

In the Footsteps of Lawrence Durrell and Gerald Durrell in Corfu

Hilary Paipeti

Free Bonus: A taste of the main text

The Durrells in Corfu: The True Story

Peter Harrison

In the spring of 1935 Mrs Durrell and her three youngest children, Leslie, Margo and Gerald, arrived in Corfu for an extended stay. They had been preceded by Lawrence, the oldest son, who was in his twenties and married, and they all initially settled in Perama, south of Corfu Town. Mrs Durrell took up residence in the Strawberry Pink Villa. Later, Lawrence and his wife Nancy moved to Kalami and set up home in the White House. There was no Mr Durrell present because he had died in 1928 in India. However, he left his wife a legacy which in those days had the same value as half a million pounds has today. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Or is it? Perhaps not. In the years that have passed since that event much has been written about the Durrells and the five years they spent in Corfu, 1935 to 1939. Most of it was written by the Durrells themselves. Yet there still remains many unanswered questions about this period, the main one being: Just how much of what has been written is true? This was a question I was able to put to Gerald Durrell myself in the 1970s, when I took a group of schoolboys to Gerald's zoo in Jersey. Gerald was kindness itself, to all of us, and he gave me answers to all the questions I had time to put to him. Answers that I then used to create the greater picture which I shared with Douglas Botting when he subsequently wrote his 'Authorised Biography of Gerald Durrell', published in 1998. I also shared it with Hilary Paipeti for use in her guidebook, 'In the Footsteps of Lawrence Durrell and Gerald Durrell in Corfu', also first published in 1998.

All members of the original Durrell family have now died. Mr Durrell died in India in 1928; Mrs Durrell in England in 1965; Leslie Durrell in England in 1981; Lawrence Durrell in France in 1990; Gerald Durrell in Jersey in 1995; and finally Margo Durrell in England in 2007. All were cremated. All left descendants except Gerald. And with their deaths the 'raison d'etre' for leaving anything unsaid has gone. So what now needs to be asked and answered? Just the perpetual Durrell/Corfu questions that everyone still asks. And here are some of my own answers to these questions, written as honestly as I can and based partly on what Gerald told me himself.

Are the biographical books Gerald wrote, and especially the first, 'My Family and Other Animals', an accurate portrayal of their life in Corfu in the 1930's? The answer is 'yes' in relation to the first book of his Corfu trilogy. The people mentioned in 'My Family and Other Animals' were all real people and all were accurately described by Gerald. As were the animals. And all of the various incidents described in the book were factual, although not always told in the correct order and sequence. But this is something Gerald acknowledged himself in his preface to the book. And the dialogue was a true rendition of the manner in which the Durrells always talked amongst themselves.

Were Lawrence and his wife, (the unmentioned Nancy), an integral part of the family during the Corfu years? Or did they live and travel separately from the others? Lawrence and Nancy spent much of their time in Corfu living and travelling on their own or with their own friends. But they also spent a lot of time living with the Durrell family, especially during the periods when Mrs Durrell was leasing the enormous Daffodil Yellow Villa (between September 1935 and August 1937) and the Snow-White Villa (between August 1937 and the time they left Corfu in mid-1939). During the initial period, when Mrs Durrell leased the smaller Strawberry Pink Villa (between February and September 1935) Lawrence and Nancy lived separately in a nearby cottage. The Durrells were always a close-knit family and Mrs Durrell was always the focus of family life during these years. But by the time the book came to be written Nancy Durrell had split permanently from Lawrence and that is the reason she was cut from the books written by Gerald.

What about Gerald's other books and his compendiums of stories about Corfu? These make good reading but they became progressively more fictionalised as the years progressed. In his second Corfu book, 'Birds, Beasts and Relatives', Gerald told some of the best anecdotes he ever wrote about his time in Corfu, and almost all of these were

true. But some were not, and some were stories that he subsequently regretted writing. The same can also be said about many of the events described in the third book, 'The Garden of the Gods'. The simple fact is that the whole sequence of their stay in Corfu was accurately told in the first book. The second book included some stories that had been missed out of this first book, but these incidents were insufficient to fill the book, so were 'padded out' with fictional happenings. And the third book, and the subsequent short stories, while often containing some measure of truth, were substantially works of fiction.

Was everything factual about these years included in Gerald's books and stories or are their things that have been missed out? There were things Gerald deliberately missed out. And quite necessarily so. As the period progressed he became more and more independent of his mother's control, and he actually spent some period of time living with Lawrence and Nancy in Kalami. This was a period he never wrote about, for a number of reasons. But if there was ever a true 'Child of Nature', or 'Wild Child', then it was Gerald during these times. Thus, if childhood is the 'bank-balance of the novelist', it was during these periods in particular, and during the Corfu period taken as a whole, that both Gerald and Lawrence filled their bank-balances to over-flowing with the experiential riches which subsequently spilled out during their writing careers.

Did the Durrells lead a life-style in Corfu that was frowned on by the locals? The family led a bohemian life by any standards. Gerald was the youngest and was much-loved during his years in Corfu: by his Mother and family and also by everyone else around him; by the Corfiot people who knew him, and to whom he always spoke in passable Greek; by the various tutors he had during these years and especially by Theodore Stephanides, who treated him as his own son; and by the Durrell's guide and mentor, 'Spiro Americanos', the taxi driver. But later revelations indicate that he did give some offence during the later period of his stay, when he 'ran wild' for a time. And the rest of the family certainly gave some. Lawrence and Nancy by swimming naked, and aborting a baby. Leslie by allegedly making the servant girl, Maria Kontos, pregnant and then refusing to either marry her or to support their son. Margo by having an affair with one of Gerald's tutors, Pat Evans, who was described as becoming too familiar with her. Pat was immediately dismissed and became ostracised by the Durrells from that moment onwards. But he didn't leave Greece when the Durrells left. He stayed on to become a member of the Greek Resistance during World War Two. Only after the war had ended did he return to England and get married. But he never again spoke either to the Durrells or about them, to anyone, including his wife or his son.

Did Leslie really produce a child and refuse to recognise him? When the Durrells left Corfu in 1939 they took their servant girl Maria Kontos with them. And she certainly became pregnant and had a son. And she claimed that his father was Leslie. But Leslie denied it and the family never accepted that the boy was Leslie's son. On medical grounds.

How famous have Lawrence and Gerald become since those years? Lawrence has now become recognised as one of the significant writers of the 20th century. Almost all of his books are still on sale, and two of his earliest novels were reprinted through the efforts of the Durrell School of Corfu and its founder and Director Emeritus Richard Pine. And it is not only his novels which remain admired, his travel books are also amongst the best ever written. Gerald Durrell, on the other hand, wrote 37 books during his lifetime, but few of them are now in print. Unlike Lawrence, he will not be remembered so much as a writer but as a communicator and naturalist. His two great contributions to posterity are his zoo on Jersey, where endangered species are being bred and returned to the wild, and his book 'My Family and Other Animals', one of the best books of travel literature ever written.

Many people remain perplexed as to why, after the war was over, the Durrells left Corfu forever. What was the reason they went to Corfu in the first place? Why did they leave in 1939? And why did they never return? The fact that another World War was approaching was recognised by them early in 1938, and they started to prepare then to leave Corfu in 1939. However, whether or not they could have remained in Corfu, had there not been a war, is a moot question. Mrs Durrell had initially followed her son Lawrence to Corfu in 1935 because it promised to be somewhere where her money could go much further than it could in England. But by 1938 she was in financial difficulties and needed to return to England anyway. Also, her family were by that time growing up and leaving home; and Gerald, the youngest, needed to be schooled. By the time the Second World War had finished, everything had changed. Gerald was by then 20. All of the children were now making their own way in life. And the post-war world was not one that would allow a repetition of the kind of lifestyle they had led before the war. Also, Corfu had changed forever. The Durrells did, however, return for numerous holidays. But both Lawrence and Gerald purchased homes of their own in France; and Margo bought a house near her Mother in Bournemouth in England. Only Leslie can be said to have been a financial failure in his subsequent life, and he died in relative poverty in 1981.

Exactly what was it about Corfu which charmed the Durrells in the 1930s? And where are the best places to go in Corfu now in order to experience the same magic? Stay in Corfu long enough to see it all and to experience its beauty. Only then you will be able to understand the magic that the Durrells felt themselves and were able to transmit to others through their books. Use the 'Footsteps' guidebook to find the places they knew.

What legacy did the Durrells leave Corfu? A very great one, that the Corfiot government and people recognise. The book 'My Family and Other Animals' has not only sold millions of copies worldwide but has since been turned into three television events - two serials and a movie. These have brought huge publicity and prosperity to the island and the people of Corfu. Add together the Durrell books and films and all the other books written about them and you have a 'Durrell Industry' which continues to generate huge amounts of money and brings millions of visitors to the Island. Gerald himself actually regretted the influence he had had on the development of Corfu; but this development has, in fact, been for the good. To emphasise the obvious, when the Durrells first arrived on the island in 1935 most of the local people lived in poverty. Now, largely as a consequence of their stay, the whole world knows of the wonderful island of Corfu, and most Corfiots now live a relatively prosperous existence.

And that is the greatest legacy the Durrell family left to their beloved island.

The Strawberry-Pink Villa

The villa was small and square, standing in its tiny garden with an air of pink-faced determination (Photo #4). Its shutters had been faded by the sun to a delicate creamy-green, cracked and bubbled in places. The garden, surrounded by tall fuchsia hedges, had the flower-beds worked in complicated geometrical patterns, marked with smooth white stones. The white cobbled paths, scarcely as wide as a rake's head, wound laboriously around beds hardly larger than a big straw hat, beds in the shape of stars, half moons, triangles and circles, all overgrown with a shaggy tangle of flowers run wild.

My Family and Other Animals Chapter 2 The Strawberry-Pink Villa

The Strawberry-Pink Villa is located on a hilltop behind the Aegli Hotel in Perama, and was the first of the country villas where the Durrells resided during their years in Corfu.

They settled there in April 1935, after a two-week stay at the Pension Suisse in Corfu Town. In 1931 Pension Suisse owner Antonio Sponza had built two villas in Perama with the intention of renting them. Both villas were the same size, but the one the Durrells chose, after having been driven to see them by taxi driver Spiros 'Americanos' Halikiopoulos. was on the top of the hill, above the current site of the Aegli Hotel, where the Kondos family then owned a fish taverna. The villa was built in the form of a square, having a central corridor and four large rooms - a kitchen and three bedrooms - into which Margo, Leslie and Mrs Durrell accommodated themselves. Gerald, then a very small ten-year old, slept in a cot in the corner of Mrs Durrell's room. This became the Strawberry-Pink Villa of My Family and Other Animals fame. Because it had been built for rental purposes it had no name of its own (disputed - see 'Villa Bumtrinket'). In 1981, Elsa Sponza sold it to Vasilis Kondos, son of Menelaos Kondos, owner of the Aegli Hotel (on the main road in Perama, overlooking Mouse Island), and he reconstructed it from the foundations up. However, at Gerald's request, he kept the 'footprint' of the original building.

Aegli Hotel owner, Menelaos Kondos, whose father ran the fish taverna below the villa, got to know the Durrells when they came to the taverna to eat. In age he fell between Gerald and Margo, and became a friend of both. He remained in close touch with Gerald until the latter's death. Gerald was delighted when he heard in 1982 that Vasilis Kondos had bought the Strawberry-Pink Villa, and in a letter dated 18 July, 1983, he wrote:
'Dear Menelaos,

'When I come back next year, I expect Gerald Durrell's Strawberry-Pink Villa to be all ready and a great line of tourists paying five hundred drachmas * each to see the inside. Don't forget you promised me fifty percent.'

Although the 'footprint' of the original villa remains, structural changes were necessary to bring it up to modern standards of comfort, and it does not resemble in any way the Strawberry-Pink Villa that Gerald knew. As a family home, it is not open to the public, but you may view it from outside. Today, other houses crowd it, and the view inland is dominated by the airport.

The second of Antonio Sponza's properties, twin of the Strawberry-Pink Villa, except for its flat roof, was at the time of writing preserved in its original style. It stands exactly opposite the roof terrace bar of the Pontikonissi Hotel, a minute's walk southwards from the Aegli Hotel, the first house on the right up the steps. It is barely visible due to the densely overgrown garden.

Visit both sites and, in your imagination, relocate the small house on the site of the original on the site of the original Strawberry-Pink Villa.

Menelaos Kondos died in 2017, aged 96. His son Vasilis and daughter Sophia now own the Aegli Hotel.

* About 4 pounds then.

Lake Antinioti

Up in the north of the island lay a large lake with the pleasant jingling name of Antiniotissa, and this place was one of our favourite haunts. It was about a mile long, an elongated sheet of shallow water surrounded by a thick mane of cane and reed, and separated from the sea at one end by a wide, gently curving dune of fine white sand. There was a certain time of the year when the lake was at its best, and that was the season of lilies. The smooth curve of the dune that ran between the bay and the lake was the only place on the island where these sand lilies grew, strange, misshapen bulbs buried in the sand, that once a year sent up thick green leaves and white flowers above the surface, so that the dune became a glacier of flowers.

My Family and Other Animals Chapter 16 The Lake of Lilies

Gerald's sand lilies (Sea Daffodil - *Pancretium maritimum*) still grow at the Lake of Lilies. This is Lake Antinioti (today the name is usually shortened *), now designated as a wildlife sanctuary, and the home of otters and many wild birds. The flowers bloom in high summer on the same sandy spit of land which separates the lake from the Agios Spiridon Beach.

Despite a few new buildings along the road which leads to the coast, and a huge hotel on the adjacent bay, it is one of the least developed beaches on the island, and only gets really busy on summer Sundays. Out of high season, the beach looks much as it would have done when the Durrells visited (Photo #8). Leave your vehicle in the beach area and follow the road on foot across the bridge to Cape Agia Ekaterini, Corfu northernmost point, where the coastal landscape remains in its natural state, and only the elements belong. For a circular walk along the coastal path and returning along tracks, see below.

The lake is located just off the coast road which runs between Kassiopi and Acharavi. Follow prominent signs to Agios Spiridon Beach.

Contrary to Gerald's assertion, Sea Daffodils are not confined to Lake Antinioti, but also bloom on other beaches, among them Agios Georgios (Pagi) and Glyfada. The flowers are featured in the Lake Antinioti sequence towards the end of the film *The Garden of the Gods*.

* Anti-niote means 'enemy of youth', referring to the devastating malaria - especially deadly amongst the young - spread by the mosquitos which proliferated on the lake. They were mostly eliminated in the 1960s by DDT spraying - but do protect yourself with anti-mosquito spray if you visit as the remaining insects (no longer malarial) are still voracious. Gerald uses the modern shortened name in his film 'The Garden of the Gods'.

Walk: Surf and Turf on Saint Spiridon Headland

Starting at Saint Spiridon beachfront, take the road along the back of the beach. Cross the bridge over the lake outlet, then almost immediately take a track to the right. The track curves back and stops on the bank of the outlet. Turn left and pick up a shoreline path, which runs over turf and sharp rocks, reaching a sandy beach. The path continues at the far side of the beach; further on, the way runs along the top of low cliffs and the rocks become very sharp - watch your footing. Eventually, you arrive at the northern-most point of Corfu, marked by a solar-powered beacon. Proceed past the beacon, still following the rocky shoreline. Soon you arrive at another beach. Here you have a choice of routes.

Short route: Just before you come to the near end of the beach, look on your left for a gap in the gorse. The way becomes clearer, winding through a delightful pine plantation, then swinging inland to run alongside its boundary. The track hits the main gravel road which bisects the headland; here you go left. Follow the track back to the bridge and to your starting point.

Long route: Pick up a track at the back of the beach. A few metres on, it meets a gravel track. Here bear right. The sea is on your right, and amongst the shrubs on the inland side are the remains of German gun emplacements dating from World War Two (take great care if you go exploring - there are unprotected holes). A British commando raid on this battery inspired Alistair Maclean's book 'The Guns of Navarone'.

Just after a little harbour, the track ends at a footbridge (which crosses to Almiros beach - you can walk from here to Acharavi). Here, at the bridge, turn left to follow a footpath leading uphill through the shrubs. It is marked by splashes of blue paint. A brief climb, and the path levels out, swinging gradually left between huge unkempt olive trees. Eventually, you meet a crossing path, where you go right (the ruined Agia Ekaterini Monastery is ahead). The path proceeds through a tunnel of bushes, then suddenly emerges into an olive grove. Here there is no clear path, but ahead, through the trees, you should be able to see a low concrete structure, a water reservoir. Head for this and you

pick up a track heading onwards. Keep to the main track, initially through olives and then out into open country. When you meet the main gravel road, turn right and you are soon back at the bridge and your starting point.

For more walks in North Corfu, purchase the ebook 'Walks in North Corfu' at www.corfuwalks.com (no print copies available).

Corfu Town: Real Shops

The butcher has moved out of town and calls his emporium a 'Meat Market'. The baker has been superseded by a 'Bread Boutique'. And the candlestick-maker, sensing his trade losing headway, has retired to take up priestly vows.

In San Rocco Square, for more than a hundred years Corfu Town's commercial centre, only the soap-maker remains from a hotchpotch of small concerns which fuelled the area's economy at the turn of the 20th century. A 1900 register lists the shops which supplied the day-to-day needs of the locals in those days: Candlemaker, bellmaker, farrier, blacksmith, chemist, foundry, gunsmith, oil storage warehouse, umbrella manufacturer, dairy, bakery, milliner. In the 1930s, the roster would have been similar.

Today, the circumference of the square is bordered by fast-food outlets, banks and boutiques. It's indicative of our changing needs, which are mostly catered for by big out-of-town hypermarkets and superstores. Today we go to town for leisure, to seek out 'stuff', not for our real day-to-day requirements, obtained at a real shop.

We know a Real Shop when we see it, but can we define what it is?

My own definition is that a 'real shop' is one that sells something you need rather than something you want. (Supermarkets are excluded from this definition. Only specialist stores need apply.) The merchandise will be stacked according to the convenience of the proprietor, rather than in an artful display aimed at making you buy. Furthermore, the real shop will be staffed by 'real people', ones who know exactly what you want even if you're not sure yourself.

Nowadays, Corfu Town is ringed by giant chain stores offering discount foodstuffs, hardware, electrical goods, toys... you name it, it's available. The quaint old shops we used to rely on - usually run by an extended family - cannot compete, and the town centre increasingly resembles a theme park, with every street bordered by boutiques, souvenir shops, jewellery stores, fast-food outlets and retail units dedicated to the God of Mobile Phones. There's not a sprat left on Fish Street, and in neighbouring Pie Street no tiropitta to be had.

Adapted from The Corfiot Magazine, June 2006

The question is, are there any 'real shops' left? The sort that the Durrells would have been familiar with? Here are three that the family could well have frequented (and in one case definitely did).

Patounis Soap Factory is a tradition which dates back to 1850, when the first of this family to go into the industry set up shop in Zakynthos. In 1891 Patounis opened a subsidiary factory in Corfu, finally dissolving the partnership in the early 20th century. The factory in San Rocco Square is the original 1891 establishment.

Soap manufacture was already a long-standing industry in Corfu due to the large quantity of olive oil produced on the island. The first commercial enterprises covering local needs dated from the start of the 19th century. Prior to this, the women made the soap themselves.

Though produced commercially, Patounis soap is still hand-made in the old way. Apostolos Patounis, whose great-great-grandfather founded the factory, believes that it is one of the few establishments left which makes pure, traditional olive oil soap by the old-fashioned 'stamped' method, as opposed to the more conventional 'pressed' process.

Visit the shop and factory premises at 9 Ioanni Theotokis Street, just off San Rocco Square. Apostolos gives a workshop tour and demonstration (in English) every weekday at 12.00. You can also purchase the products.

Read the article in Part 2 of the full book.

Papageorgiou Patisserie, established in 1924, is located on the opposite side of the road from the alley leading to the former site of the 'Partridge', at 32 N. Theotoki Street. Here you can obtain some of the 'sweets to try' that Lawrence recommends (Prospero's Cell Appendix for Travellers). Ask for mandolato, pasteli, trigono, kadaifi and baklava, or indeed any of the shop's delicious products. It may well have been here that he first experienced these delicacies, and you can just imagine Larry and Nancy, on leaving the 'Partridge', buying some little frippery not available in Kalami.

Chrysomallis Taverna is located at 6 N. Theotoki Street (Photo #14), just a few steps back from the Liston Bar (formerly the Corfu Bar, Durrell 'HQ' in the 60s). There is evidence that it may be Corfu's oldest continuously-in-use eating establishment, since it is believed to pre-date the headquarters of the Old Philharmonic, founded in 1840, and located on an upper storey close by (often, you can listen to musicians practising). In 1902 the establishment was taken over by a man named Chrysomallis ('golden-haired one' in Greek), acquiring the name we know today.

The current proprietor Haralambos ('Babbis') Statiris has worked there for 65 years. 'The tables [indoors] date from Venetian times,' he says. 'The taverna's a registered Unesco site. If we modernise, we lose the history.' Indeed, although it now boasts the inevitable Internet connection, the taverna would be instantly recognisable to clientele from at least as far back as the 1960s. Gerald Durrell was one of them.

'He would sit at the window table, looking out,' reminisces Babbis. 'Every time he spotted a friend going by, he'd leap up and shout their name.' Babbis remembers that he would 'get through three or four bottles of retsina a day.'

On the wall above that same table hangs the famous photograph of Gerry flanked by his friends Michalis Halikiopoulos, son of Spiros Americanos, and Christos Vlachopoulos, brother of household-name-famous actress Rena, posing as 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil', with a corner of the taverna's sign visible behind. Vlachopoulos was the long-time partner of artist Theresa Nicholas, whose book *Corfu Sketches* has preserved, at least on paper, the island known to the Durrells in the 1960s (see the dedicated book review in Part 2 of the full book).

Other famous visitors include the original Zorbas Anthony Quinn, and novelist Mary Stewart, whom Theresa remembers as a 'rather dour Scottish lady, not in any way like her heroines.'

Indeed, in her 1965 romantic thriller *This Rough Magic*, Mary Stewart mentions the taverna by name, in the same phrase as the Corfu Bar, the Durrells' nearby Liston HQ: 'Sometimes he eats at Chrisomallis' (sic), or the Corfu Bar.' In her 'Author's Note', Stewart specifically thanks 'Mr Michael Halikiopoulos ... for all his kindness, and for the help he gave to me', in parallel to the role that his father had in the lives of the young Durrells thirty years earlier.

Chrysomallis links them all in place and time.

Perhaps it was at Chrysomallis, over a few jugs of retsina, that Lawrence Durrell and Stewart discussed the book she planned, and was at that time researching. See 'This Rough Prospero' in Part 2 for a full examination of the books' connections.

Chrysomallis is perhaps the only remaining taverna in the Town to function with its original fittings, which include the sign over the doorway: ZYTHOPSITOPOLEION (as it reads when transcribed into Latin letters). Proprietor Babbis reminds us that 'birra' (beer) is a neologism in Greek. 'The drink used to be called 'zythos', and that's why it says ZYTHO on our sign.'

The full translation means 'a place selling (POLEION) beer (ZYTHO) and grills (PSITO)', though these days a full taverna menu of simple, mainly local dishes is on offer, the sort of food you are likely to be served in a family home. Pastitsada, Sofrito and Moussaka are served every day, as is the fish stew bourdetto, made famous by Lawrence Durrell as the 'eel-meat in red sauce' of Prospero's Cell. Stuffed vegetables are also cooked regularly, and the 'Ladera' (cooked in oil) dishes Briam, Green Beans and Gigantes are on the menu depending on availability of the ingredients.

Chrysomallis only has seven tables (those Venetian ones!) indoors, but its seating spreads across the pavement and onto N. Theotoki Street. It's closed during the winter months and for Sunday lunch.

The last word is from Babbis: 'The things I've seen!'

At the Durrells' Table

The Durrells' Bourdetto

'The Corfiots put lots of paprika in their food so that they are thirsty for wine.

And then they throw themselves into song.' (Traditional)

Why Corfu is the only part of Greece where hot red pepper features so heavily in the cooking is a mystery. Perhaps it derives from the island's proximity to Balkan countries, from centuries of trade with the Dalmatian coast, perhaps from the influence of the Venetians, its rulers for 400 years.

In contrast to locations in and around the Aegean which look to Turkey and Africa, Corfu's cuisine has a bias towards the west and north. Most ports around Venice's 'Great Lake' - the Adriatic - possess a version of 'brodetto', a fish soup or stew. In Corfu, the name is 'bourdetto' and the dish is definitely a stew, though there may be copious sauce. But unlike elsewhere, bourdetto contains 'lots of paprika' to the extent it may have the heat (though not the subtlety) of a curry.

A robust dish, bourdetto requires robust fish that's not going to disintegrate as the sauce bubbles. Corfiots use

common eel, conger or moray eel, skate, dogfish, octopus and - if they can get it - scorpion fish (skorprios in Greek), a ruddy-coloured creature with needle-sharp spines (Photo #25).

Gerald describes the fish as 'some two feet long with a great filigree of sharp spines, like a dragon's crest along its back, and enormous petrel fins spread out on the sand. It had a tremendous wide head with golden eyes and a sulky pouting mouth. But it was the colours that astonished me, for it was decked out in a series of reds ranging from scarlet to wine.'

Taki's Scorpion Bourdetto

Taki was the carbide lamp fisherman from Benitses who took Gerald on a nocturnal fishing trip, picking him up at the 'beach below Menelaos' at Perama. They caught some scorpion fish, and Taki instructed Gerald to cook it 'with hot paprika and oil and potatoes and little marrows. It is very sweet.' (**Birds, Beasts and Relatives** Chapter 2 The Bay of Olives).

1 kilo scorpion fish (skorprios)

For the stock:

1 small onion

2 cloves garlic

A couple of stalks of pot celery, or some celery tops

1 bay leaf

a few whole black peppercorns

salt

For the stew:

1/2 wineglass olive oil

1 large onion

1 tablespoon sweet paprika

1 teaspoon hot paprika or cayenne

8 small potatoes

A dozen very small courgettes

Salt

Clean and fillet the fish, reserving the bones and head. Care is required with the spiky fins and backbone. Place the bones and head in three wineglasses cold water with the stock ingredients and bring to the boil slowly. Simmer gently for 30 minutes. Strain into a clean bowl and discard the bones.

Scrub and trim the courgettes, which should be not much more than finger size. Peel the potatoes.

Heat the oil. Grate the onion and fry gently until it takes a light colour. Add the red pepper and stir for a couple of minutes. Put in the courgettes and potatoes and stir until coated with the oil. Add two wineglasses of stock and simmer, covered, for about 10 minutes. Add the fish fillets and continue to cook at a lively simmer for another 10 minutes. Test that everything is tender - if not, give it a few minutes more.

The only accompaniment you need is a green salad - and lots of good crusty bread to mop up the sauce.

Bourdetto at the White House

'To-night we shall have eel-meat with red sauce for supper', writes Lawrence in 'Prospero's Cell', after observing the killing of an eel on the rocks near the White House. It was a 'zmyrna', a moray eel, and the dish they anticipate is bourdetto. (*Chapter 1 Divisions upon Greek Ground*).

1 kilo fish (common, conger or moray eel; or dogfish, skate, scorpion fish)

1 wineglass olive oil

3-4 onions

1/2 to 1 tablespoon hot paprika or cayenne or more to taste

1 tablespoon tomato paste or 1 wineglass tomato purée

Salt

Clean and cut up the fish into thick slices or serving-sized pieces. Grate the onions and fry gently in the olive oil until lightly coloured. Add the hot pepper and fry briefly to release the aroma. Add two wineglasses of water and the tomato paste or one of tomato purée and one of water. Bring to a lively simmer, put in the fish, cover and cook, uncovered, for 15-20 minutes. The sauce should be reduced and thickened. Allow to rest a few minutes before serving as a main course with lots of crusty bread, or as part of a meze.

'Portovecchio' Bourdetto

[He] had bought three small-to-medium scorpion fish, bright red in colour, with huge wide-open eyes. Their prickly skin and fangs protruded in all directions, deadly. Blossom took a deep saucepan, put it on the stove, lit it and warmed a little olive oil. Then she added two finely-grated onions, lots of chopped up garlic, two sliced carrots and a little sliced celery. She sautéed them slightly, and when the vegetables became soft and a little brown, took the saucepan away from the heat. Then she added the fish and enough water to cover it. She sprinkled the stew with plenty of salt and pepper, enough cayenne pepper and paprika to turn it a deep red colour and then added two bay leaves. She replaced the saucepan on top of the stove and boiled everything very slowly for about ten minutes.

The Cat of Portovecchio - Corfu Tales Maria Strani-Potts

The Achillion Palace - Untold Stories

Hilary Paipeti, The Agiot Online Newsletter, July 2018

'A monstrous building surrounded by gimcrack sculptures and lovely gardens belonging to the late Kaiser', is how Lawrence Durrell dismissively describes Corfu's most-visited monument. Can thousands of tourists all be wrong? Well, perhaps they can, since the Palace is a perennial fixture on the Grand Island Tour, sandwiched between the Kanoni view of Mouse Island and the Paleokastritsa Monastery, and therefore impossible to avoid if you have booked this popular coach tour.

The Palace was built in 1890 on the site of a country villa, Villa Vraila, an estate purchased by the Empress Elizabeth of Austria. Sissi, as she was known, intended it as a refuge from the Austro-Hungarian court with its intrigues and protocols, and as a sanctuary to mourn the mysterious death of her son Rudolf at Mayerling. In contrast to her strict and stuffy husband, Emperor Franz Josef, Sissi was a romantic who looked to Greek mythology for inspiration. Her special hero was Achilles and, inevitably with her melancholy view of life, she commissioned a statue of the demi-god in his death throes to be set in the upper part of the garden. This is only one of the 'gimcrack sculptures' in the garden, mostly without artistic merit, though I would not turn down the one depicting a boy and dolphin entwined if it were offered to me.

In her 1964 novel 'This Rough Magic', Mary Stewart is rather scathing about the statues: ... hideous metal statues at the corners and the row of dim-looking marble 'Muses' posing sadly along a loggia. ... a dreadful statue of Achilles triumphant ... and a worse one of Achilles dying ...; some Teutonic warriors mercifully cutting one another's throats in a riot of brambles. In the commentary of his film 'The Garden of the Gods' (1967) Gerald Durrell agrees: We'd see [the tourists] filing solemnly in to look at this ghastly statuary and equally ghastly architecture.

After a few visits, when you begin to concentrate on the details of the figures rather than the overall picture, you start to notice that there are rather a lot of life-size naked male bottoms. Was Sissi frustrated as well as sad? Did she caress the muscular globes as she strolled by?

What we do know is that she was obsessive about her weight, to the extent that she would have been diagnosed as anorexic today. She is said to have chewed her food forty times, subsequently spitting it delicately into a handkerchief. In very modern style, she apparently had a gym attached to her bedroom, and weighed herself several times a day. If she found herself to be a few grammes heavier than at the previous weigh-in, she would exercise until she deemed she had burnt it off. Part of the regime consisted of very long walks through the surrounding countryside, at so quick a pace that the locals dubbed her 'the locomotive' *. But these excursions at least removed her from the 'palace bubble' and allowed her to appreciate how her village neighbours lived. As a result, she paid for a covered well to be built at a central point in the nearby settlement of Gastouri to facilitate the village women's access to water, as well as a laundry area with slabs for scrubbing and pounding linen (see entry under 'Corfu Town: The Venetian Well' for more about Sissi's Spring).

This act of philanthropy differs somewhat from the behaviour of Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, who purchased the Palace after Sissi was assassinated in 1898. His jaunts out of the Palace were made in a fleet of Mercedes limousines, often to his favourite sunset spot above Pelekas, now famous as the 'Kaiser's Throne'. During these excursions, when he roared past village women he would fling them a handful of brass-chain necklaces, specially acquired for the purpose; when in their best attire, the women wore the family wealth around their necks in the form of real gold, but the Kaiser assumed that the jewellery of mere peasant women was surely made of cheap brass. He believed they must be grateful for his gift; no doubt they smiled thinly, though they must have found the gesture ignorant and insulting. Worse - for the village women made their own - he is also said to have lobbed them bars of soap.

We have a description contemporary with the Kaiser's ownership of the Palace from Sophie Atkinson (1911): *The Achilleion Palace was built for the late Empress Elizabeth of Austria in 1890-91. It is in modern Renaissance style by*

*Raffaello Carito, of Naples, and the decorations are in imitation of Pompeii. It is really rather painful as a work of art. Internally there is no colour scheme; externally the place looks a misfit. But its site is superb and the grounds are charming **.*

The Palace interior is indeed rather stark, with the small section that is nowadays open to the public comprising just half a dozen rooms. The furnishings are opulent but meagre, and some of the owners' possessions and portraits are on display - if you can catch a glimpse of anything in the squash of coach groups, each one being harangued by its own tour guide ***. More interesting is a large room that opens from the top-level chessboard terrace (Photo #27) where old photographs of local scenes are on show. This area was once the casino; in the James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only* it served as location for a gambling scene, in which Roger Moore orders a bottle of Theotoky wine - a wine made on the family estate of Count D. (**Prospero's Cell** Chapter V History and Conjecture. See entry 'Ropa Valley: The Retreat of Count D.')

Though you must not expect Royal Horticultural planting standards, Lawrence is nevertheless correct about the 'lovely gardens', if you can ignore the statue that is Kaiser's monstrous take on Achilles. Just as Sissi's melancholic nature drew her to the romantic notion of 'Achilles Dying', so the militaristic but puny Kaiser demanded a portrayal of the hero in his full pomp - 'Achilles Triumphant'.

Sophie Atkinson describes the setting of the gardens: *Kyria Ki* (sic: Mount Agia Kyriaki, the hill behind the Palace) *is too steep to accommodate its entire bulk at one level, so the sea front is two storeys above the main south door. At the higher level is a beautiful terrace of great palms, which commands almost the whole range of the views. The breeze is fresh under the rustle of fronds, and the sea never looks bluer than between their greenery; cool ivied arcades flank it and flowers cover the ground. The statue of the dying Achilles (by Herter) gleams whitely in the midst. Less admirable sculpture adorns the adjoining terrace of the muses on the seafront of the palace, and some scenes from Greek story and song painted on the verandah walls are really very primitive indeed, somehow reminding one of the Sunday school illustrations of one's youth.*

Regrettably, the best part of the garden is out of bounds. It stretches in a narrow swathe down to the sea, where the jetty of Kaiser's Bridge provided Wilhelm with a disembarkation point from his motor yacht (Ironically, the bridge itself was demolished by the Germans during the war to allow southwards passage for their heavy guns). A softly graded carriage road with wide switchbacks links the jetty with the Palace, and down the centre of this garden a series of cascading terraces unfurls, linked by balustraded stairways, each section displaying a different double geometry, one a twin half-circle, another with its steps bending at a two sharp angles. At about the mid-point of the descent, the widest of the terraces houses a rotunda that once sheltered a statue of Sissi, gazing forever out to sea.

Disclosure here: I entered this garden unofficially sometime in the 80s when researching a walking book: I was trying to piece together the entire course of the 'Yarda', the yard-wide maintenance path running over the brick pipe aqueduct that since the 1840s had supplied Corfu Town with water from springs above Benitses. The path I was following came to its end at a chain-link fence; but there was a hole in the wire, probably made by hunters. It was too much of a temptation.

While unkempt, the grounds were no jungle, as would have been the case if they had been left untended. But the silence was eerie, much heavier than just outside the boundary. And though alone, I felt watched and whispered at, but not at all in a hostile manner. The Spirit of Place was formidable.

The lower garden seems to have been almost the same in 1911, when Sophie Atkinson visited: *As one descends towards the shore the garden ceases and the grounds are almost left to nature; the path zig-zags steeply through the shade of olives, almonds, oranges, lemons, oleander, syringa and all the easy growth of the island. There are a few patches of scarlet lilies and flowers of strong growth among the wilder vegetation, but mostly the beauties are Corfu's own: deep-toned cypresses, and rich colours of orange trees, and fairy lightness of blossom among the woods, and always the gleam of Albania's snows over the wonderful blue [It seems she sneaked in during winter when the Kaiser was absent]. A statue of the late Empress of Austria now replaces that of a banished Heine in a little temple half-way to the sea, and a colossal triumphant Achilles has just been erected at the end of the terraces. Discreetly hidden in trees and grotto is the artesian well, which brings such an enviable gush of water for the palace use, and the pulse of which sends a throb of modernity through the mediaeval atmosphere.*

During works for the 1994 European Leaders' Summit, the Achillion served as venue for the official banquet, and accordingly a vast programme of repair and redevelopment was carried out in deference to the esteemed EU politicians, persons of much more importance than the 'little people' of the locality on whom infrastructural spending had never been considered worthwhile. Thus the road to the village was widened and graded to ensure smooth passage for the VIP-bearing automobiles, and the palace kitchen that had served the old casino perfectly well was entirely replaced at huge cost for the event (then left to rust, never to be used again). The building underwent a much-needed facelift, not having been previously subjected to one for the benefit of the mere touristic visitors in their countless coachloads. I don't know whether work was done in the lower garden, but building supplies were delivered by that route, via a

widened footpath and much-enlarged hole in the fence, the one that had allowed my access.

Someone stole Spring. Stuck her on the back of builder's truck and sneaked her off.

Spring was a Sissi-era statue that stood along with her fellow Seasons somewhere in the lower garden, near where the contractors entered. The theft was only discovered when the foolish klepts, in the mistaken belief they had nicked a rare work from Classical Greece, put the statue on the international arts market for an absurd sum of money. Of course, potential buyers quickly discerned that the piece was less than a hundred years old and of no special quality. The statue's location was reported, and Spring was brought home.

The upshot was that the statues of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter were relocated to a place of safety in the main garden. Sissi too was removed to a spot beside the palace portal, where she can be scrutinised by every visitor. No longer standing serene on her secluded rotunda, she is destined for evermore to gaze on milling, clamorous crowds.

I wonder whether the Spirit of Place fled the garden when the statue was moved ...

Notes

* One of Sissi's favourite hikes was the climb to the summit of Mount Agia Kyriaki, which rises between Gastouri and the sea. The chapel on the summit displays a plaque that reads: 'In this sacred place the anguished Empress Elizabeth prayed and found her peace.' (Translation from the Greek)

** This description corresponds with Durrell's assertion that the Palace is 'monstrous', but that the gardens are 'lovely', quoted at the start. See in the main book: Sophie Atkinson: *A Source for Prospero's Cell, or Victim of a Crib?* Perhaps Larry's opinion of the Palace was not his own, but also 'borrowed' from Atkinson.

*** It's best to visit in the afternoon, when the coaches have departed.

Behind the Taverna with the BBC

Hilary Paipeti, *The Corfiot Magazine*, September 2002

When the BBC contacted me to assist them in the making of a Radio Four show on the theme of the wildlife that's to be found behind the taverna, I was tempted to point them in the direction of Kavos and have done with it. But it turned out that they were talking about animal wildlife rather than the nocturnal kind.

Now, I don't know a lot about Corfu's animal and bird population. I am much better on flowers, since they stay still while you identify them. I saw a pine marten once, and the odd terrapin and frog, but large walking groups and accompanying dogs do not create the best conditions to sneak up on shy animals. Therefore, I suggested to the BBC that Jean Pierre Wuetschert, the then recently retired manager of the luxury Corfu Palace Hotel, would be a much more helpful person to speak to. Jean Pierre is a leading expert on snakes and reptiles who has been consulted by no less a figure than Gerald Durrell.

So on a burning August morning, we set off from the Corfu Palace Hotel, in search of Corfu's wildlife. As producer Caroline explained, the broadcast aims to show visitors that there is another side to popular holiday resorts - that, a few steps behind the taverna, tourist tat gives way to nature. The five-part series is called 'Behind the Taverna' and is scheduled to go out in March. The first show focuses on Corfu, with other destinations such as Majorca also being featured.

Our first stop was the 'Chessboard Fields' area between Vrioni and Perama. Thus christened by Gerald Durrell in his book 'My Family and Other Animals', they comprise an extent of cultivated fields bordering Lake Halikiopoulos. 'Each neat little patch of earth, framed with canals,' wrote Durrell, 'was richly cultivated and green with crops of maize, potatoes, figs and grapes. These fields, small coloured squares edged with shining waters, lay like a sprawling, multi-coloured chessboard on which the peasants' coloured figures moved from place to place.' Here, he used to search out terrapins and water snakes. My former mother-in-law remembered his habit of stuffing the snakes inside his shirt to carry them home.

We trekked down a lane into the fields, less cultivated than formerly but still patched with crops of wild strawberries and studded with ripening pomegranate and quince trees. A minute off the main road, and we were in the middle of nowhere. A watermill stood beside the lane, now choked completely by a forest of ivy. It was powered by a stream which gurgles up from nearby Cressida's Spring, a source which fed the ditches inhabited by terrapins and frogs.

But today the ditches were bone-dry, dessicated by the sun and by inland boreholes which extract water for domestic use. Not a terrapin or frog to be seen. We headed instead for Lake Skotini (Photo #23), near Danilia.

It was another favourite haunt of Gerald Durrell, who described it as 'perhaps four acres in extent, its rim shaggy with reeds and its water green with plants.' Today, in August, it had shrunk somewhat, and we were able to walk on the

dried-out mud flats along its edge. As we approached the water's edge, there was movement everywhere, and then I saw that the entire surface was seething with tiny bright green frogs. We had scared them, and they were plopping off onto more distant patches of weed. Having moved to safety, they sat immobile, looking just like plastic bath-toys.

Presenter Brett was beside himself. A flight of White Egrets swooped around the lake, and a Little Bittern took refuge in the reeds. This was Brett's first ever sighting of this rare bird. And mine too, of course.

Then, as Jean Pierre was explaining to Brett that the frogs were prey to watersnakes ('This lake is snake paradise'), they suddenly broke off their calm conversation. The frogs were plopping hurriedly again, and we saw a slithering eddy in the water. Right on cue, it was a large snake. It had caught a frog and was swallowing the unlucky beast whole and feet first. Snakes don't do that, Jean Pierre assured us; head first is their usual dining style. Though radio is hardly a visual medium, Jean Pierre and Brett provided such an exciting commentary that listeners will receive in words a clear image of this remarkable spectacle.

Though there were terrapins around they were distant, and nothing could top the snake. But Jean Pierre knew of a spot where he could guarantee close encounters.

Near Kyprianades, a spring flows out of the hillside into a clearing shaded by water-loving plane trees. The stream flows out of a rustic stone shelter, through a covered clothes-washing installation and into the main river. Upriver, there are cataracts, and the water was flowing strongly. 'I can't believe we're here on a scorching August day, at the driest time of the year, and there's all this water,' exclaimed Brett. We followed a channel downstream, with Caroline walking precariously backwards, in search of a terrapin which Jean Pierre had named Old Jack. He told us that he only sees large terrapins in this locality - old ones that have lived many decades - and no babies. But inconveniently Old Jack was not basking.

Further downstream, still on terrapin alert, we found a pool of shallower water. And on the bank was a terrapin.

Instinctively responding to the movement of our approach, it plopped into the pool, while Brett gave his usual word-picture commentary. 'I'm going to take my shoes off and go in,' said Jean Pierre. 'The manager of the Corfu Palace Hotel is taking off his shoes,' added Brett. 'Now my trousers,' said Jean Pierre. And dropped them. 'The manager of the Corfu Palace Hotel has now taken off his trousers and is jumping into the river,' continued Brett, redundantly since the sound boom was picking up every splash and splosh.

Jean Pierre is famed for his ability to deal with situations which could appear to others undignified. In his book 'How to Shoot an Amateur Naturalist', Gerald Durrell gleefully describes an incident during filming of the series 'The Amateur Naturalist' when Jean Pierre, in charge of getting a large snake to the right spot on cue, was to be seen face down in the dust with a wriggling reptile.

Jean Pierre, in his shirt tails, rummaged through the weeds. 'I've got it!' he shouted in triumph, and raised the beast out of the water. It was an empty terrapin shell.

'How did it do that?' gasped Brett.

Jean Pierre cast the shell aside and went back to his rummage. Just seconds later, he had it. About eight inches long, the terrapin was thrashing its legs and lashing its tail in fury. Unlike a tortoise, which boringly would have retreated into its shell and waited for us to go away, this one seemed determined to take us on, all at once. It was, Jean Pierre told us, a Stripe-Necked Terrapin, much rarer than the European Pond Terrapin which we had expected. It was a female, so we christened her Old Maria, and having described the beast in detail for the listeners, we placed her back in her element, whereupon she went off for a sulk under some logs. We could see her malevolent little eyes watching us as we tied up the show, assuring the listeners that, just a short distance from their resort, lots of wildlife awaits them.

Amateurs in Eden

The Story of a Bohemian Marriage: Nancy and Lawrence Durrell

by her daughter *Joanna Hodgkin*

Reviewed by *Hilary Paipeti*

Never has a muse been so completely written out of history as was Nancy Myers.

You may think you have not heard of her, but if it wasn't for Nancy we would not have 'Prospero's Cell', nor 'My Family and Other Animals' and its sequels. We would certainly not have had the whole literary oeuvre of Lawrence Durrell as it exists, and perhaps not even Gerald Durrell's pioneering work to save endangered species. We wouldn't have enjoyed the ITV serial 'The Durrells of Corfu' on Sunday evening TV, if Nancy had not met Larry.

Without Nancy, Lawrence Durrell might possibly have remained a frustrated estate agent, writing forever unpublished poetry in his spare time. Gerald might have remained a low academic achiever, condemned to menial jobs in veterinary practices or zoos for all his working life. Or, on a different life's pathway, they both might have

enjoyed equivalent success in their fields. But that story would have been a different one, without that singular point when Larry and Nancy met and meshed.

For it was Nancy who introduced Lawrence to George Wilkinson, her friend long before her soon-to-be husband came on the scene; and it was Nancy who, through an inheritance, largely supported Larry through the lean years of their early Bohemian lifestyle.

George Wilkinson, immortalised as the rather inept tutor of young Gerry in *My Family and Other Animals*, is a vital character in the Durrell story; for George, with his 'tantalising descriptions of balmy winter days', inspired Larry and Nancy to relocate to Corfu, followed very shortly by the rest of the family. Thus setting in motion the whole cascade of circumstances that would culminate in the Alexandria Quartet and the Jersey Zoo.

Yet, in 'Prospero's Cell', Nancy appears as a character in only a couple of scenes, named as 'N', most memorably seen diving for cherries at the Shrine of Saint Arsenius (though whether she actually did so is subject to doubt). Otherwise, she inhabits a low percentage of Durrell's perpetual 'we'. In Gerald's *My Family and Other Animals* she does not show up at all.

And that's despite the fact that the family saw a great deal of Nancy. 'We used to stay with her and Larry at the White House at Kalami,' said Margo, in conversation with Lawrence's biographer Ian MacNiven. 'And we all loved her very much; she was a very gentle, lovely person ... she was often painting and reading - she was a quiet person. There was a spirituality about her.'

In *'Amateurs in Eden'* Nancy Myers' daughter Joanna Hodgkin has reset the balance. Joanna, scion of Nancy's second, very happy, marriage to journalist Edward Hodgkin, takes us through her mother's damaged childhood, to her days in 30s Bohemian London, and on to her early attempts at getting by with Larry - and then to Corfu, to the crux of their relationship.

Unlike many biographies (though this is not a typical one), the information in *'Amateurs in Eden'* comes mostly from the horse's mouth and is not the product of belated research. When Nancy contracted a second bout of cancer (one that would be fatal), she told her story, first in writing and then in taped conversations with her husband and her daughter. In this book, Joanna has extracted the nitty gritty.

Lawrence does not come out of it well, though I suspect it was not through any display of acrimony on Nancy's part, but rather from her daughter's evaluation, taking into consideration other sources.

On arrival in Corfu, the young Durrells were, as we would say today, 'joined at the hip'. To a great extent, literally. This was a passion, played out in the heat and summer sun of Kalami and the contiguous coastline, where in coves they thought were deserted (but sometimes weren't) they swam naked in the sea, upsetting the acutely conservative locals. Into this idyll intruded Larry's ambitions.

While in the early phase of their relationship Nancy was the dominant partner, a sort of 'mother figure' to a man-child, Paris changed everything. In 1937, the Durrells paid an extended visit to the city, to acquaint themselves with Henry Miller and his literary coterie, which included diarist Anais Nin. It should have been an exciting time for them, for Larry had completed his third novel, *'The Black Book'*, the work in which he famously first heard his own voice; while Nancy, a promising artist, had sold a couple of cartoons to a literary magazine in London. That just before the visit they were still immensely close is manifest in the 'coda' to *'The Black Book'*, in which Larry writes: I get up in a panic and go to where you are sitting, working, and knitting, and put my hands on your hands. Then in a moment my courage is restored and I return to the pages...' Muse, indeed.

But already, in retrospect, some indications that Larry was beginning to hanker for something more than this simple, solitary life with Nancy were in evidence, if one were to look closely. And in Paris, success seems to have gone to his head. There, in prestigious literary company, eager to be the centre of attention, he became controlling, jealous and domineering. Nancy, an (unconsciously perceived) threat to his newly shining star, was sidelined and silenced. It was not long before they were 'no longer enjoying being together, but by no means ready to separate'.

Of course, separate they did, in the wake of their flight from Greece to Egypt, together with baby Penelope, the author's half-sister. Larry penned *'Prospero's Cell'* after the break-up - and all but wrote Nancy out, just as she had, thanks to him, been cold-shouldered by his Paris clique. Nancy sat out the war in Palestine, where because of her previous friendship with Henry Miller she inadvertently obtained a position with a radio station, and met her to-be second husband, the station's director.

'Amateurs in Eden' is very much about Nancy's Durrell years, so the last 'And After' chapter - the greater part of Nancy's life, when she became a different person, 'an exotic, wise and forthright mother' - is as a result skipped through quickly. But the book has achieved its task of restoring Nancy to her rightful place in the Durrell canon, as the unacknowledged 'enabler' of their work, their muse. Every time we read a Durrell book, or watch a Durrell episode, we should remember her.

'Amateurs in Eden', by Nancy Myer's daughter Joanna Hodgkin, was first published in 2012 by Virago Press. Writing as Joanna Hines, she has authored a number of novels of crime and historical fiction.

Gerald Durrell in the Sunday Times - A Belated Rebuttal

Hilary Paipeti, 2018

In 1987, Gerald Durrell wrote a piece for the Sunday Times decrying Corfu's tourism industry - and nearly wrecked it in the process:

I have had a most extraordinary affair of the heart. It started when I was eight years old and I fell deeply and irrevocably in love with a ravishing creature who was mature and beautiful. She gave me joy, brightness, freedom of spirit and opened my eyes to beauty, colour, knowledge, love and laughter. Her name was Kerkyra, the island of Corfu... Going back to her recently was like paying a visit to the most beautiful woman in the world suffering from an acute and probably terminal case of leprosy - commonly called tourism... [W]hat [the people of Corfu] have done with [Corfu] is vandalism beyond belief.

Returning in the early sixties, I could see what the future had in store. A few hotels, apparently designed by Salvador Dali aided by an inmate of the Corfu lunatic asylum, had sprung up along one of Corfu's greatest assets, her lovely sea coast. New villas of the most preposterously bad taste were starting to glower at you from hitherto unspoiled olive groves at the edge of the sea.

*The BBC, in its series *, was hard-pressed to find areas that resembled the places that would depict the loveliness and peacefulness of Corfu in 1935.*

A dear friend of mine took me on a tour of what she called "old Corfu" and of course we found mysterious, hidden olive groves, secret valleys lined with umbrella pines whose huge cones littered the ground like some strange, wooden Christmas trees around the ruins of old Venetian villas, villages with houses for the most part untouched and the villagers as charming and hospitable as they have always been, but they are remote and will become fewer unless something is done to control the locust horde of tourists ... Man-made things, though wonderful, can be recreated ... but Nature, once destroyed, can never be recreated.

* The 1980s series of 'My Family and Other Animals', starring Hannah Gordon and Brian Blessed.

Corfu had something of a tourism crisis in the early 1990s. Much of it was due to shocking reports of the antics of 18-30s-type visitors, first in Benitses, and then in Kavos, where the rowdy operators moved en masse in the late 80s. But this article did not help at all. Many potential visitors must have quickly deleted Corfu from their holiday list, convinced by the Sunday Times that they would encounter 'locust hordes', and be confronted with 'vandalism' of the natural environment.

Through aggressive marketing during the late 1990s, coupled with initiatives such as the Corfu Trail (www.thecorfutrail.com), and the fashion for posh villa holidays on the North East Coast - both of which drive tourism in other sectors - the island regained a measure of its popularity with British guests, and has in parallel attracted new markets.

Gerald Durrell's spirit must be looking on in horror as the leprosy again proliferates.

I live ten minutes' walk from the sea, near a west coast bay mentioned by Lawrence Durrell in 'Prospero's Cell'. Here stands one giant hotel (500 beds), flanked by four smaller ones, probably catering for around 1000 visitors in total at any one time, in high season. But unless I go to the beach, I see hardly anyone except for a few people out for a stroll in the completely untouched valley that is tucked in behind the resort. The low-rise buildings and bungalows of the giant hotel cascade pleasantly down the hillside in a series of terraces, amid extensive natural woodland of pine, cypress and eucalyptus, whilst the smaller ones have been constructed with the island's architectural style in mind. Supplementary businesses consist of two small shops selling the usual beach and booze stuff, a bar and a beach bar, two car hire and two bike hire offices, and two beachside tavernas ... and that's it. There's no loud music, and the most exciting it gets is during the Thursday evening firework display at the giant hotel. It starts at 10pm, and it's over by 10.02. During the day, a 15 minute hike directly from the beach takes visitors along a beautiful mountain footpath to a delightful ruined chapel on a small promontory high above the sea. Like the great majority of tourism localities in Corfu, this one has not contracted leprosy.

Go to Lafki and walk to the viewpoint on the vista track that starts beside the church, and look out over the whole of North Corfu. What do you see? Nothing that could place you in this century, neither in most of the last. Olive groves as far as the sea; the coast ahead dotted with a thin line of miniature buildings that constitutes the resort of Acharavi. Over to the left, in the distance beyond the huddled rooftops of a village or two, a small urban centre is visible, surrounded by a forest of olive groves - Sidari, Corfu's second most demonised resort. A view like this demonstrates just how LITTLE of Corfu has been blighted by development.

If you are holidaying in a resort like Sidari or Kavos, it's quite easy to believe the facile cliché that 'Corfu is spoilt'.

That is, if you don't move out of your resort - and many visitors don't. But if you are prepared to forgo the swimming pools, the relentlessly pounding music and John Smith's beer and venture instead into the countryside, you find yourself very quickly in a different world. Kavos is a little two-street ghetto, with a remarkably well-defined border outside of which development suddenly ceases. Just beyond this border is the so-called 'Pool of Plenty', where nature is so untouched that an exploring naturalist found several rare beasts (see 'Butterflies, Beetles and a Touch of Magic'). It's minutes' walk from Kavos Central. A mile or two from the horribly built-up Canal d'Amour neighbourhood of Sidari is Peroulades, a village that - at least in its centre - comprises hardly a building that is not from eons ago.

But since most people's experience of the island comprises their chosen resort, and perhaps incorporates a trip to Corfu Town - and maybe a car or coach excursion to the crowded must-visit sights, or a sardine-can boat trip along the villa-strewn North East Coast - they easily can come away with the impression of a despoiled landscape. Main roads are blighted by ribbon development, much of it dedicated to the worship of Petrol. But on winter Saturday hikes we can walk for two or three hours and see neither a modern building nor a non-tractor vehicle. On my little country lane, about a mile and a half long, there are precisely nine buildings, all domestic except for a barn. Even in summer, fewer than a dozen cars pass by every hour, though traffic volume doubles briefly for the school run. Between Liapades and Ermones, the coastline is untouched, as is much of the west coast. At Arillas, a very popular resort in the north west, low-key apartments sit amongst vast plots where artichokes grow in springtime, and where goats graze the rest of the year. After a hike along the Corfu Trail, a walker from Latvia wrote: 'I could not believe, on this island that we heard was so developed, that we could walk for nine days and see nothing but nature.'

In the Sunday Times article, Gerald appears to have judged the island in terms of its North East Coast, where ostentatious villas have indeed blighted the coastline, instead of viewing it equally through the prism of less familiar domains. Yes, 1935 has gone, but plenty of locations remain where you can recapture the 'loveliness and peacefulness of Corfu.'

Given Gerald's 1987 tirade, it is ironic that the latest ITV 'My Family and Other Animals' series is showcasing the many still-remaining beauties of the island, and thus attracting a new generation of visitors, who will indeed be able to discover, truly, that much of the Corfu the Durrells knew endures.



If you love Corfu, you'll enjoy this book

The Raven Witch of Corfu

by *Effrosyni Moschoudi*

Just south of Messongi, and standing slightly separate from the aerial-capped hill of Hlomos, is the 'pyramid-shaped' mountain of Martaouna, one of the main settings for Effrosyni Moschoudi's new novel, 'The Raven Witch of Corfu'. Dubbed a 'fantasy holiday romance', it's a step up from Mills and Boon - much more Mary Stewart than Barbara Cartland, with a bit of Gothic horror and Harry Potter-esque magic in the mix. And it's certainly a page-turner - ideal for lazy afternoons on Messongi beach (where much of it is set), or indeed at any place or time.

The plot gets going so quickly that it is almost impossible to précis it without giving the game away. Suffice to say that the heroine has returned to Corfu after twenty years, with a task to undertake - namely to claim back her twin brother, who was kidnapped, aged 12, on her previous visit. In a cave. By a wicked witch.

Sounds unlikely? So was Harry Potter, but that turned out OK, didn't it? Continuous action through nearly 400 pages (how DID she keep it up?) and a number of sub-plots draw you in fast. Reading a pre-publication edition, I was supposed to be proof-reading, but I was so keen to know at every stage what happened next that I forgot!

Approaching the denouement, I really puzzled over how it would work out; I'm usually good at guessing endings, but this one floored me. Would it finish with a cop-out? No. Effrosyni came up with the goods, with a brilliant 'twist' that pulled the plot back from the brink.

What anchors Effrosyni's books in reality is her sense of place. Her Corfu books are set in and around Moraitika, the ancestral home of her grandfather, and the place where she has holidayed every year since childhood. While plots may possess touches of the supernatural, they are set in a real and familiar world, which renders the incredible somehow plausible. You can walk with the heroine to the secret olive groves on the mountain of Martaouna, and accompany her around Messongi and to a 'Varkarola' festival at Petriti, where you'll experience a long evening in high summer. These concrete scenes help us accept the surreality of the storyline, just as hobbits, orcs, elves and wizards could justifiably inhabit a world fully recognisable as England and north Europe.

But the supernatural is not contained only in the book itself. As Effrosyni tells us in her blog, 'something spooky happened when [the artist] got to work on the cover! I only told him my book was set on a beach in Corfu and, of all places, he showed me this image that actually depicts the bay in Messonghi.' So, if you think you're going to have to suspend belief when reading 'Raven Witch', just consider: There are more things in Heaven and Earth... Who knows what's really hiding on Martaouna?

'The Raven Witch of Corfu' is available on Amazon, in Kindle format or as a paperback. The Kindle is published in four episodes of around 100 pages each. If you sign up to Effrosyni's newsletter, you will receive a free pdf copy of Episode One.

To read/download a free sample, and for the book trailer, go here:

<http://effrosyniwrites.com/books/the-raven-witch-of-corfu/>