A modern-day Peter Pan

From walking across Europe to kidnapping a German general, Patrick Leigh Fermor’s life was the stuff of schoolboy fantasies.

By any standards, Patrick Leigh Fermor led an extraordinary life. At just 18, he walked across Europe from the Hook of Holland to the gates of Istanbul. After more than a year on the road, he settled in Greece, fell in love with a Romanian aristocrat and went to live on her Moldavian estate. When war broke out in 1939, he joined the Intelligence Corps and worked with the resistance in Crete, famously leading a daring operation to kidnap a top German general.

After the war, Powell and Pressburger turned the story into a film, Ill Met by Moonlight, with Dirk Bogarde playing Leigh Fermor. In the meantime, the man himself was building an enviable reputation as a writer, publishing two luminous books on Greece, Mani and Roumeli, and two highly acclaimed accounts of his great European walk, A Time of Gifts and Between the Woods and the Water. His home in rural Greece became a magnet to writers and adventurers alike, and when he died last year, at 96, his friends queued up to proclaim him the greatest travel writer of his generation.

On the surface, Leigh Fermor’s life was the stuff of schoolboy fantasies, a saga of death-defying escapes, beautiful mistresses and prizes, leaving most men feeling rather weedy by comparison. But it was only after reading Artemis Cooper’s affectionate and amiable biography — whose subtitle, An Adventure, is well chosen — that I realised how much his life was a vast exercise in running away.

Soon after Leigh Fermor was born in 1915, his parents left him in England while they went back to India, and he did not meet his mother again until he was four. As a boy, he was expelled from a series of schools, some of which were downright bizarre: in one establishment, where staff and pupils performed country dancing and eurythmics in the nude, the headmaster was “in the habit of bathing the older girls, and towelling them dry himself”.

Unsurprisingly, Leigh Fermor foundered. He performed poorly in exams and was described by one headmaster as “a dangerous mixture of sophistication and recklessness”. Like so many neglected children — Winston Churchill springs to mind — he was restless, naughty and desperate for attention. After school, he toyed with the idea of Sandhurst, but became a door-to-door stock-selling salesman. Then he had the idea of walking to Istanbul, or Constantinople, as he characteristically called it. As Cooper astutely remarks, it was less a great adventure than a great escape “from his parents’ disappointed expectations and his own hopeless, idle, easily distracted, unemployable self”.

The walk, which took a Continued on page 40
Paul Cézanne's personal life comes dramatically into focus in an insightful biography that concentrates on his intense relationship with Emile Zola.

WALDEMAR JANUSZCZAK

CEZANNE: A Life
by ALEX DANCHEV
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Writing about Cézanne is difficult. And it is difficult from all angles. If you focus on the art itself, you face a momentarily elusive body of work which twists your understanding this way and that, and defies straightforward description. His oeuvre is a mountain that has never found a Hillary. If, however, you take the biographical route, and focus on his life, you face another set of obstacles.

Basically, nothing much happened to him. At least not in conventional biographical terms. He was born in Aix in 1839, tried and failed to make it in Paris, and returned to Provence for the second half of his life to paint revolutionary art in grumpy isolation. One wife. One son. A rich father who wanted him to be a lawyer. The bullet points of Cézanne's life would leave lots of white on the back of a postcard.

There is the additional problem of his personality. Which was, or seems to have been, deeply unattractive. In eyewitness accounts, he invariably comes across as weird and awkward. I list these difficulties to make clear that Alex Danchev has taken on in his brave new life of Cézanne.

Danchev is not your usual artistic biographer. Currently the professor of international relations at Nottingham University, he has previously written about the Falklands war, about Britain's special relationship with America, and about international perspectives on the Gulf conflict. All of which is excellent preparation for a life of Cézanne. Only someone as new to Cézanne's art-historical presence as Danchev would have dared take on the task.

Not that this is a conventional biography. Broadly chronological, but also enthusiastically bracketed off with a life that jumps hopscotch to gather up all the reasons the Cézanne feels so unfamilial, Danchev's book is a distinguished attempt to paint the picture of a life in tiny details. It's the kind of book that is often dismissed as unhistorical, but none the worse for that.

Cézanne's best friend, Emile Zola, and the other writers of his generation, were among the first to notice Cézanne as an artist. Zola's memories of Cézanne are as vivid as his writing about him is. The trouble is that, as this book shows, it is rather more vivid than the writing.

As an instinctive realist, Cézanne was drawn to his subjects and to the people he loved. But Danchev's narrative is also shot through with the same preoccupation with the personal and the private that accompanied Cézanne's work. Danchev's is an honest, lively, and surprisingly personal biography. And he is always a whisperer for Cézanne.