

THE OSTRACON

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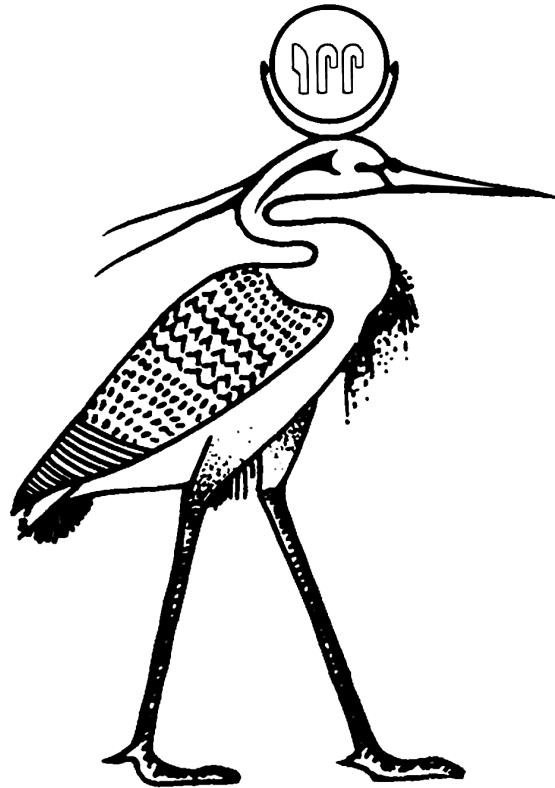
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HOUSE OF SCROLLS

Book Review. Desert Queen by Janet Wallach
Richard S. Harwood, Reviewer



IN THIS ISSUE ...

House of Scrolls

***Desert Queen* by Janet Wallach,**
1996, 377 pages. Nan A. Talese/Doubleday.
ISBN 0-385-47408-3.

If Lawrence of Arabia was the brawn behind much of the modern geo-political map of the Near East, Gertrude of Arabia was the brain. *Desert Queen: The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell: Adventurer, Adviser to Kings, Ally of Lawrence of Arabia* is a well-researched, fascinating and easily readable biography of this remarkable woman.

In the late 1800s, an upper-class young English lady had only three “social seasons” in which to find a husband. Gertrude Bell failed. Perhaps it was her plain looks or the fact that she was one of the first female graduates of Oxford that scared men off. Perhaps it was her sharp tongue or her superior intellect. Whatever the reason, her status as a childless spinster haunted Gertrude for the rest of her life. But it also led her to an unconventional life that changed the course of history.

Supported lovingly by a wealthy, aristocratic family, Gertrude took her loneliness to the deserts of the Near East, particularly to Mesopotamia (now Iraq), with which she fell in love. She was a prolific writer. Her popular books and governmental reports, and the hundreds of letters she sent home to family, friends and politicians form the backbone of Wallach’s definitive biography.

To call Bell unconventional is a gross understatement. But, as a Victorian gentlewoman, she was also very conventional. She slept

alone on desert sands and endured imprisonment by tribal sheiks. Yet even in the most remote stretches of the Arabian Desert, she dined on fine china, drank imported wine from crystal glasses and wore imported furs. Throughout the cities of the Near East, she charmed diplomats in her fashionable French gowns at foreign embassy balls, but welcomed Bedouin murderers and thieves to her desert campsites. She considered herself equal to any man but, back in England, she fought vehemently against voting rights for women.

Bell spent her life among powerful men. She entertained and was entertained by desert sheiks, often the only woman allowed to be unveiled in their presence. She sought their knowledge but was conceited about her superior intellect and experience compared to the top English politicians, with whom she corresponded regularly.

An equal among men, she had the strong passions of a woman. An underlying theme of Wallach’s biography is Bell’s passion for men she could not possess. She met T.E. Lawrence for the first time at the archaeological site of Carchemish, near Damascus, in 1910. She was forty-two, he was twenty-three; she was already attending classes at Oxford when he was born. Did they have an affair? You’ll have to read the book. Wallach is circumspect with regard to the details of Gertrude’s most intimate relationships, but her love of several men dominated much of Bell’s life.

Gertrude Bell was an amateur but talented archaeologist. She discovered and excavated archaeological sites, and established the world-renowned Iraqi Museum in Baghdad, now even more famous for its looting in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

In the early 1900s, Bell knew more about the Near East than almost any other European. She knew and understood the two most powerful desert sheiks: Ibn Rashid, a ruthless ally of the Turks and Germans; and Ibn Saud, the leader of the Saudi tribe, who favored the Western nations. But, as a woman, Gertrude was constrained by the English government before they grudgingly acknowledged her expertise and allowed her to return to the Near East as an employee and informant.

At the outbreak of World War I, the Near East consisted of only four countries or territories: Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine and Arabia, almost all of which were controlled from Constantinople (now Istanbul) by the Turks of the Ottoman Empire. At the end of the War, Gertrude was instrumental in redrawing the modern borders of those countries.

Wallach's book is not only a biography, it's a history of the Near East, both ancient and modern, doled out in short chapters with even shorter sub-chapters. Almost without realizing it, the reader

begins to understand the dynamics of the region and the forces that created the current political situation. The book is an engaging, behind-the-scenes look at the making of the modern Near East, told from a very personal perspective.

Written before the outbreak of the current war in Iraq, *Desert Queen* still provides sharp insights into the forces that created and still control the political picture of the modern Near East. The conflicts between the Sunni and Shiite Muslims play an important role in the story, as do the now-familiar cities of Baghdad, Mosul, Basrah, Karbala, Nasariya, Najaf and other centers of the current conflict. When Wallach was writing her biography in 1996, she could have had no idea how prophetic Gertrude Bell's descriptions of Iraq's problems would be to us today.

Richard S. Harwood

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