

THE WRITER WHO TRAVELS

Dolores Payás

(translated by Amanda Hopkinson and Nick Caistor)

To Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor

with gratitude

'Solvitur ambulando' it'll be resolved on the way, Patrick Leigh Fermor told Bruce Chatwin one evening as they were walking in the Greek olive groves of a remote village on the Mani peninsula. Fermor was already seventy. Chatwin, who had just turned 45, had adopted him as his mentor.(1)

At a time when dashing merrily from one place to the next has become a mass sport, plunging into the work of the writer and traveller Patrick Leigh Fermor implies a considerable shock. A shock that is at once a marvellous and a sadly disconcerting experience. Marvellous because of the undeniable pleasure it offers us, sad and disconcerting because we cannot avoid a feeling of melancholy at this manner of exploring the world which we have lost for good.

Journeys now lack any romantic connotation. When we visit somewhere that is meant to be beautiful, interesting, or desirable, it's impossible for us to indulge in daydreams or to lose ourselves in the experience. The crowd which inevitably surrounds us becomes an unsurmountable obstacle when we try to find some poetry, however slight, in the view. We arrive everywhere in hordes, and all too often become empty-headed tourists when we would much prefer to be authentic travellers.

We need to remember: there are tourists and there are travellers.

The former are those who visit unknown places and there indulge in a huge variety of mainly frenetic activities. They are dedicated visitors to monuments and museums, ply between restaurants and wine-cellars with equal enthusiasm. They graze beatifically in distant meditation centres or burn adrenaline in sports that demand large doses of testosterone. It does not really matter what they do, because nothing will change them substantially. They will go home with their minds a blank and their senses as dulled as they were when they first set off. Essentially a tourist is waterproof: impervious to whatever he meets, his trip slides off him like raindrops down a window-pane. Just like Phileas Fogg landing at his club in St. James entirely unperturbed and unperturbable after his eighty-day journey (2), tourists may reach the far corners of the earth, but they come back with their souls intact and their physical integrity unchallenged. For the former, they can count on their own resources, as their natural lack of imagination protects them from any danger; for the

latter, all they need is to insure themselves with a good agency.

Travellers on the other hand are porous and vulnerable. In each of their journeys they surrender their senses and abandon their souls to immerse themselves in the air they breathe, the landscapes they are travelling through, the voices they hear. All of this flows through them time and again, and rises in vaporous clouds that colour their dreams like wine when it stains clear water.

For the genuine traveller, every movement in time and space carries with it the seed of a 'journey', an initiation or learning process. And the traveller's passion to discover and understand everything around him is so intense that nothing will detain him. On the way he will ignore his own lack of roots, the days of frustration, his persistent tiredness, and a more than likely sense of existential disorientation.

If tourists are of many different types but are all basically the same, then travellers are all different but can be divided into two basic types: the discreet and the indiscreet. The former guard their secrets jealously. The latter offer them openly and generously, to the pleasure and delight of their readers.

These generous authors are often called 'travel writers'. This is an arbitrary classification which irritates many of them. As Leigh Fermor aptly observes, a writer is simply a writer, and if he also travels, he is not so much a travel writer, but a 'writer who travels'. If we examine it more closely, we might first of all discuss what exactly is meant by a journey, since no-one has yet established what the minimum distance should be for the narration of a trip can be called a 'journey' (it is almost obligatory at this point to recall the painstaking, infinitely dissected itineraries undertaken by W.G. Sebald that are as brief in geographical distance as they are vast in their intellectual scope. Is Sebald therefore a 'travel writer'?)

Whatever we call them, the works of these authors have little resonance nowadays. They have been displaced by the amazing amount of information available on the internet, and the directive Guide-books, some of which are excellent and pleasantly biased (for example, the Rough Guide series is to be recommended for their sarcastic commentaries and malicious winks at the reader). For those who do not even want to go so far as to make the effort to struggle with the written word, there is the alternative of eye-catching DVD documentaries that can be bought at any newsagents. And as a resort, the laziest need to do nothing more than turn to the fantastic spectacle provided by Google Earth which enables them to circle the planet like petrified model after the H-bomb, with houses and cars untouched. Joking apart, Google Earth's swooping views are both entertaining and educational. They enable us immediately to see, for example, the perfect, comprehensive and uninterrupted deflagration of Spain's Mediterranean coast.

All this is very useful, but it is rapidly consumed and digested. Even sometimes we wish to swim in deeper waters, to get mucky in dense, risky surroundings that are teeming with life, fantasies, and sudden changes. That is when we long for the genius of the romantic storyteller of yester-year, the sort of writer who takes us with him on his magic carpet, along with our armchair and reading lamp, and transports us to intriguing lands where we personally will have no chance to lose ourselves - because of a lack of time, money, or strength - but where he lingered without any pressure.

If a gentle rhythm and gradual exposure are indispensable to the real traveller, they are even more essential to the writer, who has often taken months or years to wander at will with his note-book and pencil, then to digest what he has lived, and later still, perhaps decades afterwards, to transfer to paper the experiences that ultimately reach us, his readers, filtered through their memories, emotions, and accumulated knowledge. As with other writers, the writer who travels creates unique worlds which include large amounts of fiction, even when in this case the source of inspiration is a very concrete reality - that of the roads he has travelled.

Nowadays it is hard to find any untrodden paths, and the figure of the romantic writer and traveller has almost vanished from the face of the earth. However, as with other species threatened by extinction, there still remains one last, rare example that has survived by miracle.

Sir (3) Patrick Leigh Fermor is part of that long tradition of British writers who combine adventure with solid knowledge, poetry with prose, humour with seriousness. Well-read, cultured, an adventurer and *bon viveur*, his biography is so full of incident that it would be enough in itself to make him an irresistibly attractive figure.

He was born in 1915. His father was a distinguished British geologist who was despatched to India, and his mother lost little time in following him out there. Little Patrick was left behind, in the care of an amiable family of farmers from whom he never received either an order or a reprimand. It was a happily wild infancy, and when his mother and sister came back to fetch him, he referred to them as 'two beautiful strangers' whom he could not wait to get away from. He had become a lively, indomitable boy. He was curious and had a huge appetite for learning, but not of the kind offered by a conventional schooling. After passing through several schools, and after being expelled from the last of them - caught *in fragranti* with the village fruiterer's daughter - his family thought he might be suited to a military career. They packed him off to London where, as was to be expected, he immediately found kindred spirits in the capital's bohemian circles. As was also to be expected, the supposed military career came to nothing. It was obvious he would not accept any discipline apart from self-discipline. He had always been self-taught: from childhood on, he had been a precocious reader, with a passion for languages, history, and poetry.

At the age of eighteen, in December 1933, he suffered an early hangover. He was tired of parties, and felt empty, with no real future prospects. He fantasised about escaping from England, reaching some distant, exotic country and starting his life afresh, as a writer. That was when he took a life-changing decision: he would walk to Constantinople.

Wearing a leather jacket and carrying only two changes of clothes, a volume of Horace and a poetry anthology, his sleeping-bag, some note-books and a metal tube filled with pencils, he took the ferry to Holland, where his adventure began. In front of him were the cold days of winter, and to face them all he had was the scanty amount of money he had managed to save, together with a small allowance from his family: four pounds a month, barely enough for him to subsist. He solved the problem by sleeping in rooms he was lent, peasant huts, or *à la belle étoile*, and surviving thanks to the hospitality of the people he met along the way. He was almost always received warmly, even enthusiastically. He was young, keen to learn, good-looking, with immense charisma and an unusual gift for conversation. He retained all these

qualities throughout his adult life, and they were always extremely useful to him in his wanderings. All those who met him in this first period of his travels are unanimous: he was a perfect 'charmeur', and was welcomed as such.

Little by little he created a network of friends and protectors who in their turn gave him letters of introduction for other potential friends and protectors whom he could call on in the later stages of his journey. This strategy was so successful that by the end of his trip he had been put up in quite a few castles and mansions. He was in no hurry: he could stay in one place two days, a week, or a whole month, and his itinerary was open to any modification or detour.

He set foot in Constantinople on the first of January 1935. Still not yet twenty, he had shared a table with peasants, shepherds, merchants and aristocrats. He had slept in shacks, monasteries, and palaces, as well as under trees. His luggage, light enough to begin with, had gradually diminished until all he had left were his note-books and pencils. But his extraordinary pilgrimage turned out to be the best school he had even known; perhaps the only one suited to someone of his temperament. The Europe he was leaving behind was on the verge of disappearing, engulfed in the clamour of the Second World War, and he never forgot the lessons he learned on his wanderings. Not only did they plant the seed of the future writer in him, but they taught him how to be the perfect traveller: stoic, Franciscan when the circumstances demanded, but sybaritic and sensual whenever the opportunity arose.

From Turkey he crossed to Greece. His encounter with the Hellenic and Byzantine world was not just a *coup de coeur* but a long-lasting, deep, and active love. He learned Greek and wandered all over the country. In Athens he met the Romanian princess Balasa Cantacuzène. She was twelve years older than him, and had just separated from her husband. It was love at first sight: they fell into each other's arms, moved into an old watermill together, and for a while lived the perfect romantic dream. They loved each other; she painted, he wrote. At Balasa's suggestion, they moved to Moldavia in the north of Romania, to live in the old family mansion that she and her sister Helena had inherited. There they succeeded in living their idyllic daydream for a few years more. In Leigh Fermor's own words (4), those were golden days. Surrounded by villages and ploughed fields, Baleni was a crumbling, antiquated and enchanting house. The Cantacuzène sisters were ruined aristocrats who possessed all the graces: they were beautiful, fearless, eccentric, amusing, and above all, cultured. There might be no money in the house, but there were still books, paint-brushes, musical scores. The days went by filled with events, companionship, and affection. They constantly explored the surrounding region, threw parties, read poems, took moonlight walks; Leigh Fermor also occasionally escaped to his native England.

Then war broke out. Leigh Fermor immediately left for London to enlist. When he left Moldavia, he bade farewell to Balasa and Helena convinced that he would be back within a few months. In the end, he did not see them again for more than 25 years, when he finally picked up their traces behind the Iron Curtain. Baleni had been confiscated, and the two sisters were living a precarious existence in a Bucharest garret, giving classes in English, French, and painting. In 1965, Leigh Fermor secured a visa to enter Romania and spent several clandestine days with them (the Ceausescu regime forbade anyone to put up foreigners). He found them poorer than ever, but with the same sense of humour and

enchantment as in their brilliant youth. They all remained good friends until the two sisters died.

When the British Intelligence Services learnt that Leigh Fermor spoke Greek, they immediately recruited him. In 1940, he was the liaison officer with the Greek army fighting the Italians in Albania. When Greece fell, his unit transferred to Crete, and when that island also fell, he stayed on for a further year and a half, living in caves hidden in the mountains. Disguised as a shepherd, his task was to co-ordinate the different groups in the legendary Cretan resistance.

After Italy's surrender, Leigh Fermor was in Cairo for a short period, until he was sent back to Crete. This time he was parachuted in with a specific mission: to organise a commando to seize the island's German commander, General Kreipe. The operation was planned and executed in a brilliant, imaginative and risky way. He and his men snatched the general from under the noses of the enemy troops, and over the following days they kept constantly on the move in order to avoid being detected. The general was treated with great respect, but could not avoid being taken on lengthy forced marches over the island's mountains.

As if this were not picturesque enough, the capture was crowned by a quintessentially 'Fermorian' incident. One morning at dawn the prisoner looked out at the magnificent landscape spreading at his feet and began to murmur: 'Vides tu alta stet nive candidum/ Soracte...' The future writer, who was smoking a cigarette beside him, immediately went on: '...Nec iam sustineant onus/ Silvae laborantes, gleuque/ Flumina constiterint acuto'. These were the first verses of one of Horace's odes – one of the few he knew by heart (or so he swore).

The General's capture entered the annals of Cretan history, and the young Leigh Fermor was acclaimed as a hero. The Greek government made him an honorary citizen of Heraklion, while the British authorities awarded him the DSO, and the ever-attentive film producers took his exploits to the big screen.

The real-life protagonist did not like *I'll meet by Moonlight*, and it is easy to see why. The film is too far-fetched, even if it does conserve a certain musty charm that appeals to lovers of kitsch. Our first sight of the main character is priceless: a queer Dirk Bogarde stands with arms akimbo, silhouetted against a night-time backdrop on the top of a Cretan cliff (although in fact it was shot in Provence). The actor was meant to be representing Leigh Fermor in his role as a guerrilla and a pretend shepherd, but for some unknown reason he always appears dressed like Lord Byron at his most flamboyant, wearing a turban and silk cummerbund. The result is hilarious as well as picturesque and, as Leigh Fermor's lifelong friend Deborah Devonshire (7) once aptly remarked: 'I'd never leave my sheep in the hands of a shepherd like him'.

At the end of the war Leigh Fermor toured the West Indies for six months. By now he was accompanied by Joan Rayner (born Eyres Monsell), a photographer he had met in Cairo. Joan came from Worcestershire, was the daughter of a Conservative Lord, and had received an 'ad hoc' education (next-to-nothing, as she explained). She preferred to choose her own way, and above all her own less conventional friends. She was beautiful, elegant, and apparently frail, but this frailty was only an illusion: no fragile or precious woman would have been able to

travel under the kind of conditions she did. Keenly interested in photography and architecture, her images were used as illustrations for several books by Leigh Fermor and other writers. She adored all cats, but above all Greek ones. Swarms of them wandered about her house in Greece, and it is said that at least eight of them accompanied her final moments. She died in June 2003 at the age of 91, after having been the writer's companion and wife for more than 50 years. In her obituary, her friends described her as a committed, loyal, funny and generous woman who preferred to stay in the background rather than to enjoy the limelight.

Patrick Leigh Fermor's adventures in the Caribbean proved fruitful, and in 1950 his first book was published. *The Traveller's Tree* (unpublished in Spain) is a book with a strong, spicy flavour that takes us directly to the Caribbean at the end of the forties, before the explosion of tourism converted the string of islands into indistinguishable resorts or unattainable luxury paradises. The author's prose is deliberately sensual, so much so that the reader can become somewhat sated, his own senses overwhelmed by the intense waves of heat, humidity, dust, salt and wind, notwithstanding the sudden downpours he finds himself caught up in (there is everything on every island). Today, we reread the book with an almost religious devotion: as we advance through its aromatic pages it is like opening a whole series of glass urns- each island being an urn- which contain precious relics that have been miraculously preserved from time and dusty modernity.

Back in Europe, he undertook other journeys to other destinations. Leigh Fermor and his wife were migrating birds who were surprisingly independent of each other. Although they did not always fly in tandem, they were in a constant dialogue, and Patrick later chose fragments from the letters he wrote to Joan for publication. Occasionally, the budding writer shut himself away in a monastery or in a corner of some friendly hole, so that he could work all alone.

A Time to Keep Silence (also unpublished in Spain) appeared in 1957. It is a very short book describing two of the author's stays with enclosed orders- Benedictines and Trappists- as well as a visit to an Orthodox monastery in Capadoccia. The writing is extremely delicate, like a fine gauze. It also marks the emergence of a new form of writing that is more introspective and calm, intermittently juxtaposed with the prose of the adventurous, irrepressible explorer. In this book, the author is more personal and intimate, although in no sense an exhibitionist. He simply talks of himself with the naturalness and good sense of someone who knows and accepts the anguish inherent in any human existence.

The couple continued their nomadic life throughout the 60s and 70s. Both must have enjoyed not only great physical robustness but a great capacity to adapt. Many of their expeditions were Spartan to say the least: they walked for hours or days, under a cruel sun or lashed by rain. They often slept out in the open, and sometimes food was scarce or unpleasant. However, at others they found themselves honoured guests in palaces and mansions. Flexibility and a complete lack of snobbery (both upwards and downwards) seem to have been their main characteristics. We find them happily ensconced wherever they may be, and always with the same calm equanimity, whether they find themselves in a ruined, rat-infested castle, upstairs in an old pub, on a millionaire's brand-new yacht, in a cheap boarding-house, a tent in the middle of a desert, a shepherd's hut or the gleaming four-posters at the Duchess of

Devonshire's.

They may have travelled to the four corners of the earth, but they always ended up in Greece, the country they both adored. They travelled around it on foot, on mule-back, in small boats or on buses (when there were any). Out of their many excursions came two moving books and the discovery of the place where at last they were to create a home, a refuge and safe haven they could return to.

Strictly speaking, *Mani* (1958) and *Roumeli* (1966) should not be classed as 'travel books' because they do not have a unifying thread through space and time. Both books are miscellanies, small essays which like luminous satellites focus now on one area, now another, of a huge shared planet: Hellenic and Byzantine Greece. We read them with grateful eagerness thanks to their heterogeneous contents and the richness of their literary variety. As the chapters unfold, the seductiveness of the author's prose envelops and 'mesmerises' the reader, leading him off on paths carefully chosen by the author. This is an audacious manipulation to which we enthusiastically surrender: poetic flights of fancy, enlightening academic knowledge, extravagant characters, ironic observations, incredible tales, comic episodes and awe-inspiring geographical descriptions. Out of all this we get the sense of a culture that is profoundly loved and understood. Leigh Fermor conveys this with infectious passion. The Greece he presents us with- his and nobody else's- is what we fall in love with and are captivated by. What it offers is so enchanting that on the strength of this dream (which is Leigh Fermor's dream) we would also willingly give up the little or much that we possess and fly off to Aeropolis, Kampos, Pyrgos or Kiparissos to find some hidden lair where we could disappear forever.

In a letter dated August 1962 (8) Leigh Fermor gives a detailed description of the only place (apart from his native island) he would feel attached to for the remainder of his life. During one of their many excursions in the Peloponnese, he and Joan had discovered a small, remote and wild location, a tiny peninsula full of olive groves that sloped down to the sea in terraces dotted with tall cypresses. The couple pitched their army tent there, and in the following years began to build a house around it. They had no water or electricity, and there were no roads to it - the building materials had to be brought in by mules - but as time went by, the place became a blessed hearth to which friends and admirers flocked (mostly to drink *retsina*).

In 1971, the author flew to Lima. He was part of a motley expedition led by a pair of climbers which included a French anthropologist, a Swiss former ski champion, and an English duke who was an amateur botanist. Departing from Cusco, this eccentric group spent two months going from peak to peak, first in the Peruvian Andes, and then in Bolivia. Despite the quantities of whisky they consumed (they had carefully allowed for considerable daily rations of it) they all suffered terribly from the cold, and lost several sizes in clothes from a diet of chocolate bars and little else. In true sporting spirit, the expedition was declared a huge success, and subsequently the same group repeated the same feat in the Pyrenees and the Pindus.

Three Letters from the Andes (also unpublished in Spain) was published 20 years later, in 1991. It is a slender but charming book, structured with easy elegance. It consists of three letters that Leigh Fermor wrote to his wife during the days of his Andean adventures. Of course, he corrected and re-organised the text before publishing it, but the book still retains

its immediacy and an admirable colloquial freshness, qualities that are the basis of any worthwhile correspondence. The majestic Andean peaks flow through its hundred or so pages, spiced here and there with delicious portraits of his expedition companions and humorous descriptions of their many hardships, all of which are met with typical British phlegm. *Three Letters from the Andes* is also one of the rare (in writing at least) occasions when the author has dealt with Hispanic culture, and is therefore doubly attractive to the Spanish reader.

Whatever direction he set off in, Leigh Fermor now had a base camp to return to. Settled in his own house, with his own study where he was surrounded by books and encyclopaedias, he at last found the necessary time and stability to organise the by-now legendary notebooks from his first journey to Constantinople. In the prolonged and painstaking process of doing so (an effort that is still ongoing) knowledge and experience gained in his mature years are grafted onto the naive, candid enthusiasm of youth. The author's genius created a harmonious whole out of all this, and this remarkable flashback turned into two very special books which have become cult reading. By now in his sixties, Patrick Leigh Fermor became not only a well-known author, but an attractive public figure (and one with a cult following).

A Time for Gifts (1977) and *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986) - published in Spain by Peninsula/ALTAIR Viajes (9), were immediate commercial successes, praised by the critics and readers alike. The first book starts from London and ends with the young writer's arrival in Hungary after lengthy wanderings through Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, following first the course of the Rhine, then that of the Danube. In the second volume, the young student (as described in his pasvsport) followed the route of the Danube once more, crossed the Hungarian plains and then vanished into deepest Transylvania before ending up in the south of Romania before the Iron Gates, stepping-off point for the Balkans.

As the astonished reader gradually advances onwards, he becomes aware of the unhurried display of a wide, baroque tapestry covered with intricate designs that the author snatches out of the air at the very moment they are about to disappear into the void forever. We are shown the mosaic of an unknown Europe, full of mysterious regions, secret woods, and archaic cultures. Worlds that the author knows are now lost, which leads him to treat them with infinite tenderness, leaving an unavoidable after-taste of sweet sadness. Even so, his prose is relentlessly alive, so much so that from time to time it lifts off into spectacular flight, becoming so dense and sumptuous that it dazzles even most excessive (and at times almost blinding).

But what in the end most dazzles us is not any one particular book by Leigh Fermor so much as the whole, which composes an unmistakable personal (and non-transferable) universe.

Leigh Fermor does not merely observe, take note, and communicate. Instead he mutates, becomes part of what he is describing, whatever that may be. This empathy with his changing environment is absolute, and is what clearly distinguishes him from other authors who travel. Like some passionate, cultured chameleon, he mimics and metamorphoses at every stage. He circles his own nature while at the same time preserving it, open and sponge-like, in order to be able to fully absorb the totality of everything around him.

If all globetrotting writers are curious and restless, Leigh Fermor seems doubly so. Only a

warm, even a fiery, personality endowed with huge reserves of energy could successfully encompass such a huge number of interests and desires. The author's curiosity is never satisfied, and his inquisitive wish to know and understand is boundless. From nature to food, history or architecture, wine, physical beauty, art, local folklore or any feast of the senses, nothing leaves him cold: he is passionately interested and involved with everything. His approach to reality is intellectual and sensual at the same time, and he is perfectly at ease in both areas. This quality is transferred to his written works, where both aspects are balanced without excluding, cancelling out, or superimposing upon the other.

Leigh Fermor's writing is eminently skilful. It is the same as he is in person, a snake-charmer who keeps all his readers under his spell. The art is not spontaneous, but premeditated and calculating (in the best sense of the word) since it is born of a clever combination of styles that are played out across a wide variety of contents, which in their turn are cunningly mingled. The result of such an artfully combined cocktail is a work that appears effortlessly attractive, fertile in content but even more so in its forms. The author is like a juggler who keeps several brightly-coloured balls in the air. When he intuits that the reader might have had enough of one brilliant colour, he throws up another more muted one, then another more elegant ball, followed by a particularly graceful one, and from then on brings them all into play at strictly calculated intervals. Poetic passages give way to a rigorous History lesson, followed by a humorous domestic anecdote, or the vivid description of a handful of olives or an opaline *ouzo*. And his style is modulated accordingly: sometimes it is subtle and airy, at others thick, dark and fleshy. At all times though it is musical, with carefully controlled rhythms and cadences (and a headache for his translators).

Mutations as extraordinary as these take place with utter normality. There are no great shows of emotion or elaborate emphases. They hover at a lightly ironic distance that invites the reader to indulge in a complicit smile. And the reader is all the more thankful because it implies respect for him and the implication that the author takes his intelligence for granted.

Leigh Fermor lives part of the year in Greece and part in England. There is no paradox in this, as it perfectly suits his hybrid personality: a steely mind combined with solar longings. He is said still to be working on the third and final volume of his lengthy journey to Constantinople. He is 94 now, and problems with his sight slow his work down considerably, but we readers have not given up hope. Inshalla...

In the meantime, two volumes have appeared that are a delight for anyone who is part of his fan club.

Words of Mercury (2004) edited by Artemis Cooper, who is also compiling the writer's authorised biography (10), is a compilation of 'Fermorian' texts. Most of them have already been published, but some are new. Altogether, they offer an interesting, not to say mouth-watering *hors d'oeuvre* to the rest of his work.

In Tearing Haste (2009) edited by Charlotte Mosley, offers us part of the long correspondence conducted over the years between Leigh Fermor and Deborah Devonshire (born Mitford), a friend since the early days and another survivor (they are still writing to each other). The collection is so refreshing and entertaining that one reads it at a run and in a single sitting. For more than fifty years the two correspondents engage in a kind of verbal

duel, the clash of their foils giving off repeated sparks and flashes of gossip: uncensored jokes, open bursts of affection, sketches of public figures, constant sarcastic remarks and hilarious descriptions of their everyday lives (the Duchess and the globe-trotter). The collection bubbles with joy, common sense, creativity and a lust for life. As we said, it is pure delight.

Even if we include this last volume of correspondence and the miscellany, it has to be said that Leigh Fermor's work is not extensive. Some literary critics argue that he is a painstaking, slow, and precise writer so concerned with the slightest detail that he can spend hours over changing a word, which then immediately implies a whole series of other changes, etc...All this is no doubt true. Yet one also has the agreeable suspicion that the author preferred to dedicate most of his life to precisely that: living. And even if this might have denied us further wonderful works, nobody can reproach him for it.

Patrick Leigh Fermor has offered us the immeasurable gift of a brilliant handful of books crammed with beauty, intelligence, humanity, humour, and wisdom. He has offered us another gift too: that of his pure and simple life.

Long may it last...

Sant Pere de Ferrerons

summer 2009

- (1) Chatwin, already ill with AIDS, spent some months with the Leigh Fermors, recuperating his strength. Four years later his ashes were buried beneath an olive tree beside a little Byzantine chapel, near the Fermors' home, in one of his favourite spots.
- (2) Having prophesied the moon landings and submarines, Jules Verne yet again hit the nail on the head in anticipating Japanese-style tourism.
- (3) Leigh Fermor finally accepted the title in 2004, after having refused it – apparently through modesty – in 1991;
- (4) As described in one of the chapters in *Words of Mercury* [2004].
- (5) The Distinguished Services Order.

(6) Directed by Michael Powell in 1957.

(7) Deborah Mitford, Duchess of Devonshire [1920-], and a longtime friend of Leigh Fermor. A great expert in sheep, she owns numerous flocks in the grounds of her various mansions.

(8) Published in *In Tearing Haste* [2009], the correspondence between Deborah Devonshire and the author.

(9) *El tiempo de los regalos* [2001] and *Entre los bosques y el agua* [2004].

(10) The biography will only be published on the author's death.