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Elizabeth Gowing, *Travels in Blood and Honey: becoming a Beekeeper in Kosovo*. Oxford: Signal Books, 2011, 251pp.

A number of features make this a unique book, as its introduction might signal, but it certainly is not simply a travel book. Lavishly illustrated, divided into short chapters in which honey features a great deal more than blood, the book reflects the author's passion for beekeeping which apparently developed shortly after her sudden, unexpected move to a country about which she says she knew little before arrival. There are anthropological insights and considerable attention to food, cooking, diet and a variety of traditional recipes, some possibly never recorded anywhere else.

The author's fluency in Albanian as well as willingness to learn Serbian, made it possible for her to be attuned to much that other researchers might miss in Kosovo. Chapters start with a few translated words or phrases, mostly Albanian, but a few Serb, roughly in proportion to the numbers of Kosovo's inhabitants speaking those as first languages. How many languages, I wonder, have a word for a man returning from abroad to search for a wife of his own Albanian ethnicity (*shaci*)?

The book's text brings the reader a variety of information, some factual about Kosovo's past or present, some warm descriptions of traditional hospitality lavished upon the author, all interspersed with comments or facts relating to bees. It takes bees visiting ten million flowers to produce a kilogramme of honey. Gowing has a special interest in the traditional, extending also to necessary paraphernalia for beekeeping, and relates that she wore her first bee-sting as 'a badge of pride'. Her interest in the self-sufficiency, that formerly was the norm of Kosovar

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families, she contrasts with of many she meets. Amongst the produce that all rural households never run short of, is the regional liquor, *raki*, which can be made from a variety of fruit. Its health-giving attribute was explained by one host: 'The *raki* you have at breakfast should really be accompanied by a spoonful of honey; the spoonful of honey should come first. This is enough to attract all the microbes that live in your gut. They swarm in to eat, and while they are busy, you down the *raki*, which kills them all off.' Her emphasis is on enthusiasm, wonder and delight, occasionally alternating with frustrations familiar to many visitors to the country. Overwhelming hospitality can become burdensome, especially if the overwhelmed person has very specific projects to pursue and limited time. Tradition in Kosovo, as in other parts of the Balkans, dictates that time is never more important than social interaction. Then there is mastering how to interpret a lack of comment. Maybe Elizabeth's most intensive experience of this comes at the end of the book, following what seemed to be a lack of concern or interest in her informing good friends that she would be leaving Kosovo shortly, maybe permanently.

Living in a country which less than a decade ago surfaced from a terrible war and whichv h endured decades of oppression, Gowing is moved by the population's resourcefulness and eagerness to move on from the deaths which probably affected every family. It is clear too that so many whom she met also responded to her own initiative and enthusiasm, and eagerness to pursue all kinds of innovative projects. For example, having worked voluntarily at the Ethnological Museum, promoting events and enticing visitors, she held her own large birthday party event at the museum, giving it new life. That same birthday brought a present from her husband which became the background theme to the whole book: a beehive full of bees. This was located in a rather inaccessible village and involved planning visits to coincide not only with

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the bees' needs, but the lives of the vendor (a keen beekeeper whose many other hives were located along with Elizabeth's), as well as their own busy lives in the capital (Prishtina/Priština).

Returning to the Ethnological Museum, working on attractive programming resulted in inviting visitors to sample *fli* (yes, of course she gives the recipe of this traditional dish), served by a member of the museum staff in costume—this brought 600 visitors in one week. Another project the author took up was to vitalize activities within a renovated *kulla* (traditional fortified large stone house), and ensure that it was filled with lively seminar participants studying topics of local interest. With initial difficulty Elizabeth set this up as a venue to sell local crafts. The first to sell her work was a young wife of an arranged marriage which she was casually informed, came about because her grandfather knows her husband's family. This is still a normal situation amongst Albanians. Equally normal, she demonstrates, is for women to obey their husband's wishes concerning dress code: Gowing comments on a young wife who wears a headscarf for religious reasons—while this choice should be her own, it is universally acknowledged that it is actually her husband who has decided, see p.87).

Gowing observed that on Women's Day (6th March) every woman was given gifts. She could only wonder why women are honoured only for one day of the year! A worrying attitude is that respect given to the guest has in many cases become undue respect for internationals, a characteristic which involves such deference that many feel these imported 'experts' must be superior in their field to any native Kosovar. Of concern too, the author observed an influential judge flagrantly ignoring the new car seatbelt law; she muses that even had she drawn attention to this, he would not have understood her concern that a country's laws are for all to abide by.

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Tim Judah, in his *Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know* (OUP, New York, 2008) wrote of Kosovo's declaration of Independence that 'celebrations finally began on the afternoon of February 16' (p.149). Was he actually there? For the date of Kosovo's declared independence, exceptionally memorable for Gowing, was 17th February 2008, which will surely remain in her memory all her life. There had been the uncertain build up for years, months, days, and even hours, for even on the day itself, uncertainty remained until after noon—until after the 1 pm 'extraordinary meeting' to which the Prime Minister had summoned the deputies of the Kosovar Assembly. Finally the rejoicing came, and contrary to pessimistic predictions, without violence.

This is a delightful and unusual book, a great introduction for anyone going to Kosovo.

Author's Comment: Olivia Manning's *The Balkan Trilogy*, reading material during Gowing's residence in Kosovo, might have been the least inspiring of British women travel writing—one of few whose subject country and people the writer seemed to have only antipathy for (it was the only work, otherwise suitable for my own co-authored book *Black Lambs and Grey Falcons: Women Travellers in the Balkans*, that we decided intentionally to omit).

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