

Letters from Baghdad

Gertrude Bell was a singular personage at the turn of the last century, a woman who embraced another world—the Middle East – and was tagged "the female Lawrence of Arabia." Born of an aristocratic family in NE England, she became intrigued by the region early on when she first Iran. She then traveled extensively there, eventually dedicating her life as a single woman to studying and understanding Middle Eastern languages and cultures, a bent that won her plaudits both as a British intelligence agent and a nonpareil area expert.

Her amazing life, lived up until 1926, is surveyed wonderfully in this spirited documentary, co-directed by Sabine Karyenbühl and Zeva Oelbaum, both New York-based documentary filmmakers.

The film is principally constructed around Bell's massive collection of letters—most sent to her family back in England—and voiced beautifully by an off-camera Tilda Swinton, who also served as executive producer. Swinton's sonorous narration is balanced nicely by an impressive parade of contemporaries of Bell, all either voiced over or appearing as talking heads, including appearances by her famous comrades like Lawrence of Arabia himself and Winston Churchill.



Bell's singular curiosity, intelligence--and her idiosyncrasies--are given full display in "Letters from Baghdad." Her capability in Middle Eastern languages was renowned, as was her ease of entry into largely male-dominated societies (*see her in photo left among ancient ruins*). Among her idiosyncrasies was an imperious style and a luxurious fashion sense that never left her, extending to her wearing a fur wrap in the shadow of the Sphinx.

Passing consideration is given to a couple of romantic relationships she had in her life, but these elements do not dominate, as they did in the much more melodramatic imagining of Bell's life in Werner Herzog's "Queen of the Desert," a 2015 film just recently released in the US. Here, the real romance is in the embracing of and identification of Gertrude Bell with a culture, culminating in her significant involvement in Mideast politics and her stewardship over the National Museum of Iraq. Another bonus treasure of the film is a trove of early silent footage of Persia and Arabia, material that provides an impressive backdrop to her life and a lively glimpse into an exotic world. Unfortunately, there is no film imagery of Bell, but rather a bountiful selection of stills.

(The film is unrated and runs 95 minutes.)

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