PROFILES OF ALBANIANHOOD IN THE FOCUS OF BRITISH ROMANTIC LENSES

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Abstract: Due to various political, social and economic reasons, unfortunately, Albanian culture, literature and history at large, have long been traced and written by foreigners rather than Albanians. Although often labeled as a "mute" people who cannot express themselves because of the disappearance of historical sources, for the sake of truth, there has always been a considerable collective memory among Albanian people which has quite frequently been used by prominent writers and albanologists. The prototype of the romantic poet, Lord Byron, and British albanologist, Edith Durham, are probably the two main credentials in their efforts to serve as spokespersons of the Albanian life in the early nineteenth and early twentieth century in the eyes of the civilized world. The purpose of this paper is to present profiles of Albanianhood as recorded in the British romantic diary of Durham's "The burden of the Balkans" held during her first lengthy expedition, on horseback and on foot, through the wilds of southern and central Albania and the long poem by Lord Byron "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage"- Canto II. What brings these two names together despite the century-long span of their literary creativity seems to be the fact that their life ideology was led by the cult of individual freedom and at the same time by the romantic conviction that it is not acceptable, not even in the nature of things that the world remain immobile. The perception of the Albanian world according to these two perspectives has many converging points that do nothing but reinforce the truthfulness of both accounts although made in two very different genres of literary writing. The featuring of these compliances as well as graphic and photographic illustrations of the issues referred to remain within the scope of the present paper.

Keywords: Albanianhood, romantic, hospitality, generosity, freedom.

I. Introduction

Although often labeled as a "mute" people who cannot express themselves because of the lack or disappearance of historical sources, for the sake of truth, there has always been a considerable amount of collective memory among Albanian people which has quite frequently been exploited by prominent writers and albanologists. But, unfortunately, for quite a long time, due to various political, social and

economic reasons, Albanian culture, literature and history at large, even though surrounded by a “wall of silence”¹, have most frequently been traced back and written by foreign scholars, writers and adventurers rather than Albanians themselves. Just to name a few, we would mention Johann Georg von Hahn (1811-1863), commonly regarded as the father of Albanian studies, Pietro Marubi (1834-1903), and more recent ones Robin Hanbury-Tenison, Robert Elsie and several others. The prototype of the romantic poet, George Gordon Byron and the British albanologist, Mary Edith Durham, are probably the two main credentials in their efforts to serve as spokespersons of the Albanian life in the eyes of the civilized world, in the early nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The purpose of this paper is to present profiles of Albanianhood as perceived and reported by two of the earliest spokespersons and promoters of Albanian worth in the eyes of the civilized western world; Mary Edith Durham in her British romantic diary “The burden of the Balkans” (1905), held during her first lengthy expedition through the wilds of southern and central Albania and George Gordon Byron in his long poem “Childe Harold's Pilgrimage”-Canto II (originally published in 1812). In mapping such primordial considerations one cannot help but noticing many complying and converging points in both these perspectives which add to the relevance and truthfulness of the issues referred to in this paper.

The term “romantic” used here does not apply to any possible romantic tale subject. Rather, it implies a broad cluster of foreign attitudes towards Albanian nature, its past, the human mind and the Albanian people's experience. The perception of the Albanian world according to these two perspectives has many converging points that in our opinion do nothing but reinforce the truthfulness of both accounts although made in two very different genres of literary writing. The featuring of these compliances as well as graphic and photographic illustrations of the issues referred to remain within the scope of the present paper.

Byron's Albanian adventure began in 1809, near the Greek-Albanian border along the old caravan road linking the villages of southern Albania to the capital of ancient Greece, Ioannina. Together with his childhood friend and future politician John Cam Hobhouse, he crossed the Greek border and spent about 10 days travelling on horseback and foot through the Albanian region, which was considered the swamp of the Ottoman Empire, under the despotic domination of

¹ As referred to by Robert Elsie in one of his interviews.

Ali Pasha and inhabited by wild tribes, and where illiteracy was prevalent. Nevertheless, the travels gave Byron inspiration for a narrative poem that helped establish him as one of the most celebrated voices of the Romantic Movement.

On the other hand, a century later Mary Edith Durham travelled extensively in this most isolated and undeveloped area of the Balkans and Europe. Setting off in 1900 from London with a female companion on a cruise down the Adriatic coast to Kotor, Montenegro, she embarked on some twenty years of rare journeys and appalling humanitarian relief work in Macedonia, which at the time required a good deal of courage and physical resistance, in particular for a woman travelling on her own. Durham seemed not to lack any of these, actually. Travelling in the Balkans became Durham's passion and enchanting lifeline and within a few years, she became an expert on "the Balkan tangle" and an active campaigner for justice, supporting the locals in their fight against Ottoman rule. Her work was of genuine anthropological significance but what was to earn her particular fame was the writing of seven books on Balkan affairs. Edith Durham was the first Englishwoman to set foot in Albania in 1904. The lady drew on her writings and set them against a historical background in the years preceding the First World War. She published numerous newspaper articles about the region, including reports from the First Balkan War. Her records are still regarded as the pre-eminent guide to the customs and society of exotic early twentieth century Albania. Repulsive of the expansionist policies of Albania's neighboring countries in the North and South, she focused her attention and sympathies increasingly on Albania and the wild Albanians among which Edith Durham acquired quite a reputation for her interest in and support of their cause. Even after her last visit to the Balkans in 1921, she did continue to campaign on Albania's behalf over the next two decades. She was a founding member of the Anglo-Albanian Association and wrote many press articles and countless "letters to the editor" to counter ignorant views and to focus public attention on Albania and its plight. People hailed her as a savior, treating her as though she was "a knight errand come to redress their wrongs" (Durham, 235). Dubbed as the "Queen of the Highlanders" she was well received in the Albanian territories while passing unmolested despite being a lone female traveler. In an address in French, written on behalf of the entire Albanian community she received this warm welcoming note: "...We entreat you to continue the journey that you have begun. For you there will be no danger, and you will be preserved through all difficulties. We thank you from our hearts. May god save you!" (Durham, 236-237)

Likewise, onto the shores of Suli, whose reputation bodes an ill reception for Childe Harold, he discovers, however, that the people of Suli are generous in their hospitality to foreigners (stanza 68). Bandits prevent him from departing the way he had come, so Childe Harold and a band of men from Suli travel through the forest. When they make camp, Harold is treated to more Albanian revelry.

Vain fear! The Suliotes stretch'd the welcome hand,
Led them o'er rocks and past the dangerous swamp,
Kinder than polish'd slaves though not so bland,
And piled the hearth, and wrung their garments damp,
And fill'd the bowl, and trimm'd the cheerful lamp,
And spread their fare; though homely, all they had:
Such conduct bears Philanthropy's rare stamp --

To rest the weary and to soothe the sad,
Doth lesson happier men, and shames at least the bad.
(Byron, LXVIII)

II. British romantic attitudes towards Albanianhood - What did they see in the "land of oblivion"?

What brings these two names together despite the century-long span of their literary creativity seems to be the fact that their life ideology was led by the cult of individual and national freedom and at the same time by the romantic conviction that it is not acceptable, not even in the nature of things that the world remain immobile. Progression, the inexhaustible human effort to what is right, beautiful, perfect, as well as the standing up against dogmas, prejudices, violence, vices and the hypocritical moral norms of the present reality make the main romantic ideals and leading principles of both their well-to-do lifetimes, which were deep in humanitarian content. Inspired by the people's lives, traditions, culture and language, they turned their attention to the high virtues of ordinary people, their aspirations and democratic endeavors. From this point of view, both of them held the pervasive causes in high regards, sang to the high virtues, and affirmed peoples' cultural and patriotic traditions.

As we have already mentioned, much of the detail in both travelogues is autobiographical. The Byronic hero, Childe Harold, is often identified with Byron himself in his being a restless wanderer, alternating between despair and great energy and commitment to new experiences. One such experience is Harold's travelling through Albania, particularly his visit to Ali Pasha's palace in Tepelen while he is

enjoying the camaraderie and revels of the fighting men gathered around the bandit warlord. In a series of stanzas he describes the festivities of mixed band of warriors celebrating their lives violently, but with great enthusiasm.

The sun had sunk behind vast Tomerit,
[...]
Childe Harold saw, like meteors in the sky,
The glittering minarets of Tepalen,
Whose walls o'erlook the stream; and drawing nigh,
He heard the busy hum of warrior-men
Swelling the breeze that sigh'd along the lengthening glen.
He pass'd the sacred Haram's silent tower,
And underneath the wide o'er-arching gate
Survey'd the dwelling of this chief of power,
[...]
While busy preparation shook the court,
Slaves, eunuchs, soldiers, guests, and santons wait;
(Byron, LV-LVI)

Madam Durham, on the other hand, seems to have crossed the same trail as if to confirm the splendor of the "court" of Ali Pasha. "An hour brought us to the Vjosa with Tepelen majestic, high on its further bank, fortified by big stone walls, loop-holed and buttressed, built by Ali Pasha and left unfinished at his death. [...] The swirling, whirling river raged in a turbid torrent, foaming between the eight buttresses of the broken bridge... (Durham, 236)

Harsh, valiant, wild, proud, loyal were Albanians described by strangers who had closely known this people to be as scary with their callousness, as astonishing with their nobility, a feature inherited generation after generation as one of the highest virtues. Nevertheless, the two journeys reveal a very different Albania from what they had been described. They found harsh and independent Albanians as well as an atmosphere that matched their romantic and adventure ideals. In fact, from the very beginning of her impressions, Durham points out that "The Albanian is not so quickly explainable." (Durham, 229) His Albanian name meaning "son of an eagle" couldn't have been more fitting to "the untamed mountain man, with his keen eyes, aquiline nose and proud bearing." (Durham, 230) Whereas the land, "the land of the eagle" is, according to Byronic considerations, "Land of Albania of that rugged nurse of savage men, where Iskander, theme of the young, and beacon of the wise, rose," (Byron, XXXVIII). It is here where the wolf roams, "the eagle whets his

beak, / Birds, beasts of prey, and wilder men appear, / And gathering storms around convulse the closing year. (Byron, XLII)

Albania, as an exotic place of the East, of magnificent and virulent nature, of simple, patriarchal and even tribal order was a special kind of seduction for both writers. Lord Byron marveled by the mystical beauty and the unknownness of the Albanian land looks up to his exotic adventure on

[...]a shore unknown,
Which all admire, but many dread to view:
His [Harold's] breast was arm'd gainst fate, his wants were few;
Peril he sought not, but ne'er shrank to meet:
The scene was savage, but the scene was new:
This made the ceaseless toil of travel sweet.

(Byron, XLIII)

The beauty of Albania's natural landscapes conveys such sensations of ecstasy for both observers, to the extent that they seem to echo one-another's impressions. In this vein Miss Durham writes:

We were off into the heart of the mountains away over great loose stones, through wildly magnificent scenery, barren and lifeless, like the bones of a dead world; then over the pass and along a hoof-wide track high along the mountain-side. Down far, far below lay the valley of the Vjosa, green and fertile "all a-blowing and a- growing" and the heights beyond were fiercely blue. The leap from winter and the wilderness to spring and colour was dazzlingly sudden. Had I been a poet I should have written a verse about it. (Durham, 264)

And in fact Lord Byron did write a verse about this incomparable scenery by the charms of which he dazzles. He writes:

From the dark barriers of that rugged clime,
Ev'n to the centre of Illyria's vales,
Childe Harold pass'd o'er many a mountain sublime,
Through lands scarce noticed in historic tales;
Yet in famed Attica such lovely dales
Are rarely seen; nor can fair Tempe boast
A charm they know not; loved Parnassus fails,
Though classic ground and consecrated most,
To match some spots that lurk within this lowering coast.

(Byron 1835: XLVI)

The description of the great grandeur of Nature is never spared. The cult of nature, a characteristic of the literal currents of Sentimentalism and Enlightenment, took off in the works of romantic writers. Nature is a source of inspiration and is widely praised. Disgruntled by the surrounding environment, romantics seek peace and comfort in the midst of nature. Even though the main romantics pay particular attention to the heroes' interior world, they are also eager to paint the exterior decoration, the material environment, natural, and social conditions.

Rock, river, forest, mountain, all abound,
And bluest skies that harmonize the whole:
Beneath, the distant torrent's rushing sound
Tells where the volumed cataract doth roll
Between those hanging rocks, that shock yet please
the soul. (Byron, XLVIII)

Not only do romantic writings give picturesque vivid descriptions related to the hero, but they also deal with important social phenomena. Albanian's patriotism flames in the entire region and is far stronger than doctrinal religion. According to Durham, their "sense of nationality" is,

[one] which is impossible to be swept away by the mighty power of any religion. He is Albanian first. His religion comes afterwards. The celebrated fights among Albanians are always intertribal, or the quarrels of rival Begs. Christians may then fight Christians, and Moslems, Moslems. But in the face of a common foe, Moslem and Christian Albanians unite. Some nations have a genius for religion. The Albanians, as a race are singularly devoid of it. [...] The cross or the verses out of the Koran are simply amulets. Under all lies a bedrock of prehistoric paganism, which has perhaps, more influence in their lives than either of the other two. (Durham, 246)

Albanians' reasonable nationalism and their religious tolerance could not go unnoticed for Lord Byron either. He says:

Within, a palace, and without, a fort:
Here men of every clime appear to make resort.[...]
The Turk, the Greek, the Albanian, and the Moor,
Here mingled in their many-hued array,
While the deep war-drum's sound announced the close
of day. (Byron, LVI-LVII)

Miss Durham's eyes were so keen on details that she even shot and developed, in some romantic tints, a word-photography of the characteristic Albanian man,

with a nose like Dante's, with a drooping tip, narrow in the bridge and fine cut; very marked eyebrows that start straight and drop in a slant below the orbit bone; a long jawbone that sweeps down in a fine line and ends in a firm chin cleft at the tip. The skull is straight-backed, as though a piece has been chopped off, and there is great width just above the ears,... (Durham, 230). Poor people, hard-working, living strenuous dangerous lives in the little oasis they have made among the mountains, who tendered their hospitality with such kingly courtesy. (Durham, 221)

Figure 1. Tosk Costumes, Southern Albania²

Lord Byron contemplates on the wild Albanian “proudly treading the ground”, in a more rhetorically embroidered description as in the following lines:

The wild Albanian kirtled to his knee,
With shawl-girt head and ornamented gun,
And gold-embroider'd garments, fair to see:
(Byron, LVIII)

Romantic writers paid special attention to the research on people's material and spiritual life. They were inspired by this people's folk wisdom which was pondered on as anthem of the awakening of the national consciousness and of their own national rebirth.

Here a man's honour is very dear to him. His life is nothing compared to his honour. [...] A man, [...] must always do his duty though he never lived to see the results. Those that come after him will benefit by his work. But we are all born either with a good or a bad nature. It is our fate. A man though he works ever so hard, his work is vain if his nature be bad. (Durham, 272)

² Illustration by M. E. Durham

In Byron's words such a precious virtue would be conveyed in the following lines:

Fierce are Albania's children, yet they lack
Not virtues, were those virtues more mature.
Where is the foe that ever saw their back?
Who can so well the toil of war endure?
Their native fastnesses not more secure
Than they in doubtful time of troublous need:
Their wrath how deadly! but their friendship sure,
When Gratitude or Valour bids them bleed,
Unshaken rushing on where'er their chief may lead.
(Byron, LXV)

Romanticists often look back on the national past or idyllic patriarchal life. They prefer themes that reflect great popular movements and important social turning points, that is, plots of implacable and proud heroes, who are at the forefront of these movements and act with self-denial. Such heroes are even the Albanian women whom Lord Byron held in high regards with respect to their chastity, devotion and selflessness in being daughters, wives and mothers:

Here woman's voice is never heard: apart,
And scarce permitted, guarded, veil'd, to move,
She yields to one her person and her heart,
Tamed to her cage, nor feels a wish to rove:
For, not unhappy in her master's love,
And joyful in a mother's gentlest cares,
Blest cares! all other feelings far above!
Herself more sweetly rears the babe she bears,
Who never quits the breast, no meaner passion shares.
(Byron, LXI)

Whereas Durham ponders over the society's patriarchal organization in more lighthearted notes:

Meanwhile the two men withdrew, and sent their ladies in-the wife of each and several daughters-all closely veiled, giggling wildly and in great excitement. [...] Suddenly a hand was heard at the door. There was a wild seizing of wraps, several shrieks, and a rapid veiling. [...] The door opened, discreetly a few inches, and a small boy of four squeezed in. This was considered a vast joke. My lord, who was the Izbashi's only hope was well aware that he was the sole representative of the superior sex and gave himself the airs of a Pasha. Cross-legged on the

Kaimmakan's couch, he received the homage of the ladies with much dignity and satisfaction (Durham, 257). [Their houses] were speechlessly clean to begin with. The Dutch are said to be the cleanest housewives but I believe the south Albanian would run them hard. (Durham, 268)

Figure 1. Two Albanian women in Scutarine costumes³

Furthermore, Durham seemed to praise Albanians' struggle for knowledge and education even in the most unfavorable political and social circumstances. On the other hand, she regretted occasional Albanian strives in putting on some European airs often at the expense of loss of their national identity. The following paragraph clearly illustrates this point.

Their houses strove all to be European and I saw with regret that European carpets and walls badly frescoed by foreign workmen were more 'à la mode' than the paneled walls and native rugs that I had admired in humbler dwellings. [...] Elbasan's struggle for knowledge is very pathetic. You may find people who are bravely wrestling, unaided, with French and even German grammars. When it is remembered that no book can be imported into the Turkish Empire, except by smuggling without passing the Turkish censor, which suspects everything it cannot understand, that no book can be sold that has not the stamp of the local Vali in it, and that before any book can be read these people have to learn a foreign language, the number of well-informed and educated persons is remarkable. (Durham, 280-281)

Even though Durham seems to have been aware of this trend since the eve of the modern century and her attitude toward this inclination was to some degree ambiguous, overall, this demonstrative

³ A picture shot by the Viennese photographer Josef Székely during the 1863 Austro-Hungarian expedition to northern Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, led by Johann Georg von Hahn

presentation is firstly trying to suggest that Byron and Durham would be willingly and rhetorically uttering the very famous Albanian slogan "Oh, it feels so good to be Albanian." But our need for integration, cultural exchanges with countries where Albanians have emigrated, the need for political representation of the country, and education have always made Albanians quite tolerant of religious beliefs, foreign ideologies, cultures, and subcultures. This kind of propensity may in turn find its lively expression in the slogan "We love Albania to be like the rest of Europe!". National pride is an unequalled and legitimate feeling of each and every people in the world. We take pride in the struggles and achievements of our predecessors, our customs, traditions and aspirations as a nation and when the foregrounding of such values and respect comes from peoples overseas, this national feeling gets evermore stronger.

Now that Albania is hoping to be integrated into the European Union, this tiny piece of account of its past is absolutely timely, in our opinion, especially coming from eyewitnesses who were present before and at the eve of the country's birth, who loved it and who tried to write about it with a cool head.

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PROFILS ALBANAIS A LA LUMIERE DES CONSIDERATIONS ROMANTIQUES BRITANNIQUES

Les circonstances politiques, sociales et économiques diverses ont voulu que la culture, la littérature et l'histoire albanaises aient longtemps été retracées et écrites par des étrangers plutôt que par des Albanais. Bien que souvent qualifié de «muét», incapable de s'exprimer à cause de la disparition de sources historiques, le peuple albanais a toujours conservé une mémoire collective considérable qui a souvent été utilisée par des écrivains et des albanologues de renom.

Lord Byron, prototype du poète romantique, et Edith Durham, albanologue britannique se sont efforcés de devenir porte-paroles de la vie albanaise devant le monde civilisé au début du XIXe et au début du XXe siècle. Cet article se propose de présenter les profils de l'Albanie tels qu'ils sont consignés dans le journal romantique «Le fardeau des Balkans» d'Edith Durham, tenu lors de sa première longue expédition, à cheval et à pied, et à travers les étendues sauvages de long poème de Lord Byron «Le pèlerinage de Childe Harold» - Chant II. Malgré la distance d'un siècle de leur créativité littéraire, ces deux noms semblent unis par le culte de la liberté individuelle ainsi que la conviction romantique qu'un monde immobile n'est pas acceptable. Leur perception du monde albanais présente de nombreuses convergences qui ne font que renforcer la véracité des deux récits, bien qu'ils reposent sur les genres littéraires différents. L'article contient les illustrations graphiques et photographies des sujets étudiés.

Mots-clés: *Albanais, romantique, hospitalité, générosité, liberté*