

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE  
Filozofická fakulta  
Ústav anglistiky a amerikanistiky

The Image of Arabia in the Letters and Diaries  
of Gertrude Bell

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí diplomové práce:  
PhDr. Soňa Nováková, CSc., M.A.

Zpracovala:  
Katarína Maruškinová  
Obor: anglistika – amerikanistika

Praha, červen 2007

I declare that the following bachelor thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned in the bibliography.

Prague, 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2007

Katarína Maruškinová

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Soňa Nováková for her guidance during my writing of the thesis, for her patience and encouragement.

# Contents

## Introduction 2

### 1. The Life of Gertrude Bell 4

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| <i>1.1 Bell and Travel</i> .....    | 4  |
| <i>1.2 Bell and Politics</i> .....  | 8  |
| <i>1.3 Bell's Writings</i> .....    | 10 |
| <i>1.4 Critics about Bell</i> ..... | 11 |

### 2. The Arabian Diaries ..... 14

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <i>2.1 Journey to Ha'il</i> .....                                      | 14 |
| <i>2.2 General Description and Themes of The Arabian Diaries</i> ..... | 15 |
| <i>2.3 The Style of The Arabian Diaries</i> .....                      | 18 |
| <i>2.4 Imagery and Symbols in the Diaries</i> .....                    | 20 |
| <i>2.4.1 The Desert</i> .....  | 20 |
| <i>2.4.2 The Colors of the Desert</i> .....                            | 22 |
| <i>2.4.3 The Desert and the Imperial Traveler</i> .....                | 24 |

### 3. Gertrude Bell and the People of Arabia ..... 27

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <i>3.1 The Arabs of Bell's Diaries</i> .....  | 27 |
| <i>3.2 Bell's roles among the Arabs</i> ..... | 31 |
| <i>3.2.1 Bell as a spectator</i> .....        | 31 |
| <i>3.2.2 Bell as a woman</i> .....            | 34 |

### Conclusion ..... 42

### Resumé ..... 44

### Bibliography ..... 46

## Introduction

Gertrude Bell is an English writer, scholar, archeologist and politician who lived at the beginning of the 20th century and enormously influenced the political situation of the postwar Middle East. She literally drew the borders of the newly-emerging state of Iraq and advised the appointed King Faisal in political matters.

Long before Gertrude Bell took her role in the high politics, she traveled across the Middle East to learn the Arabic language, to get to know the Arabic culture as well as to photograph, work on excavations and, very importantly, to spy. She never failed to keep a diary of some sort to remember her individual journeys and adventures for her beloved ones. Her book of letters addressed to her parents consists of hundreds of letters which introduce us to the Arab world of the early 20th century. *The Arabian Diaries*, which she wrote in the year of 1914 give us a chance to take a glimpse at the most important, the most adventurous but also the most dangerous journey she undertook in her life - the journey to the city of Ha'il, which lies in the middle of the Arabian desert.

This work will examine Gertrude Bell's life and travels before her journey to Ha'il, her reasons for visiting this city and her political activities prior to the visit. The focus then will be on the Diaries, which is a collection of daily entries in the form of letters addressed to her lover Doughty-Wylie. I will examine the language and style of the *Diaries* to stress its specifics. The analysis of this work will then be divided into two parts: Bell's description of the desert country and her attitudes towards the desert from the point of view of the European imperial traveler, and Bell's accounts of the Arabs that she meets in the desert, her description of Arab men and women, as well as Bell's role within the Arabic society. Above all, the goal is to stress the uniqueness of Bell's approach towards the foreign culture and her relationship to it, based on her life-experiences as well as the influence of her learning and upbringing

which finally earned her such an important role in the political field and allowed her to participate in creating and forming the future of the Middle East.

## 1. The Life of Gertrude Bell

### 1.1 Bell and Travel

Jane Robinson in her book, *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travelers*, lists over 150 women of various nationalities who traveled to different parts of the world and left the readership with the accounts of their experiences over the span of centuries. Out of this stunning number, 46 were travelers to the region of Arabia and Mesopotamia.

The traveling women writers are divided into two categories; those who traveled out of their own choice and those who didn't. In the first group, she lists the brave women who became pioneers, explorers, missionaries, scientists, climbers or mere tourists, traveling the world out of curiosity, without any special aim. The last category consists of diplomats, emigrants or native Arabs who relocated very often without their consent.

Gertrude Bell stands out as a very unique traveler. Robinson lists her among the group of the pioneering women, but Bell herself admitted in her first book, *The Desert and the Sown*, written in 1907, that she wasn't traveling on the "ground virgin to the traveler",<sup>1</sup> and this would be true for all her journeys in the Middle East and elsewhere. So this categorization is not very precise, and, what's more, Bell falls into almost all other categories of the traveling women. We can see her traveling as an explorer, a scientist, a spy, a climber, a politician and diplomat, and also as a mere tourist. In terms of her roles in the field of traveling, Bell therefore comes to achieve much more than any other woman traveler at the turn of the twentieth century.

Bell's traveler's roles have been established and so must be the reasons for her traveling in order to understand her personality and her writings. Two reasons seem to stand

---

<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Bell, *The Desert and the Sown* (New York: E.P.Dutton and company, 1907) 50.

out as the most important impulses: her passion for “wild travel” and her attempt to escape from the stereotypical life in England. We can feel from the words that open her first book, *The Desert and the Sown*, she dreaded the stereotype and wanted to escape from it by the means of traveling:

To those bred under an elaborate social order few such moments of exhilaration can come as that which stands at the threshold of wild travel. The gates of the enclosed garden are thrown open, the chain at the entrance to the sanctuary is lowered, with a wary glance to right and left you step forth and behold! the immeasurable world.<sup>2</sup>

All her life, Gertude Bell is on the run – away from the family, especially her stepmother, away from the Victorian society of England of the late nineteenth century, and away from the pain of a broken heart and following spinsterhood.

To understand Bell and her motivations, it has to be said that she came from a politically very influential English family; her grandfather Isaac Bell was a successful businessman during the Industrial Revolution and a Member of Parliament in Benjamin Disraeli's government. According to Rosemary O'Brien, her grandfather's political career was of key importance to Bell's political involvement in the Middle East. Her stepmother, Florence Bell, with whom young Gertrude did not have a very cordial relationship, would often invite various politicians into their house for discussions about world politics. Gertrude, therefore, literally grew up with the knowledge of the world and its complexity as far as politics go and many of the public figures that she encountered in her own house would become useful to her in her later political career.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Bell, *The Desert and the Sown* 3.

<sup>3</sup> Gertrude Bell, *The Arabian Diaries, 1913-1914*, ed. by Rosemary O'Brien, (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 6.

Bell's first travel adventure comes in her early adulthood, at the age of 24, with her first journey to the Middle East. This happened in the year 1892 when she accepted an invitation of her aunt Mary to join her and her daughter to travel to Persia, where Bell's uncle, Sir Frank Lascelles was serving as a British minister. Bell readily accepted and for the first time she traveled out of curiosity about the world beyond the borders of her native country.

From the very beginning, it is important to stress one distinct mark of Bell's attitude towards travel – she always took time to make a careful preparation for her ventures in terms of the knowledge of the place. Her journey to Persia is a good example; Bell, once she accepted the invitation to the trip to Persia, started to study the language spoken in Persia, Farsi. She was highly motivated in her study and excited to see results: in one of the letters she sent back home from the journey, she exclaims: “There are great shields hung high up on the walls with the names of the descendants of Mahommed written in Arabic on them – imagine my excitement when I looked up at one and read it!”<sup>4</sup> Little did Bell know that her knowledge of Arabic will be essential to her later adventures in the Arabian desert. Not only that, Bell later publishes a translation of the fourteenth century poems of the renowned Persian poet Hafez.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, she travels out of passion for mountaineering and this passion takes her to Switzerland. When she is not climbing the mountains, she is learning the classical languages and also immerses herself into the study of archeology, to become a scientist and a specialist on the region of the Middle East where she later works side by side with Sir William Ramsey, a New Testament scholar in the region of Turkey. In 1907, she embarks on a journey to Mesopotamia and works in the Hittite city of Carchemisch and other sites.

---

<sup>4</sup> Elsa Richmond ed., *The Earlier Letters of Gertrude Bell* (London: E. Benn, 1937) 255.

This is the time when she is supposedly serving as a spy for the British Empire. This is the result of her joining British Intelligence in Cairo at the Arab Bureau but also of her connections with the people in high politics thanks to her grandfather's membership in Parliament and, quite obviously, her interests and abilities.

It is also at the beginning of the new century, in Bell's early thirties when her role of an explorer-traveler comes to light. She travels to Jerusalem and to the Syrian mountains to look for the Druzes. In order to reach her aim she dresses as a man and is rewarded by befriending the Druze King Yahya Bey.

Her exploration of the area continues with her visit to Ha'il in the Arabian Desert in the year of 1914. With this journey, she again immerses herself in the art of espionage and the pre-war political situation in the Arabian desert. This journey is by many critics and observers considered to be the most important one that Bell undertook in her life.

Bell's last and at the same time most important role is that of politician and diplomat; her political involvement in the region contributed to the creation of the modern state of Iraq after the First World War. Her work was specially mentioned in the British Parliament, and she was awarded the Order of the British Empire.

Gertrude Bell's life comes to an abrupt end in the twenties; Bell briefly returned back to Britain in 1925, and found herself facing family problems and ill health. Her family fortune had begun to decline and after her return to Iraq, she developed pleurisy. When she recovered, she heard that her brother had died of typhoid.

Bell committed suicide in Baghdad on July 12, 1926, with an overdose of sleeping pills. She was buried at the British cemetery in Baghdad. Her funeral was a major event, attended by large numbers of people.

## 1.2 Bell and politics

Gertrude Bell is one of the few women who made it into foreign politics and had an enormous impact on the political situation in the early twentieth century. As Chris Calder, in her article about Bell states, her name will forever be connected with Iraq:

America has its Founding Fathers; the modern nation of Iraq has a peculiar kind of Founding Mother. Or maybe she was a national nanny. For Iraq's Founding ... Someone ... was not Iraqi, but a red-haired, Oxford-educated mountaineer, an honored poet and opponent to suffragettes, an Arabist and proud British imperialist named Gertrude Bell.<sup>5</sup>

Bell's political career began with spying. She was recruited sometime in her early twenties. Victor Winstone, the writer of a biography on Bell says that she was „ripe for recruitment by British Intelligence in 1896, at the age of 28“<sup>6</sup> and he states the following reasons for this recruitment:

[she was a] ... woman with an ability to speak Arabic, the resourcefulness to survive long spells in the desert, and a keen understanding of archeology and ancient architecture to justify her travels<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> Chris Calder, "Gertrude Bell and the Birth of Iraq," *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, 26. May. 2004, 17. Mar. 2007, <<http://www.theava.com/04/0526-gertrude-bell.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Winstone, H.V.F., *Gertrude Bell* (London : Cape, 1978) 128.

<sup>7</sup> Winstone 128.

No doubt her origin and family connections predestined her to do this job, which subsequently led to her diplomacy position. Rosemary O'Brien provides some details about her initial involvement in the Middle East:

Bell took on a new role ... fusing polite travel with an explicit form of information gathering ... From 1900 until the Great War, she monitored the political pulse of Arab Turkey; in the tents of powerful Arab sheikhs and the divans of Ottoman officials she spent hours sipping coffee, asking questions, and honing her insights into the state of affairs. London was curious to know just how far Germans had penetrated Turkish provinces in Syria, Mesopotamia, and north Arabia. More particularly, were they attempting to poison Arab minds against the British? On her many trips to the East in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bell tried to find answers to these questions for the Foreign Office in London.<sup>8</sup>

In 1916, Bell arrived in Basra, which British forces had captured in November 1914, to advise Chief Political Officer Percy Cox. She became the only female political officer in the British forces and received the title of "Liaison Officer, Correspondent to Cairo."

When British troops took Baghdad, Bell was summoned to Baghdad and presented with the title of "Oriental Secretary." Bell persuaded Winston Churchill to endorse Faisal, the recently deposed King of Syria, as the first King of Iraq. When Faisal arrived in Iraq in June 1921, Bell advised him in local questions, including matters involving tribal geography and local business. Bell also supervised the selection of appointees for other posts in the new government. Faisal was crowned king of Iraq in 1921 and due to Bell's influence with the new king, Bell earned the nickname, "the Uncrowned Queen of Iraq."

---

<sup>8</sup> Bell, Diaries 79.

Her influence in the Middle East does not end with her new title of a “Queen”. Thanks to her study of archeology, she knew how to draw maps and she practiced their knowledge during her journey, especially during the journey to Ha’il. Once in Baghdad, Bell drew the boundaries of the new countries, thus blotting out what used to be “largely a blank patch on Europe’s maps.”<sup>9</sup> She also encouraged the Iraqi tribes and religious groups to support the new nation-state.

### 1.3 Bell’s Writings

Gertrude Bell was a prolific writer. Her writing can be divided into several categories. The first category are the letters she wrote to her family, her father and stepmother back in England. She started with the letters to her beloved father and mother from the University of Oxford, where she pursued the study of modern history. The first travel letters come from her trip to Persia, where she kept a daily account of the journey. Her account is very detailed and easy to read. It continues with the letters written from different trips in the Arabic region, letters from the trip to Ha’il and those she wrote from Bagdad. A year after her death, in 1927, her stepmother edited and published two volumes of Bell's collected correspondence written during the 20 years preceding World War I.

The book which resulted from her travels throughout Syria, Jordan and Lebanon is called *The Desert and the Sown*, and it was published in 1907.

The second category are archeological books written about the explorations she worked on, predominantly in Mesopotamia. Among these are the *Amurath to Amurath* and *Thousand and One Churches*.

---

<sup>9</sup> Calder 1

Yet another category is the translation of poems. She translated the poetry of the ancient Persian poet Hafez to English.

The last and the most notable category is her correspondence with her lover Charles Doughty-Wylie. Doughty-Wylie was a nephew of the great Arabian traveller Charles Montague Doughty, who wrote *Arabia Deserta*, the Bible of the travelers to the Middle East. Bell and Doughty-Wylie met for the first time in Turkey in 1906, seven years before their romantic relationship started. Doughty-Wylie was married and never exchanged his not very successful, yet stable relationship to his wife for a romantic affair with Bell.

Doughty-Wylie and Bell spent more time apart from each other than with each other. This was due primarily to Bell's constant journeys from which we are, however, left with an extensive number of letters between the two lovers. The most interesting and valuable are the letters which Bell wrote to Doughty-Wylie during her journey and stay in Ha'il.

#### **1.4 Critics about Bell**

Since Gertrude Bell was not only a writer, but primarily an explorer, scholar and politician, she has drawn the attention of critics from the field of literature and also politics and science.

As a politician, she was and still is famous primarily for her effort in creating modern Iraq. She was praised not only by the British, but also the Iraqis who loved her and called her "al-Khatun", which means "a Lady of the Court who keeps an open eye and ear for the benefit of the State".<sup>10</sup> According to H.V.F. Winstone, who wrote Bell's biography, she is "the most

---

<sup>10</sup> "Gertrude Bell", 9.May.2007, 12.Dec.2006, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gertrude\\_Bell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gertrude_Bell)

famous and respected of all the Britons who had devoted themselves to the exploration and politics of the East."<sup>11</sup>

As a scholar, Bell was at the birth of one of the most important archeological museums in the world, the Baghdad Museum.

Though praised as a politician and a scientist, Bell was never adequately appreciated for her writings. Among the travel writers, she is listed as one of those who penetrated the Arabian peninsula, but she was neither the first, nor the most famous one to do so. She is not given much attention among the lists of women travel writers, though she is one of the very few who dared to travel without the company and protection of their husbands or other family members. Likewise, she is unique in her education and her knowledge of languages, but this is rarely mentioned.

As far as her writings are concerned, she is one of the very few authors who wrote in so many different styles – letters, travelogues, non-fiction books on archeological sites, political pamphlets.

What Getrude Bell is primarily known for, are her letters to her lover, Doughty-Wylie, known as *the Arabian Diaries*. Because of their late-Victorian romanticist character, they were often downgraded as love letters without further exploration of their qualities, especially in terms of their informative and descriptive value. However, thanks to the rebirth of interest in Bell as a political figure, her *Diaries* have been recently re-read and re-evaluated. They are no longer looked at merely as letters full of unfulfilled love, but also as very valuable texts which reveal some of the most important of Bell's attitudes towards Arabs. Most of the critical work was done by Rosemary O'Brien, who wrote a detailed Preface to the new publication of *The Diaries*.

---

<sup>11</sup> H.V.F. Winstone, *Al Khatun the Fearless*, 5.Jul.1986, 2.Feb.2007, <http://www.getrudebell.com/news02.htm>

It must also be noted that Bell was the winner of the gold medal of the Royal Geographical Society; the honorary director of antiquities at the Baghdad Museum; and the recipient of a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and her influence was so great that when she died, the whole city, together with Islamic leaders and desert sheikhs, turned up to follow her coffin.

In recent years, Gertrude Bell's life achievements, especially her work in the area of politics are remembered once again as the political situation in Iraq became a crucial aspect in the world events, and Bell's decisions about the country's future back in the 1920's is being re-evaluated once again.

## 2. *The Arabian Diaries*

### 2.1 Journey to Hail

Bell's journey to Ha'il stands out among all her journeys as unique. Ha'il was the center of the Rashidi amirs from 1836 until 1921. The first Rashidi amir, Abdullah bin Rashid, took power in 1836 from the former ruler of Hail, Mohammad Ibn Ali, who was a fellow member of the Jafaar lineage of the Abde section of the Shammar tribe.

The last Rashidi amir was ousted from power by Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia in 1921. Ibn Saud then gave orders to destroy the Barzan palace and also ordered the Rashidi leaders to move from Ha'il.

During the Rashidi period many foreign travellers visited Ha'il and the Rashidi amirs, and described their impressions in different journals/books, among them, for example, G. A. Wallin in 1854, William Gifford Palgrave in 1865, Lady Anne Blunt in 1881 and Charles Montagu Doughty in 1888.

Gertrude Bell visited Ha'il at the beginning of the year 1913. As with all other of her adventures, she plunged into the study of the texts written about Ha'il before the actual trip began. Especially precious for her was the account of Charles Montague Doughty, *Arabia Deserta*, which, according to the words of Rosemary O'Brien, became her "travel Bible"<sup>12</sup>. At the time when Bell decided to set off for Ha'il, the family of the Sauds was in possession of most of the Arabian peninsula and desired to defeat the Rashids. Tribal war was expected by the British government.

Bell, however, decided to go to Ha'il in spite of the danger. She wrote a letter to her lover Charles Doughty-Wylie and he wished her luck. She spoke about it lightly, and it can be

---

<sup>12</sup> Rosemary Bell, Diaries, ed. Gertrude Bell: *The Arabian Diaries, 1913-1914* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000) 17.

argued, if it was because she underestimated the danger, or because her attitude was „part of the sangfroid of prewar Edwardian culture“<sup>13</sup>, as O'Brien says.

Bell left Damascus in November 1913 and the journey took three months. She hired several men to help her en route. The Turkish officials did not approve of her trip and the British government did not support her. Therefore, she set on the road as an outlaw. During the three month trip, she and her companions visited several tribes and explored ruins of medieval fortresses. By mid-February, they were in Nefud, a region which had never been mapped before. Bell therefore made some important measurements and at the end of February, she found herself in the city of Ha'il.

She was welcomed by a steward of the amir who was not present in the city. Then she was kept in captivity for eleven days, living in the harem and befriending the inhabitants of the palace. During this time, she had a chance to penetrate the Rashid family and the condition in which it was as well as to observe and carefully write down her observations about the life of the Arab women. Thanks to the intervention of the Anazehs, potential allies of the Rashid family who were then visiting Ha'il, Bell was eventually granted permission to leave along with her caravan.

## **2.2 General Description and Themes of *The Arabian Diaries***

*The Arabian Diaries* is the name given to the letters that Bell wrote to her lover Charles, who was at that time staying in London. This compilation excludes the letters that she wrote to her father and stepmother at the very same time and which were published a year after her death along with other letters to the family under the title *The Letters of Gertrude*

---

<sup>13</sup> O' Brien 16.

*Bell*. There are some considerable differences between the *Letters* and *The Diaries* and they will be noted when relevant to the discussed topic.

Concerning *The Diaries*, there are more than fifty individual letters that Bell wrote to Charles during her five month long journey to and from the city of Ha'il. She was indeed a prolific writer, writing almost on a daily basis. Each of her letters is dated and would be one to two pages long in handwriting. Some of the letters were actually posted soon after she wrote them to Charles, who received them and responded back to Bell. These are the letters that Bell wrote before entering the area of Nafud, deep in the Arabian desert, where, obviously, no letter postage was possible. From that time until her departure from Ha'il, she wrote the letters into her diary and posted them as soon as she could.

*The Diaries* can be divided into three groups according to their topic, or rather, according to the progress of the journey. The first group consists of letters that Bell wrote on her way to Hail, which took her a little over thirty days. They mostly contain a description of the difficulties they were met with along the way, such as water shortage, the danger of being attacked by various hostile desert tribes and fatigue from the ongoing travel. She is also expressing her views on Islam and Arabs in general, but most of the letters are concerned with the Arabian desert itself – its beauty, danger, vastness and colors.

The second group of letters was written after Bell left Ha'il where she was held hostage and headed toward Baghdad. These letters are the longest ones and focused primarily on the events of the week she spent in this city. The reason why she did not write to Charles during this time is never explicitly mentioned, but she was probably not allowed to have any correspondence and there are no letters written between February 24<sup>th</sup> and March 7<sup>th</sup>. However, the following letters, after her departure, deal with the adventures she underwent in the city of Ha'il. She also gives an account of the political situation of the city and describes the traditions and customs held there.

Between the second and third group of letters, there is again a time gap of about two weeks. The third group contains the letters written after she left the Arabian desert and arrived in Baghdad, where she met various friends and later continued on to Damascus and back to England in June. It was from Baghdad that she posted the letters written in the desert to Charles. She sent them to Addis Ababa as this was where he was serving at this point in time as a British representative to a commission marking the southern boundary of Abyssinia.

*The Diaries* can also be divided into two groups according to Bell's level of excitement and optimism. She set off from Damascus with expectations of an adventurous journey to the headquarters of a tribe which was at those times considered one of the most bloody in the Arabian desert. In her personal life, Bell at this time was already experiencing disappointment from Charles' unwillingness to divorce his wife and marry Bell while enjoying time with her as his lover. Unfulfilled in her intimate relationship with Charles, Bell hoped to find satisfaction in traversing the desert full of dangers. The first part of her journey is therefore a cheerful one, but after she spends several weeks in the vast desert which does not change over the course of time, she becomes weary and starts to doubt the purpose of the journey. She is disappointed and depressed.

Then she arrives in Ha'il, which is the climax of her journey and writes about it with enthusiasm. However, this enthusiasm leaves her by the time she arrives in Baghdad and once again she is questioning the reason why she had gone to Ha'il. She feels exhausted and she longs to be with Charles. Though she wants to write a book about her journey, she never does so. Therefore, the letters are full of ups and downs in her mood and motivation.

Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn  
urn:nbn:de:hbz:5:1-63862-p0111-7  
DFG

### 2.3 The Style of *The Arabian Diaries*

All the letters from the journey to Ha'il have the character of a diary. Bell loved to write about the details of the journey, to the most picayune nuances, sometimes describing in detail the individual hours of the day. Considerable attention is given to the description of the place, using the local as well as international, when applicable, geographical names and terms.

It is also notable that Bell spoke Arabic on a proficient level and used it freely in the text. The reason for using Arabic terms might be Charles' command of Arabic or at least its basics, which, however, is doubtful as she in most cases adds an English translation of the word after her Arabic term. Another reason for using Arabic in her letters to Charles is that she is most likely trying to preserve as much of the atmosphere that she is experiencing as possible. Yet another reason, and probably the most valid one, is that she somehow lost the ability to convey the message solely in her mother tongue after speaking exclusively Arabic for several months during the journey. However, it has to be noted that from time to time Bell also translates her Arabic utterance to English as if she feels a need to domesticate the Arabic original.

At any rate, Arabic words contribute to the linguistic richness of the text and give it a unique oriental taste which is missing from other works of authors traveling in the same area of Arabia, for example Bell's predecessor Lady Anne Blunt, but also from Bell's own letters addressed to her closest family. We can easily interpret this phenomenon as a sign of appreciation of the Arab culture and language and a need or desire to convey it to the person who shares this appreciation. This person is Doughty-Wylie, not her parents who do not have the knowledge of Arabic and likewise lack love and passion for the Arab environment.

The terms which are in Arabic in the text are the terms describing the different status or position in the society, for example *wakil*, *rafiq* or *amir*, Islamic religious terms, such as

*inshallah*, *ilhamdulillah*, which are used heavily in everyday speech by the native speakers, but also words for vessels and things of everyday use in general. Then she also uses words like *qasr* for the castle in Ha'il, and mentions different parts of the castle by naming them in Arabic. The reason for using the status terms is most likely the absence of their adequate translation in English. Concerning the Islamic terms, there is an English translation available, yet the Arabic *inshallah*, "Lord willing" is until modern times used by speakers of any world language to convey his feelings specifically to the Islamic view of God, *Allah*. In addition, however, the words like *inshallah* are used by the native speakers of Arabic in everyday speech often without thinking about their meaning, solely as part of conversation, as interjections.

Very interestingly, Bell sometimes interprets the whole conversation in Arabic, with the addition of a translation of several sentences that she might have felt Charles would not wholly understand:

"Did you not enter Jof?" said I. "*La billah*" said he. "*Sahih?*" said I – is it true? "*Egh billah Sahih – w'al shof ma shufn* – and we did not even set eyes on it." "*Wallah?*" said I. "*Egh wallah*" he replied.<sup>14</sup>

This clearly shows that her command of Arabic was on a very proficient level and it was easy and natural for Bell to reproduce these situations with authenticity, and thus contribute to the local color of the text.

---

<sup>14</sup> Bell, Diaries 88.

## 2.4 Imagery and Symbols in the Diaries

The letters are colorful not only linguistically, but also in terms of imagery and symbols used. Most of the descriptive passages of the letters are concerned with the landscape that Bell and her company traversed through, before arriving at Ha'il.

### 2.4.1 The Desert

Bell had travelled in the Middle East before her visit to Ha'il and knew the desert well enough. In spite of that, this was the first time she spent several weeks in the middle of it, without being able to change the environment, and therefore she mentions the desert and its impact on her in almost every letter she wrote to Charles.

The very first word she uses when describing the desert is the word *terrible*. In what sense it is terrible is easy to derive from her other descriptions: "We have ridden for two days over very desolate country and today has been quite featureless," and "There are no words to tell you how bare and forbidding is this land<sup>15</sup>." It seems that the view of the countryside does not cheer Bell up and she finds it empty, therefore very similar to the feelings in her soul. Indeed, the desert resembles Bell and Bell resembles the desert. She projects herself on to the desert and finds in it a reflection of her state of mind.

However, Bell is known for her dislike of the late Victorian way of life which she found limiting and without adventure, and it is understandable that the desert was a way of escaping the cage. She soon overcomes her dislike of the desert environment and uses the world terrible for the very environment that she just some weeks ago called her home. "All the terrors which I conjured up between house walls have fled before me and the desert is

---

<sup>15</sup> Bell, Diaries 51.

clothed once more in abiding security.”<sup>16</sup> The desert for Bell is no longer terrible because of its emptiness, but rather liberating and beautiful for the same reason: its barrenness and vastness.

In spite of the desolation and the emptiness, it is beautiful / or is it beautiful partly because of the emptiness? At any rate, I love it, and though the camels pace so slowly, eating as they go, I feel no impatience and no desire to get to anywhere. It is cold still.<sup>17</sup>

She is relieved to be in the desert: “When two days ago I cut myself loose from civilization I felt as if I had cast down all burdens<sup>18</sup>”, though it is “abandoned of God and man, that is how it looks<sup>19</sup>”. And the very next letter starts with the following words:

Whether it is from the pleasure of being at last on the direct road to Nejd, or whether this empty desert delights my men as much as it does me, I do not know, but we are traveling on in the best of spirits and contentment.<sup>20</sup>

She is surprised by her own admiration of the desert: “I wonder why one takes pleasure in such a landscape, but the fact remains that one does, and if you were here you would like it as much as I do<sup>21</sup>”. The desert not only protects her but also provides refreshment along the way: “I wish you were here to see this wide desolate landscape and

---

<sup>16</sup> Bell, Diaries 45.

<sup>17</sup> Bell, Diaries 65.

<sup>18</sup> Bell, Diaries 45.

<sup>19</sup> Bell, Diaries 64.

<sup>20</sup> Bell, Diaries 64.

<sup>21</sup> Bell, Diaries 53.

breathe an air which is like a breath from the very fountain of life<sup>22</sup>” until she finally exclaims: “It is cloudy and mild – last night it froze like the devil – and I feel as if I had been born and bred in the Nefud and had known no other world. Is there any other?<sup>23</sup>”

Bell undergoes a development of her feelings toward the desert: from desolation, bareness she moves to affinity with the place and even to the feelings of liberation because it allows her to escape her society and her own state of mind. This is the most frequent and obvious reason why a traveler set on a journey, to escape from the stereotypical lifestyle in order to plunge into the new adventures, wherever it may be. The new place is found to be great and refreshing, not for what it is, but for what it is not - it is not the home country, in this case England.

It might not have been the main reason for Bell to penetrate the Arabian desert, but it served her well. And once she overcame her first negative feeling toward the desert, she started to notice that this place is not in any way empty and dull; she comes to appreciate the vast array of colors that the desert provides.

#### **2.4.2 The Colors of the Desert**

Once Bell changes her attitude toward the desert and in spite of finding its most obvious characteristics such as emptiness and vastness positive, she starts to notice the colors of the desert. From her initial accounts one might expect her to find the desert of only one color, be it black because of its desolateness, or light brown because of the natural color of the sand. But on the contrary, Bell goes beyond what is expected and portrays the desert in a vast range of colors: black, white, grey, green, golden, red, purple and yellow in great detail.

---

<sup>22</sup> Bell, Diaries 67.

<sup>23</sup> Bell, Diaries .72.

Black is the color of the countryside, which is flat, empty and without any other color or shape. Black is also the color of the tents of the Howaitat tribe that she visits along the way. The sand of the desert is yellow, but even more often she uses the word *golden* to describe its color and the most often used collocation is *golden red* for the color of the sand. The color of the sand is often put in contrast with the color of the flowers and bushes growing in the desert. The green color seems to delight Bell most of all colors – it is the color of life that is so rare in this region. When she sees it for the first time after ten days of travel deep in the desert, she says: “The plain from the *khabra* was covered with small plants, so many that in stretches it was quite green – a green which to our unaccustomed eyes seemed dazzlingly brilliant<sup>24</sup>.” She is not less enthusiastic when she sees the desert flowers: “There were flowers, red and white and purple – we should scarcely notice them in our beflowered England, but here they seemed like separate jewels<sup>25</sup>” and she is very fond of their smell: “The aromatic desert plants give it a delicious scent<sup>26</sup>.” If we find Bell initially depressed over the unending emptiness and vastness of the desert, we see her later full of energy and enthusiasm when she sets her eyes on the flowers. The desert, initially and only seemingly dead and barren, is full of life and even life giving.

Another element in the desert that makes Bell rejoice when seeing it, is water. Water in this environment is life-important; not finding water for several days in a row means the risk of death. The abundance or scarcity of water is a very important element which can change the travel plans or even marr them.

Water does not have any particular color or other characteristics in the text, but it is obviously thanks to it that the flowers and the plants grow in the desert. Water is found in the text stored in *khabra* or as rain that is considered a gift from God.

---

<sup>24</sup> Bell, Diaries 55.

<sup>25</sup> Bell, Diaries 58.

<sup>26</sup> Bell, Diaries 65.

### 2.4.3 The Desert and the Imperial Traveler

The desert and its life which have been discussed on the previous pages can be interpreted in terms of their poetic meaning, but also in terms of the relationship between the imperial traveler and the virgin landscape. For Bell, the desert is at first vast and uninhabited – an ideal place for exploration, which is the main purpose that Bell travels into Arabia for. Even later this aspect of purity of the landscape is enhanced by the flowers which are the symbol of innocence. As Billie Melman remarks in his *The Middle East/Arabia: 'the cradle of Islam'* remarks: “Travelers endow the desert with redemptive and purifying powers which ‘cleanse’ the suffering individual [...],”<sup>27</sup> and thus Gertrude Bell is actually a typical example of an author who views the environment around her as therapeutical, helping her with her own problems and traumas. The very reason why Bell undergoes the journey to Ha’il is to find redemption from the love troubles that she was experiencing with Doughty-Wylie, as has already been mentioned.

On the other hand, though, Bell’s approach of an imperial traveler to the land she is traveling across may differ from the traditionally imperial approach that we are used to from other travel writings of authors such as sir Walter Raleigh, with his description of Virginia, where the roles of conqueror and conquered are very clearly distinguished; the traveler in such accounts is figured as the conqueror, whether literally or symbolically, and the land is conquered and submitted to him, no matter what his purpose of travel might be officially. This is not the case of Bell, where the border between the conqueror and conquered is blurred. The author in many accounts of travel writing of contemporary writers is presented as the “conqueror”, the one who comes to submit the land, to penetrate it and infect it with her beliefs, Eurocentric values and visions. This could be expected in Bell’s accounts, too, since

---

<sup>27</sup> Hulme, Peter and Youngs, Tim, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* ( New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 115.

she herself comes from an aristocratic family whose involvement in the government shaped her views and beliefs about the order of the world at the dawn of the twentieth century. In spite of this, we find Bell in the middle of the desert as an outlaw, without any protection from British authorities, without her beloved Doughty-Wylie and also, from time to time, without a clear motivation to finish the journey at all. At times, it seems that it is actually the desert who conquers her and shapes her – its change of temperature, quality and colors has a huge impact on Bell's mood and stamina. Moreover, she frequently acknowledges how, because of the cold, she and her companions have to adjust the course of the journey and because of the shortage of water they have to do the same. It is nature, in this case the desert which seems to be the ruling superior element. In this way, the traditional hierarchy of culture and nature is destabilized.

However, it cannot be said that the desert possesses only “masculine” characteristics (the desert as overpowering), but also “feminine” ones (the desert as nurturing). Bell is a woman on the road, adventurous and daring but also lonely, unprotected and unhappy. She confesses she is seeking refuge, comfort and peace of mind. After the initial dislike of the desert, she soon finds that the surrounding environment provides all that she needs. The desert stretches its arms towards Bell and embraces her with tenderness as a loving mother.

In this way, the traditional picture of the author - landscape relationship is destabilized and substituted with a picture of the environment the gendering of which is relativised. This makes the text even more interesting, while revealing more from Bell's thoughts and attitudes. The classical pattern of the conquering individual and a conquered land is substituted by the conquered lady traveler in the midst of a conquering desert. Simultaneously, the descriptions of the desert environment move between hostile images of conflicts and pictures of a life-giving, nourishing and healing space. In such manner, we may conclude that as a woman traveler, Bell problematizes the usual concepts of imperial travel writing. What we find,

however, is not merely a simple reversal of the gender roles but there is actually a fairly complex interplay of gender figures. Therefore, Bell's text proves as insufficient the obvious interpretative models provided by critics such as Mary Louise Pratt or Peter Hulme.

### 3. Gertrude Bell and the People of Arabia

It has already been mentioned that Bell's main reason for visiting Ha'il was to find out as much as possible about the political situation in the city and the two leading tribes of the Arabian desert – the Sauds and the Rashids. Therefore, it is interesting to study the passages in her letters to Doughty-Wylie concerning her attitude towards Arab politics, Arab culture and towards the individual people that she comes in contact with during her journey, both men and women.

From the point of view of pure quantity and allotted space, much more care and time is devoted to Bell's attempts to describe to Doughty-Wylie the countryside and landscape than the inhabitants of the desert. Along the way, she indeed meets only a limited number of different tribes and in Ha'il, she ends up in captivity. Therefore, these accounts are brief, though very interesting.

Bell, among other remarks, states her opinion on Arab politics in the letter from Ha'il; she believes that the Rashid family which rules the desert from Ha'il, is slowly but progressively coming to its end and the Saudi family will take up the rule. Bell proves here her ability to foresee the future political situation in the Arabian peninsula as the tribe of Ibn Sa'ud does indeed overrule the Rashids and creates the state of Saudi Arabia

#### 3.1 The Arabs of Bell's *Diaries*

First of all, we have to look at how Bell uses the term *Arab*. She does not use it in a way that this term is used nowadays, that is, to design a group of people who share the Arabic culture, heritage and language regardless of religious affiliation and country. For Bell, the Arabs are only the people of the desert – the beduin tribes which adhere to Islam and their

specific tribe traditions. These are, for example, the ruling families in Arabia, the Rashids and the Sauds, with their desert allies and enemies. This specification obviously excludes the inhabitants of the desert of other than Muslim confession as well as other Muslims and speakers of Arabic language who don't live in the desert. Therefore it is not surprising to see that Christians living in the region are never called Arabs, according to Bell:

I went up to the farm of some Christians, not 3 hours from Ziza, to the north of that place of captivity, and there all my friends of 9 years ago came to see me and I spent the night. They are men these hosts of mine; tall and broad and deep voiced, ready to square all the difficulties which cross their path, the exactions of the government and the exactions of the Arabs. They kill a sheep every night for those who claim they hospitality; they heap up the enormous rice dish, and fill the mangers with corn ...<sup>28</sup>

Neither the Christians, nor the Muslim companions – *rafiqs* are considered Arabs. Bell takes up *rafiqs* along the way who know different tribes that she might encounter during her journey and their task is to protect her and her caravan. A great contrast can be found between her feeling towards the desert where she feels at ease: “All the terrors which I conjured up between house walls have fled before me and the desert is clothed once more in abiding security,”<sup>29</sup> and the people of the desert whom she dreads: “In the sand we saw comparatively recent footprints of camels and ‘Ali declared that the Arabs must be all round us”<sup>30</sup>.

Bell gives a vivid description of her companions and their abilities as *rafiqs*:

First, there is Muhammad al-Ma’rawi, Mr Carruthers’s companion. In his youth he rode with the rajajil of Muhammad ibn al Rashid; in his wiser years he bought and

---

<sup>28</sup> Bell, Diaries 44.

<sup>29</sup> Bell, Diaries 45.

<sup>30</sup> Bell, Diaries 52.

sold camels from Nejd; now he has fallen on lean times and takes whatever odd job may present itself – he had few odder jobs than me, I expect. He knows all the Arabs of every part ... Next there is his nephew Salim ... he is an excellent servant, educated and well mannered. Next comes ‘Ali,...he is an ‘ole dog, but I love him. He is as brave as a lion and in the hour of danger as cool as you could wish. He will never leave us ... And finally there is Fattuh, the alpha and omega of all, with his eye on everything although it never appears to be taken off me.<sup>31</sup>

Though Muslims and speakers of Arabic, these men, because they are friends, protectors, are not considered and called Arabs. Therefore, we can see a distinction between “us” and “them” in the letters. “Us” are Bell’s companions, all of them of course being Arab speakers from different tribes and ethnic groups, while “them” are the tribes that might potentially pose a threat to the journeying caravan.

Arabs, according to Bell, are the exotic inhabitants of the desert who are to be feared, even if respected, and though their way of living has remained the same for centuries, they play a very important role in the future of the region.

It is not only her, an outsider and a woman, who sees the inhabitants of the desert in this way. Her companions share the same opinion, and they are the ones who shape her views and attitudes towards the Arabs on the first place.

“My lady”, said he “when I first came here, 30 years ago, the big well was filled up. Upon a day of day the ‘Isa fell here upon the Sukhur and the Sukhur killed of them two camel riders and they killed a horseman. The Sukhur took the camels and the two men and threw them into the well and rolled stones on top.” “Haram!” said I “it is forbidden.” “No wallah”

---

<sup>31</sup> Bell, Diaries 46.

he answered, “the ‘Isa thirsted and if they had drunk the water of the well they would have followed the Sukhur and killed them.” It was a good thought” said Sayyah. ”Shayyatin al ‘Arab,” said Muhammad, “they are devils, the Arab.” “Shayyatin” said Sayyah. ”They are the very devil” said I with conviction – with such conviction that Sayyah looked up at me and laughed – it was his turn now. How I wish you were here to laugh too.<sup>32</sup>

This passage very vividly points out what the co-habitants of the desert think about the Arab tribes - they are robbers, treacherous, bloodthirsty, cunning and untrustworthy.

Bell refers to Arabs, above all, as to the robbers: “We kept watch, however, for stray robbers, who finding us watchful would turn in as guests, but finding us asleep would lift our camels.”<sup>33</sup> They are treacherous, devious, using one’s signs of weakness (sleep). If faced with strength, they bow to power.

Another characteristic trait of the Arabs that Bell seems to stress over other is their desire for blood. She notes with resentment that “their history is one long tale of treachery and murder” and “In Hayyil murder is like the spilling of milk and not one of the shaikhs but feels his head sitting unsteadily upon his shoulders”<sup>34</sup> which one can understand as a political statement, but not only. It is a clear sign how her political judgement was colored by her dual construction of the local native inhabitants.

One more trait that Bell noticed very easily and remarked upon with slight sarcasm is their attitude toward labor: “The men worked half naked with the passionate energy which the Arabs will put into their job for an hour or two – no more.”<sup>35</sup>

Taking all these and other specifications of Arabs into consideration, it is no wonder that Bell admits that it takes enormous patience to travel among them:

---

<sup>32</sup> Bell, Diaries 50.

<sup>33</sup> Bell, Diaries 48.

<sup>34</sup> Bell, Diaries 92.

<sup>35</sup> Bell, Diaries 73.

I would have you know that the quality most needed when traveling among the Arabs is not (as some have wrongly stated) courage, but patience. My fairy godmothers forgot to endow me with it – you know how little I have it – But perhaps I shall have learnt how to practice it before this journey is done. If I have not, it will not be for want of opportunity.<sup>36</sup>

This is the way Bell sees the Arabs, but above all, one wouldn't find in her accounts hatred, resentment or scorn as is typical for the other travelers' accounts, for example Anne Blunt or other writers. Instead, one can sense Bell's sincere interest in learning as much as possible about these people whose history she was later to shape.

## **3.2 Bell's roles among the Arabs**

### **3.2.1 Bell as a spectator**

It has already been said that Bell is indeed a political figure with an extraordinary ability to notice, evaluate and describe while being at the same time a fragile woman with a broken heart who comes to journey through the boundless desert to find comfort and peace of mind, but also a western traveler who looks with some amount of disdain and snobbery at the bloodthirsty Arabs. Yet the author emerges in one more role, and that is one closer to a character in *The Arabian Nights*. This role becomes very visible after Bell's journey finds its climax in the city of Ha'il. She describes her stay in the city with the following words: "I feel as if I had lived through a chapter of *The Arabian Nights* during this last week" and the remark that follows is in the same mood: "And to the spiritual sense the place smells of

---

<sup>36</sup> Bell, Diaries 56.

blood.”<sup>37</sup> Bell might find the bloody history and presence of the place problematic from the political point of view, but it definitely fits into her picture of a city à la Arabian Nights. Bell seems to be rather fascinated than disgusted by this very fact of the life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Arabian peninsula. She even seems to expect it to be so and when there is nothing happening she notes that “I sat down and waited on events. But there were no events”<sup>38</sup> and she seems to be surprised by this as a tale is never without an event that moves the tale forward.

The re-imagining of an exotic place as a part of an ancient fairy-tale text is a strategy well-established in travel accounts. It provides a sense of adventure, mystery and exoticism to the place, while simultaneously bringing it closer to home by alluding to a known literary account. It provides a framework from within which the disturbing experience of otherness can be easily comprehended as already established, articulated, literary, therefore, comprehensible.

Bell draws obvious parallels between Ha’il and places from *The Arabian Diaries*. First of all, it is possible that the city of Ha’il changed only slightly, if at all, from what it could have been in the Middle Ages, as Bell remarks:

I went (riding solemnly through the silent moonlit streets of this strange place), and passed two hours taken straight from the Arabian Nights with the women of the palace. I imagine that there are few places left wherein you can see the unadulterated East in its habit as it has lived for centuries and centuries – of those few Hayyil is one.<sup>39</sup>

She finds a source of fascination in this petrified, unchanging idea of an exotic East while takes on a magical indeed fairy-tale, quality.

---

<sup>37</sup> Bell, *Diaries* 82.

<sup>38</sup> Bell, *Diaries* 80.

<sup>39</sup> Bell, *Diaries* 85.

Second, Bell was a woman of adventure - one might trace her passion for traveling for unusual places and encounters throughout all her Letters and without her courage and determination she would never get to places she visited. As a woman of learning, she formed the East with its unfathomable desert and many practices irrational, yet also exotically dreamlike. She stressed these aspects in her attempt to escape of her life that was far from happy.

The third explanation for Bell's treatment of her experiences as taken from the *The Arabian Nights* is her upbringing and background of a rich and educated woman from the Victorian period on a conquest of the virgin desert. She grew up in a society with many constraints and then she finds herself standing on the border of the civilized world with the medieval, untouched world. She brings her own dreams and expectations of what it will look like deep inside the desert with her from the books that she read about it as well as from the ideas and opinions, which are widespread in her home country. Though she is culturally sensitive to the point that she understands the language of Arabia and even is able to conform to certain rules that govern the life there, she shapes the reality according to her visions of what Arabia of the 19th century should be - "fantastically oriental and medieval".<sup>40</sup>

The picture of Arabia which she prefers most is one taken from the tales in the *The Arabian Nights* - this is Gertrude Bell's Arabia as she wants it to be - untouched by the western and especially British culture, naturalistic, even bloody sometimes, but always beautiful in its unadulterated and uncivilized purity.

---

<sup>40</sup> Bell, Diaries 86.

### 3.2.2 Bell as a woman

In many writings from the Victorian period we find the writers in their attempt to subdue the country they are writing about according to the politics of Great Britain in this period. The country, mostly a British or other colony, is likened to a virgin female who falls prey to a male who came to rape her and rid her of her beauty, richness and innocence. This is especially true about the male British authors who identify themselves with their mother country in this act of suppression and subduing as very vividly portrayed by Jan van der Straet in his picture of Amerigo Vespucci upon meeting America.

As a woman traveler, it can be expected that Gertrude Bell's position in the Arab world may be different from that of her male fellow travelers'. Indeed, do her gender, and her beliefs about her gender, play an important role in her relationship towards her image of the desert Arabia?

When one looks at the life and writings of this woman, she might at first glance appear to be, by today's standards, a typical feminist: very well educated, living on her own, brave in reaching her goals, a woman involved in high politics, undeterred by any period considerations of feminine propriety. However, she is far from that; she was vehemently opposed to the women's suffrage movement and became Honorary secretary of the British Women's Anti-Suffrage League. Many authors and critics acknowledge their surprise at this. Perry Hicks points out this conflict in the following words: "Mysteriously, you will not find Gertrude Bell's name among the pantheon of feminist goddesses. Yet, in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century she was arguably one of the most influential and powerful women on earth."<sup>41</sup> Gertrude Bell had all the markings of a feminist, yet she was not – she believed that the roles of men and women were specific and women could never be what men are, just as the men could never take up the roles of women successfully. Bell, therefore, stands out among the

---

<sup>41</sup> Hicks, Perry, "Iraq's Place In The War On Terror," *Gulf Coast News*, 21. Jun. 2004, 19. Dec. 2006, <http://www.gulfcoastnews.com/GCNguestOpinionWar2.htm>.

other Victorian women travelers for her ideas and beliefs, as she breaks the rules, yet expresses them. Thanks to that we get a very unique picture of Arab cultures in terms of the gender roles as well as a somehow unbiased picture of the life of women in Arabia.

Bell's ideas about gender colour her qualifications of the political situation in Ha'il. Bell did not believe that women should prove their equality with men in e.g. political rule, and she describes the politics at Ha'il with quite a displeasure: "Hayyil gave me a sinister impression. I do not like the rule of women and of eunuchs."<sup>42</sup> That she herself became a woman of politics, that is another story; though it may be argued that Bell was very ambitious and perhaps tried to solve her own tragedies in life by emerging herself in high politics, nowhere there is a hint that she did so in order to prove to herself and those around her that she is capable and gifted in spite of, or thanks to, her gender.

Nevertheless, when it comes to Bell's picture of an Arab woman, we can again find some very interesting observations. Bell was a woman, after all, so women always attracted her and they were the ones she was most trying to come in close contact with. Here we find a stark contrast between Bell's description of a woman, her behavior and status in society with the accounts of other women travellers of her period, for example Anne Blunt or Isabel Burton.

In a recent study of western women who write about their eastern counterparts, Judy Mabro states:

For centuries Europe has been both fascinated and repelled by the veil and the harem, symbols which, on the one hand, have prevented the observer from seeing and communicating with women and produced feelings of frustration and aggressive behaviour. On the other hand, they have provided men with a fantasy and dangled the

---

<sup>42</sup> Bell, Diaries 89.

promise of exotic and erotic experiences with the 'beauty behind the veil' and the 'light of the harem'. Female observers, [...] have been as ambiguous, as hostile and as Eurocentric as men in this respect, [...].<sup>43</sup>

Among the false presumptions about the women of the east, especially the Muslim women was that they live in a harem and they are passive, oppressed and ignorant, and altogether unhappy and imprisoned in their male-dominated society. Interestingly enough, this western picture of Muslim Arab woman was far worse and degrading than the picture of an ideal woman we get when reading the Qur'an.

Mabro, however, believes that the picture of the Oriental woman is changing when stating, thanks Western womens' realization that

[...] it was not the place of a Western woman to decide what was the pivotal issue for a Middle Eastern or African woman; and that by throwing off the veil or the fetters of genital mutilation women would not suddenly acquire the economic independence, food and peace which many of them considered to be the issues that should be dealt with first.<sup>44</sup>

Mabro in her book *Veiled Half Truths* lists Bell among, as she calls them, Slaves to Prejudice and calls her *arrogant*. Bell indeed comes across as such very frequently, especially in one of her letters that she wrote from her stay in Syria when describing a young Syrian Girl:

---

<sup>43</sup> Judy Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths: Western Travellers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women* (New York: Tauris, 1991) 2.

<sup>44</sup> Mabro 2.

My Syrian girl is charming and talks very prettily but with a strong local accent. It adds enormously to one's difficulties that one has to learn a 'patois' and a purer Arabic at the same time. I took her out for a long walk on Friday afternoon and when photographing about Jerusalem. She was much entertained, though she was no good as a guide, for she had never been in the Jewish quarter though she has lived all her life here! That's typical of them. I knew my way, however, as every Englishwoman would - it's as simple as possible.<sup>45</sup>

This was written at the beginning of Bell's travels and career in the Middle East and it shows her feeling of superiority, very typical of a western, educated woman. However, Bell's attitudes and opinions change as life goes on. She is very much influenced by the already mentioned unhappy relationship with Doughty-Wylie. Also, she ventures into the heart of Arabia, where she cannot dare say that an Englishwoman knows her way around simply and easily. She actually is dependent (and concedes this) upon the individuals of the very ethnic group that she might have considered inferior some years ago.

Her journey to Ha'il must have been a real eye-opener to her in all aspects and among them is her attitude to the women of desert Arabia. All the women that Bell met during her stay in Ha'il were in one way or another connected to the city hierarchy, or they were the rulers themselves. She met them as soon as she arrived in Ha'il and spent most of her time with them.

As soon as I was established in the *Roshan*, the great columned reception room, and when the men had all gone off to see to the tents and camels, two women appeared. One was an old widow, Lu.lu.ah, who is caretaker in the house; she lives here with her

---

<sup>45</sup> Bell 58.

slave woman and the latter's boy. The other was a merry lady, Turkiyyeh, a Circassian who had belonged to Muhammed al Rashid and had been a great favourite of his. She had been sent down from the *qasr* to receive me and amuse me and the latter duty she was most successful in performing.<sup>46</sup>

This is her first account of women in Ha'il and nowhere can the reader detect any hostility or snobish attitude. Given the circumstances in which Bell suddenly found herself, she must have definitely been thankful to have someone that she can connect to.

And the Circassian, Turkiyyeh, has spent another day with me; and my own slaves (for I have 2 of my own to keep my gate for me) sit and tell me tales of rapid and foray in the stirring days of 'Abd al Aziz, Muhammad's nephew; and my men come in and tell me the gossip of the town.<sup>47</sup>

Rather than focusing on the women's appearance and differences from her, Bell mentions how helpful and hospitable these women are. Nowhere is there a feeling that Bell considers Turkiyyeh inferior to herself in intellect or manners. As we will see later, this woman had the greatest impact on Bell in Ha'il.

Another important woman of Ha'il, is Fatima, a grandmother of the *Amir* whom Bell never had a chance to meet and about who she speaks with a certain degree of respect, if not fear:

The gossip is that the hand which has pulled the strings in all this business is that of the *Amir's* grandmother, Fatima, of who Ibrahim stands in deadly fear. I have asked to

---

<sup>46</sup> Bell, Diaries 79.

<sup>47</sup> Bell, Diaries 81.

be allowed to see Fatima and have received no answer. She holds the purse strings in the *Amir's* absence and she rules. I may be that she is at the bottom of it all.<sup>48</sup>

Here is an example of the ambivalent self-conception of Gertrude Bell as once a vulnerable, weak woman in need of advice, and yet also the strong, adventurous who sees herself as powerful. When in Ha'il, Bell appreciates the hospitality of the local women, but she uses Ha'il to formulate more explicit political opinions and comes closer to established and traditional conceptions of female rule as perverse, dangerous and undesirable. Nevertheless, Bell asks to Fatima, the woman in charge of Ha'il and superior in position and power to Bell, but she is not granted it.

Another woman that Bell has a chance to meet and observe is Mudi. This time it is not because of her social rank, but her beauty and femininity. Bell admires the beauty and appearance of Mudi and the other women while having to admit that neither they nor anybody else in Ha'il lacks anything that European civilization is or offers. What is more, Europe, represented by Bell's presence seems an unnecessary addition that does not contribute, but contaminates the whole picture. At the same time, however, she has to admit that she is lucky to be a European woman with her freedom to travel and live on her own as opposed to these beautifully dressed women who have no choice of their own on the most important issues of their lives:

Next day came a word from the *Amir's* mother, Mudi, inviting me to visit them that evening. I went (riding solemnly through the silent moonlit streets of this strange place), and passed two hours taken straight from the *Arabian Nights* with the women

---

<sup>48</sup> Bell, Diaries 81.

of the palace. I imagine that there are few places left wherein you can see the unadulterated East in its habit as it has lived for centuries and centuries - of those few Hayyil is one. There they were, those women - wrapped in Indian brocades, hung with jewels, served by slaves and there was not one single thing about them which betrayed the base existence of Europe or Europeans - except me! I was the blot. Some of the women of the shaikhly house were very beautiful. They pass from hand to hand - the victor takes them, with her power and the glory, and think of it! his hands are red with the blood of their husband and children. Mudi herself - she is still a young woman and very charming - has been the wife of 3 *Amirs* in turn. Well, some day I will tell you what it is all like, but truly I still feel bewildered by it.<sup>49</sup>

As her trip in Ha'il neared the end, Bell already considered these women her close friends – no more was there any difference between them in class, nationality, education or social rank. Nevertheless, the affectionate friendship came to exist and survive only as a potentiality:

As I was going home there came a message from my Circassian friend, Turkiyyeh, inviting me to tea at her house. I went, and photographed Hayyil from her roof and took an affectionate farewell of her. She and I are now, I imagine, parted for ever, except in remembrance.<sup>50</sup>

We can assume that Bell's positive and friendly attitude towards women of Ha'il came partly from her own status in the city - she was a prisoner, a captive who could not even be sure that she would come out alive, an existence on the margins, excluded and anonymous.

---

<sup>49</sup> Bell, Diaries 86.

<sup>50</sup> Bell, Diaries 87.

She therefore identifies with similar marginal groups. The women who were on positions in power she looks up to, and considers herself even inferior to them. Once, though, she is again on her way back, firmly situated in a Eurocentric, stable environment, she reconsiders the state of affairs in Ha'il and discusses the political rule in Ha'il, in effect a rule of women, as contempt and destined for an end.

## Conclusion

Gertrude Bell, by her visit to Ha'il earned fame and respect, and also a Golden Medal from the Geographical society but she herself did not after all classify this trip as successful. It might have helped her forget her loneliness and unhappiness, but she returned back to reality where nothing changed in the meanwhile.

Though she always wanted to, she never wrote a book or even an official report about her trip to Ha'il. She even doubted if her journey made any sense. She was disillusioned and did not know what course in life to take afterwards.

Bell, however, entered high politics just one year after this journey and she never left it until her death in Baghdad in 1926. Her accomplishments in Iraq made her internationally famous and it is the politics that she is today most known for.

Bell is far less famous as a writer than as a politician, and though her name appears on the list of the women travel writers, not adequate attention is given to her writings whether it be her letters to the family members and her lover Doughty-Wylie or her travelogues and archeology books. This may be because she has proved to be a rather nonconventional figure, difficult to accommodate within the traditional frameworks of contemporary post-colonial analyses of travel writing.

Bell in *The Arabian Diaries* breaks the traditional picture of the imperial traveler subduing the colonial land by problematizing the gender roles while providing qualified literary descriptions of the land in terms of its beauty and atmosphere. Because of her proficiency in Arabic, she can understand the culture and the actions of the people she travels with and meets on the way. Because she approaches the Arabs with less bias than other authors might have done, she is able to describe their lives and the political situation accurately. Though expected to be a feminist by her lifestyle, she surprises the critics with her

beliefs about gender roles and her accounts of women of Arabia lack scorn and easy judgements while appreciating the qualities of these women and sympathizing with their fate within the given cultural frame.

Bell with her experience in travel, archeology and politics, combined with her erudition and upbringing provides a very unique view on the imperial issues and the Arab world and thus her writings deserve greater critical attention than they have received.

## Resumé

Gertrude Bell je jednou z nejvýznamnějších autorů cestopisů britského původu na přelomu devatenáctého a dvacátého století. Vyniká zejména svou erudovaností ale také vlivem, který měla na oblast Blízkého východu, kde působila ve vysokých funkcích a zasloužila se o vznik moderního státu Irák.

Bell milovala psaní a psát začala už v době svých studií na Oxfordu, posléze psala zejména dopisy svým rodičům. Její první dopisy z cest popisují její výpravu do Persie, kde si zamilovala Blízký východ a dokonce přeložila verše perského básníka Háfeze.

Bell cestovala nejenom ze zájmu o nové kultury, ale také kvůli výzkumům na poli archeologie, kterou vystudovala, a v neposlední řadě jako špiónka ve službách britské vlády. Její první zpravodajská cesta za účelem zjištění politických poměrů v Arábii byla do města Ha'il přímo v srdci Arabského poloostrova. Bell tady strávila dva týdny v zajetí, během kterých se jí podařilo nejen zmapovat situaci a poměry ve vládnoucí rodině Rašídů, ale také poznat blíže život žen, které žily ve vládnoucí rodině. Bell tak pronikla do nejintimnějších oblastí života kočovných Arabů. Z této cesty se zachovaly dopisy, které autorka adresovala svým rodičům, a které byly vydané krátce po její smrti; mnohem přínosnější a objevnější jsou ale dopisy věnované jejímu milenci Charlesu Doughty-Wylieovi, které vyšly pod názvem *Arabské deníky*.

*Arabské deníky* obsahují na stovku dopisů, které Bell napsala během svého putování pouští a svého pobytu ve městě Ha'il. Popisy přírody, kterou Bell prochází, se střídají s pocity opuštěnosti a deprese, které zažívá, až nakonec v nekonečnosti pouště nachází útočiště a bezpečí. Tradiční obraz exotické země jakožto bezbranné ženy, která se poddává svému přemožiteli je tady porušen a Arabská poušť má daleko více ženských, než mužských charakteristik.

Bell svému milému přibližuje situace, se kterými se každý den potýká, přičemž je často zachycuje v jazyku svých průvodců a tím čtenáři věrně přibližuje atmosféru Arábie. Velmi pozorně si všímá jednotlivých osob, které na cestě potkává, a z jejich chování si dotváří obraz Arabů a Arábie. Velmi přímo a bez okolků opisuje jejich vlastnosti a charakteristiky, jak pozitivní tak i negativní.

Bell dále sleduje ženy a jejich osudy a srovnává jejich životy se svým vlastním životem. Neodsuzuje je pro jejich jinakost, nýbrž ji obdivuje a vyzdvihuje zejména krásu těchto žen. Jsou to právě ženy, které jí v zajetí v Ha'ilu nejvíc pomáhají a mezi autorkou a těmito ženami vzniká přátelství. Svým přístupem k domorodým ženám se Bell výrazně liší od autorek jakými byly například Anne Blunt, která také navštívila město Ha'il nebo Isabela Burton. Jediné, co Bell kritizuje, je vláda, která je v rukou některých žen. Tomuto fenoménu Bell připisuje stav, ve kterém se tato společnost nachází.

Bell se vyhýbá předčasnému hodnocení a rychlým soudům díky svým bohatým cestovatelským zkušenostem a pozitivnímu vztahu k arabské kultuře a proto je možné považovat její obraz Arábie za mnohem objektivnější než obraz jiných autorů, kteří v této oblasti cestovali.

I když se v poslední době o autorce více mluví, zejména ve spojení s jejím dílem při vzniku Iráku, kritika ji stále dostatečně nedoceňuje.

## Bibliography

Bell, Gertrude L. *Syria : The Desert & the Sown*. New York: E. P. Dutton and company, 1907.

Bidwell, Robin. *Travellers in Arabia*. Berkshire: Garnet, 1994.

Calder, Chris. "Gertrude Bell and the Birth of Iraq." *Anderson Valley Advertiser*. 26. May. 2004. <<http://www.theava.com/04/0526-gertrude-bell.html>>.

Foster, Charles, ed. *Travellers in the Near East*. London: Stacey International, 2004.

"Gertrude Bell." *Wikipedia*. 9.May.2007. 12.Dec.2006. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gertrude\\_Bell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gertrude_Bell)>.

Hackluyt, Richard. *The Principall Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*. *eBooks@Adelaide*. 13. June. 2007. <<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/h/hakluyt/voyages/v05/>>

Hicks, Perry. "Iraq's Place In The War On Terror." *Gulf Coast News*. 21. Jun. 2004. <<http://www.gulfcoastnews.com/GCNguestOpinionWar2.htm>>.

Hulme, Peter and Youngs, Tim, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Lady Bell, ed. *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*. London: Benn, 1927.

Mabro, Judy. *Veiled Half-truths : Western Travellers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women*. New York: Tauris, 1991.

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Mills, Sara. *Discourses of Difference*. London: Routledge, 1991.

O'Brien, Rosemary, ed. *Gertrude Bell : The Arabian Diaries, 1913-1914*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Richmond, Elsa, ed. *The Earlier Letters of Gertrude Bell*. London: E.Benn, 1937.

Robinson, Jane. *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travelers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

Tabachnick, Stephen E., ed. *Explorations in Doughty's Arabia Deserta*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987.

Winstone, H.V.F. *Gertrude Bell*. London : Cape, 1978.