



Women Travellers to Albania in the Long Nineteenth Century: Two Case Studies

Mariaconcetta Costantini

Abstract

This essay takes a specific sub-category of Victorian travel writing – the travel reportage written by women who visited Albania in the long nineteenth century – to demonstrate the pervasive influence of nineteenth-century tropes associated with popular fiction. Little known to Britons and stereotyped in terms of savagery and violence, Albania was part of the so-called “Turkey-in-Europe” associated with the alluring mysteries of Ottoman culture. By examining two authors who visited Albania in different periods, Emily Anne Beaufort and Mary Edith Durham, this essay invites reflection on these women’s construction of their public personæ as well as on their dialogue with the popular culture and literature of their times. Worthy of notice are especially Beaufort’s and Durham’s oscillation between factuality and imagination, their negotiations with the contemporary print market and the widening readership, their revision of Byronic Orientalist clichés and their appealing use of themes and strategies drawn from popular literary genres and modes, such as the adventure romance, the sensation novel and the Gothic.

Key Words

Travel writing; travel tropes; popular fiction; sensation fiction; Gothic; nineteenth-century women travellers; Emily Anne Beaufort; Mary Edith Durham; Albania; Balkan images.

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Women Travellers to Albania in the Long Nineteenth Century: Two Case Studies

Mariaconcetta Costantini

Introduction

In the last few decades, interest in Victorian popular culture and literature has grown, posing ever-new problems of definition and boundary-marking. Following Stuart Hall's dialectic view of popular culture as one that "oscillat[es] wildly" between "containment and resistance" (Hall 1981: 228), Victorianists have discussed the different meanings of the term "popular," which is crucial to understanding nineteenth-century culture. What makes this term so relevant is not only the rising academic attention for the material aspects of Victorian print culture, such as the age's unprecedented circulation of texts and its widening readership. In addition to these quantitative aspects, scholars have tackled a number of qualitative questions raised by the Victorian popularisation of literature, including the development of a cross-class readership, the hybridisation of genres and forms, and the consequent debasement of literary standards. These questions, which invite us to rethink literary categories and taxonomies, already challenged Victorian cultural producers and consumers. A telling case was the diatribe against sensationalism launched by elite reviewers in the 1860s. Their stigmatisation of the genre caused a heated controversy around the idea of popular literature, raising problems that are still discussed nowadays.

On these premises, it is hardly surprising that scholars of Victorian culture continue to discuss the meanings of the "popular" and to expand its conceptualisation. "How are we to understand 'Victorian Popular Fictions' today?", asks Andrew King in the opening article of the recently founded *Victorian Popular Fictions Journal (VPFJ)*, before adding that "we need to consider several basic questions, not least what texts Victorian popular fictions comprise today, where they lie in the academy, what methods can be used to describe and discuss them" (King 2019: 6-7). Without questioning the common understanding of Victorian popular fiction as those books that were widely read at the time, King invites us to focus on other important questions, including the fluidity of genres, the reconsideration of the canon and the flexibility of a time-period that should coincide with "the long nineteenth century (c. 1790 to c. 1914)" as "neither narratives, publishing nor human lives abide by convenient chronological cut-off points" (7). Similarly, in the second volume of *VPFJ*, guest editor Minna Vuohelainen comments on the porosity of Victorian popular genres, proposing to map new inter-generic connections. The spatial approach used in that issue is a good example of the possibility of capturing the specificities of a literature that was "acutely aware of questions of space, place and mapping" and of "genres such as domestic realism, the city novel, the Gothic, the adventure romance and science fiction" that were "intimately concerned with delineating a set of characteristic spatialities" (Vuohelainen 2019: 6).

In the wake of those pieces by King and Vuohelainen in this journal, which invite scholars to reconsider literary and critical boundaries, my essay explores some connections between Victorian travel writing, popular culture and literary forms, focussing on a specific sub-category: the travel reportage composed by women who made journeys to Albania in the long nineteenth century. I will focus on the works of two women in particular, Emily Anne Beaufort, Viscountess Strangford, who visited some areas of today's Albania in 1863, and Mary Edith Durham, who embarked on risky

travels to the Balkans and was the first Englishwoman to explore the mountainous parts of Northern Albania in 1908. Through a comparative analysis of their experiences and of two travelogues they authored, I will reflect on the influence that Victorian popular culture had on their imagination and their relation with mass-appealing literary genres. The choice of a mid-Victorian traveller and an Edwardian one is meant to highlight differences in attitude, self-representation and professional development between the two authors, which reflect the changing reality of their times. Yet, I also focus on common elements of their travel adventures and writings. Besides proving the persistence of many gender prejudices and literary conventions throughout the long nineteenth century, these common elements reveal interesting facets of the two authors' representations of Albania's disquieting Otherness. A first aspect that deserves consideration is Beaufort's and Durham's use of sensational and gothic paraphernalia that were widely employed in the age's popular fiction. Both the sensation novel of the 1860s and the *fin-de-siècle* gothic that dominated the literary scene when Durham began travelling to the Balkans were forms that appealed to a cross-class readership craving for thrilling stories and adventurous encounters with an Otherness that was both disturbing and fascinating. Furthermore, Beaufort and Durham adopted some adventure-story conventions that traditionally nourished travel writing. Despite their gender and generic specificities, their travelogues offer elements and figures typical of adventure romances by Frederick Marryat, G. A. Henty and Henry Rider Haggard which, between the middle and the late century, embodied imperialistic propaganda, targeting a predominantly young male readership. In ways similar to these adventure narratives, Beaufort's and Durham's texts heroise the traveller's hardships and survival in the face of danger and highlight British cultural superiority over locals. At the same time, however, their travelogues revise some formulas of the adventure genre: they introduce a gender twist by characterising their travelling personæ as feminine and partly deconstruct the binary observer vs. observed through the language of sympathy.

My intention is to show that Beaufort and Durham interacted with the aforementioned popular genres in two ways. First of all, they drew from literature the force to explore inhospitable landscapes and meet populations that were considered savage and dangerous by Britons. Particularly interesting, in this sense, was their dialogue with the early-century tradition established by George Byron, whose Orientalised depictions of Albania offered a wide range of adventurous, exotic and gothic *topoi* to Victorians. Secondly, Beaufort and Durham contributed to developing the popular culture of their times by offering fresh images of a wild Eastern Europe that they personally visited and observed.

These images imply a further interpretation of the "popular" in connection with their work: their attempt to capture and reproduce the *Volksgeist* of Albanian people. In ways similar to male ethnographers, Beaufort and Durham studied the "spirit" of the local *populus* from the outside. As women, however, they had more problems in producing authoritative texts for a male audience of experts. For this reason, they made a larger use of the captivating devices of fictionalisation, striving to find a balance between literary tropes and direct observation. Although it was a recurrent strategy of all travel literature, I am suggesting that the combination of fact and fiction was particularly pertinent for women, since women had greater difficulties in being accepted in the high spheres of culture and the learned professions. By engaging with popular culture instead of aiming at purely factual expertise, Beaufort and Durham were thus negotiating, each in her own way, their positions within a cultural market that was still arranged along strict gender lines.

This negotiation was further complicated by their class affiliation. Both the upper-class Beaufort and the upper-middle-class Durham belonged to a cultural domain that limited women's participation in the public sphere and tolerated activities outside the household as long as respect for gender norms was maintained. The ideal of respectability the two authors were asked to embody had to be constantly mediated with their aspirations to embark on adventurous journeys and face dangers that were considered unladylike. Similarly, they had to develop a proper form of writing to describe

the territories they explored – a form that, constantly wavering between fiction and nonfiction, imagination and observation, could make their writings both appealing and reliable. This form had to be negotiated within a male-dominated tradition of travel literature that tended to confine women to amateurish, secondary roles. High-rank women, in particular, had to write respectably without invading the male-reserved sphere of expertise. They were supposed to target unspecialised readers, composing texts that sparked the public's imagination, but avoiding the excesses of exoticism and over-emotionality.

Caught between these poles, Beaufort and Durham strove to find their own personal balances. Their works bear witness to this difficult negotiation and offer precious food for thought. Scholars have so far analysed some aspects of their contribution to travel literature both as women and as Balkan explorers. Less researched, instead, is their relation with the nineteenth-century “popular,” which is here considered away from the numerical. Independently from their selling figures, their Albanian books bear evidence of the two authors' interaction with the “popular” considered as an all-pervasive cultural force that shaped their actions and writings. My intention, in examining some aspects of this interaction, is to suggest the huge potentiality of reading the travel genre against popular culture and fiction and to invite scholars to expand this line of research.

Women's travel writing has, of course, been widely researched since the 1980s. Studies like Catherine Barnes Stevenson's *Victorian Women Travel Writers in Africa* (1982), Patricia Romero's *Women's Voices on West Africa* (1992), Alison Blunt's *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism* (1994), and India Ghose's *Women Travelers in Colonial India* (1998), among many others, have investigated various aspects of women's travelling in the long nineteenth century, analysing their identity shaping, their representation of local women and the distinctive features of their writing. Most of these studies, however, focus on women who travelled to the colonies and were directly involved in the British imperial venture. A number of other books, like Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness* (1988) or Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* (1995), examine specific aspects of Victorian colonial discourse, such as the racialising tropes of the age's (predominantly male) literature, or explore complex intersections of gender, race and class. Less attention has been paid to nineteenth-century women travellers to South-Eastern Europe, who explored areas excluded from the traditional Grand Tour without venturing into the far-off territories of the Empire. Even though they have attracted growing scholarly interest in the last two decades, these women deserve further examination. The liminality of the territories they visited, which were considered both European and culturally assimilated to the East, gave them more freedom of action than was generally granted to women in the colonies and encouraged more comparisons with their home culture. Worthy of reflection is also their relation with Victorian popular literature and the editorial market. As they travelled in decades of political turmoil in the Balkans, which aroused much curiosity in Britain, these women had no problems in finding publishers. This essay offers some reflections on their authorial choices and on the dialogue they established with popular literary genres, from which they drew a set of appealing motifs and figures.

Women Travellers and the Lure of “Turkey-in-Europe”

The Victorian age witnessed a significant increase in women's travels. While the class-specific Grand Tour was refunctioned “to suit that atmosphere in which ‘everybody’ seemed to be abroad” (Buzard 2020: 49), rising numbers of women ventured into foreign lands previously explored by men. A main driving force was the colonial enterprise that reached its climax in the age of Victoria. Even though they lived in a society that limited their freedom outside the home, some women were personally involved in the imperial mission or influenced by exotic narratives that encouraged them to “travel in all kinds of rôles – as wives, sisters, daughters of missionaries, diplomats or envoys, as scientists

or naturalists, as explorers seeking to prove something to themselves, as individuals in search of the unexpected, or of leisure or instruction, alone or accompanied, for personal or professional reasons” (Bassnett 2002: 231). Their travel experiences became more frequent in the Edwardian era, when the seeds of women’s rights sown in the previous century started to bear fruit, paving the way to their increased autonomy in the interwar period.

The variety of the aforementioned roles suggests the sheer diversity of the experiences women had abroad between the nineteenth and the early-twentieth centuries. If many travelling “under the umbrella of the British Empire were, albeit unconsciously, colluding with the colonial enterprise” (228), others did not share the imperial ideology and were less patronising in their approach to populations that were considered inferior by most Victorians.

Similarly heterogeneous was the nature of their travel accounts. Rarely commissioned by publishers or scientific societies, these accounts were composed for different purposes – some originally intended for publication, many written for private use as personal letters and diaries. They varied significantly in style, genre, approach and reported experiences. Still, there were, in these texts, elements that defined them as “feminine” as opposed to a tradition of masculine texts that women had to appropriate and rework. While male-authored travelogues aimed at objectivity and greater scientificity, women’s ones were generally more subjective, targeted more readerships and blurred more generic lines as they were subject to the literary conventions that defined “female literature” throughout the nineteenth century (Foster 1990: 18). Besides laying a strong emphasis on the personal, travel writings by women often combined the ethnographic with the anecdotal, were more detailed in describing “the minutiae of everyday domestic life and the writer’s psychological reactions to a new environment” – which were supposed to appeal to “a predominantly female audience” – and generally consisted of “more private, fragmented, episodic autobiographies (often in the form of a diary or series of letters) which impose[d] no overarching design on their lives or travels” (Stevenson 1982: 9-10). Furthermore, women made a larger use than men of self-effacing paratexts like prefaces and introductions, in which they posed as amateurs to prevent gender criticism. More frequent was also the authors’ tendency to cross the boundary between fact and fiction in their travelogues. While male authors could choose between fictionalised accounts and nonfictional texts characterised by rationality and analytical skills, women travellers were more inclined to produce generic hybrids that combined reportages with stories (personal and reported) and to adopt similar strategies as those used by the popular novelists of their age. Although they are not found in all travelogues penned by women, these gender specificities are important to consider as they reveal the difficulties these women faced in writing for a market that tended to confine female writing into pre-set categories.

Like most travelogues produced in Victorian and Edwardian times, including male-authored ones, women’s travel literature was forgotten for decades. Some female authors have been rediscovered only lately as part of the feminist revival agenda, but this process of revival is not exempt from risks, as evidenced by the essentialising approach of much feminist scholarship. Quite limiting, for example, is the tendency to view all women travellers as fugitives from a strictly normative society, who discovered in distant lands the autonomy and the emotional fulfilment they had been unable to find at home. Studies like Dea Birkett’s *Spinsters Abroad* (2004) trace interesting parallels between women explorers who overcame the social and geographical boundaries of their age. Yet, although they make a convincing use of biographical and socio-cultural evidence, such studies offer exclusively gendered readings that risk overshadowing relevant aspects of these women’s experiences. If the commonality of their *female* condition answers many questions, specific aspects of their biographies and writings still need to be accounted for and thoroughly investigated. To what extent did the experiences these travellers had abroad evolve in the course of one century? Did their self-perception change in relation to changing circumstances, such as their travel destinations and social status? Did these authors perceive themselves as professionals? What readers did they target when they decided to publish their works and what position did they come to occupy within the

nineteenth-century publishing market? How could we classify their works in view of the century's debates between highbrow and lowbrow culture, specialised and amateur writing?

In addition to focusing on the *gendered* identity of these travellers, we should thus ascertain the contribution of their works to the cultural milieu of their age, to the popularisation of the complex genre of travel writing and to its interaction with other literary forms that were widely commercialised and read. This article tackles these latter questions by focussing on the specific cases of two women travellers to Albania, a land that, frequently discriminated in terms of primitiveness, was increasingly visited and described by Englishmen and Englishwomen after the mid-century. Travelogues drew on circulating stereotypes, but some of them negotiated between dominant views and counter-discourses inspired by the traveller's direct observation of local culture.

Today's Albania, which became an independent state only in 1912 – after the publication of both the texts discussed here – includes territories that were previously divided into ethnically heterogeneous *vilayets* governed by the Ottoman Empire. Like other Balkan areas, these territories were “commonly referred to as ‘Turkey-in-Europe’ or the ‘Near East’” (Goldsworthy 2006: 19), two expressions that configured them as the gateway of a romanticised Orient to which they were culturally ascribed. Nineteenth-century travellers conceived Albania more as an ethnic concept than a purely geographical one. To them it was the “Land” described by Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812: 79) – a term condensing geography, language, ethnicity and national aspirations. More specifically, it corresponded to the *Volksgeist* of a population divided in various tribes who, as Durham wrote, descended from “fierce [...] Illyrians,” had mixed with Serbs and Turks, but were still united by a language and old customs that had survived over the centuries as if stuck in time (1909: 2-3).

An early reference to this little-known culture was provided by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. The wife of an English ambassador, Montagu met some Albanians during her stay in Turkey and offered a brief description of them in a letter written in 1717. It is, however, with Byron, who visited the Balkans between 1809 and 1811, that the region become an exoticised literary setting. Byron reported his travel experiences extensively in his correspondence and transposed them into the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) which, together with his *Eastern Tales* published between 1813 and 1816,¹ offered an inventory of Romantic literary *topoi* associated with the Ottoman Empire and the tyrannical Ali Pasha. All these texts represent the Turks “in terms of exoticist stereotypes, which serve to separate the West from the East: uncontrollable violence, pomp, luxury, polygamy and excess” (Alber 2013: 124). *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* provides good examples of such stereotyping. Stanza XXVII of Canto Two describes pre-Ottoman Albania as the land of the heroic “Iskander” (Alexander the Great) and of Hellenistic civilisation, later turned into a “rugged nurse of savage men” by Turkish occupation and the penetration of Islam: “The cross descends, thy minarets arise” (Byron 1812: 79). In reimagining the Balkans, moreover, Byron drew upon the Gothic to create a set of dark, fascinating and tormented hero/villains. Besides building up the heroic character of traveller/wanderer exemplified by Harold, he portrayed Ali Pasha as a combination of a proud warrior, a violent despot and a generous host, thereby “establishing a paradigm for Byronic hero/villains” further developed in his *Eastern Tales* (Leask 2004: 113). These figures, which combined exoticism with Romantic outlawness and passion, were widely disseminated within Victorian popular culture and took different literary shapes, as evidenced by the self-assured and violent characterisation of Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). They were also sources of inspiration for many travellers to the East, who attached heroic connotations to their wanderings and used Byronic clichés to render the locals' fascinating backwardness.

¹ These narrative poems are *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), *Lara* (1814) and *The Siege of Corinth* (1816).

Together with his travel companion, John Cam Hobhouse, who also emphasised the Turkish influence on Eastern Europe in his own travelogue (1813), Byron thus popularised the Balkans as a new Oriental destination for travel and adventure. This process of construction of the Other as Oriental, which would be later exposed by Edward Said ([1978] 1985), was achieved through the “romanticization of Ottoman harems, architecture and the Turkish way of life” which “often sat uneasily alongside descriptions of the atrocities and cruelty towards the subject nations that accompanied Ottoman decline” and “sparked an interest in Balkan folklore and superstitions” (Goldsworthy 2006: 26-7).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, rising numbers of Britons explored the Balkans in the footsteps of Byron and Hobhouse. One of these travellers was Edward Lear, whose *Journals of a Landscape Painter in Albania, &c.* (1851) was based on his 1848 journeys to Macedonia and Albania in search of the picturesque. Lear found beauty and grandeur in Balkan landscapes, but he also represented the filthy, disorderly and savage elements of local culture. Probably due to Lear’s “very little genuine interaction with the indigenous population” (Hammond 2004: 607), these negative views were nourished by Byronic images of the Balkans’ semi-barbarism, although the growing taste for realism encouraged mid-century travellers to highlight the dreariest aspects of this Romantic legacy.

After the mid-century, travellers to the Balkans continued to waver between factuality and stereotyping, with the latter tendency taking new forms. Picturesque-hunting was gradually replaced by a stronger inclination to exoticise those areas which, watched with an imperial gaze, were more decidedly turned into “the antitype of the enlightened West” (Hammond 2014-15: 601). The reasons for Orientalising South-Eastern Europe were both anthropological and political. Besides validating the presumed superiority of Britons (and, on a lesser scale, of Westerners) over all Eastern peoples, the discursive construction of the Balkans “as a peripheral zone of barbarism and conflict, particularly via the journals of travellers” reflected the “ambiguous, shifting patterns of diplomatic and economic strategy” adopted by Britain which, increasingly confronted with the challenge of the Eastern Question and the decline of the Ottoman Empire, was forced to deal with a problematic area that was not part of its empire (602). For these reasons, many travelogues composed by British authors in the mid- to late-nineteenth century conveyed ideas of Balkan inferiority that validated the ambiguous policies of Britain in the area. A case in point is the volume *Travels in the Slavonic Provinces of Turkey-in-Europe* published by Georgina Muir Mackenzie and Adeline Paulina Irby in 1867. Anticipated in the title, which includes the Orientalising epithet “Turkey-in-Europe,” their stereotypical description of the Balkans is confirmed by their support of the “quasi-civilized inhabitants” of “Old Serbia” as opposed to the “barbarians and Islam” that came to oppress them (Mackenzie and Irby 1867: 250), as well as by their racialisation of Albanians as more primitive and ferocious than Muslims (Gargano 2014: 178). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the second edition of their volume, which appeared in 1877, was prefaced by William Gladstone, who was leading the British opposition against the Ottoman power in the region. Well aware of the efficacy of travel writing in moulding public opinion, Gladstone used the preface to reinforce the anti-Muslim messages of the text and to pursue a specific political objective: that of contrasting the policies of his Tory opponent, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, who supported Turkey to check Russian ambitions in South-Eastern Europe.

Mackenzie and Irby championed anti-Ottoman views which, increasingly after the Crimean War, spread in Britain. A few years before them, Beaufort had expressed Liberal anti-Turkish prejudices, which grew stronger in the 1870s when she supported the Bulgarian struggle of independence. The turn of the century witnessed an increasing popular hostility against the Turks, fuelled by the Armenian Massacres of the mid-1890s. Strongly connoted as a religious clash, the Massacres reinforced British anti-Muslim prejudices among Liberals, while Conservatives hoped in

the Ottomans' ability to reform themselves. Unlike her mid-century predecessors, Durham refused to share Liberal prejudices, but she was also sceptical about the Turkish possibility of solving problems in the region and resented British policies in favour of Serbs and Russia.

Despite their different political views, women travellers like Beaufort, Mackenzie, Irby and Durham showed that, after the Crimean War, the Balkan region had become a possible destination for "unprotected" Victorian women even if, unlike those who accompanied husbands or brothers, they ran the risk of being labelled eccentric by travelling "singly, in pairs, or in groups" (Pemble 1987: 78). Although some still journeyed with male escorts, others ventured into far-off lands alone or with female friends, in open defiance of dominant gender rules. Attracted by the whole Balkan area, "unprotected" women were particularly interested in exploring the wildest territories of Albania, which were the least known to British travellers. In the early twentieth century, this interest was noticed by the author of an unsigned article, which appeared in the *Graphic Magazine* in 1912. "The East attracts women because it is feminine to the core, just as the West is essentially masculine," claims the unknown author, after tracing a parallel between the East and the Balkans, "those rough, wild, semi-civilised and more than half Orientalised little countries" (qtd. in Allcock and Young 2000: xxii; Goldsworthy 1998: 199). Besides posing the question of why women showed a growing preference for such destinations, the author proves the persistence of strong prejudices against the Balkans, whose cultural inferiority is suggested by their alleged feminisation in contrast with the masculinised West.

Like many colonised areas of the world described in travel literature, and like the exotic settings of the age's adventure stories, South-Eastern Europe continued to be represented through disparaging clichés. These clichés were part of a Western prejudiced discourse which, as Said famously wrote about Orientalism, aimed at "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Other" ([1978] 1985: 3). A discursive macro-category that included various manifestations, such as Byron's early-century romanticising of the East, Orientalism acquired specific characteristics in the Balkans which, though part of Europe, were perceived as dangerously close to the Middle East. As theorised by Maria Todorova, Northern European preconceptions about this area converged into a specific discourse called "Balkanism," a sub-category of Orientalism which cast the Balkans as "an incomplete self," a hybrid not so utterly alien as the colonised Orient but supposedly corrupted by its backward culture and religious fanaticism (1997: 18). In ways similar to Orientalism, Balkanism fulfilled a powerful denigratory function: it enabled nations like Britain to affirm their alleged cultural superiority and to justify their intervention into South-Eastern European politics.

The influence of Balkanism is manifest in Victorian representations of the area. Albania, in particular, is portrayed as a land of primitives and brigands in many travelogues, as evidenced by MacKenzie and Irby's work. The bias of long-established clichés was reinforced by the challenges its territory posed to travellers with its bad roads and high peaks. Its northern mountains were especially hard to explore for women who, besides climbing in hot or rough weather, had to cope with hostile chieftains and strict patriarchal societies unused to female autonomy. Still, Englishwomen felt a puzzling fascination for Albania which they increasingly chose as a travel destination. A convincing explanation for this phenomenon is offered by Vesna Goldsworthy, who avoids the risk of essentialising these travellers' choice. After contesting the *Graphic Magazine's* view of the Balkan region as "a form of substitute, accessible Orient," Goldsworthy provides a range of good arguments which, all together, cast some light onto the choices made by Victorian women travellers. In addition to escaping the boredom and the strictures of their domestic life, these travellers enjoyed "a sort of 'honorary male status' in the Balkans" which gave them "a chance of real equality with men;" they were also offered possibilities of becoming "professionally involved and committed to the region" by working in various roles, of creating "their own itineraries" and developing a new identity "free from institutional pressures and without a pre-set agenda" (Goldsworthy 1998: 199-201).

The shift from amateurish to professional roles mentioned by Goldsworthy acquires special relevance in the case of women travellers to Albania, which forced curious travellers to decipher its still impenetrable culture. The intellectual efforts necessary to make sense of the land's contradictions and upsetting customs were coupled with representational efforts that travellers had to make in order to produce fresh and reliable accounts. Women were particularly challenged to develop new strategies of composition. Those who wrote specialised nonfiction, such as anthropological reports, strove to gain expertise in areas of knowledge that were traditionally masculine and to acquire an authoritative voice. Others merged reportage with autobiography and storytelling, and they experimented with strategies of fictionalisation that innovated the Byronic vision, making their writings more appealing to the Victorian public. In many cases, the traveller-narrator offered a heroic self-representation by laying stress on the dangers and the obstacles she met on the way. Though written in a spirit of authenticity, such travelogues generated the same thrilling effects as sensation novels, as they portrayed a Victorian woman involved in unfeminine, indecorous and dangerous situations. Another strategy was that of weaving captivating stories heard on the spot within travel accounts, which were thus turned into hybrid texts that were both imaginative and informative. Often violent, gothic or bizarre, these interpolated stories combined the Byronic tendency to exoticise the alien culture with a more scientific interest in local folklore that women travellers developed in the course of the century.

Anecdotal, sensational and rich in psychological insights, many travelogues composed by women were not only guidebooks or sources of specialised knowledge; they were romances that offered vicarious adventures to their readers. Although they were not *soi-disant* fictions, these travelogues nourished the literary tradition inaugurated by Byron. Popular literature, in particular, drew on the exoticism of "Turkey-in-Europe," which inspired a large variety of novels. At the *fin de siècle*, for instance, political turmoil in the Balkans sparked the "vogue for novels, plays and operettas set in imaginary kingdoms," which was inaugurated by Anthony Hope's bestseller *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894), the fantasy story of an aristocrat's adventurous ascent to the throne of Ruritania (Goldsworthy 1998: 45). Balkan settings are also found in novels that rejuvenated the Gothic as evidenced in Joseph Sheridan LeFanu's *Carmilla* (1871-72) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), which associate vampirism with disturbing Eastern European locations.

Women's travel accounts reinforced these British imaginings of the Balkans. The exotic tropes of their writings enriched the paraphernalia of nineteenth-century literature, which also drew upon their subjective impressions and sensational details. Although some female authors earned professional recognition by producing serious texts of journalism and anthropology,² most of them composed travel accounts that drew inspiration from the age's popular fiction and, in turn, offered fresh ingredients to a readership craving for the Gothic, the sensational and the adventure romance. Still largely shrouded in mystery, Albanian culture beguiled nineteenth-century travellers with its violent customs and pagan rituals, which survived in combination with other religious creeds, and with its heritage of stories and legends deeply rooted in folklore. This cultural lure was more strongly felt by women who, unlike their male counterparts, could not aspire to write exclusively for experts. If all travel writing, "although purporting to be non-fictional, is in fact highly imaginative" because it aims at "entertaining [...] home audiences" (Cameron 2020: 23), this imaginative quality is more evident in writings by nineteenth-century women who, marginalised by high culture, were forced to target a more general readership. In some cases, moreover, these authors challenged the hegemonic discourse of Balkanism by composing discursively complex texts in which the denigration of Albanian culture was counterbalanced by attempts to decipher its fascinating Otherness.

² Professional recognition was mostly achieved by women from the early twentieth century onwards. First-generation women anthropologists, born before 1901, were generally British and American (Khan 1989: xiv).

In analysing Beaufort and Durham, I am keen to find traces of this negotiation among genres and ideologies. Both authors fluctuated between fact and fiction, between support and critique of racialising stereotypes; and they both tended to sensationalise their adventures, thereby offering a heroic self-representation that challenged dominant masculine discourses. As observed by Ross Cameron, Durham was undoubtedly influenced by an “emergent proto-modernist sensibility” that might account for some peculiarities of her work as opposed to “the travel writing conventions of the Victorian era” (2020: 25-6). Yet, Cameron himself acknowledges that, owing to their ethnic and gender position of “superior-inferior[s],” many women travellers explored an “unstable discursive terrain” (24) that partly differentiated their writings from male-authored ones. Beaufort’s and Durham’s travelogues bear evidence of this tendency, as they oscillate between opposing ideologies and approaches to Albanian culture. Both of them, moreover, produced works that perplexingly engage with popular culture, exchanging fantasies and anxieties with the mass-consumed literary genres of their times.

Beauty and wretchedness: Beaufort’s Albanian experiences

Emily Anne Beaufort was the daughter of a “distinguished British Navy Admiral” and inherited “a passion for travel and exploration from her father” (Hosaflook 2014). After her father’s death in 1857, she went on a three-year journey to the Middle East with her sister, reporting her experiences in the volume *Egyptian Sepulchres and Syrian Shrines* (1861). In 1862 she married Percy Smythe (the eighth Viscount Strangford) and the following year she travelled to various Balkan areas, including Southern Albania and some more accessible areas of the mountainous North. Beaufort was encouraged to embark on this hard journey by her husband, who was sent to the Balkans as British diplomat to work on the Eastern Question. Too weak to travel extensively, Smythe asked his wife to explore the region with five friends – two women and three men – and bring him back information which, he was convinced, would be accurate and unprejudiced. On her return, they wrote together *The Eastern Shores of the Adriatic* which, divided into seven chapters (four authored by Beaufort, three by Smythe), appeared under her married name of Viscountess Strangford.

The circumstances of the volume’s genesis and publication deserve attention. Although she ventured into a region that was considered primitive by Britons, Beaufort travelled with male escorts (the three friends) and was commissioned to collect data by her husband. The ‘unfeminine’ activities she performed on travel (such as mixing with local people) were counterbalanced by her embodiment of a conventional wifely role. Like Isabel Burton and other Victorian women who “accompanied their husbands or brothers in their journeys and contributed to their research” (Antosa 2019: 60), Beaufort dared to explore unknown territories, but she shaped her public persona in ways that reduced her potentially transgressive agency. Her wish to incarnate the roles of obedient wife and helper is confirmed in the preface to *The Eastern Shores of the Adriatic*, in which she intentionally downplays her experiences and her travel accounts:

This brief narrative of a summer’s journey is not offered to the public as containing any very new or important information. The ground, however, is not as yet hackneyed, and some account of it may interest the general reader.

Those who seek for something better and more solid, I gladly refer to the three chapters added by my husband.

([Beaufort] 1864: n.p.)

In ways similar to other women travellers, who felt the need to conform “to current criteria of literary femininity in order to make their works acceptable” (Foster 1990: 19), Beaufort adopted three self-effacing strategies. First of all, she used *preterition* to omit the extraordinary aspects of her adventure, opting for the commonplace definition of “summer’s journey.” Secondly, she denied the novelty and the importance of the information, dismissed as “brief narrative.” Finally, she promoted the last three chapters contributed by her husband as “something better and more solid” than the four she authored.

The constructedness of this self-effacement is suggested in the preface itself, as evidenced by the expressions “not as yet hackneyed” and “may interest.” Both are at odds with the previous denial of novelty and importance, which is further disproved by the interesting details offered in the volume. Especially worthy of reflection is the reference to “the general reader” whom Beaufort hopes to attract. Her claim to target an unspecialised public is a self-devaluing device through which she connotes her contribution as non-professional in opposition to her husband’s systematic writing. The qualifiers “better and more solid” applied to the latter’s chapters highlight the gendered sub-division of the volume into two parts written in different styles and targeting different readerships. This sub-division not only confirms the difficulties that high-rank women had in composing travelogues snubbed by high culture; it also explains why, in her chapters, Beaufort combines accurate nonfiction with thrilling fictional passages which, like the popular stories consumed in the 1860s, were likely to attract and entertain the Victorian “general reader.” The audience she targets has something in common with the “Readers in general” mentioned by Wilkie Collins in the 1866 Foreword to *Armadale* who, clearly distinguished from learned reviewers classified as “Readers in particular,” are hoped to “appreciate whatever merit there may be” in the sensational narrative ([1864-66] 1995: 5).

The conventionality of Beaufort’s modesty is also evident in the preface to *Egyptian Sepulchres and Syrian Shrines* (1861), an account of the travel to the Middle East she and her sister made as “unprotected” women, which “was reprinted several times and provoked discussions” (Popova and Muratova 2016: 120). In its preface, Beaufort shows more confidence than in the one appended to her successive travelogue; but she also acknowledges the existence of two different readerships between which she uneasily oscillates. After declaring her difficulty in attracting scholars, who could learn just “a few facts” from which they might draw “deductions” (Beaufort 1861: I:vii), she confesses to have written chiefly for a public of general readers whom she invites to enjoy the pleasures of travelling vicariously. The latter public includes action-craving women “compelled to stay at home,” whom she hopes to convince to seek out similar experiences by showing “with what ease and security ladies may travel even alone, in countries which have been frequently supposed to be open only to strong and energetic men” (I:vii-viii). The encouraging function of this passage is enhanced by references to the “physical difficulties and impediments” the authors overcame on travel, which attach heroic connotations to her enterprise (I:vii). Considered all together, these strategies suggest Beaufort’s engagement with the “popular,” as she adopts the persuasive mechanisms of juvenile adventure fiction, even though she aims at a different gender group.

Egyptian Sepulchres and Syrian Shrines was reviewed by Percy Smythe in *The Saturday Review* which led to his meeting Beaufort and their marriage (Hosaflook 2014). The review was not positive. Smythe highlighted the “defects and blemishes” of the volume, including its linguistic mistakes, its “religious sentimentality” and the “weight of superfluous lore” which often interrupted “her vivid and delightful personal narrative” ([Smythe] 1861: 123). Yet, he also defined it as a good book, “worth buying, in spite of its faults,” “better than all the other ladies’ books on the subject put together” and written by an author who had the merit of “minute and unusual accuracy” (124). The half-ironic, half-admiring tone of the reviewer suggests that many reservations about women’s travelogues derived from dominant gender prejudices, which encouraged Victorians to perceive feminine writing as inherently inferior. These prejudices might also account for Beaufort’s increased timidity in the preface to *The Eastern Shores of the Adriatic*. In order to prevent criticism, she probably decided to highlight her married status and used her husband as a protective figure to lend authority to the volume.

Despite her self-deprecating comments, Beaufort’s four chapters are compelling. Her descriptions of Albanian territories, in particular, convey fresh information about a little-known region that must have interested both learned and general readers. Her references to botany, zoology and landscape are based on her direct observation of the environment. She also provides accurate historical information, often enriched by explanatory footnotes; and she reveals a keen interest in

anthropology by offering detailed images of ethnic types, customs, manufactures and language usages. The realism of her prose, which strives to offer an objective reproduction of her impressions reinforced by footnotes to sources, is evident in passages that highlight the dullness of landscapes, the wretchedness of towns and the decaying state of monuments. Instead of transfiguring or idealising what she saw, Beaufort strove to offer unbiased, credible sketches of her experiences which were also purged of romanticised literary *topoi*, such as those popularised by Byron.

“To me there was always something wanting in Southern Albanian views,” she declares in describing the view from the hill of Zitza, adding that this dismal effect is produced by the “want of brilliant hues” and by “a certain hardness not to be pointed out so much as felt, – a something which took away the richness from the green” ([Beaufort] 1864: 19). The negativity of this image is increased by her disappointment at visiting the local monastery “made famous by Lord Byron, in stanzas that are rather too good for the occasion” (18). Instead of idealising the monastery, she offers a realistic depiction of its current state, specifying that it “has been almost entirely rebuilt quite lately; it is quite comfortable, but uninteresting and unremarkable, except as consecrated by Lord Byron” (18).

Cities like Durazzo are described as “in the last degree wretched and miserable” with “few narrow streets,” and Shkodra is said to be “[c]rouched down into a very low plain,” “absolutely airless and breathless as an oven” and “a deadly hot-bed of fever and malaria” (95, 179-80). The awfulness of Shkodra is however counterbalanced by the splendour of its lake, which offers to the traveller a scenery of “grandeur and beauty” (176). The opposite impressions of the lake and the city are evidence of Beaufort’s opposition between realism and imagination, between the objective desolation of the urban space captured by her observant eye and the “grandeur and beauty” of a natural scenery rendered in the language of the picturesque. These passages also include references to the physical trials overcome by the author which are resonant with the self-heroising efforts made by adventure-story (male) protagonists. In describing how they cross the lake squeezed on a “long clumsy boat” with “puddles of water” at the bottom, Beaufort highlights her ability to travel in “the stifling heat” and her ingenuity in sheltering all from the “burning sun...under an umbrella covered with [her] shawl” (173).

The alternation between realism and imagination becomes more evident when she portrays the local population. In the first chapter, Beaufort describes some ethnic groups and classes of Southern Albania, expressing her liking for *zaptiehs* (mounted policemen) and shopkeepers, but using strong words to define low-class “Albanian Mussulmans.” In the wake of George Finlay, a Scottish scholar who provided early information on the Albanian population, she defines local peasants as “remarkable for laziness and ignorance” and “seldom pleasing” in countenance, and she classifies them into two groups that are equally detestable: “the doltishly stupid, and the mean sensual cunning” (36-7). Such definitions prove that Beaufort was not immune from the racialising discourses that circulated in mid-Victorian society. Although she drew some unbiased portrayals of local people like the *zaptiehs*, she was also influenced by Balkanism and by Byronic images of the Orient. Her use of denigratory clichés is evident in the above-mentioned definitions of peasants as well as in portrayals of the “horrid-looking Turkish soldiers” that are the chief inhabitants of Durazzo (95), which are evocative of adventure-romance strategies of racialisation of ‘natives.’ In other passages, however, Beaufort manifests sympathy for the observed, thereby deconstructing her dominant position as observer. When she meets “a sick and wounded Montenegrine chief,” she describes the scene as “quite Eastern” and “picturesque,” but she nonetheless sympathises with the man’s distress by using the adjective “pitiful” for his “suffering face” (138). In another episode, she expresses her feelings for the sufferings of different creatures by indirectly associating the “unfortunate” Suliotes persecuted by Ali Pasha with the sight of a “poor” mule “dreadfully cut and bleeding” after falling down hill (40-1).

Beaufort's views of gender relations are similarly rife with contradictions, which confirm her oscillation between fact and fiction, distance and emotionality. In describing Montenegro society, she underlines that a woman is "the chief beast of burden and the hardest worker of the two sexes; she is in fact the slave of the man" (157). Based on her direct observation, this harsh comment is counterbalanced by the clarification that, though exploited, a local woman is "not humiliated" by men and "never attacked by the stronger" (157) – two details that suggest her factual, unprejudiced approach to some aspects of the female condition. Elsewhere, Beaufort reports her visit to a harem as a commonplace experience, only mentioning the food she is offered and the surprise of servants and slaves in seeing an English lady (191). The simple reference to the pasha's wife is so unremarkable that it is at odds with traditional harem literature which, generally written by men, was characterised by Orientalist stereotypes and highly charged sexuality (Bassnett 2002: 230). What Beaufort offers is a quasi-reassuring image of domestic life as she casually mentions that she "spent an hour chatting with his [the pasha's] wife" and that, although she was "a Hungarian by birth, everything was *à la Turque*" (1864: 190-1).

The reverse is true of other passages in which Beaufort highlights the gothic and sensational aspects of some events and spatial descriptions. In so doing, she creates brief narrative sketches that have much in common with popular forms of mid-Victorian literature. In addition to whetting her reader's appetites for thrilling and melodramatic stories that are in line with the 1860s sensational vogue, she makes an interesting use of gothicised Oriental paraphernalia, thereby contributing to perpetuating a literary taste for exotic mysteries and horrors. This taste, indulged by Byron and Walter Scott in the early nineteenth century, was preserved in the course of the century despite the mid-Victorian domination of the "homely Gothic," and it was rekindled at the *fin de siècle* when "the East, at the high point of Victorian imperialism, provided many wonderful adventures and strange tales" (Botting [1996] 2005: 74ff, 100).

Two passages that reveal the extent of Beaufort's dialogue with these popular genres are found in Chapter One. In describing some locations linked to the legendary figure of Ali Pasha, "the famous Albanian despot and tyrant" who exerted a strong fascination on Byron, Beaufort emphasises the graphic details of the atrocities committed by Pasha and of his violent death (1864: 26). The report of her visit to the tyrant's tomb mentions his beheading and his cruel murder of his wife, "shot with his own hand in an access of fury" (26). When she describes the Island of Nisi where the despot was killed, moreover, Beaufort adds gothic elements to her narration by interpolating a shocking reconstruction of his iniquities (30-2). These iniquities include Ali Pasha's persecution of the Suliotes, a Christian group that rebelled against the Ottomans. Their resistance was broken by the tyrant who killed many opponents and sent others into exile. Earlier references to their tragic story are followed by an ampler reconstruction that Beaufort makes when she visits a particular place: three "singularly pointed peaks, called Trypa" located in the Suli mountains (41). The sublime view of the peaks and of the "magnificent chasm" at the bottom encourages her to narrate the story of the mass "suicide of Suliote women" who, besieged by the tyrant, "threw themselves down into the abyss below in suicidal despair, rather than fall into the hands of Ali Pasha" (41). Evoked on the very location where it took place, the suicide of the Suliote women is interspersed with elements of the picturesque and the Gothic that confirm Beaufort's tendency to combine nonfictional accuracy with thrilling fictionality:

The sufferings of the unfortunate Suliotes have been made the subject of a hundred romances in prose and poetry; yet a few words of their real history may not be unacceptable while we stand, as it were, facing their dark and rugged rocks.

(Beaufort 1864: 42)

In subsequent pages, the author adds more gothic details to this tragic story. After describing how the hostages were treacherously imprisoned and “all starved to death,” she comments on the “insatiable” cruelty of the tyrant, who ordered whole Suliote families “to be murdered” (45, 47). These horrific details are combined with elements that are meant to generate pathos and sympathy, such as the vulnerability of the victims of two mass suicides: one involving the women of Dhimula who, “on the arrival of Ali’s troops,” “shut themselves up in an old tower full of gunpowder, and set it on fire;” and one that took place “on the summit of Kiafa,” in which “the women threw their children over the rock, and then flung themselves down into the abyss” (46-7).

By underlining the gothic and emotional aspects of the Suliotes’ genocide, Beaufort turns her historical reconstruction into a half-thrilling, half-pathetic narrative that is supposed to captivate her readers. She also challenges prejudiced views established by Hobhouse – who described the Suliotes as bandits – and by Byron himself, who had reservations about their loyalty (Leask 2004: 114-15). The sensational elements of this interpolated story are highlighted by the unusual gendering of the Suliote women who are said to be “as active as the men” in fighting and “of whom a very large number were killed in battle” ([Beaufort] 1864: 46). In open defiance of the separate-spheres doctrine and of Victorian ladylike ideals, Beaufort portrays a group of strong, combative women that have much in common with the transgressive heroines characterised by sensation novelists. Their unfeminine resolution and courage are evocative of the “masculine resolution and energy” of Goisvintha, the fierce Goth woman featured in Collins’s *Antonina* (1850), who swears to avenge her murdered children. When confronted by a strong opponent, Goisvintha is sustained by “her iron-strung nerves” and manifests her “suicide pride” ([1850] 1896: 159). The Suliote women’s fearlessness in facing death is also suggestive of the daring suicide committed by the anti-heroine of Collins’s *Armada*, Lydia Gwilt, who resolutely poisons herself to escape a difficult situation ([1864-66] 1995: 666). These examples suggest that there were, at the height of the sensation craze, mutual exchanges between travel literature and those forms of popular literature that were being consumed by growing numbers of readers. The dialogue between these genres is confirmed by the fact that they often circulated within the same publishing market. Quite interesting, in this sense, is the role played by Richard Bentley, who printed *The Eastern Shores of the Adriatic*. Before Beaufort’s travel account, Bentley had in fact published some thrilling fictions that anticipated the sensational decade, such as Collins’s *Antonina* and *Basil* (1852). He had also published the bestselling novel of the time – Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861) – and continued to print Wood’s sensational works in the 1860s.

Beaufort occupied an ambiguous position within nineteenth-century print culture. While striving to write objectively, she interacted with the popular fiction of her age as evidenced by the adventure, gothic and sensational ingredients she added to her travelogue. This interaction was undoubtedly triggered by hegemonic views of feminine writing which, generally perceived as amateurish, was excluded from male-dominated high culture. As evidenced by the preface to *The Eastern Shores of the Adriatic*, Beaufort came to terms with this gendered categorisation of travel writing, connoting her husband’s chapters as specialised and associating her own chapters with the general public that consumed fashionable literary genres. Another interesting aspect of her relation with the “popular” was the energy she drew from it. Like the heroic protagonists of adventure romances, Beaufort explored supposedly dangerous territories but, as she intimated in her first travelogue, she challenged gender stereotypes, proving that such exploits were not only reserved to men. This energetic approach was confirmed by the many philanthropic activities in which she was engaged abroad. Instead of acting as a ‘ministering angel’ in the safe space of her home country, she aided Druse and Christian women during some hostilities in Lebanon in 1861. As a widow, she travelled to South-Eastern Europe to assist the wounded in Turkish hospitals and to perform relief work for Bulgarian peasants in the period 1876-78 (Melman 1992: 43; Popova and Muratova 2016).

Half a century after Beaufort's travel to Albania, more and more British women dared to venture into such remote lands and reported their experiences in works that targeted general and learned readers alike. Many of them travelled alone or with female companions; and they developed a stronger sense of their professional abilities, sometimes working for newspapers or gaining recognition from anthropological societies. Their position within the market changed too. More respected by highbrow journal editors and publishers, *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian women travellers were increasingly viewed as experts in travel report and in related fields of knowledge – such as anthropology and history – and they often produced works that were well received by critics and specialists. Still, some peculiarities of their predecessors' writing styles were perpetuated in their travelogues, which interestingly combined erudition with imagination, specialised knowledge with narrative strategies that were meant to produce strong emotions.

Realism, storytelling and folklore in Durham's *High Albania*

1863, the year of Beaufort's exploration of Albanian territories, was also the year of birth of Mary Edith Durham, who was destined to become the best-known woman traveller to the region. Durham was born in a liberal, well-to-do London family and received a good education.³ She studied art at Bedford College and at the Royal Academy, and executed some illustrations for the *Cambridge Natural History*. Despite this early training, however, she led a rather uneventful life as a young woman, nursing her ailing mother after the death of her father. The role of carer she undertook weighed upon her spirit and affected her health. In 1900, she suffered a nervous breakdown and was prescribed a change of air by her doctor. She travelled abroad "unprotected" for the first time, visiting Dalmatia and some remote parts of Montenegro. Although she did not reach Albania on this first journey, she viewed its northern mountains from a distance and developed a keen interest in this little-known area of "Turkey-in-Europe."

Durham alternated her nursing function at home with trips to the Balkans until 1906, when her mother died and she felt freer to spend more time abroad. Two years later, she embarked on an eight-month exploration of the remotest recesses of Northern Albania "in the company of an Albanian guide, Marko Shantoya" (Tanner 2014: 119). The experiences she made provided material for her third book, *High Albania* (1909), a travelogue that was reprinted several times and is still considered her best work. While exploring these mountainous areas, Durham took notes and photographs and made sketches she later used in her contributions to specialised anthropological journals. She also collected ethnological materials (garments, ornaments, embroideries, etc.), later donated to the Bankfield Museum in Halifax (Hill [1991] 2000: 33), and developed a knowledge of the political situation of the area which made her an international advocate of the Albanian cause.

The *succès de scandale* achieved by *High Albania*, which was the object of heated debates in England (Tanner 2014: 144), turned Durham into an established author and a recognised expert of the Balkans, thereby paving the way to a professional career. In subsequent years, she returned to the region in different roles, contributing letters to the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Daily Chronicle* and performing humanitarian relief work (161). In contrast with British policies in the Balkans, she championed the cause of Albanian independence until her death. In 1921 she made her last visit to Albania and noticed that, owing to modernisation, the old native societies she had enthusiastically depicted no longer existed.

Although Durham gradually faded into obscurity in Britain, her fate among Albanians was different. Unlike most Britons, who viewed her as an eccentric spinster, Albanians celebrated her courage and commitment to their cause, hailing her as "the *kraljica inglezit*, the English Queen" – an

³ Biographical information on Edith Durham is mainly drawn from Tanner (2014), Birkett ([1989] 2004) and Shanafelt (1996).

epithet that is well-known in the area today (155, 249-50). The author of seven books on different aspects of the Balkans, Durham is especially remembered as the age's best expert on Albania. In addition to composing *High Albania*, she devoted parts of other volumes to her explorations there, enriching her travel accounts with ethnographic details and political considerations. Other aspects of Albanian culture and history were reported in her numerous articles appeared in scientific journals, in her lectures and in her correspondence. For some decades, she contributed to serious periodicals such as *Folklore* and *Man* (the journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland), providing information on Albanian customs, folklore, magic, taboos, rituals and supernatural beliefs. In 1908, she became a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, rare for women (Birkett [1989] 2004: 214), and she successfully performed as "a skilful painter and illustrator," "a linguist" and "a student of humanity" (Myres 1945: 21). One of her obituaries appeared in *Man* (1901-) highlighted "her ability as a writer and artist" and, while officially denying her the status of "'systematic' anthropologist in the academic sense," implicitly granted her a professional role in the field by praising the precious scientific information provided by her books – "books [...] replete with the raw materials, the stuff and matter of ethnology and folklore, and [...] a mine of information of great value to these sciences" (Braunholtz 1945: 22).

Durham's freedom contrasts with the limited agency of Emily Beaufort, whose position became more difficult after her marriage, when she lost the liberty she had enjoyed on her journey to the Middle East. Unlike her, Durham tailored for herself an autonomous role of a woman traveller. In addition to facing many risks during her expeditions, she freely pursued different occupations and acted as a self-assured professional in important fields. Her greater autonomy was certainly favoured by the changed Edwardian milieu and the gender rights women had acquired in half a century. Yet, her differences from Beaufort were also due to her strong personality. Brave, stubborn, full of contradictions, endowed with "a wicked sense of humour" and capable of being "incredibly ungracious and unkind to individuals" (Tanner 2014: 12), Durham achieved objectives that were considered unattainable by many women in the long nineteenth century. Unlike Beaufort, moreover, she strove to succeed in typically male professions showing less interest in relief work, which she performed on few occasions.

Durham's preference for unfeminine occupations and her violation of gender boundaries are confirmed by her travel narratives, which convey the picture of a bold woman capable of facing dangers, suffering hardships and dealing with men on equal terms. In the preface to *High Albania*, she clarifies that her account is not that of "an outsider" ("Of outsiders' views on Balkan problems we are, most of us, tired"); it is rather the account of someone who met Albanians in their own environment and "reported what the people themselves said" (Durham 1909: vii). This view is reinforced in Chapter Two where she adds that "one must live the life of people, and know not merely the past, but the present facts of their life" (20). In later years, Durham complained about travel writers like Robert Seton-Watson who lived comfortably at hotels, with no idea of what local people were like, and took all their information from politicians (Birkett [1989] 2004: 172-3).

Fully convinced of the importance of learning through field research, Durham used her accurate descriptions of Albania to fashion a heroic role for herself. *High Albania* bears evidence of her self-portrayal as an intrepid explorer of untrodden lands that few Britons, including men, had the courage to visit. In describing how she climbs a mountain, for instance, she gives details of the terrible heat and the "incessant physical and mental labour;" yet, she adds that she could not let herself be defeated: "I could not show my face in England and say the North Albanian mountains had beaten me in six days" (Durham 1909: 71). In ways similar to Beaufort, she constructs her heroic persona drawing upon the Byronic model and adventure romances, but she subverts the gender implications of this tradition by posing as a muscular, daring, mentally strong woman. Her pride in overcoming the obstacles posed by the rugged landscape emerges in various passages that highlight her ability to adapt. "Luckily I am never giddy, or I should have gone overboard years ago," she admits in

describing how she crawls on the precipice side of a rock (117). In a more dramatic episode, she narrates an accident that occurs to her guide, Marko, who falls and sprains his ankle. Besides using pathetic adjectives that configure Marko as her inferior – “Poor Marko had fallen” – Durham underlines her courage and practical skills in assisting the wounded man: “My pocket-knife was sharp as a razor; we soon had the boot off. I took the puggree off my hat, tore it in strips and bound him up tightly” (178). Repeatedly used in the travelogue, the qualifier “poor” highlights Durham’s posing as a strong woman capable of reversing gender stereotypes as she fulfils a protective function towards her young male guide.

Alongside physical problems and hindrances, Durham faced a number of socio-cultural dangers that are carefully reported in the text. Initially unaware of local customs, she strove to understand her hosts and sometimes found herself in risky situations; but all her descriptions emphasise her lack of fear and her talent for adaptability. In narrating her visit to a Muslim village in an area called “the Forbidden Land,” for instance, she explains that she agrees to pose as “the sister-in-law of one of the party,” to take off her “kodak and fountain pen, as they were not in keeping with the part,” and especially “to hold [her] tongue” (136). She behaves as advised without anxiety, “taking mental notes asquint” and, after overcoming the test, she is invited “to eat with the men of the house” and sleep in the same room with them (142). The bravery she shows in managing these difficulties is coupled with her ease in sharing her sleeping space with men instead of women, drinking *rakia* and discussing unfeminine topics like blood feuds and politics – a situation that would sound improper to British prudes.

On other occasions, Durham came close to being killed and expressed all her satisfaction for overcoming the threat. An interesting combination of relief and pride is found in the account of a danger she faced in remote Luria, an area that was particularly distrustful of foreigners. Suspected of being the sister of the King of England and of interfering with their affairs, Durham was threatened with death by a local man – “he would cut off my head at once” – and asked if she was afraid (315). Instead of showing fear, she replied with self-assuredness and made a joke which, she knew, could appeal to Albanians. “I [...] replied that if some one would lend me a revolver I should be very pleased to shoot him,” she explains in her travelogue, thereby suggesting that she managed to win the man’s favour by adopting his defiant language and by priding herself on her ability to use weapons (315).

The unusual gender autonomy enjoyed by Durham was reinforced by two things she experienced on her Albanian expeditions. First of all, she derived freedom of agency from her foreign identity, as a person coming from a richer and more powerful country. Repeatedly addressed as “Giaour” (145, 226, 238, 245, 262, 288, 292, 302) by Albanians – a term derogatively used for all foreigners – she was nonetheless admired by her male hosts, who drew a clear distinction between their enslaved women and a “superior-inferior” foreigner travelling under the auspices of British imperial power. Paradoxically, Durham found more freedom and respect in the strictly patriarchal society of Albanians than at home. Her courage and self-assuredness, coupled with her unfeminine look,⁴ made her “enjoy the status of honorary [man]” (Goldsworthy 2006: 30) among local chieftains and patriarchs who were glad to eat, drink and talk freely with her. Equally strange was Durham’s encounter with “sworn virgins” – a category of women who had broken infant betrothal and, by taking oaths of life-long celibacy, were granted special gender rights. Treated like equals by men and often allowed to wear male clothes, these virgins worked as a sort of mirror for Durham who could perceive, through them, the anomaly of her own gender positioning. As suggested in an article she published in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Durham felt that she had less in common with veiled Albanian wives than with crossed-dressing virgins. The fact that

⁴ According to colleagues, Durham “cut a most unusual figure [...] short hair, no stays, very plain and stout” (Goldsworthy 1998: 168).

she was “always treated with great honour and classed with the buck-herd” proved that her independence and unmarried status encouraged men to think that she “belonged to the sworn-virgin class and was fit to be associated with” (Durham 1910: 460-1).

Apart from having extraordinary experiences, Durham worked as mediator between the strange culture she discovered and her British readers. This function was fulfilled by reporting the minutest details of local life, including its most shocking elements. If read from an anthropological perspective, *High Albania* offers a wide range of valuable information on the social, political, economic and religious organisation of the communities visited by Durham, who underlined relevant similarities and differences between villages and ethnic groups. The realism of her descriptions is an element of novelty. Accurately examined and documented, the strange customs depicted in the text disproved some circulating prejudices against Albanians which, drawing upon Byron’s stereotypes, had been largely fed in the course of the nineteenth century. In Chapter One, Durham expresses her surprise at being treated with unexpected friendliness by “Moslem village people” like the Drivasto-Drishtis, who were generally “reputed fanatical” (13). Elsewhere, she invalidates widely shared stereotypes on the basis of her personal experience. “It is the fashion among journalists and others to talk of the ‘lawless Albanians:’ but there is perhaps no other people in Europe so much under the tyranny of laws,” she comments before conveying crude pictures of the “unwritten law of blood” derived from her personal observations (41).

The complexity of Albanian socio-cultural rules comes fully to the fore in Durham’s descriptions of the “Canon of Lek,” a bulk of unwritten laws attributed to the legendary Lek Dukaghin (25). Details and interpretations of this set of rules are offered in numerous passages of *High Albania*, which show that they are respected by all Northern Albanians independently from their religious beliefs. The basic custom of the Canon is the law of blood (or, blood-vengeance), which is doggedly adopted by local populations. “Blood can be wiped out only by blood,” Durham writes, before explaining that “[t]he blood need not be that of the actual offender. It must be male blood of his house or tribe” (32). The more Durham penetrates into the Albanian territory, the more detailed her illustration of blood-vengeance becomes. Remarkable, in these descriptions, is her combination of fact and fiction. In the same way as she merges heroic self-representations with accurate travel reports, Durham grafts sensational elements into her anthropological accounts, which thus acquire an appealing fictional quality.

Many pages of the travelogue consist of gruesome stories heard from local people and episodes of violence witnessed by herself. In telling these stories, Durham often wavers between pathos and objectivity, conveying heart-rending pictures of family feuds but also striving to analyse their social reasons. This oscillation is especially evident in the many narratives involving children as either victims or killers. On other occasions, glimpses of gothicism are caught in detailed descriptions of the Canon. An interesting case is that of a young man she nicknames “the Primæval” who, involved in blood feuds from the age of twelve, is untouched by any sense of guilt and lives his life happily. In describing the boy’s savage demeanour, Durham offers blood-curling details that would appeal sensation-craving readers, such as his “almost tigerish thirst for blood” and his pleasure at firing revolvers “dancing and shrieking like a demon” (167, 174). Yet, she also declares her intention to examine his behaviour objectively, “from an unprejudiced point of view.” This lack of prejudice stems from a recognition that the observer-observed distinction is not clear-cut, again recalling strategies from popular fiction where “sympathy” between victim and aggressor performs this deconstructive task: “His instincts were primæval, and he rejoiced in his exploits so wholeheartedly that I could not but sympathise with even the bloodiest” (170, 167). As she wrote in the preface, this is partly a market position (the market is “tired” of “outsiders’ views”), but also an ethical one, because she is concerned to give voice to Albanians themselves: “I [...] have reported what the people themselves said rather than put forward views of my own” (vii).

That said, Durham's efforts to unravel the intricacies of this culture and make sense of its apparent contradictions were undoubtedly a form of the "imagined colonialism" practised by Western travellers. As Andrew Hammond states, paraphrasing Mary Louise Pratt, many travellers combined their desires for physical adventures with a drive for global knowledge that was typically masculine: "Solving mystery may have been a more cognitive pursuit than physical adventure, but its determination to reveal, elucidate, and classify was no less masculine" (Hammond 2006: 96). Durham undoubtedly performed such an epistemological action. In so doing, she confirmed her ability to cross gender boundaries and gain an authoritative vantage point, even though she was officially denied scientific expertise. This lack of recognition, which is evident in the aforementioned obituaries, was a problem faced by all women travellers. In comparison with Beaufort, Durham had more chances to work with circles of experts, but she was aware of the obstacles that high culture continued to put on the way of ambitious women, granting them only a half-professional status. This situation partly explains why, in the preface to *High Albania*, Durham announces that she will offer "a comprehensive view" of the land rather than "details of any special branch of study" (1909: vii), though she was also of course aiming for popularity outside a specialist sector. Published by Edward Arnold, who specialised in educational and scientific texts but also handled literary works, *High Albania* targeted middle- to high-class readers of both genders, who had various interests including fiction. Unlike Durham's contributions to specialised periodicals like *Man*, this travel book was thus meant to reach a wider public which, though refined in taste, consumed different cultural products.

What Durham offered to her readers was, therefore, a nonfictional travelogue enriched with specialised knowledge but hybridised with strong imaginative elements derived from various literary genres. In addition to the sensational, adventurous and gothic details mentioned above, its cross-generic quality was reinforced by a wide range of embedded Albanian tales and legends, which Durham collected on the spot. These stories had a clear ethnographic value, as they conveyed precious knowledge about local habits, norms and beliefs that were little known in Britain at the time. But they also provided an exciting combination of violence, cruelty and supernaturalism, thereby fulfilling a similar function as *fin-de-siècle* popular literature. Whetted by Durham's exciting autobiography, in which a woman met unfeminine challenges, the public's appetites were further satisfied by this cluster of stories framed into the main narrative – a cluster of horrific tales of witches and vampires, scary stories of blood feuds and legends of devilish possession.

The *enchâssés* stories are too many to be analysed in detail, but a look at their variety can shed light onto their narrative functions. In Chapter Seven, for instance, Durham reports a sequence of two violent stories pivoting around the practice of infant betrothal. Besides showing the complexity of this practice, which was the main cause of blood feuds and murders, the two stories expose the misogynistic tendency of Albanian society that considered women as chattels exchanged and controlled by men. Both clearly distinguished from the main travel narrative with separate subtitles, these interpolated texts are told by local people to offer moral justification for their customs. In reporting them, Durham not only supplies valuable ethnographic information; she also draws upon the gothic and the supernatural to represent the violence of gender relations she personally noticed. "This woman was a Devil," we read at the very beginning of "The Story of the Woman Who Was Thrice Married" – a statement that is extended to the whole gender in the tale's conclusion: "Now you see that I spoke truly when I said that all evil comes from women. They are Devils" (185-7). These hints at demonic agency are made more gripping by the text's association of bloodshed and sensual yearnings with the female sex. The second story, focussing on wife-beating, is replete with supernatural elements as it narrates the conjugal problems of a man who could magically "understand the talks of beasts and birds" (187). More gruesome are other stories of violence reported by Durham, such as "the Tale of the Mirdite Woman," in which a wife takes an awful revenge upon her husband who betrayed her brother to the Turks. The graphic details of the scene in which she kills her sleeping

man by “hew[ing] the head from off his body” is followed by the brutal murder of their children whom she slays to wipe away the “Seed of a serpent” (92-3).

Although she refuses to interpret such tales from a progressive Westernised perspective, Durham makes a comment that might sound proto-feminist, as she asserts that in Albanian folklore the woman “has neither voice nor choice – *adet* (custom) passes over her like a Juggernaut car” (91). Combined with a few remarks on the local enslavement of the female sex, this statement suggests that, in some passages of *High Albania*, the author makes a ‘political’ use of the Gothic to stigmatise gender disparities without openly criticising them. The fierceness of these reported stories, which sensationalise some inequalities she notices in Albanian society, enable her to raise thorny issues while keeping a scientific distance from the observed reality. This obliqueness is in line with her cold approach to many demure women she meets on travel, with whom she rarely empathises, and with her manifest desire to be classed with men. A proof of the “discursive complexity” of Durham’s writing, which “cannot be read monologically” (Cameron 2020: 30), this wavering between proto-feminism and anti-feminism is also the result of her attempts to describe the enslavement of her sex group from the gender-neutral position of an expert, while letting her indignation take imaginative shapes within the embedded gothic tales.

A similar function is fulfilled by some *enchâssés* tales of “the Shtriga, the vampire woman that sucks the blood of children” (Durham 1909: 87-8), which reinforce the negativity of Durham’s social commentaries on ignorance, poverty and infant mortality. In one of them, she narrates the story of a woman in Seltze who, convinced that her mother-in-law was a blood-sucker, kept her latest baby indoors to protect it from the monster. In so doing, the woman contributed to killing her baby who was “poisoned by vitiated air” (88). Both associated with evil forces, the frightened mother and the monstrous Shtriga are victims of a patriarchal society that imprisons them within pre-set roles, denying their autonomy of action and judgment. In another tale, female blood-sucking is associated with fears of poisonous breast-feeding that connote the maternal in dangerous terms. The horrific elements of this latter tale reinforce the social Darwinist implications of a comment by Durham, who underlines the sheer determinism of a society in which “[o]nly the very strong survive, and they become extremely enduring” (88).

Heterogeneous and captivating, these embedded stories show the author’s personal response to the *fin-de-siècle* revamping of the Gothic, which had gained new vitality and had adapted to the changing cultural environment. Like Haggard, Stoker and other contemporaries, Durham was influenced by the re-emergence of gothic motifs in new shapes, which came to express circulating “anxieties about the stability of the social and domestic order and the effects of economic and scientific rationality” (Botting [1996] 2005: 88). These anxieties were manifest in the popular attraction for the occult and the supernatural, in fears of mental and criminal degeneration widely expressed in literature, in worries about the agency of New Women and immigrants, and in the spectacular images of violence and punishment of the imperial Gothic which, as evidenced by fiction written in the period 1880-1914, revived Orientalist prejudices in new forms, “blend[ing] the adventure story with Gothic elements” to express fears of imperial collapse, nativisation and invasion (Brantlinger 1988: 227ff).

Influenced by this resurgent taste for terror and horror narratives, Durham effectively merged British gothic paraphernalia with scary elements drawn from Albanian folklore. Her relish for the Gothic was noticed and stigmatised in contemporary reviews of *High Albania*. Newspapers like the *Nation* and the *Daily News* accused her of “revel[l]ing in her tales of violence and brutality,” of glorifying “man-slaying” and of having written a book that “literally reeks of blood” (qtd. in Tanner 2014: 134). Interestingly, these criticisms evoked similar objections raised to popular fiction by the champions of highbrow literature who, from the 1860s onwards, deplored the growing use of sensationalism and violence in fiction. In ways similar to many popular novelists writing in the long

nineteenth century, Durham was not put off by this censure, “doubtless seeing notoriety as preferable to obscurity” (134). In any case, these attacks were counterbalanced by reviews appeared in newspapers like the *Manchester Guardian*, which praised her for publishing a “thrilling” book and a “brilliant record of her wanderings” (134).

A generic hybrid, *High Albania* bears evidence of Durham’s combination of serious nonfiction with devices largely employed in the age’s popular literature, suggesting a significant dialogue between fictional and nonfictional genres. On the one hand, she adopted an objective style of writing to convey information that could get recognition from anthropologists and historians; on the other, she used strategies of fictionalisation that gave a strong imaginative quality to her travelogue. In ways similar to Beaufort, Durham was energised by the long tradition of adventure romances which, after nourishing travel literature throughout the century, had acquired darker connotations at the *fin de siècle*, evolving into imperial gothic narratives. This influence emerges in exciting passages of her travelogue, as well as in her tendency to heroise her own figure of intrepid traveller – a tendency that she clearly shared with Beaufort. Secondly, Durham drew inspiration from the supernatural and from sensational elements of popular fiction and, in turn, created electrifying tales of violence and mystery that gratified a general readership. Less influenced than Beaufort by Byronic Orientalist clichés, which had conflated into late-century imperial Gothic, Durham nonetheless used similar expedients, adopting thrilling strategies inaugurated by the 1860s sensation fiction and interspersing her travel narrative with blood-curling elements derived from literary genres that were avidly consumed by readers.

These similarities with Beaufort do not cancel the specificities of Durham’s prose which, besides drawing on established forms, interacted with the *fin-de-siècle* literary scene. If compared with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), for instance, *High Albania* reveals some interesting parallels in genre, ideology and figurative language. A telling case is the metaphor of “The Land of the Living Past” which, used both at the beginning and in the last chapter of Durham’s travelogue, connotes Albania as a land where Westerners can travel backwards in time and experience a reality of “thousands of years ago” (1909: 1, 344). This sense of immobility is strengthened by the opening image of a river that “crawls sluggishly through dull flats:” “For folk in such lands time has almost stood still,” asserts the narrator, specifying that “[s]uch backwaters of life exist in many corners of Europe – but most of all in the Near East” (1). Durham’s use of a river metaphor to describe a regressive travel to Europe’s primitive past evokes an analogous trope adopted by Conrad who, through Marlow’s voice, compares the navigation up the Congo River to a journey backwards in time: “Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, and impenetrable forest” (Conrad [1899] 2008: 182-3). Evocative of Conrad is also Durham’s challenge of racialising stereotypes which, though widely employed, are complicated by her direct observation of local people’s qualities, such as their friendliness and hospitality. Disquietingly fascinating, her portraits of Albanians bear evidence of the same negotiation between clichés of primitivism and perceived reality suggested by the problematic pictures of Africans in *Heart of Darkness*. Although it appeared in the conservative *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, which became popular among military men at the *fin de siècle*, Conrad’s novella did not espouse the journal’s colonial policies.⁵ Like Conrad, with whom she shared a proto-modernist sensibility, Durham questioned the imperialistic discourse at the core of nineteenth-century adventure fiction and contributed, on a smaller scale, to reshaping the conventions of this genre, which was made less formulaic and more complex by the author of *Heart of Darkness* (White 1993: 150ff).

⁵ “There isn’t a single club and messroom and man-of-war in the British Seas and Dominions which hasn’t its copy of *Maga* [*Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*]” (Karl and Davis 1990: 130).

The links with Conrad validate the hypothesis that, at the turn of the century, there was still a fertile exchange between fiction and travel writing. Women travellers, in particular, were more willing than their male counterparts to blur generic boundaries, especially when they explored unknown areas like Albania, which they strove to describe objectively but also reimagined creatively. For this and other reasons mentioned above, travelogues like Beaufort's and Durham's demand more critical attention. Besides being analysed within the field of travel writing, they should be more extensively read in relation to the larger cultural context and to the literature produced in the long nineteenth century, especially popular genres, with which they exchanged a whole range of images and ideas.

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