

Benjamin Disraeli and Scanderbeg.
The novel 'The Rise of Iskander' (1833) as a contribution
to Britain's literary discovery of Albania.

by

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1. Benjamin Disraeli the statesman

The charismatic Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) is remembered as one of the most colourful figures of British politics in the nineteenth century. He was also a well-known and much read author of Victorian prose.

Disraeli was born in London on 21 December 1804 of a noted Jewish family. His father, Isaac Disraeli (1766-1848), a retiring and genteel scholar with a passion for trees, was the author of Curiosities of literature: consisting of anecdotes, characters, sketches and dissertations, literary, critical and historical (London 1791-1793), a collection of miscellaneous anecdotes and essays which had gone through a number of editions. Benjamin Disraeli's mother, Maria Basevi, was descended from a distinguished Jewish-Italian family. In 1813, Isaac Disraeli had quarrelled with the elders of the local synagogue, a dispute which later led to the baptizing of his children. The young Benjamin was thus raised as a Christian which, in view of anti-Semitic legislation in force in Britain until 1858, facilitated the political career he was to choose. After education at a series of private schools, Disraeli was articled in 1821 to a firm of solicitors. His initial steps in professional life were more or less a disaster. In 1824, he invested heavily in mining shares in South America, a mistake which put him into such debt that he only recovered years later. The following year he was entered at 'Lincoln's Inn', the London legal society, but soon withdrew. Another complete failure to which he was connected was the founding of the new Tory newspaper, the Representative, which was established to rival the much-read and independent Times. He had tried to launch the daily with publisher John Murray who was a friend of his

father's. The story of this catastrophe was told in the novel Vivian Grey, which Disraeli published anonymously in 1826-1827 and in which he lampooned Murray. A rousing public scandal ensued when Disraeli was later unmasked as author of the book.

Disraeli was first elected to Parliament in July 1837 as a Conservative candidate for Maidstone in Kent. His maiden speech in the Commons proved to be yet another great failure but did not impede his career for very long. Due to his affected manners and outlandish dressing habits, he was shouted down by the house soon after he had begun speaking. Disraeli persevered, however, and concluded prophetically, "I will sit down now, but the time will come when you will hear me." In 1839, he married Mrs Wyndham Lewis, a widow with a house in London and a considerable fortune. This marriage gave him social standing in English society and at the same time helped relieve his precarious financial situation to a certain extent.

By 1848 Disraeli had become a leading name in British politics. He was made Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1852 in the short-lived government of Lord Derby (1799-1869), despite his protests that he knew nothing about finance. It was indeed the budget of that year which was to lead to the collapse of that Conservative government. In 1858, Lord Derby formed a new government and Disraeli resumed his duties as Chancellor of the Exchequer. In 1859, Disraeli introduced a moderate reform bill which was defeated. His second reform bill of 1867, which had been inspired by Queen Victoria (r. 1837-1901) and Lord Derby, was however passed. This reform doubled the size of the electorate, giving voting rights to two million houseowners in Britain and strengthening the position of the Conservative Party which Disraeli now led. In 1868, he succeeded Lord Derby as Prime Minister of a caretaker government which was soon defeated by the Liberals under Disraeli's great rival, William Gladstone (1809-1898).

Disraeli's second period in office as Prime Minister (1874-1880) was characterized at home by further social legislation (e.g. the public health act, factory acts and compulsory schooling) and abroad by imperialist expansion (e.g. annexation of the Fiji Islands and the Transvaal, wars against the Afghans and the Zulus). His greatest foreign policy achievement of this period was to secure the controlling interest in the Suez Canal (1876). That same year, he persuaded Queen Victoria, of whom he was an intimate friend and advisor, to accept the title Empress of India. By this time, political life had taken its toll on Disraeli at the "top of the greasy pole" and he aged rapidly. In 1876, he agreed to accept the title Earl of Beaconsfield and took over as leader of the House of Lords.

2. Disraeli and Albania

In his later years, Benjamin Disraeli came to play a major role in the search for a solution to the so-called Eastern Question. The Balkan Peninsula was already a powder keg and during these years of disintegration in the Ottoman Empire, it threatened to jeopardize the balance of power among the major political forces of Europe.

The Russo-Turkish conflict had been dormant since the Crimean War (1853-1856). In

1877, however, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire, ostensibly to protect the Christian subjects of the Porte, in particular the Orthodox Slavs of the Balkans, and by early 1878 her forces were at the very gates of Constantinople. The resulting Treaty of San Stefano of March 1878 was not recognized by the 'great powers' and was to be reviewed at the Congress of Berlin.

Benjamin Disraeli, now Lord Beaconsfield, and Lord Salisbury (1830-1903) were chosen as English plenipotentiaries to the congress which convened on 13 June 1878. Their primary objective at this gathering of aging diplomats was to protect British interests in the great age of imperialism and, in particular, to check Russian influence and prevent the Czarist Empire from expanding into the Mediterranean either via Asia Minor or through the Balkans. In principle, Disraeli was thus in favour of the creation and strengthening of independent states in the Balkans. At the same time, although he had persuaded Turkey to cede Cyprus to Great Britain, he was not interested in the total annihilation of the Ottoman Empire since this would have created a power vacuum to the advantage of Czarist Russia and Austria-Hungary. In opposition to the Dreikaiserbund (Three Emperors' League), a tactical alliance of the three eastern European empires, Russia, Prussia and Austria-Hungary, Disraeli was determined to follow an independent foreign policy to defend British interests in Europe and the Middle East. As such, Great Britain had become the virtual protector of the Ottoman Empire on the international scene, just as it had been during the Crimean War.

It is for this reason, among others, that the 19-page 'Memorandum of the Albanians'¹ addressed to Lord Beaconsfield at the Congress of Berlin on 13 June 1878 fell on deaf ears. The complete collapse of Turkey in Europe was simply not in British interests. Although the atrocities committed by Turkish irregular forces two years earlier against Balkan Christians, the so-called Bulgarian Horrors, had caused a good deal of outrage and moral indignation in Britain and elsewhere in Western Europe, imperialist rivalry continued to blind the great powers, Great Britain in particular, to the aspirations of little Albania, a primarily Moslem country to boot.

As opposed to her Balkan neighbours, Serbia, Montenegro and Romania, which had been declared independent, Albania gained nothing from the Congress of Berlin that year and would have to wait another half a century for independence, until after the definitive collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Though Disraeli himself was content at having brought home "peace with honour" from the Congress of Berlin, most of the peoples of the Balkans were bitterly dissatisfied by the conference. The Bulgarians had seen their country partitioned, the Romanians had lost southern Bessarabia, the Serbs were worried about Austro-Hungarian expansion into Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Greeks failed to gain any territory, and the Albanians received absolutely no concessions at all.

Despite such overriding strategical interests, Disraeli was not unaware of the plight of the Albanians in the labyrinth of Balkan politics. Indeed he seems to have had a special attraction for Albania. He had, after all, visited the country himself almost half a century earlier.

¹ cf. Memorandum... 1878.

As a young man, after gaining initial fame as a writer with the novel Vivian Grey (1827), Benjamin Disraeli had decided, despite the financial disasters he had suffered, to take a grand tour of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, ostensibly for health reasons. This seventeen-month tour (from June 1830 to October 1831), which took him to Spain, Malta, Albania, Greece and the Middle East, proved to be one of the most formative experiences of his early years and one of the most vivid memories of his whole life.

In early June 1830, Benjamin Disraeli in the company of William Meredith, a friend who was engaged to his beloved sister Sarah, set sail aboard the H.M.S. Messenger for Gibraltar and Spain. There they spent two months. In August of that year, he and Meredith met up in Malta with an old acquaintance, James Clay. Clay's renowned and moustached valet, Giovanni Battista Falcieri, known as Tita, who had once served Lord Byron (1788-1824), was to act as an interpreter for the trio in Greece. Disraeli reported home with characteristic enthusiasm, "Byron died in his arms, and his moustachios touch the earth. Withal mild as a lamb, tho'. He has two daggers always about his person²."

Disraeli was fascinated by the exotic customs, landscapes and costumes of the Levant. Already known in England for his excessive dressing habits, he had a Byronic love of costumes and orientalia, delighting throughout the trip in clothing himself in the colourful garb of a Greek pirate or of an Ottoman vizier. In Malta, Meredith describes the man who was later to become Queen Victoria's Prime Minister as wearing:

"a shirt entirely red, with silver studs as large as six-pences, green pantaloons with a velvet stripe down the sides, and a silk Albanian shawl with a long fringe of divers colours round his waist, red Turkish slippers, and to complete all his Spanish majo jacket covered with embroidery and ribbons."

Towards the end of September 1830, the three men set sail on Clay's yacht for "the most beautiful island" of Corfu which they reached after a three-week passage. From there they intended to proceed to Janina (Iôannina), then the capital of southern Albania under Ottoman rule, which Lord Byron had visited in the days of Ali Pasha Tepelena (1741-1822), the so-called Lion of Janina.

Byron had first opened up Albania to the English public with his long verse tale Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (1812-1819) and Disraeli, with this work in mind, had hoped to follow Byron's tracks as he had done in Switzerland on an earlier tour with his London solicitor Benjamin Austen. But for all his love of Byron and of Greek pirate costumes, the romantic Disraeli sympathized more with the Turks than with the rebellious Greeks and Albanians. The English merchants he had met in Malta had also been of predominantly anti-Greek and pro-

² Letter to Ralph Disraeli, 17 Sept. 1830.

Turkish sentiment, in particular since their ships had been at the constant prey of Greek pirates. Their attitude confirmed Disraeli's pro-Turkish stance. In a letter to Benjamin Austen, Disraeli had noted that he had "had some thoughts, indeed had resolved to join the Turkish army as a volunteer in the Albanian war." Disraeli and his companions nonetheless arrived too late to prove their manly valour by taking part in the Grand Vizier's campaign against the rebels. The uprising had already been nipped in the bud. In August of 1830, Mehmed Reshid Pasha had journeyed to Monastir (Bitola) in order to proclaim a general amnesty to the rebellious Albanians. In the course of the celebrations marking the amnesty, to which the leading nobles of the country had been invited, his troops encircled and massacred five hundred chiefs and their families, thus exterminating virtually all the nobility of southern Albania in one fell swoop and with them, all Albanian resistance to Turkish rule.

Disraeli's official pretext for the journey into the wilds of Albania was to deliver a letter to the Grand Vizier from Sir Frederick Adam, the British Governor of the Ionian Isles. Sir Frederick also gave him a "very warm letter" of recommendation for the British consul-general in Preveza on the Greek mainland. From Preveza, Disraeli and his companions set out on 14 October 1830 with their servants, including the renowned Tita, for the border town of Arta (Ambracia) which they reached after a day's journey. There they found accommodation at the British consulate. The once famed town of Ambracia, like most others in the region at the time, had been severely damaged in the fighting and lay in ruins. Disraeli reported, "I shall never forget the effect of the Muezzin, with his rich and solemn and sonorous voice, calling us to adore God in the midst of all this human havoc³." He and his companions paid a visit to the Albanian governor in Arta in order to ask for an additional escort on to Janina and departed with a sense of awe at having entered the divan of the Great Turk. The Albanian officers in the bey's household were described as "finely shaped men, with expressive countenances and spare forms." Disraeli delighted in particular in the Albanian costumes.

"Their picturesque dress is celebrated, though, to view it with full effect, it should be seen upon an Albanian⁴... The long hair and the small cap, the crimson velvet vest and jacket, embroidered and embossed with golden patterns of the most elegant and flowing forms, the white and ample kilt, the ornamented buskins, and the belt full of silver-sheathed arms; it is difficult to find humanity in better plight."

The bey granted them "a guard of Albanians" who like the rest were "armed to the teeth with daggers, pistols and guns, invariably richly ornamented, and sometimes entirely inlaid with silver, even the barrel." He also gave them a letter of recommendation for an Ottoman colonel stationed at a mountain khan where they would spend the next night "under the only roof which

³ Home letters, p. 76-77.

⁴ Contarini Fleming, Part V, Chapter 10. p. 302.

probably remained between Arta and Yanina.⁵" The colonel received them courteously but could not understand the Greek of their interpreter. The ice was broken when the party recalled that they had some brandy and "that we could offer our host a glass, as it might be a hint for what should follow to so vehement a schnaps." A "most capital supper" was eventually brought in and much more to drink.

The party continued the next morning onward towards Janina, passing through a devastated countryside: razed villages, smouldering ruins of farmhouses, olive groves felled. "So complete had been the work of destruction that I often unexpectedly found my horse stumbling amid the foundations of a village, and what at first appeared the dry bed of a torrent often turned out to be the backbone of the skeleton of a ravaged town." Finally they reached the fabled city of Janina nestled in the mountains at the edge of a sparkling lake.

"At a distance we first beheld it, this city once, if not the largest, one of the prosperous and the most brilliant in the Turkish dominions, still looked imposing; but when I entered, I soon found that all preceding desolation had only been preparative to the vast scene of destruction now before me. We proceeded through a street winding in its course, but of very great length to our quarters. Ruined houses, mosques with their tower only standing, streets utterly razed. These are nothing. We met great patches of ruin a mile square as if a swarm of locusts had had the power of desolating the works of man as well as those of God. The great heart of the city was a sea of ruin. Arches and pillars isolated and shattered, still here and there jutting forth, breaking the uniformity of the desolation, and turning the horrible into the picturesque. The great bazaar, itself a little Town, was burnt down only a few months since, when an infuriate band of Albanian soldiers heard of the destruction of their chiefs by the Grand Vizier⁶."

Albanian warriors, horrified by the atrocious massacre which had taken place at Monastir, had indeed razed the great bazaar of Janina to the ground in revenge. Yet the city bustled with life. Disraeli had finally reached the Orient and was exhilarated by the atmosphere he encountered.

"Military chieftains, clothed in the most brilliant colors and most showy furs, and attended by a cortege of officers equally splendid, continually passed us. Now, for the first time, a Dervish saluted me and now a Delhi with his high cap reined in his desperate steed, as the suite of some Pacha blocked up the turning of the street. The Albanian costume, too, is inexhaustible in its combinations, and Jews and Greek priests must not be forgotten. It seemed to me that my first day in Turkey had brought before me all the popular characteristics of which I had read, and which I expected I occasionally might

⁵ Home letters, p. 78.

⁶ Home letters, p. 84-86.

see during a prolonged residence.⁷ ... I longed to write an eastern tale."

Disraeli, who had bid farewell to his Albanian bodyguard and found accommodation at the house of a Greek physician, was overwhelmed. The next morning, after having delivered Sir Frederick's letter to the Grand Vizier's secretary, Disraeli, Clay and Meredith set out for the fortress, "greatly battered by successive sieges, but still inhabitable" for their audience with the Grand Vizier.

The audience hall was "the finest thing of the kind I had ever seen... built by Ali Pacha purposely to receive the largest Gobelin carpet that was ever made, which belonged to the chief chamber in Versailles, and was sold to him in the French Revolution." Some of the details of this scene were later to be incorporated into Disraeli's novel The Rise of Iskander, as were the accompanying descriptions of Janina at the foot of "purple mountains of picturesque form". Indeed much of what Disraeli saw and experience in southern Albania was used in his writing, not only in The Rise of Iskander, but also in Contarini Fleming and The Wondrous Tale of Alroy.

"Conceive a chamber of great dimensions, full of the choicest groups of an oriental population, each individual waiting by appointment for an audience, and probably about to wait for ever. It was a sea of turbans, and crimson shawls, and golden scarfs, and ornamented arms. I marked with curiosity the haughty Turk, stroking his beard, and waving his beads; the proud Albanian, strutting with his terragan, or cloak, dependent on one shoulder, and touching, with impatient fingers, his silver-sheathed arms; the olive-visaged Asiatic, with his enormous turban and flowing robes, gazing, half with wonder and half with contempt, at some scarlet colonel of the newly disciplined troops, in his gorgeous but awkward imitation of Frank uniforms; the Greek still servile, though no more a slave; the Nubian eunuch, and the Georgian page⁸."

The three mylort inglez were then received in the audience hall by the Grand Vizier who offered them coffee and pipes.

"Here I beheld, squatted up in a corner of the large divan, a little, ferocious-looking, shrivelled, care-worn man, plainly dressed, with a brow covered with wrinkles, and a countenance clouded with anxiety and thought... I seated myself on the divan of the Grand Vizier ('who', the Austrian consul observed, 'has destroyed in the course of the last three months', not in war, 'upwards of four thousand of my acquaintances') with the self-possession of a morning call. At a distance from the Grand Vizier, in a group on his left hand, were his secretary and his immediate suite. The end of the saloon was lined with

⁷ Home letters, p. 86-87.

⁸ Home letters, p. 90.

lackeys in waiting, in crimson dresses, with long silver canes... We congratulated him on the pacification of Albania. He rejoined that the peace of the world was his only object, and the happiness of mankind his only wish: this went on for the usual time. He asked us no questions about ourselves or our country, as the Turks did, but seemed quite overwhelmed with business, and, although courteous, moody and anxious. While we were with him, three separate Tartars arrived with despatches. What a life! And what a slight chance for the gentlemen in the antechamber⁹!"

Disraeli spent a 'wondrous week' in Janina with visits to military leaders and local dignitaries, and experienced scenes comparable 'to anything in The Arabian Nights'. In a letter written to Austen from Nauplia on 18 November 1830, he wrote of the delight he felt "at being made much of by a man who was daily decapitating half the province."

From Janina, the party proceeded to Corinth, Athens and Constantinople and then on to the Middle East. Further adventures came to an abrupt end on 19 July 1831, however, when William Meredith died of smallpox in Cairo. It was a tragic loss for Disraeli who abandoned the tour and returned to England. He reached English soil by the end of October 1831, and was now about to embark upon another adventure: a double career as a politician and as a writer.

3. Disraeli the writer and 'The Rise of Iskander'

Benjamin Disraeli was an imaginative and witty writer though he is not usually considered to have been among the sublime literary figures of his age. His best novels, Coningsby: or the New Generation (1844) and Sybil: or the Two Nations (1845), are entertaining and embody, as one might suspect of a statesman, his political creed: a mixture of social response to the misery created by the Industrial Revolution and of idealism and faith in the monarchy and the aristocracy to give proper leadership to the working class. Present in much of his work are a dash of adventure in foreign locales and a touch of oriental philosophy, the "great Asian mystery" which the author was wont to profess. It was Disraeli's tour of the East which proved to be decisive not only for his political thinking and his attitudes in foreign policy, but also for the Levantine atmosphere which comes to the fore in many of these novels and romances: Contarini Fleming: a psychological autobiography (1832), The Wondrous Tale of Alroy (1833), Tancred: or the New Crusade (1847), and Lothair (1870).

A fine example of Levantine atmosphere was Disraeli's The Rise of Iskander (1833), a prose work based on the life of the Albanian prince and national hero George Castriota (Alb. Gjergj Kastrioti), better known as Scanderbeg (1405-1468).

⁹ Home letters, p. 90-93.

The Rise of Iskander is a short novel or novelette, 113 pages in the 1904 edition. It was most likely written in the southwestern English town of Bath in the winter of 1832-1833, two years after Disraeli's Albanian tour and was first published in London in 1833 together with the novel The Young Duke. The plot of the novel, which is divided into twenty-two chapters, may be summarized as follows:

- 1.) The tale begins with a description of a noble stranger in Albanian dress on the Acropolis in Athens. It is the Turkish commander Iskander who has come to visit his youthful friend Nicaeus, Prince of Athens, before departing for war as the head of the Epirotes. A crypto-Christian, Iskander betrays to Nicaeus his abhorrence now at having for the first time to make war on his own religion and his own country.
- 2.) Iskander, the 'Grecian Prince' from Croia, capital city of Epirus, who as a child had been given over to the Sultan as a hostage and educated as a Moslem and warrior in Adrianople, must now prepare for the battle between the invading Christian forces under John Hunniades and the Turks under Karam bey. He bids farewell to his friend Nicaeus.
- 3.) Iskander, now at the Turkish camp near Mount Haemus, discusses battle plans with Karam bey.
- 4.) At night, Iskander disguises himself and slips over to the Christian camp to reveal himself to Hunniades. There he first meets the latter's fair daughter, Lady Iduna, who shows a marked interest in his presence. Iskander announces to Hunniades his unwillingness to fight Christian forces and his intention of defecting from the Turkish side.
- 5.) The battle scene during which Iskander calls upon his men, "All who love their country, follow me!" and, with his five thousand Epirote horsemen, abandons the battle and takes flight.
- 6.) Iskander returns to Croia which he takes by a ruse. The town is liberated to cries of "The Cross, The Cross! Liberty! Greece! Iskander and Epirus!"
- 7.) Word of the fall of Croia spreads. The castle of Petrella, too, is taken and all of Epirus is freed. Nicaeus arrives on the scene. The tragic news is announced of Lady Iduna's capture by the Turks. Nicaeus, obviously in love with Iduna, plots with Iskander to rescue Iduna from the Seraglio in Adrianople.
- 8.) Iskander, arranging for affairs in Epirus to be taken care of, announces his immediate departure. The two heroes reach Adrianople, Iskander dressed as an Armenian physician and Nicaeus at his side disguised as a page. Nicaeus reveals to Iskander his love for Iduna who is reported to be pining away in captivity. A reward of one hundred purses of gold is said to be offered to anyone who can cure her.
- 9.) Iskander presents himself to the Chief Eunuch with a bribe and offers to cure the captive lady.
- 10.) The eunuch introduces Iskander and Nicaeus into the Seraglio. The Armenian physician meets Iduna and reveals to her in Greek that he is acting on behalf of Nicaeus, Prince of Athens. She is to ready herself for escape.
- 11.) Mahomed, her captor, who has sworn to have the heart of Iduna and the head of Iskander before the new moon, meets the foreign physician. Iskander advises him to plunge his scimitar into the fountain of Kallista in Epirus at midnight and call out the name of the enemy he desires to meet.
- 12.) Iduna is rescued and the three escape on horseback. Iskander is now torn between his growing affection for Iduna and his friendship with Nicaeus. The party is pursued by the Turks. Iskander, finally revealing his identity to Iduna, remains behind at a three-arched bridge to fight off the pursuers, while his companions take flight into the mountains. Iskander

defeats the Turks single-handedly. 13.) In a wild ravine, Nicaeus and Iduna find shelter in the cavern of an Eremite. Nicaeus resolves to have Iduna, by abduction if needs be. 14.) Nicaeus declares his love for Iduna and is rejected. 15.) Nicaeus and Iduna depart for Epirus and spend the night at the home of the former's friend Christo, the father of seven daughters. 16.) Nicaeus and Iduna carry on to a fair castle, said to be owned by one Justinian, and take quarters there. 17.) A feast scene. 18.) Nicaeus delays at the castle and tries in vain to please Iduna who wishes to proceed to find her father. The castle of Kallista overlooking the Ionian Sea proves to be Nicaeus' own, and Iduna is now his prisoner. 19.) Iduna escapes out of the window and flees at midnight to a fountain in a grove of olive trees. There to her horror, she comes upon Mahomed, plunging his sword into the water and calling out the name of Iskander. At this moment, Iskander and Hunniades rush forth from the wood to rescue Iduna. Mahomed and Iskander agree to do battle with their respective forces the following day. Iduna tells Iskander and her father of her second captivity. The repentant Nicaeus then arrives on the scene and is forgiven by Iduna and Iskander. 20.) An account of Iskander's earlier return to Croia and his endeavours to find Iduna and Nicaeus. The battle between the Christian forces and the Turks culminates in a Christian victory due in great part to the heroism of the Prince of Athens. 21.) Mahomed is routed and takes flight. The mortally wounded Nicaeus withdraws over a mountain pass to die in solitude at a Doric temple. 22.) Iskander receives the hand of the fair Iduna to jubilant cries of "God save Iskander, King of Epirus!"

In The Rise of Iskander, Benjamin Disraeli has made use of the figure of Scanderbeg to create a melodramatic tale of adventure and romance very much to the tastes of the broad masses of the reading public in the early nineteenth century. The basic plot structure of the novel, more akin to the libretto of an eighteenth-century opera or an early silent movie, contained nothing particularly unusual for the reader such that the novel did not prove a great success. The periodical American Monthly Review noted briefly in the year of the novel's initial publication, "The story is pleasantly told, and is altogether the most unexceptional of any work of fiction from the author's pen that we have seen¹⁰."

Although in his Home Letters Disraeli often referred to the Albanians and seemed to be fascinated by their physical presence and their martial ways, it is not without interest to note that Scanderbeg is portrayed in The Rise of Iskander not as an Albanian, but as a Grecian prince. Indeed the word Albanian occurs only once in the whole novel, in a early description of the hero's clothes: "He wore also a full white camese common among the Albanians." This is no particular surprise however since at the time the tale was written and in the years of Disraeli's visit to Epirus, half a century before the Albanian national awakening, cultural identity in the region was determined primarily by religion and not by ethnos. Anyone in the southern Balkans who was a Christian was a Greek and anyone of Moslem faith was a Turk. In this respect,

¹⁰ cf. American Monthly Review, vol. 4 (October 1833), p. 279-282.

Disraeli did not deviate far from formal conditions at the time.

The Rise of Iskander makes no attempt to be historical nor in any way does it endeavour to paint a realistic picture of Scanderbeg's life. It is simply a sentimental tale in the form of a short novel, which makes use of the figure of Scanderbeg to provide the oriental backdrop, with requisite local colour and costumes which the author so loved.

Though not one of Disraeli's major triumphs as a novelist, The Rise of Iskander was nonetheless much read by the British and American public in the nineteenth century. It went through many editions, among which: Philadelphia 1842, London 1871, Boston 1874, London 1881, Boston 1887, London 1888, London 1890-1891, Boston 1900, London 1900, London & New York 1904-1905, London & New York 1919, London 1926-1927, and New York 1927. It was also translated twice into Greek¹¹ and once into Slovenian¹². In the early twentieth century it began somewhat to disappear from view as tastes among the general public changed.

4. The historical figure of Scanderbeg and its occurrence in English literature

George Castriota¹³ (1405-1468), now the Albanian national hero, stemmed from a family of landowners from the Dibër region in northeastern Albania who were no doubt of mixed Albanian- Slavic ancestry. His father John Castriota (d. 1440) had initially submitted to Ottoman rule but, after the Battle of Ankara in 1402, declared his independence from the Turks, extending his influence from Dibër through the Mati valley to the Adriatic. In 1410, despite his attempts to form an alliance with the Republic of Venice, he was forced once more to give way to the supremacy of the Sultan. As a pledge of his submission, John Castriota sent his sons, Stanisha, George and Constantine and perhaps one other, in ransom to the Sultan's court at Adrianople (Edirne) in 1423. It was here that George received military training, was converted to Islam and took the name Alexander (Iskander). The young Iskander also participated in military campaigns against the Christians, for which his father was obliged to beg the pardon of the Venetian senate in 1428. For his military valour, Iskander was awarded the title of bey (beg), thus the name Scanderbeg by which he was to be universally known. In 1438, having gained the confidence of Sultan Murad II (r. 1421-1451), he was appointed military commander of the fortress of Krujë (Croia), where he established initial contacts with Venice and Ragusa (Dubrovnik). In 1440 he was made Sandjak-bey of Dibër. Scanderbeg's strength and popularity in his native region and

¹¹ cf. Disraeli 1880 and 1890.

¹² cf. Disraeli 1910.

¹³ On the historical Scanderbeg cf. Barletius 1508-1510, 1537, 1596, Petrovitch 1881/1967, Noli 1921, 1947, Frashëri 1962, Drizari 1968, and Valentini 1967-1977.

the military success of the Hungarians under John Hunyadi (ca. 1385-1456) in their battles against the Turks convinced him that the time was ripe to abandon the Ottoman forces. An opportunity arose during the Battle of Nish in November 1443 when Turkish troops were in disarray after a Hungarian offensive. Scanderbeg, his nephew Hamza and 300 chosen horsemen abandoned Turkish forces and returned to Dibër, whence they carried on to the fortress of Krujë. Within a matter of days, Scanderbeg had assembled his own Albanian forces for a general uprising. The fortresses of Petrela, south of Tiranë, and Svetigrad in Dibër were soon taken by the Albanians. To consolidate his power, Scanderbeg formed alliances through marriage of the main ruling families of Albania. He himself married Andronika, daughter of Gjergj Arianiti (d. 1463), and his sister Mamica was given in marriage to Charles Musachi Thopia. On 2 March 1444, Scanderbeg convened an assembly of all important Albanian nobles at Alessio (Lezhë) during which it was decided to set up a standing army to counter an impending Turkish invasion. Scanderbeg was selected to head this force of about 15,000 men. A huge Turkish army soon flooded into Albania but was beaten back in Dibër at the end of June 1444. In view of the superior strength of Turkish forces, Scanderbeg's troops made optimal use of the terrain for guerilla warfare. Two further Ottoman invasions were repelled, one in October 1445 on the Mokër Plateau near Pogradec and a second in September 1446 in Dibër. The following year, Scanderbeg's relations with the Republic of Venice deteriorated when the latter endeavoured to extend its influence into the region of Dagno (Danjë). The conflict led to two years of warfare with the Serenissima, forcing Scanderbeg to fight on two fronts. Although his troops managed to defeat the Turks at Oranik on 14 August 1448, he realized that he had to reach an agreement with Venice if he wished to carry on resistance. A peace treaty was concluded on 4 October 1448 under which Dagno and Drivast were abandoned to the Republic of Venice in exchange for the payment of 1,400 ducats of gold annually.

In May 1450, Sultan Murad II arrived personally at Krujë and besieged the fortress for four and a half months. Although overwhelmingly outnumbered, the Albanians managed to resist Turkish forces and conferred a humiliating defeat upon the Sultan, who was obliged on 26 October to return to Adrianople empty-handed. Scanderbeg's victory over the Moslem hordes was widely acclaimed in the Christian world. Pope Nicholas V (r. 1447-1455), King Ladislaus V of Hungary (r. 1444-1457) and King Alfonso of Aragon-Naples (r. 1435-1458) sent messages of congratulations and offered Scanderbeg their support. On 26 March 1451, Scanderbeg concluded an alliance with King Alfonso at Gaeta under which the former pledged allegiance to the latter. Catalan troops were subsequently stationed at Krujë under the command of the Aragonese viceroy Ramon de Ortafa.

Scanderbeg's position became somewhat more tenuous after the final Turkish conquest of Constantinople on 29 May 1453. Mehmed the Conqueror was determined to vanquish Albania in order to prepare an attack on Catholic Italy. Naples, the Church and Venice now came up with military and financial assistance. With Neapolitan help, Scanderbeg attempted to reconquer Berat in central Albania in 1455 but was forced back. The alliance of Albanian nobles cemented in Alessio in March 1444 also began to break up. The Dukagjini, Arianiti and Balsha dynasties withdrew their support and even Scanderbeg's commander Moisi Golemi and his nephew Hamza

abandoned him. Scanderbeg nonetheless carried on and repulsed two Turkish invasions in 1456 and 1457. For his defence of Christendom against the Moslem hordes, Pope Calixtus II (r. 1455-1458) awarded the Albanian warrior the title Atleta Christi.

In 1458, Scanderbeg was summoned to Italy to fulfil his obligations as vassal under the treaty of Gaeta. Ferdinand I (r. 1458-1494), successor of Alfonso who had died on 27 June 1458, required assistance to defeat the rival house of Anjou which was endeavouring to take power in Naples. Scanderbeg arranged a three-year peace treaty with the Turks and proceeded to Italy with about 2,500 troops. In Barletta and Trani, he managed to defeat Ferdinand's main rival Giovanni Antonio Orsini, Prince of Taranto. After the campaign, some Albanian forces remained in Italy and established colonies in Calabria under one Demetrio Reres, colonies which constitute the first Arbëresh settlements. In 1462, Scanderbeg returned to Albania to discover that the Turks had once more invaded the country despite the treaty. He defeated no less than three Turkish military expeditions in 1462 before a new six-month peace treaty could be arranged in April 1463. It was in November of that year, during the cease-fire, that Pope Pius II (r. 1458-1464) declared a holy crusade on the infidels, absolving Scanderbeg of his obligations under the peace treaty with the Turks. The Pope died, however, on 15 August 1464, bringing the crusade to a sudden and inglorious conclusion. Scanderbeg now found himself faced with five successive Turkish invasions under the command of Balaban Pasha. All were successfully repulsed. In 1466, Sultan Mehmed II himself arrived in Albania with an army said to have comprised a total of 150,000 soldiers, and laid siege to Krujë. After two months of siege, the Sultan was forced to return to Turkey and left his troops under the command of Balaban Pasha. He also had a new fortress built at Elbasan in central Albania on the Shkumbin river. Scanderbeg hastened to Rome and Naples to request assistance in his struggle against Turkish forces. In April 1467, he returned to Albania just in time to repel a renewed Turkish attack during which Balaban Pasha perished at the foot of the walls of the fortress. In July 1467, Mehmet II returned to Albania, this time with all of his forces, determined to bring Scanderbeg to his knees. The Albanian prince once more requested assistance from Venice and called for a new assembly of nobles in Alessio in January 1468. On 17 January 1468, however, before the assembly could convene, the heroic Scanderbeg died and resistance to the Turks soon collapsed. Albania was to return to Ottoman rule for another four and a half centuries.

Scanderbeg had gathered quite a posthumous reputation in Western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. With virtually all of the Balkans under Ottoman rule and with the Turks at the very gates of Vienna in 1683, nothing could have captivated readers in the West more than an action-packed tale of heroic Christian resistance to the Moslem hordes. Books on the Albanian prince began to appear in Western Europe in the early sixteenth century.

One of the earliest of these histories to have circulated in Western Europe about the heroic deeds of Scanderbeg was the Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi, Epirotarum Princeps (Rome ca. 1508- 1510), published a mere four decades after Scanderbeg's death. This 'History of the life and deeds of Scanderbeg, Prince of the Epirotes' was written by the Albanian historian Marinus Barletius Scodrensis (ca. 1450 - ca. 1512), known in Albanian as Marin Barleti, who

after experiencing the Turkish occupation of his native Shkodër at first hand, settled in Padua where he became rector of the parish church of St. Stephan. The work was widely read in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and was translated and/or adapted into a number of foreign language versions: German by Johann Pincianus (Augsburg 1533), Italian by Pietro Rocca (Venice 1554, 1560), Portuguese by Francisco D'Andrade (Lisbon 1567), Polish by Ciprian Bazylik (Brest-Litovsk 1569), French by Jaques De Lavardin, also known as Jacques Lavardin, Seigneur du Plessis-Bourrot (Paris 1576), and Spanish by Juan Ochoa de la Salde (Seville 1582). The English version, translated from the French of Jaques De Lavardin by one Zachary Jones Gentleman, was published at the end of the sixteenth century under the title, Historie of George Castriot, surnamed Scanderbeg, King of Albinie; containing his Famous Actes, his Noble Deedes of Armes and Memorable Victories against the Turkes for the Faith of Christ, London 1596.

Another important work which increased the renown of Scanderbeg in Europe was the Commentario delle cose de' Turchi, Venice 1531 (Commentary on the affairs of the Turks) by Paulus Jovius (1483-1552), Bishop of Nocera. This was translated from a Latin version into English as A short treatise upon the Turke's Chronicles, London 1546.

Among other works of this period dealing with the Albanian prince were: Polish author Martin Cromer's Oration of Arsanes agaynst Philip; of the Ambassadors of Venise against the Prince that vnder crafty league with Scanderbeg layd snares for Christendom and of Scanderbeg prayeng ayde of Christian Princes agaynst periurous murdering Mahumet, and agaynst the old false Christian Duke Mahumet's confederate, London 1560?; Andrea Cambini's Two very notable commentaries; the one of the originall of the Turcks and empire of the house of Ottomanno, written by Andrewe Cambine; and thother of the warres of the Turcke against George Scanderbeg, prince of Epiro, and of the great victories obteyned by the seyd George, aswellas against the Emperour of Turkie as other princes, and of his other rare force and vertues, worthy of memorye, London 1562; and Richard Knolles' The Generall Historie of the Turkes, London 1603.

One year after the Turkish siege of Vienna (1683) which was overcome by Polish king John III Sobieski (r. 1674-1696), a book was published in London on the victorious monarch, comparing his deeds to those of Scanderbeg. This anonymous history was entitled: Scanderbeg redivivus. An historical account of the life and actions of the most victorious Prince John III (Sobiesky), king of Poland, London 1684.

In the eighteenth century, we come upon yet another historical work on Scanderbeg, entitled: A brief account of the life and character of George Castriot, King of Epirus and Albania, commonly called Scanderbeg, London 1735. With the aid of such publications, the figure of Scanderbeg was kept very much alive in Europe in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as a prime symbol of Christian resistance to the ever-expanding Ottoman Empire.

Whether Benjamin Disraeli had access to or interest in any of these early histories of the life and times of Scanderbeg is uncertain. What is quite possible, however, is that he came upon

references to the Albanian prince in essays by prominent seventeenth and eighteenth century statesmen and military leaders, such as diplomat and writer Sir William Temple (1628- 1699), who ranked Scanderbeg among the seven chieftains of history who had deserved, without obtaining, a crown¹⁴; essayist, poet and politician Joseph Addison (1672-1719); and General James Wolfe (1727-1759), commander of English forces at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in Quebec in 1759, who noted in a letter to Thomas Townshend on 18 July 1756: "he excels all the officers ancient and modern in the conduct of a small defensive army. I met him in the Turkish History but nowhere else¹⁵."

It is reasonably certain that Benjamin Disraeli acquired most of his information on Scanderbeg from the writings of the influential British historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794). Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, London 1776- 1778, was, after all, the faithful companion of every genteel reader in early Victorian England and, in particular, of all travellers to the sunnier climes of the Mediterranean. Of Scanderbeg, Gibbon had written:

"In the list of heroes, John Huniades and Scanderbeg are commonly associated, and they are both entitled to our notice, since their occupation of the Ottoman arms delayed the ruin of the Greek empire. John Castriot, the father of Scanderbeg, was the hereditary prince of a small district of Epirus or Albania, between the mountains and the Adriatic Sea. Unable to contend with the sultan's power, Castriot submitted to the hard conditions of peace and tribute: he delivered his four sons as the pledges of his fidelity; and the Christian youths, after receiving the mark of circumcision, were instructed in the Mahometan religion, and trained in the arms and arts of Turkish policy. The three elder brothers were confounded in the crowd of slaves; and the poison to which their deaths are ascribed cannot be verified or disproved by any positive evidence. Yet the suspicion is in a great measure removed by the kind and paternal treatment of George Castriot, the fourth brother, who, from his tender youth, displayed the strength and spirit of a soldier. The successive overthrow of a Tartar and two Persians, who carried a proud defiance to the Turkish court, recommended him to the favor of Amurath, and his Turkish appellation of Scanderbeg (Iskender beg), or the lord Alexander, is an indelible memorial of his glory and servitude. His father's principality was reduced into a province; but the loss was compensated by the rank and title of Sanjiak, a command of five thousand horses, and the prospect of the first dignities of the empire. He served with honor in the wars of Europe and Asia; and we may smile at the art or credulity of the historian, who supposes, that in every encounter he spared the Christians, while he fell with a thundering arm on his Mussulman foes. The glory of Huniades is without reproach: he fought in the defence of his religion and country; but the enemies who applaud the patriot, have branded his rival with the name of traitor and apostate. In the eyes of the Christians, the

¹⁴ cf. Temple 1754, p. 226-315.

¹⁵ cf. Willson 1909, p. 296-297.

rebellion of Scanderbeg is justified by his father's wrongs, the ambiguous death of his three brothers, his own degradation, and the slavery of his country; and they adore the generous, though tardy, zeal, with which he asserted the faith and independence of his ancestors. But he had imbibed from his ninth year the doctrines of the Koran: he was ignorant of the Gospel; the religion of a soldier is determined by authority and habit; nor is it easy to conceive what new illumination at the age of forty could be poured into his soul. His motives would be less exposed to the suspicion of interest or revenge, had he broken his chain from the moment that he was sensible of its weight: but a long oblivion has surely impaired his original right; and every year of obedience and reward had cemented the mutual bond of the sultan and his subject. If Scanderbeg had long harbored the belief of Christianity and the intention of revolt, a worthy mind must condemn the base dissimulation, that could serve only to betray, that could promise only to be forsworn, that could actively join in the temporal and spiritual perdition of so many thousands of his unhappy brethren. Shall we praise a secret correspondence with Huniades, while he commanded the vanguard of the Turkish army? Shall we excuse the desertion of his standard, a treacherous desertion which abandoned the victory to the enemies of his benefactor? In the confusion of a defeat, the eye of Scanderbeg was fixed on the Reis Effendi, or principal secretary: with the dagger at his breast, he extorted a firman or patent for the government of Albania; and the murder of the guiltless scribe and his train prevented the consequences of an immediate discovery. With some bold companions, to whom he had revealed his design, he escaped in the night, by rapid marches, from the field of battle to his paternal mountains. The gates of Croya were opened to the royal mandate; and no sooner did he command the fortress, than George Castriot dropped the mask of dissimulation; abjured the prophet and the sultan, and proclaimed himself the avenger of his family and country. The names of religion and liberty provoked a general revolt: the Albanians, a martial race, were unanimous to live and die with their hereditary prince; and the Ottoman garrisons were indulged in the choice of martyrdom or baptism. In the assembly of the states of Epirus, Scanderbeg was elected general of the Turkish war; and each of the allies engaged to furnish his respective proportion of men and money. From these contributions, from his patrimonial estate, and from the valuable salt-pits of Selina, he drew an annual revenue of two hundred thousand ducats; and the entire sum, exempt from the demands of luxury, was strictly appropriated to the public use. His manners were popular; but his discipline was severe; and every superfluous vice was banished from his camp: his example strengthened his command; and under his conduct the Albanians were invincible in their own opinion and that of their enemies. The bravest adventurers of France and Germany were allured by his fame and retained in his service: his standing militia consisted of eight thousand horse and seven thousand foot: the horses were small, the men were active; but he viewed with a discerning eye the difficulties and resources of the mountains; and, at the blaze of the beacons, the whole nation was distributed in the strongest posts. With such unequal arms Scanderbeg resisted twenty- three years the powers of the Ottoman empire; and two conquerors, Amurath the Second, and his greater son, were repeatedly baffled by a rebel, whom they pursued with seeming contempt and

implacable resentment. At the head of sixty thousand horse and forty thousand Janizaries, Amurath entered Albania: he might ravage the open country, occupy the defenceless towns, convert the churches into mosques, circumcise the Christian youths, and punish with death his adult and obstinate captives: but the conquests of the sultan were confined to the petty fortress of Sfetigrade; and the garrison, invincible to his arms, was oppressed by a paltry artifice and a superstitious scruple. Amurath retired with shame and loss from the walls of Croya, the castle and residence of the Castriots; the march, the siege, the retreat, were harassed by a vexatious, and almost invisible, adversary; and the disappointment might tend to imbitter, perhaps shorten, the last days of the sultan. In the fulness of conquest, Mahomet the Second still felt at his bosom this domestic thorn: his lieutenants were permitted to negotiate a truce; and the Albanian prince may justly be praised as a firm and able champion of his national independence. The enthusiasm of chivalry and religion has ranked him with the names of Alexander and Pyrrhus; nor would they blush to acknowledge their intrepid countryman: but his narrow dominion, and slender power, must leave him at an humble distance below the heroes of antiquity, who triumphed over the East and the Roman legions. His splendid achievements, the bashaws whom he encountered, the armies that he discomfited, and the three thousand Turks who were slain by his single hand, must be weighed in the scales of suspicious criticism. Agaian illiterate enemy, and in the dark solitude of Epirus, his partial biographers may safely indulge the latitude of romance: but their fictions are exposed by the light of Italian history; and they afford a strong presumption against their own truth, by a fabulous tale of his exploits, when he passed the Adriatic with eight hundred horse to the succor of the king of Naples. Without disparagement to his fame, they might have owned, that he was finally oppressed by the Ottoman powers: in his extreme danger he applied to Pope Pius the Second for a refuge in the ecclesiastical state; and his resources were almost exhausted, since Scanderbeg died a fugitive at Lissus, on the Venetian territory. His sepulchre was soon violated by the Turkish conquerors; but the Janizaries, who wore his bones encased in a bracelet, declared by this superstitious amulet their involuntary reverence for his valor. The instant ruin of his country may redound to the hero's glory; yet, had he balanced the consequences of submission and resistance, a patriot perhaps would have declined the unequal contest which must depend on the life and genius of one man. Scanderbeg might indeed be supported by the rational, although fallacious, hope, that the pope, the king of Naples, and the Venetian republic, would join in the defence of a free and Christian people, who guarded the sea-coast of the Adriatic, and the narrow passage from Greece to Italy. His infant son was saved from the national shipwreck; the Castriots were invested with a Neapolitan dukedom, and their blood continues to flow in the noblest families of the realm. A colony of Albanian fugitives obtained a settlement in Calabria, and they preserve at this day the language and manners of their ancestors¹⁶."

¹⁶ cf. Gibbon, vol. 5, p. 401-406.

As we have seen, Scanderbeg captivated the European reader initially as a figure of history and as a fine example of a military strategist. With time, the Albanian prince also came to serve as a modest source of inspiration for creative literature throughout Europe. We have for instance a sonnet on Scanderbeg by French poet Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585); a 'comedia famosa' entitled El Principe Escanderberg by noted Spanish dramatist Lope de Vega (1562-1635); and at least three operas on the Scanderbeg theme, one of which by Venetian composer Antonio Vivaldi (1675- 1741)¹⁷. A good number of articles have been published, principally in the late nineteen sixties, dealing with the role of Scanderbeg in the various European literatures to which the interested reader may refer: Italian¹⁸, French¹⁹, English²⁰, German²¹, Swedish²², Hungarian²³, Russian and Ukrainian²⁴, and Serbian²⁵.

The earliest literary references to Scanderbeg in English literature stem from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. London-born poet Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) was first to publish an English sonnet on Scanderbeg. It appeared in preface of the above-mentioned translation Historie of George Castriot, surnamed Scanderbeg, King of Albinie; containing his Famous Actes, his Noble Deedes of Armes and Memorable Victories against the Turkes for the Faith of Christ, London 1596. Of the Albanian hero, Spenser writes:

¹⁷ Antonio Vivaldi's Scanderbegh, with a libretto by Antonio Salvi (d. 1742) of Arezzo was first performed at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence on 22 June 1718 but has since been lost. A second opera, the five-act Scanderberg. Tragédie, was composed by François Francoeur (1698-1787) and François Rebel (1701-1775) with a libretto by critic and dramatist Antoine Houdar de la Motte (1672-1731). It was first performed in Paris by the Académie Royale de Musique on 27 October 1735 and subsequently for Louis XV at Fontainebleau on 22 October 1763. The third opera, also entitled Scanderberg, was composed by Bernard Germain Lacépède (1756-1825) in Paris in 1785/1786, but was apparently never performed. cf. Robert 1963, Sokoli 1981 and Boetzkes 1988.

¹⁸ cf. Lacaj 1967.

¹⁹ cf. Bulka 1967, Zoto 1980, 1982, and Jaka 1980, 1990.

²⁰ cf. Ashcom 1953 and Luarasi 1967.

²¹ cf. Irmischer 1968 and Grimm 1969.

²² cf. Rexha-Bala 1968.

²³ cf. Daniel 1968, 1969.

²⁴ cf. Popov 1959.

²⁵ cf. Schmaus 1969.

"Wherefore doth vaine antiquitie so vaunt
Her ancient monuments of mightie peeres,
And old Heroes, which their world did daunt
With their great deedes, and fild their childrens eares?"

Who, rapt with wonder of their famous praise,
Admire their statues, their Colossoes great,
Their rich triumphal Arcks which they did raise,
Their huge Pyramids, which do heauen threat.

Lo! one, whom later age hath brought to light,
Matchable to the greatest of those great;
Great both by name, and great in power and might,
And meriting a meere triumphant seate.

The scourge of Turkes, and plague of infidels,
Thy acts, o Scanderbeg, this volume tels."

To poet and dramatist Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) is attributed a play entitled The true historye of George Scanderbarghe "as yt was lately playd by the right honorable the Earle of Oxenforde his servantes". This work was entered in the Stationers' Register on 3 July 1601 but it does not seem to have been published and is now unfortunately lost²⁶. Evidence for Marlowe's authorship is tenuous, although the subject matter would certainly have appealed to him after the success of his two-part play Tamburlaine the Great, ca. 1587²⁷.

Some brief and rather curious allusions to the name of the Albanian hero are to be found in other works of English theatre of the period. Scanderbeg sometimes appeared as a symbol of heroism and at other times was demoted to the figure of a ruffian. Dramatist Ben Jonson (1572-1637) referred for instance to a "Horson scander-bag rogue" in his comedy Every man in his humour (1598), I, iii, 22. Dramatist and pamphleteer Thomas Dekker (ca. 1572-1632) referred to "Skellum Skanderbag" in his best play The shoemaker's holiday or the gentle craft. London dramatist James Shirley (1596-1666), for his part, introduced the figure of a Captain Squanderbeg in his Honoriam and Mammon, IV, i, but also made reference to Scanderbeg as a warrior in his play The gentleman of Venice, III, i.

In verse, cavalier poet Richard Lovelace (1618-1658) evoked Scanderbeg, or more

²⁶ cf. Ashcom 1953, p. 24.

²⁷ cf. Chew 1973, p. 477.

properly his bones, in a poem entitled To the genius of Mr John Hill, on his exact translation of Hierocles, his comments upon the golden verses of Pythagoras from the volume Lucasta, originally published in 1649. Legend had it that when the janissaries desecrated the tomb of Scanderbeg in Lezhë, they struggled to carry off pieces of the hero's bones to keep and wear them as amulets to protect them in battle:

"That Soldier Conquest doubted not
Who but one Splinter had of Castriot,
And would assault ev'n death so strongly charmd
And naked oppose rocks with this bone arm'd"²⁸

Poet and critic John Dryden (1631-1700) also refers to the talismanic powers of Scanderbeg's bones in Epistle to the Whigs, his preface to the 322-line poem The Medall. A satyre against sedition (London 1682), where he notes:

"I believe, when he is dead, you will wear him in Thumb-Rings, as the Turks did Scanderbeg; as if there were virtue in his Bones to preserve you against Monarchy."

In the early eighteenth century, the figure of Scanderbeg served as the subject matter for three English plays, all of them seemingly written within the space of five years. The first of these was the modest Scanderbeg or love and liberty, London 1747, by Thomas Whincop, which was based on Le grand Scanderbeg, Amsterdam 1688, by Mlle de la Roche Guilhem (ca. 1653-1710), an equally modest French novel which had been published in English in 1690 and 1721. Whincop was rector of St. Mary Abchurch in London and died in 1730. Three years later the 75-page Scanderbeg. A tragedy, London 1733, was published by William Havard (1710?-1778). This play was performed, it seems, with no success whatsoever at the Theatre in Goodman's Fields on 13 January 1735. The third and best of these classical tragedies on Scanderbeg was the 68-page The Christian hero by George Lillo²⁹ (1693-1739). The Christian hero, published in London in 1635, was performed at the Royal Theatre in Drury Lane and was somewhat more entertaining than the previous two. There were various accusations of plagiarism made at the time, but the three playwrights do not seem to have copied from one another³⁰. Scanderbeg had simply become fashionable as a subject for the stage.

Of all English writers to have introduced Scanderbeg and Albania to the English-speaking public, none was more influential than Lord Byron (1788-1824). Byron was fascinated by Albania and the Albanians during his travels in the Mediterranean and indeed began to learn

²⁸ cf. Lovelace 1925, vol. 2, p. 173.

²⁹ cf. Rautner 1900.

³⁰ cf. Ashcom 1953, p. 24-28.

the Albanian language. He had not been uninfluenced by Gibbon's portrayal of the Albanian prince. In the lengthy poetic tale Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (1812-1819), which Byron had begun writing while in Albania, Scanderbeg and his warrior nation are described in the following terms:

"Land of Albania! where Iskander rose,
Theme of the young, and beacon of the wise,
And he his namesake, whose oft-baffled foes
Shrunk from his deeds of chivalrous emprise:
Land of Albania! let me bend mine eyes
On thee, thou rugged nurse of savage men!
The cross descends, thy minarets arise,
And the pale crescent sparkles in the glen,
Through many a cypress grove within each city's ken."

Canto II, XXXVIII.

"Fierce are Albania's children, yet they lack
Not virtues, were those virtues more mature.
Where is the foe that ever saw their back?
Who can so well the toil of war endure?
Their native fastnesses not more secure
Than they in doubtful time of troublous need:
Their wrath how deadly! but their friendship sure,
When Gratitude or Valour bids them bleed
Unshaken rushing on where'er their chief may lead."

Canto II, LXV.

The initial publication of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage took England by storm and there is no doubt that this work was of major inspiration to Benjamin Disraeli.

Though the figure of Scanderbeg waned in post-Disraelian literature in England, it did crop up in the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States. The volume Tales of a wayside inn, Boston 1863, by popular New England poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), contains a 173-line poem on Scanderbeg entitled The Spanish Jew's second tale, very much a period piece.

Another book of the period inspired by the Albanian hero was 404-page novel The captain of Janizaries. A story of the times of Scanderbeg and the fall of Constantinople, New York 1886, by James Meeker Ludlow (1841-1932) who was no doubt influenced by the historical work George Castriot, surnamed Scanderbeg, King of Albania, New York 1850, by Clement Clarke Moore (1779-1863). Moore himself is better remembered as the author of the

much-loved poem The Night before Christmas.

5. Conclusion

Benjamin Disraeli's novel The Rise of Iskander, while not a great piece of literature if judged by modern standards, is nonetheless a work of some significance. It constitutes the first and most notable instance of a literary adaptation of the Scanderbeg theme in English prose and is, at the same time, the first, and seemingly the only work of English prose focussing on what one might describe as Albanian subject matter.

Surprisingly enough, the novel has remained virtually unknown to scholars of Albanian affairs and to the scant number of specialists in Scanderbeg studies. The Rise of Iskander has been overlooked in virtually all the bibliographies and articles to date on Scanderbeg and his place in foreign literature³¹ and even the National Library of Tiranë, which has a sizeable Albanological collection, had not heard of the work³².

As the only work of literary prose published in England which used Scanderbeg as its subject matter and as the first work of original literary prose in English to be written on an Albanian theme, The Rise of Iskander, dusty and relegated to oblivion though it may now be, constitutes a monument to Britain's literary discovery of Albania in the nineteenth century, and to Anglo-Albanian literary and cultural relations in general.

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³¹ cf. for instance Petrovitch 1881, Ashcom 1953, Luarasi 1967, and Kostallari 1981.

³² A photocopy of the novel was donated to the National Library of Tiranë by the present author in the autumn of 1991.

epirotarum Principis, qui propter celeberrima facinora, Scanderbegus, hoc est, Alexander Magnus, cognominatus fuit, libri Tredezim per Marinum Barletium Scodrensem conscripti, ad nunc primum in Germania castigatissime aediti.

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