

John E. Mack

Psychiatrist biographer of T.E. Lawrence with an interest in aliens

JOHN E. MACK was a psychiatrist, a psychoanalyst and a prize-winning biographer of T.E. Lawrence. His later academic career, however, was marred by controversy over his developing interest in aliens from outer space.

His biography of Lawrence, entitled *A Prince of Our Disorder*, was published in 1976 to rave reviews and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1977. He had been attending the T.E. Lawrence Society Symposium in Oxford when, next day in London as he was walking home after dinner, he was struck by a vehicle. He is thought to have died upon impact.

Mack's early career was distinguished in a conventional sort of way. After graduating from Oberlin College in Ohio in 1951, he got a medical degree at Harvard Medical School in 1955, interned at Massachusetts General Hospital, and did a residency in psychiatry at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center. He served as an officer in the US Air Force from 1959 to 1961. He trained as a psychoanalyst at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute and also underwent training in child psychiatry and in child psychoanalysis. With all this graduate education and training, "there can't be more than a hundred like him in all America", a colleague wrote in a preface to an early book by Mack.

He joined the Harvard Medical School faculty in 1964 and became Professor of Psychiatry in 1972. He was a keenly devoted psychiatrist with uncanny empathy for a wide range of patients, an empathy that was evident in his weekly, almost hour-long demonstration interviews for trainee psychiatrists. As Assistant Clinical Director of the Massachusetts Mental Health Center, he used to strive to see past descriptive psychiatry into the humane-ness, the individuality, the "soul" of each patient.

A resident of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Mack founded the department of psychiatry at Cambridge Hospital and became chairman in 1969. He was instrumental in the department's affiliation with Harvard Medical School, and continued to lead the department. From 1980 to 1986 he was chairman of the executive committee of the departments of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

An early book, *Nightmares and Human Conflict* (1970), reviewed the literature on nightmares and night terrors, gave case examples of his own, and offered a theory. He tried to show not only that nightmares are based on internal conflicts that have generated anxiety in the course of psychosexual development, but also that these internal struggles are intimately associated with external danger situations that threaten the individual currently or have done so in the past. The ego in the nightmare reacts with a kind of anxiety consistent with the perception of intense actual danger threatening survival, that is, as if the threat to the dreamer were absolutely real. It is this quality of vivid and actual threat that perhaps most sharply characterises nightmares.

Mack's biography of Lawrence of Arabia explored the relationship between Lawrence's inner life and his historical activities. It was based on extensive interviews with people who had known Lawrence well, on published and unpublished letters, and on War Office dispatches, among other research. In an interview Mack said that he became

hooked by Lawrence because he was extraordinary for a public figure, a military commander, in the degree to which he was involved with exploring his own inner life. Lawrence himself asked what was propelling him, what was the meaning of what he was doing, what was his own purpose in getting involved with the Arab revolt, how did it relate to his own personal development... He had a great gift for psychological insight.

In a preface to a second edition, Mack wrote that what seemed most significant about Lawrence's life was that he was "ahead of his time" in his definition of "political responsibility". Mack saw Lawrence's "odd martyrdom" as a "contemporary version of what is likely to befall a person who takes exaggerated individual moral responsibility in a turbulent political arena".

In a talk at an earlier Lawrence symposium, "T.E. Lawrence's Vision for the Middle East: how does it look now?" (1988), Mack, who was Jewish, said,

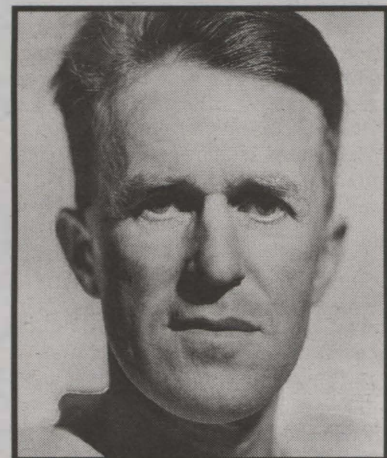
Perhaps it is his personal struggle, his self-consciousness about violence, his exaggerated concern for the well-being of each tribal or national group in the Middle East region, which is of particular value for us now.

Writing for *The Boston Globe* last June, in an article entitled "The Responsible Warrior", Mack compared Lawrence - favourably - to George W. Bush. Mack said: Behind this extreme and somewhat precocious sense of responsibility - Lawrence had just turned 28 when he began the organisation of the tribes in Arabia and Jordan - was a loathing of what he called "murder war", and he struggled desperately to limit the loss of life. Only as a last resort, he wrote, "we should be compelled to the desperate course of blood and the maxims of 'murder war'..."

Mack concluded about the present war in Iraq:

In this terrible moment we are seeing the results of a war prosecuted by a leadership that appears to be singularly lacking in the capacity for doubt, self-questioning, or the acknowledgement of mistakes. We have been plunged into a moral chaos that can only end when saner minds, "man rationale" in T.E. Lawrence's words, can once more assume authority in this nation.

Mack was born into a wealthy family in New York City in 1929. His mother died in his infancy. In the late 1970s, in an attempt to re-experience the grief of her loss, he became involved with a sort of therapy that was popular at the time: *est* or Erhard Seminar Training. He and the founder, Werner Erhard, became friends, and Mack began to finance *est* weekend workshops for psychiatrist trainees in



T.E. Lawrence: a 'precocious sense of responsibility', said Mack

his department. He hoped that he could apply *est* techniques to help the Middle East peace process.

In 1983 Mack founded the Center for Psychology and Social Change, which this year became the John E. Mack Institute. According to the institute's own statement, it "explores the ways in which perceptions and beliefs about reality shape the human condition".

For many years Mack was devoted to doing what he could to lower the threat of nuclear war. In particular he was concerned about the psychological impact of nuclear arms on children. Mack was known to have interpreted psychotic delusions of adult patients presented at case conferences as intelligible responses to their worries over nuclear arms.

The salient interest of John Mack's later life was alien abduction. He believed that "aliens" from higher space-time dimensions are visiting Earth, and that this phenomenon is occurring in the context of the threat to the earth as a living system, a response to the ecological devastation that our particular species has undertaken.

The aliens are engaged in what he called a "cosmic correction"; they appear to function "as a kind of intermediary between the Source of creation and us, emissaries perhaps of that correction". He believed that our planet evidently has a place in the larger fabric of meaning and significance in the cosmos, and this one species cannot be allowed to destroy it for its own exploitative purposes.

He said that the alien encounter experience seems almost like an outreach program from the cosmos to the spiritually impaired.

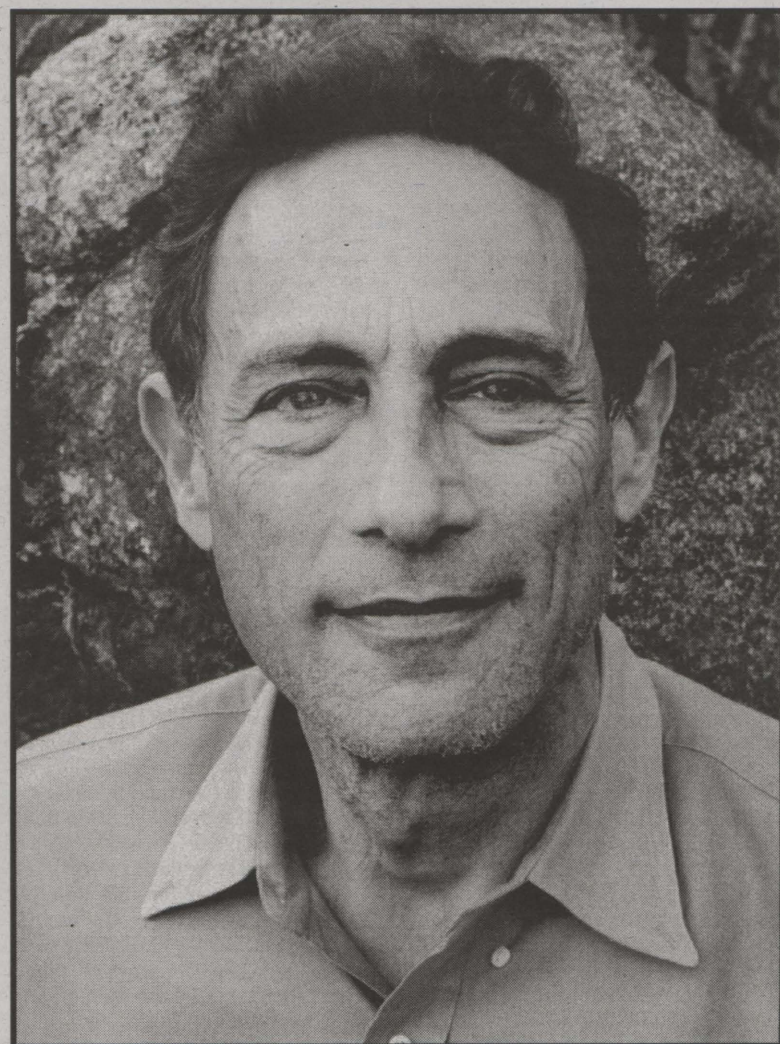
Mack used hypnosis and other techniques to retrieve "memories" of abductions by aliens. His 1994 book *Abductions: human encounters with aliens* reported accounts with the revived memories of 13 abductees, and was a best-seller. This led to an inquiry by an embarrassed Harvard Medical School. After a year-long investigation, in which Mack won the support of, among others, Alan Dershowitz, the Harvard law professor best known for his involvement in celebrity trials, the school's ruling body reaffirmed his academic freedom. But it also "urged him not, in any way, to violate the high standards" of the faculty. Undaunted, he then wrote *Passport to the Cosmos: human transformation and alien encounters* (1999).

John Mack never reported an experience himself of being abducted by aliens. He spent time and slept overnight at sites where previous abductions were alleged to have taken place, in the hope of being abducted.

Whatever one thinks of his views about aliens coming to rescue us from ourselves, one must acknowledge his impassioned eloquence on the human predicament:

The extension of a new world view that derives from our experience of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all living things, together with a recognition of the fragility of the earth's ecosystems, will be an important step in the preservation of the planet.

But blowing the traditional Western mind is not enough. Leadership and action on behalf of life and the environment will be required. We will need to take risks and expose our vulnerabilities. Perhaps it has always been so, but I am struck by how



Mack: aliens are engaged in a process of 'cosmic correction'

many of the political and intellectual leaders I admire for their efforts on behalf of human life have spent time in prison. Facing up to the established order, taking a stand with one's whole being, exposing one's vulnerability, and risking the loss of personal freedom all seem to inspire both leaders and their followers.

MORTON SCHATZMAN

It was not T.E. Lawrence the Technicolor man of action who attracted the interest of John Mack, writes Malcolm Brown, but Lawrence the man of troubled conscience and psychological complexity. In short, to use a keynote phrase of his, Lawrence "on the edge", a description which he felt applied also to him.

Crucial to his approach for his 1976 biography were the insights of the American critic Irving Howe who, in an essay on Lawrence published in 1963, wrote:

The hero as he appears in the tangle of modern life is a man struggling with a vision he can neither realise nor abandon, "a man with a load on his mind".

(That last phrase, from a review of Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by Herbert Read in 1928, was one that had a special resonance for John Mack.)

In Howe's view:

What finally draws one to Lawrence, making him seem not merely an exceptional figure, but a representative man of our century, is his courage and vulnerability in bearing the burden of consciousness.

Significantly it was Howe's description of Lawrence as "a prince of our disorder" that gave Mack the title for his book: a far cry from the trite "Prince of Mecca" or "Uncrowned King of Arabia" labels too often attached to Lawrence in the tabloid headlines of the 1920s.

Yet though, in a sense, he approached Lawrence as a psychological case, he did not do so with any clinical coldness. "I do not claim to be neutral to my subject," he wrote:

I unabashedly regard him as a great man and an important historical figure, and intend in the pages that follow to show how the evidence led to my opinion. But I have sought to suppress nothing that would lead to a contrary view.

A supreme virtue of Mack's honest but persuasive portrayal was that, in the wake of Richard Aldington's destructive assault in the 1950s and Hollywood's hugely popular but flawed glamorisation in the 1960s, he made the life and writings of Lawrence the subject of serious, scholarly enquiry. Lawrence still attracts hero-worshippers and denigrators, as his friends knew he always would, but Lawrence studies now have a secure status that owes much to the scrupulous, rigorous and far-reaching researches of John Mack.

Two weeks ago on a brilliant September morning I took him on a gentle introductory amble through the gracious gardens and quadrangles of St John's College, Oxford. It was here, in my own college, that this year's Symposium of the T.E. Lawrence Society, held biennially, was taking place, Professor Mack having flown over from the US to be its chief guest. He was delighted at seeing the place in its rich autumn hues, and throughout the Symposium he was its undoubted star.

There is tragedy in his sudden exit, which curiously parallels that of his father, himself a distinguished professor though in a different discipline, also killed in a road accident, while changing a wheel.

John Edward Mack, psychiatrist and writer: born New York 4 October 1929; Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School 1972-2004; married 1959 Sally Stahl (three sons; marriage dissolved 1995); died London 27 September 2004.

GAZETTE

BIRTHDAYS

Mr Christopher Bland, Lord-Lieutenant of the Isle of Wight, 68;

Baroness Boothroyd, former Speaker of the House of Commons, 75; Professor Sir John Cadogan, chemist, 74; Mr John Hardman,

chairman, Asda Group plc, 65; The Rev Jesse Jackson, civil-rights campaigner, 63; Mr Iain Luke MP, 53; Mr Alasdair Milne,

former Director-General, BBC, 74; Miss Bel Mooney, writer and broadcaster, 58; Dame Merle Park, former principal, Royal

Ballet, 67; Mr Ray Reardon, snooker champion, 72; Mr Albert Roux, chef de cuisine, 69; Miss Sigourney Weaver, actress, 55.

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