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# The Durrells Of Corfu



## Synopsis

The Durrell family are immortalised in Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals* and its ITV adaptation, *The Durrells*. But what of the real life Durrells? Why did they go to Corfu in the first place - and what happened to them after they left? The real story of the Durrells is as surprising and fascinating as anything in Gerry's books, and Michael Haag, with his first hand knowledge of the family, is the ideal narrator, drawing on diaries, letters and unpublished autobiographical fragments. *The Durrells of Corfu* describes the family's upbringing in India and the crisis that brought them to England and then Greece. It recalls the genuine characters they encountered on Corfu - Theodore the biologist, the taxi driver Spiro Halikiopoulos and the prisoner Kosti - as well as the visit of American writer Henry Miller. And Haag has unearthed the story of how the Durrells left Corfu, including Margo's and Larry's last-minute escapes before the War. An extended epilogue looks at the emergence of Larry as a world famous novelist, and Gerry as a naturalist and champion of endangered species, as well as the lives of the rest of the family, their friends and other animals. The book is illustrated with family photos from the Gerald Durrell Archive, many of them reproduced here for the first time.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I grew up reading the saga of the Durrells on Corfu, and used to pretend that I was there. It was such an enchanted book. Gerald made everything seem wonderful and funny and happy. This book was perfect for me to read as a grownup and find out more about their real lives there. I learned so much in such a slim volume. It was very well written and gave a balanced overview and the views of the family members. I was the most touched by Mrs. Durrell, the mother of the brood. She was so slight and delicate, being completely Anglo Indian, even her grandparents were born in India. She married a wonderful man and they were very happy and adventurous, traveling around India together, having children pretty constantly, when he died suddenly of a brain tumor. I was horrified to read that people convinced her to move to England to raise her children. It was so awful. She had never lived there! It was like moving to the moon for her and her children were deposited in boarding schools except for Gerald. She became a lifelong alcoholic after that. It was so unnecessary! Probably the worst advice anyone ever took.

Years ago, when I was studying for my English O'Level, we studied *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell, and it was hilarious. It was that book which made me aware of Lawrence Durrell and his writing, so that when I saw *Monsieur*, the first book of the Avignon Quintet out in bookstores I snapped it up, and as you know, that set off my life long love affair with Lawrence Durrell. Anyway, this book takes you behind the scenes of the time the family spent on Corfu. It starts with an overall view of the family and what happened before Corfu, and at the end follows up what happened to them afterwards. I already knew a lot of what's in this book, but that's because I've done lots of reading around Larry, but there were some interesting facts that were illuminating. For example, money wasn't the main reason the family moved to Corfu, it was concern over Mother's drinking - she often took to gin when she was depressed and lonely. As Larry and his wife Nancy had already decided to go to Corfu, it seems they felt it important to keep an eye on her! For those who haven't read much background on the family, you'll find it interesting, and also a little disturbing to find out just how much is fictionalised in a supposed non-fiction account of the family on Corfu.

Recommended!

Author has added and exposed some enjoyable events regarding the Durrell but almost half it seems is devoted to diluting what was written in many instances by Gerald. If he did not intend to

do so he's picked apart dozens of Gerald's written work. He also has written dispiriting remarks about many of the family. In many instances what he has written is tabloid styled remarks. In my opinion very inappropriate.

Having read and enjoyed Gerald Durrell's books about his childhood spent in Corfu I thought this book would be a way to learn more. It certainly delivered in that aspect. I've read Gerald Durrell's authorized biography, a book written by Margo, and a few other things but this book brought everything together nicely. Sympathetic to the family but still honest. Lots of great pictures are included.

Great after watching the masterpiece theater program of Durrells and Corfu. Look forward to reading the trilogy and other works.

Gerald Durrell has long been one of my cultural heroes, ever since I discovered his books and television programmes in my teens, and it would be no exaggeration to say that he, along with other popular naturalists of the period such as Peter Scott and David Attenborough, was responsible for my enduring love of the natural world. More recently I have become an admirer of the literary works of Lawrence Durrell, who has joined his younger brother in my personal pantheon. Anyone reading this review will in all probability be familiar with Gerald's *Corfu Trilogy*, or at least with the recent television series based on it, so I needn't waste much time in introducing Gerry, Larry and the rest of the clan. Michael Haag starts his book with a chapter about the family's Indian background. Now I knew that Gerald and his siblings were all born in India, where their father was a civil engineer. What I didn't realise was how deep the family's Indian roots went. Both Louisa Durrell (Mother in the Trilogy) and her husband Lawrence Durrell senior were Anglo-Indians, not in the sense that they were of mixed race but in the sense that they were born to families of English descent but permanently settled in India. In Louisa's case her roots went back several generations; not only her parents but also her grandparents had been born in the sub-continent. Haag speculates that it may have been this Indian background which made it difficult for the family to settle in the cooler climate of England after Lawrence senior's death and which led to their choosing a Mediterranean island as their domicile. Lawrence junior, the novelist, could never really settle down in Britain, although he remained a British citizen, and spent most of his later life in the Mediterranean area, either Cyprus or Southern France. Leslie went to live in Kenya, only returning to England to avoid prosecution for

embezzlement. (He appears to have been something of a black sheep of the family). There was a good deal of interest in the chapters dealing with India and with what became of the family and their friends after they were forced to leave Corfu by the looming war. We learn, for example, that Gerald's tutor Mr Kralefsky (real name Krajewski) was killed when the Germans bombed Corfu during the war and that the family's close friend Spiro died only a few months after their departure. (He died of natural causes; the war had not yet come to Greece in December 1939). For me, strangely, the least interesting part of the book was the middle part dealing with their lives on Corfu itself. Although Haag concedes that many of Gerald's anecdotes in *My Family and Other Animals* may well be invented, or at least exaggerated, he cannot resist padding his narrative out by quoting these stories verbatim as though they were Gospel truth; at times they form his principal source for his account of the family's life on the island. (For some reason he pays a lot more attention to *My Family* than he does to the other two parts of the Trilogy). Haag does mention some curious discrepancies between the reality of the family's life on Corfu and Gerald's account of it. The most important of these is that Gerald writes about Larry as though he were a bachelor living with his mother and younger siblings. In fact, Larry was married during this period and for most of the time he lived separately from the rest of the family with his wife Nancy (whom Gerald never mentions). However, Haag never informs us of the reason why Gerald should have omitted Nancy from the Trilogy. (Was it, for example, that Larry did not want to be reminded of a marriage that ended unhappily?) Another curious feature of the Trilogy is that, in sharp contrast to most childhood autobiographies, Gerald never mentions any playmates of his own age. Apart from his teenage siblings Leslie and Margo, just about everyone else he mentions is an adult; his closest friends appear to have been his dog Roger and his other pets. If he ever befriended any local Corfiot boys he never mentions them. Yet Haag points out that Gerald did indeed have a constant companion of his own age in Alexia, the daughter of the family's close friend Theodore Stephanides. Neither Alexia nor her mother Mary ever appears in the Trilogy, and again the impression is given that Theodore is a confirmed bachelor. Again, however, we are left to wonder why Gerald should have made this change in his writing. This is a fairly short book, around 200 pages long, and I would estimate that, of those 200, about 50 are taken up with photographs of the Durrell family at various points in their lives. Although some of these photographs are of interest in their own right, the use of so many does tend to give the impression that the book is more substantial than it actually is. There is plenty in *The Durrells of Corfu* that is of interest, but I was left with the impression that it could have been a lot more informative.

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