

CROSSING THE BORDERS OF FORMER EMPIRES: PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR AND HIS JOURNEY THROUGH THE BALKANS IN THE 1930S

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In the winter of 1933, eighteen-year-old Patrick Leigh Fermor set out on an adventurous walk across Europe, starting in Holland and ending in Constantinople. Decades later he would tell the story of that journey in his books *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water* that would immediately grasp the public attention and ultimately make him the most acclaimed British travel writer of the twentieth century. The final volume of his conceived trilogy *The Broken Road: From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos* appeared posthumously in 2012, a year after his death. In the course of that journey, Leigh Fermor not only crossed the borders of several countries, but also the borders of two former empires – the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian one, the presence of which could still be felt decades after they had ceased their existence. An intelligent and curious observer, Fermor offers interesting examples of this inefaceable presence. This is most evident in his description of Transylvania, which he considers a part of central Europe and something quite different from the rest of Romania, and also in his description of Bulgaria, where he finds clear traces of the Ottoman legacy, the crossing of the Danube seen as entering into the Orient. This paper presents and analyzes those examples of imperial legacies in the Balkans in the 1930s.

Keywords: travel writing, borders, empires, Transylvania, Romania, Bulgaria.

A few years ago, in a bookstore in Bucharest I came across *Drum întrerupt: De la Porțile de Fier până la Muntele Athos*¹, the Romanian edition of Patrick Leigh Fermor's book *The Broken Road: From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos*. The book is the last part of a trilogy describing his journey across Europe on foot that he undertook in his youth in the early 1930s. That was my first encounter with the writings of this extraordinary personality, who turned to be one of the most famous British travel writers of the 20th century. Although this third volume is focused mainly on Bulgaria, with a short interlude on his stay in the Romanian capital, it is not translated into Bulgarian and I dare to say it is almost completely unknown to the Bulgarian public. In Romania, earlier in the same year (2016) was published the second volume of the trilogy *Between the Woods and the Water (Între păduri și ape)*², which describes Leigh Fermor's trip through Hungary and Transylvania, a region that made part of Romania at that time.

¹ P.L. Fermor, *Drum întrerupt: De la Porțile de Fier până la Muntele Athos*, Bucharest, 2016.

² P. L. Fermor, *Între păduri și ape. La pas spre Constantinopol: de la Dunarea de Mijloc pâna la Porțile de Fier*, Bucharest, 2016.

I was intrigued to see how the Balkans, and Bulgaria and Romania in particular, looked like in that period through the eyes of an outsider. What impressed me first while reading Leigh Fermor's story about that trip was his superb style of expression and the abundance of information about the places he had visited along the way. Splendid pictures, wonderful descriptions of people, places, nature, all of them so vivid that one could feel the smells, the sounds, imagine the clothes, the houses. I was surprised to see that there was almost no talking about current politics although the trip was taking place in very interesting times. Leigh Fermor would explain this lack of interest in politics himself in the "Introductory Letter" to his friend Xan Fielding, which opens the second book of the trilogy: "Books about this part of Europe incline to be chiefly, if not exclusively, devoted to politics, and this abundance lessens my guilt about how small a part they play in this one, where they only appear when they impinge directly on the journey".³ In fact, it is clear that what the author was keenly interested in were the people and the history of the places. The story of his daily experiences and impressions of what he saw along the way is coupled with passages (often in the form of lengthy footnotes) about the recent or more distant history of the places he visited. Thus, the whole voyage was in a way like traveling in time, a constant crossing of borders, not only physical, geographical, but also historical borders. I will try to look for the vestiges of former empires as they appear in Patrick Leigh Fermor's story of his long trip across Europe, while focusing on the second and the third volume that deal with Romania and Bulgaria.

Yet, before focusing the attention on Leigh Fermor's glimpse on Europe in the mid-1930s, I consider it necessary to say a few words about the journey and the book that described it, for that will give us a key to understanding how that glimpse was shaped. I will not go into details about the author, although his long and interesting life is itself worth being the plot of a novel or a movie. All the important information about the lifetime of travel and adventure of Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor could be found in his outstanding biography that was published shortly after he passed away in 2011 by the writer Artemis Cooper.⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I will just point to several moments from his biography and the way he came up with the idea of making the trip and writing a book about it that will help understand his attitude towards the places, people and events he describes in the aforementioned books.

Born in London in 1915, from an early age Paddy, as everyone called him, had a marked interest and talent for history and languages. After being expelled from several schools for unruly behavior, at the age of eighteen he considered his life a failure and was overwhelmed by hatred and contempt for everything. That is indeed the moment the idea of the trip came about as something that would give a

³ P.L. Fermor, *Between the Woods and the Water: On Foot to Constantinople: From the Middle Danube to the Iron Gates*, London, 1986, p. 12

⁴ A. Cooper, *Patrick Leigh Fermor. An Adventure*, London, 2013 (first edition 2012).

new meaning to his life. The answer, he wrote, came suddenly one rainy evening. To leave London and travel would solve all problems. On his pound a week allowance he would walk from west to east across Europe, sleeping in barns and hayricks, eating bread and cheese, living like a wandering scholar or pilgrim, keeping company with tramps and vagabonds, peasants and gypsies. His goal would be the city which in 1930 had officially changed its name into Istanbul, but he would never call it anything but Constantinople.⁵

Thus, it is very important to keep in mind that from the very outset he conceived and embarked on the trip with a very romantic vision of Europe in his head. On 9 December 1933 Patrick Leigh Fermor left London on a Dutch steamer for Rotterdam, taking with him drawing blocks, notebooks, pencils and three books. A friend of his landlady provided him with some letters of introduction to friends of hers in Germany that would prove quite valuable in his passage through Europe. The journey took him a bit more than a year and having passed through seven countries, on January 1, 1935, he managed to reach his final destination. Then he decided to go a bit further and visit Greece and Mount Athos.

For young Patrick that trip would turn to be a life-changer and would link him to the Balkans forever. In the following years he lived and traveled much in the Balkans – mainly in Romania and Greece. While being in Athens, he fell in love with Balasa Cantacuzene, a Romanian aristocrat belonging to the princely family of Cantacuzene and for a while he lived with her in the Cantacuzene family house in the village of Băleni, near Gălați. He was fascinated by the people he met in Romania and by the places they visited during their excursions throughout the country. With the outbreak of World War II Leigh Fermor decided to return to England determined to take part in the war. He was one of the few British intelligence officers tasked with organizing the island of Crete's resistance against the Germans. After the war he lived in Greece, where he worked for some time for the British Institute in Athens and travelled a lot with his then girlfriend Joan Ryner, who would later become his wife. In the early 1960s together with Joan they bought a house in Kardamily, in the Southern Peloponnese, and in the following years they would separate their life between Greece and England.

In 1950 Patrick Leigh Fermor published his first book *The Traveler's Tree*, which won him a literary prize and established his career as a travel writer. It was followed by *A Time to Keep Silence* (1957), *Mani. Travels in the Southern Peloponnese* (1958) and *Roumeli. Travels in Northern Greece* (1966). But the time for the book about his journey in Europe in the 1930s was not ripe yet. It turned out that the complete story about that journey would see the light of day only more than seven decades after the journey itself.

In 1933 young Patrick departed London with the idea to find himself, to try himself as a writer, convinced that “at least he would have something to write about”.⁶ Along the way he took notes and kept a diary. Unfortunately, the first one

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*

was stolen in Munich, but then he bought a new one in Bratislava, the so called “Green Diary”, because of the notebook’s green fur cover. Already in the late 1930s, when he lived in Romania with Balasa, Leigh Fermor started to write down his impressions from the journey, but nothing came out. Then the war came, later on other preoccupations seemed to be more pressing and this idea was always set aside. In the early 1960s the American “Holiday” magazine had asked him to write a 2000 words article on the pleasures of walking and he took it as a good opportunity to come back to his great journey across Europe. But the story was getting too lengthy and what finally came out of this was an article about a cave on the Black Sea that was published in the “Holiday” issue of May 1965 and a much longer narrative called “A Youthful Journey” (describing the last part of the trip), that would later become the basis of the third volume.⁷ Then he was commissioned to write a long article about the Danube, which was published by the same magazine in August 1966. As his biographer had noticed, elements in the journey down the Danube point the way forwards his future books on the great walk.⁸ Leigh Fermor never gave up the idea of writing the trip down, but was quite slow. The first volume *A Time of Gifts*, which describes his journey through the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia appeared 1977. Although the reviews were quite enthusiastic, it took him almost ten years to finish the second volume, which appeared in 1986. And he could never finish the third volume, which was published posthumously in 2012 by his family friend and biographer Artemis Cooper and the travel writer Colin Tubron.

As pointed above, the second volume *Between the Woods and the Water* is an account of his trip in Hungary and Transylvania. In this part of the trilogy the relics of the Austro-Hungarian Empire are clearly seen. Thanks to the letters of introduction, Leigh Fermor was able to live among Hungarian aristocratic families, a world he would otherwise not be able to penetrate into. As Michael O’Sullivan observed in a recently published intriguing book that follows the traces of all places he had been into while in Hungary and Transylvania, “when standing at the bridge of Esztergom on Easter Day (1 April) 1934, he was completely unaware that he would one day become the chronicler of a form of social life and of a class, which were soon to be extinguished by the vicissitudes of war, the repression which was so often the attendant handmaiden of Communism and in some cases by their own folly”.⁹

Although Leigh Fermor also writes about Gypsies, shepherds, peasants, he had met along the way, for the most part he enjoyed comfortable life, spending

⁷ This “Green Diary” had an interesting story itself. In 1939, when he left Romania, the diary remained there with Balasa and in 1965, when he first had the chance to visit her again in Pucioasa, a small town in the foothills of the Carpathians, where she lived at that time, she gave it back to him. When in 1949 her family was evicted from their house in Baleni and were allowed to take a small suitcase each, his diary was one of the objects she put into it. It would become the basis of “Youthful Journey”. See: A. Cooper, *Patrick Leigh Fermor. An Adventure*, p. 390–393.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

⁹ M. O’Sullivan, *Patrick Leigh Fermor. Noble Encounters between Budapest and Transylvania*, Budapest – New York, 2018, p. 1.

each night in wealthy country houses, his hosts being a series of interrelated Hungarian landowners. Besides, he met very interesting people, one of them, for instance, the ex-prime minister of the Kingdom of Hungary count Paul Teleki who was originally from Transylvania. For the young boy, who had insatiable curiosity for history and language the opportunity to spend hours undisturbed in their rich libraries, exploring the history of the countries all around, to talk about history and traditions and to enjoy social life and the company of people of his age was an immense unexpected pleasure. For him it was easy to communicate with these people and with some of them he even established lasting friendships.

It is worth asking why did those people show such readiness to talk to him, to open their homes and their hearts for him? As his biographer has pointed out: “happiness, excitement, youth, good looks, eagerness to please and to open hearts – Paddy had them all”.¹⁰ But she also notes a very important psychological detail, the fact that he was genuinely fascinated by his hosts and wanted to hear everything they could share about their families, their history and their way of life. “The greatest blessing a guest can bring to his host, she wrote, is the right kind of curiosity, and it bubbled out of Paddy like a natural spring”. At this age, everything he came across was worth knowing, plus he considered them true friends whom he loved and cared about. This cheerful, polite young Englishman could easily make an old count from Eastern Europe realize he was part of the living history.¹¹

At the same time, every place he set foot on, Leigh Fermor was always looking for the ancient past. Thus, while in Budapest, he noted “scarce marks of the long sojourn of the Turks: a few Ottoman fragments, the tomb of a dervish on the Hill of Roses, some hammam-cupolas scattered about; later, a mosque here and there in the provinces”. His imagination was constantly at play how things could have looked like at a certain moment of history, or, to put it in his words: “But it was hard, during my explorations, to imagine the skyline – the clustering domes, the minarets and the fluttering crescents – which Charles of Lorraine and his reconquering companions must have gazed at when they laid siege to Buda in 1686”.¹²

Leigh Fermor crossed the frontier into Romania on 27 April 1934, as he wrote, “relieved to hear a romance language after the Magyar”.¹³ In Transylvania he continued his country-house stay. His hosts, mostly friends and relations of the people with whom he had just been staying, were not Romanian, but Hungarian. And it was their point of view on the history of the region that he would hear most often. Actually, it was a few days before he crossed the border into Romania that he became aware of the existent animosities and prejudices between Hungarians and Romanians. The Wenckheim family with whom Leigh Fermor stayed in Doboz

¹⁰ A. Cooper, *Patrick Leigh Fermor. An Adventure...*, p. 44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69–70.

¹² P.L. Fermor, *Between the Woods and the Water*, p. 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

were alarmed to hear that he was actually planning to walk across Transylvania. They were appalled at his idea to go into Romania, the very mentioning of Romania making them uneasy, and told him Romania was a terrible place, where “they would take him everything he had”, so they gave him a pistol.¹⁴ Indeed, that was not the first and the last time that Hungarian irredentist convictions would raise their head. Although he approached Transylvania as “a place full of stories and superstitions”, Leigh Fermor considered it necessary to go deeper into the history of the Hungarian-Romanian dispute over the region. So, there is a long passage in the book about the contended history of Transylvania, where he would point that for the Hungarian landowner whose families had lived there for centuries, it was like an amputation, a loss they could never get used to.¹⁵

In Kapolnas, where he stayed with count Jenő Teleki, first cousin of count Paul Teleki whom he had met in Budapest, Leigh Fermor had the first opportunity to hear the Romanian point of view on the issue of Transylvania. The wife of the celebrated entomologist was Romanian and this issue occasionally popped up in their conversation. It was through the couple’s exchange of bitter comments that he began to understand how deep the national rivalry ran. As time went by Leigh Fermor would hear more Romanian voices about the handover of Transylvania. These tensions had little impact on the author at the time. His position was based on his feeling of loyalty and friendship, so when he started to write about it, he tried to be diplomatic. “I am the only person I know”, he wrote, “who has feelings of equal warmth for both these embattled claimants”.¹⁶

Young Patrick enjoyed life in Transylvania so much that he spent three months there. As he would later remember, many things had made this part of the journey different from the rest, and although he had “occasional pricks of conscience” about drifting from his original intentions, he never regretted that, for “when I look back it was all worth it because in the following decade this world was completely gone - when I started to climb the Balkan passes south of the Danube I realized how unusual were the regions I had just passed”.¹⁷

The final chapter of *Between the Woods and the Water* bears the telling title “The End of Middle Europe” and includes Leigh Fermor’s preconceptions of Bulgaria as a Balkan country that is quite different from the countries of Central Europe. He had no letters of introduction for Bulgaria, no one he had met over the course of the summer had ever set foot in that country, and they thought he was mad for planning to go there. Bulgaria, as everyone knew, had been under Ottoman rule for longer than any other country in Europe, and was a rough and backward place. “Rather surprisingly, he wrote, I had never met anyone who had been to Bulgaria. If the Hungarians were loth to cross the Carpathians into old Rumania,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75–76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90–97.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Bulgaria was even further from their minds; and the Rumanians, for all their earlier ties with Constantinople, were just as reluctant. Both countries looked westward to Vienna, Berlin, London and Paris and the benighted regions of the Balkans remained *terra incognita*. All they knew was that Bulgaria had been a province of the Ottoman Empire until sixty years earlier, and that the yoke had not been finally and formally shed until 1911”.¹⁸

So, if the border between Hungary and Romania is almost unnoticeable, when crossing the Danube, the change is abrupt. Leigh Fermor entered Bulgaria on 14 August 1934 and he felt he had crossed a cultural divide: to the north laid a Romanized, western culture that looked towards Paris and Vienna, while on the south bank, were the Balkans, the Orthodox and Ottoman east. He found evidence of that everywhere: “in the domes and minarets and the smoky tang of kebabs cooking on spits, in the jutting wooden houses and the Byzantine allegiance of the churches, in the black cylindrical hats, the flowing habits, the long hair and beard of the priests, and in the Cyrillic alphabet on the shop fronts which gave a fleeting impression of Russia” and therefore he concluded: “It was a grave moment, I realized that everything had changed”.¹⁹

Before crossing the Danube into Bulgaria, Leigh Fermor visited the island of Ada Kaleh, where he first saw Muslims, but it was in Bulgaria where he felt a strong Ottoman presence, both physical, expressed in the architecture – Turkish baths, mosques, fountains, Turkish *tchiftliks*, but also in the mores – a very patriarchal society, no women, but only men, on the streets, in the restaurants and cafes... The first town that he visited in Bulgaria was Lom and it strongly impressed him with its Oriental atmosphere. From there, through Berkovitz, where he bought himself a *kalpak* (a sheepskin cap), Leigh Fermor headed for the Bulgarian capital. He was lucky because on the ship he had met an English girl, who was visiting the wife of the British consul in Sofia and that’s how he spent a few wonderful days with the Tollintons, where he felt at home. He was happy to hear about Bulgaria from his courteous host, to consult his library and to enjoy the beauty of the Vitosha slopes that could be seen from his window. He happened to be in Sofia while the Congress of Balkan Studies was taking place, so he was delighted to hear erudite scholarly man talking about the history of the region. Apart from that, he was not impressed by the life in the Bulgarian capital.

During a short excursion to the Rila Monastery, Leigh Fermor met a group of students and became friends with a beautiful girl Nadejda and she became the reason for him after returning to Sofia to visit Plovdiv and visit her. He was very much surprised by the liberal atmosphere in her house, which ran in contrast to his impressions of the patriarchal traditions of the Bulgarians but he explained that with the half-Greek origin of Nadejda’s grandfather. When walking around

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹⁹ P.L. Fermor, *The Broken Road. From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos*, London, 2014, p. 3–5.

Plovdiv, Leigh Fermor was captured by the ethnically colorful atmosphere of the city and wrote that the days spent there were some of the happiest in his life.²⁰

Although he was approaching the Bulgarian-Turkish border and his final destination, persuaded by Nadejda he should visit the old Bulgarian capital Veliko Tarnovo and see the beautiful Byzantine churches there, he changed his route. He never regretted that decision, for upon entering the city, he was overwhelmed by its beauty, which is evident by the stunning description from a distance he made it in the book and his “enthusiasm grew into excitement” when he found himself on the main street.²¹ There is an interesting episode in Tarnovo, which is, actually, one of the rare occasions when the author speaks about current politics. While sitting in a restaurant with a certain Gatcho with whom he accidentally became friends, Leigh Fermor witnessed a sudden agitation among the people. They started dancing, singing, drinking “*slivo*” (plum brandy) at the news of the assassination of the Serbian King Alexander I Karadjordjevic by Vlado Chernozemski in Marseille on October 9, 1934. He was kind of startled at seeing this picture. “The Bulgarians roared the national anthem ‘*Shumi Maritza*’ until the veins of their foreheads popped up”, Leigh Fermor wrote in his memoirs.²²

In Tarnovo there was again a change of plans. Instead of going to Varna and then south towards his final destination, he decided to visit Bucharest first. Thus, on 15 October 1934 he left Tarnovo and headed north towards Rustchuk (today Russe). Gatcho was strongly against that because, in his view, the Romanians were “a terrible lot: liars, robbers, thieves, villains, immoral”, which is quite evident by the fact the “they stole Dobrudja, all the land between the Danube Delta and the Black Sea which is pure Bulgarian”.²³ Leigh Fermor took that as yet another manifestation of the mutual hatred between the peoples in the region and explained to his companion that he was not a political observer and wanted to see “the people, what they were - races, language, churches, songs...”, which is again an indication of his attitude towards current politics.²⁴

Rustchuk was a pleasant surprise for Leigh Fermor. All he had heard from other travelers was that it was considered to be “a charmless, ugly place”, nothing pre-Turkish and very little before the 19th century. But he himself saw quite a different picture of the city on the Danube, which due to its location had experienced over the years a favorable mixture of various cultural influences that could still be clearly noticed. Parts of it, in Leigh Fermor’s view, “had a dilapidated Victorian feeling” and probably thanks to the big river, on which it was built, “a slight but distinct alloy of Mitteleuropa tempered its Balkan consistency”. What is

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28–34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70–71.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 89–92.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

more, he was really happy to see that there was even a bookshop and newsagents with foreign newspapers, mostly German and Austrian.²⁵

With his very entering into Romania, he noticed a difference in the people: “there was something quicker, sharper, more brittle and more vocal – more glib perhaps – in the people all round, something very different to the rough-hewn, slow solidity of the ones I had just left”.²⁶ That was the change from the Slav to the Latin world. Yet, he pointed to an even more important change that was shaped by history and it laid into the fact that direct Ottoman rule stopped at the river. And he draws the conclusion: “the dark extent of the Danube outside, with the twinkling necklace of Rustchuk the other side with the dotted line of frontier down the middle, was a far wider gulf than its actual geographic span”.²⁷ It was thus far the real border of the Ottoman Empire stretched and that actually made the whole difference.

Leigh Fermor crossed the Danube into Romania on 23 October 1934 and the next day he was in Bucharest. He really liked the Romanian capital, which he found quite different from the capital of its southern neighbor he had just visited: “Bucharest is an amazing town, he wrote in his diary, almost like London or Paris, not like Sofia...; lights, cars, everything; lovely town” and he enjoyed spending several wonderful weeks there.²⁸ Because of good luck and former acquaintances, he happened to enter the Romanian elite circles. He lived at the apartment of Graf Rantzau, a diplomat at the German legation, where he met many diplomats and politicians. In Bucharest he frequented fancy places, enjoyed the company of refined people, or, as he put it, “it was a time of entertaining and luncheons... accepting so much kindness and hospitality; being at the heart of the wickedness and delight of Bucharest” and “this particular stratum of Romania was by far the most civilized and sophisticated, and, in a way, the most idiosyncratic society that I had ever encountered”.²⁹ Leigh Fermor speaks at length about the cultural influences that had shaped a society that was a “mixture of late Byzantium and Proustian France” and could not contain his admiration and fascination of one particular feature of the representatives of the Romanian elite, which, in his words, “distinguished them from the rest of pleasure-loving aristocratic Europe”, namely, “their anti-philistinism: a fastidious passion for erudition for its own sake, for literature, painting, music, sculpture and the movement of ideas, that turned their houses into the haunts of Academicians”.³⁰

He left Bucharest by train early on 14 November 1934, reentered Bulgaria and arrived at Varna on the Black Sea late that night. From there he took the road

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Cited in: A. Cooper, *Patrick Leigh Fermor. An Adventure...*, p. 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186–187.

heading towards Constantinople. For him Bucharest was a “deviating escapade”, which had left pleasant and lasting memories. Actually, in the parts devoted to his time spent in Romania, Leigh Fermor is constantly making comments and comparisons with Bulgaria, which are for the most part, to the detriment of the latter. In fact, he didn’t like the Bulgarians very much. He disapproved the roughness of their manners and was startled by their nationalism. It is true that the more he travelled in the Balkans, the more he found that every country was suspicious of the morals and intentions of its neighbors and had deeply rooted stereotypes about them. Yet, it was his observation that the nationalism of the Bulgarians exceeded that of the other countries he had passed through, or, to put it in his words: “for one reason or another, the Bulgars have always detested all their neighbors. They have their hate to keep them warm”.³¹ This is how he describes the Bulgarians: “with the exception of Gatcho, whom I liked, and Nadejda, whom I adored: all their obvious qualities, their courage and scrupulous honesty, their frugality, their doggedness and diligence and the passion for literacy – all this was forgotten or discounted, and with it, their hospitality and their odd and beautiful songs... stripped of all this, how heavy, boorish and sometimes bloodthirsty they seemed...”.³² At the same time, the only clear thing that he apparently didn’t like in the Romanians was their “deep-rooted and almost universal anti-Semitism”, a prejudice that, he pointed, was being “even more violent than in Hungary”.³³

Despite the beautiful pictures of places and nature, the excitement of drinking “*slivo*” and eating Bulgarian yoghurt, which was his favorite food there, for the most part he was overwhelmed by grim mood and had some outbursts of depression. Besides, he had unpleasant memories from his stay in Bulgaria, too – his rucksack was stolen, he was asked to pay for a ride in the mountains, which he considered outrageous, his Bulgarian friend Gatcho attacked him with a knife. All that could not but influence the way he wrote about the country and its people in general. The fact that in Bulgaria he didn’t have the letters and acquaintances to provide him an access to the elite circles of the society also played its role in shaping the general picture of the country. Just for the sake of comparison, I shall point to the way Bulgaria of that time appears in the memoirs of another British, the Minister Plenipotentiary Sir Joseph Rendel, who came to Bulgaria on June 1, 1938. Although some of his general observations are quite similar with those of Leigh Fermor, such as the backwardness of the society, the patriarchal traditions, the lack of aristocracy, Sir Rendel writes with much more sympathy about the Bulgarians. “Although Sofia was a small capital and Bulgaria was the last of the Balkan countries to be freed from Turkish rule, he wrote, it was surprising to find out how widely European education and European culture had spread” and continued “life was simple and somewhat primitive” but at the same time the

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 112–113.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

Bulgarians “had an attractive simple sincerity; and, if they lacked some of the graces of life, their lack of sophistication and complete absence of snobbery was a great compensation”.³⁴

The fact that the book is written so beautifully and with such erudition and makes it captivating for the reader and very powerful. But, here comes the question how credible the author is, given the fact that the trilogy was written so long after the journey itself? His biographer Artemis Cooper reflects on his flexible approach to historical fact, speaking of the “selectiveness of his memory” and “the interplay of his memory and imagination” and also pointing to the fact that “alongside this curiosity about the past ran a more imaginative impulse”.³⁵ It has been established that some of the stories were made up (a whole chapter in the second volume “Triple Fugue”), and the author himself recognizes that there are instances where one part of the journey is transposed to another, that sometimes he had mixed up different visits. At the same time we cannot but agree with the journalist Dervla Murphy when she wrote that Leigh Fermor’s writing was so enjoyable that “it doesn’t matter a damn whether he is describing it as he remembers it in 1934 or in 1964 or simply as he fancies it might have been in 1634”.³⁶ And, last but not least, we can cherish Leigh Fermor’s book of his trip to Constantinople as a beautiful travelling in time across the borders of former empires.

³⁴ G. Rendel, *The Sword and the Olive. Recollections of Diplomacy and Foreign Services, 1913–54*, London, 1954, p. 140.

³⁵ A. Cooper, “Patrick Leigh Fermor, Mythmaker”, *History Today*, vol. 62, issue 12, December 2012.

³⁶ Cited by A. Cooper, *Patrick Leigh Fermor. An Adventure*, p. 364.

