

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 Shiite, Sunni,

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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

investigation of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison's home state in the half-century after the Revolution, as it struggled with slavery, weighed government's role in public education, and speculated about the proper parameters of democracy more generally. Dunn, a smooth and persuasive writer, digests the best literature on Virginia and Virginians, highlighting the scholarship of the last 50 years as well as drawing on newspapers and correspondence of the early 19th century. In these pages, illustrious founders vie with lesser lights to chart the future, only half-realizing and half-accepting how shaky a foundation—how exhausted the soil—the future rests upon.

Virginia's decline from Enlightenment-era prosperity to political and cultural backwardness was spiritual as much as a matter of political economy. For her explanation, Dunn points to the depletion of tobacco-stained land, crop failures, the migration of common farmers to the fertile West, the refusal of a tax-averse legislature to support public schools, and the general lack of interest in creative solutions to these issues. Most telling, though, is state representatives' inordinate fear of the consolidation of power within the federal government. "Prisoners of their own plantations," as the author calls Virginia's planter elite, perpetuated their myth of splendor in the grass.

No portrait of the Old South is complete without the eccentric provocateur John Randolph of Roanoke (1773–1833), and he pops up several times in Dunn's account. His people, polished and unfailingly decent, were content to remain isolated from whatever challenged the legitimacy of their dream world. Even Jefferson, a hero of states' rights as much as he was a clarion on behalf of individual rights, was not conservative enough for Randolph. In one of the great put-downs of the 19th century, he dismissed the third president's ample intellect with faint praise for his invention of the moldboard plow: When, in 1829, Jefferson was invoked to promote state constitutional reform, Randolph declared, "Sir, if there be any point in which the authority of Mr.

Jefferson might be considered valid, it is in the mechanism of a plough."

Dunn's take on Madison is complex and interesting. Unlike Jefferson, Madison acknowledged and struggled with the contradiction between social happiness and national identity. Neither man could stomach the idea of a biracial society, but Madison was a unionist, clearer in his insistence that North and South were equally bound by the constitutional compact of 1787. Despite his own culpability for the "looming crisis," Madison's final message to the nation, delivered in a short public letter he penned in 1834, "was a supremely rational one—union and vigilance—though he offered it in vain."

Dunn completes her analysis by relating the South's early sacrifice on the altar of limited government—a creation of Jefferson's misguided idealism and provincialism—to Virginia politicians' later opposition to New Deal legislation. And she connects the conservative call for hands-off government in our own generation, and a self-satisfied lethargy that stalled advances in civil rights, to that same unreasonable fear of intrusive federal power. The American nation was conceived in energy and dynamism, much of it engineered in Virginia. So what happened to divide North and South? Dunn's answers, some unsettling, are all credible.

—Andrew Burstein

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SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

## Physician, Think for Thyself

ONCE UPON A TIME, DOCTORS made house calls and eye contact. Chatting at patients' bedsides or with their families at kitchen tables, doctors

assessed both patient and context. They understood the sensible counsel of postbellum physician William Osler: Listen, and the patient will tell you the diagnosis. So how can 21st-century physicians hope to interpret their patients' ill-

**HOW DOCTORS THINK.**

By Jerome Groopman.  
Houghton Mifflin.  
307 pp. \$26