



Courtesy of Patrick Leigh Fermor

## BIOGRAPHY

Patrick Leigh Fermor—dashing adventurer, decorated war hero, incomparable prose stylist, and erudite historian familiar with seemingly all the peoples, languages, migrations and arts and letters of Europe—has, as Anthony Lane wrote in *The New Yorker*, “so much living to his credit that the lives conducted by the rest of us seem barely sentient” in comparison.

Fermor was born in 1915 of an Anglo-Irish background, and was left behind in England for what should have been a short separation while his mother and sister sailed to join his father in India. World War I extended the separation to four years, and Fermor was raised as a wild rural child: “marvellously lawless years,” he later wrote, which “unfitted me for the faintest shadow of constraint.”

At eighteen, he set out to walk the whole length of Europe, to Constantinople, where he arrived three years later; he joined the British Army at the start of World War II and served most notably in occupied Crete, where he kidnapped a German general in 1942. He settled in Greece, with his companion of many years, Joan Rayner, whom he married in 1968; he lives there still, in a house he built in an olive grove on the Mani peninsula in the southern Peloponnese. His other books include two about Greece: *Mani* and *Roumeli* (both published by NYRB Classics); and a memoir about monasteries called *A Time to Keep Silence* (forthcoming in the fall of 2007 from NYRB Classics).

# A TIME OF GIFTS

by Patrick Leigh Fermor

Introduction by Jan Morris

978-1-59017-165-3

“The greatest of living travel writers . . . an amazingly complex and subtle evocation of a place that is no more.” —Jan Morris

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

Expelled from secondary school in the midst of his final year for a chaste flirtation with a local girl (and not for one of his numerous other crimes and misdemeanors), Patrick Leigh Fermor headed for London to launch a literary career. Soon enough he abandoned the city to set out on a singular quest: starting in December 1933, he would travel on foot across snowy Europe, along the Rhine and the Danube, to Constantinople, an excursion that was to take him until 1935 to finish. It was the adventure of a lifetime, and half a lifetime later, in 1977, he published *A Time of Gifts*, describing the first stage of the journey, which took him from Holland to Prague.

One of the most beloved travel books ever written, *A Time of Gifts* is a book that defies classification. Leigh Fermor recaptures the innocence of being young and footloose, tromping through the biting cold of a northern European winter, scraping to earn a few pennies by going door to door in Vienna apartment buildings and making sketches of the residents, or accepting the sometimes lavish hospitality of friends, innkeepers, and barons that he meets along the way. Some of the portraits in this book—of German bargemen, postmaster’s widows, or Central European aristocrats—are incomparable set pieces of travel writing, capturing a character or a whole way of life with a few deft strokes. But Leigh Fermor is also a writer of remarkable, if always lightly worn, learning, and hidden within *A Time of Gifts* is an astonishing overview of European art and history, full of fascinating excursions into medieval Germany, Danube School painting, Austrian horsemanship, Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale*, and the histories of dozens of people and places in Europe. Above all, Leigh Fermor’s gusto for experience, friendship, knowledge, giving and receiving hospitality, and capturing it all in his lush and masterful sentences and paragraphs make this book a glorious evocation of all of life’s gifts.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. In his introductory letter and later in the book, Leigh Fermor describes his parents and the way he was raised. How did Leigh Fermor’s upbringing prepare him—or destine him—for his later adventures? Do you approve of how he was raised?
2. The author constantly looks both backward and forward in time; for instance, in the first paragraph after “the formal start of my journey,” he walks into a Rotterdam church, is reminded of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, and comments that the whole city would be destroyed in the war a few years later [pp. 27–28]. Do you find one or the other more enriching, his histories or his foreshadowings? How would the effect of the book be different if there were one without the other?
3. Leigh Fermor often gives miniature lectures, or “a theory...I may as well get off my chest” [p. 96]. Do you think these more sweeping topics interrupt his personal story, or vice versa? Do you think of this book as a memoir or a history of Europe?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Patrick Leigh Fermor's story of his trip continues in *Between the Woods and the Water*. Other related books you might enjoy include:

Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana*

Bruce Chatwin, *In Patagonia*

Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*

Joseph Roth, *The Radetzky March*

## OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

### **A Time to Keep Silence**

Patrick Leigh Fermor

### **Between the Woods and the Water**

Patrick Leigh Fermor  
(introduction by Jan Morris)

### **Roumeli: Travels in Northern Greece**

Patrick Leigh Fermor  
(introduction by Patricia Storage)

### **Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese**

Patrick Leigh Fermor  
(introduction by Michael Gorra)

### **The Towers of Trebizond**

Rose Macaulay  
(introduction by Jan Morris)

### **The Thirty Years War**

C. V. Wedgwood  
(introduction by Anthony Grafton)

### **The Fox in the Attic**

Richard Hughes  
(introduction by Hilary Mantel)

4. Part of young Leigh Fermor's excitement is finding himself cut off from his checkered adolescence and with a clean slate: "In the past, I had always arrived on any new scene trailing a long history of misdeeds and disasters. Now, the continuity was broken" [p. 283]. Were you surprised to read this in a book so obsessed with historical and geographical continuities? Are there other parts of the author's personality which seem to pull in the other direction from the main story he tells?

5. Which place described in the book would you most want to visit? Why? Because of what Leigh Fermor says or how he describes it, or because of something in your own history?

6. Jan Morris's introduction says that Leigh Fermor's "Cretan adventure of 1942 pervades the narrative of 1933, because it obviously pervaded the mind of the author in 1977" [p. ix]. Do you agree? It comes up twice in the book [pp. 85–86 and 220–221]; do those passages seem central to you? How are the events of 1942 relevant to the story of Leigh Fermor's walk?

7. In one of his modest asides about his own personality, Leigh Fermor writes that people were nice to him "because I was the youngest and because genuine rashness, linked with a kind of clownish exhibitionism, whose secret I had learnt long ago and sedulously cultivated, always won a dubious popularity" [p. 126]. Does the author of the book—Leigh Fermor 42 years later—come across the same way as the younger man he describes? Do you respond to him now the way people responded to him then?

8. As the journey progresses, Leigh Fermor spends less and less time sleeping in barns and consorting only with peasants, and more time with new friends in castles and cities. Do you think this is a failure of his original plan, or a good deviation from it? How do his city adventures in Stuttgart, Vienna, Bratislava, and Prague compare with his time in the country, in inns and farmers' houses?

9. "The link between journeys and painting, especially this sort of journey, is very close" [p. 156]. What do you think Leigh Fermor means by this? How are paintings important to him? Do you feel that his travels have a closer connection with painting or poetry? What does he get from one that he can't get from the other?

10. With writing as rich and rhythmic as Leigh Fermor's, it's a different experience to hear it out loud. Have each member of the group pick a paragraph and read it out loud; what do you notice, or how do you feel, that's different from when you read it to yourself? Here are some suggestions for paragraphs to read: the ice-yacht [pp. 27–28], castle architecture [p. 72], the Danube [pp. 89–90; 92–94; 145; 299], mealtime in Germany [pp. 104–105], the snowy forest [pp. 116–117], a lonely sunset [p. 120], paintings of martyrs [pp. 151–152], the Giant Catfish ["People say they eat babies" [p. 164] to "amazement" [p. 165], widow Hübner's monologue [pp. 182–183], Fermor's first customers in Vienna [pp. 203–205], two Czech nuns [pp. 249–250], entering and leaving Prague [pp. 254 and 273], memories of fashionable Europe [p. 284], the coming of spring [first half of p. 287 and pp. 301–302].

11. The book ends with Leigh Fermor "poised in mid-air" on the middle of a bridge with Easter services about to start [p. 313]. How is this an appropriate ending to the book? What is he about to cross; what is about to be reborn? Are you disappointed that the book ends before he gets all the way to Constantinople, or do you think the incompleteness works well?