

Feb 4 2014

Ruritania in Brussels: Balkan stereotypes in the Age of Austerity

LSEGE2017



Vesna Goldsworthy, Professor in English Literature and Creative Writing at Kingston University and accomplished author, has been LSEE's first guest speaker in the academic year 2013/14, presenting on "[Ruritania in Brussels. Evzones in the Eurozone: Balkan Stereotypes in the Age of Austerity](#)". Her book "*Inventing Ruritania: the Imperialism of the Imagination*" is an in-depth account of how the Balkans, the "Wild-East" of Europe, have provided material for the literature and entertainment industries in Western Europe and America.

At the outset of your career as a writer, you were determined not to make out of your ethnic background your profession. What made you still choose South Eastern Europe as one of your main research fields?

As a Yugoslav arriving in Britain in the mid 1980s, I was drawn to exploring the British views of my homeland. I read every book about Yugoslavia I could lay my hands on. I particularly enjoyed – with masochistic glee! – those which got things horribly wrong. Yugoslav ideas about the Brits were often equally hilarious or hair-raising (my memoir, *Chernobyl Strawberries*, is full of such mutual misunderstandings) but they had fewer consequences for Britain than the other way round.

At the same time, I was reluctant to teach anything Balkan, anxious not to become "another annoying Itch" — as just about every British writer calls "us" when he (sic!) is trying to be funny — enthusing about "obscure places". There is a perception that university departments with a regional focus – be it South-East Europe or South-East Asia — are "expat centres" for teachers and students alike. So I started my postgraduate studies with the idea of writing about Henry James or Ford Madox Ford – the sort of novel I still teach and sometimes write about – but I went to Romania the day after Ceausescu was shot with a copy of Olivia Manning's *Balkan Trilogy* in my suitcase, and I got caught in the excitement and the beauty of it. Thus I "returned home" by way of Bucharest. I am glad I did. I knew less about Romania than I knew about Portugal or Iceland when I started and it was anything but boring.

In "Inventing Ruritania" you elaborate on the split between Disraeli and Gladstone over the Bulgarian horrors, defining the Balkans as the "litmus paper that exposes Western divisions". Is this statement still valid today?

Yes, absolutely. I could almost devise a British personality test composed entirely of "obscure Balkan questions". An answer to, let's say: "Should Albania join the EU?: a) now b) in thirty years' time c) never d) I don't care" will tell you a little bit about the Balkans, but much more about the British view of Europe. Just compare the reporting of the current easing of travel restrictions for the Bulgarians and the Romanians in the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* and you will learn more about differences between those two newspapers than you will about the EU's "Eastern Fringe".

"Stereotypes – ant. Greek for stiff images – enable rapid response, but they ignore differences between individuals". Is austerity stiffening these images further?

I think so. For example, the Balkans have long been a byword for chaos, corruption, and inefficiency. You will find Slovenia symbolically "returning" to the Balkans as it now appears much less efficient in comparison to the European north than it once appeared in relation to Bosnia or Serbia. Greece was the first Balkan country inside the EU and routinely described as a "bridge" between the Balkans and Europe, but it is now seen as unequivocally "Balkan". Funnily enough, in Belgrade I grew up with a perception of the Greeks as extremely hard working, and canny merchants. This is another dubious stereotype, for sure, but it is the exact opposite of what "Europe" thinks of the Greeks now.

"I don't speak about real countries", you told a member of the public who thought you were going to present about Sandžak. What can the story of imaginary countries tell us that the history of real ones cannot do?

Just look at this verse from Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*:

*Nobody knows where it is on the map
Who'd ever think it could start such a flap?
Each Montenegrin and Serbian too,
Waitin' for something, right outta the blue – oh honey!
Pack up my Gladstone 'n' brush off my suit,
And then light me up my big fat cigar –
If ya want my address, it's
That Orient Express
To the Sanjak of Novi Pazar!*

Seriously, though, I look forward to reading this new history of Sandzak. I would have loved to attend the launch and meet its authors. I am teaching, unfortunately. I was just taking my seat when the slide with the announcement was projected behind me. Someone from the audience jested: “Are you talking about Sandzak, then?” I was instantly reminded of that hilarious moment in Saki’s story “The Lost Sanjak” when the narrator, who is posing as some sort of a Balkan expert, comes under cross-examination to prove his expertise, and he is asked “with a diabolical suddenness” if he could tell the “whereabouts of Novibazar”.

There are quite a few Balkan historians who know the history of the region better than I do, and there are many more fans of imaginary countries – the internet is teeming with them – but there are few professors of English literature connecting these two groups. In our anodyne, PC days, when people would rather say everything is lovely than court trouble, it is often only these imaginary versions of real places that tell us why we react to the real ones the way we do, why certain countries are admitted to important political clubs readily, while others are kept waiting, treated as a joke, or much worse.

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