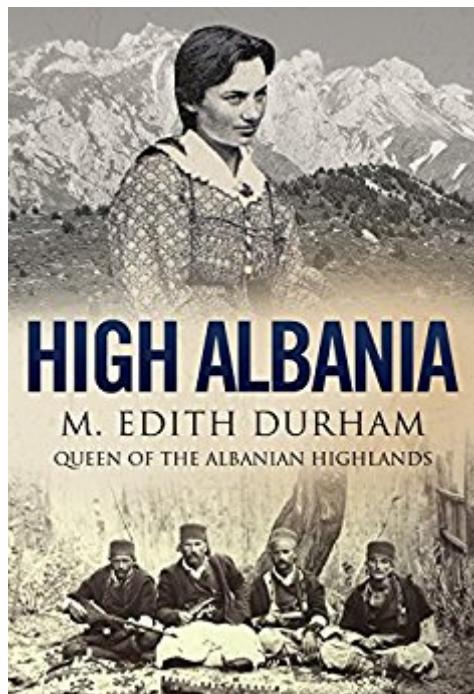


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# High Albania



## Synopsis

The Balkans were a dangerous place in the early twentieth century. The Ottoman Empire was on the verge of collapse, losing control of areas like Albania where the people were calling for political rights. Disease, the threat of violence and war were looming over the people who lived in primitive conditions. Yet, it was into this world that Mary Edith Durham, a thirty-seven-year-old Edwardian lady dressed in boots, long skirt, umbrella, and straw hat, entered. She would go on to spend the next twenty years of her life travelling through the Balkans, focusing particularly on Albania and Kosovo, some of the most underdeveloped regions of Europe. *High Albania* is Durham's most famous work and confirmed her position as the pre-eminent expert on the customs and society of the Balkans. Through this work Durham explains the history of the region, geography, and cultural interactions including their almost medieval blood honor system, which led feuds between families to persist for generations. Durham was a staunch supporter of the Albanian people and is still revered in the country, for example the fourth President Alfred Moisiu described her as "one of the most distinguished personalities of the Albanian world during the last century". Her work provides fascinating insight in this colorful region with its troubled past. "a tremendous sense of honor, justice, and humor. Her verve and funniness make her irresistible." The New York Review of Books "her perceptions remain so pertinent that we know a correspondent who operated there [in 1999] with an old edition of this book in lieu of a Nato briefing." The Guardian Mary Edith Durham was a British traveller and author who wrote a number of anthropological accounts of the Balkans in the early twentieth century. *High Albania* was published in 1909 and Durham passed away in 1944.

## Book Information

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## **Customer Reviews**

Written before WW1, this is another Victorian English woman traveling alone in a fairly unknown land and culture. There are no maps so her travels are hard to follow. She travels to many village and town that few of us have ever heard of and many have likely changed names since the book was written. The many customs and tribes that she describes are interesting and may explain the area's recent history, but you would need much more to set the descriptions in any modern counties.

More entertaining than any description could possibly make it sound - this book should be on the reading list for anyone traveling through the Balkans. It is the story of a kick-ass single woman who traveled through the mountains of northern Albania and Kosovo on the eve of the Balkan Wars and of Albanian independence. She did not set out to write a story, but rather to document the people she encountered and the things she saw. The result is an intriguing travelogue with a strong anthropological flavor that is surprisingly cohesive.

Great book!

I really liked this book, because it's interesting on different levels. First, it is a travelogue of a journey to a region that includes parts of modern-day Albania, Montenegro, and Kosovo. It was undertaken in 1908, a time when "the Near East" apparently was understood by Westerners to include Eastern Europe (or at least those parts still under the Ottomans). This region was considered to be "the Lhassa of Europe", in terms of being little-known, largely "off the map". The mere tale of the journey, as such - the remarkable characters, the surprises, dangers and hardships encountered, the twists and turns, is well-written, engagingly told, and very interesting as just "adventure travel". In addition, the ethnographic descriptions of the daily life and beliefs of the Albanian people of those days are

fascinating in themselves. There is a little bit of everything, from tattooing, to dress and hair fashions, hospitality, cooking, household economy, gun culture, games, humor, and religious beliefs. I recommend an illustrated version, for the drawings and photos. Despite taking note of the ignorance and grinding poverty of their circumstances, Durham's account of the Albanians is also remarkably even-handed when comparing them to the British and western Europeans of that day. Much of the narrative concentrates on dialogues with her traveling companions about "blood relations" - both in the sense of kinship, marriage and tribe, and in the sense of honourable retribution, or "blood debt", which was a major part of the culture. There are illustrative anecdotes - some traditional, and some ostensibly from the actual experiences of her hosts and companions. Her description of their tribal, vs. an individualistic perspective on duty and responsibility is particularly interesting. On yet another level, the narrative is particular to a historical moment - it climaxes just at the time of the "Young Turks" coup, and reflects the political and social circumstances of the place and time - in the Balkans, during the prelude to the First World War. The author very much sympathized with the Albanian people. She was no friend of the Great Powers of her day, as she describes their machinations to gain and/or keep influence over the region. Her very personal account of how "everything started to go wrong" (and perhaps could not have helped but go wrong, given the systematic ignorance and mismanagement already in place) is perceptive, compelling, and tragic. It will also have an uncomfortably familiar ring to anyone familiar with American (or any other great power's) misadventures in foreign policy.

And the Victorian lady who discovered it. No other historical text or account will give you a better, more vivid and fascinating insight into the culture, customs, people, and the lands of Northern Albania as it was in the early 20th century. Hers is an unimaginable tale of a people that for all practical purposes lived in Medieval times even though this was 1908. Every Albanian or those interested in Albanian people should read "High Albania" and sit back and marvel at this grand feat. We owe her a great deal of gratitude and I, for one, will forever remember her graceful writing, her tireless efforts to give posterity a postcard of a past which would have forever remained in the dark history without the "Queen of the Highlands".

Ms. Durham's writing was so vivid that I traveled with her. It is amazing that a woman from a foreign country traveling accompanied only by a single guide much of the time through such untamed areas in the early 1900s could go unmolested. It is a tribute to the fact that she was not judgmental of and was open to learning about local culture, history, and cultures that she did so. It is also a tribute to

the honor and courtesy of the local tribes. It would have been good if the author had explained the meaning and concepts behind the occasional foreign words in the text. Sometimes they could be ascertained from the context, but not always. Otherwise a thrilling ride through untamed regions of the world.

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