lawrence about Arabia. After all, they had so much else to talk about. Besides Greek poetry Lawrence was deeply interested in the "moderns": Siegfried Sassoon, John Masefield, and Thomas Hardy. And there were

Graves's own poetic works, which Lawrence helped to edit. Graves's book on Lawrence, *Lawrence and the Arabs*, was more hagiography than biography. But clearly Graves was on to something about Lawrence.

As a close reading of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* would reveal—Lawrence's use of Greek algebraic concepts to devise a guerrilla strategy, for instance—what is essential about this icon of British imperialism is not his military daring, his physical endurance, his conflicted sexual life, his going native with the Arabs, or any of that. As with Richard Burton, it is the breadth and texture of Lawrence's intellect that sets him apart from his contemporaries. Lawrence's knowledge of Arabic and Arabia is merely one facet of an intensely curious mind. That is why Graves, who would go on to write *I, Claudius*; *The White Goddess*; the greatest rendition ever of *The Greek Myths*; and more than thirty other books on the most erudite of subjects, was able to appreciate Lawrence better than could Lawrence's own colleagues in the British Arab bureau.

Lawrence, of course, had his flaws. Like other British Arabists of his day, he was an inspired amateur rather than a professional. The nature of the British class system and of the boys' schools in particular, led to various behavioral eccentricities—like romanticism and homosexuality—to which Lawrence was prone.

But imagine, if you can, a more normal, middle-class Lawrence, an American of the Cold War era rather than a Briton of Empire days; someone with both an intellectual and an operational brilliance, who suffered from no identity crises, whether national or sexual; someone with a suburban house and a family, too self-reflecting to take sides; a thoroughly modern, post-industrial Lawrence, in other words.

Up until now Hume Horan has lurked at the periphery of this story. Like the other Arabists he was at the Beirut field school. If you ask anyone at NEA who was the bureau's greatest Arabist in terms of actually speaking the language, you get an instant, three-syllable reply: Hume Horan. Horan is the only Arabist ever to complete the field school's twenty-one-month course in twelve months. He emerged with the highest rating ever awarded by the Foreign Service's scientific linguists, who considered him more than fluent and almost bilingual. In Beirut Horan spent the evenings translating a popular Arab novel into English, Mahmoud Teymour's *The Call of the*

*Unknown.* Later, in Libya, he would audit courses in *shari'a* law at an Islamic university. And in Washington he would study biblical Hebrew in order "to read Amos, my favorite prophet, in the original" and to "understand Israelis as Israelis, to know them through their own language, a language of boulders tumbling down mountains—*wow*, no wonder they can be so tough. Hebrew is a parallel line traveling with Arabic. . . ." Horan races on, his eyes swimming in enthusiasm and sensitivity. If only he had one more life.

Yet Horan is also fluent in Spanish, French, and German. He can sing the Argentinean national anthem, quote whole sections of Goethe (in German) and Edgar Allan Poe, hold forth on West African novels, Mayan exploration, and children's literature. He talks in stirring detail about such subjects as the history of Haiti and the early settlement of Quebec. Deeply steeped in Americana, Horan gives a blow-by-blow description of John Wesley Powell's journey down the Colorado River in 1869 and can rattle off the lesser known stanzas of "The Star-Spangled Banner." His is the kind of intellect that has largely gone extinct in the electronic media age, when even the brightest of minds spend less time reading than in former eras.

In Jordan, during Black September 1970, when Nixon, Kissinger, and Sisco were masterminding developments on a strategic level from Washington, Horan was the DCM in Amman, where during the fighting he rescued one of the U.S. embassy's secretaries from a bombed-out building; making his way back to the diplomatic compound through a series of checkpoints manned by Palestinian fedayeen, he convinced them in Arabic that he represented the Red Cross. The new ambassador, L. Dean Brown, had arrived just as the combat got under way. The only way for Brown to present his credentials was for King Hussein to send an armored convoy at 6 A.M. to fetch him and Horan. The convoy shot its way from the embassy to the palace. Horan was too hungry to worry. *Would the king give us breakfast*, he thought. (The king did.) Holed up for two weeks in the bullet-ridden embassy, Horan was limited to a quart of drinking water a day, of which he denied himself enough to shave and wash the collar and cuffs of his shirt. Horan is nothing if not meticulous.

When the 1973 Yom Kippur War broke out and Saudi Arabia unleashed the oil weapon, Horan was the DCM in Jidda, running the embassy on his own, waiting for the arrival of the new ambassador, James Akins. Horan, keeping his own counsel, saw the whole nasty drama between Akins and

