

LETTERS FROM BAGHDAD

UK/US/France 2016 95mins

Directors: Zeva Oelbaum Sabine Kragenhuhl

Both women were attracted to this subject because of the forceful character of Gertrude Bell and the unique position she occupied as a woman in early 20th C Middle East politics.

They spent 5 years researching the subject, going through the archives of her papers and letters and contemporary film archives and photographs shot in the locations she visited. One of the ways they raised the money for the film was to undertake conservation of parts of the film archives. These were obviously often in a perilous state of preservation and wherever possible they went back to the original negatives and got additional prints made. They also experimented with different approaches to filming their “dramatized” sections, and in the end settled on 16mm colour film that they then toned down to black and white to make it fit with the tones of the archive material.

Their premise was that the film would be as if it had been made in 1929-30 using people’s recent reminiscences of Gertrude Bell. Thus anyone who was not alive in 1929-30 could not be “interviewed”, but just represented by a still photograph.

They began work on the film in 2009, thinking of the parallels between 1916 and 2003, but as they went on the further parallels between 1916ff and the destructive impact of Isis on the archaeology of the area became something they could not ignore (hence for instance Bell’s photographs of Palmyra, since destroyed by Isis.)

Tilda Swinton, who voices the words of Gertrude Bell is also an Executive Producer of the film. She had in fact been cast 10 years ago in the role of Gertrude for another film that never got made, so was very happy to take on the role.

The film chronicles Bell’s time in the Middle East and her involvement in the politics of the area during WWI and the immediate aftermath of the war when the states of Jordan and Iraq were established under British “guidance”/control. Bell’s experience and position were extraordinary as she had travelled extensively under her own steam throughout the area, establishing friendships and relationships with tribal leaders and recording it all with writings and photographs that she developed herself. Throughout it all she kept diaries and wrote copious letters home. The Middle East to her was an opportunity for freedom way beyond the confines of late Victorian and Edwardian society of England. Her subsequent status amongst military and government staff was unique as a woman. Not surprisingly in later accounts of the time written by men she is barely, if at all, given a mention.

Some of her remarks seem remarkably prescient now. Writing of the way the British “occupied” Baghdad, she commented, “We rushed into this business with our usual disregard for a comprehensive political scheme. Can you make people take your side when they’re not sure you will be on theirs?” Remind you of anything?

The film does not fit easily in any particular category. It is a sort of dramatized documentary, but in a rather formal fashion. It does not purport to be a full biography of Gertrude Bell’s life, looked back on with the benefit of hindsight (which would be in fact be completely unfair to include.) It is simply a chronicle of events carefully selected, sympathetically and carefully filmed and also provides a background explanation to all the subsequent disasters that have overtaken that area of the world since that date.