

Last leg

BEN DOWNING

Patrick Leigh Fermor

THE BROKEN ROAD
From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos
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If there was ever a prodigy of travel, in the sense that there are prodigies of music and mathematics, surely it was Patrick Leigh Fermor. Others have hit the road earlier and followed it farther, but nobody has manifested a genius for meaningful travel as precociously as Leigh Fermor, who as a teenager spent a year walking across Europe and squeezed more out of it than an ordinary mortal could get from ten lifetimes. Despite having almost no experience of life beyond England, he stepped ashore in Holland in December 1933, pointed his feet towards Istanbul, and instantly became the perfect traveller. His toughness and stamina, in league with insatiable curiosity and a photographic memory, made him a sort of marching camera, while his knack for languages and for extracting, assimilating and cross-referencing vast quantities of information—historical, cultural, architectural, geographical—made him a proto-Wikipedia. But it was Leigh Fermor's personal qualities that served him best. Handsome, clever, sweet-tempered, bibulous and game for anything, he was rarely at a loss for company, and nearly everyone he met, from swineherds to countesses, was disarmed, drawn out, and often seduced, resulting in a series of friendships, romances and virtual adoptions that put him in the thick of things and gave him a panoptic view of the old life of Central and Eastern Europe just before its annihilation. He had no need for Baedekers.

After letting the journey marinate for many years, Leigh Fermor finally began to write about it, publishing *A Time of Gifts* in 1977 and *Between the Woods and the Water* in 1986. More than a few people, myself included, felt them to be the greatest travel books ever written, and expectations for the promised third volume were high. Though the gap between volumes made plain that they hadn't come easily, it was hoped that Leigh Fermor, his goal in sight and the wind in his sails, would complete the trilogy with relative dispatch. But a decade passed, then another, and his admirers began to despair. *Between the Woods and the Water* had broken off at a place with the Tolkienesque name of the Iron Gates. Were they never to swing open? It was as if Frodo had been left paralysed at Cirith Ungol.

Leigh Fermor died in 2011, aged ninety-six, and the dream of a full trilogy seemed to die with him. What had gone wrong? Though he never gave up, and in fact decided to extend the third book to include a visit to Mount Athos, somehow it wouldn't come right. Always a compulsive tinkerer, he became even more so in old age, perpetually pulling his sentences to bits. His follow-up visits to Romania and Bulgaria, which he hoped might jump-start the book, had the opposite effect, the Communist degradation of those countries leaving him depressed. The death in 1993 of his editor, Jock Murray, was another blow. And the longer his writer's block dragged on, the more self-perpetuating and painful it grew. When, during an interview in 2001, I asked about his progress on the book, a look of agony flashed across his face, as though a twinge of gout and a stab of grief had assailed him simultaneously.

When Artemis Cooper's biography, *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An adventure*, appeared last year, it made distressingly clear just how deep a shadow the book had cast over the last quarter-century of his life. In an appendix, Cooper partially offset this gloom with a piece of happy news: the third volume was imminent. It

seems that in 1963 Leigh Fermor wrote "an incomplete typescript of some sixty thousand words" that described his journey from Holland to Orşova (near the Iron Gates) in "very compressed form", but the final leg in detail. "It is this unpublished document", Cooper stated, "that will form the bulk of the posthumous conclusion of Paddy's great walk."

Now here it is. In their introduction, Cooper and Colin Thubron explain that "A Youthful Journey", as the abortive book was tentatively titled, grew out of a magazine assignment and was written entirely from memory. Then, in 1965, Leigh Fermor retrieved a long-lost diary that covered the same territory. Yet instead of



Patrick Leigh Fermor, Rila monastery, Bulgaria, 1934

serving to supplement and spur on the book, the diary stymied it, and he put the book aside. In his early nineties he returned to it, despite suffering from tunnel vision. "He was still editing, in a shaky hand, until a few months before his death", Cooper and Thubron say. They have made a few light edits of their own to the typescript, divided it into chapters, appended the Mount Athos section of the diary, and given the whole thing its title, *The Broken Road*, which they describe as acknowledging that it "is not the polished and reworked book that [Leigh Fermor] would have most desired: only the furthest, in the end, that we could go".

While not consistently at the level of its pre-

decessors, *The Broken Road* is superb, towering above the usual run of travel books. Even its flaws are fascinating, at least to an admirer. Cooper, Thubron and their fellow literary executor, Olivia Stewart, have performed a noble service in helping their demoralized friend reach a finish line of sorts.

The route covered by *The Broken Road*, which begins in August 1934 and ends in February 1935, is as follows. From Orşova, Leigh Fermor headed to Sofia and then Plovdiv. Here, on impulse, he began a massive detour, striking northward to Timovo (now known as Veliko Târnovo) and Bucharest. He then took a train to Varna, from where he walked most of the way to Constantinople, as he atavistically calls it. After about three weeks in the city, he went by boat to Mount Athos, where he spent almost four weeks going from monastery to monastery and celebrated his twentieth birthday.

As for the book's flavour, it is vintage Leigh Fermor. He alternates between grunge and luxury, sleeping one night in an "abandoned shepherd's lean-to of branches" and the next in the guest room of a British consul. He has a fling with a Francophile Bulgarian girl whom he introduces to the enchantments of Baudelaire. He hits the Slivovitz and belts out Slavic folk songs. He picks up a bit of Bulgarian, improves his Romanian, and begins his lifelong study of Greek. Riveted as always by "ethnological rock pools", he observes Pomaks, Szeklers, White Russians, Sephardic Jews and Armenian merchants, "their eyes bright with acumen on either side of their wonderful noses like confabulating toucans". He wallows in exotic lexicons, eagerly mentioning "yatagans and khanjars", "logothetes and Sebastocrators", "comitadjias and voivodes".

The Broken Road includes a number of bravura set pieces. Leigh Fermor is at a café in Plovdiv when news comes that King Alexander I of Yugoslavia has been assassinated by a Bulgarian; the place erupts in patriotic joy, its customers smashing wine glasses, dancing in "a giant hora", and hurling "a fully-laid table" into the ravine below. The entire Bucharest chapter is splendid. On arrival, Leigh Fermor takes a room in a seedy hotel that turns out to be a brothel; its denizens, who view him as "the best joke for months", iron his clothes and wax eloquent about the opulent whorehouses of pre-war Odessa. Later he takes up residence with a German diplomat and falls in with an ultra-sophisticated fast set, "a mixture of late Byzantium and Proustian France". In Varna, his friend Gatcho goes temporarily mad and tries to stab him. And in a cave by the Black Sea, he joins shepherds and fishermen in a wild, late-night "nautico-pastoral wassail"; over the top even by his standards, the scene is a crazy tour de force.

The prose in which all this is rendered is as distinctive as ever, if not always as burnished. There are off-key sentences, as when Leigh Fermor writes of traversing "a hot plain pronged at random with swing-wells, each with a sprinkled population of men and women breaking up their baked fields"; such heavy alliteration and awkward phrasing fall below his standard. But there are far more virtuosic sentences, along with countless bursts of com-

ic and figurative panache: on Mount Athos, for instance, "the priest who came round to cense the congregation (using a strange, jangling, chainless hand-thurible) had the air of a retired publican coming out to water his roses on a summer evening".

More surprising than the erratic prose is the fact that the narrative fizzles out at the end. For reasons that remain obscure, Leigh Fermor seems to have been put off by Istanbul, or else in a protracted funk; at any rate, the typescript of "A Youthful Journey" abruptly breaks off in Burgas, though Cooper and Thubron include in *The Broken Road* his few brief diary entries from Istanbul. But the most startling of the book's problems is its self-consciousness. *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water* triumphed in part because Leigh Fermor so persuasively and consistently inhabited his teenage sensibility, almost never breaking the frame. (His famous digression on kidnapping General Kreipe is a rare exception.) In *The Broken Road*, by contrast, he routinely interrupts the story to fret over the difficulties of its delayed composition. "This brings up", he declares at one point, "the whole question of piecing together things which have [*sic*] happened a number of years ago—twenty-nine in fact". At another, he worries whether he can "exclude the inklings gleaned later when writing of these first encounters". It's telling that the book's first title—before "A Youthful Journey"—was "Parallax", in reference to these challenges of backward gazing.

Ultimately, *The Broken Road* only deepens the mystery of its own incompleteness. It is not as if there were (Istanbul aside) yawning gaps in Leigh Fermor's narrative, and one might think he would have had relatively little trouble filling them in, eliminating the self-referential passages, and generally bringing the book into line with its predecessors. My suspicion is that his frustrations had less to do with memory or any sort of literary mechanics than with imagination. Though he took fewer liberties than his friend Bruce Chatwin, Leigh Fermor did fictionalize. (In her biography, Cooper points to the invented horse Malek as an example.) And even when he didn't fudge the facts, he swept them up into the baroque engine of his mind, transmuting and rearranging them with a novelist's sense of art. Another telling detail is that in assembling the Mount Athos epilogue, Cooper and Thubron sometimes had to choose between four or more "corrected versions" of the same material. If the notion of multiple drafts of a diary sounds contradictory, that's precisely the point. For Leigh Fermor, getting things right was a matter not only of reconstructive precision, but of vision and fancy, and one senses that the last third of his "Great Trudge", as he called it, refused to submit to those igniting faculties.

Given that his walk was all about pleasure, it is sad and ironic that his documentation of it should have become a source of misery, as if he were paying a delayed debt to the gods. One wishes it had been otherwise, and that the trilogy had turned out a perfect masterpiece. In a way, though, *The Broken Road* is better than any gleaming capstone: while giving us a more than satisfactory idea of Patrick Leigh Fermor's Balkan adventures, it also, in its raggedness, accentuates the seamless magic of the books that came before, and it wraps the whole enterprise in a pathos that humanizes the author's superhuman gifts.