Gertrude Bell: An Orientalist in Context

Andréa Elizabeth Schnell

Islamic Studies

McGill University, Montréal

May, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.

Gertrude Bell in a feather hat and boa (University of Newcastle)

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-51403-0
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-51403-0

Abstract

This thesis is about the life and work of Gertrude Bell, a British woman born in the late nineteenth century, whose extensive knowledge of Middle East cultures and people won her a job as the Oriental Secretary in Iraq after World War One. Modern historians, including Toby Dodge and Edward Said, consider Bell to be an irredeemable orientalist, one whose work is only ethnocentric and essentialist. Using the work of Billie Melman and Mohja Kahf, my aim is to contextualize Bell's work, and to see if, given the various circumstances in which she worked, a more sympathetic reading is not possible, and if perhaps Said and Dodge are not sometimes guilty of essentialism. I will also examine Said's theories in *Orientalism*, and though this thesis is in no way an attempt to discredit Said's work, I wish to pose a question; if one can take a small piece of the Orientalist puzzle (Bell's work) and shows that it differs from Said's description, does this undermine the idea of orientalism as a cohesive body of ideas?

Cette thèse est à propos de la vie et de l'oeuvre de Gertrude Bell, une femme Britannique née vers la fin du dix-neuvième siècle. Bell avait une connaissance profonde des cultures et des peuples du Moyen-Orient. Cette connaissance l'a mené à au poste de Secrétaire Orientale en Irak après la première guerre mondiale. Plusieurs spécialistes de l'histoire moderne, dont Edward Said et Toby Dodge, la considèrent comme une orientaliste impardonnable, et que son travail ne contient que d'essentialisme et d'ethnocentrisme. En utilisant les théories de Mohja Kahf et Billie Melman, mon but est de mettre en contexte l'œuvre de Bell, et de voir si une compréhension plus compatissante d'elle serait possible. Je vise à voir aussi si Dodge et Said sont eux-mêmes coupables d'essentialisme dans leur traitement de Gertrude Bell. Quoique cette thèse ne

soit pas une tentative de discréditer les théories d'Edward Said, j'aimerais poser une question; si on peut montrer que l'œuvre d'une orientaliste (Bell) est différente et plus complexe que Said la décrit, qu'est-ce que cela veut dire pour la théorie de Said que l'orientalisme est un discours cohésif et fermé?

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Laila Parsons, for all her help and motivation, and to Ann Yaxley, and Kirsty McKinnon, who work in the office of Islamic Studies. Without them, this thesis would not have been possible. I want to thank my parents, Madeline and William Schnell, for their unconditional love and unwavering confidence in me. Without them, I would not be who I am today. I would like to thank Kirstin Dane for her help in editing this thesis. She was a great source of inspiration to me and my endeavours. There are several people I would like to thank simply because they were always there for me, and never stopped believing in me; Juhi Shahin, Meredith Warren, Martin Saidla and above all Sébastien Paquin. Many thanks also go to my cats, who helped enormously to relieve the stress of thesis writing.

Gertrude Bell: An Orientalist in Context

Table of Contents

Gertrude Bell, age 53 (University of Newcastle)

Gertrude Bell: An Orientalist in Context

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis will be an examination of theories set forth in Edward Said's *Orientalism* as they relate to the life and work of Gertrude Bell, an aristocratic British woman who played a key role in the administration of the British Mandate of Iraq. Said, and those who follow his work, use Bell an example of all things Orientalist, and consider her to be archetypically ethnocentric. A closer inspection of Bell's life and work, however, will demonstrate that it is complex and contradictory, containing typical orientalist assumptions of her time, while at the same time sometimes revealing moments empathy and deeper understanding of Arab people and culture. This thesis will demonstrate how these contradictions are connected to her life experiences and those she had while in "the Orient."

The first chapter provides a general outline to my thesis and provides an overview of the various sources and various critiques of Said and his work. The second chapter of the thesis will be a biography of Gertrude Bell, and will discuss the cultural and literary backdrop that influenced her conceptions of the Middle East before travelling there. The third chapter will be an examination of *The Desert and the Sown*, Bell's most famous book and one that is frequently cited as evidence of her orientalism. In addition, this third chapter will deal with how Bell used "the East" and the British Empire as a means to escape traditional life in Britain. Bell began travelling in the Middle East to escape being perceived as a spinster. She later worked in the service of the Colonial Office in the British Mandate in Iraq. In Iraq she was able to live as she pleased with out the social

pressures that accompanied a woman of her class in Britain. The fourth chapter will be an analysis of Gertrude Bell's life and work in the British Mandate of Iraq. I will analyze the work of Toby Dodge in his book *Inventing Iraq*, in which he relies heavily on the theories of *Orientalism*. I will demonstrate the contradictory nature of Bell's work and how it changed depending on circumstances she was in. I will also show how at times, even though Bell appears at first to be making an orientalist statement or judgement, a more thorough, contextualized reading shows it to be less so.

Orientalism

The publication of *Orientalism* in 1978 caused an upheaval in the way in which the West's perception of "the East" was conceptualized in the academy. *Orientalism* was a critically acclaimed work, and the theories and methodologies put forth therein revolutionized the way in which scholars studied the history of "the Orient" by "the Occident," as well as the way they viewed East-West relations. The meaning of the term "Orientalism" itself is quite varied, and came to mean different things at different times. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the word "Orientalism" was used to denote the work of Orientalists, those scholars who were well-versed in the languages and literatures of "the Orient" (those of Turkey, the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Arabia, and later also China, Japan and India) in an academic setting. With regard to the arts, it identified a style or quality particular to the East.[1] The meaning of the word remained much the same until the decolonization that took place towards the end of, and after, World War I. It then came to mean, in addition to the above definitions, a corporate institution for dealing

[1] *Orientalism: A Reader*. A.L Macfie, ed. New York: New York University Press, 2000, 1.

with the Orient, a view of Islam, and even an ideology justifying the oppression of various colonized or formally colonized peoples.

Said was one of the first scholars to identify Orientalism as a discourse that supported the colonization of "the East." [2] Broadly speaking, the book *Orientalism* contains Said's explanation of the discourse of superiority, developed in Europe, that aided the Europeans, (particularly the British and the French) and later the Americans, in colonizing and dominating the East, with special reference to the Middle East. Said posits that the first glimmerings of Orientalism arose around the time of the European Renaissance, and that this was when scholars started to become more interested in Oriental languages, literature and culture. After Napoleon's invasion of Europe, this fascination with knowledge of the Orient grew, and Europeans began to marshal their extensive knowledge when colonizing these Eastern lands.

According to Said, this vast knowledge of "the East" by "the West," without a similar store of knowledge on the part of "the East," in addition to helping to dominate "the East," began to create the idea of an essential difference between all things Eastern and all things Western. The West was, among other things, masculine and rational, while "the East" was characterized as feminine, romantic and irrational. When it became "obvious" that the Eastern countries were, by virtue of the above characteristics, unable to govern themselves, colonization and domination seemed ready solutions to the dilemma.

Academic disciplines such as history and philology aided in the classification and collection of knowledge of "the Orient," and literary genres, such as that of travel writing, helped to solidify the image of "the Orient" as exotic other and reinforced the

[2] Ibid, 2.

dichotomies previously mentioned. Said's intention in *Orientalism*, by drawing on Foucault, is to reveal these discursive underpinnings and to destabilize them, and thus to render them less powerful and authoritative. Another tactic frequently used by orientalists was to call on a civilization's glorious past. Though this was seemingly done in praise of the civilization's history, Said claims that it was also a way of showing that the contemporary culture in question was stagnant, or in a state of decline. Yet another Orientalist strategy was to state, again (according to Said) in an ostensibly positive manner, that a group or culture was living in a simpler or more pure state. Again, Said holds that this was another means of saying that this particular group or culture was stagnant and unchanging, perpetually frozen in an earlier era.

A final Orientalist tactic described by Said was to claim that a particular group or cultural entity was incapable of governing itself, and to portray the colonizing country as offering benevolent guidance and leadership. Said believes that instead of considering each country and situation in the Middle East as new and unique, many Orientalists fitted their work and research to conform to preconceived notions and cohesive theories about the Orient. The intention of *Orientalism* is to reveal these discursive underpinnings and to destabilize them, and thus to render them less powerful and authoritative

Edward Said uses examples from Gertrude Bell's work, the majority of them from *The Desert and the Sown*, to support his theories about Orientalists and the methods they used to subjugate colonized peoples. He takes passages from her writing that conform to his ideas. He particularly takes note of the instances wherein Bell mentions the glorious past of the Arabs, her discussions of tribes living in an earlier era in human history, and the examples where she seems to feel that Arab people are unable to care for themselves

and are in need British guidance. An example of Said's use of Bell is her statement in *The Desert and the Sown* that "the Oriental is like a very old child,"[3] wherein Bell describes how European and Arab society and modes of thought differ from one another.

One can indeed find all these examples in Bell's work, but Said ignores the context in, and the purpose for which they were written. Edward Said attempts to demonstrate that Bell's work is subordinated to that pre-existing and cohesive body of Orientalist ideas, but this can only be done through selective readings of her work, and is not effective when the work is considered as a whole. Said also neglects to point out the instances in which Gertrude Bell writes in what could be considered a non-Orientalist manner, or those in which she draws positive parallels between Arab and British ways of life.

Critiques of Orientalism

I will now give a brief outline of some of the principle critiques levelled at Said and his work in *Orientalism*. One of Said's principle criticisms of all forms of Orientalism is that they contributed to, and in some ways created the belief in a deep and essential difference between "Easterners" and "Westerners," and led to "the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority." [4] It is therefore interesting to note that these same criticisms of creating inaccurate and artificial dichotomies, and perpetuating an essentialist viewpoint, are among those that have been levelled at Said. Sadik al-'Azm is among those who have criticized Said for his presentation of Orientalism as monolithic and unstoppable. In his review article of Said's *Orientalism*, titled 'Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse,' published in 1981, al -

[3] Bell, Gertrude. *The Desert and the Sown*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co.. 1907, preface.
[4] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1979, 58.

'Azm, notes that Said has a tendency to "essentialize the Occident, in much the same way as he accuses the Occident of essentializing the Orient." [5]

Though no one would deny that Orientalism was and continues to be a very powerful phenomenon, al-'Azm is of the opinion that Said portrays it as being more potent than it was and is. It is in Said's representation of the link between academic Orientalism and institutional Orientalism (and what Said perceives to be the deep roots of Orientalism) that al-'Azm locates the problem, and it is to academic Orientalism that he believes Said really ascribes too much power. Said seems to be suggesting, at least from al-'Azm's perspective, that the emergence of iconic Orientalist figures such as Lord Cromer in Egypt[6] is better understood with reference to the Orientalist aspects of Homer rather than the aforementioned political and economic concerns of the day.[7] According to al-'Azm, while the accumulated body of knowledge of academic Orientalism was undoubtedly used in service of the subjugation of colonized peoples, to imply that it the was inevitable outcome of the academic Orientalist tradition, rather than something done in service of the economic and political aspects of colonialism, gives it too much weight, and reinforces the idea that Orientalist imperialism was the inescapable outcome of Western culture.

Bille Melman

Billie Melman also critiques Said for his essentialism with regard to the question of the feminine experience of colonialism and imperialism. Scholars of culture and

---

[5] al – 'Azm, Sadik. "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," in *Orientalism: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000, 217.

[6] Lord Cromer, né Evelyn Baring, was a British statesman and colonial administrator. He was the British controller in Egypt in 1879, and was consul-general there from 1883 to 1907. Bell mentions in *The Desert and the Sown* that she believed Cromer's work in Egypt helped improve the British image elsewhere in the Middle East.

[7] al-'Azm in *Orientalism: A Reader*, 220.

history tend to assume that the female experience of imperialism was subsumed by the male experience, and these same scholars often consider it to be part of a hegemonic and homogenously patriarchal tradition. In her book, *Women's Orients*, (published in 1992) Billie Melman asks whether it was possible for Western women, the "other within," to develop a unique perspective on "the other without," the foreign and or colonized peoples. Melman asks the following question: How do the politically marginalized people of a time and culture (women) perceive those that the dominant (male) culture defines as different? [8] More specifically, she asks:

> ...did gender and socio-economic differences matter more than national, religious and racial ones? Was women's experience of a modern colonialism subsumed in the newly invented tradition of an expanding empire (Hobsawm's term), or did they develop a separate feminine experience? [9]

Melman poses the question of whether gender and socio-economic differences were sometimes more significant than religious and national ones. [10] This issue is particularly relevant to the case of Gertrude Bell, because as a British woman, Bell's status as one of the ruling class was always in tension. She was British, and as such certainly part of the dominant class, but as a woman, she was always in some way a subjugated member of that class. Compared to a man of similar social standing, she was subjugated, despite her education, intelligence, and wealth. There were limitations and prejudices placed upon her because of her gender. I rely heavily on Melman's theories and work in my chapter on Said's usage of *The Desert and the Sown* to question his reading of Bell.

---

[8] Melman, Billie. *Women's Orients*. London: Macmillan, 1992.
[9] Ibid,2.
[10] Ibid.

Melman also points out that it has of late become acceptable and even fashionable to view travel as a form of domination. [11] The traveler's gaze is a symbol of the inequality between east and west,[12] and is almost always associated with the negative aspects of Orientalism. According to Melman, another aspect of travel and exploration is all but forgotten; the comparison between self and other, between cultures, that travel makes possible. [13] Travel also made it possible for Europeans to recognize the diversity of human experience, and it was through travel that Europeans became aware of the relative nature of value systems, but also of the shared aspects of the human condition. In the chapter about *The Desert and the Sown,* I will show this dimension of Gertrude Bell's work, and contrast that with the more frequently noted negative aspects.

Mohja Kahf

In *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman,* (published in 1999) Mohja Kahf criticizes Said with regard to his neglect of the important role gender plays in Orientalist discourse. She also shows how Said ignores the ways in which Western descriptions of the "Muslim woman" changed over time, thus undermining Said's presentation of Orientalism as a discourse that is fixed across time. According to Said, one of the most notable Orientalist refrains was that the colonized people were weak and unable to govern themselves, and that they were in need of European civilization and governance. [14] Since the Orient was also cast as "feminine," and therefore feeble, there was no more obvious target than the status of the "Muslim woman" in the Harem. One might then expect the discourse of the "oppressed Harem woman" to appear around the

---

[11] Melman, 9.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Melman, 10.
[14] *Orientalism*, 231.

time of European colonial ascendancy, perhaps around the time of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, an event which Said considers to be of immense importance with regard to Europe's production of knowledge about the Orient.[15] Kahf, however, notes that the image of the "oppressed" Harem woman appears in Europe before the Napoleonic invasion, and long before the heyday of European colonialism. Rather than being part of the colonial project, Kahf is of the opinion that the discourse of the "Muslim woman" in the Harem served as a foil against which European men could present the life of European women as free or liberated. For Kahf, the image of the Muslim woman was in no way fixed or unchanging, and was profoundly linked to trends in social and moral tenets in Europe.[16]

It was in eighteenth century Europe that new discourses about the ideal woman, and the preferred style of sexuality for that ideal woman arose.[17] Before this time, Kahf states that the ideal woman had been an aristocratic lady. Aristocratic woman were notably active in many ways; they engaged in various kinds of intrigue to cement and maintain familial alliances, and they were expected to be well-educated in various domains. The aristocratic woman was also expected to have an active style of sexuality, which she would perhaps use to draw in prospective husbands.

The sexuality of the new eighteenth century ideal woman, in addition to her other traits, was much more passive. She was a housewife who devoted herself entirely to her husband and family, with no time for frivolous pursuits such as music or art.[18] The "oppressed" harem woman became the polar opposite and negative foil for this woman.

---

[15] Kahf, Mohja. *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999, 113.
[16] Kahf, 2.
[17] Kahf, 115.
[18] Ibid.

She possessed all the negative traits of the aristocratic woman, such as wasting her time on frivolous pursuits and seducing men with her active sexuality. Furthermore, she was far away, making her an even more lucrative target for slander. Kahf also gives several examples of European women who travelled to the East, and used the stereotypes about Oriental life as a means of establishing themselves in literary circles. I depend on Kahf's research in my biographical chapter on Gertrude Bell, particularly in the section in which I discuss travel as a form of escape from the traditional confines of British life, and as a means of establishing a career for oneself.

Sources

In the chapter on the life of Gertrude Bell, I rely on her biography, *Desert Queen*, by Janet Wallach, for data and to give a context of the events of her life. I also use *A Quest in the Middle East*, by Liora Lukitz, for a context of the events that occurred while Bell was a colonial administrator in Iraq. *Heart-Beguiling Araby*, by Kathryn Tidrick, provides much of the context for my discussion about the sources, found in popular British culture of the time, of Gertrude Bell's preconceptions of the East. Tidrick also offers biographical data on another British woman, Lady Hester Stanhope, who used travel as a means of escape from the social norms of her era. Primary sources, which are used throughout the thesis, particularly in the chapter on *The Desert and the Sown*, include, of course, *The Desert and the Sown* (first published in 1906), The *Letters of Gertrude Bell,* and *Gertrude Bell from her Personal Papers* (collected and arranged by Elizabeth Burgoyne and published in 1958).

In the fourth and final chapter, in my discussion of Gertrude Bell and her time in the British administration of Iraq, I use Toby Dodge's *Inventing Iraq*, published in 2006.

Inventing Iraq examines the colonial administrator's preconceptions about Iraqi society, which Dodge considers to be among the chief reasons for the British failure in Iraq. As Dodge bases much of his book on Said's theories of Orientalism, (in particular, the aspects of Orientalism where the Orientalists believed that people were part of tribe, ethnic group or other entity before they were individual actors, and the idea that fitting their work to meet cohesive, pre-existing stereotypes was more important than examining a particular culture) many of the critiques of Said's work also apply to Dodge's.[19] I demonstrate this in the chapter on Bell's work as an administrator in Iraq. I contrast Dodge's examples of Bell's almost stereotypically ethnocentric behaviour and writing with examples that show her in a more sympathetic light.

My aim in this thesis is not to claim that Said is wrong, but rather to pose a question about his theory of Orientalism. If it is possible to take one of the building blocks of Said's discourse (Gertrude Bell and her oeuvre) and show it to be different and more complex than Said claims it to be, does this undermine Said's idea of Orientalism as a coherent and cohesive discourse?

[19] These would include the critiques about a lack of attention to context and a tendency to generalize about those working in the service of colonial governments.

Chapter 2: Biography of Gertrude Bell

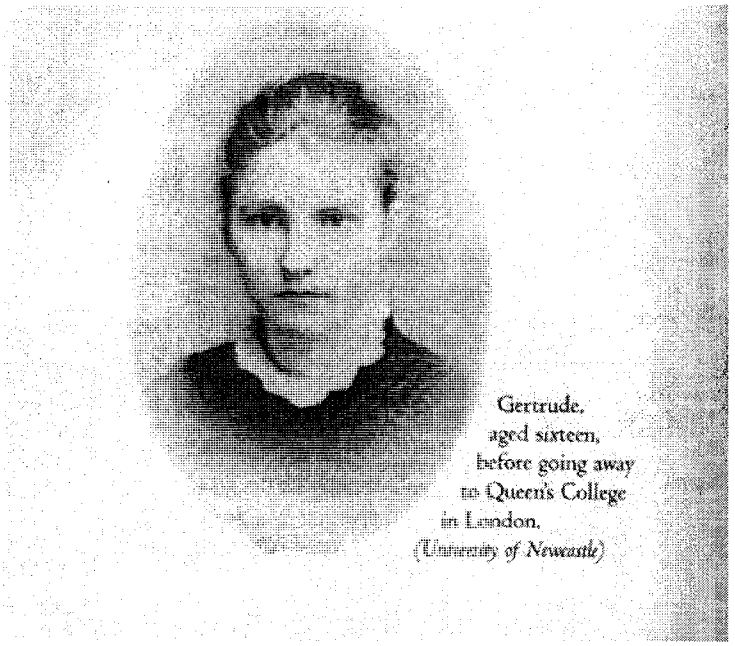
Beginnings

Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell was born into a British home that epitomized everything a prosperous colonial family was supposed to be. In 1844, her grandfather, Isaac Lowthian Bell founded, with two of his brothers, a company that became northeast England's most important ironworks. It employed nearly 50,000 people and supplied more than one third of the coal used in England. Lowthian Bell, in addition to being a shrewd industrialist, was extremely well-educated in the arts and physical sciences, and at the time it was rare for an entrepreneur to be so well-learned in so many fields. Lowthian Bell was fascinated by the world around him and his granddaughter inherited his sharp mind and inquisitive spirit.[1] Gertrude was born on July 14, 1868 to Hugh Bell (the son of Isaac Lowthian Bell) and Mary Shield Bell. She was raised in a household acutely aware of Britain's place in the world, in a family that endeavoured to maintain that place.[2]

In *Desert Queen*, Wallach notes that despite having been born into a family deeply steeped in tradition, the Bells were in many ways very progressive thinkers. At this time, no matter how much intellectual aptitude they displayed, girls of the upper classes were rarely sent to school.[3] Her mother died when she was three years old, and Gertrude Bell's father and stepmother recognized that an intellect like Gertrude's needed an outlet that could not be provided at home. In 1883, she was sent to Queen's College, a girls' school for the wealthy in London[4]. Gertrude Bell

---

[1] Wallach, Janet. *Desert Queen*. New York: Anchor Books, 2005, 7.
[2] Lukitz, Liora. *A Quest in the Middle East*. New York: I.B. Taurus, 2006, 14.
[3] Wallach, 15.
[4] Lukitz, 14.



Gertrude, aged sixteen, before going away to Queen's College in London. (University of Newcastle)

excelled at all things academic and athletic, but was lonely away from her male companions, namely her father and her brother Maurice.[5] She also chafed under the restrictions placed upon her at school. At home she did mostly as she pleased, whereas at Queen's College she was not allowed to leave the school grounds without a chaperone. In her letters home she complained of the strictures placed upon her because of her gender, saying that if she had been a boy, she could go to the museum anytime she pleased, but because she as a girl she was forbidden from seeing the pretty things there except occasionally[6]. Her fellow students were found to be lacking, according to her rigorous intellectual standards, and over the years she developed a certain scorn for many women and "feminine ideals".[7]

After Queen's College, Gertrude Bell took the radical step of enrolling at Oxford University, being one of the first women to do so. [8] While Bell was at Oxford, she lived at Lady Margaret Hall, which was presided over by a Miss Elizabeth Wordsworth, a grandniece of the poet. The primary aim of Miss Wordsworth was to see her charges married, and to ensure that no impropriety

[5] Ibid.
[6] Wallach, 16-17.
[7] Lukitz, 16.
[8] Ibid.

ensued. Women were allowed to attend lectures, but women's pursuit of higher education was at this point still considered somewhat suspect. [9] She found Oxford to be much more intellectually satisfying than Queen's College, and considered herself the mental equal of any man there. Bell relished the amount of homework given to her as a chance to prove her superior intellect. As a means of underscoring Bell's confidence in her own intellectual prowess, Wallach mentions that she never hesitated to argue with her lecturers if she felt they were in error, though this was certainly not behaviour expected of a proper young lady. She was the first woman to be awarded a "First" in Modern History. Like many well-to-do Victorians, Gertrude Bell subscribed to the social conventions of the time, but did not hesitate to circumvent them if it suited her purposes.[10] This selective adherence to tradition would become a large part of Gertrude's life, and she was often the exception that proved the rule. [11]

After graduating from Oxford, she had her first visit to Continental Europe in 1888. She stayed in Bucharest with the family of Sir Frank Lascelles, who was British envoy to the Court there. His wife, Mary, was Florence Bell's sister.[12] Bucharest was Bell's first taste of a larger world, and also her first glimpse of what she would have regarded as "the East." While there, she became interested in Constantinople, and when she visited that city with Billy Lascelles (son of Frank and Mary) she was captivated by the different lifestyle and culture that she encountered there. This visit was also her first encounter with the role of England in the world,

---

[9] Wallach, 20.
[10] Lukitz,16.
[11] Lukitz,45.
[12] Lukitz,17.

and did much to shape her world view. The family wanted her to marry Billy Lascelles, but as she would with so many others, Gertrude found him lacking in intellectual depth. When she returned from Bucharest to London, her "coming out" to British society could no longer be postponed. At her age of twenty-one, most of the girls coming out were at least three years younger then she.[13]

First Forays into" the East"

When she failed to find a husband within three of high society's seasons, travel seemed the only suitable option available to her. According to Wallach, the idea of remaining a spinster in England did not appeal to her. Frank Lascelles, husband of Mary, had just been appointed the British envoy to Shah Nasiraddin. At the age of twenty-three, having spent the winter studying Persian, she set off for Teheran. It was in Teheran, after learning Persian, that her interest in Arabic was first sparked. While there she met Friedrich Rosen, a diplomat and Oriental scholar, who encouraged her to study the language and culture. She would later visit the Rosen family in Jerusalem when she was learning Arabic.[14] She also embarked on her first romance in Teheran, with Henry Cadogan, an extremely intelligent, well-educated young diplomat. Henry Cadogan was the first person to bring her on horseback to the middle of desert, an event which had a lasting effect on her. [15]

Though she and Cadogan shared a similar upbringing and outlook on life, Cadogan was comparatively poor, and her father denied her permission to marry him. Bell was disappointed, but dutifully obeyed, thinking that her father might perhaps relent if Cadogan were given a promotion with a bigger salary. She waited

[13] Wallach, 29-31.
[14] Wallach, 33.
[15] Wallach, 57.

for a year in anticipation of this, but she then received the sad news that Cadogan had died following a brief illness. His death left her inconsolable and several years after Henry Cadogan's death, while visiting Venice with friends, Bell describes how she still misses Cadogan, and how she thinks of him often:

> In a moment St. Mark's sprang up in front of us. I confess I felt very inclined to cry. The band played and the Piazzetta was full of people, and it seemed too silly, but the whole place was full of Henry Cadogan, and too lovely not to be sad. [16]

She felt that the only thing to do was to throw herself into work and travel, even though the sense of loss remained with her for quite some time afterward [17]

Part of this work was to write an English translation of the poems of the Persian poet Hafiz, called *The Teachings of Hafiz*, which was published in 1897 when she was only twenty-nine years old. At the time of its publication, the book received critical acclaim from scholars.[18] In addition to publishing her book, she spent much of the time following Cadogan's death travelling around continental Europe. She scaled some of Europe's highest peaks, and visited friends at the British Embassy in Berlin. Eventually, despite the memories of her time there with Henry Cadogan, she decided to revisit the Orient and learn Arabic.[19] Her goal was to learn the language, as she had learnt Persian, and to better understand the region.[20]

The New Year of 1900 found Gertrude Bell back in Jerusalem, staying with the Rosen family and studying. She found Jerusalem to be "extremely interesting,

---

[16] *Gertrude Bell from her Personal Papers*, Elizabeth Burgoyne, ed. London, E. Benn, 1958, vol, 49.
[17] Wallach, 38.
[18] Lukitz, 36.
[19] Wallach, 69.
[20] Wallach, 73.

but certainly not pleasing," and wrote this in reference to the many religious buildings built one on top of the other. She also expressed her characteristic disdain for religion in general:

> Even the Abyssians have their church. *C'est le rendezvous de toutes les folies religieuses,* says someone. And they all fight the new dogs, so much so that the Turkish soldiers have to be stationed at every sacred point to prevent the Christians from throwing stones at each other. It is a comfort to be in a cheerful irreligious family again! [21]

Gertrude was much more interested in the Holy Places for their architectural and archaeological value, and though she found it very difficult and challenging, she was "wildly interested" in the Arabic language, and found the task of learning a new language the best cure for her grief at losing Cadogan. [22]

Figure 2 –Bell with Rosen family in Syria (University of Newcastle)

In the spring and early summer of 1900, she went on more excursions into the desert, several of them without the Rosen family for company. She was determined to enter the Druze territory, something viewed with great suspicion by Ottoman authorities in the region. When she reached the Druze village at Areh, in present day Israel/Palestine, she received a warm welcome

[21] *Personal Papers*, vol 1, 82.
[22] *Personal Papers*, vol.2, 82 – 83.

when she made it known that she was English, and not German (the Germans were viewed with suspicion). Gertrude immediately made friends with the Druze, and she actually managed to meet Yahya Beg, the Sheikh and leader of all Druze in the region, with whom she struck up a firm friendship. She managed not only to secure his permission to travel around Jebel Druze, in present-day Syria, but also the promise of a guide.[23] After traveling in the Druze country, she made her way to Damascus, from whence she made several more excursions into the desert, namely to examine the Roman ruins at Palmyra.

By June of 1900, she was on her way back to see her family in Yorkshire.[24] In 1902, Gertrude and her brother Hugo set off on a year-long tour around the world, during which they would most notably stop in India for the durbar of 1903, the celebration commemorating Edward the Seventh's ascension to the throne of England, and his becoming the Emperor of India.[25] Hugo was studying to become an Anglican priest, a decision of which Gertrude, an avowed atheist, heartily disapproved. She was certain that, over the course of a year, she could use her "better brain" to convince Hugo of the fallacy of his faith. [26] Hugo, was, however, determined to become a priest, and nothing she said could deter him.

While in India she met Percy Cox, who was at this time the British Consul in Muscat, and would later become the Oriental Secretary, and her immediate superior, in Iraq. During her conversation with Cox she caught up on the news from the

---

[23] Wallach, 53.
[24] Wallach, 57.
[25] *Personal Papers*, vol. 1, 137.
[26] Ibid.

Middle East, and this strengthened her resolve to travel through Central Arabia. [27] Upon returning from the world tour she was reminded of her impending spinsterhood, and in January 1905, she again traveled to "the East," for the journey about which she wrote her best known work, *The Desert and the Sown.* Her goal with this book was to inform the English of the ways of "the East," and also to put herself on the map as an author, traveler, and as a "Person of some importance." [28]

Preconceptions

Though Gertrude Bell had a great natural curiosity about the world around her, there were many cultural and literary elements that informed her preconceptions of the Middle East, many of which would have been acquired through the popular literature of the Victorian and late-Victorian era. According to Kathryn Tidrick, author of *Heart-Beguiling Araby*, four travel writers, Richard Burton, Gifford Palgrave, Wilfrid Blunt, and Charles M. Doughty, were principally responsible for the idea the British knew more than anyone else about the Orient and its people. Tidrick gives a psychological analysis regarding the men's desire to explore in and write about the desert. I am not in a position to judge the accuracy of the psychological analysis, but in addition to this, Tidrick gives a thorough background on the various contributions that each man and his made to popular British culture and imaginings of "the Orient." It is worth examining the lives and work of these men in some detail as they had a profound influence on Bell and on her construction of "the Orient."

---

[27] Wallach, 67.
[28] Wallach, 70.

Richard Burton

The first author that Tidrick examines is Richard Burton. Burton studied Arabic at Oxford, after having grown up in various places in Continental Europe. Being unfamiliar with the British education system, Tidrick is of the opinion that Burton felt very out of place and insecure in a British university, where he did not fare well. After being expelled from Oxford, he joined the Indian Army, where he learned the Hindi language, and worked as an intelligence officer, but after a work-related scandal[29] he was relieved of his position.[30]

After leaving India he obtained the support of the Royal Geographical Society to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca. In April of 1853, he left London disguised as a Persian.[31] From Cairo, Burton went by camel to Suez with two Bedouin guides, and was convinced of the honour of Bedouin life. He dismissed the heat, the language barrier and other hardships that travelers often complained of by saying these travelers either did not know the Bedouin, or had done something to provoke or offend them. He felt that only a real gentleman could earn the respect of the Bedouin.[32]

Burton continued his journey towards Mecca and Medina in a pilgrim's caravan despite suffering from a painful infection caused by a seemingly superficial wound that he had incurred earlier in the journey. He wrote of his admiration for the Bedouin way of life, seeing in it a society where the strongest and most capable

---

[29] The scandal was caused by a report that Burton wrote at the behest of his immediate superior about homosexuality in the region, and in his pursuit of information about his report he visited homosexual brothels. The report was later leaked by a colleague to the Government Office in Bombay, where it had the intended affect of ruining Burton's career in India (Tidrick, Kathryn. *Heart-Beguiling Araby* London: I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd., 1989.)

[30] Tidrick, Kathryn. *Heart-Beguiling Araby*. London: Tauris, 1989, 66.

[31] Tidrick, 68.

[32] Tidrick, 69.

obtained dominion over the rest. Burton believed that anarchy was avoided by the sheer force of personality asserted by the ruler (the sheikh) over others. One can see echoes of this view in Bell's discussion of the political opinions of the members of the tribes in Iraq. Bell feared that the tribesmen would vote en masse for a candidate or issue simply because their sheikh told them to do so, and that they could be convinced to vote for candidates that could be destructive or divisive. She wrote her stepmother that the vast majority of Iraqis "haven't any views at all,"[33] so convinced was she of the strength of the sheikhs, and their power over the people.

Tidrick also claims that Burton was one of the first authors to explicitly admire Bedouin raiding culture. For Burton, the bandit (or raider) became a "romantic rebel" against society. Though he was of the opinion that Bedouin society was somewhat crude, he liked the fact that in it physical and intellectual strength were rewarded by power. [34] He felt that in effeminate, European society, this was not the case, and Tidrick believes that he felt constricted by this. He also believed that all the aforementioned characteristics added up to Bedouin chivalry, to which he devoted much space in his writing.[35] In her writing, Bell also expresses admiration for the honesty of the raw emotions felt during, or just before, a raid. Using an orientalist technique of referring to the colonized people as belonging to an earlier stage of human development, she asserts that the emotions elicited by the raid are part of the "naked, primitive passions of mankind."[36] These and other familiar

---

[33] *Personal Papers*, vol 1, 104.
[34] Tidrick, 73.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Bell, Gertrude. *The Desert and the Sown*. London: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1907, 92. This passage concerning raiding from *The Desert and the Sown* will be analyzed in greater detail with regard to Said's *Orientalism* and the critiques of it in the third chapter.

conventions regarding Arabs, such as the idea that the urban Arab was inferior to the pure desert Arab, are often later found in the work of Bell and her contemporaries.

Gifford Palgrave

Gifford Palgrave is the second writer analyzed by Tidrick. He was born to a prominent Victorian family, to a father who had converted from Judaism to the Church of England upon marriage.[37] Like Burton before him, Palgrave attended Oxford, but left to join the army in India. Two years after this, he joined a Jesuit Order in Southern India.[38] His first missionary journey was to Syria, but he later went to Nejd, the territory of the Wahabi sect of Islam.[39]

Palgrave's account of his travels in Nejd is striking because it deviates from the others with regard to the Bedouin. British reviewers were shocked by his descriptions of the Bedouin as less than noble, and in Tidrick's view this more than anything else demonstrates the extent to which the image of the "noble Bedouin" in popular culture had become fixed and widely disseminated.[40] In contrast to the descriptions made by Burton, Palgrave described the famous Bedouin honour as a sham; he said they often led astray travelers whom they had been assigned to guide for the purpose of robbing them. Far from being pious Muslims, Palgrave claimed that the Bedouin were irreligious, and claimed that the absence of national and religious affiliation made them more likely to be ruthless and bloodthirsty, and this

[37] Tidrick, 85.
[38] Tidrick, 86 – 87.
[39] Tidrick, 89.
[40] Tidrick, 96.

same lack prevented them from having any honour. He was of the opinion that rather than being truest, purest Arabs the Bedouin were a degenerate branch of the tree.[41]

Palgrave also believed strongly in the idea of a civilizing mission; the idea that imperial countries should impart their way of life and government to the colonies (and that the colonies should accept foreign rule). He felt the Bedouin to be completely at odds with his definition of civilization.[42] Though this view was not espoused by Bell, it was held by some of her contemporaries, including Arnold (A.T.) Wilson, her supervisor when she first began work in Iraq. Wilson had an aversion to the Bedouin mostly because of what he perceived as their savage behaviour during the First World War, and because he felt, like Palgrave, that they were the antithesis of civilization.[43] Wilson's absolute unwillingness to make any concessions to Arab nationalists in Iraq led in part to the violent revolt of 1920.[44]

Wilfrid Scawen Blunt

It is Tidrick's opinion that of the four writers profiled in *Heart-Beguiling Araby,* Blunt was most captivated by the Bedouin.[45] Blunt was familiar with the Middle East in general. Before traveling to Mesopotamia with his wife, the scholarly Lady Anne Blunt, they had visited Turkey, Algeria, Egypt and Syria, but the trip to Mesopotamia was their first venture off the beaten path, and also their first encounter with the Bedouin.[46] Both Blunt and his wife were enchanted by the Bedouin, and it was about this journey that they wrote *Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates.* In the

---

[41] Tidrick, 97.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Dodge, Toby. *Inventing Iraq.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 16.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Tidrick, 120.
[46] Tidrick, 107.

Shammar Bedouin Blunt found all the noble virtues previously described by others, and he never wavered from this description. It was also on this trip that Blunt came to be of the opinion that his destiny was linked to that of the Arabs.[47]

Blunt became enamored of the Bedouin political system, admiring its freedom from bureaucracy, and also the freedom the tribesmen maintained within it. Of course they had to cede some authority to the tribe, but believed they could withdraw this authority if they did not approve of tribes actions. While Blunt described the Bedouin political system as a democracy, Tidrick believes that Blunt was actually describing an aristocracy, wherein those of noble blood or origins were in charge of others. The Bedouin, according to Blunt, who became sheikhs were almost all of noble birth and manners. They were kind and respectful towards their inferiors, and did not engage in vulgar displays of power. Blunt's conception of the sheikhs' relationships with the tribesmen was one of noblesse oblige; the idea that the aristocracy has an obligation to care for those of a lower social station.[48]

This was also how Blunt viewed Britain's relations with the rest of the world, that because of Britain's noble position in the world, it had an obligation to aid the less fortunate peoples of the world to develop. [49] When he and Lady Anne visited the Nejd, he felt he was seeing the truest and fullest example of Bedouin government because they were farthest from Ottoman dominion.[50]

Blunt believed that Britain could help return the Arabs to their former glory by helping them throw off the yoke of Ottoman rule. He wanted to set off an Arab

---

[47] Tidrick, 118.
[48] Tidrick, 124 – 125.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Tidrick, 123.

regeneration by helping them to restore the Caliphate back to Mecca.[51] Blunt felt that with an Arab caliph, Arab genius would flower again and Islam would renew itself. He believed that the British were set apart from other Europeans by their tolerance of Islam, and that the Muslims realized this and naturally sought out the British as their protector and advisor. Blunt had a great deal of respect for Islam and even toyed with the idea of becoming a Muslim. The idea of restoring the Caliphate was rejected out of hand by the Foreign Office, but it was an idea whose time had not yet come. Thirty-fve years later, when the British were looking for ways to defeat the Turks in World War One, they happened upon the idea of sponsoring an Arab Revolt. They proposed a deal to the Sheriff of Mecca; in return for his help in a revolt against the Turks they would support his claim to the caliphate and guarantee independence after the war.[52]

Charles M. Doughty

Tidrick considers there to be two constants in Doughty's life; a profession of the Christian faith and an active devotion to Britain.[53] He did not set out to penetrate Central Arabia, but rather originally went there to visit ruins at Madain Salih[54] that had not previously been explored by Europeans. After he finished copying the inscriptions, his mission in Arabia was finished, but he decided to explore the desert and live with the nomads.[55] For a year and a half, until he reached Jedda, Doughty lived with the Bedouin, and did not attempt to deny his identity as a Christian and an Englishman, and endured many trials (verbal and sometimes physical abuse, reluctance on the part

---

[51] Tidrick, 125.
[52] Tidrick, 126.
[53] Tidrick, 136.
[54] Madain Salih is an ancient city similar to Petra found in the Northern Hejaz of Arabia that had been inhabited by Nabateans and Thamudis.
[55] Tidrick, 138.

of the Bedouin to share their food with him) because of it. Despite the hardships of desert life, Doughty developed a strong appreciation for the Bedouin, for their charity towards the poor (many times he was forced to throw himself at the mercy of their hospitality, and he always managed to survive) and of course, for the purity of their speech.[56]

According to Tidrick, Doughty disliked Victorian life, and *Arabia Deserta* was his attempt to show people back in England that there was something else out there.[57] Though he thoroughly disliked the religion of Islam, feeling it to be inferior to Christianity, he respected the Bedouin. He lived with them for a year and a half in very intimate conditions. Of all the men profiled in the book, Doughty came to know Bedouin life the best.[58]

Victorian Arabism and Gertrude Bell

The works of these Victorian men and others like them contributed to the stereotypes that developed about the Arab people – that the Bedouin were renowned for their hospitality, that they were liars and untrustworthy, for example – but it was not, according to Tidrick, the individual stereotypes that mattered, but rather their cumulative effect. All the stereotypes and ideas and books about the Arab people served to build the idea that the British, more than anyone else, were capable of understanding the Arabs. It did not very much matter what the stereotypes and books said, but rather the fact that they strengthened the popular perception that the Arabs were intelligible to the British.[59]

---

[56] Tidrick, 153.
[57] Tidrick, 141.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Tidrick, 208.

In Bell's work, one can mainly see references to Blunt and Doughty. She was personally acquainted with the Blunts, and throughout her travels, frequently visited them, discussing Arabia and the Arabs. Lady Anne Blunt, interestingly, was one of the few women that Bell felt to be on her intellectual level.[60] Though she had no interest in reviving Islam, (an avowed atheist, she disdained Islam the way she did all religions) she was involved in military intelligence about the Arab Revolt, and supported the idea of Arab states that were loyal to the British..

Though Bell does not mention Palgrave or Burton, she was undoubtedly familiar with them, and she great had a great deal more to do with Blunt, and particularly with Doughty. Bell greatly admired from Doughty's work, and drew a grew deal of inspiration from it. She felt that both she and Doughty had been similarly inspired by the solitary, poetic nature of the desert. [61] She kept her copy of *Arabia Deserta* with her wherever she went, and she based her journey through the Nejd on Doughty's travels in the region.[62] Bell corresponded with Doughty through his nephew, Richard "Dick" Doughty-Wylie, with whom she had an ill-fated love affair.[63] She admired the way Doughty was able to fully live among the Bedouin for such a long time, and this was something that she very much wished to do. At one point in her *Personal Papers*, she writes her friend Valentine Chirol lamenting the curse of her gender, which prevented her from living among the Bedouin the way Doughty had.[64]

Bell was not the only British traveller and orientalist to be inspired by these Victorian Arabists. Bell first met Thomas Edward Lawrence, better known as

---

[60] *Personal Papers*, vol. 2, 30.
[61] *Personal Papers*, vol. 1, 27.
[62] *Personal Papers*, vol. 1, 48.
[63] Wallach, 63.
[64] *Personal Papers*, vol. 1, 296. This letter is discused at greater length in the third chapter.

Lawrence of Arabia, when she was in Mesopotamia on an archaeological dig in 1911. On one of her first encounters with the young man (he was nearly twenty years her junior) she chided him for his sloppy excavating techniques, and proceeded to show him the correct way. [65] Lawrence was deeply influenced by Wilfred Scawen Blunt and his work. Lawrence felt, as had Blunt, that the Arab who would rise up and unite the Arab world must come from the Sherifian family of Mecca. This family, despite having had a great deal of contact with Turkish officials, retained traditional dress, manners, and outlook, and were what Lawrence and Blunt considered to be "truly Arab." He did not particularly care about the Caliphate, but believed that if it were revived in Mecca, under the care of the family of the Sherif, it would lead to a general revival of Arab culture throughout the region [66]

Because of his background in archaeology, Lawrence already had fairly extensive knowledge of the Levant, Syria, and Mesopotamia, and it was because of this knowledge that he was sent to Cairo to work in military intelligence. During the First World War, he fought with Arab troops under the command of the Emir Faisal, coordinating guerilla attacks against the armed forces of the Ottoman Empire.[67] Like Bell, and the four aforementioned Victorian Arabists before her, Lawrence believed that his destiny was inextricably linked with that of the Arab people, and also like them, he felt that only the British could lead the Arabs to realize their full potential.

Like most people, Bell's personal life and experiences affected her work, and this is something that I have endeavored to demonstrate throughout this thesis. The looming prospect of spinsterhood in England, which in no way appealed to her, led her

---

[65] Wallach, 93.
[66] Tidrick, 174.
[67] Tidrick, 175 – 176.

to travel throughout the Middle East, and it was her writing about these travels, including *The Desert and the Sown*, that led to her career in the British Mandate of Iraq. Her desire to overcome the limitations of her gender, and often to behave in a typically male fashion, led her to have a sympathetic rapport with desert peoples, who did not shun her because she was too masculine or feminine, but rather accepted her as she was. Bell's work and life are further discussed throughout the second and third chapters.

Chapter 3: *The Desert and the Sown*

The Desert and the Sown, a memoir of her travels throughout the Syrian Desert, became Gertrude Bell's most recognizable work. It is alternately one of her most lauded and most heavily criticized works. In it, one finds both stereotypically ethnocentric comments on the superiority of British ways, and sensitive insights into shared aspects of English and Arab life. Billie Melman's theories about women and the Orient are a good place from which to begin analysis. Melman critiques those who study the history of colonialism and Orientalism for relegating women to the sidelines of imperialist culture, and automatically assuming that women's experiences of the Orient were subsumed in a "hegemonic and homogenously patriarchal tradition".[1] As I mentioned in the introduction, Melman is interested in the perspectives of women ("the other within") on the colonized peoples of the East ("the other without"), and wonders what insight there is to be found in how politically and economically marginalized groups within a dominant culture perceive those that the dominant culture defines as different.[2] Melman encourages the reader to question whether or not gender and socio-economic differences mattered more than those of race, nationality and religion.[3] It is this question that is particularly relevant to the case of Gertrude Bell, because as a British woman, Bell's status as a member of the dominant or marginalized culture was always in tension.

---

[1] Melman, Billie. *Women's Orients*. London: Macmillian, 1992, 1.
[2] Melman, 2.
[3] Ibid.

Edward Said on Gertrude Bell

Edward Said felt that Gertrude Bell always belonged to the dominant group, and that she always spoke "for" the "Eastern" people, never allowing them a voice of their own, and he often uses her and her work as an example of all the negative aspects of Orientalism. Melman believes that Said and others like him who criticise Orientalists for ethnocentric statements and vague generalizations about those who they studied or administered are often guilty of the very thing for which they condemn others. Said considers Bell to be an archetypal Orientalist. He states that in her work, Bell subordinates all of her writing about the Arabs people to a generally acknowledged body of knowledge about "Oriental" people in general. Speaking of Bell and her fellow Orientalists, and how they constantly worked to define their subjects, so as to make ruling them, "keeping them at bay,"[4] an easier task, Said says:

> Such ideas and their authors emerge out of complex historical and cultural circumstances, at least two of which have much in common with the history of Orientalism in the nineteenth century. One of them is the culturally sanctioned habit of deploying large generalizations by which reality is divided into various collectives: languages, races, types, colours, mentalities, each category being not so much a neutral designation as an evaluative interpretation. Underlying these categories is the rigidly binomial opposition of "ours" and "theirs"...What gave writers...the right generalities about race was the official character of their formed cultural literacy. "Our" values were (let us say) liberal, humane, correct "we" shared in them every time their virtues were extolled.[5]

---

[4] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, 226.
[5] Said, 227.

Also:

> Only an Occidental could speak for Orientals...every statement made by Orientalists conveyed a sense of the irreducible distance of Occidental from Oriental; moreover, behind each statement there resonated the tradition of experience, learning, and education that kept the Oriental-colored to his position object studied by the Occidental-white, instead of vice versa. Where one was in a position of power – as Cromer was, for example – the Oriental belonged to the system of rule whose principle was simply to make sure that no Oriental was ever allowed to be independent and rule himself...he felt it incumbent upon him to readily to define and redefine the domain he surveyed. Passages of narrative description regularly alternate with passages of re-articulated definition and judgement...[6]

To illustrate his point about Bell, and Orientalists in general, Said quotes a passage from *The Desert and the Sown*, and another from Gertrude Bell's *Personal Papers*. In this first passage from *The Desert and the Sown*, cited by Said in *Orientalism*, Bell is describing the Arabs raiding culture and how, despite its destructive nature, the Arabs have done nothing (she believes) to try change it or end it:

> How many thousands of years this state of things has lasted, those who shall read the earliest records of the inner desert will tell us, for it goes back to the first of them, but in all the centuries the Arab has bought no wisdom from experience. He is never safe, and yet he behaves as though security were his daily bread. [7]

---

[6] Said, 228.
[7] Bell, Gertrude. *The Desert and the Sown.* New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1907, 66.

In this second passage, from a letter published in *Gertrude Bell from her Personal Papers*, also cited in *Orientalism*, Bell is discussing how she "knows the East," and how her journey there has been made easier and more pleasant by British politicians and military campaigns elsewhere:

> I believe that my being English is a great help...We have gone up in the world since five years ago. The difference is very marked. I think it is due to the success of our government in Egypt to a great extent...and my impression is that the vigorous policy of Lord Curzon in the Persian Gulf and on the Indian frontier stands for a great deal more. No one who does not know the East can realize how it all hangs together. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that if the English mission had been turned back from the gates of Kabul, the English tourist would be frowned upon in the streets of Damascus. [8]

These examples illustrate Said's point very well. In them, Bell is ethnocentric and condescending towards those she is traveling amongst (the Arabs). She also relies on the idea that one can essentially "know" an Arab, and Arab culture in general, and makes sweeping generalizations, wiping out the possibility of the Arab acting as an individual rather than as a type and reinforcing the idea that Orientalists saw these people as "Arabs" first, and people second. Bell also draws on the typically Orientalist idea that the inhabitants of the Orient are frozen in time, in a pure and perpetually primitive state, meaning that they are unable to progress in any way, shape or form.[9] At first glance, the above analysis seems to be correct, and while it is not entirely wrong, it does not take into account all the factors in play.

---

[8] *Gertrude Bell from her Personal Papers*, vol. 1. Elizabeth Burgoyne, ed. London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1958, 204.

[9] Said, 30.

Gertrude Bell's Writing in Context

There can be no argument that the last part of the former passage, from *The Desert and the Sown*, where Bell talks about how the Arab has learnt nothing from centuries of existence, is both ethnocentric and condescending, and an example of everything Said holds to be true about Orientalists, but Said does not put the passage into context. Several sentences earlier, Bell describes a scene in which she sees an old man weeping because he has lost all his earthly possessions due to a raid, and then discusses with her guide the complexities of the rules governing the raid. Bell also notes that because of the complex nature of the raiding culture, the fortunes of those living it in can be extremely varied.[10] Although this is an Orientalist statement, Bell's intention seems not to be to deride the Arabs, but rather to express her surprise at their ability to live with the constant threat of raiding. In addition, when *The Desert and the Sown* was written, Bell was not yet a colonial administrator, and so Said's point about defining and redefining the subjects "under her control" is not really valid here.

The latter passage, from *Gertrude Bell from her Personal Papers*, is from a letter Bell wrote to her family in England while she was traveling through Syria and writing *The Desert and the Sown*. In it she describes how she is learning about the people, politics and culture of Damascus, and how she has met people from many different walks of life there.[11] "No one who does not know the East can realize how it all hangs together," is indeed a very orientalist statement, giving the idea that someone can essentially know all things Eastern. However, Said again does not give the context of the paragraph. In the letter to her parents, Bell discusses the complexity of life in

[10] Bell, 65
[11] *Personal Papers*, vol. 1, 203.

Damascus, and the various roles played by politicians and people there. She also describes the rivalries between various tribes and ethnic groups in the area, and the position of the government with regard to these groups:

> The Druze are always at odds with the Arabs, except the Ghiāth and the Jebeliyyeh...on the other hand, the government was at war with the Ghiāth by reason of their having robbed the Baghdad mail...[12]

The phrasing is again typically Orientalist, and I will not claim that there is no Orientalist sentiment behind it, but the intent behind the passage seems to be to explain the intricacy of life in Damascus, and to say that it would be difficult to understand if one was not familiar with the area and its citizens, not to reduce the denizens of the East to a simple explanation. Her assertion that being English "was a great help," seems to be her perception that the people of Damascus respond well when she discloses her nationality. Since she had visited the region five years earlier, she had a legitimate basis for saying that the general public viewed the English in a more positive light than it had previously done.

Gertrude Bell made many statements about the people of the Middle East. Some were unabashedly ethnocentric, but others showed insight into, and even empathy with, Arab culture. She draws parallels between Arab and British ways of life, and occasionally notes the fallacies of common perceptions held by Europeans about Middle Easterners. In this passage, Bell has just arrived in Damascus. She has gone to meet the Vali of Damascus, who she learns she has agitated by visiting the Jebel Druze. She discusses the problems of the Turkish government in Syria, and how the land

---

[12] *Personal Papers*, vol. 1, 203.

administered by the Turks frequently contains very few Turks, and holds many other ethnic and cultural groups:

> We in Europe, who speak of Turkey as though it were a homogenous empire, might as well when we speak of England intend the word include to India, the Shan States, Hong Kong and Uganda. In the sense of a land inhabited mainly by Turks there is not such a country as Turkey. [13]

In this passage Bell recognizes that some generalizations held about the Middle East are incorrect and extremely vague. In addition this recognition, she draws a parallel between these generalizations and an equivalent generalization that could be made about a group of people in Europe. This passage indicates that Bell had an awareness of the disparity between European perceptions of people in the Middle East and their reality. In other passages, she makes similar observations While she was travelling through the Levant, she notes that the foreign designation of "Syria" to the region corresponded in no way to the sentiments espoused by its inhabitants. [14]

At times, Bell seems, contrary to Said's statements about her work, not to try to speak for the Arabs, but rather to attempt to tell the story of her uniques experiences in the Middle East. Bell writes of the sights in Damascus, the churches, castles and minarets, but only after she has described her experiences with the people of the city. "This is what I know Damascus; as for the churches and the castles, the gentry can see those for themselves."[15] Throughout this chapter on Damascus, Bell has discussed not monuments or buildings, or other sites of interest to the tourist, but rather the people she has met, and the local customs she has observed. In this quote she indicates that she

---

[13] Bell,145.
[14] Bell, 228.
[15] Bell, 158.

feels her individual experiences are more relevant to her than famous monuments throughout the region, indicating that at least in this instance, she is not subordinating her writing to a cohesive body of ideas.

Billie Melman's Theories Applied to the Work of Gertrude Bell

Billie Melman encourages the reader to question whether or not gender and socio-economic differences mattered more than those of race, nationality and religion,[16] and it is this question that is particularly relevant to the case of Bell. [17] As a British woman, Bell's status as a member of the dominant or marginalized culture was always in tension. It has recently become acceptable and even fashionable to view travel and travel writing as forms of domination. The western traveler's gaze and explorer's eye is sometimes a symbol of the unequal relations between the east and the west. This view of travel means that another aspect of it has been put aside. The comparison between self and other, between societies and between cultures that travels makes possible, and also the broadening of Europe's horizons that allowed European's to realize and recognize the diversity of human experience, relative nature of value systems, morals, and of human organization is not taken into account.[18]

While Gertrude Bell's gaze certainly played the former role at times, it also played the latter fairly frequently. On more than one occasion in *The Desert and the Sown*, Bell is able to make comparisons between British and Arab life. While visiting with the Kaimakan (the ruler) of an old Crusader castle, the man decides that he will recite a poem he has written for her. The Kaimakan has just lost his son, and his poem is full of emotion. Though she considers the poem to be somewhat poorly written, Bell

[16] Melman, 2.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Melman, 9.

empathizes with the man, and compliments him in a believable manner, much as she would do in a similar situation in London:

> I offered him sympathy and praise at suitable points and could have laughed to find myself talking the same agreeable rubbish in Arabic that we all talk so often in English. I might have been sitting in a London drawing-room instead of between the bare walls of a Crusader tower, and the world is after all made of the one stuff throughout.[19]

Throughout *The Desert and the Sown*, Gertrude Bell vacillates between ethnocentric statements and insightful comments about the lifestyles and cultures of the Middle East. In the book, she frequently discusses the Bedouin, the nomadic desert tribesmen. Although she frequently uses this term, which is a western designation, she explains that the term Bedouin does not exist for the nomadic Arab, meaning that she understands that various cultures are understood differently by insiders and outsiders. She also mentions specifically how Bedouins refer to their living quarters, and how this differs from the Western conception of a house:

> In the desert there are no Bedouin, the tent dwellers are all *'Arab* (with a fine roll of the initial guttural), just as there are no tents but houses – "houses of hair" they say sometimes if a qualification be needed, but usually just "houses" with a supreme disregard for any other significance to the word save that of a black goat's hair.[20]

She then discusses the various Bedouin tribes and gives an astute analysis of their positions and rivalries. Her analysis relies on information given to her by local people,

---

[19] Bell, 209.
[20] Bell, 23.

not Western authority.[21] In this instance, Bell puts aside ethnocentric assumptions and relies on "Oriental" authority and observation. Depending upon the subject or situation she is writing about, she can sometimes prove Said's assumptions wrong.

All of this is not to say that Gertrude Bell did not sometimes espouse an unadulterated ethnocentrism. Her writing often falls into the trap of making generalizations about the character of a group of people. In these instances she considers, as Said notes, Arabs to be Arabs first, and human beings second.[22] On her way to visit the Druze, she encounters the Arabs who live at the foot of the Hauran Mountains, and makes a sweeping statement about them and their way of life.

> The Arabs who live at the foot of Hauran mountains are called the Jebeliyyeh, the Arabs of the Hills, and they are of no consideration, being but servants and shepherds to the Druze.[23]

In the above passage, an entire group of people is dismissed in a sentence. Bell takes no time to describe their way of life, nor does she inquire as to why to they live this way. They fall under the designation of "the Arabs of the Hills," and individuals among them are of no consequence except in so far as they serve the Druze who live in the mountains.

Bell is also unable to escape the Orientalist pitfall of referring to the Arabs as being permanently frozen in an earlier era, and unable to achieve any kind of "progress":

> ...their wisdom is that of men whose channels of information and standards for comparison are different from ours, and who bring a different set of preconceptions to bear upon the problems laid before them. The Oriental is like a

---

[21] Bell, 24.
[22] Said, 30.
[23] Bell,75.

> very old child. He is unacquainted with many branches of knowledge which we have come to regard as of elementary necessity; frequently, but not always, his mind is little preoccupied with the need of acquiring them, and he concerns himself scarcely at all with what we call practical utility. He is not practical in our acceptation of the word, and more than a child is practical, and his utility is not ours. On the other hand, his action is guided by traditions of conduct and morality that go back to the beginnings of civilization, traditions unmodified as yet by any important change in the manner of life to which they apply and out of which they arose.[24]

In this passage, Bell uses several typically Orientalist techniques. First of all, she describes the Arabs as uninterested in progress, an argument that easily lead into a discussion of the need for British colonial officials to care for and govern the Arabs, as they seem, from this description, to be unable to govern themselves. Bell also indicates here that the Arabs are uninterested in any sort of development, and ignores the fact that the people in the region may view progress differently than would an aristocratic British woman. Lastly, Bell classifies the Arabs as "living fossils," a more primitive type of human than still continued to live in modernity, saying that their lifestyle had remained unchanged throughout the thousands of years they have existed.

An "Honorary Man"

. It is as an "honorary man" that Gertrude Bell most likely wanted to be remembered. She was first given this designation while staying at a Druze camp, and took great pride in it.[25] She considered herself to be the equal of any man, and the majority of her of her

---

[24] Bell, preface to *The Desert and the Sown.*
[25] Wallach,74.

closest confidants (Valentine Chirol and her father Hugh, for example) were male. It was also among the Arabs, as an "honorary man," that Bell felt the most comfortable. According to Wallach, most of her male colleagues shunned her because she was a woman and their wives were suspicious of her because they thought her too masculine[26] . Bell did many things to bolster her image as an honorary man. When she traveled among the Arab tribes, she showed little to no interest in the women's activities. To her, the Harem was merely a place to be observed and photographed, but not one that she considered herself to in any way belong to.[27]

From the time she was a young girl, she had almost exclusively preferred the company of men. While at Queen's College, she wrote letters home complaining about how the other girls did not match up to her intellectual standard. [28] Later, while staying with her father wile he recovered from an illness, she is known to have considered the male visitors mostly interesting, but found the women to be "dullish." [29] Regarding issues such as women's rights and suffrage, Bell felt herself to be the exception rather than the rule. She believed that most women were capable of dealing only with family and household issues, and not at all up to the challenge of evaluating and electing political candidates. She was an active member of the Anti-Suffrage League.[30] As much as Bell may have wanted to avoid being associated with all things female, she was unable (or perhaps unwilling) to always suppress her anger and disappointment at the opportunities denied her, as is evinced in an excerpt from a letter to her long-time friend Valentine (Domnul) Chirol:

---

[26] Wallach, 232.
[27] Wallach, 74.
[28] Wallach, 17.
[29] *Personal Papers*, vol. 2, 142.
[30] Wallach, 83.

> February, 16th. I am suffering from a severe fit of depression today – will it be any good if I put it into words, or shall I be more depressed than ever afterwards? The depression springs from a profound doubt as to whether the adventure is, after all, worth the candle. Not because of the danger – I don't mind that; but I am beginning to wonder what profit I shall get out of it all.... It's nothing, the journey to the Nejd, so far as any real advantage goes, or any real addition to knowledge, but I am beginning to see pretty clearly that it is all that I can do. There are two ways of profitable travel in Arabia. On is the *Arabia Deserta* way, to live among the people, and to live like them, as Doughty did...It's clear *I* can't take that way; the fact of my being a woman bars me from it.[31] .

The resentment that she felt because of gender inequality, no matter how strong it may have been, remained personal, and was not enough for her to identify with the cause of women's rights.

Despite Bell's preferences, and her life-long efforts, she could not entirely overcome the limitations that society placed on her gender. This greatly influenced her work and the discussion of Arab people in it, a fact that is ignored in Said's treatment of Gertrude Bell and her work. Melman feels that Said tends to treat Bell and other successful female Orientalists as what she calls "emergency men."[32] Melman states,

> The imperialist experience and tradition are presented as androcentric. In Edward Said's script of the exchange between the West and the East, the occidental

---

[31] *Personal Papers*, vol. 1, 296.
[32] Melman, 5.

> interpretation of the Orient is a symbolic act of appropriation from which Western women are excluded.[33]

Bell's gender, and her desire to overcome the limitations placed upon her gender, is not taken into consideration when Said analyzes Bell and her work. At times, her gender allowed her a certain insight into how others could be misunderstood and misrepresented. At the very least, it allowed her a genuine affection and appreciation for the people in the Middle East, which was where, because of the constant alienation she felt from British society generally, she felt the most at home[34]. In other instances, her desire to "overcome" her gender seems to have led to become an arch-imperialist, perhaps as a means to proving that she really belonged to that group of men.

While staying with the same Druze who referred to her as an honorary man, Bell learned of a Druze raid against the Sukhur, a rival tribe. She asked to sit at the campfire with the war party, and was given permission to do so. She became swept up in the fervour of war preparations, and she recounts in *The Desert and the Sown* that one young man, upon noticing her presence, raised his sword above his head and shouted, "Lady! The English and the Druze are one!" to which Bell responded, "Thank God! We too are a fighting race!" [35] Bell is just about to leave with them and go on the raid when realizes that if the Ottoman authorities somehow found out about her participation in a raid, it could seriously compromise her future travel plans. With this letdown, she sadly writes,

> The fire had burnt out on the castle walls, the night struck suddenly cold, and I began to doubt whether if Milhem and the Vali of Damascus could see me taking part in a demonstration against the Sukhur they would believe the innocence of

---

[33] Ibid.
[34] Wallach, 150.
[35] Bell, 92.

> my journey; so I turned away into the shadow and ran down to my tents and became a European again, bent on peaceful pursuits and unacquainted with the naked primitive passions of mankind.[36]

Here, perhaps as a means to underscore her disappointment at being unable to participate in this part of masculine desert life, Bell uses ethnocentric and Orientalist writing techniques. Despite what she says earlier about the English being similar to the Druze as a fighting race, she here sets up a barrier between European and Oriental, between cultivated and uncivilized. After declining to participate in the raid, she reverts into being "a European," who she considers to be divorced from humanity's more primal emotions. Though she was moments earlier eagerly prepared to participate in the fighting, she is now entirely separated from the Druze, who are, to her, permanently frozen in an earlier stage of human development. Said's statements about and observations of Bell are in no way incorrect, but rather they are somewhat incomplete. He fails to take into account various factors in Bell's life affecting her work, and the fact that she espoused different positions in the different circumstances about which she was writing. In the above passage, for example, one must take into account Bell's severe disappointment at being unable to go with the others on the raid, a disappointment related to the fact that she was a woman.

There is more going on here than first meets the eye. When Bell says she "became a European again," perhaps what she really means is that she became a European woman again. Traveling among the Arabs, in the desert, Bell was able to live as an honorary man. She was able, up until this point, mostly able to live without the restrictions of gender placed upon her as they would have been in Britain. She is, right before the raid,

---

[36] Ibid.

almost at the point of experiencing complete freedom as an "honorary man," and is ready to act as one, until she remembers the limits of her nationality, but mostly, of her gender.

Travel As Escape

Gertrude Bell never stopped promoting the righteousness of the British Empire, and she parlayed that promotion of the Empire, combined with her knowledge of the region, into a career with the Colonial Office in the Mandate of Iraq. Though it seems obvious that Bell had a genuine interest in Middle Eastern people and culture, her work and travel in the Middle East served another purpose. Despite her endless endorsement of Britain and its ways of life, British life did not suit Gertrude Bell particularly well. In many ways, she was a woman ahead of her time. In spite of her disapproval of the women's suffrage movement, she possessed many of the qualities espoused by the movement. She was independent, intelligent, and had a career of her own. In Wallach's view, her independence, exuberance and curiosity prevented her from "settling" for marrying the men who proposed to her Britain.[37] In addition, her romances with Henry Cadogan when she was in her twenties, and with Richard Doughty-Wylie, Charles Doughty's (author of *Arabia Deserta*) nephew, when she was older, both ended in heartbreak. The prospect of becoming a spinster in England, where she believed she would be mocked and pitied, was not appealing to her. She felt most at ease when she felt she could behave like a man, or perhaps more accurately, like an honorary man. In Iraq, in the Middle East generally, Bell felt largely free from most of the judging eyes of British aristocratic society.

---

[37] Wallach, 31.

Acceptance

Some of her colleagues found her to be suspect because of her gender, but the local Arabs, she felt, accepted her as she was. They seemed not to be bothered by fact that she was a woman working in a typically male position. In the Middle East, she was free to promote Britain, while at the same time distancing herself from all the aspects of it that she found unpleasant. She used the Empire, and travel throughout it, to get away from the confines of life in Great Britain, to avoid becoming, and being considered an old maid. Although Bell was a unique woman who had what was in many ways a ground-breaking career, she was not the first British woman to use travel as a means to an escape or a career.

Other Women Who "Escaped" to "the Orient"

As I stated in the introduction, Mohja Kahf critiques Edward Said for the fact that he characterizes the phenomenon of Orientalism as being fixed and unchanging over time. Kahf claims that the image of the Eastern (Middle Eastern) woman was mutable and changed according to social and political currents in Europe. The portrayal of "the Oriental" woman seems always to have been one of debasement, but this debasement was not of a uniform sort. Her image as secluded, cowed and controlled by a man emerged in Europe when Europe began colonizing "the Orient" in the nineteenth century, when colonialism was reaching its heyday.[38] Before that the Muslim women was, in fact, reviled for being too "liberated." As I mentioned in the introduction, in the eighteenth century, many changes occurred in the European (and British) social and familial

[38] Kahf, 115 -116.

structures. The image of the ideal woman also changed. Prior to this time, this ideal had been one of an aristocratic lady, and aristocratic ladies were notably active, sexually and otherwise.[39]

The eighteenth century witnessed the publication of a great number of books on a new ideal woman, one who was more domestic. The earlier aristocratic ideal woman was, as I stated earlier, notably active in most aspects. She was expected to exchange in various kinds of intrigue in order to cement familial, or perhaps even royal, alliances. To attract the attention of suitable young men, she was expected to be proficient in various arts; including music, art, and conversation.[40] If a marriage was arranged purely for convenience, the aristocratic woman might even be expected to take a lover. After the development of the image of the new "domestic woman," a new negative comparison was needed; one that shared characteristics with the aristocratic woman, but that was also farther away. According to Kahf, this negative comparison was supplied with the image of the Muslim woman in the Harem.

This "Harem Woman" shared many traits with the aristocratic woman. She was expected to have a proficiency in art, music and dance, and was expected to keep guests (men) entertained. According to Kahf, she aroused "the wrong kind of desire,"[41] in men and she represented a lurid and very active kind of sexuality. The new ideal "domestic woman"[42] in Britain was much more passive. She was concerned not with such frivolous pursuits as music and dance, but rather with her marriage, raising children and keeping a household. The "Harem Woman" satisfied the British need for a negative counter-image

---

[39] Kahf, 115.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Kahf, 116.
[42] Kahf, 7.

for the ideal woman in the home, in terms of politics, religion and social life. She could, as I mentioned earlier, arouse the wrong kind of desire, but could also serve to show what the right kind was.[43] While the creation of this negative representation of the Muslim woman was eventually used in support of the colonial enterprise, such was not its original purpose, according to Kahf. She effectively demonstrates that not all creations and representations of the Orient were used to dominate it, and that at times, some were used in the service of social control at home. Thus, Kahf gives further authority to the critique of Said's claim that Orientalism was always linked to the project of asserting power over "the other."

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

A biographical sketch of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu will help to demonstrate how European women before Bell had used travel in "the East" as a form of escape from societal pressures in Britain, and as a means to establishing a career. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu lived for one year in the Ottoman Empire with her husband, who was the British ambassador there. When she arrived there in 1717, the narrative of the debased harem woman was already operative, but Lady Mary had a vested interest in dispelling it,[44] and her reasons for wanting to do so were varied.

Lady Mary came of age in England in an era in which it was neither practical nor fashionable for a wealthy woman to be well-educated in philosophy or the classics, and less practical still for her to be fascinated by them. It is said that Lady Mary taught herself Latin by candlelight after her governess had retired. [45] No doubt feeling that she herself was somewhat oppressed by the social strictures of her time and place, Lady Mary would

---

[43] Kahf, 117.
[44] Kahf, 118.
[45] Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, intro to *Turkish Embassy Letters*, xxvi.

have had little desire to reinforce the position that the social and political ways of Britain were superior to the ways of the rest of the world.

Due to her dissatisfaction with her position in Britain, or perhaps because she was finally able to give her curiosity free reign, Lady Mary was able to write a travelogue that contains remarkably few of the orientalist assumptions and refrains that Said so frequently finds in the work of travel writers such as Nerval and Chateaubriand. Kahf argues that Lady Mary's true gift was in being able to see these two different societies, Ottoman and British, not as polar opposite and irreconcilable others, but as porous bodies having much in common with one another.[46]

There is, of course, a class element to this; Lady Mary was a wealthy British woman who spent time almost exclusively in the company of wealthy Ottoman women during her sojourn in that Empire. She knew little to nothing of the way "common" Ottoman woman lived, and one can see this bias in her well-known collection of letters called *Turkish Embassy Letters*. [47] Had she been able to interact with the lower classes, perhaps her perspective would have changed. Nonetheless, she shows remarkably few of the typical European prejudices when she describes the harem as functioning very much like a British noble home, and the Ottoman court as functioning like that of Britain.[48] She also claims that, in direct refutation of the image of the "Harem Woman" as debased and luridly sexual, the Turkish ladies were exquisitely well-mannered, and that they behaved in a way that was utterly relaxed and natural, much like "men in a coffeehouse."[49] Lady Mary Wortley Montagu used travel outside Britain to establish herself in literary circles,

---

[46] Kahf, 119.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, intro to *Turkish Embassy Letters*, xxvii.
[49] Ibid, xxviii.

and in a way, to escape the strictures placed upon her in England. Though she had less personal freedom than Gertrude Bell, she used her travel experience as an opportunity for "career" advancement as well as a (temporary) means to obtain some personal freedom.

Lady Mary was also of the opinion that Ottoman woman sometimes also had certain rights and privileges that were not afforded to their European counterparts. She was impressed with the legal status accorded to women; that they were allowed to keep their own money, which was sometimes greater than the sum of their husbands, and that their husbands were required to keep them in the finest jewels and clothes. [50] She even briefly extols the virtues of the veil, (the full niqab, or veil that covers the entire face) which even in the eighteenth century drew cries of oppression and debasement from the west,[51] claiming that wearing it was liberating, because it freed a woman from recognition and the prying eyes of men. She tells her female correspondents that it permitted women to carry out secret assignments, and that it even permitted her to sneak, unnoticed, into the Hagia Sophia.[52] Such an ability to see the difference in cultural norms was surprising in the eighteenth century, but continues to be so in the twenty-first, where the view of the veil is still predominantly that it is oppressive and anti-woman.

Of the all the orientalist assumptions and biases that Lady Mary was able to transcend, none is more notable than the authority she gave to Turkish medical practitioners and practices. She gave birth to her second child while living in the Ottoman Empire, and claimed that childbirth there was infinitely less unpleasant than in Britain, and that people treated it as a natural course of life rather than an illness.[53] Wortley

---

[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid, xxix.
[52] Ibid, xxviii.
[53] Ibid, 108.

Montagu also expresses her wish that the British would adopt this attitude, however unlikely that would be to happen. More surprising than this is her respect for the Turkish method of smallpox inoculation, most often performed by older women, to which she submitted her small son while in the Ottoman Empire. The low incidence of small pox and the lack of scarring upon those who did contract it after being vaccinated convinced her of its efficacy. [54]

Smallpox was a sore point with Lady Mary, because she had contracted it as a much younger woman, and it had left her scarred and less beautiful.[55] So taken was she with this method of vaccination that she campaigned to have it adopted in Britain, going so far as to have her daughter inoculated in this fashion by an English physician before witnesses. This provoked a great deal of debate, but eventually a member of the British royalty chose to have her children inoculated in this manner as well.[56] The above examples clearly demonstrate that at least one Westerner was able to transcend stereotypes and appreciate another culture on its own terms.

Lady Mary Wortely Montagu was someone who, in all probability, should have adhered to typically Orientalist practices. She was wealthy, and travelling in a privileged fashion to a country that was, if not subordinate to Britain, at least on the wane from the height of its power. And yet, she managed to stay surprisingly free of these Orientalist practices. The narrative of the luridly sensual Harem woman described by Kahf, designed to convince people of the superiority of European ways, aroused Lady Mary's curiosity. Once she saw that it was inaccurate, she decided to use her positive experiences to try to show the hypocrisy of these images of the harem woman. This indicates that travel

---

[54] Ibid, 80.
[55] Ibid, introduction, xv.
[56] Ibid, xviii.

writing did not necessarily have to be Orientalist, especially when one considers the gender and position of the author.

The view of Sadiq al-'Azm, who critiques Said's (who does not mention Lady Mary in his work) sometimes essentialist portrayal of "the West's" view of "the East," is also validated by the example and work of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Her writing and her attitudes towards the people that she wrote about demonstrate that an orientalist framework was not an integral part of being a Westerner, and that it was indeed possible for an individual to overcome these prejudices, and approach an Eastern culture from a more neutral perspective. Lady Mary may have been the exception rather than the rule, but she does prove that the rule was not absolute. The example of Lady Mary reminds the reader that while many Westerners who travelled to "Eastern" lands were Orientalist and ethnocentric, the fact of being Western does not mean that one will automatically express these opinions.

Lady Hester Stanhope

Chronologically closer to Gertrude Bell, Lady Hester Stanhope was another British woman who found travel through the Empire a good way to avoid social pressures within Britain. Lady Hester Stanhope was the daughter of Lord Charles Stanhope, an eccentric aristocrat who took the family arms from his carriage and sent his children to perform menial tasks on his farm. Whatever her father's intentions, Tidrick notes that this treatment did nothing to distinguish Lady Hester's pride in her aristocratic birth, and in 1800 she "escaped" to her grandmother's house, and later to the home of her uncle William Pitt, who was the prime minister of Britain from 1783 to 1801, and again from

1804 to 1806.[57] As Pitt was unmarried, he needed a hostess for various social and political functions held at his home. Lady Hester was his niece, so she fit the bill perfectly. She became a well-known social success because of her wit and vivacity, and her time as Pitt's hostess was the period of her greatest renown. [58] She had many admirers during this time, but did not manage to win herself a husband.[59] When Pitt died suddenly in 1806, Lady Hester's future in political circles died too. She initially retired to Wales but found the spinster's life there to be too confining and dull. She left shortly thereafter for a journey in the Lebanon.[60]

Having used what Tidrick feels must have been her considerable charm and finances to ingratiate herself with the local notables, Lady Hester entered Damascus at the head of a procession wearing the traditional garb of a Turkish nobleman.[61] She later adopted traditional (male) Bedouin dress, which she considered to be the most comfortable, and the most striking. When she left Hama (another city in present-day Syria) for Palmyra, she again headed an impressive procession into the city. The local people of importance there (mainly Bedouin sheikhs) were happy to receive her, and must have been impressed by a seemingly limitless supply of gold.[62] Stanhope revelled in her success, and in the latitude it allowed her. Having decided to travel outside the Empire, Stanhope decided to remain there, and give free rein to all her eccentricities. She wrote home that "I am quite wild about these people; and all Syria is in astonishment at my courage and success. To have spent a month with some thousand of Bedouin Arabs is

---

[57] Tidrick, 38.
[58] Tidtick, 38 -39.
[59] Tidrick, 39.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Tidrick, 40.

no common thing." [63] Much like Gertrude Bell, Lady Hester Stanhope felt comfortable with the Arabs, in many ways more comfortable than she had felt at home in Britain. Like Lady Hester, Bell was a woman working in a male-dominated sphere, who was viewed with suspicion because of her gender. She was also viewed by other woman as being too masculine, because of her job. It was only with the native population that she felt that she could be herself without fear of judgement. One cannot underestimate how important being an "honorary man" was to Gertrude Bell, and her perception of herself as an honorary man makes her interactions with those in the Middle East more complex than Said portrays them to be.

Bell in Iraq in 1909 at the age of 41 (University of Newcastle)

As Gertrude Bell believed firmly in the British way of life, and in the greatness of the Empire, it is somewhat curious to note that Bell spent the bulk of her adult life away from Britain and the lifestyle she claimed was so wonderful. It seems that for Bell enjoyed the idea of British life more than the actual fact of it. She herself felt the prospect of living a life of spinsterhood in England to be almost unbearable, and decided upon a life of travel and work in "the Orient" as a way to escape it. Bell's extensive travel throughout the region and the contacts that she had made there made her valuable to the Colonial Service. The opportunity to promote British

[63] Ibid.

government and British ways of life while remaining far away from them presented itself in the offer of a job in the British Mandate of Iraq, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: A Career in Iraq

Historical Context

Some of the best examples of Bell's work as an Orientalist are found during her tenure working for the Colonial Office administering the British Mandate of Iraq. Gertrude Bell's foray into foreign politics had begun before Mesopotamia became a British Mandate. It began in earnest after her trip to Hayil, on the Arabian Peninsula, in 1914, during which she was briefly held prisoner (albeit in a very genteel prison) in the summer home of Ibn Rashid[1]. Around this time, Britain's interest in the Middle East had grown even greater. In 1911, in order to maintain its naval superiority, Winston Churchill, (then Lord of the Admiralty) had ordered the Navy to change from coal to oil burning ships. Churchill had signed an agreement in 1912 for a major share in the Anglo – Persian Oil Company, whose oil wells were in Southern Persia, and whose refineries were near Basrah. It was therefore absolutely necessary for Britain to protect that region, but with a weakened Ottoman Empire open to German – led attack, the area was very vulnerable.[2]

Upon returning from her journey to Hayil, she received word that Louis Mallet, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, wanted an audience with her to hear of her news from Arabia,[3] and Bell was anxious to report on what she had learned. At this point, the Ottomans had only a tenuous hold on the region, and Bell felt that the British were in a good position to take advantage of this weakness. She

---

[1] Wallach,, Janet. *Desert Queen.* New York: Anchor Books, 2005, 123 – 125.
[2] Wallach, 132.
[3] Ibid.

had also gleaned from various sources that the Arabs of Syria were open to the idea of British rule. More interesting still was the substantiated rumour that Ibn Saud, nemesis of Ibn Rashid, would be interested in a British Alliance. According to Wallach, Mallet listened attentively, told others of her exploits, and generally let it be known that he thought her to be a goldmine of information. [4]

Shortly after she returned to England in 1914, Archduke Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was assassinated. This event sparked conflict through out Europe and by August of that year the Continent was at war.[5] Gertrude became a vital source of information about the Eastern Front. Her reports were studied by the War Office and the Foreign Office in London, and at Military Intelligence in Cairo. She presented a recommendation and a plan to organize an Arab Revolt against the Turks, and very much wanted to be "on the ground" when this happened, but she was refused permission to go, as the situation was considered far too dangerous for a woman. Her gender had once again become an obstacle. [6]

By November of 1915, she was again contacted because of her extensive knowledge of the region, which was considered to be of potential use to the war effort. David Hogarth, an old friend, was pressing the Chief of the Marine Secret Service to allow her to work in Cairo as a spy. This was the opportunity that she had been waiting for. She would soon be in the employ of the Office of Military Intelligence, soon to be renamed the Arab Bureau. [7] Although some of the military

---

[4] Wallach, 133.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Wallach, 135.
[7] Wallach, 146.

personnel treated her with scorn, those involved with the actual intelligence work (perhaps due to their reputedly "quirky" nature) were very welcoming [8].

Bell's job was to collect and categorize data on the Arab tribes. She analyzed their political alliances, whether or not they could perhaps be persuaded to ally with the British, or whether they would remain loyal to the Turks [9] Her position at the Arab Bureau in Cairo was to be the stepping stone to her job in Iraq, the country in which she did her most notable work. [10] The administrations in Cairo and New Delhi feuded over the question of who would administer Iraq. Iraq was essential to the British Empire; its grain supplies could feed the army, its oil fuel the navy ships, and its location provided a land route to India. Bell's assignment in the Mandate of Iraq was again to gather information about the various tribes, and also to act as a go-between for the administrations in New Delhi, India and Cairo.[11] Bell was the only woman invited to the Cairo Conference, which was convened to discuss the future of Britain's involvement in the Middle East generally, and in Mesopotamia in particular.[12]

Oriental Despotism

Inventing Iraq is Toby Dodge's analysis of how ingrained modes of thinking and rigid adherence to a code of ideas doomed the British endeavour in Iraq. Building on Said's work in *Orientalism*, Dodge locates the source of British Orientalism and ethnocentrism during the British Mandate of Iraq in Britain's

---

[8] Wallach, 147.
[9] *Personal Papers*, vol. 2, 30.
[10] Wallach, 159.
[11] *Personal Papers*, vol.2, 33.
[12] Wallach, 296.

Bell, Winston Churchill and others at the Cairo Conference in 1921 (University of Newcastle)

inability to understand Iraq outside of the way the British imagined it to be. According to Dodge, Ottoman rule in Iraq was conceived to be "Oriental Despotism," and perceived it to be stagnant, corrupt and brutal:

> The European vision of the world the British staff confronted was sustained by two central tenets. First, the Ottoman Empire in Iraq was conceived as an Oriental Despotism. Under this rubric it was unchanging and unable to escape the constraints of its inherent superstition, violence and corruption. Secondly, Iraq was perceived as fundamentally divided. For the British, the urban centers of Iraq were largely made up of *effendis*, remnants of the Ottoman Empire, who were tainted by training and working within corrupt institutions. Juxtaposed against the contaminated cities was the Arab countryside. Here the "true" Iraqi lived, unscathed by Ottoman influence and in need of protection from the grasping *effendis*. The coherence and pervasiveness of this core vision had far-reaching effects.[13]

Dodge believes that the British perception of the functioning of the Ottoman Empire extended far beyond British beliefs about the Ottoman administration, to the relationship of the government to its people, the urban to the rural, and the way in

[13] Dodge, 43-44.

which the average person viewed politics. All of these were conceived of in very specific ways. The British believed that the bureaucracy in Iraq was peopled by corrupt, Ottomanized *effendis* who not be able to adapt to the new system, hence they were reluctant to use the existing administrative structures and personnel. [14] The Ottoman Empire was perceived by the British as having generally failed Iraq; they believed that it had in no way helped the populace to adapt to changing conditions, nor had it, among other things, worked to develop the country's agricultural resources.

The British perception of the Ottoman legacy was cemented by the work of Stephen Longrigg, a British administrator and scholar. In contrast, empirical evidence shows the Longrigg's perception of the Ottoman Empire as stagnant and his attribution of its problems to this stagnancy was mostly false. [15] If the system of governing was negatively perceived, the effects of this system on the native populace were seen to be worse. The *effendis*, who formed a bridge between the Arab populace and their Turkish rulers, embodied everything that was wrong with the Ottoman system.[16]

Dodge argues that these *effendis* were seen by the British as corrupt, and as aping the trappings of Western modernity. They often wore the "travesty of European dress"[17] and imitated European lifestyle, attempting to copy European modernity without first going through the process of achieving it. British officials

---

[14] Dodge, 45.
[15] For example, Dodge points out that Ottoman rule in Iraq, particularly during the nineteenth century was quite active. Government iniatives from Istanbul were both reactive and proactive, attempting to meet local needs and demands, but also trying to integrate it into the governing structures and economy of the Empire, while trying to increase its security and production (Dodge, 47 – 48).
[16] Ibid.
[17] Dodge, 49.

feared that the *effendis* would bring too soon the influence of modernity to Iraq, and pull the general population out of the natural order of things, forcing it to develop before it was ready.[18] In short, according to Dodge, the *effendis* and their ways did not fit it in with the British conception of Iraq was "supposed" to be. Ottoman rule was capable of ruling and ordering urban life, but did not extend to the countryside, where, according to the beliefs of Oriental Despotism, their governance only harmed the country-side dwellers.[19] It was the intrusion of the British that would save the Iraqi population from the corrupt, dead hand of the Ottoman Empire. [20]

Gertrude Bell and Oriental Despotism

In Bell's eyes, there was a sharp distinction between an oppressive and corrupt Ottoman administration and an immature and oppressed provincial society. The urban was separated from the rural, with the tribal rural people considered the authentic Arabs, and the Ottoman – educated, elite as impure, over-privileged city - dwellers.

> The chief thing is how to protect the rural, tribal population from Baghdadis who know and care nothing about them, for you see Arab officials are and must be almost invariably Baghdadis...And the tribes...hate them. [21]

As the administrators in Baghdad had previously worked for the Ottomans, it was believed by the British that they could be easily re-corrupted, so the British put their trust in the rural people, and tribal sheikhs. The above quote, however, should not be so readily dismissed as blind adherence to the tenet of Oriental Despotism that said

---

[18] Dodge, 49.
[19] Ddoge, 53.
[20] Dodge. 48.
[21] *Personal Papers*, vol.2, 128 – 129.

those in the city were naturally corrupt. Bell may have indeed believed in the idea of "Oriental Despotism," but that does not render invalid what she says in the above quote, about the rural tribesmen needing to have their interests protected from the Baghdadis.

Like Said, Dodge neglects to consider all aspects of Bell's character and experience before passing judgment upon her. Could the aforementioned be simply an analysis of the social and political situation in the Mandate of Iraq? Bell had a great deal of experience in the region, and was on very good terms with many tribal leaders and sheikhs. Is it not possible that these leaders had told her that this was how they felt, ignored and slighted by those in Baghdad who neither understood nor cared about them?

Phebe Ann Marr, author of a doctoral thesis on Yasin Pasha and nationalism in Iraq is of the opinion that Bell was not entirely incorrect in her assessment of Baghdadis as insensitive to the needs of rural tribesmen. Marr believes that although the goals of Ottoman reform preceding the British tenure in Iraq (to secure land tenure through legal processes and encourage settlement, and to develop a system of public education) had been laudable, they had mainly succeeded in the growth of a new class of owners, and in the development of a new barrier between the government and the majority of the population.[22]

These reforms resulted in the creation many new subdivisions of land and land ownership, which in turn resulted in the creation of a new class of Iraqi civil servants, trained in the manner of Ottoman administrators. Marr believes that these

---

[22] Marr, Phebe Ann. *Yasin Al-Hashimi: The Rise and Fall of a Nationalist*. Cambridge : Harvard University, 1966, 37.

civil servants followed in the Ottoman tradition of rule by elite, which managed to alienate them from those living in the countryside, because, in Marr's opinion, the Turkish-educated townspeople had little desire to serve in the countryside, or learn of conditions there. [23] Marr quotes Gertrude Bell as saying that those in the educated administrative class treated the rural people and their economy with scorn, and never seemed to realize that rural conditions needed to be studied and understand:

> The intelligentsia from top to bottom, neither had any knowledge of rural conditions, nor have they begun to realize that these must be studied and known. Except for the families of tribal descent...the Baghdadi knows little about tribal organization,, the position and influence of the sheikh for good or ill, or the characteristics and customs of the various tribes. And he regards the whole tribal population on which the economy of Mesopotamia ultimately rests, with a mixture of fear and disdain.[24]

According to Marr, the new system of education was most responsible for building this new administrative class of Iraqis that was separated from the rural, tribal population. The main thrust of this system seemed to be to "Ottomanize" the Arabs. The main language of instruction was Turkish, and all paths of higher education inevitably led to Istanbul, which led to further alienation from the majority of the Iraqi populace, where the lingua franca was Arabic. This new administrative class identified more with the Turkish governments than with the needs of Iraqi peasantry, and this divide led to mistrust of government officials on the part of the

---

[23] Marr, 39.
[24] Gertrude Bell quoted by Marr, 39.

tribal sheikhs.[25] Certainly there were instances (discussed later in this chapter, regarding the education system in Iraq) in which Bell made decisions and analyses based on a belief in Oriental Despotism, but Bell's position regarding the relationship between the urban and rural populations seems to have been based on as much on shrewd observation of realities on the ground as it was on some fixed, Orientalist mindset.

The British belief that rural people were the guardians of "authentic" Iraqi society did not mean that the British thought them fit to be entrusted with political power, or capable of making decisions related to politics. It was assumed by many, including Bell, that the Iraqi tribesmen belonged to a kind of "collective mind," and held to collective opinions, because "they had not been subjected the selfish individualizing drives of modern life."[26] Here is an instance where Dodge's analysis of Oriental Despotism holds up. Colonial administrators believed that most Iraqis were not yet capable of holding individual opinions about various topics in the same way that modern Europeans were.

Many of those in the British administration feared that if individual members of tribes had the right to vote, they would be do exactly as instructed by their sheikh, leader, or whomever happened to be in charge at the moment, and would vote in droves for whomever they were told, even if the candidate's policies were not sound.[27] Bell expresses the idea that the masses were without opinion and indifferent to independence and writes her family that:

---

[25] Marr, 40 – 41.
[26] Dodge, 94.
[27] Ibid.

> The vast majority here haven't any views at all; most of thinking people want our administration, guided by Sir Percy, but there's a small if vociferous group which thinks they could get on quite well without us. They would have immense fun for a bit, but it would be a very short bit, abruptly ending in universal anarchy and bloodshed.[28]

Here, Bell is the personification of someone who believes strongly in the ideas of Oriental Despotism, and who adheres to Orientalist ideas about indigenous people being unable to govern themselves. While the question of whether independence at an earlier date would have caused "universal anarchy and bloodshed" cannot be answered, Bell demonstrates here her belief that the majority of the Iraqi people cannot hold these kinds of opinions because they are not supposed to. In this context, she expresses all the ideas of a typical Orientalist.

Bell also writes often about how the Iraqi populace was unprepared for immediate independence, and how they lacked the focus to prepare for that independence. Here, she espouses the kind of Orientalism described by Said wherein Bell views the Arabs as Arabs first, and individuals second. They were expected to conform to certain behavioral norms as a group. Furthermore, these expectations became official policy. She held fast to the idea that only the British could adequately mould them for statehood. She expresses these views about the possibility of Iraqi independence in a memorandum written to the Under Secretary of State for India in the Foreign Political Department:

---

[28] *Personal Papers*, vol. 2, 104.

> Its prematurity has so clearly been manifest that it has found no support among the stable elements of the community. They have, on the contrary, been frightened into closer co-operation with the British Administration. [29]

This seems again to be further evidence of her belief in Oriental Despotism, and perhaps it is, but it also could be an observation. It is indeed possible that there were elements of the Iraqi community who felt that, given the confusing circumstances and upheaval following the end of the First World War, it would be wise to wait until a relative calm had been achieved before making a bid for independence. These Iraqis might also have seen the British as being able to provide that stability. Again, obedience to Orientalist thought patterns plays a role in Bell's breakdown of the situation in Iraq, but it is not the sole component of the analysis.

She writes in her personal journal about a conversation with Yasin Pasha, who would become Prime Minister of the first Iraqi government after the treaty with Great Britain came into effect. Yasin Pasha was firmly anti-British, but was at the same time willing to cooperate reasonably with them. Their conversation was on the subject of educating the Iraqi populace:

> He then began to talk of education to which he said we had purposely paid little attention. He would be content to leave all sovereignty and administration in our hands if we would provide the young men of Iraq with sound education. I explained our difficulties, lack of teachers chiefly, and said it was better to go slowly till we had adequate men. He said it would have been better to continue the Turkish schools and improve them gradually, the fruit of a small tree being

---

[29] *Personal Papers*. vol 2, 106.

preferable to none; to which I replied that the fruit which was being offered by the Turks was poison. [30]

One can see here that Bell was not only emphasizing the need to gradually build up the new education system, but also stressing the absolute failure of the Turkish system. This is indeed an instance where Bell follows the administrative line of Oriental Despotism, supporting the policy to remove all things Turkish, even when they could have perhaps been useful, to the possible detriment to the nascent Iraqi state. Throughout her personal notes, memorandums, and papers from this time, she continually focuses on the idea that only those who had been "Turkified" could possibly want independence in the short term:

...Men of Arab race who had been in Turkish Civil Service or Military employment and had thrown in their lot with the Turks after the occupation...and others who had not ventured to remain in Baghdad on account of their well-known Turkish sympathies came back from Mosul early in November. Many of these at once engaged in anti-British propaganda.[31]

These and other instances of unwavering adherence to popular (and official) belief about the nature of the Turks and the Arabs kept Bell's ethnocentrism and Orientalism firmly intact, preventing her from taking courses of action that may have aided the development of the British Mandate. While Bell's orientalism and ethnocentrism remained firmly intact throughout her tenure in Iraq, her adherence to them was not absolute.

---

[30] *Personal Papers*, vol. 2, 117-118.
[31] *Personal Papers*, vol 2, 106.

A T. Wilson, 1920. (University of Newcastle)

In contrast, there were instances, during Bell's tenure in Iraq, of her taking a nuanced and flexible approach to the question of Iraqi independence. This was obviously an extremely important issue and one in which she could have easily gone the route of adhering to the beliefs of Oriental Despotism. With regards to the Iraqi constitution that would be in place after Iraqi had become an independent nation (with the British staying on in an advisory capacity) Bell felt, contrary to some of her superiors, that the constitution was reasonable, and viable:

> ...you'll find in it a draft of the Mesopotamian constitution by Yasin, which I thought was quite reasonable and said so. A.T.[32] sent a covering letter in which he stated that anything of this kind was entirely incompatible with British control, and he told me he would never accept it. [33]

Here, Bell is willing to work with Iraqis and accept their point of view, while others, such as Wilson, were unwilling to do so.

Despite the recent trend in criticizing Orientalists like Bell, she was a product of her time. Even Dodge notes that although Bell and those like her were guilty of ethnocentrism and Orientalism, "Inserted into an unfamiliar society, officials had little choice but to strive to understand Iraq in terms that were familiar to them." [34] Bell had a genuine appreciation for the Iraqis, their culture and their desire to have

---

[32] A.T. refers here to Arnold T. Wilson, Acting Civil Commissioner to Iraq from 1918 to 1920. He was later replaced due to his inability to accept the changing system and the eventuality of Iraqi independence.
[33] *Personal Papers*, vol. 2, 141.
[34] Dodge, 1.

an independent nation, but this appreciation was not enough to overcome the long ingrained ethnocentrism and beliefs about the Iraqis.

Bell was an amazingly complex woman, who knew more about the Middle East than most others. Her writing about the people of the Middle East, and her work regarding them was equally complex. She fluctuated between perceptive analysis of the people and their politics and a rigid adherence to official lines of thought. Bell's work and life are examples of how, when analyzing someone in terms of Orientalism and ethnocentrism, all aspects of that person's life, character and experiences should be taken into account, if an accurate portrayal of that person is to be achieved.

Conclusion: Putting An Orientalist in Context

Gender Ambivalence

Gertrude Bell was many things, but above all she was complex, and her life was a study in contrasts. As a woman, she was better educated, more well-travelled, and achieved more in her career then most men of her day. Despite this, she was not in favour of women's rights and suffrage. She felt herself to be the exception rather than the rule. She was able to transcend what were typically female roles, but believed that the majority of women were incapable of doing so. Her ambivalent feelings toward her gender and her gender's role led her to work in a field typically reserved for men, and also to have hobbies that were typically male (she worked in the British Mandate of Iraq, where she was the only woman in her office, and she travelled alone in the open desert, something few other woman had done).

Gertrude Bell felt most comfortable with the desert Arabs because they considered her to be, and treated her as, an honorary man. They were able to overlook, or look past, the conflicting (at least to Europeans) nature of her gender and her work. They accepted her for who and what she was. Despite all Bell's efforts to truly live as an "honorary man," there were still limitations placed upon her because of her gender, and this was extremely troubling to her. As I discussed in the third chapter, to those closest to her, Bell lamented the restrictions of her sex, such as in her letter to Valentine (Domnul) Chirol where she wonders whether or not her desert exploration will make any kind of contribution to the field:

> There are two ways of profitable travel in Arabia. One is the *Arabia Deserta* way, to live with the people, and to live like them, as Doughty did...It's clear *I* can't take that way; the fact of my being a woman bars me from it.[1]

As I discussed in chapter three, Bell associated the people in the desert with being male. She probably could have lived among the women of desert tribes, but this did not interest her.

Another example of Bell's conflicting and contrasting viewpoints is found in her attitudes towards Britain. She spent her entire life promoting the British Empire, British ways of life, the British system of government, and of course the "uniquely British" ability to understand and work with Arabs. She was of the opinion that many regions and ethnic groups would fare better under British dominion, and she also thought that many people in these regions would prefer British rule, to that of the French or the Ottoman Empire:

> I believe that my being English is a great help...We have gone up in the world since five years ago. The difference is very marked. I think it is due to the success of our government in Egypt to a great extent... No one who does not know the East can realize how it all hangs together. [2]

In many ways, Bell dedicated her life to working for the causes of the British Empire, and she is best known for her administrative work in the British Mandate of Iraq. It is therefore interesting that Bell spent much of her adult life outside of the country she claimed to love so much. For all her professed admiration of its government and culture, she chose not to live there. She never found a suitable man to marry, and

---

[1] *Personal Papers*, vol. 1, 296.
[2] Bell, Gertrude. *The Desert and the Sown*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1907, 6.

among other social pressures, did not relish the idea of a spinster's life in Britain.[3] Bell managed to avoid the aspects of British life that she did not like by travelling and working in service of the British government in Iraq.

An Irredeemable Orientalist?

There are many scholars of modern history, including Edward Said and Toby Dodge, who have written off Bell's work as that of an entrenched Orientalist. To be sure, there are instances where Bell is all the things that Dodge and Said accuse her of being. In chapter four, I present one obvious example where she acts in adherence with the Orientalist idea of Oriental Despotism, rather than in the best interests of the people in Iraq. She dismissed out of hand the idea of using any of the remnants of the Ottoman system of education in the Mandate of Iraq. Here, for the sole reason of its association with the "corrupt" Ottoman Empire, Bell refuses to use any of the frameworks for education that were already in place, even though this could have been beneficial to the Iraqi populace.

Another example is found in her explanation of the Iraqi political mentality, also mentioned in the fourth chapter. Bell considers the average Iraqi to be incapable of retaining Western-style political opinions. In a letter published in her *Personal Papers*, she writes to her stepmother, saying that

> The vast majority here haven't any views at all; most of the thinking people want our administration, guided by Sir Percy, but there's a small if vociferous group which thinks they could get on quite well alone and certainly have much more

[3] Wallach, 32.

> fun individually without us. They would have immense fun for a bit, but it would be a very short bit, abruptly ending in universal anarchy and bloodshed.[4]

The majority of Iraqis are written off as being incapable of certain kinds of thoughts and opinions, simply because they are Iraqis.

There are also instances where Bell's writing is quite non-Orientalist in nature, or at the very least, less orientalist. In *The Desert and the Sown*, Bell recounts a trip to an old Crusader castle, and her dinner with its ruler, the Kaimakan. Here Bell does not draw absolute boundaries between "Eastern" and "Western," but rather sees the similarities between them. She recognizes that there are many parallel social situations to be found in both cultures, most likely because this is a social situation in which she had found herself many times before in both England and Iraq. The Kaimakan's son has recently died, and he has written a poem about it. Though the poem is not especially good, Bell praises it in all the proper places, exactly as she would have done in London:

> I might have been sitting in a London drawing-room instead of between the bare walls of a Crusader tower, and the world is after all made of the one stuff throughout.[5]

A Second Look?

The situations which best demonstrate Bell's complex nature are those in which her writing seems at first to be Orientalist and ethnocentric in nature, but after a second reading, seem less so. In addition, an explanation can very often be found for her Orientalism. Examples of these instances are found in chapters three and four. In chapter three, I discuss Bell's near-participation in a Druze raid. Bell became caught up in the

---

[4] *Personal Papers*, vol. 2, 104.
[5] Bell, 209.

energy preceding the raid, and nearly went, but at the last moment realized that it would not be a prudent thing to do.

> ...so I turned away into the shadow and ran down to my tents and became a European again, bent on peaceful pursuits and unacquainted with the naked primitive passions of mankind.[6]

At first glance, this would seem to be a typically Orientalist passage, but before making a judgement, one must first consider the circumstances under which she wrote the passage. Throughout the trip about which she wrote *The Desert and the Sown* Bell was living the way that she preferred to, as an "honorary man." Going on the raid would have been the culmination of this experience, but Bell realized at the last moment that this would make local authorities suspiscious of her activity in the region. Bell experiences a thorough disappointment at being unable to go on the raid, and she expresses her disapointment in a seemingly Orientalist manner. However, considering that Bell seemed to want nothing more than to live her life as an "honorary man," and that she was unable to do so, the Orientalism seems mostly to mask her sadness and anger at the lost opportunity.

Another example of a situation that requires a second look is found in Bell's discussion of the inability (or unwillingness) of the Baghdadi politicians to understand the needs and the situation of rural people. Bell writes that Baghdadis seem to care nothing for the rural people, and at the outset, this seems like a profession of an adherence to a belief in Oriental Despotism, discussed in chapter four, which Toby Dodge believed governed the British Mandate in Iraq. But there seems to be more to it than that. Bell had travelled extensively throughout the rural areas, and was familiar with

---

[6] Bell, 92.

the tribal leaders. Perhaps her assertion that the Baghdadis cared nothing for the rural people was, rather than blind adherence to a particular thought pattern, merely the expression of what she had heard when she visited the countryside.

Though she was born to a wealthy and privileged family, Gertrude Bell's life was not always easy. She was extremely intelligent and ambitious and had a natural curiosity about the world around her. She aspired to things that were at that time considered suspect for a woman to do, such as obtaining a university education, travelling in the open desert, and working in a high-ranking position in the colonial service. While she often succeeded in her lofty goals, the fact that she did not conform to what was expected of women at that time often led to her alienation from her peers. This sense of isolation was compounded by the fact that Bell was unlucky in love, and both of her two serious romances ended in tragedy and heartbreak.

My reading of Gertrude Bell as someone whose work was complex and contradictory adds depth to Dodge and Said's use of her as an example of a stereotypical Orientalist. As I have stated throughout this thesis, although Bell certainly had moments where she espoused an unadulterated ethnocentrism and Orientalist attitude, she also had moments where she did not. An awareness of the context in which Bell wrote, and the circumstances surrounding her life and work is crucial if one wants to achieve an accurate portrait of her. If one is able to see how and why she sometimes used (or did not use) Orientalist techniques in her work, one can gain a more balanced, nuanced portrait of Bell. A more nuanced perception of a perceived Orientalist helps the student to avoid essentialist thinking, and to consider Bell on the basis of her individual merits, rather than on the basis of perceived notions of about Orientalists generally.

Said and Dodge accuse Bell (at times rightly) of in her work treating the Arab people as "Arabs" first and as individuals second, and being unable to see them as having distinct, unique personalities, and of subsuming all of her work about the Arabs to the cohesive framework of Orientalism. Despite this critique, Said and Dodge are often guilty of the very thing for which they condemn Bell. They treat her as an Orientalist first, and an individual actor second, and do not pause to consider the various contexts in which Bell worked and wrote. At times, Bell's writing was indeed irredeemably Orientalist, and at other times, it lacked an Orientalist tone. More interesting still are those instances, such as the Druze raid discussed earlier, where Bell seems at first to be inexcusably Orientalist, but which can be shown, upon further reading and consideration of the circumstances of Bell's life, to be less so.

My usage of the work of Billie Melman and Mohja Kahf helped to create this more nuanced portrait of Bell. Melman's theory that women who were part of the dominant culture could, due to their position as being both dominant and oppressed, form an opinion of the colonized people differing from that of the men in the dominant culture was very useful when analyzing Bell's work. It was particularly pertinent when examining the instances where her work seems at first to be a straight-forward example of Orientalism, such as the aforementioned example of the Druze raid, but where, upon further investigation, another explanation can be found for it.[7]

Kahf also critiques Said for his portrayal of Orientalism as a discourse that was fixed across time. Kahf asserts that the image of the Middle Eastern woman in Europe was anything but fixed, and changed according to changes in European society. She argues that prior to the nineteenth century, the image of the Middle Eastern ("Harem")

[7] Melman, Billie. *Women's Orients*. London: Macmillan Academic and Professional, Ltd, 1992, 2.

woman was not used in service of the colonial enterprise, but was rather used in the service of social control at home, as an example for European woman to show them all things they should not be and do. In addition to this chronological critque of Said's work, Kahf also gives an example of another British woman, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who also used travel as a means of escape from the strictures of upper-class British life, and as a means to make a name for herself as a writer, showing that there was a precedent for Bell to follow. Though Bell was at times a staunch Orientalist, working in the service of the British Empire was not the only item on her agenda. She, like Lady Mary, was also fleeing her own sort of oppression in Britain.

Both Melman's and Kahf's work help me to segue into the central question of my thesis: If it is possible to take one of the building blocks of Said's discourse (Gertrude Bell and her oeuvre) and show it to be different and more complexe than Said claims it to be, does this undermine Said's idea of Orientalism as a coherent and cohesive discourse? Through presenting Gertrude Bell in a more nuanced way, this thesis supports the validity of posing such a question.

Bibliography

al-'Azm, Sadik. "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," in *Orientalism: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Bell, Gertrude. *The Desert and the Sown.* New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1907

Berchet, Jean - Claude, ed. *Le Voyage en Orient.* Paris: R. Laffont, 1985.

Black, Jeremy. *Eighteenth Century Europe*. London: Macmillan Education, 1989.

Daniel, Norman. *Islam and the West: The Making of An Image*. Oxford: Oneworld, 1993.

Dodge, Toby. *Inventing Iraq*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Forsdick, Charles. *Travel in Twentieth Century France and Francophone Cultures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Gertrude Bell: From Her Personal Papers. Elizabeth Burgoyne, ed. London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1958.

Grabar, Oleg and Edward Said. Reply by Bernard Lewis. "Orientalism: An Exchange." *The New York Review of Books*, August 1982, 13.

Halsband, Robert. *The Life of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956.

Izzard, Molly. *Freya Stark: A Biography*. London: Sceptre Books, 1993.

Kahf, Mohja. *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999.

Lewis, Bernard. *Islam and the West.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Lewis, Bernard. "The Question of Orientalism." *The New York Review of Books,* June 1982, 11.

Lewis, Reina. *Gendering Orientalism.* New York: Routledge, 1995.

Lowe, Lisa. Critical Terrains: *French and British Orientalisms.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Lukitz, Liora. *A Quest in the Middle East.* New York: I.B. Taurus, 2006

Marr, Phebe Ann. *Yasin Al-Hashimi: The Rise and Fall of a Nationalist.* Cambridge : Harvard University, 1966, 37.

Melman, Billie. Women's Orients. London: Macmillan, 1992.

Mills, Sara. *Discourses of Difference: Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism.* London: Macmillan, 1990.

Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley. *Turkish Embassy Letters.* Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993.

Nerval, Gérard de. *Le Voyage en Orient* . ed. Henri Clouard. 3 vols. Paris: Le Divan, 1927.

Parsons, Claudia. *Century Story.* Sussex: The Book Guild Ltd, 1995.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism.* New York: Random House, 1993.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1997.

Said, Edward. "Orientalism Reconsidered." *Cultural Critique* 1 (Autumn 1985): 89 - 107.

Sprinker, Michael. *Edward Said : A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.

Stark, Freya. *Letters from Syria*. London: Wyman and Sons, Ltd., 1946

Targhi, Mohamad Tavakoli. *Refashioning Iran*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Taylor, Philip M. *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda, 1919 – 1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

The Letters of Gertrude Bell, vols I & II. Lady Florence Bell, ed. London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1927.

Tidrick, Kathryn. *Heart-Beguiling Araby*. London: Tauris, 1989.

Wallach, Janet. *Desert Queen*. New York: Anchor Books, 2005.