

Isabella Lucy Bird, married name **Bishop** (15 October 1831 – 7 October 1904), was a nineteenth-century English explorer, writer, photographer, and naturalist. With Fanny Jane Butler she founded the John Bishop Memorial hospital in Srinagar.

She was born in [Boroughbridge, Yorkshire](#). Her father, Edward Bird, was a [Church of England](#) priest and the family moved several times across [Britain](#) as Edward received different parish postings, most notably in 1848 when he was replaced as vicar of St. Thomas' when his parishioners objected to the style of his ministry.

Isabella was a sickly child and spent her entire life struggling with various ailments, which seem to have had something of a psychogenic character: when she was doing exactly what she wanted she was almost never ill and what Isabella wanted to do was travel. In 1854, she was given £100 by her father and went to visit relatives in [America](#). She was allowed to stay until her money ran out. The results of the journey, she wrote up anonymously in her first book *The Englishwoman in America*, published in 1856. The following year she went to [Canada](#) and then toured [Scotland](#), but time spent in Britain always seemed to make her ill and following the death of her mother, in 1868, she embarked on a series of excursions in order to avoid settling permanently with her sister Henrietta (Henny) on the island of [Mull](#). Henny was the stay-at-home type in a way that was unendurable to Isabella who supported her travels through writing. Many of her works are compiled from letters she wrote home to her sister in Scotland.

Isabella finally left for foreign parts in 1872, going first to [Australia](#), which she disliked and then to [Hawaii](#) (then called the Sandwich Isles), which she fell in love with and which led to her second book (published three years later in 1875). She then moved on to [Colorado](#), then the newest state in America, where she had heard the air was excellent for the infirm. Dressed practically and riding not side saddle but frontwards like a man (though she threatened to sue the *Times* for saying she dressed like one) she covered over 800 miles in the [Rocky Mountains](#) in 1873 and her letters back to Henny comprised her third and perhaps her most famous book, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*.

Isabella's time in the Rockies was enlivened especially by her acquaintance with Jim Nugent, an outlaw with one eye and equal tendency towards violence and poetry. "A man any woman might love but no sane woman would marry", Isabella declared, in a section excised from her letters prior to their publication. Jim too seemed captivated by the independently minded Isabella but ultimately she left the Rockies and her "dear desperado". Jim was shot dead less than a year later.

At home, Isabella again found herself pursued, this time by John Bishop an [Edinburgh](#) doctor in his thirties. Predictably ill, she went travelling again, this time to the far east: [Japan](#), [China](#), [Vietnam](#) and [Singapore](#). By this time Henny was ill and died of [typhoid](#) in 1880. Isabella was heartbroken and finally accepted Bishop's proposal of marriage. Her health took a severe turn for the worst but by the time Bishop himself died in 1886, Isabella had been put back together. Feeling that her earlier travels had been hopelessly dilettante, she studied medicine and resolved to travel as a [missionary](#). Despite nearing sixty, she set off for [India](#).

Later years

Arriving on the subcontinent in February 1889, Isabella visited missions in [India](#), crossed [Tibet](#) and then travelled in [Turkey](#), [Persia](#) and [Kurdistan](#). The following year she joined a group of British soldiers travelling between [Baghdad](#) and [Tehran](#). She remained with the unit's commanding officer during a period of his survey work in the region armed with her revolver and a medicine chest supplied (an early example of corporate sponsorship) by [Henry Wellcome](#)'s company in [London](#).

Featured in journals and magazines for decades, Isabella was by now something of a household name and recognition followed. In 1892, she became the first woman inducted into the [Royal Geographical Society](#). Her final great journey took place in 1897 where she travelled up the [Yangtze](#) and [Han](#) rivers in [China](#) and in [Korea](#). But, later still, she went to [Morocco](#), where she travelled among the [Berbers](#) and had to use a ladder to mount her horse. She died in [Edinburgh](#) within a few months of her return, on October 7, 1904, just 8 days before her seventy-third birthday. She was still planning another trip to China.

"There never was anybody", wrote the *Spectator*, "who had adventures as well as Miss Bird." In 1982, Caryl Churchill used her as a character in her play *Top Girls*. Much of the dialogue written by Churchill comes from Bird's own writings.