

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Wildest Province

Roderick Bailey

CONTENTS

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Praise

List of Illustrations

Maps

Dedication

Title Page

Prologue

1 'Tip and run thuggery'

2 'A few volunteers'

3 'Everything going fine'

4 'Endurance Vile'

5 'Enthusiasm and romanticism'

6 'A nightmare beyond description'

7 'This God-forsaken, savage country'

8 'Second Front started. Huns all around'

9 'Colleagues in conspiracy'

10 'Why should we attack them now?'

Epilogue

Picture Section

Notes

Nominal Roll, Awards, Casualties and Code-names

Pronunciation and Place-names

Index

Acknowledgements

Sources and Bibliography

Copyright

About the Book

From the summer of 1943, small teams of elite British soldiers began to parachute into Axis-occupied Albania. They were members of Britain's Special Operations Executive, and their task was to find and support bands of local guerrillas and harass the Axis as best they could. None had been to Albania before, or knew what awaited them.

Trying to survive in extreme conditions and formidable terrain, SOE troops lived in constant danger of capture and death, and were plagued by illness, lice and frostbite. Casualties were appalling and most guerrillas seemed keener to kill each other than fight Italians and Germans. In his extraordinary new book, Roderick Bailey draws on interviews with survivors, long-hidden diaries and recently declassified files to tell the full story of this remarkable corner of SOE history and finally settle the question of whether or not British communists in the SOE, perhaps even colleagues of the Cambridge spies, had conspired to lead British policy astray.

About the Author

Born in 1974, Roderick Bailey is a graduate of Cambridge and Edinburgh universities and a former Alistair Horne Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford. In 2003 he was appointed to run a major project to acquire new material for the Imperial War Museum's SOE collections.

‘An excellent account of a little known but fascinating and still haunting episode in that titanic mid-century struggle. It deserves to be regarded as definitive’
Spectator

‘Charting the wartime Albanian missions of some of Britain’s finest German killers ... *The Wildest Province* is a must-have acquisition for anyone remotely interested in the region, the war, its politics, or the experiences of the men who fought there’
Anthony Loyd, *The Times*

‘A tribute to average men with the guts to be extraordinary ... The author’s research is monumental’
Sunday Express

‘A rich and rounded account ... he has mastered a mass of complex material, and analysed it with great clarity and fairness ... it is hard to imagine that task being done better than this’
Noel Malcolm, *Sunday Telegraph*

‘Authoritative ... More than a decade’s study in an impressive range of archival and oral sources has allowed him to weave a complex but engrossing story ... An important contribution to the history of SOE’
Times Literary Supplement

‘Superbly well-researched ... It is, undoubtedly, one of the most comprehensive and painstaking pieces of research yet undertaken on that controversial organisation ... We can all certainly learn something from this thought-provoking book’
The Herald

‘Thanks to the excellent investigative work of Roderick Bailey we now have this gripping account of the British soldiers who fought with the partisans in occupied Albania ... this is an unknown but important chapter in war history, which has now found a fine chronicler’

Financial Times

‘Bailey has made skilful use of letters, interviews and diaries, as well as official files, to tell a scholarly and readable story almost worthy of Buchan himself’

BBC History Magazine

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

FIRST SECTION

1. Margaret Hasluck (Crown Copyright: supplied by the SOE Adviser at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office)
2. Philip Leake (courtesy of Kenneth Martin Leake)
3. David Smiley and Billy Mclean at Biza, October 1943 (Imperial War Museum)
4. Alan Hare, Peter Kemp and Richard Riddell (courtesy of Richard Riddell)
5. Andy Hands (courtesy of Nigel Hands)
6. George Seymour (courtesy of Home Headquarters, Royal Highland Fusiliers)
7. Bill Tilman (courtesy of Lynette Croudace)
8. Myslim Peza and Baba Faja (The National Archives)
9. Mustafa Gjinishi (courtesy of Marcus Lyon)
10. Female Partisans (courtesy of Robin Bruford-Davies)
11. Nexhip Vinçani with David Smiley (The National Archives)
12. Balli Kombëtar delegation at Biza (Imperial War Museum)
13. Arthur Nicholls (courtesy of Richard Riddell)
14. 'Trotsky' Davies at Biza (Imperial War Museum)
15. Frank Smyth, 'Trotsky' Davies, Alan Hare, Arthur Nicholls, Billy McLean and David Smiley at Biza, 23 October 1943 (Imperial War Museum)

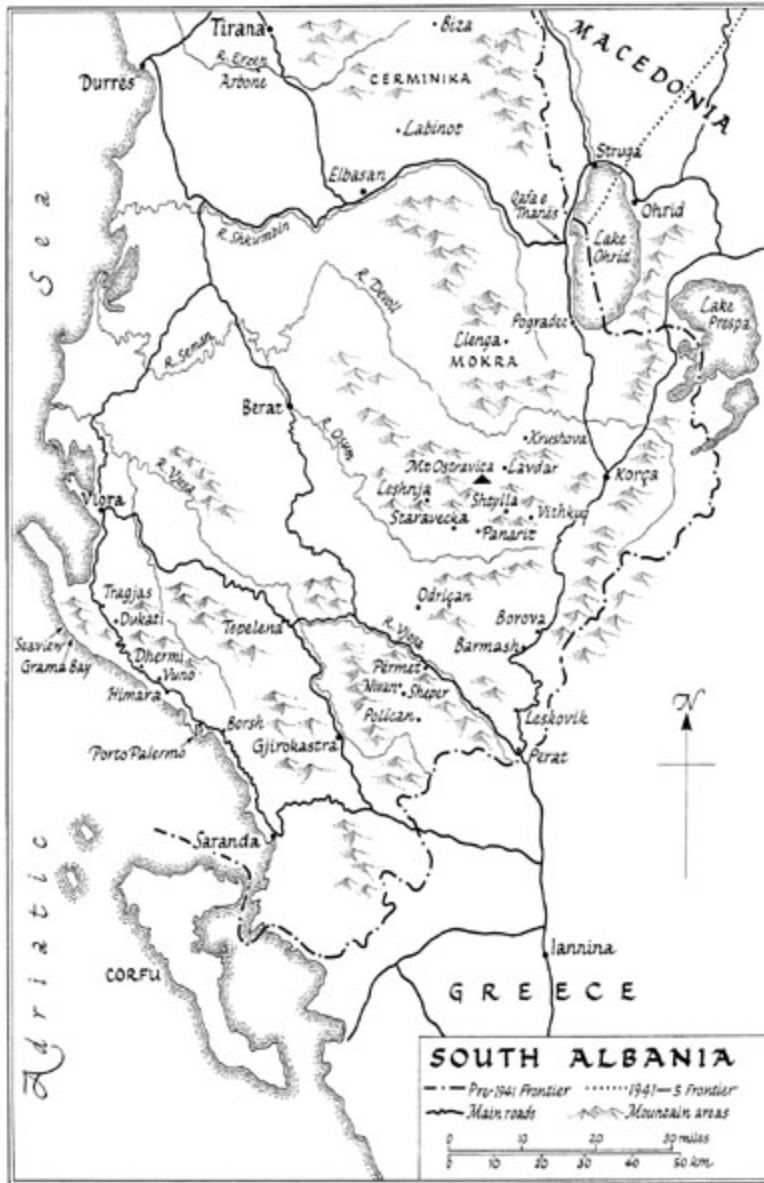
- [16.](#) Cigarette case, sovereign and silk escape map carried by 'Trotsky' Davies and showing bullet damage and blood stains (courtesy of Robin Bruford-Davies)
- [17.](#) John Hibberdine, March 1944 (The National Archives)
- [18.](#) Ian Merrett (author's collection)
- [19.](#) Reginald Hibbert (courtesy of Richard Riddell)
- [20.](#) Muharrem Bajraktar (The National Archives)
- [21.](#) Abas Kupi (courtesy of Rafal Brzeski)
- [22.](#) Jerry Field (Crown Copyright: supplied by the SOE Adviser at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office)
- [23.](#) Giuseppe Manzitti (courtesy of the Quayle family)
- [24.](#) In the cave at Seaview (courtesy of the Quayle family)
- [25.](#) Men of Dukati visiting Seaview (courtesy of the Quayle family)

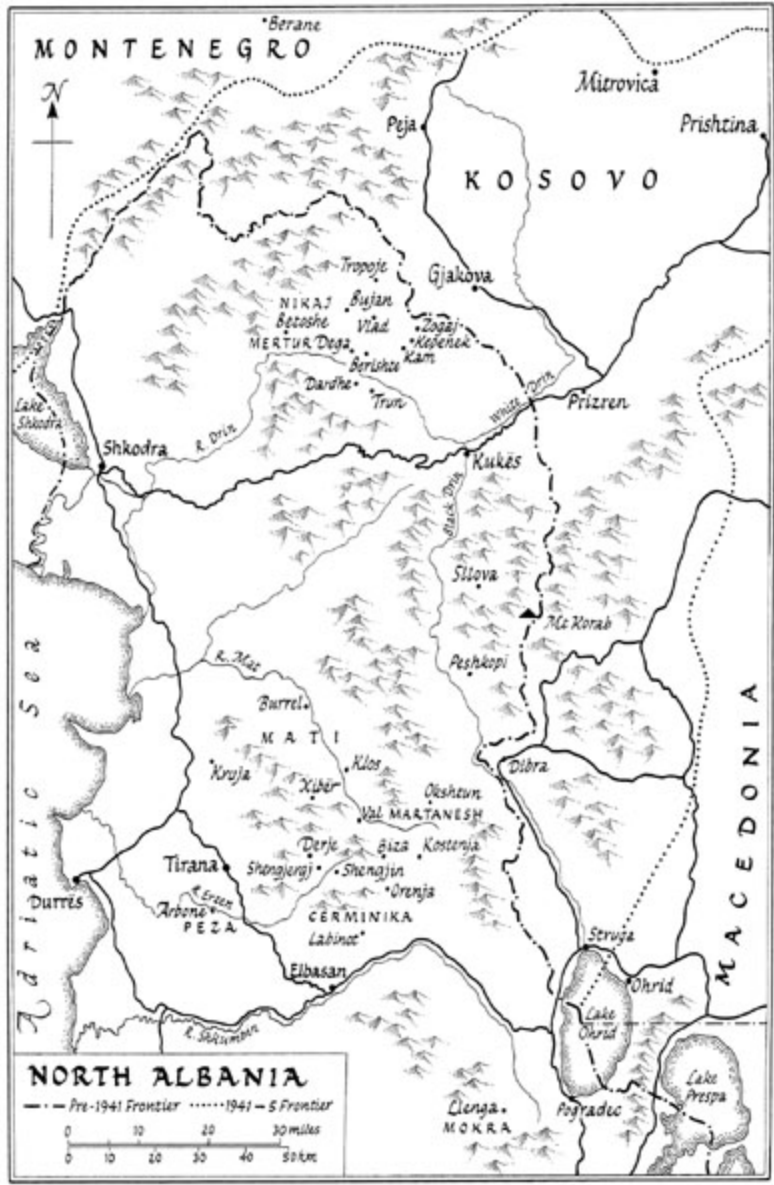
SECOND SECTION

- [1.](#) Anthony Quayle, February 1944 (The National Archives)
- [2&3.](#) The first ten nurses reach Bari, January 1944 (2. The National Archives; 3. courtesy of Robin Bruford-Davies)
- [3.](#) courtesy of Robin Bruford-Davies)
- [4.](#) Marcus Lyon (The National Archives)
- [5.](#) Johnny Shaw (courtesy of Bruce Johnston)
- [6.](#) Jack Dumoulin (Crown Copyright: supplied by the SOE Adviser at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office)
- [7.](#) Brian Ensor and Gordon Layzell (courtesy of the Quayle family)
- [8.](#) Norman Wheeler (courtesy of Robin Bruford-Davies)
- [9.](#) Alan Palmer (courtesy of Richard Riddell)
- [10.](#) Alan Palmer, Myslim Peza, Philip Leake and Enver Hoxha, at Permet, 5 June 1944 (courtesy of Lynette Croudace)
- [11.](#) Tony Simcox en route to join Gani Kryeziu (courtesy of Harry Clement)
- [12.](#) Julian Amery and Billy McLean (The National Archives)

- [13.](#) Fadil Hoxha, Tony Simcox, Gani Kryeziu and Lazar Fundo (courtesy of Harry Clement)
- [14.](#) Fred Brandt, Tony Neel, Harry Button and Tajiks (The National Archives)
- [15.](#) Eliot Watrous and Victor Smith (courtesy of Lynette Croudace)
- [16.](#) John Eyre (Crown Copyright: supplied by the SOE Adviser at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office)
- [17.](#) Jon Naar (courtesy of Jon Naar)
- [18.](#) Bill Harcourt (courtesy of Marcus Lyon)
- [19.](#) Billy McLean, Julian Amery and David Smiley, summer 1944 (The National Archives)
- [20.](#) Partisan column moving off to attack Peshkopi, July 1944 (The National Archives)
- [21.](#) Tony Northrop and Tommy Renfree (courtesy of Lynette Croudace)
- [22.](#) Hugh Munro and Gjakja family on board the *Due Fratelli* (courtesy of Hugh Munro)
- [23.](#) Partisans during the battle for Tirana (The National Archives)
- [24.](#) Enver Hoxha enters Tirana, 28 November 1944 (courtesy of Marcus Lyon)
- [25.](#) The British military cemetery in Tirana, 1946 (courtesy of Oliver Gilkes)







FOR MY PARENTS

RODERICK BAILEY

The Wildest Province

SOE in the Land of the Eagle

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PROLOGUE

THE General of the Dead Army, the first novel of the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare, tells of an Italian officer searching for the remains of Italian soldiers killed in Albania in the Second World War. It is a bleak, desolate tale, set years after the conflict in a rain-swept landscape of mountains and mud. The general is hardly welcome. The Italians had invaded in 1939 and, though harassed by guerrillas and badly mauled by the neighbouring Greeks, stayed for more than four years. The general, in turn, loathes the locals, both the peasants who stare at him as he hunts and digs and the surly band of labourers in his pay. On one damp mountainside he crosses paths with a one-armed German officer looking for his own countrymen. Germany had taken over the occupation after Italy's collapse in 1943.

Away from the hills a café owner remembers the severed hand and burnt shirt, displayed in the square, of a downed English pilot. But while Kadare makes no other mention of British dead, the war had left a number in Albanian soil and there does exist a story of a post-war search for them. That tale is found in the files of the British Army's Graves Registration Units. Unenvied and unsung, the role of these tiny teams of dedicated officers and men was to comb old battlefields for the makeshift graves of British servicemen, remove the remains to military cemeteries and, in the process, try to identify each casualty found. As the records of these units show, it was a grim and exacting task, too harrowing for some, which began before the war was over and continued for long months afterwards.

'A hard working officer of a Graves Unit is entitled to the sympathy and respect of all those whose duty is different,' reads one report, from the headquarters files of Graves Registrations, Central Mediterranean Forces, on the mental strength required properly to do the job. The best officers were volunteers, 'because it was found in practice that certain people are simply incapable of doing a thorough search of a body which has been buried for some time'. Recent postings had not volunteered 'and the first of them to arrive has said that he simply cannot face exhumations. He is, therefore, completely useless to us.' In this line of work, the report explains, 'we are not so concerned with the officers' feelings as we are with the fact that if the search is not efficiently done an identity may be lost'. Even a volunteer could find it too much for him. 'Unless he can arrive at a mental state in which he can pull a blanket over his mind as soon as he has finished his day's work, he never becomes any good. Those who cannot do this have to be let go.'¹

When that study was written, in late 1945, HQ Graves Registrations, CMF, with its office in Florence, still directed a spread of twenty teams from the southern tip of Italy up to Austria and across to the Balkans. Months had passed since Germany's surrender but there remained much work to do, particularly in territory held by the enemy until the end. Although the British and Americans had landed on Italy's toe in September 1943, the push north had been slow: Rome fell in June 1944, Florence in August, Ravenna in December. The advance had been held up again and again and, in the spring of 1945, Austria and much of northern Italy remained in German hands. As for the Balkans, never invaded by the western Allies, the German withdrawal was barely complete by the end of the war. But even with the fighting over and the Germans gone, searching for the dead in some of these places could still prove problematic. One such spot was Albania.

Forty miles east of the Italian heel, thickly forested and heavily mountainous, Albania had been controlled by the Axis for nearly six years and more than fifty British and Dominion soldiers, commandos and airmen were thought to have died out there. And at first the graves office in Florence seemed to have just the man to find them: an officer on its books, who, very unusually for an Englishman, had been to Albania before; he had even known some of the men Florence wanted him to find. The Brixton-born son of a train driver, twenty-six-year-old Ian Merrett was then digging up Florence's battlegrounds and reintering remains in the city's new military cemetery. An ex-commando, he was also a former officer in Britain's Special Operations Executive, a secret organisation set up in 1940 to encourage subversion and carry out sabotage behind enemy lines. It was SOE that had sent him to Albania, after it was given the task in 1943 of intensifying resistance throughout the occupied Balkans. Looking to go on the offensive and return to the Continent, Churchill and his senior strategists had viewed guerrilla activity there as a useful means of diverting enemy troops from other fronts, hastening Italy's collapse and preparing the way for any future thrusts through Europe's 'soft underbelly'. The region became a major SOE theatre, with dozens of small missions of specially trained troops, almost all of them British, dispatched to find and encourage resisters, blow up bridges, ambush convoys and call in supplies of weapons and ammunition.

By the end of the war, SOE had sent into the Balkans several hundred men. Of the hundred destined for Albania, most had expected to get to grips quickly with the enemy and many, including Merrett, had rather hoped to find themselves fighting a romantic and worthwhile war of liberation. Waiting for them, in a striking setting, were indeed enough chiefs and tribes and rifle-wielding guerrillas to conjure lively images of Lawrence and the

Arabs. But here, too, were squalid villages and burning homes, terrible privations and a hazardous existence plagued by lice, malaria and the constant threat of capture and death. Winter, when missions were chased high into the snowbound peaks, was horrific. 'At dusk the road is safely recrossed and a forced march made up the mountain,' reads the diary, recently discovered, of one hunted mission.

This is as steep as the side of a house, very rocky and slippery and in our weakened state a terrible trial ... The effort required to maintain and recover one's balance is truly appalling - none of us has ever experienced so severe a trial of physical and moral strength and endurance. At 2100hrs having nearly reached the summit, the guides, after much questioning, have to admit that they have lost the way! The decision is taken to make camp but if we are to survive the night fires must be lit. Our clothes are already standing out stiffly round us like boards and every twig and branch is heavily covered in gel frost. To stand still for a moment is to court frostbite and death.²

SOE personnel in Albania performed feats of great enterprise and stamina, but the dangers took their toll. Of the first fifty men sent in, sixteen died or were captured and seventeen were subsequently decorated. Tasked with dropping men and stores, the Royal Air Force also suffered, losing several crews as they wove through the mountains at heights of a few hundred feet.

Merrett had parachuted into Albania in December 1943. He was brought out by boat ten months later. In September 1945, however, when the Florence office tried to send him back, the Albanian Government refused to have him. As a note in the files explains, 'he had been employed in Special

Operations in that country and the present Administration regard him as an “undesirable character”³. Merrett’s offence would seem to have been that he had worked during the war with the wrong Albanians. When he and other SOE men had gone out there to fight, they had found themselves dealing with a variety of rival bands, many of whose leaders, their eyes on post-war power, were happier killing each other than fighting Italians or Germans. Merrett himself had lived and worked for months with supporters of King Zog, the rakish chief who had crowned himself monarch in the 1920s and fled the country at the time of the Italian invasion. Other SOE officers had been attached to Albania’s communist-led ‘Partisan’ movement. And at the end of 1944, when the Germans pulled out and a brief civil war was coming to a close, that movement had seized control. Headed by Enver Hoxha, the former schoolteacher who had led the Partisans for most of the war, a ruthless communist government was swiftly in place, anti-Western sentiment embedded in its outlook. Particular hostility was reserved for the British, who, the communists felt, had worked against them by trying to prop up the hated old order.

So Florence tried again, this time with a staff major called McIntosh who had no prior experience of the place. This was more successful. McIntosh crossed the Adriatic with his jeep, maps and notes and the Albanians let him in. But it was soon quite clear that the new regime was hardly keen on any graves officer’s presence. Four months later, so the Florence files record, McIntosh, his job unfinished, was back, ‘filled with disgust with the treatment accorded him in his effort to collect British dead who had given their lives to liberate Albania’⁴. McIntosh had assumed the Albanian Government would help him, but from the start, he reported later, ‘they had little interest and were not in the least willing to co-operate’⁵.

First, the government had refused to let him leave the capital, Tirana, where he 'lived and fed' in the Dajti Hotel as Kadare's general would do, until he had submitted full particulars of where each grave was thought to be. 'This collecting of information was no mean job, considering the channels of communication ... which were sometimes literally by courier on horseback to isolated villages.' Weeks passed before enough evidence was found for him to be allowed to start work. Even then, the government demanded that he visit the country's ten prefectures individually, then return to Tirana after each one to seek permission to visit the next: 'one had to count on at least a week between each journey'. Then, when finally at work, McIntosh found himself escorted everywhere by a Partisan lieutenant, 'ostensibly to protect me but in fact his job was to see that I did not talk politics or do spying or photograph the quite non-existent military objectives'.⁶ Early on this man was 'an absolute nuisance', taking notes on everyone McIntosh met.⁷ In time he impressed McIntosh as 'an agreeable fellow' and worked well and willingly as his assistant. In the end he became so 'pro-British' that he was suspended from duty. 'He was told by his chief that he had been too kind to the "English Major" and had failed in his counterespionage duties.'⁸ Less impressive was a two-man bodyguard once detailed to accompany them. 'The only good they were was to pull me out of a river when I fell off a horse's back into water waist deep. The river was in flood and we had either to cross it or do a three day march round about.'⁹

The terrain caused serious problems. Of one 'very successful' journey, a five-day round trip through mountains behind Korça, a market town close to the border with Greece, when he recovered eleven sets of remains, McIntosh reported:

There was approx 6 hours walking each day and at night sleeping accommodation was found in isolated villages. The going was difficult: up to 7,000 feet and down again to about 1,000 feet several times a day. For about half the time there was snow on the ground. Result - bad cold, covered with lice bites, sore feet from walking and sore bottom from riding a mule with a crude wooden saddle ...

In this country the weather is severe and for 4 months much of the interior is completely cut off. During these 4 months, the people there - who all work on the land - do absolutely nothing and if they have no animals to look after, they seldom ever leave their houses. They have no newspapers - and of course radio is unheard of.¹⁰

Later he estimated that three-quarters of all graves lay in 'difficult locations' which meant 'going on mules or in the very difficult parts on foot over mountains with mules carrying the bedding and food'. Everywhere locals had gone to 'endless trouble' to help him. 'On every occasion their hospitality was outstanding, to the extent of giving up part of their own meals rather than allow us to eat our own food.' Village guides and working parties were always obtainable, seldom accepted payment and proved themselves invaluable. 'Only in isolated instances were the graves marked, and without the help of these local people location would have been quite impossible.'¹¹

Still, by February 1946, in spite of the government's obstruction and the harshness of the terrain, McIntosh had achieved a great deal. He had gathered the remains of fifty-two personnel and reinterred them in Tirana, carefully laying out a small British cemetery and erecting new wooden crosses, and thought only two 'definite' graves were left to find. It was then that the communists expelled

him. Their reasons, he felt, were simple. Partly it was their general 'anti-British policy'; partly it was 'feebly to get their own back' after the United Nations deferred discussion of their membership; and partly it was because 'they decided I was a spy and a political reactionary'.¹² Protests were made. Hoxha's government shrugged them off. McIntosh, it pretended, had had 'more than sufficient time' and 'all the necessary facilities and exceptional help'.¹³ The British colonel in charge at Florence appealed for someone, anyone, to force these 'barbarians' to give his men better treatment.¹⁴ Little could be done; the Albanians were unmoved and the last two graves were never collected.

Worse was to come. In October 1946 two Royal Navy warships struck mines in the narrow stretch of water between Albania and Corfu. Lives were lost, Britain accused Albania of deliberately mining the channel and diplomatic links, already bad, were effectively severed. With no Britons now on hand to watch over McIntosh's cemetery, the British Government asked French diplomats to check on the site and make arrangements to keep it tidy.¹⁵ But when a French military attaché visited Tirana in 1950 he could find no trace of the cemetery and feared, in fact, that the Albanians had dug it up.¹⁶ Only in the 1990s, with the collapse of the communist regime and the opening of Albania's borders, was that fate confirmed.¹⁷

High among Albania's southern ranges sits Sheper, a leafy little settlement of hanging vines and stone-built homes. Not much has changed up there for years: goatherds tend flocks in the scrub; the road to neighbouring villages is a potholed track; rusting containers, dropped by parachute sixty years ago, now empty and hammered flat, patch outhouse roofs and walls. And on bare ground on the edge of the village, unmarked and untended, lies one of the graves that McIntosh ran out of time to collect. It belongs

to Major Philip Leake, killed outside Sheper in June 1944. A wooden cross once marked the spot but soon after his death, so locals recall, German soldiers entered the village and blew up the church, after finding arms and explosives hidden inside, and the rubble collapsed over the grave. It also covered the graves of a Dakota crew buried a few yards away. Today the slates and stones have long been removed and reused for building. Leake and the airmen remain, though village memory is the only guide to where the old churchyard had been.

Oxford-educated and a former headmaster of Dulwich College Prep, Leake was thirty-eight when he died. He was also the highly regarded head of SOE's Albanian country section. A month earlier he had been safely behind a desk in Bari, the port in liberated southern Italy where the section had its office, and he died the day he was due to make for the coast and return. Drawing on a range of sources, from declassified records and diaries kept against orders to unpublished memoirs and personal memories, what follows traces the tortuous and costly course of what Leake and his men had been sent there to do. It is not a history of the resistance in Albania. Nor, indeed, is it primarily about that country. Rather it is an attempt to open a window into one small corner of SOE history and the experiences of a few young Britons trying to do a difficult job in a strange and dangerous place. By shedding light, too, on life and work at SOE headquarters, it also seeks to resolve one of the most enduring and disturbing conspiracy theories to surround SOE's wartime record.

Of the men who survived, many emerged with fine memories of camaraderie, and of an exhausting but exhilarating and defining time lived with a rare intensity. Some emerged with long-term scars, physical and mental. Yet a vocal few, appalled at Hoxha's success, came away convinced that the British themselves had condemned Albania to communism. No other power had been more

deeply involved in working with Balkan guerrillas, but Britain's policy, these men felt, had erred terribly, arming the Albanian Partisans excessively and to the unfair exclusion of rival bands. Some suggested that communist sympathisers at SOE headquarters, perhaps even Soviet agents, had worked deviously and deliberately to lead policy-makers astray. Such subterfuge was thought to have occurred during the summer of 1944 when German withdrawal and communist victory were still several months away. Leake's death is seen by some as the turning point: had he lived, the British and particularly the SOE office might not have become so biased towards the Partisans and other guerrillas might have been accorded more support.¹⁸

But the story of SOE's work in Albania begins earlier than that. The British, that summer, had had missions there for more than a year, while desk-bound plotting outside the country had started as early as 1940. And to understand why, from the outset, SOE and its predecessors had to rely so heavily on so many young men with no prior knowledge of the place, it is instructive to glance first at how little, before the war, Albania had ever really interested the British.

'TIP AND RUN THUGGERY'

FROM THE ISLAND of Corfu, the stony and scrub-covered slopes of southern Albania can be seen quite clearly across the sea. Looking north, to where they run straight down to the shore, it is sometimes possible to make out on one mountainside a small white zigzag. That is Albania's coastal road, rising to cut through the peaks at a spot called the Llogora Pass. It was through those peaks that Edward Lear, the English landscape painter and poet, had picked his way in the autumn of 1848. Lear, then in his thirties, had gone to Albania to draw and paint and he believed himself the first Englishman to have 'penetrated' the coastal 'fastnesses' visible from Corfu.¹ He was wrong, but not many of his countrymen had been there before him. Nor have many been there since: Albania has never been a land much visited by the British. Given the unsettling images presented by men like Lear, perhaps that is not surprising.

Lear's published letters and journals brim with descriptions of the stirring terrain and anguished reports of how hard had been the travelling. For every passage praising the mountains, forests, rivers and gorges there is another about the oddness of the locals or the fatigue he was feeling or the squalor of his lodgings. By the walls of the 'unclean & horrible' town of Elbasan, trying to sketch, he had been surrounded by a crowd shouting '*Shaitán*

scroo! ('The Devil draws!') and chased away in a shower of stones.² Tirana was 'as wretched and disgusting' as Elbasan.³ Impressed by the mosques and market squares, he found his night-time billet revolting. 'How people can live in such places I can't imagine,' Lear wrote to his sister. 'A mad Dervish was my next neighbour - but he did me no harm. As for the mice and spiders - I kept them off by a mosquito net.'⁴

More unpleasantness followed. Done with Tirana, Lear left for the coast and, near the top of the Llogora Pass, looked down on the village of Dukhádhes. 'Shut out as it stood by iron walls of mountain, surrounded by sternest features of savage scenery, rock and chasm, precipice and torrent, a more fearful prospect and more chilling to the very blood I never beheld.' To 'this strange place, perhaps one of the most secluded in Europe', Lear descended to spend the night. A bed was found. Before dawn he was woken by 'the most piercing screams ... nearer - nearer - close to the house'. Lighting a candle, he illuminated 'all the Albanians in the room, sitting bolt upright, and listening with ugly countenances to the terrible cries below ... I do not remember ever to have heard so horrid and deadly a sound as that long shriek, perpetually repeated with a force and sharpness not to be recalled without pain; and what made it more horrible, was the distant echo to each cry from the lonely rocks around.'⁵

The cries were those of a woman who had just been told of her husband's death in a local feud. She had also been presented with his head, which dogs had found lying near the river. The screaming, Lear learnt, usually continued for nine days, 'commonly in the house of mourning, or when the performers are engaged in domestic affairs'. In this instance, however, 'the distressed woman, unable to control her feelings to the regular routine of grief, is walking all over the town, tearing her hair, and abandoning herself to the most frantic wretchedness'. For Lear, since it also

appeared that the weather would delay his departure, this was 'no cheerful beginning for the morning'.⁶

Byron, whose own travels there had helped inspire Lear's, may well have been among the first of his countrymen to see other parts of Albania, and tales of his adventures were to prove especially resonant. In 1809, aged twenty-two, he had sailed to Greece and, riding north, in thunderous rain, past a severed human arm hanging from a tree, ventured as far as the fortress at Tepelena, seat of Ali Pasha, a notorious despot. In letters home Byron wrote excitedly of 'a country of the most picturesque beauty', of 'the savage character of the natives' and of 'the wildest province of Europe, where very few Englishmen have ever been'. Ali, with whom he stayed, he described to his mother as 'a remorseless tyrant, guilty of the most horrible cruelties ... He has been a mighty warrior, but is as barbarous as he is successful, roasting rebels &c &c.'⁷

In his notes to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, his epic poem of a young man looking for distraction in foreign lands, Byron wrote later that he believed he had been further into Albania than any other Englishman 'with the exception of Major Leake'.⁸ This was William Leake, a lone British officer resident at Ali Pasha's court during Britain's wars with Napoleon. Albania was then a province of the Ottoman Empire, as it had been for four hundred years and would remain for another hundred, and Leake, sent to make military surveys, would be tasked with assessing and improving the potential of local pashas to resist any French incursion. Years later, Leake, too, published his journals.⁹ Topography, antiquity, customs and local character were his principal themes. Pained tales of physical hardship were not, perhaps, to be expected of a cultured man who came to Albania after fifteen years of soldiering and had survived the shipwreck of the Parthenon marbles. Nor did Leake write much about his dealings with Ali, although his despatches, found in Foreign Office files, reveal how

dramatic some of that work had been. Once, Leake made a hazardous landing on a storm-blown beach, sheltered with Ali in the lee of the cliffs and held secret discussions to improve relations with Constantinople. On another occasion, Ali asked Leake to poison the local French consul.¹⁰

The extent to which Leake engaged with the Albanians and travelled about was exceptional. Most Britons who set foot there in the nineteenth century were seafaring passers-by or, more commonly, soldiers of the Corfu garrison who crossed the channel with packs of spaniels to hunt on the plains round the ruined ancient city of Butrint. Few stayed very long or wandered very far. 'English officers,' wrote Captain J. J. Best, in *Excursions in Albania: Comprising a Description of the Wild Boar, Deer and Woodcock Shooting in that Country*, 'always contrived to keep clear of hostile collisions with the half-savage people that are found near the coast.'¹¹

Best did describe how, in 1838, he and three other officers, more adventurous than most but all well armed in case of attack, had ridden a few miles inland. The locals, he recorded, were 'little better than semi-barbarians', capable of the 'most outrageous acts of murder and piracy'. Every man, 'even from five years old, is obliged to be armed up to the teeth'. Women were spotted bearing 'tremendous' loads 'which I should have scarcely expected a strong man to lift'. Local dogs were fierce and feared but it was 'unwise' to shoot one 'because an Albanian's dog is his companion and friend, and a sly shot at the offending person from behind a rock would inevitably follow'. And there was a sudden moment of alarm when, shouting and shooting, a couple of dozen Albanians appeared, heading in their direction. The four Britons 'waited patiently for the bullets, which we expected any minute to whiz past our ears', and prepared to shoot back. 'The numbers were on the side of the Albanians but our guns were double-barrelled and not