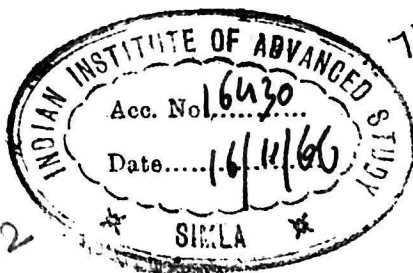


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REMINISCENCES OF GERTRUDE BELL

By DOUGLAS CARRUTHERS

A BOOKLET has just come into my hands, entitled *Twenty-five Years of Mesopotamian Discovery*, the purpose of it being to commemorate the silver jubilee of the British School of Archæology in Iraq. The two persons who did most to bring this school into existence were the late Sir Edgar Bonham-Carter and the late Gertrude Lowthian Bell.

Since this school was also partly endowed by Gertrude Bell, it may be an opportune moment to add a few of my own personal reminiscences of this most remarkable woman, and to do further justice to her contributions to our knowledge of the Middle East.

For remarkable the "Sitt" was (perhaps extraordinary would be a better adjective), and in more ways than one. Archæology, languages, politics and a deep understanding of the common crowd of the Oriental bazaars, as well as of the wild mountaineers, or the desert men with whom she came in contact, not to mention her unique ability to mix and get on with all—from Turkish Vali to Badawi Sheikh and nomad camel-drovers: all these attributes were incidental to her indomitable spirit to achieve what she had set out to achieve.

Would that Gertrude Bell had lived to see the result of her ambition—"the discovery of Mesopotamia."

I first met Gertrude Bell on February 23, 1905, in Damascus. She had come in from the forbidden Jebel Druze, and was called to the Governor for an explanation. I was on my way to the Palmyrene Desert to collect birds and study migration. I put up at the Hotel d'Orient, the "Ritz" of Damascus in those days, and on entering the dining-room was astonished to see an English lady—obviously English and obviously a lady—but no tourist nor missionary was she, holding forth in three languages to the usual cosmopolitan assembly that frequented the *table d'hôte*. In English, French and Arabic she held her own against all argument. Her character and personality immediately struck one as something quite out of the ordinary.

The following day she donned her best frock and proceeded to Salahiya to answer the Turkish Vali. By lunch-time she was back again, having successfully appeased Turkish apprehensions about an English-woman being loose in the Jebel Druze! She then proceeded on her travels to Antioch, Aleppo and Anatolia, and eventually produced the best book of its sort ever written on the Middle East—*The Desert and the Sown*—of which Hogarth said, "whether for its matter or for its veracity, or for its style, takes rank among the dozen best books of Eastern travel."

On my return from North-West Arabia in 1909, we met again in

London. She was then engaged upon *The Thousand and One Churches*, but was already making plans for a journey into Arabia. This was as ambitious as most of her ideas always were—namely, to penetrate the heart of the peninsula, make contact with the two rival Amirs, Ibn Rashid at Hail and Ibn Saud at Riyadh. No European had been into Northern Najd for over twenty years (Nolde, 1893) and none had visited Wahhab; Riyadh for nearly half a century (Pelly, 1865), so hers was a bold project. She suggested that I should accompany her. My plans, however, were already well advanced for a journey in Siberia, to the sources of the Yenisei, and perhaps beyond; I might be away for a year or two, so I demurred, but I offered her my man Mohammed Merawi, who did actually escort her on her journey into Arabia and out again a few years later. I often wonder what he thought of my four camels, compared with Gertrude Bell's twenty!

The dip into Arabia was eventually accomplished in the early months of 1914, but Gertrude Bell considered it a failure. She did not achieve anything like what she set out to do: and what Arabian traveller has yet done so? She never met Ibn Rashid, far less Ibn Saud, and only touched the fringe of Najd proper. In consequence, she was bitterly disappointed and did not take the failure kindly. She wrote *not one word*, when she might have written an epic, even if it was of a failure. Anyone who has read *The Desert and the Sown* will know what astonishing powers of description she possessed. Moreover, Arabia has the undeniable reputation of being able to distil abnormal powers of prose into its adherents. So we lost a good book which might indeed have eclipsed all else she wrote.

Now, by a strange turn of the wheel of fate, when the First World War sent her back to the Orient, to Cairo and Baghdad, it put me in charge of the elucidation of all her Arabian surveys. For this purpose I had at my disposal all her notebooks, diaries, and astronomical observations; and these were used to plot her route, to adjust it to those of (the few) previous travellers, and finally to incorporate it on to the six sheets of *1/Million Carte Internationale du Monde*: namely, Medina, Riyadh, El Jauf, Basra, Baghdad, and Esh Sham.

Thus, although Hogarth eventually did justice to her posthumous diaries, it devolved on me to trace her footsteps mile by mile and to put her route on the map. This familiarity with her everyday records thus allowed me inside information on her ability and character.

Although it was only the first 300 miles of her journey in 1914 with which I had personal acquaintance, yet the following 1,200 miles to Jebel Shammar, Iraq, and back to Damascus were so well known to me from my researches into the traverses and journals of all preceding travellers—including some of the early Moslem geographers—that I was on familiar ground, and I could follow every stage almost as if I myself had actually been there.

During this period, while I was at work in London, Gertrude Bell kept up a running commentary from Baghdad on my labours, so that between us the fullest justice was done to her surveys. The round journey covered 1,500 miles, and she kept up her route traverse without

a break over the whole distance. She carried a 3-inch theodolite, and her observations consisted of meridian altitudes of the sun taken with this instrument. On the outward journey she checked her route at Burka, Kasr Azrak and Bayir, at a camp in the Tubaiq, and again at Hail.* Her rate of travel was, of course, slow, for she had a large caravan, servants, rafiqs, and baggage. I had nothing but my saddle-bags, and so could move as fast as my riding-camels allowed. She spent some thirty days on the stretch between Ziza in Jordan and the point where she by-passed Taima: a passage which I had made in sixteen days. But she made good use of her opportunities on this first stage between Ziza and Hail, for she visited Bayir, being the second European to do so—for I claim to be the rediscoverer, in 1909, of this now famous site, and I presume my forerunners to have been Moses and the Children of Israel (Num. xxi. 16-18). She was also the first to record Kilwa in the Tubaiq, a site now famous for its palæolithic rock engravings, and made the first crossing of the south-western corner of the great Nafud sand-bed, where she fixed the position of some recorded, but by no means certain, waterings. I doubt whether any subsequent Western traveller has seen any part of this section of her route, or will ever do so again—now that the car has supplanted the camel!

The salient points of Gertrude Bell's outward journey were obviously:

The Jebel Tubaiq, a unique feature in North-West Arabian topography, to which she was the third European to penetrate. Here she and I were on common ground, and I would have liked to have read her impressions of that most fantastic world of violent erosion, for she had as keen an eye for the wonders of nature as she had for the nature of mankind. All she tells us, from her notes, is that it is a region "full of wild beauty and full of legend." Whether wild beauty or wild horror, no one who has set eyes on the Tubaiq can but fail to be moved by its abnormal scenery. *Terrifying* and *fantastic* have been the adjectives applied to it, and my own impression was that if some artist of imagination wanted to depict a lunar landscape, or the scenery of some burnt-out planet, like Venus, he could do so very well by visiting the Tubaiq. For instance, Bonestall's illustration of the latter, in *The Conquest of Space*, is an exact representation of the Tubaiq from the south, where it presents an abrupt escarpment, slashed, and carved into a thousand intricate designs and rent by a maze of gullies. Being a sandstone range, with lava outcrops, the sandstone has been worn away while the lava has endured; coal-black cores of basalt stand sentinel over denuded sandstone slopes, where the refuse is piled in glorious ruin. Below and beyond the drift of ages silts up against the foothills like breakers surging on to a rock-bound coast.

Beyond the Tubaiq lies the most grisly God-forsaken wilderness it has been my ill-fortune to behold, and although Gertrude Bell passed to the east of my route, and therefore did not see the worst of it, I would have liked to have read her impressions of it. T. E. Lawrence, the only

* A list of astronomically determined positions in Northern and Western Arabia (up to November, 1918). Compiled for the Geographical Section of the General Staff by D. Carruthers and E. A. Reeves.

other to see and describe it, did so very well on page 246 of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

Passing as she did within 35 miles of Taima, it must have been galling for an archaeologist of her attainments to have been forced to miss the chance of visiting so ancient and famous an oasis. But Mirawi would not venture there at any price after his experience with me five years before. Moreover, she had been pre-warned to give Taima a very wide berth.

I often wonder to myself how secret Taima has survived the recent dramatic unveiling of other parts of Arabia. From what I can gather it would appear to have retained its peculiar seclusion for a longer period than any of the other famous oases. Indeed, I doubt whether the whole of this particular north-west corner of Saudi Arabia has altered very much, for it is igneous, not sedimentary, and therefore of no interest to oil men. Mr. Philby, who could go anywhere he wished in Saudi Arabia, once told me that he had *not* visited Taima, but that when he was making tracks for it on one occasion he was suddenly recalled by King Ibn Saud. I wonder why? The fact remains Ibn Saud left Taima to its own devices for a very long period, twenty-five years or more, and it was only when the bloody family feuds and murders of the ruling house—the Rummman Barons (as Philby calls them)—became too much even for Arabia, that the King sent his men in and “took over” Taima. That was in 1950, only a few years before his death. Mr. Philby entered the place a few months after its subordination—the first non-Arab to tread the narrow lanes of that delectable but sinister oasis since myself, forty years before.

On reaching Hail, the capital of the northern Amirate of Jebel Shammar, Gertrude Bell was treated with respect and entertained according to the usual custom of Arab hospitality—but no more. She met her first rebuff, coming up against something she had not met before in all her Eastern travels—a blank wall of suspicion and fanaticism. The truth was that she had achieved so much, so easily and with such remarkable success in other difficult countries that she expected Arabia to be as easy a prey: which it was *not*, at that date, to anyone however experienced. Her disgust at the reception she received was ill-disguised, and it had a lasting effect on her. As in my day, Inner Arabia was full of war and rumours of war—“a country of constant strife and bloodshed.” Najd, never at rest for long, was in a particularly explosive state at that moment, and, although Gertrude Bell did not know it, this was the lull before the storm which was about to break, and did break, a few months later, when the two rivals for power—Ibn Rashid and Ibn Saud—met in deadly conflict at the battle of Jarrab, in which Captain Shakespear was killed: a turning-point, perhaps, in Arabian history.

But nearer still in time and place was the raid which the Amir Saud Ibn Rashid was engaged upon whilst Gertrude Bell was his guest in his capital and gossiping with his harem. Thereby hangs a tale which is typical of the unique Arab society of Hail and its blood-stained chivalry. I repeat the story as told by Shakespear in his diary, but I can find no confirmation of the episode.

At this particular moment, when Gertrude Bell was just clear of

Arabian soil and had reached Baghdad, Shakespear, whilst on his great trans-Arabian journey, was coming up from central Najd and skirting Jebel Shammar on the north. At the wells of Hiyaniya, where Gertrude Bell had watered recently, he heard the following story of what had happened ten days before: "Heard startling news about Ibn Rashid today. It appears that a letter was received yesterday from the Aghayls on ahead to say we ought to hurry as Ibn Rashid had murdered Zamil Ibn Sabhan and the Shammar were restless. This took place nine days ago (that is, on April 10) and the manner of it was thus. Apparently the Shammar have evinced an amount of want of faith in Saud Ibn Abdul Aziz's ability to be the Amir, and having shown plainly that they thought Zamil Ibn Sabhan should be the Amir, something had to be done. Accordingly, young Saud Ibn Rashid (the writer reckons he would have been about 16 years of age) and the son of Salah Ibn Sabhan put their heads together and determined to clear Zamil and his immediate friends out of the way. When they were mounted and were on the march somewhere near Abu Ghar, a slave came up from behind and shot Zamil in the back, killing him outright. Seeing this, Zamil's brother and some others jumped on to their mares and made off. They were rounded up, however, and then killed out of hand; a brother (?) and cousin of Zamil's, a slave and another man. Men were sent off to make sure of Hail, and young Ibn Rashid now hopes to make the Shammar want him as their Amir! A low-down crime, as but for Zamil young Saud Ibn Abdul Aziz would not be alive now."

The last sentence is correct, for it will be remembered that this boy was the sole survivor of the holocaust of 1907, when his three brothers were assassinated, he alone escaping to safety, being smuggled away to Medina by a faithful slave. He was eventually brought back to Hail, and proclaimed Amir in February, 1909. All this happened during the period of my own journey, and no doubt was the reason for my trouble in Taima. Small wonder that the local Governor claimed that the roads onwards to Jebel Shammar were closed! Zamil had acted as the protector of this youth and had filled the office of Regent, after his previous Regent, an uncle, Hamud Ibn Sabhan, had been poisoned. However, young Saud Ibn Rashid himself was assassinated in due course, in 1920, just before the eclipse of his Amirate by Ibn Saud in 1921.

Such was Shammar society in those days! I think it was just as well that Gertrude Bell left Inner Arabia when she did.

During her "detention" in Hail she was not free to do anything except gossip with the harem, but a record of her conversations with the Amir's ladies would have been most entertaining. The book she never wrote would have contained some illuminating passages, written in her own inimitable style. The intrigues and atrocities of the blood-stained annals of the Shammar rulers would have seen the light of day for the first time, and a horrible story it would have been. "The place smelt of blood" was her casual comment. Apart from this introduction to Oriental melodrama we would have learnt little. She saw nothing of the place nor its surroundings, and contributed nothing to archæology nor to geography, apart from one observation for latitude, which cor-

roborated Huber's twelve observations made in November, 1883. And although, no doubt, the information she gained of men and matters in Central Arabia was of great value, none of it has ever been made public.

On her retreat from Hail to Baghdad, by force of circumstances, she took a new route, and so added to our knowledge of the region. Her survey from Hiyaniya to Najaf covered nearly 300 miles of what was previously a blank on the map. The same applies to her return journey to Damascus across the south Syrian desert: another 500 miles of hard desert journeying over uninteresting country to her, but not to me, trying to unravel the hydrography of that area. Her route took a line which cut across the upper reaches of the great western affluents of the Euphrates—wadis that we knew of in their lower courses, but whose origins were mere conjecture. Her surveys therefore, enabled me to solve some knotty problems for *The Western Affluents of the Euphrates*, published by the office of the Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, in 1919.

Those lucky people who now cruise across this vast 600-mile-wide wilderness by car, by bus or by air can have little idea of how small was our knowledge of it prior to 1914.

Back in Damascus; four months and fifteen days after she had set forth, Gertrude Bell little guessed that she would be in Baghdad again the following year, and would make it her home until the day of her death eleven years later, leaving behind as her memorial "The British School of Archæology in Iraq."

OXFORD UNIVERSITY EXPEDITION TO IRAQI KURDISTAN, 1956

By JOHN WILKINSON

Report of a lecture illustrated by slides delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on February 27, 1957, Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt, G.B.E., K.C.B., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: It is a pleasure to introduce John Wilkinson who has kindly come to tell us of the Oxford University Expedition to Iraqi Kurdistan in 1956. He is at St. Edmund Hall and is an Old Harrovian. We, as a Society, try to encourage young men to join in such expeditions and sometimes we are able to help them. I believe it was so in this case because some of our distinguished members who know the area well were able to offer a little advice which we hope proved of use to Mr. Wilkinson and his colleagues, some of whom are, I believe, with us now.

THE Oxford University Expedition to Iraqi Kurdistan consisted of four undergraduates all with another year to do at Oxford. The members were Peter Galloway (Merton), geographer; Barrie Haley (The Queen's), botanist; Euan Thomson (St. Peter's Hall), reading engineering, who came as doctor and to help Haley with botany; and myself, from St. Edmund Hall, geographer and leader. In the field we had attached to us an Assyrian called Warda, who acted as interpreter. We had originally planned to have a Kurdish student from Baghdad in this capacity, but when we arrived in Iraq we found that he had gone to Paris, which he obviously preferred to two months' roughing it in the field. However, the Iraq Petroleum Company came most generously to the rescue with Warda, who was a storeman in their geological department. We also had a cook called Saleh, of Persian extraction, for some of the time.

Our programme of work fell into three main parts. The geographers' was to make a regional description of the area selected. This involved collecting information of a varied nature and fitting it into an overall geographical pattern. Included in the work we were doing was making a land-use survey map of a selected village and studying as much of the country as possible.

The botanist's job was principally concerned with making two collections of plants of the area for the College of Arts and Sciences, Baghdad, and the British Museum.

We were all concerned in what might be termed the exploratory work in the country. Although the area could not be called a *terra incognita*, there are parts, particularly in the extreme north-east corner where Persia, Turkey and Iraq join, about which very little is known.

We also had certain minor objectives, such as collecting coins for the Ashmolean Museum and cave exploration.

We were very generously supported, being sponsored by the University, the Royal Geographical Society, and by several institutes, societies and



