

# BOOKS

## BOOK OF THE WEEK

PATRICK LEIGH FERFORMOR:

An Adventure | ARTEMIS COOPER

John Murray, £25, 448 pp

*A magnificent biography adds new depths to the life of a familiar hero, says Jan Morris*

**H**appy the hero who, after a lifetime of glorious achievement, in death finds a biographer worthy of his memory. Patrick Leigh Fermor, "Paddy" to all his acquaintances and half his readers, died last year to a plethora of obituaries, and his life has been so widely celebrated in print, in film and in legend that the task of writing another 400 pages about him would seem, as he might himself say, Sisyphean.

Artemis Cooper, however, rolls the immense boulder with an apparently effortless grace, and makes this marvellous book less a mere life story than an evocation.

The life itself hardly needs retelling. The rapsallion school years, the wonderful adolescent walk across Europe, the derring-do in wartime Crete, when Leigh Fermor was responsible for the kidnapping of a German general, the books that established him as one of the great prose writers of the 20th century, the profound explorations of things Grecian and Byzantine, the illumination of everything by tremendous gifts of scholarship and linguistics – all this is almost too familiar.

But Cooper makes it all seem new. She knew Paddy well herself, she has travelled almost everywhere he travelled, and she has had access to unpublished diaries and innumerable informants. More to my point, she has immersed herself in the minutiae of Leigh Fermor's character, so that the epic figure of his reputation becomes not clearer, but more convincingly blurred.

In no way does she diminish his renown, but she humanises it. Of course he could sing folk-songs in eight languages, and translate PG Wodehouse into Greek, and swim the Hellespont in his 70th year, and mingle as easily with dukes as with layabouts, and extemporise sonnets, and design his own house, and discuss the most obtuse points of theological dogma or historical theory and write lyrical extravaganzas in a manner that was majestically his own.

Dear God, we knew all that! Did we realise, though, that Paddy smoked at least 50 cigarettes every day for half his life, and for much of it was more or less penniless? Does it surprise us to observe Joan Rayner, later to be his wife, slipping him a few banknotes at the table in case he needs a girl after dinner? We

Non-fiction Philip Womack on penmanship **p28** Ed O'Loughlin on Antarctica **p28**  
Keith Lowe on life in the Soviet satellites **p29** Fiction AN Wilson and Susie Boyt **p30**  
Paperbacks **p31** Five of the best Harry Hill on books about the Beatles **p31**



**THE BEST OF MEN** Patrick Leigh Fermor, voracious traveller and raconteur, in Baleni, Romania

surely would not have expected Somerset Maugham to define him as "a middle-class gigolo for upper-class women"; on the other hand we might be mildly taken aback to learn that in his old age he was simultaneously a member of four London clubs – White's, Pratt's, the Beefsteak and the Travellers.

It is no surprise, though, to be told what terrific fun Paddy was. For myself, with a slight distaste for raconteurs and virtuoso conversationalists, I feel I might have been rather overwhelmed by the torrential exuberance of his company, but a vast company of his acquaintances revelled in it, and his friendships were lifelong. Even General Kreipe, the man he kidnapped, was reconciled to him, and a violently vindictive Cretan whose son Paddy had accidentally killed forgave him in the end. Almost at the moment of his own death, Leigh Fermor touchingly wrote in the book he was reading: "Love to all and kindness to all friends, and thank you for a life of great happiness".

His days were full of astonishments, but I find myself most amazed, as I read this record of his 10 decades, by the truly prodigious energy that pervades its every chapter. His social life, pursued among all classes of society (but mostly, one must concede, among cultivated toffs), was unflagging. His instinct for travel kept him constantly on the move, from boyhood to old age – tirelessly exploring new places and revisiting old haunts, and absolutely never, it seems, either daunted or bored. For years he never learnt to use a typewriter, writing everything in a longhand whose endless crossings-out and juxtapositions were the despair of his publisher, "Jock" Murray: but once he had mastered the machine he could play his prose upon it, so he once reported, in "mad *obbligato*".

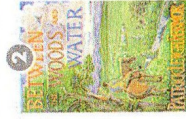
There seems an element of frenzy to all this. There are few passages of calm in this book, few moments of inner contemplation. As I read about its incessant goings-on I

am sometimes haunted by the feeling that they shelter a quieter soul. We hear little about religious convictions in his life, but one of his lesser books concerns three separate sojourns in monasteries, he wrote thoughtfully about his experiences on Mount Athos and he was intensely interested in the varied mysteries of sacred thought. That smashing *obbligato* passage was played in order to get rid of unwanted visitors; inveterate socialist that he was, and a cheerful lesser sinner (wine, women and the occasional fib), perhaps just now and then he pinned to be alone with one god or another.

He was a good, kind sort of hero anyway, and his life did end on a gentler note, spent largely with his beloved Joan in the house they had built beside the sea in the southern Peloponnese. When she died he divided his time, as was only proper, between Greece and England, and gradually his splendid body failed him. He lost part of his sight, part of his hearing, and in his 96th year he went to his rest beside his wife in Worcestershire.

He is justly commemorated in this magnificent biography, and will surely be remembered for ever as one of the very best of men.

### READ ON



Patrick Leigh Fermor's most famous books are **1 A Time of Gifts** (1977) and **2 Between the Woods and the Water** (1986), about the great trans-Europe walk of his youth; a third, unfinished volume is to be published in 2013. If you cannot wait until then, read his gentler book about monasticism, **3 A Time to Keep Silence** (1957).