

Bell of Arabia: The epic 1962 Hollywood film titled *Lawrence of Arabia* is virtually as immortal as are the real life adventures and accomplishments of Thomas Edward Lawrence. But his legacy and its true story is often debated. Jeremy Wilson, biographer of T. E. Lawrence, cites Lawrence's, *Seven Pillars* as: "...extremely accurate historically, ...What it isn't, is complete... true in essence...perhaps wrong on a few details." Details, perhaps of a woman who rode camels in Arabia?

NPR's Jackie Lyden says of the man who created his own myth, "... it may be that the best way to regard T. E. Lawrence is to consider what would have happened in the Middle East without him." Or, may it be posited, without her?

Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) was born into a very wealthy Victorian era British family, groomed from infancy to become a proper woman, meaning she would marry and serve as a wife and mother. But Gertrude had zeal for intellectual pursuits and a hunger for learning. She was an unrelenting reader who escaped through her books. Despite that only boys were sent away for formal schooling, a wise but radical parental decision, allowed Gertrude to attend Queen's College, a girls' school in London where she excelled in her studies. If she found a class too easy, she requested transfer to an advanced class.

Beyond her years at sixteen, she found other privileged young girls focused on domesticity to be uninteresting. She missed intellectual exchanges with her father, brother, and male cousins. She was not allowed to visit the museums without an escort, but, if a boy, she could. At eighteen, she petitioned her father to allow her to continue her studies at Oxford. He agreed and allowed: Another radical parental decision.

At Oxford, Gertrude entered a world of the elite and powerful, literally a world of men, but she lived in Lady Margaret Hall with the other females. Albeit allowed to "sit in" on male lectures, the pursuit of higher education for women was still questionable. Girls were duly reminded of their place inferior to man, which did not affect Gertrude who knew she was equal, not inferior. Upon graduation in 1887, she received a *First in Modern History*, the first woman to do so.

After Oxford, Gertrude travelled to Bucharest to stay with her uncle Frank Lascelles, the British Minister to Romania. There she entered into a world of diplomatic events and engaged with aristocrats from the West and East from whom she garnered enormous political knowledge and established influential relationships. She started learning Persian and was able to understand the locals in Teheran when she arrived in June 1892 again to visit her uncle Frank Lascelles, now the newly appointed British envoy to Shah Nasiraddin.

She continued to travel, following her philosophy of the pursuit of personal happiness coupled with the moral responsibility for the welfare of others. After nearly a decade of travel, social, and political events, Bell, now thirty-one, set a goal to enter the Arab world. She went to Jerusalem to study Arabic. Her days were filled with language lessons (Arabic, Hebrew and Turkish) and horseback riding. She became fluent in both Persian and Arabic, as well as in German, French and Italian. She became proficient in horseback riding, hunting, dancing, shooting, fishing, gardening, and mountain climbing.

She walked among the Arabs, photographed them, absorbed their culture and was an expert in the languages and cultures of this region. She planned a series of solitary

trips of desert travel for the next year. She completed two trips around the world (1897-1898 and 1902-1903).

But her curiosity about the Middle East went beyond tourism. She was involved in the archaeological and political affairs of the Middle East from the early 20th century. She took courses in archaeology and cartography, and she was an accomplished photographer. It became her mission to document ancient ruins and the current landscape, and she published numerous books of her work and experiences that, in many cases, became the definitive reference for the region and influenced policy decisions. Her accomplishments as an archaeologist are evident in her book *The Thousand and One Churches*, published in 1909 and still referenced by scholars today.

At the Royal Geographical Society she had studied how to survey, how to make astronomical observations, and how to apply the techniques of mapmaking. She decided to map the uncharted sands of Mesopotamia and in 1909 departed Syria for Mesopotamia. Bell had spent almost two years in the Arabian Desert as an explorer, cartographer, photographer and archaeologist. In 1914, she received the prestigious gold medal from the Royal Geographical Society.

During World War I Bell served her country in France where she worked for the Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Department. There she developed a workable system to keep accurate records of the wounded soldiers.

Recruited by British intelligence during the war, she was sent to Basra in 1916 to draw maps helping the British army reach Baghdad. Bell was the only commissioned female officer in the British army and was duly honored by the British government for her work. In October 1917 she was made a Commander of the new Order of the British Empire.

April 1917 Bell, now 49, moved to Baghdad to continue her work. This would be her permanent home for the rest of her life. She reveled in speaking Arabic, in the Arab way of life, and secured the necessary Turkish travel permission to head towards the mountains of the Druze. She was in places only few had been in the past, and never a European woman.

In 1918, the incoming Judicial Officer, Sir Edgar Bonham-Carter, after conferencing with Bell, took the first steps toward creating an independent nation by setting Arabic as the official legal language of Iraq and establishing a new court system for civil and Sharia law in an effort to appease Sunnis and Shia. Five new schools for girls were opened with female faculty.

Bell later served as a Political Officer and then as Oriental Secretary to the High Commissioner in Baghdad. As an important figure in Iraq following the war, she was the only woman invited to the 1921 Council of Cairo where she, Lawrence, Winston Churchill, and 37 others discussed the fate of Mesopotamia. She was a close adviser to King Faisal I of Iraq.

In Cairo she worked to help ferment a rebellion of the Arabs against the Turks. Because of her intricate knowledge and personal dealings with the Arab tribes Gertrude was able to offer a wealth of information that was used by Lawrence and others in the successful Arab revolt.

Eventually boundaries were agreed upon to divide Mesopotamia into individual countries and Bell and her colleagues lobbied to have Faisal ibn Hussain, a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad and son of Sharif Hussain ibn Ali, installed as the

first ruler of the self-governed new Iraq. Faisal officially became king in 1921 and Bell's dreams of Arab independence were realized.

Along with Lawrence, Bell helped establish the Hashemite dynasties in what is today Jordan as well as in Iraq. She played a major role in establishing and helping administer the modern state of Iraq. During her lifetime she was highly esteemed and trusted by British officials and given an immense amount of power for a woman at the time.

When the situation in Iraq began to be a little more stable, Bell was able to pursue her interest in archaeology. The last three years of her life were devoted to the creation of the museum in Baghdad. She founded the Baghdad Archaeology Museum in Iraq with its extensive collection of artifacts dating back into antiquity and the times of Babylon.

She was a pioneer in calling for national treasures to be kept in the country of origin and insisted, for the first time, that antiquities excavated should stay in the country of their origin, thereby ensuring that the National Museum of Iraq, her monument in the land she loved, would possess a splendid collection of Iraq's own antiquities. The Baghdad Museum was one of the world's most prestigious archaeological museums.

Bell's 600 letters, 16 diaries (covering her travels from 1877 to 1919), 7,000 photographs taken between 1900 and 1918, and her account of her 1905 trip across Syria, originally published in 1907, has been republished several times, most recently in 2001 as *The Desert and the Sown: The Syrian Adventures of the Female Lawrence of Arabia*.

But with her ill health, financial troubles, no husband and reduced political responsibility, Bell became depressed. On July 11, 1926 exhausted from the heat of the day, she came home told her maid to wake her at six am and went to bed early. Her maid dutifully checked in on Bell after a couple of hours and found a suspicious bottle of pills on the bed stand.

Bell died in the early hours of July 12 two days before her 58th birthday. King George V sent his personal condolences to Bell's parents.

Gertrude Bell's biography would be a distinguished one for any age. Historically, Bell has been shadowed by Lawrence and Churchill, but the fact that she lived and worked and shaped Middle East politics during a time when women were relegated to the footnotes of history is what makes Gertrude Bell's story even more extraordinary, a true Hollywood-type tale: Another epic film still to be (?) titled perhaps, *Bell of Arabia*.

Sources: Desert Queen, Janet Wallach; *Gertrude Bell: Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations*, Georgina Howell; *Gertrude Bell: Explorer of the Middle East*, Heather Lehr Wagner; NPR's Jacki Lyden at:

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