

Albanian Byron Conference, 14th to 18th September, 2009

By Allan Gregory, Irish Byron Society

Will we go to Albania? The International Byron Society website advised us to get in touch with our relevant embassies concerning the feasibility of travelling. The Irish contingent could not comply with this advice as Ireland does not have an embassy in Albania. However, our friends at the Greek embassy wondered what all the fuss was about. "There is no problem travelling to Albania", they informed us.

And so, six of us, including former Lord Mayor of Dublin, Councillor Mary Frehill, booked our flights, liaised, through this writer, with Professor Afrim Karagjosi, and set out with Malev Airlines, via Budapest, and arrived at Mother Teresa airport in Tirana on Monday, 14th September, 2009.

We were met at the airport by Afrim's glamorous colleague, Irma Kolic, who dutifully directed us to the waiting bus. We arrived at the four-star Mondial Hotel, mid-afternoon, where Professor Karagjosi greeted us as if we were long-lost emigrants returning home for a wedding. It was, indeed, the heartiest of welcomes. Following registration we were each given our red and black conference bag, nameplate, brochure, programme of events, Byron Albanian badge, and a beautiful copper wall plate with the embossed image of Byron in Albanian costume. Following refreshments, Afrim organized a two-hour tour of the city of Tirana, which is surrounded by the beautiful Dajti Mountains on the one side and the coastal plains on the other. City attractions included the monument of national hero G.K. Skanderbeg, the Grand Park, the Mosque of Ethem Bey and the Clock Tower. Buildings such as the National Historical Museum, the Archaeological Museum, the Museum of Natural Sciences and the Opera and Ballet Theatre all have their distinct character with design and embellishments representing a once Soviet Socialist dictum. Traffic in the city reminded us of the problems we encounter daily in Dublin. In the evening, the welcoming dinner was a veritable feast at the Hotel Mondial, which was attended by delegates, university staff and international award-winning writer, Tessa De Loo.

Next morning taxis were organized to take delegates from the Mondial Hotel to the Symposium venue at the five-star Tirana International Hotel in Skanderbeg Square. The venue was state-of-the-art with full interpretive and amplification facilities.

Television cameras and newspaper photographers were awaiting delegates as they entered the conference area. Five representative models in clay, of the new Byron monument by famous Albanian sculptor Mumtaz Dhrami, were on show in the foyer. At the end of the symposium, the delegates voted for their preference, but the final decision will be made by Professor Karagjosi, together with a selection committee. The monument will be erected in Tirana.

The conference was opened by the Deputy Lord Mayor of Tirana and the British Ambassador to Albania, Fiona McIlwham, following which Professor Karagjosi

read in English, and interpreted to Albanian, greetings from Joint President of the International Byron Society, John Clubbe, Earl John Lytton, Lord Ian Strathcarron and Geoffrey C. Bond. These greetings were also published in the conference catalogue of events, together with greetings from Charles Robinson and Ken Purslow. During each session English papers were translated into Albanian and Albanian papers into English, through headphones, by Afrim's translators. Papers were varied in their topics but mostly deliberated on Byron's visit to Albania in 1809 and his encounters with the now celebrated warlord Ali Pasha.

Allan Gregory opened the morning session with a paper entitled *Byron's Oriental Realism* {this paper was published on the 16th September in its entirety in the Albanian daily newspaper, *The Standard*, with a large photograph of Thomas Phillip's portrait of Byron in Albanian costume}. Following the opening paper, Enit Steiner from Switzerland spoke of *Byron's contribution to Albanian National Identity*. Morelli Smith from Scotland told us of Byron's enduring connection with Epiros in a paper entitled *The Opening of the Treasure Cave*, and Shobhana Bhattacharji's paper reflected on the influence Byron had on later Albanian trailblazers such as Edward Lear and Patrick Leigh Fermor.

A buffet lunch was provided following which the afternoon session commenced on schedule. Dorian Koci, from UFO University, Tirana, read an interesting paper entitled *Reading Byron Differently*, and one of the most entertaining papers of the day was given by Anila Mullahi who spoke on *Byron and the Albanian Costume*. Other speakers included Olivier Feignier, Reiko Yoshida and She-Ru Kao, who arrived from the Greek conference in Missolonghi. The final paper of the day featured Albanian writer and poet Flutura Acka who spoke of *Byron's Influence on Albanian Literature*. Flutura is also a well known Albanian publisher and translator and is Managing Director of Skanderbeg Books, the Albanian Publishing House. A lively discussion, chaired by Tessa de Loo, brought conference proceedings to a conclusion.

A walking tour of areas formerly occupied by Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha, who exercised a tyranny which affected every aspect of Albanian life up to his death in 1985, was most enlightening; Flutura Acka proved to be a most informative guide. The walking tour was topped-off by a breathtaking view from the new Sky Building in Tirana where the city and its environs could be seen for miles around. Dinner in the evening was attended by delegates, organizing group and academic committee in the beautiful "Piazza" restaurant in central Tirana, which sported many interesting paintings and a large framed copy of Thomas Phillip's Byron portrait.

On Wednesday 15th September, following breakfast, we boarded the coach to take us down the Adriatic coast of Albania to the city of Saranda, which is situated in an open sea gulf, opposite the island of Corfu. Passing through the coastal towns of Kavaje, Lushnje, Fieri, and Vlore, panoramic views of the Adriatic coastline were interspersed by miles and miles of sandy beaches as we reached our lunch destination of Llogara, where the Adriatic meets the Ionian sea. Llogara is a national park and is surrounded by forests and cold water springs. The proprietor of "Restorant Sofu" was

ebullient in his hospitality as he and his staff eagerly served up a spread only fit for a king {the food in Albania is delicious}. We stopped again at Dhermi, the heart of the Albanian Riviera, where Greek Islands look as if they are within swimming distance, and a visit to a roadside restaurant, built into the side of a mountain, revealed an almost paradisiacal oasis, as rivulets after rivulets cascaded down the mountain at either side of the dining tables, as an Albanian folk group, in full Albanian costume, serenaded us with songs associated with the region.

We checked into the five-star Butrinti Hotel in Saranda at 4.15pm. At 4.45pm we again boarded the coach for a visit to the world Unesco Heritage site of Eternal Butrint, 15km south of Saranda. The site consists of the circular theatre, the temple of Aesculapius, the Baptistery, Nymphaeum, city gates and the Venetian tower of Butrint, all situated within a walled park, and excavated under the supervision of Italian archaeologist Luigi Ugolini in the 1920's. It is truly a beautiful site and its location idyllic, which prompted Edward Lear to write to William Martin Leake on the 22nd February 1856:

“On the high mountains of Santi Quaranta there has hardly ever been snow, and only the furthest range is thoroughly white. I long to land there once more, and draw the great rocks of Filátes, and to see Butrinto”.

An evening meal of fish with Albanian wine at Butrinti Castle brought to a close a wonderful day for exhausted Byronists.

Next morning we set off at 8.30am for Gjirokaster, one of the major cities in Southern Albania. This Unesco listed “museum city” is situated on the side of Mali iGjere, 325 metres above sea level and boasts the biggest castle in Albania, which stands out above the city like a balcony, and houses the National Museum of Weapons. Various weapons from antiquity are on show in this vast edifice, from mediaeval cannons to an abandoned-looking World War II German fighter plane. Here we also visited the Museum of Ethnicity which is housed in a typical Gjirokastrian mediaeval dwelling, fully furnished from the period, and this provided an interesting insight into how families lived, and still live, in this area of extreme climate variation. Following lunch in Gjirokastra we set off on the winding, undulating narrow cliff-top road to Ali Pasha's Tepelené. The beauty of this magnificent wild countryside now came into sharp focus, as, looking down onto the valleys, one could almost picture Byron, Hobhouse and company trekking slowly and laboriously, through the dense woodlands below. Tepelené, the home of Ali Pasha, is located on the left bank of the Vjosé river, about three kilometers downstream from its break from the Drino. The name “Tepelené” means “Helen's Hill”. Its location is strategically important, which is why Ali Pasha held court here. The Pasha's citadel is now in an almost ruinous, abandoned state, which is a pity, as properly maintained, it could become a tourist focal point for the district. The town and its environs have a complex, turbulent history, from wars to earthquakes to uprisings but is now home to the successful Albanian enterprise of Tepelené Mineral Water. Ali Pasha was born in the nearby village of Hormova, which can be seen from the citadel and built into the side of a hill, on the opposite bank of the river Vjosé. In 1847, the great British

writer and landscape painter, Edward Lear, visited Tepelené and noted and recorded its devastated buildings and streets. And so, back to Tirana.

At 7.00pm, a large crowd, which included Tiranian literati and arts aficionados thronged the conference hall at the Mondial Hotel for the launch, by the Dutch Ambassador, H.E. Mr. Henk van den Dool of *Byron in Albania* by international best-selling author of *The Twins*, Tessa De Loo. The book, originally written in Dutch, has been translated into Albanian and retraces Byron's travels through Albania in 1809, undertaken by Tessa de Loo, assisted by Afrim Karagjosi in 1994. Following a reception the conference group was joined in the main dining hall of Hotel Mondial by Their Excellencies the British Ambassador Ms. Fiona McIlwham, and Dutch Ambassador, Mr. Henk van den Dool, for the farewell dinner. The dinner was a happy affair with the usual excellent Albanian hospitality which we had now come to expect from our hosts. We ate in the company of Johnny Lee Miller as Lord Byron in the magnificent 2003 BBC production of *Byron* on a giant screen, provided by the university,

After dinner, two former members of the Byron Society, no longer with us, were fondly remembered. Mrs Maureen Charlton, former President of the Irish Byron Society, who died in 2007 and the irreplaceable Mrs Maureen Crisp, secretary of the International Byron Society, who sadly passed away following the International conference at St. Andrews in 2008.

Happy 80th birthday was extended to Madame Christiane Vigouroux, one of the greatest women on the planet, who had trekked up settlements and down battlements with us during the week. A heartfelt rendering of the Marseillaise would have been appropriate.

Professor Karagjosi was presented with a volume entitled *A History of Ireland and its Peoples* from the Irish Byron Society and was congratulated and loudly applauded for his excellent organization of the conference. Tirana is a wonderful venue and has to be considered as a future location for an International Byron event.

It was with sadness we said our goodbyes on Friday morning as we boarded the bus to take us to the Airport for our return home. But not before the Irish ladies, under the guidance of Flutura Acka, managed to search the bazaars of Tirana for bargains, presents and mementos of their visit to the Balkans.

Allan Gregory, 29th September, 2009
