



## Starling Lawrence

Montenegro  
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### How did you decide to set *Montenegro* in the early-twentieth-century milieu?

My choice of the year 1908 was influenced by two factors. First, there was a model of sorts for the boy Toma in *Montenegro* who grows into the inventor/protagonist of *The Lightning Keeper*. He was an immigrant Serb scientist named Michael Idvorsky Pupin, and he did his important work during that period, though he was a bit older than TomA: He wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning autobiography, *From Immigrant to Inventor*, that was tremendously useful in reconstructing an immigrant life, and I knew of him because he had built an extravagant stone castle just down the road from my parents' house.

Second, I wanted there to be a bit of excitement in the Balkan setting of *Montenegro*, but reaching directly for World War I seemed too obvious and predictable. Fortunately, or unfortunately, there is hair-raising material wherever you look in the history of the Balkans, and the year 1908 was full of interesting developments that prefigured the outbreak of the world war. That was the year of the

Young Turks' revolt, and everyone knew that it meant trouble to come in the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire; the secret Serb revolutionary movement, sometimes known as The Black Hand, was already active and had, only the year before, tried to assassinate Prince Nikola of Montenegro, using exactly the same bombs that Gavrilo Princip carried to Sarajevo; and in 1908 Austria formulated the secret — or not so secret — mobilization orders (Plan Yellow) that it would implement to overwhelm Serbia in 1914. In other words the tinder was there in 1908, waiting for the match.

### *Montenegro* has been variously described as an historical epic, a love story, and an adventure novel. As the book's author and a publisher by trade, how would you categorize it?

That's like asking me to say which of my three children I like best, and I have always thought of categories for books as a dreary publishing necessity. May I not have all of the above? My book doesn't make much sense without the love story — actually three love stories. Writing fiction about the Balkans that is not an adventure would be like writing a novel set in the Vatican that doesn't mention religion. And as for "historical epic," I think everyone who has written about the Balkans, fiction or non-fiction, comes to William Faulkner's conclusion about the history of the American South: "The past is not dead. It isn't even past." So if someone has to choose a category for *Montenegro*, it won't be me.

### What sorts of historical and field research did you do in writing *Montenegro*?

Aside from encyclopedias, my information came largely from the work of three extraordinary women (in whose company I would love to have traveled.) First and foremost there was Rebecca West's magnificent history of the Balkans, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, a book so beautiful and so full of useful material that it took me well over a year to read. Then there was Edith Durham, who wrote many volumes on Albania and her neighbors leading up to and through the world war. And last — though first chronologically — was Georgina Muir Mackenzie, who traveled just about everywhere in the region in the early 1860's and wrote *Travels in the Slavonic Provinces of Turkey-in-Europe*, a book brimming with details on language, customs, landscapes, dress, food, architecture, and so on. Colorful incidental information was found on the dusty shelves of contemporary accounts in the London Library: odd volumes by Colonel Blimp and his clones chronicling hunting or automotive adventures. The fictions of Ivo Andric supplied evocative details on many aspects of Balkan life and history.

All of this reading allowed me to bluff my way through the setting and history behind the novel, although I had spent only a week in Montenegro itself. Of course there is no real substitute for being there, but I was handicapped during that week by the language barrier and by trying to keep one eye on the road and one on the extraordinary scenery. And I forgot, literally, to put film in my camera, so I was really grateful for those books.

### The true nature of Auberger Harwell's mission in Montenegro remains mysterious even to him. Why did you decide to leave this key element of the novel ambiguous?

The ambiguity seemed both realistic and interesting to me. Harwell's employer, who exists only in my imagination, is a man of vast wealth and thwarted political ambition. He doesn't send Harwell out there to storm the Bastille or overthrow a government, but to gather information that will give him, Lord Polgrove, an advantage over the fellows in Whitehall who seem to have their heads firmly in the sand when it comes to the Balkans. For years — this is history now — the foreign ministry of Sir Edward Grey had been pursuing a policy of neutrality and willed ignorance, leaving the Balkans as rope in a Great Power tug-of-war between Austria and Russia: British disinterest had reached the point where, in the mid-1890's a directive went out to British consuls to cease collecting economic information on the Balkans. The home office wasn't interested and didn't know what to do with it. But Polgrove is no fool: he knows that things are happening in the Balkans that will affect the balance of power in Europe, and any man who has good information and can predict events is in a position of power. It is Harwell's job to be Polgrove's eyes and ears, and had he been a more able or willing spy, he could have given Polgrove the information contained in the answer to the first question, above.

### Your most recent book, *The Lightning Keeper*, follows Toma Pekočević, whom you introduced to readers in *Montenegro*. What drew you to revisit this character?

I could hardly do otherwise. When I started out to write a novel based loosely on the life and career of Michael Pupin, I knew I had to create an interesting and lively background for him, some sort of cultural and family history that would propel him from Europe to the

United States. What I didn't know is how interesting his (Pupin's or Toma's) background would turn out to be. As a result of all the reading I did, I had amassed a trove of material on the Balkans that cried out to be used, and it simply resisted compression into a prologue, or a first chapter, or even part one of the novel I thought I would write. In other words, the Balkan background grew into a whole book of its own — *Montenegro* — and the rest of the story about Toma's life in America and his scientific achievement was put off until I could write *The Lightning Keeper*.