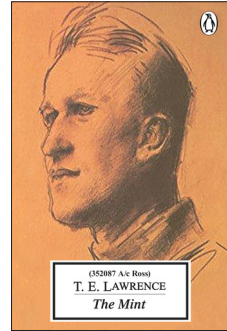


Book Reviews

The Mint



By T. E. Lawrence

Publisher: Penguin Books (1978) (ISBN-13: 978-0140045055) 232 pages

Reviewed by Wing Commander Matthew Smith

Biography: Wing Commander Matt Smith is an Aerosystems Engineer with a broad base of experience in airworthiness and capability development, particularly for Fast Jets. He is currently serving as the MOD Saudi Armed Forces Project's Senior Team Representative at King Fahad Air Base, Taif. He is a Chief of the Air Staff's Fellow, having graduated with an MA in Air Power in the Modern World from King's College London in 2016.

Introduction

In 1922 the world of aviation was one of excitement, of invention and of romance as man sought to further his mastery of this new domain. It is little surprise, therefore, that T. E. Lawrence sought sanctuary in the fledgling Royal Air Force to escape the unwanted fame his exploits in Arabia had attracted. Lawrence had written to Sir Hugh Trenchard requesting he support his anonymous enlistment as an airman. Lawrence also felt that the development of this new Force would offer a perfect literary subject and that only in the ranks would he be able to see it clearly. His objective was to write a portrait of the Royal Air Force.

Lawrence's objective was curtailed, as just 5 months after initial enlistment his identity was revealed by the press and he was discharged. *The Mint* was created from notes he had taken during recruit training at Uxbridge, kept only to create the introduction to a larger novel. The Uxbridge notes are curated into two sections: 'The Raw Material', which describes the early part of the harsh depot regime; and 'In The Mill', which details his experiences with his Flight prior to assignment from the depot. Following Lawrence's later re-enlistment he drafted

‘Service’, which, contained within the Uxbridge section, forms a reflection upon his time as an aircraft mechanic at the Cadet College, Cranwell.

To this reviewer, the value of *The Mint* stems from three facets: First, it offers a vivid contemporaneous insight into the nascent Service written by an exceptional author. It may, therefore, be considered by some to be significant. Second, Lawrence, regarded as an exceptional leader, provides an honest critique of those charged with leading and developing the future stock of the RAF. Finally, Lawrence offers open observations of the inter-personal dynamics at play within his Flight. The lessons that may be drawn from these observations, which are rooted in human nature, are timeless.

There are some inevitable imperfections given that the book failed to reach its intended form. The Cranwell chapters sit incongruously with the Uxbridge notes. Their overwhelming positivity contrasting sharply with the character of the bleak depot chapters. Lawrence’s self-doubts are frequently mentioned and the self-pitying tone can, at times, wear thin. Finally, the author’s truthful descriptions extend to a frank account of barrack room language and behaviour which some readers may find distasteful.

There is much to commend *The Mint* as a historical record. Lawrence depicts a Service that was still under the influence of its parents, with the Non-Commissioned Officers and Officers generally all having transferred from the Navy or Army. The author notes the Air Ministry’s deliberate and punctilious efforts, to the point of folly, to make its Service unlike the other two Services. Beyond the descriptions of the brutalities of training, which were much removed from actual Service life, the Cranwell chapters give us a valuable insight into the living and working conditions of the average airman of the time. *The Mint* offers a rare account of the development of the RAF’s cultures, rituals and symbols from an airman’s perspective.

There is little doubt that Lawrence was an exceptionally capable commander and therefore his analysis of the qualities of his leaders is one that carries great credibility. He judges that the pervading attitudes of the Depot leadership are anachronistic (even for the times) and much is said of the resultant poor leadership. His vignette on the Depot’s Commanding Officer is particularly damning. He displays an arbitrary brutality towards his charges and so commands little respect from them. The rest of the Officer cadre are conspicuous by their anonymity to the recruits, yet in his analysis, ‘to know the troops’ mentality and nature and outlook is the main part of their duty’.

Lawrence’s thoughts on the traits that the Service ought to be nurturing in its officers and airmen were prescient. He posited that the soldier, which the depot sought to create, and the technician, that the Service required, were mutually destructive ideals. The Service required people who were intelligent, free thinking and passionate about the air. His favoured leaders were those who could imbue and develop those qualities in their airmen. Lawrence was really

describing the necessity for the leadership of a technologically driven Service to embrace the principles of mission command to harness the intelligence of its workforce.

The transformation of a diverse group of civilians to airmen is described in minute detail. Lawrence brings out the tensions created by the environment and identifies those that are the product of the squad members' characters. His thoughts on the delicate maintenance of harmony within a group sharpened the mind of the reviewer to the minor frictions, that if left unchecked, can lead to a destructive dissonance. This lesson is pertinent to leaders and followers alike, in any given environment.

Lawrence charts the evolution of the Flight from a group that arrives at opinions through debate to one which was able to instinctively think, decide and act without a word said, attaining 'a flight-entity which is outside our individualities'. He largely sees this being achieved through the suppression of individual feelings, 'we jettison our realities...or cover them so deep we fail to hear their voice'. Whilst this may be true, what is not acknowledged are the dangers of this psychological regime to the individual. In an effort to preserve harmony they may instead destroy something of themselves.

The Mint offers a unique observation of life in the early Air Force produced by a renowned academic who was also an authority on military leadership. Whilst there are some minor shortfalls it is nevertheless an excellent work. It is highly commended to all those with an interest in the history of the Royal Air Force and to those who have the responsibility to lead at whatever level.

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