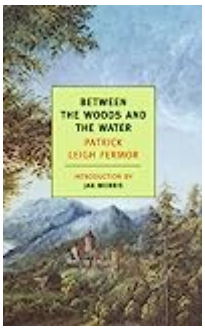
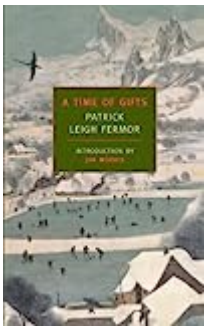
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Patrick Leigh Fermor. *Between the Woods and the Water: On Foot to Constantinople: The Middle Danube to the Iron Gates.* New York: New York Review Books, 2005. xii + 264 pp. $15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59017-166-0.



Patrick Leigh Fermor. *A Time of Gifts: On Foot to Constantinople: From the Hook of Holland to the Middle Danube.* New York: New York Review Books, 2005. xi + 321 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59017-165-3.

Reviewed by Thomas Ort (Center for European Studies, New York University)

Published on H-Travel (December, 2006)

Entering Eastern Europe

In recent years travel writing on Eastern Europe has been criticized from academic quarters for a variety of reasons, above all for helping to justify a relationship of subordination vis-Ã -vis the West and for promoting facile generalizations and fixed, often negative, stereotypes of the region. Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* is probably the travelogue that has received the greatest censure, and deservedly so. This ill-informed account of the Balkans may have had real world consequences in discouraging President Clinton from intervening in a more timely way in the Bosnian War of the 1990s. Kaplan is a writer so consumed by the idea of the essential beneficence of the West and benightedness of the East that he is incapable of accepting that a phenomenon such as Nazism could have had Western European origins. "Nazism, for instance, can claim Balkan origins," he wrote, conveniently re-locating the ideology's birthplace from Germany to the Balkans. "Here politics has been reduced to a level of near anarchy that from time to time in history flowed up the Danube into Central Europe."[1] With unaccountable assertions such as these it is not hard to see why scholars have often treated travel

writing skeptically and credited it with a host of undesirable effects.

In *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), Maria Todorova argued that the "balkanist" discourse–the notion that the Balkans as a whole have *always* been a brutal, violent, and unstable place–originated primarily in the journalistic and travel literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was around the time of the Balkan wars of 1912-13 and especially during the First World War that the negative image of the Balkans crystallized in the minds of travelers and political commentators alike. Thereafter, it became difficult to conceive of the region in anything but pejorative terms. *Balkan Ghosts* is only one of the more recent (and more egregious) travelogues in this tradition; not surprisingly, Todorova singles out Kaplan's book for rebuke–five times.

If travelers to the more easterly regions of Europe helped give the Balkans a bad name, Larry Wolff assigns them an even more pivotal historical role: the invention of the idea of "Eastern Europe."[2] Whereas prior to the eighteenth century, Europe was conceived as divided along ancient north-south lines, Enlightenment-age travelers effected a conceptual re-orientation of the continent. Now, they imagined the relevant geographic divide as that between the "East" and the "West." In a Europe so conceived, Enlightenment thinkers defined the West as the locus of civilization and the East as a zone of relative backwardness halfway between the civilized world and the outright barbarism of the Orient. As such, Eastern Europe became a land ripe for projects of political and social engineering aimed at raising it to or surpassing the standards of the West. It was a place where, in the name of progress and civilization, despotism and even conquest could be justified. Forms of political and personal domination that no enlightened thinker would wish on the West were deemed permissible and necessary in the East. *Inventing Eastern Europe* is in many respects the intellectual genealogy of the post-1945 division of Europe and of Soviet hegemony in the East. More precisely, it is the prehistory of the acquiescence by many political leaders and opinion makers in the West to that division and to the establishment of dictatorial control in the East. Eighteenth-century travelers first helped make the divide seem natural and acceptable.

Travel writing, then, has been accorded a privileged role in shaping perceptions of and attitudes towards Eastern Europe in the West. If those perceptions have frequently been negative and attitudes unfortunate (for Eastern Europe), then it is because not enough people have read *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*, British author Patrick Leigh Fermor's superb narratives of his travels across Central and Eastern Europe. Unlike so many Western travelers to the East, Fermor seems to have genuinely enjoyed his time there, bad roads and all. It is not that Fermor is wholly free of the prejudices and associations that historians like Todorova and Wolff have identified in travelogues of the East; he is not, but he is also unwilling to let those preconceptions dominate his perspective for too long when his own eyes and ears are telling him otherwise. It helps greatly that he is a brilliant writer, but what truly distinguishes him is his gift for human interaction, his ability to communicate with and gain the confidence of a broad range of people across wide social, cultural, and linguistic barriers. Fermor is a person who gets along with almost everyone he meets, and it shows. The result is a deeply sympathetic account of the people he encounters and the places he visits. These books, while not without their flaws, stand at the pinnacle of their genre.

Born in England in 1915, Patrick Leigh Fermor is considered one of the greatest living travel writers. His numerous books detail his journeys in the Caribbean, the Andes, Greece, and Central and Eastern Europe. His first travels began in 1933 when he decided to traverse Europe from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople–on foot. He reached his destination about a year later when he was just nineteen years old. *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water* recount the first two-thirds of this remarkable journey. The former volume concerns Fermor's trek through Holland, Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, while the latter tells of his wanderings in Hungary and Romania, leaving off literally mid-stream as Fermor sails down the Danube to Bulgaria. The now ninety-one-year-old author is reportedly at work on the third and final volume of his trilogy, but it has yet to appear.

A Time of Gifts and *Between the Woods and the Water* describe Fermor's earliest travels, but they were only published much later in his life, in 1977 and 1986 respectively. Thanks to New York Review Books, they were reissued in the United States last year. One of the reasons for the long delay was the loss of the author's diaries and their later recovery at an estate in Romania. The result, as Jan Morris points out in her excellent introduction to *A Time of Gifts*, is that the journey is effectively evoked by two people, "the carefree young dropout who experienced it, and stored it up in memory and in diary, and the immensely experienced author who, knowing more about history forty years later, turned it into art" (p. viii).

When Fermor set out for Constantinople, he was an impulsive and more or less directionless young man who had trouble with authority. He had recently been expelled from The King's School in Canterbury. When he wrote about his travels several decades later, he was a decorated military officer and an accomplished student of art, history, and languages. During the Second World War, he led a special operations unit in Crete that kidnapped the German general in command of the island and removed him to Egypt. The books are animated by the ecstatic spirit of youthful rebellion, but they are also sober reflections upon the past and a world utterly transformed by violence and war. The Fermor who traveled through the towns and villages of Central and Eastern Europe in 1933-34 did not know that many of its monuments and inhabitants would soon be obliterated; the one who wrote the books did.

Fermor's journey across Europe began on December 10, 1933, when he arrived at the Hook of Holland on a steamer from London. The primary purpose of the trip is to see the lands of Eastern Europe, but most of *A Time of Gifts* is devoted to Fermor's passage through Holland, Germany, and Austria, and he has many interesting things to say about his travels there. In Holland, seeing for the first time its canals and churches and neat fields, he is overwhelmed with the feeling of dÃ©jÃ vu. The accuracy of the Dutch painters' representation of their land is astounding: "So compelling is the identity of picture and reality that all along my path numberless dawdling afternoons in museums were being summoned back to life and set in motion" (p. 34). But the war casts a pall over these reminiscences, tainting them with regret. Of his visit to Rotterdam and its great cathedral, Fermor writes, "except for this church, the beautiful city was to be bombed to fragments a few years later. I would have lingered had I known" (p.27).

When Fermor crosses into Germany a few days later, the swastika flag is flying. One of the many interesting things readers will learn from the account of his travels here is how thoroughly Nazified the country was less than a year after Hitler's assumption of power. Not only are Nazi slogans and symbols ubiquitous, but in almost every inn or tavern at which Fermor stops, portraits of Hitler and other party luminaries gaze down upon him. It has long been known that small business owners voted for Hitler in large numbers, but it is rare to learn of such a simple measure of the depth and breadth of their support.

There is nothing predictable about Fermor's trip through Germany. He comes across avid Nazis, but also opponents of the regime. Knowing where the fervent support for Hitler will eventually lead, a lesser writer might have been tempted to indulge his scorn for the movement's followers, but not Fermor. When a group of brown-clad S.A. men march into the tavern where he has settled himself, sit at tables close by, and break loudly into song, Fermor comments, unexpectedly: "It was charming." He then continues: "And the charm made it impossible, at that moment, to connect the singers with organized bullying and the smashing of Jewish shop windows and nocturnal bonfires of books" (p. 41). To be sure, the S.A. men sing regional folk songs and not militant anthems, but Fermor resists the impulse to de-humanize even the goose-stepping throngs.

Born during the First World War, Fermor testifies that he was raised on a hearty diet of anti-German images, and that he was not well disposed towards Germany before his visit there. He is not surprised therefore by some of the coarseness or militarism he finds. But he is also amazed by the kindness and generosity complete strangers show him at almost every turn. He is routinely treated to drinks and meals, invited to lodge at inns for free, or welcomed into the homes of families both humble and well-to-do. After one particularly warm reception at a tavern in Heidelberg on a snowy December night, he wonders how a comparable German traveler would be treated in Oxford–probably not as humanely.

Traveling in Germany shortly after Hitler has come to power, it is natural that Fermor should offer his observations about the country's turn to Nazism. Yet by his own admission, politics is not his strong suit. He does engage in some political discussions both in Germany and elsewhere, but they are frankly limited. Embarrassed by the political innocence of his youth, Fermor excuses himself by noting how many books have been written on the subject. It is true that the author was not yet twenty when he made his journey, and only so much political insight can be wished for from such a young man. But given the incredibly polarized politics of the interwar years and its importance to so many other aspects of life, one wishes that the young Fermor had not been quite so naive. His obtuseness is occasionally painful. Reaching Vienna on February 12, 1934, Fermor arrives in the middle of the violent suppression of the socialist workers' uprising. He notes the cannon and machine gun fire and the soldiers in the streets, but otherwise he barely seems to notice. Hundreds if not thousands of people have just been killed, but he goes about his business the next day as if nothing especially unusual had happened.

After lingering in Vienna for several weeks, Fermor crosses the Austrian border into Czechoslovakia near Bratislava. In doing so, he reaches what he takes to be the true goal of his journey: Eastern Europe. He is not disappointed. For the first time, he hears languages–Slovak and Magyar–whose sounds are totally foreign to him. (He speaks passable German.) He sees sheepskin-clad Slovak peasants, clamorous Jewish coffeehouses, and Gypsies with dancing bears. The peasants make the following impression on him: "Swamp-and-conifer men they looked, with faces tundrablank and eyes as blue and as vague as unmapped lakes which the plum-brandy was misting over. But they might just as well have been swallowing hydromel a thousand years earlier, before setting off to track the cloven spoor of the aurochs across a frozen Trans-Carpathian bog" (p. 242). Except for the beautiful prose, we are back on the well-worn terrain of Western travel narratives of the East. Entering Czechoslovakia, Fermor steps back in time–a thousand years! He crosses not just a political but a civilization frontier. Citing with approval a phrase attributed to Metternich, "Oestlich von Wien faengt der Orient an" ("East of Vienna, the Orient begins"), he leaves behind one world, the West, and enters an altogether different, mysterious, and vaguely menacing one, the East (p. 239).

The problem with Fermor's account of Bratislava, as with so many other travel narratives, is that, convinced he has entered a whole new world, he goes looking for difference and he downplays similarity. Differences in degree become magnified into differences in kind. There are thus no descriptions of the city's upscale residential neighborhoods (where he actually stayed) but plenty of its seedy suburbs and red light district. It is in places like these that Fermor finds backwoods peasants and Gypsy camps, and that is exactly why he goes there. "I felt drawn there like a pin to a magnet," he says of the city's ramshackle outskirts (p. 243). Among its denizens, he sees not just poverty or ignorance but evidence of Easternness. Designating Bratislava a city "full of secrets" (a characterization that will likely strike more than a few readers as odd), Fermor goes on to relate his impressions of the town's Jewish community. The most revealing aspect of this portrait, however, is not its contents, but rather the fact that Fermor only seems to notice Jews when he is in Bratislava, that is, in the East. Although he has just arrived from Vienna, a city with a Jewish population vastly larger than that of Bratislava (185,000 versus 15,000) and approximately the same in percentage terms (around 10 percent), Fermor claims that there he only caught "fleeting glimpses" of the city's Jews and then "always from a distance" (p. 244). The real difference is that whereas in Bratislava he takes a keen interest in Jewish life because it represents something Eastern, in Vienna he ignored it. You find what you are looking for.

Also revealing are Fermor's repeated visits to Bratislava's red light district. As with his sudden fascination with Jewish life, it is only in Bratislava–the East–that he feels tempted to debauchery. Although he claims that the prostitutes in Bratislava are less beautiful than their Western counterparts ("These girls, after all, were not their Viennese sisters, who could slow up a bishop with the lift of an eyelash," p. 248), their allure is more difficult for him to resist. Notwithstanding the fact that many of the prostitutes in Vienna were likely of Eastern European origin, what makes those in Bratislava so appealing to Fermor is almost certainly not some quality of their own, but rather a change in him. It is surely *his* sense that the rules have changed, that the constraints that apply in the West do not apply in the East, that makes him want to indulge his passions. For those who have puzzled over the phenomenon of the licentiousness of Western men in Eastern Europe, the second chapter of Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe* is required reading.[3]

Things get stranger when Fermor visits Prague, or at least that is how he puts it. "Everything here was strange," he says plainly (p. 257). A few pages later in *A Time of Gifts*, he delivers the same judgment: "Prague seemed–it still seems, after many rival cities–not only one of the most beautiful places in the world, but one of the strangest" (p. 265). These comments refer primarily to Prague's architectural heritage and the tension Fermor perceives between its Slavic (i.e., Eastern) and Teutonic (i.e., Western) traditions. Yet it is difficult to escape the feeling that what really makes the city strange for him are his own expectations. Traveling to the capital of Czechoslovakia, it seems clear that he expected to find a far more "Eastern" city. But instead of spying dancing bears and onion domes, he discovers some of the most dazzling examples anywhere of (Western) gothic and baroque architecture, and he does not know what to make of it. What is really unusual about Prague for Fermor is not the city's Easternness, but rather that it seems so Western. "The very familiarity of much of the architecture made Prague seem more remote," he avers (p. 265). Locating a Western city deep in the heart of the East is very strange indeed!

Because of his insistence on interpreting his experiences through the narrow and frequently misleading

lens of "East" and "West," Fermor's first chapters on Eastern Europe, those that describe his travels in Czechoslovakia, are the weakest in the two books. But things get better, much better. The more time he spends in the East, namely in Hungary and Romania, the less he views his surroundings through this optic. Besides remaining for much longer in these countries (months rather than weeks), the major difference is that Fermor actually begins to speak with their inhabitants. Whereas in Czechoslovakia Fermor's experience was mediated almost entirely by a Viennese acquaintance residing in Bratislava ("Vienna was his true home," p. 237), in Hungary and Romania his contacts are more varied and direct. He also makes a serious attempt to learn Hungarian, an effort for which he is amply rewarded.

Fermor's travels in these areas of Europe stand apart in another respect. When he began his journey, he styled himself a kind of itinerant scholar, sleeping in sheds, barns, taverns–wherever he happened to stop for the night–and he did just that, more or less, in the West. Yet the further east he goes, the more luxurious his accommodations become. By the time he is in Hungary and Romania, he essentially moves from one noble estate to another with only intervals of tramping in between. This mode of travel undoubtedly skews his perspective on these societies, but it also seems to have a salutary effect. In long conversations with cultivated Hungarian and Romanian aristocrats, he gains a real appreciation for the ancient, tempestuous, and proud histories of these regions. The more he learns, the more he comes to see the incredible ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity around him not as something queer and threatening but as unique and special. Some of the best parts of *Between the Woods and the Water* are devoted to his encounters in Transylvania with communities of Romanians, Magyars, Saxons, Swabians, SzÃ©kelys, Jews, and Gypsies. Fermor's last night in Romania is spent on the Danubian island of Ada Kaleh, populated almost exclusively by Turks. The homogeneity of Western Europe seems downright boring in contrast.

For all of Fermor's enthusiasm, a kind of sadness permeates his writing, especially in the second volume. He has captured a world and a way of life on the brink of its disappearance. The aristocratic social milieu in which he moved is gone, swept away by the torrents of war and revolution. The same is true for the region's Jews, murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. Then in turn came the forcible expulsion of millions of Germans from across Eastern Europe. Other population "transfers" and "rationalizations" continued well into the postwar years. The world he evokes is no more.

The final chapter of *Between the Woods and the Water* describes Fermor's voyage through the Iron Gates, the stretch of the Danube on the Romanian-Yugoslav border that carves a deep gorge between the Carpathian and Balkan mountain ranges. With cliffs rising a thousand feet or more on each side and the river shrinking to a mere four hundred feet in width, the Danube becomes an angry cauldron, sinking unvigilant ships at will. The book ends shortly upon Fermor's passage through the Iron Gates, but the real conclusion is an appendix that follows. Here Fermor discusses the damming of the gorge by Yugoslavia and Romania in 1972 to create a reservoir for an enormous hydro-electric power plant. This wild stretch of the Danube has been turned into a vast, uninteresting lake. It has submerged marvels of the ancient world such as the Roman road scratched into the western wall of the gorge to facilitate the conquest of Dacia in the years 101-106. The lake has also swallowed up the island of Ada Kaleh, displacing its entire population of Turks. The flooding of the Iron Gates is a fitting coda to Fermor's journey not because it is a metaphor, but because it is another manifestation of the historical forces that held sway in this part of Europe for most of the past century. Fermor is correct to observe that in recent times change in Eastern Europe has been more radical and disruptive than in the West, flooding, submerging, drowning, and destroying not only natural wonders, but entire social and ethnic groups. Fermor's idea of Eastern Europe may be rather anemic at the outset, but by the end of *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water* he succeeds in putting some real flesh on its bones.

A few words about the books' technical and editorial aspects are necessary. Bring an atlas. There are no maps in either book, making Fermor's perambulations difficult to follow without expert geographic knowledge or outside assistance. A simple map of his route would have been very helpful. In books of this complexity and detail, with hundreds of place and proper names, it is inevitable that there will be some mistakes, and there are. But given that these are re-publications and not first editions, more errors, such as the spelling of the name of Czechoslovakia's first president "Maszaryk" instead of "Masaryk," should have been caught (in *A Time of Gifts*, p. 248). The indexes of the books are also strangely incomplete. There is, for example, no entry for Maszaryk (or Masaryk). Even less explicably, the blurb on the dust jacket of *A Time of Gifts* advertises Fermor's travels through "the great cities of Hamburg, Munich, Vienna, and Prague." He goes nowhere near Hamburg. Finally, it is not clear

why the two volumes of Fermor's narrative have been published separately. It is true that they were originally published this way, but that is because they were written years apart. It would make sense if both books could be read independently, but the second cannot be read apart from the first. *Between the Woods and the Water* repeatedly refers to *A Time of Gifts*, to the point of including footnotes instructing the reader to turn to a specific page of the first volume to orient him or herself. There seems to be little reason not to publish the two together now. Still, these are superb books that are not widely enough known, and the editors have performed a real service by bringing them out again. The third and final volume of Fermor's journey is eagerly awaited.

Notes

[1]. Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. xxxvii.

[2]. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[3]. Wolff, "Possessing Eastern Europe: Sexuality, Slavery, and Corporal Punishment," *Inventing Eastern Europe*.

Citation: Thomas Ort. Review of Fermor, Patrick Leigh, *Between the Woods and the Water: On Foot to Constantinople: The Middle Danube to the Iron Gates* and Fermor, Patrick Leigh, *A Time of Gifts: On Foot to Constantinople: From the Hook of Holland to the Middle Danube*. H-Travel, H-Net Reviews. December, 2006.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12667