Like all years, 1988 was a year of anniversaries. Three hundred years earlier the catholic king of England had been replaced by a Dutch protestant. The anniversary of this glorious event was loudly proclaimed in Britain last year. In 1588 a protestant wind had woven death and misfortune among a catholic naval fleet, and the integrity of the virgin queen’s England was preserved. Four hundred years later this too was widely commemorated.

Likewise, the fact that T.E.Lawrence, legendary hero of the Arab Revolt during the Great War, had been born in 1888 did not go unnoticed. The centenary of his birth saw David Lean’s Lawrence of Arabia once again galloping across the screens of many a cinema. The long list of Lawrence biographies grew yet again with the publication of A Touch of Genius: The Life of Lawrence by Malcolm Brown and Julia Cave. Indeed the diversity of interpretations that are offered by his various biographers has lead Stephen E. Tabachnick and Christopher Matheson to publish Images of Lawrence, a work which reviews the development of the Lawrence myth. For those members of the public whose curiosity had not yet been satiated, or who simply wished to look beyond the written biographies, the National Portrait Gallery in London organised an exhibition in which numerous aspects of Lawrence’s life were displayed through paintings, photographs, manuscripts, maps and memorabilia.

Yet despite this deluge of publicity dedicated to the memory of Lawrence it has gone completely unremarked that half a century previously an historical novel appeared which, metaphorically, celebrated the magnitude of Lawrence’s achievements.

In this novel, Count Belisarius, the author of the book, Robert Graves, had attempted to offer the reader a fictionalised yet authentic account of the life of Belisarius, the brilliant general who restored the influence of the Byzantine Empire in North Africa and Italy during the reign of the sixth century emperor Justinian. Yet behind the account of the life of Count Belisarius emerges a vivid description of his character which shows a great resemblance to that of Lawrence of Arabia, whose remarkable
achievements had astounded the western world only a twenty years earlier. What this article intends to do is to show that this resemblance was fully intended by Graves. I will do this not by giving a full account of the main events in the novel, nor by summing up the achievements of Lawrence, but merely by giving a description of the character of Belisarius, as it is portrayed in the novel and by reproducing what is known from Graves' relationship to Lawrence from other sources.

When Count Belisarius was first published in 1938 the initial reviews were far from lyrical in their praise. Most reviewers criticised the novel for its rather stiff portrayal of the main character, finding him to be "altogether too noble". Graves, never a lover of critics, reacted strongly and in one of two letters which he wrote to the Sunday Times claimed that it was "a shocking comment on twentieth century literary taste that when ... a really good man is shown ... it must be said that he does not come to life".¹

It is interesting to note how Graves has side-stepped the real issue here, namely the criticism of his own penmanship - his novel is dull and the leading character is not brought to life. Instead he turned the tables on his reviewers by transforming his work into a statement of objective morality, because he had shown Belisarius to have been "a really good man" and British critics were therefore guilty of being the pervaders of bad views.

Moreover, this expression - "a really good man" - is of the utmost interest. It is surprising to see Graves using a term of such absolute admiration. In none of his previous works can we perceive such panegyrics, with the exception of his biography of Lawrence of 1928 - a work that is best described as hagiography. In fact the belief in "good men" is in direct contradiction with the opinion which Graves expressed to his friend and fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon: "I do not believe in great men".²

Perhaps then Graves does not believe in great men and Belisarius is the exception which proves the rule. Or one could conclude that when Graves wrote to Sassoon in 1930 he had not yet realised the extent of Belisarius' greatness and therefore was as yet unaware that a great man had ever existed. Neither of these, however, will stand up to closer inspection. Belisarius was not the only exception to the rule, for Graves was already aware of the existence of a great man well before he penned his letter to Sassoon. We learn this from a letter he wrote in 1921 in which he describes someone with the very words "a great man".³ And the someone in question? T.E. Lawrence!

The conclusion is unavoidable. Graves did not believe in great men but he made two exceptions: Count Belisarius and T.E. Lawrence. The reader might object at this point and claim that Graves described Belisarius as being 'good', not as being 'great'. A close reading of Count Belisarius will erase any doubt. Belisarius is portrayed here as possessing all the necessary ingredients of greatness; bravery, honour, compassion, intel-
ligence, loyalty. The narrator in Graves' novel, Eugenius - a servant of Belisarius' wife and a Christian, though not without a dash of the old pagan beliefs - ends his narration by saying that those who abide by the pagan customs and believe that virtue is the highest honour will be confirmed in their beliefs by the example of Belisarius: "For Count Belisarius had such a simple devotion to virtue". He then adds, "Those of you for whom the Gospelstory carries historical weight may perhaps say that Belisarius behaved at his trial before Justinian very much as his Master had done before Pontius Pilate".4 When a Christian takes it upon himself to compare a fellow human being with the Christian saviour of the Christians, this can only be considered as an expression of boundless admiration. Furthermore, it undoubtedly invests the object of such wonder with the title 'great man'.

Belisarius and Lawrence were singled out for special treatment. Lawrence was 'great' and Belisarius 'good/great'. Indeed the latter was compared to Jesus Christ. But what of Lawrence then? Doesn't he too deserve a comparison to the Jew whose sacrificial death signified a turning point in history? Graves obviously thought he did and in a letter to the military historian and biographer of Lawrence (and admirer of Belisarius as well), Basil Liddell Hart, he wrote: "Let us be Plutarchean for once and make a comparison between T.E. and Jesus Christ."5

Renouncement of the Flesh

The critics found the Belisarius of Graves "too noble". As a youth, we learn from Graves' novel, he took an oath "renouncing the world, the flesh and the devil".6 Unflinching in the face of danger, incorruptible in a world of intrigue, uncontaminated by the temptations of selfish ambition; Graves would no doubt have agreed with Gibbon that Belisarius was "a hero who in the vigour of life disdained the fairest offers of ambition and revenge".7

This description is equally applicable to Lawrence. Graves felt that Lawrence had renounced the world, the flesh and the devil. Lawrence had discarded the army rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and, though one of the heroes of the Great War, sought anonymity by re-enlisting as an aircraftsman in the RAF. This rejection of worldly ambition was impressed on Graves by Lawrence himself who wrote: "when I first went into the RAF ... it was the nearest equivalent of going into a monastery in the Middle Ages".8 Graves denied the possibility that Lawrence was homosexual9 and believed that his rejection of the flesh meant that he died a virgin.10 Finally, Graves admitted that Lawrence was tempted by the devil but in this he was compared to Jesus Christ and, presumably, did not give in to temptation.11

Graves admitted that Lawrence "could never squarely face the fact of
the existence of women". In this Graves felt that Lawrence was similar to Jesus Christ for "both had mothers, and both tried to manage without women (with as little offence to women as possible). But Lawrence's puritanism bears an equal resemblance to that of the Belisarius in the novel of Graves. Graves quotes the citizens of Constantinople as saying: "He (Belisarius) is a sort of monster. No man ever saw him drunk; he dresses as simply as his station allows; so far from being lecherous, he has not so much as cast a longing eye on a single one of his captured women ...".

Unlike Lawrence, Belisarius did partake in the pleasures of the flesh; at least we may suppose so, for even Graves could not hide the fact that Belisarius married an ex-courtesan called Antonina. Interestingly, Graves has portrayed the marriage as having been based on equality and comradeship. Antonina is more than a wife to Belisarius; she is his friend and companion, an astute defender of his political interests and a capable fellow military commander. In Graves' eyes, the private life of Belisarius, like that of Lawrence, was a-sexual.

Also, the fact that Belisarius was married ought not to entice us to conclude that he could do what Lawrence could not do, namely, "face the fact of the existence of women". When Belisarius discovered that his wife had been having an affair with his own adopted son Theodosius, his initial reaction was one of consternation; "he wished to kill Theodosius ... he wished to kill ... Antonina ... he wished to kill himself ...". Instead he drew the most comforting conclusion that she had been seduced against her own will by some evil magic. In other words, he denies the existence of Antonina's illicit sexual urge. However, during a private conversation with Antonina he permits himself to be convinced that the whole affair was pure fabrication.

Clearly, in a matter as queasy as female sexuality Belisarius, like Lawrence, prized ignorance above enlightenment.

A Soldier's Honour

In 1929 Graves wrote to Edward Marsh that Lawrence was: "legendary for his honour" and in the same year wrote in his autobiographical Good-Bye to All That: "It was a point of honour to him (Lawrence) not to make any money out of the revolt". Years later Graves, in a short essay, was to claim that honour is the most important ingredient in a man's morality. Revealingly, the title of that essay was A Soldier's Honour. Belisarius was a soldier and, clearly, an honourable one. Lawrence was honourable, but was he a real soldier? The opinion of Graves leaves no room for doubt: "He (Lawrence) was, merely, to me, a fellow-soldier." That Graves should consider honour as being associated with soldiers ought not to surprise us. His Good-Bye to All That has often wrongly been
labelled an anti-war-novel. Graves was not a pacifist and his autobiography was an attack on the stupidity of the 1914-1918 war only. He had had the horrifying experience of seeing how normal young men could be transformed into killers:

"How furiously against your will
You kill and kill again, and kill:
All thought of peace behind you cast"1

(Country at War)

He had discovered new depths to the meaning of "Death the Leveller"....

"Yet in his death this cut-throat wild
Groaned 'Mother! Mother!' like a child,
While that poor innocent in man's clothes
Died cursing God with brutal oaths."

("The Leveller")

However, these experiences did not cause a total rejection of war. Recently the British comedian Spike Milligan handed over his correspondence with Graves to St. Johns College, Oxford. Milligan, though a good friend of Graves, admitted that they disagreed about one thing: war. He has remarked that Graves had "a macho regard for war - he seemed to have a certain liking for it, if only poetic." This despite the fact that Graves had written to Milligan that war was becoming more and more repulsive "with napalm, Saigon-syphilis, Rest and Recreation brothels, lies, defoliation, massacre of children."20

It is not war as such that Graves objected to, only the destructiveness of modern warfare. Indeed he claimed that war was a "natural human function", but no less a person than T.E. Lawrence had convinced him that warfare had ceased to be human when the English introduced the use of 'artillery' and defeated the French at Crecy in 1346. Hence, "Military genius has now come to be a contradiction in terms."21

Graves, then, had a romantic view of war. Sometime in the distant past war had been an honourable practise and furthermore, only in that lost era was military genius possible. The idealization of Belisarius that we find in Count Belisarius is consistent with this point of view. Here is a general of the 'good old days', the pre-'Crecy' past, when it was still possible to be a genuine hero. No napalm, but surely Graves would have had to admit that even in this distant age children were massacred and women prostituted.

In the opening chapters of Count Belisarius Graves does comment that the inevitable degeneration of warfare had already commenced in the early centuries after Christ. He introduces the fictitious person Modestus, a character whose "strained rhetorical talk full of puns and recondite
allusions" make him anything but modest. For Modestus, like Lawrence and Graves, one particular battle represented a historical calamity and an end to civilised warfare. Modestus' 'Crecy' was the battle of Adrianople in which the brave Roman legionnaires were slaughtered due to the cowardice of the cavalry: "Our allied cavalry betrayed us. That was all. The legions fought to the death." Modern innovation on the battlefield had destroyed the invincibility of the noble, honourable Roman foot-soldier.

It was Belisarius who restored influence to the Eastern Roman Empire. Here was a character who, though a soldier, was first and foremost a "really good man". Far from the age of trench-warfare and despite the disaster of Adrianople he had turned the tide of warfare's degeneration and reinvested the word 'honour' with meaning. Furthermore, here is a gentleman-general who admits: "Nobody with the smallest claim to common sense enjoys fighting, even when fighting is necessary; and the general who begins hostilities has a grave responsibility not only to the men under his command but also to his whole nation".

The parallels with Lawrence demand examination. In his own words Lawrence's mission was "to restore a lost influence", not to the ancient Romans but to the modern Arabs. He may have been "merely a fellow soldier" but more important, he was "a great man" and an honourable one. His description of a good general bears a remarkable resemblance to that of Belisarius; "Never fighting an unnecessary battle and never asking more of his troops than he is ready to give himself." Finally, though Crecy may have been the beginning of the end, for a brief moment the forward march of history had been brought to a halt by Lawrence's war. For someone who had experienced the blood and mud of the trenches during The Great War, Lawrences Middle Eastern adventures must have seemed an anachronism, a faint revival of the glorious past, an echo of a time when heroes could be made.

There was one military disadvantage that both Belisarius and Lawrence managed to turn to their own advantage. Both had armies that were far outnumbered by the armies of their adversaries. Belisarius however, realised that a preponderance in numbers might cause an acute difficulty and Graves quotes him as saying: "There are few generals capable of controlling forty thousand men in battle." Did the historical Belisarius say these words? The historical Lawrence did say something similar: "The worst thing for a good general is to have superior numbers."

Conclusion

One of Modestus' companions remarks to the old man: "Modestus, my generous host, you live in a world long dead, shut in that book-cupboard yonder. You have no conception of the nature of modern fighting. In every age there are improvements." Indeed there are, and Graves was well
aware of the so called ‘improvements’ of his own time. Yet it is clear that Graves, like Lawrence, preferred an age gone by, the world shut in the book-cupboard: an age before the advent of modern war. Lawrence, in Graves’ eyes, had temporarily brought this age out of the cupboard and back to life. And Graves himself had revived the memory of the past heroic era in *Count Belisarius*.

The military historian Basil Liddell Hart was also aware of the similarities between Belisarius and Lawrence. He regarded Lawrence as being the successor of Belisarius and Alexander the Great.29 For Lawrence himself the parallels were self-evident. As a youth he had made partial translations of Procopius, historian and secretary of Belisarius. Similarly, he had studied Belisarius’ military tactics.30 In the 1930s Lawrence had written Graves a letter comparing himself, indirectly, with Belisarius. Already during the 1920s Graves had compared Lawrence in a poetic analogy with Alexander the Great. Lawrence’s reaction has been preserved: “Send me another poem whenever you remember Belisarius”.31

Graves never wrote that poem. However, to conclude that he never fulfilled Lawrence’s wish to “remember Belisarius” would be erroneous. In February 1935 Lawrence of Arabia had a fatal motorcycle-accident. In July 1937 Robert Graves began reading his sources for *Count Belisarius*. By January 1938 he had already finished the book. It was published later that year, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of Lawrence’s birth. Graves’ homage to a great, heroic soldier was complete.

NOTES

3. Letter to Edmund Bunden, 10-3-1921.
5. Letter to Basil Liddell Hart, 18-6-1935.
9. *ibid*. p.8
10. Letter to Basil Liddell Hart, 2-12-1935

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11. Letter to Basil Liddell Hart, 18-6-1935
12. T.E. Lawrence to his Biographers, p.8
13. Letter to Basil Liddell Hart, 18-6-1935
14. Graves, Count Belisarius, p.314
15. ibid. p.223
16. ibid. p.225
19. Graves, Goodbye, p.369
20. Quoted from: Sunday Times, 12-6-1988
22. Graves, Count Belisarius, p.38
23. ibid. p.116
24. T.E. Lawrence, The Seven Pillars of Wisdom. (London and Toronto, 1940) p.23
26. Graves, Count Belisarius, p.112
29. T.E. Lawrence to his Biographers, Volume II, p.184
30. ibid. p.24 and p.130