

British Anti-Suffrage and the Emancipation of Women in Iraq: The Case of Gertrude Bell

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Abstract

For Gertrude Bell being ‘as good as any man’ was an objective she tried to prove all her life, not only by climbing the Alps and roaming the Arabian Desert but in almost all aspects of life. This challenge remained with her till the end and may well have been one of the reasons behind her success. Bell was against female suffrage and had eagerly worked to prevent granting the vote to British women, yet she became the first British female officer and many times, exceeded the performance of her male colleagues. Bell enjoyed her role as the Oriental Secretary to Sir Percy Cox to the point of forgetting she was a woman. She insisted she was sexless and dismissed most women as uninteresting. However, her sex facilitated her mission among the Arabs who wondered what British men would be like if this was one of their women. After the vote was partially granted to British women in 1918, Bell embarked on emancipating Iraqi women. This paper highlights the contrast between Bell’s public and private personas, her anti-suffrage activities and her role in emancipating urban women in Iraq.

Keywords: Gertrude Bell, British Anti Suffrage, Iraqi Women, British Colonial policy

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‘I’m as good as any man.... and from what I see of the capacities of the ordinary mountaineer, I think I am.’ (Bell, to Florence, 12 August, 1900, Online Archive)

Introduction

For Gertrude Bell being ‘as good as any man’ was an objective she pursued not only by climbing the Alps but also by employing her ‘bewildering versatility of gifts’ and exceptional aptitude to various fields of her life and career (Saturday Review, 1927). Bell rose to a high position and exercised freedoms beyond the reach of other women. Despite her success she remained in a subordinate post serving under the Chief Political Officer in Iraq (Ridley, 1943, p. 129). While in England, Bell backed the conservative view against women’s Suffrage and her name remained on the Anti-Suffrage Review till it ceased publication in 1918. In private Bell exercised all the trends of the New Woman and resented the restrictions imposed on her sex, yet advocated the Victorian ideology of Separate Spheres.¹ When the vote was partially granted to British women in 1918, Bell embarked on westernising and ‘emancipating’ urban Iraqi women. This paper argues that the contradiction between Bell’s public face and her private persona indicate that she was neither anti-suffrage nor an emancipator of women but an unhappy woman who, in the service of the British Empire, had found escape from her personal circumstances and the stifling conventions governing the lives of Victorian-Edwardian women.

Methodology

Apart from the several biographies recording Bell’s life and career, Bell wrote over one thousand and six hundred letters home and left many diary entries. This paper throws a fresh look on Gertrude Bell’s life by setting the biographical information, her letters and diary entries against factual events. A close reading of her letters and diaries clarifies many points ignored or overlooked by her biographers and enables the reader to relate her actions to the circumstances in her life. This method helps explain why Bell advocated the Anti-Suffrage argument, travelled extensively and alone to the colonies, took a post in Baghdad and refused to return home even when her role subsided after King Faisal’s ascension to the throne in 1921. The crossed sentences, the omitted names and paragraphs, imply the removal of sensitive information, yet what remains clearly highlight the circumstances that led her to become an iconic colonial figure.

Bell believed it unwise to show one’s feelings, yet, a close look at her childhood letters highlights the forcefulness of her character. Aged eight she wrote to her father: ‘I have not time to write another letter so this must do for you and Grandmama’ (Bell, to her father, 23 November, 1874, Online Archive). What attracts attention is the way this ‘high-spirited, not to say naughty child’ (Richmond, 1937, p. 5) readily accepted her step-mother, Florence Olliffe despite her strong attachment to her father. Unlike most children her age, Bell began to call Florence ‘Mother’ five days after the wedding (Bell, to Florence, 9 and 15 August, 1876, Online Archive). Lady Bell, on the other hand, acknowledged the difficult character of her stepdaughter, describing her as a child of ‘spirit and initiative’ who led her brother ‘into most perilous adventures’ and one who would ‘lead a climbing expedition on to the top of the greenhouse’ (Bell, F., 1927a, p. 1).

In her teens, Bell was sent to Queens College. Her letters from there depict a rather unhappy young woman. Apart from resenting the college's rigid discipline, she acknowledged she was unpopular among her schoolmates whom she dismissed as 'uninteresting.' Although she tried to improve her relationship with them in the second year, the emotional strain caused by heavy family censorship did not help overcome her unpopularity as no invitation was to be accepted before her parents thoroughly checked the suitability of the homes she was to visit (Howell, 2007, p. 31). The barrier created between her and her classmates intensified her desire to escape into the world of literature, consequently widening the mental gap between herself and her female acquaintances. In later years, she apparently camouflaged this with a show of superiority and professionalism. Just as she had dismissed the girls at her school as uninteresting, she described the British women in Baghdad who called upon her as 'idle women' who 'have nothing to do all day and expect me to call and be called in the one hour of the day when I can get out and think of nothing' (4 February, 1920, Online Archive). She knew she was unpopular: 'They can think what they like about me but I won't bother anymore' (Bell, to her mother, 4 February, 1920, Online Archive). Bell, who wanted to be liked by everybody (Tibble, 1958, p. 29), writing to 'not bother anymore' emphasises that Bell was aware of and concerned with her unpopularity: 'I don't want to antagonize the whole feminine world, with which I stand badly enough already' (Bell, to her father, 1 November, 1921, Online Archive).

After Queens College², Bell was immediately sent to Lady Margaret's Hall (1886) and not to the usual one-year finishing school for young ladies, a trend which persisted among the upper-middle classes until World War I. This may well be attributed to the strained relationship between Bell and her stepmother, which they both tried hard to cover. A diary entry by her half-sister Molly Trevelyan expects 'another scene' with Gertrude because she was contradicting 'everything mother says' and had gone 'out of her way to be disoblging and snubby' (Howell, p. 27). This indicates that conflict was not an odd occurrence between Florence and Gertrude. Her other sister Elsa Richmond described Bell as a: 'high-spirited, not to say naughty child' (Richmond 1937, p. 5). A closer reading of some letters clearly demonstrate Bell's provocative attitude to her stepmother; in response to a letter from Florence asking her not to use abbreviations, Bell wrote : I waded through [your letter] which I consider a great act of self-discipline- but I avenged myself by burning [it] promptly ... My life is not long enough to give everything its full title. (Howell, p. 30)

Aged twenty-one, she wrote to Florence, minimizing her importance to her own children: The children and I played the race game in the nursery... They have expressed no regrets as to your absence... I wonder if you are amused! (Bell, to Florence, 30 October, 1889, Online Archive)

Her provocative tone becomes clearer when she demands Florence's attention: 'Are you alive or are you dead, or is it that you can't tear yourself away from Mrs. Green and Mrs. Richie' (Richmond, 1937, p. 113). In an article for the Monthly Review, Lady Bell admits that: 'smooth family intercourse can be attained only by incessant watchfulness, by deliberate and sustained effort' (Bell, F., 1901, pp. 100-101).

The tension between Florence and Bell is further reinforced if Florence's conservative view on girls' education is taken into consideration; as a typical, conservative woman, Florence

believed girls should not be overstrained with education, but trained to be good wives and mothers. Her daughters Elsa and Molly were sent to Queen's College but not to university. Molly Trevelyan explains: "... the more serious side of education did not take any part in the plans my mother made for us. Science, Mathematics, political economy... there was no need for any of those". (Howell, p. 25)

With this in mind, it is highly probable that Bell was sent away to Queens College in 1884–1886, then to Oxford University the same year and on a trip with the Lascelles3. Immediately on graduation in 1888, efforts were made to keep her away from home. Although Florence recommended sending Bell on a holiday to get rid of her 'Oxford manners' (Howell, p. 43), it is more likely that it was the former because she received a different treatment than her half-sisters and most of the girls of her class. It is worth noting that home education remained typical for the wealthy middle classes during the 1880s and 1890s and was only modified by the turn of the century (Dyhouse, p. 41). Thus the different standard applied in Bell's case highly suggest that Bell was more than Florence could handle; Bell continuously demanded her father's attention, when home, and invalidated Florence's dictates through persuading her father to take her side (Howell, p. 18). This indulgent father-daughter relationship remained till the end: Dearest Father... But what I loved in you [sic] letter was your understanding of how much I had been troubled and your wish to comfort me whether I had been right or wrong. (Bell, to her father, 1 November, 1920, Online Archive)

In the almost exclusively male world of Oxford, Bell discovered that women needed to be chaperoned whenever they attended mixed classes, went to men's colleges or mixed in male society; only thirty-three female students attended Lady Margaret's Hall in 1886 (LMH Archive). In her letters from Lady Margaret's Hall, Bell comes across as a daring New Woman rather than a conventional young lady. In those letters, she wished she was born a boy and resented the limitations and the restrictions imposed on her sex. She defied conventions and at times, to her stepmother's disapproval, broke away from the chaperone to accompany a friend on her rounds in Whitechapel. She also practised most of the feminist trends of the time like cycling, smoking, rowing, engaging in debates and flirting 'awfully' (Howell, p.148). Her behaviour seemed to alarm the family and she was reproached for flirting on a couple of occasions (Howell, pp. 49–50).

Her second visit to the Lascelles, in Persia in 1992, may well be considered a major turning point in Bell's life. In Persia, she fell in love with a British low-ranking diplomat of the English delegation, Henry Cadogan, but the family disapproved and she was summoned home. Bell exerted every effort and even wrote to friends to convince the family but all was in vain, however the story came to an end with Cadogan's death from pneumonia nine months later. Although Bell was devastated and mourned him for years, her response to her family deserves some attention; though she grieved, she did not blame anyone and her outward reaction was as compliant as that of any Victorian daughter, which seems uncharacteristic of Bell's nature.

To overcome her sorrow she followed Florence's advice and wrote about her travels. Her book was anonymously published in July 1894 as *Safar Nameh—Persian Pictures, A Book of Travel*. This was immediately followed by her translation of Sufi poems from *Divan of Hafez*4; her translation of the poems suggests Bell had used them as an outlet for her resentment. The

poems not only reflect rebellion against Victorian conventions but bitterness and loss. A simple comparison between Bell's translation and one by the Sufi bilingual Persian poet Shahriar Shahriari (Shahriari, 1995–2005) of the same verse shows the vast difference in meaning: Bell's verse, for example, writes: 'Where is my ruined life, and where the fame of noble deeds?' (Bell, 1897 [1994], p.85). Shahriari's translation, on the other hand, reads: 'Where is sensible action and my insanity whence?' The hidden agony reminds the reader of her belief in not showing one's feelings and recalls to mind Georgina Howell's comment that Bell strapped a pistol to her calf under the 'Victorian lady's silk petticoats and dresses of lace' (Howell, p. X).

Dutiful Anti-Suffrage

Anti-suffrage required mobilising women to make a convincing argument. Women's financial dependence and Victorian conventions of loyalty and compliance obliged most conservative wives and daughters to adopt the views held by their patriarchs. Women whose financial circumstances required them to work but were too ambitious to accept the position of governess⁵, for example, were inclined to advocate the dominant ideology too, even if it contradicted their beliefs. Most aristocratic women, whose interests were entwined with the Empire, prioritised the interest of the State at the expense of the Woman Question: 'If the interest of women were opposed to the interest of the State, then I say fearlessly the interest of the State must prevail' (Curzon, 1912, pp. 18–19). Influenced by politicians in their families and social circles, these women reiterated this argument, dismissing any need for the vote; Lady Salisbury's⁶ comment to Lady Frances Balfour⁷: 'What earthly good will it do to any woman to have a vote?' (11 February, 1897, Online Archive) may serve to clarify the way many aristocratic and upper middle-class ladies reacted to suffrage (Pugh, 2000, p. 147). However women of the upper and middle-classes who sought change had to be of great courage and full financial independence to risk challenging the dominant ideology.

Bell definitely had courage but lacked financial independence. This is indicated by her letter to her friend Chirol (Sir Valentine Ignatius, 1852–1929), in which she remarked that marrying Cadogan meant her father would have to finance another household (Howell, p. 57). Apart from demonstrating that '... beyond love and sympathy he [Cadogan] could not give her what she wanted' (Winstone, 1980, p. 36), it clarifies why she really had to succumb to family wishes. Similarly Bell's father, Sir Hugh, advocated anti-suffrage and Bell, apart from adoring her father, was too clever to risk losing his support. The fact that her anti-suffrage vigour did not last for long – despite her appointment as first Secretary of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League in 1908, and membership of the executive committee of the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage (1910–1918) – reflects that she was not totally convinced. Her active involvement ended around 1912 but her financial contributions remained and were clearly financed by her father: 'Tell Father I sent the Anti-Suffrage office £101 out of his cheque for their entertainment scheme...' (Bell, to Florence, 8 January, 1915, Online Archive). This highlights that she maintained her financial contributions as a form of duty or for the sake of class politesse and her name remained on the front page of the Anti-Suffrage Review till both the League and the paper closed down in 1918.

Like many 'Antis', Bell's public face contradicted her private persona; her close friend Janet Hogarth (née Courtney) comments that Bell was 'surprisingly' appointed the first Secretary of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League in 1908 and mentions that she enlisted both Lord

Curzon and Lord Cromer 'who were ready to make common cause with anyone sharing their fear of allowing feminine influence to sway imperial policy' (Courtney, 1931, p. 509). Howell argues that 'Gertrude betrays lack of mission in the affair... that suggests she had taken the work largely to please Florence' (Howell, p. 76), and Brian Harrison mentions that Bell had in 1912 prevented a meeting for the Church League for Women's Suffrage⁸ by slipping a word to the Archbishop of York and preventing the suffrage question from coming up at the Middlesbrough Church Congress (Harrison, 1978, p. 184). However, Bell's general attitude is best summed by H. V. F. Winstone, who comments that Bell 'both acknowledged and breached the conventions of her age,' and doubted the concept of equality, 'but only a very brave man would dare to deny her right to an equal place in his midst' (Winstone, 1980, p. 81).

Bell mostly reflected the New Woman; this makes it hard to believe that she would advocate anti-suffrage unless something influenced her to do so, such as pleasing her anti-suffrage father, which in turn gained her the admiration of his influential friends. Her description of an incident involving suffragettes reflects amusement rather than dismay or criticism:

Dearest Father ... Asquith⁹ was interpolated by 3 suffragettes, one of whom shook him on the stairs, taking him by the shoulders. He was furious and Mrs Asquith was so angry that she hit one of them with her fan... Sir Meiklejohn was so raging about the suffragettes that he could scarcely speak! Everyone asked why you were not there. (Bell, to her father, (n.d.) June, 1912, Online Archive)

Although Bell's anti-suffrage cannot be regarded as completely financially based, money played a significant role in shaping her life. Yet her compliance seems unusual for a woman of her character unless financial dependency is taken into consideration. Not willing to jeopardise family support or risk social gossip through open rebellion, Bell sought escape by being away most of the time. Following the publication of *Divan* in June 1897, Bell began a six-month round-the-world tour with her brother Maurice. From that year onward, she showed little tolerance for staying home for long. She went on several short trips with members of her family until she left England in 1899 on her first trip alone to Jerusalem. This was immediately followed by another to the Arabian Desert in 1900. However it is interesting to find that no one seemed to mind her travelling unaccompanied 'by man or woman of her own race,' even though this constituted a breach of Victorian conventions. To the contrary *The Anti-Suffrage Review* was proud of her:

'Miss Bell is one of the most accomplished women of our day, and suffragists might do well to ask themselves why she is also one of the strongest Anti-Suffragists of our day.' (*Anti-Suffrage Review*, February 1911, p. 23)

T. E. Lawrence's comments that Bell 'changed her direction like a weathercock' and was a 'slave of some momentary power' and a 'bad judge of men and situations', though discriminatory, help explain how, as a woman, she had to manoeuvre and accommodate to get and maintain a position in a highly prejudiced environment (University of Newcastle, 1994).

Accommodation is a skill exercised by the intelligent and it seems that Bell had gained this skill early in life. Her acceptance of her father's marriage, Cadogan's death, and her strained relationship with Florence did not lead to open rebellion, thus it is viable to assume that she

sought her way out through travel. Being by her father's side during anti-suffrage gatherings reflected her as the ideal conservative daughter which eased her travels and facilitated her later career; this would have been problematic had she openly been a New Woman or a suffrage activist. During her travels, Bell did not waste time but worked hard to acquire information valuable for the British Empire. With great precision, Bell identified the Oriental way of life, thinking, religious beliefs, habits and social hierarchy. Her superior knowledge of the Arab region gained her the recognition of the British government and colonial administrators, like Sir Winston Churchill, Sir Percy Cox, and many others.

Although she may not have been officially employed during her earlier travels, due to restrictions on women's employment, her letters indicate an early connection with intelligence. Barbra Furst and others say Bell gained entry to the Foreign Office and the Indian Civil Service through her father's connections after he passed on her letters to influential people in London (Furst, 2005).

Like many male graduates of Oxford who travelled as archaeologists, Bell obtained valuable information to realise two Empire objectives: organize the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turks and protect the oilfields near Basra and Shatt al Arab, which was the only source of oil for the Royal Navy. Bell also examined the economic potential of competing with the Germans in projects like the railways, and her intelligence was encouraged by the British establishment from as early as 1900. Even though she is not recorded to have formally joined the British Secret Service until 1916, the circumstances of her journeys suggest otherwise. Her visit to Jerusalem in November 1899, for example, came in response to an invitation by Nina Rosen, wife of the German Consul in Jerusalem, but a closer look suggests it was more like an undercover training expedition. Apart from coinciding with other secret-servicemen's explorations in the region, in Italy Bell met, earlier in the year, David Hogarth, who later became her secret service mentor. In Jerusalem she did not stay with the Rosens, who had invited her, but in a hotel and began learning Arabic which she said was 'a great rock in time of trouble' (Bell, to her father, 25 January, 1900, Online Archive). This suggests more than mere tourism and weakens Winstone's assumption that the German Consul's house lacked space to accommodate Bell (Winstone, p. 53). Her comment that she 'would rather get well hold of Arabic than anything in the world' (Bell, to her father, 11 February, 1900, Online Archive), and her risky journey, on her own, to Petra and Jabel Druze, in south-western Syria, against the wishes of the Turkish authorities, arousing their suspicions, makes it very likely that she was involved in espionage in some way. A letter to her father in 1913 clearly indicates that there was a reason for her presence in the region: 'things are working out much better than I expected they would.' She also asked that the purpose of her travel must not to be disclosed to others at least for the time being: 'but don't talk about Nejd to outsiders in case it does not come off' (Bell, to her father, 29 November, 1913, Online Archive). Similarly, Lord Cromer's 'much concern' to oblige her request to 'to have a good talk with a learned [Arab] sheikh' in Cairo and the 'immediate result' of visiting Al-Azhar on the same day suggest great interest in her observations (Bell, to Florence, 1 January, 1907, Online Archive). Bell's letters on more than one occasion mention her being given letters of introduction: 'These last I shall certainly take... but I never tell anyone of the Nejd plans except [her guide] Muhammad al Bassam' (Bell, to her father, 29 November, 1913, Online Archive).

Her letters, accurate reports and superior knowledge led to her appointment at the Cairo Bureau with the outbreak of WW1, three years before the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act. She operated under the title of 'Major Miss Bell,' becoming the first British female Intelligence and Military officer. David Hogarth (1862–1927) credited Bell for much of the success of the Arab Revolt, stressing that her extensive travels in the Middle East provided a 'mass of information' crucial to British success, stressing that T. E. Lawrence's 'revolt in the desert' would not have been possible without the intelligence provided by Bell: 'It was this information' Lawrence relied on in the 'Arab campaigns of 1917 and 1918' (Furst 2005). Bell established close relations with tribe members across the Middle East. Her sex made it easier to befriend Arab men and gave her access to the women's chambers too, where she could find out critical information and study the social habits and culture. When the British replaced the Turks in the region, she was appointed Oriental Secretary to the High Commissioner in Mesopotamia, Sir Percy Cox, in 1916.

Al-Khatun: the unrivalled woman in Iraq

In Iraq, Bell enjoyed all the freedoms. She smoked in public, rode horses and ponies at dawn, dined with and manipulated men of the Iraqi government. She received male guests and attended exclusively male gatherings. With her colleagues, Bell considered herself an officer and therefore 'sexless' and her colleagues acted accordingly. However, the situation differed with Arabs who are conscious of sexual differences. Notwithstanding her fondness for ordering fashionable clothes from home when she was in the Middle East, whatever she wore was more revealing than any outfit worn by Arab women outside the home simply because she was unveiled. Her intelligence, aristocratic gentility, and her freedom to visit and receive men on her own impacted Iraqi men in two different ways: firstly, Iraqis generally admire and respect women with a masculine mind. Such women, usually elderly, are desexualised and are often called 'sister.'¹⁰ Bell understood the implication in Hajji Na'muk Bey's statement and was undoubtedly proud to be considered a man rather than offended:

I was writing letters when in came my friend Hajji Na'muk Bey ... he gave me back my rifle... He loves me more than a sister, he says, because I am a man - if you understand this confused statement. (Bell, to her father, 18 March, 1911, Online Archive)

However, her female influence not only charmed a strict Iraqi cleric to the point of losing his reserve (Bell, to her father, 18 May, 1917, Online Archive), but the King¹¹ himself 'kissed my hand at intervals, which is is [sic] very disconcerting'. The King's 'disconcerting' kisses enabled a 'terrific discussion' on serious affairs of the kingdom (Bell, to her father, 4 June 1922, Online Archive). She amusedly acknowledged: 'I was different and perhaps the King does hold my hand more though he embraces Mr Cornwallis oftener - we compare notes' (Bell, to her father, 16 July, 1922, Online Archive). Her position as a colonial administrator serving the Empire –sometimes more efficiently than her male counterparts– gave her satisfaction and enabled her to prove her worth. She admitted not wanting to leave the freedom of the colony to the limitations of home: 'I shall be sorry to leave this wonderful freedom and to be back within walls and gardens.' Unlike the women of the country, Bell's sex and colonial authority gave her an upper hand in managing affairs. She influenced, persuaded, hassled and controlled influential politicians and religious figures as part of her role within the British Empire. Bell's existence in the colony made her feel a 'somebody' and a 'person', as she repeated on many occasions. It

granted her privileges; she was called Al-Khatun, a title equivalent to that of Lady, and was fussed over by the King and prominent officials:

Faisal [King of Iraq] has promised me a regiment of the Arab army - the Khatun's ... I shall presently ask you to have their colours embroidered. Nuri [the Prime Minister] proposes that I should have an army corps!

Oh Father, isn't it wonderful. I sometimes think I must be in a dream. (Bell, to her father, 6 August, 1921, Online Archive)

Amidst the glory of her achievements, Bell sometimes forgot she was a woman but was sometimes reminded by the Arabs of her sex; she recounts how a sheikh reminded her of her womanhood and placed her, though temporarily, back in her 'right place;' the man amazed to see a woman handling affairs had wondered if 'this is a woman - what must the [British] men be like!' (1 June, 1917, Online Archive). Her absorption in her role convinced her that she could transcend gender differences and gave her hope that she may succeed Sir Percy Cox: 'I'm second choice for High Commissioner here, so I'm told... It's really just as much a female job' but this was not encouraged by the British government even after the removal of the Sex Disqualification Act. However, Bell thought that she could fill that seat and signed her letter 'Your very affectionate High Commissioner Gertrude' (Bell, to Florence, 5 December, 1918, Online Archive).

At home, her services abroad granted her the admiration of her people and diverted attention away from the rules she broke, for which otherwise she would have been considered a rebel. Bell considered herself to be an exception; this is evident in her harsh remarks against spouses of British officers' in post-war Baghdad, of whom she said: 'A collection of more tiresome women I never encountered.' She further refers to them as: 'the dreadful second rate little minxes of which Baghdad society has so far mostly been composed' (Bell, [recipient unspecified], 5 January, 1922, Online Archive). Although she admits to being caustic and lonely - 'I know I am inelastic' - she could not force herself to befriend any of them: 'I simply can't bear that sort and I just stand out all the time wishing there were someone I liked to stand with' (Bell, 5 January, 1922), however she enjoyed her privileged role in Iraq; 'I'm currently described as a Kokusah¹², i.e. a female Chosroes. Isn't it delicious!' (Bell, to her father, 8 June, 1917, Online Archive).

Emancipator of Iraqi Women

Bell's interest in Iraqi women only becomes evident after the vote was partially granted to women over the age of thirty in 1918. Her letters noticeably begin to mention the emancipation of Iraqi women, marking a sharp turn from her anti-suffrage affiliation. Whether Bell's role was part of the colonial administration's scheme to emancipate women as part of the grafting process in the colonies, or a personal one, the fact that it coincided with the enfranchisement of women in Britain strongly suggests she voiced the metropolis's point of view. The British Empire through its administrators worked on comprehending and reordering the foreign in parallel and analogous terms, thus the rest of the Empire was to be made part of Britain (Cannadine, 2002, pp. xvii, 1-5). Long before 1918, Lord Cromer, a prominent anti-suffrage, and British Consul-General in Egypt 1883-1907, stressed, as part of the colonial 'grafting process' to transplant its spirit in the colonies, that the Egyptians should be 'persuaded or forced' to become 'civilized' by disposing of the women's veil. However, since the 1850s

there had already been a general movement of scientific and literary reinvigoration, including the question of women, in Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq, generated by increased contact with the Europeans (Hussein, 1935, pp. 30–31). Bell acknowledged Iraq's tribal traditions and people's opposition to the Western style of life, thus avoided direct intervention and supported setting two legal systems for Iraq; rural communities were subject to the Tribal Criminal and Civil Dispute Regulations which permitted the application of 'tribal law' in tribal communities while the urban population were governed by the civil and criminal laws (Efrati, 2012, pp. 21–85).

Bell backed British non-interference in tribal customs and laws, however the situation slightly differed in Baghdad and other major cities where efforts to educate women had already been introduced by the Ottomans in the late nineteenth century. Girls' schools were mostly available to upper-class people who encouraged the education of their daughters (Mikhail, 2004, p. 1). Figures like Sati' al-Husri¹³ and poets like Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi, combined efforts, writing articles and poems calling Iraqi women to unveil. Poets like Ma'ruf al-Rusafi based their argument, in support of women's education, on the principles of Islam that encouraged the education of both sexes, but these calls were met with fierce opposition; Al-Zahawi's article, published in Egyptian *Al-Mu'ayyad* in 1910, triggered strong reactions in Baghdad, Egypt and other Arab capitals, accusing Al-Zahawi of atheism for which he was dismissed from law school (Al-Haydari, 2014). Bell avoided direct intervention in this delicate matter: 'They must work out their own salvation and it wouldn't help them to be backed by an infidel, even if the infidel were I who am permitted many things here' (Bell, to her father, 15 May, 1921, Archive).

Indirect British support involved opening the Women's Awakening Club in Baghdad on November 1924 and the encouragement of any tendencies to grant more freedom to women; Bell commented that British efforts were paying off: '... I went ... to the opening of a Women's club - yes, indeed. Aren't we [the British] advancing Moslem women! There's a quite considerable women's movement going on' (Bell, to her father, 26 November, 1924, Online Archive). Bell also encouraged Iraqi female vanguards to move forward and some even approached her to support their nationalist issues (Efrati, 2008, p. 451). She also encouraged younger generations: 'afraid of all the prejudiced old tongues' to rebel against the old traditions and welcomed visits from young Iraqi men who: '...bring their wives to see me which is an unexpected departure from Baghdad customs... I welcome everything which tends in this direction...' (Bell, to her father, 15 May, 1921, Online Archive). Bell lectured and held social events, introducing the closed society of Baghdad to cinematography and modern life. Iraqi upper-class women welcomed the new horizons:

"On Monday I lectured... On Tuesday I had a terrific evening - the Ladies' night at the Cinematograph. Not very many of the veiled women came, but those who came were all of great families, so I hope it will make a beginning... my part of explainer was not difficult". (Bell, to her father, June 7, 1918, Online Archive)

Although her previous hostility to women, though still existent, became less apparent in her efforts to move in 'that direction,' her letters continued to express her dislike for keeping regular contacts with Iraqi women. Her business-like tone and complaint for having to see those women strongly suggest it was part of an obligation. Twice in less than a week she complained to her father about having ladies' tea parties: 'Today I'm waiting for a number of the ladies of

Baghdad- I've got one lot today (Monday) and another on Wed. One must get these things over before Ramadhan which begins May 8' (Bell, to her father, 2 May, 1921, Online Archive). Six days later, she wrote again: 'On Wed. I had second tea party [for Iraqi] ladies; about 25 came and it was very friendly and pleasant...'; however, her relief to see the parties stop is evident: 'This week Ramadhan begins which will put an end to tea parties, a thing I shan't regret' (Bell, to her mother, Baghdad, May 8, 1921, Online Archive).

Her interest in the results of this British experiment in Iraq also confirms it as being part of British policy. In a letter to the political officer for the middle Euphrates, Captain Frank Balfour, Bell wrote:

Do you know the emancipation of the female sex is going forward? Women ... rebel against Baghdad standards of feminine behaviour... But think of it in Baghdad! I await developments. (Bell, to Frank [Balfour], 17 December, 1921, Online Archive)

Four years later, Bell seems to have understood the impact of British policy on society and the difficult position created for women seeking Western emancipation in a tribal-based Muslim social structure; undecided whether to continue or leave women to sort themselves out she wrote: 'I am wholly in favour of it –it's the first step in female emancipation here– and yet wholly against it' (Bell, to her father, 22 January, 1924, Online Archive). Her mixed feelings towards emancipation, her indirect intervention and the timing of her emancipation efforts all help to consolidate the view that she undertook this task as part of her colonial role. It is also unlikely that Bell, who could not tolerate the 'ordinary' wives of the British officers, should dedicate time and effort for emancipating the women of Iraq. Her belief in the inferiority of the Arabs as part of her colonial identity is obvious in her surprise to find Iraqi women acting with decorum and 'complete absence of self-consciousness' better than 'many of the greater ladies' of Britain (Bell, to her father, 8 December, 1921, Online Archive). Bell's comments on the freedom to sit on the balcony, enjoyed by the female members of the royal family, 14 clearly highlights her certainty that life in Iraq, facilitated by the British, was much better in comparison to their life in Saudi Arabia: 'just think of the life they've all led, imprisoned in the Mecca palace with a pack of women and slaves! Just to sit on the balcony and see the Tigris flowing must be wonderful to them.' (Bell, to her father, 23 December, 1924, Online Archive).

Deep-seated Alienation

Bell dreaded going back home and was encouraged by Florence to stay in Iraq for another year. She was conscious of the change in her personality: 'the me they knew will not come back in the me that returns,' she wrote to her friend Valentine Chirol. In the same letter, she further emphasised her estrangement with family and former milieu: 'perhaps they will not find out' (Burgoyne, 1958, p. 143). Bell also admitted to her friend Janet Courtney (née Hogarth), on her last visit to Britain in the summer of 1925, that she did not know what to do if she were to return home. Hogarth suggested she should stand for Parliament, but Bell dismissed the idea on the grounds that she was not suited for politics and was in view of slipping back to the 'comfortable arena' of archaeology and history (Bell, F., 1927 b, p. 222). This comes across as yet another occasion in which she did not reveal her thoughts. Apart from being a natural politician, she had, at that particular time, been diagnosed by doctors as suffering great nervous and physical fatigue, which makes archaeological work in the Middle East climate easier said than done. Bell also noted that, apart from it making her miserable, Parliament's doors were closed before her: 'I know that I could not enter the lists' (Bell, F., 1927 b, p. 222). Not being

able to 'enter the lists' of electoral candidates meant that Bell was unable to take that route even if she wanted to. The absence of close family relationships and a suitable career meant that Bell had nothing to return to.

Unlike other Victorian women travellers who returned to settle among friends and family, Bell insisted on staying in Baghdad despite the fact that her role and power had significantly subsided (Birkett, 1991, p. 260). The issue of Bell's return home cropped up once more in 1926 in a conversation with writer, novelist and traveller Vita Sackville West (1892–1962) while in Baghdad. Bell explained: 'I can't pick up the thread where I dropped it' (Birkett, 1991, p. 260). She knew that life at home was not going to be easy: 'I can't. And it becomes more, not less difficult' (Birkett, 1991, p. 260).

Her refusal to return home suggests she dreaded the revival of memories or unresolved matters: 'Oh if I could look forward and see a time when thought should stop, and memory, and consciousness' (Birkett, 1991, p. 260), but she knew she would have to return one day. Her long absence deprived her of the opportunity to be equally productive or prestigious at home. The change of stratum she would have had to face at the age of fifty-seven would place her in a position similar to that of the intellectual in exile who suffers the loss of his professional future and his former distinct position. The long years of separation from family inevitably meant that she had missed out on most developments, weddings, and births that had taken place: 'this is the 8th Christmas that I've been away' (Bell, to her father, 8 December, 1921, Online Archive). This in turn made it hard to slot herself back within the family. The glorious past, the privileges she enjoyed as the one 'Khatun' of Baghdad and the freedoms she had been allowed in that strict society, would make it hard for her to accept the idea of returning to the secondary position of a spinster aunt, that is if she still had any position, other than symbolic, in the family. Two months before Bell died, she wrote to her stepmother that she did not want to leave Iraq and find herself 'really rather loose on the world' (Bell, to Florence, 26 May, 1926, Online Archive).

However, Bell was unhappy with her life in Iraq too: '... I'm so tired of struggling on alone.' She knew it was time to leave because she had become 'not at all necessary in the office' (Bell, to Florence, 26 May, 1926, Online Archive). This went hand-in-hand with her declining political reputation in Britain after the outbreak of the Great Iraqi Revolution in 1920 which materialised Iraqis' discontent with the British Mandate. Bell had ignored the warning of the British Civil Commissioner in Baghdad, Sir Arnold Wilson 1918–1920, on the possible outbreak of trouble, and the revolution cost the British several hundred lives and forty million pounds and the end of direct colonial control. By 1926, her role as advisor to the Iraqi monarch had also subsided; now King of the unoccupied state of Iraq, Faisal was no longer tied to her advice. Bell also retreated from the expanding colonial community in Baghdad which emphasises that the British government was not as interested in her services. The fact that she wanted a permanent post in Iraq but could not ask the Iraqi government is a clear-cut indication that she was jobless and far less prominent than she had ever been:

"I would have liked to stay in the Dept of Antiquities ... but I don't feel justified in asking the Iraq Govt to give me anything like a permanent post.' Despite that, it was hard to return home: 'I don't see at all clearly what I shall do but of course I can't stay here forever'" (Bell, to Florence, 26 May, 1926, Online Archive).

In conclusion, Bell was neither an emancipator of Iraqi women nor a genuine British anti-suffrage figure but an intelligent woman seeking a way out of unhappy circumstances. Both her attitudes were adopted in sheer strategic compliance with the policy-makers of the time. She changed her views accordingly when it became part of the Empire's policy to anglicise the colony. Her successful career was triggered by her personal bereavements; her three attempts to find true love were doomed to failure. Apart from Cadogan, Bell later fell seriously in love the married Major Charles Doughty Wylie (1868–1915). The relationship also came to an end by his death, in Gallipoli. A one-sided love on Bell's part for Kinahan Cornwallis (Howell, 2007, pp. 433–436) also seems to suggest that Bell's femininity was mostly effective as part of her colonial role, where life not only provided a legitimate escape but helped Bell prove her worth as a colonial administrator in Iraq after WWI.

Despite the recognition and the British government's dependence on the information she provided, she was never a decision-maker even in the affairs of the country she knew exceptionally well, and of which she drew its borders and recommended its King to the British government. Her role was restricted to giving advice to the people in charge. As a woman, Bell remained in a secondary position despite her important contributions to the British Empire. Her death, from an overdose of sleeping pills, came when she realised her services were no longer needed. Death put an end to her fears of an unhappy future and provided a lasting escape. Bell's obituary, published by the Royal Geographical Society, curiously described her as escaping the desire to be advertised 'thanks to lifelong indifference to what are called Feminist Movements... which some distinguished members of her sex have suffered' (D.G.H., 1926, *The Geographical Journal*).

Notes

1Early Victorian gender prescriptions featured men as industrious breadwinners and women as their loyal helpmates. Reinforced by social philosophers like Herbert Spencer, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and John Ruskin, this developed into a mid-century doctrine of 'separate spheres', whereby men were figured as competitors in the amoral, economic realm while women were positioned as decorative trophies and spiritual guardians of men and in charge of providing domestic bliss for the man when he comes back from the exhausting world outside. In the 1860s, the Darwinian theory of 'survival of the fittest' added a pseudo-scientific dimension which placed men higher on the evolutionary ladder.

2Queen's College in Harley Street was an Anglican institution for the education of future governesses. It accepted girls and women from the age of twelve.

3Mary Emma Lascelles (née Olliffe), spouse of Sir Frank Lascelles, was the sister of Lady Florence Bell (née Olliffe). Sir Frank served as Consul-General in Egypt from 20 March to 10 October 1879, during the last years of the reign of Khedive Isma'il Pasha. In 1879, Lascelles became Consul-General in Bulgaria until 1887, then Romania from 1887 to 1891 and Persia from 1891 to 1894, where Gertrude Bell visited him. He served briefly as Ambassador to Russia 1894–1895, and in the latter year he succeeded Sir Edward Mallet as Ambassador to Germany.

4Fourteenth-century Sufi Persian poet.

5Being a governess was one of the few legitimate ways by which an unmarried middle-class woman could support herself in Victorian society. Her position was often depicted as one to be pitied, and the only way out of it was to get married. They were usually in charge of girls. They also taught younger boys till they were old enough to attend school.

6Lady Salisbury chaired the executive committee of the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage (1910–1918) and was the wife of Lord Salisbury, a British Conservative statesman, who served as prime minister three times for a total of over 13 years.

7Lady Frances Balfour (née Campbell; 22 February 1858 – 25 February 1931) was one of the highest-ranking members of the British aristocracy to assume a leadership role in the women's suffrage movement. In 1879, she married Eustace Balfour, elder brother of Arthur Balfour, Conservative British prime minister from 1902 to 1905.

8A small Anglican suffragist organisation founded in 1909.

9Herbert Henry Asquith (1852–1928) served as the Liberal Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1908 to 1916.

10The term 'sister' is used by most Arabs and Muslim men to express respect for a woman void of sexual desire.

11King Faisal I of Iraq (1921–1933).

12The feminine of 'Kokus', the native Iraqi pronunciation of Sir Percy Cox's surname.

13 A former Ottoman official and later the director-general of education in Iraq (1923–1927).

14Iraq's royal family were from Saudi Arabia. King Faisal I, former ruler of Syria, was nominated by Bell as the best man for the throne.

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