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He is English, after all

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- *The Broken Road: From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos* by Patrick Leigh Fermor
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The first book ended with ‘To be continued’. The second with ‘To be concluded’. But the third book of Patrick Leigh Fermor’s famous walk from the Hook of Holland to ‘Constantinople’ was never completed. He died two years ago, rewriting and correcting and adding and tweaking almost to the end. The manuscript, some versions of it handwritten, some typed up, remained unfinished.

He had been working on it, more off than on, for over fifty years. The journals of the first two legs of his march, from Holland to Hungary and from Hungary through Transylvania to the Danube gorges, had long been published. *A Time of Gifts* (1977) and *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986) were adored by readers thirsty for the final instalment. By then, Leigh Fermor, generous, handsome, brave and crazily talented, was already a hero. He had written fiction and travel books; he had fought as a partisan in Crete and kidnapped a German general. In his last decades, he was happily married and settled in Greece. But he could not finish that book.

There’s no real explanation. But now Artemis Cooper, his biographer, and Colin Thubron have done it for him – or done as much as they could.[*] *The Broken Road* (they chose the title) is more or less the manuscript ‘Paddy’ left behind; it breaks off at Burgas, in Bulgaria, before he reached Istanbul. With it comes ‘the Green Diary’. All the day-to-day diaries the young traveller wrote up in 1933-35 were stolen or destroyed except for this one, left with an aristocratic Romanian lover who saved it through fascist and communist nightmares and returned it to him long after the war. It contains daily jottings when he’s on his travels, but almost nothing about his stay in Istanbul (a curious blank), and a long, brilliant account of his winter walk through the monasteries of Mount Athos.

The journal starts at the Iron Gates as Leigh Fermor – now aged 19 – crosses into Bulgaria and walks to Sofia. It’s his usual zigzag between sleeping on peasants’ mud floors and bursting into consular drawing-rooms or baronial halls with his letter of introduction: ‘Oh, good, there you are, just in time for the brandy.’ At the Rila monastery, he meets a clever, rebellious girl he calls Nadejda and goes to stay with her in Plovdiv. (His sketch of her is unforgettable, for, unlike many English travellers, Paddy actually liked women intensely and was absorbed by their accounts of their lives. ‘Most men are just take, take, take,’ one much later lover said. ‘With Paddy it’s give, give, give.’)

He walks on across the mountains to Karlovo and Kazanlik and Gabrovo and Tirnovo; he meets Turks and White Russian soldiers in exile; he meets a young Yorkshire woman ill in bed in a small Bulgarian town and – typically – scribbles a note of all the English books on her shelf (*Jock of the Bushveld, Black Beauty, Pears Encyclopaedia* …). The sky above his head is darkened by hordes of migrating storks launching out over the Black Sea towards Africa. He treads grapes, smokes hashish, gets drenched by storms and is joined by a dog that

howls every time the moon appears from behind a mountain. He talks about Hasidism with a Jewish innkeeper and about patriotism with a young German diplomat in the newly Nazi embassy in Bucharest, where he enjoys weeks of fantastic high life in the 'Paris of the Balkans'. He is in a Bulgarian café as it explodes with joy at the news that King Alexander of Yugoslavia has been assassinated, and in Ruse entertains his landlady by singing a Marlene Dietrich song backwards (he is English, after all).

And one night, south of Varna, he falls off the rocks into the sea and recovers in a cave full of singing, drinking fishermen – except that he didn't. The fascination of this book is that it reveals how Leigh Fermor wrote and how he debated with himself the tricks and gaps of memory. When he first sat down to write about his walk, he was separated from it by a world war and more than thirty years of life (he was only twenty when he reached Mount Athos). He had lost almost all his notes. But he had talents to fall back on. He possessed a prodigious, Google-sized memory, luckily undisciplined by any university, for everything from poetry in many languages to minute visual detail of costumes, landscapes or the contents of rooms. He also had a molten, multiplex imagination which flashed up improbable connections and could effortlessly replace gaps in recall.

So the story about falling off the rocks and waking in a cave actually turns up twice in this book. Once in the main memoir in Bulgaria, and then on the coast of Athos where – Cooper shows – such an event really happened, although not on anything like the terrific scale of the memoir version with its Jolly Beggars night of mighty bardic song, feasting and ancient dances. There's clearly a lot of this transposing and reimagining in all three books. Leigh Fermor himself writes here about using 'the haul of irrelevant detail' to coax larger memories out of oblivion, about 'balloons of afterthought added to the text' and 'the temptation to slide in one or two postdated wedges'.

Surprisingly, the sudden reappearance of the Green Diary in 1965, when he returned to Romania and secretly met the princess who had hidden it for him, did not help composition. He had already started writing up this last stage of his long walk, and although he treasured such a relic from his past, he seems, so Cooper says, not to have collated the diary with his new manuscript or used it as a source. Had he done so, there would presumably have been only one version of the sea-cave adventure and a good many other changes to the text of *The Broken Road*. In a way, this bobbing-up of long lost evidence was disconcerting and interfered with his handling of inspiration.

It's hard to rate him as a writer. Knowing that many things he grows lyrical about can't have happened as or where he says they did can make one grumpy. Purple prose, sky-high overwriting? There's certainly some of that, or some high-wiring on the edge of that. His father, he recalls, wore 'slung about his long form a japanned vasculum with a wide web baldric'. The town of Tirnovo is 'this winged insurrection of houses'. Or 'the precinct reeked of goats, fish, curds, cheese, tar, brine, sweat and woodsmoke, an abode harmoniously shared by Polyphemus and Sinbad.' Yet the sensual enthusiasm, the assurance that young Paddy really did snuff and savour all these things, somehow carries it off, even if the sentence happens to be about the Bulgarian sea-cave party which didn't happen there or like that. The other two books, started later and finished earlier, have many passages jingling and glittering in a harness of gorgeous adjectives. *The Broken Road* has far fewer, possibly because Leigh Fermor never reached the final revision stage in which he might have buckled them on, and the book is all the better for it.

Sometimes his boisterous catalogues of detail and epithet grow tiresome: why can't he shut up for a moment? But sometimes, as with this watermelon at the river port of Vidim, he's all cool economy: 'so we slashed the green football open in bloody and black-pipped slices and then shared it.' When a description soars over the top, the vexed reader is consoled in the next paragraph by Leigh Fermor's linguistic dexterity. And the three-page set-piece inspired by the great migration of the storks – 'all at once we were under a high shifting roof of wings … they benighted the air. A ragged shadow dappled the mountainside all round us' – is easily the finest thing in the book. To express the privilege of such an experience is not easy. To make the reader feel privileged to have read about it takes an even rarer skill.

Older Brits sometimes complained that Leigh Fermor was bumptious and noisy. It was hard to get anything done when he was in a mood for loud laughter, drinking and telling stories in several languages. But he was also a superb listener, notorious on walks or wartime marches for stopping every old peasant lady or charcoal burner to ask for their opinion and biography. As he wrote about himself, 'ever since I could remember, my boredom threshold had been so high that it scarcely existed at all … I was unboreable, like an unsinkable battleship.'

Unboreable and uncritical (everything 'filled me with the same wild fascination'), he stacked his enormous memory with a cargo of recondite European history (preferably dynastic and medieval), with library-loads of poetry and fiction in several languages, with the liturgies of all the main Christian faiths and with theories of ethnic character and origin, archaeology and sociology, on which his grip was rather uncertain. But in spite of all this knowledge, gathered not only from books but from countless conversations with Balkan people and their masters in peace and war, his politics were elusive.

A Bulgarian friend asked how he could possibly want to visit Romania, after it had stolen the Dobrudja from Bulgaria and seized Transylvania from Hungary. Leigh Fermor retorted that he wasn't a political observer: 'races, language, what people were like, that was what I was after, churches, songs, books, what they wore and ate and looked like, what the hell?' He was not far, in other words, from that venerable motto which didn't survive Mrs Thatcher's Tory spring-clean: I can't stand politics, that's why I'm a Conservative. Cooper's biography shows that he regarded communist partisans in wartime Greece as dangerous rivals rather than allies (other factions in British special operations thought the opposite). He was away from his beloved Greece at the height of the Civil War after 1946, which meant that – although he was known to be anti-communist and a romantic monarchist – he was not perceived to be taking sides. But he was living in the Peloponnese during the dictatorship of 1967-74. He despised the Colonels' claim to be saving Greece from Bolshevism – 'all my spontaneous sympathies (in spite of my official views generally) are against the coup' – but he took no stand against the junta.

With all the praise for *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*, there came a few catcalls. Too many epithets, too many magnificent landscapes. And what sort of footsore traveller was this, who spent so many nights along the way in the schlosses of decayed Mitteleuropean grandees? As he notoriously wrote in *A Time of Gifts*, 'there is much to recommend moving straight from straw to a four-poster, and then back again.' Didn't that convey a scent of slumming it, venturing occasionally to share the hay with picturesque but loyal tenants?

There are fewer schlosses in this book. The explanation is that after using a good many introductions to nobility across Austria, Hungary and then Transylvania, he had entered

Bulgaria. Barons with Germanic titles and estates didn't feature in this land of peasant villages and Orthodox monasteries, which had only recently emerged from centuries 'under the Turkish yoke'. And Leigh Fermor was now crossing formidable mountain barriers – the Balkan and Rhodope ranges – as winter approached. To survive, he had to rely on the food and shelter offered to him along the way. He is in no way condescending about his hosts. This strange, penniless English boy walking to Constantinople had nothing to offer them but his curiosity, and they were as interested by him as he was by them.

'Paddy's travel writing is often brilliant and moving, always humane. And yet its sheer descriptiveness, its concentration on things and people exotically "other" when contrasted to some assumed English norm, does put it in a category.' The guide here is Vesna Goldsworthy's *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (1998). As she shows, writing imaginative or purely fictional work about the Balkans has been an overwhelmingly British habit. Byron can be said to have set it off. But the genre reached its zenith in the late 19th century and early 20th. Anthony Hope's Ruritania seems to be located in Germanic territory rather than further south-east, but other writers – 'Sydney Grier' (Hilda Gregg), Dorothea Gerard, Bram Stoker etc – floated their dreamlands far down the Danube and into the 'bloodthirsty' Balkans. Later, John Buchan, Lawrence Durrell, Evelyn Waugh and Malcolm Bradbury were among those who tried their hand at brutal, gaudy Balkan Ruritanias.

Literary 'othering', as teachers tell their classes, is a way of confirming your own society as 'normal' by heightening the aberrant weirdness of its supposed opposite. Does Leigh Fermor offer such a performance? Goldsworthy, rightly, doesn't accuse him of that. Instead, she suggests that he edited his Balkan memories of seventy years ago to construct a nostalgia which, whether he intended it or not, implied deep regret for what England had become in more recent times: 'Sacheverell Sitwell and, to some degree, Patrick Leigh Fermor lament the passing of a feudal world, the Europe of peasants and princes … Their melancholy reminiscences about the decaying palaces in the East, the pre-industrial Arcadias of Europe's Orient, with their Romanticist, more or less openly anti-urban and anti-modernist agenda, are again unmistakably British.' There is some truth in that. But it's also true that Leigh Fermor was alert to his own delusions. As he worked on this book, he was obviously determined to qualify the Ruritania-loving instincts of his boyhood. He writes about 'how heavy, boorish and sometimes bloodthirsty' the Bulgarians seemed, 'though I didn't, in my romantic idea of the Balkans, mind this last characteristic, which is common to all Bulgaria's neighbours, as much as I should, and their political role as Europe's villains had a certain dark glamour … I made no allowances for the stunting and stifling damage of barbarous occupation for half a millennium, gave no pat on the back for the compensating break with medieval feudalism.' As that suggests, he came to understand perfectly well that the 'old order' (in Hungary and Romania especially) had been doomed and indefensible. Did he already grasp that at the age of 19, as those kindly landowners helped him to hot baths, four-posters and the run of their ancestral libraries? By the time he sat down to write the three books about his walk to Constantinople, his hosts were scattered, expropriated, dead on battlefields or lost in prison camps. He was entitled to be sad about them. It's impressive that he is not bitter.

In the end, it's his moments of joy, his revelling in a young man's moments of epiphany, which stay in the mind. He sleeps under the moon in the ruins of a small mosque, beside a campfire; 'one of the great and recurring delights of these travels: the awareness that nobody in the world knew where I was, and in this case not even I with any certainty.' Or this, from an unrevised Athos entry in the Green Diary when, digging in his rucksack, he finds a poetry

book ‘my mother gave me last birthday’ and some British pipe tobacco: ‘Pipe tobacco, after a month’s cigarette smoking, is an ecstasy too deep for words. I found the same clearing as the day before, looking over and into the monastery, and beyond at the sea, and spent the morning there lying on my overcoat under a Scotch fir, reading *A Shropshire Lad* and finally falling asleep.’ His delights were never complete unless he could share them with others, in actions or through words like these.

[*] Artemis Cooper’s biography, *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure*, is published by John Murray