



A Woman in Arabia: The Writings of the Queen of the Desert

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The writings of one of the great woman adventurers of the twentieth century - the 'female Lawrence of Arabia' - and the subject of a new film starring Nicole Kidman.

In the last century, few people lived more astounding - or influential - lives than Gertrude Bell. During World War I, she worked her way up from spy to army major to become one of the most powerful woman in the British Empire. After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, she was instrumental in drawing the borders that define the region today, including creating an independent Iraq. This is the epic story of Bell's life, told through her letters, military dispatches, diary entries, and other writings. It offers a unique and intimate look behind the public mask of a woman who shaped nations.

Georgina Howell is the author of the acclaimed biography *Gertrude Bell: Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations*.

A Woman in Arabia: The Writings of the Queen of the Desert Details

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Kathy Duffy says

I had read Gertrude Bell's Biography Desert Queen and then found this book with her letters in it. What a truly fascinating and exciting woman. Wish I had known about her when I was younger - a marvelous role model. She was brilliant spoke 11 plus languages and multiple dialects of several of them, she graduated from Oxford with honors, she was a mountain climber, an archaeologist, an explorer, a politically savvy individual with extensive knowledge of the Middle East that the British Government used extensively. She had massive organizational skills and she taught Lawrence of Arabia the skills, drew him maps and gave the name of the Arabic leaders that he needed to pull off his famous raids. She was at the table with Churchill, Cox and Lawrence when the current boundaries of the Middle East were drawn and she helped the new state of Iraq, its ruler and government for years and built the famous museum there.

Reading her letters and excerpts from her other writings really made her come alive for me.

Roslee Saad says

Pasti ramai yang mengenali Lawrence of Arabia, pegawai British yang mengapi-apikan semangat kesukuan Arab untuk bangkit melawan kerajaan Othmaniah.

Gertrude Bell juga antara individu yang memainkan peranan di dalam melakarkan sempadan negara-negara di Timur Tengah khususnya Iraq dan Jordan.

Lahir di dalam keluarga aristokrat. Keluarganya antara keluarga terkaya di era Victoria kesan daripada revolusi perindustrian di Eropah.

Beliau menamatkan pengajian di dalam bidang sejarah di Universiti Oxford dengan ijazah kelas pertama. Ketika berusia 24 tahun beliau melawat pakaiknya yang bertugas sebagai duta di Parsi.

Buku ini merakamkan perjalanan beliau di dalam melakukan ekspedisi menjelajah padang pasir di Timur Tengah. Perjalanan ini dilakukan secara persendirian.

Perjalanan ini membolehkan beliau menjelajah dan mengenali pelbagai suku Arab yang bebas dari naungan Othmaniah dan juga pengaruh British.

Di dalam siri ekspedisi ini beliau merekodkan dan merakamkan kawasan-kawasan sejarah, tapak arkeologi dan juga kawasan ketenteraan kerajaan Othmaniah.

Maklumat ini kelak digunakan oleh British ketika membantu Arab melawan kerajaan Othmaniah. Gertrude diberi pangkat major dan dianugerahkan pingat Comander of British Empire di atas sumbangan beliau.

Dikalangan orang Parsi dan Arab, Gertrude amat dihormati. Beliau diberi gelaran "Khatun" bermaksud permaisuri di dalam bahasa Parsi dan juga Umm al Muminin (???)

Sumbangan terbesar beliau apabila berjaya memujuk Raja Faisal untuk menjadi Raja di Iraq. Raja Faisal yang membantu British menakhluk Damsyik telah dikhianati apabila Damsyik diserahkan kepada Perancis di dalam Perjanjian Sykes-Picot.

Iraq yang ditinggalkan oleh kerajaan Uthmaniah berada di dalam keadaan tanpa kerajaan memerintah. Gertrude memainkan peranan di dalam persetujuan kerajaan British untuk melantik Raja Faisal sebagai Raja Iraq.

Pengalaman beliau bersama pelbagai suku Arab dan Kurdis berjaya mengolah persetujuan mereka untuk menerima kepimpinan Raja Faisal di kalangan Sunni, Syiah dan Arab sekular. Beliau berbakti untuk Iraq sehingga akhir hayatnya. Beliau meninggal dunia ketika berusia 58 tahun di Baghdad.

Gertrude diingati sebagai seorang poligot (beliau boleh bertutur tujuh bahasa), agen British, ahli arkeologi, ahli fotografi, pendaki, penjelajah yang ulung dan penentu raja yang memerintah.

Dolly says

This book combines commentary with letters written by Ms. Bell to portray a true Renaissance woman of her age.

interesting quotes:

"While the franchise was denied to so many men, Parliament could not have contemplated giving the vote to women. In discussions about giving the vote only to women of property, Parliament came up against an insuperable difficulty: the property laws. The possessions of wives automatically became their husband's property on marriage. This was the law that led Gertrude's father to refuse her marriage to Henry Cadogan, known to be a gambler. So married women would be denied the vote, while much of the franchise would have been granted to widows, prostitutes, and spinsters. As independent and rational women such as Gertrude and Florence felt, women's suffrage could not be addressed until the property laws were transformed." (pp. 18-19)

"These women dreaded a reaction to the demands of the suffragists - who kept within the law - and the suffragettes - who broke it - that would bring retribution and destroy the advances that women had already made." (p. 19)

"I read them your letter and I said to them, Oh Sheikhs' - we hung upon his words - 'This is a women - what must the men be like!'" (p. 22)

[E.L. Strutt]: "Everything that she undertook, physical or mental, was accomplished so superlatively well, that it would indeed have been strange if she had not shone on a mountain as she did in the hunting-field or in the desert. Her strength, incredible in that slim frame, her endurance, above all her courage, were so great that even to this day her guide and companion Ulrich Fuhrer - and there could be few more competent judges - speaks with an admiration of her that amounts to veneration." (p. 30)

new word: peroration

Joanne says

This is a brilliant book. I never knew anything about this remarkable women until I saw the movie Queen of the Desert. I immediately went in search of her books. What a woman, truly inspirational story and achievements. I wonder what she would think of the events now in these areas that she loved so deeply. There are comments to suggest she was against the right for women to vote. After reading her book I don't believe this at all. Her life was certainly different than most women, she was given the opportunity to work, travel and write the book give the impression it was done with not my obstruction yet I believe it was quite a struggle at times. Regardless, her books and photographs are a testament to her extraordinary life and achievements. There is little wonder a statue is dedicated to her in Afghanistan.

Harajyuku says

Very interesting. And what a cool fucking lady! Not at all what I usually read. I'm having a difficult time figuring out what to call this book - a biography? Miss Bell's letters are indeed the primary reference, but this is hardly a compendium. The editor, clearly a dedicated fan, shows her handiwork a little strongly for my tastes, but she has obviously done her homework and should be proud of that. (Anyway, there is hardly any such thing in the world as an objective biography.) Moreover, the book's organization is an acquired taste: chapters are topical rather than chronological, though they follow a rough trajectory through time. An accurate reflection of the many facets and facts of Miss Bell's life and character, yes, but it did leave me often enough flipping back to the preface's timeline of events.

Sheila says

In her own words, Gertrude's life in Mesopotamia and later Iraq - Insightful and rewarding. However after reading first the biography Desert Queen, I didn't like this book's format as much as DQ. It was organised by subject rather than chronologically and so flip flopped about a bit in time. Not as successful I thought in assembly of her words. Getrude Bell was a very great woman and died too soon. Did she have cancer through her incessant smoking and did she really commit suicide or her taking of too much medication was an oversight on her part. We will never really know.

Rachel Rogers says

Didn't quite finish this one but what I read was fascinating. Nothing like reading about someone like Bell (or Ben Franklin) to make you feel as though you have accomplished nothing in your life. I'm intrigued by the idea of a film about Bell coming out in a few months; could be excellent, could be horrible. Fascinating person. I wish the American government had paid a bit more attention (e.g. Any) to Bell's observations and learning about Iraq, seeing as she was the unofficial queen of the country, and the mother of it, guiding the UK to the formation of the country. Perhaps some of this bloodshed would have been averted.

Olga Vannucci says

Not too many English ladies
On the banks of the Euphrates.

Mandy E says

-orientalism & the imperial project; the extent to which the "orientals" she meets are othered & western identity & intellectuality always the standard against which

-the annoying tendency of biographers/editors to justify/rationalize any character failings of their subjects; both come off looking shoddy and compromised.

-annoyed by the continual references to her "love of beautiful clothing". Why is this of any importance?

"I sat in my tent & read Hamlet from beginning to end & as I read, the world swung back into focus. Princes and powers of Arabia stepped down into their true place & there rose up above them the human soul, conscious & answerable to itself." -excerpted from her diary while in a tent in the desert when travel stymied by rain.

"[...] once you've made up your mind that you have no luggage, it is rather an exhilarating feeling." -
Baghdad, Apr 22 1925 (56)

"The whole world shone like a jewel, green crops, and blue waters and far away the gleaming snows of the mountains that bound Mesopotamia to the north—we saw them today for the first time. I sat on a hill top for an hour and considered the history of Asia that was spread out before me. Here Mithridates murdered the Greek generals, here Xenophon began to have his command, and just beyond Zab the Greeks turned and defeated the archers of Mithridates, marching then on to Larissa, the mound of Nimrud, where Xenophon saw the great Assyrian city of Calah standing in ruins. Nimrud stood out among the cornfields at my feet. A little further east I could see the plain of Arbela, where Alexander conquered Asia. We people of the west can always conquer, but we can never hold Asia—that seemed to me to be the legend written across the landscape..." -record of her first view, 60 miles south of Mosul, of what would become Iraq, excepted from her diary, April 27th, 1909 (83-4)

"[...] the Tower of Silence is visible, a mocking gleam reminding the living of the vanity of their eager days." -from Persian Pictures, published reluctantly (she thought it "feeble"), about her journey in 1892 (93)

"You will find in the East habits of intercourse less fettered by artificial chains, and a wider tolerance born of greater diversity. Society is divided by caste and sect and tribe into an infinite number of groups, each one of which is following a law of its own, and however fantastic, to our thinking, that law may be, to the Oriental it is an ample and a satisfactory explanation of all peculiarities. A man may go about in public veiled up to the eyes, or clad if he please only in a girdle: he will excite no remark. Why should he? Like every one else he is merely obeying his own law. So too the European may pass up and down the wildest places, encountering little curiosity and of criticism even less. The news he brings will be heard with interest, his opinions will be listened to with attention, but he will not be thought odd or mad, nor even mistaken, because his practices and the ways of his thought are at variance with those of the people among whom he finds himself. "Adat-

hu:" it is his custom. And for this reason he will be the wiser if he does not seek to ingratiate himself with Orientals by trying to ape their habits, unless he is so skillful that he can pass as one of themselves. Let him treat the law of others respectfully, but he himself will meet with a far greater respect if he adheres strictly to his own. For a woman this rule is of the first importance, since a woman can never disguise herself effectually. That she should be known to come of a great and honoured stock, whose customs are inviolable, is her best claim to consideration." -excepted from The Desert and the Sown, p.1907 (95-6)

"In the desert every newcomer is an enemy till you know him to be a friend." -excerpted from Amurath To Amurath, p1924 (99)

Laura says

Gertrude Bell Archive

Having most relevance for research in Archaeology, History, Politics and Travel, the books and papers of Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) were given to Newcastle University Library by Gertrude's half-sister, Lady Richmond, although part of the Doughty-Wylie correspondence came from St. Anthony's College, Oxford.

Her diaries are available online [here](#)

Her letters are available online [here](#)

Shelley says

Gertrude Bell should be as well known as Laurence of Arabia. She actually had a more interesting and wide-ranging series of adventures, in my opinion. This book is a good introduction to her amazing life...

TheSkepticalReader says

There is too much justification on the part of the editor about anything that Bell was doing which might be deemed 'controversial' (like the fact that Bell didn't want women to get the right to vote). And I think this causes what Bell *actually thought* and what the editor *wants you to believe* to become blur together too easily.

Honestly, I don't think the book is all that unpleasant or anything, but it certainly wasn't what I was expecting. A lot of parts were actually quite interesting to read about but overall, this was just ok.

Elena T says

Very interesting and informative, especially in its second half where we get to follow Gertrude through her long advocacy in favour of Arab self-determination. Eventually, the nation of Iraq, which used to be made up of three separate regions of the Ottoman Empire, is established with King Faisal I on its throne and we, as

readers, get to experience it all through the words of one who was there when these events took place, one without whom things would, perhaps, not have turned out as they did.

Despite being a woman who lived between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, Gertrude Bell managed to become by sheer determination and tireless hard work one of the most respected authorities on matters of the Middle East. She spoke a huge amount of local dialects and languages, was passionate about the area's history and worked there as an archaeologist as well as a museum director, helped map out areas of which no accurate maps existed yet, had close relationships with innumerable tribes and local key figures, became THE ONLY female political officer in the British forces, and that's just the tip of the iceberg.

All of these aspects of her life are touched upon in the book, each being assigned its own neat little section made up of a short presentation by the editor, Georgina Howell, giving us context and followed by a collection of pertaining writings by Bell herself. I found this set-up very clever and liked that Howell did not shy away from pointing out some of Gertrude's less admirable moments that just made her all the more fascinating to me. She wasn't perfect, so what?

The only downsides to this book, in my opinion, were the absence of any of Bell's letters and reports concerning the Armenian genocide and the considerable level of dryness. This is not stuff you devour in a frenzy to get to the end, but that you work your way through in order to learn something new.

Kyle says

Fascinating story about a woman ahead of her time. Her contributions to the world have gone unsung for too long, and it is good to see that she is finally getting her due. It is uncanny how her observations of the British mishandling of post-WWI Middle East accurately describe the next century's slide into the chaos we see there today. another reason why women worldwide should have an equal role in any political process.

S says

I was looking forward to reading this book since I had heard about Gertrude Bell and her vast accomplishments; adventurer, writer, traveller, political officer, archaeologist, explorer and cartographer.

She was an English woman and after finishing her studies at Oxford, she went around the world traveling and for a decade, she was a Mountaineer, climbing some of the most difficult peaks and setting records first as a climber and second as a female climber. You have to remember that this was the year 1899, when women were absolutely not doing this sort of thing.

She then became fascinated with archaeology, which would stay with her through her long life. She actually worked on excavation sites in Iraq and Syria, which led to her creating the first museum in Iraq, under the King. She went around to excavation sites In Iraq, where other countries were taking away Iraq's antiquities, and she fought for pieces and brought them all back and painstakingly had them all labeled to create their first Museum (which ironically got raided when the US invaded Iraq).

She was a woman ahead of her time, incredibly educated (she learned to speak and read several languages including Arabic and Farsi), with a great spirit for life.

As fascinating as the woman was, I found the way the book was laid out, dry and too cut up. Rather than attempt to write a book about her life, Ms. Georgina Howell, grouped all of Ms. Bell's vast writings, into relevant groups titled for example, "the archaeologists", "the dessert traveller" etc so though you are reading from the letters of Ms. Bell, the end result is a chopped up book where a full picture of the woman is a bit difficult to put together.
