

Lowell Thomas

(Edited from Wikipedia)

Lowell Jackson Thomas (April 6, 1892 – August 29, 1981) was an American writer, broadcaster, and traveler, best known as the man who made Lawrence of Arabia famous.

In 1910, Thomas graduated from Victor High School where one of his teachers was Mabel Barbee Lee. The following year, he graduated from Valparaiso University with bachelor's degrees in education and science. The next year, he received both a B.A. and an M.A. from the University of Denver and began work for the Chicago Journal, writing for it until 1914. Thomas also was on the faculty of Chicago-Kent College of Law (now part of Illinois Institute of Technology), where he taught oratory from 1912 to 1914. He then went to New Jersey where he studied for a master's at Princeton University (he received the degree in 1916) and again taught oratory at the university.

Thomas was a relentless self-promoter, and he persuaded railroads to give him free passage in exchange for articles extolling rail travel. When he visited Alaska, he hit upon the novel idea of the travelogue, movies about faraway places.

When the United States entered World War I, he was part of an official party sent by President Wilson, former president of Princeton, to "compile a history of the conflict." In reality, the mission was not academic. The war was not popular in the United States, and Thomas was sent to find material that would encourage the American people to support it.

Thomas and cameraman Harry Chase first went to the Western Front, but the trenches had little to inspire the American public. They then went to Italy, where he heard of General Allenby's campaign against the Ottoman Empire in Palestine. Thomas traveled to Palestine as an accredited war correspondent with the permission of the British Foreign Office, where he met T. E. Lawrence, a captain in the British Army in Jerusalem. Lawrence was spending £200,000 a month encouraging the inhabitants of Palestine to rebel against the Turks. Thomas and Chase spent several weeks with Lawrence in the desert, though Lawrence said "several days." Lawrence agreed to provide Thomas with material on the condition that Thomas also photograph and interview Arab leaders such as Emir Feisal.

With Allenby's permission he linked up with Lawrence for a brief couple of weeks ... Returning to America, Thomas, early in 1919, started his lectures, supported by moving pictures of veiled women, Arabs in their picturesque robes, camels and dashing Bedouin cavalry, which took the nation by storm, after running at Madison Square Gardens in New York. On being asked to come to England, he

made the condition he would do so if asked by the King and given Drury Lane or Covent Garden ... He opened at Covent Garden on 14 August 1919 ... And so followed a series of some hundreds of lecture–film shows, attended by the highest in the land ..."

Thomas shot dramatic footage of Lawrence and, after the war, toured the world, narrating his film *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia* and making Lawrence—and himself—household names. The performances were highly dramatic. At the opening of Thomas's six-month London run, there were incense braziers, exotically dressed women dancing before images of the Pyramids, and the band of the Welsh Guards playing to provide the accompaniment. Lawrence saw the show several times; he later claimed to dislike it, but it generated valuable publicity for his own book. However, to strengthen the emphasis on Lawrence in the show, Thomas needed more photographs of him than Chase had taken in 1918. Lawrence claimed to be shy of publicity, but he agreed to a series of posed portraits in Arab dress in London. Thomas later said of Lawrence, "He had a genius for backing into the limelight."

Thomas and Lawrence's initially friendly relations became more prickly as Thomas's film grew in popularity and as Thomas ignored several alleged requests from Lawrence to end it. In fact, the film gave Lawrence a degree of publicity that he had never previously experienced. Newspapers were keen to print his attacks on government policy, and politicians began to pay attention to his views. At the end of 1920, he was invited to join the British Colonial Office under Winston Churchill as an adviser on Arab affairs. However, Lawrence said that he never forgave Thomas for exploiting his image, and called him a "vulgar man."

About four million people saw the Thomas film around the world, and it made Thomas \$1.5 million. He later wrote the book *With Lawrence in Arabia* (1924) about his time in the desert and Lawrence's exploits during the war. It was the first of fifty-six volumes.

Later career

During the 1920s, Thomas was a magazine editor, but he never lost his fascination with the movies. He narrated Twentieth Century Fox's Movietone newsreels until 1952.

In 1930, he became a broadcaster with the CBS Radio network, delivering a nightly news and commentary program. After two years, he switched to the NBC Radio network but returned to CBS in 1947. He hosted the first-ever television news broadcast in 1939 and the first regularly scheduled television news broadcast (even though it was just a simulcast of his radio broadcast) beginning on February 21, 1940 on NBC Television.

In the Summer of 1940, Thomas anchored the first live telecast of a political convention, the 1940 Republican National Convention.

However, the television news simulcast was a short-lived venture for him, and he favored radio. Indeed, it was over radio that he presented and commented upon the news for four decades until his retirement in 1976, the longest radio career of anyone in his day (a record later surpassed by Paul Harvey). "No other journalist or world figure, with the possible exception of Winston Churchill, has remained in the public spotlight for so long," wrote Norman R. Bowen in *Lowell Thomas: The Stranger Everyone Knows* (1968).

Thomas is also known for two television programs: *High Adventure*, a series of travelogue specials filmed in the late 1950s for CBS; and *Lowell Thomas Remembers*, a 1970s PBS series that reviewed major news events from 1919 through 1975 on a year-by-year basis using newsreel footage, including some that Thomas originally narrated for Movietone.

Thomas was a successful businessman. In 1954, he and his long-time business manager and partner Frank Smith bought a small Albany New York-based broadcasting company and turned it into Capital Cities Communications, which took over the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) in 1986. In 1995, the Walt Disney Company bought Capital Cities/ABC for \$19 billion.

In 1976, President Gerald Ford awarded Thomas the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He has two stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and was inducted into the National Radio Hall of Fame in 1989.