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the land of the living past —

Edith Durham in Prokletije



by Rudolf Abraham

Early one morning in the summer of 1908, a small party left the village of Thethi in northern Albania. And, having floundered through the waist-deep snow which still choked the Qafa e Pejë or Ćafa Pes, the travellers descended into the Ropojana valley, in what is now Montenegro.

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The party consisted of Edith Durham, that redoubtable Balkan traveller and champion of Albanian affairs, together with her loyal guide and friend Marko Shantoja, the local Franciscan

padre and his servant, and a headman from the village of Okolo (Okol). Their destination was Vuthaj (nowadays Vusanje), a small, predominantly Muslim village in the Ropojana valley which, along with the rest of the Plav-Gusinje area, was then still part of Albania.

Having passed a lake, “very blue and deep but made, I was assured, entirely of snow-water”, they continued along the valley, to arrive at Vusanje, where Durham noted the small mosque with a wooden minaret. The habits of the lake, and the distinctive type of mosque, remain unchanged to this day. Durham’s book, *High Albania*, describes her journey. It is a classic piece of travel literature.

ABOVE: an old mill in the Ropojana valley, just outside the village of Vusanje (photo by Rudolf Abraham)

“Do you know the charm of such a land? It has the charm of childhood. It has infinite possibilities — if it would but grow up the right way. It has crimes and vices; I know them all (that is to say, I trust there are not any more). But it has primitive virtues, without many of the meannesses of what is called civilisation. It is uncorrupted by luxury. It is cruel — but so is Nature. It is generous as a child that gives you its sweets. It can be trusting and faithful. And it plays its own mysterious games, that no grown-ups can hope to understand.”

from Edith Durham, *High Albania* (1909)

Durham's ultimate goal was the village of Gusinje. The extreme difficulty in reaching Gusinje led her to describe it as “the Lhasa of Europe, closed to all,” and the not-so-far distant Plava (Plav) as “the other forbidden city”. Ironically, Plav is now the most visited place in the area, but a hundred years ago this remote mountain region was among the most inaccessible parts of Europe, both by virtue of the difficulty of the terrain and the reluctance of the locals to tolerate any visitors. Edith Durham had tried previously to reach Gusinje from Andrijevica in Montenegro in 1903, without success; such was her determination to reach it on this occasion that she declared herself ready to “see Gusinje and die”.

To avoid arousing suspicion, Durham reluctantly agreed that she would be introduced as the sister-in-law of one of the party, and that she should hold her tongue. In keeping with the part, she was also obliged to put away her camera and her fountain pen — although she did manage to obtain some surreptitious photos of Vusanje, and later even a few distant shots of Gusinje, all with the padre's excited encouragement. “Quick...” cried the padre, thrusting the camera into her hands, “you are the first foreigner as near as this!” The whole adventure appears to have been great sport to the padre, who was at least partly motivated by a desire to pilot the Englishwoman closer to Gusinje than an Austrian (who had succeeded in making himself exceptionally unpopular over the hills in Thethi) had recently managed to get. “I was a pawn in the game of annoying Austria,” wrote Durham.

Durham's hopes that she would be allowed to continue to Gusinje were not realized. As

it was, she spent much of her stay in Vusanje confined to a *kula* (the local tower-like, fortified house), and then a summer house set further back up the valley. Word had already reached Gusinje of her arrival in the area, and not two hours after Durham's party returned across the hills, men were sent to Vusanje to arrest her. The journey back over the snowy pass was enlivened by the search for a sheep which had fallen from the trail, and which later provided supper.

Edith Durham's excursion into Prokletije was only one of many she made that summer through the remote mountains of northern Albania. As it happened, 1908 was also a year of historic events, and Durham was in Scutari (nowadays Shkodër) in August during the Young Turks' rebellion. Durham ran through the town with the tribesmen, screaming wildly, and blazing ball-cartridge from an old Martini. “For the time being, at any rate,” she wrote of the occasion, “I belonged to the mountains”. She also took advantage of the ensuing *besa* (peace), declared by the various factions, to visit Kosovo.

Durham's *High Albania* was published in 1909. It remains one of the most perceptive and utterly absorbing books ever written about the Balkans, and a unique record of an area which Edith Durham described as “the land of the living past”. ■

For a biographical note on Rudolf Abraham, who wrote this piece, see page 19 in this issue of HIDDEN EUROPE. The May 2008 issue of the magazine had a feature on the Prokletije mountains, also written by Rudolf. It was not until after the first Balkan war (1913) that the villages of Gusinje and Vusanje — mentioned in the text above — were ceded by Albania to Montenegro.