

Artemis Cooper

Artemis Cooper is the author of *Cairo in the War, 1939–45* and *Writing at the Kitchen Table*, the authorized biography of Elizabeth David. With her husband Antony Beevor she wrote *Paris After the Liberation, 1945–1949*. As well as two collections of letters, she has edited *Words of Mercury*, a collection of pieces by Patrick Leigh Fermor, and, with Colin Thubron, *The Broken Road*, the final volume of Patrick Leigh Fermor's walk from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople. *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure* was shortlisted for the Costa Biography Award, the National Book Awards and Waterstones Book of the Year, and received more recommendations as book of the year in the national press than any other title in 2012.

Praise for Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure

'This book is a primer for those poor souls yet to encounter his work, and a valuable, decoding manual for the multitude who believe that Leigh Fermor's trilogy about his youthful walk from the Hook of Holland to Istanbul marks one of the high points of twentieth-century English prose . . . Sometimes you can judge a book by its cover'

Allison Pearson, *Daily Telegraph*

'Happy the hero who, after a lifetime of glorious achievement, in death finds a biographer worthy of his memory. Artemis Cooper . . . makes this marvellous book less a mere life story than an evocation. [Patrick Leigh Fermor] is justly commemorated in this magnificent biography, and will surely be remembered for ever as one of the very best of men'

Jan Morris, *Sunday Telegraph*

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William Dalrymple, *Financial Times*

Also by Artemis Cooper

A Durable Fire: The Letters of Duff and Diana Cooper
Cairo in the War 1939–1945

Mr Wu and Mrs Stitch: The Letters of Evelyn Waugh and
Diana Cooper

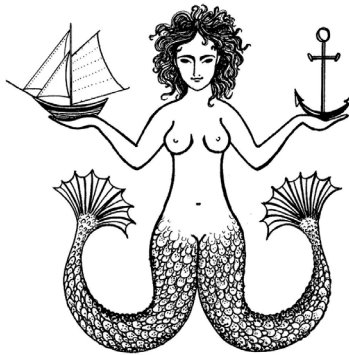
Paris After the Liberation (*with Antony Beevor*)

Watching in the Dark: A Child's Fight for Life

Writing at the Kitchen Table: The Authorized Biography of
Elizabeth David

Patrick Leigh Fermor

An Adventure



ARTEMIS COOPER

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For Adam and Nella
live well

Contents

<i>Maps</i>	ix
<i>A Note on Names</i>	xi
1. Neverland	I
2. The Plan	21
3. 'Zu Fuss nach Konstantinopel'	39
4. An Enchanted Summer	57
5. Bulgaria to Mount Athos	76
6. Balasha	99
7. An Intelligence Officer	120
8. Crete and General Carta	143
9. Setting the Trap	166
10. The Hussar Stunt	178
11. The British Institute, Athens	199
12. The Caribbean	214
13. Writing <i>The Traveller's Tree</i>	229
14. Travels in Greece	242
15. Byron's Slippers	263
16. Cyprus	285
17. In Africa and Italy	296
18. A Visit to Rumania	314
19. A Monastery Built for Two	335
20. Shifts in Perspective	356
21. 'For now the time of gifts is gone'	379
<i>Appendices</i>	
I: A Note on the Green Diary and 'A Youthful Journey'	390
II: Patrick Leigh Fermor's Walk across Europe, 1933–5	394

III: Horace's Ode 1.9, 'To Thaliarchus', translated by Patrick Leigh Fermor	396
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	397
<i>Illustration Acknowledgements</i>	400
<i>Notes</i>	401
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	427
<i>Index</i>	431

Maps

The Walk, 1933–4: From Rotterdam to the Iron Gates	40
From the Iron Gates to Constantinople, 1934–5: Rumania and Bulgaria	78
Crete	145
Greece, Albania and Turkey	244

A Note on Names

Patrick Leigh Fermor was always known as Paddy, except in Greece, where he was called Mihali. Leigh Fermor, or Fermor, would perhaps look more professional in a biography, but those names seem to rob him of that boyishness which was such a part of his nature. Some biographers use their subject's initials as a way of avoiding undue familiarity, but I find it looks so odd on the page when every other name is spelled out. Patrick? It is more formal, but in his case it was only ever used in his lifetime when joined with Leigh Fermor. So I am left with Paddy: the name I have called him since childhood, the name by which he was known by all the hundreds of people who knew and loved him: a friendly, cheerful name with a spring in its step.

As for place-names, wherever possible I have aimed to keep the spellings that he himself used. So in this book it is Rumania and not Romania, Euboea rather than Evvia, Calcutta rather than Kolkata, Constantinople rather than Istanbul.

A.C.

Lynsore Bottom, Canterbury

March 2012

I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy. Indeed, I think that most grown men who are remarkable in this respect may . . . be said not to have lost the faculty, than to have acquired it; the rather, as I generally observe such men retain a certain freshness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased, which are also an inheritance they have preserved from their childhood.

Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, Chapter II

I

Neverland

The village of Weedon Bec in Northamptonshire was an unlikely setting for paradise, but for Patrick Leigh Fermor the years he spent there as a small child were among the happiest in his life. The people he lived with were not his family. While surrounding him with love and warmth, they imposed no constraints and made no demands. He was never scolded for being late for meals, or for coming home covered in mud and burrs. Until this idyll came to an abrupt end in the summer of 1919, all he had to do was get on with the exciting business of growing up.

The local children taught him how to run his hand up the dried stems of wild sorrel, and feel his palm swell with the kibbled seeds that he threw to the wind. They scrambled into half-used ricks and jumped; it was prickly but soft, so you sank into the sweet-smelling hay. They helped him clamber into the saddles of old apple trees, but soon he would be able to hoist himself into tall trees like the bigger boys. Then he would climb into the topmost branches, invisible, hidden by leaves, and no one would be able to find him. For now he hid in sheds and barns, and sometimes behind the big double doors leading into the yard of the Wheatsheaf, and people shouted, ‘Paddy-Mike, where are you?’ while he hugged himself because no one could see him, and no one knew where he was.

The grown-ups talked in low voices about the Germans and the war, which was going on a long time. No one liked the Germans but there were no Germans in Weedon – at least he didn’t think there were. Once he found a big pile of earth and set to work digging and building, and one of the older ones said, ‘You shouldn’t do that!’ – ‘Why not?’ – ‘Because of the Germans.’ – ‘But you can’t see any!’ – ‘No, you can’t see them because they’re so tiny!’ He had

no idea what they meant but he knew what Germans looked like: he had seen pictures of them in their funny helmets. He looked very hard, half-expecting to see miniature Germans in their pickelhaubes rising out of the earth.

He was not afraid of the Germans, but once he saw a steamroller the size of a house coming down the road. The driver looked so grim and fierce he was terrified. (The steamroller formed part of his childhood nightmares for years.) He ran as hard as he could till he found Margaret, and clung to her warm back and held on to her plaits as she brought him home, where Mummy Martin took him on her lap and gave him a hug. When she gave him bread and syrup, he turned the green and gold syrup tin round so he could see the picture of the lion and the bees. The lion looked asleep but in the bible story he was dead, that was why the bees were coming out of him.

George Edwin Martin and his wife Margaret lived at 42 High Street, Road Weedon, a small terraced house with a narrow garden at the back. They had three children. Their son Norman was ten in 1915, when Paddy-Mike came to live with them. Their daughter, also called Margaret, was eight. She helped her mother look after Paddy and her younger brother, Lewis, aged six. It was a big village, divided into three parts. The cottages and smallholdings of Upper Weedon were sunk in green fields. The church and village school were in Lower Weedon, whilst busiest of all was Road Weedon, which straddled the old turnpike between Northampton and Daventry. This was where the Martins lived, on the main road (now the A45), with shops and pubs on either side. Coal and beer were delivered to the Wheatsheaf and the Horseshoe in open lorries, while men on tricycles with creaking baskets delivered goods and groceries from Wilson's Stores and Adams the grocer. Sometimes you could see troops of soldiers marching past, and officers on gleaming horses, or the bus with its open top and its jangling bell – he always ran up to the top deck when the Martins went into Daventry.

Road Weedon was dominated by Weedon Barracks and the huge complex of the Royal Ordnance Depot. Set up for the storage of arms and ammunition during the Napoleonic wars far from possible landing sites on the coast, it had its own well-defended branch of the Grand Union Canal to secure safe delivery of its stores. Sometimes

Margaret would take Paddy-Mike to the barracks to watch the cavalymen trotting and wheeling their horses round the great parade ground. It seems odd that the broad canal that divided Road Weedon from Lower Weedon does not feature in his memories, but no doubt Margaret was under strict orders to keep him away from it. Mr Martin, whom he was later to remember as a farmer, in fact worked at the Ordnance Depot as an engineer and served in the local fire brigade. He was huge and had a bristly moustache.

When the First World War ended in November 1918 Paddy-Mike was almost four, and Margaret almost twelve. They stood in the road and saw German prisoners in carts, on their way back to Germany – they wore rough grey uniforms with big red diamonds on their backs, so they would be easily identified if they tried to escape. Because the war had ended in winter, everyone decided to save the peace celebrations for the summer. It was going to be even better than Christmas, with a band and dancing, tea in a tent, and a huge bonfire with fireworks.

A few days before the peace celebrations, which were to take place on 18 June 1919, Paddy-Mike was washed and brushed and led into the parlour. There was a strange woman wearing the grandest clothes he had ever seen, and with her was a girl in a real sailor-suit, complete with a whistle attached to a thick white string. Mummy Martin said they were his real mother and his sister Vanessa, who was eight, and they had come from India. With them was a fluffy black dog with a squashed-in face and white feet like spats. He had never seen a lady so magnificently dressed and he was intrigued, but he remained wary of the yearning in her voice which seemed to claim him in some way. He bolted outside and ran and hid and they all chased after him calling, 'Paddy-Mike, where are you? Come back, Paddy!' while the dog with the white feet yapped hysterically. Reluctantly, he was persuaded back to the house where there was cake.

He looked at the lady's shoes which had a bumpy pattern on them and she said they were made of crocodile skin, which was interesting. He looked at the whistle on the girl's sailor-suit and she said he could blow it if he liked, so he did. The dog with the squashed face was called Sir Percy Spats S.T.A., which stood for Sweetest Thing in Asia. The smart lady went away, but the girl in the sailor-suit stayed.

Owing to bad weather, Weedon Bec's peace celebration bonfire had to be postponed till 21 June. A mountain of wood and straw and furze stood in the middle of a field between the canal and the railway, and at its summit were effigies of Kaiser Bill and 'Little Willie', the German Crown Prince, wearing captured German boots, and the Kaiser had a proper German helmet. First they all had tea in a tent, and in Paddy's memory, everyone lay about on the grass singing songs till it grew dark – though after three days of heavy rain the ground would have been sodden.

Before the bonfire was lit a man called Thatcher Brown seized a ladder and, despite protests from the spectators, scaled the pyre to relieve the effigies of their boots: 'Too good to waste,' he said.¹ Then at last the bonfire was set alight. Paddy was hoisted aloft so he could see better. The rising flames were accompanied by an explosion of firecrackers, and then everyone made a circle and danced around the blaze.

Fifty years later, relying on nothing but his memories, Paddy described the bonfire and its dramatic sequel in *A Time of Gifts*. From one moment to the next, people began screaming and calling for help. Margaret went to see what had happened. Then she hurried back, grabbed Paddy and dragged him away as fast as she could.

Margaret was very upset. 'When we got home,' he wrote, 'she rushed upstairs, undressed me and put me into her bed and slipped in, hugging me to her flannel nightdress, sobbing and shuddering and refusing to answer questions.'² According to Paddy, it was several days before she was willing to satisfy his curiosity. She said that one of the boys had been dancing around with a firework in his mouth. It had slipped down his throat, and he had died 'spitting stars'. There is no reference to this tragedy in the *Northamptonshire Chronicle*, nor is it mentioned in the Weedon Deanery Parish Magazine which described the celebrations in considerable detail. Was Paddy remembering another night and another bonfire, or did Margaret invent the story to cover up why she had been so upset?

The most likely reason for Margaret's distress was that she had realized what was about to happen. Paddy-Mike, to whom she had grown so attached and cared for so devotedly, was leaving them. Vanessa was his sister now; and when Mrs Fermor returned to

Weedon she would take her children back to London, and Margaret might never see Paddy-Mike again.

When the day of departure came he was sick with apprehension and misery, desperate at leaving Margaret and Mummy Martin. He was nauseated by the oily, sooty smell of the train that took him farther and farther away from Northamptonshire, stifled by the grimy maze of London from which he could never run away. Paddy was not yet five, and this was the second time he had been uprooted from one world and briskly repotted in another. Being a robust and cheerful child he adjusted to these upheavals, but he never felt as connected to his family as most children do. Like Peter Pan some part of Paddy refused to grow up, hankering for the Neverland from which he had been exiled.

Since his parents lived in India, Paddy liked to think that he had been conceived in Calcutta, Simla or Darjeeling. He was rather downcast to hear from his sister Vanessa that the most likely venue for this important event was the seaside town of Bournemouth on the south coast, where the Fermors came to spend a few weeks in the spring and summer of 1914.

As a member of the Indian Civil Service, Paddy's father Lewis Fermor was granted six weeks' leave in England every three years, and Lewis used his furlough to pursue his passion for botany and natural history. Leaving his wife and four-year-old daughter to enjoy the delights of Bournemouth, Lewis took long walks inland to collect wild flowers, or searched the Eocene-age strata of Bournemouth Cliffs for plant fossils. When the family were together, Dr and Mrs Fermor made an odd pair – he tall and scholarly, she short and high-spirited. The dissimilarities in their characters were just as marked. 'You could not imagine two people more different in taste, outlook, and temperament,' said Paddy of his parents. 'What *were* they doing in each other's company?'

That question can only be answered by retracing their story. Lewis Leigh Fermor was born in September 1880 in Peckham, south London. (He was called 'Leigh' not because it was a family name, but after one of his father's closest friends.) He was the eldest son of Lewis Fermor, who worked as a clerk in the London Joint Stock

Bank, and Maria James, a woman of intelligence and determination. She schooled Lewis herself till he was seven, by which time he could not only read and write but was showing considerable skill in mathematics.

He won a scholarship to Wilson's Grammar School in Camberwell, and decided to try for a scholarship to the Royal College of Science. He was told by his tutor at Wilson's that this would only be achievable if, on top of his schoolwork, he put in an extra four hours a day for two years. This punishing workload was most arduous in the summer, when the evenings were long and he could hear the sounds of his five siblings – Ethel, Bertram, Aline, Frank and Gerald – playing in the garden below his window.

One reason why Lewis worked so hard was that he was determined not to let life get the better of him. His father's misfortunes had started when he was obliged to retire from the bank as a result of chronic writer's cramp. Not having served the time required to gain a pension, he was given a gratuity. With this he set up a sign-writing business, but it never prospered and eventually closed.

Young Lewis won a national scholarship to the Royal College of Science in 1898, and having completed his studies in the Royal School of Mines he was appointed Assistant Superintendent in the Geological Survey of India. He set out on the long journey to Calcutta in October 1902, and this was to be his base for the rest of his working life. Compared to the enormous efforts he had made over the past years, his duties in India must have seemed leisurely. There were long months in the field, mapping the stratification of rocks and mineral deposits and inspecting mines, but he had time enough to prepare for his BSc (1907) and DSc (1909). In the early days he also kept a diary, in which he writes matter-of-factly about the hunts laid on by local maharajahs, various clashes with porters and uncooperative villagers, and the musicians and dancers who appeared out of nowhere to entertain the camp. The diary is also dotted with descriptions of flowers, birds, animals and insects. His air of lean austerity was complemented by a tall figure, fine features, and deep-set brown eyes. Despite his dedication to work, Lewis enjoyed society. He was a keen racegoer, and the elegance of his dancing was noticed at the balls given by the ladies of Calcutta.

Paddy's mother was Muriel Æileen Ambler, the daughter of Charles Taaffe Ambler, founder and owner of Ambler's Slate & Stone Co. Ltd, of Dharhara near the town of Monghyr, some two hundred and fifty miles to the north-west of Calcutta. It may be that Lewis first made a connection with the Amblers through professional channels: in 1904, the Geological Survey had tested Charles Ambler's slate and found it to be unusually strong, breaking at a pressure of three tons per square inch.

Charles's first wife died in 1884, and within the year he had married Amy Webber, an artistically talented woman less than half his age. They had two children: Huart, commonly known as Artie, who was born in 1886, and Muriel Æileen, Paddy's mother, who was born in 1890. Like most children of the empire, Artie and Æileen were largely brought up in England. But they were not left in the hands of sadistic aunts or Dickensian boarding schools; their mother Amy spent long stretches of time with her children in Dulwich, a prosperous suburb of south-east London, where they were raised and educated. Artie attended Dulwich College, while Æileen was educated by her mother and a succession of governesses at home.

Education done, the family returned to India. The Amblers had built a villa a few miles from Dharhara, at a place called Bassowni: a high-ceilinged house with a vaulted roof and a wide veranda. Artie took up work in the family business, while Æileen and her mother began the task of finding her a husband. This meant abandoning Charles and Artie in Dharhara while Amy and Æileen based themselves in Calcutta. The city not only provided an active social life and suitable young men, but also portrait commissions for Amy.

In a family that appreciated the arts, Æileen was a keen reader and a good pianist, with a broad repertoire of songs. In company she sparkled a little too brightly, talked and laughed rather more loudly than was considered proper. Her tendency to set off on long rides at dawn, unchaperoned, also raised a few eyebrows. The only release for her energy and emotional extravagance was the stage, and she was happiest when surrounded by the trappings and excitement of amateur theatrical life. It was unthinkable that a young woman from her background should become a professional actress; but there was drama in her movements, in the rich mass of wavy

auburn hair that she was so proud of, and the large untidy scrawl of her letters written in purple ink.

Æileen was one of those people who feel a need to reinvent themselves from time to time, and she had used a bewildering variety of names. As a girl she signed herself 'Avrille' or 'Mixed Pickles' when writing to her parents, while they and her husband most often referred to her as Muriel. She signed herself 'Muriel' too, though in later years this name was consigned to oblivion because Paddy hated it. She also used Æileen, though she liked her intimates to call her Pat or Fudge. As for surnames, two were definitely better than one. Though her parents always addressed each other on their envelopes as Mr and Mrs Charles Ambler, Æileen referred to her family as the Taaffe Amblers.

The Amblers believed themselves to be descendants of Sir John Taaffe of Ballymote, County Sligo (d. 1641), whose descendants served as chancellors, diplomats and cavalrymen in Austria and became Counts of the Holy Roman Empire. Gaps in the genealogical record mean that these dashing figures cannot be linked with any certainty to James Ambler, Charles's father, a builder born in County Cork in the first half of the nineteenth century. But when Æileen (and later Paddy) referred to their Irish ancestry, this is what they meant. On Lewis's side, things were more prosaic. Since the eighteenth century the Fermors of Kent and Sussex (the name is a variant of 'farmer') had been yeomen, brewers and builders, whose descendants would gradually join the professional classes as the century progressed.

Æileen Ambler and Lewis Fermor probably met in 1907, and became engaged soon after. She always called him 'Peter' though his middle name was Leigh, and it was she who hitched the Leigh on to Fermor.

In the first flush of love Æileen was willing to overlook Lewis Fermor's lack of connections, and their mutual attraction must have seemed very natural – she so vivacious and artistic, he so focused and ambitious. As for her parents, the match must have looked promising enough, as long as the young couple did not rush into marriage. Neither party was rich and they had no expectations, but in a few years Fermor would surely be able to provide a comfortable life for their daughter.

In early 1909 Lewis was in his late twenties, and his career had reached a critical point. He had been publishing papers in geological

journals since 1904, and much of this research was now supporting his monumental memoir on *The Manganese-ore Deposits of India* which, along with maps, diagrams and photographs, ran to over 1,200 pages. No wonder that the eighteen-year-old Æileen felt rather sidelined, as he prepared the most important publication of his professional life for the press.

Realizing that her demands would always come a long way behind those of her future husband's work, Æileen told Lewis that she would not marry him after all. 'Perhaps it's just as well,' wrote Charles Ambler's daughter-in-law Ruth, 'as it was to have been a very long engagement.'³ But they were reunited, and married in St Paul's Cathedral, Calcutta, on 12 October 1909.

Until she met Lewis Fermor the most important man in Æileen's life had been her brother Artie, whom she revered as a paragon among men. A great winner of prizes at school, he settled down to work in the family business with commendable zeal. He was a volunteer in two local regiments, and according to Æileen he would vanish into the jungle for days at a time armed only with a kukri. He was also an enthusiastic sportsman: the only surviving family photograph shows him standing nonchalantly over a dead leopard.

Æileen and Lewis had been married seven months when they heard that Artie had collapsed with a high fever at the slate works. He was taken to the Jamalpur hospital, where the only way they could reduce his temperature was by packing him in ice; but as soon as the ice was removed his temperature soared back to 107 degrees. He died on 19 May 1910, aged twenty-four.

The loss of Artie was a crippling blow for his parents. Æileen too had idolized her brother, but her life was moving on, as Lewis wrote to his mother-in-law in July:

[Æileen] has now become resigned to the facts and is becoming merry once more, for two reasons: firstly, because she thinks Artie would not like her to grieve too much: and so she constantly tells that Artie used to love doing this, or didn't like that, in tones almost as joyful as if he were still with us. Secondly, my Loved One is rejoicing in the fact that she is going to replace Artie with another, the fruit of our love, Mother, and we hope that this will be a consolation . . .⁴

The 'consolation' was their first child, born in Calcutta on 17 February 1911. She was named Vanessa Opal, for Lewis liked the idea of his children bearing the names of semi-precious stones.

Soon the baby was joining her parents on long trips upcountry. They travelled with a team of cooks, drivers, servants and bearers, plus mules, oxen or camels depending on the terrain, and lived in tented camps the size of a small village. The tents for the family were large and well appointed, with carpets and furniture. Æileen even had her own travelling 'cottage piano', and cherished a romantic image of herself playing Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Chanson Hindoue' in the sunset, looking out towards the campfires while her husband wrote up his notes. Yet rain and wind could make camp life miserable, whilst the minor complaints that bedevilled everyone's health could turn swiftly into life-threatening illnesses.

It was with relief that they returned to Europe in the spring of 1914, though a distinct malaise hung in the air. Those astute enough to see the fragility of the European status quo were seriously alarmed, yet most newspapers were more interested in reassuring the public than in tracing the political fault lines as they split asunder. But on 28 June, Franz Ferdinand Archduke of Austria was assassinated in Sarajevo, and events began to accelerate at a bewildering speed. Germany declared war on France the following month, and Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August, the day that German troops marched into Belgium.

As a member of the Indian Civil Service, Lewis was in a reserved occupation and was soon called back to India. But Æileen, pregnant again, decided to stay on in England with Vanessa and await the birth of her second child.

Patrick Michael Leigh Fermor (not Jasper or Garnet, thanks to his father's absence) was born on 11 February 1915, at 20 Endsleigh Gardens, in the district of St Pancras, London. The house belonged to a Miss Mary Hadland, who had rooms to rent. Perhaps Æileen chose Endsleigh Gardens because it was not far from the Three Arts Club in Marylebone Road, to which she belonged; perhaps Miss Hadland was already a friend. Yet it is strange that she did not lodge with members of her own family, or even with Lewis's relations in Camberwell. (Paddy had a strong suspicion that his mother did not

get on with his father's relations, and that the feeling was mutual.) Paddy was christened that spring in the village of Coldharbour, near Dorking in Surrey.

Æileen realized that the longer she stayed in England, the harder it would be to return to India. The first Zeppelin raids on Yarmouth and King's Lynn had taken place in January 1915, a month before Paddy was born, and in May, London itself came under attack. The raids were not very effective considering the effort and investment that had gone into the development of the new flying weapon; nonetheless the Zeppelin gave rise to a lot of public anxiety, and the country had no means of combating this terrifying new form of warfare. Æileen had originally planned to take both children back to India, but the sinking in May of the *Lusitania* by a German submarine convinced her that passenger vessels were no longer safe. She could not risk losing both her children. Instead she resolved to return to Calcutta with Vanessa, leaving her infant son in England. Thus it came about that, when almost a year old, Paddy-Mike was settled in Northamptonshire with George and Margaret Martin.

Paddy himself, though endowed with a prodigious curiosity, never asked his mother how she came to know the Martins. He said it had never occurred to him to ask, and perhaps some of the golden bloom that dusted his changeling childhood would have worn off had he known the answer. It remains a mystery still, though a clue might lie in Mrs Martin's maiden name of Hadland: a name she shared with Mary Hadland, the owner of the house in Endsleigh Gardens where Paddy was born.

His memories of Weedon became greener and more rural as they receded into the past. The Royal Ordnance Stores faded, as did the parade ground and the shops, the pubs and traffic of the High Street. What was left was 'a background of barns, ricks and teazles, clouded with spinneys and the undulation of ridge and furrow . . . I spent these important years, which are said to be such formative ones, more or less as a small farmer's child run wild: they have left a memory of complete and unalloyed bliss.'⁵

Paddy's misery at leaving Weedon did not last long, for Æileen laid on a series of treats and outings designed to make his new world

as delightful as possible. There was also a trip to Rowe's, the fashionable children's outfitter in Bond Street. A stuffed pony stood in the shop, on which children being fitted for jodhpurs would be asked to mount. Paddy came out with several boxes of new clothes including, to his great satisfaction, his own sailor-suit, with HMS *Indomitable* emblazoned in gold letters on the cap ribbon.

No. 3 Primrose Hill Studios, where Æileen had installed her family, seemed palatial after Weedon; they were so close to the zoo that at night one could hear the lions roaring. The house was on two storeys, reached through a gateway rather like a cloister, and the nursery was equipped with toys from India: brass figures of elephants and camels on wheels, and painted clay figures of maharajas and maharanis, merchants and shopkeepers, dancers and musicians. One of their neighbours was the illustrator Arthur Rackham, whom Æileen had persuaded to paint one of the doors on the ground floor. He sketched in a huge tree with Peter Pan sleeping in a bird's nest, and among the roots a number of carousing mice toasting each other in acorn cups.

Paddy was about six when for the first time he met his father, then home on leave. He longed to show off in front of this impossibly tall and remote figure, but Vanessa had a great deal more to show. She had been reading since the age of four, whilst her brother was still struggling with his letters. He found this shameful and, to camouflage his slowness, he would memorize long passages of text which could then be reeled off by heart: an early exercise which must have strengthened his extraordinary memory.

From the moment he mastered reading (an edition of Robin Hood stories unlocked the code) there was no turning back. Soon he was on to *Puck of Pook's Hill*, *Rewards and Fairies*, and – a book that was to sow the seeds of his passion for Greece – Charles Kingsley's *Heroes*. 'Till it was light enough to read, furious dawn-watches ushered in days flat on hearth-rugs or grass, in ricks or up trees, which ended in stifling torchlit hours under the bedclothes.' Thus he gobbled up *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, *Black Beauty*, *Wet Magic*, *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare*, *Three Men in a Boat*, and *The Forest Lovers* by Maurice Hewlett – a romantic love story full of knights and ladies and enchantments. His lust for books was much encouraged by Æileen, who also loved reading aloud. She could do

any number of different accents which brought books to life, especially Dickens and Shakespeare. Since Æileen was reading for Vanessa as well some books were inevitably a little beyond Paddy, but he was more than willing to listen. He was also an enthusiastic singer, and as Æileen played the piano, he picked up her huge collection of traditional and music-hall songs.

'Book-ownership was the next step,' wrote Paddy. 'To assuage a mania for Scott, I was given four Collins pocket Waverley novels every birthday and Christmas and my father sent sumptuous works about animals or botany from India, wrapped in palm leaves and sewn with a thousand stitches by Thacker & Spink in Calcutta or Simla.'⁶

Æileen was a great believer in looking smart and presentable: she wore well-tailored jackets and skirts, and an eyeglass on the end of a black string which Paddy thought very dashing. Unquestionably a snob and a terrific name-dropper, she thought that her family was nobler and more romantic than the Fermors. Some of this rubbed off on Paddy whose recklessness and wild imagination she associated with her own Anglo-Irish genes. Whenever Paddy looked serious or glum Æileen would say, 'You look just like your father.'

Living with Paddy must have been like living with a very boisterous puppy, despite the hours he spent reading. No wonder Æileen was often angry and exasperated – though his sister Vanessa felt that their mother's punishments were sometimes unnecessarily severe. It was not so much the spanking with the back of a hairbrush that hurt: it was the way she could be so loving and friendly one minute, and then icily cold and unapproachable the next. Sometimes she would turn her back and refuse to acknowledge his existence – not for a few minutes, but for hours at a time. Vanessa remembered him, even at the age of ten, being made to sit on the front step, again for several hours, with a bib around his neck.

But whatever her faults, Æileen was the most inspiring and amusing figure in his life. She wrote plays and always dreamed that one day one of them might be staged, but it never happened. Paddy had a look at some of them after her death, and admitted that 'they weren't up to much.' She had a knack of making things fun or memorable, and he described her as 'a mine of disinformation, but the sort of thing that made you more interested in a character rather than less'.⁷

She told him, for example, that Mary Queen of Scots had such white skin and such a slender neck that people said they could see the red wine going down her throat as she drank.

Æileen's parents left India after the war and retired to Brighton, and occasionally she would take the children down to see them. Only once did Paddy meet his paternal grandparents, when his father took him and Vanessa to lunch with them at the East India United Service Club in London. Æileen was not there. Both she and Lewis had decided to lead more or less separate lives, although appearances were maintained for the few weeks that he was back on leave. She never returned to India again after the First World War.

In the early 1920s, Æileen had taken the Vicarage Cottage in Dodford: a tiny hamlet at the bottom of a wooded valley, some two miles west of Weedon where Paddy had lived with the Martins. A broad brook ran beside its only street, ending in a ford at one end of the village; while at the other end stood a pub called the Swan, more commonly known as the Dirty Duck, where visiting friends stayed since the cottage was so tiny. This was where Æileen and her children spent most Christmases and holidays until 1930. Since she remained in touch with the Martins, Paddy must have met them from time to time, and he remembered going to see *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* with Margaret, a film that came out in 1921. But the spell was broken, and no further memories remained of Mummy and Daddy Martin.

After a few terms at a school called Gordon Hall, just the other side of Regent's Park from Primrose Hill, Paddy and Vanessa were sent to an establishment in West Byfleet, Surrey, called The Gables. But despite an early taste for English and history, Paddy was not an easy child to handle. On one level he wanted to do well and impress people; but a sense of mischief was never far below the surface, ready to overturn his efforts at conformity in an instant. Describing himself in *A Time of Gifts*, he wrote that since he was 'Harmless in appearance . . . and of a refreshingly unconstricted address, I would earn excellent opinions at first. But . . . soon . . . those short-lived virtues must have seemed a cruel Fauntleroy veneer, cynically assumed to mask the Charles Addams fiend that lurked beneath.'⁸

His first proper school was St Piran's, a preparatory school for

boys near Maidenhead. Lewis Fermor chose it because, unlike most prep schools of that date, it gave priority to scientific subjects and its pupils went on to schools such as Oundle and Haileybury, which were known for producing scientists and engineers. The trouble was that, unlike Lewis, Paddy had never been inspired by the sciences and was spectacularly bad at them, whilst Latin, history and English, at which he excelled, were accorded little value at St Piran's. Paddy was miserable, and detested the team games that were considered so vital to the formation of young Englishmen. He described St Piran's as 'all cricket pads and snake belts', and he particularly hated the headmaster, Major Bryant, 'who beat us all quite a lot'.⁹

One small incident from his days at St Piran's is worth mentioning because it shows how willing Paddy was to romanticize people, to give them a story which immediately cloaked them in a subtle glamour. There were whispers running around school that Anthony West, a boy who was one of Paddy's few friends, was *a bastard*. Paddy had no idea that Anthony West was the illegitimate child of H. G. Wells and Rebecca West, but he was very impressed. To his Shakespeare-tinted imagination, the fact that West was a bastard meant that he was almost certainly of Royal Blood.

Fermor was in constant trouble for being absent-minded, noisy, a show-off, answering back, losing his kit, along with all the other schoolboy transgressions that Major Bryant raised to the level of cardinal sins. Although he failed to beat some discipline into his pupil, he did instil a new and darker streak of aggressive frustration, and a dull conviction in Paddy that he could never do anything right. After about a year the headmaster's patience snapped and Paddy was sent home in disgrace in early 1924.

Lewis and Æileen were so worried by reports of Paddy's behaviour at St Piran's that they decided to consult a specialist. The first was the genial Sir Henry Head, who had at one point been consulted by Virginia Woolf. Sir Henry must have found nothing wrong with the boy, for the Fermors then consulted a Dr Crichton-Miller. He had heavy spectacles and his manner was a good deal drier than Sir Henry's, but he did have a solution: there was an experimental school for difficult children at Walsham Hall, Walsham-le-Willows, Suffolk. Perhaps Paddy might do better there.

In the spring of 1924 Lewis Fermor was back on leave. The family travelled to the Swiss ski resort of Zweisimmen near Gstaad, which Æileen and Lewis had discovered early on in their marriage. They always stayed at the Terminus Hotel, which had a lot of regular English visitors who enjoyed not only skiing but bobsleighbing and skating. But as Paddy grew older he liked to slope off with the village boys, whose daredevil sport was ski-jumping. The jumps were never more than about three feet high, but you were in the air for a few glorious seconds, and Paddy was overjoyed when he won second prize in their contest, which consisted of two oranges wrapped in a pair of ski-socks. Æileen did not approve of the village boys; nor did all the guests at the Terminus Hotel measure up to her standards. Her manner in the dining rooms and lobbies depended very much on who she was talking to. She could be loftily monosyllabic, or very chatty and gregarious – particularly in the evenings, when she and her coterie got together for fancy-dress or dancing parties. Paddy particularly enjoyed doing the Charleston, which was at the height of its craze in the mid-twenties.

After ten days or so Æileen and Vanessa went back to England, where Vanessa had to return to school at Malvern Abbey. Since Paddy's term at Walsham Hall was not due to begin for another week he stayed on with his father, who was to attend a conference of geologists in Milan.

This was the first time that Lewis and his nine-year-old son had been alone together. They went round a great many churches and art galleries, and in Baveno, on the west side of Lake Maggiore, they stayed in a hotel with an abandoned music room where Paddy made a lot of noise on an electric organ.

In the train between Baveno and Lake Como, Lewis demonstrated the new knife he had just bought. He told Paddy he would peel an apple without breaking the long spiral of skin, which he did; but when he tossed the peel out of the window, he accidentally let go of the knife as well. Paddy collapsed into fits of laughter, which he prolonged with ever more raucous guffaws when he saw how much it annoyed his father. Lewis finally lost patience and banished him to the next carriage. It was very hot and in an attempt to open the window Paddy pulled the communication cord, with dramatic results.

They made an expedition into the Dolomites to collect plants and geological specimens. Lewis was an imposing figure in his plus-fours and Norfolk jacket, but this attire was topped off with an item that made his son writhe with mortification: 'a vast semi-circular cap, I think originally destined for Tibetan travel, like a bisected pumpkin of fur armed with a peak and with fur-lined ear-flaps that were joined (when not tied under the chin which was worse still) by a disturbing bow on the summit.'¹⁰ Slung over one shoulder on a strap of webbing was his vasculum, a flat oval tin lined with moss in which he would carefully place the flowers he collected. (He never travelled without his flower presses.) Stuck in his belt was a geological hammer, used to strike off chunks of rock to observe their stratification and check for fossils with a pocket lens. The large arrow marked on the hammer meant it was Government Property, and Lewis told Paddy that only convicts or members of the civil service could be seen with tools marked in this way. Paddy was acutely embarrassed by the arrow. He turned the hammer round on his father's belt to hide it, in case people should think his father was a convict. Lewis must have enjoyed his young son's intelligence and curiosity, when he was not misbehaving; it was sad for both that they were never to be so close again.

Paddy's new school, Walsham Hall, was run by Major Faithfull (discreetly referred to as Major Truthful in *A Time of Gifts*). He was a pioneer of the wilder shores of education, and looked the part with messianic eyes and a shock of grey hair. The staff were bohemian: the men in hairy tweed jackets and knitted ties, the women in beads and homespun skirts.

The thirty-odd children who made up the school ranged from the emotionally damaged to the intractably wayward, with a sprinkling of children who would now be diagnosed as dyslexic or dyspraxic. Both boys and girls wore brown jerkins and sandals, with skirts or breeches. Lessons were very haphazard; there was also what Paddy described as 'a lot of lying down and doing free association while Major Faithfull took notes. I used to invent all sorts of things for him.'¹¹ Most bewildering of all were the country dancing and eurhythmics, in which both staff and pupils participated in the nude. 'Nimbly and gravely, keeping time to a cottage piano and a recorder,

we sped through the figures of Gathering Peascods, Sellinger's Round, Picking-up Sticks and Old Mole.¹²

For all its oddness Paddy enjoyed Walsham Hall, because the pupils were allowed to do more or less as they pleased. Armed with bows and arrows made of raspberry canes and dressed in hoods of Lincoln green, Paddy and his Merrie Men turned the nearby woods into their own Sherwood Forest. Not all pupils held the school in such affection. Years later Deryck Winbolt-Lewis wrote to Paddy with memories of Walsham Hall which he called 'a crazy establishment', and where he remembered Paddy as 'a rebel but never a bully'. The letter continues: 'Instead of Scouts, Faithfull had to have another crackpot association called Woodcraft and one summer we went to camp at Ringwood where we were duly starved. With others . . . I pinched bags of crisps from the stores, and when we went to the beach we ate raw mussels from the rocks with conspicuously unpleasant results.'¹³

The one school that did not order Paddy's expulsion, Walsham Hall was too unorthodox to last. Æileen herself had never approved of it and might have been among those who wanted the school shut down. She had heard a rumour that Major Faithfull was in the habit of bathing the older girls, and towelling them dry himself.

Persuading Major Bryant that Paddy was a reformed character, the Fermors succeeded in reinstating him at St Piran's. Paddy tried to keep the Fauntleroy veneer in place, but it proved impossible and before long he was expelled for the second time, and had to make the humiliating journey home accompanied by a master. His parents' dismay and disappointment, and his own inability to do what was expected of him, reduced Paddy to near despair. Compared to his father's academic progress, his own school career had been an unqualified failure.

By now, Æileen and Lewis were contemplating divorce. Lewis needed a wife who was quieter and less demanding than she would ever be, while she could not live with a man who paid her so little attention. It was bad enough that all Lewis's energies were focused on his work; but Æileen also suspected him of indulging in a string of casual affairs in Calcutta – as she revealed in a letter to her mother in Brighton.

[Lewis] having made the most solemn oaths to me has quite cheerfully broke them all – you can never guess just quite what a blighter and a mongrel that man is – he even astonishes me – and I thought I knew him pretty thoroughly . . . there is one thing I regret and that is that I didn't leave him straight away the first time I longed to – which was three days after my wedding day. He is impossible.

Geoffrey Clarke is home and has taken me dining and dancing once or twice which has saved my life – at the Savoy the other evening we ran into Mrs Strettell that was – she was divorced you know and is now Mrs Dane – she looked so well and young and happy.¹⁴

The mention of how well Mrs Dane looked was evidently a way of preparing her mother for the worst. Lewis and Æileen were divorced in May 1925.

The problem of Paddy's schooling was finally solved by sending him to a tutorial establishment at Downs Lodge near Sutton, in Surrey. It was run by a couple called Gilbert and Phyllis Scott-Malden – both descended from long lines of prep-school masters – who would take in six or seven boys at a time to prepare them for the Common Entrance exam. Paddy was very happy here, and the only surviving letter from his childhood was written from Sutton. It is not dated but presumably he was eleven or twelve when he wrote it, and the spelling has not been corrected.

Dear Mummy, I hope you are getting on alright. We went to Cheam church, and had a topping sermon, preached by Mr Berkeley, who always preaches good sermons. The day before yesterday a lot of new furniture arrived from Windlesham. They are topping. We have got a topping old oak chest, which is carved, just such a one as old Samuel Pepys hid in. Also there is a ripping role-top desk for Mr Malden, when you role the top up, it looks [?sounds] like a switchback railway at a fair. Last and best, there is a fine old cupboard, probably as old as James the first. It has got a lovely circular shelf supported by a pillar. It has got cable carving along the front. There are two brass lions-heads on the doors to open them by. The lions have both got brass rings in their mouths. We have christened both after their masters, one S. Jerome, and the other is called Androcles. There are two carved dragons on the top. The whole thing looks topping because we have polished it up. it's fine. Love from Paddy¹⁵

Paddy was as happy at Downs Lodge as he had been miserable at St Piran's. He was welcomed into the easy warmth of the Scott-Maldens' family life, and he got on well with their three sons, particularly David (who became a pilot during the war and, eventually, an Air Vice-Marshal). There was a lot of reading aloud and acting in the evenings, and in the summer the boys built a tree house in a huge old walnut tree. It had a tin roof, and for his last summer term Paddy was allowed to sleep in it.

They also let him pursue what he referred to as his budding religious mania. The Scott-Maldens were not particularly religious, but Paddy – as the letter above indicates – took a deep interest in religion at this stage. Catholicism and the Latin mass exerted a strong appeal, as did the candles and bells, incense and statues of the Roman tradition. Paddy never converted, but he identified himself as 'R.C.' on official forms until the end of the war. His religious feelings seemed to subside after that.

Paddy remembered the Scott-Maldens as the two best teachers he ever had. Instead of being constantly checked as a know-all who knew nothing worth knowing, his enthusiasms for religion, history, languages, drawing and poetry were fostered and encouraged, as was his reading. Paddy applied himself assiduously to his Latin and French, yet to his disappointment he was not allowed to start Greek because his maths were still so bad. In fact so poor was his grasp of this subject that he was obliged to take his Common Entrance a year late, at the age of fourteen; but he passed.

Lewis Fermor still hoped he would go to Oundle, which Paddy thought sounded very gloomy, whilst his mother pined for Eton or Winchester, which were out of the question. With his relatively poor Common Entrance marks no first-division public school would have considered Paddy, unless there had been a strong family link, and Lewis Fermor – scholarship boy that he was – did not have such connections. In the end, his parents decided to send him to the King's School, Canterbury. King's was not particularly distinguished at the time; but it was the oldest school in England, counted Christopher Marlowe and Walter Pater among its old boys, and lay in the shadow of an ancient cathedral where a saint had met his martyrdom. As far as Paddy was concerned, no school had better credentials.