

## Great Northern Women

# Gertrude Bell

## “Queen of the Desert”

14 July 1868 – 12 July 1926

**Born in Washington, Raised in Redcar, Lived and died in Baghdad**

The most powerful woman in the British Empire in her day.  
She shaped the modern Middle East after World War I  
in ways that still reverberate today.

Ironically, despite great success and many firsts  
in what was a man’s world in her lifetime  
Gertrude Bell was not only ***not*** a feminist,  
she was actively ***anti***-suffragette.

**(1868) Gertrude Bell was born into a wealthy family of industrialists and politicians. They lived at Red Barns, Redcar, from the year she was born.**

*Her father was Hugh Bell, Baronet, Sherriff, JP, 3-times Mayor of Middlesbrough and Lord Lieutenant of North Yorkshire, as well as being director of Bell Brothers (later Dorman Long) steelworks in Middlesbrough and a director of North-Eastern Railways (NER).*

*His father was Sir Isaac Bell, Baronet, Mayor of Newcastle, MP for North Durham and for Hartlepool and Minister under Disraeli, as well as being a chemist and ironmaster, co-founder of Bell Brothers ironstone mines and ironworks, and a director of NER and the Forth Bridge.*

The family owned Washington Hall, Co Durham up to the time Gertrude was born there but they had already acquired Rounton Grange, Northallerton in 1866 and by 1871 they had rebuilt and moved there. Washington Hall was given to be an orphanage renamed Dame Margaret Home in honour of Gertrude's grandmother. Red Barns had been built in 1868 as her father's family home and he was important enough to have a private railway stop on the NER line between Middlesbrough and Redcar.

**(1871) Gertrude was aged just 2 when her mother died in childbirth to the first of her brothers.**

Losing her mother when very young, Gertrude was very close to her father. He later remarried and subsequently Gertrude had another brother and a sister. As wealthy industrialists, the family were also philanthropic patrons of arts, particularly the arts and crafts movement, and valued education, including their workers and their daughters.

From her grandfather and stepmother she developed an interest and involvement in both international (British Empire) politics and the welfare of women, typically as wives of steelworkers in the family steel mills.

She also developed a lifelong interest in gardening in the gardens at Red Barns and Rounton Grange.

Gertrude was home educated until in 1881 she was sent away to boarding school at Queens College, London. Thereafter she wrote many letters.

**(1886 - 1888) She went to Oxford University, Lady Margaret Hall, where she became the first woman to achieve a First Class Degree in Modern History.**

At that time it was difficult and unusual for women to get into university and history was one of the few subjects they were allowed to study. She was one of only two women to graduate in 1888. Only the men were actually recorded as having achieved their Bachelors degrees.

After graduating she came back to live at Red Barns, Redcar and spent a couple of years laying out the new gardens of the family seat at Rounton Grange, Northallerton. (In fact the family later moved to Arncliffe Hall and Rounton Grange itself was eventually demolished in 1953. Some of the gardens however remain and there is a memorial to Gertrude in the church at East Rounton)

**(1892) After a visit to her uncle, then Minister in Tehran, she embarked on years of travel and archaeological work across the British, French and Ottoman (Turkish) empires.**

In her travels, as well as the Middle East, visiting Persia (Iran), Mesopotamia (Iraq), Syria and the Levant / Palestine, she went twice around the world. In her spare time, when not returning home to Red Barns and the gardens at Rounton, she pioneered multiple mountaineering ascents in the French & Swiss Alps. There's even a peak named after her – *Gertrudspitze*.

She knew 8 languages, learning Arabic & Turkish languages as well as French, German & Italian, and got to know the people and their cultures as well as the geography. She wrote letters and published books of her adventures and archaeological work, often travelling alone in remote and inhospitable locations.

She crossed paths and met with T E Lawrence (of Arabia) and his mentor D G Hogarth in their archaeological projects, including at Carchemish on the Euphrates River forming the border between modern day Iraq and Turkey. She was awarded the Prize of the Royal Geographical Society.

**(1908 –1914) Bell was a founder member and secretary of the Women’s National Anti-Suffragette League.**

In the context of this exhibition of Great Northern Women celebrating women’s suffrage and the centenary of granting of the vote for the first time in the 1918 Representation of the People Act, it is significant that Bell was an active correspondent and campaigner against universal suffrage.



**(1914 - 1918) During WW1 she was recruited to British Intelligence because of her knowledge and first-hand experience of the Middle East, where the Ottoman Turks were now the enemy.**

From the outbreak of war she volunteered to serve with the Red Cross, rescuing and caring for troops in the Middle-East however D.G.Hogarth was instrumental in her recruitment to the intelligence service. *Like Lawrence*, she became part of General Clayton's Arab Bureau, based initially in Cairo.

She was the first woman in British Intelligence and actually served mainly in Mesopotamia (Iraq) though at first, *being a woman*, she could be assigned only unofficially to help Hogarth compile *existing* reports from pre-war expeditions by Lawrence and herself.

After 1916, then based in Basra, she helped British forces plan their way to Baghdad following the tragic defeat at Kut and was herself witness to the Armenian genocide by the Turks. She was ultimately mentioned four times in official dispatches and awarded a CBE for her work.

**(1919 – 1926) After the war she was invited by Churchill as a middle-east expert to join the Paris (Versailles) and later Cairo peace conferences.**

As well as being bold and knowledgeable – *like Lawrence* – she was also politically skilled. Bell continued to work with and for “the Arabs” long after WWI, *unlike Lawrence* who left the conferences frustrated and disillusioned. She was “kingmaker” in getting Faisal installed as the King when Iraq was set up as an independent state in place of imperial Mesopotamia. She opposed Zionism and the Balfour Declaration in the setting-up of Israel.

As well as being advisor to the King, she was an integral member of the Iraq government in various roles until her death in 1926. Amongst other things, she set-up the Iraq Archaeological Museum, was honorary director of antiquities and served as president of the National Library of Iraq.

She maintained her interest in gardening to the end, planting daffodils in Baghdad it is said. ***Her death aged 57 in 1926*** appeared to be the tragic result of an accidental overdose of sleeping pills.



(1926) **Obituary by D G Hogarth**

“No woman in recent time has combined her qualities – her taste for arduous and dangerous adventure with her scientific interest and knowledge, her competence in archaeology and art, her distinguished literary gift, her sympathy for all sorts and condition of men [*and women*], her political insight and appreciation of human values, her masculine vigour, hard common sense and practical efficiency – all tempered by feminine charm and a most romantic spirit.”

(2007) **Rory Stewart (MP for Penrith, now Minister of Justice)**

“When I served as a British official in southern Iraq in 2003, I often heard Iraqis compare my female colleagues to Gertrude Bell. It was generally casual flattery, and yet the example of Bell and her colleagues was unsettling. *More than ten biographies* have portrayed her as the ideal Arabist, political analyst, and administrator.”

(2016) Red Barns Gertrude Bell Memorial Museum Campaign:

Since 2016 there has been a campaign to preserve Red Barns in Redcar as a permanent memorial and museum to Gertrude Bell and the Bell family, supported by local MP Anna Turley. (See [Pat Yale piece in The Guardian 9 Aug 2016](#))



(2018) **References and sources of further information:**

**Newcastle University** has a comprehensive Gertrude Bell collection, including Bell's own archive as well as teaching resources for all ages. <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/gertrudebell/> Some of these materials are curated and displayed at **Kirkleatham Museum**, Redcar as well as the Hancock "Great Northern" Museum in Newcastle. (***The Extraordinary Gertrude Bell*** – is a collection of essays edited by Mark Jackson and Andrew Parkin – *all the images on display are taken from there.*) Lady Margaret Hall also maintains a "**Portrait of Gertrude Bell**" on their alumni pages at Oxford University.

There are many biographies, documentaries and dramatisations of her life. Rory Stewart reviewed a number of these for the New York Review of Books. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/10/25/the-queen-of-the-quagmire/> In Werner Herzog's film "**Queen of the Desert**" Gertrude Bell is played by Nicole Kidman. Most recently BBC4 TV showed "**Letters from Baghdad**" where she is played by Tilda Swinton.