



Desert Queen: The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell: Adventurer, Adviser to Kings, Ally of Lawrence of Arabia

By Janet Wallach

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This “richly textured biography” (*Chicago Tribune*) inspired the mesmerizing documentary, *Letters from Baghdad*, coming soon to theaters.

Here is the story of Gertrude Bell, who explored, mapped, and excavated the Arab world throughout the early twentieth century. Recruited by British intelligence during World War I, she played a crucial role in obtaining the loyalty of Arab leaders, and her connections and information provided the brains to match T. E. Lawrence's brawn. After the war, she played a major role in creating the modern Middle East and was, at the time, considered the most powerful woman in the British Empire.

In this masterful biography, Janet Wallach shows us the woman behind these achievements—a woman whose passion and defiant independence were at odds with the confined and custom-bound England she left behind. Too long eclipsed by Lawrence, Gertrude Bell emerges at last in her own right as a vital player on the stage of modern history, and as a woman whose life was both a heartbreaking story and a grand adventure.

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- Sales Rank: #18665 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Anchor
- Published on: 2005-07-12
- Released on: 2005-07-12
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.99" h x .90" w x 5.19" l, .94 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 425 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

A biography of the woman who, indirectly, was the catalyst for many of the troubles in the Middle East, including the Gulf War. In 1918, Gertrude Bell drew the region's proposed boundaries on a piece of tracing paper. Her qualifications for doing so were her extensive travel, her fluency in both Persian and Arabic, and her relationships with sheiks and tribal and religious leaders. She also possessed an ability to understand the subtle and indirect politeness of the culture, something many of her colonialist comrades were oblivious to. As a self-made statesman her sex was an asset, enabling her to bypass the ladder of protocol and dive into the business of building an Empire.

From Publishers Weekly

To Sir Mark Sykes, the pre-WWI British Foreign Office Arabist, "that damned fool," Miss Bell, created an "uproar" wherever she went in the Middle East and was "the terror of the desert." Three social seasons were all a young lady of good family was allotted to snare a husband. Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) had thrice failed and received the consolation prize, a trip to Teheran to visit her uncle, the British envoy there. After that, she could not be kept close to the dank family manse in Northumbria but was drawn to the sun-drenched Middle East. Dominated even there by her Victorian father, head of a family-owned ironworks, she was denied permission to marry a moneyless diplomat. She refused?to her later regret?a married lover in the military and assuaged her disappointment by pressing British interests in Arab lands east of Suez, becoming in effect the maker of postwar Iraq. The first woman to earn a first-class degree in modern history at Oxford, she wrote seven influential books on the Middle East and, following WWI, was named oriental secretary to the British High Commission in Iraq. Not just another book about an eccentric lady traveler, this colorful, romantic biography tells of a woman with an inexhaustible passion for place that did not always substitute successfully for continuing heartbreak. Despite some maudlin passages, Wallach, coauthor with her husband, John Wallach, of *Arafat*, vividly evokes a memorable personality.

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From Library Journal

Anyone familiar with T.E. Lawrence is at least acquainted with the name Gertrude Bell. Almost 20 years older than Lawrence, from a wealthy Victorian family, Bell traveled alone with local Arabs through the deserts of the Middle East when at home in England she couldn't go the British Museum without a chaperone. One of the first women to graduate from Oxford, Bell was independent and intelligent yet paradoxically snobbish and antifeminist (she worked against the suffrage movement). In her travels, writings, and political activities, she strove to become a "person," but, alone and childless, she committed suicide at age 57. Wallach, coauthor of *Arafat: In the Eye of the Beholder* (LJ 9/1/90), has written a well-researched, readable biography of a fascinating yet ultimately sad woman, too long relegated to the footnotes of other people's biographies. For larger public and academic libraries. ?Katherine Gillen, Luke AFB Lib., Ariz.

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Users Review

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James Ritchey:

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