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The Other Gertrude Bell



Gertrude Bell.

Gertrude Lowthian Bell, granddaughter of Sir Isaac Lowthian Bell, the greatest metallurgist of his day, was a phenomenon. Her courage and character held men of her generation in awe. Her achievements as a linguist fluent in six languages, as a traveller, archaeologist, Orientalist, author, poet, photographer, diplomat and nation-builder are unsurpassed. Less well recognised has been her prowess as an outstanding woman mountaineer. At the close of the First World War, Gertrude Bell's contribution to the cause of Arab independence had made her world famous. Yet few recognise her name today, notwithstanding Werner Herzog's 2015 film *Queen of the Desert*, with Nicole Kidman sadly miscast as the heroine.

The foundations of Gertrude's early reputation rested on the half-dozen journeys of archaeological exploration she undertook throughout Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Mesopotamia between 1900 and 1913. Funding these herself and travelling with no other European companion, she covered some 20,000 miles in the saddle, often through hostile, little-known desert country, surviving brigandage and capture, risking death at a time when Arab provinces in the Ottoman Empire were mostly lawless and in revolutionary ferment. These experiences, compounded by her boundless self-confidence and mastery of Arabic, Turkish and Farsi gave her so profound a knowledge of the tribes and geography of the Middle East that,



Above: Nicole Kidman as Gertrude Bell and Damian Lewis as Charles Doughty-Wylie in Werner Herzog's biopic *Queen of the Desert*. (Benaroya Pictures)

Left: Gertrude Bell painted c1890 by Flora Russell (1869-1967).

at the outbreak of the First World War, the British government enlisted her support in mobilising the Arab revolution that overthrew Ottoman rule.

During the war, her daring political and military missions behind enemy lines liaising with and influencing tribal chiefs led to her appointment as the first female political officer in the British army. She became oriental secretary in Baghdad, an important British representative at the 1921 Cairo Conference and, having played a key role in creating the free and united post-war Iraq that secured the succession of Feisal I to the throne, was appointed by him as director of Iraq's antiquities in 1922. The following year, she established the Iraq Museum. In his obituary tribute, Feisal described her as 'the greatest woman of her time ... to whom no danger or exploit was too great for her to face.'

Almost everything Bell attempted was crowned with success. Her pre-war archaeological journeys earned her the Royal Geographical Society's Gill Memorial Prize (the first awarded to a woman) and both its Gold and Founder's Medal. At her memorial service at St Margaret's, Westminster, King George V and the British Parliament paid her fulsome tributes. Yet her last years were embittered by disappointment and remorse. Why should so brilliant a star have faded thus? Her autocratic and confrontational character did not endear her to everyone. Throughout her life, she had challenged authority and espoused a policy towards Arab independence that ultimately ran counter to official British policy. HMG's miserly official recognition of her exceptional wartime and post-war service was the CBE in 1917, the very year in which the rank of dame was initiated. By the early 1920s her reputation was being eclipsed by that of T E Lawrence, whose role as the champion of the Arab revolution was vigorously promoted by the American journalist Lowell Thomas.



The limestone spires of the Engelhörner in the northern Bernese Oberland from the east with the Gertrudspitze marked.



The Engelhörner from the foot of the Simelistock ridge above the Engelhörn hut. From left to right: Vorderispitze, Gertrudspitze, Ulrichspitze and Mittelspitze. (Paul Rudkin)



Monika Romang on the last few metres of the first ascent of *Queen of the Desert*, named in Bell's honour, an eight-pitch 7a+ on the Gertrudspitze. (Daniel Anker)

These were grave disappointments, but the fundamental source of her disenchantment was that despite a passionate nature, circumstance and her moral code prevented her from having a full relationship with any of the three men in her life. First was the romantic young diplomat Henry Cadogan whose proposal of marriage she accepted when staying in Tehran aged 24 as the guest of her uncle Sir Frank Lascelles, the British minister. But Cadogan was a gambler and Gertrude's father disapproved of the match and the following year he died of pneumonia. Next was the dashing but unhappily married soldier-scholar Capt Dick Doughty-Wylie. Gertrude wanted him to leave his wife but she threatened suicide if he did so. The matter was solved when he died a hero's death at Gallipoli in 1915. After that Gertrude focussed on work. Finally, towards the end of her life in 1925, came the dazzling Kinahan Cornwallis, Britain's intelligence chief in Cairo. Fifteen years her junior, his brusque rejection of her marriage proposal shattered her self-esteem. With her world crumbling around her and her health undermined, she took a fatal dose of barbiturates on 11 July 1926, two days before her 58th birthday. She was buried in the British Military Cemetery, Baghdad. Arab leaders and tribesmen throughout Iraq and Syria still mourn her passing.

Gertrude Bell's prowess as a mountaineer is the least known of her achievements. Much credit for what recognition they received must go to

Col Edward Lisle Strutt, First World War hero and the deputy (if unpopular) leader of the 1922 Everest Expedition. Strutt, for ten years editor of the *Alpine Journal* and president of the Club has an unenviable reputation as a die-hard Alpine traditionalist and controversialist whose wartime experiences left him virulently opposed to the nationalist philosophy of German and Italian Alpine climbs of the inter-war 'Iron Age'. But he was never a misogynist, a direct consequence of his boyhood mountaineering apprenticeship under the tutelage of his governess Beatrice Tomasson (1859-1947), an outstanding woman mountaineer whose first ascents included half a dozen Dolomite peaks and most memorably the south face of the Marmolada in 1901, then reckoned to be 'the longest and most difficult climb in the Alps'. Their relationship was rumoured to have been more than platonic but whatever the truth, Strutt understood how strong women climbers could be and became a fervent admirer of Gertrude Bell. On becoming editor of the *Alpine Journal* in 1927, the year after her death, he published the insouciant accounts of the climbs she recorded in the private letters she wrote to her family. Some of these were compiled by her stepmother Frances and posthumously published in *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*. Strutt himself echoed the judgement of King Feisal in his obituary (*Alpine Journal* 38, Nov 1926) that Bell was 'one of the greatest women of all time'.

Curiously, George Band's *Summit* (2006), recording 150 years of the Alpine Club, makes no reference to Gertrude Bell. Her reluctance to publicise her climbs, with the exception of an article, 'Concerning Mountains: Die Engelhorner', for the *National Review* (1901) reflected an innate modesty and that mountaineering was simply a diversion in her multi-faceted life, covering no more than five Alpine seasons from 1899 to 1904. The achievements of such distinguished British women mountaineers as Lucy Walker, Elizabeth Jackson, Katherine Richardson, Beatrice Tomasson, Mrs Aubrey Le Blond and Emily Bristow were more numerous and better known. Yet it was not so much the quantity of Gertrude's climbs, but rather their quality and style that earned her the admiration of her guides and accolades from such luminaries as W A B Coolidge, another *Alpine Journal* editor, who ranked her as the 'best of all lady mountaineers'.

Gertrude's upbringing, natural gifts and character forged the mountaineer she became. From childhood, she had exhibited an exceptional intellectual and physical vitality. Slim, slight even, but immensely strong, her early years were privileged but disciplined and rigorous. Assertive and self-opinionated, she went up to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford in 1886 aged 18 to follow a strict academic regime of seven hours daily study leavened by rowing, hockey, acting, and dancing. Unflinching when challenging her tutors in debate, she became the first woman to get a first in modern history at Oxford.

She spent four years loosely anchored to the family home Rounton Grange, a masterpiece of high-Victoriana built by her grandfather in 1870, designed by Philip Webb and decorated and furnished by William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Then she travelled to Tehran in 1892 to fall in love

Sep. 3. Leaving the shoulder of the Simili Stock at 8.30 we ascended the peak to the South of the saddle & reached the top at 9.15. We christened this peak the Vorderspitz. We descended the south side to the west saddle & ascended the west peak by some smooth rocks on the NW side reaching the top at 9.55. We named the peak Gertrude's Peak. We descended the rocks onto the same saddle & then followed down a smooth couloir for about 5 minutes & kept to the SW along the foot of the ~~peak~~ peak taking the next couloir onto the saddle to the south of the peak. The rock in this couloir is much more solid than that of which the rest of the arête is composed. When we were on the southern saddle we saw a good chimney on the SE side of Gertrude's Peak ~~by~~ which it could be ascended

A big day out. From Gertrude Bell's entry in the Hotel Rosenlauri's climbing book. 'Sep. 3. [1901] Leaving the shoulder of the Simili Stock at 8.30 we ascended the peak to the South of the saddle and reached the top at 9.15. We christened this peak the Vorderspitz. We descended the south side to the west saddle & ascended the west peak by some smooth rocks on the N W side reaching the top at 9.55. We named the peak Gertrude's Peak. We descended the rocks onto the same saddle & then followed down a smooth couloir for about 5 minutes & kept to the S W along the foot of the peak taking the next couloir for about 5 minutes & kept to the S W along the foot of the peak taking the next couloir onto the saddle to the south of the peak. The rock in this couloir is much more solid than that of which the rest of the arête is composed. When we were on the southern saddle we saw a good chimney on the S E side of Gertrude's Peak by which it could be ascended on this face. We followed along the arête & reached the top of the vert peak at 12.45. We named it Ulrich's Peak. We descended this peak by the southern face & continued along the arête past a gendarme until we reached the top of the fourth peak (1 of 5) which we named the Mittelspitz, it being the centre of the chain between the Vorderspitz & the Engelhorn.'

(Daniel H Anker/Hotel Rosenlauri)

not only with the ill-fated Henry Cadogan but the whole Islamic world. To assuage her grief after losing Henry, she embarked on an exhaustive travel programme that included four family holidays to Switzerland between 1893 and 1896. On first visiting the Dauphiné in 1897, she was held spellbound by La Meije (3983m) and, after hiring a couple of local guides, scrambled as far as its Promontoire ridge before turning back, vowing that she would return ere long to complete the climb.

Two years later, after a social visit to the Wagner family in Bayreuth, she returned to fulfil her vow, though still without proper rock-climbing experi-



Bell in Iraq, where she founded the Baghdad Museum. (San Diego Air and Space Museum Archive)

ence and yet to put on a rope. Engaging the same guides, the trio warmed up on the Grand Galibier – three hours up and two down – before moving on to La Bérarde. Here, she ran into the formidable German lady mountaineer Helene Kuntze who had just climbed La Meije's summit peak herself: 'Very nice,' was Gertrude's surprised comment about the woman who was soon to be her rival.

Then as now, La Meije is a serious climb and its first ascent in 1877, after 28 unsuccessful attempts, was hailed by Arnold Lunn in his *Century of Mountaineering* (1965) as 'the greatest achievement of the Silver Age'. Gertrude had already decided to outdo Fraulein Kuntze by attempting the mountain's complete traverse: a feat only accomplished eight years before and still regarded as one of the great expeditions of the

Alps. After a sleepless night at the Refuge de l'Alpe de Villar d'Arène, they left at 1am on 29 August 1899 and nine hours later, after 'hanging by my eyelids over an abyss,' reached La Meije's main summit. The challenge of the Cheval Rouge was overcome by straddling it *à cheval*. After summiting the Pic Central, they followed La Meije's teetering crest over 'endless dents' before reaching La Bérarde at 6.30pm that evening to complete their triumphal 17 and a half-hour expedition.

Gertrude allowed herself a two-day break before attempting the Barre des Écrins (4101m), the highest peak in the Dauphiné, inspired by Whymper's account of his harrowing first ascent in 1864 with Moore and Walker and guides Almer and Croz. Bitter weather, a profusion of ice couloirs and rotten rock made this 19-hour traverse far less enjoyable than La Meije. Gertrude had swapped her heavy skirt for a pair of men's trousers, which kept her nether regions warm, but the intense cold cost her three badly frostbitten fingers.

Undeterred, she completed this 1899 season with a lightening seven-hour ascent and descent of the Pelvoux before investigating the mysterious Aiguille Meridionale d'Arves: an 'inhuman and forbidding needle ... one of the most singular views I have ever seen.' Unbeknown to Gertrude, she had already been forestalled as the aiguille's first female summiter nine years

earlier by Katherine Richardson, another exceptional British woman climber who had made the first ascent of the Aiguille de Bionnassay's knife-edge south ridge in 1885. Nonetheless, the Aiguille Meridionale retained a notorious reputation due to a 50ft overhanging pitch known as the Mauvais Pas which had previously defeated many parties and which, 29 years later, merited a future Club president Claude Wilson's 10-page article in the *Alpine Journal* (AJ 40, May 1928) about its difficulties. Gertrude tossed off her own four-hour ascent as 'amusing climbing ... better than anything I have done,' and dismissed the dreaded Mauvais Pas as 'most enjoyable'.

Now bitten by the climbing bug, Gertrude based her 1900 season on Chamonix, and after fitting herself out with a bespoke blue climbing suit, engaged Ulrich Fuhrer and Ernest Simond as her guides. They climbed Mont Blanc, the Grépon and then romped up the Grand Dru, 'a heavenly rock climb', in record time as a prelude to attempting the complete Drus traverse. However, the passage to the Petit Dru, involving several abseils and a dangerous *pendule*, proved 'extremely difficult' and although their overall time of 24 hours was exceptional, Gertrude again found Katherine Richardson had pipped her, having done the traverse in the marginally more difficult opposite direction eight years earlier.

In 1901, Gertrude established herself at Grindelwald and engaged Ulrich Fuhrer and his younger brother Heinrich as guides. Their first objective was the south-east ridge of the Schreckhorn (4078m), a mountain described by Leslie Stephen as 'the most savage and thrilling' in the Oberland. Initially, Gertrude was unimpressed with the mountain's 'absurd reputation', but after a final hour of 'capital rock climbing' up-graded it into the 'first class of mountains ... though somewhat low in its class'. When the weather broke, she de-camped to Rosenlauri for a fortnight's climbing in the 'fascinating' and then virtually unknown Engelhörner. With Ulrich and a journeyman local guide, she came away with 10 new or first ascents including the first traverse of the Unbachthaler Engelhorn, a demanding two-day expedition involving one bivouac, several long stretches of seriously hard climbing with one pitch that necessitated a do-or-die boots-on-shoulder move and the temporary abandonment of the assistant guide who was unable to follow. Afterwards, Ulrich admitted that they would never have completed the traverse without her climbing skills ('as good as any man'), drive and determination.

It was now that Gertrude first conceived her audacious plan to climb within a single week the Finsteraarhorn's virgin north-east arête before attempting the hitherto uncompleted traverse of the Lauteraarhorn and Schreckhorn. However, after recceing the route on 12 September in heavy snow and rain, she sensibly called it off. The following year, after several months of archaeological research in Greece, Turkey and the Lebanon, Gertrude returned to Rosenlauri in July to discover that Helene Kuntze, guided by her very own Ulrich, had already made several Engelhörner first ascents the previous month. Gertrude graciously acknowledged these as 'very good indeed', but not to be outdone put up another new route there herself before switching operations to the neighbouring Wellhorn group. Here, on 14 July,

she and the Fuhrers made the first complete traverse of the Wellhorn and Klein Wellhorn from the Lastsattel to the Unter Wellhornsattel, a climb involving 10,000ft of ascent previously reckoned 'impossible' and described by Jeremy Talbot in the West Col *Engelhorner* guide (Collomb, 1968) as 'one of the finest ridge climbs in the Bernese Oberland'.

Six days later, their attempt on the Wetterhorn by a new route was frustrated by seracs, but after regrouping Gertrude and the Fuhrers decided to launch their first assault on the Lauteraarhorn-Schreckhorn traverse which had so far rebuffed all-comers. Starting from Grimsel with three days of provisions and 500ft of rope, an assortment of guides and several other hopefuls, including Prince Luís of Orléans-Braganza, crammed into the Pavillon Dolfuss that night. A tremendous thunderstorm boded ill for the morrow and when the braver hearts eventually got under way, progress up the Lauteraarhorn's seemingly endless, gendarme-studded ridge in bad visibility, unremitting rain and snow gave Gertrude 'the nastiest day of my life'. On reaching the summit in a blizzard, they called it a day and then hazarded a risky, unsighted descent to the glacier. Gertrude vowed never to attempt the climb from Grimsel again, but four days later, on 24 July, she made her second and this time successful attempt on the traverse from Grindelwald, spurred by the news that Helene Kuntze was bent on doing it in the opposite direction. There appears to be no detailed description of this achievement, but Strutt regarded it as Gertrude's most important climb.

With that behind her, she again set her sights on the north-east arête of the Finsteraarhorn (4274m), the 'Monarch of the Oberland'. This huge, isolated chunk of rock is notorious for bad weather and when she disclosed her plan to the Fuhrers, they reckoned the climb so difficult and dangerous that they kept it secret from the valley. On 31 July 1902, the trio left the hut at 1.35am in uncertain weather. As the day progressed, it steadily deteriorated with persistent snow and mist before developing into a raging storm with thunder and lightning that sent their ice axes humming. At 8pm, high up on the shark's fin north-east rib, they were forced to bivouac. Huddled together on a tiny ledge Gertrude surveyed the scene with sublime detachment 'to enjoy the extraordinary magnificence of the storm and the lightning bolts which made the rocks crackle.'

At dawn, with the storm unabated, they began a desperate retreat involving several near-fatal falls on the ice-coated rocks, and eventually reached the glacier in blinding mist. The weather never relented and as the day wore on, a second bivouac on the glacier in sodden clothes became inevitable. Dawn on the third morning saw them staggering into Meiringen dehydrated, hypothermic, frostbitten and utterly exhausted after spending 57 hours on the mountain mostly roped together. Later described as 'one of the greatest expedition's in Alpine history', Ulrich Fuhrer's tribute was that 'few surpassed her in technical skill and none equalled her coolness, bravery and judgement ... had she not been full of courage and determination, we must have perished.' Twenty-eight years elapsed before the ambitious



'The Dôme de Neige des Ecrins', by Charles Henri Contencin (1898-1955).

Miriam Underhill climbed the rib with the Swiss guides Adolf and Fritz Rubi. Underhill rated its objective dangers as 'unjustifiable'.

Gertrude's Finsteraarhorn epic was not the end of her mountaineering career. During a six-month world tour in 1903 taking in Afghanistan, the Himalaya, Burma, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, Korea and Japan, she stopped off in Vancouver for a few days climbing in the Rockies. That same July she based herself on Zermatt where she met Geoffrey Winthrop Young 'a very nice creature, charming to look at.' After asking herself the question 'Why do people climb?', she traversed the Matterhorn with the Fuhrers from its more difficult Italian side: 'a much better climb than I expected.' The rope ladder normally placed as an aid above the Tyndallgrat was broken that year and Heinrich Fuhrer found free-climbing the 40ft pitch 'immensely difficult'. Gertrude thought it 'beautiful' and described the descent down the Hörnli as 'more like sliding down bannisters than climbing'.

Gertrude's penultimate climb that season was an ascent of the Lyskamm (4527m) by its east ridge. This was a very different proposition to the Matterhorn traverse due to the immense double cornices, which, in those days, could make the ridge impossible. From the Betemps hut, their route to the

summit involved 1,742m of climbing, much of it on pure ice which, at times, could only be done by traversing the sheer face of the ridge underneath the cornices. For once, Gertrude 'went through ten minutes of unmixed fear.' Reversing the ridge in descent was even more perilous, but they reached the safety of the Marguerita hut that night, at 4,556m the highest in the Alps, and the following day completed the circuit of Monte Rosa's highest summits. It was Gertrude's last climb.

Gertrude's mountaineering years were amongst the happiest of her life: halcyon days before the post-war years brought disappointment and embitterment. Her stepmother Frances described her life revealingly as one in which 'great joys came with great sorrows', but she was spared the demolition of her beloved Rounton Grange in 1950. She was also spared the madness of the Second Gulf War and the devastation of Iraq when the Anglo-American invasion resulted in the looting of 10,000 of the Iraq Museum's artefacts and its closure. In 2019 English Heritage erected a blue plaque outside Gertrude's London home to honour an almost forgotten British heroine whose star still illuminates the wasted lands of Iraq and Syria.

Gertrude Bell was incomparable. However, like her, a visit to Persia altered the course of my own life. My attempt to climb the Finsteraarhorn on ski only got as far as the 4,089m Hugi Sattel, but in 1968 Nick Allen and I did two of the great Engelhörner rock climbs and our traverse of the Schreckhorn ended in drama when we rescued a badly injured German guided party who had fallen down its south-east face. The fearsome Lyskamm double-cornices were not in evidence in 1971 when Michael Baker and I did the traverse but I shall never forget our negotiating the nightmarish crevasses of the Zwillings glacier.