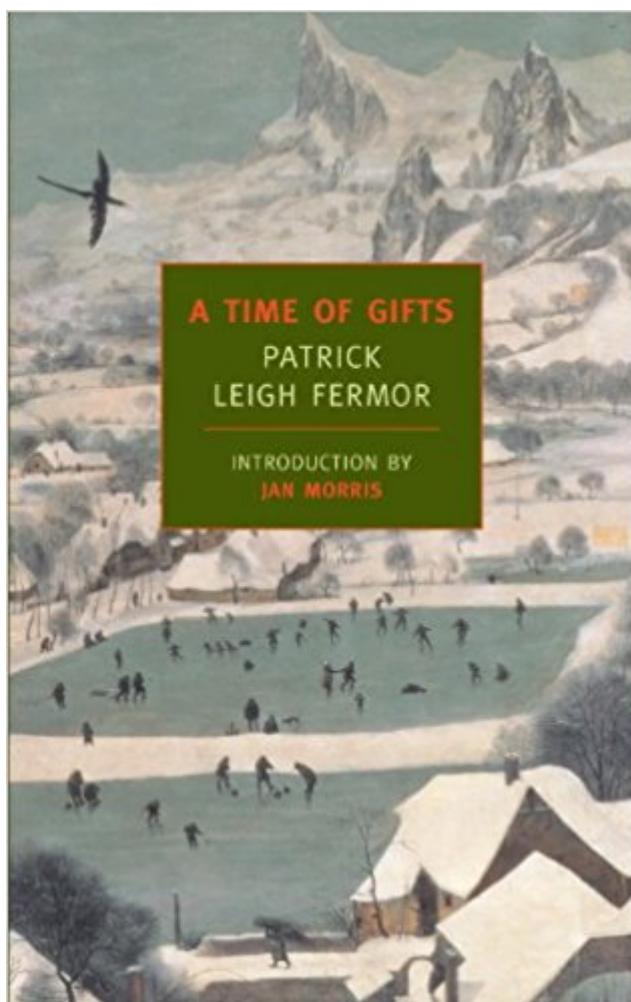


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# A Time Of Gifts: On Foot To Constantinople: From The Hook Of Holland To The Middle Danube (New York Review Books Classics)



## Synopsis

At the age of eighteen, Patrick Leigh Fermor set off from the heart of London on an epic journey—*to walk to Constantinople*. *A Time of Gifts* is the rich account of his adventures as far as Hungary, after which *Between the Woods and the Water* continues the story to the Iron Gates that divide the Carpathian and Balkan mountains. Acclaimed for its sweep and intelligence, Leigh Fermor's book explores a remarkable moment in time. Hitler has just come to power but war is still ahead, as he walks through a Europe soon to be forever changed—through the Lowlands to Mitteleuropa, to Teutonic and Slav heartlands, through the baroque remains of the Holy Roman Empire; up the Rhine, and down to the Danube. At once a memoir of coming-of-age, an account of a journey, and a dazzling exposition of the English language, *A Time of Gifts* is also a portrait of a continent already showing ominous signs of the holocaust to come.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This is a glorious feast, the account of a walk in 1934 from the Hook of Holland to what was then Constantinople. The 18-year-old Fermor began by sleeping in barns but, after meeting some landowners early on, got occasional introductions to castles. So he experienced life from both sides, and with all the senses, absorbing everything: flora and fauna, art and architecture, geography, clothing, music, foods, religions, languages. Writing the book decades after the fact, in a baroque style that is always rigorous, never flowery, he was able to inject historical depth while still retaining the feeling of boyish enthusiasm and boundless curiosity. This is the first of a still uncompleted

trilogy; the second volume, *Between the Woods and the Water*, takes him through Hungary and Romania; together they capture better than any books I know the remedial, intoxicating joy of travel." • Thomas Swick, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* "Recovers the innocence and the excitement of youth, when everything was possible and the world seemed luminescent with promise. ...Even more magical...through Hungary, its lost province of Transylvania, and into Romania... sampling the tail end of a languid, urbane and anglophile way of life that would soon be swept away forever." • Jeremy Lewis, *Literary Review* "A book so good you resent finishing it." • Norman Stone "The greatest of living travel writers" • Jan amazingly complex and subtle evocation of a place that is no more." • Jan Morris "In these two volumes of extraordinary lyrical beauty and discursive, staggering erudition, Leigh Fermor recounted his first great excursion" | They are partially about an older author's encounter with his young self, but they are mostly an evocation of a lost Mitteleuropa of wild horses and dark forests, of ancient synagogues and vivacious Jewish coffeehouses, of Hussars and Uhlans, and of high-spirited and deeply eccentric patricians with vast libraries (such as the Transylvanian count who was a famous entomologist specializing in Far Eastern moths and who spoke perfect English, though with a heavy Scottish accent, thanks to his Highland nanny). These books amply display Leigh Fermor's keen eye and preternatural ear for languages, but what sets them apart, besides the utterly engaging persona of their narrator, is his historical imagination and intricate sense of historical linkage | Few writers are as alive to the persistence of the past (he is ever alert to the historical forces that account for the shifts in custom, language, architecture, and costume that he discerns), and I have read none who are so sensitive to the layers of invasion that define the part of Europe he depicts here. The unusual vantage point of these books lends them great poignancy, for we and the author know what the youthful Leigh Fermor cannot: that the war will tear the scenery and shatter the buildings he evokes; that German and Soviet occupation will uproot the beguiling world of those Tolstoyan nobles; and that in fact very few people who became his friends on this marvelous and sunny journey will survive the coming catastrophe." • Benjamin Schwarz, *The Atlantic* Praise for Patrick Leigh Fermor: "One of the greatest travel writers of all time" • "The Sunday Times" "A unique mixture of hero, historian, traveler and writer; the last and the greatest of a generation whose like we won't see again." • "Geographical" "The finest traveling companion we could ever have . . . His head is stocked with enough cultural lore and poetic fancy to make every league an adventure." • "Evening Standard" If all Europe were laid waste tomorrow, one might do worse than attempt to recreate it, or at least to preserve

some sense of historical splendor and variety, by immersing oneself in the travel books of Patrick Leigh Fermor. — Ben Downing, The Paris Review

Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915-2011) was an intrepid traveler, a heroic soldier, and a writer with a unique prose style. After his stormy schooldays, followed by the walk across Europe to Constantinople that begins in *A Time of Gifts* (1977) and continues through *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), he lived and traveled in the Balkans and the Greek Archipelago. His books *Mani* (1958) and *Roumeli* (1966) attest to his deep interest in languages and remote places. In the Second World War he joined the Irish Guards, became a liaison officer in Albania, and fought in Greece and Crete. He was awarded the DSO and OBE. He lived partly in Greece — in the house he designed with his wife, Joan, in an olive grove in the Mani — and partly in Worcestershire. He was knighted in 2004 for his services to literature and to British-Greek relations. Jan Morris was born in 1926, is Anglo-Welsh, and lives in Wales. She has written some forty books, including the *Pax Britannica* trilogy about the British Empire; studies of Wales, Spain, Venice, Oxford, Manhattan, Sydney, Hong Kong, and Trieste; six volumes of collected travel essays; two memoirs; two capricious biographies; and a couple of novels — but she defines her entire oeuvre as “disguised autobiography.” She is an honorary D.Litt. of the University of Wales and a Commander of the British Empire. Her memoir *Conundrum* is available as a New York Review Book Classic.

Europe of 1933 was different:- There were no motorways- There were no modernist architecture- There were no global brands- There were no tourist- There were no immigrantsThat year a young man decided to walk from London to Istanbul with a notebook. In 1977 he decided to write about his first foreign journey. What an accomplishment it is. He writes totally without sentimentality. I love the youthful attitude of bewilderment and wonderment. I instantly feel like wanting to recreate his trip. The landscape has changed so it is no longer possible to walk and meet people so it has to be by car (or maybe I just don't want to spend two years). However, even more, I love the author's prose. He writes in a beautiful way. The descriptions are very direct and detailed. I want to read slowly to really savour the writing. I also want to understand the nature of his writing. It is interesting how the old author writes about the younger self. Beautiful writing.Another travelogue is — *The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography*; a book about the lost cultural diversity of what is now France. Also immensely interesting. These two books have made me think about the lost cultural diversity. It is impossible to keep people and ideas from moving across countries. However, we need to think

more about protecting the diversity that once was. Books and museums are fine, but not sufficient. Leigh Fermor's trilogy certainly took some time to write; first volume in 1977, second volume in 1985, and third volume in 2013. The author died last year almost 100 years old. A life well lived.

What would you do if you were a bright and sensitive 18-year-old Englishman, a boy really, whose parents just had a very messy separation and, though very intelligent, you had not done very well at any of your schools? And life seemed pointless and depressing? Why, walk across Europe to Constantinople naturally, and write three marvelous best-sellers about the journey while you were about it. And, oh yes, let's say the year is 1933 and all Europe is convulsed politically by a life-or-death struggle between communism and fascism, and the Nazis are just coming into ruthless and total power in Germany. That would make it much more interesting. You would want to put a copy of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* and *Horace's Odes* in your rucksack for company, of course, and you would want your parents to give you one pound a week for spending money, that would be more than enough. And that is what these three amazing books are about. Fermor is an unusually keen observer, and his vivaciousness and immensely likeable personality combine with his brilliant observational power to create this compelling personal odyssey. The first volume carries Fermor from the Hook of Holland through fascist Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia; the second takes him through Hungary and Transylvania; and the third winds through Rumania and Bulgaria and ends up with him being deposited in Greece, where the hair-raising wartime adventures he later became famous for were to occur. He sleeps rough in the country sometimes, sometimes in the fantastic castles of middle Europe, sometimes in barns with bucolic peasants. But everywhere he is observing, and writing everything down compulsively in battered notebooks. The detailed notebooks from this amazing journey became the wellspring of the three beloved classics, but how this voyage became the three books is a great story in itself. His first notebook was stolen and lost forever in Munich in the first volume, a minor disaster. But then a major disaster happened in the third volume: his rucksack was stolen in Rustchuk, a Bulgarian town on the Danube, and ten months of notes were lost. Miraculously, however, the rucksack and the notes were recovered and they were ultimately put away for safe-keeping during the war at Harrods where they were later destroyed, unclaimed. And that was the end of the notebooks. Then life intervened: World War II and a brilliant literary career that carried Fermor into the first rank of English writers of the 20th Century. Then, late in a long and well-lived life, the accomplished author returned to his memories, without the benefit of contemporary notes, to see if

he could make something of his unaided recollections. The books themselves were written when the wandering boy had become an old man, a great writer at the height of his powers. The first volume came out in 1977 when I was at Oxford, but somehow I completely missed them until now, to my great loss. The second volume appeared in 1986. Both attracted universal critical acclaim, and the world waited patiently for the concluding volume. But Fermor died in 2011 with the trilogy incomplete. In 2013, it was finished and lightly edited by Colin Thubron and Artemis Cooper and, although the third volume is not quite as brilliant as the first two, it is extremely well done and eminently readable. It beautifully completes this remarkable saga.Undertaking this journey today would be most unwise. To do it in 1933 at the age of 18 seems positively insane. What Fermor saw is now a completely vanished world, of course. Imagine walking across Europe at that young age and in that time, walking across Germany just as the Nazi terror was coming to power, strolling observantly through a wonderful world that was about to vanish forever, in flame and death. The elderly author sees sensitively through the eyes of the young traveler, and the reader is keenly aware of having the benefit of both perspectives. The young Fermor observes the charming folk traditions of the gypsies of Bulgaria, and the reader knows they will all surely be liquidated in the coming fascist occupation. There is a bitterly poignant air that hangs over this trilogy -- of aching beauty, doom and death, love and loss, an irrepressible zest for living overshadowed by the reader's knowledge of what was about to befall these beautiful countries and these lovely people.I am enchanted by the reveries he invokes and how in these books you can hear both voices, see both points of view, read the one writer enthusing about a wonderful experience while understanding it is being told by another writer who knows all of that world vanished forever in an evil conflagration. So you get both points of view, one feelingly perceived by an adventurous boy and the other well crafted by a gifted older man, both writing about a beautiful and bucolic world the boy perceived and from the perspective of the older man who knew it was a doomed world.

Enthralling.

This book is an extreme rarity. It is one that I cannot imagine ANYONE NOT enjoying. Strapping young precocious Fermor, bounced out of school and knocking about London with some chums awaiting, in Fermor's case, with many misgivings, the military rigours of Sandyhurst, decides to chuck it all and go gadding about Europe during the interwar years toward Constantinople at the age of eighteen (He turns nineteen about halfway through.). The result, culled from memories and diaries that survived, and penned decades later, is a bouncing picaresque jaunt through the heartland of Europe, all seen (save for the occasional aside) through the coruscating eyes of youth,

is one I simply can't imagine anyone wanting to miss, especially given that this is a world now lost to us almost completely. Interlarded herein are disquisitions on literature, architecture, and history, history, history (a witches' brew of real and apocryphal). Add to this delightfully unguided rather than misguided quest a cast of characters ranging from the homeless seeking shelter to the aristocrat in his schloss whom the author chances upon the way and you have a simply irresistible and *sui-generis* narrative. You have this book which, regardless of how many grey hairs age has snowed upon your head, will make you feel young and in love with the world again.----5 lofty, swirling stars.

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