

Report for the May 2016 meeting of the Malvern Civic Society

On Friday 13th May Mrs Jan Long, MBE, Rotarian and freelance public relations consultant gave us a lively and illustrated talk about Gertrude Bell, who was best known for her part in establishing modern Iraq after the First World War. The title of the talk was “*Unsung Heroine of Iraq*”: multi-talented Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) lived in a period when, despite her huge achievements in education, diplomacy, politics, languages, travel, photography and archaeology, she went unrecognised by many. Jan Long has conducted studies on Gertrude Bell and given talks about her for many years now, having discovered quite by chance a book about this remarkable woman. The book was by Victor Winstone, who specialised in Middle Eastern topics.

Gertrude Bell was a writer, archaeologist and political officer, educated at Oxford University in a period when women had to sit behind a curtain during lectures for fear that they may cause a distraction to the gentlemen students.

Born in the North East, she came from a rich family (her father was Sir Hugh Bell), with wealth gained from the ironworks, an industry that once employed 70,000 people. Very intelligent, Gertrude was the youngest woman at university to gain a First Class degree in history. Not without suitors, she did not wish to settle and marry, so after going mountaineering she went on a world tour, with her brother as chaperone. After travelling through Japan and Canada she went on to the Holy Land where she learnt Arabic and Persian. As an atheist, she argued constantly with her devout brother. At Cappadocia in Turkey she photographed a church of 400AD which very soon afterwards was no longer there because the locals stole the building's stones! She continued taking photographs and sending them back to Britain, photographing locations in Syria, Tehran and Constantinople (now Istanbul). In Jerusalem she got engaged to Henry Cadogan but her father was annoyed as Henry had not asked for his permission. Background checks by her father found that Henry was “unworthy” and so he told her to break off the engagement.

After a short break at home, Gertrude returned to the Middle East, where British Intelligence thought that she would be useful. She forged a friendship with the Arabs and shot someone who tried to attack her in her tent. In the First World War Gertrude met Lawrence of Arabia with whom she worked to forge alliances with the Arabs. In 1921 she participated in the Cairo conference convened by Churchill to establish the boundaries of the new state of Iraq. She had successfully influenced the choice to make ex-King Faisal of Syria the King of Iraq. Gertrude was the only woman at the conference amongst forty men. She stayed on in Baghdad where she continued to discuss matters of state with Faisal, who made her the keeper of the Museum of Antiquities. Although in 1926 it appeared she may have committed suicide, none of her family believed that this was the true reason for her death. Jan suggested that the conspiracy theories blaming British Intelligence, instead, may well have some truth in them as Gertrude's continuing presence in the region could have become too awkward. However, suicide continues to be the official explanation for her death.

Clive Hooper gave the vote of thanks for this splendid talk about a fascinating woman. Gertrude's life as an explorer, cartographer and archaeologist for the British Empire is celebrated in the film “Queen of the Desert”, which Jan recommends for its beautiful costumes and musical scores rather than for factual accuracy.

On Civic Society matters, the meeting paid tribute to the late John Handley, a former Chairman and a Vice President. For details about the Civic Society, please visit the website at: <http://www.malverncivicsociety.org.uk>.

Denise Preston, Press Officer, Malvern Civic Society
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