Images of Albania and Albanians in English Literature from Edith Durham’s *High Albania* to J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*

On 12th February 2002 Dr Gëzim Alpion presented a paper at the Institute for Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham, UK. Dr Alpion is an Honorary Fellow of the Institute.

The Albanian State, as we know it now, was born at the turn of the twentieth century, but the history of Albania predates that of Greece. History has been cruel to the Albanians since the Roman conquest. Except for the 1443-1468 period, when the Albanian national hero Gjergj Kastrioti, Skanderbeg, (1403-1468) was successful in his mammoth task to defeat the Ottomans (thus defending both the Albanian nation and Catholic Europe), the fifteen years (1925-1939) when Ahmed Zogolli (1895-1961) ruled Albania first as a president and then as a monarch, and the post World War II period, for the last two millennia the Albanians have been constantly living under occupation. In this respect, Albania is the closest European equivalent to Egypt. Like the Egyptians, who had to wait for almost three millennia until they finally could govern themselves again in 1952, the Albanians never abandoned the dream for
self-rule. As opposed to the Egyptians, however, when the Albanians finally succeeded in proclaiming their country’s independence in 1912, they were not left with much of a country to govern. The Albania that resulted from the dreadful historical miscalculations and injustices culminating in the London Conference of the Ambassadors of the Six European Great Powers in 1913, was a dismembered nation, something of a still-birth whose long-term survival was never taken seriously.

But survive, the fledgling Albanian State did, and so did the Albanians living in Albanian territories unjustly left outside Albania. Survival has been a basic instinct of the Albanians since 169 BC when Gent, the last Illyrian king, was captured by the Romans at Shkodra. This has always baffled foreign Albanologists. It was this specific Albanian characteristic that surprised and marvelled Edith Durham (1863-1944), one of the most well known, some would say controversial, Western Albanologists of the first half of the twentieth century.

Durham was not a scholar when she first visited the Balkans and the Albanian territories in 1900. It would probably be unwise to consider everything she wrote on the region’s complicated history as being indisputably correct. Durham did not go to the Balkans to do fieldwork; she went there on medical advice when she was ill and depressed. She left England for a cure and found a vocation. She is one of the first Western travel-writers to discover that the Balkans is a career.

Many British and European hopefuls are trying to emulate Durham’s example, especially recently when so much has happened in the Balkans: the collapse of Communism, the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, the wars in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosova, and the fighting in Macedonia.
As opposed to some recently self-proclaimed Western experts in Balkan and Albanian affairs, Durham appears to have gone to the region not with many preconceptions and prejudices. While it is true that she wrote favourably more often than not about the Albanians, her ‘preference’ for one of the most ancient European nations was not inspired or motivated by the interests of her own country in the Balkans or Albania. Durham was her own spokesperson when she defended the Albanians. With her determination to speak her own mind, she set an example seldom followed by her contemporary British and Western Balkanists and Albanologists.

Durham was a scholar by instinct rather than by trade. She based her judgements on her own observations. She wrote about what she saw. In this respect she is different from the nineteenth-century German writer Karl May, who offered to the German readership an almost entirely fictitious picture of the Albanians.

Durham upset many of her contemporary, one-sided and often blinkered Balkans experts because she championed the cause of a long-neglected people. But this was not done for reasons of self-interest. Despite her initial reason for visiting the Balkans, Durham benefited the region more than it benefited her. The Albanians were so impressed with her relentless efforts on their behalf (in Albania and the UK) that they expressed their gratitude by referring to her as their Kratlitse (Queen) (Durham 1985, 131).

Durham, however, never saw herself as the Queen of the Albanians. She took an interest in the Albanians without a desire to lead them. As opposed to her contemporary Hungarian aristocrat Baron Franz Nopcsa (Alpion 2002, 6-12), she had no ambition to claim the throne of Albania. Durham approached and vigorously defended the Albanian question primarily as a humanist.
By the time Durham ‘discovered’ Albania, especially Northern Albania, the country was perceived as being in a state of hibernation as a result of successive invasions by the Celts, the Romans, the Slavs and the Turks. The Albanians appeared ossified. Although geographically near, they were politically and economically far from the European Powers that had perpetually chosen to ignore and often abandon them in favour of their own political and economic interests.

When Durham visited Albania, Europe had little time for the long neglected country. She found the Albanians isolated, but not of their own volition. They had been forced into isolation. Cut off from Europe, the Albanians had no alternative but to ensure their survival by relying on their ancient mythology, laws and traditions. These were bound to change and in some cases to become distorted in order to suit the often extraordinary circumstances the Albanian nation had experienced during the previous two thousand years. The Canon of Lek Dukagjin, for instance, is probably the best example of the need the Albanians felt to revive, preserve, update and to some extent ‘spoil’ their ancient traditions of self-government in order to meet the challenges of surviving under the Turkish rule and the constant threat of assimilation by their neighbours (Alpion 2001, 4-15).

Much as she regretted the Albanians’ imposed isolation from Western Europe, Durham makes no secret of her exultation at discovering the exotic Albania and Albanians. While it is true she differs from many former and contemporary European ‘experts’ in Albania for the unfashionable sympathy for the Albanians, the exotic is as central in her writings on Albania as it is in the work of other Western travel writers, past and present.

Although Durham travelled widely throughout the Albanian territories, her most inspired work High Albania (1909) concentrates on one of the most isolated and as such, one of the most exotic parts of Albania and the Albanian
nation. High Albania offered Durham a unique opportunity to see a ‘backwater of life’ at the heart of Europe, which has ‘primitive virtues, without many of the meannesses of what is called civilisation. It is uncorrupted by luxury’ (Durham 1985, 118). It was in this particular region of Albania, well known for its breathtaking and epic landscape and its people’s proverbial hospitality, that Durham felt transported into an alien yet majestic world of living myths and legends, about which her European education had taught her almost nothing. Charmed by a reality she had never thought it existed, Durham remarks:

I think no place where human beings live has given me such an impression of majestic isolation from all the world. It is a spot where the centuries shrivel; the river might be the world’s well-spring, its banks the fit home of elemental instincts – passions that are red and rapid.

(Durham 1985, 119)

High Albania was for Edith Durham the land before time, or as she puts it, ‘the Land of the Living Past’ (Ibid., 344). In this newly discovered reality she had no wish to be reminded of the civilisation she had left behind. High Albania was a place of such an ‘absorbing interest’ for Durham that she often ‘forgot all about the rest of the world’ (Ibid., 123). In High Albania Durham came into contact with an enchanting wilderness, which explains why when she was there she commented: ‘I never want books. They are dull compared to the life stories that are daily enacted among the bare grey rocks’ (Ibid., 128).

This mountainous part of Albania was for Durham something of an exotic oasis at the heart of Europe, which at times she felt was better left unspoilt. In High Albania Durham the humanist and champion of the rights of small nations is at times subdued by Durham the selfish Western tourist who seems to believe that the world and other nationalities exist primarily for her own recreation and entertainment. Thus Durham emerges as judge and jury; she alone knows best what is good or bad for the Albanians and what they should and should not do.
Her patronizing attitude is seen especially in the comments she makes when hearing that the farmers in one of the most fertile regions in Albania would welcome the building of a new railway:

\[ I \text{ looked at the room full of long, lean cat-o’-mountains, and wondered whether it would benefit anybody – let alone themselves – to turn them into fat corn and horse dealers. } \]

‘Civilisation is vexation,
And progress is as bad,
The things that be, they puzzle me,
And Cultchaw drives me mad.’

(Durham 1985, 140)

Durham was not the only one who would have preferred the Albanians to remain ‘uncivilised’. ‘God cast you into Hell,’ a priest once said to her, ‘that you might tell of it in England – that you might cry to every Catholic in England: ‘Save these people!’’ (Ibid., 197).

Durham understood the Albanians well enough to realise that they were not ‘wild’ and ‘uncivilised’. She tried hard to comprehend and explain, sometimes successfully sometimes not, why they were lagging behind other European nations. Occasionally, however, Durham glorifies the primitive/primeval life in which contemporary Albanians lived. Dazzled by the festive atmosphere she witnessed throughout the feast of St. John, she remarked:

\[ I \text{ thought how dull London dinner-parties are, and wondered why people ever think they would like to be civilised. This was as good as being Alice at the Mad Hatter’s Tea-party. } \]

(Ibid. 175)
If not taken out of context, Durham’s remarks on the Albanians’ lack of civilisation are on the whole light-hearted. I personally enjoy reading her work not because she wrote, and in most cases favourably, about Albania. She had the ability to rediscover Albania, to reinterpret the country, the people and the culture not just for the European audience still largely ignorant of this ‘terra incognita’, but also for the Albanians. Her independent mind, her eye for details and her sincere and fresh narrative are bound to continue to attract the attention of open-minded readers who do not judge Albania and the Albanians simply on the basis of hearsay, ill-informed and often hostile literature.

*High Albania* depicted only one Albanian region. Durham made it clear from the beginning of the book that the conditions there ‘are very different from those in South Albania, and it is with the wildest part of High Albania alone that this book deals’ (Ibid., 1). Did she offer this explanation simply because she wanted to clarify to the readers the scope and focus of her book, or because she was afraid lest her work would be seen as the ‘definitive’ picture of all Albania? Whatever her reasons were, it cannot be disputed that in *High Albania* and other works, Edith Durham introduced Albania and the Albanians to the British readers in a sympathetic light (although at times patronisingly) hardly seen before.

Edith Durham’s work belongs to the best tradition of the British travel writing where foreigners are depicted not as the alien and hostile ‘other’ but as fellow human beings who try hard, at times against all odds, to retain and protect their individual and national identity and integrity. Writers like Edith Durham, D. H. Lawrence, George Orwell and E. M. Forster presented a new picture and perception of overseas peoples and cultures to a largely ignorant and at times misinformed British readership.

The British, like most people in the West, were frequently ignorant and misinformed about East Europeans during the Cold War. The chasm between
the two Blocks (what a telling word this is!) became so ridiculously wide creating the impression that the Berlin Wall was a great divide between two completely different human species, which, by a weird coincidence, had the same physique. Never before had humanity dehumanised itself more than during the 1950-1990 period. We humans have rarely been completely at peace with each other anywhere or at any time, but the venom between East and West in the second half of the twentieth century is unique. That human beings could display such an intense hatred for fellow human beings is very unsettling in itself. That this should happen immediately after the horrors of the World War II became common knowledge makes this hostility the more inexplicable and disturbing.

The Berlin Wall but not its legacy is now history. I was on the East side. Those fortunate enough to be on the West side were always trying hard to reach out for us, to introduce democracy in our ideology-ridden countries so that we too could enjoy the right to speak our minds. This was our dream, everybody’s dream, and we cherished it stubbornly. When the Berlin Wall was demolished, however, and remember that its destruction commenced on the East side, our dream gradually turned sour. We saw that our ‘friends’ in the West had built imaginary walls about us in the East. We were the unfortunate people deserving the charity of the West, but that was it. The possibility of being seen as equals was beyond question. We were perceived and unfortunately continue to be seen as different and inferior.

Brick walls are demolished easily, but not the walls in our minds. And the most resistant of all walls are those built by books. Since the collapse of Communism, Western literature has hardly presented Eastern Europe sympathetically. There is an ongoing tendency to patronise and pigeonhole East Europeans. The phantom of Bertha in Jane Eyre (1847), for instance, is still present in contemporary English fiction. British writers should learn from the courage and far-sightedness of George Eliot and Wilkie Collins who
portrayed ‘strangers’ as hard working and decent individuals capable of and willing to give to the society probably more than they received from it. The Silas Marners of today are expected to be grateful to Britain for the humiliating charitable pittance that comes in the form of vouchers.

If one is to assess the treatment of outsiders in the United Kingdom in the light of some politicians’ stale remarks, the impression is that this is the most welcoming country in the world. We cannot welcome foreigners, however, if we demean their country of origin, if we brainwash our own citizens that we should help the unfortunate strangers to show off how economically strong we are, and what a liberal, open minded and tolerant Christian society ours is. In contemporary English literature as well as in the British and Western media, Eastern Europe is still depicted as a distant, and mysterious land, where almost everything is corrupt, and everybody extremely poor, and so at the inevitable mercy of our charity.

There has always been an element of dogma and propaganda in English literature. Willy-nilly, even the best of English fiction writers have expressed directly or indirectly their allegiance to the British Empire, thus undermining their credibility and independence as artists. No national literature is completely impartial to outsiders, and English literature is certainly no exception to this rule.

It is no surprise that Charlotte Brontë presented Bertha, a foreigner, as mad and inarticulate. After all, Brontë did in Jane Eyre what the Bard had already done a couple of centuries before her in The Tempest. Bertha is Caliban’s daughter. Shakespeare and Brontë are some of the first-rate writers whose works uncover eternal truths about human nature, yet are hardly entirely free from restricting nets of allegiances to nationalism, empire, colonialism, religion, and more disturbingly, ‘race’.
But the Britain of Shakespeare and Brontë is not the Britain of the twenty-first
century. So much has changed especially recently here and throughout the
world. However, some references to foreigners, especially to East Europeans in
contemporary English literature seem to have been taken verbatim from works
written a century ago or from the boys’ magazines many of which appeared
after the Great War. Referring to the Gem’s tendency to stereotype different
nationalities in 1939, George Orwell remarks in his essay ‘Boys’ Weeklies’:
‘The assumption all along is not only that foreigners are comics who are put
there for us to laugh at, but that they can be classified in much the same way as
insects’ (1995, 178). Children’s magazines should not be considered as serious
literature but, being read by many young people, they may suggest that those
who live overseas are strange, uncivilised, ridiculous, comic or not worth
taking seriously. What is more disturbing, as Orwell rightly notes, those young
readers would never read anything else in life except newspapers (Ibid., 183).

Considering that most of these boys’ weeklies were the property of the
Amalgamated Press and were closely linked up with the Daily Mail and the
Financial Times, one is bound to think that the ‘free’ and ‘fair’ British press
has never been and hardly is that ‘free’ and ‘fair’. According to Orwell, the
purpose of this literature is to convince the young readers that:

> the major problems of our time do not exist, that there is nothing wrong
> with laissez-faire capitalism, that foreigners are unimportant comics and
> that the British Empire is a sort of charity-concern which will last for
> ever

(Ibid., 183).

Orwell goes so far as to suggest that in England, popular imaginative literature,
indeed all fiction from the novels in the mushroom libraries downwards, is
censored in the interests of the ruling class (Ibid., 185).
The denigration of foreigners, especially the Albanians, is an ongoing process in the British media. This denigration also manifests itself in the works of authors like Robert Carver and Malcolm Bradbury and especially in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*. Whether or not Rowling will still be a celebrity writer in the future is something we have to wait and see, and perhaps not very important. That her legacy will endure, however, and not necessarily for all the good reasons, is a much better bet, and this is very important.

*Harry Potter* invites young and not so young readers into a world of fantasy, where things are often as complicated and ugly as in the real world, but where, with a bit of magic, good eventually wins over evil. As a piece of escapism, *Harry Potter* is among the best. This escapist work, however, often takes the easily impressionable young readers to a world of foreign lands similar to that described in some of the boys’ weeklies in the first half of the twentieth century. Different from the weeklies’ scribes, Rowling has chosen to ridicule and dehumanise not the French, the Italians, the Chinese, the Indians, or the Arabs – some of the usual victims in the boys’ magazines. Rowling prefers to demean Albania in her ‘imaginative masterpiece’. In *Harry Potter*, Albania is the country where the evil ‘Dark Lord’ and his dedicated followers find a perfect hideout. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), we learn that Lord Voldemort is ‘currently hiding in the forests of Albania’ (242). In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2002), the witch Bertha Jorkins is said to have gone on holiday to Albania and ‘never came back’ (58). She is believed to have disappeared in Albania where Voldemort was rumoured to be last (292-3). That Bertha Jorkins definitely arrived in Albania is confirmed by the fact that ‘she met her second cousin there. And then she left the cousin’s house to go south and see an aunt…and she seems to have vanished without trace, en route’ (388). In the same book, Voldemort himself explains that his loyal servant Wormtail:
‘sought me in the country where it had long been rumoured I was hiding...helped, of course, by the rats he met along the way. Wormtail has a curious affinity with rats, do you not, Wormtail? His filthy little friends told him there was a place deep in an Albanian forest, that they avoided, where small animals like themselves had met their deaths by a dark shadow that possessed them’

(Rowling 2002, 567-9)

Later on in the book we learn from Crouch, another servant of Voldemort, that his master ‘had captured Bertha Jorkins in Albania’, tortured and finally killed her (597).

I do not know why, of all countries, Rowling has chosen Albania as the place that harbours evil creatures. If she has done this for a laugh, then this is a cheap and irresponsible laugh at the expense of a European country that has become small, ‘insignificant’ and ‘voiceless’ largely as a result of political witchcraft and wizardry practiced beyond its artificially drawn and imposed borders. I am inclined to believe that Rowling’s choice of Albania is an indication of the intellectual arrogance and ignorance often displayed by Western authors when writing about, to borrow Edward W. Said’s phrase, ‘lesser peoples’. By choosing Albania as the right habitat for the evil to reside in, Rowling reveals how little she knows about the world beyond the British shores, and in particular about a tiny spot like Albania.

*Harry Potter* could be a well researched book as far as witchcraft and wizardry go. Rowling is obviously out of her depth, however, when she tries to connect her world of magic with the real world. Her references to Albania reveal a disturbing tendency in contemporary Western literature. Writers like Rowling, and more experienced scribes than her, seem to think that ‘vivid fantasy’ is an excuse and a cover for their limited knowledge of the real world. In the works of writers like Rowling the reality, especially the overseas reality, is sketched
through some incoherent and often incorrect sweeping statements, which often undermine the value of the best works of fiction.

A little learning is always a dangerous thing, especially when this is manifested in books intended for children. The worst books, Orwell (1995, 182) warns us, ‘are often the most important, because they are usually the ones that are read earliest in life’. This is not to say that *Harry Potter* belongs to this category of books. Rowling, however, does no favour to millions of young readers in this country and overseas by introducing them in such an irresponsible way to a country about which she obviously does not know much. Albania and other Eastern European countries deserve a more objective and sympathetic treatment in Western and English literature. It is not very rare that a heart of darkness starts on the pages of a book.

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