The eponymous epistles come from Gertrude Bell, pioneering historian, photographer and self-made stateswoman who took it upon herself to become Britain’s foremost eminence on Arab culture thus negotiating the creation of the modern Iraq in the years following WWI.

Many have called her the female Lawrence of Arabia and while this film isn’t quite the epic tribute David Lean gave TE, it has a quiet power of its own, the letters read with jolly gusto by Tilda Swinton.

It’s the archive footage of both London and cities such as Cairo, Tehran, Damascus and Baghdad that add such allure, missives from another era that contrast so deeply with the footage we now see so regularly from that war-ravaged region.

Not to say war and rivalry weren’t always the key currencies there – Bell’s skills lay in befriending various tribal factions in the country then called Mesopotamia. Many of the letters are written back to her beloved father, whom she butters up considerably before regularly asking for some more money to support her latest desert expedition. “Desert camels are 13 pounds a piece, with equipment,” you know.

Many letters are also to high ranking Government and military officials – Bell was part explorer, part spy. For many, she was the most powerful woman in the British Empire at the time.

Throughout the film, however, she proves an enigmatic presence. In photos her eyes beam out at you, a challenge and a very British mystery – not for nothing are photos of the Sphinx featured. Her prose is colonial matter-of-fact yet touchingly poetic
and intelligence and determination shine through. “There's a bit of a fandango about my report,” she confesses...

When they make the feature film, she might be played by Emma Thompson, Swinton herself of course, or Carey Mulligan, or even Daisy Ridley or Brie Larsson. Oh well, Jennifer Lawrence (of Arabia) will probably get it...

In the meantime, this film puts us far more in the picture than Werner Herzog's doomed Desert Queen, which starred Nicole Kidman as Bell and James Franco as lover Henry Cadogan, a film quickly lost to the sands of cinematic time.

Bell’s photographs are shown – she pronounces them “not bad”, but they’re better than that, beautifully, dramatically composed and sweeping with majesty. One might even say epic.

After the creation of Iraq, she became its Director of Antiquities, founding Baghdad's museum with archeological wonders and remaining a confidant of both Winston Churchill, TE Lawrence and the Emir Faisal whom she supported as the first King.

Several characters in this inventive doc are played in voice over and in a very simple “Edwardian talking head" form by actors including Rachel Stirling, Joanna David and Paul McGann, as Bell’s only, thwarted love, the married Henry Cadogan, who was very good at tennis and billiards, but fatally poor with finances.

TE Lawrence himself is represented by actor Eric Loscheider and he gets practically the last word: “Do read her letters,” he urges, “they are splendid.” And how right he is.