

THE LAST TRAVELER

Patrick Leigh Fermor. *The Broken Road: From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos*, edited by Colin Thubron and Artemis Cooper. London: John Murray, 2013.

Artemis Cooper. *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure*, London: John Murray, 2012.

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Every traveler has regrets—places not seen, missed connections, things lost or forgotten. Chief among mine is that on my visits to Greece I never met Patrick Leigh Fermor, the legendary traveler, soldier, and writer, who died in 2011, at the age of 96. Mutual friends hailed Paddy, as he was known, for his gusto, gift for languages, and extraordinary memory. His wit, repertoire of stories and songs, and antic sense of humor made him the life of the party wherever he went, and he went everywhere. In Artemis Cooper's affectionate new biography, he emerges as a man on whom, in Henry James' words, nothing was lost—a wandering scholar who stayed determined up until the final weeks of his life to complete his celebrated trilogy of books based on his walk across Europe, in 1933, from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople. The first two installments of the trilogy, *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*, had earned him high praise in literary circles; when he passed away, readers avid for the final volume, which had bedeviled him for decades, despaired of hearing the rest of the story. Happily, Cooper and Colin Thubron salvaged from his manuscript and a long-lost notebook more than enough material to satisfy even skeptics of such editorial enterprises, and with the posthumous publication of *The Broken Road: From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos* Leigh Fermor's remarkable journey comes to an end.

It began in the first months of World War One, when soon after his birth his mother left him with a family in Northamptonshire and returned to India, where her husband worked as a geologist. The free reign he was given as a child decisively shaped his attitude toward authority, and from his early days in school it was apparent that despite his linguistic brilliance and passion for poetry, history, art, architecture, music, and religion he was not cut out for a quiet academic life. After his expulsion from the King's School in Canterbury, where his classmates included Alan Watts, who became an authority on Zen Buddhism, his education took a different form. He was

just 18 when he set out for Constantinople, now sleeping in shepherds' huts, now in the country houses of aristocrats, who opened their private libraries to him. Here he indulged his wide-ranging intellectual interests, in various languages, and followed his hunches and leads, acquiring a large view of the world, which would serve his writings.

He made friends everywhere, fought with Greek royalist forces to put down a rebellion in Macedonia, fell in love with a Romanian noblewoman. He was living with her in Moldavia when World War Two broke out; when he returned to London to enlist with the Irish Guard he could not know that when they next met, in 1965, she would be a prematurely old woman living in desperate circumstances, stripped of her possessions and lands by the Communist authorities. But she had a gift for him—his so-called Green Diary, the last and only surviving notebook from his journey, which furnishes the final pages of *The Broken Road*.

He had a good war, the highlight of which took place in Nazi-occupied Crete, when he led an operation to capture the German commandant and spirit him to Cairo—a daring plot that became the subject of a popular feature film, *Ill Met by Moonlight*, in which his role was played by Dirk Bogard. (It is said that his friend Ian Fleming based the character of James Bond on Paddy's exploits, which included parachuting into Crete on three separate occasions.) There is a famous story about their escape from the island: how at daybreak the German officer, gazing at the peak of Mount Ida, quoted a line in Latin, "*Vides ut alta stet nive candidum Soracte*" (You see how high Soracte stands, bright with snow). "It was one of the few Odes of Horace that Paddy knew by heart," Cooper writes, "and which he had translated at school. Taking up where the General had left off, he went on to the end of the poem.

The General's blue eyes swivelled away from the mountain-top to mine—and when I'd finished, after a long silence, he said, '*Ach so, Herr Major.*' It was very strange. '*Ja, Herr General.*' As though, for a long moment, the war had ceased to exist. We had both drunk at the same fountains long before; and things were different between us for the rest of our time together.

There is also a dark story about him killing a close friend in the Cretan Resistance, when his gun accidentally went off. This grieved him to no end—and caused a blood feud, which was not lifted for more than thirty years, by which time he had embarked on a successful literary career, publishing travel books about the Caribbean and Greece, a novel, and his translation of a wartime memoir by another Cretan friend. He married a British viscount's daughter, designed and built a house in the Peloponnese, and several de-

ades after his journey across Europe wrote, from memory, *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*.

The Broken Road was his first attempt to deal with this material. A magazine assignment to write about the pleasures of walking unleashed a torrent of memories and words, roughly 65,000 more than his editor wanted, and this inspired him to return to the beginning of his walk and write it up in its entirety. “Bad luck,” he confides, “dogged my notes and my sketches all through this journey.” His first diaries were stolen in Munich, his subsequent diaries were left in Romania, and so the “only tangible data” remaining from his journey were two tattered maps punctuated by cross-bars marking his overnight stays and his passport; from these he pieced together his itinerary and wrote page after page of gorgeous descriptions. In *The Broken Road* he describes his method of composition:

All these dispersed fragments cohere in a jigsaw which is far from complete; but, by driving my memory back, by coercing and focusing it on one particular gap, I find that the missing pieces often slide to the surface and dovetail. Perhaps the fact that I have already recorded this particular tract of the past in a notebook, even though the records are lost, has helped to fix much of it several strata deep. Tones of voice, moods, lighting, details of landscape or costume, streets, castles, mountain ranges, warts, eyelashes, gold teeth, scars, smells, the arrangement of a room, a line of a song, the taste of food or drink tried for the first time, the name of the book left open on a bench, a paper headline or, quite often, some irrelevant object in a shop window that I neither admired nor coveted, a bowler-hatted or trilby-shaded face under a lamp-post or in a bar that I never met or conversed with or wanted to, but merely observed—how distinct from the galaxy of Baudelairean passing strangers I longed to know, like the figure in *A une passante!*—come running or lounging or sidling out of the cobwebby dark that has been harboring them for close on three decades. But there are some gaps that no feat of concentration can fill: the missing piece is lost for good.

My introduction to Leigh Fermor’s work was *A Time to Keep Silence*, an account of his visits to monasteries in France and Cappadocia in Turkey. This is his shortest book, and in some ways his most personal. He wears his learning lightly, distilling the essence of his wide reading, and honors the men who provide him sanctuary. “Life, for a monk,” he notes, “is shorter than the flutter of an eyelid in comparison to eternity, and this fragment of time flits past in the worship of God, the salvation of his soul, and in humble intercession for the souls of his fellow exiles from felicity.” He liked to visit monasteries in order to write, which prompted him to remark, “At St. Wandrille I was inhabiting at last a tower of solid ivory, and I, not the monks, was the escapist. For my hosts, the Abbey was a springboard into

eternity; for me, a retiring place to write a book and spring more effectively back into the maelstrom. Strange that the same habitat should prove favourable to ambitions so glaringly opposed.”

He was not an especially religious man, though he was fascinated by the variety of beliefs that he encountered in his travels, and yet it somehow seems fitting that his last published words date from his visit to the monastic republic of Athos, in northern Greece. Of Constantinople he wrote very little before traveling to Mount Athos, the center of Eastern Orthodox monasticism, and in the journal of his time there we glimpse those endearing qualities that will find full expression in his later work—his incongruous sense of humor (he was reading Byron’s *Don Juan* in a community of celibates), his eye for pattern and detail, his zeal for living. He brought out the best in people, as in this sketch of a monk who dreams of winning the sweepstakes:

After supper, Velisarios paid me a visit in my room, sat himself down with a whirl of draperies, and seemed quite changed from his former worldly mood. He railed against the Catholics and freemasons, and then went on to sinners in general, saying that they may have a good time now, but when they are dead, ‘God’ll see to ’em, God’ll fix them fullows up OK?’ Then he launched forth on saints and miracles and peripatetic ikons, fascinating tales of which, owing to his strange English, I could not grasp the rull tenor. One phrase sticks in my mind: ‘His woman, she made him three boys.’

Hearing that I was setting off for the mainland tomorrow, he drew a little sketch map of the way and said he would talk to Ignatios about making up a lunch packet and wrote a note to an innkeeper there, explaining that I was going tyo Stathatos estate, and to help me as much as he could.

After he went, I wrote awhile, and then smoked the last of my tobacco, listening to the sea under my window, the waves breaking with a crash then sucking backwards with a rasp of pebbles. Looking at my jolly room, with the clean sheets and everything arranged so neatly, and at the glowing stove piled high with logs, I feel a great deal of regret at leaving this quiet and happy life. This last month will be an unbelievable memory when I’m back in England. I wonder when I shall be here again?

Paddy had a good time here below. And wherever he may be now we are fortunate that in these pages he left us his share of the winnings.