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The Mountain Life of Freya Stark



Herbert Arnould Olivier's portrait of Freya Stark, painted in 1923 when the explorer was 30. She began travelling in 1927, following the death of her sister Vera.
(National Portrait Gallery).

Dame Freya Madeleine Stark, who died in 1993 having reached her centenary, achieved a degree of fame as a traveller that few other British women have rivalled. Showered with medals and awards from learned societies and academic institutions, she was awarded the CBE in 1953, created a dame in 1972 and latterly became a friend of the Queen Mother. She was also an honorary member of the Alpine Club. Widely travelled, she had an unquenchable restlessness that saw her pony-trek aged 77 through Nepal and the Himalaya, albeit supported by a BBC television team. Her name is still familiar even to those who have never read a single page of the two-dozen books of travel and autobiography she intended as her epitaph.

As a desert traveller, she was compared with 19th century women pioneers like Lady Hester Stanhope, Jane Digby El Mesrab, Lady Anne Blunt and Gertrude Bell: 'intrepid solitary Englishwomen exploring the far-flung corners of the East'. *The Telegraph's* full-page obituary blithely portrayed her as 'journeying into the wildest parts of Syria, Turkey, Persia, Afghanistan and the Himalayas' while that in *The Times* described 'a woman who travelled the hard way in male lands,' although she did once ask her publishers to send her a tin bath.

Freya Stark's courage, steely determination and scholarship are undeniable; she also possessed literary genius. But she never made desert journeys of any significance and her claims as a pioneer traveller must rest not on two over-hyped south Arabian journeys in 1935 and 1938 but the three she made through the mountains of Persia between 1930 and 1932 and her ride from Hakkari to the Tigris some 25 years later. Janet Adam Smith's timely corrective in her *AJ* 1994 obituary of Stark – 'long before she had made her name as a traveller and writer she had made her name as a mountaineer' – lends useful perspective. For mountains were always the metier that guided her paths and provided the stage for her most challenging adventures.

That Freya achieved national treasure status within her lifetime reflected an exceptional determination and force of character driving her to attain the fame she craved. Born in Paris in 1893 to Bohemian artistic parents, their peripatetic lifestyle and unhappy marriage ended in a separation that left Freya confused, insecure and miserable. Her rootless teenage years in provincial Italy were blighted by the ill health that forever dogged her. Although her adolescent years never lacked for intellectual and artistic stimulus, she was a shy, gauche and awkward girl ever conscious of her face having been permanently disfigured by an accident when she was thirteen: her hair was caught in machinery and her right ear torn off, requiring skin grafts. These inauspicious beginnings only steeled her resolve, strengthened her instinct for self-preservation and developed a highly competitive and ruthless streak buttressed by sublime egotism.

As a child brought up at Asolo, where she lived in a house belonging to the artist Pen Browning, the looming shadow of the Dolomites imbued in her 'the love of hills in the years before memory'. When her parents moved to Drogero, a mountain village ringed by the Maritime and Cottian Alps with Monte Viso dominating the eastern skyline, their sight 'filled me with a strange yearning and has done ever since'. To seek solace from an unhappy marriage, her father was wont to retreat to a tiny mountain hut called La Messigliera where he found the company of smugglers and chamois hunters more congenial than the domestic hearth. Freya often came along as his companion and together they would trek all day through the Piedmont foothills with the glittering snowfields beckoning above.

Freya's early setbacks were cast aside in 1911 when at 18 she enrolled at Bedford College, London. Here she renewed an adolescent acquaintance with William Paton Ker ('WP') a distinguished scholar and later the Professor of Poetry at Oxford. Ker early recognised Freya's unusual intellectual



The Macugnaga or east face of Monte Rosa, which Stark climbed in 1924. (*Alamy*)

qualities and became the friend, mentor and adopted godfather ‘who taught me all I know about English literature.’ WP was also a member of the Alpine Club, elected in 1908 aged 52 with a reputation for exceptional physical strength and endurance. On the regular annual Alpine visits he made until the outbreak of the Great War, his delight in the company of the young included Freya whose mountain yearnings he transported to a higher plane in 1913 when he introduced both she and her sister Vera to ‘the hazards of mountaineering’ in Italy’s Gran Paradiso range. Here, the sisters did their first roped climb on the Petit Pousset and then went on to climb the Grivola, Gran Serz, Herbetet and Torsiva with WP and guides.



Freya's promising mountaineering career was interrupted by the First World War and in 1916 her private life shattered when her fiancé, the 39-year-old Italian artist Guido Ruata, broke off their year-long engagement and married his former mistress. To restore her self-esteem, Ker suggested she enrol as a nurse in G M Trevelyan's Italian ambulance unit. She served for eight weeks in a Voluntary Aid Detachment near the Italian-Austrian front based at the Villa Trento forward HQ where Geoffrey Winthrop Young, severely wounded by shellfire while driving his ambulance four days before Freya's arrival, was about to have his left leg amputated. He survived this traumatic operation on 7 September. Freya later recalled in *Traveller's Prelude* (1950) 'creeping in and hearing Geoffrey Young playing to himself on the piano.'

In the immediate post-war period, impoverishment, illness and domestic disharmony further tested Freya's resolve. However, by 1919 she had recovered sufficiently to join Ker in Courmayeur from where they completed the circuit of Monte Rosa, trekked up to the Brouillard glacier, and traversed the Cima Blanca and Betta Forca. They also climbed Freya's first 4,000m peak, the Zermatt Breithorn, a 15-hour day which ended

disagreeably when WP adjudged their guide so incompetent that he refused to shake the wretched man's hand after paying him off. Before leaving Courmayeur an incident presaged trouble to come when, on climbing to the col du Géant hut (now the Torino), WP experienced minor heart troubles. Undeterred, they moved on to Macugnaga, the alpine village under the shadow of Monte Rosa, which Ker had always regarded as his 'holy of holies'. Their successful ascent of the Pizzo Bianco, Ker's 'special mountain', was the first by a woman.

For the next couple of years Freya was subsumed in her family's complicated domestic affairs, but in 1921 her decision to take up Arabic (rather than following WP's bizarre suggestion that she learn Icelandic) marked a signal



Freya Stark in Jebel Druze, Syria, in 1928. (RGS/Alamy)

turning point. Mountaineering was resumed two years later in 1923 when Ker invited her to join his family party at Macugnaga, selecting the Pizzo Bianco as a first objective with Ker, two of his granddaughters, Freya and his guide Tofi. Ker was now 68 and although 'very strong and happy that day', was struck down by a heart attack; he sank to the ground murmuring 'This is my mountain,' and expired. While Tofi raced down for help from the valley, the three women waited besides WP's body for seven hours.

After Ker's burial at Macugnaga's churchyard, Freya decamped to Zermatt to join her mother taking with her Tofi. From Zermatt, the two of them crossed into Italy via the Cima di Jazzi before embarking on a traverse of the Matterhorn from Zermatt to Breuil. While descending fixed ropes on the Italian side Freya's frozen fingers lost their grip and she fell. Left dangling at the end of Tofi's rope she quickly recovered and they returned to Zermatt across the Theodul pass having completed the traverse in the fast time of 17 hours. Later that year, Freya visited the Pyrenees with Venetia Buddicombe, an adventurous aristocrat whose cool elegance Freya much admired. After wandering about the hills, making a leisurely two-day ascent of Canigou, Freya observed that the Pyrenees were 'wilder than the Alps'.

The following year, 1924, Freya returned to Macugnaga with her mother, ostensibly to join a Ker family visit to WP's grave. Her covert object was to climb Monte Rosa's east face by its greatest route, the *Marinelli* couloir, notorious for its length and avalanche danger. The team consisted of a Belgian and his guide, Freya, Tofi and a porter. After a seven-hour hut march they began the climb that same night at 11pm as a very early start is essential to negotiate the couloir: a 'highway for the avalanches of Monte Rosa which

pour down with a dull soft sound as if they were milk.' At one point, Freya disappeared into a crevasse to the horror of her mother who was watching progress through a telescope below.

Having safely exited the lethal couloir, they still had to climb the Lys glacier, near vertical in places, with Tofi cutting steps continuously for five hours. They reached Monte Rosa's summit after 12 hours but took another four to find safe haven at the Margherita hut. The following day, the Belgian was so sick with altitude that his guide rushed him down to Zermatt while Freya, Tofi and the porter returned to Macugnaga by the Italian side. Freya's accounts of this magnificent expedition, only the second by a woman and 'the only really big climb of my life' were written many years after the event: 'all detail forgotten.' She had originally intended to return and put up a new route with Tofi 'but illness intervened and the longer climbing was over,' leaving her to repine 'the loss of mountaineering more than most things'.

In 1927 Freya enrolled at the School of Oriental Studies (SOAS) in London to advance her Arabic. The following year she embarked on her first journey to the Near East, again with Venetia Buddicombe. Intent on exploring the volcanic Hauran plateau in south-west Syria (now the Golan Heights) this mountain tramp, accompanied by a local guide, a mule and two donkeys, almost ended in disaster due to Freya's insouciance in blithely disregarding official warnings that this dangerous Druze territory was under strict martial law. Eventually arrested as spies, they were lucky to be released after only three days' detention. Venetia described the experience as 'a grim little journey'. For Freya it was a magical *entrée* to the Oriental world.

While at SOAS Freya had learned Farsi as well as Arabic and now looked eastwards to Persia. After centuries of decline, a country that boasted three thousand years of civilisation was undergoing radical transformation under its dynamic new leader Reza Khan. Appointed shah in 1925, Reza instituted a crash programme of industrial modernisation, social change and the brutal re-settlement of Persia's nomadic tribes. This had one positive effect: making areas previously blighted by internecine tribal warfare, brigandage and extortion comparatively safe for travellers. Both the Elburz mountains and Luristan fell within this category and Freya was determined to visit both.

For Freya the Elburz held a special fascination as the site of several reputedly inaccessible Assassin castles secreted within its mountain fastnesses. The history of this Ismaili sect whose suzerainty over much of 10th century Persia and Syria had been secured by a network of strategically sited fortresses, was coloured by their unsavoury reputation. Revisionist historians have re-evaluated the Assassins as cultured and devout rather than hashish-crazed fanatics, but Freya's romantic nature inclined to the older tradition. Moreover, as few Europeans had penetrated their Elburz redoubts, she was determined to be the first woman to reach the most famous of them all – Alamut. Built by Hasan-i-Sabah the 'Old Man of the Mountains', on a massive rock overlooking a remote valley, here he trained his *Hashishin*, 'hashish eaters', in the dark arts of assassination with the promise of an eternal afterlife in a paradisaical garden where lubricious houris satisfied every fleshly need.



Panorama of the Takht-i-Sulaiman massif, photographed in 1956. Left to right: Alam Kuh (4826m) from north-east ridge; Sarchal glacier; and Takht-i-Sulaiman (4665m). The massif's glaciers are largely gone. (*J G R Harding*)

In May 1930, she set out from Qaswin with two muleteers in search of Alamut and duly attained the goal that only one European, Lt Col Sheil in 1838, had achieved before her. Amidst its ruins, she ruminated on the fate of nations and how in 1256, Hulagu, grandson of Genghis Khan, had wantonly destroyed both the castle and its priceless library. Pressing on up the Shah Rud to Garm Rud, she undertook a hazardous climb of over 4,500ft to reach the ruins of another legendary Assassin castle, Nevisar Shah to become its first European visitor.

Freya now headed north to the Caspian coast by an ancient trade route across the spine of the Elburz. On breasting the Salambar pass her sight was arrested by a group of striking peaks to the east. Having correctly identified one of these as Takht-i-Sulaiman, the Throne of Solomon, her imagination was seized by the ancient legend of how the wily King Solomon had lured Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba to share his bivouac or freeze to death on its summit. But it was the throne's distinctive pyramid which she fancifully likened to Switzerland's Weisshorn, the 'Queen of the Alps', that fired her ambition to be the first European to attain its summit.

Freya's research was generally meticulous but apparently not as regards the exploratory history of these genuinely alpine peaks. Under winter snow, the 4,619m Takht-i-Sulaiman, the Throne of Solomon, undoubtedly bears resemblance to the Weisshorn, yet an immediately adjacent mountain Alam Kuh, significantly higher at 4,826m with a magnificent north face and six-kilometre glacier at its base, had already been climbed in 1902 by the Austrian botanist brothers Bornmüller from the upland southern basin of



Hazarchal where, in 1843, another Austrian botanist, Theodor Kotschy had spent several weeks on scientific research. That no European had made a serious attempt to climb Takht-i-Sulaiman was due to local insecurity, problems of access and the Caspian mist that envelope these mountains in summer. Nonetheless, Capt J B L Noel (later photographer to the 1922 and 1924 Everest expeditions) had spotted them in 1913 en route to India to make his covert Everest reconnaissance. Curiosity prompted him to strike inland through Mazanderan's deciduous jungle to reach the Kalardasht valley from where Takht-i-Sulaiman is visible on a clear day and accessible within two days' hard trekking. But Noel went no further. Freya had read his account in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* for June 1921 but drew no conclusions.

In August 1931, Freya left Qaswin on her second Elburz venture with the Throne of Solomon her prime objective. But whereas her previous year's journey had been in May with the high peaks still snow-covered, she now chose the hottest and unhealthiest month for travelling. Initially retracing her 1930 route, she bagged her third Assassin castle at Lamasar, but then contracted a series of illnesses in the malaria-ridden Shah Rud valley. Grounded for a week in the village of Kandichal 'slipping from coma to coma' with malaria and heart trouble, she got word through to a young doctor who gallantly interrupted his own family holiday to make a five-hour journey to offer aid. After diagnosing malaria and dysentery, he injected a cocktail of camphor, emetine and quinine, allowing her to continue on muleback while he meekly bowed attendance. A second bout of illness enforced another week's halt at Bara Rud where the selfless doctor administered quinine injections three times a day while fortifying himself with opium and *arak*.



Alam Kuh's north face and north-east buttress (centre) from the summit of Takht-i-Sulaiman. (J G R Harding)

On reaching Garm Rud, she hired a second guide, Hujjat Allah, 'the refuge of Allah', to lend support as her regular muleteer Aziz was faltering. Weakened by illness, she found the mule-back climb to the Salambar pass 'steeper than the way from Zermatt to the Hornli Hut', but recovered enough to descend the spectacular Gelza Rud gorge and then swing south up the Sehazar Rud to Darigan, the last village in the valley. Here, to her chagrin, she discovered the tearful, homesick Greek wife of a Hungarian engineer commissioned by Reza Shah to investigate the area's potential for shooting. Put out by having to accompany this miserable lady the following day to the hot springs of Abigarm, Freya was further dismayed by the unwelcome presence of a dozen men and women up from the coast taking its sulphurous waters. Copying Balqis' example after her night with Solomon, Freya took a surreptitious dip in its murky waters before spending a cheerless night in her tiny tent.

Next morning she retraced her steps down the valley to Mian Rud from where the Throne of Solomon was barely five kilometres away up the narrow Barur Rud valley. According to a local shikari she had hired as a guide, it was now easily accessible but when she, Aziz and the shikari pressed on up the Barur Rud, the shikari suddenly made off with her binoculars in search of ibex. 'Guideless and lost', Freya and Aziz carried on to a point from which both Takht-i-Sulaiman and the great wall of Alam Kuh (Freya's Siah Kaman, the 'Black Carder Bow') were clearly visible. But at this *moment critique* Freya's courage failed her: 'Though there appeared no difficulty for an able-bodied mountaineer ... still weak from my illness ... no path appeared for a mule to follow ... I judged the thing to be a ten-hour effort.'



Descending Takht-i-Sulaiman with Haft Khan (4539m) behind and the north-west glacier below. (*W J E Norton*)

Freya estimated the Throne to be 15,300ft, actually 1,252ft more than its correct height. Nonetheless, to have covered the five kilometres from Mian Rud to its base would have involved climbing 4,778ft in dehydrating heat, crossing a crevassed glacier and 'an endless grind of scree'. At 38, Freya should have been at the peak of her powers, but she had done no serious climbing since the Marinelli eight years earlier and had been travelling on muleback as an invalid for most of the past few weeks. She decided that the Throne was a peak too far though later blamed the Hungarian engineer for telling her errant shikari that if a foreign woman climbed the Throne, Reza Shah would punish all who had helped her. She also surmised that had they only continued up the Sehazar Rud beyond Abigarm 'an easy mule track would have led us to a possible distance of the summit.' Freya was mistaken. Precipitous peaks bar approaches from the upper Sehazar Rud; the Barir Rud had offered the easiest route to the Throne.

To have had this glittering prize snatched from her grasp was a bitter blow. But Freya was ever resilient and took the advice of an old shepherd to continue her journey to her next objective – the Kalardasht valley – by a high-level mule route traversing the massif's northern outliers. That she only just managed to cross the 14,000ft Kalau pass after experiencing severe altitude sickness for the first time in her life vindicated her earlier decision.

Dropping down through the dense Mazandaran forest, her reception at the Kurdish village of Rudbarek from its bullying headman was hostile. She tamed his rudeness with resolute charm and after a desultory investigation of the site of the legendary city of Kalar, completed the final stage of her Elburz trek after swinging south up the Chalus gorge to follow another high-level trade route with tantalising views of Takht-i-Sulaiman to the west and thence to Tehran.

Here, at the British legation, she bumped into the 25-year-old diplomat Douglas Busk, a former leading light in the Oxford University Mountaineering Club who had done some serious Alpine routes with the great Chamoinix guide Armand Charlet. Though later a pillar of the establishment as chairman of the Mount Everest Foundation, thrice an ambassador and a knight of the realm, the youthful Busk had been a prominent member of the 'Young Shavers', a ginger group of young Alpine Club members determined to adopt modern mountaineering methods. Before Busk left England, Brig Ernest Gueterbock, an AC grandee, had mentioned that an unclimbed peak called Takht-i-Sulaiman existed in an unmapped section of the Elburz.

Busk's chance meeting with Freya, who generously showed him her Elburz sketch maps, spurred his ambition to climb this mystery mountain that same autumn. His reconnaissance from the south with a legation colleague failed to locate its precise location due to misleading local information and lack of time. However, in 1933, accompanied by two other legation members, muleteers and mules, a four-day approach march took them to Hazarchal where both Kotschy and the Bornmüllers had made their base. From here, Busk and his head muleteer Ni'matullah attained Alam Kuh's heavily indented east ridge to see, across a wide glacier, the Throne of Solomon barely two kilometres away. Busk realised immediately that his chances of reaching it from this side were negligible due to Alam Kuh's seemingly impassable two-mile-long north face dropping 700m plumb. He pressed on alone to make the second (and first British) ascent of Alam Kuh's teetering summit.

With the group's topography now unveiled, Busk saw that the key to climbing the Throne of Solomon was from the north. But once again, time constraints left him with no alternative save the southern approach. In 1934 he gave it his last shot and after meeting up with the German explorer-scientist Hans Bobek who was making a comprehensive geological and cartographical survey of the area, they climbed Alam Kuh together. In 1936 Bobek returned with a powerful German mountaineering team to make first ascents of Takht-i-Sulaiman and Alam Kuh's north-east buttress, but a 17-hour expedition that so impressed its lead climber Ludwig Steinauer, fourth to climb the Grandes Jorasses' central spur, that he named it the 'Persian Jorasses'. Bobek's definitive map *Karte der Takht-e Sulaimangruppe* published 22 years later in 1956 to celebrate the Vienna Geographical Institute's centenary, is reproduced in *AJ* 1958.

Subsequent British climbing history in the Takht-i-Sulaiman massif is short in telling. The Cambridge North Persian Expedition 1956 led by Bill Norton made the first British ascent of the Throne of Solomon and several

other peaks. In 1963 Richard Isherwood and Henry Day, members of another Cambridge expedition, repeated Steinauer's north-east buttress climb in five hours. In 1964, while attempting Alam Kuh's north face direct, Trevor Jones was lucky to survive a stone fall that split his climbing helmet, left him badly concussed and peremptorily ended the expedition. Leyla Pope, a president of the CUMC, has since described Steinauer's route as 'an easy day for veiled ladies'.

For Freya, the 150-mile Elburz journey in 1931 was the longest and most demanding she ever undertook, though her failure to climb the Throne of Solomon was probably her greatest disappointment. Early in the following year 1932 she embarked on her last Persian adventure: a covert, unauthorised journey to explore the remote highlands of Luristan while ostensibly searching for Bronze-Age figurines. Travelling up from Baghdad, she slipped over the Persian frontier with a Lur guide who didn't even have a passport. Covering some hundred miles on horseback, amongst the wild and anarchic Lur nomads 'untainted by civilisation' who would have 'murdered for a toman'. This hazardous venture yielded no treasure and ended in another fiasco when the Persian mounted police eventually caught up with them. Freya was escorted to the Iraq border and deported as an illegal entrant. The fate of her guide is not recorded.

In 1934, *The Valleys of the Assassins* was published by the impressionable 22-year-old Jock Murray. Promoted as 'travels in unexplored Persia' it was an immediate bestseller with a freshness and clarity that in her later works is sometimes submerged in an overworked tapestry of language and historical allusion. Almost overnight, Freya became a celebrity. Although already awarded the Royal Geographical Society's Back Grant for her Persian cartographical work, the Royal Asiatic Society now presented her with the Burton Memorial Medal. Ten years after her Marinelli triumph, Freya was awarded honorary membership of the Ladies' Alpine Club without having been an ordinary member. Save for Janet Adam Smith, she knew few if any of the Club's distinguished literary members such as Dorothy Pilley. Similarly honoured was the veteran traveller-explorer Gertrude Benham, who had climbed over 300 mountains in all seven continents alone, save for native guides, and had once walked across South America. Freya's record might not have compared but she counted her honorary membership as 'a rare honour which could not have given me more pleasure.'

Emboldened by her literary success, Freya now turned her attentions to the legendary wadi Hadhramaut in south Arabia to trace its ancient incense routes and to become the first European to visit the ruins of fabled Shabwa. In 1935, a six-day donkey ride from Mukalla with an armed escort took her to the wadi where she recorded in meticulous detail domestic life in its sky-scraping, mud-brick cities. Suddenly struck down by illness, she was evacuated from the wadi by the RAF at considerable cost to the Aden government, with neither objective realised.

On her second Hadhramaut venture in 1938, she attached herself to an archaeological expedition led by the formidable Gertrude Caton Thompson.

Freya had no professional qualifications for the arduous fieldwork involved, took no active part in the expedition's organisation or excavations and was frequently ill. Caton Thompson was not impressed. Freya resented the snub, quit the expedition early and made her own way back to the coast after deliberately disregarding official instructions not to do so for political and security reasons. This three-week journey, punctuated by stops for illness, was completed after she joined an armed camel caravan travelling only by night. These abortive Hadhramaut trips, fulsomely recorded in *The Southern Gates of Arabia* (1936) and *A Winter in Arabia* (1940), in which Caton Thompson is never referred to by name, only cemented her reputation as an intrepid traveller.

During the Second World War, Freya was employed by the British government to promote anti-Axis propaganda and undertake intelligence work in Aden, the Yemen, Egypt and Baghdad. In 1942, she was awarded the Royal Geographical Society's Founder's Medal for her Persian and south Arabian travels. In March the following year, Lord Wavell, then viceroy of India, invited her to stay. Having persuaded him to give her special permission to drive a government car to Baghdad on the clear understanding that it would then become part of the embassy's carpool, she enlisted a high-ranking airman as her chauffeur. Their circuitous, 1,200-mile sight-seeing journey through Persia ended prematurely in Tehran where Freya sold the car for a 500 per cent profit and pocketed the proceeds. When her host the ambassador Sir Reader Bullard got wind of it, she was never again offered work by the British government.

In 1947 Freya married her erstwhile Aden boss Stewart Perowne, a distinguished colonial civil servant and brilliant classical historian. It only lasted five years. Freya later maintained that she had no idea he was a homosexual. In 1951, she was awarded the Royal Society for Asian Affairs' Sykes Memorial Medal and switched her main travelling interests to Turkey's southern shore, including one journey by private yacht. Her final Turkish venture, a hundred-mile horseback ride from Kurdish Hakkari to the Tigris along the fringes of the Taurus, (*Riding to the Tigris*, 1959), ranks as one of her most original and was her last of consequence.

In 1972, her eightieth year, Freya was appointed a Dame of the British Empire and continued to travel as a distinguished tourist in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Himalayan foothills, her reputation as 'one of the most famous of all Arab and Asian travellers' seemingly unassailable. However, in 1993, Molly Izzard's biography *Freya Stark* burst the bubble. Izzard, an adventurous journalist long resident in the Middle East whose husband Ralph had been the *Daily Mail's* ostracised correspondent for the 1953 Everest expedition, had been commissioned by Jock Murray. However, the deeper Molly delved into Freya's life, the more she disliked her subject, concluding that she was sly, hypochondriacal, ruthlessly manipulative and self-centred. When Murray insisted that changes be made, Izzard refused and switched to Hodder & Stoughton. On the book's publication, Freya's many friends and admirers damned it as spiteful, nit picking and debunking. But others, including



Stark at the reception following her wedding to the historian and colonial civil servant Stewart Perowne. The marriage proved shortlived. (*Alamy*)

Colin Thubron, were impressed by Izzard's meticulous research while Wilfred Thesiger dismissed her journeys as no more than those of 'any moderately enterprising secretary'. This was ungallant, to say the least. Her three Persian journeys and ride to the Tigris were brave and imaginative ventures.

My own path crossed with Freya's several times, in the Elburz, Hadhramaut and Turkey, and in 1973 I happened to meet her for real. There might have been much to chat about and she graciously signed my copy of her *The Valleys of the Assassins*. But that was it. Freya Stark was neither a saint nor a pioneer explorer but rather an acute observer whose genius as a writer and photographer illuminated landscapes and the lives of those with whom she empathised. Above all, mountaineering was to her 'the key to a world a little above the human world and beyond it'.

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