



GERALD DURRELL

My Family & Other Animals





PUFFIN

Gerald Durrell

MY FAMILY & OTHER ANIMALS

It is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects, and indeed the sundry contemplation of my travels, which, by often rumination, wraps me in a most humorous sadness.

As You Like It



PUFFIN

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PUFFIN BOOKS

MY FAMILY & OTHER ANIMALS

Gerald Durrell (1925–1995) moved from England to Corfu with his family when he was eight. He spent much of his time studying the island's wildlife and surprising his family by keeping lots of very unusual pets in very unexpected places. He grew up to be a famous naturalist and conservationist, leading expeditions to exotic places such as Argentina, Sierra Leone, Assam and Madagascar. Durrell dedicated his life to the preservation of wildlife, especially the less glamorous kinds, which he called 'little brown jobs' and 'small uglies'. It is through his efforts that creatures such as the Mauritius pink pigeon and the Mallorcan midwife toad have avoided extinction.

Over his lifetime he presented many TV shows, and wrote thirty-seven books, including *My Family and Other Animals* and its two sequels, *Birds, Beasts and Relatives* and *The Garden of the Gods*. He founded Jersey Zoo in 1959 as a centre for the conservation of endangered species, and in 1963 created the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust – later renamed Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust in his honour – of which his wife, Lee, is still Honorary Director. He was awarded the OBE in 1982.

This special edition is published to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *My Family and Other Animals*.

durrellwildlife.org

To My Mother

The Speech for the Defence

‘Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’

The White Queen – *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*

This is the story of a five-year sojourn that I and my family made on the Greek island of Corfu. It was originally intended to be a mildly nostalgic account of the natural history of the island, but I made a grave mistake by introducing my family into the book in the first few pages. Having got themselves on paper, they then proceeded to establish themselves and invite various friends to share the chapters. It was only with the greatest difficulty, and by exercising considerable cunning, that I managed to retain a few pages here and there which I could devote exclusively to animals.

I have attempted to draw an accurate and unexaggerated picture of my family in the following pages; they appear as I saw them. To explain some of their more curious ways, however, I feel that I should state that at the time we were in Corfu the family were all quite young: Larry, the eldest, was twenty-three; Leslie was nineteen; Margo eighteen; while I was the youngest, being of the tender and impressionable age of ten. We have never been very certain of my mother’s age, for the simple reason that she can never remember her date of birth; all I can say is that she was old enough to have four children. My mother also insists that I explain that she is a widow for, as she so penetratingly observed, you never know what people might think.

In order to compress five years of incident, observation, and pleasant living into something a little less lengthy than the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, I have been forced to telescope, prune, and graft, so that there is little left of the original continuity of events. Also I have been forced to leave out many happenings and characters that I would have liked to describe.

It is doubtful if this would have been written without the help and enthusiasm of the following people. I mention this so that blame can be laid

in the right quarter.

My grateful thanks, then, to:

Dr Theodore Stephanides. With typical generosity, he allowed me to make use of material from his unpublished work on Corfu, and supplied me with a number of dreadful puns, some of which I have used.

My family. They, after all, unconsciously provided a lot of the material, and helped me considerably during the writing of the book by arguing ferociously and rarely agreeing about any incident on which I consulted them.

My wife, who pleased me by laughing uproariously when reading the manuscript, only to inform me that it was my spelling that amused her.

Sophie, my secretary, who was responsible for the introduction of commas and the ruthless eradication of the split infinitive.

I should like to pay a special tribute to my mother, to whom this book is dedicated. Like a gentle, enthusiastic, and understanding Noah, she has steered her vessel full of strange progeny through the stormy seas of life with great skill, always faced with the possibility of mutiny, always surrounded by the dangerous shoals of overdraft and extravagance, never being sure that her navigation would be approved by the crew, but certain that she would be blamed for anything that went wrong. That she survived the voyage is a miracle, but survive it she did, and, moreover, with her reason more or less intact. As my brother Larry rightly points out, we can be proud of the way we have brought her up; she is a credit to us. That she has reached that happy Nirvana where nothing shocks or startles is exemplified by the fact that one week-end recently, when all alone in the house, she was treated to the sudden arrival of a series of crates containing two pelicans, a scarlet ibis, a vulture, and eight monkeys. A lesser mortal might have quailed at such a contingency, but not Mother. On Monday morning I found her in the garage being pursued round and round by an irate pelican which she was trying to feed with sardines from a tin.

‘I’m glad you’ve come, dear,’ she panted; ‘this pelican is a *little* difficult to handle.’

When I asked her how she *knew* the animals belonged to me, she replied: ‘Well, of course I knew they were yours, dear; who else would send pelicans to me?’

Which goes to show how well she knows at least one of her family.

Lastly, I would like to make a point of stressing that all the anecdotes about the island and the islanders are absolutely true. Living in Corfu was rather like living in one of the more flamboyant and slapstick comic operas. The whole atmosphere and charm of the place was, I think, summed up neatly on an Admiralty map we had, which showed the island and the adjacent coastline in great detail. At the bottom was a little inset which read:

CAUTION: As the buoys marking the shoals are often out of position, mariners are cautioned to be on their guard when navigating these shores.

PART ONE

There is a pleasure sure
In being mad, which none but madmen know.

DRYDEN, *The Spanish Friar*, II, i

The Migration

July had been blown out like a candle by a biting wind that ushered in a leaden August sky. A sharp, stinging drizzle fell, billowing into opaque grey sheets when the wind caught it. Along the Bournemouth sea-front the beach-huts turned blank wooden faces towards a greeny-grey, froth-chained sea that leapt eagerly at the cement bulwark of the shore. The gulls had been tumbled inland over the town, and they now drifted above the housetops on taut wings, whining peevishly. It was the sort of weather calculated to try anyone's endurance.

Considered as a group my family was not a very prepossessing sight that afternoon, for the weather had brought with it the usual selection of ills to which we were prone. For me, lying on the floor, labelling my collection of shells, it had brought catarrh, pouring it into my skull like cement, so that I was forced to breathe stertorously through open mouth. For my brother Leslie, hunched dark and glowering by the fire, it had inflamed the convolutions of his ears so that they bled delicately but persistently. To my sister Margo it had delivered a fresh dappling of acne spots to a face that was already blotched like a red veil. For my mother there was a rich, bubbling cold, and a twinge of rheumatism to season it. Only my eldest brother, Larry, was untouched, but it was sufficient that he was irritated by our failings.

It was Larry, of course, who started it. The rest of us felt too apathetic to think of anything except our own ills, but Larry was designed by Providence to go through life like a small, blond firework, exploding ideas in other people's minds, and then curling up with cat-like unctuousness and refusing to take any blame for the consequences. He had become increasingly irritable as the afternoon wore on. At length, glancing moodily round the room, he decided to attack Mother, as being the obvious cause of the trouble.

'Why do we stand this bloody climate?' he asked suddenly, making a gesture towards the rain-distorted window. 'Look at it! And, if it comes to that, look at us ... Margo swollen up like a plate of scarlet porridge ... Leslie

wandering around with fourteen fathoms of cotton wool in each ear ... Gerry sounds as though he's had a cleft palate from birth ... And look at you: you're looking more decrepit and hag-ridden every day.'

Mother peered over the top of a large volume entitled *Easy Recipes from Rajputana*.

'Indeed I'm not,' she said indignantly.

'You *are*,' Larry insisted; 'you're beginning to look like an Irish washerwoman ... and your family looks like a series of illustrations from a medical encyclopedia.'

Mother could think of no really crushing reply to this, so she contented herself with a glare before retreating once more behind her book.

'What we need is sunshine,' Larry continued; 'don't you agree, Les? ... Les ... *Les!*'

Leslie unravelled a large quantity of cotton-wool from one ear.

'What d'you say?' he asked.

'There you are!' said Larry, turning triumphantly to Mother, 'it's become a major operation to hold a conversation with him. I ask you, what a position to be in! One brother can't hear what you say, and the other one can't be understood. Really, it's time something was done. I can't be expected to produce deathless prose in an atmosphere of gloom and eucalyptus.'

'Yes, dear,' said Mother vaguely.

'What we all need,' said Larry, getting into his stride again, 'is sunshine ... a country where we can *grow*.'

'Yes, dear, that would be nice,' agreed Mother, not really listening.

'I had a letter from George this morning – he says Corfu's wonderful. Why don't we pack up and go to Greece?'

'Very well, dear, if you like,' said Mother unguardedly.

Where Larry was concerned she was generally very careful not to commit herself.

'When?' asked Larry, rather surprised at this cooperation.

Mother, perceiving that she had made a tactical error, cautiously lowered *Easy Recipes from Rajputana*.

'Well, I think it would be a sensible idea if you were to go on ahead, dear, and arrange things. Then you can write and tell me if it's nice, and we all can follow,' she said cleverly.

Larry gave her a withering look.

‘You said *that* when I suggested going to Spain,’ he reminded her, ‘and I sat for two interminable months in Seville, waiting for you to come out, while you did nothing except write me massive letters about drains and drinking-water, as though I was the Town Clerk or something. No, if we’re going to Greece, let’s all go together.’

‘You do *exaggerate*, Larry,’ said Mother plaintively; ‘anyway, I can’t go just like that. I have to arrange something about this house.’

‘Arrange? Arrange what, for heaven’s sake? Sell it.’

‘I can’t do that, dear,’ said Mother, shocked.

‘Why not?’

‘But I’ve only just bought it.’

‘Sell it while it’s still untarnished, then.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, dear,’ said Mother firmly; ‘that’s quite out of the question. It would be madness.’

So we sold the house and fled from the gloom of the English summer, like a flock of migrating swallows.

We all travelled light, taking with us only what we considered to be the bare essentials of life. When we opened our luggage for Customs inspection, the contents of our bags were a fair indication of character and interests. Thus Margo’s luggage contained a multitude of diaphanous garments, three books on slimming, and a regiment of small bottles each containing some elixir guaranteed to cure acne. Leslie’s case held a couple of roll-top pullovers and a pair of trousers which were wrapped round two revolvers, an air-pistol, a book called *Be Your Own Gunsmith*, and a large bottle of oil that leaked. Larry was accompanied by two trunks of books and a brief-case containing his clothes. Mother’s luggage was sensibly divided between clothes and various volumes on cooking and gardening. I travelled with only those items that I thought necessary to relieve the tedium of a long journey: four books on natural history, a butterfly net, a dog, and a jam-jar full of caterpillars all in imminent danger of turning into chrysalids. Thus, by our standards fully equipped, we left the clammy shores of England.

France rain-washed and sorrowful, Switzerland like a Christmas cake, Italy exuberant, noisy, and smelly, were passed, leaving only confused memories. The tiny ship throbbed away from the heel of Italy out into the

twilit sea, and as we slept in our stuffy cabins, somewhere in that tract of moon-polished water we passed the invisible dividing-line and entered the bright, looking-glass world of Greece. Slowly this sense of change seeped down to us, and so, at dawn, we awoke restless and went on deck.

The sea lifted smooth blue muscles of wave as it stirred in the dawn-light, and the foam of our wake spread gently behind us like a white peacock's tail, glinting with bubbles. The sky was pale and stained with yellow on the eastern horizon. Ahead lay a chocolate-brown smudge of land, huddled in mist, with a frill of foam at its base. This was Corfu, and we strained our eyes to make out the exact shapes of the mountains, to discover valleys, peaks, ravines, and beaches, but it remained a silhouette. Then suddenly the sun shifted over the horizon, and the sky turned the smooth enamelled blue of a jay's eye. The endless, meticulous curves of the sea flamed for an instant and then changed to a deep royal purple flecked with green. The mist lifted in quick, lithe ribbons, and before us lay the island, the mountains as though sleeping beneath a crumpled blanket of brown, the folds stained with the green of olive-groves. Along the shore curved beaches as white as tusks among tottering cities of brilliant gold, red, and white rocks. We rounded the northern cape, a smooth shoulder of rust-red cliff carved into a series of giant caves. The dark waves lifted our wake and carried it gently towards them, and then, at their very mouths, it crumpled and hissed thirstily among the rocks. Rounding the cape, we left the mountains, and the island sloped gently down, blurred with the silver and green iridescence of olives, with here and there an admonishing finger of black cypress against the sky. The shallow sea in the bays was butterfly blue, and even above the sound of the ship's engines we could hear, faintly ringing from the shore like a chorus of tiny voices, the shrill, triumphant cries of the cicadas.

Chapter 1

The Unsuspected Isle

We threaded our way out of the noise and confusion of the Customs shed into the brilliant sunshine on the quay. Around us the town rose steeply, tiers of multi-coloured houses piled haphazardly, green shutters folded back from their windows, like the wings of a thousand moths. Behind us lay the bay, smooth as a plate, smouldering with that unbelievable blue.

Larry walked swiftly, with head thrown back and an expression of such regal disdain on his face that one did not notice his diminutive size, keeping a wary eye on the porters who struggled with his trunks. Behind him strolled Leslie, short, stocky, with an air of quiet belligerence, and then Margo, trailing yards of muslin and scent. Mother, looking like a tiny, harassed missionary in an uprising, was dragged unwillingly to the nearest lamp-post by an exuberant Roger, and was forced to stand there, staring into space, while he relieved pent-up feelings that had accumulated in his kennel. Larry chose two magnificently dilapidated horse-drawn cabs, had the luggage installed in one, and seated himself in the second. Then he looked round irritably.

‘Well?’ he asked. ‘What are we waiting for?’

‘We’re waiting for Mother,’ explained Leslie. ‘Roger’s found a lamp-post.’

‘Dear God!’ said Larry, and then hoisted himself upright in the cab and bellowed, ‘Come *on*, Mother, come on. Can’t the dog wait?’

‘Coming, dear,’ called Mother passively and untruthfully, for Roger showed no signs of quitting the post.

‘That dog’s been a damned nuisance all the way,’ said Larry.

‘Don’t be so impatient,’ said Margo indignantly; ‘the dog can’t help it ... and anyway, we had to wait an hour in Naples for *you*.’

‘My stomach was out of order,’ explained Larry coldly.

‘Well, presumably *his* stomach’s out of order,’ said Margo triumphantly. ‘It’s six of one and a dozen of the other.’

‘You mean half a dozen of the other.’

‘Whatever I mean, it’s the same thing.’

At this moment Mother arrived, slightly dishevelled, and we had to turn our attentions to the task of getting Roger into the cab. He had never been in such a vehicle, and treated it with suspicion. Eventually we had to lift him bodily and hurl him inside, yelping frantically, and then pile in breathlessly after him and hold him down. The horse, frightened by this activity, broke into a shambling trot, and we ended in a tangled heap on the floor of the cab with Roger moaning loudly underneath us.

‘What an entry,’ said Larry bitterly. ‘I had hoped to give an impression of gracious majesty, and this is what happens ... we arrive in town like a troupe of medieval tumblers.’

‘Don’t keep *on*, dear,’ Mother said soothingly, straightening her hat; ‘we’ll soon be at the hotel.’

So our cab clopped and jingled its way into the town, while we sat on the horsehair seats and tried to muster the appearance of gracious majesty Larry required. Roger, wrapped in Leslie’s powerful grasp, lolled his head over the side of the vehicle and rolled his eyes as though at his last gasp. Then we rattled past an alley-way in which four scruffy mongrels were lying in the sun. Roger stiffened, glared at them and let forth a torrent of deep barks. The mongrels were immediately galvanized into activity, and they sped after the cab, yapping vociferously. Our pose was irretrievably shattered, for it took two people to restrain the raving Roger, while the rest of us leaned out of the cab and made wild gestures with magazines and books at the pursuing horde. This only had the effect of exciting them still further, and at each alley-way we passed their numbers increased, until by the time we were rolling down the main thoroughfare of the town there were some twenty-four dogs swirling about our wheels, almost hysterical with anger.

‘Why doesn’t somebody *do* something?’ asked Larry, raising his voice above the uproar. ‘This is like a scene from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.’

‘Why don’t *you* do something, instead of criticizing?’ snapped Leslie, who was locked in combat with Roger.

Larry promptly rose to his feet, snatched the whip from our astonished driver’s hand, made a wild swipe at the herd of dogs, missed them, and

caught Leslie across the back of the neck.

‘What the hell d’you think you’re playing at?’ Leslie snarled, twisting a scarlet and angry face towards Larry.

‘Accident,’ explained Larry airily. ‘I’m out of practice ... it’s so long since I used a horse-whip.’

‘Well, watch what you’re bloody well doing,’ said Leslie loudly and belligerently.

‘Now, now, dear, it was an accident,’ said Mother.

Larry took another swipe at the dogs and knocked off Mother’s hat.

‘You’re more trouble than the dogs,’ said Margo.

‘Do be careful, dear,’ said Mother, clutching her hat; ‘you might hurt someone. I should put the whip down.’

At that moment the cab shambled to a halt outside a doorway over which hung a board with Pension Suisse inscribed on it. The dogs, feeling that they were at last going to get to grips with this effeminate black canine who rode in cabs, surrounded us in a solid, panting wedge. The door of the hotel opened and an ancient bewhiskered porter appeared and stood staring glassily at the turmoil in the street. The difficulties of getting Roger out of the cab and into the hotel were considerable, for he was a heavy dog, and it took the combined efforts of the family to lift, carry, and restrain him. Larry had by now forgotten his majestic pose and was rather enjoying himself. He leapt down and danced about the pavement with the whip, cleaving a path through the dogs, along which Leslie, Margo, Mother, and I hurried, bearing the struggling, snarling Roger. We staggered into the hall, and the porter slammed the front door and leant against it, his moustache quivering. The manager came forward, eyeing us with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity. Mother faced him, hat on one side of her head, clutching in one hand my jam-jar of caterpillars.

‘Ah!’ she said, smiling sweetly, as though our arrival had been the most normal thing in the world. ‘Our name’s Durrell. I believe you’ve got some rooms booked for us?’

‘Yes, madame,’ said the manager, edging round the still grumbling Roger; ‘they are on the first floor ... four rooms and a balcony.’

‘How nice,’ beamed Mother; ‘then I think we’ll go straight up and have a little rest before lunch.’

And with considerable majestic graciousness she led her family upstairs.

Later we descended to lunch in a large and gloomy room full of dusty potted palms and contorted statuary. We were served by the bewhiskered porter, who had become the head waiter simply by donning tails and a celluloid dicky that creaked like a convention of crickets. The meal, however, was ample and well cooked, and we ate hungrily. As coffee was served, Larry sat back in his chair with a sigh.

‘That was a passable meal,’ he said generously. ‘What do you think of this place, Mother?’

‘Well, the *food’s* all right, dear,’ said Mother, refusing to commit herself.

‘They seem a helpful crowd,’ Larry went on. ‘The manager himself shifted my bed nearer the window.’

‘He wasn’t very helpful when I asked for paper,’ said Leslie.

‘Paper?’ asked Mother. ‘What did you want paper for?’

‘For the lavatory ... there wasn’t any in there,’ explained Leslie.

‘Shhh! Not at the table,’ whispered Mother.

‘You obviously don’t look,’ said Margo in a clear and penetrating voice; ‘they’ve got a little box full by the pan.’

‘Margo, dear!’ exclaimed Mother, horrified.

‘What’s the matter? Didn’t you see the little box?’

Larry gave a snort of laughter.

‘Owing to the somewhat eccentric plumbing system of the town,’ he explained to Margo kindly, ‘that little box is provided for the ... er ... debris, as it were, when you have finished communing with nature.’

Margo’s face turned scarlet with a mixture of embarrassment and disgust.

‘You mean ... you mean ... that was ... My God! I might have caught some foul disease,’ she wailed, and, bursting into tears, fled from the dining-room.

‘Most insanitary,’ said Mother severely; ‘it really is a *disgusting* way to do things. Quite apart from the mistakes one can make, I should think there’s a danger of getting typhoid.’

‘Mistakes wouldn’t happen if they’d organize things properly,’ Leslie pointed out, returning to his original complaint.

‘Yes, dear; but I don’t think we ought to discuss it now. The best thing we can do is to find a house as soon as possible, before we all go down with something.’

Upstairs Margo was in a state of semi-nudity, splashing disinfectant over herself in quantities, and Mother spent an exhausting afternoon being forced

to examine her at intervals for the symptoms of the diseases which Margo felt sure she was hatching. It was unfortunate for Mother's peace of mind that the Pension Suisse happened to be situated in the road leading to the local cemetery. As we sat on our small balcony overhanging the street an apparently endless succession of funerals passed beneath us. The inhabitants of Corfu obviously believed that the best part of a bereavement was the funeral, for each seemed more ornate than the last. Cabs decorated with yards of purple and black crêpe were drawn by horses so enveloped in plumes and canopies that it was a wonder they could move. Six or seven of these cabs, containing the mourners in full and uninhibited grief, preceded the corpse itself. This came on another cart-like vehicle, and was ensconced in a coffin so large and lush that it looked more like an enormous birthday cake. Some were white, with purple, black-and-scarlet, and deep blue decorations; others were gleaming black with complicated filigrees of gold and silver twining abundantly over them, and glittering brass handles. I had never seen anything so colourful and attractive. This, I decided, was really the way to die, with shrouded horses, acres of flowers, and a horde of most satisfactorily grief-stricken relatives. I hung over the balcony rail watching the coffins pass beneath, absorbed and fascinated.

As each funeral passed, and the sounds of mourning and the clopping of hooves died away in the distance, Mother became more and more agitated.

'I'm sure it's an epidemic,' she exclaimed at last, peering down nervously into the street.

'Nonsense, Mother; don't fuss,' said Larry airily.

'But, dear, so *many* of them ... it's unnatural.'

'There's nothing unnatural about dying ... people do it all the time.'

'Yes, but they don't die like flies unless there's something wrong.'

'Perhaps they save 'em up and bury 'em in a bunch,' suggested Leslie callously.

'Don't be silly,' said Mother. 'I'm sure it's something to do with the drains. It can't be healthy for people to have *those* sort of arrangements.'

'My God!' said Margo sepulchrally, 'then I suppose I'll get it.'

'No, no, dear; it doesn't follow,' said Mother vaguely; 'it might be something that's not catching.'

'I don't see how you can have an epidemic unless it's something catching,' Leslie remarked logically.