Gertrude Bell and Iraq: A life and legacy

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In September 2013, the British Academy and the British Institute for the Study of Iraq (Gertrude Bell Memorial) held a conference on 'Gertrude Bell and Iraq – A Life and Legacy'. This article by Dr Paul Collins, a Council Member of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq, draws on remarks made by Professor Charles Tripp FBA at the conclusion of the conference.

> No woman in recent time has combined her qualities – her taste for arduous and dangerous adventure with her scientific interest and knowledge, her competence in archaeology and art, her distinguished literary gift, her sympathy for all sorts and condition of men, her political insight and appreciation of human values, her masculine vigour, hard common sense and practical efficiency – all tempered by feminine charm and a most romantic spirit.[1]

With the end of the First World War, the lands of the vast Ottoman Empire were partitioned, and the League of Nations granted to Great Britain mandate authority over the territory of Mesopotamia. Here, within a few years, the British had established an Iraqi monarchy and the Iraqi state. In group photographs of the British diplomats who determined this new political shape of the Middle East, both at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and the Cairo Conference of 1921, there appears a solitary female, her slim figure resplendent in furs and a voluminous hat (Figure 1). This is Gertrude Bell, one of a small group of imperial officials whose influence went far beyond their roles as colonial advisors. She remains a controversial figure, especially in the context of the founding of the modern state of Iraq. Even today, 'Miss Bell' is a name that for many Iraqis either conjures an image of a more innocent age when their country was born out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, or personifies the attitudes and decisions that have created a divided Middle East mired in repeated military occupations and conflict.

1. D.G. Hogarth, 'Obituary: Gertrude Lowthian Bell', *The Geographical Journal*, 68/4 (1926), 363–368.

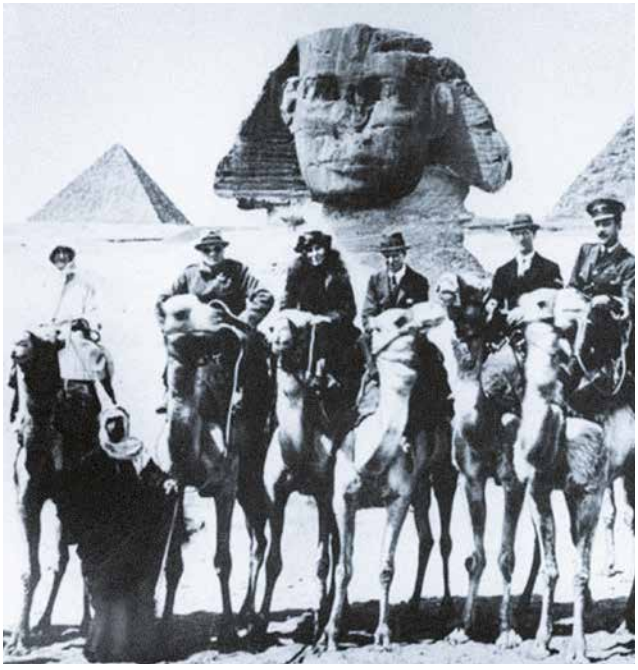

Figure 1
Gertrude Bell on a camel in front of the Great Sphinx of Giza, at the time of the Cairo Conference in 1921. Winston Churchill is to the left of her, and T.E. Lawrence to the right.

Focus

In September 2013, the British Academy and the British Institute for the Study of Iraq, in association with the Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University, organised an international conference to explore the life of Gertrude Bell with the aim of a fuller understanding of her life and legacy, especially in regard to Iraq. Focusing on Bell it was possible to begin to see how she – and the British administration – understood Mesopotamia, and how these understandings were to shape their state-building project in the country that was to become Iraq. It also highlighted the processes that were set in motion as a result of this project, leading to an intimate and often violent intertwining of British and Iraqi histories: it is worth remembering that the 2003 occupation of

Iraq was the third invasion of the country by British forces during the past century.

Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell (1868-1926) has proved an attractive subject for modern biographers. They are helped by the fact that she was not only a public figure, responsible for generating reports, memos and letters as part of her official duties, but was also an indefatigable letter writer, as well as author of a number of books describing her travels, impressions and encounters. What especially appeals for many of those who write about Gertrude Bell is that she was able to achieve so many things as a woman. Bell refused to be constrained by the expectations of the day for women of her rank: she was able to succeed in the 'man's world' of high politics and diplomacy through her imperialist politics, her class entitlement, and her forceful personality.

Figure 2
Gertrude Bell on horseback at Kubbet Duris, Lebanon, 1900. Photo: courtesy of the Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University (archive reference A-340).

Background

Born into a family of wealthy entrepreneurs of the industrial revolution in what was then County Durham, Gertrude Bell received her early education in London. At the age of 17 she entered Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford, and left two years later having graduated with a first-class degree in Modern History. Thereafter her family's money enabled her to travel extensively overseas, in particular throughout the Middle East. It was the experience and knowledge gained on these journeys that would establish Gertrude Bell's later authority. She would be the only senior member of the Mesopotamian Administration to have had any significant experience of the Ottoman Empire before the First World War. Bell journeyed to various parts of the region. Beginning with a visit to Iran in 1892, she spent the years 1899-1900 in Palestine and Syria (Figure 2), describing her experiences in *The Desert and the Sown* (1907) and *Amurath to Amurath* (1911).

Archaeology

It was especially Bell's interest and involvement in the archaeology of the Middle East that shaped her approach not merely to the understanding of vanished civilisations, but also to the peoples and societies that she encountered in her travels. She undertook a detailed study of Byzantine churches in central Anatolia and, with William Ramsay, produced what remains a key study, *The Thousand and One Churches* (1909). It was, however, at the ancient city of Ashur on the Tigris River in north Mesopotamia that she witnessed cutting-edge excavations by a team of German archaeologists under the leadership of Walter Andrae (Figures 3, 4). The systems of archaeological recording that Bell encountered at Ashur would inform her own seminal work, *Palace and Mosque at Ukhaiḍir: A Study in Early Mohammadan Architecture*, which was published in 1914 to much praise.

By the time that Bell was undertaking and publishing her archaeological work, European explorers had already excavated substantial evidence for Mesopotamia's rich and complex past, with many of the most impressive artefacts and written documents transported to museums lying at the heart of the imperial capitals. In the early decades of the 20th century, the focus of scholarship on this material had narrowed from a study of the ancient civilisations and empires to that of their peoples, who were understood invariably in terms of race. The Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen describes the prevailing intellectual climate of the time:

> There was a virtual unanimity about what had shaped early Mesopotamian history, it was race, Sumerians fighting Semites. Races differed in physique and in character, so cranial measurements, shapes of noses, and even bearded or beardless were matters of moment.[2]

The search was on for what was perceived to be the very essence of nations, races and civilisations as the way to reveal their past; Gertrude Bell was part of this endeavour. Thus, Bell was enchanted by a belief that in the tribal peoples of Syria and Arabia she had discovered something uncorrupted by her own industrial civilisation, something true and timeless. For these same reasons, she was dismissive of the urban societies of the Arab Middle East, regarding them as unsuccessful

2. Thorkild Jacobsen, 'Searching for Sumer and Akkad', in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York, 1995), volume 4, p. 2747.

Figure 3
Panoramic photograph of Ashur taken by Gertrude Bell.

hybrid cultures, split between a kind of modernity and a timeless 'Orient'. Equally, it is significant that, like many of her contemporaries, Bell repeatedly speaks not of Arabs, Turks and Kurds, but of 'the Arab', 'the Turk' and 'the Kurd', suggesting thereby that there was an essential type which, once uncovered and excavated would unlock a true understanding of the motives, preferences and worldviews of all Arabs, Turks and Kurds.

Politics

This was to become the basis on which Bell and other imperial officials viewed and dealt with the populations of Mesopotamia after the British invasion and occupation during the First World War. Gertrude Bell's intimate knowledge of the region and its tribes made her an obvious target of British Army Intelligence, and in 1915 she was assigned to its headquarters in Cairo. The following year, Bell was sent to Basra (which British forces had captured in November 1914), to advise Chief Political Officer Percy Cox. When British troops took Baghdad in March 1917, she was relocated there with the title of 'Oriental Secretary'. Gertrude Bell would be among a select group of 'Oriental' officials at the Cairo Conference of 1921, where it was decided to end the unpopular Mandate over Mesopotamia (a full scale insurgency had broken out the previous year) and that Prince Faisal (son of Husain, the Sharif of Mecca and King of the Hijaz) should become king of a newly created Kingdom of Iraq.

Figure 4
Gertrude Bell dining with the German expedition team in the Ashur dighouse in 1911. Photos: courtesy of the Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University (archive references Q_220 and Q_225).

Faisal was Bell's preferred choice. A descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, Faisal represented for her the essential and resolute Arab tribal leader, while the nationalism he espoused could be viewed as a force that would allow the Arabs, as she understood them through her archaeological work, to re-emerge in the narrative of world history. In contrast, Bell disliked thoroughly the conservatism of Iraq's Shi`i clerical hierarchy and described the Kurds as 'ungovernable'. These views – many of which she shared with other British officials as shown by their selection of Sunni Arab elites for appointments to government and ministry offices – had a fateful and lasting effect on the organisation of power and privilege in the Iraqi state, setting in motion processes of inclusion and exclusion that were to mark Iraqi politics for decades to come.

Museum

During the last years of her life, Gertrude Bell returned to archaeology, including developing Iraq's first national museum. She devoted much time and energy in searching for a place to store the flood of antiquities coming from the many European and American excavations taking place across the new country; it was only a few months before her death in July 1926 that Bell managed to secure the co-operation of British and Iraqi officials to ensure that a building for a permanent museum was found. Of equal concern was the need to regulate the archaeological excavations as well as the illicit trade in antiquities. Bell's proposed legislation was a hybrid that addressed and protected both Iraqi and British interests. In many ways, the hybridity of this work helps to define Gertrude Bell: she was both an Iraqi nationalist and a British imperialist, and sought to reconcile the two. Examining the tensions inherent in such a position helps our understanding of the origins of the current forms of power in Iraq as well as perhaps the implications for the future.

It is intended that essays derived from the conference will be published in due course in a volume in the *Proceedings of the British Academy* series.