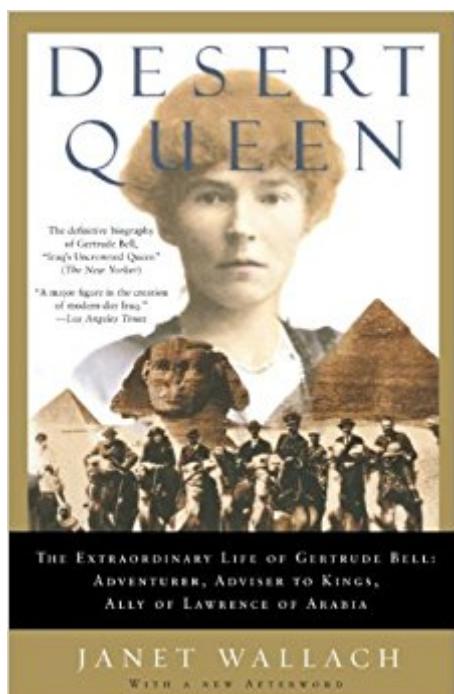


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# Desert Queen: The Extraordinary Life Of Gertrude Bell: Adventurer, Adviser To Kings, Ally Of Lawrence Of Arabia



## Synopsis

This “richly textured biography” (Chicago Tribune) inspired the mesmerizing documentary, Letters from Baghdad, now in theaters. Here is the story of Gertrude Bell, who explored, mapped, and excavated the Arab world throughout the early twentieth century. Recruited by British intelligence during World War I, she played a crucial role in obtaining the loyalty of Arab leaders, and her connections and information provided the brains to match T. E. Lawrence’s brawn. After the war, she played a major role in creating the modern Middle East and was, at the time, considered the most powerful woman in the British Empire. In this masterful biography, Janet Wallach shows us the woman behind these achievements—a woman whose passion and defiant independence were at odds with the confined and custom-bound England she left behind. Too long eclipsed by Lawrence, Gertrude Bell emerges at last in her own right as a vital player on the stage of modern history, and as a woman whose life was both a heartbreakingly tragic story and a grand adventure.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A biography of the woman who, indirectly, was the catalyst for many of the troubles in the Middle East, including the Gulf War. In 1918, Gertrude Bell drew the region's proposed boundaries on a piece of tracing paper. Her qualifications for doing so were her extensive travel, her fluency in both Persian and Arabic, and her relationships with sheiks and tribal and religious leaders. She also possessed an ability to understand the subtle and indirect politeness of the culture, something many

of her colonialist comrades were oblivious to. As a self-made statesman her sex was an asset,

enabling her to bypass the ladder of protocol and dive into the business of building an Empire.

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To Sir Mark Sykes, the pre-WWI British Foreign Office Arabist, "that damned fool," Miss Bell, created an "uproar" wherever she went in the Middle East and was "the terror of the desert." Three social seasons were all a young lady of good family was allotted to snare a husband. Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) had thrice failed and received the consolation prize, a trip to Teheran to visit her uncle, the British envoy there. After that, she could not be kept close to the dank family manse in Northumbria but was drawn to the sun-drenched Middle East. Dominated even there by her Victorian father, head of a family-owned ironworks, she was denied permission to marry a moneyless diplomat. She refused?to her later regret?a married lover in the military and assuaged her disappointment by pressing British interests in Arab lands east of Suez, becoming in effect the maker of postwar Iraq. The first woman to earn a first-class degree in modern history at Oxford, she wrote seven influential books on the Middle East and, following WWI, was named oriental secretary to the British High Commission in Iraq. Not just another book about an eccentric lady traveler, this colorful, romantic biography tells of a woman with an inexhaustible passion for place that did not always substitute successfully for continuing heartbreak. Despite some maudlin passages, Wallach, coauthor with her husband, John Wallach, of *Arafat*, vividly evokes a memorable personality.

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A very well written biography of an intrepid woman traveling through the Middle East in the last years of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth. Bolstered by her family's wealth, she was able to employ servants wherever she went and she was welcomed by dignitaries of the various countries she visited. The local conditions were usually primitive, but she traveled with mounds of luggage and some of the luxuries she preferred. Her tolerance for hardship, nevertheless, was commendable. But along the way, one is reminded of the brutalities of human society. She meets acquaintances in some god-forsaken part of the mid-east desert: "The last time she had seen them was in 1905, but the men boomed a hearty welcome and invited her to stay the night. Tall and broad-shouldered, they were as big in heart as in body: they slew a sheep to show her hospitality, piled up a platter of rice in her honor," etc. So much for the human heart..."they slew a sheep". The sheep didn't want to die. Later, during the First World War, Gertrude served in a British office in

Egypt, then in Iraq. Eventually she witnessed the Paris peace negotiations in the company of Lawrence of Arabia. Her career in the nascent Iraqi state is told in full and interesting detail. The active life she led holds the reader's interest throughout. The style is superlative. I highly recommend this biography of a remarkable woman.

Had we only known.... Wallach's careful research and precise presentation lay out the twists and turns of Empire as the British plotted and planned and ultimately carved up the desert kingdoms we know today as Iraq and Iran (among others....). Gertrude Bell's amazing adventures along side so many other key players at the turn of the century provide a most readable and comprehensive look back at the seeds of today's complicated and unsettling Middle Eastern events. An excellent layman's introduction to the history and culture of the region and a cautionary tale....

Fascinating book that reads almost like today's news...or at least helps you to better understand it. What a remarkable woman! I'm not certain I had heard about Gertrude Bell before--an important British explorer and expert on Mesopotamia who served as an advisor to the British government and was a protege of T E Lawrence.) This book fills in a lot of gaps in history of the middle east--from ancient to 20th century. The real main "character " in this book is Mesopotamia, it's peoples, leaders, customs, etc. Many of the same places and tribes that were in conflict from long ago still are. This is a very enjoyable and important book.

Gertrude Bell , whose insights and behind the scenes investigations as well as her appreciation for the Arab culture led to a remarkable life as an adopted daughter of Iraq make for fascinating journalism. The author, through the lens of the life of Miss Bell sheds much light on the current political climate in Iraq. And what an interesting way to learn the history of a country through the eyes of a pro-western contemporary figure with a sincere appreciation for the culture and inherent diversity and beauty of Iraq.

After awhile, I felt like sticking my head in the desert sand. Too drawn out, my goodness, enough of the brat behavior. Even in so called intelligent, enlightened women. I was so sick of her and her self entitlement. The story itself was interesting history but, this women was so self centered it drove me nuts. The book just loses its way about half way through. It becomes silly and redundant. I love history, that's why it got 3 stars.

I have read many books about this period and I thought I had a good understanding of the region and its history. Well Janet Wallach opened some doors and I'm once again humbled. Intellectual humility is always a safe and recommended place to reside. I would strongly recommend reading this fascinating account of the period in both England and the Middle East. It certainly expands one's understanding of what happened then, and is quite relevant to what is happening now.

Ms. Bell is unique and very interesting. How she managed to penetrate the desert world as a woman, let alone a Victorian woman is almost beyond belief, but apparently quite real. One can only speculate that the rules of gravity just don't apply to everybody. Janet Wallach is an excellent writer. Her sentences are clear and her descriptions are complete and visual. She has knitted together this woman's Odessa with clarion precision. This, in my opinion, is a really fine book.

A very informative book which lends insight into why the Middle East is such a mess, and how instrumental an uncredited woman was in diplomacy. However, the volume of detail made the reading a rather dry experience.

I first read *Desert Queen* about 12 years ago, and just finished reading it again. The book is so poignant -- so timely -- I would love to see more people read it, especially now with all that is taking place in the Middle East. This is the story of how the European powers, in particular England, divided the old Ottoman between WWI and WWII. That division lives with us today--and it was by no means the best division. Gertrude Bell played a key role in the political machinations of the time. Although she was a woman, and would never attain a primary political position, she worked behind the scenes to accomplish her goals. An adventurer, linguist, traveler, fearless communicator, and brilliant writer -- she is a woman we should all hold in high regard today and always.

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