

Gjergj Fishta

The highland lute. Third Edition

[*Lahuta e Malsisë. Botim i tretë*].

Rome. Qendra e Katolikëve Shqiptarë jashta Atdheut. 1991. 525 pages

Pal Duka-Gjini

The life and works of Gjergj Fishta

[*Jeta dhe veprat e Gjergj Fishtës*].

Rome. Provinça Françeskane Shqiptare. 1992. 299 pages

It is an unusual phenomenon indeed for a country to lose its national poet, but it happened in Albania. Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), a Franciscan priest and writer from Shkodër, was the greatest and most influential literary figure of his age, and produced a literary epic which, though some regard it as having been written a century too late, still ranks among the most impressive creations of all of Albanian literature. It is the work which gave artistic expression to the searching soul of his people.

*Lahuta e Malsisë* (The highland lute) is a 15,613-line historical verse epic in thirty cantos, focussing on Albania's struggle for autonomy and independence and in particular on border conflicts between the fiercely independent northern Albanian tribes and their equally fierce Montenegrin neighbours from 1858 to 1913. This literary masterpiece, which we may regard as the first Albanian-language contribution to world literature, was composed between 1902 and 1909, though it was constantly refined and amended by its author over the following thirty years. The definitive edition of the work was presented in Shkodër in 1937 to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the declaration of Albanian independence. After exile reprints in Rome (1958) and Ljubljana (1990) and translations into German (1958) and Italian (1968), the present full-length edition of 'The highland lute', published by the 'Albanian Catholic Centre Abroad' in Rome, is the first to make the epic accessible once again to the reading public in Albania itself.

The Albanian Franciscans in Rome and Assisi have also come out with a monograph on Fishta's life and works by Pal Duka-Gjini (pseudonym of Daniel Gjeçaj), the first major study of the Scutarine poet and dramatist in half a century. This 299-page monograph, 'The life and works of Gjergj Fishta', contains an extensive biography of the poet, an overview of his works, and comments and views on Fishta made by domestic and foreign authors. As such, it is a highly useful compilation, though nothing revolutionary from a scholarly point of view.

Up to his death on 30 December 1940, Father Gjergj Fishta was lauded as the national poet of Albania, indeed as the Albanian Homer. Gabriele D'Annunzio called him the 'greatest poet of the glorious people of Albania'. After the war, however, Fishta was attacked by the new rulers, and denigrated more than any other pre-war writer, and fell into prompt oblivion. The national poet had become an anathema.

The reason for Fishta's fall from grace after 1944 is to be sought not in his life or works, but rather in the origins of the Albanian Communist Party which took power under Enver Hoxha and Mehmet Shehu. In July 1946, Albania and Yugoslavia signed a Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance which gave the Yugoslavs effective control over Albanian affairs, including the fields of education and culture. It is no doubt the said 'anti-Slavic sentiments' expressed in 'The highland lute' which caused the work and its author to be proscribed by the Yugoslav authorities. In actual fact, 'The highland lute' is no more anti-Slavic than the *Chanson de Roland* or the *Poema de Mio Cid* are anti-Arabic, but such were Balkan

sensitivities. After relations with Yugoslavia were broken off in 1948, expressions of anti-Montenegrin or anti-Serbian sentiment would certainly no longer have been considered a major sin in Party thinking, but an official position had been taken with regard to Fishta and, possibly with deference to the new Slavic allies in Moscow, it could not be renounced without a scandal. Such was the fear of Gjergj Fishta in later years that even his bones were dug up secretly and thrown into the river.

Despite four decades of unrelenting Party propaganda reducing Fishta to a 'clerical and fascist poet', the people of Albania, and in particular the inhabitants of Shkodër did not forget him. After almost half a century, Gjergj Fishta was commemorated openly for the first time on 5 January 1991 in his native Shkodër. During the first public recital of the poet's works in forty-five years, an actor at one point lost his lines, and was immediately and spontaneously assisted by his large audience - who still knew 'The highland lute' by heart.

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