
Biography and Balkanism in the Travel Writing of Edith Durham

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In 1900, Edith Durham, aged thirty-seven and having spent the previous years caring for her ailing mother, set sail from Trieste down the Dalmatian coast on a steamer bound for Kotor. Reflecting on the journey two decades later, she remarked that as the boat threaded through ‘the maze of mauve islets set in that incomparably blue and dazzling sea’ and stopped ‘at ancient towns where strange tongues were spoken and yet stranger garments worn’ she found a ‘fascination of the Near East’ take hold that endured until her death in 1944.¹ In the two decades following her first brief excursion to Dalmatia she continued to travel to the Balkans regularly – usually to locations further beyond the beaten tourist trail – and published seven full-length works on the region that ranged in style and content from travelogue to political commentary and ethnographic study.² In the process, she also emerged as a prominent advocate for the Albanians, one of the region’s least-known nationalities in West Europe at the time.

Despite Durham’s prolific output of work on the Balkans she is an understudied figure today. What little scholarship that has been written on her focuses on her life story and treats her travel writing as autobiographical inscriptions.³ Like many early studies of Victorian and Edwardian women’s travel writing, this scholarship presents Durham as a proto-feminist (or less progressively as an eccentric spinster) using the masculine preserve of public mobility to escape the constraints of the feminine domestic sphere. However, as Sara Mills notes, by treating women’s travel writing as a simple expression of personal endeavour, biographical methods eschew textual analysis and lack ‘an overall perspective’, eliding how texts produced by women travellers were shaped and constrained by elements other than

¹ M. Edith Durham, *Twenty Years of the Balkan Tangle* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1920), p. 9.

² Besides *Twenty Years of the Balkan Tangle*, Durham’s other works are: *Through the Lands of the Serb* (London: Edward Arnold, 1904); *The Burden of the Balkans* (London: Edward Arnold, 1905); *High Albania* (London: Edward Arnold, 1909); *The Struggle for Scutari* (London: Edward Arnold, 1914); *The Serajevo Crime* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1925); *Some Tribal Origins, Laws and Customs of the Balkans* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928).

³ John Hodgson, ‘Introduction’, in Edith Durham, *High Albania* (London: Virago, 1985), pp. ix-xvi; John Hodgson, ‘Edith Durham: Traveller and Publicist’, in (eds. John B. Allcock and Antonia Young), *Black Lambs and Grey Falcons: Women Travelling in the Balkans* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), pp. 9-32; Gary W. Shanafelt, ‘An English Lady in High Albania: Edith Durham and the Balkans’, *East European Quarterly*, 30:3 (Sep., 1996), pp. 283-300; Harry Hodgkinson, ‘Introduction’, in Edith Durham (ed. Bejtullah Destani), *Albania and the Albanians: selected articles and letters, 1903-1944* (London: Centre for Albanian Studies, 2001), pp. i-xii.

authorial intention, such as the contradictory discursive formations that circulated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴

Most scholarship on Durham was also written prior to or shortly after the publication of Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* (1997) and was therefore unable to engage with the major theoretical advances it inaugurated in the study of Western images of Southeast Europe. Todorova's articulation of the tropes of 'balkanism', a discourse that parallels but is by no means synchronous with that identified by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), has since made it axiomatic to understand the discursive relationship between West and Southeast Europe as based on a series of hierarchical civilisational oppositions that invariably favour the West.⁵

The purpose of this article is to use biographical scholarship on Durham as a point of departure for a contrapuntal reading of her travelogues, namely *Through the Lands of the Serb* (1904), *The Burden of the Balkans* (1905) and *High Albania* (1909). As stated above, biographical studies present her as a woman escaping the constraints of domesticity but elide discussion of how this position impacted her textual representations of the Balkans. This article will illustrate that this position, alongside the countervailing discursive formations of balkanism, femininity and proto-modernism, profoundly shaped her writings on the region. These overlapping formations result in the destabilisation and, in some cases, inversion of the hierarchical registers upon which balkanism is predicated with her travel writing partially shifting away from the denigratory representations of the region found in male authored texts from the same period.

Born in 1863 into an upper-middle class family in Mayfair, Durham, the eldest of eight brothers and sisters, had a promising start in life attending the Royal Academy of the Arts and illustrating several volumes of *Cambridge Natural History*. However, despite auspicious beginnings, Durham appeared as if she were to be 'the Victorian victim' of the family.⁶ As all her siblings went onto achieve success in their respective careers, her artistic trajectory stalled and she remained unmarried and childless. Moreover, as Durham's mother's health deteriorated, the burden of caring for her fell squarely on her shoulders and she became resigned to life of monotonous domesticity. Indeed, she would later write that when questioned by Serbian police who suspected she was spy she provided enough details for an accurate biography, the 'excessive dullness [of which] went a long way towards soothing their agitated nerves'.⁷

⁴ Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An analysis of women's travel writing and colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 34.

⁵ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 1-19; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

⁶ Hodgkinson, p. ii.

⁷ Durham, *Lands of the Serb*, p. 156.

In 1900, after years confined to the domestic sphere, Durham was diagnosed with a psychosomatic illness and her doctor ordered her to get away from England. After she negotiated with her siblings that she would have two-months annual leave from her duties as their mother's carer, she set off for Dalmatia where she 'first picked up a thread of the Balkan tangle' sparking a lifelong engagement with the region. The exact reasons as to why she chose the Balkans for her first two-months of leave remain unclear with Durham herself attributing it to 'Chance or the Fates'.⁸ However, biographical scholarship makes clear that she saw travel to the Balkans as a flight from the life of restricted domesticity enjoined upon her in London.⁹ Indeed, by the turn of the twentieth century the Balkans had developed a formidable reputation for masculine adventure, something that most likely appealed to a British woman seeking a departure from the feminine private sphere where life, as she remarked, 'stretched before me as endless years of grey monotony'.¹⁰

After establishing that she travelled to Southeast Europe seeking to escape the constraints of domesticity, biographical scholarship tends to describe the many great achievements Durham had in the region that mark her out as an exceptional woman. They admiringly and uncritically recount how after her first excursion to the Balkans she returned regularly over the following two decades and travelled across the independent states of Montenegro and Serbia, Habsburg administered Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ottoman Macedonia, where she distributed aid following the 1903 Ilinden Uprising, Kosovo and Albania.

Her biographers also stress that during this period of engagement with the region she developed outspoken views on the Eastern Question that ran counter to conventional opinion.¹¹ In Macedonia, seeing that Greeks, Serbs and Bulgarians were fighting one another rather than uniting against the Ottomans, she came to believe that British Liberal support for Balkan Christians, looked favourably upon since the Bulgarian Horrors, was 'deluded'.¹² Durham became increasingly pro-Albanian, whom she sympathised with as they were without a Great Power sponsor. This was a position that put her increasingly at odds with public opinion in Britain. Indeed, her advocacy for a little known national group who were predominately Muslim drew slim returns as they evoked less sympathy than Balkan Christians.¹³ Support for the Albanians also saw Durham become increasingly anti-Serb, a position that became deeply unpopular during World War One when Serbia was presented as Britain's heroic ally. Most of her biographies conclude with her final botched visit to Albania in 1921 and her gradual decline in public standing resulting from her unpopular politics, her position as an outspoken woman and her disputes

⁸ Durham, *Balkan Tangle*, p. 9.

⁹ Hodgson, 'Introduction', p. x; Hodgson, 'Edith Durham', p. 11; Shanafelt, p. 289; Hodgkinson, p. iii.

¹⁰ Durham, *Balkan Tangle*, p. 9; Andrew Hammond, 'Memoirs of Conflict: British Women Travellers in the Balkans', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 14:1 (2010), p. 58.

¹¹ Hodgson, 'Edith Durham', p. 10; Shanafelt, p. 285.

¹² Durham, *Balkan Tangle*, p. 94.

¹³ Shanafelt, p. 254.

with Balkan historian Robert Seton-Watson and Rebecca West, author of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1942).¹⁴

Although shedding light on her life story, biographical scholarship on Durham offers an overly straightforward reading of her travel writing. Indeed, none of her biographers interrogate how her position as a woman escaping the constraints of domesticity impacted her textual representations of the Balkans. In this way, these studies are best understood as part of the initial wave of studies in women's travel writing where scholars sought to correct the genre's gender imbalanced history. Much of it interpreted travel writing through a biographical lens, focusing on the unusual life stories of women travellers, their great achievements and transgression of Victorian social norms. Moreover, it advanced 'a very specific feminist success story' with women travellers 'redefining themselves, assuming a different persona and becoming someone who did not exist at home' through travel.¹⁵ Women travellers have also been understood to 'move through the world differently than men' with their writings read as proto-feminist and thus opposed to the masculine colonial enterprise.¹⁶

Biographical readings are right to stress that travel offered women a chance to escape the constraints of domesticity. However, there are also problems with such realist interpretations. Although the historians Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom suggest that autobiographical texts offer a 'significantly "historical" form of self-expression',¹⁷ as the author selects the events most meaningful to them, scholars of travel writing point to manifold reasons why critical readings of the medium must account for the 'play of fantasy and desire'.¹⁸

Travel writing, although purporting to be non-fictional, is in fact highly imaginative. Most clearly, travelogues are subjectively emplotted by writers to make their narratives more entertaining for home audiences – after all, they are an 'unabashedly commercial' enterprise.¹⁹ Other factors shape and constrain travel writing beyond authorial intention. The process through which travel writers construct foreign lands as 'agonistic spaces of alterity' sees them oppositionally construct the identity of their home culture

¹⁴ The details for this biographical summary of Durham's life are taken from the previously referenced biographical scholarship.

¹⁵ Eva-Marie Kröller, 'First Impressions: Rhetorical Strategies in Travel Writing by Victorian Women', *Ariel*, 21:4 (Oct., 1990), p. 89; Susan Bassnett, 'Travel Writing and Gender', in (eds. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs), *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 234.

¹⁶ Mary Morris, 'Introduction', in (eds. Mary Morris and Larry O'Connor), *Maiden Voyages: Writings of Women Travellers* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. xvii.

¹⁷ Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom, 'Introduction', in (eds. Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom), *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography and Gender* (New York: State University of New York, 1990), p. 2.

¹⁸ James Duncan and Derek Gregory, 'Introduction', in (eds. James Duncan and Derek Gregory), *Writings of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 5-6.

¹⁹ Steve Clark, 'Introduction', in (ed. Steve Clark), *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999), p. 1.

with travel writing, then, revealing far more about how writers imagined themselves and their home cultures than it does historical reality.²⁰ In this way, travel writing does produce an autobiographical self-portrait but it is one rooted in Eurocentric fantasies.

Scholars influenced by post-structuralism have sought to move beyond biographical methods by examining women's texts in relation to colonial discourse. Discussing women travellers in the Middle East, Lisa Lowe finds that gender intersects with orientalist discourse to produce 'paradoxical, or multivalent' texts that simultaneously support and disavow colonialism.²¹ Expanding upon this, Sara Mills describes women's travel writing as a multi-vocal site of discursive conflict with women travel writers unable to adopt either discourses of colonialism or femininity *in toto*. This unstable discursive terrain sees women's travel writing offer fluctuating support for the colonial project, at times challenging Western imperialism but at others converging with male travel writing in its denigration of native populations, Eurocentric belief in the superiority of bourgeois culture and support for the imperial project.²² Similarly, Reina Lewis finds that women's position as the superior-inferior in terms of the colonial divide between West/East and the gender divide between male/female results in cultural difference being 'registered less pejoratively and less absolutely'.²³

Studies of Balkan travel writing generally adopt the paradigm set by Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, which suggests balkanism, in contrast to orientalism, 'is a discourse about an imputed ambiguity'. Rather than constructing the Balkans as 'culturally, intellectually, spiritually outside Europe and European civilisation',²⁴ balkanism, so the argument goes, imagines Southeast Europe as a liminal space, an 'incomplete self'. In this way, the Balkans, corrupted by Orthodoxy and Islam, is constructed as a pre-Enlightenment version of West Europe through a series of hierarchical civilisation oppositions: rational/irrational, progressive/backwards, orderly/chaotic, civil/violent and masculine/hyper-masculine.²⁵ Despite balkanism's differences from orientalism, it should be stressed that its material effects are similar with the denigratory juxtaposition between Europe and the Balkans serving to undergird the former's supervision of the latter.²⁶

Shaped by her position as a woman escaping domesticity, Durham's travel writing challenges Todorova's hegemonic understanding of balkanism. Her travelogues are a site of discursive contestation with her

²⁰ Duncan and Gregory, pp. 5-6.

²¹ Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 31.

²² Mills, pp. 67-108.

²³ Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 4.

²⁴ Said, p. 71.

²⁵ Todorova, pp. 1-19.

²⁶ Andrew Hammond, 'Balkanism in Political Context: From the Ottoman Empire to the EU', *Westminster Papers*, 3:3 (2006), pp. 6-26.

gender intersecting with balkanist discourse to produce images of the Balkans that at times assume a more complimentary form than those found in male travel writing. She contrasts the traditional lifestyles found in the region favourably against ‘so-called civilisation’,²⁷ romanticises and sexualises Balkan men, who are ‘all tough sinew and as supple as ... panther[s]’,²⁸ sees order where previous travel writers had primarily seen chaos and obfuscation and finds a spiritual depth in the region that she deemed lacking in the materialistic West. As writers are restricted in what they can say by epistemic discursive constraints, Durham’s counter-hegemonic assertions do not entail ‘absolutely new objects, enunciations, concepts’ but rather inverse the meaning of the existing denigratory tropes of balkanism.²⁹ This also undercuts the colonial logic of balkanism, as complimentary representations of the region are clearly less amenable to the facilitation of West European political and economic power.

The counter-hegemonic positions Durham enunciates are also shaped by the time in which she was writing. As Helen Carr notes, the first two decades of the twentieth century were ones of synchronic instability in travel writing with the medium increasingly influenced by an emergent proto-modernist sensibility. Gradually shifting away from the empirical plain statements of Victorian travel writing, which facilitated the imperial project by allowing Western travellers to ‘passively look out and possess’ foreign lands,³⁰ travelogues became ‘more subjective and more literary’. Shaped by the cultural anxiety of the *fin-de-siècle* that saw a widespread unease take hold regarding the rapid pace of urbanisation, industrialisation and rationalisation, these travel texts began to question the hegemonic progressive narratives of the preceding century and unsettle the binarism of civilised self/savage other that characterised Victorian identity.³¹

While this may seem irrelevant to Durham’s position as a woman in flight from the private sphere, it must be remembered that the clash between discourses of colonialism and femininity made women’s travel texts unstable and susceptible to discursive slippage. More specifically, Joyce Kelley has shown that women like Durham who sought travel to escape the confinement of the Victorian era and redefine themselves were often the first to engage in the ‘experimentation with literary form and language’ that presaged the emergence of interwar modernism. She posits that travel was ‘conceptualised as an avenue to freedom of movement and thought’, which allowed for new and radical formulations of self and other to take shape, thus suggesting that Durham’s formative experiences in the domestic sphere predisposed her to discursive bricolage.³²

²⁷ Durham, *Lands of the Serb*, p. 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁹ Michel Foucault (trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith), *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 38, 173.

³⁰ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 8-9.

³¹ Helen Carr, ‘Modernism and Travel’, in, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, p. 75.

³² Joyce Kelley, *Excursions into Modernism: Women Writers, Travel and the Body* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 4-12.

Within travel writing this emergent proto-modernist sensibility saw writers distance themselves from mass tourism and the accompanying effects of modernity. In seeking out places beyond Thomas Cook and Baedeker's beaten tourist trails, they purposefully travelled to 'primitive' cultures in order to escape the rationality and materialism of modernity and in doing so demonstrated the same suspicion of popular travel that modernist writers exhibited towards popular culture.³³ Throughout her works Durham expresses just such a disdain for mass tourism. Discussing Dalmatia she writes that the region has 'its charms, but tourists swarm here, and the picturesque corners are being rapidly pulled down to provide suitable accommodation for them', suggesting that package holiday tourists are dulling the colourful otherness that makes the Balkans attractively different from West Europe.³⁴ Moreover, unlike previous travellers who wrote at length of the wretchedness of *hans*, Durham found these traditional lodging houses preferable to 'any hotel starred by Baedeker' with their primitiveness serving to distance her travel experience from that of bourgeois tourists with their modern conveniences.³⁵ In this context, Durham's work can be situated as proto-modernist, as it offers a 'wandering away' from the travel writing conventions of the Victorian era.³⁶

Unsurprisingly, the attraction of the Balkans was primarily to be found for Durham in 'the extreme primitiveness of the place'.³⁷ Indeed, her pre-modern descriptions of the region's places and peoples demonstrate admiration and not denigration, thus destabilising the binarism of Western superiority/Balkan inferiority that characterises Todorova's balkanism. For example, the typically denigratory evaluation of the Balkans as irrational is inverted by Durham becoming a signifier of the region's spiritual depth, something that was judged lacking in materialistic and rational West Europe. In her travelogues Durham details but does not deride the superstitions and quasi-pagan practices she found in the Balkans and contrasts them favourably against the *fin-de-siècle* craze for 'planchette and table turning' practiced by 'the tribes near Bond Street'.³⁸ However, it was the region's primitive form of Christianity she found most spiritually profound leading her to the conclusion that once religion 'becomes "civilised" it becomes anemic ... it has lost red blood and the joy of life'.³⁹

This is a sentiment exemplified by her experience in a makeshift church in northern Albania where the altar was a dressed-up flour bin and the congregation jostled for space with farm animals. She describes how the elementary setting was 'lightened only by one brilliant ray of sunlight' coming through the roof, which 'glorified' and 'haloed the yellow hair of the bullet-headed, bull-necked Padre'. Durham was awestruck by the scene and as the voice of the Padre 'thundered sonorous' she exclaimed that the primitive mass held before a 'wild flock' was 'incomparably magnificent' suggesting that such an ascetic

³³ Carr, p. 79.

³⁴ Durham, *Lands of the Serb*, p. 3

³⁵ Durham, *Highb Albania*, p. 40.

³⁶ Kelley, pp. 27-31.

³⁷ Durham, *Lands of the Serb*, p. 124.

³⁸ Durham, *Highb Albania*, pp. 191-192, 200.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 281.

and spiritual experience could be found nowhere else, least of all the spiritually impoverished West.⁴⁰

Similarly, while balkanist discourse typically denigrates the region as obfuscated and discordant, Durham understood Balkan society as defined by codes of conduct. Her account of northern Albania includes detailed ethnographic descriptions of the blood feud and *besa* (pledge of honour) leading her to remark that ‘there is perhaps no other people in Europe so much under the tyranny of laws’.⁴¹ Moreover, when visiting Podgorica she went as far as to state that ‘in spite of the mixed Christian and Mohammedan population excellent order is maintained’ with ‘not even our own policemen perform[ing] the said superintending more quietly and efficiently’, suggesting that the disorderly society was not the Balkans but Britain with London described as a ‘vast and uncivilised wilderness’.⁴² This sense of order is best captured in her account of the celebrations that followed the 1908 Young Turk Revolution in Shkodër where despite ‘bullets whistling continuously over every roof ... there were no fatalities, nor any street fighting nor drunkenness’ with such ‘perfect order’ discursively undercutting the *raison d’être* of balkanism by suggesting Southeast European cultures were capable of self-rule without having to conform to Western standards.

Another inversion of what was deemed a valuable cultural attribute by Durham can be seen in her positive evaluation of the pre-modern masculinity of Balkan men. While balkanism has rightly been characterised as a masculine discourse, Durham’s travel writing does not support Todorova’s assertion that the gendering of the Balkans is an entirely negative process without the ‘sexual overtones of orientalism’.⁴³ Indeed, Durham uses the adjectives and motifs typically used to denigrate Balkan men as backwards and savage as epithets of romanticised and sexualised masculinity.

Her Balkans is populated by ‘magnificent specimens’ of manhood with ‘lean supple figures’ who carry themselves with ‘extraordinary dignity’.⁴⁴ They are often ‘half stripped’, making ‘up with firearms for deficiency in shirts’.⁴⁵ Even when a man was ‘no beauty’ they were attractive with their ‘naughty sparkling eyes’ and ‘tiggerish thirst for blood’.⁴⁶ Moreover, whereas in London she remained unmarried and constrained within the domestic sphere, in the Balkans she delighted that she had ‘good looking fellow[s] at my beck and call’.⁴⁷

She also enjoyed the men’s ‘peacocking’, as they walked with ‘swagger’, ‘carried splendid silver-mounted weapons’ and ‘thrust great silver ramrods’ into their ‘tight-fitting *chaksbir*’, which ‘set off the[ir] lean supple figures to the greatest advantage’.⁴⁸ These romanticised and sexualised descriptions mark Durham’s approval of a pre-modern, natural form of masculinity that she contrasts favourably against bourgeois

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 181-182.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 41.

⁴² Durham, *Lands of the Serb*, pp. 28-29, 98.

⁴³ Todorova, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Durham, *Highb Albania*, pp. 49-50.

⁴⁵ Durham, *Lands of the Serb*, p. 23.

⁴⁶ Durham, *Highb Albania*, p. 167.

⁴⁷ Durham, *Lands of the Serb*, p. 230.

⁴⁸ Durham, *Highb Albania*, pp. 49-50.

masculinity when she:

Looked at the room full of long, lean cat-o'-mountains and wondered whether it [the building of a train line] would benefit anybody – let alone themselves – to turn them all into fat corn and horse dealers.⁴⁹

Women are nearly absent in Durham's travelogues, as her journey was one from domestic drudgery into the hyper-masculine, thus liberating, culture of Southeast Europe. The women of the Balkans are described as 'extraordinarily ... blank' and, 'being kept for mainly breeding purposes, their conversation was much like what that of a cow might be, could it talk'.⁵⁰ Although Durham does comment on the oppressive conditions faced by women in the region's patriarchal society, she gives them little agency in her texts. Indeed, the women she gives voice to are mainly sworn virgins who lived much like men.⁵¹

Durham's escape from the feminine private sphere led her to define Balkan domestic spaces in terms of primitive masculinity. Representative is her description of a northern Albanian home as 'nothing more than a huge rudely-built stone cattle-shed – vast, cavernous – lighted only by a pile of blazing logs' and the 'glitter [of] ... cartridge-belts and brand-new Mausers'.⁵² Entering another domestic space she was 'plunged into a huge cavernous blackness'. Once accustomed to the light she saw the room was 'vast ... so vast' with 'arms and field tools hung on the walls' and 'sheepskins ... strewn' on a floor of 'axe hewn planks'. For Durham, the whole space was 'more like a cave than a house. There was something majestic and primeval in its size, its gloom and chaos'.⁵³ From these descriptions it is clear Durham found the masculine domestic space of the Balkans, characterised through its asceticism and weaponry, exhilarating in its radical difference from the Western bourgeois domesticity she escaped from.

In these domestic spaces Durham also indicates her absorption into local patriarchal social structures, which she had been excluded from in Britain. Rarely eating with the women who prepared the food, she notes she was 'always classed with the buckherd', which allowed her to feast on 'Homeric' meals served on 'common platters' shared between herself and 'twenty-four men-at-arms'. Importantly, in these domestic spaces Durham invariably includes herself in the masculine 'we' - for example, 'we tore and worried the seethed lamb' – thus textually incorporating herself into the region's patriarchal society and undercutting the binarism of self/other that typically defines balkanist discourse.⁵⁴

The radical difference between Durham's work and prior British travel writing on the Balkans should not be underestimated. While a journey to the region was seen by her contemporaries as one where 'you must travel with a revolver in each pocket and your life in your hand',⁵⁵ Durham found the region's very primitiveness appealing due to her position as a woman traveller escaping the domestic sphere and the

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 140.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 51, 291.

⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 80-85.

⁵² Ibid, pp. 145-146.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 60.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 64, 145-146.

⁵⁵ Harry de Windt, *Through Savage Europe* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907), p. 15.

influence of an emergent modernist sensibility on her writings. However, her works are also multi-vocal, something that is both commonly found in women's travel writing and is befitting of a period of synchronic instability, allowing for moments that align with dominant discourses of femininity and balkanism.

This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated through her repeated affirmations of feminine respectability, which illustrate her continued enmeshment within hegemonic conceptualisations of women's dress and decorum. Therefore, even while transgressing codes of femininity through travel she details requesting private rooms in *hans* and explains her morning routine – indeed, one of the most fraught moments in *High Albania* comes when she is 'to go uncombed and untoothbrushed' after losing her toiletry bag.⁵⁶

The discursive mutability of Durham's texts allows for moments that align with the denigrating balkanism found in men's travel writing, which saw them bring the region into a position where it 'could be influenced [and] exploited'.⁵⁷ For example, Durham frames the places she travelled through as 'entirely unexplored' and 'unknown' (when of course they were not),⁵⁸ thus presenting them as *terra incognita* ready to be conquered through ethnographic observations in a similar fashion to what Mary Louise Pratt calls the 'anti-conquest', whereby Western travellers empirically master foreign environments.⁵⁹

Similarly, Durham's interest in Southeast Europe often appears less rooted in its culture and more in the elevated social position she found there. She regularly delights in the fact that in the Balkans a woman who 'merely lives in a London suburb' could discuss politics with royalty, ministers and religious leaders. Moreover, she reveled in the fact that the region's native inhabitants treated her as 'no less a person than "Mary of England"'.⁶⁰ In this way, Durham's interest in the Balkans seems to have stemmed at least partially from the authority she commanded in the region's public sphere and over its native inhabitants by virtue of her position as a West European.

As Durham's politics became increasingly pro-Albanian her sympathy for other Balkan peoples decreased. Although the Serbs and Montenegrins receive positive treatment in *Through the Lands of the Serb*, being described variously as 'industrious', 'chivalrous', 'plucky', 'bright' and 'enterprising' with any deficiencies blamed on four centuries of Turkish rule,⁶¹ by the time she wrote *High Albania* she used balkanist tropes to denigrate them. Serbs in Kosovo are a 'seething mass' who bring with them 'indescribable confusion'. Their buildings are 'rabbit warrens' that 'melt into the mud' while their streets are littered with 'stinking heaps of refuse, unutterable filth'. It is evident her contempt for Serbs in Kosovo lies in her belief that their claims to the region were 'lost, dead and gone'. As she succinctly put it, 'Kosovo-polje is Albanian'.⁶² However, even her favoured Albanians are described as 'child-people, helpless before the problems of grown up life', suggesting that for all their admirable qualities she still

⁵⁶ Durham, *High Albania*, p. 143.

⁵⁷ Roy Bridges, 'Exploration and Travel Outside Europe (1720-1914)', in, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, p. 53.

⁵⁸ Durham, *High Albania*, pp. 131, 193, 232; Durham, *Burden of the Balkans*, pp. 86, 170.

⁵⁹ Pratt, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Durham, *Lands of the Serb*, pp. 9, 124.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, pp. 70, 214-217, 256.

⁶² Durham, *High Albania*, pp. 250-253, 275.

viewed them as occupying a bottom rung on a hierarchical ladder of civilisations with West Europe clearly at the top.⁶³

In this context, Durham's texts do not offer as comprehensive a departure from male travel writing as biographical scholarship on women's travel writing tends to suggest. Far from being proto-feminist, Durham's work is littered with moments that align with hegemonic articulations of femininity and balkanism, thus reinforcing her conformance to Eurocentric and patriarchal norms. Biographical scholarship also fails to see that Durham's position as a woman escaping a life of domesticity led her towards more experimental articulations of self/other in her travel writing, something that destabilised the discourse of balkanism identified by Todorova. More broadly, the contradictory utterances found in Durham's travel writing help expose the oversimplified and selective readings offered by biographical scholarship on women travel writers. Indeed, it is possible to show that she expresses proto-feminist and anti-feminist, anti-colonial and colonial sentiments in her texts, highlighting that women's travel writing cannot be read monologically but must instead be treated as sites of discursive complexity and indecipherability.

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⁶³ Ibid, p. 328.

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