



Roumeli: Travels in Northern Greece

Patrick Leigh Fermor , Patricia Storage (Introduction)

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Roumeli is not to be found on present-day maps. It is the name once given to northern Greece—stretching from the Bosphorus to the Adriatic and from Macedonia to the Gulf of Corinth, a name that evokes a world where the present is inseparably bound up with the past.

Roumeli describes Patrick Leigh Fermor's wanderings in and around this mysterious and yet very real region. He takes us with him among Sarakatsan shepherds, to the monasteries of Meteora and the villages of Krakora, and on a mission to track down a pair of Byron's slippers at Missolonghi. As he does, he brings to light the inherent conflicts of the Greek inheritance—the tenuous links to the classical and Byzantine heritage, the legacy of Ottoman domination—along with an underlying, even older world, traces of which Leigh Fermor finds in the hills and mountains and along stretches of barely explored coast.

Roumeli is a companion volume to Patrick Leigh Fermor's famous *Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese*.

Roumeli: Travels in Northern Greece Details

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Sairam Krishnan says

My first Patrick Fermor was interrupted by several important life-decisions, and therefore had to be read in demarcated chunks, and over more time that I wanted it to be ingested in.

And yet, it was so so good.

I do not profess to know much about Greece and its history, and I came to the book to see the linguistic style and narrative flourish I had heard so much about. And I wasn't disappointed at all. The descriptions and tales just blew my mind, and I couldn't have enough.

I'm filing this away to come back to, perhaps after a primer of Greek history and geography, and maybe even after Fermor's earlier books, so I can read this with even more comprehension and delight.

Emin says

Even though he's too much of a philhellene (philrhomaioi?) for my taste I found his writing style and eye for detail exquisite.

The various chapters can be read independently and I highly recommend the chapter on the multiple identities of Greeks (hellene vs. rhomaioi) to understand Greeks of today. I would love to visit Meteora and reread his chapter on it before and after.

Alan Parker says

Another beautifully written book by Patrick Leigh Fermor. It gave me a yearning to go and discover what is left of the lost world of Northern Greece that he describes, far from the tourists beaten tracks.

Tanja says

Patrick Leigh Fermor is without doubt one of my favorite writers. I just truly enjoy delving into one of his books (whether it is his account of his youthful journey on foot through Europe just prior to the outbreak of the second world war, or his time working with the Greece resistance during WWII). Without fail they catapult me into a different world with which I can claim only partial acquaintance. That said, his books are not easy reads, this one especially required quite a few trips to my trusted OED. I have certainly extended my vocabulary once again (one never knows when 'haruspicate' might come in handy). I love that once I put down his books, I feel not only that I enjoyed myself, but also that I learned something. And his account of these out of the way Greek places entice me to explore and experience the roumeli on my own.

Margo Berendsen says

I picked this book up for research about Greece; I soon discovered I couldn't put it down. This is no mere travelogue. Fermor is part anthropologist, part linguist, and part poet. The way he describes the nomadic shepherds of the mountains of Greece (I did not know such people even existed!) is so well done I feel as if I'm still hearing their chants and the rhythmic stomp of their dances, still shivering from their superstitions (this is Greek mythology you probably haven't encountered before!)

I will definitely be picking up more books by this author; there are three more and wish there were more.

Spiros says

I think that the subject got too big for Fermor here: he was trying to write a book about the Roumeli (loosely defined as the region from the Bosphorus to the Adriatic, between Macedonia and the Gulf of Corinth), in the space of only 250 pages. The result is very episodic, if entirely fascinating: one wants to read so much more.

Bruce says

Ever the master traveler, raconteur, and writer, Leigh Fermor in this book about northern Greece has again written an account guaranteed to delight those who have come to know and enjoy his companionship. Less of a continuous narrative, the book represents a series of extended explorations of topics that Leigh Fermor found fascinating as he traveled this region. With him we experience the monasteries of Meteora, his friendships and relationships with the people of Crete (how this digression fits into the region of Greece called Roumeli is anyone's guess), stories of Lord Byron and his legends in Missolonghi, time spent with Sarakatsan shepherds, visits to Krakoran villages, reflections on languages and dialects, stasis and change, traditions and modernity. This is once again an opportunity to revel in the author's use of language, his enormous and precise vocabulary, his perceptiveness and insights, his gregariousness and boundless sense of adventure. It is a chance to reflect with him on the differences between Western and Byzantine culture and history, on the places in the world that seem little touched by life in the twentieth century, on the basic humanity of people that connects us all beyond the boundaries of time and place.

Do not look for plot in a book like this. But if you like characterizations and descriptions and simply magical writing, you will be enchanted. Leigh Fermor is, alas, no longer alive, having died in 2011 at the age of 96. But we are fortunate to have his many writings that remain for us to enjoy.

Christos says

Πρ?κειται για μια συλλογ? απ? περιηγητικ? κε?μενα με τις εμπειρ?ες του συγγραφ?α απ? τις περιπλαν?σεις του στη Β?ρεια και Δυτικ? Ελλ?δα (με μια μικρ? παρεκτροπ? για την Κρ?τη) τη

δεκαετία του 50. Συμμετ?χει σε ?να Σαρακατσ?νικο γ?μο, φιλοξενε?ται απ? μοναχο?ς στα Μετ?ωρα, αναζητ? τις παντ?φλες του Λ?ρδου Β?ρωνα στο Μεσολλ?γγι, επισκ?πτεται τα φτωχ? και ?γωνα χωρι? των Κραβ?ρων στην ορειν? Ναυπακτ?α κ.α. Οι περιγραφ?ς του ε?ναι ζωνταν?ς και ?χουν τερ?στιο ανθρωπολογικ? (και ?χι τουριστικ?) ενδιαφ?ρον, απεικον?ζουν τοπ?α, ?θη, ?θιμα και ?να τρ?πο ζω?ς ολ?κληρων κοινοτ?των που πλ?ον ?χει αλλ?ξει ολοκληρωτικ?. Παρ?τι καθ?λου συνηθισμ?νος στην ταξιδιωτικ? λογοτεχν?α, μου κρ?τησε αμε?ωτο το ενδιαφ?ρον μ?χρι το τ?λος.

Steve says

This book is filled with 5 star writing, and yet I can't shake the sense that the parts are greater than the whole. But perhaps that's the case with travel writing in general. I'm not all that widely read in the genre, and whenever I do read an acclaimed author and book, I tend to get frustrated. I suppose I like my foreign adventures (and descriptions) wrapped in a story -- or a history. So in other words, I suppose the fault lies with me. This particular book by Fermor is one of his Greek travel books, with a focus (broadly) on the northern part of the country (there's a lengthy (and beautifully poetic) wartime interlude in Crete -- which is way south). The early part of the book has Fermor attending a traditional wedding, with wonderful descriptions of food, drink, and apparel (especially the bride)-- all of which are probably now long gone (the book was written in 1966). What next follows is some monastery crawling -- most of which are located on steep mountains. (How did they build them?) The descriptions are, again, beautiful, but oddly lacking in any descriptions of the art. (In contrast, see Rebecca West's descriptions in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.) Fermor does mention, at least once, that the paintings are "darkened." In other words, maybe he's seen better, and didn't bother.

Throughout the book, there are several meditations on the Greek personality, which I found circular and boring. I'm sure there are many that find them nuanced and poetic. One particularly wonderful episode, which is actually two, involves a search for a pair Lord Byron's shoes. Fermor clearly loves Byron, and he expends a number of pages on this search. The first part has Fermor and a friend visiting an eccentric 80 year old descendant of Byron's. They are pulling together what information they can for the search, which was prompted by a letter from Greece to the ancestor. The visit ends with a game of pool during a rainstorm. This could of easily been a wonderful short story. The second part has Fermor in Missolonghi (the eventual site of Byron's death) seeking out the holder of the shoes. For me this is the heart of the book, and made the reading trip all worthwhile.

Things sort of tailed off for after that. Fermor continues to ramble about, but throughout all of this, there is a tinge of lament. Fermor sees the Greece that he loves dying in a wave of what we now call Globalism. That which is unique is being diluted, dumbed down or done away with. One poignant episode, late in the book, really made an impression on me. In it, Fermor, traveling on a bus, encounters a young Greek woman traveling with her child. I believe it captures the experience of the book (the best part anyway) in a nutshell:

We had passed a couple of meagre hamlets and the bus had emptied of all but Andreas and me and, in the seat behind us, a pretty mountain girl whose face was alight with candour and happiness. A voluminous black kerchief swathed her head, thick chestnut plaits fell down her back, and she was encased in one of those coats of homespun goats' hair, flaring from the waist and gallooned round the hem and along the perpendicular pockets with a dark red braid, that the call a "segouni." Round silver plaques as big as saucers fastened her woven belt. A swaddled baby in a hewn cradle like a little trough rested across her lap; it had been slung across her back like a papoose when she got in. She looked about fifteen. As she listened to Andreas her eyes grew wider still and laughter covered her face with the spread fingers of one brown hand.

(pg. 192).

I doubt you would encounter that woman, in that attire, these days. Anyway, as you can see, Fermor doesn't write -- he paints with words. And that's a rare gift.

Jim says

On the plus side, Patrick Leigh Fermor is becoming one of my favorite authors. Even a little known travel book such as *Roumeli: Travels in Northern Greece* is so brilliant and effortless in its erudition that one hates to come to the end of chapters, of paragraphs, even of sentences. On the minus side, I'm coming to the end of Fermor's oeuvre and will have to re-read his books just to feel the same buzz.

Like *Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese*, **Roumeli** seems at first glance somewhat haphazard in its organization. We begin with Fermor among a shepherd tribe known as the Sarakatsán with its own culture and dialect that he encounters in northeast Greece, near the Turkish border. Then he visits some monasteries located on the tops of steep rock columns at -- no, not Athos -- but in a north central region known as Meteora. Then he travels around the north end of Gulf of Corinth visiting small unknown towns and getting all wrapped up in the argot and culture of a tribe of beggars who inhabited a region known as the Kravara. There is even a chapter about Crete, which is hardly in northern Greece.

I am sad that Fermor is closing in on his first century. Though still very much alive, he cannot have too many more works in him.

But what a fine mind! What a splendid eye for detail and character! After Fermor, all other travel writers -- Theroux, Morton, Morris, Durrell, Lawrence, and even Chatwin -- seem insipid by comparison.

Theelegantreader says

A wonderful book chronicling the famous author's travels through northern Greece in the year 1966. The author's deep understanding of Greece and its 5000 year history, language and culture is impressive. Sometimes it's almost too much knowledge conveyed for a reader not that much familiar with Greece. Since the book is almost 50 years old it also serves as a kind of time capsule of the times before Greece was mutilated by mass tourism and the ill effects of the recent Euro-crisis. My favourite story in there is the search for Lord Byron's slippers in Missolonghi and a mountain hike with a friendly Greek military officer who turns out to be quite a hedonist. Definitely worth reading for anyone that loves Greece.

R. says

This is my least favorite of the 4 Fermor books I've read. Fermor's digressions become distracting here, and it took me a lot longer to finish the book than with his other titles.

That being said, there are some jewels in here. I enjoyed the passages about Meteora, and those that dealt with the years of Ottoman subjugation. And there's a priceless passage about Byron's missing slippers. The Greeks consider Byron to be their equivalent of Washington, or maybe Lafayette. He died just before going into battle near Missolonghi during the Greek War of Independence.

The story goes that Byron rewarded his boatman with a pair of his shoes/slippers for ferrying him daily through the marshes to the battle area. At some point in history, the slippers disappeared.

In preparation for his journey through Greece, Fermor visits the 80 year-old woman who caretakes Byron's estate (she being the main remaining descendant). He wants to get all the information he can, and find the missing slippers.

She wines and dines him and his companion, soundly thrashes him in billiards, and over a period of time, tells all she knows about Lord Byron, giving Fermor unlimited access to view Byron's estate. Perhaps the most important item she tells him is the name of the Byron's boatman.

Armed with all of this, Fermor sets off on a tortuous trail through Greece, and is just about to give up near Missolonghi, when...

Ah, but that would be telling! Suffice it to say that what unfolds has all the mystery and excitement of the best mystery fiction.

For this one tale alone, I'm glad this book is in my library.

Patrick Cook says

I distinctly remember being disappointed by this book the first time I read it. It was nothing like as good as 'A Time of Gifts' or 'Between the Woods and the Water'. Having re-read it, nearly a decade later, and actually in Greece (indeed mostly on Mount Athos), I still stand by the latter part of the judgement — it really isn't as good as the two books of his uncompleted trilogy. His excesses are not reined in here, as they are there, by careful and conscientious editing. This would not be a book to give to someone who was unfamiliar with Leigh Fermor's work. But it's still wonderfully evocative, erudite, and quite a lot of fun. Second-rate Leigh Fermor is still better than most travel writers can produce on their best days.

Donna says

I'm encountering Patrick Leigh Fermor suddenly and unexpectedly on multiple fronts...simultaneously happy to be reading him for the first time but sad that I haven't been reading him for years! Without realizing who he was, I do know the story of his daring and bravery on the Isle of Crete during WWII through the movie about same starring Dirk Bogarde, Ill Met by Moonlight. Also unbeknownst to me was his long friendship and correspondence with Debo Mitford...their letters have been recently published...In Tearing Haste...

Decided to read his first two books, written as a very young man, of his travels across Europe, mainly on foot, from Holland to Constantinople, during years of rising Fascism.

Nick says

I'll read anything Patrick Leigh Fermor has written. In fact, I'm busy right now chasing down *Three Letters from the Andes*, a minor work by the master that is not always easy to find. *Roumeli* has passages of vintage Fermor -- travel writing that exceeds just about anything ever written in that genre -- and that brings to life these moments and places in rural Greece that are gone in two senses -- geographically swallowed up by the encroachments of the Western industrial world, and temporally gone in the swirl of the last fifty years and all the mixed blessings of modern life. Fermor has an openness to people and experiences that makes him a joy to travel with, even on the printed page, even after a half-century, even though the places and people he writes about are gone. It feels like something is missing from modern life that Fermor embodied -- a shared joy and awareness of the fragile beauty of human life we seem to have lost. Can you imagine anyone creating a scene like the author Lawrence Durrell describes when, years ago, during a time of tension between England and Greece over a territorial dispute, Fermor broke into song at a private dinner (in Greece), singing Greek, Cretan, and other songs long into the night -- and a silent crowd of Greeks gathered outside, standing in the dark, simply to hear him sing through the open windows? What have we lost, that such human connections seem more impossible than ever?
