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Edith Durham began her travels late in life on her doctor's orders. She sailed to Montenegro and began a love affair with the Balkans that lasted the rest of her life. This is her passionate account of life in the formidable mountainous terrain of Northern Albania.

High Albania: A Victorian Traveller's Balkan Odyssey Details

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From Reader Review High Albania: A Victorian Traveller's Balkan Odyssey for online ebook

Mergim Ukaj says

Kur flitet për këtë libër nuk mund të diskutohet shkrimi (mendoj është i mir), por përmbajtja. Është xhevahir për sa i përket njohjes së Shqiptarëve dhe mënyrës së jetesës që ishte komplet e ndikuar nga politikat e asaj kohe, e më saktë nga pushtimi ottoman, por dhe sllav.

Nuk e kuptoj pse nxenesit shqiptarë të Kosovës nuk njihen me këtë libër nga shkolla fillore; e them të Kosovës ngaqë aty u shkollova unë. Nuk njihem dhe aq me sistemin e edukimit në Shqipëri e vise tjera shqiptare që duhet të kenë një sistem edukimi shqip. Pese çfarë për përmbajtjen. Njoh veten më mirë falë kësaj pune.

Five stars for the content. I got to know myself better through it.

T. says

The book was of interest because of our upcoming trip to Albania. It details the lives and customs of the mountain tribes, leading up to the Constitution of 1909.

Amy says

This was very informative from a research perspective. It's an Englishwoman's study of various Albanian tribes in 1907. Fascinating. And the author reminded me of Amelia Peabody!

LeAnn says

Written just half a dozen years before World War I, British anthropologist Edith Durham's account of her travels throughout northern Albania presents a fascinating picture of a place that she dubs "the Land of the Living Past." In 1908, as Durham bravely rode through the untamed Albanian wilderness where joy is celebrated with gunshots into the air and bloody vengeance is pursued whenever a man's honor has been insulted, the Ottoman Empire and other European nations played political and diplomatic games with the Balkans. Given what happens just a few short years later in 1914 (when a Serbian terrorist assassinates Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, sparking World War I), Durham's insight into the plight of the Albanians as well as their Balkan neighbors in Serbia and Montenegro is chillingly prescient.

I particularly liked Durham's obvious affection—mingled with exasperation, true—for the Albanian people. Her low opinion of their inability to comprehend effective government and the poisonous futility of blood debt is as clear as her disdain for their hardheaded obtuseness regarding the treatment of women and marriage. Several times in her travelogue, she comments on the similarities between the superstitions of the Albanians and the average British citizen despite the great disparity in wealth and education between the two countries. Indeed, she finds Albanian hospitality a decided advantage over British society. Further, she laments that modern, machine-manufactured and shoddy goods had started supplanting traditional, handmade products (yet at the same time lamenting the sheer waste of some traditional practices such as

using axes to chip away most of trunk in order to get a single plank of lumber).

Vicky Hunt says

The Land of the Living Past

In a traveler's history that is both descriptive and interesting to read, Mary Edith Durham penned the page that was turned in Albania's history; from a loose tribal 'lawless people' to the new Constitution under the restored Prenk Pasha. She traveled there in 1908, traveling through much of High Albania and into a town in present day Kosovo. She recorded the customs and feelings of the people on most every subject, most of all on the subjects of honor and their desire for leadership.

Blood Feuds were the big problem, and that was their answer to the question of honor, just as men in every country fight wars. But, theirs was on a more interpersonal level since they were tribally organized. The book is filled with details about everyday life, and how Durham fit into the picture. All in all, it makes quite interesting reading. And, it was really funny in moments, especially with her ability to relate stories, as in The Tale of the Ugly Bride.

Durham is unprejudiced in her expressed views, and tolerant of other cultures. The most valuable part for me was the history of the cultural groups in the region and how different people came to live there; as well as the reasons for the ethnic rivalries stemming from differences in language and religion. She readily accepted the customs of the people uncritically, describing with interest marriage customs, education, and the like. She drew pictures of the people and houses. She also revealed a great deal of the political situation at the time with the Young Turks, Austria's espionage, and the European involvement in the government of Albania.

I read this classic in the Kindle format for my Journey Around the World in 80 Books for Albania. It is a highly recommendable read for anyone interested in the history of the Balkan Peninsula. My next stop is Greece.

Ellen says

Edith Durham was a British traveler of the early twentieth century who focused much of her travel and writing on Albania. At the time, the West knew little about Albania – the country was largely unexplored. In her travelogue, High Albania, Durham notes at times the gross inaccuracy of the maps she's traveling with, giving some sense of just how unknown the region was.

Durham occasionally delves into anthropology, but High Albania is a book best read as the travel diary of a woman in love with the Albanian people. There's some discomfort here for a reader visiting the book over a hundred years after it was first written, as Durham frequently offers cringe-worthy statements about the childlike nature of the Albanians, or broad criticisms of the Muslims she encounters on her travels. (Though she never goes as far as the Christian Albanians, who claim you can always tell when a Muslim is in the room by the stench.) But read with a sense of the time at which it was written, and a knowledge of Durham's unabashed love for Albanians – that other famous female chronicler of the Balkans, Rebecca West, criticized Durham for returning home "with a pet Balkan people established in their hearts as suffering and innocent,

eternally the massacree and never the massacrer” – this is a stunning glimpse at Northern Albania just before the first World War.

I usually keep my reviews out of the realm of the personal, but in the case of High Albania I'm not sure there's a way to do so, or even a reason to try. One of the things I most loved about Durham's writing was that it highlighted so many of the things I felt and experienced when I lived in Macedonia, over a hundred years after she made the trip she writes about in this book. There is something awing about getting a glimpse of the continuity of a regional culture, and to see that for all the aspects of life that have changed in Northern Albania (and also in Western Macedonia – I'm extrapolating, because although there are a number of real distinctions between the Albanian cultures and religions in the two countries, and between Macedonian Muslims and Albanian Muslims, there are also a lot of commonalities, broadly speaking) there are many that are just the same. When Durham eats at a sofra, for instance, I was drawn back to my first time eating at a sofra with my host family in Debar, and to some of the traditions they explained over the two years I lived with them.

The women brought warm water in an ibrik and soap, and a clean towel for each. We washed our hands, the sofra was spread with the men's dinner. We squatted round (I am always classed with the buck-herd) and the women withdrew to a respectful distance.

The soup, fowl, eggs, and milk were excellent. We ate with wooden ladles from a common platter. The Kastrati took the breast-bone of the fowl and held it against the light, scrutinised its markings, and declared it foretold no evil to this house – which was very polite of him.

[...]

We washed our hands and rose from the sofra. The women hurried up and carried the remains to the other end of the room, where they devoured them. (64)

High Albania is composed of moments like this. There's no real organizing principle evident behind Durham's writing; at points, there is even a jumpiness to the text that suggests a direct transcription of notes she made while traveling. Durham's shifting from describing travel conditions to a blood feud (one of her main focuses as she writes) to a traditional story gives us a vivid portrait of Albanian life. That Durham chose not to attempt better organization was actually one of my favorite aspects of the book, as the crush of information about all aspects of Albanian life so closely mirrors the actual experience of moving to a new country and attempting to assimilate cultural traditions and history and habits all at one moment.

In recounting traditional stories, Durham also offers a glimpse of the sort of favorite stories that will rarely show up in a history book, and that highlights some aspects of the Albanian character that we might otherwise miss. She includes perhaps five or ten stories of a few pages each in High Albania, but there are also briefer examples of this type of story – here's one.

The tribesmen love a joke. It is usually a tale of a successful swindle. Thus: A man bought a donkey at the bazar and led it away. Two thieves followed him. One slipped the halter from the donkey, and went off with it. The other put the halter on his own head, and followed the man. When the first thief had had time to escape with the donkey, the second began to pull and groan. The astonished man looked back, and found the donkey gone and a man in its place. "Where is my donkey?" he asked. "Alas!" cried the thief, "I am that luckless being. A wicked magician turned me into a donkey for fifteen years. The time has just come to an end. I have

nothing, and know not where to go.” The kind man then released him, and gave him some money. (212)

As Durham writes, the idea of the trickster is such a common one in Balkan stories – it is these characters, in fact, who are the “heroes” of the story. In the despairing way in which they speak of the Turkish government, and of the possibility of having greater rule and fewer blood feuds in the Northern region, there is a sense of why this tale of the swindle is such a central one in Albanian culture. For a group of people so removed from government, who may have heard of the great workings of the West or the Ottoman Empire but saw no evidence of them in their own lives, for people who might work hard every day but have their lives changed by one instance of good or bad luck, the notion of a man tricking his way into a better situation must have been an apt one. Durham does a fantastic job of pointing the reader to this, and to so many other factors influencing the lifestyles and mindsets of the Albanians she meets.

High Albania is a great read for anyone into old-timey travelogues, the Balkans, or casual anthropology.

Kavita says

Mary Edith Durham was a remarkable woman for her time. Unmarried and unfettered, she carved out a life for herself as a traveller and an author, so much so that she was highly respected by the people she wrote about. The Albanians even went as far as to refer to her as the Queen of the Highlanders.

High Albania is an account of Durham's trip to the Albanian mountains, where there was very little exposure to 'modern' life. Durham visits all the tribes and makes friends, going into detail about their customs and traditions. The tribesmen take to her and take good care of her. The duty of hospitality is paramount to these people and Durham herself is a good guest. She takes her hosts as they come and refrains from offending them. I liked the way Durham behaves with utmost respect and stops short of judging them, despite not agreeing with some of their ideas. With little access to education, law & order, and justice, she understands how difficult it is for Albanians up on the mountains to progress with respect to issues like blood feuds and women's rights. Maybe modern people could learn something from her!

One thing that Durham focuses on is the prevalence of blood feuds in Albanian society at this time. It was really interesting to see which tribes were in blood with whom, and how they carried out their fights. As long as there was lack of good governance, there could be no hope of eradicating this. Even today, the country faces this problem, more than a hundred years after Durham was there. There have been 12,000 murders in the last 25 years - lives taken for some obscure and outdated notion of 'honour'.

One thing I found strange is that Durham delves deeply into the male society and makes friends with the men, but disdains sitting with the women and learning about their lives. Though she sometimes argues with the men against the role of women in society, she does not present the women as individuals in her book. A great opportunity is missed to delve into the minds of the women and see what they thought about their restrictive lives. Another minor irritant was that Durham mostly met with the Christian tribes. The Muslim population was mostly ignored though she does describe the tribal customs. But this is done from a distance and the reader does not get the same sense of intimacy.

There were occasional splashes of humour throughout the book. For example: *Our driver suddenly loaded his Martini, and rushed off to shoot at two wild-geese on the river. It proved a wild-geese chase.* There were many such witticisms in the book, which made me smile. The way the Albanians considered the newly established Constitution was also quite funny, but also spoke to a deeper truth. Implementation and

involvement is just as important.

I knew nothing about Albania at all - not even where it was located. Now after reading this book, not only could I pinpoint the country on a map, I also know quite a bit of its history. This 1909 book is a snapshot in time of the old Albania. And that's the only way to read this book!

Kristian says

this book is about a lady named edith durham and her travels from Kosovo all through albania and montenegro. she is a french women who decided to write a book on albanians hospitality and everything about them. she wrote about how she had to travel when she was asleep with other albanians to hoti (my village), gruda, and all other little villages. she traveled at night on foot because if she traveled at day the serbs would have stopped her and killed her. so she enjoyed her stay, but she had to move on, she said how albanians gave up there bed and horse and food for her. just so she can be happy. albanians like to do that, they like making people feel as if they are in there own homes while on visit. she ran through some obstacles but she still had a great time. she also taught alot of albanians about french history. she was an interesting lady. i can connect this book to my life because i am albanian and i know alot about albanians and my countries history. i give this book a 5 because i got to learn more bout my history and i learned more about my people. i reccomend this book to albanians.

Sarah says

I probably wouldn't recommend this book unless you were really interested in Albanian history. The author provides great insight into the culture of early 20th Century Northern Albania. Some of her comments about ethnic relations can still be seen in the Balkans today. An interesting read, but it did get a bit dull a points.

Lee Grohse says

Loved this unusual book. Durham must have been a fascinating person to leave her tame, middle class English life and travel alone through the most remote and unexplored areas of the mountains of Albania during the first decade of the 20th century. And what a place it was! A world that time had bypassed. The primitive, violent culture of "blood" that allowed even the murder of young children to avenge a death or an insult, the isolation from the rest of European life, the unrelenting harshness of the land and the life were fascinating to read about. How did I get this far in life without hearing about Durham and her adventures and reporting about this part of the world?

Zan says

I've struggled to write this review because there's so little for me to say. Edith Durham saw the Balkans in 1908 perhaps as no Westerner had before and certainly never will again, and High Albania is a brilliant and engaging work of ethnography and travel writing. She writes in an intimate and conversational style, as if telling the story of her adventures to the reader directly, yet with an attention to detail and sensitivity to the

nuances of a wholly alien culture that come only from prolonged experience and careful observation. Her fondness and respect for all Balkan peoples, not least the Albanians, is apparent, and her writing lacks the judgement or presumption of superiority associated with cross-cultural observation of an earlier era, but is also uncontaminated by the academic jargon and intellectual posturing of contemporary anthropology. Rather, Durham's words feel like a direct conduit to facts on the ground in this fraught extremity of Europe's sick man six years before the advent of WWI, and the tensions are palpable. I could go through a laundry list of all the fascinating tidbits between High Albania's covers, but they're much better read for oneself. It's available for free online, so you have no excuse.

Martinxo says

Written at the turn of last century, this is a wonderful account by Edith Durham of her travels through the Albanian uplands. You can get a free copy for Kindle etc here: <https://archive.org/details/afg4972.0...>

Brenda Marcellino says

I quit reading this book because it could not hold my interest. I think I know less about WWI than WWII so I didn't truly understand what was going on in that area or era. Not a good book to start reading about.

Jonah says

Ms. Durham's book is the rival of Ms. West's "Black Lamb" (rated above)....also inferior - i couldnt get into it. More an anthropological notebook than anything else.

Rebecca says

As I am currently living in Northern Albania (although Ms. Durham did not make it to my neck of the woods on this trip), I think that this book is an interesting study on a culture and people that is all but gone 100 years later, but still echoes in the minds of the people living now. The pull of modernization is evident in her travels- the first Western woman to go through this uncharted land. While there have been many more Western women here since, it is still not so common and I feel like I am in some ways not so far removed from her experiences. She laments several times in the book how she can see how the culture would disappear as the roads and railroads got better, bringing in modern things and ideas and I see how that has happened. But the roads also took away most of the violence (but not all) that she focuses on so much. I think her analysis of the people's reaction to the Turkish constitution is really interesting in light of current politics- people still want the "government" to come in and solve all their problems and do not feel connected to or a part of this process. Durham notes that the mountain Albanians are political children- I think they have grown up, but are not quite adults yet, maybe still teenagers.
