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Durrells and donkeys: the representation of animals, Greeks, and Corfu in Gerald Durrell's *The Donkey Rustlers*[1]

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The celebrated conservationist, and serial memoirist, Gerald Durrell often imaginatively revisited the Corfu of his childhood. Donkeys were integral to his vision of Greek rural life. Both the setting and the style of his literary output resisted what he regarded as unwelcome modernization. His 1968 publication The Donkey Rustlers, *one of his few novels, shows how Durrell attempted to perpetuate an outdated view of both Greece and children's literature. It is argued that Durrell's well-attested affection for the Greek people was not well reflected by a narrative in which both foreign children and donkeys seem to come out on top.*

Keywords: donkeys; Corfu; Durrells; children's literature; human-animal studies

During the last decade, two craft beer companies have been set up in Santorini to take advantage of the market for something more distinctive than mass-produced lagers. These brands chose for their identities features of the island which were thought to be internationally recognizable. *Volkan* depicted the erupting volcano which carved Santorini into the distinctive shape it is today, and *Donkey* foregrounded the beast which traditionally bore people up the steep and winding steps from sea level to the main town. For the latter, the tag-line 'Hip-Hoppy, Kick-Ass Beer' was presumably meant to imply that this Greek product was, like the animal it referenced, individualistic, uncompromising, and pungent.

Donkeys are ever-present in outsiders' visions of an enduring rural Greece, appearing as local colour in everything from travel writing to Hollywood movies. In 1968, Gerald ('Gerry') Durrell, the prolific tale-teller of animals and Corfu, moved Greek donkeys from bit-part characters to titular agents of change for one of his only two extant novels, and the only one explicitly written with children in mind, *The Donkey Rustlers*. At the present

1 My thanks to Janne White, Toni Wolstenholme and their colleagues at the Jersey Archive for facilitating access to Gerald Durrell's papers. Professor Garry Marvin first made me aware of the existence of the academic field of human-animal studies.

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time, interest in the Durrell family remains strong, with a British-made television series, *The Durrells*, somewhat tenuously based on Gerald's memoirs, reaching its fourth and final series in 2019, and even the recipe book of the matriarch, Mrs Louisa Durrell, seeing publication.[2] Fifty years on from *The Donkey Rustlers*, and in the light of the viewpoint that 'Children's literature now receives considerable critical attention from scholars and students',[3] the time seems right to re-examine this hitherto overlooked publication. The pioneer of 'human-animal studies' Garry Marvin has noted that 'Academic journals in nearly all fields now regularly include articles about animals'.[4] This article is an attempt, perhaps for the first time in depth, to introduce this area of interest into Modern Greek Studies. In the first section, I outline the role of donkeys in Greece, drawing out the characteristics and stereotypes found in popular culture and British travellers' representations. Following this, I consider Gerald Durrell's responses to animals, to the evolution of children's literature, and to the impact of tourism on his beloved Corfu. I will go on to argue that the donkey is used by him as an obvious emblem of the alleged traditional and backward nature of the country. But this animal has often been represented in literature and elsewhere as not merely useful but also as proverbially stubborn. When, in *The Donkey Rustlers*, even the donkeys are willing to move forward and it is the locals who are ridiculed for their eccentricity, credulity and stupidity, I will suggest that Durrell, for all his vaunted love of the Corfiots who had welcomed his family to live amongst them in the 1930s, is using the animals to turn the Greek people into the butt of his story's jokes.

Donkeys in Greece: reality and perception

Traditionally, donkeys were an integral feature of Greek rural life. A recent study has, however, revealed a dramatic decline: 'From 508,000 animals in 1955, there were only 14,570 animals in 2008; a decrease of about 97%'. Specifically in the Ionian Islands, the region in which Durrell's books are set, the 2008 census was 286 animals. The remaining population is now a luxury, rather than the basis of the rural economy, used largely for recreation and tourism.[5] Viewed by the British with sentimentality, according to a recent monograph by Jill Bough 'donkeys receive a disproportionately high percentage of charitable support from the population of the UK – and raise funds with ease.'[6] Originating both in Greece and in outreach projects from countries such

2 D. Shimwell, *Dining with the Durrells: Stories and Recipes from the Cookery Archive of Mrs Louisa Durrell* (London 2019).

3 M. O. Grenby and A. Immel (eds), 'Preface', in *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* (Cambridge 2009) xiii.

4 G. Marvin and S. McHugh, 'In it together: an introduction to human-animal studies', in G. Marvin and S. McHugh (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies* (Abingdon and New York 2014) 4.

5 G. Arsenos, A. I. Gelasakis, and El. Papadopoulos, 'The status of donkeys (*Equus asinus*) in Greece', *Journal of the Hellenic Veterinary Medical Society* 61.3 (2010) 214, 217.

6 J. Bough, *Donkey* (London 2011, e-book) 57.

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as Britain, these charities 'improve the health and welfare of working donkeys by educating owners and providing healthcare'.[7] In her pioneering work of the 1970s, British-based specialist Elisabeth Svendsen was extremely distressed by some of her findings in Greece: 'We saw the most terrible sights including donkeys with their eyes poked out by sticks and the most savage beating which even my medications could not ease.' As a result, the animals had 'half the life span of donkeys in England'.[8] A 2019 campaign targeting the increased weight of passengers who are borne by donkeys making the steep journey from port to town in Santorini has urged tourists to put themselves 'In their hooves'.[9]

It is no accident that, for many generations, rural communities in Greece had relied on donkeys. As Jill Bough has explained, 'Donkeys are hardy and resilient animals that can work tirelessly with little maintenance. Although usually slow paced, they are steady and sure-footed. They are also strong and sturdy and can carry heavy burdens relative to their size.'[10] In a manual for animal husbandry published at the time of Gerald Durrell's literary heyday, M. R. de Wesselow argued that, despite the negative connotations sometimes attached to them, 'They are the most patient beasts and immensely willing', and 'you are unlucky if you get a really obstinate donkey'.[11] Elisabeth Svendsen, who founded her own donkey sanctuary, naturally regarded them as 'the most beautiful, the most underrated, animals in the world'.[12]

However, most mid-century Anglophone readers of Gerald Durrell's books were, as city-dwellers, inevitably more familiar with the *idea* of a donkey than the reality. The social anthropologist Garry Marvin argues that 'animals are more likely to appear as representations in various media than they are as embodied creatures in the habitats of humans'. Whilst there is of course such a thing as a 'real' donkey, Marvin points out that:

> the animal is, in the moment of our encounter, always a social and cultural animal. There is no social or acultural platform on which we can stand to see an animal as that animal really is. It is important to attend to these social and cultural perspectives if we are to understand how and why people look at animals and the practices that result from such viewing.[13]

In short, 'the creatures we are concerned with are always socially and culturally constructed'.[14] In popular imagination and in language use, the donkey has been

7 Arsenos et al., 'The status of donkeys (*Equus asinus*) in Greece', 219.

8 E. Svendsen, *Down Among the Donkeys* (London 1981) 31, 166.

9 H. Smith, 'Tourists urged to avoid riding donkeys up Santorini's steep steps', *The Guardian*, 2 April 2019: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/02/tourists-avoid-riding-donkeys-santorini-steps.

10 Bough, *Donkey*, 10.

11 M. R. de Wesselow, *Donkeys: Their Care and Management* (London 1967) 106.

12 Svendsen, *Down Among the Donkeys*, 190.

13 G. Marvin, 'Guest editor's introduction: seeing, looking, watching, observing nonhuman animals', *Society and Animals* 13. 1 (2005) 3, 6–7.

14 G. Marvin, 'Wolves in sheep's and other clothing', in D. Brantz (ed.), *Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans and the Study of History* (Charlottesville and London 2010) 62.

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stereotypically stubborn and stupid, but also, as Jill Bough has shown, with more positive connotations such as patience and dependability.[15]

In British literature recording foreign journeys, donkeys have likewise been represented as possessing both positive and negative characteristics. In the 1970s, for example, Robert Crisp decided to walk around the perimeter of Crete with a beast of burden who lacked a name at first, having been known merely as 'donkey' by its previous, local, owner. At her best, he found that 'my donkey had many of the qualities I had been seeking in my walking companion – sedateness, intimations of character and feminine unpredictability, an unhurried gait and the gift of silence.' But at other times he discovered her stubborn and uncooperative side: 'Her favourite form of deceit was to kid you that she was exhausted and couldn't go any further.' In an echo of a scene I shall discuss from Durrell's *The Donkey Rustlers*, a sudden rainstorm causes man and donkey to be stuck on opposite sides of a river, with one of the pair far from unhappy at the separation: 'I could see the donkey grazing unperturbed in the downpour.'[16]

Crisp's practical and literary model was undoubtedly Robert Louis Stevenson, who acquired a donkey, Modestine, to aid him in his travels across France. Stevenson's subsequent account brims with criticism for the behaviour of the animal, particularly its pace, and is disturbing for his descriptions of the beatings he administered. He discovers the goad as the perfect instrument to keep her moving, with any imagined criticisms dismissed: 'And what although now and then a drop of blood should appear on Modestine's mouse-coloured wedge-like rump?'[17] Morgan Holmes has recently discussed why, in *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*, the writer represents his empathy towards the donkey as eroding, increasingly treating her as a lesser beast than himself: 'Stevenson appears to have wanted his readers to view his treatment of Modestine – his erasure of animal affinity – as a matter of a stranger conforming to the customs of the foreign land through which he travelled.'[18] British values towards animals were not to be encountered, expected, or conformed to, when abroad. I shall be showing how in Durrell's novel, as also with recent donkey charities who export their values to less 'enlightened' parts of Europe, kindness to animals is similarly shown as a superior trait possessed by the British and lacked by island locals. The foolish Greeks are represented as unable to care for or handle their beasts, and it is the initiative of the visiting British children which enables the donkeys to be released and taste freedom.

15 Bough, *Donkey*, 15.

16 R. Crisp, *Zen and the Art of Donkey Maintenance* (London 2015) 108, 109, 121, 115.

17 R. L. Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (Project Gutenberg ebook 2004) loc 257.

18 M. Holmes, 'Donkeys, Englishmen, and other animals: the precarious distinctions of Victorian interspecies morality', in R. Ambrosini and R. Dury (eds.), *European Stevenson* (Newcastle upon Tyne 2009) 116.

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In a traveller's account of a much more recent vintage than that of Stevenson or Crisp, it is the pace of the animal that is explicitly the point of the journey. Andy Merrifield values the fact that 'Time slows down amid donkeys. In their company things happen quietly and methodically.' His journey around the French countryside with a borrowed donkey is therefore a bid to escape the modern world: 'I felt long ago that the grown-up world isn't all it's cracked up to be'.[19] Alongside their many other proverbial characteristics, donkeys have become for Merrifield emblematic of slowness, the past, an escape to childhood. For Gerald Durrell, as I shall show, writing about donkeys, and indeed the whole industry he built up around his representation of Corfu, was likewise about a return to youth.

Durrell's Corfu and its Donkeys

Gerald Durrell's official biographer can hardly be said to have undersold his subject:

> naturalist, traveller, raconteur, humourist, visionary, broadcaster, best-selling author, one of the great nature writers of the twentieth century, one of the great conservation leaders of the modern world, champion of the animal kingdom, founder and Honorary Director of Jersey Zoo and the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, saviour of endangered species, champion of the lowly, the defenceless and the doomed.[20]

Zoological assistant Jeremy Mallinson discovered during his own animal collecting expedition that name-dropping his mentor opened doors even in the remotest parts of Africa, receiving a royal welcome from the Queen Regent of the Batawana tribe.[21]

The career-defining memoir *My Family and Other Animals* (1956) has been characterized as 'a wonderful Utopian tale of an island idyll, a classic of childhood seen through the eyes of a grown man who was still that same child at heart'.[22] The enduring popularity of this work led to several sequels, which continued the winning formula by combining stories of his eccentric British relatives and the Greek locals with his boyish excitement about the prolific nature he found all around him in Corfu. Gerald himself, however, always inserted into his tales a word of caution about their veracity: 'some are true, some have a kernel of truth and a shell of embroidery'.[23] His friend Peter Bull, who became a resident of a nearby Greek island towards the end of a successful career as a screen actor, found Durrell myths also circulating orally around Corfu. Visiting the current owner of an ex-Durrell house, Bull was shown 'Margaret Durrell's painting box'; the next day, however, he was categorically told by Gerald's

19 A. Merrifield, *The Wisdom of Donkeys – Finding Tranquillity in a Chaotic World* (London 2008) 3, 25.
20 D. Botting, *Gerald Durrell: The Authorised Biography* (London 1999 [2017 ebook]) loc 184.
21 J. Mallinson, *The Touch of Durrell: A Passion for Animals* (Kibworth, Leicestershire 2018) 88.
22 Botting, *Gerald Durrell*, loc 4965.
23 G. Durrell, *Marrying off Mother and Other Stories* (London 1991 [2016 ebook) loc 25.

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eldest brother Lawrence that 'his sister, to his fairly certain knowledge, at that time never put a paintbrush into her mitt'.[24] This tradition of myth-making has continued through to the recent British-made television adaptation *The Durrells* whose producers chose to make some significant departures not merely from reality but even from Gerald's own representation of it. This screen version is told from the point of view of Mrs Louisa Durrell, played by Keeley Hawes, rather than of the boy Gerry, as a popular British television listings magazine reported: 'In the book, Mother is a comfortable figure, a sketchily drawn dispenser of tea and good sense. Hawes's Louisa is altogether more entertaining. Funny, courageous and – when she gets the chance – sexy, she's the emotional lodestone of the drama.'[25] Towards the end of his life, Gerald came to fully fictionalize his family, dog and house in Corfu, when his youthful self is made to rescue a talking animal from the sea for the children's picture book *Toby the Tortoise*.[26] As a child, another of his friends recalled, Durrell had devoured classic books: 'Kenneth Grahame, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, all making animals human'. As an adult, Durrell claimed that he continued to identify with children in the same way that he could understand animals: 'I always seem to survive with kids because we're on the same mental level'.[27]

Among twentieth-century British travellers and writers such as Durrell, Corfu has usually been recorded and recalled as a place of positive experiences. Having been part of a British protectorate from 1815–64, this was the exotic Mediterranean laced with the familiar – Greece with the added attractions of cricket and ginger beer.[28] The main port, so familiar to Durrell three decades before, received praise in a 1971 guidebook: 'It combines the picturesqueness of a medieval town and the nostalgic appearance of a Regency spa with many of the comforts of a modern resort – and all this in an incomparable setting of distant mountains and blue sea.'[29] A recent anthropological study has noted the reasons given by northern European visitors for the lure of Corfu as 'the warmer climate, picturesque landscape and slower pace of life'.[30]

Jim Potts, whose association with Corfu as visitor and resident stretches back to the 1960s, asserts that 'Corfu was once an earthly paradise' and that 'parts of the island are still relatively unspoiled and unscathed'.[31] Writing in 1966, Lawrence Durrell was delighted to report, for example, that 'The sheep bells still tonked among the glassy

24 P. Bull, *It Isn't All Greek to Me* (London 1967) 131.

25 E.J. Dickson, 'It's hard to be a mum', *Radio Times* (22–8 April 2017) 14.

26 G. Durrell, *Toby the Tortoise* (London 1991).

27 D. Hughes, *Himself and Other Animals* (London 1997) 44, 97.

28 P. Mackridge, 'Introduction', in A. Hirst and P. Sammon (eds), *The Ionian Islands: Aspects of their History and Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne 2014) 11.

29 M. Young, *The Travellers' Guide to Corfu and the other Ionian Islands* (London 1971) 136.

30 G. Lazaridis, J. Poyago-Theotoky, and R. King, 'Islands as havens for retirement migration: finding a place in sunny Corfu', in R. King and J. Connell (eds.), *Small Worlds, Global Lives: Islands and Migration* (London and New York 1999) 303.

31 J. Potts, *The Ionian Islands and Epirus: A Cultural History* (Oxford 2010) 58.

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glades'.[32] The anthropologist Roger Just retreated to a nearby Ionian island, Meganisi, to conduct his fieldwork in 1977–80, in search of what was then a pattern in his discipline: it was remote, and the community small and well defined. At first, it seemed to him to epitomize traditional Greece: 'its whitewashed houses, its gnarled fishermen, its grizzled elders, its quaintly attired women, its donkeys and chickens and sheep and goats and all the sights and sounds that prompt the sense of having discovered a different, unchanging and forgotten world'. Certainly, there was no electricity until 1973 and just a single telephone as late as 1977.[33] As I shall discuss shortly, Gerald Durrell chose to reproduce this insularity in his 1930s-set memoirs and his 1960s novel. But Roger Just found that, far from being remote, 'his' Ionian island was very well connected with the outside world and with modernity. At a baptism, for example, he encountered the expected shepherds, olive-growers and ship-owners, but also a surgeon trained in the US, a paediatrician from Athens, the holder of a degree in theology, and another with a doctorate in philosophy from Heidelberg. In contrast to the first impressions of outsiders, Just concluded, 'things there were always changing'.[34] This is, I will argue, very different from Durrell's static representation, a world from the 1930s which he was as loath to leave behind as he was his own childhood.

There have been a few literary exceptions to the representation of the Ionian Islands as idyllic. An example of the characteristically dark output of British writer Robert Aickman, *The Wine-Dark Sea* has as its protagonist a single male traveller who found the Corfiot 'food monotonous, the noise incredible, and the women disappointing'.[35] In Durrell's world, the exaggerated simplicity of the Corfiot lifestyle similarly had negative elements which could become the subject of ridicule. The locals' gullibility, which is such a prominent characteristic of *The Donkey Rustlers*, is echoed in his short story 'The birthday party'. In this, the Durrell party stops at an isolated village on the mainland, where the locals are initially unwelcoming until attracted by magic tricks. The naïve villagers vociferously insist that the large-denomination drachma banknotes, sprouting miraculously from the mayor's beard, belong to them, to the extent that a brawl threatens.[36] Even for the Durrell family when in residence, then, life in Corfu was apparently not perfect. Gerry constantly wound up his eldest brother, then still merely an aspiring writer, although Lawrence did comment to their great friend Theodore Stephanides that 'You can have a little too much even of Paradise and a little taste of Hell every now and then is good for my work – keeps my brain from stagnating. You can trust Gerry to provide the Hell.'[37]

32 L. Durrell, *Spirit of Place* (London 1969) 300.

33 R. Just, *A Greek Island Cosmos* (Oxford and Santa Fe 2000) 93, 14–15.

34 *Op. cit.*, 29–31, 259.

35 R. Aickman, *The Wine-Dark Sea: A Collection* (New York 1988) 13.

36 G. Durrell, *Fillets of Plaice* (London 1971 [2016 e-book]) 27.

37 T. Stephanides, *Autumn Gleanings: Corfu Memoirs and Poems* (Corfu 2011) 65. Theo continued to help Gerry throughout the rest of his life. Writing on 10 June 1958, Theo gave Durrell an account of Corfiot wine and olive production for use in the 'sequel' to *My Family and Other Animals* (i.e. *Birds, Beasts and Relatives*).

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However, for a budding young British naturalist, Corfu was pleasingly exotic. In a note on the reverse of a scrap of paper listing ideas for what became *Birds, Beasts and Relatives*, the second of his series of youthful memoirs, Gerald Durrell explained his excitement: 'To me this was a jungle teeming with life – a jungle just as thrilling, just as full of new forms of life as any tropical forest explored by some Victorian hunter. It did not matter to me that my big game was, in reality very small – it was just as thrilling hunting it as searching for a Bengal tiger.'[38] In contrast to Greece, Durrell complained, Britain felt like 'the old grey island on the far edge of everything nice'.[39] Once he began his career capturing animals for zoos from locations across the world, the writing-up of his adventures became a source of profit which proved vital in keeping his wildlife conservation work afloat. Durrell's official biographer has argued that his subject's attitude towards far-flung people and places developed positively. At first, Durrell appeared to be recalling 'essentially a colonial experience, and an old-fashioned one at that'; but, later, his literary treatment of his travels sheds 'all the imperial pretensions and colonial posturings.'[40] In contrast, I will argue that Durrell's somewhat condescending tone towards his human subjects in the Ionian Islands continued well into the 1960s with the writing of *The Donkey Rustlers*, and indeed beyond. For example, in one of his latest chapters of memoir, he chose to profess that as a boy he worried that his donkey, Sally, his most treasured possession, would be stolen at night by some 'dastardly member of the peasantry'.[41]

Donkeys are a ubiquitous element of the rural landscape in all of Durrell's Corfu tales. They were essential for pleasure as well as for agriculture, for example when travelling to a village festival: 'Fleets of donkeys were tethered to trees (for the relatives of the villagers had come from far away, some as far as six miles).'[42] In his 1967 documentary *The Garden of the Gods*, Durrell is shown demonstrating his affinity with his fellow creatures by making an impression of a donkey bray, which, as it echoes across an olive grove, is apparently sufficiently convincing to be answered by the real thing. Yet even his beloved Sally, the donkey he received on a youthful birthday, possessed some drawbacks along with her many advantages: finding her 'an invaluable, if stubborn, companion', she would 'become impervious to shouts, threats, or even whacks with sticks'.[43] In the same chapter, *Dogs, Dormice and Disorder*,

Further notes by Theo, contained in an envelope postmarked 5 December 1967, included some information which was read verbatim in his voiceover for the film of the same year, *The Garden of the Gods*, for example on the Chaste Tree. Both are now in Jersey Archive, L/C/317/A1/13.

38 Jersey Archive L/C/317/A1/13

39 Hughes, *Himself and Other Animals*, 84.

40 Botting, *Gerald Durrell*, loc 2779, 3267.

41 Durrell, *Marrying off Mother and Other Stories*, loc 833.

42 *Op. cit.*, loc 988.

43 Durrell, *The Corfu Trilogy*, 564.

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Gerry described loading up Sally ready for a day trip when she nipped him on the behind. He found himself angrily giving her a 'clout'.[44]

The beating of his own donkey is just one indication that Durrell's literary treatment of animals was not straightforward. A recent critic, in seeking to discover amongst the voluminous exaggerated stories what 'really' happened in Gerry's childhood, has offered the view that 'Personally I am not satisfied with the explanation that Gerry "sympathised" or "empathised" with the plight of homeless animals. If anything, Gerry made a life's work out of uprooting and incarcerating animals.'[45] Durrell himself denied to his biographer that his attitude was anthropomorphic: 'He didn't look on animals as little furry humans, and he would have no compunction in shooting one and eating it, if need be.'[46] Yet, in his writings, Durrell did habitually endow creatures with human qualities: a scorpion was said to be 'apologetic' in raising its tail; his pet owl watched him swimming with 'faintly disapproving eyes'; and his magpies chuckled 'like a pair of city slickers that have successfully duped a crowd of bumbling and earnest villagers'.[47]

Theo Stephanides maintained that in Corfu '*anything* can happen'.[48] This supposedly eccentric local colour and atmosphere was essential to Durrell's writing. His story about the new fire station, for example, includes forgetting to install a pole and a missing key which meant that the hose cannot be fitted. It was, he claimed, like living in 'one of the more flamboyant and slapstick comic operas'.[49] In both his memoirs and his novel, he therefore often portrayed the locals not merely as rural and isolated, but also, for comic effect, as bumpkins unable to cope with modernization. The policeman of thirty years standing who 'owed his lack of promotion to the fact that he had never made an arrest', reappeared as a fully fictionalized character in *The Donkey Rustlers*. The community in which Durrell lived came complete with its own 'village idiot', who, as with his counterpart in the novel, always appears dressed in a bowler hat. All villagers are superstitious, believing for example that falling asleep under a black cypress will drive a person to madness.[50] Gerald's brother Lawrence, in his earlier travel writing about Corfu published in 1945, had criticized this 'sentiment

44 *Op. cit.*, 565. In an early typescript for this chapter, the section on giving her a 'clout' is missing. Instead, there is a handwritten note 'Sally sulky', with these sentences evidently to be inserted later (Jersey Archive L/C/317/A1/39/2). The treading on the donkey's foot, resultant nipping of Gerry on the buttock, and Gerry's clouting of Sally, all first emerge in another typescript for *Dogs, Dormice and Disorder* which is demonstrably a later version because the epigraph on Turks by Carlyle is now typed after the title, whereas in the previous version it was handwritten on afterwards (Jersey Archive L/C/317/A1/40).

45 N. van der Leek, *The Other Durrells* (no publisher, 2017 e-book) loc 353.

46 Botting, *Gerald Durrell*, loc 6419.

47 Durrell, *The Corfu Trilogy*, 130, 152, 252.

48 *Op. cit.*, 27.

49 *Op. cit.*, 299, 7.

50 Durrell, *The Corfu Trilogy*, 604, 41, 43.

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which attaches to the pastoral life of these picturesque communities … [which] has been very much overdone'.[51]

Gerald's first trip to Corfu since his 1930s childhood took place in 1960. He noted the risks such a visit would entail: 'You wonder, if you return, whether the place will measure up to your memory of it, or will you find that your memory was distorted by the magic eye of childhood.' But he professed in a magazine article to have swiftly found 'that sense of timelessness that is one of the island's chief charms'. In the end, he was 'grateful that I had not been disappointed, that the essential atmosphere of the island was still the same'.[52] However, despite Durrell's wishful thinking for public consumption, the reality was that, as his friend Peter Bull could attest, 'a revolution is taking place'.[53] Durrell was to complain privately that the coastline had been transformed into 'a welter of chromium plate and glass, by enormous hotels like fifteen cement aircraft carriers joined together'.[54] He felt that his writings and films had contributed to this process by publicizing the delights of the Greek island. *Birds, Beasts and Relatives* (1969), his second volume of memoirs, was written in response to his later visit: 'as an antidote to the desecration of modern Corfu, Gerald found it therapeutic to try to recreate yet again the unspoiled wonderland of his childhood'.[55] He was evidently unable to appreciate, as Jim Potts does in a recent analysis, that tourism did 'raise many people out of poverty'.[56]

The 1968 novel *The Donkey Rustlers* was, then, yet another of Durrell's books which not merely paid the bills of his zoo, but was a means for him to escape back to his childhood. In his professional life as a conservationist, Durrell's main purpose was to stave off change, to turn the clock back so that endangered animals would survive and be reintroduced after successful captive breeding programmes to their remaining natural habitats. Potts has noted in literature about Corfu the persistence of 'the condescending "gaze" that perceives the Corfiot villager or agricultural worker, with or without traditional dress, as a peasant'.[57] Likewise, Durrell's literary view of Greece, its landscape and residents, was static, both in *The Donkey Rustlers* and in his own life stories. As one recent critic has pointed out witheringly, 'No one gets married. No one gets a job. Nothing of real consequence ever happens.'[58] Durrell's representation is very much Greece in a bubble, where nothing shows progress.

51 L. Durrell, *Prospero's Cell: A Guide to the Landscape and Manners of the Island of Corcyra* (London 1945) 36.

52 G. Durrell, 'Summer in Corfu', in J. Forte (ed.), *Corfu: Venus of the Isles* (Clacton-on-Sea 1963, 3rd edn 1968) 83, 85, 86.

53 Bull, *It Isn't All Greek to Me*, 132.

54 Hughes, *Himself and Other Animals*, 72.

55 Botting, *Gerald Durrell*, loc 7274.

56 J. Potts, 'Grockles and locals: tourists, service providers, and residents – mutual perceptions and the reciprocal gaze (a Mediterranean case study: Corfu, Greece)', in G. R. Ricci (ed.), *Travel Tourism and Identity* (New Brunswick and London 2015) 261.

57 Potts, 'Grockles and locals', 268.

58 van der Leek, *The Other Durrells*, loc 2163.

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Rustling up donkeys

Gerald Durrell wrote his novel at a time when he was concerned that his store of raw material for publications was drying up – there were no more of his expeditions in search of rare and endangered animals which he had not written up. Each day, he produced one chapter of *The Donkey Rustlers* by dictating the story to his secretary in the morning, who would then type it up in the afternoon for him to check. His biographer calls the result 'charming and ingenious', and it was successful enough for a British television version, starring David Niven and Peter Bull, which was only abandoned 'when Greek co-production funding fell apart a week before shooting was due to start on Corfu'. A novel for children set in the Ionian Islands was clearly not much of an imaginative stretch for Durrell: 'This was not too daunting a challenge. He was half-child himself, and a born raconteur, and he loved Greece.'[59]

In addition to the inspiration provided by his own experiences as a boy in Corfu, it is hardly surprising that Durrell chose a plot which combined children in affinity with animals. Children's literature specialist David Rudd has demonstrated the long history of this association: 'the persistence of the link seems to arise from the fact that those at the top of the human ladder wish to see themselves as most distant from animals, as civilized, with "lesser" beings automatically coded as closer to nature.'[60] In addition, Durrell's novel, and indeed his more celebrated volumes of memoir, can be said to fit into the genre of a 'family story' for children. These are, as defined by Brian Attebery, 'realistic works, often autobiographical, about growing up with a sizable number of siblings in reasonably happy circumstances'.[61]

Attebery also finds that the family story, which dominated children's literature in the mid-twentieth century, 'combines a fantastic structure with a realistic surface'.[62] Certainly, Durrell opens his book by trying to centre it in reality, dedicating it to an 'adopted grandson, who lives on an island where this could well have happened'. Having said this, the island in question, although situated within the Ionian Sea, the region which Durrell knew so well, is the fictional Melissa and is said to be 'tiny'. This is no mere barren rock, however, since 'water is plentiful and so the countryside is lush with olive groves and cypress trees and at certain times great areas of it are pink and white with almond blossom'.[63] This remote place is described as ripe for a narrative of the unusual, because here, similarly to Stephanides' observation about Corfu quoted in Durrell's first memoir, 'practically anything can happen, and frequently does'. As chronicled in a well-known chapter from *My Family and Other Animals*, the Durrells had joined the annual throng in Corfu town hoping for a miracle by kissing

59 Botting, *Gerald Durrell*, loc 7015, 7023, 7458, 8387.

60 D. Rudd, 'Animal and object stories', in Grenby and Immel (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, 242.

61 B. Attebery, 'Elizabeth Enright and the family story as genre', in *Children's Literature* 37 (2009) 114.

62 *Op. cit.*, 125.

63 G. Durrell, *The Donkey Rustlers* (London 1968), 9.

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the slipper-clad feet of the mummified Saint Spiridion. In *The Donkey Rustlers* there is no preserved body of a holy man, but instead in this fictional island a saint's pair of slippers alone become 'the focal point for every religious ceremony'.[64] Isolation and primitiveness are further emphasized by there being just one passenger boat which serves the island and one taxi,[65] which is reminiscent of Spiros Americanos, the driver who dominates the family's transportation requirements in Gerry's memoirs. Crucial to the plot is the existence of an even remoter island, occupied only by an abandoned church, but within a child's swimming distance, which closely resembles the Mouse Island of Durrell's childhood remembrance.[66]

As in the Durrell memoirs of *The Corfu Trilogy*, there is a 'small foreign colony', and the narrative centres around one, rather eccentric, English family. This was a scenario Durrell quite obviously knew much about and he no doubt wanted to reassure his expectant readership that this departure into novel form was merely much of the same. The mother is like Louisa Durrell in that she cannot converse with the locals yet relies on her local cook to assist her with the preparation of meals: '"Mother, you are hopeless," said Amanda impatiently. "Even if you can't learn to speak Greek, you might at least stop confusing her by asking for things she has never even *heard* of."'[67] The father is an eccentric who spends his time painting (badly) the same scene over and over, has a monocle, and an aluminium false leg on which he taps out allegedly-African drum rhythms. Kimberley Reynolds has noted that 'Arthur Ransome's Swallows and Amazons books about the Walker, Blackett and Callum children (1930–47) keep the parents very much at a distance, for the most part supplying provisions and monitoring the children's adventures from the shore.'[68] The plot of Durrell's novel is likewise very much focused on a group of children, rather than their parents, and other *Swallows and Amazons*-style elements include camping away from home and attempting to pull the wool over parents' eyes about hair-raising adventures. Brian Attebery has noted that 'In the late 1960s the older style of family story began to give way to books about social problems, including dysfunctional, broken, and abusive families'.[69] But as Douglas Botting points out, Durrell's works of fiction remained 'curiously old-fashioned'.[70] In *The Donkey Rustlers*, Durrell's English family enjoy essentially harmonious relationships with each other and a high social standing in their adopted community.

64 Durrell, *The Corfu Trilogy*, 102–4; Durrell, *The Donkey Rustlers*, 10.

65 Durrell, *The Donkey Rustlers*, 15.

66 Durrell, *The Donkey Rustlers*, 21; Durrell, *The Corfu Trilogy*, 345–6; Durrell, 'Summer in Corfu', 86. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for this point.

67 Durrell, *The Donkey Rustlers*, 19.

68 K. Reynolds, 'Changing families in children's fiction', in Grenby and Immel (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, 200.

69 Attebery, 'Elizabeth Enright and the family story as genre', 121.

70 Botting, *Gerald Durrell*, loc 7458.

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Due to a loan which his late father had taken out, the English children's young friend Yani owes a debt to the mayor – that 'oily, slimy old hypocrite with his pot belly' – which threatens the loss of his home and land.[71] The venality exhibited by the mayor has been described by some anthropologists as endemic amongst officials: 'it is well-known in Corfu and in other parts of Greece that such "presents" are commonplace, part of the normal currency of everyday life. In a purely practical sense, they are necessary to avoid interminable delays and to get public servants to relax certain regulations'.[72] The local forces of law and order which the mayor has at his disposal are, however, more inept than corrupt. As with the example which Gerry recalled from his own years in Corfu, this fictional village policeman is 'far too kind-hearted to arrest anybody' and is so lazy 'that it was with great difficulty one could get him out of bed should there be a dire emergency'.[73] His superior, the Chief Inspector, proves to be no improvement when investigating the mass disappearance of the village donkeys: he arrives bearing lots of impressive equipment – magnifying glass, fingerprinting kit, a pair of hunting dogs – but has little clue. A lengthy search in the countryside merely leaves this Inspector 'grimy, tattered and torn'. His efforts end in farce as the dogs home in on the mayor's own house, attracted by his own pet which is in season.[74]

The plot hatched by the children to save Yani's property from the grasp of the mayor relies upon the peasants being weak-minded and superstitious. Caught in the act of stealing one of the village donkeys at night, Yani calls out in the darkness pretending to be a vampire. The terrified owner describes this supernatural figure, which he has in reality only heard rather than seen, as 'like a goat with man's form, only with the face of a snarling dog and with two great horns'. His rapt listeners from the village 'could hardly contain themselves. This was, without doubt, one of the most exciting things that had ever happened in Kalanero'.[75] They are so gullible that Yani's self-inflicted wound to his foot, designed as a distraction, can be read as a snake-bite in need of immediate attention. As a result, 'after his foot had been anointed with seventeen different remedies and bound up in a piece of most unhygienic cloth, he was carried reverently down to his house and put to bed. They closed the shutters and the door firmly to keep out every breath of fresh air, for it was well known that fresh air was the worst thing you could have in the case of illness.' The two foreign children, whose plan is predicated on English intellect being superior to the Greek, 'were almost hysterical with laughter by the time they got back to the villa for lunch.'[76] Encouraged by the appearance of signs proclaiming 'Donkeys of the World Unite', the villagers fall for the ludicrous suggestion that the disappearance of all of the donkeys is a

71 Durrell, *The Donkey Rustlers*, 30–31.
72 Lazaridis et al., 'Islands as havens for retirement migration', 313.
73 Durrell, *The Donkey Rustlers*, 33.
74 *Op. cit.*, 95, 106, 104.
75 *Op. cit.*, 66, 78.
76 *Op. cit.*, 70–1, 75, 122.

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Communist plot, or is the result of witchcraft.[77] The Greeks are also depicted as childlike, staring in wonder at their own inexpertly-printed reward notices, which 'were so pretty to look at' that everyone wanted to keep one. Although 'the lines of writing went up and down like the waves of the sea … everybody agreed that this enhanced rather than detracted from the charm of the posters'.[78]

Honour is highly valued, so that when, at the end of the novel, the mayor tries to renege on his promised reward for the return of the donkeys, the villagers and local priest hold him to it. When 'the whole gorgeousness of the situation dawned on them' – that the donkey-rustling plot had been a deception designed to get the mayor to pay the reward and thereby cancel the loan on Yani's land – the onlookers are actually pleased with 'the cleverness of the English children'.[79] Durrell's novel, then, reflects children's literature more generally in that 'The view that children are "better" – cleverer, more sophisticated – than adults is a mainstay of contemporary popular culture'.[80] The representation of the villagers' attitude ties in with the anthropologist Roger Just's analysis of 'public virtue' on his Ionian island, in which positive values were listed as: 'open (*aniktos*), upright (*orthios*), honest (*timios*), honourable (*filotimos*), hospitable (*filoksenos*), gentlemanly (*kirios*) and a good fellow (*chiftis*)'.[81] For Lawrence Durrell, writing with extensive knowledge from having lived in various parts of the Greek world, 'Their national character is based on the idea of the impoverished and downtrodden little man getting the better of the world around him by sheer cunning'.[82]

The Greece of *The Donkey Rustlers* is simple and rural. Heard from afar, the sounds of the community are 'the tinny voice of one old peasant woman greeting another; the sound of a young rooster practising, rather ineffectually, his first attempts at crowing; the barking of a dog and then the familiar, lugubrious sounds of a donkey braying.'[83] Donkeys are central to this way of life, as the children swiftly realize when hatching their plan: 'All the fields of the village lie down below the hillside on the flat country. Now, how do people work those fields and gather their crops and then carry them to the village?' The conclusion that 'Remove the donkeys and you paralyse the entire village' is also reached by the mayor and the local policeman when, in the absence of their only means of transport, they have to walk in search of help from the Chief Inspector, proving to be a dusty trip on inadequate roads: 'never in their lives had the usefulness of a donkey been brought home to them so forcibly'.[84] The donkeys have the virtues of calmness and pragmatism: surviving a sabotaged bridge which ditches

77 *Op. cit.*, 81–2.
78 *Op. cit.*, 121.
79 *Op. cit.*, 136, 143.
80 L. Vallone, 'Ideas of difference in children's literature', in Grenby and Immel (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, 18.
81 Just, *A Greek Island Cosmos*, 166.
82 Durrell, *Prospero's Cell*, 47.
83 Durrell, *The Donkey Rustlers*, 42.
84 *Op. cit.*, 35, 43, 86.

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both beast and rider into the river, the mayor's donkey simply swims 'remarkably well', and then remains 'standing grazing placidly under the trees',[85] behaviour which is echoed in the passage by Robert Crisp which has been noted earlier. However, the mass kidnapping by the children provokes the donkeys into stubbornness, as they at first refuse to swim over to their island destination: 'They kicked and bucked and one of them even broke loose and took the unprecedented step of actually cantering down the beach with the children in hot pursuit.' Perfectly understandably, they don't like 'sea bathing at dawn'. Eventually, having survived the journey, 'the donkeys hauled themselves ashore and shook themselves vigorously and sighed deep, lugubrious sighs to indicate their irritation and disapproval of the whole venture.'[86]

In this fictional Ionian village, then, there is no discernible technology, and the way of life is reliant on the donkeys. The animals are shown as straightforward, their desires understandable, so that, as the donkey-rustling plot unfolds, 'it was probably the eighteen donkeys and the Mayor's little horse who were the most satisfied with life at the moment. They had spent a quiet day dozing and munching, and now here were the same friendly children bringing them still more food. What more could any donkey ask for?'[87] In contrast, the adult humans are represented as shackled by their negative characteristics – riven with superstition, ineptitude, and venality at the level of their elected officials. In common with many throughout history, the villagers underestimate the importance of their donkeys. Adopting the somewhat condescending tone of animal welfare experts towards 'backward' Greece, the foreign children assert that an enforced period of rest once a year should continue, a 'sort of holiday camp for donkeys'. But Amanda and David are equally certain that this remains unlikely: 'I doubt we could get the villagers to adopt it'.[88] This is despite the villagers adopting an apparently enlightened approach to their animals when they are returned: even the mayor 'took the unprecedented step of actually throwing his arms round the neck of his biggest donkey and kissing it on the nose'.[89] A recent novel for children by Bibi Dumon Tak takes up from Durrell this theme of children showing their elders that donkeys must not be taken for granted. In *Mikis and the Donkey*, a grandfather starts out by emphasising to the boy protagonist that their newly-acquired donkey should be regarded as equivalent to a truck. But with overloading resulting in an injury, Mikis finds that he has to give 'donkey lessons to his grandpa'. As a result, the old man is forced to concede that 'She's a donkey and she has feelings.'[90]

85 *Op. cit.*, 53, 55.
86 Durrell, *The Donkey Rustlers*, 68.
87 *Op. cit.*, 108.
88 *Op. cit.*, 129.
89 *Op. cit.*, 133.
90 B. Dumon Tak, *Mikis and the Donkey*, illustrated by Philip Hopman, translated by Laura Watkinson (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge 2014) 31, 47, 78.

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Conclusion

Gerald Durrell was a celebrated champion of both the Ionian Island Greeks and of animals throughout the world. Yet his characterization of both in *The Donkey Rustlers* was to a significant degree condescending as, I have argued, is the case in Durrell's more famous works, his memoirs. The animals are shown in the novel as vital to a simple, rural way of life, and indeed are the impetus behind a change in attitudes and the resolution to an unfairly-caused financial predicament. It is the donkeys which bring peace, a long term association which, as Jill Bough has pointed out, dates back to the account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.[91] But the animals are passive in the whole process, forced into initially unpleasant circumstances at the behest of their human betters. The villagers remain 'peasants', represented as small-minded in their social and religious attitudes. Anthropological researchers in the field at a similar time period, such as Roger Just, showed that these islands were much less cut off from modernity than would at first be apparent. Durrell was fully aware that change caused by tourism and technological developments was happening to this corner of Greece in the 1960s, but chose to give his story a timeless – indeed, old-fashioned – setting on a fictional island. Similarly, Durrell evidently could not bring himself to recognize that children's writing had been developing during the same period, encompassing more complex themes and unsettled social circumstances. This was Corfu, and literature designed for children, as he wished they had remained. The real heroes of *The Donkey Rustlers* are the English family, whose children are easily able to manipulate the Greeks and show them the error of their ways. Likewise, in his 1960s documentary, *The Garden of the Gods*, Durrell began by announcing from a balcony, with a distinctly proprietorial air, that Corfu is 'My kingdom'. Both this theatrical gesture and his writing reveal that, despite having lived among the people as a boy, he continued to oversee Greece with the gaze of a Western outsider. This is in contradiction to his official biographer's claim that, with age and experience, Durrell became less old-fashioned in his dealings with people in the so-called developing world. In his novel, Durrell continued to figuratively put Corfu – Greece – under the colonial microscope which he had so famously used literally in his more celebrated boyhood memoirs.

91 Bough, *Donkey*, 73.

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