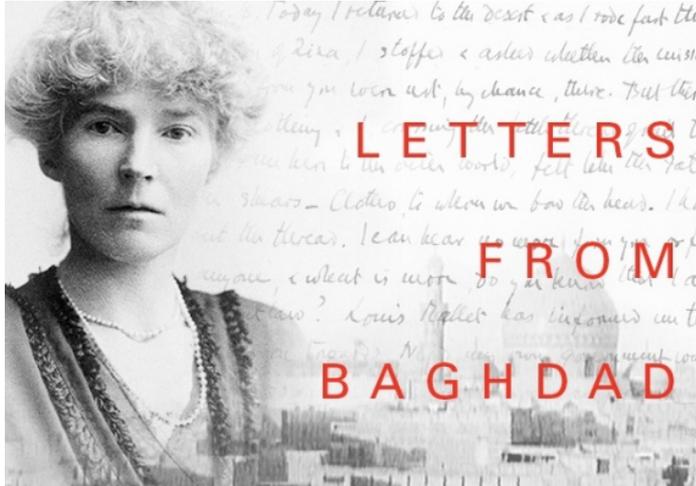


Filmmakers Shed Light on Gertrude Bell's Hidden Historical Legacy

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by Sabine Krayenbühl & Zeva Oelbaum

Images courtesy of the Gertrude Bell Archives, Newcastle University

Letters from Baghdad is our film about British-born Gertrude Bell, also referred to as “the female Lawrence of Arabia.” She was an adventurer, spy, archaeologist and powerful political force who travelled into the uncharted Arabian desert and was recruited by British Military Intelligence to help reshape the Middle East after World War I. She drew the borders of Iraq, helped install its first king and established the Iraq Museum of Antiquities in Baghdad that was infamously looted during the 2003 American invasion.

As female filmmakers, we’ve always been interested in telling the stories of women, and we are fascinated by the choices that trail-blazing women almost always have to make. How do circumstances and personality come together to create a woman like Gertrude Bell, who turns her back on comfort and privilege in exchange for power and the potential to make a difference? Bell was a hugely successful woman in an all-male arena, but her contradictions make her a complex, intriguing and compelling subject for our film.

We first met while working on **Ahead of Time**, a film about another remarkable woman named Ruth Gruber. During a conversation one day, Gertrude Bell’s name came up and we realized we had shared the same feelings after having read Janet Wallach’s engrossing biography ‘Desert Queen’: amazement and fascination for Bell’s extraordinary story, and shock that we had not heard of her before. How is it that a woman of such extraordinary accomplishment and significant influence on the shaping of the modern Middle East could be practically missing from history?

A recent biography of T.E. Lawrence didn’t mention Bell once, despite her important role in the success of the Arab Revolt of 1916-18 that made him famous. In the Academy Award-winning film, *The English Patient*, the “Bell Maps” were mentioned in reference to the maps she drew of Central Arabia, and yet, Gertrude Bell is referred to as a “he” by one of the main characters!

As the first female British Intelligence Officer and adviser on Arabian affairs to the British government, Bell helped shape the geopolitical map of the world as it changed dramatically after World War I. She was the only woman with a diplomatic role at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and the only woman invited by Winston Churchill to the Cairo Conference in 1921.

Her archaeological contributions were significant as well. As academic institutions did not support women in archaeology at that time, Bell had to organize and finance her own expeditions and collaborate with professionals for her work to be recognized. Her expertise and love of archaeology led her to become a champion for Iraq. In 1925, she drafted the new progressive Law on Antiquities that formally established Iraq’s control over its vast archaeological treasures and established the Iraq Museum. She

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also championed education for Muslim girls, helping to establish one of the most progressive educational systems in the Middle East. In remembering Gertrude Bell, renowned archaeologist Max Mallowan commented: "no tigress could have safeguarded Iraq's rights better."

Like so many other accomplished women, Gertrude Bell has been written out of history, mainly in the memoirs of her male colleagues that are often used as the "primary" source material for writing the history of that time. Dr. Priya Satia, Associate Professor of Modern British History at Stanford University, considered the rationale of such an omission:

"What's interesting is that the entire British engagement with that region in the first part of the 20th century was in some ways a testing place for British masculinity. She disturbed the notion of the desert as a masculine space...[and yet] We don't get the complete story if we don't have Gertrude Bell in that mix. It is all the more important that we put her back in that story and hold on to her central role in the making of the modern Middle East."

Gertrude Bell was part proper Victorian and part modern woman, and she exemplified the transitions of her era both for women and for the British Empire. Although her dramatic story might lend itself to a biopic, our research revealed such fascinating primary source material and stunning archival footage of the Middle East in the early 1900s, we felt we had to make a documentary. We love the way that primary source material and archival footage can combine to create a narrative and put the audience inside the mind of our subject.

Also we felt a documentary was the optimal way to ensure that the importance of Gertrude Bell be told: as an archaeologist, a writer, a photographer, a spy, a diplomat, a nation builder – rather than overshadowed by a typical Hollywood dumbed-down tragic love story. While we are all for dramatic tension and a riveting narrative, we also recognize our responsibility for documenting visually a critical life and time in history.

The obvious contemporary relevance of Gertrude Bell's story is one of the main reasons for making **Letters from Baghdad**. Our film could not be more timely, in light of the current events in the Middle East, when the world is reexamining the impact of the colonial legacy and ongoing Western policies and interventions in the region, including the effect of that legacy in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.

The decisions that Bell and her colleagues in the colonial office made resonate every day in our headlines. She drew the borders of Iraq, which are the cause of much sectarian strife today; we feel it is important to better understand the decisions that were made at that time by shedding light on the tangled history of Iraq through such a remarkable personal narrative.

Letters from Baghdad currently has a **Kickstarter campaign going until Sunday April 13th** – please go to our page to learn more about the film and see our trailer: <http://kck.st/1cGbHFq>.

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About the author



Sabine Krayenbühl & Zeva Olebaum

Sabine Krayenbühl and Zeva Olebaum are co-directors of **Letters from Baghdad**, a documentary about Gertrude Bell. The two originally met while collaborating on *Ahead of Time*, an award-winning feature length documentary about centenarian journalist Ruth Gruber.

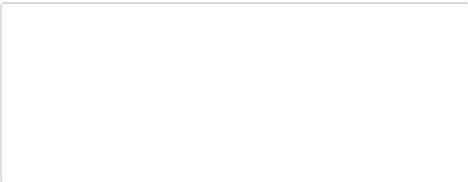
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