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Prologue
Lawrence Stone – as seen by others

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The myth and the man

JULIAN MITCHELL

I knew Lawrence Stone as a myth before I knew him as a man. In the 1950s, although many of us had done National Service, and so had some experience of the outside world, undergraduates felt considerable awe in the presence of their tutors, and spoke of them amongst themselves, at least till they got to know them, as beings of a superior order. It was a quiet and obedient time, and we brought to Oxford the respect for teachers we had learned at school – respect still being as important a part of the curriculum at some schools as learning. Like any other under-class, we mixed prurient gossip with our awe. There was much speculation about the Fellows' personal habits and sexual tastes, and their alleged sayings were repeated and analysed like sacred texts. Above all we liked them to be 'characters'. This was perhaps especially so at Wadham, where the College was presided over by Maurice Bowra, one of the most formidable Oxford 'characters' of the century, a ferocious wit whose *bons mots* (and they were excellent, unless you were their victim) were meant to be repeated in the smartest London drawing-rooms.

The Wadham historians, graduate and undergraduate, proudly claimed Lawrence as a 'character' to outdo any other in the College. Where Pat Thompson was comfortably pipe-smoking and relatively gentle in his treatment of incompetence, Lawrence was a dragon-tutor whose lightest breath would scorch your essay to a pile of ash. It was known that he had published an article while on a destroyer in the Atlantic during the war, and a whiff of depth-charge hung about him still. The fact that the article was about the Armada added a romantic glow, a touch of Elizabethan privateer. His intolerance of idleness was terrifyingly naval and upper-deck, while his use of the vernacular was unsettlingly lower – dons didn't

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habitually use rude words to undergraduates in those days. Naturally his pupils adopted his language and tried to outdo him, but this could be risky. One undergraduate dashingly described Northumberland as a Fascist beast. Lawrence thought only for a moment, then said Northumberland wasn't a Fascist beast but a bloody shit; not the same thing at all. The speed of judgement was almost more awe-inspiring than the judgement itself.

Everything about Lawrence was swift. Tall, thin, rangy, he loped about Wadham like a long-legged lurcher, a squash- or tennis-racquet in his hand, a hard stare behind a long nose perpetually questing for facts. Even his car was an Allard, a very rare and piratical sports car which seemed perfectly suited to his impetuous character. But of course in Oxford impetuosity is called rashness, and by the time I arrived at Wadham Lawrence was already embroiled in the great row over the Rise of the Gentry. In our eyes this made him a specially glamorous figure, but some of his colleagues in the university were spiteful. I remember overhearing a conversation about him in the King's Arms one lunchtime. Two dons were cutting him up over a hot pie. 'The trouble with Lawrence Stone', said the female of the pair, 'is he's the sort of man who will stick that long nose of his *into* things.' The man sighed, then said, with the malicious satisfaction that distinguishes so much Oxford conversation, 'He will get it bitten.' It was dangerous talk in the Wadham pub, for we were fiercely loyal to our tutors, especially those under fire, but I dare say the pie did for the dons what I would like to have done. Those pies were lethal.

By then, after an idle and unhappy first year, I had abandoned PPE and been allowed to do history instead. But before I could start, I had to resit my Prelims, as I'd wholly failed to grasp the elementary principles of economics, and to this day cannot see what Perfect Competition has to do with anything in the real world. This economic blindness meant I had temporarily to suspend what I considered my serious work at Oxford, which was in writing and the theatre. However I did allow myself the luxury of appearing in a Wadham revue, called, I'm almost sure (it almost always was), 'WADS and Sods'. The Wadham Amateur Dramatic Society was then under the benign leadership of Michael Barnes, a history graduate as tall and thin as Lawrence himself, and now a powerful figure in the artistic life of Northern Ireland. Among the sketches was one in which he played a history tutor, who peered down a

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cardboard tube at a hapless undergraduate whose essay on the reforms of Thomas Cromwell consisted of the single magnificently irrefutable sentence: 'Henry VIII came to the throne in 1509.' In this important role, I was directed to read the sentence with the solemnity of a great scholar announcing a major discovery. There was a long silence. Then Michael, who had been gazing out of the window through his tube, turned, and with all the affronted incredulity which Lawrence brought to the fallen world of undergraduate essays, said '*Is that all*?'

It brought the house down, and I thought I knew what I was in for if I did manage to satisfy the examiners in economics. '*Is that all*?' was Lawrence's motto, according to his pupils, and even members of the Boat Club trembled before climbing the narrow stone stair to his room over the main gate. This room seemed physically set apart from the rest of the College – like a turret employed for particularly gruesome tortures; or so one felt on first entering. In fact it was high and handsome, with a grand fireplace and two big windows. I was much too frightened to think so at the time, but it now seems significant that it was, or seemed to be, the only one in college which looked out as much as in. What did seem appropriate, even then, was that it was the room in which the Royal Society was supposed to have been founded in the 1650s. For in spite of his critics, Lawrence's approach to the truth about the past seemed fundamentally scientific rather than literary, which so much of the history we had done at school still was. The counting of manors, or the manner of counting them, might have gone astray, but among the young there was never anything wrong with the idea that you should bring modern methods to the study of the past.

The Royal Society's foundation in Wadham during the Interregnum was a direct link to the period of British history which seemed in the 1950s of most relevance to our own time. Intellectual Britain was obsessed with class; the Rise of the Gentry, or their Decline, or whatever *did* happen to them, was almost painfully important to us. The debate about the origins of the English Civil War was confused in our minds with Nancy Mitford's notorious article on the use of U and Non-U, published in the smart new intellectual magazine, *Encounter*. Undergraduates discussed class day and night, with arrogance or fear according to their confidence in their own place in the existing scheme of things and their hopes for the future. People like myself, from a solid professional background, were challenged

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to produce a working-class ancestor to appease the new left, and longed for at least an Honourable one as well in order to feel at ease in Christ Church and Trinity. The submerged subject of the rancorous debate in the *Economic History Review*, or so it felt to us, was the future of Britain. I'm not sure we weren't right. Nothing else can satisfactorily explain the wholly disproportionate anger which the subject inspired.

Of course we undergraduates loved the intemperance of the row. The idea of the pages of academic history journals being stained with modern blood gave us huge delight, and we thought of Trevor-Roper as a Cavalier and Lawrence as a Roundhead. Whether it was actually so or not, Trevor-Roper seemed utterly Christ Church – a hunting Tory, with the aristocratic brutality in argument brought to perfection, if that's the word, by Evelyn Waugh – who himself contributed to the U and Non-U debate. Lawrence was Roundhead, as we were – Wadham prided itself on its radicalism then, as it does today, though Lawrence, as it happened, had been an undergraduate at Christ Church under Trevor-Roper. The long nose, poking into aristocratic archives, the expressions of outrage at what he found there in the way of idleness, immorality, extravagance and incompetence, the impatience with detail in the desire to get to the truth, the withering '*Is that all*?' – all these made him definitely of the godly party. The fact that he was anything but a literal iconoclast, that he'd actually written a book about early sculpture in Britain, was difficult to reconcile with the myth, so we tended to ignore it. What mattered was the English Revolution. If we could only properly understand what produced that upheaval then, perhaps we could understand what was happening to our own class-ridden society now, and, by not making the same mistakes, make sure the new revolution lasted. Happy days.

After the myth, the reality, when I at last came face to face with it, was distinctly disappointing. Lawrence did not set fire to one's essay in front of one's face, and a cautious scrutiny of his room showed no evidence of human blood. He did, it's true, sometimes gaze at the New Bodleian through a cardboard tube, like Michael Barnes, he did prowl about the room, and he did occasionally swish his squash-racquet, but there were no mutilated academic journals and no evidence of angry inkpots hurled at recalcitrant students or nit-picking opponents. Furthermore he was extraordinarily open-

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minded about the controversies in which he was engaged. He made us read the evidence for ourselves and come to our own conclusions. His passion was evident, but it was not for personalities but for truth, whatever, in history, that may be. The aggression was there all right, and a passionate desire that his pupils should make an effort and *understand*, that we should *think* – but in this form they were not frightening but stimulating.

Now that I've known Lawrence for thirty years, I see why the superficial characteristics were the ones we first latched on to. They can still be alarming. His croquet, even in his sixties, is furiously competitive. He challenges his opponent at every turn, questions and tries to bend the rules, accuses everyone else of cheating, and wreaks terrible revenge on those who dare to dismiss him to the rose-bed. One might be in the presence of a dangerous psychopath. Listening to him ordering Jeanne how to play her shots, one cannot imagine how the marriage has survived. He is intolerant, aggressive, argumentative – and then he laughs. As he did in tutorials. There would be intense concentration as he developed an idea, then a sudden shrug and smile, and the dismissal of everything that had gone before as possible nonsense. After wreaking havoc on a jejune answer in my Collection paper, he typically added at the bottom, in his hurried handwriting, 'A silly question, anyway.' That a don could undercut his own authority like that seemed quite astonishing. But then he never really seemed like a don, or, when it came to it, a 'character'. He was too direct, too busy to play up to our idea of him. Not the least important thing I learned from Lawrence was that myths and appearances aren't nearly so interesting as realities.

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The enfant terrible?

C. S. L. DAVIES

My own credentials for this appreciation consist in being an undergraduate pupil of Lawrence's at Wadham between 1956 and 1959, and being supervised by him as a research student between 1959 and 1962; and, to my surprise, being elected to succeed him at Wadham in 1963.[1] Lawrence took his interrupted final examination in 1946, and was immediately elected to the Bryce Research Studentship. In 1948 he began a teaching career by becoming a Lecturer at University College, Oxford; and in 1950 he was appointed Fellow of Wadham, remaining there until 1963 when he moved to Princeton.

Those who have known Lawrence since 1963 will not be surprised to learn that he was not a pillar of the Establishment. But what may surprise them is that for most of the time at least he was not particularly prominent as an agitator for reform. Oxford is very good at defusing the potential trouble-maker – partly because of the diffusion of power between colleges and the university, partly because of the democratic nature (as far as teaching staff are concerned) of the university's organization. Syllabus reform, for instance, involves constructing a scheme which will avoid offending too many interest groups, piloting it through or past the labyrinthine committees of the Faculty Board, only, for the most part, to have it rejected in the Faculty Meeting by an unholy coalition of conservatives opposing change generally and radicals opposing this particular change.

Rebels rarely have the temperament; Lawrence, perhaps least of all. But, more fundamentally, it was not until the end of the 1950s, that Lawrence's dissatisfaction with 'a curriculum stifling both in its

[1] Especially valuable have been conversations with Mr J. O. Prestwich and Mr A. F. Thompson.

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national insularity and in its limited late Victorian conception' of history seems to have come to a head.[2] Before that time he had, no doubt, grumbled; had been involved in an abortive attempt, in 1957–8, to introduce what now seem very limited reforms; but, in this realm, as in so much else, the existing system seemed unshakable. Fundamental reform was as inconceivable as, say, throwing the ancient colleges open to women.

I suspect Lawrence would not in any case have wanted to establish a following among undergraduates. As a tutor he was not given to expounding his own views. He would challenge the logic of our argument, demand evidence for unsubstantiated statements, express his amazement at any suggestion that public life might be conducted on any but the lowest principles. Above all, he would try to provoke us to fight back: disconcerting, even demoralizing for some, but for those of us who understood the game that was being played, not too hazardous, especially as a parry was often enough to send Lawrence scuttling back to his corner. He would provide an efficient, up-to-date and realistic set of books to read, but leave it to us to work out our own interpretation – no mini-lecture to expound his own views, no careful feeding of dollops of recent discoveries to stimulate the imagination or help fool the examiners. It was an astringent regime. Of course, college tutors also delivered lectures to the history students of the university at large. Unfortunately I took too literally Lawrence's own advice not to go to lectures, anachronistic as an art-form since the time of Caxton, and so missed his own: a survey of the main issues of Tudor and Stuart politics, I gather, the progenitor, without the sociological vocabulary, of *The Causes of the English Revolution*.

There was little in the way of a graduate school in history in Oxford in the 1950s. Lawrence had I think only three graduate students of his own, all of them represented in this volume, all of them in fact formerly undergraduates of Wadham. Graduate students were relatively thin on the ground, but I suspect that part of the reason may have been the general impression following the 'Gentry' controversy that Lawrence was 'unsound'. Lawrence did not aspire to the American or Germanic views of the role of supervisor (much in evidence in Tudor studies in London and Cambridge). He did not regard his students' work as ancillary to his own, did not attempt to influence what one wrote, let one make

[2] See below, pp. 583–4.

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one's own mistakes. His only requirement, and that a salutary one, was to insist on regular production of written work; in effect, a thesis chapter per term. As with undergraduate essays criticism was confined largely to style and internal logic.

Lawrence's intervention in university affairs seems to have been concerned mainly with practical aesthetics. He cared about the fabric of Oxford's buildings, protesting at over-zealous restoration by both university and colleges. He had, I suspect, more institutional loyalty than he would readily admit. At Wadham he did a superb and rather thankless job in sorting and cataloguing the college archives.[3] He avoided college office otherwise, and carefully rationed his time so as to press on with *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*; aided here by the willingness of his colleague A. F. (Pat) Thompson to spend hours in administration and dealing with the foibles of the young.

Lawrence's teaching, although not allowed to encroach into research time, was never skimped; and he cared about the quality of student entry and performance in History Schools. At college meetings he was a vigorous but (fortunately) unsuccessful critic of investment policy. Wadham in the 1950s was a convivial and intellectually stimulating place, the cracking pace set by its legendary warden Sir Maurice Bowra. The fellowship numbered about fourteen, almost all of them Lawrence's own generation and sharing in the general progressive optimism of those years of broad political consensus. Lawrence played his full part in the social life of the college; while the bonds created in the (male-only) Senior Common Room were reinforced by strenuous entertaining by Jeanne of colleagues and colleagues' wives (and indeed of pupils) in their house in Woodstock Road.

Not, it seems, until Lawrence's visit to Princeton in 1960 did serious dissatisfaction with Oxford set in. On his return he wrote in the *Oxford Magazine* about the diminishing enthusiasm of 'most of us who have been doing the job for nearly twenty years' (a splendidly characteristic piece of Lawrentian hyperbole) for undergraduate teaching. He wanted a switch of emphasis to graduate studies. To effect this, Oxford should revert to the pre-war practice of choosing only a minority of its undergraduates on grounds of academic merit, reserving the rest of its places for 'good college

[3] See *A Catalogue of the Muniment of Wadham College*, produced for the Historical Manuscripts Commission, National Register of Archives, 1962.

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men' (i.e. sportsmen, actors, and so forth), a proposal which must have put Lawrence in the unfamiliar company of a declining band of reactionaries lurking in the darker corners of the university. In turn, this would help appease the fears of other English universities that Oxford and Cambridge were denuding them of their best students – itself a rather remarkable example of Oxonian condescension.[4]

As it happened this coincided with the foundation of the 'new universities' which were to shake, for a while at least, Oxford's self-confident assumption of its own superiority. Instead of plodding like their predecessors through years of apprenticeship to the University of London, Sussex, York, Lancaster, Kent and Essex were to spring into being as fully fledged universities, determining their own syllabuses and with a mission 'to make the map of knowledge'. Heading a history department (or whatever it might now be called) might be a challenge, might also be an opportunity, especially as ambitious and publicity-seeking vice-chancellors were determined to recruit young and radical senior staff. Change was in the air in Oxford as well. For the first time undergraduates launched a campaign for reform of the syllabus; prominent amongst them were such luminaries as Tim Mason, Brian Harrison and (a new graduate) Peter Burke. Lawrence gave conspicuous support. In the short run, at least, nothing came of it. Expectations roused, then dashed, accounted in classic 'J-curve' fashion for Lawrence's accepting the offer of the Dodge Chair at Princeton.

It is, fortunately, premature to review Lawrence's scholarly work; nor would I be the person to do so. His production record while he undertook his tutorial stint (a minimum of fourteen hours a week, sometimes as much as twenty) was amazing, in bulk and range; not only *Palavicino* and *Sculpture in Britain: The Middle Ages*, but *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, the typescript handed in just before his departure for Princeton. I was given a draft of the chapter on 'Violence' to read. It was a revelation in its demonstration that, far from being cured by Edward IV or Henry VII (we used to debate which), 'bastard feudalism' was alive and kicking until late in Queen Elizabeth's reign. Indeed, while Stone was shattering the legend of a Tudor peace, K. B. McFarlane was taking the violence out of the fifteenth century. The dialectic of historical controversy produced the apparent paradox of a sixteenth century

[4] *Oxford Magazine*, 28 October 1961.

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