

Heard and Seen

SIX PILLARS OF WISDOM

Professor A. W. Lawrence has complained that the Speigel-Lean film which has his brother for its hero is false to the spirit, and certainly to the text, of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. It has to be admitted that Mr Robert Bolt's admirable script has little in it of the Doughty-and-Authorized-Version grandeurs, and inevitably some foreshortening of the epic was necessary to make the film at all. As it is, you are imprisoned for four hours, and, however voluntary a captive you may be, enough in this context must mean a good deal less than a detailed recapitulation of the book.

The narrative is simple, confined almost entirely to the desert campaigns that led to the capture of Aqaba and the entry into Damascus. There is mercifully little attempt to use Lawrence as the peg for an interpretation of abnormal psychology. His illegitimacy is referred to (by himself), and the humiliation of his treatment at Deraa is indicated (though with much less sadistic detail than the book itself supplies). In effect we are shown a resolute, romantic Englishman who has a deep love and understanding of the Arabs and who is convinced that he can win them unity in their common revolt against the Turks. The film is an account of how this happened, and how in the end Lawrence's hopes were betrayed by the politicians and by the Arabs' failure to preserve into peace the resolve they had known in battle.

In a curious way we know little more about Lawrence in the end than we did in the beginning. Peter O'Toole's much praised performance preserves an odd reticence, not only of word and gesture (which the character of Lawrence requires) but of understanding. We are not altogether convinced that such a huge dynamic lies beneath the external man. Perhaps this is intended, but none the less there is an unexplained gap between the achievement and the man who was its architect. Mr O'Toole is of course not ideally cast. He is much too tall, much too obviously formed by forces that the Oxford of 1910 never knew. But he wins us over. Was it charm, after all, that principally did the trick? It is a quality that the Arabs are aware of, and often possess, and Lawrence always suggests an easy sympathy with the Bedu, loyal and loving and hating against the cruel landscape of the desert.

For it is the desert that is really the hero of this film. It can never before have been interpreted with such fidelity, and David Lean's direction makes wonderful use of the infinite wastes of sand, the Gehenna-like rocks and the occasional gift of water at a well. The panoramic range of the screen, the beautifully modulated colour and the constant pattern of tribesmen and camels against such stupendous distances, give to the film a dimension that is altogether new. The star-studded cast - Alec Guinness, suave and civilized as Feisal; Jack Hawkins, prepared to let his imagination affect his military instincts, as Allenby; Claude Rains, the

mild but powerful civilian adviser - all do what is required. But somehow they always seem contrived, for their occasional appearances have to compete with the accumulated effect of the long campaign through the desert, in which the Arabs, however anonymous they may be, are as authentic as the sand. The details of life in the desert are wonderfully observed, and when finally we arrive at Damascus it is as though we had travelled there ourselves, so pervasive is the sense of heat and weariness, of companionship and courage.

It is unusual nowadays that a film should so resolutely refuse the opportunity to explore the hidden places of human weakness, which, in the case of Lawrence, thanks to Aldington's biography and much other writing as well, are already well enough known. Just occasionally, as in the emphasis on Lawrence's realization that his hatred of blood can become a love he can't resist, there are hints of the strange quality of this man. But, for the most part, it is the events that speak, and how eloquent they are in that innocent air!

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Reviews

CHRISTIAN UNITY: A Catholic View. Being an account of the first official conference organized by the Bishop's Committee for Christian Unity (Heythrop, August 1962). Edited by John C. Heenan, Archbishop of Liverpool, Sheed and Ward; 10s. 6d.

The printed report of any conference can never do justice to the gathering itself, since much that is valuable is achieved in informal discussion and in the exchange of experience. One may suppose that the Heythrop conference was full of such uncovenanted mercies. Those who were not present must be content with the prepared papers, and they are, without exception, models of ecumenical understanding, though geared, as is natural, to the special circumstances of this country.

In an introductory, and most informative, chapter on the conference itself, the Archbishop of Liverpool emphasizes how far we have still to go in order to enter fully into the spirit - and the methods - of a truly ecumenical theology. He instances the unfavourable reactions of many Catholics to a statement he himself made soon after the Heythrop meeting, namely that 'Christians have come to realize that what matters most is not that they are Catholic or Protestant but that they are fellow Christians'. Mgr Heenan points out how recent any