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# Review: Patrick Leigh Fermor and the Pleasures of Places and People

Leigh Fermor sought isolation in order to work, but his gregariousness made him a poor hermit.

*By Ben Downing*
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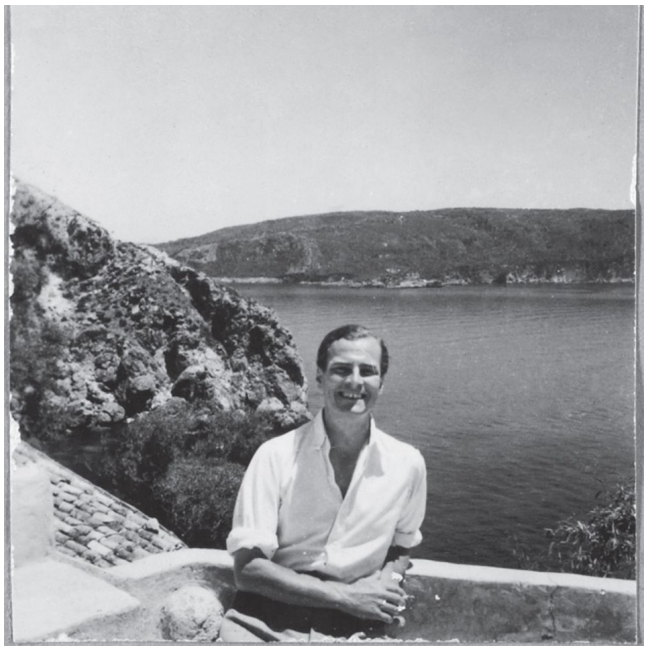
**In a 1958 diary entry,** the writer and Bloomsbury Group member Frances Partridge recalled a dinner during which "the conversation turned to present-day pessimism, or *cafard*. Where can one look to find enthusiasm for living? I could only think of Paddy Leigh Fermor." Called Paddy by his legion of friends, Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915-2011) struck many as a paragon of zest, a man on whom scarcely a crumb of life's banquet was wasted. Prodigiously smart, charming, funny and handsome as well, he dazzled most who met him. His social gifts, however, threatened his literary ones: Why struggle to write at a lonely desk when you can swill whiskey on the terrace all night and talk like a Roman candle?

Fortunately, Leigh Fermor did struggle, some of the time. The result is a body of prose—travel books, mostly—radiant with his brilliance and unique experience but also with his exuberance and warmth. Especially in his magnum opus, a three-volume account of walking as a teenager from Holland to Istanbul, his erudition and descriptive skill are balanced by simple likability—never, one feels, has so much riveting detail been so beautifully served up by such an irresistible person.

Leigh Fermor published little during his last decades, but the years since his death have yielded several books by or about him. All rewarding, at least to fans, were Artemis Cooper's biography, Wes Davis's account of Leigh Fermor's most celebrated military exploit (the abduction of a Nazi general on Crete) and Nick Hunt's book about retracing his route across Europe. The real treat, though, was a book few expected ever to see: the last part of his trilogy, posthumously published as "The Broken Road." Leigh Fermor's inability to finish it, despite a quarter-century of fitful labor, was the great frustration and sorrow of his life, yet the manuscript his executors assembled was nearly complete and full of his usual panache.

Nor was that the last of the manna. The publication, in 2008, of Leigh Fermor's correspondence with Deborah Devonshire (the youngest Mitford



Patrick Leigh Fermor in Corfu, Greece, in 1946. PHOTO: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND

PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR: A LIFE IN LETTERS

Edited by Adam Sisman

*New York Review Books, 469 pages, $19.95*

sister) had shown his letters to have many of the virtues of his books, including a more casual version of their tumbling, gloriously idiosyncratic style. But the bulk of his letters—untold thousands of them—remained unseen. Then, last year, a selection, edited and introduced by the outstanding biographer Adam Sisman, appeared in Britain. Now available here, it spans 70 of Leigh Fermor's 96 years. Like his travel books, it amounts largely to a gushing expression of pleasure in art, history, places and people, but it also gives glimpses of his battles with indolence and the toll they took.

Addressed mainly to friends, lovers and Leigh Fermor's longtime partner, Joan Rayner (whom he married in 1968), the letters are notable for, if nothing else, the variety of their postmarks. Even after he got a place of his own—a house in the Peloponnese that he and Joan built in the early '60s—Leigh Fermor spent half his life as a wandering guest, and from age 18 to almost 50 he hopped constantly between dwellings, most of them romantic, secluded, and either dirt cheap or free. A 1953 letter contains a typical update: "I am established in a damp and ruined Aragonese fortress on the edge of the Tuscan Maremma, a sort of Zenda, really."

Though he often sought isolation in order to work, Leigh Fermor's gregariousness and polyglotism made him a poor hermit. Ensconced in a French monastery in 1948, he wrote that its chatty abbot had befriended him. "Occasionally he lapses into Latin. . . . It is the first time I have ever heard it spoken as a living language, and . . . I flog my brains to construct a sentence, feverishly trying to get the syntax right, usually a question that at

last I enunciate with as much nonchalance as I can muster, to keep going the flow of this silvery monologue."

Odd encounters were routine for Leigh Fermor. In a 1975 letter he describes one three decades in the making. After he accidentally killed a Cretan guerrilla during the war, the man's hothead nephew, Yorgo, refused to forgive him. Revisiting "old haunts in Crete" in the 1950s, he was warned that Yorgo, a crack shot, planned to assassinate him. Intermediaries pleaded fruitlessly with Yorgo for years after that. Then, out of the blue, Yorgo asked Leigh Fermor to be his infant daughter's godfather. ("This is the classical and *only* happy ending to a Cretan blood feud.") The very next week he flew to Crete for the baptism. At the drunken banquet for 300 that followed, Yorgo hugged him and offered to eliminate "anyone you want got rid of." "I hastened to say that there was no one, *absolutely no one!*"

Not surprisingly, Leigh Fermor's sex life was robust: With Joan's consent, he enjoyed flings, affairs and the low delights of the brothel. This activity rarely makes it into his letters, but the exceptions can be piquant. Writing in 1958 from Cameroon, where he was on the set of a John Huston movie, he told a (male) friend: "Errol Flynn and I . . . sally forth into dark lanes of the town together on guilty excursions that remind me rather of old Greek days with you." One of the book's zaniest passages is in a 1961 letter to Huston's wife, Ricki, with whom Leigh Fermor had been sleeping. "I say," the passage begins, "what gloomy tidings about the CRABS! *Could* it be me?" Riffing on pubic lice and their crafty ways, he conjectures that, during a recent romp with an "old pal" in Paris, a force "must have landed" on him "and then *lain up,* seeing me merely as a stepping stone or a springboard to better things"—to Mrs. Huston, that is. As comic apologies for venereal infection go, the passage is surely a classic.

If high spirits dominate the letters, pain often throbs at their edges. What Leigh Fermor termed "neurotic literary paralysis" led to spells of depression, and the pattern worsened with age. "My reaction to any demand for writing," he confessed to his long-suffering editor and publisher, Jock Murray, in 1965, "seems to be to dig an enormous bog and flounder in it." The acute phase began after the publication, in 1986, of the second volume of his trilogy. Istanbul in sight, he hoped his sails would fill with steady wind but instead found himself largely becalmed.

Full of self-deprecation ("I can be a terrible gasbag") and profuse apology (most often for his slowness as a correspondent), Leigh Fermor's letters are remarkably free of backbiting, bellyaching and other standard epistolary vices. When referring to the Oxford don Maurice Bowra, he cannot resist the mocking anagram "Eroica Rawbum." And in 1974 he rants, ever so briefly, about the decline of Greek civilization: "I can't help feeling there has been a serious break since the times of Theocritus." That's about it, though.

However appealing, Leigh Fermor's sunny disposition somewhat constrains his letters, which lack variety of tone and the kind of frank, piercing comment on human behavior and emotion one looks for in the genre. (An exception is the handful of psychologically astute letters about his troubled mother.) It is this that makes me not quite agree with Adam Sisman's

assertion that the best ones are “as good as any in the language.” What’s more, to fully appreciate Leigh Fermor’s letters you need to be familiar with, or at least curious about, the circles he moved in. If names like Lady Diana Cooper mean nothing and you couldn’t care less about the half-bohemian, half-aristocratic world of footloose Brits in the Mediterranean (dating back to Byron and Shelley), this might not be the book for you.

Then again, it might. For all their beau monde glitter, Leigh Fermor’s letters are touching in a universally appreciable way. Writing to, among others, the widowed Diana Cooper and his former lover Balasha Cantacuzène, a Romanian princess and painter who endured many hardships under communism, he displayed a tender solicitude and eagerness to raise spirits that must have brought both laughter and tears and that are, in the best sense, chivalrous. (When he was knighted in 2004, it seemed appropriate not just to his achievements but his character.)

Most moving of all is to watch Leigh Fermor maintain his gallantry, verve and humor to the end. (He was nearly 95 when he wrote the last letter in Mr. Sisman’s selection.) Having gotten to know him in 2001, I received a few of these late letters. Embellished with drawings of clouds and birds, they seemed at first sight to be written in Linear A, but as I slowly deciphered their scrawl I found jokes, flights of fancy, extravagant mea culpas, deep learning worn lightly as silk. Thanks to Mr. Sisman, readers everywhere can have (minus the furrowed brows and headaches) a similar experience, discovering how this wonderful man made sheets of stationery, like the pages of his incomparable travelogues, glow.

*—Mr. Downing is the author of “Queen Bee of Tuscany: The Redoubtable Janet Ross. ”*

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