

Lucian Boia, ed., *Maria, Regina României, Jurnal de război: 1916-1917. Precedat de însemnări din 1910-1916 [Mary, Queen of Romania, War Diary: 1916-1917. Preceded by notes of 1910-1916]*, translated from English by Anca Bărbulescu, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2014, 502 pp.

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Romanian history is not very rich in feminine characters. Surely, there are ladies and princesses of all time, but their role is rather decorative and their notoriety, quite low. Moreover, in the 20th century, negative myths were surrounding the women of those times (e.g., Elena Lupescu and Elena Ceaușescu). One character is nonetheless the exception: Queen Mary. Sometimes, lately, it seems that she is overrated. For example, a few years ago, almost all contributors of a feminist texts collection mentioned her as a model of socially and politically involved woman. This is true, but not really feminist! I will explain on request. Like any great character, the one called Maria is as complex as it is prone to simplifying reception. That's what the war diary reveals.

Some "technical" clarifications are necessary. First, the main merit belongs to Lucian Boia, a declared fan of the Queen, to which he paid tribute in his previous book, *Balchik. The little paradise of Great Romania* (Humanitas, 2014). But, with all my admiration for Professor Boia's work, I think that, on the cover page, it would have been more appropriate to mention "on an idea by", instead of "edited by". The *Foreword* is mainly short and summarized; the explanatory notes are

pretty frail and they leave plenty of characters and situations in fog. Certainly, *hard* historians or document editors have many reproaches. But, the pleasure of reading is not seriously affected. The text has something special, different from the Queen's souvenirs (covering the period up to 1918 and published under the title *The story of my life*, first in the interwar period, then in several editions since 1989) and the daily diaries (so far ten volumes, from different publishers, during 2006-2013). Talent is obvious everywhere. But the *Diary* of 1916-1917 (when the myth aroused) lacks, sometimes, "self-censorship", as Lucian Boia remarked in the *Foreword*. Maria said things more "directly" than in her other writings (p. 6).

Even more spectacular than the diary itself are the autobiographical notes (written between 1910 and 1916) preceding it. Maria recounts her childhood fairytale and her dramatic first years in Romania. The main source of sorrow was the loneliness of the 17 year girl, cut off from family and forced to live in the oppressive Romanian Royal Palace. Outside the new home, everything looked strange to her: from the elites' habits to the fact that the few trees were cut without a care. The portraits of her relatives are memorable. Carol I, the "uncle", that she sincerely and increasingly appreciated, is described as "a man who lived solely for his work" (p. 73), but he was inclined to tyrannical behaviour and sometimes had the air of a vaudeville character. The "reluctant" Ferdinand (Nando) was just the opposite, allowing the old King to dominate him, though, often, he did not agree with him. In the princely couple, things were not rosy. Between the two, there seemed to be a physical and psychological incompatibility. He "was not the man to awaken interest in a young girl" (p. 61); she was "a young girl innocent as a newborn lamb and almost as stupid as one" (p. 58). The first pregnancy seemed something "horrible, horrible, almost monstrous" (p. 70).

But the relationship went forward, willingly needed. The two came to the throne in complicated times. The years 1916-1917 were, probably, the hardest of their lives as royalty and as humans. Maria was no longer the "baby" from the beginning, but a strong woman

who would make history. Her life was marked by the death of little Prince Mircea (October 20/ November 2, 1916), her youngest son. It added the refuge in Iasi, after the occupation of the south, with the bleak prospect of exile in Russia. But Russia was seized by the revolutionary buzz, and Mary became concerned for the fate of her sister, Ducky, married to Grand Duke Kirill (considered later the "Tzar in Exile"). Altogether, the Queen shows herself as a normal woman, with all common activities, thoughts, pleasures. She was involved in arranging a residence in Iasi, talked to the ladies around, walked etc. Occasionally, she even noted: "I washed my head." Ferdinand, with his many duties, is an episodic appearance. She has quasi-permanently two men around, two pillars: Colonel Ernest Ballif (royal adjutant) and the legendary Barbu Știrbey (at that time, the administrator of the Crown Domains). The woman had several crises of jealousy and possessiveness. For example, when she felt that "my good Ballif" fell under the influence of another woman: "I am the most gentle person in the world, but what's mine is mine" (p. 300), "I would rather give up to ask any service, no matter how significant it would be for me, than to know that I'm not the only one he serves" (p. 302). It is a well-known legend that Barbu Știrbey was an "intimate friend" of the Queen. The *Diary* does not bring anything sensational. "Barbu" appears next to her day by day, especially in delicate moments. "Barbu came to tea" is a leitmotif of the story.

Due to her public activity during the war, Maria earned the nickname "Mother of the Wounded". In Bucharest, she patronized a hospital. In Iasi, she could not do this, but she spent most of the time visiting and bringing aids (including cigarettes) in many hospitals and camps. She also wrote in the newspapers many articles of encouragement. At one point, she found that some soldiers "drew the letter M on their buttons, with pen, or they scribbled my name". And she wrote: "I cannot deny that the news gives me great pleasure, as it is a sign that my words have reached the hearts" (p. 374).

However, the humanitarian activity is not the only source of Mary's legend. She had gone beyond the traditional role of wives of

monarchs. Unhappy with the men's actions (Ferdinand, Carol, various politicians and officers), she sought to intervene in political and military matters. Status and context forced her to backstage action (especially through the same Știrbey). For our history, it is important to report the discussion with the Prime Minister of the time, Ionel Brătianu, who "knows he's stronger than me, but also knows that I'm the only force that might cause grief" (p. 68). She wanted more; she wanted to exercise power directly. The "supreme exclamation" (Lucian Boia, p. 9), retained by almost all who presented the book, is: "I would like to be King - I might be wrong, but I would not allow anybody to tell lies on my account, I would compel everyone to do their duty from morning to night, with harsh words and harsh facts, if needed ... "(p. 139). Hence, a certain tension between the two crowned heads: "... the situation of the two houses (mine and Nando's) is not at all simple, natural jealousies arise and the other side, materially stronger, tries to tease our side which is recognized as morally superior" (p. 441).

Beyond Queen's expressive writing - or perhaps because of it - there is a danger, the danger of too firm conclusions. The *Diary* feeds the widespread prejudice of a weak King, sustained or substituted by a powerful Queen. It seems she was almost everything and he was almost nothing. But we must keep in mind that things are presented from one single perspective. If the attention is focused on a character, it does not mean that the other does not matter. There are still many things to be studied. In the next issue of this journal, we will present the other two volumes of the *War Diary*, covering the years 1917 and 1918.