

Is it Osama bin Laden? Or is it Usama bin Ladin? Or perhaps Usama bin Ledin? Who knows? As we can see from the world press, just about anything is permissible. But for some thoughts on why *any* spelling is probably good enough for a contemporary magazine story, a newspaper article, or even an international death warrant, we can refer to a famous writer of years gone by, none other than T. E. Lawrence, a.k.a. Lawrence of Arabia, for a brief and humorous ditty on the spelling of Arabic proper names. The following is from the preface to his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* with a slight variation from the same story's derivative, *Revolt in the Desert*:

The spelling of Arabic names varies greatly, and I have made no alterations. It should be explained that only three vowels are recognized in Arabic, and that some of the consonants have no equivalents in English. The general practice of orientalists in recent years has been to adopt one of the various sets of conventional signs for the letters and vowel marks of the Arabic alphabet, transliterating Mohamed as Muhammad, muezzin as mu'edhdhin, and Koran as Qur'an or Kur'an. This method is useful to those who know what that means, but this book follows the old fashion of writing the best phonetic approximations according to ordinary English spelling. The same place-name will be found spelt in several different ways, not only because the sound of many Arabic words can legitimately be represented in English in a variety of ways, but also because the natives of a district often differ as to pronunciation of any place-name which has not already become famous or fixed by literary usage. (For example a locality near Akaba is called Abu Lissan, Aba el Lissan or Abu Lissal.) I reprint here a series of questions by the publisher and answers by the author concerning the printing of *Revolt in the Desert*.

Q. I attach a list of queries raised by F. who is reading the proofs. He finds these very clean, but full of inconsistencies in the spelling of proper names, a point which reviewers often take up. Will you annotate it in the margin, so that I can get the proofs straightened?

A. Annotated: not very helpfully perhaps. Arabic names won't go into English, exactly, for their consonants are not the same as ours, and their vowels, like ours, vary from district to district. There are some 'scientific systems' of transliteration, helpful to people who know enough Arabic not to need helping, but a wash-out for the world. I spell my names anyhow, to show what rot the systems are.

Q. Slip 1. Jeddah and Jidda used impartially throughout. Intentional?

A. Rather!

Q. Bir Waheida was Bir Waheidi.

A. Why not? All one place.

Q. Slip 20. Nuri, Emir of the Ruwalla, belongs to the 'chief family of the Rualla.' On Slip 23, 'Rualla horse,' and Slip 38, 'killed one Rueli.' In later slips 'Rualla.'

A. Should have also used Ruwala and Ruala.

Q. Slip 28. The Bisaita is also spelt Biseita.

A. Good.

Q. Jedha, the she-camel, was Jedhah on Slip 40.

A. She was a splendid beast.

Q. Slip 53. 'Meleager, the immoral poet.' I have put 'immortal' poet, but the author may mean immoral after all.

A. Immorality I know. Immortality I cannot judge. As you please: Meleager will not sue us for libel.

Q. Slip 65. Author is addressed 'Ya Auruns,' but on Slip 56 was 'Aurans.'

A. Also Lurens and Runs: not to mention 'Shaw.' More to follow, if time permits.

Q. Slip 78. Sherif Abd el Mayin of Slip 68 becomes el Main, el Mayein, el Muein, el Mayin, and el Muyein.

A. Good egg. I call this really ingenious.

In the face of such replies to the publisher's well-intentioned questions, further expostulation was clearly impossible.