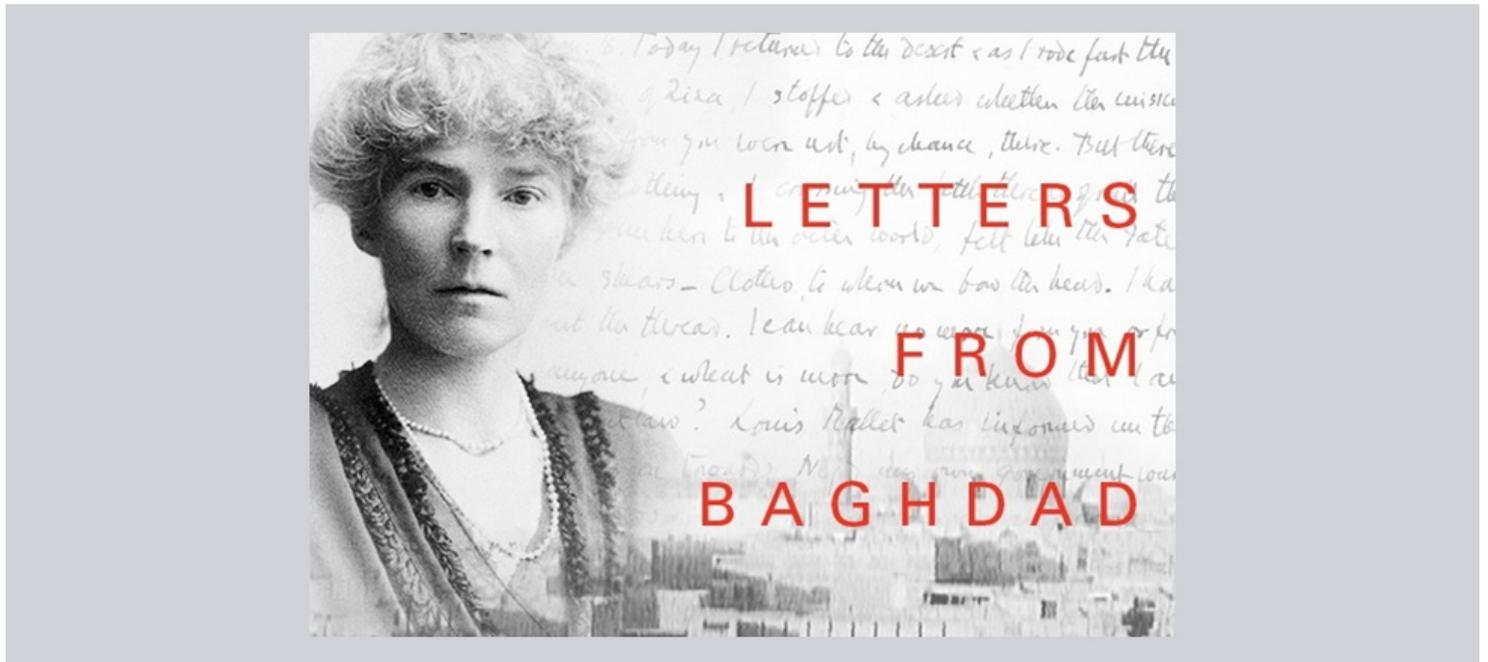


## Documentary uncovers the forgotten story of Gertrude Bell



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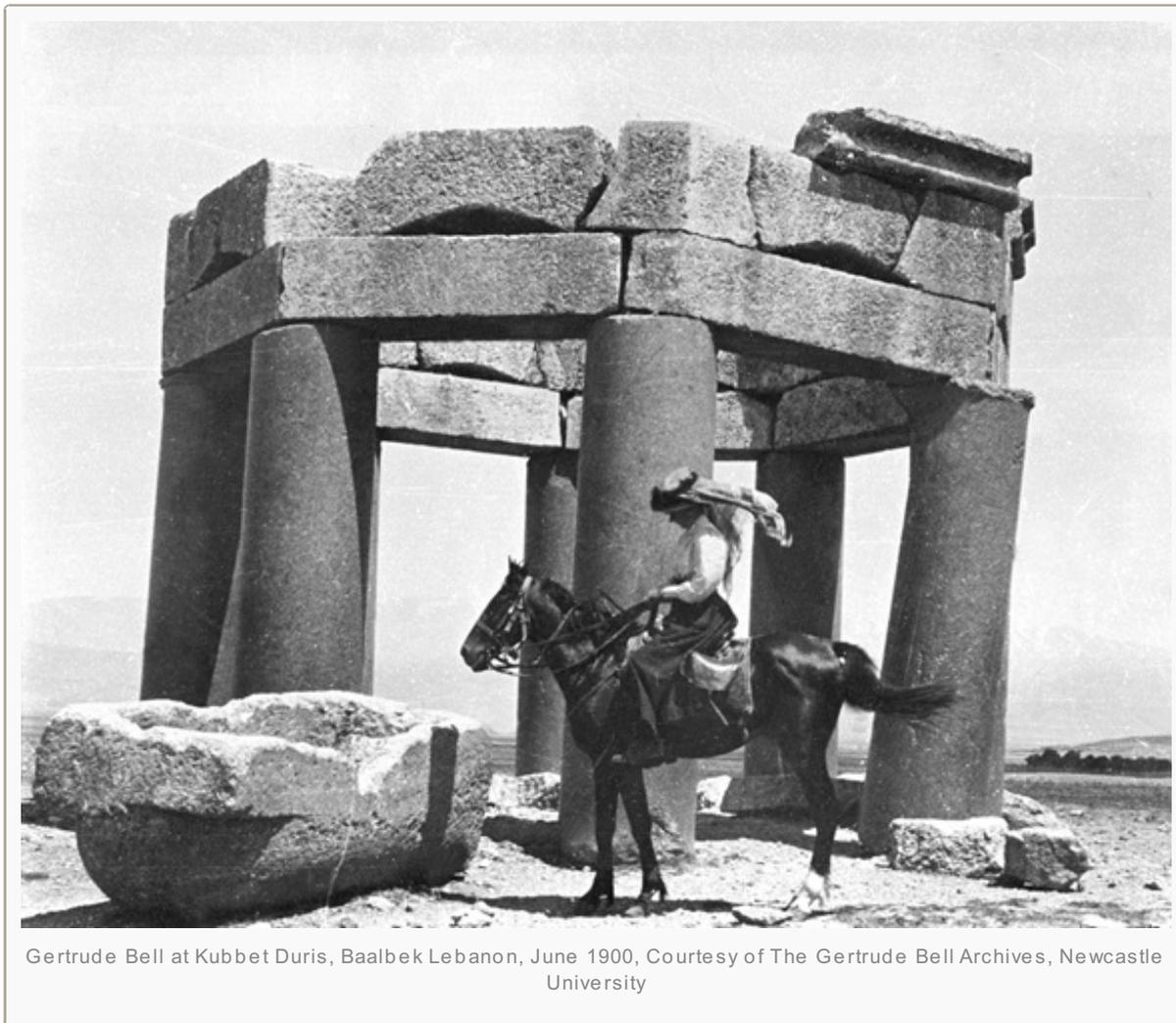
By Zeva Oelbaum & Sabine Krayenbühl

Letters from Baghdad is a film about Gertrude Bell, the most powerful woman in the British Empire, who drew the borders of Iraq, wrote its first Law of Antiquities and established the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad.

As female filmmakers, we've always been interested in telling the stories of women, and fascinated by the choices that trail-blazers 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.

British-born Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), often referred to as the female Lawrence of Arabia, 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.

Her fascination and passion for the Middle East began soon after she became the first woman to receive highest honours in Modern History at Oxford when she visited relatives in Bucharest, then part of the Ottoman Empire. An interest in Syrian archaeology was sparked by subsequent travels to iconic sites such as Petra, Palmyra and Baalbek and, in 1905, she embarked on a journey to Konya in Asia Minor, where she pursued her interest in the Byzantine churches of Anatolia. During these early forays, she committed herself to becoming fluent in Arabic, later crucial to her archaeological and political work, and the lasting relationships that she developed with the tribes in Arabia.



Gertrude Bell at Kubbet Duris, Baalbek Lebanon, June 1900, Courtesy of The Gertrude Bell Archives, Newcastle University

To this day, her work in the Middle East is held in high regard by academics in the field of archaeology many of whom gathered in London at the British Institute for Studies in Iraq (BISI) conference in September 2013 to present papers re-examining her work and the lasting impact it has had on their field and on Iraq, in general:

*“Some may have labelled Bell as an amateur archaeologist because she never carried out her fieldwork under the auspices of an institution like a university or museum, and never held a formal academic position...on the other hand, if we consider archaeology to be the illumination of the past human cultures and behaviours through the study of their material remains, then Gertrude Bell can most justifiably be considered an archaeologist. Her study of ancient sites entailed comprehensive descriptions, plans and photographs...and those [archaeologists] who were most familiar with her work readily acknowledged her wide knowledge and astute observations.”*

– Lisa Cooper Associate, Professor of Near Eastern Art & Archaeology, The University of British Columbia

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After her 1905 journey, Bell returned several times to her architectural and archaeological researches: exploring the Hittite and Byzantine site of Bin-bir-kilisse in Turkey, to Mesopotamia to survey the Roman and Byzantine fortresses on the banks of the Euphrates, and to the palace of Ukhaidir southwest of Baghdad, considered to be one of the finest remaining examples of Islamic architecture. She was a prolific writer and published numerous and widely acclaimed scholarly papers as well as travel books on her work and observations including *The Desert and the Sown* (1907), *The Thousand and One Churches* (1909) with Sir William Ramsay, *Amurath to Amurath* (1911), and *The Palace and Mosque of Ukhaidir: a Study in Early Mohammadan Architecture* (1914).

*“Based upon her extensive travels in the area in the late 1900s, she had also become a leading expert on the*

*monuments and sites in Iraq...In a larger arena, she viewed the ruins of ancient Mesopotamia as a precious legacy to be protected not just for Iraq but also the world.”*

– McGuire Gibson, Professor of Mesopotamian Archaeology, University of Chicago

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Gertrude Bell at Ukhaidir 1911, Courtesy of The Gertrude Bell Archives, Newcastle University

In addition to her archaeological work, her extensive and detailed knowledge of the geography and local tribes became of “signal use” to British Military Intelligence during the Arab Revolt of 1916-18 that made Lawrence of Arabia famous during WWI. When the British defeated the Germans and Turks taking Baghdad in 1917, Gertrude Bell joined British High Commissioner Sir Percy Cox as Oriental Secretary with the task of establishing the modern state of Iraq. During the war Bell had put aside her work in archaeology, but as she engaged in this new job, her knowledge and appreciation for it in many ways informed her vision for the country as she believed strongly that cultural heritage was at the core of creating a national identity.

*“She was the primary author of the Antiquities Law, and when King Faisal I asked her to establish the Iraq Museum, she not only found and furnished a major building, but she also set up the entire antiquities service and began immediately to train Iraqis in that department with the intention that they would eventually take control...As the first Iraqi Director of Antiquities, she closely monitored the first truly controlled archaeological excavations at Kish, Ur, and other sites, demanding a level of professionalism that had not been shown in most excavations in the 19th Century. The routines she established for fieldwork and for museum administration are still being followed today, despite the disruptions of the past decade.”*

– McGuire Gibson, University of Chicago

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When we began thinking about a film on Gertrude Bell, we were immediately struck by the tone and quantity of the more than 1600 letters and 7000 photographs she left behind. Her vibrant, humorous and richly detailed letters were written primarily to her family and friends and captured a very full view of her travels and work – in the field of archaeology as well as in the political realm.

We also have collected over 500 clips of rare footage shot in the Middle East in the early 1900s, from international archives. These visuals, some hand-tinted, will transport the viewer into the exotic, vanished world that Bell loved and provide a startling contrast to the demonstrations and bomb-shocked cities that we've grown accustomed to seeing in the media.

*“Gertrude Bell continues to be revered in Iraq to this day—certainly by my archaeological colleagues. She built an antiquities service that was the model for the rest of the Middle East...”*

– Elizabeth Stone, Professor of Archaeology, Stony Brook University

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**“Letters From Baghdad”** could not be more timely when the world is re-examining the impact of the colonial legacy and Western interventions in the Middle East. Our film – using this extraordinary footage and Bell’s unique perspective – allows the viewer a window into a past that’s been forever altered by military invasion and political upheaval, and provides key insights into the decisions that laid the foundation of post-WWI British policies in the Middle East.

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## More Information

### Who we are:

We are Zeva Oelbaum and Sabine Krayenbühl, the founding partners of [Between the Rivers Productions](#). We started working together 6 years ago on a film about another extraordinary woman, journalist Ruth Gruber. Zeva produced that film and Sabine was the editor. We discovered that we have the same sensibility, and that we collaborate incredibly well. When we found out that we both loved the story of Gertrude Bell, we decided to embark on making LETTERS FROM BAGHDAD. Sabine is an ACE award nominated editor who edited over 20 feature documentaries including Academy award-nominated MY ARCHITECT, MAD HOT BALLROOM, and MY REINCARNATION. Zeva is an award-winning producer whose film, AHEAD OF TIME, premièred at the Toronto International Film Festival, was broadcast on Showtime Channel and won 5 Best Documentary awards. Zeva came to film from a career in still photography and her work has been extensively published and exhibited.

Our combined films have screened theatrically, at every major international festival, and have broadcast on networks including HBO, Showtime, PBS, ARTE, and BBC.

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