

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 18, No 1 (2021)

Historical Review / La Revue Historique

The *H*istorical Review
La Revue *H*istorique



VOLUME XVIII (2021)

Section de Recherches Néohelléniques
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Section of Neohellenic Research
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF

Brewster Chamberlin, The Durrell Log: A Chronology of the Life and Times of Lawrence Durrell

Wayne Arnold

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To cite this article:

Arnold, W. (2022). Brewster Chamberlin, The Durrell Log: A Chronology of the Life and Times of Lawrence Durrell. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 18(1), 283–285. Retrieved from <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/historicalReview/article/view/31385>

Brewster Chamberlin,
THE DURRELL LOG:
A CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE AND TIMES OF LAWRENCE DURRELL,
London: Colenso, 2019, 230 pages.

Lawrence Durrell's family has recently become somewhat of a household name due to the popularity of the ITV British network series, *The Durrells (The Durrells in Corfu)*, which ran for four seasons, from 2016 to 2019, and is based on Gerald Durrell's *The Corfu Trilogy* (1956–1978). Born in Jalandhar, India, Lawrence Durrell lived for 78 years (1912–1990); throughout these years, he traversed several continents and numerous countries before ending in Sommières, France. Not surprisingly, a comedy-drama TV series does not accurately depict the true lives of its characters. To trace the meaningful events across Durrell's history, the late Brewster Chamberlin (1939–2020) begins the third edition of *The Durrell Log* (revised, retitled and expanded) to document events in Lawrence Durrell's lifetime – it is, unsurprisingly, a more precise depiction of the man. The log commences with the year 331 BCE, the founding of the city of Alexandria, near the Mediterranean Sea. *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–1960) is arguably Durrell's most well-known and momentous literary contribution to twentieth-century British literature, and thus Chamberlin foregrounds Durrell's birth with the establishment of Alexandria, 2,300 years ago. Far from a biography, and devoid of literary analysis, *The Durrell Log* is a systematic approach aimed to provide

readers an easily accessible overview of the highs and lows of the author's history.

The original chronology on Durrell was first published in 2007. With an additional 12 years of historical data on Durrell, Chamberlin is able to expand this new volume to incorporate additional events that are beneficial for studies involving Durrell or his literary circle. Chamberlin credits his research during the writing of *A Hemingway Log: A Chronology of His Life and Times* (2015) with helping him determine areas where *The Durrell Log* could be improved. Significant effort was given to correct misleading or erroneous information previously published in the biographies. At times, Chamberlin reacts rather harshly to these unintended errors; in other places, the facts are not clear and Chamberlin states why he agrees or disagrees with the biographers. Towards the middle and later period of Durrell's life, the focus is placed more on the writing and publication of his novels. While the majority of the log is well-cited for sources, the material covering the latter days seems less documented, leaving curious minds to wonder where additional information may be found.

Chamberlin is tightly connected with the top scholars on Durrell, and his extended communication with these

individuals – ranging over several years – has meaningfully contributed to new and clarified biographical facts on Durrell. Three of Chamberlin’s correspondents are worth mentioning. Most importantly is the feedback on the original text (first edition) that Chamberlin received from Ian MacNiven, Durrell’s official biographer, and personal friend. MacNiven published *Lawrence Durrell: A Biography* (1998) and was editor of the expanded *The Durrell–Miller Letters, 1935–80* (1988). The biography of Durrell took two decades to compile, and Chamberlin had access to these materials and received advice on the draft from MacNiven. Next, the corrective feedback and biographical insight from Richard Pine (founder of the Durrell School of Corfu), who met Durrell in January 1972 and then again in 1988, adds clarity to certain areas of Durrell’s history. During these years Pine exchanged letters with Durrell and eventually published *Lawrence Durrell: The Mindscape* (1994, 2005). Pine utilised archival material on Durrell to publish *The Mindscape*, and his knowledge of Durrell’s notebooks and writing methods make his input substantial. A third important correspondent was Michael Haag, author of *Alexandria: City of Memory* (2004) and *The Durrells in Corfu* (2017). Haag is currently working on a new biography of Durrell, and his knowledge of Durrell’s physical movements as well as having conducted interviews with people who knew Durrell is important for the data. Additional support was provided by Durrell’s family members, Penelope Durrell Hope and Lee Durrell. The contributions by these three established Durrell scholars in

conjunction with Chamberlin’s extensive reading on Durrell helps to ensure that *The Durrell Log* is the principal source of chronological information on Durrell.

While Chamberlin has created a very readable account of Durrell’s activities, there are a couple of major detractors to the log. The first relates to the lack of incorporated archival research. While much of Durrell’s correspondence is published, these letters have been released in an edited form, meaning Chamberlin must rely on the editors and their cuts and omissions from certain correspondences. Apparently and lamentably, there is no direct handling of the Durrell materials at Southern Illinois University (that Durrell sold in 1970 and then built a swimming pool with the money); although, there are numerous indirect references to the materials held there. It also seems a significant gap that the Durrell letters at the University of California, Los Angeles, appear to have remained unexamined. It may be that Chamberlin saw these materials, but there is no direct citation to either crucial archive – only indirect references. Additionally, the log might be more engaging if certain snippets were included from various published letters that Chamberlin references. The other noticeable detractor is that Chamberlin inserts his personal opinion into historical facts, far too often – almost to the point of distraction. For instance, when Durrell was 25, he began reading Nietzsche, which Chamberlin posits was “a potentially dangerous undertaking in one so young and volatile” (31). Such comments, and many others, diminish rather than add to the chronicle; after all, a factual timeline is desired, not one

peppered with personal musings about events and people.

The Durrell Log is a relatively quick read and has been compiled by someone who clearly has a passionate interest in the subject. Importantly, Chamberlin does not avoid the controversial side of Durrell's abusive relationships with women and his daughter, Sappho. Nor does he skirt around the fact that Durrell cuckolded his bosom friend Henry Miller (1891–1980) through his brief affair with Hoki Tokuda. As with most historical inventories, this log is a work in progress, one that may never satisfactorily conclude. In its third iteration, the work

has certainly reached a point where it needs to be considered as essential material for any scholar intending to write about Durrell and his compatriots and fellow writers. The book will also serve as a useful resource for exploring additional texts that mention Durrell, as Chamberlin compiled an extensive list of cited works. While not flawless, *The Durrell Log* is worth the reasonable price and can function well in placing Durrell's publications in an easily visualised and linear historical context.

Wayne E. Arnold
University of Kitakyushu