Published: December 15, 1989
Last Updated: November 17, 2016

BELL, GERTRUDE MARGARET LOWTHIAN

BELL, GERTRUDE Margaret Lowthian, 1868-1926, British traveler, private scholar, archeologist, sometime government servant, and a translator of Ḥāfeẓ, whose concern with the Middle East generally, as well as with Iran, extended over a whole third of a century from 1890 to 1925.

Born in the north of England, at Washington Hall, County Durham, she was the elder child and only daughter of Sir Thomas Hugh Bell, a great steel magnate. While she lost her mother in infancy, her father's second marriage afforded her intimate access to the Lascelles family, then at the peak of its influence in British society, politics, and diplomacy. She studied at the universities of both London and Oxford, and was the first woman to gain an Oxford first class degree in modern history, when still not quite twenty years of age. For the next sixteen years, until about 1904, her life was a busy round of social occasions, private study, strenuous Alpine climbing, and lengthy visits to her diplomatic relatives in Bucharest, Tehran, and Berlin. Her Iranian stay, 1892-93, led to the publication of her aptly titled *Safar Nameh. Persian Pictures. A Book of Travel* (1894). As was often the fashion at the time, the work appeared anonymously, but it was reissued posthumously under her own name in 1928 with its shorter title *Persian Pictures*, and with a preface by E. Denison Ross. It was reprinted in a third edition in 1947 in The Bouverie Library with a preface by A. J. Arberry. In Tehran she began to study Persian with a certain Shaikh Ḥasan, whose students included Friedrich Rosen (Rosen,

pp. 157-58)—a cultural and esthetic interest maintained throughout her life—and by 1897 her mastery of the language had reached the point where she was able to publish some remarkable verse translations entitled *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz*. The translation is done in a free style, with little attention paid to the order of the lines, so that it is not always easy to identify a particular verse. Rosen, who knew Bell quite well and kept in close contact with her, though praising the work as "exquisite," remarked that she had made free use of the German translation by Vincenz Rosenzweig von Schwannau without acknowledging the fact (p. 158). E. G. Browne compiled a concordance of her translation and the odes (*ḡazal*s) in the Rosenzweig-Schwannau edition of Ḥāfeẓ (*Lit. Hist. Persia* III, pp. 305-06) while Q. Ḡanī, an authority on Ḥāfeẓ, carried the task farther in his notes on the margin of the 1928 edition of the *Poems*, and identified almost all the original verses, made explanatory remarks, and pointed out some lapses and where spurious verses had been translated (published in vol. 6 of *Yāddāšthā-ye Doktor Qāsem Ḡanī*, London, 1360 Š./1981). Nearly a century later, Bell's work remains highly esteemed by both the learned and the laity, for both its subtle insights and its confident and delicate artistry. Around the turn of the century, she was resident in Jerusalem for a while, studying Arabic (for the sake of which she discontinued her Persian studies; Rosen, p. 158), and visiting Petra and Baalbek.

From 1905 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Bell traveled widely and systematically—usually in primitive and isolated circumstances—throughout the whole Middle East and beyond. Her ride through Syria and Cilicia to Konya resulted in *The Desert and the Sown* (1907) and in some articles in the *Revue archéologique*. Exploration of Hittite and Byzantine sites was conducted and recorded (jointly with Sir William M. Ramsay) in *The Thousand and One Churches* (1909). Next, she went from Aleppo down the Euphrates to Ukhaidir (Oḵayżer; then virtually unexamined in any serious way), returning to Asia Minor via Baghdad and Mosul. The account of this trip (with an interesting excursus on the Young Turks) appeared in 1911 as *Amurath to Amurath*. A carefully planned return visit to Ukhaidir led to Bell's most important archeological publication of all, *The Palace and Mosque of Ukhaidir* (1914). Finally in this period, she made an ultimately abortive, but still useful, exploration of northern Arabia in 1913-14.

In the first year of World War I, the restless Gertrude Bell was sidetracked into various worthy, but personally unsuitable activities (such as nursing on the

western front), but by November, 1915, she had been recruited to do intelligence-cum-political work in the Middle East, where the Allied Powers were encouraging local insurrections against the Ottoman Empire. Here began her close association with the chief political officer, Sir Percy Cox, and his sometime successor Sir Arnold Wilson. At the beginning of her last decade of life, she had finally found her true métier. In March, 1917, she arrived in Baghdad as “Oriental secretary”; and from 1920 onward, when Cox became British high commissioner in Mesopotamia, she played a key role in the establishment of the new state and government of Iraq and the installation of Amir (later King) Faisal. In 1917 she was awarded the decoration Commander of the British Empire, and her abilities were further recognized in her appointment as a delegate to the peace conference in 1919. To this period belong two important documents authored by her: *The Arab of Mesopotamia* (1917) and a British official report (White Paper) entitled *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia* (1921).

Bell had long been absorbed in archaeology and the proper care of antiquities, and she worked energetically, after 1918, for the establishment of an Iraqi national museum. This was inaugurated in 1923 and gained its first significant building and staffing in 1926. With the more or less parallel setting up of a national department of antiquities, Gertrude Bell’s lifework was consummated with every reason for deep satisfaction; she had in fact spent all her forces and began to think seriously of quiet retirement in Britain. Before this could be realized, however, she died suddenly in her sleep on the night of 11-12 July 1926, and was buried the next day, with considerable ceremony, in Baghdad. Her remarkable life and achievements have since been disparaged, in some quarters, with the fashionable charge that they were little more than imperialistically motivated “orientalist” dilettantism. In reality, she was a liberal, even a radical, thinker; often at odds with her own society and government; a serious scholar; and a sensitive admirer of the peoples and cultures of the region to which she devoted the second half of her relatively short life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bell's own principal publications (virtually all long since out of print, despite their intrinsic importance) have been mentioned above. Her voluminous letters, in selection, were edited by her stepmother, Lady Bell, as *The Letters of Gertrude Bell* in two volumes in 1927 and reissued in 1947.

The *Earlier Letters* were edited by Elsa Richmond in 1937.

Some thirty years after her death, three biographies of varying quality appeared within a few years: by Josephine Kamm, 1956; by Ann Northgrave, 1958; and by Elizabeth Burgoyne, vol. 1 in 1958, vol. 2 in 1961.

Rumors have long persisted of further studies to come, emphasizing her role as an unusually successful woman in an earlier, largely male-dominated era.

See also Denison Ross's and Arberry's prefaces mentioned above; "The Emma of the Desert," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 11 September 1953; the notice in the British *Dictionary of National Biography 1922-30*, Oxford, 1937 (and reprinted); and F. Rosen, *Oriental Memories of a German Diplomatist*, London, 1930, pp. 156-58, 273-77, 279-81.

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