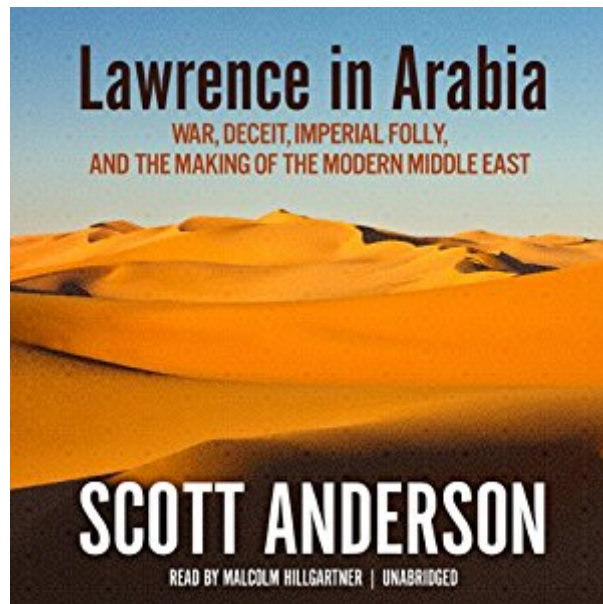


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Lawrence In Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly, And The Making Of The Modern Middle East



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 PrÃfÃfer 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 Arabiadefinitively 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.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 23 hours and 44 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Blackstone Audio, Inc.

Audible.com Release Date: August 6, 2013

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00DLK0PEC

Best Sellers Rank: #10 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Military > World War I #11 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Politics & Current Events > International Relations #14 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Middle East

Customer Reviews

Scott Anderson brings an interesting background to this latest history of the modern Middle East. His father was an agricultural advisor to the US government. As a result, Anderson grew up largely in Taiwan and Korea, although he graduated from Gainesville High School in Florida. A novelist and veteran war reporter who has covered foreign conflicts for two decades in five countries, Anderson spent four years researching Lawrence in Arabia. He combines a feeling for foreign locales and an understanding of the realities of the battlefield with an extensive use of primary documents. The result is provocative history that reads like a political thriller. Given the strategic importance of the Mid-East today, it is fascinating to read of the disproportionately large impact of some fairly low level functionaries in this "sideshow of a sideshow" (Lawrence's own words) in the run up to World War I. German academic and womanizer Curt Pruefer works to foment Arab jihad against British rule under the protection of Turkish rulers. Aaron Aaronsohn was a renowned agronomist and dedicated Zionist who gained the trust of the Ottoman governor by trying to relieve Syria of a plague of locusts. Twenty-seven year old American William Yale transitioned in a short eighteen months from roustabout duties in an Oklahoma oil field to Standard Oil's main agent charged with locating and securing oil in central Judea. Abdul-lah ibn Hussein is assigned by his father, Emir Hussein of Mecca, to sound out the British on supporting an Arab revolt in the Hejaz. Marching into history and legend was TE Lawrence who achieved the wholly unlikely transition from 21 year old archeologist in Syria in 1914 to head of a foreign Arab army in 1919, without a single day of military training.

T. E. Lawrence was legendary even before he died, and some of it was genuinely earned. What makes him a favorite in popular imagination is that he was disdainful of the myth that surrounded him- even when he was instrumental in perpetuating it. He is also, perhaps, seen as a reflection of what many commoners might have felt in the midst of the morass that became World War I: determined to get through the byzantine (no pun intended) negotiations and considerations that were foisted upon the world by outdated principles to arrive at an outcome that would allow his country some honor and the Arabs he was trying to help a measure of dignity that would justify the sacrifices he helped convince them to make. That he made great sacrifices himself is arguably the primary reason there was any honor or dignity to the outcome at all, but the compromises Lawrence had to make to get that far weighed far heavier on him. This volume gives an extensive, nearly blow by blow account of how Lawrence came to the Middle East, why he became attached to the war effort and, most importantly, what he did. Anderson also explores the lives and careers of others who influenced the war and to some extent the outcome, including the German academic Curt Prufer, the American oilman William Yale and the Romanian-Palestinian-Jewish agronomist Aaron

Aaronsohn. What all of three of the men shared was that they were also at one point spies, and each of them was trying to play the conflict in the Ottoman Empire to achieve their own ends. To do that, all of them needed the mercurial Djemal Pasha, one of the leaders of the Young Turks, in one way or another. Lawrence, however, is the star.

This is a fascinating book, for the most part well written. While the key character is T. E. Lawrence, the book is formally structured as an examination of the roles of and sometimes interaction among four characters: T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia), Curt Prufer (umlaut over the u), Aaron Aaronson, and William Yale. A brief note about each. Lawrence began World War I on an archaeological expedition--and ended up as a celebrity. Prufer was a German who worked for German interests in the Middle East. Aaronsohn was a Zionist and an agronomist trying to enhance agriculture in Jewish areas. He also developed a spy network as World War I broke out. Yale was of the family after whom the college was named. He was, at the outset of WW I, an official for Standard Oil of New York (now Mobil) seeking access to lands that might be rich in oil. During the war, he became a representative of the United States' foreign policy apparatus. The book provides considerable depth to each of these persons--but Lawrence is at the center. He is portrayed as somewhat enigmatic, someone who was almost a tragic character. While he fought for Arab independence, he knew of nefarious schemes by the English and French to be dominant forces in the Middle East after the war's end. He was a decent person who ended up tolerating acts of violence (such as watching as prisoners were killed after surrendering). The author suggests that, after a period of time at war, he became someone afflicted with Post traumatic stress disorder. Aaronsohn, too, was an important figure. He tried to advance Zionist ideals and saw that working with Great Britain might be the best pathway. He developed an espionage network in the Middle East, with his sister as a key player.

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