

OBITUARY NOTICES

Gertrude Bell

On 12th July, within two days of her 58th birthday, Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell was laid to rest at Baghdad in the distinguished company of her fellow-workers, General Sir Stanley Maude and Colonel G. E. Leachman—both of them, like herself, cut off in their prime, when already much had been accomplished and much, very much, still remained to be done. And who shall not say of them, with all conviction and in loving memory, the simple words that stand engraved on every cenotaph of France and Flanders: “ Their name liveth for evermore ” ?

And this at least will be recorded of her by posterity as surely as it is the considered verdict of contemporary judgment that, even as Stanley Maude was the conqueror of Mesopotamia, so was she the maker of ‘Iraq. For, if the kingdom of King Faisal survives the vicissitudes of time—as it has under her guidance the ups and downs of the past five years—and emerges vigorous and independent from its present chrysalis-stage of British tutelage, it will stand forth in history a monument to her genius, to the versatility of her knowledge and influence, and to the practical idealism tempered with honest opportunism which were the outstanding characteristics of a remarkable Englishwoman. *Si monumentum quaeris, circumspice*. Fortunate, indeed, was she in the place and manner of her death; and fortunate, perhaps though to the world’s regret, must she be accounted to have escaped the years of strenuous labour that lay before her, inevitably and inexorably, from the moment of her liberation from the harness of active service for a well-earned rest. The frail body, that needed rest and ever deferred the tempting holiday at the imperious behest of some new task thrust upon her or conceived by a tireless brain, now rests for ever. And the world is not to have, at any rate not directly from her own pen, that record of a tense period of the history of its oldest settlement, which it would have demanded of her leisure. But fortunately the material is there—though

without the spirit to inform it—among the archives of 'Iraq. And who has better earned the right to say with Charles Lamb—apostrophising the "India House" on his retirement a century ago—"Farewell . . . thou dreary pile. . . In thee remain and not in the obscure collection of some wandering bookseller, my 'works'! There let them rest as I do from my labours, piled on thy massy shelves, more MSS. in folio than ever Aquinas left. . ."?

Of the literary and artistic value of the voluminous output of her official pen, stored away as it is for the most part among the files of the High Commissioner's office at Baghdad, the world must for the nonce judge by a single specimen. For it fell to her to write the official administration report on 'Iraq for the "difficult period" of the British military occupation of the country down to the summer of 1920, "when, a Mandate for Mesopotamia having been accepted by Great Britain, steps were being taken for the early establishment of an Arab Government." It would have been nearer the truth to say that steps were being taken to crush an Arab rebellion, but the delightful euphemism of the India Office official preface to her report had at least the merit of leaving Gertrude Bell to tell her own story in her own way; and she, in a report of 150 foolscap pages of print—admirably arranged, packed full of unconventional comments on the routine and accidents of administration, controversial and even tendentious, but always restrained as though in deference to the cloth of officialdom—manages to leave the reader in ignorance of the fact that the writer was playing or had recently played a foremost part in a drama as poignant and stirring as any recorded in the annals of imperial Britain.

That report assuredly sets the seal of versatility on the author of *Syria: the Desert and the Sown*, *Amurath to Amurath*, and the earlier translations of Hafidh, which last, to say the least, display the incipient reaction of a sensitive spirit to the romance of the primitive East, which was to hold her for the rest of her life. In a notice of this

kind it is impossible to do justice to the first-named works. They are simply "classics", each in its own category, full of piercing observation and deductions, judicious though bold, but always characteristic of a mind shaped in no common mould. And perhaps, had she been asked to choose among her many achievements the greatest, she would have hesitated between the discovery of the palace of Ukhaidhar, now within a few hours' journey by car from Baghdad, and the great journey to Hail, the capital of a dynasty now no more, and to the last regretted by her, as she watched with a jealous scepticism, which she never attempted to conceal, the triumphant march of the Wahhabi monarch to the hegemony of Arabia. Of that great journey she apparently never gave the story to the world, and it is to be hoped that it may yet be sought out among her papers and published to swell the scanty records of European penetration of Arabia. It will be by no means the least important addition to the scroll.

Of *The Thousand and One Churches*, whose authorship she shared with Sir William Ramsay, it must suffice to make mention, while returning with insistence to the point that the greater part of her greatest work lies among those files of Baghdad veiled from the public gaze by the inexorable laws of official anonymity. The curious official may seek them out here and there during the centuries to come for his own delectation or instruction, but, if the world is to have them in the form she would herself have chosen, it must plead with the father, who was the unfailing inspiration of her life and work, and, through a long period, the regular recipient of a collection of letters which will some day take its place among the masterpieces of literature.

Sir Hugh Bell, in all the vigour of evergreen old age, survives his distinguished daughter, whom those of us who served with her as colleagues in the days of storm and stress salute at her passing with Roman words that reflect the measure of her achievement: *Frater, ave atque vale!*

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