

# SALMAGUNDI MAGAZINE

A QUARTERLY



THE SPECIAL FEATURE IN SALMAGUNDI #182-183 INCLUDES “NADEIDA” BY PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR AND THREE FULL ESSAYS ON HIS WORK. THE ISSUE IS AVAILABLE FOR ORDER [HERE](#).



PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR

AN ONLINE FEATURE

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## “ON A BORROWED HORSE” – MICHAEL ONDAATJE

It is not just in his own books that Patrick Leigh Fermor has that delicious off-hand gift of description of the world he travels through. Reading his introduction to Miklos Banffy’s trilogy, *The Writing on the Wall*, a great work whose recent popularity is partly the result of Fermor’s championing of it, you see him again draw you into a rare and new place, even if it is someone else’s story:

I first drifted into the geographical background of this remarkable book in the spring and summer of 1934, when I was nineteen, halfway through an enormous trudge from Holland to Turkey. Like many travellers, I fell in love with Budapest and the Hungarians, and by the time I got to the old principality of Transylvania, mostly on a borrowed horse, I was even deeper in....

Ever since the arrival of the Magyars ten centuries ago, the family had been foremost among the magnates who conducted Hungarian and Transylvanian affairs, and their portraits – with their slung dolmans, brocade tunics, jewelled scimitars and fur kalpaks with plumes like escapes of steam – hung on many walls.

The world Banffy describes was Edwardian Mitteleuropa. The men, however myopic, threw away their spectacles and fixed in monocles...hundreds of acres of forest were nightly lost at chemin de fer; at daybreak lovers stole away from tousled four-posters through secret doors, and duels were fought, as they still were when I was there.



Fermor was born in 1915, a year after the beginning of the First World War. It was a time in which prevailing certainties, Georgian absolutes and the parameters of habitual experience were being assailed and demolished by the slaughter in France. Thereby, Fermor was born at the beginning of the modernist literary and artistic revolutions: two years after the publication of *Du Côté de chez Swann*, three years before James Joyce's *Ulysses*, ten years before Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. At the beginning of *A Time of Gifts*, Fermor describes one of his earliest memories — of Armistice Day, 1918, when euphoric celebrations went tragically awry, and caused the death of a local boy. "It was a lurid start," he writes. Later, he saw "trucks full of departing German prisoners go by." The war was the indelible taint on society in the 1920s; even someone as young as Fermor at the time could not escape its after-effects. Soldier writers such as Robert Graves, who had fought in the trenches, found after the war that they despised the establishment that had cavalierly squandered so many lives, and cast themselves into angry exile. Writers such as W. H. Auden and MacNeice, both of them a decade older than Fermor, had not fought but were equally influenced by the scepticism and disdain of the interwar literary elite. Auden and MacNeice left

Britain for Iceland in 1936 seeking to escape from dire events in Europe, looking for somewhere free of "overemphasis." Fermor's mid-30s exile was less embittered, driven more by curiosity than suspense or revulsion. Unlike Auden and MacNeice, he was not in search of a sanctuary, the "silence of the islands," as MacNeice wrote. Fermor walked, instead, quite deliberately, into the eye of the storm. He went from Holland through Germany and Austria, through Czechoslovakia and Hungary, towards Istanbul. He lived among, and befriended, Germans who would, only a few years later, be on the opposing side in another catastrophic war.

The modernist novels of Joyce and Woolf aimed at depicting an entire life in a single day, as their protagonists moved through the past, present and future in a single phrase. In *A Time of Gifts*, Fermor aims at something allied, but significantly different: a whole life in a single journey, a now-ragged civilization glimpsed, too, as he walks. He slides, all the time, through the ages of collective history and the ages of his own autobiography. Everything is filtered through the experience of his youthful self, as the hero of his own personal grail quest. The grail is, as with any heroic quest, loosely symbolic. Fermor suggests a few possible interpretations in a letter to his friend Xan Fielding that forms the introduction

to *A Time of Gifts*: "A new life! Freedom! Something to write about!" As this introductory letter also explains, Fermor is, in the late-1970s, looking back at this self from a great distance of time and knowledge: "I had reached a stage when one changes very fast: a single year contains a hundred avatars." He travelled through Europe at a time when these selves were "flashing kaleidoscopically by." Yet, he begins *A Time of Gifts* firmly, as firmly as possible, in the mind of this youthful, long-gone avatar:

"A splendid afternoon to set out!", said one of the friends who was seeing me off, peering at the rain and rolling up the window.

The other two agreed. Sheltering under the Curzon Street arch of Shepherd Market, we had found a taxi at last. In Half-Moon Street, all collars were up. A thousand glistening umbrellas were tilted over a thousand bowler hats in Piccadilly; the Jermyn Street shops, distorted by streaming water, had become a submarine arcade; and the clubmen of Pall Mall, with china tea and anchovy toast in mind, were scuttling for sanctuary up the steps of their clubs. Blown askew, the Trafalgar Square fountains twirled like mops, and our taxi, delayed by a horde of Charing Cross commuters reeling and stampeding under a cloudburst, crept into The Strand.

Here we have the jovial irony of the opening line, "A splendid afternoon to set out!" — as London is lashed by rain. As well, the jovial group of friends. The passage is riddled with time-specific details — though London is a tricky city to fix in time, as it clings still to so many of its traditions. The street names have not changed, even as I write: Shepherd Market, Half-Moon Street. Jermyn Street is still packed with shops, of an expensive sort. Even



now, the clubmen still shelter from the rain in their gentlemen's clubs, and even now they might still be eager for their "china tea and anchovy toast." The commuters still stampede and reel at Charing Cross. Yet, the "sea of bowler hats" definitely gives things away. And we can hardly blame Fermor for the remorseless adherence to tradition in the richer areas of London. He is trying to evoke a particular day, a rain-sluiced, grim day, when he is glad to be leaving England. He moves into a description of the crossing to Holland, as the "anchor-chain clattered through the ports and the vessel turned into the current with a wail of her siren." He carefully lists the eastern ports of London, as the Thames flows towards the sea: "Rotherhithe, Millwall, Limehouse Reach, the West India Docks, Deptford and the Isle of Dogs were rushing upstream in smears of darkness." In Holland, too, we are locked into the long-gone past: "Snow covered everything and the flakes blew in a slant across the cones of the lamps and confused the growing discs that spaced out the untrodden quay.... I wandered about the silent lanes in exultation... As I was gazing, it slowly tolled five." In a bar, Fermor continues, "I made a second long entry in my journal — it was becoming a passion — and while the landlord polished his glasses and cups and arranged them in glittering ranks, dawn broke, with the snow still coming down against the lightening sky. I put on my greatcoat, slung the rucksack, grasped my stick and headed for the door. The landlord asked where I was going: I said, "Constantinople."

So far, so very past historic: we are firmly within the consciousness of the 18-year-old protagonist, within the past that was his present. His thoughts are streamed to us, as he walks: "I could scarcely believe that I was really there...surrounded by all this emptiness and change, with a thousand wonders waiting." When he remembers, he remembers backwards from this past moment, describing

the memories that swirled in his 18-year-old mind. Entering a Dutch cathedral in the early morning, he is amazed by how "compellingly did the vision tally with a score of half-forgotten Dutch pictures." The pictures are already half-forgotten to the 18-year-old Fermor, rather than to the later Fermor who is finally writing up his book. When the youthful Fermor wakes suddenly in a strange place, we share his confusion: "After supper in a waterfront bar, I fell asleep among the beer mugs and when I woke, I couldn't think where I was. Who were these bargees in peaked caps and jerseys and sea-boots?" This young Fermor is, at this point, like the central protagonist of the novel whose thoughts are being delivered to us by the self-effacing author. Yet, there are faint hints that he is being viewed from afar; brief, circumscribed nods to another perspective. "Except for this church, the beautiful city was to be bombed to fragments a few years later. I would have lingered, had I known."

Soon after, the real transition occurs: a swift change of key; the revelation, quite abruptly, that all is not what it seems, in narrative terms, that much has been forgotten, that the author, the late-life Fermor, is even mired in obscurity, dredging for memories, and, at times, finding very little:

Except for the snow-covered landscape and the clouds and the tree-bordered flow of the Merwede, the next two days have left little behind them but the names of the towns I slept in...Some old walls stick in my memory, cobbled streets and a barbican and barges moored along the river.

Until this point, we have been, largely, within the illusion cast by fluid prose, within the past, striding along with Fermor's former self. Now, the fragile mechanism is revealed — the author in the present (or rather, at the time of writing), an elderly man

struggling to recall the past. From rich description, this aged Fermor dwindles into vague details: "the clouds," "some old walls," or "barges moored along the river." The "vapours" have descended, he explains. Time after time, in this book, Fermor builds narrative momentum, draws the reader into his half-recreated, half-invented past — and then reveals the contrivance. Time after time, the fluidity of traveller's anecdote, the comical-tragical-comical encounters with strange people and strange places, are interrupted. This mingling of vaporous forgetfulness and a more robust and anecdotal style makes both *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water* mercurial in tone, often quite radically so, as entire episodes are barely sketched in, the details consigned forever to oblivion. It makes these books even hallucinatory and disorienting, akin to a psychic portrait of the author, as if the reader has been sent to roam through a landscape constructed entirely from Fermor's often tenuous recollections, misty and obscure where his memories are obscure, and occasionally plunged into complete darkness. To conjure, to summon and evoke and to beguile the reader with impression after impression and then, suddenly, to shatter the illusion, to reveal the author in his old age, struggling to return to these places that exist only in his memory, finding they are edged around with shadows — this is a pretty risky enterprise, and yet Fermor is charming, ironic and wise enough to carry it off.

## THE COUNTRY HOUSE AT KÖVECSES – THOMAS DE WAAL

“On the evening I arrived, Sari laid dinner on a folding table in the library. When it was cleared away, we went back to armchairs and the books with our brandy glasses and, undeterred by a clock striking midnight somewhere in the house, talked until nearly one o'clock.

Those days at Kövecses were a sojourn of great delight and important private landmark. The delight is plain sailing--the kindness and charm of Baron Pips, and all the erudition, worldly wisdom, reminiscence and humour squandered on someone a third of his age; but the importance as a landmark is more complex. Being told by someone much older to stop calling him Sir may have had something to do with it. It was a sort of informal investiture with the toga virilis. I seemed to be getting the best of every world. The atmosphere at Kövecses was the culmination of a change which had been taking place ever since my departure from England. In the past, I had always arrived on any new scene trailing a long history of misdeeds and disasters. Now the continuity was broken. Somewhere between the Dogger Bank and the Hook of Holland the scent had gone cold; and for a quarter of a year there had been no rules to break except ones I had chosen.”

— from Chapter Ten of *A Time of Gifts*

**W**hen Patrick Leigh Fermor arrives at the little country house at Kövecses in Slovakia at the end of *A Time of Gifts*, something clicks into place. He is welcomed by Baron Pips von Schey, seated “in his library in a leather armchair and slippers reading Marcel Proust,” into a world of books, erudite conversation, word-play and racy stories. In the author's journey as bildungsroman, this is a moment of arrival. And if we have read anything else by Leigh Fermor, we know that this is a civilized world he will try to re-create for himself over the next sixty years and share with us.

Like so many others, I read Patrick Leigh Fermor not just with delight but with envy for the life he had dared to live. Jestingly, he gives us an image from detective fiction, a story of Sherlock Holmes or Philip Marlowe: “the scent had gone cold.” The young Leigh Fermor had escaped the officers of the law and respectability pursuing him (England, a conventional career). He has begun his life of literary vagrancy—and we want to share the illicit adventure.

And he breaks the rules of time too. The author in his sixties does indeed get the best of both worlds as he collapses remembered past into present, conveying the adolescent delight of 1934 simultaneously with the distilled remembrance of 40 years on. The best memoirs always seem to be ones of childhood and youth where we live



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vicariously with the writer both in the moment and in the anticipated future, where all is still possible. For me the delight of Patrick Leigh Fermor is that he somehow pulls this trick off not just in *A Time of Gifts* and its sequels, but even in his vivid adult journeys around Greece.

Through some strange coincidences, I shadowed him 50 years on. I too grew up underneath "the booming and jackdaw-crowded pinnacles" of Canterbury Cathedral (although I remember more crows than jackdaws). The King's School I went to had moved a little further into the 20th century, but was still antiquated and overawed by its own 1500-year-long history.

Unlike Leigh Fermor, I graduated from the school without scandal (some people claimed that Nellie, the Canterbury town girl whose courtship cost him his place, was still alive.) But I was inspired by him on many accounts. One Leigh Fermor achievement I wanted to emulate was the way he got the best of both Englands, never shedding his Englishness but leaving the boring bits of his native island behind. So, post-school, aged 17, I headed for Greece as soon as I could (I was studying both Ancient and Modern Greek). But when I passed through the town of Kardamyli and asked in the shop next to the author's house about "Kyrios Patrick" I was told that he was away. For years, going back and forth to Greece, I would hear stories about "Paddy" (as the expatriates actually called him) or "Michalis" (a Cretan comrade-in-arms I met one evening near the Villa Ariadne in Knossos), but I never called again.

The strangest connection however is with that little house in Slovakia. My father, Victor de Waal, gasped with excitement reading the book, because this Kövecses belonged to Baron Pips, his great-uncle. His mother had loved this place: in her type-written handed-down memoir she described visiting her grandparents here every September and October as "paradise." Aged five or six, my father also spent a couple of dreamy childhood summers in the bathing ponds and streams of Kövecses. He still remembers the horror he felt one day when he saw the body of a tawny owl nailed to a barn door. Then the Second World War ended his European childhood and brought him to wartime England. After that, although Kövecses was not far from Vienna, the Cold War intervened, the Iron Curtain came down and those traces completely froze.



Later, Uncle Pips and his beautiful daughters were exactly the kind of glamorous European cousins you would want to have. My father visited Pips in his house by Lake Maggiore on the Swiss-Italian border in the 1950s and received from him the same urbane nonjudgmental approbation that made such a difference to the young English vagabond. Pips advised my father that Charles Dickens — no longer Proust — was the best reading companion for old age.

In 1991, a friend who also wanted to escape England moved to Prague (he still lives there). I visited him and proposed a trip to Slovakia and Kövecses. We took the train to Bratislava, then we set out by car towards the town of Nitra with nothing but *A Time of Gifts* as our road-map. We quickly discovered that, 57 years on, all the Hungarian names had been rendered into Slovak. Still, Fermor's directions were so precise that outside Nitra, a local

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Hungarian confirmed to us that we were on the right road and should be looking for a village named Strkovec.

It was a flat brown landscape of creeks lined with poplars and willows — horse country, meant for riders and hunters, its expanses now sadly broken up by 40 years of Communist industrialization. We baptized our slow trip "Closely Observed Trains" after Bohumil Hrabal's comic novel as we waited, more than once, at a level crossing with a clanging bell as a goods train with whale-black cars slowly passed down a single-track line.

At the end of a no-through-road, near an apparently newly dug reservoir, we found Kövecses. It was more humble than I had expected: a hunting-lodge more than a castle. A dusty village green overhung with poplars, then a small burnt-orange chapel, its metal gate bolted shut. Back in the trees was a long low-slung dull yellow house with square windows and an undulating red-tiled roof. This must be the "long straight wing" my grandmother remembered from her childhood with its billiard table, grand piano and large leather armchairs, where Leigh Fermor had sat with Pips von Schey.

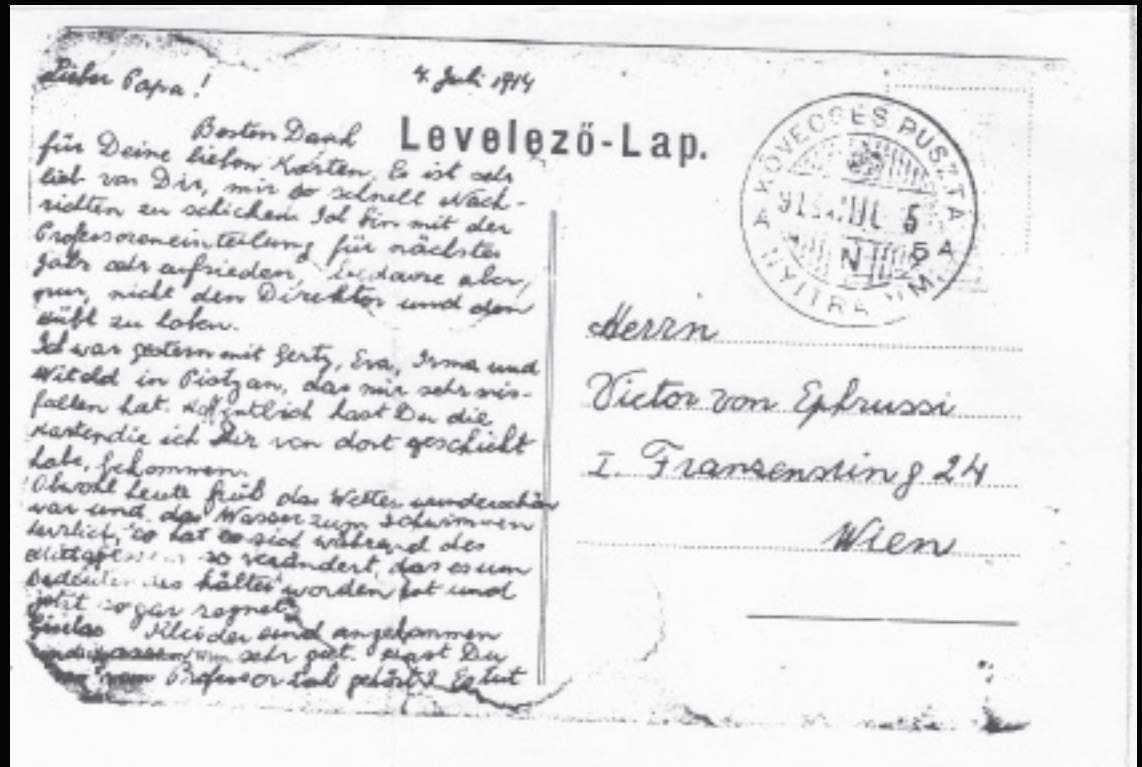
The house had been preserved from destruction by the Communist planner by being turned into a boarding-school for deaf and disabled children. A white-coated doctor greeted us. A more sinister purpose of these institutions was sometimes "socializing" children of the Roma community and David thought he saw some small Roma peeping through the windows at us. The doctor showed us their clinic and then led us into the brick stable-yard to a cottage where we were welcomed in by a little old lady half my height, with white curly hair and big spectacles. Trying to make out our broken Czech and answering in her Slovak,

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she told us she had worked for the "Baron" many years ago. He had been very rich and she believed the rumor that he had buried some valuables before he fled. She seemed unsurprised by this sudden visit—"we knew this would all pass and people like you would start to come back," she said with an uncanny air, her prescience confirmed.

It was a terribly amateur visit. I could and should have looked for my great-grandmother's grave, tried to see what remained of the bathing pond. I suppose I had not really believed that the house would still be there or that we would find it.

But I did write to Patrick Leigh Fermor in Kardamyli and received a warm scribbled card in return. He wrote that he was glad to hear news of "a place that meant so much to me" and confirmation that it was still intact, unlike so many of the Central European houses he had stayed in on his long walk. "Give me a sign if you are in the neighbourhood," he ended. I never did. And yet, I mind less than I should do: he had shared so much with me already.







**KÖVECSES (2008) – ANDREW HILLARD**











## FINDING KÖVECSES: A LETTER TO PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR

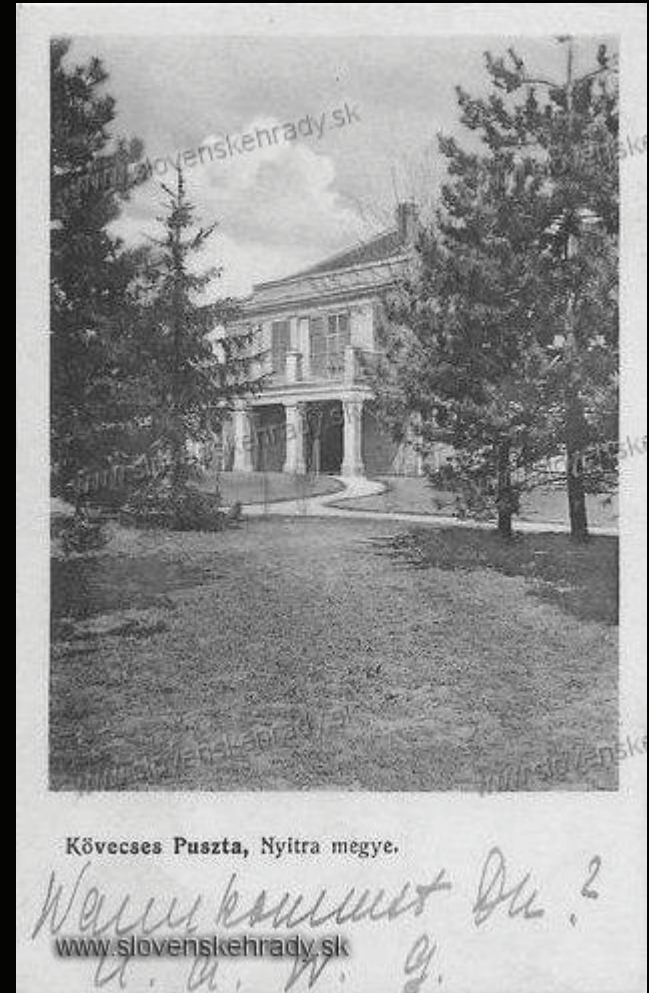
24 February 2009

Dear Patrick Leigh Fermor,

I hope you'll forgive me for taking the liberty of writing you at home. I hope, though am not at all sure (perhaps such letters arrive with too much regularity these days), you might find some interest in a brief account of a recent and imprecise (car instead of foot; fall instead of early spring; highways instead of rutted mud lanes) attempt to retrace only a very few of your 1934 steps.

I returned to Bratislava last October to read poems at a festival there and though I was enjoying the hospitality of our Slovak hosts as well as an occasional breakfast at the restored Carlton Hotel on the Danube (which might as well be the model for the Savoy of Joseph Roth's novel set in the same year as the events you recount) I felt the urge to take a short trip into the countryside beyond the old Hungarian seat. I wonder if you returned to former Poszony or simply pressed on when you went the length of the Danube while researching *A Time of Gifts*; in either case, perhaps you passed under the monstrous socialist bridge for which the old Jewish quarter with its old synagogue was razed. There's much you'd recognize today in Bratislava and much more that's altered beyond all recognition even since my first stay there in '91 when I had a good bean soup in a bistro on that "staircase of a hundred harlots," an approach that has become as domesticated as a dancing bear since you discovered it (that street is the same one, I'm certain, to which Mann sent the protagonist of his *Doktor Faustus* to contract syphilis, the source of the composer's madness and perhaps of his genius as well). Given all that attracts me to Bratislava, then, it takes some reason to leave good company and familiar surroundings, not to mention an ample board laid out twice daily with local specialties, and I had one such compelling desire: to look for the Von Schey kastely.

I set off for Kovecses—a village now known by the Slavic equivalent Strkovec—with three companions: Ben, a Canadian friend who runs Next Apache (a homophone for the Slovak "nech sa páči," a waiter's "here you are" or a polite "after you"), the Bratislava coffeehouse and bookstore where I ate, drank, and wrote daily when I lived there in 2006; Andy, a gifted and saturnine English photographer and musician who teaches lessons in his native tongue to float his art, and Peter, a Slovak friend of theirs (and, quickly, a friend of mine as well) with a mischievous smile and bone-dry wit who drove the car and made most of the inquiries once we arrived. I had fantasized about taking a day and walking to Strkovec, in the spirit of your trek, but quickly realized that would have been both foolish and impossible as we crossed the Danube on our way out of Bratislava, passing acres of fields, and winding through several substantial towns, quite far apart even by car. Between two of them, we saw a garish sign for "Erotic Show" in a razed field—"Not much has changed," Peter sniped sotto voce in good English as he pointed down an avenue of old trees at the end of which we could just make out a substantial building that had been a "retreat" for high party officials before '89. The establishment, apparently, serves much the same function now for the public as it did then for the commissars.



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We knew we must cross a river if we were to be confirmed in our sense of the right trajectory and it seemed we had, but then we saw that the bridge over which we were speeding carried us not across water but above a railway line. Peter made a rapid u-turn (the Slovaks are not timid behind the wheel) and went back the other way before seeing signs for Dlha Nad Vahom, the last town before Strkovec, if our translation from A Time of Gifts to Google Maps was to be trusted (there are three Strkovecs in Slovakia, one of which—Strkovec-on-the-Plains [which you cite as Kovecsespuszta]—is well to the east of the country, so we might have been chasing down the wrong place entirely.)\* We zipped around a rotary and careened off in the likeliest direction, saw the real river this time—the Vah—and crossed over it with a brightening sense of proximity. The road was deserted, paved but dusty, marked only by stands heaped with big bags of onions and potatoes from the recent harvest, no one in sight to sell them. Then we spied the sign for Strkovec, a long black and white strip of metal bent into the shape of a cartoon lightning bolt but still offering up its unmistakable black arrow pointing to our destination. We took a left and drove into the deserted square you must have crossed just before knocking on the Baron's door.

We got out of the car and tried to take account of where we were. Was that official-looking building the *kastely*? What about this long one? Should we knock on a door to ask? Strkovec is still a very small village—the square, aside from the substantial buildings to its north, gives only onto a long apartment building, converted, I imagine, from what was originally a brick storehouse for the estate (as the baron had both a distillery and grew tobacco in the fields nearby; I wonder why he didn't give you his own rather than a tin of English Capstan when you left) and now inhabited by several families from India who work at an agribusiness concern just down the road (well-guarded by a ferocious dog and signs threatening even to one who doesn't read the language). It's curious that these immigrants from the ancestral land of the Roma you found so enthralling during your trek are in residence hard by the baron's house where you stayed—worlds collapsing and colliding as they have been wont to do in the last century and during so many before the last, as perhaps you more than anyone know. There's a chapel in the square as well—barely more than an ecclesiastical façade more like a prop on a Hollywood back lot than church, dusty and peeling though still distinguished by that inimitable faded Hapsburg yellow that conjures so palpably the atmosphere of the old regime. There's also what is perhaps an early 20th century weigh-master's house, derelict now like most everything in the village, with an impressively large drive-on scale (this was an area rich with gravel and sand deposits).

At the far end of the square, to the left of a quiet grove of wizened trees that seem a nearly lost memory of the great forests that once surrounded the village, is the Baron's country house. It's now a state home for the disabled behind a fence of cement pickets and metal bars painted in primary colors, an attempt at cheer that only intensifies a feeling of sadness about the place. To describe it to you in those terms makes me wince and wonder if it wouldn't be better to leave the place as it is in your memory. The house itself is fully enclosed by this barricade so that it's impossible to enter the yard or even come close enough to hail a keeper who might be asked to let a visitor in. At first a dis-



\*Charles Sabatos, an American scholar of Slovak literature working on the image of the Turk in Slovak and pre-Slovak sources, did some homework for me before the trip. He writes:

Our visit inspired me to track down the mysterious Slovak castle, so I took out A Time of Gifts from the library here and did some Internet searching among various arcane Slovak & Hungarian sources. From what I can tell, "Kovecses" (the place PLF refers to) is not Dlha nad Vahom, the one you had written down, but the next village north of it, called Strkovec (with *hacek* on the "S," thus "S<sup>h</sup>tr-kov-etz") in Slovak. The Hungarian name for Dlha is Vaghosszufalu, which I think means Long Wall on the Vah [River]. But on a Czechoslovak Parliamentary report from 1919 (!) I found a list of Hungarian and Slovak names side by side, and Kovecses is in fact Strkovec.

To make it a little more confusing, our author also uses the name "Kovecsespuszta," which would mean "Kovecs-on-the-plains," and in fact there is a town called Kovecs on the plains (*puszta*) of present-day Hungary. When both were part of Hungary, the longer name was likely used to keep the two distinct.

Interestingly, the map of the Czech lands that I have hanging in my office here, which was printed in Austro-Hungarian times, also shows a bit of Western Slovakia, including the Sala region, but both Strkovec and Dlha are too small to show up under whatever name (Hungarian, German, Slovak) they would have gone by.



## FINDING KÖVECSES: A LETTER TO PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR

appointment, the inaccessibility of the house came to seem a blessing: spared the reality of what the property surely suffered under the transformation to its present use, the image of Baron Von Schey's study as you describe it remains intact, bookshelves lined with those well-read volumes of Proust, the monogrammed cigarette cases in a row on his desk and lustrous in the half-light. From the outside, there's still an element of historical density about the place, even if one has to look hard to feel it. Two apses with their spear-tipped roofs jut into the courtyard from a one-story section connecting the handsome main building with a utilitarian ell at the southern end of the yard. Still, without your account of the place—and even with it vividly in mind—it's hard to square the building we saw with the long and very different place it was before the war.

From a little distance we heard the sound of hammers on metal and looking down a dirt road made out someone in blue coveralls working alongside an older man, silver-haired, in a yard cluttered with scrap metal and engine parts. They were happy to talk, this father and son (perhaps 65 and 40) with their handsome, hatchet-sharp faces (your image) nearly identical but for the years, especially, Ben revealed later (I couldn't understand more than a passing word or two of the conversation), as we weren't interested in buying property but only wanted to know about their town, 'their' baron. Forgetting about the engine they'd been banging on and walking out of the yard to talk with us, the father and son eagerly answered questions, occasionally punctuating their responses with a finger pointed in this or that direction, an economical gesture that in its simple confidence bore evidence of their place here, their full possession of it. More than once I heard the word barony, accent on the second vowel, roll off their tongues as though Baron von Schey himself, open rifle balanced over the crook of his arm, had just passed them on his way to the woods. Of course, the Baron has been gone these seventy years and more, but they knew just where the baroness was buried (I wondered if it was the poetic white Russian of whom you wrote or the wife of a previous von Schey) and where the smaller hunting lodge had been. There was a kind of long memory, inherited memory, at work in these men—a knowledge of the past that hadn't found an occasion to emerge for decades, perhaps, before these strangers with their questions arrived. Even though nearly everything in this small, provisional place seemed to have been qualified and diminished by time, a succession of boundaries drawn and redrawn, not to mention the pressure of war and atrocity, the past still carried into the present.

My friends had heard this was good country for fresh fish and the locals told us that if we asked the man working in the shop up the road, his mother might cook something for us. We did and she obliged. Forty minutes later, as we sat next to a small body of water, once the fire pond for the baron's distillery (a building in serious disrepair just beyond a grove of towering chestnuts; I've enclosed with this note one of their fruits), the plates arrived, full of fried fish, savory-smelling and covered in golden crumbs, salad and potato. It turned out there was only one beer in the house, but plenty of very fruity domaci (home-made) slivovice so we changed our order to the harder stuff without any protest. As we ate and drank, the afternoon ripened under the late and then later light. The talk was good and the bonhomie more and more pronounced. The cook's son appeared regularly with fresh trays of short glasses filled with clear plum brandy and we raised glasses to our host, to you, to one another, to the



## FINDING KÖVECSES: A LETTER TO PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR

book and to the baron, trying between rounds the delicious spring water from the deep well your friend had dug 150 meters deep to provide a pure base for his cordials. For a few hours we sank into this place with its rich and particular connection for the two of us who had read *A Time of Gifts* and came away feeling somehow a little more whole, more firmly attached to a sense of continuity that through books and friendship and the local nectar remains in place as so much changes around it. As you write often and appealingly of fast friendships and unexpected moments of pleasure, I couldn't help but feel closer to the world you knew and captured—or rather, set free—in your fine prose. Cheered by the sense that I was spending a day utterly without practical virtue but with so much to recommend it, I remembered, on the ride back to Bratislava, the fields a blur of russet and ochre on either side of the road, your tacit response to “a vague relation-in-law” who said of the baron, “What a charming man! Magical company! And wonderful looking. But he never did anything, you know.” We hadn't “done” anything either, my friends and I, but that day will always remain with me, untallied, unaccountable, beautifully present.

With great regard,

M. W.



## CONSTANTINOPLE – SUZANNE JOINSON

“We shall never get to Constantinople like this. I know I ought to be moving on; so does the reader. But I can’t – not for a page or two.” — Patrick Leigh Ferm

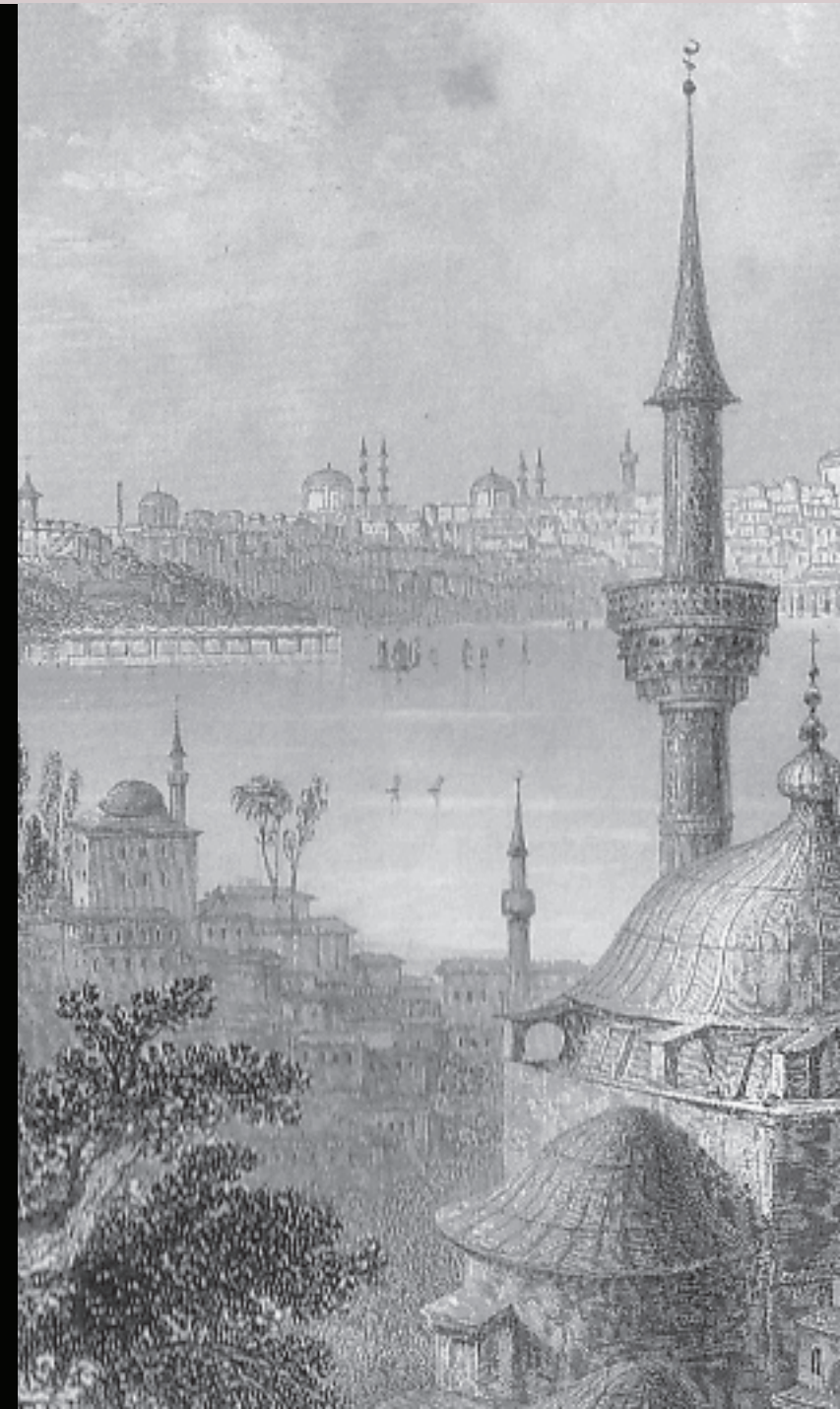
**A**t the age of eighteen I threw in my waitressing job at Ye Olde Bakery in Sussex, England and decided to travel until my money ran out. I had served tea and scones to old ladies with cotton-wool hair for months and finally could stand it no more. I took a ferry from Dover to Calais and then caught the fast train to Paris where I spent some time deciding where to go next. In my bag were two books: Patrick Leigh Fermor’s *Between the Woods and the Water* and Laurie Lee’s *As I Walked out One Midsummer Morning*.

I don’t exactly recall how those books came to me in the first place, whether recommended or chanced upon, but Fermor’s whimsical decision at the age of nineteen to travel by foot to Constantinople struck me as the best idea I had ever heard. Likewise, Lee’s impulse to escape his neighbouring women’s whispers of marriage (he was twenty-one) and the accuracy with which he captured the essence of my home region as he passed through, ‘here were the sea-shanty towns, sprawled like a rubbishy tidemark...’ meant that the two books immediately became talismanic amulets for me; guidebooks with step-by-step instructions for a heroic (or foolhardy) bid for freedom.

My plan was vague. Like Fermor and Lee, I wanted to get away from the small town I had grown up in, to get out and to find, as Fermor put it, ‘A new life! Freedom! Something to write about!’ I wanted to be lost and to taste the loneliness of sleeping on trains. I wanted to flirt with the edges of safety and cross thresholds, borders and edges. I knew I was looking for a hyper-awareness of place and for landscapes to insert myself into and I was interested in exploring the bridge between the dream-spaces of the books I was reading and the real places I was physically moving through.

I aimed to get to Paris and then decide: either follow Laurie Lee southwards, through Spain, to the place where Europe slips into the sea and turns into an altogether different continent, or to with Fermor towards Hungary and Romania. East, through a hallucinatory hyper-real version of Cinderella forests until finally reaching Constantinople by way of the real Istanbul. Constantinople seemed to me a place of magical otherliness. A spell of a name, like Calvino’s *Zaira*, city of high bastions. It is an imaginary city, an Oxiana, a Xanadu or a Shangri La. It is an unreachable destination and that is its point, I wanted to spend forever trying to reach it, eating cherries and carrying chrysanthemums on the way.

It was raining in Paris, it was spring and the sky was grey. Strangers spoke to me regularly in a way that didn’t happen in England but I held onto the coat-tails of Fermor and Lee’s youth for courage. They wrote themselves into being as they travelled; their on-the-road movements were inextricably connected to the formulation of their writerly selves. The fact that they shaped their youthful stories over thirty years later was lost on me as a reader at that time and I determined to do the same as them. If I could just figure out how.



For me, sex, travel and reading belong together, a trilogy of experience, although it is not sex exactly but rather the tensions of possibility. It is not hard to be seduced by the image of a chair by a balcony with a view of the sea or the sight of a ship pulling out of a harbour. Fermor's luminous writing is the definition of seduction. Reading *Between the Woods and the Water* at that age was like being taken by the hand and led into a dense forest full of castles, secrets and Cossacks. Similarly, reading Laurie Lee was like being serenaded by a melancholy violinist with an incorrigible air of good luck beneath infinite skies, or some-such form of wordy caress.

Both guides were inherently male. They possessed their landscapes with swagger. Cruising new towns with confidence, they plucked lovers like pale flowers from behind rocks and dropped them like tissues. For Lee, the women of a 'nameless village' in the Spanish Zamoran wheat-plains were toy-like: 'each girl a crisp, freshly laundered doll, flamboyantly lacy around neck and knees'. Sexual lasciviousness and whores popped up with regularity in both books. In Artemis Cooper's biography of Fermor there is a typically Fermor-esque anecdote told in a curiously strait-laced manner: swimming naked with his flamboyant (married) Serbian lover, Xenia Csernovits, two peasant girls discover them and begin to tease them, plotting to run off with their clothes. Before long, all three women find themselves 'frolicking about in the hayrick' with Paddy, 'nothing half-hearted, nor interrupted, about the sex they enjoyed that afternoon'.

Fermor's wanderings, through moveable, mutable geographies invariably involved taking up with the Hungarian or Romanian beauties he called Vengerka, or 'Hungarian girl' the translation of which label, he explained, had 'an earthy and professional sense'. Women met en route led him beyond the real into a fantastical (and fun) place of otherness. A world beyond adulthood, I supposed, dreamlike or onwards towards death. Wandering alone on winding tracks he would reach dark forests, where "there lives an old woodman, with a single beautiful daughter", it was that sort of region... I already knew that Fermor's taste lay in a specific direction:

my aesthetic notions, entirely formed by Andrew Lang's *Coloured Fairy Books*, had settled years before on the long-necked, wide-eyed pre-Raphaelite girls in Henry Ford's illustrations, interchangeably kings' daughters, ice-maidens, goose-girls and water spirits, and my latest wanderings had led me, at the end of a green and sweet-smelling cave set dimly with flowers

and multicoloured fruit and vegetation – a greengrocer's shop, that is, which she tended for her father – to the vision of just such a being.

I read with fascination, peering into a world where delicately sampled women were very much of the landscape, blended into the stories of the architecture and the fabric of the paths. How, I wondered, might I fit myself within those parameters? Possibly Fermor's conflation of the princess of a fairytale with real women was infectious because, although to some extent I could not help but feel that both he and Lee were writing ostensibly for male readers about place and women, I still very much wanted to be there. By 'there' I meant reading them, but also existing for them, inside their journey. I suppose I meant inspiring them. It was a struggle to locate myself, the clumsy dichotomy of muse versus artist. Was I comrade-writer-spectator-partaker? Or how might I relate to that single, beautiful daughter? One thing I did know was that I was as keen as Fermor and Lee to gain access to her faraway wonderlands.

Fermor was an unreconstructed orientalist in keeping with his time. He was also archetypically English (it is difficult to find a more striking image of the English man abroad than of Paddy Leigh Fermor puffing away, 'half-pasha and half-caterpillar in many a Bulgarian khan'). In the same vein, Lee quickly threw off his scents of hedgerows and cider and his nostalgia for a long-gone England with stark echoes of Empire. They were tramping to a territory past the confines of nationality and I was attracted to that endeavour. Reading Fermor in particular, I was hunting for a journey through an architecture that could transcend English (or Western European) familiar zones. Trotting behind an English male travel writer whose view was shaped by doors the shape of keyholes, I could see exotic carpets, castles, the edge of civilisation and beautiful exotic women but I was left nowhere.

Still, I was in love with both authors about as much as I was in love with myself so that whenever I encountered real men myself – and when you travel alone at the age of eighteen there is no avoiding conversations with strange men – I must have given off a distracted glow, or possibly I was protected by a charm because they mostly offered to protect and help me rather than anything more corrupting. As a survival technique I evolved a curious mode of travel: to make myself as ethereal and as not-of-the-flesh as possible. To become a passive reflection in a window. At that age I was reading to see myself in chapters, I was looking at views from cafe windows at my own reflection.

## CONSTANTINOPLE – SUZANNE JOINSON

Travel, for women (along with life, writing and existence in general) is a navigation of safety, desire and freedom. Cesare Pavese wrote that ‘travelling is a brutality. It forces you to trust strangers and to lose sight of all that familiar comfort of home and friends. You are constantly off balance. Nothing is yours except the essential things – air, sleep, dreams, the sea, the sky – all things tending towards the eternal or what we imagine of it.’ Being off-balance was exactly what I craved. In Paris I made friends without effort and spent six days in a hotel room in Saint-Germain-des-Prés with a handsome Australian trainee-lawyer and for a short time forgot about my own flow towards Constantinople. Time disappears when one is busy reading Simone de Beauvoir’s *She Came to Stay* in a fog of literary pretention that can be achieved only in one’s late teens in a hotel room in Paris on the Rue St. Jacques with a man popping in and out with wine and fresh baguettes. At some point, though, I began restless walking of the city each morning and often found myself gravitating towards the Gare du Nord or the Gare de l’Est where I stood for too long watching the departure boards flick through limitless destinations.

Station architecture is a contrast of permanence and transience, a restless zone full of gaps and ghosts. I was born in a station town in the middle of England with nothing to the place apart from people passing through, people changing trains and the untenable claim that Paul Simon wrote ‘Homeward Bound’ on Platform Two. To sit on a platform is to be stationary in time and space as if nothing is happening. It is to be trapped in a nowhere place whilst going somewhere. The magic of the hotel room on Rue St Jacques was fading and I realised that staying still was causing familiar feelings of panic. Was I to be a writer, like Lee? Or one of Fermor’s ‘familiar affecting friendship’ with hotel maids or working girls? Which side of the glass was I on? Could I be on both?

I decided to take the long-way round to a Constantinople that even then I knew did not have much to do with a real city. I wanted to escape the clamours of the lawyer who was becoming clingy, sensing my withdrawal and I chose to go South. I took a night-train to Madrid without telling him I was leaving, without leaving a note or saying goodbye and I left him some cherries in a ripped brown paper bag on the small table in our hotel room.

Freedom felt splendid as I meandered through Lee’s Spanish deserts. This was the nineties, before Easyjet, Kindle and speedy travel. Along with Fermor and Lee the only other book I carried in my rucksack was a huge, thickly bound European rail timetable. After Madrid my plans grew vague again and so I simply drifted downwards, towards the sea.

Panicked into an endless restlessness, I shunted into parallel never-worlds: stations and hotel rooms, chapters and endings. I shunned dreaded youth hostels with all their awfulness. I stayed on train station benches when I missed connections and spent nights in cheap rooms above brothels in unsavoury ports listening to the drug running boats coming from Morocco. Somehow, as if the two books were charms, I moved around in a protected bubble. A Spanish truck driver gave me a lift – feeding me apples without the slightest hint of molestation – when all the Spanish train drivers went on strike. Later in my life travel became perilous. Too many hotel rooms, airport lounges and empty bathrooms left me disjointed and confused and the blank chlorine-blue water of five-star hotel swimming pools seemed an alarming invitation to die, but during this magical spring time was stretched and contracted and knew no edges.

My train rolled through station after station. I revelled in Lee’s tremendous descriptions of colour, of his visit to El Greco’s house, ‘still preserved in its sloping garden; a beautiful, shaggy, intimate little villa, full of dead flowers and idiot guides. Inside were the paintings: colours I’d never seen before, weeping purples, lime greens, bitter.’ I was stunned by the beauty and exoticism of the city of Cadiz. I thought it a jewel of a town, described by Lee as, ‘incandescence, a scribble of white on a sheet of blue glass, lying curved on the bay like a scimitar and sparkling with African light.’ Yet, as I read on, I saw a reflection of what I myself was experiencing:

In fact it was a shut-in city, a kind of Levantine ghetto almost entirely surrounded by sea – a heap of squat cubist hovels enclosed by medieval ramparts and joined to the mainland by a dirty thread of sand.

The strangers I met were still gracious, but faces began to change, became slightly more hostile. The point of travel is to run. The compulsion is escape, but as Lee edged towards a ‘bitter South’, where poverty and squalor became impossible to ignore, where he met the homeless ‘who lay down at night among rats and excrement and were washed out to sea twice a year by the floods’ he lost his ‘romantic haze’ about Spain and was confronted with ‘a rotting hulk on the edge of a disease-ridden tropic sea’. He was confronted, too, with the edge of Europe and that reality made him – and me – uncomfortable, even if I couldn’t admit that to myself.

The walled cities felt closed rather than magical. To follow was escape, but the rooms I was reading about were leading to entrapment, and what I first thought

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of as freedom – the long-lines of a bridge arching over a river, a balcony terrace, the contours of a courtyard space – were paths leading me back into interior cities. The insularity of travel was returning me to my own beginnings which is exactly where I did not want to be. I had to fight off memories of home and family ghosts invaded my sleep.

I hired a room in a pension for a number of nights. Sitting on the edge of the narrow bed in the small room felt like being locked in a photograph, as if I were pinned psychically into one segment of time forever. I wished I had gone the other way, Eastwards, to Fermors fairytale land, but turning back to his books I saw that he too was entering his own psychic nightmare and struggling not to get lost, or with the possibility of not being lost:

As the crow flies between Rotterdam and Constantinople, I was a little less than half-way. But no crow would have flown in the enormous loop that I had followed, and when I plotted the route and set it out with dividers, the total came to a great deal more than half; not that this meant much: the rest of the journey was sure to take an equally torturous course.

Again and again I found myself reading of trapped women:

To starboard the dungeon-island of Babakai, where a pasha had chained up a runaway wife and starved her to death, was still drowned in shadow. Then the sun broke through spikes and brushwood high above, and caught the masonry of the Serbian castle of Golubac – a prison too, this time of an unnamed Roman empress – where battlemented walls looped a chain of broken cylinders and polygons up to the crest of a headland; and here, with the lift and the steepening tilt of the precipices, the twilight was renewed.

The place I came to at the end of that particular journey, not quite Constantinople but an Ottoman-styled somewhere, was the Corral del Carbon in Granada, a conflation of an Almunecarian funduq or Fermor's 'balconied houses gathered about the mosque and small workshops for Turkish Delight and cigarettes, and all round these crumbled remains of a massive fortress. Vine-trellises or an occasional awning shaded the cobbled lanes'. I camped here for as long as I could remain still, which chimed exactly with the point at which I was fiscally forced to travel home, and I did so by hitching a lift the whole way back with two friendly Scottish fiddle players in their unreliable VW van.

One thing I have noticed is that travellers and travel writers in particular are not very good at coming home (or making a home) even though they spend their lives searching for one, or trying or pretending to want one. Each journey is a betrayal to someone, just as each written word is a betrayal. To come home is to be whole, to not be a risk to yourself or people who love you, to be central, to have all the lines drawn neatly, to not fall off a cliff or stay under the skin of the swimming pool water, to not pour yourself out intimacy after intimacy into golden cups to be handed out, to hold your children very close and not be gone in the night, to sleep for a very long time. But it is difficult to remain still.

It is of no surprise to me that Patrick Leigh Fermor struggled to finish what he called 'The Great Trudge' and reach his supposed destination of Constantinople, nor that when he finally reached the city his diary entries were underwhelmed and exhausted sketches. This is no reflection on Istanbul the city, but on the mythical otherworld cities of our imagination and what happens if we ever reach them. He must have known that getting to them is a kind of death.

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It is November and I am in Istanbul. I have been invited to talk at a Literature Festival on the theme of 'Women's Voyages in Fiction'. My modern hotel room is opposite a more opulent, oriental hotel where Agatha Christie apparently wrote, *The Orient Express*. It is cold outside, the sky as grey here as the Paris sky twenty years ago. I have walked and walked the city which endlessly opens like a fan. It is unreachable, unreadable and fascinating. There are many cats.

I have only just clarified to myself the difference between the words 'journey' and 'voyage'. Journey, the act of travelling from one place or another, derives from *journee*, meaning a day's work or travel and right up to the 18th Century its primary sense was still 'the travel of a day.' The meaning inherently links to the concept of work. The word *voyage* is quite different; it links back to *viaticum*, which means provisions for a long journey, 'especially a long journey by water to a distant place.' A huge difference, it seems to me.

I've just finished Fermor's final part of the trilogy, published after his death and I no longer look for myself in the spaces of his narrative, nor do I despair at the picking up and dropping off of women along the way. The essence of loneliness begins to permeate his long journey and I now understand that the loneliness of station platforms, of the places where buildings once were but have now been

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destroyed or of hotel rooms in mega-cities at four in the morning is a loneliness not of psychosis, nor an entrapment, but a temporary gift of time that can only be melancholy but is no less sweet for that.

Travelling is the same as writing: it is saying out loud – on trains or in hotel rooms – things we would not say to someone close. It's the glory of setting out at eighteen with no particular plan, it's the art and curation and cultivation of that particular journey and all its rawness, and the understanding of how all along the trip was a simple map to home, which is a place where you will always be restless. It took me a long time to work out that home isn't a trap and the safety of a train on the move is an illusory thing. On my hotel bed is a book that I bought at an English language bookshop I found near the Sultanahmet tram stop. The book is called 'Hayalet Yapilar – Ghost Buildings'. Published in English and Turkish, it is an imaginary exploration of abandoned or vanished buildings of the city. There are photographs of Antiochos Palace, and the military barracks on Taksim Square. Earlier today, I walked from my hotel to Taksim Square, to have a look at Gezi Park, to watch the small sprinkle of protestors. Then I wandered back to prepare myself for talking to a room full of strangers in a large room at the top of a regenerated factory. Somewhere along the way of both my own journeys and voyages, the vast seas covered and the determination to make writing my work, I have found a way of reading Fermor and Lee with joy. Not passively, or distractedly, but on my own terms.

To travel is to find one's story, to escape one's story or to gain a perspective on the story busily being lived and concocted. If our own story becomes a map, it usually leads us to love or away from love – and often we lose that love, or we lose the map. Sometimes the story folds in, disintegrates, collapses, and then we are lost and undone. How we get back from there depends on how we choose to pick up the story again. Along the way motifs come into sharp relief: castles, bridges, khans, courtyard gardens and hotel rooms. Stations, flowers along railway embankments, night-markets, trunks. They tattoo into the mind and add layers to our own interior guidebooks which we can keep in our memories or write down as we like. Stored away as significant and private, they are like special shells found on beaches and kept in pockets for as long as they care to remain there, both precious and eminently losable.



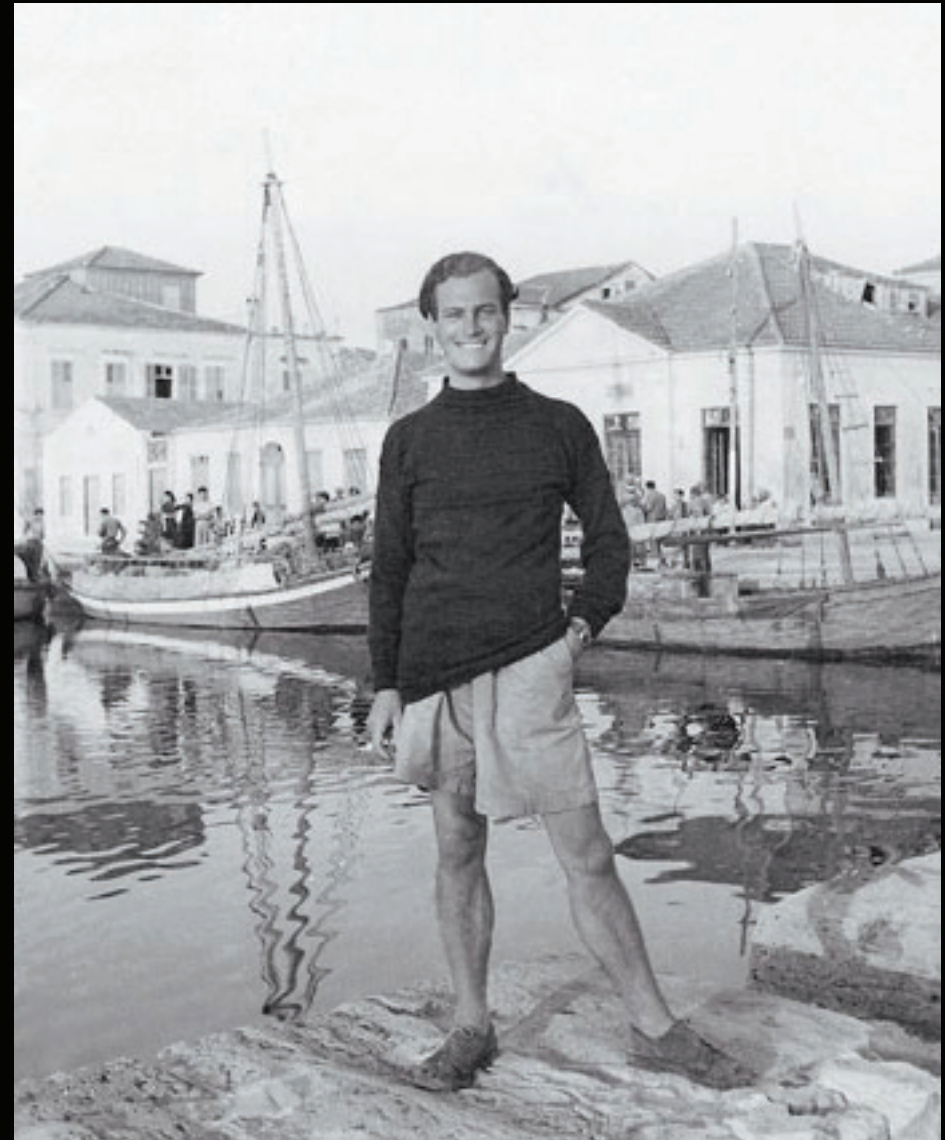
In the castellated village of Kardamyli above the Messenian Gulf, Patrick Leigh Fermor ate a giant silver fish beneath a whitewashed mulberry tree on a terrace overlooking the sea, which brought back memories of three grilled *kephali* eaten with two friends several years before while seated waist-deep in the Messenian Gulf beneath the moon and Dog-Star as bobbing fishermen proffered wine and wailed old songs in praise of hashish. He awoke next morning thinking of the Mourtzini and the Palaeologi. The particular problem that roused him was a question he'd failed to ask of the charming village schoolmaster the day before: When did the Mourtzini family die out? The question mattered because its answer could pinpoint the moment when Byzantium ceased to be incarnated.

• • •

And so . . . to the ingredients Fermor combined to cast his Kardamyli spell.

First comes travel, arduous and dramatic. A demanding bus trip along a switchback road above the Messenian coast brings Fermor to a village unlike any he has so far seen in Greece, its houses “resembling small castles built of golden stone.” He wanders the streets, observing local customs and visiting historic sites. He falls into conversation with the educated local schoolmaster who points him to stone traces of the Palaeologi’s history in the place. He meanders further, drawing word-pictures and interjecting historical context, explaining his own long-standing interest in the fate of the Palaeologi, and mentioning the schoolmaster’s assertion that members of the historically prominent Mourtzinos family, which produced a leader of the Mani in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, were thought to have been descendants of the Palaeologues.

The initial step is more or less straightforward travel literature, marbled with extra-rich deposits of history. Then comes the first real narrative swerve — in truth a double hairpin turn. “Here I must anticipate a few weeks,” Fermor writes. “Some days after this, in the Deep Mani, a young man gave





me the name of his uncle.” This uncle proves to be a publisher in Athens, who owns a bookshop and has written a volume about the Mani. Forward a few weeks, then several days yet farther on, lies the key to a distant past. The tale of the acquisition of the book itself smacks of mythical quests and invests those deeper historical ruminations into the Mani provoked by Fermor’s reading of the book with a quality of sacred lore. The primary wisdom gleaned from this text concerns the morphology of local names through time, a knowledge that Fermor stresses in a footnote is held in a remarkably inclusive democratic trust by the inhabitants of Crete. “Every shepherd, though he may be unable to read or write, carries a mountain Gotha in his head,” Fermor writes, in the course of elucidating how names can evoke lost time (lost battles against the Turks especially), regardless of their guardians’ fluency in other categories of knowledge. Names are their own irreducible truths, Fermor maintains. The deployment of proper names in his prose functions in a manner reminiscent of the role Byron accords to color in Byzantine painting, “fired with an independent life”; displaying “an intrinsic virtue born of its own interplay,” each name represents “an expression of mystical emotion” that ultimately surpasses understanding.

Step three: Fermor returns to his account of discovering the town. The day ends with a swim near a forest of reeds, followed by the purchase of the large fish from a boy who happens into view carrying this silver wonder by its tail. The fish is cooked and consumed on a terrace overlooking the sea as the sun is setting. “The sea’s surface was striped with gold which turned as the sun dipped into pale sulphur shot with lilac,” Fermor writes. A few pages deeper into the chapter, these hues

will be reinvoked as central colors in the vision of brocaded vestments that exhibit the full “pomp of Orthodoxy” before the giant bronze portal of St. Sophia in Fermor’s vision of Byzantium restored. But the key move he makes—the Byzantine gambit—goes beyond the suggestion that sensory details in the present can provoke a historical fantasy. The sunset doesn’t only anticipate elements of the Byzantine vision, it also brings back to Fermor an actual memory shot through with intoxicants that Fermor is able to reactivate in the service of making his readers more susceptible to his revelation of the new Byzantium.

As Fermor and his companion think of their fish, they recall a meal taken several years before in another village altogether at the very tip of the Messenian Gulf, whereupon Fermor proceeds to narrate one of the most famous instances of his bravura lifestyle. In the midst of a public holiday, the precise nature of which Fermor never ascertains, he, Joan Monsell, his partner and photographer, and Xan Fielding sit down to dinner on the waterfront. The heat reflected off the stones before them is scalding. On a sudden impulse, the three of them rise, lift their iron table and step down fully dressed several yards out into the sea. They return for their chairs and seat themselves around “the neatly laid table-top, which now seemed by magic to be levitated three inches above the water.” The waiter appears with their meal and, hardly missing a beat, advances waist deep into the ocean to serve them their meal “with a butler’s gravity.”

It’s an irresistible example of acting on impulse—the “uncircumspect spirited” language of the body responding to an invitation from the physical environment. The mete élan of their action is appreciated by the other diners on the seafront who

proceed to send the trio “can upon can of retsina.” Fishermen in gently rocking boats that surround their table assist with disposal of the wine. By the time the moon has risen, the soused fishermen are regaling the night with odes to hashish. “When the hookah glows and bubbles, / Brothers, not a word! Take heed! / Behold the *mangas* all around / Puffing on the eastern weed...” The scene is so enchanting that it reads as a discrete interpolation. But if we accept it in context, the interlude becomes an artful fulcrum between the current moment and two flourishes of the past (near and ancient).

Fermor segues immediately from this memory of inebriation—a memory that nestles within its folds mysterious chants invoking still more exotic fantasies of intoxication “on the eastern weed”—to the moment in which he awakens high on thoughts of the Mourtzini and the Palaeologi. The juxtaposition is so abrupt it’s easy to lose sight of the fact that he is not waking from that euphoric night in Kalamata several years before but from a sober repast before the polychrome sunset at Kardamyli. Memory serves as its own hallucinogen.

To recap: A meditation on place and history leads to the acquisition of a text, which deepens the meditation on history and place, which is broken by physical release in the sea, followed by a shining meal that provokes an enchanting sensual memory, which deepens yet further the historical meditation, which swells under pressure of physiological stimulation, historical knowledge and personal memory, until finally the past surges, cresting higher and higher—washing over the present, drowning out all but flashes of flailing limbs. For the moment Fermor realizes what he’s failed to ask the schoolmaster regarding the latter-day history of the Mourtzinos, he passes the question to his hotelier, Socrates

Phaliréas, who promptly informs him that the family has never died out. ““Strati, the last of them, lives just down the road.”” Phaliréas explains.

Fermor follows the tip and discovers a fisherman named Evstratios Mourtzinis seated in his doorway weaving “a huge globular fish-trap” of stunning complexity. The montage scene that Fermor stitches together from the ensuing interaction creates a narrative design involving symmetrical parabolas of equally fantastical dimensions and intricacy. When Fermor asks Mourtzinis about his Palaeologian ancestry, Mourtzinis smiles, with “an expression of dubious amusement.” He acknowledges that people say such things, but concludes “we don’t know anything about it. They are just old stories.” Fermor takes this assertion as a challenge. What does it mean for a narrative to be “just old stories”? “Old stories, indeed,” Fermor allows. “But supposing every link were verified, each shaky detail proved?” If old stories can be reeled into the present on a line twitching with lustrous names they might be sufficient to tug history from the depths of time so that it thrashes, coruscating, across the surface of the present. Fermor makes a case for what might be called ecstatic genealogy.

While Mr. Mourtzinis pours shots of ouzo and tells his fisherman’s tales, Mrs. Mourtzinis prepares a meal centered around an octopus tentacle; and Fermor fantasizes about the man before him being revealed as heir to the throne of Byzantium—summoned at this hour to resume command of the resurrected majesty of Constantinople. It’s a *tour de force* conjuring act, which relies, as did the moment in the water before Kalamata, on intoxication, in this case what Fermor calls the “special delight” of morning drinking in Greece. In the cross-cutting syncretic rush, just as the colors of sunset find their place in the vestments of the Byzantine hierarchs and the architectural decoration of that spectacular metropolis on the Golden Horn, the floating table in the sea correlates with and helps summon the image of Constantinople itself ascending. One can in fact pick through the sunset meal, the scene three years earlier in Kalamata, and the setting of Mourtzinis’ seaboard room, identifying image after image that directly foreshadows or resonates with the hues, shapes and materials composing the vision of Byzantium restored. (For example the gathering flotilla of vessels in Fermor’s reverie echoes the fisherman boats floating around the magically levitating table. What Fermor calls the “dazzling

interplay of symmetrical parabolas” in Mourtzinis’ fish trap anticipates the “blood-red parabolas” of Greek fire emanating from the “warships’ brazen beaks” before the Theodosian Walls.)

In a celebrated passage near the end of *Mani* Fermor records his impression of being able to *see* the words of his Greek interlocutors leave their lips as physical substances, the distinguished shapes of the letters, the flicker of different accents. Lying on a hotel bed in Gytheion, “smoking in a sybaritic trance,” he watches the sounds of voices on the street below him take on forms from the worlds of tools, weaponry, culinary arts and divination. The words float before him through the air in what Fermor calls a “dialectic geometry.” A verbal restoration effected on these terms where language goes substantial has implications beyond play. If you can believe in the names, the words of a narrative spell become its realization. Elevated spirits are essential for this alchemy. And the scene inside Mourtzinis’ room ends with a comic drum-and-cymbal come-down: “...The bottle was empty...The schoolmaster’s shadow darkened the doorway.” Tripping over a basket of bait and a couple of tridents, Fermor and his companion step out “into the sobering glare of noon.”



## ‘AN AMAZING VISION’ – MICHAEL GORRA

About ninety pages into *A Time of Gifts* Patrick Leigh Fermor describes the way his young self climbed his way up inside the tower of Ulm Minster, on the Danube in Southern Germany. It was winter, just after the New Year in 1934, and the spire is the tallest in Europe; from the top the streets below seemed to shrink “to a groveling maze.” To the south he could see the eastern edge of the Black Forest, and imagined the trough of the Rhine, flowing north out of Lake Constance. And then in the distance “the whole upheaval of Switzerland gleamed in the pale sunlight”:

It was an amazing vision. Few stretches of Central Europe have been the theatre for so much history. Beyond which watershed lay the pass where Hannibal’s elephants had slithered downhill? Only a few miles away, the frontier of the Roman Empire had begun. Deep in those mythical forests that the river reflected for many days’ march, the German tribes, Rome’s Nemesis, had waited for their hour to strike. The Roman limes followed the river’s southern bank all the way to the Black Sea. The same valley, functioning in reverse, funnelled half the barbarians of Asia into Central Europe and just below my eyrie, heading upstream, the Huns entered and left again before swimming their ponies across the Rhine—or trotting them over the ice—until, foiled by a miracle, they drew rein a little short of Paris. Charlemagne stalked across this corner of his empire to destroy the Avars in Pannonia and a few leagues south-west, the ruins of Hohenstaufen, home of the family that plunged Emperors and Popes into centuries of vendetta, crumbled still. Again and again, armies of mercenaries, lugging siege-engines and bristling with scaling ladders, crawled all over this map. The Thirty Years’ War, the worst of them all, was becoming an obsession with me: a lurid, ruinous, doomed conflict of beliefs and dynasties, helpless and hopeless, with principles shifting the whole time and a constant

shuffle and re-deal of the actors. For, apart from the events—the defenestrations and pitched battles and historic sieges, the slaughter and famine and plague—astrological portents and the rumour of cannibalism and witchcraft flitted about the shadows. The polyglot captains of the ruffian multilingual hosts hold our gaze willy-nilly with their grave eyes and their Velasquez moustaches and populate half the picture-galleries in Europe. Caracoling in full feather against a background of tents and colliding squadrons, how serenely they point their batons; or, magnanimously bare-headed and on foot in a grove of lances, accept surrendered keys, or a sword! Curls flow and lace or starched collars break over the black armour and the gold inlay; they glance from their frames with an aloof and high-souled melancholy which is both haunting and enigmatic . . .

The paragraph will run on for another page, listing those mercenary captains and noting the way that heraldic emblems of Europe seemed in that war to move about on the map itself, the Bohemian lion and the blue and gold lilies of France. But I’ve quoted enough to show what I love here, the infectious energy with which Leigh Fermor seems to turn space and time. Or maybe it’s the other way around, time into space, a history made visible as he looks at the land below and sees not one moment but a dozen. Two things can’t occupy the same space, but two moments can, and so it is here, Hannibal and the Huns at once despite the centuries that separate them. Time and space fall into one another; history becomes a picture, an arrangement in three dimensions to which our minds add the fourth. That’s the wonder of Leigh Fermor’s travel writing, and maybe its limitation too; his visual imagination is so strong that, as at the end of this passage, the record of our barbarity becomes a kind of pageant. Literally colorful. Only his own biography can excuse or justify, can make us forgive, that enduring sense of romance. But it does, oh it does.





**Patrick** Leigh Fermor is an emblem of the author as *preux chevalier*. And, to this author anyhow, a figure straight out of romance. (Take Richard Burton—of the *Arabian Nights*, not the actor in “*Cleopatra*”—and Robert Byron—of *The Road to Oxiana*, not his ancestor’s “*Childe Harold*”; add a dash of T. E. Lawrence and a pinch of Rupert Brooke and you get the kind of poet-warrior I mean.) A classicist also, of course: grounded in Latin and fluent in Greek. Handsome, well-born, well-educated, well-married, a wanderer with no fixed abode until the one he built. His prose is opulent yet lapidary, his charm and brio legendary; his books—though there are few of them—endure. Fermor’s wartime heroics inspired a movie in which he was played—impersonated, really—by the actor Dirk Bogarde. Hard to separate the skeins of fact and fantasy, hard to situate him in the present century, though he died at 96 in 2011: an old man always youthful, an ancient smiling child.

In our household his has been a household name for decades. When one loses the taste for his fellow-expatriate, Lawrence Durrell, one enlarges admiration for the more reticent Fermor. Holding the mirror up to nature, he turns it only seldom on himself. After the lush language of Durrell’s *Bitter Lemons*, Prospero’s *Cell and Reflections on a Marine Venus*, for example, the style

of his own travel narratives seems by comparison spare.

Too, his adventures enchant. I have heard him referred to as “Paddy,” a natural aristocrat at ease with a rucksack and walking-stick, able to melt away guerilla-like into the forest and Greek mountain fastness, then emerge to take hostage a German general and recite the *Odes of Horace* while they establish a truce. Equally at ease in British club and peasant taverna, in stately home or shepherd’s hut, he seems to have known everyone and sojourned everywhere. After his three-year-long walk across Europe, after his military service and daredevil exploits, he settled in the Mani peninsula, and there—as well as in Worcestershire—remained.

• • •

Odysseus, sailing back to Ithaca from Troy, began the tourist trade. He was, although scarcely by choice, a wanderer, and spent more time than he intended on the water road. It took him nine years to get home. In this sense the Olympians were travel-agents of the time; they ordained that Homer’s voyager should spend glad seasons abroad with the Lotus-eaters and on Calypso’s island. Yet he left Polyphemus the Cyclops—that most inhospitable of hosts, who had a bad habit of slaughtering guests—in his wake as soon as possible. Wily

Odysseus knew where to stay, when to go.

Literally “Pelop’s island,” the Peloponnese is a sizeable peninsula attached to the mainland near Corinth, west of Athens. According to legend, Pelop was the infant son of Tantalos, king of Phrygia and a favorite among the gods. In one of those family stews so common to Greek myth, however, Tantalos served up his son as a feast. Once they digested what they’d eaten, the Olympians were displeased—and, condemning the server to the underworld, restored Pelops to life.

The Peloponnese hangs off the Bay of Corinth like poorly anchored teeth. A drive of its southern perimeter—or, to shift the simile, the first three fingers that hang from that wrist—took us a leisurely week. My wife and I explored the Mani in late October, 1992, now twenty years ago, when the region was opening up. I kept a travel log. The weather was propitious, clear: the autumn rains and wind held off, and each day was a gift. In the seaside village of Kardamyli, for example, flowers bloom as though they cannot fade—and those who eat their chocolate or drink coffee or ouzo sit at café tables in the unending-seeming sun. Thucydides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and a foreign legion of enthusiasts have all found the landscape compelling; all sing its harsh beauty, its clarity of light. There is no countryside I know more resonant with history, or suffused by the spirit of place.

## AN HOMAGE – NICHOLAS DELBANCO

We stayed in Nauplion, then Monemvassia, then Vathia in the deep Mani, then the small towns of Gytheion and Pilos and Olympia, then drove back to Athens again. We stopped at ancient Corinth and the high ring of stones that sheltered, once, the doomed house of Atreus, the town of Mikinis. Nearby also is that splendid theatre, Epidauros, where the tragedies of Agamemnon and Oedipus and their troubled progeny are still, every summer, performed. This is the region that those inveterate traders, the Venetians, used for way-stations and ports; earlier the Frankish armies laid claim to strategically positioned sites, and later so would the Turks. Gypsies and pirates and Nyklians turn by turn passed through. But the principal spirit of place remains the ancient one; the treasury at Mikinis and Nestor's Palace at Pilos feel as if they still might yield a kingly bounty. Goats, sheep, dogs and chickens wandered past. The old men on their donkeys glared at our rented chariot; old women walked to market as they have for centuries. Here, according to Lord Byron, "grew the arts of war and peace," and they do so in fertile if hard-to-till soil. The orange groves and olive trees and tombs and the blue Aegean remain what—were he less blind than tradition would have it—Homer saw.

• • •

Our keen-eyed recent bard spent long years living in a house outside of

Kardamyli. As the brief biographical note on Patrick Leigh Fermor's Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese informs us, "In the Second World War he joined the Irish Guards, became a liaison officer in Albania, and fought in Greece and Crete. He was awarded the DSO and OBE...He was knighted in 2004 for his services to literature and to British-Greek relations." If those "relations" were, to start with, diplomatic and military, in the end what made him famous were the books. His later narratives about his youthful journey, *A Time of Gifts* (1977) and *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986) are perhaps more celebrated, but *Mani* (1958) and *Roumeli* (1966) attest also to his interest in languages and language, the intimate encounter with a distant place. Not for nothing is he known as the travel writer's travel writer; think of Bruce Chatwin, Paul Theroux, or Colin Thubron and you follow the line of descent.

The Mani remains a part of Greece that's off the beaten tourist-track, but when Fermor built himself a stone house in an olive grove, it was almost literally by foreigners unmapped. When we drove there the roads had been recently paved; when he himself first walked to Kardamyli it would have been on dirt tracks. Not for this writer the charms of Sicily or Malta or Capri—those jewels of the Mediterranean reported on by a gaggle of others; not for him the gentle or harsh islands of the Aegean Sea. He

had traversed them all, of course, and found much to write about, but this is where he fetched up and would stay. Sir Patrick was for me, therefore, the guardian spirit of place. I took his book along as Baedeker the way one might take Dr. Johnson as a tour-guide to the Hebrides or Robert Louis Stevenson in the Cevennes. It's not as though he tells you where to eat and sleep or how much to tip the porter; rather, Fermor tells you why you're there. And when we went I knew him to be living still in Kardamyli; we put it gladly on our itinerary. I dreamed of an encounter in a market-stall or village square, a post-office or restaurant perhaps: "Oh, Mr. Delbanco, you too write books? Excellent; come up to the house and we'll finish that bottle of wine..."

• • •

Today in America, as I write, countless doorbells are being run. A thousand strangers present themselves for one reason or another at a thousand doors. It may be in order to make a delivery, to read a water meter, to present a petition for signing or canvass for a politician or sell magazines, it may be—as in the case, say, of a broken car or urgent need to use a telephone or medicine chest—in real need. But how many house-holders, standing at that door, will fling it wide? Imagine: you say to this stranger, "Please don't tell me why you're here until you've had a chance to catch your breath. Come in,

why don't you, and sit down, this is my favorite chair. Is it sufficiently close to the fire; do you feel warm enough now? Take off your shoes, please; no, let me help you; my daughter, by the way, is here to wash your feet. And we were just about to have supper; won't you join us? This is the best cut of meat. Eat, drink your fill, have a shower or, if you prefer one, a bath. Then tell me, when you're ready, who your parents are and where you come from and when you're completely at your ease, inform me of the reason that you're here..."

Needless to say, it's not likely. Yet the scenario of open-handed host and guest is played out time and again in Homer's *Odyssey*. It mattered to those hill-bound and sea-scattered tribes that the wanderer be made welcome, and no questions asked. In contemporary Greece, Zeus Xenias remains the God of visitors: tourists, strangers, foreigners. The Xenia Hotel or Tavern is nearly a generic name, and there's a widespread belief that hospitality matters: the wanderer requires roof and food. Often in such stories a deity arrives disguised—in order, as it were, to test the local waters and gauge the quality of generosity in a farmhouse or town. So the traveler who knocks at your door must be made welcome within.

Still today this ritual observance of hospitality continues; one conducts a transaction with coffee or candy; one concludes a transaction with ouzo or raki, and it's the seller

## AN HOMAGE – NICHOLAS DELBANCO

you rent a car or examine a sweater in Athens it's part of the bargain that food be included, so you may share at least an offered remnant of tradition. In the Plaka, a warren of streets on the slope of the Acropolis, I met a man called Stephanos. He sat in his shop's doorway in afternoon sun, reading his newspaper, absorbed in the football results. He sold leather goods—belts, briefcases, duffels, handbags, purses—and it was the end of the season and he was closing things down. He had a cousin in Grand Rapids (every Greek has cousins in America or, increasingly, Australia), and this seemed sufficient reason for a drink. We talked about the weather, politicians, the colonels once in power there, the quiddities of fame, the fiscal exchange rate, democracy, writers, Melina Mercouri, a border dispute, and only in conclusion—sitting back, smacking his lips—did he inquire courteously, “So, tell me; why are you here?”

• • •

Why I was there was in order to visit a country I used to know well. My best friend in college was Greek; at his urging I joined him and learned to love the islands; after college I returned. My first novel used Greece as its landscape, and when they made a movie of it I went back again. But it was more than 20 years since I'd visited the mainland, and my wife had been there only once—for a quick trip to

the Acropolis while waiting to change planes. So I was full of anticipatory nostalgia when we returned that October to see what we could see. Much had altered, much remained.

As Fermor writes in his Preface to *Mani*: “All of Greece is absorbing and rewarding. There is hardly a rock or a stream without a battle or a myth, a miracle or a peasant anecdote or a superstition; and talk and incident, nearly all of it odd or memorable, thicken round the traveller's path at every step.” (p. 6) A page later, he declares, “These private invasions of Greece, then, are directed at the least frequented regions, often the hardest of access and the least inviting to most travellers, for it is here that what I am in search of is to be found.” (p. 7)

To search and to find are the infinitives as well as the imperatives of his life-long journey, and it began early on. His parents served in India; he thought them a pair of attractive strangers when they dropped by to visit; he had wanderlust from the start. “A dangerous mixture of sophistication and recklessness” is how those who expelled him from the King's School, Canterbury, expressed it, and it made them “anxious about his influence on other boys.” Reportedly, he was expelled for holding hands with a greengrocer's daughter, which sets a kind of precedent for his ease with the strata of society. One never has the sense of Fermor “slumming” or failing to find attractive those who are not listed in Debrett's. Yet the woman

he married—after many years of life together—was the daughter of the 1st Viscount Monsell. The photographer Joan Elizabeth Rayner died in 2003.

When finally death came to claim her husband also, he wanted to do so in his native England. Unlike the wanderer Odysseus, he went home to die. But till that final illness he could—according to Anthony Lane's hagiographic portrait in “The New Yorker”—drink you under the table with ouzo, then dance upon the table-top and sing Greek peasant ballads with perfect intonation; he stayed hale until the end. Until the end he kept his notebooks and recorded observations, accumulating language for the third volume of his projected trilogy of youthful wanderings; he taught himself to type. And his language near life's close remains an inward-facing discourse—allusive, information-packed, full of obscure referents and the polymath's prolixity, an O.E.D. always at hand. There's the assumption of shared culture, a languid button-holing urgency and pleasure in arcana; it's as though a dinner table conversation—famous at the Fermors for its range and sparkle—gets transcribed to the page. Or, to put it another way, the reader-interlocutor becomes his boon companion, going along for the ride.

That ride is strange and special, full of stops and starts and narrative diversions; what this author stops to notice is the edge of things. A geography lesson, a florid, a trip taken for the fun of it, a discourse overheard

or superstition examined, a lark. Here, near book's end, is a characteristic passage: “Rich in digressions and vallyonia acorns, the plain and the pale blue ranges glided by, their relationship flowing and changing fast as we advanced up the wide gulf. Skoutari and Kalyvia and its peninsula had drifted south, and Ayeranos and the hump of Mavrovouni. The green world continued.” (p. 334)

As does he. “Digressions and vallyonia acorns” could well be the slogan on Patrick Leigh Fermor's shield.

• • •

The deep Mani in its ancient way suggests the modern proposition, “Less is more.” The Mani has no cultural locus as such, no famous site where tourists flock or grand hotels facing out on the Acropolis; it's an empty and to a degree forbidding place. There are Byzantine chapels and hillside shrines, but little to evoke “the glory that was Greece.” The Folkloric Museum in Nauplion, for example, has an ample and well mounted exhibition of native handicrafts; the museum in Olympia boasts Praxitiles's masterful statue of Hermes. But the Museum of the Mani displays photographs of building projects, not statuary or pottery shards. The roads are steep-and-switch backed; erosion and tree-felling and centuries of grazing goats have left the mountains barren, a mixture of red dirt and shale. The olive or the orange tree looks less firmly rooted than the

## AN HOMAGE – NICHOLAS DELBANCO

prickly pear. The Maniots are famous for their quarrelsome independence; this part of the Peloponnese has never been conquered, and its characteristic structure—a stone tower, sometimes as high as five storeys—appears to have been, for centuries, built for the sake of toppling; the local blood feuds are fierce. You knock down your neighbor's tower, and then he levels yours. The young have fled to Athens, where there's nightlife and at least the possibility of work; those who stay behind are elderly, and most of them wear mourner's black. They keep some chickens and perhaps a goat for milk; the men drink coffee and ouzo and play cards and board games noisily in the café. They pass the time in a manner not wholly comprehensible to this hurried, harried Westerner; in turn time has passed them by. What these folk expect seems closer far to what they get than is the case for most of us; the distance, as it were, between ambition and achievement seems less large. An old woman in the water, with her slippers on and skirt hiked up, was anchoring her evening meal—a fish in a string-bag—with rocks. That way it would stay in its element, salt-laved, till cooking time; she would have, no doubt, a jug of wine, and there would be bread.

In the small seaport of Gytheion, there's little to write home about—a dock for car-ferries from Italy and the islands, a skein of hotels, a clutch of sidewalk restaurants and

cafés. In season it's a tourist-town; off season it battens down the hatches against the meltemi and rain. There's a high seawall to keep back spray, and—as with so many of the roads in Greece—garbage dumped beneath and sometimes hanging off each tree. At a curve in the road there's an outcrop—an unprepossessing island connected by a causeway to the town.

It was called, in the old days, Kranæ. Legend has it that when Paris abducted his beautiful Helen and fled from Sparta to the shore, they shared their first night in this place. They hid from Menelaos and disported themselves brilliantly, and in appreciation Paris built a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. After the fall of Troy, however, Helen's aggrieved husband razed the temple and erected one to justice and to punishment instead. Now there's a lighthouse—its windows broken, slogans painted blackly at arm's reach. My wife and I walked to its edge: a listless surf, a motor-boat putt-putting past, thorns and brambles underneath. Then, of a sudden the moon rose; the fisherman cut his caique's engine; a scent of fennel wafted to us, and Gytheion was magicked by the song great Homer sang.

In his Mani, Travels in the Southern Peloponnese, Fermor uncovers the same mystery, though years before. He closes the book with the recognition that he too has stumbled on Kranæ:

Gytheion, to which a small island was tethered by a long narrow mole, trembled towards us through the afternoon haze. It was sunk in afternoon catalepsy. Nothing moved among the shipping and the cranes along the waterfront or among the inert tiers of houses that climbed the hill-side. Beyond the ship's awning the sun beat down like a curse and I could feel the heat of the quay through the soles of my shoes as though I were treading across a flat-iron. Every shutter was down.

He says, in effect, that only the adulterer would be out and about in such weather. And since we aren't in Athens, even the illicit lover can't be bothered to confront the heat and stays inside to rest. Then, by the kind of association that festoons his pages everywhere, he thinks of that adulterous couple, Paris and Helen of Troy. And there's the sudden shock of it, the glad recognition: "We were dumfounded. Kranæ! I had always wondered where it was. The whole of Gytheion was suddenly transformed. Everything seemed to vanish except the dark silhouette of the island where thousands of years ago that momentous and incendiary honeymoon began among the whispering fennel."

May I call you Sir Patrick, Sir Patrick?"

"Nonsense, boyo. Call me Paddy."

"It's very kind of you to greet us. To make us feel so welcome."

"In French, my boy, the word for guest is interchangeable with that of host. Hôte. And much the same pertains here too. Zeus Xenias. Come in."

"I'm grateful. Very grateful."

"Don't be. I myself was taken in repeatedly by those who made me welcome. And turnabout's fair play."

"Volte-face."

"You have a little French, it seems."

"Small Latin and less Greek."

He smiles. "How curious, that 'taken in' should be both an announcement of welcome and a description of trickery."

"Yes. As you yourself 'took in' the German general."

"Old history, my friend. And scarcely worth discussing. You'd have done the same, I'm sure."

"Not likely, Sir Patrick. Paddy."

"So, tell me, why are you here?"

• • •

I imagine this, of course; I dream myself into his presence. In the end we did not look for his house or, finding it, knock on the door. It would have been, I told myself, impertinent, and it was not needful. His language is an edifice; it stands.

• • •

## PEOPLE HAVE FACES THERE: ROMANIA\* – NICK HUNT

*\*from Walking the Woods and the Water: In Patrick Leigh Fermor's Footsteps from the Hook of Holland to the Golden Horn (Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2014)*

Ileana was younger than I'd expected, a slight girl in her mid-twenties. We sat on the steps outside the church in the afternoon sunshine.

'There is something I didn't tell you,' she said. 'I am the great-granddaughter of Count Jenő Teleki.'

'A tall, spreading, easy-going middle-aged man, with gold-rimmed spectacles and a remarkably intelligent, slightly ugly and very amusing face ... he had all the instincts of a polymath: everything aroused his curiosity and sent him unwieldily clambering up the library steps. He delighted in gossip and comic stories, and he had a passion for limericks, the racier the better.' That was Paddy's description of the count, with whom he had stayed blissful weeks as a guest in Kápolnás – now Căpâlnaş – thirty miles east along the valley. A scholarly, cultured and generous man, historian and butterfly collector, his speech inflected with Scottish from his upbringing by a Highland nanny, the kindly figure of Teleki represented the best of the privileged culture that the war, and Communism, had torn apart.

The story of Ileana's family was a permutation on a narrative that was familiar by now. Their estate was nationalised in 1948, and they were preparing to flee when they were betrayed by a former servant, arrested and imprisoned. Their property was confiscated. 'Recently we obtained an inventory of the things taken from the house. It was obvious no one had any idea what they were dealing with. Very valuable items were marked as "ring", "piano", "painting", "chair". We asked the National Bank what happened to it all. They said it was sold to help pay off the external debt in the 1980s.'

Throughout the Communist era, the remaining members of the family were disgraced and humiliated. After being tortured in jail, Jenő's son Eugen was given a menial job in a railway station and became an alcoholic. When people used to jeer at him, asleep in the waiting room, he would say: 'Let me be. This is how the last Count Teleki wishes to die.'

Ileana had grown up knowing nothing of this. Her grandmother had kept it secret, knowing the Teleki name was a black mark against the family. But after Ceauşescu's televised execution in 1989 and the fall of Communism, they pieced the story together. Ileana's father had won back the house – used for

decades as a psychiatric hospital – in a legal case, but as they had no idea what to do with such a property, they continued renting it to the state.

'Have you ever slept in an asylum before?' she asked. 'There's a room we can use. You can stay as long as you like.'

But first, she wanted to show me other broken houses in the valley: the continuation of the trail of ruins I had followed since Štrkovec. In nearby Odvoş – formerly Otvos – we broke in through a shattered door to explore the shell of the house where Paddy had stayed with Mr v. Konopy, a learned wheat-breeding enthusiast. Dust motes swooshed as we passed through the rooms. Traces of silver-patterned wallpaper still gleamed on the walls. In the family chapel the ceiling had collapsed in a downwards sneeze of straw, and a crack running down the wall bisected the painted face of Christ. Since Ileana had last been there, the pews had been stolen.

'This vandalism was deliberate,' she said. 'The library at Căpâlnaş contained communications with the Vatican, illuminated manuscripts written on calfskin. When the house was nationalised the peasants didn't know what to do with them, so they turned these manuscripts into socks to line their moccasins.'

We went next to the kastély at Bulci, where Paddy had attended a party, rubbing shoulders with monocled Francophiles and ladies in gorgeous gowns. Now the house was Sleeping Beauty's castle: weeds prised through the broken tiles of what might once have been a breakfast terrace, shutters hung at crazy angles from boarded-up windows, and paint flaked from the doors like tiger bread. Since Ileana's last visit, the portico had collapsed. I tried to imagine the windows lit up, the hallways humming with life. Now there were dogs sleeping in the ruins and the only sound was birdsong.

My ruin guide left me there, to camp beside the river while she drove on; we arranged to meet at her asylum the next afternoon. I pitched my tent beneath a white willow on the bank of the Mureş, and woke to a field of frost. The sky was the colour of a smashed blood orange. On Bulci's overgrown lawn, a man was quietly cutting grass for his animals with a sickle.

For most of the day I followed the river, struggling through jungled woods and tripping over vines. The river had





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widened since Radna, here and there narrowing into bottlenecks or forking to enclose wooded islands. ‘Everything in these reedy windings was inert and hushed under a sleepy spell of growth and untroubled plenty,’ wrote Paddy, but now much of the land had grown wild. As I neared my destination I fought through a stubble of charred stalks from the burning of the winter grass, pushing my way through scorched willow that whipped across my face and arms, giving me charcoal stripes. Coated in ash and sweat, I came to Căpâlnaş looking like I’d escaped from a fire.

I loped exhausted through long shadows to the kastély at Kápolnás. Double flights of steps mounted to a balustraded terrace, where people were sitting out in the cool moment before sun set; there were glimpses through French windows of lighted rooms beyond. If I squinted it was almost the same, though the people on the terrace wore dressing gowns rather than evening wear. Dogs slumbered in the sun, and a stocky, powerful-looking man was strolling in the garden. He was wearing what looked like a walkie-talkie, and from his authoritative bearing I took him for an attendant. It was only after he’d seized my hand, linked arms and marched me to the house that I realized he was one of the patients; the walkie-talkie was actually a blaring radio. Weirdly, he looked a lot like Jack Nicholson.

‘Ion,’ he introduced himself. ‘Like the singer, Elton Ion.’

‘Nicholas,’ I said.

‘Sarkozy?’ he cried, then slapped himself on the forehead and erupted with laughter. ‘Vive la France!’ Then he seized me by the head, a slightly alarming turn of events, and landed two bristly kisses on my cheeks.

A curious circle of patients gathered round, shaking hands and smiling; men and women, old and young, in plastic slippers and woolly hats, smoking furiously. One young man with a shaved head and white socks pulled up to his knees approached me with an expression of rapture. Ion impatiently shooed him away, circling his finger in the air and giving me a meaningful look.

‘Crazy,’ he explained.

Double doors of polished wood led to a dim, tiled hallway. A marble staircase laid with dirty rugs climbed to the upper floor, where an ornate gallery looked down on the glass-paneled ceiling of the room below: once the famous library, from which the moccasin-socks were made, now a recreation room scattered with stained sofas. The dining room was a dormitory, where daylight from the french windows spilled onto hospital beds piled with slumbering forms, disordered heaps of pyjamas and legs, men in various stages of exhaustion or depression. The rest of the house was a mildewed warren of corridors and mysterious half-closed doors, lit by flickering chandeliers, where patients shuffled in semi-darkness in a fug of tobacco. Woman in shawls scowled around door frames. The upstairs bathroom was occupied by

aggressive stray dogs. Unlike Štrkovec or Mocrea there was nothing sanitised here: this hospital looked more the set of a low-budget horror film.

Ileana showed me to the room set aside for her family’s visits: three hospital beds and a ceramic stove the colour of a glazed pie dish. She showed me family photographs – Count Teleki staring owlishly through round spectacles, with a spotted bow tie and a toothbrush moustache, Eugen glaring at the camera in traditional costume – and took me on a tour of the estate: the overgrown gardens reverted to nature, the half-collapsed stables and outhouses, the attic, the roof, the labyrinthine cellars.

As evening wore on, I started to feel curiously at home. Under the surface creepiness was a gentle, even tender sense, as if the house and the gardens around it were, like the patients themselves, deep in convalescence. We visited Teleki’s grave in the woods; he had died during the war, before the estate was nationalised, and his resting place was surrounded by lichened columns and vaulted with trees like a chlorophyll cathedral. In communist days the family was forbidden from setting foot here, so they couldn’t lay flowers on his grave. They used to throw them over the wall; it was the closest they could get.

As her great-grandfather had done with Paddy, Ileana drove me down the valley to Hunedoara next morning, on the now traffic-snarled E68, to visit the famous castle. This was the stronghold of Ioan Hunyadi, a medieval ruler with the rare distinction of being a hero to both Romanians and Hungarians, who had defended these lands against Ottoman attack. She told me the legend of the well in the courtyard, dug for fifteen years by three Turkish prisoners on the promise of freedom when it was done. Hunyadi’s widow later broke the promise and ordered them put to death. The story said they’d left a message carved at the bottom of the well: ‘apă ai, inimă n-ai,’ ‘you have water, but you have no soul.’

From Hunedoara we ventured on, winding through the hills to the Hațeg Valley to see the church at Densuș, constructed on a Dacian place of worship with pillars made of Roman tombstones; thousands of years of history layered into an edifice that resembled a collapsing cake. The eyes of the saints on the icons had been cut away; powerful charms in witchcraft, Ileana said. She told me local vampire stories – ‘not like Dracula, you know, more like energy-sucking beings’ – tales of female forest spirits that people went blind if they saw, went deaf if they heard, went dumb if they talked to. Perhaps there was something of Teleki in her passion for these tales.

To the south lay snowcapped mountains, forming a seemingly impassable barrier to whatever lay beyond. This was the massif of Retezat, one of the highest and wildest parts of the ‘wolf-harboursing Carpathian watersheds’ Paddy had set out to find, and my desire to walk through those peaks was overwhelming. It was a bit

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like falling in love: a breathlessness and a sense of dizzy possibility, accompanied by immediate fear of somehow losing my chance. It affected me like a chemical shift. But for now I had to turn my back: following Paddy's trail, my immediate route lay north and east in a loop through Transylvania. In a month, I would return this way.

Back at Căpâlnaş we shared a bottle of wine on our hospital beds. The night was cold, so we summoned someone to light the stove in our room. 'Excuse me, one fire!' the assistant yelled, charging through the bedroom with a flaming log balanced on a shovel; as soon as he thrust it into the stove the room filled with smoke, flowing through cracks in the tiles and pouring into the corridor, where patients gathered anxiously, prepared to evacuate. Luckily, there were no smoke detectors in the hospital.

Dogs sang in the garden and patients griped in the corridors. The lights intermittently brightened and dimmed as if controlled by an unseen pulse from the overworked heart of the building. The house itself, I had come to see, was the victim of a trauma; it seemed an appropriate sanctuary for people who, in ways I'd never know, had been through traumas of their own. It was like the special-needs school in Ineu, built to deal with the damage caused by the failed orphanage system: traumatised children housed in the ruins of a traumatised culture. Căpâlnaş, like its current inhabitants, was in recovery from history, refugees from the modern world. Ileana repeated something Ion had said, when she'd told him of her family's plans to renovate the house.

'Why renovate?' he'd replied. 'Objects, like people, get morally damaged.' I left on a grey, overcast morning, the birds singing as if before rain. Ion shook my hand and planted two last tobacco-smelling kisses on my face. He was standing at the gate to say goodbye, hand raised in salute.

'Long live the Kingdom of Great Britain!' he roared as I went by. Then greenery closed over the house, and Căpâlnaş was gone.

The inward migration of storks had begun. Storks were a recurring motif in Paddy's journey, and I was delighted to see their return; cumbersome and awkward birds, all joints and pivots, hinges and elbows, settling in giant nests on telephone poles and rooftops. The sound they made was extraordinary, less a song than a knocking together of pebbles in the throat. I followed an unmetalled road on the south side of the Mureş, and was gobbled at by turkeys in the villages and rushed by gangs of geese that lowered their heads to attack, hissing like evil lizards.

There was one final stop on my tour of ruination. In the hills above Gurasa-da I climbed through a broken window into the kastély where Paddy had spent his longest, and happiest, country-house sojourn, befriending an ex-hussar called István and falling in love with a married woman, with whom he embarked on a love affair in a grand loop through Transylvania. This house was smaller than the others, and I wasn't sure I'd found the right place until I recognised the octagonal pillars, the ochre walls of the arcade, the fanlight of green and purple glass, amazingly still intact. Nothing stirred inside but dust. The rooms were empty apart from piles of musty agricultural pamphlets. In lieu of the 'fine portrait of an ambassadorial ancestor', the centrefold of a porn magazine was pasted to the wall.

I'd considered sleeping the night inside, but there was nothing to stay for. I'd had my fill of ruins. So I spilled my last drop of țuică on the steps and headed to the woods. Acorns crunched under my boots. As I was putting up my tent, I heard the first spring cuckoo.



Touching my arm, the shepherd pointed downstream at something in the dark-shadowed east high above the river and just discernible across the failing sky. Ragged and flocculent, fading to grey, scattered with specks of pink from the declining sun, varying in width as random fragments were dropping away and re-cohering and agitated with motion as though its whole length were turning on a single thread, a thick white line of crowding storks stretched from one side of the heavens to the other. Mounting Africa along the Nile, they had followed the coasts of Palestine and Asia Minor and entered Europe over the Bosphorus. Then, persevering along the Black Sea shore to the Delta of the Danube, they had steered their flight along that shining highway until they had come to the great bend a few miles downstream. Deflecting from the river, their journey was now following a westerly as well as a northern bias; they were bound for Poland, perhaps, and shedding contingents as they went at hundreds of remembered haunts. We gazed at them in wonder. It was a long time before the rearguard of that great sky-procession had vanished north. Before nightfall the whole armada would subside in a wood or settle all over some Slovakian hamlet – astonishing the villagers and delighting them, for storks are birds of good omen – like a giant snow storm.

— Patrick Leigh Fermor, *A Time of Gifts*

This is part of a famous passage which comes right at the end of Patrick Leigh Fermor’s *A Time of Gifts*, where he stands on the bridge over the Danube river at Esztergom, about to enter into a new country, Hungary. The next book about his extraordinary ramble across Europe, *Between the Woods and the Water*, picks up the story once again from that bridge.

As both a starting point and an ending point, the bridge at Esztergom was clearly a strategic moment in his journey. He chooses the moment to describe how his journey intersects with another epic migration of nature, that of the storks. And the whole passage was one of those that inspired me, it turn, to make my own intersecting journey in his footsteps for my book, *Blue River Black Sea*.

The stork description is a virtuoso piece of writing, demonstrating the acuity of his observation, and the originality of his use of language – “ragged and flocculent... its whole length turning on a single thread”. But it is also typical of his writing in the way that it riffs off into other connections: the origins of the birds and their destinations, the impact of their arrival; Fermor was never content with merely depicting what was there in front of him.

The bridge at Esztergom scene is typical of the way the Danube manages to be exotic whilst threading through the heart of Europe, and it is that mix of the familiar and the unknown which grabbed me; PLF found true adventure in Europe’s midriff, and I wanted to see whether adventure still existed, so close at hand. But his view from the bridge was also a passage that I found depressing, because when I, in my turn, found myself standing on the self-same bridge, I felt like a dullard. “I could see no storks, only a Tesco’s plastic bag rising steadily on an upward draft of hot air, drifting out to mid-river and then hitting a cooler airstream and plunging down... into a metaphysical bath of cold water.”

It wasn’t a good moment in my journey, comparing my experience to his, and I have to confess I felt quite depressed about it at the time. But I learned a key lesson on that bridge: I was no Leigh Fermor, and I shouldn’t pretend to be. However, I had other, less glittering, strengths. He had his style, and I had mine. Hopefully there’s value in both.



In a tone of high seriousness, sympathy, and subtlety, Patrick Leigh Fermor writes explicitly against the Euro-colonial grain on the controversial Petro rite and on voodoo ritual more generally. I shall quote amply from this passage to offer a full sense of Fermor's respectful tone, and his sincere and sustained attempt to account for the maligned local customs:

The Mondongo Lwas also form part of the Petro rite. They are the representatives of the Congolese race of the Mondongos, who were notorious in colonial times for cannibalism...There is no doubt that human sacrifice has, in the past, played a certain minor role in the rites of the Petro Lwas. But, as Dr. Dorsainvil suggests, these ritual murders were the equivalent of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia to enlist the favour of the gods, or of Abraham's abortive immolation of Isaac to appease Jehovah. It is the expression of a psychological state fairly general in primitive humanity. And it is, above all, a characteristic of primitive religions in which the gods may be unkind, harmful and wayward powers which can only be appeased with human blood. So, though the offering may, in point of fact, be eaten, such sacrifices must be absolved of the vulgarity of ordinary cannibalism.

One can detect in this passage the attitude of cosmopolitan attachment that generally characterizes Fermor's relation to his foreign context. As per his usual humanist exoticism, he draws analogies to classical and Biblical mythology in order to diminish a cultural distance between Europeans and Haitians that has heretofore been exaggerated by other writers; the ultimate goal of such a rhetorical move is to induce cross-cultural empathy in the reader. And finally, in a spirit of sympathy he qualifies a colonially-maligned local practice so as to place it, sympathetically, if not quite to vindicate it. In each of these ways, Fermor's approach to the custom is radically different from the Carib case.

Different, too, is Fermor's willingness to engage honestly with what he calls "delicate" aspects of the matter at hand. Fermor goes on with the discussion:



Claircine, the youthful Republic has had a bad time from foreign writers. This reached such a pitch in the last century that Froude, disembarking for an hour or two in the Haitian port of Jacmel, records, with an insincere coyness surprising in such a writer, that he hardly dared to glance at the butchers' booths in the market for fear of the disquieting wares that might have been exposed for sale.

Here Fermor does not simply distance himself from colonial writers on Haitian anthropophagy, but he becomes the champion of the beleaguered “youthful Republic” that “has had a bad time from foreign writers.” The irony is that Fermor’s diagnosis of Froude could well apply to himself in the Carib case of anthropophagy: “an insincere coyness surprising in such a writer” and a reluctance to engage with the culture in front of him. A curious case of cognitive dissonance.

Fermor finally dispels the myth of voodoo anthropophagy altogether, but in doing so, offers respectable justifications for its former existence:

To me, ritual murder seems more remarkable by its scarcity than by its actual occurrences. A very large number of the slaves originated in the Congo, and of these, many were drawn from the populous Mondongo tribes. After the War of Independence.... there was nothing to veto the prolongation of the customs to which, in the happy freedom of Africa, they, or their fathers and grandfathers, had been accustomed. Whether Mondongo anthropophagy was religious or merely gastronomic—Moreau de Saint Mery hints that it was the latter—atavistic beliefs certainly spiritualized and elevated it. Instances, with the infiltration of western prejudices, became steadily rare, and authorities are today agreed that human sacrifice, in Voodoo, does not exist.

Note how Fermor judiciously shifts the emphasis from occurrence to scarcity, correcting for his European forebears’ excesses. Moreover, he offers a sound, sympathetic—even ennobling—and historically contingent explanation for whatever vestigial cases of anthropophagy might have existed in the immediately

post-Independence era. He presents this atavistic practice of cannibalism as an understandable liberationist impulse, one merely claiming the “happy freedom” of the ancestors of recently enslaved people.

Having acquitted contemporary voodoo of the specific allegation of cannibalism and human sacrifice, Fermor goes on to extend the association between voodoo in general and liberation, thereby embedding even the most controversial practice within a generally unimpeachable framework. Like Alejo Carpentier and other European admirers of Haiti, Fermor attributes the crowning moment in Haitian history to Afro-syncretic voodoo:

It was the unifying force of Voodoo, far more than the advent of New Ideas from Europe, that impelled the slaves at the time of the French Revolution to revolt... The first chain-breakers—Mackandal the poisoner and Boukman, whose terrible *jacquerie* struck the first overt blow—were both Voodoo initiates, and the Haitians were carried to victory by the inspiration of their equatorial numina, for, like Castor and Pollux at Lake Regillus, the Lwas appeared on the battlefield and participated in the rout of the whites. Now the heroes of the war are themselves triumphant denizens of the Voodoo pantheon, worshipped in the Petro rites with fanfares and drums and with the explosions of gunpowder and the clashing of sabres... This, for Haitians, is the sovereign importance of Voodoo: the memory and the worship of their great ancestors and heroes and a melancholy and triumphant nostalgia for their lost home in the forests of Africa—the remote and legendary green kingdoms of *Nan Guinan*.

In this short passage, Fermor redistributes credit from European Enlightenment to native cosmology. Further, he evokes a rousing scene that makes vivid for his reader the power of this cosmology to change the face of world history. Fermor’s tone becomes so poignant in this passage that he leaves no doubt as to his sympathies for Haitian voodoo culture. He presents Voodoo practice as a historical necessity of sorts: it has thrived because the (former) Haitian slaves feel compelled to dignify their existence by recalling their New World heroes and ennobling African traditions.



**ONE IS ONLY SOMETIMES WARNED, WHEN THESE PROCESSES BEGIN, OF THEIR CRUCIAL IMPORTANCE: THAT CERTAIN POEMS, PAINTINGS, KINDS OF MUSIC, BOOKS, OR IDEAS ARE GOING TO CHANGE EVERYTHING, OR THAT ONE IS GOING TO FALL IN LOVE OR BECOME FRIENDS FOR LIFE; THE MANY LENGTHENING STRANDS, IN FACT, WHICH, PLAITED TOGETHER, COMPOSE A LIFETIME.**



## Notes on Contributors

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**PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR**'s motto was *solvitur ambulando* (it is solved by walking) and his trek, mostly on foot, from Holland to Istanbul in 1933 and 1934 provided the subject for his best known work, a three volume account of the journey: *A Time of Gifts, Between the Woods and the Water* and *The Broken Road*. Along with two books on Greece—*Roumeli* and *Mani*—Fermor published a volume on the Caribbean, *The Traveller's Tree*, a book on monasteries, *A Time to Keep Silence*, and one novel, *The Violins of Saint-Jacques*. He died in 2011 at the age of 96

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