

Curiosity and courage

WOMEN'S JOURNEYS TO THE ORIENT

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Gertrude Bell with Winston Churchill on her right and T.E. Lawrence on her left during a conference in Cairo on 20 March 1921 | Photo: George M. Georgoulas / Newcastle University Library, public domain (Wikimedia Commons)



These days, we can name many famous female travellers who reach the farthest corners of the globe – they traverse deserts and tropical forests, explore the ocean depths, and conquer mountain peaks. They bring us closer to different cultures, the customs of indigenous peoples, and the beauty of the natural world, and their travel accounts inspire future generations of women, showing them that anything is possible. This unique group includes Anna Neumanowa, Helena Szolc-Rogozińska, and Ewa Dzieduszycka. Although there is still much to be done in terms of inclusivity and gender equality, it is much easier for women to travel today than it was a few centuries ago.

‘There is no denying that women have always played a role in shaping the world’, says Julia Szoltysek, PhD from the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Silesia, who specialises in travel literature. ‘Their activities flourished in all spheres of life, science, and culture. However, women’s achievements were not publicised for quite a long time, and were even appropriated by men to whom they were subordinate as wives, daughters, or sisters’, adds the researcher.

Traditionally, women were considered to belong solely to the family sphere: in Victorian England, it was believed that the home was the only appropriate place for them, and that they should devote themselves to it completely as ‘good angels of the household’. Unfortunately, this was the extent of their role – apart from the duty of running the household to perfection and caring for children and elderly women, they had no economic or legal privileges, nor could they inherit property or hold public office. Higher education also remained out of their reach for a long time – although aristocratic women attended classes in foreign languages, art, music, and literature, universities did not accept female students, and if they were allowed to attend lectures, they could not obtain a degree nor be entered into the register of graduates. The researcher emphasises that education was only intended to help them fulfil the role of an elegant and cultured wife

at the side of her husband, who held important state and political positions.

However, the image of women as timid and incapable of great deeds that men created was broken by those who decided to take up the challenge of travelling. For many women, travelling was often the only chance to gain autonomy and independence – the journey offered an opportunity to escape the conventions and rigid moral constraints. Julia Szoltysek also points to the openness and curiosity of 19th century female travellers who built local communities in India, one of the most important British colonies at the time. The rapidly expanding colonial apparatus needed them desperately: not only as wives for officers stationed there but also as teachers, missionaries, nurses, and carers. Many of them also set off to India for more mundane reasons, such as starting a family, gaining social status, or finding a husband.

For many women who were travelling more and more frequently, discovering the Levant, India, or Arabia was a dream come true and the fulfilment of a long-standing fascination, as well as a mission linked to patriotism and a sense of responsibility towards Great Britain. This attitude characterised Gertrude Bell who, despite the restrictions imposed on women in the 19th century, had a great career in politics, archaeology, photography, and travel writing. During World War I, she was Winston Churchill’s unofficial right-

hand person for Arab matters and, together with T.E. Lawrence, took an active part in the campaign to divide the Ottoman Empire and establish the borders of British protectorates in these regions. There were even rumours that Bell and Lawrence were British spies in the Middle East! Interestingly, despite the hot climate, the traveller adhered strictly to the English etiquette: she wore elegant dresses with lace details, leather ankle boots, and a wide hat, and did not give up her corset. The carefully assembled attire did not prevent her from enjoying her beloved horse riding – Bell became a pioneer in wearing riding trousers, which she hid under a flowing skirt. They allowed her to ride comfortably without causing a scandal. The traveller also played an extremely important role in the creation of the state of Iraq – her efforts to achieve independence for the country earned her the nickname of the ‘uncrowned Queen of the Desert’.

‘She also helped establish the Iraq Museum, which was a milestone in building the identity of the Iraqi people’, says the researcher from the Faculty of Humanities.

Another traveller who was enchanted by the Orient was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who accompanied her husband to Constantinople where he mediated peace talks between the Ottoman Empire and Austria (1716–1718). The British aristocrat was a fairly progressive woman – she allowed, among other



Mary Wortley Montagu
by Charles Jervas (public domain,
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Annemarie Schwarzenbach
Photo: Anita Forrer (CC BY-SA
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things, the court physician to vaccinate her son against smallpox, which was an epidemic in Turkey at the time. Her decision shocked the British aristocracy of the time, who were distrustful of vaccinations, especially when administered by Ottoman doctors. What is more, the traveller had the opportunity to get to know the women of the harem and the rules that governed it. Thanks to these experiences, she was able to refute the accounts of male travellers who described the place as a hotbed of depravity and unbridled eroticism – Lady Mary proved that the harem was the heart of the home, an almost sacred space, intended for raising children, for women to spend time together, and which no man was allowed to enter. She also visited hammams – Turkish baths – many times, describing them as spaces serving personal hygiene, with a clear division between the women's and men's areas. Interestingly, Lady Mary hated the English court dresses she was required to wear from an early age.

'Upon arriving in Turkey and becoming familiar with the fashion there, she abandoned her muslin dress in favour of the local women's outfit, including a head covering, a veil to partially cover her face, and characteristic Turkish slippers', says Julia Szoltysek.

During her stay in Turkey, Lady Mary described her experiences in letters to her loved ones, which were published as a collection entitled *Turkish Embassy Letters*.

'Travelling is not an all-inclusive holiday – it involves a great deal of physical, emotional, and mental effort. Travel is often a limit situation, a kind of a rite of passage that puts us in difficult, often unpredictable conditions', emphasises the researcher.

This is clearly illustrated by the example of the 20th-century Swiss traveller Annemarie Schwarzenbach, who, despite being a highly educated person – fluent in eight languages – and coming from a wealthy family, often experienced physical and mental suffering during her travels. She was addicted to opium and morphine and struggled with depression, which resulted in several hospitalisations. Despite this, she never lost her desire to travel – she saw her last chance for salvation in a road trip from Switzerland to Afghanistan, which she embarked on in 1939 with her friend, fellow traveller and writer Ella Maillart. At that time, Annemarie promised to give up morphine and keep her companion regularly informed about her condition. The women recorded their experiences during the nine-month journey in their books, although their accounts differ drastically. The researcher points out that Maillart's text is entirely devoted to Schwarzenbach, in which the traveller describes her struggles with her friend, who repeatedly broke their agreement. In her diary, on the other hand, Annemarie describes exclusively her own experiences, and one could even get the impression that she went on this journey

alone. Despite the difficulties, their journey was a success – the women arrived safely in Kabul, from where Annemarie travelled further east, and Ella returned by ship to Europe to prepare for her trip to China with Peter Fleming.

'Their journey is fascinating, because it shows how two women broke a travel taboo – they drove from Switzerland to Afghanistan, fleeing the war that was beginning to break out in Europe', says the researcher.

The researcher emphasises that today we are beginning to appreciate more and more the contributions of female travellers and their influence on culture, science, and universal civilisation heritage. The Gertrude Bell archive (maintained for years by Newcastle University), which has been included in the UNESCO's Memory of the World International Register, and in particular her photographs and maps, are the only record of many ancient civilisations in the Middle East, which would have been lost forever had it not been for her efforts. The lives of female travellers also inspire the world of art – in 2018, the Givenchy fashion house dedicated its autumn-winter collection to Annemarie Schwarzenbach, expressing its appreciation for her original, androgynous beauty. The biographies of these female travellers have also inspired several books and films that showcase their openness to the world and their pursuit of independence.