



STARK, FREYA MADELINE

STARK, FREYA Madeline (b. Paris, 31 January 1893; d. Asolo, Italy, 9 May 1993), British travel-writer. Her 1934 book *The Valley of the Assassins and Other Persian Travels* belongs to the canon of English travel literature.

She was born to parents who divided their lives between England and Italy. She was educated privately, and by the time she had grown up, she was fluent in Italian, English, German, and French. At the age of 12 she suffered a serious accident at a carpet factory near Genoa, part-owned by her mother, in which one ear was damaged, leaving scars on her head for life. In 1912 she enrolled in Bedford College, University of London, where she studied for a degree in history. At the outbreak of war in August 1914, she abandoned her studies and volunteered as a nurse on the Italian front. In September 1917 her ambulance unit became part of the famous retreat that followed the defeat of the Italian army by the Austrians at Caporetto.

After the war, having taken some private lessons in Arabic, she enrolled at the School of Oriental Studies in London before moving to Lebanon and Syria for further study. In May 1929, accompanied by a woman friend, she explored the Jabal Druze south of Damascus without obtaining permission from the French authorities, although the areas had been placed under martial law following an unsuccessful rebellion. Her account of this trip in the *Cornhill* magazine brought her to the attention of its editor, John Murray (1884-1967), one of Britain's leading publishers. In 1929 she moved to Baghdad, where she began learning Persian. The following year she visited the Isma'ili castle of Navisar Shah and the castle of Alamut in the Alborz mountains, which had been the



seat of the Nizari Ismaʿili imamate and was destroyed during the Mongol invasion in 1256 (see [ISMAʿILISM xv. Nezāri Ismaʿili Monuments](#)). She returned to the Alamut area in 1931 and passed by Qom, Isfahan, and Sāva, before undertaking a search for Luristan Bronzes (see also [BRONZES OF LURISTAN](#)) and other treasures in Lorestan province, near the Iraqi border. Returning to Baghdad, she honed her skills as a writer by taking a job as sub-editor of the English-language *Baghdad Times*. Her feature articles—subsequently reprinted in *Baghdad Sketches* (1932)—included descriptions of the Shiʿite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, rarely accessible to European and American visitors. In 1933 she returned to Italy by way of Amman, Petra, and Jerusalem. Arriving in London she enjoyed her first taste of public recognition. The Royal Geographical Society awarded her the Back Memorial Grant for her travels in Lorestan, and the Royal Asiatic Society its Richard Burton Memorial Medal. Her 1934 book about her travels in Iran, mentioned above, was an immediate success. Reprinted three times within six months it is still in print, having earned its place in the canon of English travel literature.

Stark's next two books of travel (1936, 1940) grew out of a journey to the Hadhramaut valley in present-day Yemen, at that time Britain's South Arabian Protectorate, in 1935 and her return to the area with the archeologist Gertrude Caton-Thompson (1888-1985) in 1937. On the outbreak of war in 1939, she worked for the British Government as a diplomat-cum-propagandist. From Aden, where she was attached to the Ministry of Information, she made the difficult journey to Sanaa in Yemen in order to counter fascist influence in the kingdom, which was regarded as a threat to British naval dominance in the event of Italy entering the war. Transferred to Cairo and later Baghdad, she worked for the Brotherhood of Freedom, an anti-Axis, pro-democracy movement sponsored by Britain. In 1943 she visited her friend Lord Wavell (1883-1950), the British commander-in-chief and viceroy of India (1941-47). Having persuaded her superiors to lend her a government car for the return journey to Baghdad by way of Iran, she incurred their displeasure by selling the car, at a considerable profit, in Tehran. The episode may have wrecked her ambitions for an official diplomatic posting.

Returning to Italy after the war, she worked briefly for the Allied Military Government before resuming her activities as a writer. In 1947 she married Stewart Perowne (1901-1989), her former superior in Aden. She accompanied Perowne on his official postings to Libya and the West Indies, but the marriage



was dissolved in 1952. Her post-war books include four volumes of autobiography (1950, 1951, 1953, 1961) and several books exploring the legacy of the classical world in western Asia (1954, 1958, 1959, 1966). In 1972 she became a Dame of the British Empire. She died at her home in Asolo, Italy, in May 1993 aged 101.

Despite the public recognition, Stark's achievements as a pioneering traveler have been questioned. Her contemporary Wilfred Thesiger (1910-2003) told Stark's biographer that her explorations in Iran and Arabia did not exceed "what any moderately enterprising Embassy secretary could have managed" (Izzard, p 18). The quality of her scholarship can also be faulted. In researching the history of the Nizari Isma'ilis, who were known in the West as Assassins, she relied largely on outdated scholarship, notably by the Austrian orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774-1856), while ignoring the work of more recent scholars, including Vladimir Ivanow (1886-1970), the doyen of modern Isma'ili studies. As Ivanow remarked in 1960, "I hope I shall not be impolite to 'Madmasel,' as she is still remembered in Alamut, if I express genuine regret that her eminently readable and entertaining book ... when so many times reprinted, was never revised, and errors corrected. Surely, this would not take much time, especially to delete her rather outrageous excursions into the history of the Isma'ilis" (p. 37).

Stark's early travel books broke new ground in the genre by presenting the author as a witty and intelligent ingénue keen to learn or gain moral insights from people she encountered, including the many women in Muslim lands to whom she, in contrast to most traveling men, had access. Rather than adopting a tone of cultural superiority, her instinctive warmth and gift for languages enabled her to engage directly with people of all classes and backgrounds, and to portray them, as individuals, to a European public still inclined to think in terms of "Orientalist" stereotypes. A natural stylist, her description of places is informed by a sensibility cultivated in the artistic and literary milieux in which she grew up. Her writings, especially in the earlier books where her learning is worn lightly, bring peoples of Western Asia to life in a manner rarely achieved by more erudite or scholarly writers, such as Richard Burton (1821-1890) or Gertrude Bell (1868-1926).

As well as being a prolific writer Stark was an accomplished photographer. Her photographic archive, now at St Antony's College, Oxford, contains thousands of images of Iran, Iraq, the Gulf, and Southern Arabia, and many preserve a record of places that have been transformed beyond recognition by



modernization and war.

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For bibliographical information about archival holdings and obituaries, see Peter H. Hansen, “Freya Stark,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, May 2009. The National Portrait Gallery, London, owns several of [her portraits](#). The best of these is the 1923 oil painting (orig. 62 x 56 cm) by Herbert Olivier (1861-1952), which she gifted to the NPG in 1981 ([NPG 5465](#)). The Egyptian magazine *Al-Ahram Weekly* published in the Baghdad Supplement of its issue for 17-23 April 2003 [a few letters](#) that Stark had included into the second volume of her autobiography (1951). The excerpt is accompanied by an undated, [anonymous b/w photograph](#) showing Stark in “Arab garb.”

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