

Ismail Kadare

*Chronicle in stone.*

London. Serpent's Tail. 1987. 288 pages

In 1971, the year of the publication of *The general of the dead army*, the first of his major works to be translated into English, Ismail Kadare published the novel *Kronikë në gur* (Chronicle in stone). The chronicle is that of the beautiful city of Gjirokastër in southern Albania under occupation during the Second World War. Known to the Greeks as Argyrocastron, the fabled city with its lofty fortress manors of stone looming from the mountainside over narrow cobblestone alleys, was successively occupied, as much of Albania was at the time, by the Greeks, the Italians and the Germans.

*Chronicle in stone* offers not so much a portrayal of the grim historical events of a city under occupation, but as a compelling mixture of the childhood observations, impressions and fantasies of an Albanian boy. Ismail Kadare, it might be noted, was himself born in Gjirokastër in 1936, as was the inscrutable Enver Hoxha a generation before him. Autobiographical in inspiration at least, the novel follows the young lad through the streets of his occupied city and through the realms of his own imaginary world as he views events and as he overhears and interprets bits of gossip, conversations and local superstitions. A neighbour he sees as Lady Macbeth; a cabbage in the market takes on the form of a severed head. Passing troops become Crusaders until he and his friends grow up to join a band of partisans, and the world of childhood fantasy finally gives way to that of our often savage maturity.

It remains to be seen whether the legendary and mythical reality of Ismail Kadare can catch the attention of the English-speaking public, as has that of Colombian best-seller Gabriel García Márquez, with whom a certainly convenient, though perhaps delusive parallel has recently been drawn.

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