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**H. E. BATES**, who wrote last war stories of Service life under the name **Flying Officer X**, reviews the just-published book by Lawrence of Arabia which has been a legend nearly 30 years

**T**HE MINT," by 352087 A/C Ross, \*formerly T. E. Lawrence, afterwards T. E. Shaw, has been a legendary book for well over a quarter of a century. Some books become legendary after their authors' deaths; a few achieve a legendary status in their authors' lifetimes; but "The Mint" is the only book I can call to mind that became legendary nearly 30 years before its publication.

For already in the 1920s, at the time of the appearance of "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom," the literary world was speaking with anticipation of Lawrence's account of his enlistment in the R.A.F. as an ordinary aircraftman, and a few privileged persons were already reading it in unexpurgated form.

Physically and mentally wrecked, spiritually groping, Lawrence decided to enlist in the ranks of the R.A.F. in 1922, "going into self-appointed exile, to save my R.A.F. skin from the repercussion of a folly in 1918," under the name of John Hume Ross.

A year later his identity was discovered. He was then discharged, but two and a half years later was allowed to rejoin the Service, this time using the name of T. E. Shaw, under which he had meanwhile served in the Tank Corps. His choice of these two particular services as a means of rehabilitating himself is, I think, highly illuminating.

### he scorched

For Lawrence was, among other things, of that fascinating hybrid type which these islands, more than anywhere else in the world, produce in such abundance: he was the arch-type of amateur eccentric, the soldier-dreamer, the visionary man of action, the poet-archaeologist who loved machines. "I adore petrol stations," he said to me on our one and only meeting as we sat drinking in the summer beauties of a garden in Huntingdonshire, to reach which he had scorched half across England on one of his beloved motor-bikes of fabulous horse-power.

In "The Mint" Lawrence set out, in his own words, to write a real book, its subject the Royal Air Force, that would to some extent counteract what he called "the inadequacy of my Seven Pillars in the cold light of revision."

### savage, unhappy

In its present form it consists of 50 chapters, some extremely short, strung out, again in Lawrence's words, like "a pound of sausages." These chapters, often mere sketches, were the foundations of an intended *opus* that never materialised.

They are a sort of diary-testament, a day-to-day record, jotted down each night, of what he called "a savage place," the depot at which he did his square-bashing, spud-bashing, garbage-slopping, swill-cart fatigues, latrine-swabbing, church-parades and all the other bull that encumbers the life of the lowest erk.

It is nearly 15 years since I first read "The Mint," reading it in unexpurgated form in something of the same circumstances in which it was written: on an R.A.F. bed, surrounded by R.A.F. men, at night.

It seemed to me then, as it still does, a savage, subjective, uneasy, brittle, unhappy, coarse and amusing book that had in it strange elements of beauty, sickness and despair. It is less like literature than a series of

\* Cape, 17s. 6d.

# 'The Mint' is bound to shock

dark Indian ink sketches done with tremendous phlegm and verve, vivid and stabbing exactitude, occasional melancholy and hatred and a Rabelaisian disregard for politeness in words. It is a soul-searcher.

In "The Mint," Lawrence the dreamer and man of action, Lawrence the visionary and erk, chivy each other continually, unrelaxed, often in torment, so that although the book is not really the "iron, rectangular, abhorrent book" that Lawrence called it, it is splintery, so to speak, emotionally abrasive and without charm.

Bernard Shaw called it dry, but a single phrase of Lawrence's own well describes its mood and his own when he speaks of himself and his fellows as being "the cannibals of our emotions."

### four words

That is, in fact, so near a bull's-eye of a description that if you add to it another remark of Lawrence's, his belief that "sincerity is the only written thing that time improves," you may be some way nearer to understanding "The Mint," the man who wrote it and possibly why, in entering the R.A.F. rather as a man enters a monastery, he chose his self-appointed exile.

As far as books go I am an unshockable person; but it is clear that many readers will find the idiom of "The Mint," ruthlessly expurgated as it is, distasteful and unacceptable. It is bound to shock; so many are the omissions of natural vernacular that whole pages of the book look like a new kind of word game or a job of a sozzled printer. But the simple substitution of three or four words of basic barrack-room—or even one, if you feel it so important—will resolve any difficulties of syntax you may encounter.

### his struggle

Finally, some doubts having been cast by the habitually cantankerous Richard Aldington on the authenticity of much of Lawrence's legendary life and actions, it is now open to any reader to assess, or at least investigate, in "The Mint," what kind of man he was. The issue here is not whether or not he was a good soldier.

It is something altogether more fiercely personal than that. Nor is it merely a question of his giving a true account of lower life in the R.A.F.—all too true, too pungent and too vivid though the account is.

There is a deep and unresolved personal struggle here and it may well have caused him, in part, to say of "The Mint": "I can't write finis to this book, while I am still serving. I hope, sometimes, that I will never write it."