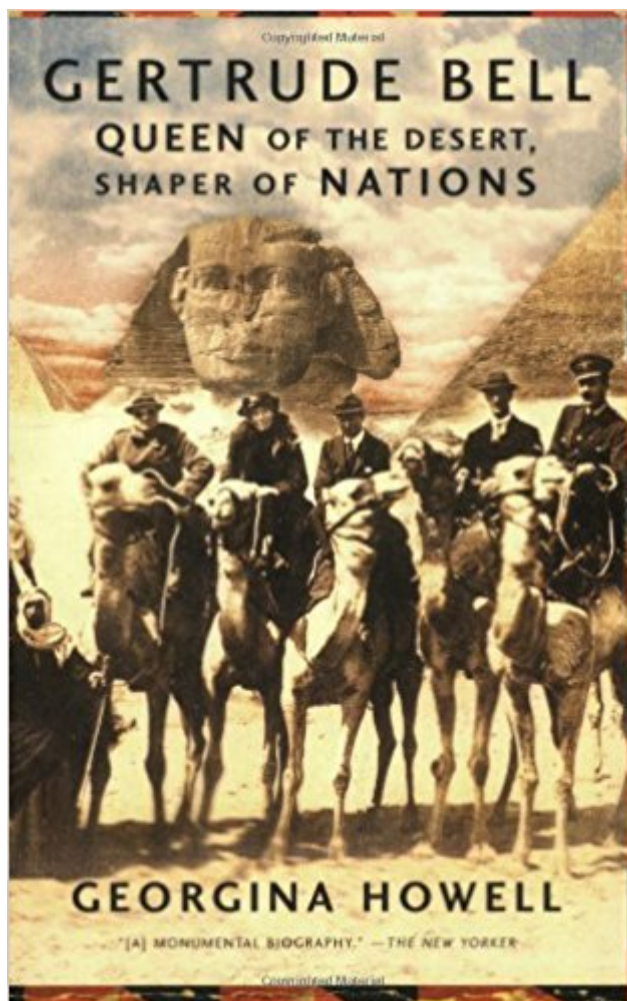


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Gertrude Bell: Queen Of The Desert, Shaper Of Nations



Synopsis

A marvelous tale of an adventurous life of great historical import. She has been called the female Lawrence of Arabia, which, while not inaccurate, fails to give Gertrude Bell her due. She was at one time the most powerful woman in the British Empire: a nation builder, the driving force behind the creation of modern-day Iraq. Born in 1868 into a world of privilege, Bell turned her back on Victorian society, choosing to read history at Oxford and going on to become an archaeologist, spy, Arabist, linguist, author (of *Persian Pictures*, *The Desert and the Sown*, and many other collections), poet, photographer, and legendary mountaineer (she took off her skirt and climbed the Alps in her underclothes). She traveled the globe several times, but her passion was the desert, where she traveled with only her guns and her servants. Her vast knowledge of the region made her indispensable to the Cairo Intelligence Office of the British government during World War I. She advised the Viceroy of India; then, as an army major, she traveled to the front lines in Mesopotamia. There, she supported the creation of an autonomous Arab nation for Iraq, promoting and manipulating the election of King Faisal to the throne and helping to draw the borders of the fledgling state. Gertrude Bell, vividly told and impeccably researched by Georgina Howell, is a richly compelling portrait of a woman who transcended the restrictions of her class and times, and in so doing, created a remarkable and enduring legacy." "There's never a dull moment in the peerless life of this trailblazing character." - Kirkus Reviews

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In this hefty, thoroughly enjoyable biography of Gertrude Bell

(1868–1926), English journalist Howell describes her subject as not only "the most famous British traveler of her day, male or female" but as a "poet, scholar, historian, mountaineer, photographer, archaeologist, gardener, cartographer, linguist and distinguished servant of the state." As Howell observes, "Gertrude always had to have a project," and she manages to bring those multitudinous projects, studies and adventures to life on the page. "I decided," Howell writes, "to use many more of her own words than would appear in a conventional biography": a felicitous decision when the subject's letters, diaries and publications are as seamlessly incorporated in Howell's engaging text as they are. Bell's role in the creation of Iraq and the placement of Faisal upon the throne, is fully detailed, both to honor her power and to haunt us today. But the strength and delight of Howell's superb biography is in the fullness with which Bell's character is drawn. Having clearly fallen in love with her subject (though not blind to her warts), Howell leaves no stone unturned—family history, school days, Bell's clothes, sometimes her meals, her friendships, her servants, her thousands of miles traveled, her fluency in languages (Persian, Turkish, Arabic) and, yes, her romances. 16 pages of b&w illus. (Apr.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Starred Review The breadth and depth of Gertrude Bell's accomplishments are extraordinary. Born to British industrial wealth and civic prominence during the Victorian era, she possessed boundless self-confidence, courage, and vitality. The first woman to earn top honors in history at Oxford, Bell was fluent in six languages, and became an intrepid traveler and celebrated mountaineer. Tragically unlucky in love, she romanced the world instead. Discovering her spiritual home in the Middle East, Bell transformed herself into a cartographer, archaeologist, writer, and photographer as she undertook perilous journeys to fabled desert outposts, commanding the respect of powerful Bedouin sheikhs. During World War I, Bell became the expert on Mesopotamia for British military intelligence, and a more crucial force in the forming of modern Iraq than that of her friend, T. E. Lawrence. From Cairo to Basra to Baghdad, Bell, against fierce adversity, devoted herself to justice. Howell writes with all the verve, historical veracity, and acumen her intoxicating subject demands--her spectacular biography leaves the reader lost in admiration and steeped in sorrow. It seems that all the profound knowledge about the culture of the desert Bell placed herself in jeopardy to gather was promptly forgotten. Donna Seaman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book was excellent, almost on par with Dr. John Mack's "A Prince of Our Disorder." Gertrude Bell was an amazing woman, mountaineer, desert explorer, red cross worker, spy and also having a strong hand in the creation of the state of Iraq. A contemporary of Winston Churchill and T.E. Lawrence, a fellow desert traveler, Bell was a "glass ceiling breaker" for Victorian-Edwardian women. Howell's book, like Mack's follows her entire life, not just the "Lawrence of Arabia" episode. Fluent in Arabic, French and German, her multilingual talents gave her tremendous range. Her forte was in the forming of the Iraq government. Commended by British politician A.T. Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference that "not one of the experts on Arabia, except for Miss Bell had any knowledge of Iraq." With the creation of the infamous Sykes-Picot Treaty, which divided the Mideast into British and French spheres of influence, Bell ran afoul of Sir Mark Sykes. Sykes the co-producer of the treaty who referred to her as a "man-woman," a true "Victorian" view of her. Gertrude Bell was a woman far ahead of her time, explorer, adventurer, spy and diplomat, and Howell's book brings to life the story of this amazing woman.

This book is well researched and well written. It fleshed out the heroine with vim and vigor, and with feeling. But, one must keep in mind, this book is written by a British author from a British point of view about a woman who was a product of the British Empire at a time when they felt entitled to act as the lord of the world. An extremely rich, well-educated, well-connected, spoiled and opinionated, but bored spinster, Gertrude Bell searched for something to do to fill her empty days. After some mountaineering in the Alps, she found archaeology in Turkish Arabia. When she became a "Person of Interest" and a celebrity for her desert exploits, she was hooked. When she realized she was the queen of her caravan and could break rules with impunity, she found where she belonged. When she does something, she goes all in. As she fell in love with Arabia, she took the trouble to learn Arabic so she could immerse herself fully in the Arab world. She came into prominence during WWI when Britain needed her knowledge of Arabia for military purposes to incite Arab unrest. Like Byron did for the Greeks, Gertrude devoted her energy to stir up Arab revolt. No tactic was too devious as long as it benefited Britain. The British, trying to expand its empire, summarily condemned the Turks for trying to defend theirs. As right and wrong are subjective, they felt no qualm about the double standard as they unleashed the jinn of chaos. The result was the breakdown of everything everywhere. After WWII, the West presided over the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and her insight of the Arab culture became politically useful. Now the table has turned, the British learned how difficult it is to govern the bickering rebellious Arabs and reacted exactly the same way the Turks did. But, of course the Brits justified it as

necessary for maintaining peace. Even though Gertrude claimed that she wanted self-determination for the Arabs, but she was dyed in the wool British and believed the British knew better. So she ignored the Arab desire for a republic and did her best to manipulate the election for her friend Faisal to become the King of Iraq. Faisal was surrounded by British advisers. And British force garrisoned Iraq. Gertrude took on a possessive and royal tone and referred to the Iraqis as “our people”. But the people did call her “khatun” which is Turkish for “queen”. She was in despair when Faisal tried to assert independence from Britain in order to pacify challengers. And she was glad that harsh British action was taken to eliminate oppositions. Iraq’s limited autonomy must be compatible with the British interest. With her role in the government diminishing, she returned to archaeology and came full circle in her desert adventure. Then she died suddenly. She was buried in the British cemetery outside Baghdad, a fitting resting place for an upper class no-nonsense domineering British “grande dame” who became the founding mother of Iraq. This is where this book ends. Despite the British claim of success, the Arabs were not about to let the Brits replace the Turks as their new overlord, especially when the Brits were not even Muslims. Unrest plagued the region. When Faisal died a few years later, there was suspicion of poisoning. His unprepared son ruled briefly then his young grandson ruled under a regency that was overthrown. The monarchy was restored by British force bent on continuing control. Finally a coup deposed the young king and his whole family were gunned down. The Kingdom of Iraq lasted only from 1921 to 1958. One could say that Gertrude’s king-making ultimately failed. But Arab self-determination resulted in despotism that ended in UN intervention. Still turmoil continued and peace remained elusive. Maybe Lawrence was right when he said “government is of doubtful benefit to a people who had so long done without”. Docile people don’t make history. If a poor man is opinionated and willful, he is a jerk. If it’s a woman, she is a shrew. But if it is a rich man, he is lauded as “will not suffer fools”. If it’s a woman, she is a “force of nature”. Gertrude Bell was a force of nature that would not suffer fools. When she had set her goal, she rolled over obstacles and mowed down oppositions with gusto in her history making.

This is a detailed biography of a person I had not known of previously. I have been reading on various aspects of Islam and the Middle East. I saw this teased on and, after inspecting the

information, ordered it. This lady traveled the sands of the Arab lands and documented in detail the the tribal makeup of the whole area. It lays out why current events are unfolding as they are. It explains why attempting to create governments promoting personal freedom and citizen participation in this region of the world is a fools errand. This is a worthy addition to the knowledge I have acquired from the volumes of the collected works of J. B. Kelly and the books by Bernard Lewis. Once again, I feel that I am in the process of gaining the equivalent of a college degree in Middle East culture, history, and religion. Even though there is much personal trivia to wade through, it was, for me, worth the effort. You will come away with knowledge of the desert from Turkey to Oman from 1896 to 1922. For those with similar interests, I recommend this book.

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