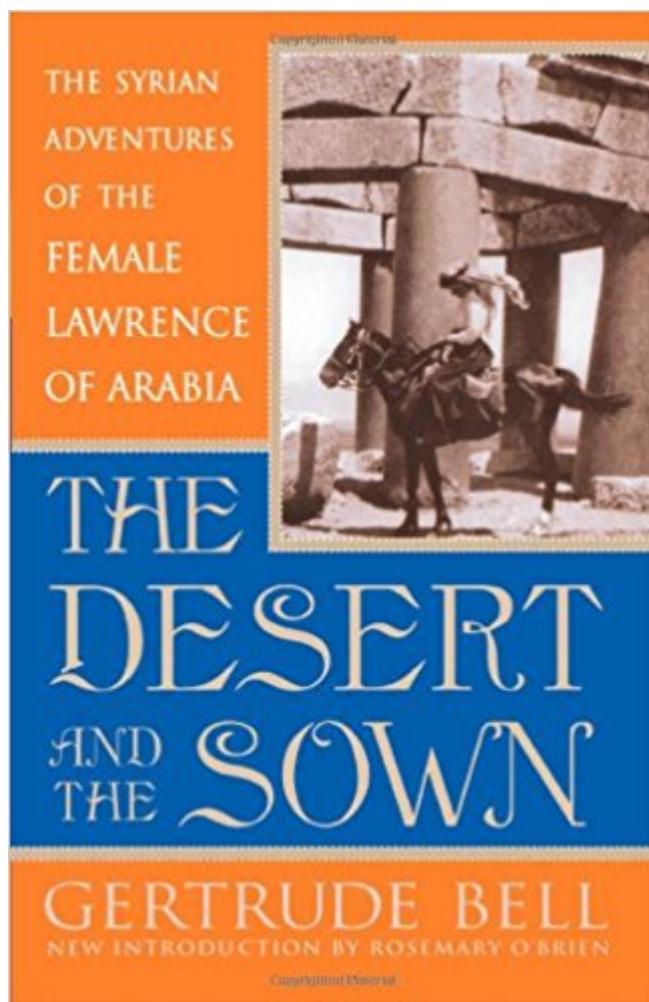


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The Desert And The Sown: The Syrian Adventures Of The Female Lawrence Of Arabia



Synopsis

A seeming contradiction, Gertrude Bell was both a proper Victorian and an intrepid explorer of the Arabian wilderness. She was a close friend of T. E. Lawrence, and played an important role in creating the modern map of the Middle East after World War I. The Desert and the Sown is a chronicle, illustrated by over 160 photos, of Bell's 1905 journey from Jericho to Antioch, a land of warring tribes under Turkish control.

Book Information

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: Cooper Square Press; New Ed edition (November 13, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0815411359

ISBN-13: 978-0815411352

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars 10 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,196,376 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #20 in Books > Travel > Middle East > Syria #363 in Books > Travel > Middle East > General #898 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Middle East

Customer Reviews

Bell is a rare combination of the thoroughly feminine woman and the fearless, daring, and resourceful traveler.... Go and read the book for yourself. I cannot quote it all and unless all is quoted, you have lost the better part. (Nation)Contrary to the ordinary practice of travelers, Bell bestowed her attention upon persons rather than places, her chief concern being to study the character and customs of the people. This fact sharply differentiates her work from most books on travel, and gives it a peculiar interest. (The New York Times)Enchanting.... Bell has a keen sense of humor, and a memorable power of... snapshotting the conversations of the inhabitants of the mountains and the deserts whom she encountered on her travels. She has just that dramatic touch, which enables her to record a conversation as a living thing, and to bring before us a vivid picture of the speakers as well as of their words.... To her power of describing scenery, and of recording the living talk of men, Bell adds a wide knowledge of archaeology and a sound instinct for the politics of Asia. (The Spectator)Fascinating. (Times Literary Supplement)Listed as recently back in print. (Catherine Watson Star-Banner)This re-publication of Gertrude Bell's 1907 book, originally entitled

simply and economically Syria, chronicles her seemingly meandering journey through the desert and countryside of Palestine, Jordan and Syria in the winter of 1906. (H-Gender-Mideast)

Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) made six extended exploratory trips to Arabia. Rosemary O'Brien lives in Princeton, New Jersey.

Gertrude Bell is probably one of the most interesting women of pre-World War I England. A daughter of privilege and she was educated and curious at a time when women of her class were expected to marry well and have children to police the Empire. Bell broke this mold and was the archetype of the "traveling Englishwoman" of the high British Empire. Bell is today best remembered for her role in building modern Iraq. But the Desert and the Sown takes place before World War I, and details her adventures in Syria. Bell was not a professional archeologist and you will need to look elsewhere for detailed scholarly studies of the places she traveled. Her usual method was to go off and visit some famous or not so famous ruin, spend a day or two there taking pictures and etching inscriptions, and then moving on. But this book is a remarkable travelogue of Syria and Palestine before World War I. She details her travels, the problems, the difficulties, who she met and what they talked about. The Turks rightly viewed her with suspicion - a child of the English ruling class, they saw her as an unofficial English agent, making contact with local tribal leaders who could be used against the Turks if war broke out. The book is a quite remarkable insight into the politics of the near East, and given the current crisis, one that should be read by all looking to figure out where to go next. My only complaint about the book is not Bell's writing, but rather the edition. The photographs would be better served on glossy paper, and better maps should be provided.

I had loved "Gertrude Bell Queen of the Desert Shaper of Nations" by Georgina Howell. Fascinating story of an incredible British woman traveling through the Middle East on her own in the early decades of the 20th century often on camel, visiting various Bedouin and other Nomadic tribes on her own as well as her life in Middle Eastern capitals. So when I saw "The Desert and the Sown: The Syrian Adventures of the Female Lawrence of Arabia" by Gertrude Bell, herself, I knew I had to read it. Great History, fascinating story, particularly insightful and pertinent in view of the where we are in the Middle East today.

Bell was one of many "arabists" who traveled throughout the Middle East near the end of the Ottoman empire. This book is really an interesting travelogue and insight into Middle Eastern culture

from the view of a privileged English woman who was viewed as curiosity by those she visited and traveled with. In a way, this is a fairly innocent view of that part of the world, but you could do worse than read this book. Much of the clannish nature of the cultures she wrote about is unchanged from her era (and indeed, from centuries before) and is worth the couple of hours it will take to read this book.

She most certainly could write, and as said, the relevance is still profound in today's world. I also enjoyed her subtle, clever British humor. Yes, I too would have appreciated a map and better quality for the pictures. Still, this book is worth every penny (and they are a modest number of pennies considering what you get in return)!

Excellent

A must read for people who want to understand the region and why it is what it is there now. If one looks close enough they will see it never changes either. I loved the book.

Of all the Westerners who decided to explore the Middle East in the last couple of centuries, none seemed to equal Gertrude Bell for her erudition as well as empathy for those who lived there. She writes with passion and wonderful descriptive powers, the subject quote being just one example. The title of the book is derived from Omar Khayyam: "The strip of herbage strown that just divides the desert from the sown." She undertook the journey described in this book in 1905, and declares her motivation in the first sentences: "To those bred under an elaborate social order few such moments of exhilaration can come as that which stands at the threshold of wild travel. The gates of the enclosed garden are thrown open, the chain at the entrance of the sanctuary is lowered, with a wary glance to right and left you step forth, and, behold! the immeasurable world." Later in the book she reports on the resonances from the native people to this sentiment: "...and when I meet the rare horseman who rides over those hills and ask him whence he comes, he will still answer: 'May the world be wide to you! from the Arabs.'" Gertrude Bell was fleeing the restrictive atmosphere of Victorian England, ironically experiencing a sense of freedom amongst societies not generally known for female emancipation. The essential factor is unquestionably being "the other," that is, NOT being a member of a given society. Bell's motivation to leave her own society and experiences in the Middle East have always resonated with my own; substitute restrictive Victorian England for the ennui of a consumer society and the sins of a colonial war, and I too found that exhilarating

sense of freedom, the ability to run "free and clear," by being the other in a society that let you roam. The book, published in 1907, contains an excellent map which outlines the author's journey. Her journey started in Jerusalem, went through Jericho, Amman, north around the Jebel Druze to Damascus, and on to Homs, Hamah, Aleppo, Antioch, and ending back on the coast, at Alexandretta. The book contains numerous black and white photos, some of the most arresting being the enormous waterwheels at Hamah, on pages 221 & 225 (this was the town that Assad "flatten," killing over 50,000 in 1982), and a tree-shaded well, the Ras UI `Ain, in the Baalbek Valley on page 187. Overall, her trip covered the area where the land of agriculture abutted the desert towards the East. All of it was part of the Ottoman Empire, in its very last days, and which would be dissolved in not much more than 10 years. One of the many relevancies for today's readers: it was Gertrude Bell who was primarily responsible for cobbling together three disparate provinces of that empire into present-day Iraq, and indeed, she has been informally dubbed "the Queen of Iraq." Her actions then are yet another verification of Faulkner's dictum: "The Past is not Dead; It is not even the Past." Of particular interest to me was her report, compliments of the amazing "desert telegraph," that relays information from mouth to mouth over hundreds of miles. And she was at least that far away, but thanks to that "telegraph" of the Shammar tribe, she was able to report on the events around Hail, where Abdul Aziz ibn Saud had just defeated Ibn Rashid, driving him back to his hometown, and restricting him to land only a few miles to the south of it. (p 44-48) Her erudition extended to the Arab poets of the "jahaliya," the time of "darkness," before the Prophet Mohammed. In particular, she quotes Imr ul Kais, who, she says: "...had seen the Pleiades caught like jewels in the net of a girdle...". She sums up her praise for these pre-Islamic poets: "Born and bred on the soil of the desert, the singers of the Age of Ignorance have left behind them a record of their race that richer and wiser nations will find hard to equal." As for the love of the land, she says: "The Arabs do not speak of desert or wilderness as we do. Why should they? To them it is neither desert nor wilderness, but a land of which they know every feature, a mother country whose smallest product has use sufficient for their needs." Overall, the book is an excellent read, both for its time and place, as well as the light it sheds on today's latest developments. Highly recommended. Note: Page numbers refer to the Virago edition.

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