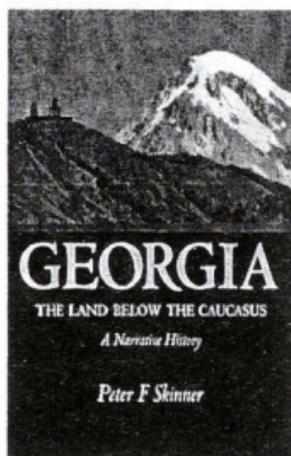


## The “Lost” Country Why is Georgian History and Culture so Little Known in the English-speaking World?

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**Resume:** In November of 2013 Levan Kiknadze, a Georgian archaeologist, residing in the US, sent an open letter to the editorial board of “The Kartvelologist” journal. He introduced Peter Skinner, an American historian whose illustrated book about the history of Georgia was being prepared for publication. Mr. Kiknadze suggested that we published Skinner’s article and informed us about his disappointment on the fact that English speaking readers hardly know the history of Georgia and had no access to the relevant literature. On my part, I

communicated to Mr. Skinner that several important books have been recently published in English in Georgia and international experts in Kartvelian studies published monographs on the history of Georgia in English and German. But we considered it necessary to publish this article after the relevant expert review.

The article demonstrates great love for and admiration of rich Georgian culture and its old, heroic history. Though, it also deals with the frustration with the fact that there are very few publications about Georgia in English and they are not available for wide circles of readers.

I believe that scholars and cultural professionals should take into account the researcher’s remarks. We should manage to listen to the remarks full of compassion towards us and improve the situation.

The article is published both in English and Georgian (translated by Mr. Kiknadze).

*Editor*

**Key Words:** *history of Georgia, Georgian literature, Piter Scinner*

(a) The problem: why is Georgian history so little known in the West?

For many English-speakers their first (and often only) meeting with “Georgia” is in the schoolroom, where the tale of Jason and Argonauts brings a vague awareness of Colchis and the Caucasus, but little else. Later, we may follow Pompey to Africa and Spain, but not to Iberia and Colchis. Thus our first tenuous connection with “Georgia” ends. Why? Why do the overwhelming majority of us know nothing about Georgia – nothing of Georgia and its brilliant Christian culture and scholarship, of Georgia and its heroic struggles against the Arabs, Jalal-ad-Din, the Mongols, Timur, the Persians, the Turks and the Russians? Why do we know nothing of Parnavaz, Vakhtang Gorgasali, David IV, Tamar, Teimuraz I, Vakhtang VI and Erekle II? Why do so few of us know of *The Knight in the Panther Skin*, or recognize the names Tsereteli, Chavchavadze, Vazha Pshaveli or Tabidze? Or Pirosmiani, Gudiashvili or Kakabadze?

A major problem is location: Georgia lies beyond Constantinople, beyond our artificial boundary of “Europe”; yet we do not associate Georgia with the Near East. Language has not helped; both the Georgian script and grammar are immensely challenging. In addition, a constantly changing mosaic of political entities hampers acquaintanceship. Religion has not helped; only the specialist sees beyond Western European Catholicism and Protestantism. Georgia (at least until 1990) could be termed “a stepchild of history,” presented to us most often as a footnote to Persian, Turkish, and Russian history, shamefully shortsighted and intellectually limited though this is.

We can argue that neglect is the fate of many small countries, but we have to note that Georgia has not yet launched any

concerted and continuing program to secure translation of the nation's most important historical and literary works (or selections from them) into English. Foreign publishers are sponsored program of translations, undertaken by Georgian and foreign translator-scholars working in tandem, will bring Georgia's history fully on stage.

(b) The current state of Georgian studies. What materials do we have in English? What level; what availability?

It would be crass to neglect what has been done. We have the recent English-language histories of Georgia by V. Silogava and Kakha Shengelia (2007) and by N. Asatiani and O. Janelidze (2009). However, both books are so fact-filled as overwhelm the non-scholar reader, and neither has an index, making fruitful use difficult. A still more recent history appears to have been machine-translated, producing frequently eccentric English in often inverted word order – and costs over \$250! We still lack a series of accessible accounts of Georgian history *selected and edited* to meet the needs of non-scholars, non-specialist who wishes to extend their horizons. A continuous chronological account is the primary need, and such an account should not exclude interesting and colorful passages from *kartlis tskhovreba*, from Vakhushti, from M-F Brosset, and from Javakhishvili and other moderns. It is desirable also to address architecture, art and literature – but to do so would require an additional volume.

In terms of English-language works, the situation is not entirely bleak; very valuable work has been done by a handful of brilliant and committed scholars. We have Oliver Wardrop's *The Kingdom of Georgia* (1888), W.E.D Allen's *A History of the Georgian People* (1932), D.M. Lang's *Last Years of the Georgian Monarchy* (1957), his *A Modern History of Georgia* (1962), and R.G. Suny's *A History of Georgia* (1988). Most recently we can welcome D. Rayfield's dauntingly detailed *Edge of Empire: A History of Georgia* (2012). On the literary front we have Marjory Wardrop's translation of *The Night in the Panther's Skin* (1912) and D. Rayfield's magisterial *The Literature of Georgia* (1994). But all the

foregoing are *academic* rather than *popular* works; all demand much knowledge of the reader. Earlier titles are out of print, and very expensive if found; contemporary titles are also extremely expensive and are held only by major university libraries – and in many cases readers may not be take them off the premises. Other more specialist material exists in scholarly books and journals within national and university libraries. These items include R. Thomson’s translation of Parts I to VI (King David) of *kartlis tskhovreba, bedi kartlisa* (ed. K. and N. Salia), and translations of a very modest number of Georgian poems, short stories, and prose pieces.



(c) An attempt at a remedy; one writer’s approach

It soon became clear that if I wanted an accessible, mid-level account of Georgian history from the Greco-Colchian period to the Soviet invasion of 1921 – with a full-page color map per century (for 20 maps), plus 80 or so black-and-white illustrations – I would have to attempt to write one myself. I labored on – and a 500-page volume resulted. The book is not a work of original scholarship; it does not draw upon hitherto unknown archives. Rather, it reweaves the tapestry of Georgian history in simpler patterns. It draws upon some 300 books and articles (95 percent in English), all referenced in a Notes section that tells the reader what information came from

where; much cited material is making its first appearance outside academia. The guides the reader to sources – though few are easy to find outside major university libraries.

This effort at a history of Georgia by a foreign non-specialist is both impudent and imprudent. But there is no claim made that the book truly fulfills the stated need; rather, it attempts do so, while **highlighting** that need. It is intended to provoke and encourage Georgian scholars to say, “This is book may be a beginning, but we can do much better in presenting Georgia to the English-speaking world – and it is in Georgia’s best interest that we do so.”

#### (d) What needs to be done?.. Key works for translation

But how can we effectively bring Georgia on stage to the general reader? The first thing to realize in grandly offering a “What needs to be done” program is that the proposer may be largely unaware of what is actually being done already – and may not have considered the practical and financial challenges of doing more. Nonetheless, an additional voice – however unreasonably optimistic it may be – may add impetus. A vital first step is an attractively produced, well-illustrated, reader-friendly history of Georgia *for non-Georgians* that remains in print at an affordable price. In a highly visual era, a generous complement of full-page colored maps is essential: a national history needs to *show* as well as to *tell*. Likewise chronologies, genealogies, a bibliography (including Georgian texts that have been translated into English) are necessary. To provide a full context and to encourage sales of such a book, a supportive series of smaller an inexpensive books is needed – perhaps a dozen broad-appeal paperbacks on the nation’s regions and their folklore, on religious architecture, on secular architecture, on castles and soldiers, on pictorial and plastic arts, on scholarship and literature, on Georgian travelers abroad, on apparel and accouterments and on food and wines. A distinctive series of such publications could do much to seed the ground. Each title should reference all others, published or forthcoming. A modest number of such books exist, but there appears to be no *comprehensive* series – and few sources of relevant information about how to find and buy

such books.

Georgia's rich and influential cultural history – not adopted from her neighbors – was and is uniquely Georgian. Monasteries and scholarship at Mt Athos and Mt Sinai, in Syria and in Jerusalem are one example. Relations with Byzantium, participation in the Crusades, embassies to European courts, leadership roles in Persia and Russia are many other little-known examples. But surely exploration of a nation's literature provides the outsider with the deepest insights and the strongest bonds. We have translations of *The Knight in the Panther Skin* by M. Wardrop (1912), V. Urushadze (1968), K. Vivian (1977) and R. Stevenson (1977), but they remain little known. Donald Rayfield (see above) offers many illustrative translations of poetry – but because of space limitations – seldom a full poem. *Georgian Poetry* (2004), edited by Badri Sharvade, offers full translations by D. Rayfield, V. Urushadze, W. May and D. Russell of some 125 poems; the authors range chronologically through the great poets from Shota Rustaveli to Anna Kalandadze. However, it is virtually impossible to obtain the book.

On the prose front it's occasionally possible to obtain Gamsakhurdia's *The Hand of a Great Master* (1955, Moscow edition) and G. Abashidze's *Lasharela* (1981); the successor volume(s) have not been translated. Undoubtedly there's a sprinkling of other titles (including M. Wardrop's *Georgian Folk Tales*), but they don't surface. Art, architecture, decoration, and cuisine fare slightly better – at least for any book buyer visiting Tbilisi. But we still lack comprehensive editions of Pirosmiani, Gudiashvili, Gamrekeli and Otskheli, to name but a few. In Tbilisi, books on church architecture abound, but works on palaces and castles appear to be lacking.

Georgian printing and book-making is absolutely first class; take, for example, the Tbilisi, Mtskheta, and Kutaisi volumes of the Old Georgian Cities and Towns series; the materials of the Georgian National Tourism Agency, the publications of the Georgian Arts and Culture Centre, and a handful of books on textiles, food and wine. But how are we to find them?