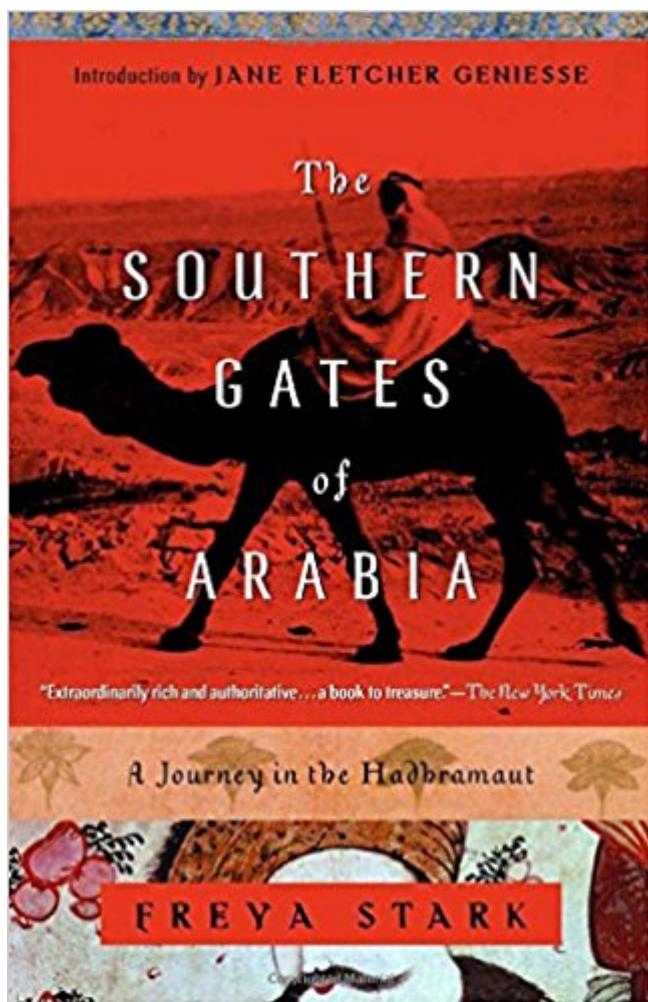


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# The Southern Gates Of Arabia: A Journey In The Hadhramaut (Modern Library Paperbacks)



## Synopsis

In 1934, famed British traveler Freya Stark sailed down the Red Sea, alighting in Aden, located at the tip of the Arabian peninsula. From this backwater outpost, Stark set forth on what was to be her most unforgettable adventure: Following the ancient frankincense routes of the Hadhramaut Valley, the most fertile in Arabia, she sought to be the first Westerner to locate and document the lost city of Shabwa. Chronicling her journey through the towns and encampments of the Hadhramaut, *The Southern Gates of Arabia* is a tale alive with sheikhs and sultans, tragedy and triumph. Although the claim to discovering Shabwa would not ultimately be Stark's, *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, a bestseller upon its original publication, remains a classic in the literature of travel. This edition includes a new Introduction by Jane Fletcher Geniesse, Stark's biographer.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 1934, a 42-year-old Englishwoman named Freya Stark arrived in the British-governed Protectorate of Aden on a singular mission: to locate the fabled, long-lost city of Shabwa. Located on the high Hadramaut plateau in what is now Yemen, Shabwa was renowned in antiquity as the source of frankincense. Little visited even then, it was also thought to be a particularly forbidding place; Genesis mentions it as the "enclosure of death," and the Roman geographer Pliny reported that it contained 60 great temples and wealth beyond measure. That was good enough for Stark, who, having not long before made a difficult passage across the badlands of Iran, thrived on improbable adventures. And so, by burro and whatever mechanical conveyances she could find,

she ascended the high mountains into a world that was sometimes perilous, but that also sometimes approached fairy-tale dimensions, as when, climbing the Hadramaut, she writes, "The path kept high and open, until gradually the valley clefts narrowed again upon us, and shut us in walls whose luxuriant green made a romantic landscape of the kind usually only invented in pictures." Stark never reached Shabwa; laid low by measles, she had to be evacuated from territory overrun in any event by warring religious factions and gangs of bandits. Though cut short, her time in the Yemeni highlands yielded this superb travel narrative, full of uncommon vistas and milieus (harems, bazaars, and Bedouin camps among them). Anyone who values tales of adventure well told will find Stark's body of work--and this book in particular--to be full of treasures. --Gregory McNamee

[Freya Stark] writes angelically in the great tradition of Charles Doughty and T. E. Lawrence. The pulse quickens as you read, because she can bring the sights and sounds of incredible countries before you in the twinkling of an eye."--The New York Times Book Review"[The Valleys of the Assassins] remains a wonderful description of a people and a place, altered today by Progress, perhaps, but through [Freya Stark's] eyes still alive with bandits, dervishes, idol worshippers, armed tribesmen, and mountain scenery of great beauty."--From the Introduction by Jane Fletcher Geniesse"Stark is constantly alive to her immediate surroundings: indeed, what gives her work its extraordinary depth and power is just this ability to focus past and present... stereoscopically, in a single image."--Times Literary Supplement [London]

One of the greatest travel stories ever written. One of my favorite books of all time. Better than most fiction of this type. Poignant, fascinating, absorbing. I was sad that it ended. I look forward to reading it again in a couple of years.

I found this book absolutely fascinating as it described a time, only 70-odd years ago, when there truly were unexplored reaches, where legend and history still co-existed, and where a culturally sensitive and aware, and properly respectful traveler could find peaceful and fulfilling adventure. This book is even more interesting now, given the changes in the Middle East in the past ten years. Can one imagine making the same kind of journey in Yemen now? Of course not; it would almost be suicide. That time has long since been destroyed, everything about this book but its pure physical setting gone, so this memoir is even more poignant and compelling. Stark has an eye for detail, as jaundiced as it is with the unavoidable Orientalism of her time and socio-cultural context. This can

be forgiven/overlooked, and she's a lot more fair and obliging when describing those she encounters than the majority of her contemporaries. She's at her best when describing the landscapes she is encountering, the stark desert and wadis, the unexpected lushness of the oases and tucked-away mountain crevices where all the shades of green burst forth. More than anything, what comes through in this book is Stark's grace and abiding respect for the people she meets. She has taken the time to learn their language, and is familiar with their culture, and takes pains to encounter them in terms that will make them comfortable. She does not attempt to bend anyone to a Western European point of view. This is not to say she is subservient or fawning; she most certainly stands up for herself when it is required. But throughout the book and on this journey, her continued success comes from her honesty tinged with her respect for the region and the people with whom she is interacting. This engenders respect for her in return. I found the three maps in the beginning of the book at first absolutely invaluable as references to Stark's locations and progress. I then found the maps to be absolutely infuriating, due to their black/white printing, the too-small script, the confusing order of the maps, the contradictory scales and place-name differences, etc. I ended up abandoning the book's maps and opening my unabridged atlas to Yemen and tracking her movement there. Editors: if you're going to offer maps in a book like this, make sure the maps are actually worthwhile and readable. Two scholarly additions to the book are good. Stark's appendix on the "Southern Incense Route of Arabia" is a fascinating account of exactly what she was looking for, and what brought her to the Hadramaut in the first place. It's her indirect formal scholarly statement of motivation. This appendix would have been well-placed as a foreword to this book, serving to establish her motivation and objective. Stark lists her sources, and they're offered as a listed bibliography immediately after the appendix. There is also an index, but for whatever reason, many of the persons and places in the text are not included, and there is no cross-referencing. For example, the names of individual wadis are placed in the index as "Sidun, Wadi," and are not cross-referenced with a "Wadi Sidun" entry. Bottom line: If you're one of the many readers newly interested in Islam, Arabs and the Middle East, and are looking for some context beyond the latest book on extremism or terrorism, something to add depth to what you think you understand, then this book will do you well. If you're looking for some insight into the cultures and traditions of Islam, this also will move you in that direction. If you're looking for a glimpse into a time when the West and Islam actually got along on a basis of mutual respect, this enjoyable book will tell you about it.

This was so interesting. A wonderful story about a little known area of the world. The fact that this was a personal journey made it even more interesting.

I found this book very interesting having recently visited Dubai. It gives an insight into the world of Arabia before it was spoilt by oil. I was impressed by the bravery of Freya Stark for venturing into this fairly unknown part of the world and am grateful to her for the knowledge. I am planning to buy another of her books

As a big fan of Thesiger and Villiers, I've been a little spoiled when it comes to Arabian travel writings. In contrast I found Freya Stark's writing style and journey incredibly boring. Her descriptions of events and people are uniformly vague and shallow. This is especially frustrating when she just glosses over some event or custom that I would have loved to know more about. For example, she mentions the fact that many of the Bedu she meets are dyed indigo to protect themselves from the sun, but never goes into detail about what to me is a very fascinating and little known practice. I haven't been able to find information about Beduin, or any other people, dying their bodies indigo in any other source so I was a big frustrated by this lack of depth. I guess its important to remember that Freya Stark's works are mostly just diaries, they weren't meant to be published as anthropological works, and so might not be very interesting to anyone but herself!!

A woman travels through the then largely unknown Southern Arabia. There are some interesting depictions of the land and insights into its people.

ok

Difficult to read for a non-native,,,

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