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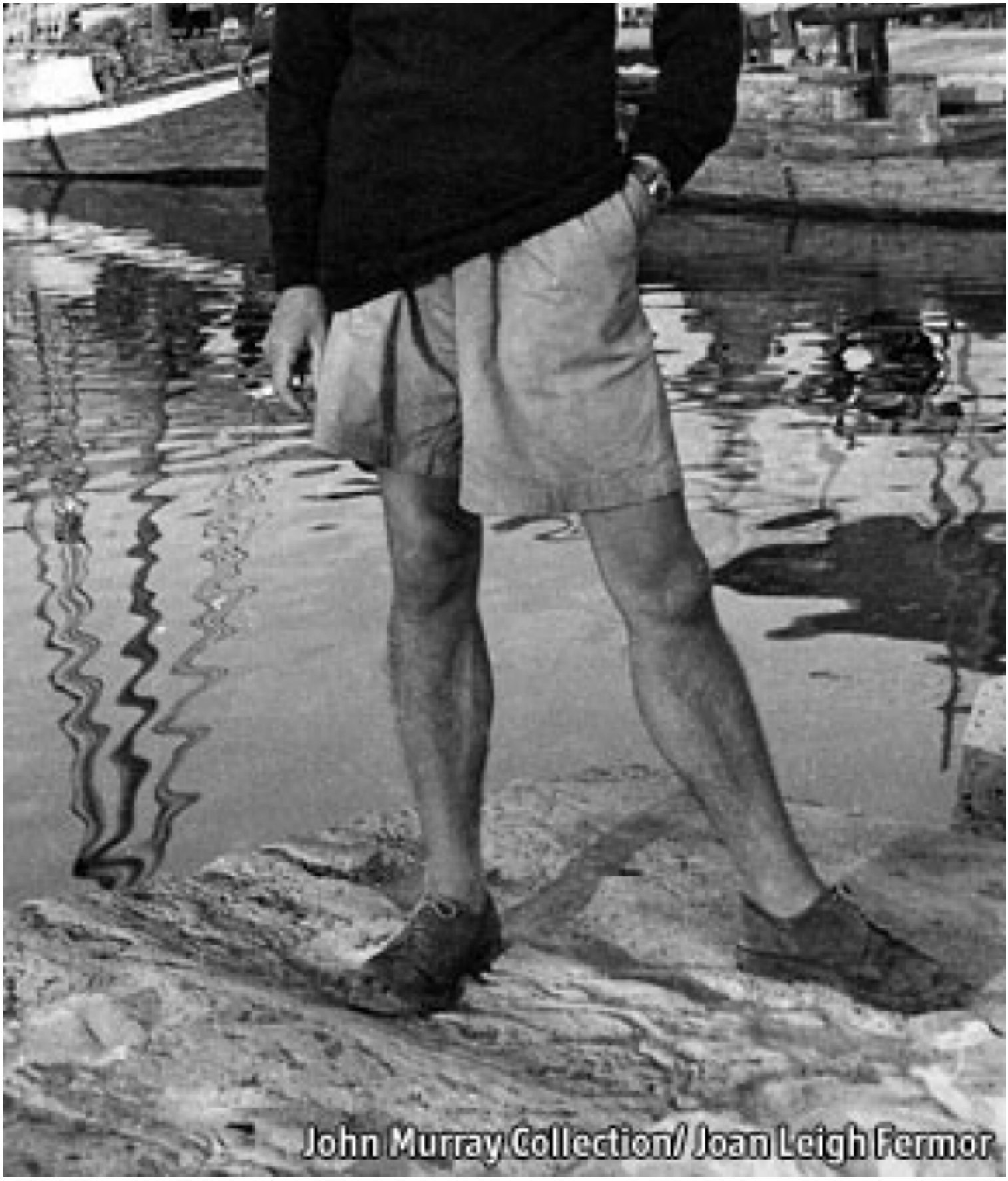
Travelling man

A biography of a charmer


John Murray Collection/ Joan Leigh Fermor

Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure. By Artemis Cooper. *John Murray; 448 pages; £25.* Buy from Amazon.com; Amazon.co.uk

SIR PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR, who died last year at the age of 96, was known to everyone as Paddy, "a friendly, cheerful name with a spring in its step", writes his biographer, Artemis Cooper. Leigh Fermor lived to the full a charmed life packed with incident and adventure, despite its unpropitious beginnings. His parents returned to India shortly after his birth and only when his mother reappeared four years later did he discover that he had been living, very happily, in someone else's family. His parents were ill-suited and soon parted. Leigh Fermor was never close to his father, an austere, distinguished civil servant, and he found his mother's tendency to veer between possessive love and complete neglect destabilising. "A dangerous mixture of sophistication and recklessness", he was repeatedly expelled from school.

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Aged 18, precocious and disillusioned, he set out to walk from Hook of Holland to Constantinople. He explored eastern Europe, fell in love with a Romanian princess and lived with her in a Balkan idyll until the outbreak of war. Back in England he was commissioned in the intelligence corps and sent to the Middle East. After escaping from a defeated Greece he returned to Crete to help organise the resistance and made his name with the capture and evacuation to Egypt of a German general. Thereafter he was widely regarded in Greece as a hero second only to Lord Byron. The affection was mutual and 20 years later he built and settled in a house in the south of the Peloponnese. After the war Leigh Fermor continued to travel widely and he used his facility with languages, scholarship and extraordinary memory to good effect as an author. Easily distracted and notoriously slow to complete a piece of writing, he published fewer than a dozen works. But his two books on Greece and, most especially, "A Time of Gifts", the first of two volumes recounting the story of his pre-war walk across Europe, established him as an acclaimed and bestselling travel writer.

Leigh Fermor was a man of legendary charm with a great gift for friendship. As a young man, footloose with rucksack and notebook, he was readily welcomed into houses humble and palatial. In his company people felt livelier and more entertaining. A friend wished that he could come in pill-form to be taken whenever one felt depressed. He was amusing and amused, quick to burst into song, ever the last to leave a party. Energetic, attractive and susceptible, he regularly fell in love but was devoted to his wife, Joan Eyres Monsell. Despite smoking 80 to 100 cigarettes a day and drinking prodigious

amounts of alcohol, he remained remarkably fit. At the age of 69 he emulated Byron and swam the Hellespont in Turkey.

It is not easy to convey the flavour of a man whose fame to a large extent rests on his ebullient personality and conversation but Ms Cooper succeeds admirably in this readable and entertaining book. Nor is she shy of admitting his shortcomings and his bouts of depression when he would retreat to a Trappist monastery in France.

Leigh Fermor was not to everyone's taste. Some found him insufferably bumptious; his enthusiasm and noise could be "wearing". Essentially, though, he was well loved, a man of action and a self-taught intellectual, who brightened the lives of his many friends and readers.

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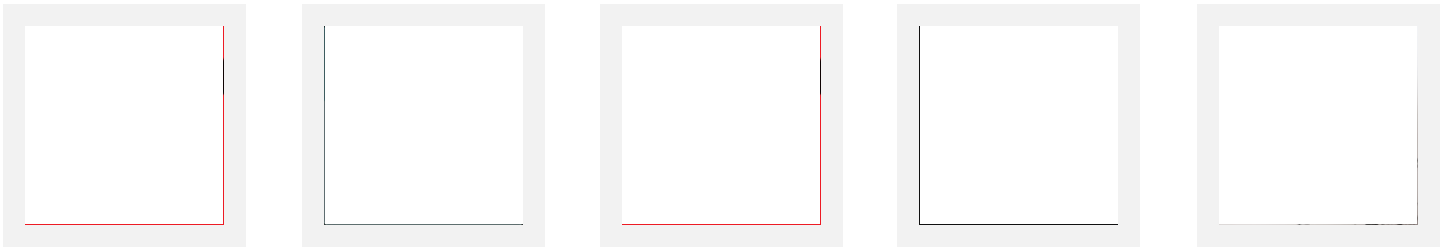

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