

With Lawrence in Arabia

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Presented by Neil Brand and Luke McKernan



James A. Cannavino Library, Archives & Special
Collections, Marist College, USA

In 1918 the American journalist Lowell Thomas, set out in search of heroic war-time endeavour to inspire the American public. Given official backing, and funded by a group of Chicago businessmen, Thomas and his cameraman Harry Chase elected to document General Allenby's campaign against the forces of the Ottoman empire in Palestine and Arabia. There he stumbled upon the man who was to make his fortune and whom he would turn into a lasting legend: T.E. Lawrence. Thomas was only with Lawrence for a few days, but he and Chase gathered sufficient material to put together an elaborate show – or what he called 'travelogue' - comprising narration, glass slides, film and music, which he first entitled *With Allenby in Palestine* and put on in New York in March 1919. The show moved to London in August 1919, where its title was soon changed to *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia*, as crowds flocked to Covent

Garden to thrill to the exploits of the young man Thomas described as being "one of the most picturesque personalities of modern times, a man who will be blazoned on the romantic pages of history with Raleigh, Drake, Clive and Gordon".

Millions saw *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia* throughout the world. It established popular fascination with Lawrence, a fascination which has never died down, and which in turn helped inspire David Lean's feature film *Lawrence of Arabia* (in which Arthur Kennedy plays a Thomas-like journalist named Jackson Bentley). However, the travelogue itself receded into history, much cited but never seen as the films (held by the Imperial War Museum) were in an unedited state, those photographs that were known to exist were scattered across several collections, and the script was believed lost. Reconstruction was not possible.

But fortunately the script was not lost. A copy emerged when the Lowell Thomas papers were donated to Marist College in the United States, together with an extensive collection of glass negatives, hand-painted lantern slides and other visual materials. The opportunity now exists to reproduce *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia* approximately, if not quite exactly as it originally was. The original show ran for two hours, and featured musical interludes from Widor, Verdi and Elgar played on the organ as well as patriotic airs from the Welsh Guards. Thomas himself was the easy-going narrator, and Harry Chase the projectionist.

This recreation of just part of the travelogue is a work-in-progress. It takes an edited portion of Thomas' script which relates to Lawrence and

matches this as far as possible to the existing and available slides that Thomas used (nearly 300 were employed in his original show), plus a small number of film clips. The idea at this stage is not to offer a finished product but a rough cut so that we can judge how this material works before an audience. We invite comments as we look to develop this material further.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Imperial War Museum for the use of film and photographic material, and the James A. Cannavino Library, Archives & Special Collections, Marist College, USA for permission to use the script and for access to their photographic archives.

Lowell Thomas went on to produce other travelogues before gaining new fame as a radio broadcaster, newsreel commentator and producer of Cinerama films. He died in 1981, aged 89.