

A Passion for Theth

Presentation given at the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam on 29 June 2012 on the occasion of the publication of the book:

MULDER, Gerda & ZONDERLAND, Herman

Een fascinatie voor Theth: het Albanese bergdorp van A. den Doolaard. Gerda Mulder, tekst en samenstelling. Herman Zonderland, foto's. ISBN 978-90-76905-28-0. (Skanderbeg Books, Utrecht & Tirana 2012) 229 pp.

I have travelled a good deal in Albania over the last thirty years, but I must admit that I had never been to Theth. It was simply too far away and too difficult to get to. But when my good friend Gerda Mulder told me repeatedly of her enthusiasm for Theth and the Dukagjin region, I realised I had to go.

Many figures more eminent than I had managed to get to Theth in the past.

The intrepid English traveller and writer, Edith Durham, journeyed through the Albanian Highlands in 1908 and so surprised the natives, as a woman travelling on her own, without a husband, that they were convinced she was the sister of the King of England.

The Austro-Hungarian scholar Baron Franz Nopcsa lived for several years in northern Albania at about the same time, and travelled to Theth and beyond in order to scale and map the mountains and to investigate the notorious blood-feuding among the Highland tribes. I have recently translated his memoirs into English.

In 1921, the well-known American journalist Rose Wilder Lane visited the region with her girlfriend Frances Hardy in order to set up schools for the American Red Cross. The fruits of this journey are recorded in her book *The Peaks of Shala* (London 1922), which was widely read at the time and went through several editions.

Lastly, mention must be made of the restless Dutch writer, A. Den Doolaard from Zwolle, who visited Theth in 1932 while travelling through Albania on foot. This journey inspired one of his best-known novels, *De Herberg met het hoefijzer* (Amsterdam 1933), which I am sure you have all read, at least I hope so. His photographs can now be seen on my website: www.AlbanianPhotography.net.

For my part, I arrived in Theth in style, on horseback. This was an adventure in itself because I had not been on a horse for forty years. At any rate, we rode up the mountains and over a 2,000 metre pass, down into the deep and verdant valley of Theth, a distant Shangri La...

Now, those who hear the word Shangri La, will have a vision of an isolated mountain valley where the inhabitants live in eternal bliss, harmony, prosperity and wisdom.

Theth is, in fact, none of this. Indeed, it is the very opposite. It is bitterly poor, backward as only Albania can be, and certainly not harmonious. The male inhabitants of the Shala tribe still have the unfortunate tendency of shooting one another in longstanding blood

feuds. And, eternal bliss? Well, you are more likely to hear the natives complain bitterly of their situation and ask you why you bothered to go to Theth when you come from much nicer countries.

And yet, Theth is indeed something very special. I can now understand Gerda's enthusiasm, that has become mine. You will see something of its beauty in the wonderful photographs of Herman Sonderland in the book, and read of its magic qualities in the texts presented by Gerda Mulder.

Theth is admittedly one of the most isolated regions of Europe. It certainly involves an effort to get there. But it is well worthwhile. In its own, very Albanian way, it is a distant Shangri-la.

Thank you.

Robert Elsie
Rotterdam, 29 June 2012