

Vesna Goldsworthy,
University of Exeter

MY EXPERIENCE OF CULTURAL TRANSFER BRITAIN-SERBIA-BRITAIN

A scholarly Interview with Professor Vesna Goldsworthy

Abstract: In this scholarly interview Vesna Goldsworthy, acclaimed scholar and Anglo-Serbian writer, speaks about her experience with the issues of cultural transfer Western Europe – the Balkans, and potential reverse transfer the Balkans – Western Europe. The issues that are raised in this interview include academic analysis of Balkanism that began in the late 1990s and potential wider impacts of that analysis, influence of the travelogue written by Rebecca West in 1941, and how much a writer may contribute to the image of other countries by writing about them.

Keywords: Balkanism, Ruritania, Rebecca West, cultural counter transfer

Introduction

Vesna Goldsworthy is professor of creative writing at the University of Exeter and at the University of East Anglia. She has authored six internationally best-selling and award-winning books, two of which, the memoir *Chernobyl Strawberries* and the novel *Gorsky*, have been serialized by the BBC. And I should add that the novel *Gorsky* sold two hundred thousand copies or more. Her book *Inventing Ruritania*, published in 1998, on the British perceptions of the Balkans, is in its 25th year on university reading lists world-wide, and it was one of the two books, together with Todorova's book *Imagining the Balkans*, that provided new insights into how the Balkans were constructed by Western travellers and policymakers. She has written three widely read novels: *Gorsky*, *Monsieur K* and *Iron Curtain* and, in 2021, she was elected fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. So, with her novels and academic writings on Eastern Europe and the Balkans, she has certainly contributed to a reverse kind of cultural transfer and, therefore, we have asked her five questions and the interview with her has been pre-recorded for the conference.¹

S. G. Markovich: The first question is that in your book, *Inventing Ruritania*, published in 1998, you describe what you

¹ The interview was conducted by Slobodan G. Markovich and aired on April 8, 2022, at the conference “Cultural Transfer Europe-Serbia: Methodological Issues and Challenges”, organised as a part of the project CTES, funded by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia.

term “the imperialism of the imagination”.² These are actually stereotypes made in British novels in the late 19th and the early 20th century that became the cornerstone of a more general image of the Balkans as the Ruritanian area of irrationality and incredible events in the American movie industry and in literature in English. Then, these images became global, and they travelled back to reach Balkan intellectuals. In your opinion, because you analysed them, what was the reaction of Balkan intellectuals? Did this cultural transfer that turned the Balkans into a kind of pejorative imaginative geography when it came back from the West to the Balkans influence the self-perception of Europeanists in the Balkans because it suddenly got this pejorative connotation?

V. Goldsworthy: It's a wonderful question. First of all, thank you very much for enabling me to record this conversation. It means that I can be in two places at once. It is strange that I am speaking from London and yet, when this is broadcast to your conference, I will be in Belgrade, so I will in fact be very close. There is something metaphorical about cultural transfer here and in the way our ideas travel from one place to another. To go back to your question about the Balkans and Britain, in the 19th century, when most of the stereotypes of the Balkans, the “Wild East of Europe” that I described in *Inventing Ruritania* originate, Britain led the world in the production of entertainment and popular culture. So, it is not an accident. All those popular writers, like Anthony Hope and Bram Stoker, and starting much earlier in the 19th century. These were the writers who sold their books in millions of copies. Those Balkan stereotypes, as were created in Britain, were then transferred to the American film industry because, by the 20th century, it is America that takes the baton culturally, but particularly in the domain of popular, entertainment industry. By the 21st century, the same images migrate into computer games and yet you still see the Balkans absolutely unchanged. Whether it is the war games, whether it is Grand Theft Auto, you will still find a wild, savage character who comes somewhere from our area and behaves in all kinds of unspeakable and primitive ways. That is a dominant image that does not change for almost two centuries now. From the moment when the Balkans first appear, even as they are being defined as a peninsula in 1908, this violent, wild imaginary persists for more than two centuries now. That is the external perception of the Balkans.

But that external perception of the Balkans becomes internal. It is something that is assimilated by us in the Peninsula, all the different na-

2 Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

tions. And it is assimilated in two forms: one is when we talk about each other, within each nation, and one is when we talk about our neighbouring nations. So, when you observe the Balkans, it is always the nation to the south, or to the south-east, that is described in these same terms that the British or the Americans use. Our neighbours are the primitive ones, our neighbours are the unruly ones, our neighbours are the savage ones and they need that external figure to control them and impose peace over them, as it were. The internal image is the one that we use when we accuse our compatriots of primitive behaviour. You may be on the bus and some person steps on your toes and, instead of attacking them for being uncouth, you say "Oh, you primitive Balkan person, move away from me". This is the way in which those images are assimilated, and perpetuated culturally.

SM: The second issue is actually connected to the first one, and it is that your book *Inventing Ruritania* and Maria Todorova's book *Imagining the Balkans*³ have, in the meantime, become standard textbooks in the field of "imagology" of the Balkans and in dealing with the discourse of Balkanism. And, back in 1999, soon after both books appeared, Misha Glenny ended his piece "Only in the Balkans" published in the *London Review of Books* with the following sentence: "Until the agents of Western culture are able to see their prejudices about the Balkans for what they are, the remarkable work of Goldsworthy, Todorova and others like them will remain largely unused in the West. That would be a tragedy".⁴

Almost a quarter of a century after the original publications of these two books, what is your assessment? Have your books, particularly *Inventing Ruritania*, made a change? Have you and Todorova made a cultural transfer of self-assessments of the Balkans to the West (as two scholars who were trained in the Balkans, in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, who began their careers in the Balkans, and therefore you have your self-assessments that are rooted in certain local traditions as well)?

VG: My reaction to that is probably – I wish. I wish they had. It is definitely true that they have made a difference in the academic world, in that certain unthinking responses to the Balkans have gone away. They have also initiated what here in England we call a "cottage industry",

3 Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

4 Misha Glenny, "Only in the Balkans", *London Review of Books*, Vol. 21, No. 9 (April 29, 1999).

meaning that PhD theses dealing with individual countries have multiplied; there are research centres that are largely inspired by what Maria and I were doing, and I have to say in some ways particularly Maria Todorova, because she is a historian, and this work had influence in history departments more than in literature departments, but in literature, too. In part because I teach in English literature departments, the Balkans are in many ways marginal. So, where I am it is a more marginal field of research than it would be for Maria's book. But, influence is undoubted. On the other hand, in public discourse, and by public I don't mean "a man in the street"; I mean journalists, I mean commentators, those people who write about the Balkans but are not Balkan specialists, relatively little has changed. Obviously, it may have changed for journalists and publicists like Misha Glenny or Tim Judah who are focused on the area and are aware of our work. But, and I'm thinking about this just now, in the last three or four days, I read four obituaries of Madeleine Albright in different newspapers and each section dealing with her role in Yugoslavia was written very much as it would have been written in the 1990s, or even in the 1890s. The vocabulary hasn't changed and the perception of the Peninsula hasn't changed. So, I would say Todorova and I made a difference, but within a small circle.

SM: Yes, ok, but in academic circles, you would agree that it has made a difference.

VG: Yes, it has made a great difference and this is interesting. *Inventing Ruritania* was *The Washington Post* book of the month and the reviewer wrote that "Goldsworthy has done enough research to start an academic department", because I read something like 300 novels, plus plays and films and poetry, and commented on so many of them in *Inventing Ruritania* itself. At that point, I thought that there was nothing left to study. And yet, I can now think of several books that build on *Inventing Ruritania*, that found further examples, that dealt with not just after the period I wrote about, but with completely new material, particularly in film, because film was marginal for me. So yes, in that sense, I would say that my study has made a difference. But, after so many years I wish it had made a difference in popular attitudes, particularly when it comes to the discussion of the Western Balkans' entry into the EU, I would like to see a much more enlightened attitude. Instead, what you see is that a lot of what I think I've done, not just I, but this whole discussion, had pushed certain prejudices underground. People do not necessarily dare to utter those prejudices, but they are still there. Unfortunately, that is what happened with post-colonialism as well. It sometimes does not destroy a prejudice, so much as it makes it unspeakable, in the literal sense of that word.



Cover page of Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).



Serbian translation of Inventing Ruritania.



Greek edition of Inventing Ruritania.



Romanian edition of Inventing Ruritania.

SM: Now, I would like to mention your predecessor, at least I see her as your predecessor. And that's the famous Rebecca West. And, in *Chernobyl Strawberries*,⁵ you basically admitted that her travelogue is one of your eleven most beloved books. It's also considered to be one of the ten top travelogues of all time in certain assessments. So, it's certainly a very influential book. What kind of cultural transfer, in your opinion, Yugoslavia-Britain, and maybe also Yugoslavia – the United States (because Americans had to read it, and for all future Balkan diplomats, it was obligatory reading during the Cold War) did that book bring?

VG: You are right to mention the United States. I will address that first because Rebecca West was very well known in the States, almost better known at that point than in Britain, I dare say, in terms of being more present, because she was writing for *the New Yorker*, she had a column there. Britain was at war, and her desire was to mobilize America to help Europe, amongst other things. Hence that very long epilogue, which deals with the Blitz and the bombing of London and the suffering of London at that moment.

The second part is that, and this is something that I always mention when I speak about Rebecca West, when you deal with British literature about the Balkans, with the exception of Byron and perhaps Tennyson, those books are mainly entertainments, as Graham Greene would define them, popular fiction. It is very unusual, and for the Balkans very important, that with Rebecca West you have a first-rate writer, but really a first-rate writer. And she is that from her first novel, *The Return of the Soldier*,⁶ twenty two years before *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*,⁷ so the first-rate writer with the highest literary status travelling to the area and writing what is her masterpiece.

With many other books that I dealt with, you are looking at something that's second- or third-rate, books that the film makes popular, but that as literature are not as great, while *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is a masterpiece of modernist travel writing. And in some ways, it is so formidable as a piece of travel writing that, as an English literature scholar, I'd say that it's a pity that it's about the Balkans, because if it had been

5 Vesna Goldsworthy, *Chernobyl Strawberries. A memoir* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005).

6 Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1918).

7 Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon. A Journey through Yugoslavia*, 2 vols. (New York: The Viking Press, 1941). British editions: Rebecca West. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon. The record of a journey through Yugoslavia in 1937*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1942).

BLACK LAMB
AND
GREY FALCON

A Journey through Yugoslavia

BY

REBECCA WEST



MCMXLI : THE VIKING PRESS : NEW YORK

*Title page of the American edition of Black Lamb and Grey Falcon by Rebecca West
(New York: the Viking Press, 1941).*

about France or Italy, it would be obligatory reading, it would be on every reading list. So, you could say, the Balkans set it back into a more obscure territory.

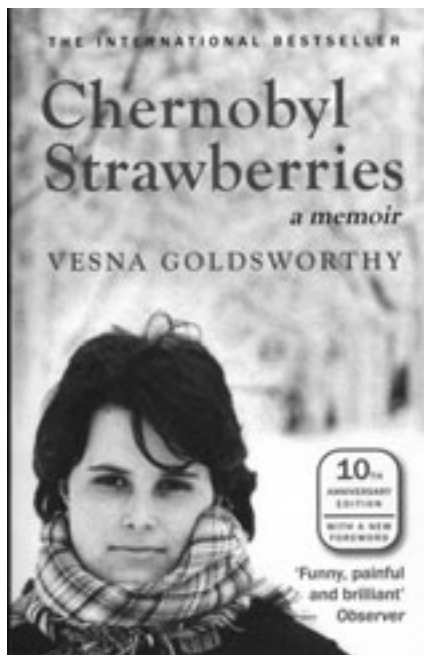
But never mind. It is a fantastic book and it made a lot of people read half a million words, a huge, chunky piece of history, and learn about this country which she saw as, if you want, a mini-European Union *avant la lettre*, and as a bulwark against Great Power influence in the world, and Great Power divisions. In that sense, West's work remains continuously topical. It is a pity that Yugoslavia exists no more, and because it exists no more, you have all these, not always very *bien pensant* intellectuals now trying to analyse whether Rebecca was pro-Serbian or not, and seeing that aspect in a negative context. She wasn't thinking like that at the time: it would be like accusing an author today of being pro-German because they write favourably about the European Union. What she was thinking about was Yugoslavia as a whole. And she was thinking about the reasons for Yugoslavia's existence and in that sort of sense, I think, she found the best country for her political case. She went to Finland first,

thinking that Finland would be a good example of a small country standing up to Great Powers, but she found Finland boring. Then she decided to visit Yugoslavia, and an unusual country met an extraordinary writer. It was a meeting of the century if you want. It's, really, a stunning book. I teach it. My students complain about having to read a thousand pages, but invariably end up loving it.

SM: Thank you and now finally the fifth and last question. It's about your autobiography, *Chernobyl Strawberries*, published back in 2005, and it was an enormous success. More than three hundred reviews. The book was a best-seller in four countries. It was played in certain theatres, if I'm right, even in continental Europe – in Austria, Germany and elsewhere. Essentially, it is a story of your two families, Yugoslav/Serbian and British, but it is also to a large degree a story of Belgrade and Yugoslavia in the 1980s, before you moved to Britain. So, many readers globally, anything they know about Yugoslavia, they know perhaps from your book. So, do you feel now, after that book (by the way do you feel like Rebecca West as well), but also, like someone who has contributed to a reverse kind of cultural transfer? In *Ruritania* you describe how the imperialism of the imagination works, but now you transfer your self-perception into the European or Anglo-American mainstream. Have you?

VG: It's true that when I started writing what would become *Chernobyl Strawberries*, I was very ill and I didn't think of it as a book for a wider audience. I thought of it as a book for my son. I thought, if I didn't get through the illness, there was a danger that he would know nothing of his maternal origins. There was a point when I was told I had six months to live, luckily that wasn't true. But, I thought, if I did not recover, I wanted him to have a story of his mother's background that he would, in some sense, see as a kind of history, his own history, that there was no need to be ashamed of. In fact, that he should be proud of his history. So, your question is in some ways built into the origins of the book. My idea was to recreate, rather than embellish the story of my childhood and youth, to present it by way of that reverse cultural transfer, as a response to everything else that he could read.

However, I also have to say that books then have their own life. It is funny you mentioned theatrical versions, and you see something about my book through those. It was serialized on the BBC as well and there, the voice recording was made by me, but there are the telling choices of music for the background, exotic, folkloric music. In the staged versions, if it was Germany, they had a Viennese actress reading my part because it



Cover page of Chernobyl Strawberries. A memoir, 10th anniversary edition (London: Wilmington Square Books, 2015). First published in 2005 by Atlantic Books.



Serbian edition of Chernobyl Strawberries.



Polish edition of Chernobyl Strawberries.



German edition of Chernobyl Strawberries entitled Heimweh nach Nirgendwo (Homesick for Nowhere).

was again the Other, that slightly different thing. So, I would be there, as a non-German speaker, often on stage, witnessing cultural transfer in action.

Here's a very practical example. A friend of mine organised a tour of Serbia for the corps diplomatique, outside Belgrade. They went to Zlatibor, I think. And, as they were returning to Belgrade, from the south-west, the diplomats' wives, because the group was mainly women, said: "Oh, this is Žarkovo, this is where Vesna Goldsworthy grew up. Can we stop and have a look?" And my friend invented some reason not to allow it. Perhaps he wanted them to keep the idea of the place as a village-suburb, as it once was. In my memoir, I describe a move my family made when I was a teenager, from one green suburb of Belgrade to another, from Dedinje to Žarkovo. Dedinje remains green, perhaps not as much as it was when I was growing up, but Žarkovo is no longer the place I describe in my book, the place I loved and hated in equal measure. Now, it's bisected by busy motorways and lined with tower-blocks, and that brutal modernity makes it look rather awful in many ways. If I write that I lived in a village on the edge of town, each diplomatic wife will bring their own imagination to what that means: perhaps my friend was right not to spoil it.

I know that in Germany, the response to *Chernobyl Strawberries* was: "Finally a normal book about Yugoslavia." Because every time people write about Yugoslavia it is through the prism of trauma, and because what I write about predates the war, there is no Yugoslav trauma in mine. The trauma is all personal, the trauma of my illness. But when it comes to the Balkans, *Chernobyl Strawberries* is "a normal book".

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