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The Origins of the Spy Myth: Portrayals of Gertrude Bell in Global and Turkish Historiography

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Casusluk Mitinin Kökenleri: Gertrude Bell'in Küresel ve Türk Tarih Yazımındaki Tasvirleri

Öz

Bu makale, Gertrude Bell'in küresel ve Türk tarih yazımında değişen tasvirini, özellikle de seyahatlerinin casuslukla ilişkilendirilmesini analiz etmektedir. Literatürün karşılaştırılması ve mevcut çalışmaların kaynaklarının gözden geçirilmesine dayanarak, bu algının somut kanıtlardan ziyade tarihsel kaygılardan kaynaklandığı öne sürülmektedir. Erken dönem anlatılarında ve kişisel tanıklıklarda seyahatlerinin motivasyonu olarak casusluktan bahsedilmemesine rağmen, 1978'den bu yana küresel literatürde casus olduğu fikri yaygınlaşmıştır. Bu değişim, Edward Said'in Oryantalizm'i ve H.V.F. Winstone'un Bell'i İngiliz politikasını baltalamakla suçlayan kitapları gibi etkili eserlerin yayınlandığı dönemde meydana gelmiştir. Çoğunlukla Lawrence efsanesinden esinlenen bu yorumlar 1960'lı yıllardan itibaren diğer İngiliz arkeologlar için de ortaya atılmıştır. Bell'in arşivi 1990'lardan bu yana çevrimiçi olarak erişilebilir olmasına rağmen, arşivin genişliği ve karmaşıklığı nedeniyle birçok akademisyen daha önceki önyargılı kaynaklara güvenmeye devam etmektedir. Bu durum spekülasyonları devam ettirmekte ve Bell'e ilişkin algıları çarpıtmaktadır. Bell'in seyahatlerinin Türk akademik çevrelerinde casuslukla ilk kez Semavi Eyice'nin 1978 tarihli makalesinde ilişkilendirildiğini belirtmek önemlidir. Casusluğu ima eden bu eleştirel çalışmaların aynı yıl yayınlanması tesadüfi görünmektedir. Ancak bu durum, Soğuk Savaş'ın daha geniş etkisi ve ulusal kaygıların yükselişi bağlamında değerlendirilebilir. Dolayısıyla, Bell'i Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun çöküşünden sorumlu bir "femme fatale" olarak tasvir eden son dönem Türk akademik söylemi, yalnızca toprak bütünlüğüne ilişkin ulusal kaygıları değil, aynı zamanda daha geniş tarihsel yorumların etkisini de yansıtmaktadır.

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Abstract

This article analyses the shifting portrayal of Gertrude Bell in global and Turkish historiography, particularly the association of her travels with espionage. Drawing on a comparison of the literature and a review of the sources of existing studies, it argues that this perception is rooted in historical anxieties rather than concrete evidence. Although early accounts and personal testimonies do not mention espionage as a motivation for her travels, the idea that she was a spy has become prevalent in the global literature since 1978. This shift occurred around the time of the publication of influential works such as Edward Said's Orientalism and H.V.F. Winstone's books, which accused Bell of undermining British policy. These interpretations, which are largely informed by the Lawrence legend, have been proposed by other British archaeologists since the 1960s. Despite the online availability of Bell's archive since the 1990s, many scholars continue to rely on earlier biased sources due to the breadth and complexity of the archive. This perpetuates speculations and distorts perceptions of Bell. It is important to note that the first association of Bell's travels with espionage in Turkish academic circles was in Semavi Eyice's 1978 article. The publication of these critical works suggesting espionage in the same year seems coincidental. However, it can be contextualised within the broader influence of the Cold War and the rise of national concerns. Thus, the recent Turkish academic discourse portraying Bell as a "femme fatale" responsible for the downfall of the Ottoman Empire reflects not only national anxieties surrounding territorial integrity, but also the influence of broader historical interpretations.

Keywords: Gertrude Bell, Spy Myth, Historiography, Orientalism, National Anxieties.

Introduction

Gertrude Lowthian Bell (1868-1926), born into a wealthy British industrialist family, pursued historical studies and embarked on extensive travels through the Middle East and beyond. These journeys, documented in popular travelogues and scholarly publications, established her reputation as an explorer and archaeologist before she entered political service. Her fluency in Arabic and deep knowledge of the region's history and Arab tribes made her invaluable. During World War I, Bell was recruited into the nascent British intelligence network in the Middle East. However, her most significant contributions came after the war. Serving as Oriental Secretary in Iraq, she played a crucial role in establishing the newly formed state. This position, often misconstrued as espionage, involved diplomatic coordination and liaison between the various parties involved in Iraqi nation-building (Perry, 2020: 11). While her influence on foundation of Iraq is debated, with some scholars downplaying her contributions (Stewart, 2007) and others exaggerating her role in border demarcation (Ortaylı, 2021: 223), it is undeniable that she supported British interests in the region.

The travels of Gertrude Bell in the Middle East prior to her formal involvement with intelligence work present a complex historical question. Some scholars posit that her extensive travels served covert intelligence purposes, citing her cultivation of a diverse social network and high-level connections. However, this interpretation appears primarily in studies published after the 1980s. Previous works, often authored by family members and close associates, acknowledge Bell's contributions to the British Empire during and after the First World War. Significantly, these accounts are silent on any motivation for espionage or political maneuvering during her travels. Prior to the 1980s, portrayals of Bell emphasized her adventurous spirit and scholarly pursuits in the East, funded by her family's wealth.

The 1980s witnessed a significant reevaluation of Gertrude Bell's historical role. This shift was the result of a confluence of factors, including the prevailing socio-political climate and evolving historical perspectives within different national contexts. Edward Said's groundbreaking work, *Orientalism* (1978), and Victor Winstone's studies on Bell placed her travels at the center of theoretical debates and interpretive speculation. Both authors situated Bell within the broader framework of Western engagement with the East. Said, focusing on her writings, analyzed her contribution to the construction of Orientalist discourse. Winstone, on the other hand, presented a more controversial view, portraying her as an operative within a covert network undermining British foreign policy. It is possible that both authors were influenced by the Cold War-era "Lawrence myth," which was popularized by Hollywood and related to American and British foreign policy. (Stubbs, 2013: 12). Bell's reevaluation aligns with this broader trend, as speculation about T.E. Lawrence's inner circle had been a pervasive phenomenon since the 1960s (Knightley & Simpson, 1969: 19; İpek, 2023: 322).

The availability of Bell's correspondence online in the 1990s has not altered this situation. Her writings and correspondence are extensive, documenting over four thousand days of her life, which presents a challenging task for researchers. These documents enable a day-by-day reconstruction of more than a decade of her fifty-seven years. Furthermore, the analysis of British archival materials pertaining to her mission in Iraq presents an additional layer of complexity in accurately depicting her life. A comprehensive examination of such a vast amount of data is proving a daunting challenge for researchers. It is therefore not uncommon for popular biographies to be used as a source in academic studies about Bell. While this approach can aid the writing process, it also results in the inclusion of fictional elements in scholarly works. Bell's historical account within academic discourse has been distorted by an overreliance on non-scholarly sources, particularly for peripheral details.

Traditionally, portrayals of Gertrude Bell within Turkish media and non-academic publications have been negative. These depictions often cast her as a manipulative figure, a "femme fatale" responsible for the fracturing of the Ottoman Empire and the arbitrary division of the Middle East. This perception likely stems, at least in part, from a broader societal reaction to foreign influence during the later years of the Ottoman rule. Individuals like Bell and T.E. Lawrence became symbolic figures of foreign intervention and perceived hostility, attracting animosity. Bell's role in the establishment of Iraq and Lawrence's openly critical portrayals of Turks in his writings arguably contributed to this negative association. Previously, up until the 1980s, Turkish academic literature primarily characterized Bell as an archaeologist. Nevertheless, Semavi Eyice's 1978 article, which proposed a potential espionage motive for Gertrude Bell's travels and gained recognition through inclusion in the TDV Encyclopedia of Islam, initiated a shift in perception. Since the 1990s, Turkish scholars have increasingly examined Bell's travels through the lens of potential espionage and Ottoman imperial division. The frequent citations of Edward Said and Victor Winstone during this period demonstrate the influence of broader trends in global historiography on this evolving perspective in Turkish academia.

The refutation of an accusation, particularly in the social sciences, necessitates a comprehensive evaluation of the evidence supporting its validity. This principle is applied to the ongoing claims that Gertrude Bell's travels throughout the Middle East were a cover for a secret intelligence-gathering operation. Therefore, the objective of this article is not to definitively reject the possibility that Bell was involved in espionage activities. However, this study argues that the current portrayal of Bell as a spy relies primarily on interpretations based on historical anxieties rather than concrete evidence. Although there is no clear evidence to confirm espionage as a primary motive for her travels, her experiences broadened her skill set and likely prepared her for a later role in British intelligence during World War I. To explore this issue, the article will examine the origins of the espionage allegations, the contexts in which they

appear, and their influence on contemporary Turkish and global academic discourse.

To investigate the evolving perception of Gertrude Bell within academia, this article adopts a five-part structure. The first section will examine pre-1980s scholarship on Bell. This section will focus on how she was represented in personal testimonies and early academic works. The second section will investigate the influence of Edward Said's Orientalism and its impact on the subsequent framing of Bell within academic discourse. The third section will analyze the works of H.V.F. Winstone, a key figure in reshaping perceptions of Bell. This section will explore how Winstone's scholarship influenced later academic studies on the subject. The fourth section will address the recent trend of incorporating popular biographies into academic studies on Bell. This section will explore how fictional elements are used as a basis for arguments in academic studies, using an example. The origins of Bell's perception in the Turkish academy and the influence of national concerns and global historiography on these studies are examined in the last section.

1. Personal Testimonies and Initial Studies

Other than her own works, the first accounts of Gertrude Bell's life and travels were published in obituaries after her death, featuring such figures as David George Hogarth, Franz Babinger (1927), and John Philby (1926). The most comprehensive of these accounts is Hogarth's article published in The Geographical Journal. In this commemorative article, Hogarth briefly summarizes Bell's travels. He explained her travel motivation with fascination for "*the chain of obscure and sandy stations and camps which once watched across the river the outposts of Rome and Byzantium*". As one of the people who knew Bell and worked with her over a long period of time, Hogarth refrains from drawing any general conclusions about Bell's travel goals (1926: 365). In his memoirs published in 1930, German diplomat Friedrich Rosen whom she had met in Tehran and spent time within Jerusalem devoted a significant portion to Bell. Rosen laments Bell's use of the knowledge she acquired, in part, from the Germans against Germany. However, he concedes her patriotism and even praises her later aid to German scientists (1930: 281). In his memoir article about Bell, Douglas Carruthers, a famous explorer of Arabia, stated that Bell's journey to Hail did not make any significant contribution to literature, except for some information on water resources. However, he also acknowledged that Bell could not have foreseen that she would return to Baghdad, consider it her home, and remain there until her death (1958: 57).

Janet Courtney, Hogarth's sister, and a friend of Bell's from Oxford wrote about his memories and observations of both his deceased brother in 1928 and Bell in her book. According to Courtney, Bell traveled to learn, and the knowledge she acquired prepared her in an imperceptible way to work for her country (1931: 78). Although Courtney dedicated forty pages to Bell in her book, she does not

provide details about her travels. She includes excerpts from some of Bell's letters, which were published by Bell's stepmother, Florence.

About a year after Bell's death, her stepmother Florence published some of Bell's letters. The book is in two volumes, before and after her move to Baghdad. From her mother's point of view, Bell's move to Baghdad and the purchase of a house seemed to mean the permanent abandonment of her home in England. However, because the book was published and prepared hastily, it contains some omissions and inaccuracies. No letters from her travel to Romania are included, and from Iran adventure there is only one long letter to her cousin Horace Marshall (Bell, 1927: 25). Florence remembers Bell's return from Persia in December (1927: 32), but this is contradicted by the letter she wrote to her father on 28 October 1892 (Bell, 1937: 340). These gaps in Bell's early travels were largely filled by her stepsister Elsa's 1937 book, which includes her early letters.

Elsa Richmond, Bell's stepsister, significantly contributed to preserving and transmitting her sister's legacy. *The Earlier Letters*, which she published in 1937, are the most important source about the period of Bell's education and her early travels. Elsa's added notes between the letters and information about the mentioned individuals provide insights into Bell's early personal life and social network. The book generally avoids a critical approach. However, in the last section, Elsa notes that Bell's travel to Iran increased her sympathy for Eastern peoples and influenced her future (1937: 341). Elsa's contributions extend beyond this book, as her editorial work can be found in most of the initial biographies about Bell (Kamm, 1956: 7; Burgoyne, 1958: 7). Although Elsa and her mother Florence's published books are not systematic narratives of Bell's life, they have been essential sources for biographical research for many years.

In 1940, Ronald Bodley, a distant cousin of Bell's, wrote a book about her life. Bodley, who had spent years living with Bedouins, aimed to compare his own experiences with Bell's adventures (Bodley, 1927: 21). His focus on Bell's interactions with Arab culture is evident throughout the book. Bodley portrays Bell as a unique traveler with a modest personality, even suggesting that the accomplishments of other explorers like Doughty, Burton, and Lawrence lacked practical significance (1940: 141). Maurice Roy Ridley, who was also close to the Bell family, wrote another biography in (1943). Further works on Bell's life were written by Josephine Kamm (1956) and Anne Tibble (1958). These short biographies do not use different sources or methods from those which preceded them. Until this period, most writers have agreed that Bell lived an extraordinary life and have aimed to convey this to readers.

In 1958, Elizabeth Burgoyne prepared the most comprehensive biography of Bell to date, in two volumes. The first volume of the book examines Bell's travels between 1889 and 1914. The second volume focuses on her life from 1914 until her death through her personal correspondence (1961). It is noteworthy that Burgoyne, unlike Bell's stepmother Florence, divides Bell's life between her

travels and the time she spent on diplomatic missions. Burgoyne had access to almost all of Bell's correspondence due to his work being sponsored by Elsa Richmond. Burgoyne's approach, however, was uneven. She often provided detailed descriptions of some journeys while summarizing others, even for journeys of similar length and importance. Despite its shortcomings and lack of critical analysis, this book is the most consistent reference work for Bell's travels. Burgoyne's work seems to have temporarily closed the chapter on Bell. Apart from a biographical novel written by Dorothy Cowlin (1967), no comprehensive study was conducted until the late 1970s.

Until the 1980s, academic research on Bell's life and work was mainly in the form of undergraduate theses and concentrated in Anglophone countries (Taylor, 1951; Wingate, 1956; Cannon, 1963). These initial studies relied on published letters and biographies as primary sources. The first known master's thesis on Gertrude Bell is Margaret Exie Fry's 1942 study. The thesis evaluated Bell's writing skills from a literary perspective, examining aspects such as description, storytelling, and letter writing. While not providing a detailed overview of Bell's travels, Fry emphasizes that his extensive travels to the Middle East in pursuit of his personal interests turned into a strategic asset for British intelligence during World War I (Fry, 1942: 5). Caroline T. Marshall's study (1968) is the first known PhD thesis on Bell. The thesis focused on Bell's activities during and after World War I, particularly his diplomatic service between 1920 and 1921. Although these early scholarly works are based on limited sources, Bell's interpretations of the travel period are consistent with personal testimonies.

2. The Paradox of Orientalism

Edward Said's work *Orientalism* has had a significant impact on scholarly works since its publication. The literature includes works that both challenge (Irwin, 2007) and support Said's theses. A detailed examination of Said's claims is beyond the scope of this study. However, some conclusions can be drawn based on the allegations specific to Bell. Said primarily accuses her of looking down on the East and enabling British imperialism. Yet, Bell is not extensively examined in Said's arguments and does not occupy a central position in his claims. Said uses quotations from her book *The Desert and the Sown* to support his claims (1979: 229). Using Lawrence's statement for the Arab Bureau as a point of reference, Said groups Bell with various individuals who seek to shape the East, and mentions her name alongside them throughout the rest of the book (1979: 224). Quantitatively, Bell's name is mentioned thirteen times in the book, and only three times is she specifically quoted. The fact that the same claim is made to more than one person in the same sentence makes it difficult to challenge the argument.

There are some indications of how *The Desert and the Sown* was viewed at the time of its publication. For example, 'Izz al-Dīn al-Tanūkhī, one of the most prominent names in Arab nationalism, quoted from the book in an article, stating that Bell was the person who best described Bedouin society (1917: 38). Likewise,

the book was reprinted in 1918 with a note of hope for support of Arab independence. This reprint reignited the debate over the book, and Bell was accused of being an Arabist (Bell, 1922: 6).

The emergence of Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* coincided with the Cold War, a period that likely fueled its initial acceptance as an explanatory framework for understanding global dynamics. Subsequent scholarship has applied an Orientalist lens to figures like Gertrude Bell, highlighting her dual role as an advocate for Arab independence and an agent of British colonialism. However, these analyses often frame Bell's seemingly contradictory stance as a paradox within Orientalism, rather than questioning the theory's absolute applicability.

The first doctoral thesis on Bell's travels was written by Gretchen K. Fallon in 1981. In this thesis, which examines the travel books of English travelers about the Middle East, Bell's 1905 travel to Syria is described as *"a restless attempt to leave civilization behind."* (1981: 122). The thesis argues that Bell is a paradoxical figure who embodies both the refined tastes of an upper-class British woman and the resilience of an experienced explorer. Fallon posits that Bell's familial connections enabled her to undertake privileged travel to the East and asserts that Bell was aware of the potential for intelligence gathering during these expeditions. (1981: 123). However, Fallon does not provide any evidence to support this claim, nor does she justify the assertion that Bell benefited from her travel experiences in her post-war mission in Iraq.

In her thesis, Pallavi Pandit analyzed the literary representations of Orientalist discourse in English travel writing, using Fallon's paradox theory and Said's Orientalism. Pandit defines Bell as an individual who conforms to societal norms but feels restless within these norms (1990: 171). After illustrating her reactions to social constraints with examples, Pandit claims that her desire to travel is a result of her desire to escape these norms (1990: 173–174). Pandit argues that Bell employs typical East-West dichotomies that oversimplify cultures, but also distinguishes herself from traditional Orientalist perspectives, making her discourse contradictory and romantic (1990: 209).

Haifa Kraid's thesis in the field of comparative literature is merely an attempt to adapt Said's claims to Bell. In the first section of her thesis, Kraid translates Bell's work *The Desert and the Sown* into Arabic, and in the third section, she analyzes her discourse on the East through contemporary anthropological theories. Kraid states that Bell includes the voice of the local people in her book but argues that this voice is subject to manipulation. She claims that Bell did not visit the Maronite regions and highlights the pro-British Druze in her book (1999: 148–149). However, her failure to compare Bell's diary and letters with the book has led her to overlook the consistency between the two texts. It is also evident that Kraid's general knowledge about Bell's life is limited, as she mistakenly believes that Sir William Ramsay is German (1999: 138). Nevertheless, she argues

that Bell played a role as a "source" for the British throughout her life, particularly in her Syrian journey, where she provided important information to diplomatic authorities and reported on the deteriorating situation of Ottoman rule (1999: 151). Kraid attempts to support her argument by citing a conversation between Swettenham and Bell in Wallach's book (1996: 79). Although, Wallach does not provide a reference to the specific speech in question, it seems to have been taken from Burgoyne's book (1958: 233). The speech pertains to trade in the Far East, and Swettenham expresses frustration that the contacts he established as a high commissioner are not considered credible by the British government. Using this speech as evidence that Bell is a source reveals the insufficiency of Kraid's historical methodology.

Opposing works regarding Said's theories in the context of Gertrude Bell can also be found in the literature. Andréa Schnell's master's thesis challenges Said's arguments, but her attempt to connect Bell's travel desires to her marital status weakens her critique due to a lack of substantial evidence (2008: 45). Similarly, Lynn Sawyer argues that Bell, though initially employing colonialist discourse, ultimately identified with Eastern culture (2012: 48). However, Sawyer downplays the imperial context of Bell's later diplomatic service. Farah Ghaderi's work (2013) offers a more nuanced perspective. While acknowledging Bell's use of some Orientalist tropes in Persian Pictures, Ghaderi argues for an alternate view that respects cultural differences (Ghaderi & Wan Yahya, 2014: 133). This is consistent with Ghaderi's Iranian background, which can provide valuable insights often neglected by Western scholarship. Ghaderi's analysis has limitations, however. She omits Bell's letters from Iran, fails to distinguish between Bell's original writings and edited texts, and may therefore have overlooked crucial details.

3. Speculative Approaches

Victor Winstone's books are the primary source of speculation about Gertrude Bell. Winstone, unlike Edward Said, also drew upon Bell's diary and correspondence. However, his 1978 biography presents a more critical but biased view of Bell. It is important to consider Winstone's background when evaluating his work. Primarily a writer and editor focused on decorative arts, Winstone's foray into Middle Eastern history began with a (1972) book on Kuwait co-authored with Zahra Freeth. This research led him to Captain William Shakespear, a then-obscure figure who served as an advisor to Ibn Saud (1976: 215). Winstone's subsequent 1976 biography of Shakespear, based on the family's correspondence, achieved unexpected success. Capitalizing on this, he turned his attention to Bell.

Winstone's lack of academic background and the relatively short timeframe devoted to Bell's biography raise concerns about its scholarly rigor. Despite an extensive bibliography, factual errors cast doubt on his meticulousness. For instance, he misidentified Bell's travel companions and

incorrectly described her routes. These inaccuracies suggest a superficial reading of primary sources. Furthermore, Winstone conflates distinct periods of Bell's life. While describing her 1909 Mesopotamian travels, he portrays her as central among a group of "fellow countrymen" working in the region (1978: 110–111). He suggests her political independence while simultaneously claiming this dubious centrality. His sole evidence for a connection with T.E. Lawrence during her journey to Arabia rests on a single sentence in a letter to Lawrence's brother (1954: 254), lacking any proof of direct communication between Bell and Lawrence.

Winstone published a book, *The Illicit Adventure*, in 1982 covering famous figures related to the Middle East. In the book, probably under the influence of Cold War espionage stories, he claimed that specific agents manipulated Britain's Middle East policy during World War I, and this led to the failure of the foreign policy (Wilson, 1985: 156). Winstone argued that the British supported Sherif Hussein instead of the powerful leader Ibn Saud due to the influence of spies like Bell and Lawrence. In trying to prove this claim, he makes unsubstantiated allegations and invents fictitious meetings. For instance, he claims that Bell and Lawrence met in the Tubaiq Mountains during Bell's travel to Arabia (1982: 111). Consequently, the book is most probably the origin of many conspiracy theories that are still discussed today. Although he is a member of the Royal Geographical Society and makes extensive use of sources, his books adopt a journalistic approach to events and interpretation of sources, rather than an academic one. Despite receiving significant criticism upon its publication (Armitage, 1983; Vyvyan, 1984; Marlowe, 1985), *The Illicit Adventure* is still utilized in academic studies.

Sorenson was one of early victims of Winstone. His master's thesis merely repeats the claim that Bell belonged to an elite group (1983: 168–169). However, Priya Satia bears the brunt of adopting these claims without question. Her doctoral thesis, which focuses on British intelligence in the Middle East, contains numerous inaccuracies and distortions, particularly concerning Bell. Satia suggests that Bell likely provided information to British intelligence before 1915 (2004: 58). She quotes O'Brien's introduction to the book (2000) containing Bell's diaries from Arabia. However, she treats the hypothetical scenario of Bell meeting Lawrence on Mount Tubayk during the same journey as a factual event, relying on Winstone's *The Illicit Adventure* (2004: 63). Fortunately, when Satia's dissertation was turned into a book, some of these errors and assertive statements were corrected. Nevertheless, the book still contains numerous misinterpretations.

Satia's portrayal of Gertrude Bell's travels in the Middle East lacks source credibility. In the introduction, she claims Bell's father, Hugh Bell, fostered her interest in the East (2008: 17), and that Valentine Chirol's consular network facilitated her first travel. Satia further asserts Chirol utilized Bell's travel reports in his Times articles and shared them with government officials. Satia interprets

Bell's scientific work in the context of intelligence gathering, including her in an "exploration fraternity" (2008: 37). However, primary sources contradict these claims. Bell's own writings identify German Consul Friedrich Rosen as her key supporter during her Jerusalem visit (Bell, 1927: 55; Rosen, 1930: 281). This detail is significant; Satia's narrative, which emphasizes an industrialist and a journalist with alleged intelligence ties, arguably prioritizes a more politically palatable narrative over historical accuracy. Satia's unsubstantiated claims have also led to errors in works citing her as a source.

Geoffrey Hamm's thesis on British intelligence activities in Arabia focuses primarily on Bell's contributions during World War I. According to Hamm, Bell volunteered to explore Roman ruins in the desert, examine the remains of medieval Islamic palaces, and conduct map studies during his travels in Arabia, without pursuing military intelligence objectives (2012: 192). The thesis is supported by primary sources that confirm the use of information acquired by Bell during her travels in drawing maps for the British army during the war (2012: 269) and in Handbook books that showed routes in specific areas (2012: 282). However, the statement that Bell met Valentine Chirol in 1902 and made her first travel to the Middle East in 1905 with his assistance is entirely erroneous (2012: 253–254). Bell actually met Chirol in Vienna in 1888 (Bell, 1937: 183). Excluding Iran, her initial visit to the Middle East was to Jerusalem in 1899. Hamm made a mistake due to his use of Satia's book as a source.

4. The Influence of Popular Biographies on Spreading Misinformation

Gertrude Bell's life has attracted continued popular attention, with biographies by Wallach (1996) and Howell (2006) emerging as frequently cited sources. Published a decade apart, both works share a tendency to romanticize Bell's experiences. Georgina Howell's biography, in particular, takes this approach a step further. Her writing style prioritizes emotional impact and incorporates more fictional elements. This is evident in Howell's idealization of Bell as a "heroine" in the preface and her avoidance of criticism, even for controversial stances such as Bell's opposition to women's suffrage (2006: 74–76). These characteristics have led critics to categorise Howell's work as hagiography, or a work of glorification, rather than a coherent biography. (Stewart, 2007; Asher-Greve, 2008: 68). The difficulty of distinguishing between factual information and fictional content in Howell's work necessitates the limitations of using the book as a source for academic research.

This is exemplified by a recent doctoral thesis on Bell by Amanda B. Perry in 2020. According to her, Bell's early travels exposed her to a global network of cosmopolitan elites, from whom she learned the foundations of diplomatic life and prepared the ground for establishing her own global network (2020: 52). Perry cites Bell's spending a day with Winston Churchill in Santa Flavia in 1902 as evidence for her claim. She references Bell's diaries from February 8th (GB/2/7/4/2/8) and 9th (GB/2/7/4/2/9) as her source. In her diaries, Bell refers to

meeting with 'Mr. Churchill' without explicitly stating his first name. However, it is clear that the person she met was not Winston Churchill, who was a Member of Parliament at the time and gave speeches on February 6th and 11th, 1902 (Churchill, 1902). Given the impossibility of traveling from London to Sicily and back within five days during that period, it is certain that the person Bell met was someone else. In a letter to her sister Elsa dated February 9th, Bell states that Mr. Churchill has not changed since their time in Iran (GB/1/1/4/1/11). Based on Bell's letters from Iran, the person referred to could be either Harry or Sidney Churchill (1937: 263). Given that Sidney Churchill served as Consul in Palermo in 1902 (Whitaker, 1902: 603), he is the more likely candidate.

Although Perry cites an archival source as a reference, it is likely that this misinformation originated from popular biographies. The information is first mentioned as a footnote in Burgoyne's book (1958: 106). Winstone, however, increased the confusion. He claimed to be quoting a letter Bell wrote to his mother, but in fact, he used a diary entry as his source. Additionally, he included irrelevant details, such as Churchill's age difference with Bell, his involvement in the Boer War, and his book *The River War* (1978: 75). Howell, on the other hand, writes that W. Churchill *was staying in a villa there in order to paint* without citing any source (2006: 120). This comparison of popular biographies demonstrates that Howell is the source of Perry's misconception.

This pattern continues with Perry's claim, sourced from Howell, that Bell's *"party was assaulted by a group of Druze"* (2020: 54). However, Bell had a positive relationship with the Druze community and is well-respected in the region. The idea that she was targeted by the Druze seems illogical and lacks coherence. Bell's diary entry also contradicts this (GB/2/13/1/2/21). She describes a disagreement with the Masa'id Arabs, a distinct tribe predating the Druze (Ṭayyib, 1997: 210–211) in the region. It's plausible that Howell misinterpreted Bell's reference to *"Arabs of the Mountain, the Jebel Druze"* (Bell, 1927: 315) as an attack by Druze. Perry's work perpetuated inaccuracies by relying on secondary sources without consulting primary materials.

To the general reader, there is no noticeable difference between the Druze and the Arabs. It may have been more interesting on paper that Gertrude Bell spent time in Sicily with Winston Churchill, who was painting, rather than the old and dull Sydney Churchill. However, citing these fictional details as fact in academic works undermines the validity of the claims made. Due to the vastness of the archive on Bell, constructing a complete narrative of her life based solely on primary sources is challenging. As a result, popular biographies and downloadable works receive more citations, leading to the dissemination of inaccurate information in scholarly studies. One potential solution to this problem is to employ digital tools and methods to analyse the vast archive in question, thereby reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation.

5. "Femme Fatale": Gertrude Bell in the Turkish Historiography

In Türkiye, the first allegations that Gertrude Bell travelled for spying purposes date back to before the founding of the Republic. An Ottoman archival document dated June 10, 1909, raises the earliest documented suspicion of her activities (BOA.DH.MKT.2880/84/2). It cites her criticisms of the Caliphate, Islam, and the Ottoman Empire in a book about Syria and newspaper articles as justifications for restricting her travel within the region. However, this document's impact appears limited. Bell demonstrably traveled to these same areas in 1911. Furthermore, upon closer examination of Bell's criticisms in her book *The Desert and the Sown*, it becomes clear that they were directed at the administration of Sultan Abdulhamid II, rather than the entire Ottoman Empire itself, as reflected. Furthermore, Bell's reception in the Ottoman Parliament and meeting with the Grand Vizier, just one month after this document's publication, indicate that the initial travel restriction may have been a misunderstanding (GB/1/1/2/1/9/21).

Four years later, an Ottoman archival document (BOA.DH.KMS.9/3/3) accused Gertrude Bell of espionage and receiving British funds (£5,000) to travel to the lands of Ibn Rashid and Ibn Saud. The document cited her planned purchase of camels and guides, highlighting the potential dangers of such a journey through Arab tribal territories. It concluded by urging the British embassy to intervene and prevent her travel to absolve the Ottoman government of future liability. However, the document does not provide concrete evidence of Bell's espionage activities. It mainly reflects Ottoman anxieties about her potential motivation and the risks associated with her travel plans. Similarly, there is no evidence of Bell inciting rebellion or receiving British funds at that time. Before 1915, Bell could best be described as a keen observer of the region. Although the document raises suspicions, it is important to note that the travel restrictions were aimed at ensuring her safety rather than hindering potential espionage. Despite the British embassy's advice against the journey, Bell ultimately undertook it and assumed full responsibility (GB/2/13/2/1/14).

Bell's travel to Hail was successful, and she subsequently reported her observations to Wyndham Deedes in a letter (IOR/L/PS/10/462). This report likely positioned her as a valuable source of information for British intelligence units in the impending war (Goodman, 1985: 73). While she initially volunteered for the Red Cross, Bell formally joined the Arab Bureau in 1915. Ottoman concerns about her activities are justified by this sequence of events. It was not uncommon for Ottoman intellectuals and administrators, especially in the last years of the empire, to worry about foreign influence and potential threats to territorial integrity. World War I served as a stark reminder of these vulnerabilities. The Republic of Turkey, established on the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, inherited not only territory and institutions but also lingering anxieties. These concerns are increased during periods of conflict and instability, a natural reaction observed in

various societies. Therefore, the portrayal of Bell in a 1937 Kurun newspaper article, as a "femme fatale", can be understood within this broader context of historical anxieties. (1937: 7).

The article portrays Bell as a "spy" who, alongside T.E. Lawrence, manipulated Arab politics "at her fingertips". It emphasizes her fluency in several languages and her ability to blend in, suggesting her effectiveness as a covert agent. The narrative further sensationalizes her activities by depicting a fictional encounter in which a veiled Bell, dressed as an Arab woman, recognizes Lawrence, disguised as a camel driver. This probably fabricated story, despite its historical inaccuracy, highlights the image of both figures as masterminds working in tandem for British interests. While there may be some truth in these accounts of their roles, the emphasis on secrecy and manipulation often overshadows the complex historical realities of the period.

Although the number of studies is limited, the initial portrayals of Gertrude Bell in Turkish historiography were not in the same context. The first mention of Bell appears in a 1940 article by Zeki Velidi Togan, who references her book Persian Pictures but offers no details (1940: 108). This brief, early reference suggests some level of awareness about Bell's work. In his 1976 work, Semavi Eyice, a prominent figure in Turkish archaeology and art history, provides more detailed information. While criticism was levelled at the mission she subsequently assumed, he acknowledges her contributions to archaeology and art history and highlights her dedication to exploration and cultural preservation (1976: 460). This recognition stands in contrast to the later interpretation offered by Eyice himself.

It is Eyice's 1978 article that marks a shift in Turkish scholarship regarding Bell. He argued that Bell's motivations might extend beyond academic curiosity, potentially including information gathering that could be detrimental to the Ottoman Empire (1978: 9). This interpretation, emphasizing potential ulterior motives, may have been influenced by the historical context. Semavi Eyice's emphasis on the Armenian ethnicity of Bell's assistant, Fattuh, in the article, may reflect the heightened national security concerns in Türkiye during the 1970s. This period coincided with activities of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA). The revival of historical anxieties, possibly fueled by the political climate, may have led Eyice to connect Bell's travels with potential espionage activity. Despite his article suggesting espionage as a motive for Bell's travels, it's impact on Turkish academia remained limited. Notably, no substantial academic studies focusing on Bell appeared until the 1990s. However, a shift in perception did occur after 1990's, significantly influenced by the inclusion of Eyice's interpretation, with no changes, in the highly respected TDV Encyclopedia of Islam (1992). As the leading reference source in Turkish social sciences, the Encyclopedia's uncritical portrayal of Eyice's view likely affected the initial approach of some scholars.

An edited volume by academics including Mim Kemal Öke and Emir Turam illustrates a shift in the perception of Gertrude Bell within Turkish scholarship. In the section written by Turam, it is suggested that Bell produced detailed travel reports for intelligence purposes, while cultivating an image of an adventurous traveler to mask her true motives (1995: 132). However, Mim Kemal Öke's book on foreign influence in the Holy Land (1991) frequently discusses T.E. Lawrence but makes no mention of Bell. Evidence of this influence can be seen in a symposium paper (Aytaç, 2002) that labeled Bell's archaeological activities as "ideological". Similarly, a symposium proceeding reflected the concerned tone present in earlier newspaper articles (Ünlü, 2007). The trend of repetition continued in the article by Mehmet İpçioğlu (2009). While these studies lack comprehensiveness on their own, they collectively mark the birth of a specific perception of Bell within Turkish academia.

Davut Hut's 2016 article aspires to be a comprehensive examination of Gertrude Bell. It incorporates documents from both the Ottoman and British archives, offering a potentially valuable resource. However, the analysis suffers from methodological shortcomings. Hut relies heavily on Semavi Eyice's interpretations to support his own views on Bell's travels (2016: 123). Furthermore, Hut's source handling is problematic. He fails to consider the entirety of the available evidence. For instance, he mistakenly claims Bell's presence in Istanbul during the 31 March incident when verifiable records place her between Baghdad and Mosul at that time (GB/2/11/4/13). Additionally, Hut presents the 1909 Ottoman archive document accusing Bell of espionage as definitive proof of her activities, neglecting a more critical assessment of its source and potential biases (2016: 127). Hut's article presents a biased analysis by selectively choosing evidence to support pre-existing historical concerns, rather than providing a comprehensive and objective examination.

Taha Niyazi Karaca's book is one of the few scholarly biographies of Gertrude Bell. While the book focuses primarily on Bell's diplomatic career, it also devotes considerable space to her earlier travels. Karaca acknowledges Bell's unofficial role, suggesting that while not a formal spy, she did share her findings with British representatives in the region (Karaca, 2018: 183). This work provides a valuable resource for tracing Bell's travels in an organized form. However, the analysis is not without its limitations. Karaca attempts to correct factual errors found in popular works, particularly films and biographies. However, a lack of clear cross-referencing makes it difficult for readers to distinguish which specific works Karaca is addressing. Moreover, Karaca's own interpretations are sometimes imaginary. For example, Karaca takes issue with a movie scene that shows Bell with her lover, Cadogan, in a "silence tower." (Werner Herzog, 2015, pt. 00:28). While the film's depiction, featuring a square-shaped minaret, is inaccurate (towers of silence are typically circular structures used by Zoroastrians) (Huff, 2004), Karaca's counter-argument also contains inaccuracies. He claims that Bell could not have visited a silence tower alone with Cadogan, and that there

are no such towers in Tehran, suggesting that she traveled to Yezd with her cousin Gerald (2018: 69–70). He cites Bell's *Persian Pictures* but without a page reference. In contrast, Bell herself mentions visiting a tower on the road to Mashhad (1894: 22). Further research reveals the presence of numerous silence towers near Tehran and Rey (Menyaev, 1897: 162; Ragozin, 1900: 129; Jackson, 1906: 440). In addition, Bell's correspondence provides a detailed account of a visit to a tower of silence south of Tehran on May 17, accompanied by the Rosen family, her cousin Florence, and under the guidance of Henry Cadogan (1937: 276). Karaca's missteps probably stem from the overwhelming volume of primary sources and a lack of careful examination. While attempting to correct popular misconceptions, a more thorough analysis of primary sources is necessary for a balanced and accurate portrayal.

The thesis written by Mustafa Celalettin Hocaoğlu in 2019 stands out as the first doctoral thesis written about Bell in Türkiye. Hocaoğlu rightfully criticizes the prior lack of comprehensive academic studies within Türkiye and the reliance on popular sources. He aims to analyze Bell's impressions of the Middle East and its societies during her extensive travels between 1888 and 1914. He further seeks to explore her role in the establishment of Iraq, moving beyond the image of Bell solely as a figure associated with imperial border-drawing (2019: 18). The thesis demonstrates an admirable effort to utilize archival sources and provide well-prepared maps, making it a valuable resource in contrast to other studies on Bell. Hocaoğlu avoids explicitly advocating for or against a singular motive for Bell's travels. Instead, he suggests a multifaceted purpose. He acknowledges her personal drive for exploration and knowledge acquisition but also raises the possibility of connections to British imperial interests. Additionally, Hocaoğlu positions her travels within the context of Victorian England's need for knowledgeable administrators to manage its vast empire (2019: 10). While the thesis offers a detailed travelogue in the second section, with breakdowns within and outside Ottoman territories, it is not without limitations. Despite dedicating substantial space to her journeys, some travels remain unexamined and factual errors are present. For instance, the claim of Bucharest (2019: 49) as Bell's first foreign travel is incorrect, with documented evidence pointing to Weilheim in 1886 (Bell, 1937: 104). Similarly, the assertion of Bell grieving a lost love in April 1893 is demonstrably inaccurate (2019: 50), as Henry Cadogan's death occurred in August of the same year (Wright, 1998: 169). Furthermore, the overall analysis of her travels and the deductions regarding their purpose remain somewhat limited, often relying heavily on route descriptions.

Five master's theses were written on Bell in Türkiye. However, they often lack clear arguments and rely heavily on secondary sources, repeating their claims without adding new insights. The first postgraduate study of Bell in Türkiye was a master's thesis by Samet Yüce, which examined Britain's Middle East policy and Bell's role. Although Yüce's thesis focuses on Bell's diplomatic mission, his arguments regarding her travels are largely influenced by Said's theory. Yüce

argues that European travelers to the East, especially Orientalists, were not objective observers but active participants in a project of cultural imperialism, using their privileged position to gather information and portray the East in a way that served European interests. (2015: 68). Derya Boyraz's master's thesis, on the other hand, uses "Queen of the Desert" as a case study to analyze how Western media can perpetuate orientalist narratives and how figures like Bell and Lawrence might be portrayed within such narratives. Going beyond the semiotic analysis of the film, Boyraz continues to repeat the claim that Bell changed her identity by wearing Arab clothes and attracted the Arabs to the British side (2018: 162). The study conducted by Sibel Karasulu (2019) analyzes the female identity in Europe and the Middle East using the example of Bell. The thesis is based on popular biographies about Bell and presents a rather romanticized portrait of her.

The first Turkish postgraduate thesis dedicated to Gertrude Bell's travels was completed by Nurullah Parlakoğlu in 2018. Focusing on the portions of Bell's Mesopotamian journeys (1909 & 1911) within present-day Türkiye, the thesis analyzes her interactions with people and institutions. Notably, it emphasizes that Bell wasn't formally employed by the British government during this time (2018: 110). Additionally, the thesis argues that Bell's observations accurately reflected the region's political and social realities (2018: 123). However, particularly in section three, the concept of "political activity" remains undefined, and neither the introduction nor summary presents a clear argument. Another work on Bell's travels is Tuğba Kabakçı's study of her travels in the province of Konya. Kabakçı asserts that Bell engaged in unofficial espionage activities for the British government, supplying them with critical information about Konya from 1905 (2019: 78). Although Kabakçı provides no evidence for this claim, she may have been inspired by Eyice's misinterpretations, which she frequently referenced.

The presence of inaccuracies on Gertrude Bell is not limited to Turkish academia. A comprehensive analysis of all such errors is beyond the scope of this paper. However, certain studies by seemingly credible Western researchers have demonstrably misled Turkish scholars. The most recent postgraduate study in Türkiye, which also focuses on Bell, reveals how errors in global historiography spread in academic studies. The thesis written by Nazmiye Yozgat in 2023 about Arab Bureau contains largely secondary sources regarding Bell, resulting in erroneous and contradictory information. For example, the claim that Bell's first Middle East travel was in 1905 is taken from Hamm's thesis (2023: 28). Hamm, in turn, obtained this information from Satia's book, but the book only mentions the early travels without specifying the dates (Hamm, 2012: 254). It is evident that Satia's book, published by Oxford University Press and presumed to be authoritative, has misled not only global historiography but also Turkish researchers.

A more concerning case in this regard is the conference paper co-authored by Mark Jackson, Director of the Gertrude Bell Archive, and Tevfik Emre Şerifoğlu.

This work incorrectly places Bell's travels to Venice in 1892 and Algeria in 1897 (2017: 465). Verifiable records show Bell visited Venice in 1896 (GB/2/5/1/1/11), while her stay in Algeria in 1893 (GB/2/3/1/1/13). Similarly, the reference of a year-long stay in Jerusalem is inaccurate; Bell spent approximately six months in the region. The inclusion of Winstone as a source is another anomaly. If such errors are present in the work of the archive director himself, it suggests a deeper issue than mere carelessness.

Conclusion

The nature of Gertrude Bell's pre-war travels presents a historiographical puzzle. The earliest accounts of Gertrude Bell make it clear that she travelled extensively in the East, undertaking her journeys a sense of scientific exploration and curiosity. It was only after the outbreak of the First World War that she began to utilise her extensive knowledge to assist British Intelligence. Her own writings support this narrative. However, a shift in perspective emerged in the 1980s, with scholars such as Edward Said and journalists like Victor Winstone characterizing Bell as an imperialist agent. This view was partly fueled by T.E. Lawrence's romanticized accounts of his wartime activities. The reality is more nuanced. The configuration of Middle Eastern borders was determined by the limitations of the involved countries in terms of military and economic resources, rather than by idealist spies. However, it is difficult to explain these complex dynamics to all segments of society. As a result, popular media often oversimplify the narrative, portraying Bell, and Lawrence as symbols of Western intervention.

In this context, Bell is often portrayed in the Turkish press and popular publications as a "femme fatale" who played a significant role in the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the drawing of boundaries. It is common for publications aimed at the general reader to take on the task of raising national concerns. The Turkish people do not need to know and understand Gertrude Bell's real motivations. Therefore, even if the scene in which she negotiates with Abdulhamid II in a TV series is completely contrary to historical facts, it should be considered as fiction created to raise public awareness. However, academic studies cannot be based on readers' intentions and concerns. They must establish consistent cause-and-effect relationships and rely on archival sources. Turkish scholarship on Bell employs sound methodology, but the heavy emphasis on national anxieties undermines the overall reliability of these works. Moreover, relying on certain Western scholarly works as a means of defending these concerns results perpetuating their errors.

The case of Gertrude Bell highlights the importance of using historical sources accurately. Although there are thousands of pages of primary documentation on Bell, researchers continue to rely on biased and superficial studies. In addition, the limitations of theories and the basis of speculation are not sufficiently analysed, so that cause and effect relationships cannot be properly established. It is difficult to argue that Bell travelled for espionage purposes. Such

an attempt runs the risk of blurring the lines between academic inquiry and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories. It should be noted that labeling her a spy could lead to similar accusations against other figures, such as Osman Hamdi Bey, with whom she interacted during her travels. In consideration of the available evidence, the most plausible hypothesis is that Bell traveled with the motivation of a scientist and explorer until 1915. She likely benefited from these experiences when she later served in intelligence units during the First World War. By objectively evaluating these travel-based observations, researchers can gain valuable insights into the socio-cultural structure of the Middle East during this period. However, several existing methods based on textual interpretation are inadequate for large archives. The use of digital tools might provide a comprehensive method for analysing resources, allowing a more accurate understanding of Bell and other historical figures who may have been misrepresented.

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