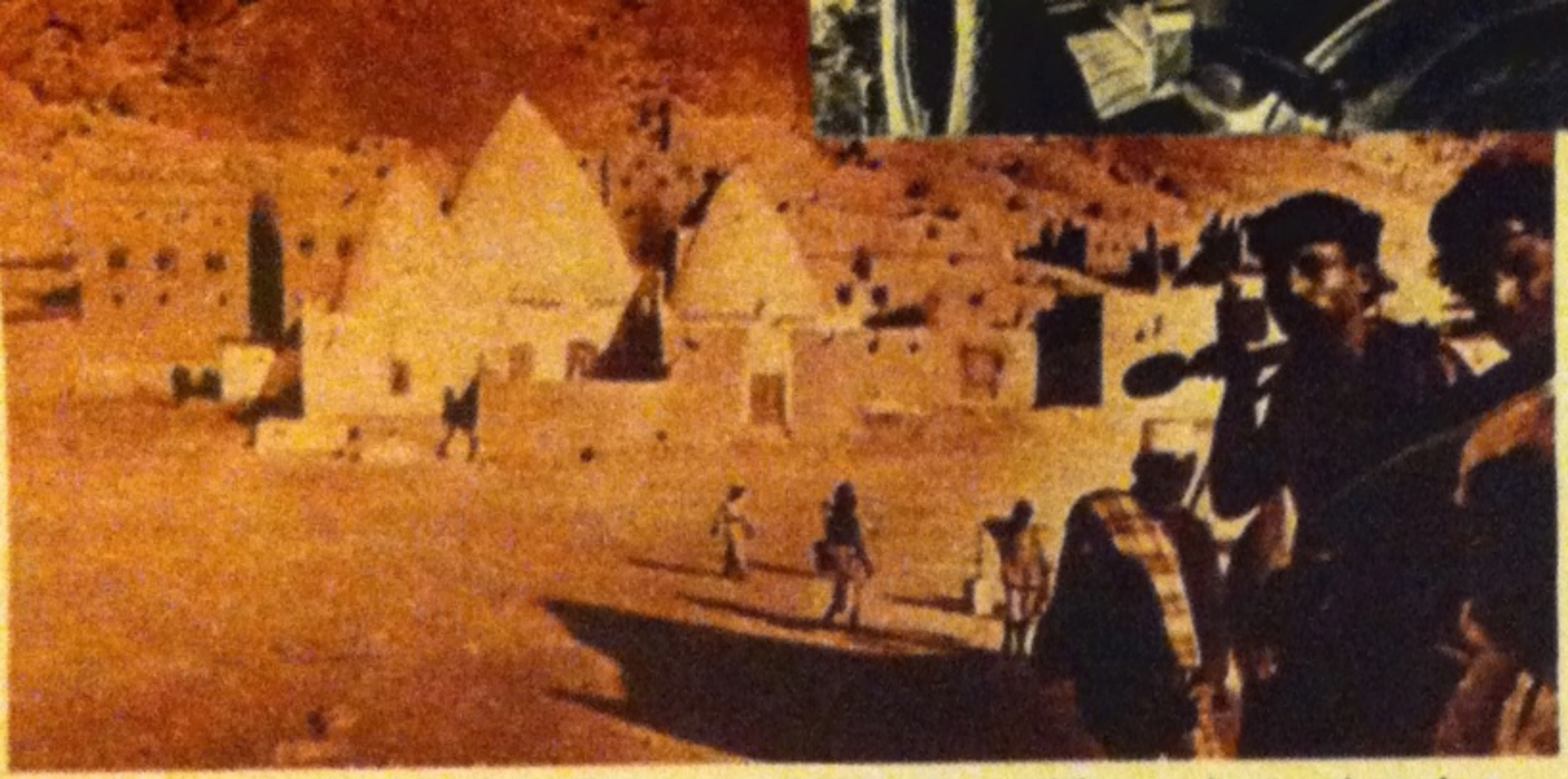
# THE LADY OF THE LEVANT

Dame Freya Stark, one of the century's great travellers, is 90 in January. Her first journey was to the Middle East in 1928. And in more than 50 years of travels in Arabia and the Levant, she has always made it a rule never to make her own coffee or camp-bed. Arab friends called her "mistress of endurance and fortitude in travel and the suffering of terrors and danger" after she had visited regions where no European woman had ever ventured. *Dervla Murphy*, herself a traveller, looks at the extraordinary woman behind the legend

COLIN LUKE/VIDEO ARTS

**Film of her 1981 Nepal trek (below), *Towards an Unknown Land*, is on Channel 4 Thursday**



Freya Stark (far left) pictured in 1928 in Bedouin dress. Dame Freya photographed many of her travels herself. Her collection of photographs amounts to some 100,000. Top left: Yafe'i guards at Shibam; top right: a market near Trebizond on the Black Sea coast, Turkey; bottom left: tomb at Meshed in the South Yemen; and bottom right: the Sultan of Seiun, South Arabia

During an unhappy few years in her early fifties, Freya Stark wrote: "I long to lead a more settled life: a quiet pendulum between exploring and books, with a month of friend-visiting here and there." She was then the wife of Stewart Perowne – historian, orientalist and senior Colonial Office official – and she had to spend her time entertaining women's welfare guest speakers, cutting tapes and presenting cups to football teams. (The marriage was abandoned.) Her glorious definition of a "settled life" is also a self-portrait. The three most important elements of Freya Stark's life have always been travelling, books (the reading and the writing of them) and friends – with regular copious letter-writing as the string which has held together this parcel of varied activity.

Freya Stark's early journeys to Arabia and Persia were astounding. Mounting a mule, camel, donkey, pony, or whatever other quadruped happened to be available, she took off without a qualm to explore unknown regions, chiefly populated by trigger-happy bandits, where no European woman and few European men had ever been seen before.

Her only companions were local guides and muleteers, or perhaps an armed guard provided by some worried sultan, or a group of Bedouin travelling with their camels along the ancient Incense Route. She slept in nomads' tents or bandits' hovels and under the wide desert sky: but she never loaded her own animals, or made up her own camp-bed, or lit her own fire, or brewed her own coffee – nor is it possible to imagine her coping with any of these tasks. The Stark progress was in its way a royal progress and the nomads, bandits and tribesmen loved it. With her assumption that one does not ever, anywhere, make one's own coffee went a most lively appreciation of the traditions, emotions, aspirations and sensibilities of the people among whom she travelled. There was no conflict between her way of life and theirs, none of the tension so often created nowadays when young Europeans seek to go native by way of absorbing other cultures. →

Shared laughter, 1939: a Syrian, faithful follower of the Stark caravan

Freya Stark demanded that as many as were feasible of her own standards (no more) were upheld, and the locals understood this because they too had their established hierarchies and rituals, which they regarded as an essential framework of everyday life. These extraordinary feats of exploration were rewarded by medals from the Royal Geographical Society, the Royal Asiatic Society, the Scottish Royal Geographical Society, the Royal Central Asian Society and other learned bodies. But the tribute that most pleased Dame Freya came from her Sayyid friends in Arabia: "This is a certificate to Miss Freya Stark, English, traveller, that she is conversant with laws and guided by religion, and of an honourable house, and is the first woman to travel from England to Hadhramaut alone – and is mistress of endurance and fortitude in travel and the suffering of terrors and danger."

When I first met Freya Stark in 1966 she had been among my chief literary idols for over 20 years and the effect on me was not unlike meeting Shakespeare's ghost. Never talkative, I went completely dumb. Lurking speechless in a corner for a whole evening, I had time to discern, through my haze of awe, a deep loneliness beneath the panoply of fame and success. In several books Dame Freya has been frank about her unhappy relationships with the men she loved – touchingly frank, sometimes almost naïvely so. One broke off their engagement, another was killed, a third was ineligible.

A friend who has known Dame Freya for many years remarked that had she been happily married she might never have written books; that for her, literary fame is to some extent a compensation. I doubt if such a genius for writing could under any circumstances have remained unexercised. Yet this theory may explain why Freya Stark reached the age of 39 before publishing her first book, and why, even then, the process by which she became a writer was almost accidental.

In the late 1920s, Dame Freya went to Baghdad to improve her Arabic and study Persian in preparation for the exploration of ⟶

...she deliberately settled in ...poorest quarter of the city – ...thereby greatly upsetting the toffee-nosed British community. Soon she found herself obliged to supplement a meagre income by working on the *Baghdad Times* – the British colony's newspaper – for £20 a month. This was her first experience of regular writing for publication. Her articles impressed so many people that she was persuaded to have them reprinted, and *Baghdad Sketches*, when published locally, made £55 for the author. But Stark's talent was unsuited to newspaper work. She told a friend: "I find it's hard work to write to order and am not at all good at rapid modern journalism." From Iraq, essays were sent to the *Cornhill Magazine*, in whose editorial office John Murray was then cutting his literary teeth. He has never forgotten his first meeting with "Miss Stark", who had called, as she thought, to collect a rejected manuscript. Instead, the young publisher suggested that she should write some more essays about her recent adventures; and so *The Valleys of the Assassins* was born. It won her fame and prizes.

Today, John Murray recalls: "Her articles indicated clearly that she was a natural traveller and a born writer. In fact, she was almost born travelling – and was carried as a baby in a basket over the Alps. But her sparkling quality as a writer stems from a passion for words and their efficient use. Letter-writing developed the vividness and intimacy of her style. Because, later, all her more important journeys were undertaken alone, she would find the time and stamina at the end of a day's travel to write home or to a friend." Those letters were the basis of travel books like: *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, *The Coast of Incense* (once ordered by a bookseller as *The Cost of Incest*), *Ionia*, *The Lycian Shore*, *Beyond the Euphrates*, *Alexander's Path* and *Travels in Afghanistan*. At once the critics recognised Freya Stark's rare gifts as both traveller and writer. Vita Sackville-West said of *The Valleys of the Assassins*: "This truly enthralling record ought to take its place among the classics of travel." It has now done so, as have all Dame Freya's travel books.

Horses tethered in the sun, Bedouins encircle their meal; Syria, 1939

During the 1890s, Freya Stark's parents occasionally trekked with their two small daughters from their home in Asolo across the Pelmo Pass to Cortina, where they caught a train for London. During a trip in 1895 their elder daughter repeatedly strayed: she could usually be seen in the distance, ascending some alluring slope. But once she was found in the parish priest's house in some remote Alpine village, politely receiving titbits. And later, in the train, her mother tracked her to the far end of the third class carriages, where she had settled contentedly on a sailor's lap. By then she was acquiring four languages – English, French, Italian and German. She has always spoken English with a faint but unmistakable Italian accent, symbolic of the divided family roots which have added so much interest and conflict to her life.

Dame Freya still lives in Asolo. One sunny autumn morning we sat together on a pale green sofa, my hostess upright, her hands folded in her lap, wearing a flowing silken gown and a white lace-trimmed bonnet: an *Emma* illustration come to life. She talked of her parents, both of whom were artists of more than average ability, but never sold their paintings since they had sufficient independent means. Many Stark landscapes and portraits hang on the walls of her flat and "Robert Stark, aged 34, by Flora Stark" ...→

shows a beloved father sitting relaxed in shapeless tweeds, a gun across his knees, home from a day's shooting on Dartmoor, where they lived immediately after their marriage. The Starks were constantly on the move and in 1887 they went to Paris and settled on the Left Bank to paint seriously. Their first child, a son, died within a year. Then, on January 31, 1893, Freya was born two months early amid the clutter of their studio.

Later the Starks moved to Asolo, buying a gate-house on the southern city wall from a friend. Its half-wild garden – sweet with nightingales, then as now – slopes towards a narrow wooded valley and overlooks the Venetian plain, spreading flatly away to hazy horizons. Not long ago Dame Freya presented this house to the town of Asolo and she now lives in a nearby flat.

During the afternoon, I climbed to the top of Asolo's hill. In *Perseus in the Wind* Dame Freya describes "a grey keep crowning the little hill on which our town is settled. Its foundations are said to have been built, long before the Romans came, by the Euganeans . . . then the Romans must have made some *castrum* here, when they established us as a centre of government and built baths beneath what is now the parish church, and a theatre in what is now my garden."

I sat within this fort, which is strangely irregular – not of any style or period but an accretion in stone of unrecorded history, conforming only to the shape of its hilltop. And there I wondered how much the historical associations of surroundings, during youth, shape our minds. Dame Freya has always lived intensely in the present, but she has never been confined by it. Most of us cower bewildered in our contemporary valley, too unaware of the past and too scared of the future. But Dame Freya stands on a mountain-top, surveying past, present and future as one whole – our kingdom of the mind. Many of her letters and essays reveal their author's striving, against her own headstrong emotionalism, for philosophical detachment. This conflict often created the fire in which her finest prose was tempered.

Intimations of immortality glimmer on many of Freya Stark's pages. Her writing is marvellously exciting when her fervently questing mind mysteriously achieves a serene, impersonal distancing of herself from the transient and the trivial. Then Dame Freya's work seems to acquire an aura of Homeric anonymity, as though these passages were rooted in the ages before men wrote. Here is a seeming paradox – her style being so emphatically an expression of her self. But one of her own essays suggests an explanation: "The Greeks, in their respect for the integrity of things, discovered a love of truth apart from human deviation . . and laid hold on the elusive immortality of diction."

That evening Dame Freya looked to the future from her mountain-top. "Eventually," she said, "it must be a matter of civilising everyone or not being civilised at all. Decay has always come from *partial* civilisation. But what a long, drab interval before that can happen! The art of the future will be to be civilised with no more than everyone else has. Surely this can be done, since reading and thinking and the creation of beauty are not so costly?"

Nobody could accuse Dame Freya of being a socialist: the notion of applying any political label to her is ludicrous. But she has a strong sense of justice, which often prompts her to condemn the misshapen branches of that capitalist tree whose more delicately-flavoured fruits have given her such joy. "My own feeling is that, in two or three hundred years, a Russian Europe might be less bad than an American one. But the intervening centuries would be very unpleasant. You know, we must make our own European civilisation worth saving. Writers have some responsibility here because the quality of civilisation depends on calling things by their proper names. All this century I have watched politicians trying to build bridges with useless words, or hoping to alter the nature of things by finding different epithets to disguise old conflicts and conceal new problems. We must not continue to maltreat words: it is too dangerous. But a literary style should not be cultivated only by writers. Do you remember how well so many 18th-century letter-writers expressed themselves? The only foundation for good writing is good thinking. The fineness of a style is in direct proportion to the layer of reality which it reaches."

Next morning Dame Freya was sitting at her circular rosewood desk, which had been made to her own specifications by a local craftsman. It revolves at the touch of a finger and Dame Freya explained: "When working with many reference books, this saves a great deal of jumping up and down – and stretching." ➤➤➤

The post had just come bringing two books from London: the new Century Press paperback editions of *The Valleys of the Assassins* and *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, Dame Freya's first two travel books. "I have recently re-read both and I enjoyed them," she said. "They are quite well written. It is all so long ago, now I can judge." Fifty years ago, Dame Freya was writing prophetically about Arabs and oil and the Palestinian problem and the West's relationship with the Middle East; to re-read those books now can be quite uncanny.

We sat outside, under an awning, and tried not to talk about today's Lebanon – a subject almost unbearably distressing for Dame Freya. That led us on to television, which she regards as a poor substitute for reality. "It's an insult to the human gift of speech to depend on pictures. If you can do nothing better than look at television you are in poor shape. Shall I tell you why?" There was a muted clang of Arabian jewellery as she gestured towards the Dolomites, rising sharply blue in clear gold sunshine. "When you look at those mountains, you are not seeing only a beautiful picture. Your thoughts go over the edge of the hill – and that's what counts. There must be an inspiration in what you see, and read, and hear and touch: otherwise life is wasted. And for inspiration there must be *truth* – please underline that word. Good photographs, like everything else of excellence, have their own truth. But the cinema and television often confuse and deceive. People fancy they have been given an idea of the Alps or the Himalayas, yet it is precisely the idea that is lacking. On screens, you don't get an uphill and a downhill. You don't feel cool shadows or noon heat. You are merely looking, cut off from the truth of the mountain and the thoughts it should bring. So you can have no idea of it, only a memory of shape."

We considered the inflence on travel writing of television, colour supplements and what Dame Freya engagingly describes as "picture-books". "The real travel book," she said, "is a method for seeing new places with companionship. And it must never be confused with the travelogue, by the bogus traveller who is really no more than a tourist. This bond between reader and writer – this companionship – is something television, or journalism, or picture-books can never replace. Always there will be prisoners of jobs, or ill-health, or poverty, or family ties who will need to move with freedom within the pages of our books."

In *The Zodiac Arch* Dame Freya has analysed the travel writer's act of creation. "You must look at your mountain, its shape, its height, its atmosphere, the trees that clothe it, the clouds that visit it, its remoteness, its history, a hundred things about it, and see them all in their proper places and relations to each other. And when you have hunted and found words for all these things, you must condense them to the size you require, and express all those hundred meanings in a handful of words."

Dame Freya stood up and briskly crossed the room to a ceiling-high bookcase. Watching her move, it was hard to believe that in January she will be ninety. "I shall show you a paragraph that took me two weeks to write," she said, and turned to page 219 of *Rome on the Euphrates*. She added: "I wonder if any non-writer realises what a drain it is. Always that sheet of foolscap, behind the sunniest morning, that awful strain to drag the butterflies of your fancy out of nothing and pin them down."

Dame Freya took down *The Coast of Incense* next, and gave me a guilty glance. "In this book I have mixed my metaphors," she said, as though confessing to some barbarous, unaccountable aberration. "I was recovering from a serious illness."

In fact one suspects that Dame Freya has never written the sort of drivel produced by lesser mortals during the first round of their struggle with a difficult passage. Those whom the Muses love cannot go wrong. On January 20, 1903, the nine-year old Freya wrote a letter to a grown-up friend which bore the unmistakable Stark hallmark. It was not precocious; any nine-year-old might have written in the same vein. But the style was superb. Every word stands at its most effective point and her distinctive rhythm is already discernible.

As we said goodbye in the doorway of Dame Freya's flat she hugged me with astonishing vigour. Then she took both my hands and said, "This has been fun, two travellers talking. It's a good way to spend one's life, don't you think, travelling . . ?" ●

*Alexander Maitland's book of conversations with Dame Freya Stark,* A Tower in a Wall *(£6·95) and* Rivers of Time: The Photographs of Freya Stark *(£25) were published last week by William Blackwood, Edinburgh.*