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**PAINT MAGIC?**

Waldemar Januszczak assesses a new life of Cézanne [P40]



## A modern-day Peter Pan

From walking across Europe to kidnapping a German general, Patrick Leigh Fermor's life was the stuff of schoolboy fantasies

**DOMINIC SANDBROOK**

**PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR**

**An Adventure**

by ARTEMIS COOPER

John Murray £25

ebook £12.99 pp464

By any standards, Patrick Leigh Fermor led an extraordinary life. At just 18, he walked across Europe from the Hook of Holland to the gates of Istanbul. After more than a year on the road, he settled in Greece, fell in love with a Romanian aristocrat and went to live on her Moldavian estate. When war broke out in 1939, he joined the Intelligence Corps and worked with the resistance in Crete, famously leading a daring operation to kidnap a top German general.

After the war, Powell and Pressburger turned the story into a film, *Ill Met by Moonlight*, with Dirk Bogarde playing Leigh Fermor. In the meantime, the man himself was building an enviable reputation as a writer, publishing two luminous books on Greece, *Mani and Roumeli*, and two highly acclaimed accounts of his great European walk, *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*. His home in rural Greece became a magnet to writers and adventurers alike, and when he died last year, at 96, his friends queued up to proclaim him the greatest travel writer of his generation.

On the surface, Leigh Fermor's life was the stuff of schoolboy fantasies, a saga of death-defying escapes, beautiful mistresses and prizes, leaving most men

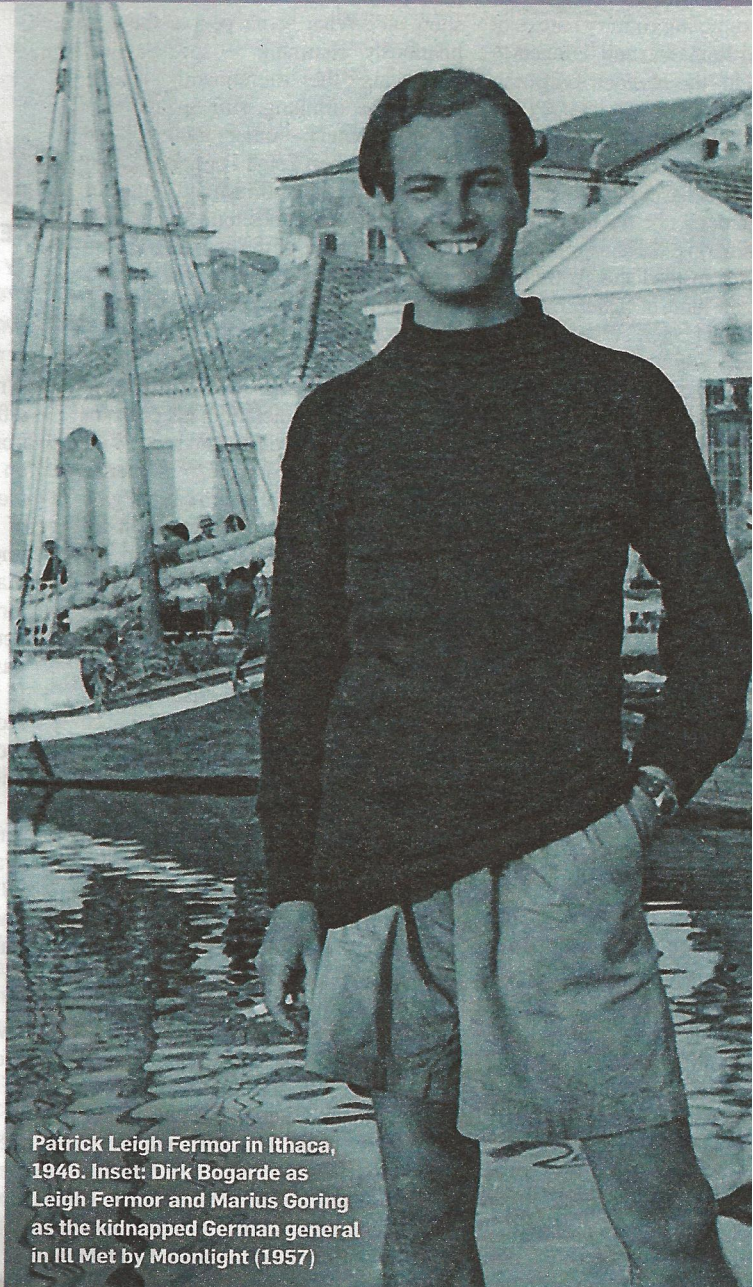
feeling rather weedy by comparison. But it was only after reading Artemis Cooper's affectionate and amiable biography — whose subtitle, *An Adventure*, is well chosen — that I realised how much his life was a vast exercise in running away.

Soon after Leigh Fermor was born in 1915, his parents left him in England while they went back to India, and he did not meet his mother again until he was four. As a boy, he was expelled from a series of schools, some of which were downright bizarre: in one establishment, where staff and pupils performed country dancing and eurhythmic in the nude, the headmaster was “in the habit of bathing the older girls, and towelling them dry himself”.

Unsurprisingly, Leigh Fermor floundered. He performed poorly in exams and was described by one headmaster as “a dangerous mixture of sophistication and recklessness”. Like so many neglected children — Winston Churchill springs to mind — he was restless, naughty and desperate for attention. After school, he toyed with the idea of Sandhurst, but became a door-to-door stocking salesman. Then he had the idea of walking to Istanbul, or Constantinople, as he characteristically called it. As Cooper astutely remarks, it was less a great adventure than a great escape “from his parents' disappointed expectations and his own hopeless, idle, easily distracted, unemployable self”.

The walk, which took a

*Continued on page 40* ▶



Patrick Leigh Fermor in Ithaca, 1946. Inset: Dirk Bogarde as Leigh Fermor and Marius Goring as the kidnapped German general in *Ill Met by Moonlight* (1957)





# What a charmer

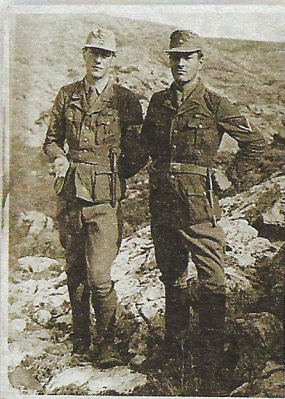
► *Continued from page 39*

year and 21 days, was the single defining experience in Leigh Fermor's life. He tramped through the snows of Nazi Germany and Austria (and one of the things Cooper makes very clear is how politically tone deaf he was), secured invitations to the crumbling country houses of Hungary and Romania, and trudged to monasteries in the remote Bulgarian mountains. His charm (at least by his own account) won over peasants and noblemen alike; his curiosity was insatiable, his enthusiasm infectious. Sensibly, Cooper does not try to compete with the glimmering, dreamlike prose of *A Time of Gifts*. Instead she shows how the book was a kind of fiction built on the foundations of Leigh Fermor's memories. He freely admitted altering characters and stories. But Cooper does her best to defend him against charges of distortion. "Paddy was making a novel of his life," she explains, "creating a new memory, shaped and coloured in his imagination." It was "so perfect in every detail" that when he wrote of riding across the Great Hungarian Plain, he believed it himself — even though he had actually walked.

The fact that Cooper calls her subject "Paddy" reflects her open and unashamed affection for him. (Her father, John Julius Norwich, was a close friend, while her husband, Antony Beevor, partly relied on Leigh Fermor's stories for his history of Crete during the war.) It is to her credit, therefore, that her book never quite tips over into outright hagiography. As she shows, even the story of the heroic operation to kidnap the German general Heinrich Kreipe in 1944 is more complicated than it first appears. For all the excitement and derring-do — Leigh Fermor and his comrades, disguised as German soldiers, intercepted the general's car at a rural junction, dragged him halfway across the island, hid in the mountains and finally made a late-night rendezvous with a British ship bound for Egypt — it was never clear whether the operation yielded any concrete results. What is more, there were claims after the war that the Germans had targeted Cretan villages for reprisals afterwards. Cooper does her best to defend Leigh Fermor's reputation, insisting that the villages would have been attacked

anyway. But nobody can ever be sure.

In her final pages, Cooper describes her subject as "one of the kindest, funniest and most interesting people on earth". But she is too scrupulous a biographer to deny that "there were plenty of people who found him an insufferable show-off". What some people thought hilariously charming — the classical quotations, the triumphantly recited poetry, the drinking, singing and unabashed lechery — others found simply annoying. When Leigh Fermor did a bit of work for the British Institute in Athens, his colleagues found him "very bumptious, a bit of a know-all". By the age of 30, he had still never had a proper job, and he was lucky that his wife, the photographer Joan Rayner, had inherited a large fortune and was remarkably tolerant of his constant womanising.



Leigh Fermor, right, and a comrade in German uniform before the kidnapping

Indeed, Somerset Maugham's cruel gibe that he was a mere "middle-class gigolo for upper-class women" contained more than a grain of truth. His lovers included the socialite Diana Cooper, the singer Juliette Greco and a host of society ladies. His wife reportedly lent him money for prostitutes; and his "more respectable girlfriends" were in constant

danger of getting sexually transmitted diseases. But he seems to have been quite unrepentant. "They're perfectly easy to get rid of," he told one. "I expect I picked them up from a tart in Athens."

The truth is that Leigh Fermor never really grew up. To the end of his days, he was still the boy setting out to Constantinople; it speaks volumes that, for 10 years after the war, he never stayed in the same place for more than a month or two. He never stopped trying to recapture the thrill of the adventure — climbing the Andes, and even swimming the Hellespont when he was 69 — and in one of her many acute observations, Cooper notes that what he wanted in a woman was not so much a mother as "someone to be Wendy to his Peter Pan". He dreamt of spending his life on the road, journal in hand and rucksack on his back. But he always needed someone to "do the tiresome, grown-up things so that he would not have to".

► Available at the Bookshop price of £20 (inc p&hp) and £12.99 (ebook) on 0845 271 2135

Paul Cézanne's personal life comes dramatically into focus in an insightful biography that concentrates on his intense relationship with Emile Zola

## WALDEMAR JANUSZCZAK

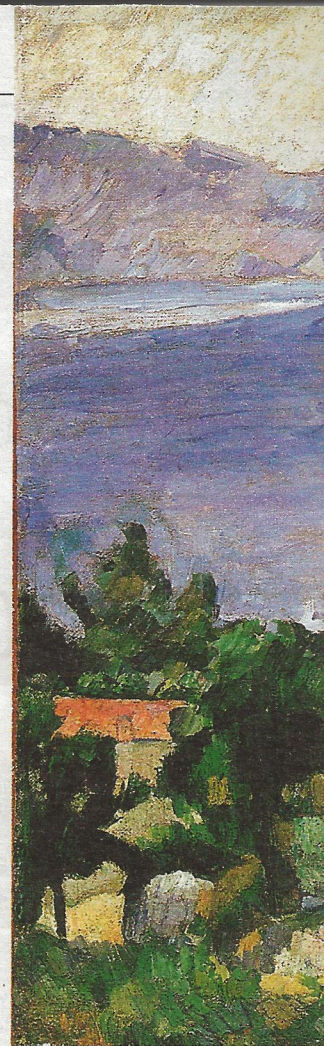
**CEZANNE: A Life**  
by ALEX DANACHEV  
Profile £30  
ebook £25 pp512

Writing about Cézanne is difficult. And it is difficult from all angles. If you focus on the art itself, you face a momentarily elusive body of work which twists your understanding this way and that, and defies straightforward description. His oeuvre is a mountain that has never found a Hillary. If, however, you take the biographical route, and focus on his life, you face another set of obstacles.

Basically, nothing much happened to him. At least not in conventional biographical terms. He was born in Aix in 1839, tried and failed to make it in Paris, and returned to Provence for the second half of his life to paint revolutionary art in grumpy isolation. One wife. One son. A rich father who wanted him to be a lawyer. The bullet points of Cézanne's life would leave lots of white on the back of a postcard.

There is the additional problem of his personality. Which was, or seems to have been, deeply unattractive. In eyewitness accounts, he invariably comes across as weird and awkward. I list these difficulties to make clearer what Alex Danchev has taken on in his brave new life of Cézanne. Danchev is not your usual artistic biographer. Currently the professor of international relations at Nottingham University, he has previously written about the Falklands war, about Britain's special relationship with America, and about international perspectives on the Gulf conflict. All of which is excellent preparation for a life of Cézanne. Only someone as new to Cézanne's art-historical presence as Danchev would have dared take on the task.

Not that this is a conventional biography. Broadly chronological, but



# New light

also enthusiastically life that jumps hay forwards to gather the reasons the Cézanne feels so unfamiliar author has been timelines. But Danchev to use literature as a point of entry.

We have always Cézanne's best friend Emile Zola, and they formed an intimate Zola's memories help writers with much information about the world. What nobody has p do — or perhaps have the patience to mount a fingertip Zola's huge fictional looking for all and his friend's presence.

As an instinctive Cézanne into his work any of us have prepared examining these appearances, in their guises, Danchev's tranche of new material biography. And bi always a whisper from this new material su