

power plant operated by the U.S. oil company produced six times the amount of electricity generated in the rest of Chad, and posh amenities abounded: modern apartments, air conditioning, Internet access, basketball courts, a health clinic, even an airport. A sign proclaimed, "Home of the World's Greatest Drilling Team."

On the other side of the road, 10,000 people lived in squalor. Atan, a town that had taken root in the desert a decade earlier as a squatter camp for job seekers, lacked clean running water. Nightclub prostitutes served an American and French clientele a short distance from Atan's houses of worship and tiny schools. "Despite the veneer of respectability, Atan is an enormous festering embarrassment for ExxonMobil," Ghazvinian writes, "a living, breathing metaphor for the failure of the Doba drilling operation to bring meaningful development to the people of Chad."

For Western oil and gas producers, Africa is the world's last El Dorado. Since the early 1990s, advances in deepwater-drilling technology and the terms of "production-sharing agreements" with host nations have cleared the way for substantial American and European footholds off the coast of West Africa and south of the Sahara. After 9/11, Big Oil and the Washington elite were captivated by the prospect that exploring for oil in Africa could loosen OPEC's stranglehold on U.S. energy supplies—and that locating wells offshore would separate them from the political upheaval that troubles so much of the oil-producing world. China joined the bonanza more recently.

Journalist and Oxford-trained historian Ghazvinian steers clear of caricatures or smug prescriptions for Africa's feeble democracies as he explores the complex political, economic, and social factors that fuel the "curse of oil." Every developing country in Africa where oil has been discovered, he notes, has seen decreased living standards and increased suffering, a phenomenon scholars call the "paradox of plenty."

African oil, Ghazvinian argues, is neither an easy source of energy security for the West nor a

spur to the African continent's healthy development. The history he recounts and the people he meets in his travels—from the young Nigerian who leads him to an illicit oil-trading post to the Chevron executive who blithely deflects reports of widespread corruption—suggest that there is more than enough blame to go around for the entrenched poverty and violence in Africa's oil-rich states.

In recent years, billions of dollars in national oil wealth have landed in the private accounts of ruling families or been redirected from development projects to arms purchases. Meanwhile, Washington often turns a blind eye. Ghazvinian's most disturbing stories emerge from Africa's small rentier states, where once-diversified economies have become dangerously dependent on the royalties paid by oil exporters. The opulence he finds in Libreville, the capital of Gabon, is a mirage. The national unemployment rate is 40 percent, and Gabon imports most of the food once produced in its jungles. Meanwhile, the oil is running out.

Like other recent books whose authors roamed the world to expose the underbelly of "energy security," including Paul Roberts's *The End of Oil* (2004) and Lisa Margonelli's *Oil on the Brain* (2007), *Untapped* taps into our growing, converging anxieties about oil supply, national security, and global warming. But Ghazvinian and his fellow authors also shed light on an important question that Americans still rarely ask: What does our relentless hunger for oil mean for those who vie to feed it?

—Joel Kirkland

HISTORY

Gertrude of Arabia

THE LIFE OF GERTRUDE BELL (1868–1926) cries out for a biopic. More famed and influential in her day than her colleague T. E. Lawrence, with whom she rallied Arab tribes

GERTRUDE BELL:
Queen of the Desert,
Shaper of Nations.

By Georgina Howell.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
481 pp. \$27.50



Gertrude Bell (middle), flanked by Winston Churchill on her right and T. E. Lawrence on her left, tours the pyramids during the 1921 Cairo Conference, where she played a starring role in determining the destiny and drawing the borders of modern Iraq.

to rebel against the Turks during World War I, she was eclipsed after her death by the myth-making that crowned him Lawrence of Arabia. But Lawrence could never have accomplished his own cinematic exploits among the Arabs if not for Bell's preceding years of intrepid travel and dogged information-gathering in the desert.

Bell was pivotal to the politics of the day, serving as Oriental secretary in the British administration in Baghdad—she was the only

woman officer in British military intelligence—and tirelessly shepherding unruly Iraq toward the wobbly independence it finally achieved in 1932. Her life, like Lawrence's, ended in pathos. The great political adventure ebbed, leaving her lonely in Baghdad, and she died at 57 after what most biographers agree was an intentional overdose of pills.

Several recent biographies, notably Janet Wallach's *Desert Queen* (1996), have striven to capture the mystique of the woman who crossed

and recrossed the Middle East on camelback, spoke fluent Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, met Bedouin and Druze sheikhs on equal terms, and ended up knowing everything about the tribes and their rivalries, trading patterns, and internal politics. Her story is painfully relevant today for the light it casts on why nation-building in Iraq is so difficult—indeed, was difficult even for someone with Bell's formidable sense of the region and its cultures. We can learn much from her struggles to draw the borders of Iraq and weld its warring

After meeting Gertrude Bell, one sheikh exclaimed, "This is a woman—what must the men be like!"

Shiite, Sunni, Kurdish, and other populations into a modern nation.

Georgina Howell, a British magazine writer, has produced a vivid portrait that

tends toward the breathless—forgivably so, for the most part, given the material. Bell was stylish and fearless. Arriving at the remote tents of a desert ruler, she would dispense gifts, share the latest political news and gossip, and join her hosts in reciting classical Arab poetry far into the night. The sheikhs, perplexed at first, came to treat her with profound respect; the British authorities, well aware of her value, accepted her as a colleague. (There were hitches: One sheikh, meeting with Bell and other senior officers in Baghdad, exclaimed, "This is a woman—what must the men be like!" "This delicious peroration," she wrote dryly to her parents, "restored me to my true place in the twinkling of an eye.")

Disappointed several times in love, Bell poured herself into the Arab cause. Late in life she wrote home, "I'm acutely conscious of how much life has, after all, given me. . . . I'm happy in feeling that I've got the love and confidence of a whole nation." This seems to have been so. The king she helped install, Faisal ibn Hussain, treated her as a valued adviser. Iraqis called her the Khatun, or great lady. As recently as 1990, in Saddam-era Baghdad, the minister of antiquities respectfully took me to see "Miss Bell's museum" (the Iraqi National

Museum, which she founded) and "Miss Bell's university."

Howell's shortcoming as a biographer is her apparent inability to criticize her subject. She earnestly defends even her heroine's antisuffrage activism. (Bell became the founding secretary of the Anti-Suffrage League in 1908, and for years opposed votes for women, most likely because she identified with the political interests of her social class—the upper crust feared a large increase in the franchise—over those of her gender.) Howell's uncritical treatment extends to the politics in which Bell was enmeshed: She shows no discomfort at the puppet-style "independence" Britain permitted Iraq after World War I, or the duplicity of the policies that preceded it. The romantic British vision of the East possesses her utterly.

Romantic expectations of transforming the Middle East have persisted long past Gertrude Bell's time. But what endures of her legacy flowed not from fanciful ideas about the region but from her intense engagement with its realities.

—Amy E. Schwartz

Daze of Yore

IN THE DECADES LEADING up to the Civil War, Virginians were casting longing backward glances. They "believed that they had already glimpsed—if not momentarily captured—the essence of the good life," writes Williams College historian Susan Dunn. But, she goes on to ask, did nostalgia tempt the Old Dominion in particular, and the South, by extension, to mistake its plantation idyll for a more-or-less permanent stasis? Did the nearly religious embrace of the rural way of life, which was equated with manly independence, and a cultivated distaste for urban industrialism eternally mar relations between North and South? What was it that sank the fortunes of proud Virginians?

Dominion of Memories is a richly detailed

DOMINION OF MEMORIES:

Jefferson, Madison, and the Decline of Virginia.

By Susan Dunn. Basic. 310 pp. \$27.50