

1998

## Freya Stark

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### Recommended Citation

Hawley, J. C. (1998). Freya Stark. In B. Brothers (Ed.), *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 195, *British Travel Writers 1910–39* (pp. 325-340). Gale Research.

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# Freya Stark

(31 January 1893 – 9 May 1993)

John C. Hawley

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BOOKS: *Baghdad Sketches* (Baghdad: Times Press, 1932; enlarged edition, London: Murray, 1937; New York: Dutton, 1938);  
*The Valleys of the Assassins and Other Persian Travels* (London: Murray, 1934; New York: Dutton, 1934);  
*The Southern Gates of Arabia: A Journey in the Hadhramaut* (London: Murray, 1936; New York: Dutton, 1936);  
*Seen in the Hadhramaut* (London: Murray, 1938; New York: Dutton, 1939);  
*A Winter in Arabia* (London: Murray, 1940; New York: Dutton, 1940);  
*Letters from Syria* (London: Murray, 1942);  
*East Is West* (London: Murray, 1945); republished as *The Arab Island: The Middle East, 1939–1943* (New York: Knopf, 1945);  
*Perseus in the Wind* (London: Murray, 1948; Boston: Beacon, 1956);  
*Traveller's Prelude* (London: Murray, 1950);  
*Beyond Euphrates: Autobiography, 1928–1933* (London: Murray, 1951);  
*The Coast of Incense: Autobiography, 1933–1939* (London: Murray, 1953);  
*The Freya Stark Story* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1953)—abridgement of *Traveller's Prelude*, *Beyond Euphrates*, and *The Coast of Incense*;  
*Ionia: A Quest* (London: Murray, 1954; New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954);  
*The Lycian Shore* (London: Murray, 1956; New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956);  
*Alexander's Path: From Caria to Cilicia* (London: Murray, 1958; New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958);  
*Riding to the Tigris* (London: Murray, 1959; New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960);  
*Dust in the Lion's Paw: Autobiography, 1939–1946* (London: Murray, 1961; New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962);  
*The Journey's Echo: Selections* (London: Murray, 1963; New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964);



Freya Stark

*Rome on the Euphrates: The Story of a Frontier* (London: Murray, 1966; New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967);  
*The Zodiac Arch* (London: Murray, 1968; New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969);  
*Space, Time & Movement in Landscape* (London: Her Godson, 1969);  
*The Minaret of Djam: An Excursion to Afghanistan* (London: Murray, 1970);  
*Turkey: A Sketch of Turkish History*, text by Stark and photographs by Fulvio Roiter (London:

Thames & Hudson, 1971); republished as *Gateways and Caravans: A Portrait of Turkey* (New York: Macmillan, 1971);

*A Peak in Darien* (London: Murray, 1976);

*Rivers of Time* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1982);

*Freya Stark in Asolo* (Asolo: Magnifica Comunità Pedemontana dal Piave al Brenta, 1984).

Freya Madeline Stark lived for a century, and into that one hundred years she packed a life of extraordinary daring and ingenuity. "Personally I would rather feel wrong with everybody else than right all by myself," she wrote in *Baghdad Sketches* (enlarged edition, 1937); "I like people different, and agree with the man who said that the worst of the human race is the number of duplicates." Such a motto defines not only her approach to the world but also the character of the woman herself. She had no duplicate. The writings that resulted from her constant travels began as wonder-filled accounts of ancient storybook kingdoms of the Middle East and moved impressively toward a reflective consideration of the differences between a nomadic way of life and the stable urbanity that might have been her lot if she had decided to fit the mold of those around her. In these accounts of her own transformation she brought a growing body of readers not only into exotic locales but also to the brink of metaphysical questions about the meaning of life.

Eventually fluent in French, Latin, German, Italian, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, Stark had written more than two dozen travel books by the time of her death. She had been awarded a Royal Geographical Society Back Grant in 1933 for her travels in Lorestan (the second woman to be so honored), the Burton Memorial Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1934 (the first woman to receive this award), the Royal Geographical Society Founder's Medal in 1942, the Mazzoti Prize for books of exploration, and an honorary doctorate from Glasgow University. She was named Dame of the British Empire in 1972 and was presented the keys to her adopted hometown of Asolo, Italy, in 1984.

As a rule Stark traveled only with a guide or a small party of people, and she was frequently the first Western European woman to venture into many of the locales she described in her books. She has often been compared to Gertrude Bell, another Arabist, but there are differences between the two women. Bell had far greater wealth to support her travels, and she eventually became one of the most powerful women in the British Empire. Stark told friends that Bell was comparatively soft, bringing along servants and lots of baggage and, in Stark's view, never staying in any one place long enough to

soak up the local color. Stark relished the sense of having overcome personal obstacles and cultural differences and of having been accepted, after much hard work, by a wide variety of ethnic groups.

A comparison of Stark and Bell would prompt many to favor Stark's assessment of the two women. Whereas Bell seemed hardy, Stark (despite her amazing longevity) was prone to illness. While sharing tents with Bedouin sheiks, traveling through deserts on camel, or living in harems (and taking some of the first photographs of the women with whom she resided), Stark had a constitution that did not seem suited to a traveler. In the first place, she was born two months prematurely. At the age of twenty-two she developed typhoid, pleurisy, and pneumonia. She soon discovered that she had a gastric ulcer. In the course of her journeys she suffered from dysentery, malaria, measles, a weakened heart, dengue fever, and appendicitis. A less determined traveler would surely have retired to her quiet hearth—but not Stark.

As she moved from one country and civilization to the next, from one language to the next, Stark seemed willing and eager to redefine herself and slip into the new world she would be encountering. The consequence of this chameleon character shows itself in the difficulty of categorizing her vocation: she was a travel writer first and foremost but also an historian, an archaeologist, a fine photographer, and, some would say, finally a philosopher, a pioneer in cultural studies and anthropology.

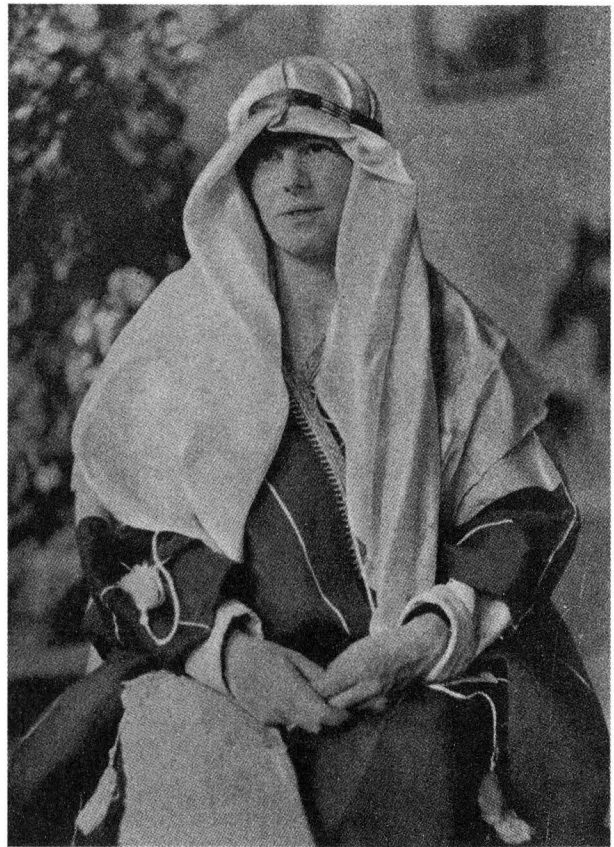
Freya Stark was born in Paris on 31 January 1893, the first surviving child of Robert and Flora Stark, who had been married for thirteen years. The marriage of Stark's parents, who were first cousins, was not a happy one. During Stark's early childhood the family lived in Devon, but in 1901 Flora Stark took Freya and her younger sister, Vera, to live in Asolo, Italy, in the foothills of the Dolomites. Two years later they moved to Dronero, a town in Piedmont. Robert Stark stayed behind in Devon. Flora Stark's connection to Italy had been through her mother, who had lived in Genoa and had entertained such British luminaries as the Trollopes, the Thackerays, and the Brownings. Having been raised in Italy, Flora Stark, who was an artist, had been uncomfortable with the Victorian British ways to which her husband introduced her in England. Like his wife, Robert Stark was a painter, but his principal training was as a sculptor. Freya Stark later said that she inherited from her father a sense of honesty and from her mother a sense of vitality. Her relationship with her mother remained possibly the closest of her life, and she continued writing to her regularly, once a week, until her mother died in

1942. The first letter in Stark's collected letters, written in 1914 when she was just twenty-one, is to her mother and asks, "have we not been growing nearer and nearer? When we go to the next world I hope St. Peter will not know which is which."

When the family moved from Asolo to Dronero, it was because Flora Stark had become involved with Count Mario di Roascio, who was starting a carpet business, which she had helped to finance. One day while walking in the factory Freya Stark caught her hair in one of the looms and was dragged around the wheel. Half her scalp was torn out, and she was in the hospital for four months while skin grafting took place. After the accident she viewed herself as physically unattractive, and for the rest of her life she always wore hats to disguise the side of her face that had been affected.

In 1908 Stark moved to London and began attending W. P. Ker's lectures in English literature at London University. Ker, who was later named professor of poetry at Oxford University, became her first mentor and a lifelong friend. Her major subject was history rather than literature, however, because she had decided that she wanted to spend her life delving into the real world. During World War I she did so by serving as a nurse in Bologna. There she met Guido Ruata, with whom she fell in love and became engaged. Several months later he broke off the engagement because his earlier lover had returned from America. Then, in 1926, Vera Stark died. Freya Stark later saw these two events as the greatest losses of her life. About this time she again took up her studies of Arabic and the Koran, which she had begun in Italy in 1921. She studied first with an Egyptian teacher in London and then at the School of Oriental Studies in 1927. On 18 November 1927, just one year after her sister's death, Stark set off for Beirut. She was thirty-four, and her creative life had finally begun.

From the beginning Stark was fascinated by what she saw, and she slipped into a pattern that was to mark all her travels. She often proceeded on foot, leisurely absorbing the sights and smells and listening carefully. In her stumbling conversations in Arabic she presented herself as a student rather than as one of the typical British women who were generally married to administrators and remained aloof in the colonial compound. Because Stark did not want to be insulated from the roughness of the life around her, she became something of a concern to British authorities, who saw her as having remarkable—possibly reckless—pluck. Though she approved of the goals of the British Empire, she did not see the need to be bound by patriarchal concerns that would have preferred her to spend her



Stark in 1928

days having tea parties, nor did she intend to limit her investigations to those areas that had been visited already by western women. In April she moved to Damascus. After seven months she returned to Europe, having written letters that were eventually published as *Letters from Syria* (1942). In retrospect this account of Stark's first journey east of Italy and her first contact with the Near East has a simple touristic quality in its observations, lacking most of the philosophical reflections that characterize her more polished works. Her first impression of Antioch, for example, was of "a population all suffering from toothache and nothing like the dignified turban of the *Arabian Nights*; but it is the *Arabian Nights* all the same."

On this first journey Stark studied Arabic for three months at Brummana, a Syrian village on a slope of the Lebanon Mountains high above Beirut. For a month she lived in a native household in the Muslim quarter of Damascus, where she became sick because of insanitary conditions. She wrote to her mother on 4 April 1928:

These well-bred Moslems are very agreeable, and just as easy to get on with as well-bred people the world over. Of course, one cannot become intimate unless one

knows enough of their civilisation to be able to see from their angle. . . . I have long thought of Mohammedanism as one form of Protestantism and far nearer to the spirit of Protestantism than the forms of Christianity here. He [Stark's Muslim host] is convinced that the Koran is superior to the Bible, just as he is convinced that Arabic poetry is superior to the literatures of Europe. This is all interesting in someone who has been in the hands of the missionaries for the *whole* of his education.

Stark was joined in Damascus by her friend Venetia Buddicom, and the two proceeded by car to Baalbek. Their next expedition, in May 1928, was unconventional and adventurous. After the Druse revolt, which had begun in August 1925 and continued until March 1927, the French rulers of Syria were not welcoming intruders, but the two women mounted donkeys, and with a Druse guide called Najm they made a leisurely progress toward Palestine. At the end of eleven days they were at Bosra, where they dismissed their guide and took a car for Jericho and Jerusalem. "I have been received with great friendliness," Stark wrote, "and the village is doing its best to teach me—only too pleased to find someone who has come neither to improve nor to rob, but with a genuine liking for their language." The narrative also includes the sorts of judgments that appear frequently in her mature writing: "Religion is a delicate point," she recorded.

Now that she [Stark's hostess] realizes I don't want to turn people into Presbyterians, or anything else for that matter, it is all coming out: all the bottled-up feelings since the time when her brother turned Quaker and she came into contact with all the People who Think They Know Better: and never said anything, but just (I believe) hated them more and more. These people never contradict: they listen politely while the convinced missionary goes blundering on—annoyed afterwards that they 'turn around.' But I believe the fact is that they don't 'turn around.' They have simply *never turned at all*: only their politeness is never to say *No* when an Englishman would say so: in fact to say *Yes*.

Nevertheless she warmed to the people and her experiences.

Finally reaching the end of this first journey—and without a sense of all the travel that still lies ahead in her life—the novice gives voice to the simple exhaustion of it all and even the pride of accomplishment. Coming upon the relative comforts of Jerusalem, she remarked,

How good it has all been: the discomforts vanish, at least from *active* memory; and the loveliness of it all remains and grows. And the joy is that I have been able

to do it after all, and the silly old body has really played up rather well considering.

She was thirty-five when she wrote these words.

It was not just the people that fascinated Stark. The landscape itself seems to have had a kind of primal effect on her. On 7 April 1928 she wrote to Robert Browning's son, Pen:

Yesterday was a wonderful day: for I discovered the Desert! . . . I can't tell you what a wonderful sight it was: as if one were suddenly in the very morning of the world among the people of Abraham or Jacob. . . . I stood in a kind of ecstasy among them. It seemed as if they were not so much moving as flowing along, with something indescribably fresh and peaceful and free about it all, as if the struggle of all these thousands of years had never been, since first they started wandering. I never imagined that my first sight of the desert would come with such a shock of beauty and enslave me right away.

In the fall of 1929 Stark went to Baghdad. Rather than living in the British compound, she stayed with a shoemaker's family in a section of the city that turned out to be in the middle of the prostitutes' quarter. It is not surprising that she wrote to her mother in 1930 that "what one misses here is that the beautiful things are so rarely in beautiful settings: it is almost impossible to feel satisfied, as one does in Italy: always there is a jarring or sordid or cruel touch somewhere. And yet it is indescribably fascinating."

From Baghdad she set out on her first exploratory journey into the area between Iraq and Persia (now Iran) known as Luristan (Lorestan). On this trip, which lasted from April 1930 until October 1931, she intended to visit the castles left behind by the Assassins, a Persian sect of Shia Muslims that flourished in the late eleventh century. The results of her trip were not entirely successful, but she found the experience exhilarating. The British who stayed behind in Baghdad and scoffed at this eccentric lady learned that Stark was a woman with whom they would have to reckon.

Stark's greatest gifts as a travel writer were her capacity to empathize with the people she visited and view her own culture from "within" that of another and to offer the harsh criticism that her hosts might have felt but might not have found the words to express. She addressed this point in her 6 May 1930 letter to her mother:

Once again I was right and the experts who have been years out here, wrong: they told me the Koran was *no* use now for getting into touch with people. If I had not known the Koran and been able to talk to the old man

from his own standpoint, he would never have started all these tales. The Koran has been their one source of inspiration for centuries: it is their background—and however Europeanized they may be, one is sure to get nearer to them *really* if one comes at them from behind as it were, through the things they knew as children, or that their parents and nurses knew, than if one comes through the medium of a new civilisation which means something quite different to them than it means to us. When I take the old Mullah's standpoint, I know where I am and what to expect; when I take a European standpoint with a 'civilised' Oriental, I can never know where I am, for I have no means of judging what 'European' means to him: it is certainly not what it means to us.

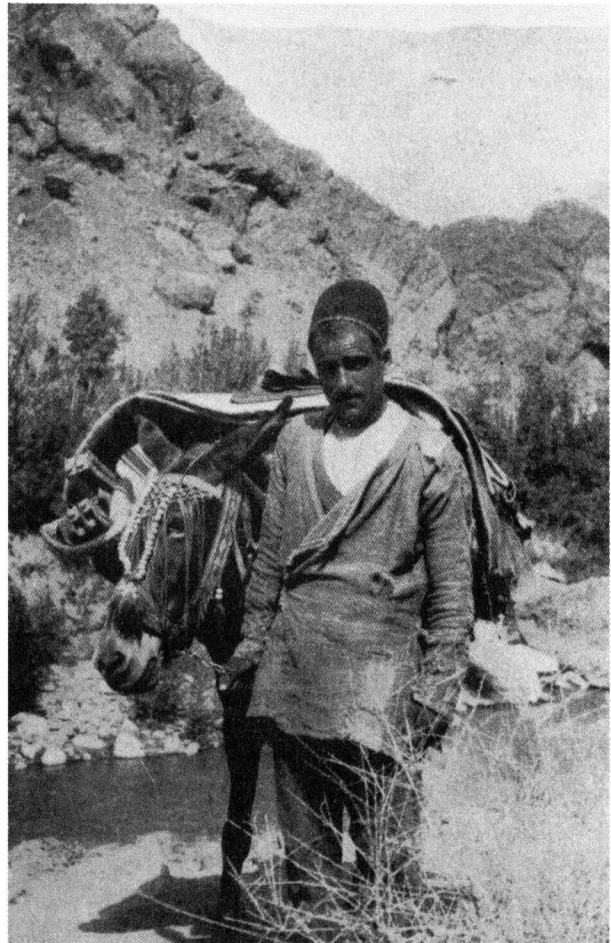
The trick, of course, was to learn enough to be able to "take the old Mullah's standpoint," and Stark seems to have been unusually capable in this regard.

Stark's writing career began when Duncan Cameron, an editor of the *Baghdad Times*, asked her to continue her explorations and to write about them. She worked at the job for a year and subsequently collected her newspaper reports in *Baghdad Sketches*, published in Baghdad in 1932 and enlarged for publication in England in 1937. At this point in her writing her narrative voice seems to be that of an ambivalent Western traveler who wishes to be the last one inside the gate before the native culture locked out all contaminating foreign influence:

Whether these Western floods, to which all her sluices are open, come to the East for baptism or drowning, is hard to say. Total immersion in any case she is bound to submit to and we—who love the creature—wait with some misgiving to see in what condition her regenerated head will reappear above the waters; we stand upon the shore and collect such oddments as we find floating in chaos—her customs, religions, her clothes and trinkets and some, alas! of her virtues. We snatch them as they drift for ever out of sight, and encase them in an armour of words—and by so doing, not unhopeful of the future, yet wage our little losing battle against the fragilities of Time.

Stark knew that change would come, and in later writings she actually welcomed it in many respects. Yet her writings reveal her delight in the charms of a culture that was on the brink of transformation beyond recognition. This cementing of the past served as a principal function of her early writing, a function that she later criticized in others.

*Cornhill Magazine* also published some of Stark's reports on the Druses, which brought her to the attention of John Murray, who was her publisher for most of the rest of her lifetime. Her first contract with him was for *The Valleys of the Assassins and Other Persian Travels* (1934). She dedicated this first endeavor to Ker, who had died in 1923 while on a mountain-climbing



Stark's guide, Hujjat Allah, with her mule and saddle bags during the journey Stark described in *The Valleys of the Assassins and Other Persian Travels* (1934)

expedition with her. The book has little of the reflective poetic language that characterizes Stark's late writing, but it does give some insight into the romantic quality that lay at the heart of her wanderlust. Her preface begins, "An imaginative aunt who, for my ninth birthday, sent me a copy of the *Arabian Nights*, was, I suppose, the original cause of trouble. . . . I must admit that for my own part I travelled single-mindedly for fun." As in her earlier letters from Syria, this reference to the *Arabian Nights* bespeaks her childlike expectations for the Arabic world, her hopes for a genie in a bottle, and her implicit quest for the magic flying carpet.

Yet her life in Asolo as a child of a mother with a somewhat dubious reputation and with constant concerns regarding finances also gave Stark what might be described as a Victorian sense of responsibility and purpose that, even in the midst of "fun," forced her to ask: "Why are you here alone? and What do you intend to do?" One thing became quite clear to her in this early outing: she was not simply a



*A wedding in the Hadramawt region, photograph taken by Stark in 1935*

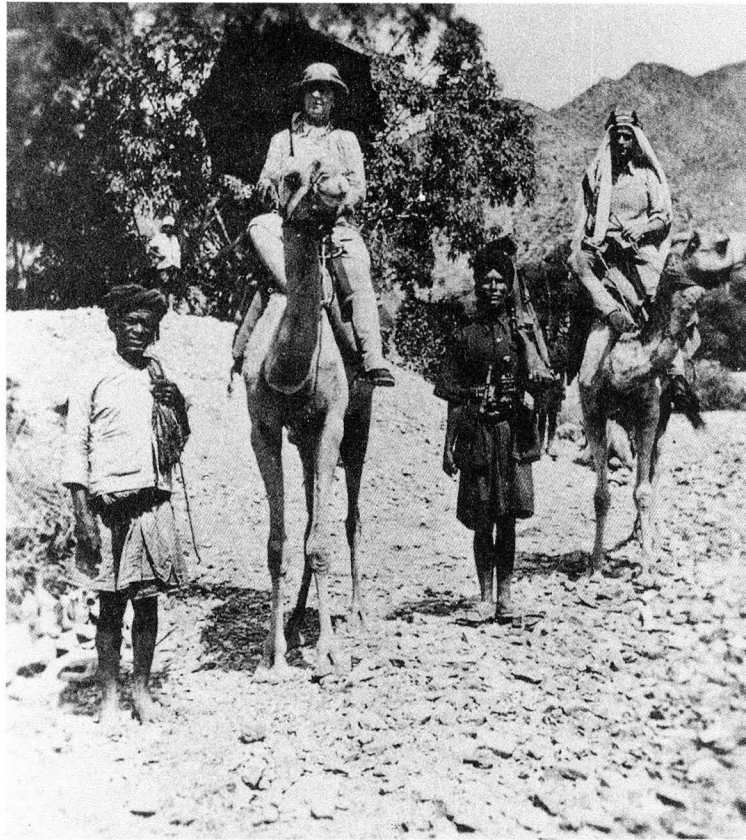
tourist. She thought, perhaps, that she had a mission. As she wrote to a young fan in 1980, "One should have a quest of one's own—history, literature, photography, anything like a pursuit to give an added reason and interest for travel."

Stark returned to London in 1933, spoke on BBC radio, and became friends with Lord David Cecil and Sir Sydney Cockerell. Becoming something of a celebrity, she set her sights on southern Arabia. In January 1935 she set out for Yemen, seeking Shabwa in the Hadhramaut (Hadramawt), which had been the center of the incense trade. The journey, which required seven days on camel, was one that Europeans had not yet made, and Stark's attempt was also unsuccessful. Along the way she stayed in Shibam, an impressive town of tall structures, but she became so incapacitated by illness that she had to be rescued by the Royal Air Force (RAF). In gratitude and with some chagrin she dedicated her next book, *The Southern Gates of Arabia* (1936), to the fliers. The book received favorable reviews and was followed by *Seen in the Hadhramaut* (1938). As difficult and frustrating as this journey had been for Stark the romantic traveler, Stark the responsible young woman had found her calling as a travel writer.

The subject of *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, Stark wrote, is

the great frankincense road whose faint remembrance still gives to South Arabia the name of Happy: whose existence prepared and made possible the later exploits of Islam. On its stream of padding feet the riches of Asia travelled: along its slow continuous thread the Arabian empires rose and fell—Mimean, Sabaeen, Katabanian, Hadhramaut and Himyar. One after another they grew rich on their strip of the great highway; their policy was urged by the desire to control more of it, to control especially the incense regions of the south and the outlets to the sea: they became imperial and aristocratic, builders of tall cities; they colonized Somaliland and Ethiopia and made themselves masters of the African as well as the Arabian forests. We can scarcely realize what riches their monopoly gave them in days when every altar and every funeral was sweetened with frankincense.

This sense of capturing a bygone era in words that would somehow populate the barren accompanying photographs runs even more insistently through *Seen in the Hadhramaut*, which is principally a series of Stark's photographs of an expedition to such cities as Shibam, Mukalla, Seiyun, and Terim. Stark's intention was "to keep the remembrance of something



*Stark and Harold Ingrams in Aden, 1940*

very complete, very ancient, very remote, and very beautiful, which may pass for ever from our world." Yet she was never blind in her assessment or imagination of past civilizations. Looking on a world that she knew to be passing from the scene, she had inescapably to view it through the eyes of a proud Englishwoman:

The civilisation they show was never, I believe, a great civilisation. Its literature, if it had any, has perished; its art, such as we know of it, was bad; the potteries, the small household objects found among its ruins ancient or medieval or still in use to-day, are unimaginative and clumsy. The actual hardships of living in Arabia must ever, perhaps, be too severe for the more fragile flowering luxuries and graces. And yet one thing has come down to us in strange perfection out of the darkness of the Arabian past—an architecture as lovely, austere, and delicate as ever found expression in the dwelling-houses of men.

In her reading of the accounts of nineteenth-century travelers, Stark noticed how little difference there really was between the people of the Hadramawt then and in the 1930s. The implication seems to be that modernization was not arising within the culture but was being brought to it from outside. In

this book, which has little text, she managed to take strong positions on imperial overtures that were echoed in progressive forces already growing in the young of the Arab countries. She reprimanded civil servants who shirked their responsibilities "partly out of a natural regard for other people's customs, partly out of a liking—which I share—for old and different ways, and chiefly, perhaps, because of the parsimony of the Treasury." The result, she feared, had been the alienation of the Arab elements that would otherwise have looked on Great Britain as a model. In her view the three most immediate objectives of government in the Hadramawt had to be the elimination of tribal wars, the creation of a local police force able to deal with daily troubles independently of the RAF, and the reestablishment of the ancient irrigation systems that brought fertility to the land. She also condemned the corruption of local peoples by capitalist interests that cared little for the greed they instilled in their wake:

It is not the Government officials who are responsible for the catastrophe of moral values: knowing and usually loving their people, they do what they can to protect them from themselves and to temper as far as possible the inevitable change. It is the Western expert.



Whether it be oil or gold, science or excavation, his loyalty is naturally bound, not to the country he visits, but to whatever it is that has sent him from outside. . . . He is like one who, using prussic acid himself for innocuous purposes, leaves the bottle lying promiscuously about among the ignorant.

Without using the word *neocolonialism*, she clearly condemned the exploitation of local talent and, more pointedly, the willingness of Western businessmen to leave the scene before the local population had been sufficiently trained to assume responsible positions. Stark remained a loyal citizen of the British Empire, however, and while she regretted the passing of an earlier, simpler way of life, she did not suggest that the Empire had no business bringing about changes.

Along with Gertrude Caton Thompson and Elinor Gardner, Stark decided to return to the Hadramawt to do some archaeological investigations into the meeting points between African and Arabic cultures during the Roman period. The threesome was not especially compatible, and their 1937–1938 expedition seems to have confirmed Stark’s preference for working on her own. The excavations were nonetheless successful and resulted in one of her major works, *A Winter in Arabia* (1940), which was praised for its careful descriptions and its sense of imagination in dealing with other races. *The Spectator* praised her ease and flexibility of idiom and expression; *The New Yorker* called her one of the finest travel writers of the century. *The New York Times Book Review* was also complimentary, as was *The Times Literary Supplement*, which called Stark one of the most unconventional and courageous explorers of her time—a twentieth-century heroine.

Part of the charm of *A Winter in Arabia* depends on its form. Stark chose to write the book in a diary format and set modest goals for it, explaining that “the scientific and more serious records of this venture are to be found elsewhere: this is but a record of actions and reactions that might occur in any small Arabian town unused to Europeans and of a journey from Hureidha to the sea.” Reviewers celebrated the fact that readers got to know as much about Freya Stark and her personal reactions to a foreign culture as they learned about the culture itself. Readers were offered rare glimpses of life behind the veil—the subtleties of business and social conduct, the elaborate beauty rituals of the women, and the bitter animosities among rival tribes. Vividly sketching the rich spectacle of a wedding, the eager affection of the children, and the allure of the stark and rocky countryside, she demonstrated the stringent benefit of the people’s directness.

In his foreword to *A Winter in Arabia* Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, who had been in the Ministry of the Interior in Iraq, was diplomatic but nonetheless skeptical about Stark’s travels:

The movements of ladies in some of the wilder parts of the country without permission was quite rightly restricted, and unauthorized visits to Persia were strictly forbidden. Miss Stark made light of such bureaucratic red tape; she saved our hair from premature greyness by just going and telling us all about it on her return. She exercised, in fact, on us the same qualities as she showed to the Arabs, and soon built up for herself a privileged position.

Cornwallis’s good-natured and backhanded compliment was unusual among civil servants, who often responded to Stark’s travel plans in outraged tones, and she wrote that “I am not of those who blame officials for looking upon me with misgiving. Far from it. If they are right in nine cases how should they know, by the mere look of us, that we are that exceptional coincidence, the tenth?” Earlier, however, in a 17 December 1929 letter to her mother, she had written, “What a blessing that Paradise isn’t run by our Civil Service, or so few of us would get in.”

While Stark was strong willed, she held ambivalent views on women’s emancipation. On the one hand she offered the following tongue-in-cheek account of the future for education of women in Arabia:

“I am not averse to women’s education,” a liberal sayyid told me . . . in Tarim: “so long as it is not *excessive*. If it is carried on to the age of nine and then stops, I do not think it can do any harm.” He looked at me anxiously, afraid that perhaps his modern tendencies were carrying him too far.

At the same time she offered a philosophical caution that seems rooted in conservative essentialist distinctions between the sexes and in a traditionalist feminizing of “the Orient”:

The Orient does not get much done: it looks upon work as a part only—and not too important a part at that—of its varied existence, but enjoys with a free mind whatever happens besides. The Occident, busily building, has its eyes rigidly fixed on the future: Being and Doing, and civilization, a compromise, between them. There is too little of the compromise now. Too much machinery in the West, too little in the East, have made a gap between the active and contemplative; they drift ever more apart. Woman hitherto has inclined to the eastern idea—the stress being laid on what she *is* rather than on what she does; and if we are going to change this, taking for our sole pattern the active



*Stark delivering a pro-British speech to a group of Arabs in Cairo, 1940*

energies of men, we are in danger of destroying a principle which contains one-half the ingredients of civilization. Before ceasing to *be*, it is to be hoped that our sex will at least make sure that what it *does* is worth the sacrifice.

Nor did Stark hesitate to alienate her “natural” support community abroad. In an article originally published in the *Baghdad Times* and collected in *Baghdad Sketches*, she wrote:

it seems a pity that women who slave away at home, at committee meetings, district visiting, local government, and all sorts of meritorious but not amusing things, should grudge time and effort and, let us say it, a good many hours of boredom, to the understanding of what lies around them abroad. A dreadful conclusion is forced on one as one travels. The British appear to be popular wherever they go until they come to settle with their wives.

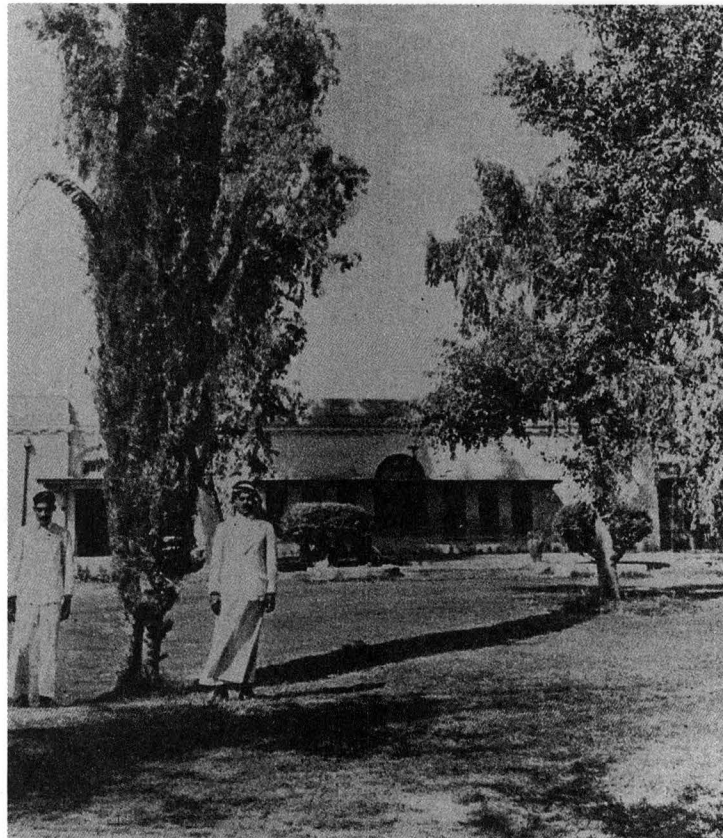
While preferring the company of men to that of women, Stark also had a “feminine” side. She became well known for her elaborate and fanciful wardrobe, showing up at cocktail parties in Arabic clothing, and at one point demanding that Murray give her a mink coat instead of a monetary advance on her next book. (He refused.)

In *A Winter in Arabia* Stark wrote, “Few pleasures give as much constant satisfaction as the inactive one of sitting quietly while the shows of life go by; it adds to the delight of contemplation the subtle

satisfaction that others are fussing about things that leave us personally calm—the feeling that one has after poking an anthill with a stick.” While some readers might have characterized this trait as feminine, Stark might have called them Arabic. As she warned her British readers,

To the Arab, manners are everything; he will forgive any amount of extortion so long as “your speech is good.” To us, since the end of the eighteenth century, they have become dangerously unimportant . . . It is in this heart of our philosophy that we amateurs disagree with your unmitigated expert, whose object is so supremely important that he cannot count, or at any rate notice, the jostling and hurting of others. . . . However important the appointment, one does not run over human bodies to catch one’s trains. If this were merely individual it would not matter, but it appears as the very core of difficulty in present dealings with the East, now flooded with experts, of commerce, of science, of oil.

After returning briefly to Europe, which was on the brink of World War II, Stark made a quick trip in 1939 to see Crusader castles. When she returned to London later that year, she began to work with the Ministry of Information as an expert on southern Arabia and was appointed assistant information officer in Aden. The head of this bureau was Stewart Perowne, whom she was later to marry. Her job was to summarize the day’s news, which was translated into Arabic and then broadcast. As events became discour-



*The house in Baghdad where Stark lived in 1941–1942,  
(photograph by Stark)*

aging, her task was to cast them in the best light, and she became a propagandist. Soon her role became more aggressive. She went into Yemen seeking to rectify rumors that were working against British interests. She showed pro-British movies and spoke to people, mostly women in harems, and came away not only with a sense of success in her public-relations mission but also with a rare Western perspective on the lives of Arabic women. She next worked in Cairo, hoping to counteract Italian attempts to turn Egyptians against the English. In Cairo and later in Baghdad she set up a series of cells called the Brothers and Sisters of Freedom, whose membership eventually swelled to thirty thousand. She was invited to speak at the Muslim university of Azhar, and after Perowne was sent to Iraq, Stark was named temporary attaché at the embassy. Her reflections on these years appeared in *East Is West* (1945), published the same year in the United States as *The Arab Island*.

The principal thesis of the book is that the young effendis, products and propagators of modern education and technologies, were gradually taking over control of the Arab world, which they were likely to bring into some sort of federated unity.

Stark dedicated the book to them and to their efforts on behalf of their countries. Her discussion moves progressively through the countries of the Red Sea (Aden, Yemen, and Arabia) to Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Transjordan, and Iraq. She noted that she had not written the book merely for pleasure. In fact there is a sense of urgency in her message. Many things had changed in the Arab world, yet the United States, she believed, was still thinking of an older Middle East. In *A Winter in Arabia* she had complained that “no one in their senses would say, ‘I have spent ten years in Holland and therefore I know all about Bulgaria’; but it is a fact that seven people out of ten will assume that a visit to Morocco opens out the secrets of Samarkand. The East is just East in their minds, a homogeneous lump.” In book after book she argued that each culture is distinct. Yet in *East Is West* her warning is of a different sort, a suggestion that the West seemed disastrously unable to see the one similarity that was spreading across these many cultures: the rise of modernism.

“The old Arab society,” she wrote, “is picturesque, and the modern is becoming less so every hour; artists in words or colours find the sheikh in his draperies easier to deal with than the effendi in

his cosmopolitan sameness." Thus in the first instance the problem for the Western powers is one of imagination, of romanticizing and exoticizing whole peoples. Yet, she added,

even in its conception of the *past*, popular imagination gives to the desert and its nomads far too great a part. What the Arabs represent in history is *the greatest commercial empire of the West between the fall of Rome and the rise of Britain*. In their rich and varied sheaf they gathered, at one time or another, southern Spain and northern India and all that lay between, and penetrated into Europe, so that Malta still remembers them in her language, and Italy in the weaving of her brocades, and the whole of Europe in the traditions of chivalry and the forms of literature that were first imported by the courts of Sicily or Provence. . . . the wall of the Arabian world, against which the crusades threw themselves, was not the wall of the desert. It was the line of trading cities that stretched, and still stretches, from Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra in the east, through Antioch, Alexandretta (now Turkish) Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Cairo.

Stark did not want to minimize the seventh- and eighth-century eruption that altered the history of the world by spreading the Muslim faith and Arab language. Yet "in speaking of the Arab world it is important to remember that its unity is one of language, largely of religion, and of the civilization they have produced; it is *not* a unity of race." That so small a group of people could impress their language and religion on so many different races suggested to Stark that "the future unifying of the Arab nations seems child's play in comparison." For her, much of the interest of Arab history in the future would chart the progress of two strands: toward individual nationalism and toward commonwealth amalgamation. Her sophisticated understanding of her subject had clearly advanced a great deal beyond her early preoccupation with *Arabian Nights*, and she seemed, in fact, to be accusing the Western powers of sharing her early naïveté.

Stark wrote that Arab liberation had been in their hearts since the middle of the nineteenth century and had actually been accomplished by World War I. It was basically an accomplishment of "the most important factor in the modern Arab world. This is the ascension of the middle class." This group had awakened in response to three factors: "the internal-combustion engine, the (mostly) American educator, and the British Government." Keeping in mind the highly developed sense of dignity in these people, Stark concluded that "what the young effendi needs is the help not so much of a governess as of a brother." The unification of the Arabian peoples would come, she predicted,

through the material support and assistance of Britain and through the spiritual unity of Islam.

Her apparent talent at winning over potential enemies brought Stark to the attention of the British government, which in 1943 asked her to help persuade American Jews that the terms of the White Paper of 1939 were reasonable. Malcolm Macdonald's response to demands of Zionists in Palestine, this document suggested that Jewish immigration to Palestine be limited to seventy-five thousand over the next five years and that after that time more would be admitted if the Arabs were willing. Stark strongly supported these terms and thought that the Arabs living in Palestine should not have immigration of Jews forced on them by the Western world. Her views on the matter, however, were perhaps a bit too public and settled to allow her to serve the cause with the necessary equanimity. In *East Is West*, for example, she wrote, "As I sat in the sun, listening to Professor Mayer on Islamic art of the Middle Ages, I wondered what gave the feeling of peace so absent from the Zionist atmosphere of the cities and farms of the plain. . . . It is perhaps toleration, the opposite of the feeling of *exclusion*. This feeling of exclusion haunts one through all the Zionist endeavour in Palestine." Thus in her travel across the United States she contacted anti-Zionist Jews and sought their support in restraining the more militant advocates of immigration. She was not particularly successful in her mission of persuasion and left the United States with some bitterness. She considered the country to be materialistic and shallow and decided that the Jews were the only citizens truly interested in ideas. Later, in editing the angry letters she had written during this period, she apologized and noted, "I should like to say that these letters from America show one aspect only of a people in general: circumstances of less strain, with no artificial direction for contradiction or support, have made later visits particularly delightful and confirmed me in the conviction that my favourite view of a people is not from a platform." With some notable exceptions, such as a congressman who asked that she be deported, Stark remained welcome in the United States.

In 1945 the wife of Archibald Percival, Earl Wavell, the viceroy of India, asked Stark to come to Delhi and help involve Indian women in the war effort. Stark stayed for half a year. While she considered her work there unproductive, she made the most of opportunities to see a last outpost of the British Empire. She was present at Simla when Mohandas Gandhi met with Jawaharlal Nehru, and she was generally well received. She returned to Asolo at the age of fifty-two, a well-known public figure



*Stark and Stewart Perowne, whom she married in 1947*

who had somehow carved out an almost legendary role for herself as the best kind of English eccentric: individual, free-thinking, imaginative, and consulted by diplomats around the world.

After six months as a “persuasion” officer in northern Italy helping restore good Anglo-Italian relations, she focused her attention on a collection of reflective essays, *Perseus in the Wind* (1948), a light work that served as a breather before her next round of major travel books. The book disappointed critics who found it less weighty than the works they had come to expect from Stark. The book does show the beginning of the sort of observations that filled her later books: “Though it may be unessential to the imagination, travel is necessary to an understanding of men. Only with long experience and the opening of his wares on many a beach where his language is not spoken, will the merchant come to know the worth of what he carries, and what is parochial and what is universal in his choice.”

This pause in her travel writing also offered Stark the occasion to reassess her position in the world in such a way that she was able to accept Stewart Perowne’s offer of marriage when it arrived by telegram. They were married in London in October 1947. Her reasons for marrying Perowne, a rather dull civil servant who was eight years her junior and apparently a homosexual, seem to have involved some desire for domesticity. By summer 1951 they had decided to divorce. Later that year she dropped his name and from then on called herself “Mrs. Stark.”

During these stormy years Stark began writing her autobiography, which eventually appeared in three volumes: *Traveller’s Prelude* (1950), *Beyond Euphrates* (1951), and *The Coast of Incense* (1953). Much of this autobiography was written in Libya, where Perowne had been posted. Throughout the three books she alternated letters written in the past with present-day impressions. The result is a composite of memory and reflection, present and past, “plaited in together, as they are in actual life: for it is usually a chord and not a note that we remember.” How far her writing had developed is obvious in the cadence of her prose in reflective passages such as the following:

Looking back through this autobiography and its vicissitudes of nearly half a century, filled as full with sensations and passions as a glass that you ring is filled with sound—the strangest thing about it all perhaps is this—that the person who emerges is still familiar to me, the same optimistic little creature who at two and a half years old set out for Plymouth with three halfpence in her pocket to see the world, whose feelings I can still perfectly well understand and remember, whose equipment will be just as meagre, and whose general attitude of curiosity will be very little different when the gate that clicks behind her is no longer that of the home field alone.

Her divorce from Perowne freed Stark to begin a new phase of her career, which focused on Asia Minor. In 1952 she set out for Smyrna (Izmir) on the west coast of Turkey, hoping to retrace the journey described by Herodotus. Typically, she prepared for this new adventure by learning Turkish. She dedicated the resulting book, *Ionia: A Quest*

(1954), to Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West. In autumn 1952 Stark traveled about the western coast of Asia Minor, visiting fifty-five ruined sites. In only one of them did she meet another tourist. Her letters from this period reveal the sense of loneliness that resulted from her failed marriage, but *Ionia* shows her customary energy and fascination for cultures that were new to her and perhaps to all, or most, of her readers. Some of her observations along the way—such as “the art of government is in the management of people’s *feelings*”—may have arisen from her internal struggle, but she was usually more grandiose in her musing, more inspirational in her imagining:

Some of these vanished cities were buried in the earth, or had sunk away in swamp, so that only a few places of wall, a cornice or shaft of column, remained, neglected or forgotten: in many, the steps of their theatres were split by the roots of trees or hidden, hardly accessible, in thorns. Here, like a manuscript of which most of the words are rubbed away, lay the record of our story, of what—trickling down slopes of time towards us by devious runnels—has made us what we are today. A great longing came to me to know more, and to bring a living image out of these dots and dashes of the past. More particularly, to discover what elements in that breeding ground of civilization can still be planted to grow among us now.

The picture she painted of Asia Minor as she moved away from Ionia and followed the Maeander (Menderes) upstream is of a formless, vast, human-dwarfing geography that was historically humanized by the Greeks and conquered by Rome. Having suffered in her personal life and having seen the vast devastation of World War II, she was prompted by the remains of past civilizations to consider the purpose of so much creation and destruction, so much similarity in the midst of diversity.

Stark was so interested in what she saw in Turkey that she spent more time learning Turkish in Crete in 1954 and then undertook a lighter travel book, *The Lycian Shore* (1956), which includes such observations as the following:

The life of insecurity is the nomad’s achievement. He does not try, like our building world, to believe in a stability which is non-existent; and in his constant movement with the seasons, in the lightness of his hold, puts something right, about which we are constantly wrong. His is in fact the reality, to which the most solid of our structures are illusion.

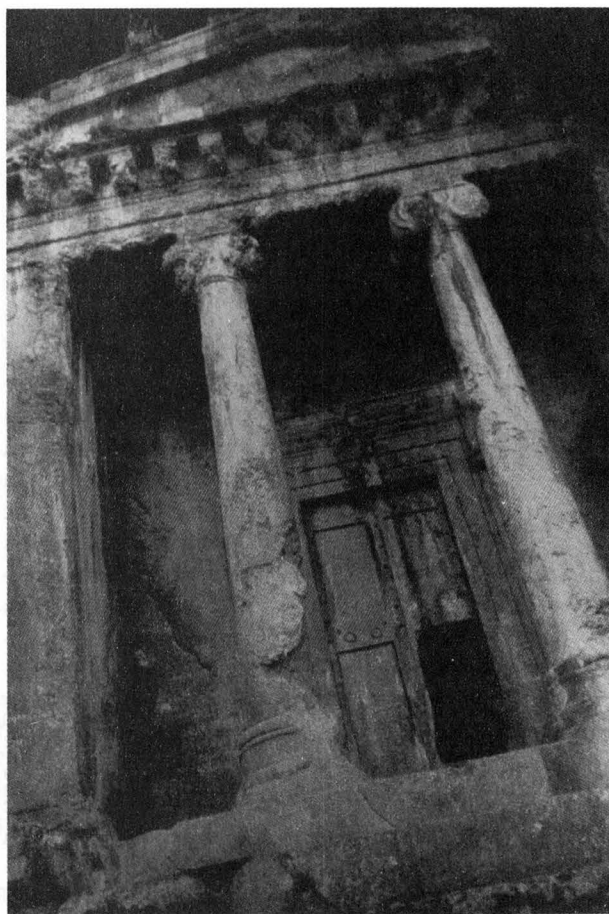
Stark’s next book was the heavily researched and well-received *Alexander’s Path* (1958), which fo-

cuses on the western and southern coasts of Turkey. Stark had intended to follow the route of Alexander the Great as it had been described by Arrian, but she began to suspect that Arrian had left out some details, including the “whole route between Xanthus and Phaselis, and the campaign against the hill-men.” She decided to live along that route for several months, coming in closer contact with country people than she had on her previous visit. She also decided to include more information than former writers had on the geography of Anatolia, the site of the first and most formative year or so of Alexander’s adventure, and on the area of Caria and its queen, Ada, who had made Alexander her adopted son when he was only a nineteen-year-old Macedonian prince who had decided to marry her niece. Stark tried to learn what Alexander did between Xanthus and Sagalassus, but she went in the opposite direction from that taken by Alexander. Although critics at the time appreciated her account, it seems speculative and a bit narrowly focused.

Stark’s *Riding to the Tigris* (1959), an account of her travels in the interior of Turkey, includes some of her finest reflection on the enterprise of travel to which she had devoted her life. Asking the same fundamental questions that she had raised early in her career, she now had more-pointed responses.

I began to wonder again why I, and so many others like me, should find ourselves in these recondite places. We like our life intensified, perhaps. Travel does what good novelists also do to the life of every day, placing it like a picture in a frame or a gem in its setting, so that the intrinsic qualities are made more clear. Travel does this with the very stuff that everyday life is made of, giving to it the sharp contour and meaning of art: and unless it succeeds in doing this, its effect on the human being is not, I believe, very great. . . . Most people anyway try to avoid having their feelings intensified: for indeed one must be strong to place oneself alone against the impact of the unknown world.

The statement is emblematic of Stark’s life. *Riding to the Tigris* is also one of the best demonstrations of her complex relationship with her native country and with the lands to which she came as a visitor. At one moment she could yearn almost palpably to be an Arab: “It was many years since I had spent a night among the tents; the sight of them, seventy or so in the hollow of the mountain, filled me as it always does with delight and pity; for they seem to me to show what our houses forget or disguise—a security based not on strength but on fragility, at rest on the surface of the world like a seagull on a wave.” Yet she could also sound as patriotic as



Photograph of a Lycian tomb taken by Stark during the travels she described in *The Lycian Shore* (1956)

anyone in the Home Office might have hoped, as in this incredible paean to her native country:

With a nostalgia that hurt like a pain I thought of England; perhaps it was the singing of the waters in the night that brought her so poignantly before me. But it was of her people that I thought: a modest people, where this terrible nationalism is rare and one is not always being told about virtues that one likes to discover for oneself: where, almost alone in the world today, the variety of tastes and opinions, the entrancing variety of the world is still encouraged and respected. People, I thought longingly, who when they go about are able here and there to care for other and different people as much as for their own. Perhaps it is only the best of any nation that can do this, and when we owned much of the world we often sent our best: but I was not thinking of being fair in the darkness of the night. The flint, I thought, is fire and the pebble mere stone: and people are civilized when *ideas*, however foreign, will strike a spark inside them: and England is now perhaps among those rare and happy nations where the fierce intellectual qualities of Greece have been toned down to a native goodness like the Turkish—a mixture that could produce civilisation. If that is so, it is the treasure

of treasures—and better to be conquered having it than to lack it among the threatening barbarians of our day.

At this point in her life Stark, who was in her early seventies, began to slow her pace. After writing a fourth volume of autobiography, *Dust in the Lion's Paw* (1961), she produced *Rome on the Euphrates* (1966), an account of the Romans' activities along one of the frontiers of their empire over a period of eight hundred years—from 200 B.C. to the Age of Justinian. Her last major travel account, the book is overly derivative and a cumbersome read, but it was an interesting topic for a woman who had lived so long as a bold adventurer on an amazing series of frontiers. Stark admitted that she was only an amateur historian and that she could read little Greek. Why, she wondered, did the Romans fight along this rich Euphrates frontier? Every impartial reading of the evidence suggested that it was a great blunder for two trading communities to fight over this lengthy period rather than seek mutual gain through commerce and traffic. The perennially recurring pattern in the history of northwest Asia, she wrote, is an east-west horizontal of trade cut at recurring intervals by a north-south vertical of war.

Though interested in the vast movements of history, Stark seems to have been most interested in the common people. In *Riding to the Tigris* she had written that “the sheep, plodding through the ages, nose the ground and bury their eyes each in the coat of the one before it, kicking up their own troubles from their own soil, patient, unquestioning, and like mankind resolute to hide their faces from the goal of their marching, trusting to a shepherd that only their leader can see.” *Rome on the Euphrates* was inspired by a visit to a group of old women in chadors: “nothing but the hands and the eyes were left to see, but in those outstretched hands and longing eyes such love and sorrow, such timid uncomplaining hope, that I have never forgotten, and think of them, and see them as Euripides saw the Trojan Women, a background or chorus for the quarrelsome nature of man.” Feted by diplomats and the powerful in many countries of the West and the East, Stark seems increasingly to have identified with the anonymous individuals who appear outside the flow of political history and completely at home in the larger flow of time.

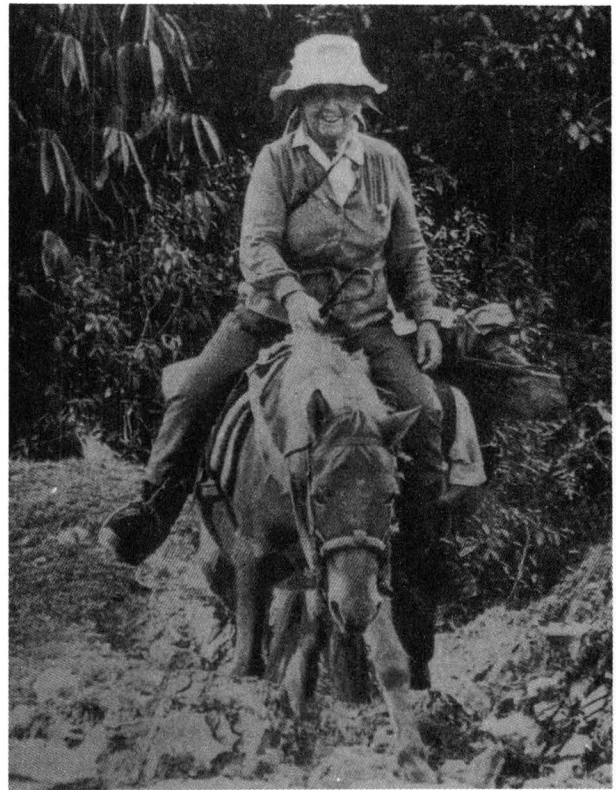
In 1971 Stark began preparing her many letters for publication. The result was eight volumes of letters (1974–1982) and a one-volume selection, *Over the Rim of the World* (1988). She also spent her remaining years in a series of less-demanding enterprises. *The Zodiac Arch* (1968) is a collection of previ-

ously published essays, and *The Minaret of Djam* (1970) is a short travel book about Afghanistan. *Space, Time & Movement in Landscape* (1969) is a beautifully crafted coffee-table book published in a limited edition of five hundred copies. In it she described space, time, and movement as the three enhancers of mood in humankind's relationship with landscape. The text is accompanied by photographs of the Arab and Turkish world. The following story from the book illustrates the interesting metaphysical turn that her aging mind was taking:

Some years ago I dreamed a disturbing dream. I was dead and found myself, on the far side of the living world, stepping into a lift, behind a neat, plump, and official woman in uniform. I noticed with some misgiving that the lift when it started began to go down, and continued to do so for a long way, past floor after floor of an out-door shaft among dingy houses. Their brick was decayed and their walls were undecorated except by streaks of gutters or of rain. When we reached the bottom, which was a narrow space with a few anaemic grasses imprisoned in its walls, the conductress took up my suitcase, led the way into a mean corridor, opened the door of a small room with bed and cupboard unmitigated by anything except one of these coco-fibre mats that have always been my aversion, and saying: "Well, here you are," left me to myself. I looked to the window—uncurtained—and saw that there was no view: only a blank wall (I must have been reading Sartre). Realising that this was my prospect for eternity, it reflects something of my natural optimism that I murmured (in my dream): "One must make the best of it I suppose," and mercifully woke up. The delight and importance of Space, my first enhancement of landscape, has remained vivid in my mind ever since.

How disturbing she must have found this dream is suggested by an early entry in *A Winter in Arabia*, in which the young traveler observed that "the charm of the horizon is the charm of pilgrimage, the eternal invitation to the spirit of man . . . at the end of days to see before you land that is yet unknown—what enchantment in this world, I should like to know, is comparable to this?"

While these reflections on space are arresting, those on time are even more so. "It must not be thought," she wrote, "that the discovery of Time in a landscape is a mere matter of ruin and decay. It is not the end, but the transitions that enthrall us. . . . The works of men share in the universal discipline and are harmonious as they are subject to the general law of ruin: they are displeasing when they seem to claim a permanence which is not theirs by nature." Then, reminding the reader once again of the vastness of the universe in which all people inevitably find themselves, she added that "a ploughman upon his tractor



Stark in Nepal at age seventy-seven (photograph by Mark Lennox-Boyd)

will appear richer if he is looked at against the incrustation of all the imprisoned movements of his earth." This image could be a metaphor for Stark herself, seen most vividly against the backdrop of her work.

*Turkey: A Sketch of Turkish History* (1971), published in the United States as *Gateways and Caravans* (1971), offers a portrait of Turkey, with text by Stark and photographs by Fulvio Roiter. *Rivers of Time* (1982) is a selection from the more than six thousand mounted prints and perhaps five times as many negatives from Stark's collection of the photographs she took from the 1920s through the 1970s. The book is an excellent reminder that taking photographs usually occupied a quarter of her time given to her expeditions. Praising the historical value of Stark's photographs, Alexander Maitland, in his introduction to the volume, singled out "Freya's studies of women and girls. A number of these, taken in the harim before the last war, show the women unveiled, something no man could have achieved." *Freya Stark in Asolo* (1984) is an essay on that place and her photographs of it. The book was published as part of the Homage to Freya Stark that the Magnifica Comunità Pedemontana held to honor her on the occasion of her ninety-first birthday.



Perhaps the best introduction to Stark's writing is *The Journey's Echo* (1963), a collection of selections from all her major works. In his introduction to the volume Lawrence Durrell described Stark as "one of the most remarkable women of our age—a poet of travel whose Muse has been wholly Arabian in plumage and whose books span nearly half a century of historical time." "A great traveller," he added, "is a kind of introspective; as she covers the ground outwardly, so she advances towards fresh interpretations of herself inwardly. And this is the quality which lends Freya Stark's books the memorable poetic density which is their special *cachet*." This comment is an especially apt assessment of Stark's writing. The reader watches with admiration as the young woman of the early books turns into the wise adult and peaceful older woman who finds in the world around her nothing that is totally foreign.

It was this older woman, clearly reconciled to the final journey that she still faced, who published the extraordinary collection of essays titled *A Peak in Darien* (1976), written not only in the voice of the aged woman but also in that of the little girl who was uprooted from England and from her father, the young woman who was always afraid of being seen as disfigured, the woman abandoned by her lover, the steely explorer of worlds that even men had avoided:

Solitude has now survived to be perhaps my earliest friend. His thoughtful and kindly presence stands at the edge of every landscape I can remember. . . . And gradually in his company and through his silence I came to realize that solitude is not loneliness, but rather the mingled voice of all things attending to their separate affairs. As the years went by, I came to recognize how fortunate was my early introduction to one who is to be the last of our companions, whose later face can be both cruel and severe.

Stark warned that these essays were not written for believers but "for such among us as are willing to advance as far as honest but purely mundane evidence can take them, and the route is geography rather than religion (though the terminus is probably the same)." In short they are a well-traveled woman's reflections on the heroism possible in accepting one's approaching death.

Stark began as an amateur traveler and archaeologist, a role for which she thought the British were somehow constitutionally fitted:

There are, I sometimes think, only two sorts of people in this world—the settled and the nomad—and there is a natural antipathy between them, whatever the land to which they may belong. Perhaps it is because we are

comparatively recently barbarians, because the stone age lingered longer among us than on the Mediterranean coasts that the English have remained so frequently nomadic at heart. It is the more imaginative attitude in a transitory world.

She ended as an amateur historian and philosopher who concluded that "the actual stature of man is no greater now than it was near his beginning: he is made tall only by standing on the heap of his ages, and using his past." In 1977 she returned to the Euphrates with a BBC film crew, and in 1979, at the age of eighty-six, she was climbing mountains in Annapurna.

Stark recognized that each man or woman is at heart a traveler bound with others by a sense of common enterprise. As she noted with great poignancy in a letter written near the end of her life, her travels gave her "a deepening of the sense of companionship independent of circumstances, national or social or even human, a recognition I had come upon in ignorance among the Druid stones of my childhood on the moors—a sense of safety in the unity of earth: a feeling which must have comforted and strengthened many travellers before me and is, perhaps, the happiest of all reasons for travel."

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