

THE WOMAN WHO DREW THE BOUNDARIES OF IRAQ

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Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.
--George Santayana

I just saw for the second time the movie *Lawrence of Arabia*. In 1963 it won best picture and six other Academy Awards. It stars Peter O'Toole as Lawrence; Omar Sharif as Sherif Ali; Alec Guinness as Prince Faisal; and Anthony Quinn as Auda abu Tayi, whom Lawrence himself called the "greatest fighting man in northern Arabia."

The absence of a leading woman in this picture is certainly not because there were none to portray. On the contrary, the screenwriter ignored the remarkable Gertrude Bell, daughter of a British steel magnate, who, during many trips to the Middle East, fell in love with Arab culture.

In 1909 Lawrence and Bell met for the first time as they worked as archeologists at Carchemish. In 1915 they were back together in Cairo where they worked as intelligence agents, and they soon became avid supporters of Arab nationalism.

The movie portrays Lawrence dashing back and forth across Arabia, forging an alliance between Faisal and Auda, blowing up Turkish trains, and executing a daring capture of Aqaba, a Red Sea port. The movie could have at least had a small part for Bell, because without her maps and intimate knowledge of desert tribes Lawrence's incredible exploits would not have been possible.

Lawrence's experience was mainly with Faisal's and Auda's tribes, but Bell had befriended more sheiks and mullahs than any other European of the time. Already in 1905 she, against incredible odds, sought out and made friends the reclusive and violent Druze Christians in Syria. Her book *The Desert and the Sown* was widely praised, but many readers still could not believe that a woman could have had such experiences.

In 1916 she arrived in Basra, Iraq, where her knowledge from previous trips to that region allowed her to become the right hand woman to the British High Commissioner in Baghdad. Speaking fluent Arabic, she traveled throughout the country meeting tribal leaders—Kurds, Shias, and Sunnis—and surveying the land for future borders. The Southeast border with Kuwait was always uncertain, and Saddam Hussein capitalized on this in his fateful decision to invade that country in August, 1991.

Lawrence led the Arab armies to victory over the Turks in Damascus, where Faisal was crowned king. When the French dethroned him, Bell persuaded the British to make him King of Iraq. With all his family in Mecca, the lonely Faisal, knowing virtually nothing about his new kingdom, took Bell as his most intimate adviser, and some hailed her as the uncrowned Queen of Iraq.

Although she fervently believed in the Arab cause, she still thought that Great Britain had to play a parental role. Reflecting the biases of her day she said that "the Oriental is like a very old child." Her biographer Janet Wallach writes that Bell "had conceived Iraq and borne it as her own. She would raise it in the best of British ways; . . . nannied by British advisers; mothered by herself."

Traveling among the Arab tribes Bell was accepted as an honorary male among the sheiks and mullahs. She did not find the Arab women's lives of much interest, at least until she realized that Iraqi girls needed to be educated. Because of her efforts, Iraq developed the best educational system for girls in the Middle East.

British leaders initially rejected Bell's and Lawrence's call for Arab self-determination, because they did not want to risk losing control of the area's rich oil fields. The result was an insurgency in which tens of thousands of Iraqis and thousands of British and Indian troops died. The British finally agreed to hand over sovereignty to the people of Iraq.

Just as we were, the British were surprised by the stiff Iraqi resistance. Their search and destroy tactics were not any more successful than American efforts in Iraq today. There were heated debates back in England about the great expense and loss of life in the Iraq campaign. Against the critics, Bell argued that if the British left, there would be chaos. (Certainly without knowing of Bell's precedent, George Bush repeated her belief that Iraq would become a model country for the Middle East.) At the Cairo Conference in 1921, Sir Winston Churchill argued that troops could be withdrawn and the air force could subdue the insurgents alone. He got his way, but his policy failed just as most other air force dominated campaigns have since then.

The French experience in Syria was much more like ours in Iraq. French officials spoke no Arabic, made no Arab friends, and internal security was far worse than in British occupied Iraq. Both Bell and the British High Commissioner were fluent in Arabic, and Bell was close friends with most of the Sunni and Shiite leaders. As one journalist said of Bell: "She carries the White Man's burden without loss of feminine charms."

During his rule in Syria King Faisal enthusiastically endorsed the idea of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Most Arabs of course did not agree with Faisal and Arab resistance to a Jewish presence is of course as firm as ever. In 1920 a prominent Jew was appointed Iraqi's finance minister, and Baghdad's Jews and Christians were invited to a reception when Faisal arrived in the summer of 1921. Faisal kissed a Torah that was presented to him and declared that in his country "there is no distinction between Muslim, Christian, and Jew."

As Director of Antiquities, Bell arranged funding for an archeological museum in Baghdad. She started it with 3,000 objects, which she herself had collected. The collection grew to 170,000 antiquities from the cradle of human civilization. Bell would

have been shocked to learn that during the American invasion of 2003, the oil ministry was well guarded, but her museum was left to be looted of 15,000 items.

Out of fear of a Shiite theocracy, Bell advised the Sunni Faisal to exclude the majority Shias from government. As she said: "Final authority must be in the hands of the Sunnis, otherwise you will have a theocratic state, which is the very devil." Sunni dominated governments continued in Iraq until December, 2005, when a Shiite coalition, with close ties to theocratic Iran, won over half the seats in the new Iraqi Parliament.

As we overconfidently occupied South Vietnam in 1962, less than ten years after the French defeat there, we were both naïve and arrogant. There is almost an 80 years gap between the British in Iraq and Bush's disastrous invasion, but there was no excuse for us not to learn from the philosopher George Santayana, who famously said that "those who forget history are doomed to repeat it."

Nick Gier taught philosophy and religion at the University of Idaho for 31 years. He is heavily indebted Janet Wallach's *Desert Queen* for information about Gertrude Bell.