



Prospero's Cell

Lawrence Durrell

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A guide to the landscape and manners of the island of Corfu.

'One of Lawrence Durrell's best books - indeed, in its gem-like miniature quality, among the best books ever written.' Freya Stark

'This charming idyll depicts the country life and cosmopolitan society of Corfu in the years immediately before the war . . . The matter of it is as sound as the story is delightful.' *Sunday Times*

'Corfu, that Ionian island whose idyllic yet blood-stained history goes back the best part of a thousand years, could not have found a fitter chronicler than Mr Durrell. For he is a poet, with all a poet's sensibility, and a humanist to boot, with a keen eye for character and a scholar's reverence for antiquity.' *Daily Telegraph*

Prospero's Cell Details

Date : Published July 3rd 2000 by Faber Faber (first published 1945)

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Author : Lawrence Durrell

Format : Paperback 176 pages

Genre : Travel, Nonfiction, Cultural, Greece, Autobiography, Memoir, History

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From Reader Review Prospero's Cell for online ebook

Udeni says

Read for Book Riots's 2017 "Read Harder" challenge: read a travel book.

"Prospero's Cell" was the first of Lawrence Durrell's hugely successful Mediterranean islands books, and it launched a rush of sun-starved Brits to the Greek Islands. His flowery prose caught the imagination of a post-war generation, who relished his descriptions of "gigantic plane trees, the bluff ilex-grown fortresses...a conspiracy of light, air blue sea and cypresses."

He conjures up a world where he and his beautiful wife move to Coreyra (Corfu), buy a boat and lead a magical life. They dive off the harbour to catch fish, they have moonlight picnics with friends, they eat breakfast in their little house: "grapes, Hymettos honey, black coffee, eggs, and the light, clear-tasting Papasrratis cigarette."

Of course, this was a fictional existence. Lawrence Durrell had moved to the island much earlier with his mother and siblings. His brother, the animal-lover Gerald Durrell, eventually became much more famous and published his own memoirs of Corfu. In Gerald's version of events, Lawrence lived with his mother. Gerald doesn't mention a beautiful wife at all. Finally, Sappho Durrell, Lawrence's daughter with his second wife (he had 4 wives in all) accused her father of sexual abuse. The abuse happened on the island, when Sappho was a teenager, living with her father after her mother had left him. This could partly explain why Lawrence Durrell is very rarely read now. I certainly found it to read his sensuous descriptions of landscapes without being a little creeped out:

"We came upon a promontory with its beautiful clean surface of metamorphic stone covered in olive and ilex in the shape of the mons pubis. This is become our unregretted home. A world. Corcyra."

Would love to hear comments from readers who enjoyed the book. I think I may have been a little harsh here.

J. says

Written in journal format this is part history part travelogue of Corfu. Lawrence Durrell lived on Corfu for little over five years with his first wife Nancy Myers. Nancy has been airbrushed out of Gerald's account "My family and other animals" and doesn't feature much in Lawrence's account. When she does feature she is dubbed "N". He moved to the island when he was twenty six years old.

"It is April and we have taken an old fisherman's house in the extreme north of the island Kalamai. Ten sea-miles from the town, and some thirty kilometres by road, it offers all the charms of seclusion. A white house set like a dice on a rock already venerable with the scars of wind and water. The hill runs clear up into the sky behind it, so that the cypresses and olives overhang this room in which I sit and write".

Lawrence wanted to live the bohemian life and indeed it did sound like a salubrious existence spending time engaging in 'pirofani' (night fishing), swimming naked in the bathing pool near the shrine of St. Arsenius, writing, drinking good wine and spending time with other intellectuals such as Theodore a doctor and erudite

naturalist who features largely in Gerald's book "My family and other Animals". The wonderful Spiro is also mentioned. He is a taxi driver, procurer of goods, tour guide and friend to the Durrell family. There is Zarian an Armenian poet, artist, polyglot and arts journalist.

There is a section on the island Saint, St. Spiridion who is interred in a sarcophagus in a chapel that pilgrims can visit. Spiridion was not a local but a Cypriot shepherd originally. Many saints seem to have started their careers as shepherds. There are some great descriptions of traditional finery and dance.

He captures the Greek people perfectly when he draws a comparison between the citizens on Corfu and the characters in Homer's 'Odyssey', "it is a portrait of a nation which rings clear to day as when it was written. The loquacity, the shy cunning, the mendacity, the generosity, the cowardice and bravery, the almost comical inability of self analysis. The unloving humour and the scolding. Nowhere is it possible to find a flaw".

Another little observation was the peasant measurement of time and distance which is done by cigarettes. "Ask a peasant how far a village is and he will reply, nine times out of ten, that it is a matter of so many cigarettes".

Lawrence's Corfu is a waking dream of languid detachment from English concerns and a salubrious existence.

This book didn't always engage me. I found it to be too fragmented and unedited and as a result sometimes not self explanatory. Having visited the island I recognised one of the locations he described but if I was recommending a book to take to Corfu it would be Gerald's "My family and other animals".

Lynne King says

Reading this book the second time around just confirms what a brilliant writer Durrell is. My love affair with his works began in my twenties with the four novels comprising what would later become The Alexandria Quartet, and his subsequent novels mainly written in France including the magnificent book The Avignon Quintet: Monsieur, Livia, Constance, Sebastian and Quinx. I cannot fault anything about him. His travel books, humour, poetry and letters especially those written to and received from Henry Miller, who would indirectly be responsible for ensuring that Lawrence Durrell would enter the literary arena.

Exquisite literature - my!

Ryan Murdock says

Born in colonial India in the foothills of the Himalayas but sent to boarding school in England, Lawrence Durrell hated the buttoned-up lifestyle of the north. When his father died he saw an opportunity to escape. Somehow, by some incredible art of persuasion, he convinced his mother to pack up their entire family—four children, of whom he was the eldest—and move them all to the Greek island of Corfu.

They lived a crazy island life with eccentric locals and writers dropping by—people like Freya Stark and Patrick Leigh Fermor—and during all those years Durrell plugged away in a little stone house on the side of a mountain and taught himself to write. Prospero's Cell is the story of those years.

When you've finished this, read *Reflections on a Marine Venus* and *Bitter Lemons*, Durrell's other island books. And then read everything else he's written. Everything.

David says

Typically Durrell, lush to the point of over-ripeness, but very interesting.

Sarah says

Durrell's prose is pure magic. Vivid yet subtle, it flirts with the Baroque without ever breaking the spell it casts on the reader.

This is seductive travel writing at its finest.

Particularly well done is the balance between descriptive prose and historical detail in order to bring the island to life out of a colourful past and into an uncertain present. The final note is a bitter sweet one, layered with nostalgia...

Robert Zoltan says

An other great book on the Greek Islands by Durrell. The ending moved me to tears.

Metodi Markov says

Not my cup of tea unfortunately...

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Jim says

Years ago when I was young, Lawrence Durrell was a god to me; and his **Alexandria Quartet** was like sacred scripture. Now that I have aged and learned a thing or two, I see that Durrell is something of a phony. His book on Corfu -- **Prospero's Cell** -- has many of the same characteristics that I loved in the **Quartet**: the significant encounters with a group of eccentric characters, leading to significant discussions and multiple epiphanies based on their knowledge of the local area.

Now that I am better read, I am astonished by things that Durrell failed to discuss, such as the role of the island in the Peloponnesian War as described by Thucydides, when different parties supporting Athens or Corinth led to ugly scenes of violence and destruction. It's not even mentioned in the chronology which appears as an appendix.

At one point, one of Durrell's characters, the sage Count D., makes fun of the British author to his face. When asked what kind of picture his book will present of Corfu, the Count answers:

“It is difficult to say.... A portrait inexact of detail, containing bright splinters of landscape, written out roughly, as if to get rid of something which was troubling the optic nerves. You are the kind of person who would go away and be frightened to return in case you were disappointed; but you would send others and question them eagerly about it.”

Soon, most of them would in fact leave the island, because it is that twilight period in which all of Europe saw the advancing shadow of World War II, as if it were a dark cloud from Mordor.

Yet, withal, I do not regret giving the book five stars. So Durrell is a bit of a fake: He seems to not have an interior life of his own. Everything is externalized through a dozen characters who surround him and serve to bring out the details about which he wants to write. I am not even sure that many of the characters are real: They are just too neat, too pat. I am particularly surprised at Durrell's female companion, whom he calls simply N., and with whom he may or may not have had a relationship.

But it doesn't really matter. The inexact details, the "bright splinters of landscape," are really good in and of themselves. So Durrell isn't a god any more: He's still an interesting writer, and **Prospero's Cell** is a legitimate travel classic.

Josh says

This is probably my favorite book to read and read again when the weather gets cold. Inspires travel lust and urges to quit one's job. A collection of Durrell's memories, journal entries and highly romanticized impressions from his travels in Corfu, Greece, before WWII.

Shovelmonkey1 says

Fate can be a cruel mistress. And sometimes she can be wonderfully kind and place all the ingredients in the right place at the right time thereby creating something almost on the other side of wonderful. Lawrence

Durrell could have been born in a time and place when he chose or was forced to have a static existence. He might have lived without the funds to furnish his travels and his exploration of all sides of the Mediterranean. Or he might have been born with funds and an unquenchable wanderlust but without the talent to commit any of his observations to paper.

Thankfully he wasn't.

Instead he lived during a time of political and social upheaval - the dark days between World War I and World War II which made him leave England in search of landscape less bleak and later forced him to retreat from the onslaught of Nazi occupied France and return to Corfu. However far from being some sort of impoverished self-imposed exile, he was able to make these moves in comfort and with funds at his disposal which provided adequate leisure time to read, think, research and observe his new surroundings.

Durrell's time on the Isle of Corfu (Corcyra) is documented in this short and bitter sweet travelogue. Sparse and sparing like the landscape but also naked, mellowed and smooth like the waves which roll around his island home, this book made it possible for me to fall in love with a place which I have never visited. Durrell's charm is that you don't resent his peripatetic writers lifestyle or the seeming ease with which he blends into communities, not only on Corfu but in Cairo, Alexandria, Paris, Languedo, Cordoba, Rhodes and all the other places he had the good fortune to call his home. He writes with an easy style and gentle manner which is a blend of diary, poetry, history, philosophy and fiction and yet it comes out wrapped up as a travelogue and I probably couldn't dispute that it serves variously as all of these things.

If you are looking for a book with the ability to lift you out of your armchair and the winter doldrums and transport you to rugged white cliffs, sparkling azure seas and the tug of the sea breeze in your hair then this is what you've been waiting for.

Sandy says

I enjoyed this book as a poetic and adult complement to Gerald Durrell's childhood memories of Corfu. Many of the same characters reappear and are seen thru Lawrence's adult eyes. The epilogue is sad; the island seems to have been a bombing range during WWII.

Ariel Evans says

Somewhere between Calabria and Corfu the blue really begins. All the way across Italy you find yourself in a landscape severely domesticated--each valley laid out after the architect's pattern, brilliantly lighted, human. But once you strike out from the flat and desolate Calabrian mainland toward the sea, you aware of a change in the heart of things: aware of the horizon beginning to stain at the rim of the world, aware of *islands coming out of the darkness to meet you.*

In the morning you wake to the taste of snow on the air, and climbing the companion ladder, suddenly enter the penumbra of shadow cast by the Albanian mountains--each wearing its cracked crown of snow--desolate and repudiating stone.

A peninsula nipped off while red hot and allowed to cool into an antarctica of lava. You are aware not

so much of a landscape coming to meet you invisibly over those blue miles of water as of a climate. You enter Greece as one might enter a dark crystal; the form of things becomes irregular, refracted. Mirages suddenly swallow islands, and wherever you look the trembling curtain of the atmosphere deceives.

--the first paragraph of Prospero's Cell

"No tongue: all eyes: be silent" -- *The Tempest*

Alex.Rosetti says

"What more does a man want than an olive tree, a native island and a woman from his own place?"

Desislava Mihaylova says

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