

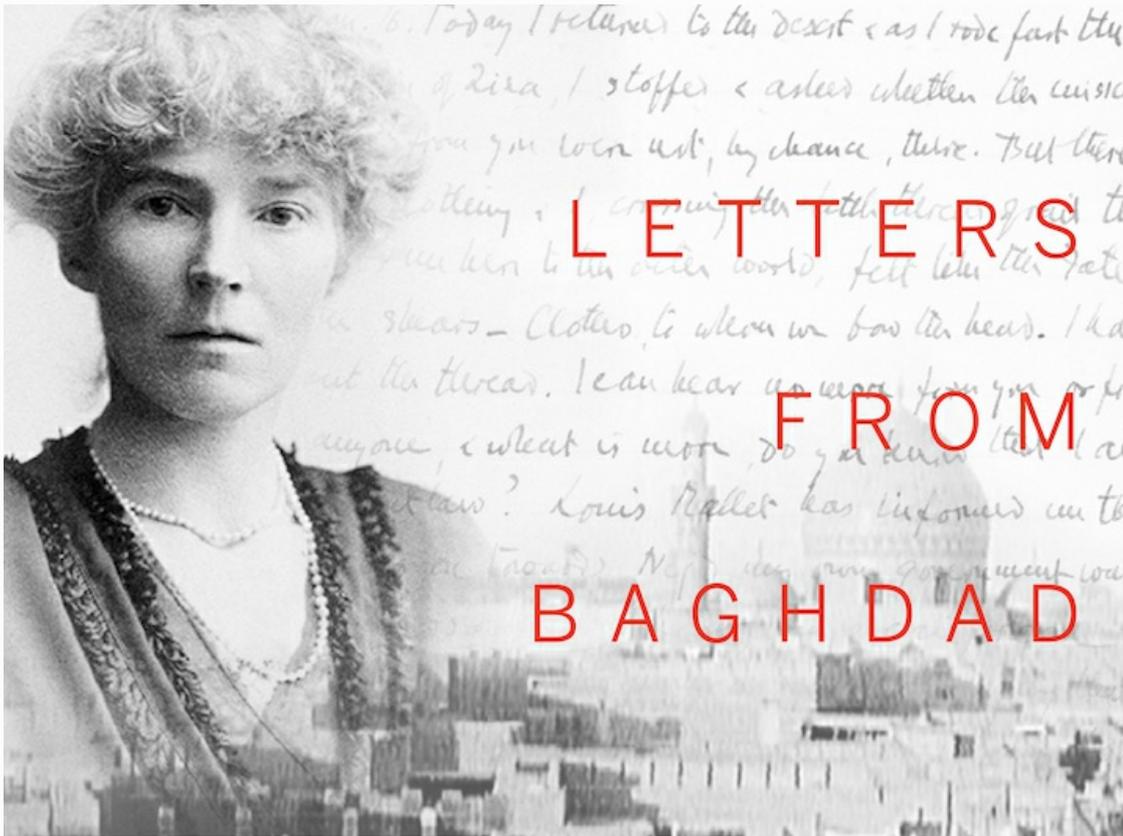


Features

In Development

Why the Story of the “Female Lawrence of Arabia” is Being Told With a Documentary, Not a Biopic

by Christopher Campbell on April 8, 2014



Between the Rivers Productions

A few weeks ago, during Women's History Month, I introduced [a list of relevant documentaries](#) by stating that there should be more films about important women and noting that at least there are some in the works on Alice Guy-Blache and Grace Hopper. Well, now there's also one on the way about adventurer-turned-spy **Gertrude Bell**, who very few people are familiar with today. The easiest way to describe her is with the label of “the female Lawrence of Arabia,” though someone of her stature (and of greater influence and power than Lawrence, in fact) requires something more difficult, like a whole feature film exploring her life and work as one of the most important people in the British Empire during the early part of the 20th century.

Letters From Baghdad is that film, a documentary from **Sabine Karyenbühl** (editor of *Mad Hot Ballroom*, *My Architect*, *Salinger* and *Ahead of Time: The Extraordinary Journey of Ruth Gruber*) and **Zeva Oelbaum** (producer of *Ahead of Time*) that is wrapping up [a very successful Kickstarter campaign](#) this weekend. Although I missed the chance to properly showcase the project during Women's History Month, when it also would have been more helpful to the crowdfunding effort, I think this is an exciting and necessary doc and believe this post is better late than never. I invited the filmmakers to share with us, via email, the reason they're bringing Bell's story to the big screen, and they make the point of addressing why, unlike T.E. Lawrence, she needs the documentary treatment rather than a biopic, even if one as grand as his.

First, here's a little more about Bell, via Karyenbühl and Oelbaum:

“Gertrude Bell, explorer, archaeologist and diplomat, left the confines of Edwardian England to seek adventure in the Arabian desert and became the most powerful woman in the British empire. Fluent in Arabic, she was recruited by British Military Intelligence at the beginning of

World War I. She drew the maps and provided the notes relied upon by British military strategists during the war and later became the high-ranking British Oriental Secretary in Baghdad, where she drew the borders of Iraq and helped install its first monarch. She was instrumental in the shaping of the Modern Middle East and towards the end of her life and established the National Museum of Iraq which was infamously ransacked during the 2003 American invasion.”

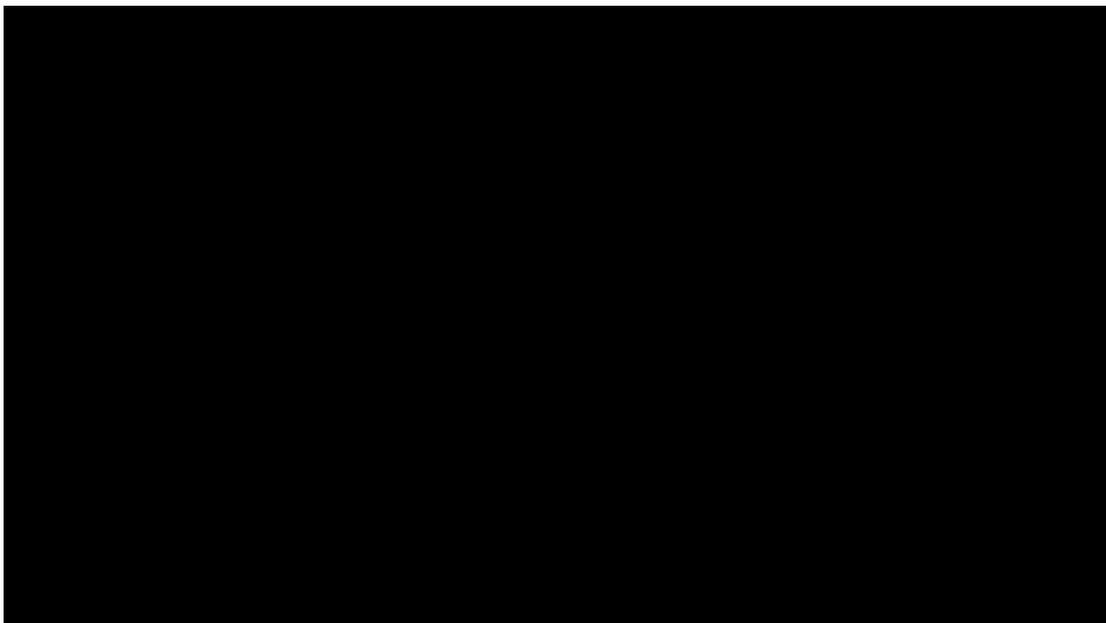
And now here are their reason for making *Letters From Baghdad*.

“We met while working on *Ahead of Time*, a film about another remarkable woman named Ruth Gruber. We discovered that we both had read the biography of Gertrude Bell by Janet Wallach and felt that Bell was an inspiring choice for a film. 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. She was part proper Victorian and part modern woman, and she exemplified the transitions of her era both for women and for Imperialist England. 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.

“Like so many other accomplished women, Gertrude Bell has been written out of history. We have a wonderful quote from one of our advisors, Dr. Priya Satia of Stanford University, and she says, ‘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 story of ... thinking of the desert as a sort of testing place for British masculinity ... We don’t get the complete story if we don’t have Gertrude Bell in that mix... and it is all the more important that we put her back in that story and hold on to a sense of her central role in the making of the modern Middle East.’

“Another important aspect which drew us to her story especially now is its contemporary relevance. 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 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. One case in point is that Bell drew the borders, which are the cause of much sectarian strife today. We feel it is important to shed light on the tangled history of Iraq and we can do it through a remarkable personal narrative. The archival footage we discovered after months of research serves as a time capsule of a region before it was altered by political upheaval and military invasion and serves as a contrast to what we are used to seeing on the news every day.”

Learn more at the [Kickstarter page](#) and the trailer below.



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Christopher Campbell is the managing editor of Nonfics and a freelance writer and editor for Film School Rejects, Movies.com, Fandango, RogerEbert.com and Moviefone. In the past he has contributed to Indiewire, MTV News, Movieline, Fandango, Spout, Documentary Magazine, Cinematical, Screen Crush, Pajiba, First Showing and The Documentary Channel Blog. He began writing film criticism and covering film festivals for a zine called Read, back when a zine could actually get you Sundance press credentials.

Since then he has received a Master's degree in Cinema Studies from NYU, where he concentrated on nonfiction film.

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