



# WOMEN WHO BECOME MEN

Albanian Sworn Virgins

Antonia Young



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*Women Who  
Become Men*

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# *Dress, Body, Culture*

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DRESS, BODY, CULTURE

*Women Who  
Become Men*  
Albanian Sworn Virgins

*Antonia Young*



*Oxford • New York*

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To my family who have been so encouraging and supportive throughout the years that this has taken to *start*. There will be no end.

And, I hope, to preserve a record for future generations of Albanians, of a culturally respected phenomenon which in the present-day turmoil may soon disappear.

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Whilst I have received much help and advice, I know that there will still be errors and omissions which I have overlooked, and shall be glad to be informed of them. The subject matter is ever changing . . .

### **Note**

The place-names included in the text are in the language of the country in which they are located at the time of writing. The exception is Kosov@, a newly evolved term avoiding bias towards the Serbian 'Kosovo' or the Albanian 'Kosova'.

For the sake of uniformity, I have only used masculine pronouns for the 'sworn virgins' when these were used in reported speech referring to any of my subjects. In all other cases I have used feminine pronouns, even where this was avoided by everyone else.

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**TO VIEW THIS FIGURE PLEASE REFER  
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**Map 1.** Albania's Balkan Frontiers.



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**TO VIEW THIS FIGURE PLEASE REFER  
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**Map 2.** The Albanian centre of Europe. The area enclosed by the dotted line marks, very approximately, the area in which most of the 'sworn virgins' mentioned in the text live or have lived.

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# Preface

‘You may . . . find that some of the very things you consider poor and backward look very different to outside eyes.’

Marjorie Senechal, *Long Life to Your Children!*  
*A Portrait of High Albania*<sup>1</sup>

It was my brother’s trip to Yugoslavia in 1954 which first sparked my interest to visit and see for myself the rebuilding of a country which had lost 10 percent of its population in the Second World War (more than half were killed in civil strife at that time). I was inspired, as were many, by the vision of national and international Youth Brigades building roads and railways, and the reported enthusiasm and excitement this evoked. E.P. Thompson was one such volunteer:

The unusual thing about this railway is the way in which it was built. It is a Youth Railway. People in England when they first heard about a Youth Railway thought it was some sort of practical game or a propaganda stunt . . . But there were no toy trains on the Youth Railway Samac-Sarajevo . . . most of the work went on without supervision and with only the most primitive tools . . . The work was driven forward, not by threats or by personal incentives, but by songs and an amazing spirit of co-operative will . . . (The book documents) what we saw in Yugoslavia while we worked among the ‘brigaders’ (*sic*) on the Railway; what we heard when we talked and argued with everyone from distinguished lecturers and youth leaders to cooks, clerks and schoolboys; what we felt when we danced the *kolo*, shouted or sang with our friends around the bonfires in the evenings.<sup>2</sup>

Post-War<sup>3</sup> Western education in the 1940s and 1950s had given no place to Eastern Europe. When the realization of its existence opened it up to me, my fascination grew as I unsystematically read whatever came my way on the subject. One of the first books I read was Rebecca West’s *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*,<sup>4</sup> describing her journeys all over Yugoslavia during the years 1937 and 1938. Although West’s view is considerably influenced by her Serb travel companions, she provides a wealth of insight into the Yugoslavia of the time. Literary critic Larry Woolf stresses the importance of this work as a prophecy of times ahead:

Almost fifty years after its initial publication *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* astonishes us by the weight and depth of what Rebecca West knew about Yugoslavia, but above all it overwhelms us with the passionate urgency of her need to know, our need to know . . . When *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* was published in 1941, Hitler made himself the master of Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia had been bombed and abolished, and Rebecca West found that she had been a visitor to a now lost world. At that moment in history, Rebecca West's book challenged Britain and America to cherish an image of Europe in its full moral and political dimensions, to recognize unequivocally that Eastern Europe was a necessary part of Europe . . . Our challenge will be to discover Eastern Europe anew, and recognize it without the ideological marks that have served for simple identification, our challenge will be to accept it as part of Europe, and not the lesser part.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s I took the opportunity to visit Yugoslavia whenever I could, travelling by all means: boat,<sup>6</sup> bus, foot, hitch-hiking, sometimes on ox-carts, and by train. One of the trains was the *mali airo*<sup>7</sup> which took seventeen hours to chug the fifty-eight kilometres from Gostivar to Ohrid. The tiny three-coached train moved so slowly up the mountains that it was possible to get out and pick blackberries alongside and get back on the moving train. In earlier times when there were three classes, only the first-class passengers were permitted to remain in the moving train as it climbed the mountains. Second-class passengers had to get out and walk, while the third-class passengers had to get out and push the train. I was shown the handlebars on the outside of the coaches for this purpose. When the train came off its tracks a couple of times along the journey everyone got out to heave it back on again.

With a Yugoslav friend I spent a summer camping in all six republics,<sup>8</sup> experiencing the fascinating differences which even Tito's enforced cohesion could not homogenize. Generally I was not believed when I claimed to be British on the Macedonian bank of Lake Ohrid as I looked across to Albania on the other side in 1958. At that time very few tourists left the magnificent Dalmatian coast to travel inland; those who did were French or German families or groups. My appearance, the fact that I was travelling alone and my use of sufficient Serbo-Croatian to be sometimes thought of as belonging to a different one of the Yugoslav republics combined to make more plausible a life story involving an Albanian childhood and escape<sup>9</sup> to Yugoslavia by swimming across the lake. I later gazed at Albania from Corfu after a journey down the coast by boat. Yugoslavia had long since broken its links with Albania: when Tito fell out with the demands of the Soviet Union in 1948, previous considerations of Albania becoming a seventh republic of Yugoslavia ended.

Marriage, emigration and family ties kept me from visiting Yugoslavia during the height of its prosperity and hope in the 1970s, but when I returned (shortly after Tito's death in 1980) it was with new purpose. My husband's work in Peace Studies took us to the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik to share the running of international conferences and courses on nonviolence and peace education. The Centre, housed in a fine building dating from the days of Austro-Hungarian domination, was an institute which could welcome students and faculty from both East and West, offering a place for interaction between people of Communist and non-Communist backgrounds. Cynics might question the validity of the work which was not able to help prevent the appalling killing and destruction of the 1990s, but it is worth mentioning that the staff of the Centre continued work throughout the worst times, despite a direct hit on the building and devastating fire. With international support, the Centre re-opened after only a short break with renewed course offerings.

The republication in the mid-1980s of the liveliest of Mary Edith Durham's seven books on the Balkans, *High Albania*<sup>10</sup> brought recognition back to her work.<sup>11</sup> This remarkable British woman (usually known as Edith Durham) travelled in the Balkans during the first quarter of the twentieth century becoming ever more involved as an artist, self-trained anthropologist and relief work organizer, as well as informed political commentator, even influencing British foreign policy in the area.<sup>12</sup>

Born in 1863, she did not visit the Balkans until the age of thirty-seven. By that time she was tiring in her task of nursing her ailing mother, and was advised by her doctor to have a break to 'get right away no matter where, as long as the change is complete'. She took a Lloyds steamer from Trieste, followed the recommendation of someone on board and disembarked at Kotor in Montenegro. Thereafter in the following years she travelled extensively all over the Balkans campaigning vigorously for the independence of the many minority populations.

In times of war and tribal revolts she took medical aid, food and blankets to the victims: she always tried to hear all sides of the many conflicts with which she came into contact, and to publicize these situations. A comment she made in 1913 could, unfortunately, well be repeated today: 'The one thing that can be said with certainty is that no permanent solution of the Balkan Question has been arrived at.'<sup>13</sup> After her first visits to Montenegro and Serbia, Durham took up the cause of the Albanians<sup>14</sup> and subsequently all her writing related to their various situations, political, historical and anthropological.

In a speech during a celebration for her eightieth birthday, Durham commented: 'It occurred to me that the vexed questions of Balkan politics might be solved by studying the manners and customs of each district, and so

learning to whom each place should really belong. I cheerfully started on this vast programme.' The result of this endeavour is her *Some Tribal Origins, Laws and Customs of the Balkans*, which is unrivalled for its graphically written anthropological detail on human groups and phenomena, many of which no longer exist.<sup>15</sup> One such phenomenon – and the focus of this book – which Durham observed was that of the 'sworn virgin'; she met at least nine of them.

If nurturing three children limited my Balkan travels, it also opened up several new dimensions. One of these was the writings of Laura Ingalls Wilder whose series of nine children's books I shared with my own daughters. Later the stories were poorly adapted and serialized on television under the title 'Little House on the Prairie'.<sup>16</sup> These relate the true life story of Laura, her parents and three sisters as they moved across America during the latter half of the nineteenth century, forever searching a self-sufficient life. In the last of these books Laura (married in the previous book) and her husband, faced new disasters and were unable to care for their baby, Rose. Such an unsatisfactory end to two years' reading left me anxious to discover what became of these real people.

I was able to follow the story quite unexpectedly. Based in Norway in 1983, I had the good fortune through the Peace Research Institute of Oslo, to become acquainted with the Norwegian anthropologist, Berit Backer<sup>17</sup> who had just completed her Ph.D thesis on Albanian kinship systems. At the time of pursuing her fieldwork, in the mid-1970s, foreigners were not permitted to conduct any independent study in Albania. Instead, Backer managed to obtain permission to work in the all-Albanian village of Isniq, in Kosov@,<sup>18</sup> two miles outside Deçani, close to the Albanian border. Her bibliography included *The Peaks of Shala: Being a Record of Certain Wanderings Among the Hill-Tribes of Albania* by Rose Wilder Lane.<sup>19</sup> This I discovered was indeed Laura's baby Rose who became an avid reader as a child, and took the unusual step for a teenage girl at that time of leaving the rural mid-West to become a journalist. In 1915 she was based in San Francisco, where she was briefly married. By the 1920s it was claimed that she was the best- paid woman writer in the world.<sup>20</sup>

In 1919 Rose was commissioned by the Red Cross to report on the situation of refugees in Europe after the First World War. Through this work she was invited by friends setting up schools in the mountains of northern Albania, to join one of their expeditions. This became the inspiration for her book, published just a decade after Durham's *High Albania*. More romantic and less detailed in ethnographic documentation than Durham's, Lane's *Peaks of Shala* nevertheless confirms many of the traditions which Durham had already noted. One of these is the phenomenon of the 'sworn virgin' (Durham's 'Albanian virgin').

There is extensive literature on travel in Albania, much written by early foreign visitors to the area in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and up to the Second World War. It includes works by such prominent figures as Lord Byron and Edward Lear.<sup>21</sup> Almost all these writers referred to the *Kanun* (the Code of laws collected by Lekë Dukagjini in the fifteenth century), and many to 'Albanian virgins'. Lane does not write of actually having met one, but records having been assumed to be one! The tribal chief Lulash of Thethi interpreted the combination of her travelling without a husband, dressed in trousers and sporting short hair as indications that she had taken the vow.<sup>22</sup> More widely documented in the past,<sup>23</sup> the phenomenon known as the 'sworn virgin' was thought to have been eradicated under the Communist regime. This became an aspect of Albanian culture that I wanted to pursue.

A conference held at Bradford University in 1987 on 'Women Travellers in the Balkans' prompted me to present a paper on Rose Wilder Lane,<sup>24</sup> and to speculate whether 'sworn virgins' still existed. When I first visited northern Albania in 1989, I made enquiries concerning this question. Western visitors to Albania at that time were only permitted to travel inside the country in diligently supervised, strictly guarded, but very well cared for groups along specific, well-prepared routes. These groups were forbidden to speak to anyone other than their tour guides or government representatives. The foreigners were informed of the wonders of the Communist era: illiteracy had been reduced from 85 per cent (even higher amongst women) before the War of Liberation (as the Second World War was referred to in Albania) to 5 per cent, no-one earned more than twice as much as anyone else, there were no taxes, no crime, no unemployment and rents were less than 10 per cent of income; furthermore, five-year plans from the 1970s had completed the electrification of the villages.

Only in later years did we hear the full cost of Albania's 'progress'. In the interests of this progress, besides the horrors which are widely known about today, many books were burnt, many banned. There were no town plans or road maps available, such was the concern of the strict Stalinist regime to keep the ordinary people in ignorance concerning anything outside their immediate domain. Little wonder then, that while few in the North, and fewer still in the South, knew that the tradition of 'sworn virgin' was still alive, recognition even of the concept was almost unheard of only a hundred miles away in Albania's capital, Tirana. This partly reflects an unwillingness of urban and aspiring Albanians to acknowledge the survival of traditions, on the other hand it goes without saying that this part of Europe is undergoing a profound and rapid change which seems likely to transform both the context and the very existence of the phenomenon described in this study.

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**Figure 1.** ‘Here we found one of the Albanian virgins who wear male attire. While we halted to water the horses she came up – a lean, wiry, active woman of forty-seven, clad in very ragged garments, breeches and coat.’ (Durham (1909), *High Albania*, p. 80). Edith Durham: Rapsha, c. 1908

## Notes

1. Senechal, M. (1997), *Long Life to Your Children! A Portrait of High Albania*, Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, p.37.
2. Thompson, E.P. (ed.) (1948), *The Railway: An Adventure in Construction*, London: The British-Yugoslav Association, pp. viii–x.
3. For anyone born in the three decades following 1930, ‘The War’ referred to the Second World War, for those born earlier it was ‘The Last War’.
4. West, R. (1982), *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*, London: Macmillan. (First published in 1941).
5. Woolf, L. (Feb. 1991), ‘Let’s Listen this Time’, *New York Review of Books*.
6. This was before the road had been built down the Dalmatian coast.
7. Built during the First World War by German troops, this narrow gauge railway still used its original rolling stock until it ceased operation in 1966.
8. Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia.
9. During the years 1945–90 few Albanians were given permission to make visits outside their country.
10. Durham, M.E. (1909), *High Albania*, London: Edward Arnold. Republished and edited by John Hodgson in 1985 in London: Virago Press; and in 1987 in Boston: Beacon Press. Hodgson’s new introduction provided the fullest biography of Durham to that date. See also Hodgkinson, H. (1995), ‘Edith Durham and the Formation of the Albanian State’ in Young, A. (ed.), *Albania and the Surrounding World: Papers from the British-Albanian Colloquium, South East European Studies Association held at Pembroke College, Cambridge, 29th–31st March, 1994*, Bradford: Research Unit in South East European Studies, University of Bradford, pp. 14–23.
11. Since this time, reference to her works appear in a large proportion of books published on the Balkans, and she has been the subject of several dissertations, for example: Jolley, L. (1988), *Mary Edith Durham: Her Life, Her Travelling and Her Collecting in the Balkans*, BA (Hon.), Manchester: Manchester Polytechnic; MacKenzie, P. (1993), *Mary Edith Durham (1863-1944): Traveller and Collector in the Balkans*; van Hal, T. (1991), *Reizen en schrijven: een onderzoek naar het werk van Mary Edith Durham* (Travel and text: the writings of Mary Edith Durham), MA, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, which includes a complete bibliography of all Durham’s writing. There are five museums in Britain which contain her collections: the Bankfield Museum in Halifax which received the bulk of her costume and textile collection with some related images, and which devotes a whole room to these collections and to other relevant photographs, maps and artifacts portraying Durham’s life and work in her areas of concern; the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (jewelry and amulets); the Museum of Mankind in London (largely manuscripts, plus a small collection of objects); the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford (jewelry, silver-handled weapons, musical instruments); and the Royal Anthropological Institute (photographs). The Bankfield Museum has produced two catalogues relating to their holdings of Durham exhibits: Start, L.E. (1977), with notes by M. Edith Durham, Halifax: Calderdale Museums; and (1997), *Bread, Salt*



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