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T. E. Lawrence

—Man of Fact

Or Irish Poet?

Reviewed by H. E. Bates

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T. E. LAWRENCE TO HIS BIOGRAPHERS. By Robert Graves and Liddell Hart. Doubleday. 260 pp. \$6.50.

THIS FASCINATING volume consists of two books in one; namely "Lawrence to His Biographer Robert Graves" and "Lawrence to His Biographer Liddell Hart," both first published, but separately and privately, in 1938.

Both writers were authorized biographers of Lawrence in his lifetime and though both formed a close and intimate acquaintance with him they never met each other, Lawrence having had a deliberate tendency to keep his friendships sealed off one from another wherever he could.

Graves's book follows a pattern formed by a long series of letters to him from Lawrence, with annotations by Graves; Liddell Hart's is more in the form of a long questionnaire on widely diverse matters to Lawrence, with Lawrence's answers and Liddell Hart's notes on them.

The Graves section of the book goes back to early 1920 and Oxford, where Lawrence had a research fellowship at All Souls and where Graves was able to introduce him to several of the younger poets of the day, among them Sassoon, Robert Nichols and Edmund Blunden.

INNUMERABLE ATTEMPTS have been made to penetrate the Lawrence enigma but Graves produces, in his acute fashion, a theory that is new to me: namely, that Lawrence envied poets, whom he felt "had some sort

of secret from which he could learn for his own spiritual profit." To this he later adds the further fascinating information that "the queerest thing he (i.e., Lawrence) did, towards the end, was to become a member of the Irish Academy of Letters—he who was "no writer." And comes, finally, to the following pungent summing-up:

"Irish he undoubtedly was . . . more Irish than the Irish. He had all the marks of the Irishman: the rhetoric of freedom, the rhetoric of mastery, the rhetoric of honour, the power to excite sudden deep affections, loyalty to the long-buried past, high aims qualified by too mocking a sense of humor, serenity clouded by petulance and broken by occasional black despairs, playboy charm and theatricality, imagination that overruns itself and tries, extreme generosity, serpent cunning, lion courage, diabolic intuition and the curse of self-doubt which becomes enmity to self and sometimes renunciation of all that is most loved and esteemed."

FROM LIDDELL HART a vastly different picture emerges. Lawrence's answers to his many queries are terse, sharp, graphic, factual, sometimes wry and always very much to the point. Recalling Graves's comment of "serpent cunning" and "diabolical intuition" it almost makes one wonder if T. E. might not have developed, in other circumstances, into some sort of tycoon.

Finally, to these two pictures is added a third: that of a pen-and-ink sketch done by an unknown artist on the back of a photogravure of a Byzantine work of art and recently picked up by Robert Graves in the Caledonian Market.