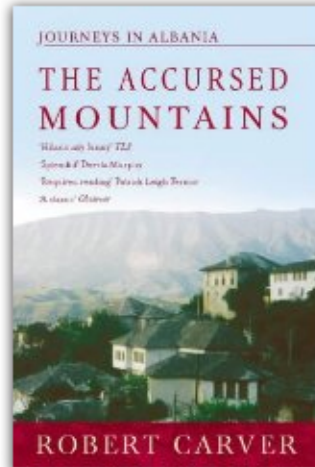


Book Review

By James Pettifer

The Accursed Mountains

Robert Carver



TLS

A stony place

JAMES PETTIFER

Robert Carver

THE ACCURSED MOUNTAINS

Journeys in Albania

339pp. John Murray. £18.99.

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Albania is an unusual country. Its recent rulers, King Zog, Enver Hoxha, Ramiz Alia and Sali Berisha, make an odd pantheon, and it is perhaps not surprising that they have also inspired some unusual books, such as William Ash's *With Pickaxe and Rifle*, Gwyn Robbin's *Geraldine of the Albanians*, and Hoxha's own seventy-one volumes of "Collected Works", the *vepra*.

Robert Carver's *The Accursed Mountains* is also out of the ordinary. At one level it is a travel book, but there is very little real exploration in it, and the *Accursed Mountains* on the far northern border with Montenegro, the stamping ground of Edith Durham and other pioneer Edwardian travellers, only occupy a few pages. It has little or no value as a guide to the complex ethnography of Albania. Carver's observations of some places do not always seem original, and a few passages are taken, more or less literally, from my *Blue Guide to Albania*. But he is a good, if opinionated, political observer and reporter and the book is a very fine impressionistic account of the late Berisha period, and an expose of the 1996-7 crisis in British policy towards the Berisha regime.

Although he is not explicit about his own beliefs, Carver seems to be a man of the romantic Right, who spent his childhood in Greek Cyprus, and he sees Albania from this viewpoint. Byron quite often hovers in the background, and Carver has a clear bias towards the civilization of the royalist Right in Greece, as opposed to a caricatured Albanian ignorance and barbarity. He seems to have been briefed before his departure for Albania by supporters of the "Vorio Epirus" irridentist movement, which is campaigning to recover most of southern Albania for Greece. He arrives first in the Albanian deep south and stays in the small town of Korca, once Greek Koritsa. Although Communism is clearly dead, and he finds "Mercedes Benz taxis and American-style jeans and T-shirts; a lively free market in dollars and drachma by the old bazaar", all is not well. The town is bitterly politically divided. He enters a world of African-level poverty and labyrinthine corruption and deception, where every-

thing has its price. It is a little before the spring 1996 general elections, where in Korca, as many other places, Dr Berisha's Democratic Party duly "wins" - perhaps "takes" is more accurate - all the seats. At this stage, Carver is uncertain as to whether the poll was rigged or not, but after a visit to Gjirokastra and then to Tirana, all is clear. The Berishaites' definition of democracy is their own Democratic Party, and dishonesty is permitted, even encouraged, if it protects their rule.

Carver is very perceptive about the complexities of the end of Communism and the lethal mixture of corruption, greed, the Mafia and genuine poverty and deprivation which led to the pyramid savings crisis of the winter of 1996-7, when society collapsed into anarchy. The central problem for Berisha and his Western backers, which Carver rightly emphasizes, is that not everyone in Albania has welcomed the end of Communism. Near Voskopoja, Carver finds that "villagers resented the privatisation of the land, too, and blamed the Democrats. The first privatisation had offered land for sale. Some villagers had bought. Then, those who hung back had been given their land. That was unjust." And although the one-party State has totally collapsed, little has taken its place. There are few functioning institutions, only personal and family ties.

But Carver definitely exaggerates the dangers of travelling in Albania, particularly in the rural north, at least before the current Kalashnikov

AK-47 era, and his view of the country is far too black. Some real economic progress was made in the Berisha period, if often in spite of the government. Carver seems not to notice the basic sense and decency of most rural village-dwelling Albanians, who have had to learn from an early age that some common values and practical co-operation are essential if any form of society is to exist in that stony, inhospitable world. Some degree of collectivism is essential for the survival of small communities in the Balkan mountains. Socialism had a genuine popular basis in many of the poorer villages, and the collapse of the agricultural co-operatives lies behind much of the contemporary emigration problems. The West, in a rush to create a consumer society in the town, does not have a policy for the rural Balkans. Capitalism has, so far, offered little to these traditional communities. Villagers distrust the Westernizing kleptocratic elite in the towns as much as they distrusted the former Communist party bosses.

But if Carver is hard on most Albanians, this is nothing compared to his disapproval of the current British diplomatic and intelligence community in Tirana. Western Establishment figures in Tirana are seen as charlatans, who try to rule Albania like the worst sorts of colonial Colonel Blimps. Three chapters in the heart of the book detail their behaviour, and they embody to perfection the now distant days between 1993 and 1997 when the Western embassies in Tirana were more pro-Berisha than the President's men themselves. Three characters and instantly recognizable, though not named (presumably for legal reasons), although it is obvious to anyone who knows Tirana exactly who they are. They are a recent British ambassador, "Carruthers", an intelligence officer, and the "General", an ex-British Army Officer who was the head of an "international peacekeeping" mission (also an

on every newspaper's front page last year when his Albanian girlfriend stabbed him (as Carver actually points out near the end of the book).

Their world is portrayed as comic, self-important and blinkeredly ignorant of Albanian realities, these failings largely caused, in Carver's opinion, by their refusal to travel outside Tirana. Carruthers, the M16 operative, is rather less isolated than the other two, as he does at least try to explore the country and so realizes that there is something very wrong with Berisha's Albania, though he confides to Carver that "when a government has decided to do something at policy level - and our own government has decided to back Berisha - there's little we can do to change their minds."

The "General" seems not to be shrewd enough to conceal properly the fact that his alleged peace-keeping organization is an intelligence-gathering operation. Innocent British taxpayers may feel that the purpose of spying is to provide information so that Whitehall can develop sensible policies, but Carver believes that in the contemporary Balkans the opposite is the case. The task of intelligence-gathering diplomats and the academics who advise the Foreign Office is largely to provide comforting bromides to bolster existing policies.

But Albanian reality does eventually assert itself, as it did in the pyramid banking crisis and subsequent armed uprising last year. Carver catches very well the undercurrent of xenophobia that was at the heart of the rebellion of spring 1997. There had simply been too many missionaries, aid-workers, spies and verbose, patronizing academics advising the Albanians what to do up in their mountain fastnesses.

The Accursed Mountains is enjoyable and occasionally hilariously funny, but it has a more serious value. It is the first sustained eye-witness account by an intelligent observer of a period in which Western governments showed themselves to be wildly self-deluded and which led up to the collapse of Berisha's government last year. It will make the author quite a few enemies, but Balkan studies being what they are, this is probably a sign that he has written a useful, mainly honest book..

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