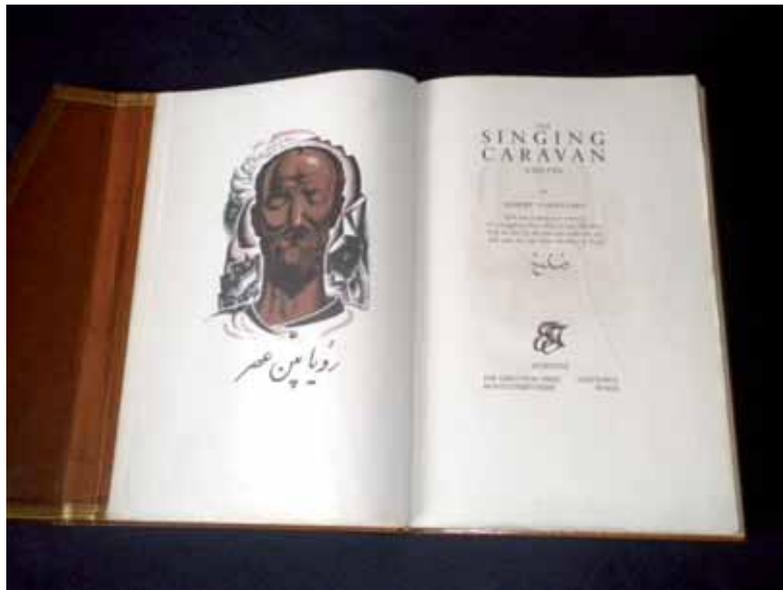


“MY CARAVAN DELIGHTS ME ...”wrote T.E. Lawrence to William McCance of the Gregynog Press on receipt of the latest publication of this fine press in 1933. But did Lawrence of Arabia ever visit Gregynog?

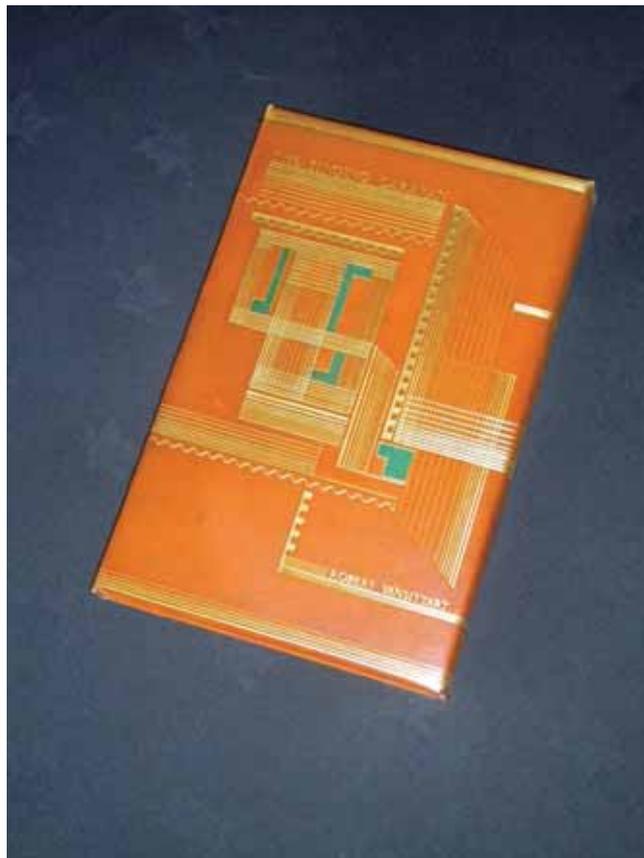


Sadly, we have so far found no evidence that that famous Brough motorcycle ever chugged down the Galloping Drive and through the woods to the hall - although how T.E. Lawrence would have loved 'Galloping Drive'. However this does not mean to say that there is no connection between Lawrence and Gregynog - indeed, had his life not ended on that fatal day in May 1935 he might, if an idea in Tom Jones's mind had come to fruition, have ended up working in the Press here. We know he took a great interest in fine printing; he had dreamed of setting up his own printing press with his friend Vyvyan Richards, and the first edition of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was a finely printed limited edition work

Furthermore Lawrence took a great interest in the Gregynog Press itself. He declined the invitation to write either an introduction to *The Stealing of the Mare* or a preface to *The Singing Caravan*, but the reason he gave was that he was tired of Eastern subjects ('£20,000 wouldn't tempt him,' David Garnett reported), not that he did not admire the press. Indeed he was very complimentary about the sample pages of *The Singing Caravan* sent to him by the then controller of the Press, William

McCance, and at once placed an order for the finished volume.

'It flatters my conceit,' he wrote to McCance, *'to fancy that I may have helped you to decide upon the Caravan for your press : for at Cliveden years ago when I last met Tom Jones I urged it upon him as a worth-while modern book, not yet fairly printed. Heinemann's edition was so badly done. Yours is going to be wholly excellent. I have ordered a copy, of course, and persuaded a few people to order one too. It is very reasonably priced and will, I hope, go well. This is a bad season for rich books, and yourself, surely, almost the only precious press putting work out. I very much hope the event will justify the venture. I've also ordered an Erewhon. (Gregynog Press 1933) That was a very good idea. A fair Erewhon was necessary ...'* He goes on to suggest that the Press publish an edition of a long- forgotten book, *Children of Earth* by Darrell Figgis, a suggestion which was not taken up.



Lawrence was very pleased with *The Singing Caravan* when he

received it. In March 1933 he wrote to McCance:

'I've been wanting to write to you for a long while about that excellent "Singing Caravan" : and the chit about Erewhon provides the last match. I've ordered an Erewhon, unjustifiable extravagance, but the book is so good that it will be a permanent possession.

My Caravan delights me. The print is small and neat and fine : paper and binding all right : and the decoration most fitting and restrained. The capital letters are quite new to me, in style and colour and most successful. Printing poetry is always difficult ... but you have kept it well in frame and harmonious. I call the whole book a very worthy performance. It is excellent stuff to read, too. I have liked it since it came out, and in this noble dress it reads better than ever. I hope you have sold them all.

You must have got a Persian to do the lettering. It feels authentic. I can't read Arabic script, so can only admire its decorative effect.'

Lawrence was quite prepared to criticise as well as to admire. In a letter to Lord Carlow in 1934 he wrote, *'I like some of the Gregynog books. During the managership of Hughes-Stanton (Blair Hughes-Stanton, who worked as an artist at the Gregynog Press alongside William McCance at this time) they too often printed on "Japanese Vellum" (neither Japanese nor vellum!) thus sacrificing the print to the pictures. Under Haberly (Lloyd Haberly, who took over as press controller in 1934) they will be more correct, but I cannot pass his poetry as more than period-pastiche.'*

Lawrence seems to have acquired a number of Gregynog Press books. Unfortunately his library was dispersed after his death and we do not know what became of them - we can only assume that some lucky collector somewhere has a copy of *The Singing Caravan* or *The Stealing of the Mare* or *Erewhon* with the precious initials TES (for of course by this time Lawrence had changed his name to Shaw) on the fly leaf.

Lawrence and William McCance were old acquaintances, being mutual friends of the artist Eric Kennington (who was to carve the effigy on Lawrence's tomb in Wareham church). In 1926 he wrote to McCance discussing potential binders for *Seven Pillars* - ending up with the kind of

self-deprecating remark for which he was to become famous:

Like you, I'm no hand at writing letters. Indeed I'd say I'm no hand at writing anything, but it is not so hard on business matters

The book has been an awful job & I shall be happy to be orphaned of it!

Of course in 1926 William McCance had no idea that one day he would become Controller of the Gregynog Press, but within a year another connection of Lawrence's was working there. Herbert Hodgson was a distinguished printer who had worked as assistant to Manning Pike during the printing of the first limited edition of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* which was supervised by the author himself. Hodgson was appointed as printer to the Gregynog Press in 1927 and stayed until 1936. There is no doubt that his skill as a printer played a crucial role in maintaining the quality of the press's output. He seems also to have transformed the social scene of Tregynon and Bettws, the two nearby villages, because he formed a small dance band which performed at all the local hops!

It seems rather surprising that Lawrence never visited Gregynog, given his interest in fine printing and his acquaintance with Hodgson and McCance - not to mention the fact that some of his closest friends, including the playwright George Bernard Shaw and his wife Charlotte, and Sir James and Lady Grigg, were well known to Gwendoline and Margaret Davies and visited Gregynog regularly in the nineteen-thirties. The nearest he seems to have got is meeting up with the Misses Davies' great friend and adviser, Tom Jones, ('T.J.') at Cliveden, home of Lord and Lady Astor. T.J. was Cabinet Secretary to the Baldwin government during these years. His diaries make startling reading - he would be accompanying Lloyd George on a visit to Hitler one day, attending a meeting of the Gregynog Press board the next, and having dinner with Lady Astor the following Friday.

No doubt like most of his distinguished contemporaries he took a bemused interest in the fortunes of the man now known as Aircraftman Shaw. In March 1935 he records that George Bernard Shaw had suggested 'a brace of knighthoods' for the Honours List and a pension of £800 a year for T.E.Shaw, alias Lawrence, 'now a destitute discharged aircraftman'. 'Not since Belisarius has there been such a scandalous ignoring of supreme military merit,' wrote GBS.. 'I put it strongly to

Baldwin years ago; but Baldwin is a genial smoker who promises everything and forgets everything.'

Just two months later T.J. wrote a sad letter to Lady Grigg:

'Today our thoughts are with 'Lawrence of Arabia'. I've not yet read the newspaper appreciations. No one writer could encompass his mansidedness. I knew him a bit, but on the side of books and printing. When he first came to see me it was to ask my help with a Civil List pension for Doughty (author of *Arabia Deserta*) which I was luckily able to put through, and after that he was well-disposed and I have somewhere a few letters from him. Just before G.B.S. went off to South Africa some weeks ago he wrote me saying the Government ought to give Lawrence £800 a year, but of course the job would be to get Lawrence to take it. My plan, however, had been to beguile him to Gregynog to play with producing books, and I had asked John Buchan for his address. Fate has settled the problem in her own dramatic way ... '

Anyone who knows Gregynog at all well must be intrigued by the thought of how different its history might have been if T.J. had acted on his plan when he first thought of it and had succeeded in beguiling Lawrence of Arabia to Gregynog to play at making books. How different Lawrence's own history might have been too! But would he have come? And how would he have fared, if he had? One is almost afraid to speculate - perhaps heroes die when they should die, leaving the rest of us behind to create the myths. The story ends, but not the book, as Vansittart wrote:

*You that come after me, and call
From summits that outstrip my hopes
Yet shall I linger on the slopes,
And dwell with those who gave their all.*

Further reading:

GRAHAM, Rigby, 'T.E.Lawrence and the Seizin Press', The Private Library, 2nd Series, Vol 6:1, Spring 1973

HARRAP, Dorothy A. *A History of the Gregynog Press*, Private Libraries Association 1980

HUTCHINS, Michael, 'Memories of T. E. Lawrence, and Gregynog', *Matrix* 6, Whittington Press, Winter 1986

JONES, Thomas, *A Diary with Letters 1931 - 1950*, Oxford 1954

NASH, Paul W. Viscount Carlow, 'T.E.Lawrence and the Corvinus Press', *The Private Library*, 5th Series, Vol 3:1, Spring 2000

All these items may be consulted in the Gregynog Library on application to the Librarian.