



Life-changing Literature

Sara Wheeler

IFIRST ENCOUNTERED Tété-Michel Kpomassie in a tent on the top of the Greenland ice cap. The temperature was thirty below, and I had burrowed into my sleeping bag to read in the pool of light cast by a lamp strapped to my forehead. Kpomassie's superb volume *An African in Greenland* not only drove out the cold. It did what I most like a travel book to do. It held up a mirror, and the Arctic reflected back the world. 'I had started on a voyage of discovery,' he wrote, 'only to find that it was I who was being discovered.'

I was already deep into a career as a travel writer, but that book changed me. First published in Paris in 1983, *An African in Greenland* tells the story of the twenty-four-year-old Togolese author's trip to Greenland twenty years earlier. In its pages I saw that the relationship between writer and subject is one of equals. It was not that I had previously imagined one side superior to the other. It was that I had thought of them as shut off from each other in a way that of course they can never be.

Many decades earlier Freya Stark, who lived from 1893 to 1993, had altered the trajectory of my writing life. Female role models in the travel-writing game are scarce, and she made me believe I could do it. She was posh and rich and I was neither, but I had the benefit of seventy years of emancipatory progress. If I had to pick a favourite from her opus, it would be *A Winter in Arabia* because it is an intimate book, less freighted with history than, say, *The Lycian Shore*, and more the expression of a woman who has come to terms with it all. In its pages she conjures little



girls in magenta silk trousers, their silver anklets frilled with bells, the drumbeats of the Sultan's procession, and veiled women bearing gifts of salted melon seeds. Like Kpomassie, Stark wrote the book many years after the journey. I learnt something from that.

She travelled widely in Luristan, Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, Syria and Iraq, and she was the first Western woman to journey through the Hadhramaut, that part of the Arabian peninsula which is now Yemen. A woman traveling alone is a suspicious figure even in 2021. But a hundred years ago? She showed me how it was done.

Her journeys and her books (there were more than thirty) were a heady mix of hardship and luxury, scholarship and mischief, loneliness and intimacy: all perfect combinations, and the oppositions give her prose tensile strength (another lesson). Above all, Stark's books revealed the crucial role of the past in the writer's life. She recognized that the present is *above all else* a continuation of the past, and found tangible evidence of the unity of landscape and history. Picking her way among ruins abandoned by Greeks and Persians in Asia Minor, Stark writes of 'a bond of past and future, with us between them.'

Making the connection: that's the key.