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Conference Paper for St. John's University, York, June 2016

'Just Who Are These Arabs?' Constructing an Idea of the 'True Arab' in Eric Kennington's 1921 Portrait Series for the Subscribers Edition of T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

Question asked of T.E. Lawrence (1888-1935) by his friend artist Eric Kennington (1888-1960) in February 1921. They had met in Oxford in December 1920 after Lawrence had visited Kennington's solo expo at the Alpine Club Gallery as it was about to end late in November and Lawrence bought two of Kennington's stunning charcoal studies of First World War British tommies.

EK visited Lawrence at All Souls, Oxford where Lawrence has a Research Fellowship. Lawrence mentioned he was writing a book about his wartime experiences in Arabia and that he was looking for an artist to produce portraits of its leading protagonists – Arab and British. Kennington was adamant that the portraitist would have to sketch his sitters in the flesh – he could not work at home from photographs. Lawrence immediately issued the challenge – would Kennington be prepared to go to the Middle East with Lawrence (who had been asked by Winston Churchill to attend as his adviser at a Conference in Cairo which Churchill had convened for March 1921) to draw certain subjects currently living in the area as Lawrence directed?

Kennington was ready to do so with barely a fortnight before departure. He was already a huge admirer of Lawrence, dazzled by the image of him offered by American showman Lowell Thomas in his theatrical production 'With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia' playing at the Theatre in the early autumn of 1919. However, EK certainly had opinions of his own.; his assessment of Lawrence was never unquestioning or uncritical. The artist was a convinced, confirmed believer in the virtues of the British Empire as a force for good in the world. The bigger the better. He respected and revered Kipling more than Lawrence ever did. One of his first questions to Lawrence on agreeing to accompany him to the Cairo Conference concerned the identity of the Arabs to whom Lawrence so frequently referred – did they really exist as a people? Did they think of themselves as such? Could they be trusted to run their own countries? Kennington was very attracted to the idea Lawrence articulated in 1921-22 that certain of the new post-Versailles Treaty Arab States could be the first 'Brown Dominions' of the British Empire.

EK arrived in Cairo in time for the opening of the March 1921 Cairo Conference which fine-tuned decisions taken by the western powers in 1919-20. Britain had been awarded the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine (by the San Remo Conference of April 1920) – a area east of the River Jordan would form a new Emirate of Trans-Jordan with Abdullah ibn Hussain as its reluctant ruler. Three provinces of Ottoman Mesopotamia (Mosul, Baghdad and Basra) would form the new kingdom of Iraq with Abdullah's younger brother Feisal as its first King. French control of Syria and the Lebanon was

confirmed. The fate of Arabia was left open to question: the India Office backed Ibn Saud while the Colonial Office under Churchill (Colonial Secretary February 1921-October 1922) with lukewarm enthusiasm supported the Hashemite Sherif Hussain of Mecca – father to Abdullah and Feisal. Kennington developed the impression from early on that the Arabs Lawrence backed were really the Hashemite family – there were plenty of other Arab Nationalists who thought little of or were actively opposed to the Hashemites.

Lawrence also made his partiality clear for the nomadic Bedouin – they were the ‘right’ sort of Arab as far as he was concerned. In drawing some of the British and Arab protagonists for Lawrence between April 1921 and March 1923 Kennington heard a very different estimation of the supposedly ‘noble’ Bedu – rapacious, treacherous who fought only for plentiful provision of British gold sovereigns. The serious fighting of Britain’s war in the Middle East had been done by British, Dominion and especially Indian soldiers.

April 1921: Kennington travelled to Damascus to draw Nuri Shalaan, paramount chief of the Rualla and an uneasy ally of Lawrence’s in September/October 1918. Nuri was not available so Kennington drew Nawaf, Nuri’s eldest son who had been on the Ottoman pay roll for much of the First World War. He made no effort to defend Feisal when he was proclaimed King of Syria which promoted a French invasion in July 1920. He turned against the French during the Great Druze Revolt of 1925-27, was arrested and died while in prison.

May 1921: after a visit to Jerusalem and staying with the British Governor there Sir Ronald Storrs, Kennington spent the best part of a month at Abdullah’s camp on the outskirts of Amman. He had the sensitivity to realise he was an unknown quantity to his Arab sitters – they had met Englishmen as soldiers, officials, generals, engineers, even photographers and cameramen, but an artist, a professional portraitist, was something quite new in their experience of Westerners. Kennington was even informed that the maker of images of human faces, a *rassam* was a cursed and damned profession. There was a tradition that such men on the day of judgement would be responsible for the souls of their sitters. It did not help that Kennington had a habit of humming or whistling to himself as he drew – this could be interpreted as the *rassam* conversing with malicious intent with djinns/ devils of the desert air.

There Kennington drew: Abdullah (1882-1951), Emir of Trans-Jordan from 1921-1946, then first King of Jordan until assassinated by a Palestinian in July 1951 (aggrieved that Abdullah had not declared war on Israel in 1948 and stood aloof).

Abdullah’s great-grandson is today’s Abdullah II of Jordan (born 1962, reigned from 1999).

Also senior chiefs allied to the Hashemite cause such as the piratical Auda abu Tayi (1874-1924) of the Western Howeitat (in command of 500 men; key to Lawrence taking Aqaba in July 1917; had supposedly killed over 70 Arabs

in single combat, he did not bother counting the number of Turks he had disposed of); the graceful, poetic Sherif Shakir (Abdullah's first cousin) conscious of his heavily pockmarked face scarred in his youth by small pox – he had also commanded 500+ men during the Revolt) and the tall, impressive Ali ibn Hussain (one of Lawrence's favourites – he would be killed trying to prevent Ibn Saud's men from taking the Hejaz from the Hashemites in 1924).

Then there were formed members of Lawrence's wartime personal bodyguard now in Abdullah's service. That had numbered in the region of 120-150 men but only half (just over 60) had actually survived the war. Some would be killed fighting for Abdullah against the Wahabi Ikwhan horsemen sent by Ibn Saud to invade Trans-Jordan in 1922 and 1924 (on both occasions the fanatical Ikwhan were crushed by a combination of the RAF and armoured cars of the British-officered Arab Legion: some 750 strong initially led by Lt. Col Frederick Peake – 'Peake Pasha' (1886-1970).

Some were men of consequence who had almost looked upon Lawrence as an equal as well as an employer: the cynical, hard-headed Hameid abu Jabir; the high spirited, dare-devil dandy Mohammed el Sheheri; the tough, serious, puritanical Saad el Sikeini (who disapproved of looting an Ottoman target before all the Ottoman soldiers present had been killed; he would defect to Ibn Saud's cause in 1924 having come to regard Abdullah as too subservient to the British infidels).

Some of Lawrence's ex-bodyguards were outsiders, renegades, criminals and marginal figures within their own societies: men with a price on their head; runaway slaves; professional killers for hire.

*Mukheymer* was not his real name but someone Lawrence had come to rely on as a cool head and a crack shot in action. *Abd el Rahman* – again not his real name; he was former slave on the run. He unnerved Kennington by loading and unloading his rifle as he sat to the artist. Rahman's close friend *Mahmas* had killed several men with a knife – though Lawrence had judged him to be 'a homicidal maniac' he did not think him old enough to go to action with the bodyguard in 1918 – Mahmas, much to his disgust, had been left behind to mind their camels. [A.W. Lawrence, ed., 1937, p.268]. He nearly stabbed Kennington when the artist moved to sharply when turning to reach for a stick of pastel while drawing him. The artist found himself closing his eyes waiting for Mahmas's dagger to: 'go in just above the collar bone.' [Storrs/Kennington, 1942, p.16].

Lawrence inspected some two-dozen of Kennington's portraits of Arabs at the artist's Brompton Road studio in June 1921. He wrote about them in late August 1921 (his preface is dated Aden, 25 August 1921) for the catalogue to Kennington's solo exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in October 1921. Lawrence differentiated sharply between his much preferred 'noble' Arab of the desert, the nomadic Bedu as opposed to the knowing, wily, educated Arab of the cities who had already been corrupted by knowledge and admiration for Western European ways and mores.

Lawrence emphasised that Kennington had instinctively been attracted to draw those whom he termed: '... the real Arab, not the Algerian, or Egyptian, or Syrian, so commonly palmed off on us ... not the noisy. Luxury-loving, sensual, passionate, greedy person but [men i.e. the Bedu] whose ruling characteristic is hardness of body, mind, heart and head.'

Lawrence revealed that arriving at Amman Kennington had a rough idea whom he was to draw for the *Seven Pillars* project but the actual list of sitters left for him by Lawrence had been mislaid. However, Kennington, 'a true artist' possessed the unerring insight to: 'draw the men of the desert. Where he was there were ten settled men to every nomad, yet his drawings show nearly ten desert men to every peasant [evidently the settled peasant agriculturalist could not be a 'real Arab' nomad of the desert wastes] ... This has strengthened in me the unflattering suspicion that the nomad is the richer creature ... The Arab townsman, or villager, is like us ... with our notions of property, our sense of gain and our appetite for material success ... The Beduin, on the other hand, while his mind is as logical as ours, begins with principles quite other than our own and gets further from us as his character strengthens. He has a creed and practice of not-possessing which is tough armour against our modern wiles. It defends him against all sentiment. [and yet ... Sir Ronald Storrs later estimated Lawrence had handed over almost £11 million in gold sovereigns to the Arabs in 1917-18 to ensure their loyalty and continued co-operation. Kennington noted that some of his Arab sitters in Amman had cheerfully helped themselves to items of his kit].

In criticism of Kennington's October 1921 exhibition his Arab sitters were divided along Old Testament lines into either noble, romantic, nomadic 'Ishmaels', or crafty, guileful, untrustworthy educated urban 'Jacobs.'

Arthur Clutton Brook wrote for many in *The Times* in rapturous praise of Kennington's 'Esau, Ishmaels ... desert messiah types ... eagles with souls' whom he contrasted with the: '... slum Arabs, slovenly and cynical ... more snake than eagle.' [11 October 1921, p.12]. One art critic, Sir Claude Phillips of the *Daily Telegraph*, tellingly classified Emir Abdullah as one of the 'Jacobs': intelligent, a man of the world and yet cunning, calculating, tricky ... [15 October 1921, p.13].

Kennington's Arab Portraits series would be reproduced in the Luxury Subscribers Edition of the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* – 30 guineas a copy, from an edition of 130 copies, published in late December 1926. EK was overall art editor for this edition and for the popular abridged version of *Seven Pillars* which was published in March 1927 as *Revolt in the Desert*. Kennington also organised an exhibition of original artwork for the subscribers edition of *Seven Pillars* held at the Leicester Galleries in February-March 1927 with characteristically combative and polemical foreword by George Bernard Shaw.

Worthy of note that since Kennington's October 1921 exhibition of the portraits, Ibn Saud had tried twice and failed to conquer Trans-Jordan (in 1922 and 1924) but in 1925 had succeeded in occupying the Hejaz; Sherif

Hussain whom the British had openly backed since June 1916 was forced into exile on the British-controlled island of Cyprus. Arabia was no longer even in small part Hashemite but now overwhelmingly Saudi.

Revealing as to whom bought some of the portraits. Arch Imperialist Sir Herbert Baker (1862-1946) purchased three between 1921 and 1927 and then in the 1930's gifted them to Art Galleries in South Africa, Australia and Canada he had designed. Two were bought by Sir Ronald Storrs (1881-1955) who ended a distinguished diplomatic career in 1934 with the Colonial Office as Governor of Northern Rhodesia – previously Governor of Jerusalem and then of Judea and Samaria (1917-1926). Single portraits were owned by the time of Lawrence's death in May 1935 by: Peake Pasha; General Archibald Percival Wavell (future C-in-C of British Forces in the Middle East, 1940-41 and later Viceroy of India, 1943-46); Air Commodore R.G. 'Reggie' Simms – pioneer with his friend Arthur Harris of RAF-imposed 'Air Control' in the Middle East; military historian and theorist of modern war Basil Liddell-Hart and Sir Lionel Curtis, Director of Chatham House [Royal Institute of International Affairs] during the 1930's and major proponent of the idea of the British Empire evolving into the Commonwealth.

Then there were writers: E.M. Foster (1879-1970), Terence Rattigan (1911-1977); John Buchan (1875-1940; later Baron Tweedsmuir and Governor-General of Canada, 1935-40) and Hugo Wortham (1884-1959; author in 1931 of the first biography in English of the first President of the Turkish Republic Mustapha Kemal Ataturk and adviser from 1922 until the King's death in 1936 of King Fuad I of Egypt).

Epilogue:

One Arab portrait, commissioned from Kennington by Lawrence in March 1923, made it into the 1926 *Subscribers Edition* but was not exhibited in February 1927, nor was it among the smaller selection of plates included in *Revolt in the Desert* published a month later (March 1927). Nor was he reproduced in the popular abridged 1936 edition of *Seven Pillars*. Not coincidental that this sitter was the extraordinary one of the highly educated and cultivated cosmopolitan *General Jafar al-Askari* (1887-1936), the epitome of the sophisticated Arab well-versed in the wiles of Western European high politics whom Lawrence profession to distrust. And yet he was a great admirer of Jafar as was Kennington.

Born a Sunni in Baghdad, trained as a soldier in Constantinople within the Ottoman Turkish Empire. He had distinguished himself as an infantry officer in the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, as a Brigadier he was captured fighting with a column of Senussi against the British in western Egypt in February 1916. After the opening of Sherif Hussain's rebellion against the Ottoman Empire – magnified into the Arab Revolt – he had offered to command the Sherif's regular forces. By the end of 1918 this had increased to about 3,000 men. He then shifted his loyalties to serve as a military adviser to Emir Feisal and for a brief spell in 1920 was his Governor of Aleppo in Hashemite Syria. On Feusal agreeing to become the first King of Iraq in August 1921, Jafar agreed to take

charge of the Iraqi Army. On two occasions he was Feisal's Prime Minister (during the first, in 1923, he visited London and sat to Kennington in his studio on Chiswick Mall, Hammersmith). More regularly, between 1921 and 1936, he was the Defence Minister and or Army Chief. Kennington met him again in 1936 when Jafar was in London to pay his respects at the funeral of King George V (who had died in January 1936). Jafar was concerned by the enthusiasm some middle ranking Iraqi officers coalescing around the future Regent Rashid Ali had been displaying for National Socialist Germany. He would be assassinated by this faction within the Army during an attempted military coup in October 1936.

Among Kenningtons Arab sitters the other wily survivor was Emir Abdullah – elevated to become a full King in 1946 but destined to be assassinated for his moderation in 1951.