

**Elizabeth Gowing, *Edith and I: On the Trail of an Edwardian Traveller in Kosovo*. Cornwall: Elbow Publishing, 2013. 280pp. ISBN: 978-0-957409-01-9.**

Research can bring its own rich rewards and excitement, as Elizabeth Gowing shows in this gripping personal investigation into the fascinating life of Mary Edith Durham (MED). Most readers of Balkan travelogues are familiar with the name Edith Durham, whose increasing fame is acknowledged especially in Albanian-inhabited lands: in Albania she had even been offered a home for life by the Communist leader, Enver Hoxha; in Kosovo, as Gowing notes, she was honoured in a series of postage stamps celebrating heroes: she was the only heroine. She wrote seven books, though few are currently in print; and numerous articles in various journals and newspapers. Durham's way of describing her journeys and her discussions with the many, both with power and without, whom she met, are intimate. But there can be no contemporary writer who has gained a clearer picture of the person behind Durham's published works, than Elizabeth Gowing. Gowing, an English traveller herself, was well prepared as she set out on her quest to understand fully Edith Durham's passion for Kosovo, since she had learnt to speak Albanian fluently. At the more personal level, she shows MED living a very modest life in London after her family duties had ended; Durham even had a soft spot for children—something that is not evident in her published work.

This is a slim, but intriguing and beautifully written book. The author explains how she followed up every possible lead, many serendipitous. Her intensive research is woven into her relating of Durham's extensive Balkan travels and sojourns, as well as Gowing's own just a century later, showing clearly and perceptively the many similarities. For example, she reports that Prizren's market day is still on a Wednesday as in Durham's day. Tremendous differences mark their modes of travel, accommodations and interactions, however. These concern all aspects of life in both wartime and relative peace. Alongside all this Gowing also describes relevant traditions and how they have survived and been adjusted to modern life; for example rural life in Kosovo in 1903 would have been closer to that of Durham's England, than Kosovo's rural life is to today's England.

Readers of Gowing's earlier book *Travels in Blood and Honey: becoming a Beekeeper in Kosovo* (2011), will be familiar with her format of brief related chapters,

which however, stand alone as fascinating and varied personal stories. In 'Edith hitches a lift with the Bible Society', Gowing relates her own discussion with present-day representatives of the same religious organization and thereby is able to give a clearer picture of Durham's motivation for working with them. In 'Love life', where other writers have failed to unearth information, Gowing pursues all possible avenues to portray a very plausible contemplation of romance for Durham, despite others' and even Durham's own assertions of dismissiveness and plain appearance. The chapter, 'God's Workshop' gives a very lively description of Gowing's research pursuit, taking her out to 'a large hangar with enormous rusting garage doors' in which was housed the 97% of material from Cambridge University's Archaeological and Anthropological Museum which is not actually on display. The author's description of the vast and extraordinary assortment of unlikely objects gives rise to marvelous speculations.

For those of us over 70, there are such re-awakened memories of our childhoods as the need to sit with one's back to the engine on steam trains (to avoid sooty marks staining our clothes) and the importance of letter writing before the telephone was very widely used. All the more spectacular is Gowing's discovery of a tape actually recording Durham's own voice, giving her 'goosebumps as Edith Durham spoke to me'. It was following this that Gowing visited the house where MED had lived (when aged seven), with her family in London at 82 Lower Brook Street.

In her close reading of what seems to have been every scrap that has been kept of MED's writing, Gowing digs up many details that MED herself apparently edited out of her published work. She likewise also found assorted unpublished writing about MED, enabling her to present a fuller character portrait for readers.

Through her travels and perseverance, MED is now acknowledged as one of the main contributors in the English language to anthropological detail concerning especially northern Albania and Western Kosovo. As Gowing writes, she 'was taking her panniers through river and marsh, access to a world culture, a frame of reference. She was a small plucky force for globalization'. This was recognized in her appointment as the first woman Vice-President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, which holds much of MED's writing and photographic material. By her own admission she found it hard to master the Albanian language; she had the

disadvantage that in her time, it could be written in three different scripts, additionally she lived at the end of the time of Ottoman rule, when Albanian rather than Turkish or Greek, was actually forbidden as a language to be used in schools.

While Durham's earlier travels were investigatory, and included becoming involved in local politics, her later activities, both in Britain and in the Balkans at the time of the break up of the Ottoman Empire, focused on bringing aid to desperate people affected by war. Gowing's concern in understanding the decades of increasing animosity between Serbs and Albanians leading up to the 1999 War mirror MED's own expectation that the strife she witnessed could only be comprehended through understanding the past. Gowing also comments that MED was highly influenced in her recording of history concerning the famed 'Battle of Kosovo', prior to her visit to the site, by such romantic writers as Byron; and that she toned down this record considerably after actually visiting, for it was only from her later travels that her sympathies grew for the plight of Albanians.

Readers unfamiliar with Kosovo and Albania would have benefitted from fuller inclusion in the initial map, of all the alternative place-names used in the text. Quotations from Durham's own writing lavishly intersperse Gowing's accounts—where these are several lines long they are clarified by bold print. This makes it more difficult to notice quotation marks around shorter phrases, especially since the book's print is a little faint. Nonetheless this is an enchanting and amusing book further enhanced with several contemporary photographs.

**Antonia Young**