

THE TRAVELLER'S TREE

A Journey Through the Caribbean Islands

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Introduction

I.

IN THE late summer of 1947, Patrick Leigh Fermor, OBE—hero of the Irish Guards, leader of the Cretan resistance, famed kidnapper of the Nazi General Kreipe—boarded an ocean liner in Southampton, bound for Central America. With him were Costa, the Greek painter who'd suggested the trip, and Joan Eyres-Monsell, an English photographer whom Fermor had met in Cairo during the war and whom he would marry two decades later. The plan was to spend six months in the Greater and Lesser Antilles.

The book Paddy came home to write you now hold in your hands. When it was published in 1950, *The Traveller's Tree* won favorable reviews and the Heinemann Literary Award, beginning the course of a life's work that would come to see Leigh Fermor widely acknowledged, for much of a storied life still thriving into its tenth decade, as our Greatest Living Travel Writer.

However deserved, the title is a somewhat dubious one—not least because his oeuvre includes works too varied to be so easily classified. Among them are a crystalline meditation on life in the Trappist monasteries of France (*A Time to Keep Silence*, 1957), a lyric pair of accounts of rambling by foot and mule through his adopted Greek homeland (*Mani*, 1958; *Roumeli*, 1966), and most famously, *A Time of Gifts* (1977) and *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), those bibles of backpacking seekers everywhere in which Leigh Fermor—writing thirty years after the events described through the gilded haze of memory (and naturally including, as he has admitted, a few conjured characters and events)—recounts setting off from England in 1933, at the age of nineteen, for a two-year walk clear across Old Europe from Rotterdam to Istanbul.

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Leigh Fermor's best-known works are often described as odes to a prelapsarian world sundered forever from us by the war. *The Traveler's Tree*, penned right after the trip it describes, is something else entirely: a report on the birth pangs of our postwar world just then coming to be. Brimming with the gratitude for life particular to a European generation that had just buried half its members, Leigh Fermor's book may well be but a humble chronicle "whose ultimate purpose . . . is to retransmit to the reader whatever interest and enjoyment we encountered." It is also a book suffused with the wondering spirit of an *engagé* asking after what will become of these New World islands which are passing from Old Europe's imperial shadow. This makes the book notable in Leigh Fermor's oeuvre for forcing him to engage with the legacy and fact of the fading empire whose highest honors he had just then received.

Writing a travel book about the Caribbean is not like writing a travel book about just anyplace. As Leigh Fermor notes: "The region of Antillea existed in the minds of Europeans long before the Antilles were discovered." From the moment Columbus gazed out from the *Santa Maria* at what he mistook for an Indie and wrote of "the most beautiful land that human eyes have ever seen," the Caribbean has been the object of fantasies projected from without: islands quickly shorn of their native peoples, who were then replaced with societies constructed, over the course of four centuries, for the express purpose of providing sugar for European tables. From the start, the Caribbean and its literature have been tied to imperial endeavor, from English ur-texts like Walter Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana* (1595), straight through to Evelyn Waugh's dyspeptic account, in *Ninety-Two Days* (1934), of traipsing through jungles first claimed for England by Raleigh. Even the Trinidad-born V. S. Naipaul, apparently at pains to adopt a worldview more English than England, piles on this imperial scorn: in *The Middle Passage* (1962) he describes the Caribbean as "half-made" societies.

Paddy Leigh Fermor, British travel writer par excellence, owes

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much to the long-standing aims of a tradition seeking to make a place called Abroad understandable for British readers on their damp isle. Where Waugh, though, is prone to homey descriptions—Monte Carlo’s casino is “like Paddington station in the first weeks of August”—the part-Irish Leigh Fermor takes no comfort from happening on reminders of Englishness abroad. Arriving early in his trip to Barbados—the only of the West Indies to remain under continuous English control from the sixteenth century to the twentieth—he writes with vivid distaste of a place whose culture “reflects most faithfully the social and intellectual values and prejudices of a Golf Club in Outer London.” This supremely elegant writer, for whom judgments of style are always moral as well, is only too happy to wave Bimshire goodbye. “Looking backwards, we could almost see, suspended with the most delicate equipoise above the flat little island, the ghostly shapes of those twin orbs of the Empire, the cricket ball and the blackball.”

Sanguine about the passing of the empire, Leigh Fermor’s questions concern what will become of these islands: How will the raw legacies of racial slavery be salvaged? Will these proximate islands, with the end of colonial rule, figure out how to confederate or relate across the divides of language and history? Or will they merely fall under the sway of a new American hegemon whose might was perhaps felt less strongly in new military bases than the incipient creep of “Coca-Cola advertisements, frigidaire, wireless sets and motor-cars”? These are the same questions that would preoccupy the generation of Caribbean leaders and thinkers, just then coming of age, who would seek in ensuing decades to forge a new regional society.

2.

Among the challenges of writing a travel book about a group of islands is the lack of inbuilt narrative thread afforded, say, by walking

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across Europe: a mode of travel and writing in which the contiguous relation of one place passed through to the next is at least partly inherent. Traveling through the Antilles, Leigh Fermor has no such luxury—but this, he thinks, is only fitting: “Short of writing a thesis in many volumes, only a haphazard, almost a picaresque approach can suggest the peculiar mood and tempo of the Caribbean and the turbulent past from which they spring.” And so it is that our party hops among the region’s islands by steamship, airplane, and schooner. Starting mid-chain in Guadeloupe, they sail through the French outer islands of Désirade, the Saints, and Marie-Galante; hop by plane down to Martinique; double back northward from there to the English isle of Dominica, its blue-green peaks wedged as if on accident between its two French neighbors. From Dominica, they fly off south and east to the little coral isle of Barbados, set a ways off in the Atlantic from the Antilles’ volcanic chain; and on to vibrant Trinidad, hard by the South American main; and then to its pacific neighbor of Grenada, before flying northward in “a drastic burst of speed through the Leeward islands in order to dawdle and still to have a little money left over in the Greater Antilles.” With brief stops in St. Lucia (“the most French of the British Indies”), Antigua (“heavy with melancholy and the allusions of ancient fame”), and St. Kitts, they travel by sail (“this, we all agreed, was the proper way to travel in the West Indies”) through the odd and monied Dutch isles of St. Eustatius, Saba, and St. Martin, where their journey attains its nadir awaiting a plane to the Virgin Island of St. Thomas (a possession of the Dutch before they sailed off to found New Amsterdam and left it to the Danes, who in 1917 deeded it to the United States), before finally, in flying on to Puerto Rico, they reach the Greater Antilles—“the last of the small islands, with their easy and familiar values . . . slipping out of control.” After lingering in Haiti, Hispaniola’s western half—recalling the singular tale of a nation born from history’s only victorious slave revolution; toasting the incomparable verve of haute Haitian society in Port-au-Prince (“the white tropical suits, the dark heads

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and hands . . . the great elegance of movement and gesture . . . a room full of sable Venuses”); detailing a few fascinated weeks immersed in vodou and what its rites represent (“the memory of Africa; unity against a cruel and hostile world; survival; the mystery, the warmth, the drums and the dances”)—they take their journey to Jamaica, and to its end in Cuba.

These florid isles naturally inspire trademark elegies to “funereal mangoes” and “nepenthean comas” and rainstorms endured by the “Gaudeloupean strategem of hiding in the sea, standing with our bodies encased in warmth and only our hair and cheeks exposed to the cold falling arrows.” But Leigh Fermor’s is always an appraising eye as well, and a key amusement of his *Traveller’s Tree* (not least for Caribbean readers) has always been his enthusiasm for making plain his likes and dislikes among the islands. Attempting to explain the vibrant timbre of Trinidad’s streets as against Barbados’s prim mores, he notes that the former is a territory that passed numerous times among the French, Spanish, and English; where slavery lasted not four hundred years but scarcely forty; and whose populace—even before the importing of indentured workers from South India in the latter 1800s—has long been a variegated chutney of immigrants from the four corners. “All [the] curious threads in the fabric of the Trinidadian world invest the social life of the island with a colourfulness, a lack of inhibition and a dashing cosmopolitan atmosphere that turn the fading recollection of Barbados into something parochial and grey and fiercely Anglo-English.” Six decades on, witnesses to Trinidad’s thriving cultural scene as against Barbados’s staid white-sand existence could hardly disagree.

Each island may be “a distinct and idiosyncratic entity, a civilization, or the reverse, fortuitous in its origins, empirical in its development,” but Leigh Fermor also knows that the story of any part can’t be understood without examining the whole. “Wherever the sugar plantation and slavery existed, they imposed a pattern,” insisted the great Trinidadian writer C. L. R. James. Leigh Fermor’s portrait of

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the Caribbean, after the manner of James and a hundred others writing from and on the region, is an attempt at synthesis: discrete experiences on individual islands are the way into examining the history of the region in toto. When Leigh Fermor visits the last substantive population of Carib Indians on Dominica, the encounter occasions a capsule history of the long-ago migrations of the Carib, Arawaks, and Ciboney throughout the region, their eventual destruction by the Spanish, and the tragic story of Bartolomé de Las Casas—the Dominican friar whose righteous protests to the Spanish crown about the colonists' killing treatment of the Indians, in the early 1500s, led him to the fateful suggestion that African slaves be imported to toil on the islands instead.

This is a Caribbean before the advent of cheap airfare and huge cruise ships made the patronage of sun-catching tourists a replacement, however unsatisfactory, for King Sugar. Our travelers are staying not in beachside resorts but at planters' manors or small inns in tumbledown seaports whose mere existence as "European town[s], in the middle of such violence of flora and elements, seems as unnatural an effect as a swimmer remaining for long periods underwater." Leigh Fermor's party is possessed of good contacts and plentiful charm; each stop tends to feature an evening around the teak banquet table of some local grandee, and the iced bottles of Riesling and fresh-caught vittles are no less vividly detailed than the speeches of dining mates discussing their island's maladies and charms.

From one such character Leigh Fermor gains his prescription for righting slavery's enduring wrongs. The man is a mulatto doctor in Martinique, lovingly described, whose hospitality and views occasion from Leigh Fermor a disquisition on how vastly preferable French approaches to righting colonial wrongs are to the English. Leigh Fermor praises the French metropole's move to grant equal rights to citizens of every color upon slavery's abolition on Martinique in 1848. He then writes admiringly of Aimé Césaire, the Martinique statesman and "father of Negritude" whose "consciousness of his colour . . .

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as his poetry shows, goes far farther than a complex or persecution mania,” and who argued—even as he was composing his searing *Discours* against colonialism—not for the French islands’ total independence but for their assimilation into the mother country as prefectures with parliamentary rights. Contemporary readers may find hopelessly naïve Leigh Fermor’s support for *docteur* Rose-Rosette’s position that racial animus can only be salved when everyone simply absorbs that “*les vieux temps sont les vieux temps*”—“the old days are the old days.” (Likewise Leigh Fermor’s view, obviously more complicated, that “if the scars of ancient bitterness were not, for political reasons, kept open artificially [after slavery], they could have healed in a generation.”) But visitors to the French *département* of Martinique, who witness its gleaming new roadways and stylish power brokers of all hues in Fort-de-France—as against the rank iniquities of, say, “independent” Jamaica, with its pocked streets and thriving market for creams used to lighten black skin—will find it hard to fault Leigh Fermor’s prediction on parting from Rose-Rosette’s home: “The future looks very dark indeed, though perhaps a shade less dark in the French West Indies than the British.”

3.

Warm nights at table debating the future and past may make up a few branches of this *Traveller’s Tree*. But like all good travelers who base their conclusions less on what they’re told than on what they see, Leigh Fermor’s interests run away from such elite tables and toward the precincts of commoner folk. And it is his observations of such that represent his most distinctive contribution to Caribbean letters—from a quizzical portrayal of the Poor Whites of Sainte Gailante (“as odd as any of the odd ethnological rock-pools of Europe”); to his effusive descriptions of Trinidad’s “saga boys” in their Cab Calloway-inspired zoot suits (“worn with a flaunting ease and a grace of

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deportment that compels nothing but admiration”); to his account of seeking out, one night in Jamaica’s capital of Kingston, a Pocomania religious service. Wandering into the poor area of Trench Town, recently built up to house the stream of wartime arrivals from the countryside, Leigh Fermor enters into “a labyrinth of slender alley-ways”:

Warm and sinuous troughs of dust uncoil between tall hedges of candelabra cactus. In the blaze of the moonshine it looks secret and mysterious and astonishingly beautiful. Gaps in these bristling palisades revealed huts of timber and palm-leaf and dusty courtyards: cool and silvery expanses with here and there a donkey or a couple of goats—portentous figures in that brilliant light—munching above the dark pools of their own shadows.

By day he sets out for another of the city’s notorious districts, ambling into a no-man’s-land by the railroad track where the red, green, and gold flags of Abyssinia flutter above hovels made from cardboard and car parts. This is the Dungle, notorious haven of an Afrocentric religious sect called Rastafari: an area, Leigh Fermor has been warned, that even colored Jamaicans studiously avoid. “What are you doing here?” asks a fearsome fellow with nappy black beard who explains that white folk aren’t welcome in the Rastafari zone. Leigh Fermor feigns the ignorance of a just-off-the-boat traveler; he begs amends and asks the man what Rastafari is. His host warms a little and invites him into a paper-walled shack adorned with a portrait of Abyssinia’s emperor Haile Selassie. Puffing on a sweet-smelling “home-made cigarette as blunt and unwieldy as an ice-cream cone,” he explains that Jamaica’s Rastafari—then numbering only a few hundred adepts—aimed one day to join with “Ethiopians everywhere” to conquer the white race and make Haile Selassie king. Leigh Fermor leaves their long talk confounded by a Rasta theology he finds “impatient of explanation”—but also with the sense that he’s encountered something significant. And indeed he has: a generation later, Rasta ico-

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nography—spread worldwide by Trench Town’s favorite son, the reggae superstar Bob Marley—would become symbolic of Caribbean culture around the planet.

This instinct for history being made before him isn’t uncharacteristic of a writer whose lush style can obscure a keen worldly sense. Describing a speech by the independence-era Jamaican politician Alexander Bustamante, Leigh Fermor writes of the “unstaunchable flow of bravura, humour, invective and peroration [in which] men and events grouped and regrouped themselves about his own protagonistic centre in an endless sequence of astonishing subsidiary combinations.” One could hardly do better in distilling the psyches and rhetorical style of Caribbean leaders ranging from Bustamante’s little cousin Michael Manley to Maurice Bishop to granddaddy Fidel himself.

Like all writers exploring what would soon become known as the third world, Leigh Fermor shows himself interested in “development”; but he is a Hellenist at heart, vivified by any scent of the Long Ago sniffed in the present. In St. Kitts, he hears from a patrician lady in Basseterre of the regal receptions and balls which once dotted its calendar. “How I would have liked to see one!” Leigh Fermor exclaims. “One is so often a century, a decade, or a day late for occasions such as these.” His imagination and pen fire most in places like northern Martinique, where the spectacular old capital of St. Pierre, built in the shadow of the Montagne Pelée volcano, was destroyed in a 1902 eruption. Twenty-six thousand inhabitants died in an instant—and only a single man survived, a condemned crook called Syparis whose imprisonment within the stone-walled city jail saved him from a molten death. “The inhabitants of Martinique,” Leigh Fermor writes on approaching the city, “still ascribe to this event nearly all the handicaps under which the island now labours, for all that was precious morally, materially, intellectually and politically had been centralized in the old capital.”

In St. Pierre, he delights in the still-standing stone cell of old Syparis (who lived out his days as a sideshow attraction in P. T. Barnum’s

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circus), but is flummoxed, too, to find that a tidy new town has built up on the site to disturb his imaginings of the long-gone “Paris of the Antilles.” Here as elsewhere, he delights in bringing the reader along with him to a bygone world by drawing on the writings of others, namely Lafcadio Hearn (who passed two horny years in the 1880s writing paens to the green-eyed *mulatresses* he liked to watch laundering sheets in the river); and before Hearn, Père Jean-Baptiste Labat, the remarkable French monk for whose voluminous memoirs from the seventeenth century—describing everything from the social rituals of Dominica’s Carib to Creole gastronomy in Guadeloupe to the form of slave dances like the calinda from Guinea*—he is rightly described by Leigh Fermor as “the best of the writers on the background of this book, in any language.” Little wonder that our Hellenist hero would soon base his only novel, *The Violins of St. Jacques* (1953), on this, the tale of the New World’s Pompeii.

4.

I recently passed through St. Pierre on a Sunday afternoon. Parking our rented car near the water, my companion and I walked through deserted Sabbath streets and under the November rain clouds which obscured Montagne Pelée’s green slopes and its distant peak. We soon found Syparis’s old cell. “The tropics are merciless to ruins,” observes Leigh Fermor, but the squat stone room that saved the convict’s life stood carefully preserved next to the thick wall of what was once St. Pierre’s magnificent theater. Gazing at the theater’s grand curving marble staircase, it wasn’t hard to imagine a crowd of finely dressed French arriving to take in an opera by Gounod or Bizet. Now we

*Labat’s fine-grained notes on slave dances remain invaluable to musicologists today, who have traced Afro-Antillean styles ranging from kompa to salsa to swing to the rhythms Labat described.

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heard, wafting from the window of a brightly painted house perched above the ruin, the new zouk tune that had followed us around the island that week. Pausing to appreciate the song—its kinetic lilt evincing strains of Haitian kompa, Jamaican reggae, and doubtless, too, the old calindas described by Père Labat—my friend and I waved to the owner of the home from which it sounded, a great-grandson of French slaves enjoying his porch on a restful afternoon. Then we returned to our car and made our way around Montagne Pelée’s hump to the island’s north shore.

There in the fishing village of Grand-Rivière, a honey-lit guava of a town at Martinique’s northern tip, we gazed across the turquoise water at Dominica. The English-speaking island’s blue peaks stood a mere twenty miles distant, but short of owning or hiring a boat of one’s own, we soon learned, it wasn’t possible to travel there. (Even ferries from Martinique’s capital of Fort-de-France were out of service, though no one could tell us exactly why.) Standing there on Grand-Rivière’s concrete pier—a shining blue placard signaling that its construction had been funded by the European Union—I spoke with an elderly villager with sparkling eyes and dark skin who, save for his distinctly accented French, wouldn’t have looked out of place on a pier on any Antillean isle. I asked the man about the news of their neighbor. He didn’t have much to say about Dominica’s new president, a Rastafarian from the country’s mountains who had made waves by selling the island’s water rights to China. He preferred to discuss the prospects of France’s national soccer team—whose match that week against Ireland was the talk of Martinique—in the approaching World Cup. In the Caribbean today, at least as much as in 1948, one is confronted constantly with the central questions of what Derek Walcott called the muse of history: of how the people who live on these islands came to be here, and of how, with their common origins, they possess such starkly different languages and cultures—of why these neighboring bits of land which share so much in geography and climate and history, meet such very different fates.

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At his journey's end, Leigh Fermor looks back from a jetliner rising from Havana, gazing south through the twilight toward where the great chain of Antilles marches off toward South America. "There lay the islands in the night, suspended between the stars and the sea's bottom with the abstraction of thoughts: the stages of a thesis that was still to be unraveled." Scarcely a decade later, Fidel Castro entered Havana with his bearded band and changed the course of that thesis in uncounted ways. His revolution led to the breakup of a proposed federation of West Indian states, and to the United States determining that "another Cuba"—such as that quashed by the U.S. Marines who invaded Grenada in 1983—would never be allowed to emerge in this "American lake." Elsewhere, the social histories of small islands competing with one another for fickle tourist dollars, their economies hamstrung by corrupt leaders and unpayable debts to the International Monetary Fund, have long been defined by ceaseless out-migration. Even as Leigh Fermor was landing at Kingston and Port of Spain that winter of 1948, the HMS *Windrush* was departing, bringing five hundred West Indian immigrants to London's docks, whose journey there is recalled today as the start of the postwar exodus of Caribbean people seeking work in northern cities. That exodus is ongoing still.

"We're always going somewhere, but we never get there," a sailor tells Leigh Fermor by Kingston's harbor late in his trip. Visiting Trench Town today, where long before the moon's rise each evening Uzi-toting teens erect barricades of scrap wood and tin to protect its alleys from rival drug gangs, it is hard not to feel as if that "somewhere" is even farther distant than when he wandered these byways. "Eventually the masters left, in a kind of a way" is how the Antigua-born writer Jamaica Kincaid has characterized the history of the Antilles; "eventually the slaves were freed, in a kind of a way." The thesis of Caribbean history is still unraveling, and not all the news is bad—as we can now thankfully learn from voices like Walcott's and Kincaid's and a thousand others, who have emerged to examine it for themselves. Viewed from across the six decades since it was written, Leigh Fermor's

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Traveller's Tree looks very much like the fullest portrait we have of these islands as region at the start of their modern era. But whatever the historical import of his first book—the postwar joyride of a war hero; the first volley in one of the more remarkable writing lives of our recently ended century—one truth on which Leigh Fermor can stand assured is its ability to “give pleasure”: to convey the joy he takes in living the moments described and rendering what he calls “the perceptible texture of [these islands’] existence.” So doing, he conveys an ethics of travel as art: a determination to gain from each day abroad in the world as much wonder and connection as one possibly can.

On a day near his journey's end, Leigh Fermor's spirits are flagging as all travelers' sometimes do. His mood is not helped by the grim concrete of Jamaica's capital, so at odds with this lush isle's interior. But soon he snaps to.

Even Kingston had its compensations. One of these was the obsolete splendor of breakfast, a sparkling still-life that could only have fallen from the volutes of a tropical cornucopia: paw-paw, sour-sop, mango, pineapple, and ice-cold mandarins peeled and impaled on forks were the merest forerunners of a multiplicity of eggs, kedgerree, sausages, bacon, fried banana, a cold wing of fowl, hot rolls, a week's butter ration, and marmalade. It was a breakfast fit for a tropical potentate or a Regency prize-fighter. Thus fortified, I left the pleasant coolness of the South Camp Road Hotel and wandered into the blinding town. The heat soon turned the smart white suit (with which, after humiliating sartorial reverses in Puerto Rico, I had prudently equipped myself) into a sopping envelope of rags.

Sopping suit or no, off into his life and history does Paddy go, and we are delighted to follow.

—JOSHUA JELLY-SCHAPIRO