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Murzaku's "Catholicism, Culture, Conversion: The History of the Jesuits in Albania (1841-1946)" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW


One of the best books ever written about the Balkans — one of the best books about any remote, far-flung, treacherous region of Europe — is Edith Durham’s High Albania, published in 1913 and a collector’s item ever since. What Rebecca West did for Yugoslavia before the Second World War, Durham did for Albania before the First. She was an outsider looking in, captivated and amazed by the harsh integrity of the place where historical memories were long and tempers short, where vendetta was a way of life (and death), where a religion of peace — Christianity in the form of cheerful and ebullient Franciscan missionaries — struggled to contain a deeper tradition of war. It is a remarkable achievement. And if Albania was (and is) extraordinary, so too was Edith Durham: a tweedy, fearless, unsinkable Englishwoman in the mountainous north; a feminist as exotic as the country she described; a “one-off” lodged in the mind long after the last page has been read. Those who would wish to know something of South Eastern Europe — and England — on the eve of the Great War should read her remarkable book.

It is not too much to say that the spirit of Edith Durham hovers benignly and impressively over Professor Murzaku’s splendid new monograph. There are differences, to be sure. Professor Murzaku is an Albanian by birth and upbringing who, educated in Rome and now a resident and citizen of the United States, has become an insider-outsider with respect to her native land. (Durham, one might say, was an outsider-insider. She came to know Albania exceptionally well but always, self-consciously, as a visitor.) Likewise, Professor Murzaku deals with Jesuits, not Franciscans: another difference between the two. But if these are dissimilarities, the similarities are greater. Each writer displays high intelligence, human sympathy, a sense of Albanian uniqueness, a deep historical awareness that recognizes the difficulty and yet necessity of moral judgment. Each shows a willingness to let Albanians speak for themselves, revealing to the reader, utterly authentically, the burden and the blessing that are history and memory. Professor Murzaku has not written another High Albania — who could? — but she is not shamed by the comparison.

Yet reading her book, the result of years of patient research and deep reflection, I was reminded not immediately of Durham but of another published a while ago called The Universe Next Door. That volume, by James Sire, offered what it called a “basic catalog of world views” — everything from Christian fundamentalism to New Age mysticism — and suggested, by its very title, the adjacency of radically different understandings of reality in any one time or place. The idea has versatility. It might be applied, with little or no
modification, to the progress of religion and nationalism in the Balkans, where notoriously
different mental universes share an unforgiving geography and harsh history and, somehow
or other, get along with each other through it all. The metaphysical becomes the physical very
quickly in south-eastern Europe. The Word becomes flesh — and often blood — at the drop of a
hat. Certainly Professor Murzaku knows this from personal experience. She almost incarnates
these neighboring, overlapping, commingling universes. So, too, her subject matter. The topic
of this monograph may seem remote and obscure, an example of academic **arcana** at their
most arcane. Only a really devoted specialist, you might think, would be interested in the
history of the Jesuits in Albania from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the
twentieth century. In fact, in Professor Murzaku’s talented hands, the story becomes an
exciting exploration of clashing worlds, an analysis of how multiple value-systems tried to
find ways of living together, not killing together. The reader will not be surprised to learn that
the efforts were not always successful. The Balkans have reduced many a dream to dust.

How, then, do the Albanian Jesuits exemplify the clashing of worlds? Let me count
the ways. They were Catholic missionaries in a country largely Muslim and partly Orthodox.
They were Italians and Austrians in land increasingly Albanian, a corner of the Ottoman
Empire swept up in the new, exciting nationalism of the late nineteenth century. They were
men of **God** in a place that became, at the end of their mission, officially Godless. They were
members of a religious order — foreigners at that — in a church where the greatest need was
for a local clergy answerable to a local bishop. They were Jesuils when some in Albania
would have preferred Franciscan. They were figures of culture and learning among a people
(through no fault of their own) primitive and backward. They were scholars and theologians
in a country that hardly knew the basic catechism. They were adepts in medicine and
practical science — good enough, in a rough-and-ready way, to undercut the local savants
(although never using these skills in crudely proselytizing ways). They were promoters of
peace in a land of vendetta and the blood feud. Almost everyone could have been offended by
them. Almost everyone, at one time or another, was offended by them. Their first mission, in
Shkodër in 1841, was a modest success — until the Muslim majority insisted that it cease. (A
house that had taken six months to build had to be demolished in six days.) Their dealings
with local priests, some of whom they had themselves educated, were frequently unhappy.
Their relations with the native hierarchy of bishops were fragile. Their promotion of alien
languages — Italian, German — caused resentment, as did their failure (in a few cases) to make
much of an effort to master Albanian. (Linguistically, some Jesuits went native but others
expected the natives, as it were, to go Jesuit.) In all sorts of ways, they promoted a
nationalism, a sense of cultural self-worth, that eventually turned against them. "You must be
a Jesuit." as one protagonist in the book suggests, "in order to have infinite patience as vast as
the sea." That could be the motto of the mission over a troubled century. They went to
Albania, Professor Murzaku tells us, “to preserve traditional Christian faith and to help in the ... growth of Christian culture. They tried to contribute to the progress of the Albanian people by exploring their language, traditions, customs, and history, [making] every effort to acculturate themselves to the Albanian setting by respecting ... native traditions.” This is a generous judgment. “They showed a sincere love for Albania and its people,” she argues – providing ample evidence to sustain the claim. Such selflessness, it has to be said, was not always reciprocated. “Away with foreigners! Away with Jesuits!” went the alternative cry. The latter was often louder.

On the other hand, this is far from a story of failure. Viewed from a purely mundane perspective, the Albanian Jesuits recorded considerable success. Their Pontifical Seminary, for instance, which they founded and led for 86 years, was the first institute of higher education in Albania. It was a remarkable achievement, one highly esteemed by government and people alike, a model of its kind. Likewise, an Albanian national culture, confident yet self-critical, could not have developed when it did and as it did without the efforts of Jesuits and those educated by them. These were concrete, palpable, tangible achievements. Yet the greatest achievement of these men is surely intangible. It lies in their very failure or, at least, in their embrace of failure. A kind of heroism is on display in Professor Murzaku’s book, the sort of valor that has men willing to risk everything for the sake of a faith and a vision and a way of life that seem, to others, folly. Armed with spiritual weaponry, death itself is not defeat but victory. No-one should pine for the rubble of the Jesuit mission in Albania. No-one should mind that, as Professor Murzaku says, the history of Catholicism in that country is, most recently, the story of “a church that has really just left the catacombs, a church that almost vanished from the face of the earth.” That it did not vanish – that its candle still flickered in some far away mountain or village – owed much to those Jesuits who were prepared to die that it might live.

The book is thus a labor of love about a labor of love. Difficult, harsh, sometimes cruel, a place (as Edith Durham reminds us) where ancient hatreds seem as if they happened yesterday, Albania is still capable of producing such a response. We are all in Professor Murzaku’s debt for offering it.

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