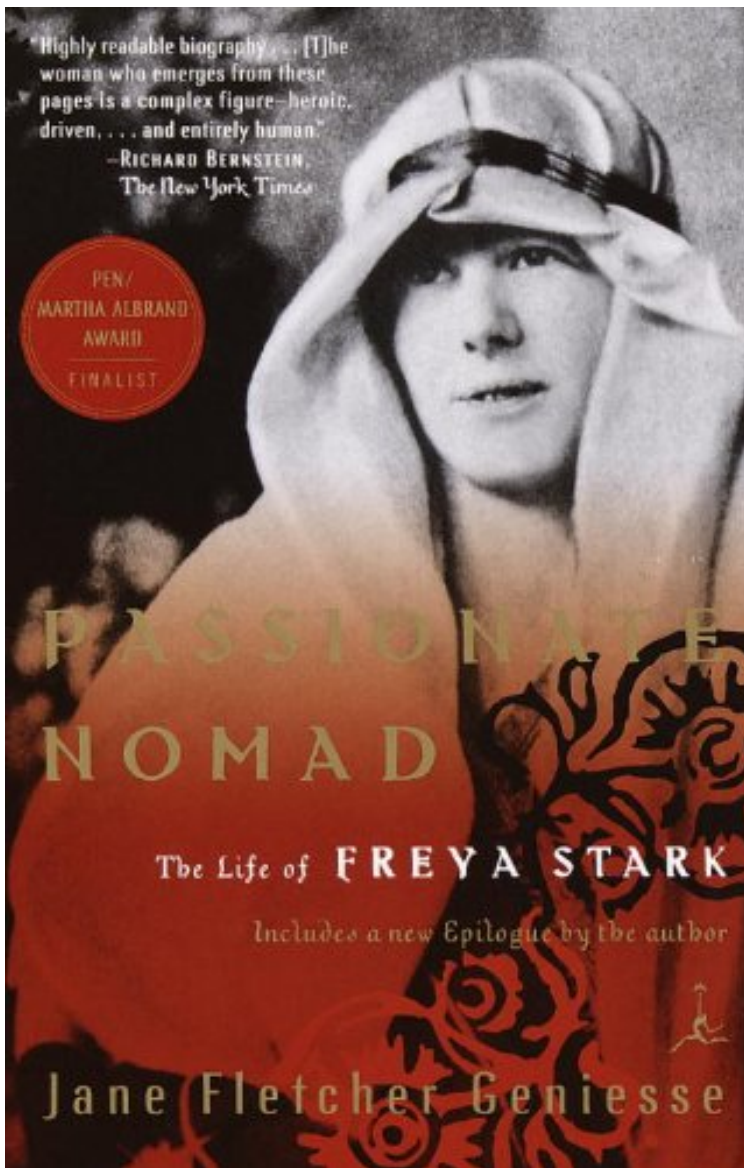


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Passionate Nomad: The Life of Freya Stark



Par Jane Fletcher Geniesse
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWith the publication of The Valley of the Assassins in 1934, a legend was launched.

Freya Stark had begun the extraordinary adventures that would glamorize her, though distinctly unglamorous, as the last of the great travelers. Hailed as a classic, the book chronicled her travels in remote and dangerous regions of the Middle East, inspiring Lawrence of Arabia to call the audacious, ambitious Freya "a gallant creature." Her reputation had begun in 1927, when she was captured by French military police after penetrating their cordon around the rebellious Druze. She explored the mountainous territory of the mysterious Assassins of Persia, became the first woman to explore Luristan in western Iran, and followed the ancient frankincense routes to locate a lost city. At first a thorn in the side of the British

colonial establishment for consorting with "wogs," Freya was later extravagantly admired by officialdom. Her knowledge of Middle Eastern languages and life aided the military and diplomatic corps, for whom she conceived an effective propaganda network during World War II. Throughout her long life--she died in 1993, over a hundred years old, having been knighted at age eighty-two by the Queen--she rejoiced in the attentions of the press and of her audiences. In private she remarked that she put herself in harm's way in order not to fear death. Her indomitable spirit was forged by contradictions. A child of privilege, she grew up in near poverty after her mother rashly allied herself with an Italian count in a rug manufacturing venture. She yearned for a formal education but was largely self-taught, mastering seven languages. She longed for love but consistently focused on the wrong men. She was thirty-four before she extricated herself from her family and embarked on the travels that would make her reputation. Her astonishing career lasted over sixty years, during which she produced twenty-two books unmatched for perception and poetic prose. This is a brilliant, balanced biography, rich in sheikhs, diplomats, nomad warriors and chieftains, generals, would-be lovers, and luminaries, with author Jane Fletcher Geniesse digging beneath the mythology to uncover a complex, quixotic, and controversial woman. From the Hardcover edition. Extrait The Beginning What I am, and why learning Arabic, is a mystery. If I say I do it for pleasure, there is a look of such incredulity that I begin to feel as self-conscious about it as if I were telling the most blatant lie," wrote Freya Stark to her mother as she shivered through the winter of 1927-28 in French-controlled Lebanon. Freya had arrived in the middle of December with a copy of Dante's Inferno, very little money, a revolver, and a fur coat. This last was to prove the most useful, for the weather was freezing. Immaculately polite and maintaining her good humor despite being wrapped from head to toe in woolens, she was just beginning to feel the throaty Arabic syllables slide more easily from her lips. She was thirty-four years old, stood scarcely five feet, one inch, in stocking feet, and was still extremely thin from a recent illness. Both the missionaries and the Arabs in the little mountain town where she had come to study agreed that she was perfectly charming. Few suspected that this appealing young person, so apparently unassuming, old-fashioned, even--they might have said--quaint, had a will of steel. In November 1927, Freya had embarked on a cargo ship for Beirut, leaving behind what she had long concluded was an unacceptable life. "It is so wonderful to be away, really away; a new land opening out every morning," she exulted as the SS Abbazia tossed through the rough Mediterranean. It did not matter that a cargo ship was all she could afford. She watched pigs, sugar, even once a Marconi telegraph machine being off-loaded between stops that grew more picturesque and unfamiliar with every passing day. "We are now among islands in the Ionian Sea. Is not the very name an enchantment? The sea is quiet, the twilight falling. I asked the name of an island on the right. 'Ithaca,' says the Captain, as if the name were mere geography." She had sat in her deck chair, the cold sirocco whipping the pages of her writing tablet, and felt that, at last, all the years of lonely study on her own, her determined efforts to make up for the schooling she had begged to have, which had been interrupted by the terrible Great War, no longer needed to be regretted so bitterly. It had been wrenching to slip out from under the attachments of family and embark on this journey. But if she had not gone when she did, she feared that she would never have got away, just as her sister Vera never did. Both had been prisoners to responsibilities they abhorred, but unlike Vera, Freya had refused to succumb. Instead, Freya had consoled herself by reading dazzling accounts of European explorers in the lands of the Arabs. One day, she had resolved, the world would hear of her "in the deserts of Arabia discovering buried cities." In 1920 Freya sensed a path quietly open. In April of that year everyone on the Italian Riviera was riveted by the events taking place at San Remo, only a few miles from Freya's home. The victorious Allies were gathering in that coastal town, and anyone who could tried to get a glimpse of the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, as he hurried back from and forth to meetings with Premier Georges Clemenceau of France. The purpose of the conference was to dispose of the sprawling territories of the defeated enemy, the Ottoman Empire. Because the United States refused to sign on to the League of Nations, the British and French were free to slice up the Middle East to their own imperial satisfaction. The Arab lands governed for over 467 years by the Grand Turk were to be "mandates" until such time as they "could stand on their own." Great Britain would supervise Mesopotamia, Transjordan, Palestine, and Egypt, while France would look after Greater Syria, including Lebanon. As for Persia, long the target of foreign influence, postwar turmoil would spark a coup against the old Qajar regime in 1921 and bring to prominence a Cossack Brigade commander, Reza Khan, who four years later would crown himself shah of a new Pahlavi dynasty. Freya's heart had soared at the thought of visiting these regions. Like everyone else who had been revolted and depressed by the seemingly hopeless bloody trench warfare in Europe, she had raptly followed the successes of Colonel T. E. Lawrence in spearheading an Arab revolt against the Turks. It had been

thrilling to imagine this young intelligence officer racing through the desert on camel-back in the company of hawk-eyed Bedouin warriors. But Lawrence was only the latest hero in the history of brilliant Eastern adventures, and Freya plunged avidly into its literature. She began to consume all she could find about the early-nineteenth-century travelers. There was Johann Burckhardt, who disguised himself as a holy man and found the great Nabataean city of Petra before dying of plague in Cairo. Ulrich Seetzen located the lost ruins of Roman Jerash, mapped the Dead Sea, and was murdered by the imam of Yemen for being a spy for the czar. She read what she could get of the works of the great Orientalist Sir Richard Burton, famed for his search for the Nile and secret ventures into Mecca and Medina. Recently Freya had finished the vast and ponderous *Travels in Arabia Deserta* by Charles Montagu Doughty, who had died just one year before she herself sailed East. The lives of these explorers and the many others were filled with bold and daring deeds, and Freya read them with shining eyes. Since she was a child she had loved Kipling's tales of British imperial grandeur, and the story of *Kim* and the Red Lama had been her favorite book. That many of these Europeans had doubled as intelligence agents in the "great game" between their rival governments only intrigued her more. To Freya, the East seemed the most exotic place left on earth. From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* "[Geniesse] has achieved, in the end, an admirable focus, at once critical and sympathetic. The portrait that emerges is a subtle and generous one. For all Starks unresolved contradictions, her distinction as a latter-day woman of letters survives." *New York Times Book*