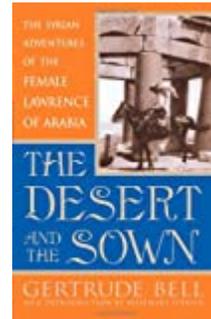




Gertrude Bell. *The Desert and the Sown: The Syrian Adventures of the Female Lawrence of Arabia.* New introduction by Rosemary O'Brien. New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001. x + 347 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8154-1135-2.



Reviewed by Ellen Fleischmann (Department of History, University of Dayton)

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Chronicle of a Long Journey: Gertrude Bell in Syria

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This re-publication of Gertrude Bell's 1907 book, originally entitled simply and economically *Syria*, chronicles her seemingly meandering journey through the desert and countryside of Palestine, Jordan and Syria in the winter of 1906. Gertrude Bell, as noted in the new introduction by Rosemary O'Brien, was an extraordinary Englishwoman who ended up being the "first and only woman administrator to be taken into the British imperial service as Oriental Secretary" (p. vi). Born in 1868 and educated at Oxford, the wealthy Bell traveled extensively throughout the Middle East in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, writing about her various experiences and adventures (including a temporary imprisonment in a harem in what is now Saudi Arabia on the eve of World War I), in the process becoming well-acquainted with the Arabic language, Arabic poetry, archeology, and, one might add, how to travel well in the area.

As O'Brien notes, "she had a talent for travel—the sort of person who not only responds to fresh discoveries but speculates on their meaning" (p. vii), something which is

borne out in the subsequent text. Eventually, this somewhat mystifyingly meandering existence led to her becoming a government official in Iraq during World War I, upon the recommendation of T. E. Lawrence. From November 1915 until her death by suicide or accident in 1926, she was based in Iraq, where she initially served as intelligence liaison between Cairo and the British Expeditionary Force in Basra during the war.

The starting point of the journey upon which this book is based is Jerusalem; the end point is Alexandretta. Along the way she visits Jericho ("an unromantic village of ramshackle hotels and huts" [p. 10]), Salt, Madaba, Homs, Damascus, Hama, Aleppo, Baalbek, and numerous sites of antiquities, as well as countless villages and encampments en route. This leads the reader to immediately confront a major deficiency of this new edition, namely the absence of a map of her route, which seems to follow no particular plan or, at least, not one that is explained. (In the publication information the deletion of "one map" is noted. This is most regrettable.)

Nor does Bell ever explain exactly why she has embarked on this journey. O'Brien claims that the "real pur-

pose” of travel “was a personal affirmation outside the narrow confines of one’s normal life. Travel literature ultimately was about the traveler” (p. ix). This may be true, especially for the other Victorian era women travelers with whom O’Brien claims Bell shares a “genre” and themes of “imperial travel narration” (p. viii). However, in the case of Bell, motives and the sense of this traveler’s self are ultimately something of a mystery; personal information about Bell is singularly lacking. Underlying any emotional expression in this book (of which there is little) is a constant tone of ironic detachment, which results in a somewhat muted personality. Indeed, this is one of many ways in which this book defies the genre.

This ostensibly objective persona seems carefully constructed. Particularly striking in this regard is Bell’s curious attitude (or lack thereof) toward gender and her fellow women. She herself is curiously un-gendered. She pays scant attention to women, other than to make remarks on their beauty or lack thereof, or to engage in discussions with men on subjects such as “the usual price paid for a wife” (p. 253) as though she were an honorary man. One cannot help but wonder how a woman achieved this status in the sexually segregated societies through which she moved. It raises intriguing and unanswered questions about her.

Bell writes in exhaustive and (sometimes tedious) detail about all other aspects of her journey: she depicts every tomb, building, temple, sarcophagus and column she visits, musing upon their origins and date; she describes landscapes, flora and fauna; and she provides often penetrating and vivid portraits of the humans she encounters. In part travelogue, commentary, anthropology, archeology, and geography, this book is difficult to neatly categorize. Bell is an astute observer about any and everything she encounters on her travels: the best way to defuse a blood feud, the relationships between the Ottoman government and “the many races” it governs (p. 238), the eating habits of the Arabs, the loss of “good manners” and unwelcome “familiarity of address” acquired by Syrian immigrants returned from the United States (p. 211), or the qualities of an Arab tent and how to pitch it.

For the historian, she is a fascinating firsthand commentator on the historical developments she was witnessing and their figures; she is on first-name terms with characters such as Shakib al-Arslan, and the (Algerian) ‘Abd al-Qadirs, not to mention she hobnobs with less famous but notable figures such as various qaimmaqams, qadis, and other Ottoman officials. (This is her descrip-

tion of Shakib al-Arslan: “a man of education and ... experience of the world” whose “views on Turkish politics were worth hearing.” She expresses the desire “that the enemies of Turkey could hear and would deeply ponder the point of view of intelligent and well-informed subjects of the Ottoman Empire” [pp. 151-152].) On another level, she logs long hours at the fireside of many lower-status, yet equally or more fascinating, people such as local village or Bedouin chiefs.

Her character portraits include both the high and mighty and the lowly and humble, including prisoners and slaves. One striking quality all have in common is their generosity toward her. One could almost conclude from this account that Bell never had to buy herself a meal. Almost everywhere she travels, she is provided with food and shelter as an honored guest.

Bell is ultimately a fascinating, elusive character. Like Lawrence, to whom she is explicitly compared in the re-named title, she is an ambiguous partisan of the Arabs, whom she both admires and condescends to. This partisanship, like Lawrence’s, was limited, however. Bell and her fellow British colonial officers categorized Arabs of different religious backgrounds as separate “races,” repeating gross generalizations about “the Oriental,” and unselfconsciously and openly expressing “aversions” to whole groups of people. (She did not like Circassians, for example, while preferring the Druze.) Yet one cannot dismiss her out-of-hand as merely a racist orientalist, for what comes through in this narrative is ultimately a deep love for, and appreciation of, (some) Arabs as a people and Arabic culture, albeit on her own imperialistic and condescending terms. Her attitudes are complex. She is an unapologetic imperialist, and although shrewd in analyzing and discussing Ottoman imperialism, is uncritical and nationalistic to the extent that it undermines one’s opinion of *her* (political) judgment.

It is not worthy of her to compare her to Lawrence. She did not seek the limelight or a grandiose role for herself (at least as revealed in this book). One of her more attractive personality traits that manages to shine through in this narrative is a certain self-deprecation and understated humor. While touring a monastery, she remarks, “In the western wall of the monastery I was shown a door so narrow between the jambs that it is scarcely possible to squeeze through them, impossible, said the monks, for any one except he be pure of heart. I did not risk my reputation by attempting to force the passage” (p. 210).

The book is a gold mine for geographers or historical ecologists (if that is a field). Bell exhaustively and

lovingly documents the glorious landscape of Greater Syria as it was and never will be again. The photographs are quite interesting, albeit of uneven quality, and anyone who is intimately familiar with the various locales and sites she describes will be quite captivated recognizing the places, as well as realizing how much they have changed. However, this is not an easy read, nor is it easy to determine its precise place as literature or its utility as, say, a teaching tool. It is almost more a catalogue *cum* melange of disjointed stories in many respects than a coherent narrative. It is overly long and often boring in its minutiae and apparent lack of recognizable structure.

For researchers it is a rich source of information, albeit one that, like any source, must be taken with full recognition of its limitations in interpretation, and the attitude of its author. Unfortunately, the introduction does not provide full answers to many questions about Bell and her personal life, such as why she took this journey (and why at that particular time), and what her aim was; rather, O'Brien highlights certain aspects of the book when one would prefer more about the author. The reader ends up feeling a bit wistful (as well as a bit tired), wanting to know more *about* this fascinating woman, and indeed, wanting to know the woman herself.

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