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Book Review: 'The Broken Road' by Patrick Leigh Fermor

The best travel writing liberates geography, history, art and culture from their arid academic moorings.

By Robert D. Kaplan
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The greatest 20th-century Britons often had a bit of the 19th century in them, if not, at times, the spirit of antiquity. Winston Churchill witnessed as a young war correspondent perhaps the last great cavalry charge in history, that of the Dervishes at the Battle of Omdurman in Sudan in 1898. T.E. Lawrence, the only romantic hero to emerge from World War I, was more influenced by Xenophon's "Anabasis," about a doomed incursion into Persia in the fourth century B.C., than by any work of modern military tactics. The legendary Orde Wingate led irregular warfare campaigns in the 1930s and 1940s in Palestine, Ethiopia and Burma that owed nothing to 20th-century battlefield precepts but instead were inspired by guerrilla tactics from time immemorial.

THE BROKEN ROAD

By Patrick Leigh Fermor
New York Review, 362 pages, $30

And then there is Patrick Leigh Fermor. One of the great minor men of the 20th century, who kidnapped a Nazi general in 1944 in Crete —and who wrote prose as if anointed by the gods of antiquity themselves—Fermor listened firsthand to the dying dialect of the paganistic Sarakatsan tribe in Bulgaria in the 1930s and felt a deep identification with Greek folkways reaching back to the early Middle Ages.

Fermor's books, nearly all of them chronicles of his journeys across Europe and the former Ottoman Near East, demonstrate how travel writing, to be legitimate, must act as a vehicle to liberate geography, history, art and culture from their desiccated academic moorings. Fermor combined style with elaborate erudition on nearly every page. His table talk bested most college lectures. Once, a decade ago, I happened to mention to him the 15th-century Neoplatonist philosopher Gemistos Plethon. Suddenly I was regaled by "Paddy" with a low-voiced disquisition describing how Plethon's remains were exhumed in 1465, when Sigismondo Malatesta, the commander of a Venetian expeditionary force in the southern Peloponnese, refused to withdraw ahead of a Turkish army without first claiming the body of his favorite philosopher. Fermor then went on about Malatesta's patronage of the arts and Plethon's reburial in Italy. His knowledge base was not only vast but, equally important, sensuous.

Fermor at the age of 18 in his 1934 passport photo. PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR ARCHIVE, REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND

The 19th century celebrated generalists, whereas the 20th and especially the early 21st celebrate specialists who come armed with troves of academic credentials. Fermor was a generalist and specialist at once, drawing on his immense learning even as he found words and metaphors to define the irreducible essence of the people and scenery he encountered on his travels. At one point he is excogitating about how traditional Greek dances "epitomize the last two hundred years of Byzantium," while at another, in sight of two Balkan mountain ranges, he notes almost as an aside: "The sun had dipped below the last blue stage-wings of the Stara Planina and the Sredna Gora, and under mulberry trees the flit and swoop of the swallows filled my ears with a noise like the swish of scissors round one's head in a barber shop." Rarely was his description of a landscape not pitch-perfect.

If Fermor had an area of expertise it would be the world of Greater Greece in all of its historical-cultural aspects: classical, Byzantine and Ottoman. "Mani" (1958) and "Roumeli" (1966), about southern and northern Greece respectively, combine some of the finest travel writing in English with a deep knowledge of iconography, Eastern monasticism, local dialects, the differing Hellene and Romios mentalities, and other antiquarian subjects that would leave many scholars dumbfounded.

It was Greece that formed the terminus of Fermor's epic journey on foot

across Europe between 1933 and 1935, begun when he was not yet 20. That journey resulted in two classics: "A Time of Gifts," published in 1977; and "Between the Woods and the Water," published in 1986. The considerable number of years between each volume—let alone the decades that separated the travels themselves from his published accounts of them—indicate just how hard Fermor worked at his writing to make it seem so easy and natural. When I met him in 2002, in his rambling home in the southern Peloponnese that was itself a tribute to his aesthetic majesty, I seriously worried that the much-awaited third and final volume of his youthful journey in the 1930s might never appear. I needn't have.

Though Fermor died in 2011 at the age of 96, he apparently overcame severe writer's block and came close to finishing the third volume in his last years. Artemis Cooper, Fermor's very capable biographer, and Colin Thubron, the intrepid travel writer of Eurasia, have accomplished their own act of virtuosity by seamlessly fitting together all the pieces of Fermor's various manuscripts upon his death, so that in this last part of the trilogy Fermor's own voice and no one else's is everywhere apparent.

"The Broken Road: From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos" is not flawless. For example, there is nothing in the text about Constantinople itself, and the section on Mount Athos in northern Greece evinces the mild repetitiveness common to much diary writing. But these are minor quibbles. For the remainder of the text, nearly every other sentence belongs in a time capsule, so evocative of time and place is the author's prose, further enabled, on occasion, by Messrs. Cooper and Thubron's fine editing.

Here is Fermor on the southern bank of the Danube, seeing Bulgaria as "less the south-easternmost corner of Europe than the north-westernmost limit of a world that stretched away" from the Taurus mountains to the Asian steppe. He takes in the "domes and minarets," the "smoky tang of kebabs cooking," and "the Cyrillic alphabet on the shop fronts which gave a fleeting impression of Russia." He comes upon the centuries-old Rila Monastery deep in the forest: "The great metal dome of a church, poised on a slit-windowed cylinder, floated above a bubbling swarm of shallow satellite cupolas," with "the shadow of a yew tree across the wall-girt flagstones." It is Fermor's melodious visual precision that provides him with his own language, the highest mark of a writer.

Then there are the disquisitions on everything from the flight paths of storks to the enjoyments of yogurt. "I almost lived on this stuff, sprinkling sugar on the dimpled crust and then spooning away. I had yet to learn how to squeeze lemon on top until the sugar is soaked, in the manner of some cunning Athenians." He goes on: "I was further still from the delicious Cretan method: pouring in a circular helping of honey . . . and then scattering the chryselephantine whorls with fragments of peeled walnut."

Despite such delights, however, all is not well in the region as he finds it in the mid-1930s: "The Balkan races overlap and dovetail in Macedonia with haphazard geography; ethnological rock pools and minorities are scattered in hostile regions far from their parent masses. These ancient hatreds burn as fiercely today as ever they did." The author delights in finding diversion

in a copy of the Encyclopedia Britannica in Sofia and a copy of Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov" in French in the little town of Boritza, even as he reads and rereads Lord Byron's "Don Juan" while traveling about the Greek seaboard. This is travel when the present moment was truly sacred, undiluted by instant messages from home.

The signal accomplishment of the entire trilogy is that, because many of Fermor's written notes from the period were lost, the volumes are the product of the author's fecund ability to recollect. About his journey from central to northern Bulgaria in "The Broken Road," he writes: "All is dim, except a few lucid alcoves of memory scooped out of these nebulous kilometres. But in the case of these surviving cartouches of memory . . . each detail, like a torch held up to a bas-relief in a cave, suddenly juts, [and] I can still taste the blackberries and recapture the owl's note and the texture of that black dog's coat."

From Bulgaria, rather than continue southeastward toward Constantinople, Fermor cannot resist the temptation of a thrust back north across the Danube to Bucharest, the Romanian capital lying nearby. Bucharest in the 1930s is a stage set of mock-European glamour compared with Bulgaria's woolly back-of-beyond. There are "the ferro-concrete façades, the rainbow tangle of electric signs" and "the blazing kiosks with their polyglot flutter of periodicals." The city "had the impact of a fascinating nightmare."

Indeed, interbellum Bucharest is an "over-upholstered Babylon" about to be undone just a few short years after his visit by political anarchy and fascism. In-depth memoirs of the period, such as R.G. Waldeck's "Athene Palace" and Gregor von Rezzori's "Memoirs of an Anti-Semite," deliciously capture the mix of glitz and blood-curdling extremism in the Romanian capital. Fermor, unlike such authors, is merely a passing traveler, not yet 20. But his incredible eye allows little of the decadence to escape his attention.

When the first two volumes of the trilogy appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, the Cold War was still in progress, and so there was a remote splendor to those books, as the cement-gray Communist ice age made everything before it in the Balkans seem so antique. But in 2014, with normal history in progress in Romania and Bulgaria for a quarter-century already, and the depressingly familiar political hurly-burly now in full force in Bucharest and Sofia, his depictions of the 1930s appear almost closer in time, even if Stalin and Hitler do not loom as they did then. The Balkans no longer teeter on the edge.

Fermor's gift of observation, fully developed in youth, transcends time, fusing the classical with the modern in prose of voluminous richness. Here he is on his 20th birthday, Feb. 11, 1935, at a Russian monastery on Mount Athos: "Gradually the chanting grew in volume, and several of the monks . . . filed up both sides into the chancel . . . joining their voices to the harmony. . . . All my landmarks were lost, it was as unlike the familiar Bulgarian, Rumanian and Greek liturgy as it could be, and looking at the inscrutable, expressionless *moujik* faces, it condensed for me the spirit of those snowbound steppes, conjuring up visions of the many-domed Kremlin, of Siberian villages among the pines and the lullaby of howling wolves."

— Mr. Kaplan's "Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific" is published this month by Random House.

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