

# Durrell and other animals

**Martin Whiting**

GERALD DURRELL:  
THE AUTHORISED BIOGRAPHY  
by Douglas Botting (HarperCollins)

**D**ouglas Botting, author of three other biographies including that of Gavin Maxwell (*Ring of Bright Water*), now provides a detailed account of the life of Gerald Durrell — conservationist, educator, writer and champion of endangered species and animals the world over. Best known for *My Family and Other Animals*, a humorous account of his upbringing on the Greek island of Corfu, Durrell served as an inspiration to countless biologists, amateur and professional alike. Indeed, his books (37 in total) probably helped launch the careers of a myriad zoologists.

To his credit, Durrell saw the big picture, of which zoos were only a part. For him, zoos were a triage procedure: a reservoir for animals requiring drastic conservation efforts. In a utopian scenario, all wild animal populations would be stable and conservation would no longer require the services of zoos.

He established special conservation programs for endangered species in their native countries for the purpose of *in situ* conservation and trained locals to make his ideas a reality. The book outlines Durrell's successes in such exotic lands as Mauritius and Madagascar. We also learn of his failures, such as his intensive efforts to save the volcano rabbit in the mountains surrounding Mexico City, which came to naught.

Botting's crisp, easily readable prose documents Durrell's life from birth to his final days in a Jersey hospital. The reader gains insight into the real Durrell: alcoholic, romantic, fiery, visionary, manic depressive and a passionate campaigner for endangered species and habitats.

The biography also tackles those aspects of Gerald Durrell's life unknown to his countless readers. We learn the intimate details of Gerald's rollercoaster relationship with his first wife Jacqui and, later, with the much younger Lee McGeorge. In both relationships, Gerald showed sometimes obsessive behaviour and desperate insecurity. If I have a complaint about the book, it is Botting's painfully drawn-out treatment of Gerald's courtship of Lee. One labours through a vast selection of love letters — a smaller selection would have sufficed.

Yet it is also the many excerpts from Durrell's unpublished writings that help make this book. We learn of the boy Gerry's extraordinary talent for poetry and how this was nurtured by his elder brother Lawrence, later a highly accomplished writer himself (author of *The Alexandria Quartet*).

Botting successfully portrays Gerald Durrell for the extraordinary talent and character that he was. He is unafraid to probe Durrell's darker side. Through the intimate details of his family relationships as well as an account of his career, Botting provides much artful insight into Durrell's life.

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