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Gertrude Bell and the Evolution of the Library Tradition in Iraq

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Abstract

This paper discusses Gertrude Bell’s involvement in the foundation of the Baghdad Public Library and the Iraq Museum Library, shedding light on issues that have surrounded their creation and development. It identifies Muriel Jesse Forbes as the person who actually initiated the concept for the library that, as a result of Bell’s energetic support, became the Baghdad Public Library and ultimately the National Library of Iraq. It also reviews Bell’s commitment to the development of a library as part of the Iraq Museum, and outlines its growth into a major information resource on the history and archaeology of Iraq. Finally it considers the motives underlying the efforts of Bell and her contemporaries, and their impact on the subsequent development of library and archives services in Iraq.

Introduction

In 1981, the author of this paper was invited to visit Baghdad to discuss collaboration between Al-Mustansiriyah University and the then College of Librarianship Wales. It was apparent that some very significant developments had recently taken place in Iraq. During the next 30 years, the author was continually involved with international aspects of librarianship, and regularly confronted with the challenge of implementing sustainable development. Recollections of the Iraqi experience suggested that the identification of the change agent in Iraq could have global benefits. However, because relevant material in English and other European languages is fragmented, the necessary understanding of the events and the cultural traditions that had shaped domestic policies required a wide ranging search of the literature.

This led, *inter alia*, to Bashkin’s book¹ about culture during the Hashemite period, in which there is a brief note that Gertrude Bell had initiated the Baghdad Peace Library, the *Maktabat al-Salam*, in 1919. The mention of Gertrude Bell prompted an exploration of her surviving

¹ Bashkin, O. *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009)

correspondence, and thence to an examination of all the biographies of Gertrude Bell that appear to have been written in English and French. It became clear that most of the western authors who have written about Gertrude Bell have paid no attention to the consequences of her actions in developing the first public library in modern Iraq and in establishing the Library of the Iraq Museum. The aim of this paper is to try to remedy those deficiencies, and to put Bell's contribution in the broader context of library development in Iraq.

'Mrs Forbes' and the Maktabat al Salam

The presence of British administrators stimulated social changes in Iraq during the 'Mandate' that had made a faltering start during the final years of the Ottoman regime. Among these changes can be seen a revival of the tradition of establishing and managing libraries and archives. There is no doubt that the library which was probably the first public library in Iraq in the modern era was initiated with the assistance of Gertrude Bell. Her involvement with the Baghdad Public Library has been noted, if only briefly, by a few of her western biographers, but most have also contributed to the myth that Miss Bell founded it. However, in a letter to her mother in November 1919, she wrote that:

I have also attended a meeting for the promotion of a public library for the native population. The scheme was started by the wife of one of the judicial officers, Mrs Forbes; I met her at the meeting for the first time - she seems a nice woman. The proceedings were in Arabic and I made a speech - it was not *extempore*, I had been asked to do it the day before and had carefully prepared it ... There was much praise of Mrs Forbes, but as she doesn't understand a word of Arabic she sat through it unblushingly. I however bridled suitably when it came to my turn to be eulogized. ²

Searching the Western literature revealed only one other mention of 'Mrs Forbes.' The library's later significance appears to have escaped the attention of Western writers, perhaps explaining the lack of recognition for her initiative and the failure to examine her motivation. Her identity has thus also, hitherto, remained unexplored, a mystery in Iraq and in the West, but it has now been possible to piece together scattered evidence that conclusively identifies 'Mrs Forbes' as Muriel Forbes,³ the wife of Henry Flavelle Forbes, a Judicial Commissioner in the Imperial Civil Service who became President of the Court of Appeal in Iraq in 1919-20.

² Bell Archive, letter: 2nd November 1919. Newcastle University Library. Available at: <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/>

³ Muriel Jessie Handyside (1884 - 1969) was born in Peterhof, Russia, a member of a Scottish family who had established businesses in Russia early in the nineteenth century. She had married Henry Flavelle Forbes in India in 1914. He was a Judge in the Imperial Civil Service, and was seconded to Iraq as a Judicial Commissioner in the British Administration from 1916 to 1920. She was with him in Iraq in 1919 and 1920. Further information about the investigation and identification of Mrs Forbes is to be published by the author in a genealogical study of the Handyside and Forbes families.



Figure 1: Muriel Jessie Forbes (née Handyside) in 1916
Photograph courtesy of Mr. D.H.F. Forbes

Joseph Dagher⁴ appears to have been the only European writer who acknowledged that the idea for the Library had been initiated by Mrs. Forbes, but claimed that ‘on her death, it was left in the care of Miss Gertrude Bell.’ This seems to have been based on a misunderstanding. It is not been possible to establish whether Mrs. Forbes was the first President of the Library’s Committee, but Miss Bell does not mention the library again in her letters until June 1921 when she informed her parents that she had attended a meeting of the ‘Baghdad Public Library’ Committee, and only then informed her parents that she had been elected its President.⁵ As Bell mentions her re-election as soon as it occurred in both the following years, I think we can assume that 1921 was the first time. Moreover, Mrs Forbes was still very much alive. However, in summer 1920, she and her husband had left Iraq for home leave in Britain and to travel in Europe, before her husband returned to his post in the Punjab. She died in Gloucestershire in 1969.

The library was initially to be called the *Mustansiriyah* Library after one of the great medieval centres of scholarship, but was eventually given a more contemporaneously significant name, *Maktabat Al-Salam*, the Baghdad Peace Library, when it opened in April 1920.⁶ Most western authors writing about Gertrude Bell’s life and work have failed not only to acknowledge Muriel Forbes’s role, but also to recognise the future significance of the *Salam* library, which subsequently became the National Library. The latter oversight is perhaps partly because of changes in the name by which it became known or referred to. In her correspondence, Miss Bell sometimes referred to the *Maktabat Al-Salam* as the Baghdad Public Library. One, later UNESCO consultant seems to have been so confused by the variations in name and the changes in location that he even suggested that the Ministry of Education set up another public library in 1921, and later merged the *Al Salam* library with

⁴ Dagher, J.A. *Répertoire des Bibliothèques du Proche et du Moyen-Orient*. [List of Libraries in the Near and Middle East.] (Paris: UNESCO, 1951)

Yunus Asaad (Joseph A.) Dagher had been awarded a Diploma from the Ecole des Bibliothécaires, which had been established in Paris with American assistance after the First World War, and had also undertaken a course in archives studies at the Ecole des Chartes (now part of the Sorbonne). He became Curator of the National Library of Lebanon, and wrote one of the first modern handbooks in Arabic on practical aspects of librarianship, as well as compiling many bibliographies of books published in the region. This note was made in the first directory of libraries in the Middle East, which he had begun to compile in 1940, and completed for publication by UNESCO.

⁵ Bell Archive, letter: 23rd June 1921

⁶ Aje, S.B. “National Libraries in Developing Countries.” In: M.J. Voight and M.H. Harris, ed. *Advances in Librarianship*, vol. 7 (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 106-143.

it.⁷ Others added to the confusion; when describing a public library which had opened in c.1920, they referred to it as the ‘General Library.’⁸

Gertrude Bell and the Baghdad Public Library

It is fair to say that, after Mrs. Forbes left Iraq, Miss Bell was very active in promoting the library’s development. She offered herself for re-election by the subscribers the following year:

In the afternoon we had a meeting of subscribers to the Baghdad library, of which I’m President, to elect a new committee. It was an enjoyable opportunity of meeting lots of people on a non-political and non-official basis and it will be most interesting to see the results of the elections. All the existing committee, which includes me and Mr Cooke⁹ and Sasun Eff¹⁰ may be superseded. I shan’t mind, but on the other hand if they re-elect me I shall take it as a pleasant proof of confidence.¹¹

The following year she wrote to her mother that:

‘We had the annual election of members of the Library Committee this week - I came out top. Last year I was third. They never elect any other European.’¹²

Miss Bell’s surviving correspondence does not make clear whether she served as President until her death, but she appears to have remained actively involved with the Committee throughout her time in Baghdad.¹³ In one of her letters to her family in England, which were always written in a very informal style, she refers to it a ‘little Arab lending library’,¹⁴ but perhaps because meetings of the Library Committee were sometimes conducted in Arabic.¹⁵

In managing the library, Miss Bell seems to have revived some ancient traditions. For example, a manager or librarian was appointed by the ‘*Salam*’ library in about 1920. Like librarians in the Akkadian empire 4,000 years earlier, he was a priest, a French educated Iraqi

⁷ Kalia, D.R. *Baghdad: National Library of Iraq*. (Paris: UNESCO, 1979)

⁸ Mahon, F.W., and L. Scharff. Contribution to the Pre-Feasibility Study for the Arab Information Systems Network (ARIS-NET): League of Arab States - (Mission). (Paris: UNESCO, 1987)

⁹ Richard Sydney Cooke, O.B.E., was Inspector General, Ministry of *Awqaf*, in the British administration. He succeeded Gertrude Bell as Honorary Director of Antiquities from 1926 to 1928. After leaving government employment, he obtained a licence to deal in antiquities, but was expelled from Iraq in 1930, accused of allegedly smuggling antiquities.

¹⁰ ‘Sasun Eff’ - Sassoon Eskill (1860 - 1932) was an Iraqi Jew, born in Baghdad. After education in Baghdad and Istanbul, he held senior positions in the Baghdad *Vilayet* administration from 1881 to 1908. From 1908 to 1918, he was a Deputy for Baghdad in the first Turkish Parliament. In 1920, he returned from Istanbul to Baghdad, and served as Finance Minister in the Iraqi government until 1925, when he was elected Deputy for Baghdad in the first parliament of the Kingdom, serving in all successive parliaments as Chairman of the Financial Committee until his death. He was awarded an honorary knighthood by King George V in 1923.

¹¹ Bell Archive, letter: 26th February 1922

¹² Bell Archive, letter: 26th April 1923

¹³ Bell Archive, letters: 30th June 1921; 6th August 1921; 25th May 1922; 24th September 1922

¹⁴ Bell Archive, letter: 12th April 1922

¹⁵ Bell Archive, letter: 3rd December 1924

Carmelite. Although he had previously been a school teacher, Anastas Al-Karmali¹⁶ is said to have been the first Iraqi to take an interest in a modern approach to libraries.¹⁷

Subsequently, as one of many people who participated in the development of the Library's collection in this way, he followed a long established tradition by donating printed materials from his private collection, while others in foreign languages remained in the library of his monastery.¹⁸ Retaining the foreign language publications seems a little at odds with Miss Bell's wish that the library should have a multi-lingual collection,¹⁹ but some explanation may perhaps be found in the content of the items that he retained.

Miss Bell was herself an avid book collector, having grown up in a wealthy household with its own library,²⁰ and had a personal collection of some 2,000 volumes, but she planned to give them to help found a British Institute in Iraq. Instead, she actively and successfully solicited free copies of books for the public library from publishers in Britain, and was fully engaged in promoting its use, writing articles for the review that was published from the Library.²¹ She was also involved in organising local fund raising events for the Library.²² Her surviving correspondence does not explain how its original premises were obtained, or where they were, but one of the fund-raising events, in April 1922, was intended to support an extension to the library, and perhaps help it to obtain more suitable premises.²³

She appears to have been proud of it. A notable Syrian-American philosopher and writer, Ameen Rihani, visited Baghdad in 1922, where he was entertained both at her home and at a reception held in the *Salam* Library.²⁴ In her opening remarks at that event, Miss Bell is reported to have spoken of 'the good work that could be done by instilling knowledge by means of the library, through which the thoughts and aspirations of clever men were brought to the attention of less learned.'²⁵

Initially, it was a private, subscription library, further supported by donated money and books. However, the maintenance of the library was a challenge. Writing to her brother in September 1923, she explained that:

We're having great dealings with the Ministry of Pious Bequests [*Awqaf*] in the matter of our library. Its finances are in a bad way and I can't go on struggling to

¹⁶ Anastas Al-Karmali (literally, Anastas the Carmelite) (1866 - 1947) was born in Baghdad to a Lebanese father (from Bikfaya) and Iraqi mother. He was named Butrus (Peter) by his father, Gabriel (Jibra'il) Yousef 'awwad, but later took the name Anastase-Marie de Saint-Élie when he became a priest after studying in France. He returned to Baghdad in 1894 to become responsible for Madrasat Al-Aaba' Al-Karmaliyin (The School of the Carmelite Fathers), where he taught both Arabic and French, in addition to preaching and counselling in the Carmelite Church (now known as the Latin Church, and used by the Copts). He became a recognised authority in the field of Arabic philological and lexicological studies, founding a journal called "Lisan (or Lughat) al-'Arab" (Arab Language) in 1911. A statue of him was one of a number planned to be erected in Baghdad as part of the Ministry of Culture's celebrations marking Baghdad as the Arab Capital of Culture for 2013.

¹⁷ Awad, G. *Father Anastas Mari Karmali: His Life and Writings from 1866 to 1947*. (Baghdad: Press Ani, 1966)

¹⁸ Al Hilaly, A.A-R. *Al Kermal: Early Founder of the Iraq National Library*. (Baghdad/Beirut: Dar al Nahdah, 1972). Translation from Arabic by Thana Shaker Hamoodi, 20 May, 2008 for: Dispatches from the Field: Iraq Archives (blog) [online]: <http://gslis.simmons.edu/blogs/dispatches/iraq/> [Accessed 31 March 2009]

¹⁹ Howell, G. *Daughter of the Desert: The Remarkable Life of Gertrude Bell*. (London: Macmillan, 2006)

²⁰ Bell Archive, letter 21st October 1925

²¹ Bell Archive, letter 4th December 1922

²² Bell Archive, letters: 12th April 1922; 13th February 1923; 1st March 1923

²³ *Baghdad Times*, 11th April 1922, p.2

²⁴ Winstone, H.V.F. *Gertrude Bell*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978)

²⁵ *Baghdad Times*, 27th September 1922, p.2

get money for it, so we've conceived the idea of offering ourselves bodily to Awqaf and are now in negotiation with the Minister who favours the suggestion. We discussed it at length at a Committee meeting yesterday.²⁶

It seemed doomed to fail before it began, because it was dependent on the support of the small number of Iraqis (and resident foreigners) who were literate in English, and a British community that declined in number as the government reduced the expatriate staff to cut the costs of the 'Mandate.' Following the discussions about its financial difficulties, the *Maktabat al Salam* was taken over by or given to the Ministry of Education in 1924.²⁷

Miss Bell's surviving correspondence does not explain how the original premises of the *Maktabat al Salam* were obtained, or where they were. In 1929, its collection of 4,283 books was shifted to the *Al-Mamoonia* school where it was renamed as *Al-Maktabatil Aammah* or the Public Library.²⁸ In 1931, the Ministry merged the Y.M.C.A. Library and the *Al-Maarif* Library with the Baghdad Public Library.²⁹ In 1952, the Baghdad Public Library was in a building (since apparently demolished) situated on Imam Al-Adham Street on the northern corner of the present day Bab Al-Mu'azzam Square in Waziriyah.³⁰ It was eventually designated as the National Library by Law No. 51 in 1961.

Public Library Development in Iraq

In 1926, the Baghdad Public Library was said to be one of only 2 public libraries in the country. The second may have been a 'public' library in Samarra reported to have been run by the anti-British '*Shahab*' club during the 'Mandate.'³¹ Another public library was established in Mosul in 1930, apparently intended as a model for similar institutions elsewhere in the country.³² The building was paid for personally by the acting *Mudir*, while the town council paid for the furniture and equipment. A collection of 700 books was transferred from the *Liwa* Directorate of Education, which assumed responsibility for adding to the collection. The original premises were soon outgrown, and a new building was constructed some years later, adjacent to the government buildings.³³

After the British 'Mandate' ended, the public library movement received some attention from the Iraqi Government, and as a result public libraries were founded in major cities in the country,³⁴ earlier than in some other British dependencies. After 1948, legislation required public library provision across the whole country with a central library and branches in each of the *Liwas*.³⁵ They were in some ways reminiscent of medieval Arab libraries. They

²⁶ Bell Archive, letter: 25th September 1923

²⁷ Al-Amin, A.K. 'Libraries and Librarianship in Iraq.' In: UNESCO Course for Teachers of Librarianship, Copenhagen 1970 : Library Conditions and Library Training in Tanzania, Thailand, Pakistan, Jamaica, Singapore, Uruguay, Brasilien, Nigeria, Jugoslavien, Chile, Iraq, Burma, Afghanistan, Indonesien, Cypren. (Copenhagen, Denmark: Danmarks Biblioteksskole, 1970). Mimeographs of Students' Initial Reports.

²⁸ Hashmi, S.A. 'Iraq and its National Library.' *Libri*, 33 (1983), 236-43.

²⁹ Dagher, *Repertoire*

³⁰ Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*

³¹ Al-Badry, A-R.S. 'Maktabat Samarra Qadimuha Wahadithuha.' [Libraries in Samarra, Past and Present]. *Alam-al-Maktabat (Library World)*, 6 (1) (1964), 30-33

³² 'Mosul Public Library, Iraq.' *UNESCO Bulletin for Libraries*, 10 (1956), 236

³³ Chilmeran, A-F. *The Development and Evolution of Libraries in the Republic of Iraq*. (Master's degree thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1962)

³⁴ Al-Werdi, Z.H. Guidelines for the Development of Library and Information Services in Developing Countries, with Special Reference to Iraq. (PhD thesis, Loughborough University, 1983)

³⁵ Al Amin, *Libraries*

generally kept books in closed access, and a deposit equivalent to U.S. \$2.50 (about £23) was required to borrow an item. Few had catalogues, and those that existed were generally inaccurate. Instead, lists of recent additions were pasted on the library walls.³⁶

Gertrude Bell and the Iraq Museum Library

Unsurprisingly, the first recognisable specialist library in Iraq focused on the country's history and archaeology, a topic that had been the subject of an increasing number of publications since the middle of the nineteenth century. A Department of Antiquities was established by the British administration in 1922, and Gertrude Bell became its Honorary Director. She established the Iraq Museum, originally known as the Baghdad Archaeological Museum, in 1923 in a single, small room in the Sarai, the Ottoman administrative complex that became the seat of the British administration.³⁷ In 1924, the Iraqi government passed its first Antiquities Law, regularising the position of the Directorate General of Antiquities. In 1926, Bell secured 2 rooms in a former Ottoman barracks from the government of Iraq for the Museum. A letter to her mother reveals her enthusiasm for the project, and her intention to ensure that it had a library:

I feel sure you will be glad to hear that I have got the building I wanted of all others for my museum... I am going to lodge the Library of the American School, which will be a great advantage to us, besides being very gratifying to them... It will be a real Museum, rather like the British Museum only a little smaller.³⁸

When the American School of Oriental Research at Baghdad (ASOR) had been founded in 1923, it was housed in the U.S. Consulate, where it proved impossible to unpack several collections of books and journals that had been donated to found a library. Miss Bell repeatedly offered a room in the new Museum building for ASOR's office and library, which was accepted by the Trustees on the recommendation of the School's Visiting Professor for 1925-26, Raymond Dougherty, who subsequently moved the School's library to the Museum.³⁹ Miss Bell had clearly intended to press ahead rapidly. Writing to her father on the same day that she wrote to her mother, she had indicated that:

It is an excellent building ... When I come back from Ur, where I am going next week ..., I shall be able to begin getting in to it, I hope.⁴⁰

Dougherty confirmed in a letter to the Director of ASOR shortly before he left Baghdad at the end of his assignment in April, 1926 that he had already moved the books to the Museum, and expected to unpack them into newly purchased bookcases and then leave them in Miss Bell's safe-keeping.⁴¹

Development of the Iraq Museum Library

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Longrigg, S.H. *Iraq, 1900 to 1950: A Political, Social and Economic History*. (London: Oxford University Press, for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1953)

³⁸ Bell Archive, letter dated 3rd March 1926

³⁹ American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR). *A History of the Baghdad School of ASOR 1923-1969*. [online] <http://www.bu.edu/asor/overseas/baghistory.html>. Accessed 22 September 2010.

⁴⁰ Bell Archive, letter dated 3rd March 1926

⁴¹ Dougherty, R.P. 'Reports from Professor Dougherty; His Explorations in Iraq; the School to Be Housed in the New Baghdad Museum.' *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 22 (1926), 1-4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1355014>. Accessed May 4, 2015.

By the end of the 1920s, the Ministry of Education was spending 500 Rupees annually on books for the Museum (about £2,400 p.a. at 2013 prices).⁴² A Rockefeller Foundation grant to ASOR commenced in 1929, providing funding that included the maintenance of its library over several years and, in 1930, enabled several important libraries of Semitic scholars to be purchased to support research at the School.⁴³

A library was reported to have been formally established by the Directorate of Antiquities in the Iraqi Museum in 1933,⁴⁴⁻⁴⁵ probably referring to its inclusion in the plan for the new Museum building that was completed in 1934. At the Emir's suggestion, the right wing of the building in Kota Bridge Street was named as a memorial to Bell. The Museum Library's initial collection was formed by taking the Antiquities Department's collection,⁴⁶ some of which, according to a list recently discovered in the Iraq National Archive, appear to have originally been in Gertrude Bell's office. In 1936, Gurgis Awad⁴⁷ was appointed Chief Librarian of the Directorate General of Antiquities, which at that time had a collection of about 800 books. A later commentator noted that the Library of the Department of Antiquities was small but well organised, and 'headed by a man who is aware of the possibilities of library service.'⁴⁸ In 1937, arrangements were concluded between ASOR and the Department of Antiquities whereby the ASOR Library was to be housed in the new Museum, where it was to be in the charge of the librarian and could be made available to qualified users⁴⁹ (Speiser 1937). By the time Awad retired in 1963, the Museum Library's collection had grown to over 60,000 items. Some of the additions were a further generous gift, of 2,500 books and 1,500 manuscripts in about 1945, that came from either the Carmelite church or the personal library of Anastas Al-Karmali.⁵⁰⁻⁵¹ The former seems more likely. The entry of the British into Baghdad in 1917 is reported to have caused the loss or destruction of much of Anastas' personal property.⁵²

Discussion and Evaluation

How then should Gertrude Bell's contribution to the development of libraries in Iraq be evaluated?

⁴² U.K. Colonial Office. [Iraq] Budget Estimates 1928 to 1929 including Iraq Government Budget (30 March 1928-9 February, 1929). National Archives, registered file CO 730/133/20

⁴³ Rockefeller Foundation. *Annual Reports, 1929-1936*. [online]: <http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/about-us/annual-reports/> [Accessed 26 April 2010]

⁴⁴ Dagher, *Repertoire*

⁴⁵ Awad, G. 'The Iraqi Museum Library'; quoted in Zado, V.Y. *The General Information Programme (PGI) and Developing Countries: A Case Study of Iraq*. (PhD thesis, Loughborough University of Technology, 1990)

⁴⁶ Dagher, *Repertoire*

⁴⁷ Gurgis Awad (Georges bin Hana bin Haji bin Elias Awad Abu Suhail, a.k.a. Kurkis Awwad) (1908 – 1992) was born into a Christian family in Mosul. His family were serious book collectors. Gurgis and his brother Mikhail Awad had begun collecting books and manuscripts in 1927. In 1937, when they moved their collection from Mosul to Baghdad, it already comprised 5,000 volumes and 400 manuscripts (Dagher 1951). He gifted his personal collection, by then said to number 15,000 items, to the Library of the Jesuit foundation, Al-Hikma University, shortly before it was taken over by the government and merged with Baghdad University in the late 1960s.

⁴⁸ Stone, 'Books for Baghdad.'

⁴⁹ Speiser, E. 'Report of the Director of the Baghdad School.' 1937. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 68 (1937), 43-44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3218860>. Accessed June 3, 2015.

⁵⁰ Dagher, *Repertoire*

⁵¹ Al Hilaly, *Al Kermal*

⁵² Haywood, J.A. *Arabic Lexicography: Its History, and its Place in the General History of Lexicography*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965)

Clearly, as ‘Mrs Forbes’ is no longer one of history’s enigmas, future western biographers will hopefully desist from suggesting that Miss Bell was solely responsible for the foundation of the Baghdad Public Library, but will now acknowledge that it stimulated the development of nationwide public library services, and that it grew and developed into the Iraq National Library and Archive.

The roots of Muriel Forbes’s initiative seem diverse. She was probably aware that the British community in St. Petersburg had established their own library there.⁵³ Her proposal for the establishment of a public library was perhaps an echo of the social reforms and philanthropy that had played a major part in the development of public libraries in Britain since the nineteenth century. The Baghdad Public Library was conceived during the passage of the Public Libraries Act of 1919, which reflected a major commitment to public library development in Britain. It was certainly a matter of public discussion while Muriel was in Britain in 1917-18, and would have been reported in the British newspapers reaching Iraq. However, it would be simplistic to ascribe the foundation of the Baghdad Public Library simply to a colonial ideology that sought to replicate the institutions of the home country. The motives that led Muriel Forbes to seek to establish ‘a public library for the native population’ may well have been distinctly different. According to her son, both Muriel and her husband had been deeply affected by the deprivation that they had witnessed in India, and were intent on doing what they could to improve conditions in Iraq, albeit in this case with an initiative that benefited the small, literate middle class. Underlying her motivation was also, according to her son, a desire to have something useful to do that would provide an acceptable role for an energetic woman of her social standing.⁵⁴

Although she could not have foreseen future developments, the creation of the library chimed well with Gertrude Bell’s desire to help the British and Iraqis to understand each other,⁵⁵ which she expressed in introducing Ameen Rihani, albeit in terms that today we might find patronising, and probably explains the energy that she devoted to the library’s development. She chose her focus well. The arrival of British administrators during the ‘Mandate’ stimulated social changes in Iraq that had made a faltering start during the final years of the Ottoman regime.

None of this entirely explains the enthusiasm with which the Iraqi government subsequently adopted and adapted the idea. Investments in public libraries in developing countries have generally been based on the idea that libraries contribute to national development and democratisation, although history provides ample evidence of public libraries being established by many types of political regimes, including non-democratic regimes, for many different reasons. Ignatow *et al.* have argued that in order to meaningfully contribute to development, public libraries must be seen to generate and distribute economic, social, and cultural capital.⁵⁶ In a country such as Iraq, with its initially high rates of illiteracy, the development of public libraries, stimulated by the example set in Baghdad, offered reinforcement for the state’s efforts to create the more literate society required to underpin a

⁵³ Karttunen, M-L. *Making a Communal World: English Merchants in Imperial St. Petersburg*. (Helsinki University Press, 2004)

⁵⁴ Derek H.F. Forbes: telephone conversations with the author, July 2013

⁵⁵ Kamm, J. *Daughter of the Desert: The Story of Gertrude Bell*. (London: Bodley Head, 1956)

⁵⁶ Ignatow, G., S.M. Webb, M. Poulin, R. Parajuli, P. Fleming, S. Batra, and D. Neupane. *Public Libraries and Democratization in Three Developing Countries: Exploring the Role of Social Capital*. *Libri*, 62 (2012), 67-80.

changing economy, fulfilling a potential role that was largely ignored elsewhere in the Arab world until many years later.

Iraqi society was not entirely ready for some of the changes introduced during the 'Mandate,' but the development of public libraries could be seen, not as a threat to the established social order, but as the revival of an ancient tradition. Beyond meeting the need to reinforce the skills of the neo-literates, the new public libraries also enabled the emerging middle class to engage in cultural pursuits. Books were expensive and, in an era when broadcast media and the cinema were in their infancy, libraries provided access to a significant vehicle for enlightenment, entertainment and discussion, supporting a modern version of the literary salons that flourished during the Abbasid era. It was thus a development that could be adopted and adapted with enthusiasm.

It must also be recognised that, during the Ottoman era, notwithstanding the reforming efforts of Midhat Pasha and some of his successors as *Vali* (Governor of the *Liwa*), Iraq had declined, educationally and intellectually, into a state such as Toynbee defined as an 'arrested civilisation.'⁵⁷ The expulsion of the Ottoman regime during the First World War was a 'traumatic disruption,' a factor that Djelic has described as one of the preconditions for innovation and the acceptance of unfamiliar and even foreign practices.⁵⁸ In short, Iraqi society in the aftermath of the expulsion of the Ottoman regime was pre-conditioned to accept changes. Miss Bell's efforts in Iraq took place in just such a period.

As in many developing countries, public library development in Iraq occurred largely after the end of foreign administration and during the period of post-independence nation-building. However, the Iraqi authorities had been made aware at an early stage of the need for these developments by the creation of the *Maktabat al Salam*, and Bell's energetic promotion of it. That their merits were recognised is evidenced by the initiative in Mosul of Haj Husein Hadeed, the *Mudir*, and the consent of the Director General of the Ministry of Education, Sati al-Husri, and the Minister (Jafar al-Askari or Muhammad Ridha al-Shabibi), to the state's takeover of the Baghdad Public Library. It was perhaps a fitting tribute that Gertrude Bell's former home in Baghdad was converted for use as a branch of the city's public library service in 1990.⁵⁹

Turning to Gertrude Bell's other major creation, it must be acknowledged that there was an element of artifice in her resolve that the Museum should house the library of the American School. Her own substantial private library was intended to help found a British Institute in Iraq. However, her vision for the Museum was clearly based on a belief that scholars should be able to easily refer to publications that described the artefacts in the museum's collection, as the British Museum Library did at that time. Although the creation of libraries in other Museums, and the significant growth of the Iraq Museum Library took place some time after her death, and through the leadership of one of the most significant librarians in twentieth century Iraq, there is no doubt that, without her initiative, scholars working in Iraq today would be unlikely to enjoy the depth of information that stems from her intention to commence building the Library's collection so soon after the earliest archaeological investigations.

⁵⁷ Toynbee, A.J. *A Study of History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 12 volumes, 1934-1961)

⁵⁸ Djelic, M-L. *Exporting the American Model: The Postwar Transformation of European Business*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

⁵⁹ Albin, M.W. 'Baghdad Public Library Opens.' *International Leads*, 4 (2) (1990), 2.

From today's perspective, we can conclude that the two libraries with which Gertrude Bell was associated played a major part in laying the foundation of modern library services in Iraq, such that, by the early 1980s before domestic and international circumstances intervened, they had become without doubt the best in the Arab world, and in some respects were beginning to stand comparison with their peers in the developed countries.

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