

General Adventures

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The subject of my essay this evening is the English writer Patrick Leigh Fermor. Leigh Fermor led a life of high adventure from his youth, first as a traveler, as a lover, as a soldier, and later as a sensitive and intelligent writer of acclaimed travel accounts and descriptions of place and peoples, one novel, and a screen play. He also wrote thousands of entertaining letters to his many friends. Some of those letters have now been published to delight the rest of us. Indeed, since his death in 2011, a growing cottage industry has arisen in Great Britain to publish and republish his books and letters, which are now preserved in the National Library of Scotland. His work has been introduced to readers in the United States, who are less familiar with him. We are indebted to a revealing biography about him written by historian Artemis Cooper, the granddaughter of Lady Diana Manners and Duff Cooper, the noted diplomat, bon-vivant, writer, and friend of Leigh Fermor. Some of you may already be familiar with Leigh Fermor and his work, but for those of you who are not, I offer my essay as an introduction and invitation to many hours of enjoyable reading.

Patrick Leigh Fermor was born in 1915, during the Great War, in England to well-educated and talented upper-middle-class parents, his father a geologist in the Indian Civil Service and his mother, a beautiful and artistic woman of imagination and intelligence. His parents left him in the care of a working-class family in rural England while his mother and his older sister sailed back to India, the idea being that if their steamer were torpedoed he at least would survive. In this bucolic landscape Paddy—the name everyone called him for the rest of his

life—spent his first years running wild around the village. When his mother returned after the end of the war she took him away from rural play in the dirt and fields to live in London. He attended and was thrown out of a succession of pricy schools where he nonetheless received a good education. Bookish and intelligent, with a broad romantic streak, he was not a dutiful scholar. He observed later that his country idyll, “had unfitted me for the faintest shadow of restraint.” [intro letter TOG, 7] At seventeen he was expelled from King’s School in Canterbury for a romance with the twenty-four-year-old daughter of a local grocer. He returned to London to live with his mother—who had divorced her husband, who remained in India and only returned to England on leave every three years. Paddy decided to enter the army via the military academy at Sandhurst. But first he had to pass the entrance exams. While cramming he fell in with a worldly group of artistic types who distracted him from study. The thought of an army career faded. But a new idea struck him. As he later wrote, “A plan unfolded with the speed and the completeness of a Japanese paper flower in a tumbler.” (*ibid.*, 17) He would hike across Europe, west to east, ending up in Constantinople (or Istanbul).

Though his family, friends, and mentors had misgivings, Paddy’s plan gained acceptance. He would start in the Netherlands and walk southeast to where Europe touched the Orient. His father continued his small allowance and he obtained a few letters of introduction to people in Germany; these letters later had a profound effect on his trek. Thus, in December 1933, at age eighteen, Leigh Fermor boarded a steamer in London and took passage to Rotterdam and set out on foot. He had obtained a rucksack, sturdy boots, puttees, a few shirts and pants, and a used army overcoat. He also carried notebooks in which he recorded what he did and saw. Along his way he would pick up one-pound notes at consulates or post offices sent from his father.

In Holland and Germany he stayed in what essentially were hostels for all types of travelers found in almost every village and town. Sometimes, especially in spring and summer, he slept in barns or in nooks along the road if he was too far from the next town. He paused in big cities to see the sights, and took a barge ride down the Rhine bidden by friendly bargemen he had met in a tavern. But mostly he walked. He ate in village groceries and coffee shops and saloons, where he talked to everyone and everyone talked to him. When he told people he was hiking across Europe he received kindness and help from everyone. He worked diligently to learn the local languages and became adept in most. He met generosity everywhere, and in turn he was kind, gregarious, and warm to all the people he encountered, rich or poor. When he reached Munich his rucksack was stolen in the hostel, but he was helped out by kindly Germans. This was a year after Hitler and his Nazi Party took control of Germany.

It was in Munich that the letters of introduction he had received first had their important effect. There he was introduced to an aristocratic family who took him in, helped to re-outfit him, wined and dined him, showed him the local sights, and generally entertained him. In turn, it is clear that he enchanted them. Here was this handsome youth, outgoing, intelligent, curious, eager to please and be pleased, in the middle of a noble quest. Everyone took a keen interest in his journey. His local hosts proceeded to write more letters of introduction to their relatives and friends along his southeastward route. In this way, he walked across southern Germany, Austria, Hungary and into Rumania, going where the letters gave him entrance. Leigh Fermor was passed from one count or baron's country house or castle to the next, following an aristocratic family trail. He was wined and dined, shown the local sights, taken to the hottest nightclubs in the cities, and danced with the local beauties in borrowed evening attire. In the summer he lingered at the country houses of Hungarian and Rumanian landed aristocrats who asked him to stay on as long

as he wished. German was the lingua franca most of the time, but his fluent French helped, too. He became close friends with many along his route, and until war broke out and destroyed many of their cultured and sophisticated lives he kept up a correspondence with them. Many were Jews, and if the Nazis did not kill them, the Soviets later persecuted them for being landed gentry. He enjoyed an extraordinary hospitality throughout his journey from both the high-born and the lowly. He often received shelter and food from peasants, especially in Hungary and Rumania. It was customary for the very poorest people to offer assistance to the traveler and stranger.

A noteworthy aspect of his journey was his application to the libraries in the country houses and castles he visited. He read about the history of countries he visited; he read their national literatures; he studied their languages. His hosts took him to their important cultural sites. They gave him books to read on his travels. These books were his prized possessions. Later, fighting the Nazis in Greece, he mourned the loss of a book given to him by a German nobleman in Munich.

Along the way, Leigh Fermor had a number of romantic adventures. In Hungary he had an affair with an unhappily married woman, aided by a worldly count with whom he was staying. On another occasion, he and the count went skinny dipping in a nearby river and encountered two saucy peasant girls watching them who teased their nakedness and goaded them into chasing them. In Bulgaria he met a young woman he called his "twin," a girl from Plovdiv with whom he had a grand time. These stories are recounted tenderly and discretely in the three books that he wrote decades later about his year-long trek. His biographer, Artemis Cooper, notes that during his journey Leigh Fermor had numerous liaisons with ladies who were enchanted by this charming youth. Indeed, it was a few months after he reached Istanbul on New Year's Day of 1935 while

visiting Athens he met and fell in love with a beautiful Rumanian countess, Balasha, a member of one of the ruling families of Rumania. He went to stay with her at her country estate as her live-in lover. There he remained for several years in unwedded bliss, making an occasional trip home to Blighty.

Though wild and romantic, duty called at the beginning of World War Two and commanded Leigh Fermor, then in Rumania, to entrain for Britain to serve his country. He planned to obtain a commission in the elite Irish Guards regiment (being of remote Irish descent). But he got badly sick and languished in the Guards Depot hospital. Soon it became clear that his worldly knowledge and command of several languages made him valuable, especially as the Germans and their Italian fascist allies were moving into the Balkans. The Intelligence Corps offered him a commission and the prospect of service in Greece. Artemis Cooper quotes the report written on Leigh Fermor's completion of intelligence training: "Quite useless as a regimental officer, but in other capacities will serve the army well."

At first attached to the British army's intelligence headquarters in Athens, Leigh Fermor took part in the effort to repel the Italian invasion of Greece. His fluency in Greek and having traveled widely in the country, living with the people, served him well. In early 1941 German forces invaded Greece and Yugoslavia. He served as liaison between the Greek and British armies in Greece, which were pushed south. He participated in the battle for Crete, in which German paratroops dropped onto the island to seize airfields allowing transports to fly in reinforcements. Allied forces had to evacuate to Egypt, where Leigh Fermor went as well.

While in Cairo he joined what later came to be known as the Special Operations Executive, SOE, which was tasked with fighting in ungentlemanly ways. He learned to blow up

things and kill with his hands. In the spring of 1942 he and a small group of SOE officers were smuggled into German and Italian-occupied Crete by boat, there to work with local Cretan resistance forces who were waging a brutal guerrilla war. German reprisals on the Cretan people were severe, with whole villages murdered. Over the next two years Leigh Fermor fought alongside Greek fighters. This was his kind of work. He ran the western half of the island, supplying Cretan fighters with arms and ammo and helping to coordinate harassment of the Germans. He acted in many sabotage raids and other actions. He survived dangerous scrapes in which many of his Greek comrades were killed. He helped keep hopes alive among the natives for an allied invasion of the island. When the Italians bowed out of the war and the general commanding Italian forces and his staff switched sides, Paddy helped smuggle them to North Africa. Rough seas in the transfer to the Royal Navy vessel precluded return to the island and forced him to seek shelter in Cairo.

In the summer of 1943, in Cairo, inspired by the success of getting the Italian general out, Leigh Fermor, now a major, thought up a plan to abduct the German general commanding in Crete. SOE headquarters agreed to it, and assigned him a junior office, William Stanley Moss, to assist in the plot. In February 1944, Paddy parachuted back into Crete; bad weather forced Moss and others to come in by boat later.

General Friedrich-Wilhelm Müller, the commander of the German garrison of about forty thousand troops and target of the abduction plot, was hated by the Cretan population for his cruelty. He had ordered various atrocities as reprisals for guerrilla raids. His headquarters were outside Heraklion, the capital city of the island. Leigh Fermor's plan to seize Müller in the midst of a powerful German force was meant to buoy the spirits of the Cretans by making the occupiers look foolish. But preparations took some patience. Leigh Fermor and his partisan

friends “cased the joint,” studying escape routes, patrol schedules, and more. When German high command replaced Müller with another general, Heinrich Kreipe, Leigh Fermor went ahead with the plan. It was April 1944.

Having studied the general’s movements between his headquarters and his residence, the two British officers donned stolen German uniforms and stopped the general’s chauffeur-driven car en route to dinner. They portrayed sentries stopping ordinary traffic. He asked the driver for his papers, then shouting “Hände hoch!” they grabbed the general and his driver. They stuffed the general onto the floor of the backseat and with a few Cretan comrades on top of him they drove the general’s car, flying the general’s insignia, with impunity through a series of checkpoints in the center of Heraklion, calculating that pursuers would not think that they would try to escape through the middle of the main garrison. They figured correctly.

On the other side of the city, on Crete’s northern coast, they ditched the car and set out on foot to reach the south coast, there to meet a Royal Navy fast boat and spirit the general to Egypt. They traveled mostly by night, hiding in friendly villages or caves. They were assisted by the people, who fed them and warned them of German rescue columns. They crested Mount Ida, the tallest mountain on the island. One night on the mountain they crossed paths with a German patrol and amazingly escaped detection.

Radio difficulties and German efforts to guard likely southern-coast spots for a boat to pick them up forced them to press on through the mountains into western Crete. There everyone welcomed Leigh Fermor, known to all as “Mihali,” for “Michael,” his middle name. All rejoiced at the kidnapping as a huge embarrassment for the hated occupiers, accepting the probability of severe reprisals. All the while, German forces combed the island to find the general. The

guerrilla party wandered westward and after about a month Leigh Fermor and Moss loaded General Kreipe onto a Royal Navy boat bound for Cairo.

“Billy” Moss kept a diary during the Cretan operation. At the end of the war he produced a book manuscript based on his diary recounting the abduction. It was published in 1950 to great acclaim as *Ill Met by Moonlight*. A bestseller, in 1957 it was made into a movie of the same name by the noted British film-making team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, with dashing English movie star Dirk Bogarde as Major Leigh Fermor. (Unfortunately, it’s not a very good movie, probably the worst of Powell and Pressburger’s works. I cannot recommend it as either a work of film art or a thrilling war flick.)

While Leigh Fermor was the acknowledged star of the abduction plan, and had lectured on it at the end of the war while still in the army as part of a propaganda effort for the British government, he stepped aside from writing his own account and let his friend Billy do the honors. But Paddy was not happy with *Ill Met by Moonlight*’s depiction of the Cretans as dirty, smelly, and ignorant cut-throats. Moss, an English patrician, showed little appreciation for their bravery, loyalty, generosity, and other good qualities. After Billy Moss died in 1965, Paddy was asked to write a 5,000 word essay on the abduction for publication. He ended up drafting a thirty-thousand-word account that makes for a short book. However, the editor chopped it down to five-thousand words for publication. The complete manuscript was finally published in 2014, after his death. In the book he makes amends for Moss’s condescension toward the people of Crete. The partisan fighters are brave, true, dependable, self-sacrificing, and more. “Mihali” describes almost all of them as his dear, best friends, stout fellows all. He writes about them in florid prose. Here’s a characteristic example from a passage describing their march in the mountains in western Crete:

A studied but dashing nonchalance marks the way people dress on the Retimo-Canea border and in spite of the patched boots and torn clothing of mountain life, most of them were dressed in black shirts, their fringed turbans rakishly looped and their cartridge clips buckled tightly round their mulberry-sashed middles. The looks are splendid hereabouts. There was a surprising lot of fair hair and grey eyes. There is also an aquiline, rather Hispano-Mauresque fineness in many of the features which may spring from the Saracenic occupation, especially along this southern shore, a thousand years ago; eyebrows like pen strokes, and eyes that blaze out like lamps. A mixture of relaxed ease and bohemianism, coupled with reckless alacrity and high spirits, stamps their bearing. They are ready for anything. At the moment an infectious feeling of elation filled them; it was caused by the rout of the Germans a fortnight earlier. [PLF, *Abducting a General*, 86]

At the end of the war, still in Cairo, Patrick Leigh Fermor met the woman who was to be his wife. Joan Eyres Monsell was a well-bred and intelligent upper-middle-class Englishwoman with a good education. With a failed marriage behind her, during the war she received cypher training and in 1943 was posted to Cairo. They met at a party. Artemis Cooper reports Paddy was instantly smitten, and she failed to resist his charms. Thereafter they lived and traveled together, she tolerating his frequent casual liaisons with mutual friends, movie stars, even the occasional prostitute. Joan wanted to marry, but he didn't. They talked about it often. Paddy told his sister that he feared replicating their parents' fiasco of a marriage. Paddy and Joan only married in 1968. Joan was a fine photographer, and part of the recent Leigh Fermor surge in Britain includes a book of her photography.

In the post-war years Leigh Fermor traveled widely, writing for magazines and newspapers. He went to the Caribbean and Central America, which became the subject matter of his first books, *The Traveller's Tree, A Journey through the Caribbean Islands*, published in 1950, and *The Violins of Saint-Jacques*, a novel, published in 1953. Neither made him famous or wealthy (he rather relied on Joan's family money for sustenance). He also traveled in France, Spain, and Italy, and frequently to Greece. He and Joan lived in London, but he couldn't write in London; there were probably too many distractions. They later settled in Greece in 1964, where "Mihali" was idolized by the Greeks. They built a house in the countryside that became a resort for all their many friends. Prior to that he published a well-regarded book on monastic life in French monasteries where he had stayed to find quiet for writing and, probably, quiet from his whirlwind life. It is called *A Time to Keep Silence* (1953). As a result of his peregrinations in Greece he wrote *Mani* of 1958 and *Roumeli* of 1966. Both reflect his esteem for the country and its people. They exhibit Leigh Fermor's characteristic ethnographic and linguistic interests, tracing the histories of populations across time and place, migrating from northern Siberia across the steppes into Europe and the Mediterranean shores, carrying with them languages that morph, blend, clash, and conquer the tongues of the peoples whom the migrants encountered.

For many years Leigh Fermor's friends encouraged him to write about his walking trip across Europe as a teenager. He hesitated for years, partly because most of the notebooks that he had filled en route had been lost or destroyed, and partly because he feared for the safety of the people who had been his generous hosts in countries then under Soviet control. He was especially worried about Balasha, his Rumania paramour, who was still alive in Rumania but suffering in greatly reduced circumstances. Partly his hesitation came from the difficulty in recounting an absolutely magical time in his youth. Nonetheless, he started work and in 1977 the

first of three volumes, *A Time of Gifts*, appeared. It covered his childhood, the origins of the plan to walk across the continent, and crossing the Channel and beginning his trek across the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. He found a voice for blending his youthful self with his mature, wiser self. The book unfolds with travel description interspersed with long asides on the history of places, peoples, ethnic groups, and their languages. Biographer Artemis Cooper characterizes the world depicted as “somewhere between memory and imagination. Paddy had found a way of writing that could deploy a lifetime’s reading and experience, while never losing sight of his ebullient, well-meaning and occasionally clumsy eighteen-year-old self.” (*PLF*, 363)

The volume was well received. Leigh Fermor worked slowly on the second volume, *Between the Woods and the Water*, which appeared in the fall of 1986. It covered his youthful trek mostly in Hungary, where during the summer of 1934 he lingered long with friends he met and became an ardent lover of Hungarian culture. It is an idealized portrait of the country and people, of endless generosity and hospitality and kindness. Readers in Britain loved the book, and voiced their eagerness for the third volume. Leigh Fermor was now a famous writer and viewed as a skilled prose stylist. The recognition and praise only added to his hesitation about finishing the project. It preyed on him. He found other things to do and write. One was to compile a delightful book of correspondence between himself and the Duchess of Devonshire, the former Deborah Mitford, one of the famed Mitford sisters. He couldn’t finish the trilogy. At his death in 2011 the third volume was incomplete. It appeared in 2013 as *The Broken Road*, edited by Artemis Cooper and Colin Thubron. It covers the walk through Rumania and Bulgaria into Greece and on to Istanbul. It is a reconstruction taken from a surviving diary and a draft written in the 1960s which he had set aside.

I read you a passage from Leigh Fermor's account of the kidnapping of General Kreipe in Crete. In the travel trilogy his writing is similarly lush, interspersed with snippets of German, Czech, Magyar, Rumanian, Bulgarian, and Greek as he describes learning the languages and communicating with the people he met. Reading him requires having a good English dictionary nearby, as he employs lots of four-dollar words to convey his thoughts. One can open any of the books randomly to get a taste of his prose style. Here he is recounting his arrival at a house on the Hungarian plain:

The look of the Magyar word *kastély*—which is rather perversely pronounced ‘koshtay,’ or very nearly—suggests, like *Schloss*, a fortified and castellated building, but the nearest English equivalent to most of those I saw in Hungary and Transylvania would be a manor house and the term leaps to mind when I try to conjure up the memory, blurred at the edges a little by the intervening decades, of the *kastély* at Korosladany. Single-storeyed like a ranch but with none of the ad hoc feeling the word suggests, it was a long ochre-coloured late eighteenth-century building with convoluted and rounded baroque pediments over great gates, faded tiles and house-martins’ nests and louvred shutters hooked back to let in the late afternoon light. Leaving my things under the antlers in the hall, I was led through the open doors of several connecting rooms, meeting my hostess at the middle of a shadowy enfilade. She was charming and good-looking with straight, bobbed fair hair—I think it must have been parted in the middle for it was this, a few years later, that reminded me of her when I met Iris Tree. She wore a white linen dress and espadrilles and had a cigarette-case and a lit cigarette in her hand. “So here’s the traveler,” she said in a kind, slightly husky voice and

took me through a French window to where the rest of her family, except her husband, who was due back from Budapest next day, were assembled round tea things under tall chestnut trees whose pink and white steeples were stickily bursting out. [p. 67 *Between the Woods and the Water*]

Here is a passage in the same volume rich with ethnographic observation describing an ethnic Hungarian town in Transylvania in Rumania on market day:

I thought I discerned, without any prompting, a different cast of feature—something simultaneously blunter and more angular about brow and cheek and chin—that corresponded to the change of language. There was a difference of costume, too, though the actual details have slipped away. Rawhide shoes and thongs were common to all, with the fleece headgear and the low-crowned black felt hat. But all along my itinerary the chief difference between country Hungarians and Rumanians had been the wide-skirted tunic or shirt, caught in by a wide belt, which the Rumanians wore outside their trousers. Both dressed in white homespun linen, but the Hungarians' shirts always buttoned tightly at the throat; their trousers were unusually wide from the waist down and sometimes pleated, which almost gave them the look of long skirts. *Gatya Hosen*, [his friend] Istvan called them; these were often replaced by loose black breeches and shiny knee-boots. But here the peasants, almost to a man, wore narrow white homespun trows like tights stitched together out of felt.

After describing the women's clothes in similar fashion, he adds:

Clothes were still emblematic, and not only among peasants: an expert in Rumanian and Hungarian symbols, looking at the passers-by in a market-place—a couple of soldiers, a captain in the Rosiori, an Ursuline prioress, a sister of St. Vincent de Paul, a Poor Clare, an Hasidic rabbi, an Armenian deacon, an Orthodox nun, a Uniat archimandrite, a Calvinist pastor, an Augustinian canon, a Benedictine, a Minorite friar, a Magyar nobleman, an ostrich-feathered coachman, a shrill-voiced Russian cab-driver, a bear-leading Gypsy with his spoon-carving fellow tribesmen, a wool-carder, a blacksmith, a drover, a chimney-sweep, a woodman or a waggoner, and above all, women from a dozen villages and ploughmen and shepherds from widely scattered valleys and highlands—would have been able to reel off their provenances as swiftly as a herald glancing along the flags and surcoats of a fourteenth-century battle. [pp. 156-157]

Leigh Fermor's writing style reflects a man who enjoyed people: meeting them, talking with them, learning about them, learning the languages they spoke, living with them, and understanding their ways. He was a humanitarian humanist in the broadest sense: he sought to promote all people's well-being and recognized that everyone deserves dignity and respect.

I am still working through Patrick Leigh Fermor's writings. I have yet to read his novel, his book about life in a monastery, or the two books about Greek life. But I make bold to commend his works to the members of this Literary Club, who, I think, would agree that he led a life of adventure.

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