



DE GRUYTER
OPEN

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN REVIEW

Volume 8, 2014

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Life of Edith Durham

By

Antonia Young

University of Bradford

Robert Elsie and Bejtullah Destani, *The Blaze in the Balkans: Selected Writings 1903–41: M. Edith Durham*. I.B.Tauris, London, 2014. 214pp. ISBN: 978–1–46885 710–0.

Marcus Tanner, *Albania's Mountain Queen: Edith Durham and the Balkans*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2014, 293pp. ISBN: 978–1–28086–819–9.

ISSN 1752–7503

DOI: 10.2478/caeer-2014-0008

© 2014 CEER

First publication

Central and Eastern European Review

Robert Elsie and Bejtullah Destani, *The Blaze in the Balkans: Selected Writings 1903–41: M. Edith Durham*. I.B.Tauris, London, 2014. 214pp. ISBN: 978–1–46885 710–0.

Marcus Tanner, *Albania's Mountain Queen: Edith Durham and the Balkans*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2014, 293pp. ISBN: 978–1–28086–819–9.

It might appear that three books featuring the sub-heading of Mary Edith Durham in just two years could be superfluous. However, each looks at very different aspects of Durham's life.

As more people have come to recognize Mary Edith Durham's extraordinary devotion to and involvement in the Balkans, she is regaining the admiration she enjoyed during most of her lifetime. Since the tragedies of the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, historians and others have looked back at Durham's remarkable work in the region. Bejtullah Destani in particular has championed Durham for the last 30 years, publishing on her intermittently.

Elizabeth Gowing's *Edith and I: On the trail of an Edwardian Traveller in Kosovo*, published last year, made a gripping personal investigation into the life of Mary Edith Durham, giving the reader a clear picture of the fascinating person behind Durham's published works.¹

Now we have two more books, further exploring these extraordinary achievements, at the same time setting her writing in clear historical context. The collection of 24 of Durham's writings (in *The Blaze*), reprinted from 14 different journals, covers a vast range of subjects concerning Albanians, Bulgarians, Serbs, Macedonians and Montenegrins. Tanner's *Edith Durham* places her very firmly within the context of contemporary political events.

1903 'The Blaze in the Balkans' (published the month following the Macedonian Ilinden uprising against the Ottoman Empire) records the fact that one point of agreement between all Balkan peoples at the time, was the need to get rid of the Ottomans.

The chapter in *The Blaze*, 'My Golden Sisters: a Macedonian Picture' first published in 1904, draws the comment from Elizabeth Gowing, in her introduction to

¹ See Central and Eastern European Review (2013), <http://www.brad.ac.uk/ssis/ceer/volume-7-2013/>

Central and Eastern European Review

The Blaze; (that this is the kind of description of relief work that Oxfam would never now give) and from Marcus Tanner when he juxtaposes Durham's commentary with contemporary writers and politicians.

The variety of Durham's writings collected for *The Blaze* gives the reader a taste of her very wide field of interests and pursuits during her months-long visits to the Balkans—from her early relative unconcern about personal safety ('Balkan Sketches: Life is Cheap') to later, much more serious analysis ('The Balkans as a Danger Point') by which time she had developed an anti-Serb stance.

Durham's earliest Balkan visits were to Serbia and Montenegro; several of the chapters on *The Blaze* describe these areas as she perceived them: 'As Others See it: a Sketch in Old Servia'. A later article analyses National Serbian songs as a way to understand the people.

Durham's observation on Albania that it has been 'hurled from the Early Middle Ages into the twentieth Century, hurled suddenly and pitilessly' (p. 48), is followed by her description of traditional dug-out boats suddenly being replaced by steamers (which connected Montenegro with Albania by boat across Lake Shkodër/Skadar—a transportation link which a hundred years later has not been renegotiated, thanks to closing borders since the Second World War).

Both books highlight Durham as a self-trained anthropologist, who took great pains both to describe and to collect tales and artifacts, making an immense contribution to the preservation of folklore in the southern Balkans; for example she wrote articles on 'The Bird Tradition' and 'Head-hunting' (both reprinted in *The Blaze*). As a woman, she was able to enter the domain of women, where the more frequent foreign writers, as men, were not able to do. On the other hand, as a foreigner, she was also accepted into the mens' world of politics and diplomacy. Tanner's book very ably gives context to all the original Durham writing in *The Blaze*, especially in the changes of attitude in London, as power changed from one government official to another.

Durham responds to the Russian assertion that an invasion of Scutari (now Shkodër) would be 'useless' in her article 'The Advance Guard of the War' first published in 1912. Bitter experience proved to her that 'the aftermath of every war is illness - not wounds'. In 'Miseria', she complains that the wonderfully equipped new hospitals prepared in European towns to receive war wounded, remain empty while

Central and Eastern European Review

those treating the sick at the warfront are confronted with appalling conditions and lack of medication.

‘Hil’ the longest piece in *The Blaze*, tells a gripping tragic tale of appalling poverty. Maybe the two most unexpected of MED’s descriptions are those of the Cuttlefish Cult and her own religious argument that it inspired; and Ritual Nudity in Europe, in which she describes some very specific instances that she came across.

In Montenegro she found that Prince Nikola supported the Great Serbian Idea (p. 134). Durham turned her hotel room into a workshop producing garments and even shoes for Montenegrin refugees fleeing Ottoman atrocities.

But MED’s concerns turned to Albania whose people she came to admire, and for whose justice she was prepared to fight. She observed that seven countries’ armies overran Albania between 1914 and 1920; yet in two years 528 schools opened there.

When illness struck Durham during a visit to Albania, she was confined to bed in Shkodër, where doctors, somewhat disbelieved her illness as she did not scream (as she observed those in any pain to do, during her hospital work in Ohrid). Instead they argued over what cure to use.

Tanner relates the interesting sudden rise, and almost as sudden fall, of Montenegro as an important player in the Balkans, and particularly Durham’s considerable role there—something which does not come through so clearly in her own published writing. Through his thorough research of Durham’s private letters, he brings to life Durham’s hopes and fears, for example her concern, eight years before the assassination in Sarajevo of the Archduke, while in Dubrovnik, of the forthcoming problems in Bosnia, observing that the 1913 Conference in London declared Albania an independent state. As Tanner notes, the Conference failed to clarify its borders, thus creating instability with neighbouring countries (p. 106). He sees Durham’s concern and influence in this matter to merit the gratitude she earned from Albanians. In discussion of the results of the Berlin Congress, Durham shows how personal tragedy ensued through border misunderstanding due to the Albanian / Montenegrin border being patrolled by outsiders with no language common to those living in the region.

Tanner also demonstrates how British sympathy burgeoned for Serbia during the First World War; in particular through reporting on ‘the Serb army’s retreat through the snows of Albania towards the coast, frostbitten soldiers carrying the old

Central and Eastern European Review

King through the mountains on a stretcher' (p. 205). He points out how British ignorance concerning Kosovar Albanians allowed the UK based Kosovo Day Committee from 1916, to increase further British concern for Serbia. As younger, more academic, writers, as well as, later, Rebecca West, took up publication of analyses of Balkan issues, this sometimes led to the denigration of Durham. This coincided with the time when Durham's health declined, and her influence also declined, and although she continued to write and publish, her focus was on the earlier times with which she was familiar in the region. Tanner implies that she felt demoted from 'Queen of the Highlands' as she had been known in Albania, to a simple spinster. However, she continued quietly to receive considerable recognition for her years of work as a self-trained anthropologist: for example, in her appointment as the first woman to hold the post of Vice President of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

Tanner completes the picture of Durham's life, recounting further travel after her last visit to Albania in 1921, through to her last foreign travel in 1937. He also records her dislike of Zog, and fear that he might look her up when he took refuge in London in 1941.

Book covers to both books feature a young Edith Durham in the same high-necked dress. Tanner's book has two maps and 18 photographs.

Antonia Young