



Patron: Jim Broadbent

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Letters from Baghdad (Cert PG)

dirs: Zeva Oelbaum, Sabine Krayenbühl

With the voice of: Tilda Swinton

Sponsor: Paul and Helen Hancocks

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Synopsis: A documentary on the life and career of Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), substantially composed of retrieved archive images shot in the Middle East in the first quarter of the 20th century and drawing on a wealth of first-person testimonies. Bell grew up in East Rounton, Yorkshire; she was raised by her stepmother, Lady Florence Bell, after her mother died when Gertrude was three. She read history at Oxford and showed clear signs of an independent spirit from an early age. A visit to Tehran in 1892 helped form her lifelong attachment to the Middle East and she felt that she "became a person" in Syria soon afterwards. Poverty thwarted a youthful intended marriage, and her subsequent crushes were all on married men. She was recruited for the Foreign Office in 1915 and sent to Cairo where she gathered information for the Arab Bureau. By 1917 she was assistant political officer in the British Consulate in Baghdad, where her sensitivity to Arab tribal matters and insights into Shia thinking proved valuable. She was privately critical of the British plan for a new Mesopotamian state, recognising that 'oil diplomacy' played a distorting role, but helped her boss, Sir Percy Cox to install Feisal as its Sunni king. She devoted her last years to creating a museum of antiquities in Baghdad and became depressed after political upheavals forced King Feisal into exile in 1926. She died of an overdose of sleeping pills soon afterwards.

"We promised an Arab Government with British advisors, and we have set up the opposite. I personally think we have governed too much." Gertrude Bell's prescient analysis of the founding of what became Iraq reverberates a century later, which makes it odd that she is generally forgotten when her contemporary T. E. Lawrence is so well remembered. Doubly odd in that Bell left voluminous traces during her 58 years: not only her cherished museum of antiquities in Baghdad (famously looted during the overthrow of Saddam Hussein), but countless photographs and more than 1,600 surviving letters to her father, stepmother and friends. This remarkable trove of first-hand reportage and commentary is housed in Newcastle University and it provides a solid core for this project to revive Gertrude Bell's reputation. Bell's own words, read by Tilda Swinton, form the bulk of the documentary's narration.

It goes without saying that the primary reason Bell's achievements need to be reclaimed is that she was a woman. The film's American co-directors, Sabine Krayenbühl and Zeva Oelbaum, both with extensive experience in the Middle East, explain that they met when they both worked on a documentary about the journalist Ruth Gruber and discovered a shared interest in Desert Queen, Janet Wallach's biography of Bell. Their decision to undertake this film, a directorial first for both, entailed not only researching all the primary written sources, including the memoirs, letters and speeches of those who encountered Bell, but also trawling two dozen film archives for usable nitrate footage from Bell's lifetime of



Middle Eastern cities and countries. They smartly chose to use only quoted texts on their soundtrack, with 22 actors on-screen speaking as if being interviewed and another ten voicing off-screen texts.

Their archival discoveries are wonderfully vivid, presenting sharp focus images of cities, deserts and archaeological digs from the early twentieth century in perfect counterpoint to Bell's own photographs, and their choice of verbal testimonies is often pointed. But their project is broken-backed. No-one could reclaim Bell's contributions to the region's politics and culture without clarifying the histories of colonial rule and post-colonial fiddles, not to mention the Sunni/Shia schisms, but the film pushes its historiography into the background. There are precious few names and dates to explain all the diplomatic manoeuvres and calculations of the period, and there are a great many elisions. The oil question gets only one passing mention. The material often seems to cry out for an Adam Curtis-style analysis.

At the same time, the film has trouble foregrounding Bell herself. It's clearly remarkable that an independent minded woman was able to do so much as Bell did in the patriarchal world of the British Foreign Office and the rebellious Arab states - and that Bell, perhaps goaded by a patronising put-down by T. E. Lawrence, managed to educate herself so comprehensively in Arab affairs - but her political role was inevitably marginal. That her many disappointments ultimately drove her to an apparent suicide is sad, but it doesn't invalidate her achievements. Neither, though, does it make her a feminist icon.

Credits

Directors
Directors of Photography
Editor
Original music
Costume

Sabine Krayenbühl, Zeva Oelbaum
 Gary Clarke, Petr Hinomaz
 Sabine Krayenbühl
 Paul Cantelon
 Allison Wyldeck

UK/USA/France 2016 96 mins

Another view

Letters From Baghdad tells the extraordinary and little-known story of Gertrude Bell, explorer, adventurer and British spy who is often dubbed the female “Lawrence of Arabia.” Indeed, some contend she was far more influential than her friend and colleague T. E. Lawrence in shaping the destiny of Iraq in the post-World War I years in ways that still resonate today.

Marking the directorial debut of Sabine Krayenbuhl and Zeva Oelbaum, the documentary brings to life a woman who was stunningly ahead of her time and profoundly of it; a proper Victorian lady and a feminist trailblazer; fiercely rebellious and totally dependent on her father’s approval; a patrician rooted in British aristocracy and an early celebrant of cultural diversity. She was most at home in the Middle East, though in later years she straddled the two worlds, feeling comfortable in neither.

Born in 1868 the granddaughter of a wealthy British ironmaster, Gertrude was raised by a loving stepmother (her own mother died when she was three) and her father, Sir Hugh Bell, with whom she had an intensely close relationship. A brilliant student, she attended Oxford University and was the first woman to receive the highest honors in Modern History. She was fluent in more than five languages and published six scholarly books, including an English translation of the 14th-century Persian poet Hafez. She was the first person to climb all the peaks of the Engelhörner range in the Swiss Alps and the first woman to undertake a solo journey into the uncharted Arabian Desert, traveling by camel for 1,500 miles across Central Arabia in 1914.

Bell provided Lawrence (20 years her junior) with the tribal notes and maps he used during the Arab Revolt and in 1915 was recruited by British Military Intelligence, becoming the first female military intelligence officer and the only woman with a diplomatic role at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and (invited by Winston Churchill) at the Cairo Conference in 1921.

On the personal front, she had two tragic love affairs (it’s not clear whether either was consummated) with a junior diplomat at the British embassy whom her father viewed as an unemployable gambler and refused to support, and with Major Charles Doughty-Wylie, a married man.

In later years she returned to one of her early avocations, archaeology, and established the Baghdad Archaeological Museum, which survived intact until the American invasion in 2003 when the institution was looted. On July 12, 1926, at the age of 58, Gertrude Bell died from an overdose of sleeping pills. Though friends said she was depressed, it was never officially determined if her death was an accident or deliberate suicide. She is buried in Baghdad.

The story is told entirely in Bell’s words and those of her contemporaries excerpted verbatim from their intimate letters, private diaries and official documents. Bell left more than 1,600 letters and 7,000 photographs. Among her many talents, she was an accomplished photographer. The film also incorporates hundreds of archival, grainy black-and-white 35mm film clips the creative team uncovered and ultimately digitally preserved during four years of research.

Bell’s words are voiced by Tilda Swinton (who also served as one of the film’s producers), while the other “characters” are played by various actors whom we see onscreen as if they are being interviewed. These snippets interwoven throughout—and they’re slightly discombobulating in their self-conscious theatricality—are shot on 16mm film in order to suggest a documentary that could have been made in the late 1920s after Bell’s death. In an effort to create an immersive and wholly authentic experience, the filmmakers chose to use only primary source material.

It’s an interesting but not fully satisfying narrative choice, as it presupposes—or doesn’t care about—the viewer’s background knowledge (geographical, historical, cultural and/or political). The film is wonderful in introducing the world to Bell. Still, watching it is not unlike entering a conversation in the middle with neither introduction nor framework to what’s being discussed. If ever a film screamed out for a little exposition, context and yes, talking heads offering plain old instruction, this is it. For example, the British occupation of Iraq and the drawing of its borders—Bell played a pivotal role here—are controversial to this day. We needed to know much more about that, and it might have been useful to hear a few thoughts on how Bell’s economic status and circumstances informed her views, choices and actions.

On the flip side, the film presents such an original, unlikely portrait—certainly a more three-dimensional spin than Werner Herzog’s loosely conceived biopic *Queen of the Desert* (2015), starring Nicole Kidman—that it may prompt viewers to research the region’s geopolitical history as well as bone up on Bell herself by, say, reading *Desert Queen: The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell: Adventurer, Adviser to Kings, Ally of Lawrence of Arabia*, by Janet Wallach (2005).

Whatever the medium, there’s no way to avoid the fact that unlike T.E. Lawrence, Bell largely disappeared from the public’s imagination. But to view her strictly through a feminist lens is reductive and it’s to the filmmakers’ credit that they don’t. Indeed, another image lingers.

Bell was no victim and not entirely likeable. She was as arrogant as she was insightful and prescient. She lived the life she wanted. Her work was her first and lasting passion. Yet it was also her escape. Towards the end she says as much, revealing herself to be a Chekhovian figure too.

Simi Horwitz, Film Journal International

Our next film - Friday December 1st, 7.30

A Man called Ove (Sweden 2015. Cert 15)

Ove is the definitive Grumpy Old Man. Living alone, he's a stickler for rules and order, and polices the estate where he lives rigorously. He's also very lonely following the death of his wife and decides to kill himself - and then Parvaneh becomes his neighbour. She is Ove's temperamental opposite and gets heavily involved in his life, with unexpected consequences.

Our last film of 2017 is an entertaining and at times moving story and a sure-fire crowd pleaser