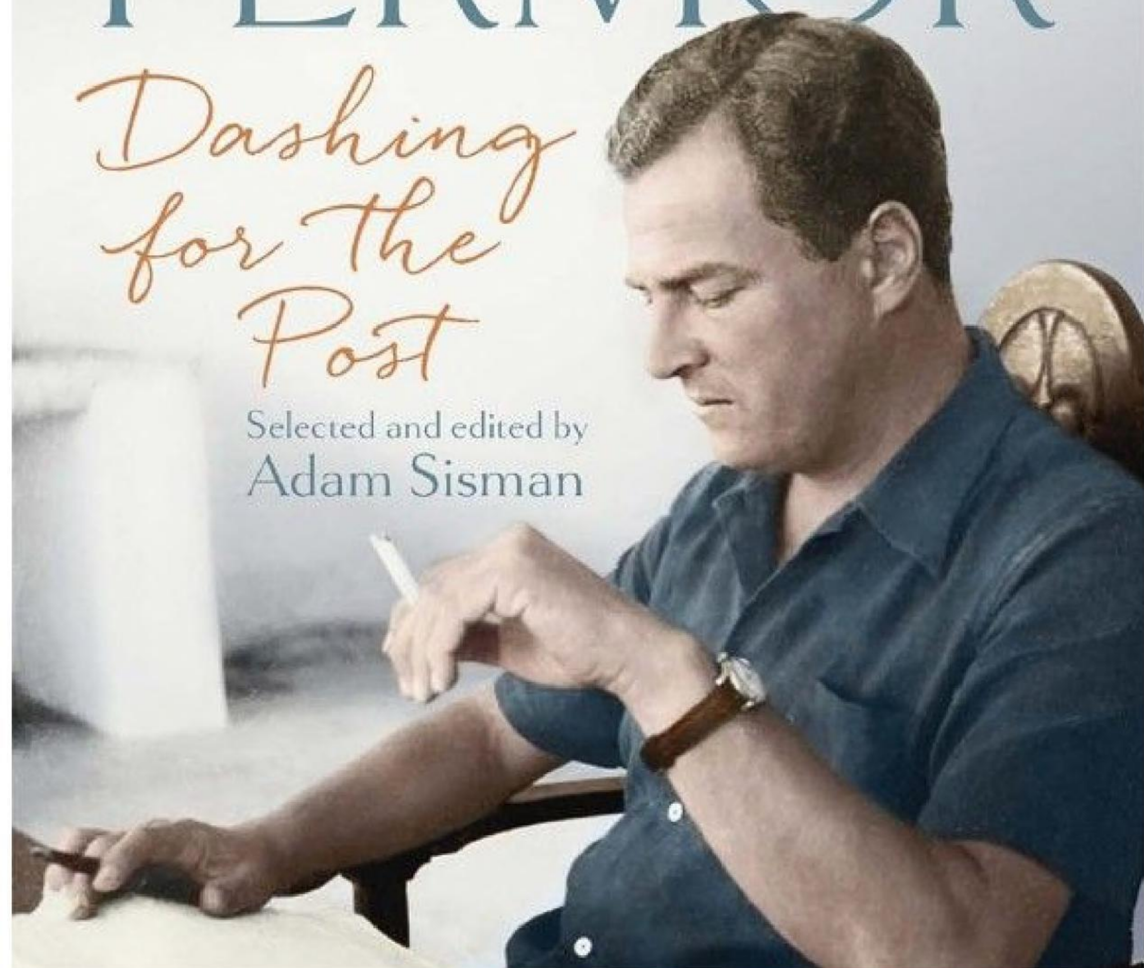
'Irresistibly exhilarating' *SUNDAY TIMES*

THE LETTERS OF PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR

Dashing for the Post

Selected and edited by
Adam Sisman



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CONTENTS

Also by Patrick Leigh Fermor
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Introduction
Acknowledgements
Editorial Note

THE LETTERS

Dramatis Personae
Illustration Credits
About the Authors
Picture Section

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INTRODUCTION

The letters in this volume span seventy years, from February 1940 to January 2010. The first was written ten days before Patrick Leigh Fermor's twenty-fifth birthday, when he was an officer cadet, hoping for a commission in the Guards. He had hurried back to England from Rumania in September 1939, expecting to die within weeks of being sent into action, like a junior officer in the First World War. The last two were written on the same day in 2010, when Paddy (as he called himself, and almost everyone else called him) was ninety-four, a widower, very deaf, and suffering from tunnel vision, which made it hard for him to read even his own handwriting. His voice was already hoarse from the throat cancer which would kill him seventeen months later. But these last letters, like the first and most of the others printed here, exude a zest that was characteristic. From first to last, Paddy's letters radiate warmth and gaiety. Often they are decorated with witty illustrations and enhanced by comic verse. Sometimes they contain riddles and cringe-causing puns.

Although, as I have mentioned, he was only twenty-four when he wrote the first letter in this volume, one of the two achievements for which he is best known was already behind him. Paddy had set out at the age of eighteen to walk to Constantinople (as he called it), after a premature exit from his boarding school (which would honour him later in life as 'a free spirit'). He left England early in December 1933, and arrived at his destination just over twelve months later, on New Year's Eve 1934. In the course of this 'Great Trudge' across Europe, he slept under the stars and in schlosses, dossed down in hostels, awoke more than once with a hangover in the houses of strangers, sat round a campfire singing songs with shepherds, frolicked with peasant girls and played bicycle polo with his host. He observed customs and practices that dated back to the

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Middle Ages, many of which were about to vanish for ever – swept away, first by the catastrophe of war and then by Communism. As Paddy puts it in one of these letters, 'a sudden Dark Age descended that nobody was ready for'. He would give an account of his experiences in what became a trilogy of much admired books, which remained incomplete at his death: *A Time of Gifts* (1977), *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), and the posthumously published *The Broken Road* (2013).

Paddy would spend the late 1930s oscillating between Greece, Rumania, France and England. In the late summer of 1938, before leaving for Rumania, he left with a friend in London two trunks, which were subsequently lost with their contents, among them notebooks he had kept on his walk and letters home to his mother. The loss helps to explain why there are no pre-war letters in this volume. Nor are there more than a couple from the war itself. Rather than going into the Guards, which had rated his capabilities as 'below average', Paddy had been snapped up by the Intelligence Corps, on the basis of the fact that he spoke German, Rumanian and Greek; and after being evacuated first from mainland Greece and then from Crete as the Germans invaded, he had been infiltrated back on to Crete to operate under cover, liaising with the local resistance. It was during this period, as Paddy made regular clandestine visits to German-occupied Crete from his base in Cairo, that he planned and executed the abduction of an enemy general, the other achievement for which he is best known. The second letter in this volume, written to the mother of his second-in-command, Billy Moss, refers to this daring exploit, albeit discreetly.

After the war Paddy worked for the British Council in Athens for just over a year – his only period of peacetime employment, as it would turn out, which ended in his dismissal. It became quickly apparent that he was 'unfit for office work'. Included here is a letter written during a lecture tour of Greece undertaken on behalf of the British Council, and another to Lawrence Durrell in which he complains at being let go, prompting a rare lapse into profanity.

The rest of his long life was spent as a writer. Before the war he was already pursuing literary projects, and had translated a novel from French into English; after leaving the British Council,

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he accepted an invitation to write the captions for a book of photographs of the Caribbean, a task that grew into a full-length book, *The Traveller's Tree*, published in 1950. (Paddy would invariably exceed any word limit he was given, just as he could never keep to a deadline.) From then on, though often short of money, he seems never to have considered any other form of work. His experiences in the Caribbean inspired him to write a novel (his only work of fiction), *The Violins of Saint-Jacques* (1953). He was already working on a book drawing on his travels in Greece, part autobiographical, part ethnographical, which grew into two volumes: *Mani* (1958) and *Roumeli* (1966).

One of the surprises of these letters is to find how much recognition mattered to him. In a letter to Colin Thubron, written towards the end of his life, Paddy admits to feeling 'rather gloomy' at not being included in a list of the greatest writers since the war. His habitual procrastination, and his apparent readiness to allow himself to be distracted by the smallest thing, suggests a dilettante. But the letters tell a different story, of a writer always anxious at his lack of progress, guilty at his failure to fulfil his commitments, and perpetually trying to do better. This is the refrain of Paddy's letters to his publisher, 'Jock' Murray, over a period of more than forty years. At Christmas 1984, for example, Paddy tells two friends that he has deferred a visit to London because he cannot face Jock while his book remains unfinished. Even after Jock's death, when Paddy was in his eighties, he felt it necessary to apologise to Jock's son for his presence in England by marking his letter 'NO SKULKING'.

At the beginning of his career Paddy had been encouraged by Harold Nicolson to aim high, and he strove to produce the masterpiece that Nicolson (and no doubt others) thought him capable of. Some thought that he achieved this in *A Time of Gifts*. Yet even the acclaim this book and its successor attracted was double-edged, because it called attention to the fact that the story was incomplete. There was public as well as private pressure on him to finish the trilogy; an article in *Le Monde* mocked him as 'L'Escargot des Carpathes' ('The Snail of the Carpathians'), a soubriquet that he ruefully accepted. The unfinished work hung around his neck to the end, weighing him

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down. Even in the last letter reproduced here, written long since everyone else had given up hope of the third volume, Paddy reports that he has recently resumed work on it 'after a long pause'.

Paddy's domestic arrangements were unusually chaotic, even by the standards of a freelance writer. For one thing, he found it hard to resist the lure of society, and was capable of travelling across a continent for a party. He seemed unable to concentrate on work in London, and sought out retreats in order to write free of distraction. He became adept at cadging houses from friends: Lady Diana Cooper's farmhouse in Bognor, Niko Ghika's mansion on Hydra, Barbara Warner's cottage in Pembrokeshire, Sir Walter and Lady Smart's manor-house in the Eure. Being usually alone in such places, he wrote to his friends, often inviting them to stay (which somewhat defeated the object). After the war he formed a permanent bond with Joan Rayner, who became his lifelong partner, and, eventually, his wife; but they spent much of the time apart, especially in the first two decades of their relations. This of course meant that they often wrote to each other. Paddy called himself 'Mole' and Joan 'Muskin'. His letters to Joan reveal an aspect of his character that he normally kept hidden, his slides into gloom and depression. He depended on her, not only for encouragement and emotional support, but also for practical and indeed financial assistance. Joan was unquestionably the most important woman in his life. It is appropriate that there are more letters in this volume to her than to any other correspondent.

But before Joan, there was Balasha, whom he had met in Athens in the spring of 1935. Though sixteen years older than him, she was still in her prime, and they fell in love – or, as Paddy might have put it, became 'terrific pals'. They were together almost five years, until separated by the coming of war: after 1939, they would not see each other again for more than a quarter of a century. By the time they renewed contact, Paddy was in love with Joan. Yet Balasha Cantacuzène had been his first love, and seems to have retained a special place in his heart. His earliest post-war letter to her, written over the Easter weekend of 1946, may never have been sent, for reasons we can only speculate about; but it is known that he sent her a letter

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the following year. She tried to escape from Rumania, but was detained and sent back, and soon afterwards she and her sister were brutally evicted from their ancestral home. Her life afterwards was hard. In 1965 Paddy was able to travel to Rumania, and visited Balasha and her sister after dark, because it was dangerous for Rumanians to be seen to consort with anyone from the West. Paddy, himself still youthful and vigorous at fifty, was shocked by Balasha's appearance: she was now an old woman, losing her teeth and her hair, the wreck of her former self. His subsequent letters to her reproduced in this volume are written with gallantry and consideration: one has the sense that he is trying to include her in his life, even at long distance.

Joan recognised the sentimental importance of Balasha to Paddy, and wrote to her affectionately as if to a member of the family. She also tolerated Paddy's lovers, and even his casual encounters with prostitutes, confident that he would never leave her. Included in this volume are love letters (some quite frisky) to two younger girlfriends, Lyndall Birch and Ricki Huston. One hilarious letter to the latter refers to the potentially awkward subject of infestation with 'crabs' (pubic lice).

As well as such love affairs, Paddy maintained several long-term friendships with women, conducted largely by letter. Though platonic, there was an element of courtly love in them; it is significant that his ladies were all well born. Among his best letters are those to Lady Diana Cooper (twenty-three years his senior) and to Ann Fleming (twenty-nine years), both of whom he always addressed as 'darling'. In 1980 Paddy dug out his letters from Diana Cooper and reread them, a correspondence that by that time had lasted almost three decades. He was very moved, he told her, 'by this record of shared delights and trust, confidence, warmth and loving friendship, and can't believe my luck, unfaltering for all these years, and still prospering in such a marvellous, happy and treasured bond, light as garlands, as lasting as those hoops of Polonius'. Another long-term correspondence was with Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire ('Debo'), youngest of the lively Mitford sisters, five years his junior. Some believed that Paddy and Debo had once had an affair, but those who knew them best doubted this. In 2008, the correspondence between them over the previous half-century

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was published as *In Tearing Haste*, edited by Charlotte Mosley. In one of the two subsequent letters published here for the first time, Paddy tells her that he has been 'dipping furtively into *In Tearing Haste*, and enjoying it *almost* as if it was a total stranger and laughing at all the jokes'. Also included are three letters from that book – apart from the two letters to George Seferis, the only letters in this volume that have been previously published in full, though extracts from some of them have been quoted in Artemis Cooper's authorised biography, *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure* (2012). The witty parody of John Betjeman's verse that precedes the letter to Diana Cooper of 22 March 1954 has appeared in a specialist journal, but this is the first time it has been made more widely available.

In the late 1940s, when writing *The Traveller's Tree*, Paddy sought sanctuary in a succession of monasteries in northern France, an experience which itself would provide a subject for a short book, *A Time to Keep Silence* (1957). Reproduced here is a series of letters from these monasteries which gives a vivid picture of monastic life. Writing the letters, and observing how the monks lived, prompted Paddy into reflections on spiritual questions, unusual subjects for him, at least in correspondence. He would return to his favourite monastery, Saint-Wandrille, several times over the next decade. Another, more temporary refuge was the 'stupendous' castle of Passerano, inland from Rome (from its battlements the dome of Saint Peter's was just discernible on the horizon), which he took for the summer of 1959. Paddy had sewn 'a vast heraldic banner, several yards square', to adorn one wall at the end of a large banqueting hall. He was tempted to fly it from the highest tower, as he admitted in a letter to Jock Murray. 'Then, when the Black Castellan of Passerano displays his gonfalon from the battlements, the peasants of the valley can hide their cattle and douse their lights and bolt up their dear ones!' To balance this attack of *folie de grandeur*, he explained that the living conditions were primitive, since the castle had not been inhabited for five hundred years. 'There is no sanitation at all. It's all fieldwork under the trees, and the only lighting is by oil-lamp.'

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Yet another refuge was Easton Court at Chagford, an hotel on the edge of Dartmoor run by an unconventional American woman and her English beau. Easton Court had been discovered by Evelyn Waugh, who wrote several of his books there; other writers had followed, including Paddy's friends John Betjeman and Patrick Kinross. From the late 1940s until the early 1960s Paddy stayed often at 'Chaggers', from which he wrote several of the letters included here. He went there to write; though another attraction of the hotel was that it offered the possibility of riding to hounds over the moor with the local hunt three times a week. Here and elsewhere, are lyrical descriptions of nature – riding home at dusk, striding along a ridge, driving into the dawn.

As all this suggests, Paddy rarely stayed in one place long. In fact, he did not have a permanent home until he was almost fifty, in 1964, when he and Joan bought a piece of land overlooking the sea in the Mani, beneath the towering Taygetus mountains near the village of Kardamyli, and began building a house. Letters included here describe the search for a site, negotiations to purchase the land, and plans for the house itself and the surrounding garden. For the first year or two at Kardamyli Paddy and Joan bivouacked in tents as the land was cleared and the house was built. Paddy took a keen interest in every detail of the design and construction, a further distraction from his writing, as he acknowledges in an apologetic letter to Jock Murray. Work on the house would not be complete until the end of the decade.

Letters provided a lifeline from this isolated spot. In an era when international telephoning was difficult and expensive, Paddy and Joan kept their friendships in good repair by correspondence. And, at least for Paddy, it went further than this. Letters were a means of reaching out to those whose company he enjoyed, of making convivial connection across the void. Paddy seems to relish the contact with those to whom he is writing, even if it is only on paper. He is psychologically and often emotionally engaged with his correspondent. At times one senses that Paddy is writing to raise his spirits, as if he knows that his imaginative construction of those of whom he is fond will bring him comfort and cheer.

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Some of their friends came to visit, bringing more than a whiff of glamour to this remote region. A letter here describes the arrival of the shipping tycoon Stavros Niarchos by helicopter, which created a sensation when it landed in the Kardamyli market square. Twice Lady Diana Cooper whisked Paddy off for a cruise of the Aegean in Niarchos's second best yacht, *Eros II*. Others came to stay, sometimes for weeks at a time, visitors ranging from John Betjeman to Bruce Chatwin. But much of the time Paddy and Joan were alone at Kardamyli, with just each other and their cats for company, enjoying simple pleasures such as swimming and reading. One letter here tells of surfacing after diving into the sea and almost colliding with a kingfisher, which Paddy watched from a floating position for twenty minutes or so. Another tells of losing his way on an evening walk in the mountains, fighting through the maquis and stumbling down a deep ravine as night fell, trying to stave off panic.

Plenty of stories are recounted in these letters, often very funny ones: an evening with the eccentric Lady Wentworth, then in her eighties, who insisted that her young male guests join her at billiards, and trounced them; the hunt for Byron's slippers in one of the remotest regions of Greece; a disastrous visit to Somerset Maugham's Villa Mauresque. The incongruity of a film crew, headed by the maverick director John Huston, and a starry cast that included Trevor Howard, Juliette Gréco and Errol Flynn, on location in darkest Africa is explored in three letters from a former French colonial territory, now Cameroon. Paddy was there in his temporary capacity as screenwriter, since he had adapted the novel on which the film was based for the screen. Another letter relates the shooting of *Ill Met by Moonlight*, the film based on the story of General Kreipe's abduction. On location in the French Alps Paddy met a screen version of himself. 'It was all pretty queer,' he writes to Debo Devonshire. 'Dirk Bogarde, the actor who is doing one in the film, is absolutely charming – slim, handsome, nice speaking-voice and manner, a super-gent, the ghost of oneself twelve years ago.'

It would be foolish to deny that Paddy had a romantic interest in aristocracy, and all its paraphernalia: genealogy, heraldry, and the rest. Yet if this was snobbery, it was of a comparatively

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innocuous kind. There was nothing oleaginous in Paddy's relations with his betters. Nor was there any superciliousness towards the lower classes. Paddy was at ease in any company: he could walk into a simple taverna and soon have everyone singing. He took delight in servants who spoke their minds to their masters, such as the Marquess of Bath's butler, whose pointed remarks to His Lordship are repeated here in a letter to Joan. Paddy's letters contain glimpses of the great and the good: a walk in the woods with Harold Macmillan, or conversation over dinner with Camilla Parker-Bowles, for example; but also of the humble: a 'picknick' with the stonemasons at Kardamyli, or a day spent with a lonely chambermaid in Saint-Émilion. In a letter to Xan Fielding early in 1972, Paddy reports on a long 'colloquy' in a pub in the Bogside area of 'Free Derry', with a spokesman for the Provisional IRA ('Don't open your mouth on the way out, for Christ's sake!', were the IRA man's parting words), before going on to spend a few days at Chatsworth. Two more different worlds could scarcely be imagined.

'He was the most English person I ever met,' recalled Agnes 'Magouche' Phillips, later Xan Fielding's second wife: 'Everything was *ripping*, and there was more talk of P. G. Wodehouse than of Horace or Gibbon.' Indeed, Paddy himself was something of a Wodehouse hero, in his boyish manner, his innocence, his gentleness, his playfulness with language, his sense of fun, and his tendency to get into scrapes, particularly when driving. (Letters here describe a crash when his car turned over, bashing a wall to escape a head-on collision, and the car being destroyed by a bomb.) There is an absence of malice in his writing, and a related unwillingness to offend. Several letters in this volume express anxiety that casual comments made in private correspondence may wound if broadcast. Towards the end of his life he began to edit those of his own letters in his possession, censoring passages that might cause upset, and adding the occasional explanatory note for his biographer, Artemis Cooper.

Paddy was a philhellene, who lived in Greece for most of his life. Among the letters here are accounts of exuberant jamborees with his old comrades from the Cretan resistance,

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most of them simple shepherds, with whom he felt the kind of kinship that can be formed only when men experience tragedy and danger together. In Athens after the war Paddy formed close and enduring friendships with Greek artists and intellectuals, especially the poet George Seferis, the painter Niko Ghika and the 'Colossus' of letters, George Katsimbalis; but in the mid 1950s these became strained by the Cyprus emergency. This was 'an argument among friends': two nations, Britain and Greece, which had enjoyed a long history as allies. It was understandable that Greeks should feel a claim on British sympathies, since only a decade earlier, in 1940–1, they had been the only other people fighting Axis troops on the continent of Europe. Paddy felt a conflict of loyalties, between the country of his birth and the country he had made his home. The enmity was such that he felt obliged to quit Greece for a while. His distress is expressed in agonised letters written at the time to his Greek friends, to Lawrence Durrell, and to others.

In general, Paddy was not a political person. An instinctive, old-fashioned conservative, he took little interest in politics except when it touched him in some way. As a young man travelling through Germany in the mid 1930s he had disliked the Nazis he encountered because of their crudeness and their anti-Semitism, but he was indifferent to their rhetoric. In 1967 he reacted cautiously to the military takeover in Greece, the so-called 'Colonels' coup'. In a letter to Joan, who was in England at the time, he suggests that she may know more about what is happening than he does. 'All my spontaneous sympathies (in spite of my official views generally) are against the coup,' he wrote, 'largely because those in the provinces who welcome it are … the people one likes least in Greece.' During the regime of 'the Colonels' he became friendly with Tzannis Tzannetakis, then in political exile, and a prominent politician (briefly prime minister) once democracy had been restored.

Paddy was certainly no xenophobe. In a letter written to Rudi Fischer in October 2001 after the attack on the twin towers in New York, he dissents from the description of the terrorists as 'cowards', and refers to President Bush's call for a 'crusade' as a 'gaffe'.

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Paddy's magpie mind is evident in his letters. Before setting out on his 'Great Trudge' he had packed *The Oxford Book of English Verse* in his rucksack, and on the walk had committed much to memory, so that he could recite great chunks of poetry, more or less accurately, at will. He would continue to read widely throughout his life, and was able to retain much: repeatedly topping up a cornucopia of knowledge that overflowed into his correspondence. 'I wonder if you fully realised that Harun-al-Rashid sent an elephant called Abulahaz as a present to Charlemagne in AD 802?' Paddy began one letter to Diana Cooper. Perhaps she did realise this, but then again, perhaps she didn't. In another letter to her, Paddy points to 'the enormous amount of buried quotation' in Raymond Asquith's letters to his wife, 'which must mean a vast quantity of shared poetry which was in daily use, and pointless if the other correspondent couldn't spot it'. There is an enormous amount of buried quotation in Paddy's letters too, and one suspects that a significant proportion of this went unrecognised by their recipients. Undoubtedly some will have escaped the editor of this volume.

The letters themselves tell us something of the circumstances in which they were written. The first of Paddy's letters to Balasha in this volume was begun on Easter Saturday, sitting at a café by the waterside; the first letter to Joan was written at a desk in his bedroom at the monastery of Saint-Wandrille, and he stays up until 4.00 in the morning to finish it. Just as Paddy finishes a long letter to his lover Lyndall Birch on an hotel terrace, a gust of wind sweeps the sheets off the table, and he scrambles to save them, 'before they took wing over the balustrade down through the circling wood pigeons to lose themselves below among the ilexes and elderflowers'. Once Paddy was settled at Kardamyli, he seems to have developed a routine of rising early to work, writing letters in the afternoon; they often refer to the need to finish before the post departs ('dashing for the post'). A postscript to a letter to Balasha tells how he had strolled into the village to post it and then reopened the envelope, after finding letters from her waiting there: he explains that he is 'scribbling this in the *kafeneion*, but must stop it now and post it, as the

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postman is rolling his eyes and tapping his fingers in mock impatience!'

Almost all of Paddy's letters were written by hand, though a handful were then corrected and typed. Some are very long, ten tightly written pages or more; many of those included in this volume have been edited to remove ephemeral content or other material of little interest to the general reader. A few have been edited to half their original length, or even less.

The 174 letters included in this volume have been selected from a hoard (scattered across six countries) at least ten times their number. The standard is such that another editor might have chosen 174 different letters to make a selection of equal quality – and perhaps more will be published in due course. Undoubtedly further letters survive which this editor has not seen, and of course many more must have been discarded or lost over the years. A rough estimate suggests that Paddy wrote between five and ten thousand letters in his adult lifetime. That is an average of several letters a week – and of course, there would have been many weeks when he could not have written any, so the rest of the time he must have been writing more. When one reflects on this, what is most striking is the sheer amount of time and effort Paddy devoted to writing letters. Since many of them record his unhappiness at failing to fulfil his promises to his publisher (not to mention his bank manager), one is forced to conclude that writing letters took up time he could have spent writing books. But was this such a bad thing? Of course, it was regrettable that Paddy never completed his trilogy, and perhaps sadder still that the evening of his life was darkened by anxiety about the unfinished work.

Yet we may take a different view. The letters may sometimes be penned in haste (or even 'in tearing haste'), but they are written in a free-flowing prose that is easier and more entertaining to read than the baroque style of his books, which can seem convoluted and overworked. I would argue that Paddy's correspondence is part of his *oeuvre*, worthy to take its place alongside the work that he published in his lifetime. Now that we can read his letters at length, we can judge their worth. At their best, they are as good as any in the language. They are utterly distinctive: Paddy's personality shines through them. His

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letters are exhilarating; to borrow an expression he liked to use, they are absolutely ‘tip-top’.

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In compiling a volume of this kind an editor incurs many debts. My hunt for Paddy's letters has ranged across two continents, and taken me to locations I should otherwise never have seen – a castle perched on a cliff in Tuscany, an apartment overlooking the Tiber in Rome, a romantic Wiltshire garden, the terrace of one of England's grandest houses; and many other interesting locations. I remember, in particular, a day in a Budapest flat with the late Rudi Fischer and his wife Dagmar, who fortified me throughout with strudel and Transylvanian schnapps (tuica). I also recall lunch at a taverna in Athens where the two of us

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consumed three carafes of retsina. I am grateful to all those who made me welcome, listed below. I am especially grateful to Myrto Kaouki and Irini Geroulanou of the Benaki Library for allowing me to stay at Paddy's house at Kardamyli, and to Elpida Beloyannis for making my stay so comfortable.

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I want to extend special thanks to John and Virginia Murray for their hospitality at the John Murray building in Albemarle Street during the days when I was there. It seemed appropriate to be reading Paddy's letters to John's father in the very room where Paddy himself had often laboured on his own manuscripts. If I needed inspiration, his portrait by Derek Hill hung on the staircase outside.

I am much indebted to Peter Mackridge, Emeritus Professor of Modern Greek at Oxford, who translated all Paddy's Greek and provided me with transcriptions.

I also want to thank Ceri Evans for her stalwart help with the transcription. Much of what she typed might as well have been written in Rumanian in that it was so far from her own experience, but she did an excellent job all the same.

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Readers should be aware that Paddy's letters are not necessarily reproduced in full: I have chosen to omit long travelogues and the more mundane passages which often refer to practical arrangements of ephemeral interest. Excisions are indicated by ellipses. I have taken it upon myself to correct Paddy's spelling errors, particularly in the use of foreign words and names, though I decided to retain his delightful spelling of 'picknick'. I have also standardised his somewhat erratic punctuation. As he himself would frequently lament, his handwriting is notoriously difficult to decipher, so I have sometimes been obliged to resort to guesswork, and no doubt my guesses have been wrong on occasion. A few words have remained stubbornly illegible. I have used square brackets for simple translations or other brief expository material, to avoid unnecessary annotation. Words that Paddy underlined are usually presented in italics, to conform to standard publishers' practice. My own footnotes are listed numerically at the end of each letter; I have retained a few of Paddy's footnotes, which are indicated with an asterisk and printed at the foot of the page.

Most of the quotations in my introductory passages are taken from Ben Downing's interview, which appeared after Paddy's death in the *Paris Review*; or from the volume of correspondence between Paddy and Debo Devonshire, published under the title *In Tearing Haste*. Short profiles of the people mentioned most often in the letters, including most of the addressees, are provided in a *dramatis personae* at the end of the book.

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THE LETTERS

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Paddy was twenty-four years old, and on a mushroom-gathering picnic in Rumania, when he heard the news that Germany had invaded Poland. He hurried back to England to enlist. Many years later he told his biographer that he came home in 1939 expecting to die. 'I had read somewhere that the average life of an infantry officer in the First World War was eight weeks, and I had no reason to think that the odds would be much better in the Second. So I thought I might as well die in a nice uniform.' Claiming Irish descent, he inveigled his way into the Irish Guards. 'I joined "the Micks" in the ranks in 1939, same day as Iain Moncreiffe and other friends, though he was in the Scots Guards,' he later explained (PLF to Rudi Fischer, 2 February 1982). 'It was the first time future Guards officers went through the ranks, and a very good idea, though it was tremendously tough. We were all from the five Guards regiments – Grenadier, Coldstream, Scots, Irish and Welsh – trained in a squad of thirty at the Gd's Depot at Caterham by the Coldstream. All had been fixed up before joining through mild pull etc., I'm sorry to say.'

The letter that follows was written to a fellow recruit while Paddy was in hospital recovering from a bout of severe pneumonia which had almost killed him. Adrian Pryce-Jones (1919–68) was the younger son of a colonel in the Coldstream Guards. His brother Alan, later a travel writer and journalist, had been briefly engaged to Joan Eyres Monsell, Paddy's post-war companion and, eventually, his wife.

To Adrian Pryce-Jones
1 February 1940

Redhill County Hospital
Earlswood Common
Redhill
Surrey

My dear Adrian,

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I liked your letter, and it really was kind of you to write at such a moment of stress. God, how pleased you must have been to have escaped from that jail. My fate is positively tragic. Apparently, as I have missed over five weeks' training through illness, the authorities are regretfully obliged to *backsquad* me; that is, I am to wait till they are at the six and a half weeks (the next Brigade Squad), finish with them and proceed with them to Sandhurst for the April intake. Isn't this wretched? I am more vexed and disappointed than I can say; obviously, because it means the Depot for three weeks, and a long pointless wait before that, but still more because I would have so loved being at Sandhurst with you and our other friends. A still graver reason for concern presents itself: as the Irish Guards have only twelve vacancies, all being competed for in your course, my commission with them may be jeopardised, as there are fifteen candidates, and I don't suppose they can very well hold one up for me, as there is such a crush. It may turn out all right, but if it doesn't it will be very sad and disappointing. I can't think of any other regiment I would like to join; and anyway, it would be wretched to be gazetted out of the Brigade. Why did I ever fall sick?

Really, you know, owing to those butcher boys at the Depot hospital, I very nearly died. I felt myself all through one night at the brink of turning into a lump of carrion. Luckily, all goes well now, and I am feeling very well, though I must remain here[1] another fortnight …

But that is enough about the horrid Depot, which you are probably beginning to forget. I want to know all about Sandhurst, if you can extricate yourself for half an hour from the maelstrom and write a fruity letter – uniform – who is there – juicy bits of scandal etc. – other candidates for our Regiments etc. Are you enjoying it? It must be silk and satin after Caterham. Please tell me all.

Here, life flows by in a mild lotus-eating atmosphere. Lots of books and fruit and flowers, in the middle of which I lie pale and endearing, with an attendant chorus of surprisingly personable and charming nurses. I have invented a fascinating brave, hurt, bittersweet expression, with eyebrows wrinkled up over a twisted smile, and I use this on them whenever I want some special favour. (Lights on late, drink etc.). It works every time. Family

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have been here several times, also sweet Prue Branch and Guy,[2] the ones I told you about. Last night something marvellous happened. I am just being tucked up for the night, when I hear strange foreign noises outside the door, which opens, and in bursts Anne-Marie Callimachi,[3] followed by Costa.[4] She was dressed in black satin and dripping with mink, with pearls and diamonds crusted at every possible point, topped by the maddest Schiaparelli hat I've ever seen. Then Costa, who is very dark, with a huge grin, and quite white hair at the age of thirty. He was dressed in a bright green polo jersey over which he wore a very long black new coat with an immense astrakhan collar: both laden with huge presents. The nurses were struck dumb. Shrill squeals burst from us all, and then we were gabbling the parleyvoo like apes. The nurses fled in disorder. Then of course, they couldn't get a taxi as Anne-Marie had left Rolls Royces etc. in London; but they had their luggage, and stopped the night at the hospital! We all pretended they were married, so the Sister, with girlish squeaks, got their room ready, with screens coyly arranged between the beds. By this time Costa was telephoning the Ritz to say Her Highness wouldn't be back that night, his voice echoing down all the passages. The sensation in the hospital was absolutely phenomenal. Huge princely coronets on the luggage – such nighties! Slippers! Oh!! The hospital hasn't recovered yet, and my glamour-value among the nurses is at fever pitch.

It was great fun. We talked and laughed idiotically late into the night, Anne-Marie narrating her latest experiences, which, as usual, were quite extraordinary. I dramatised the Depot to them. I told them about you, and as they know your brother Alan well, Anne-Marie was very curious to know what you were like. I said you were just a naughty little jazz-baby. Nothing could have intrigued her more.

They left this morning, Anne-Marie leaving a munificent cheque for the Hospital Fund, which I tendered with a languid gesture to the head doctor. Their passage will not be forgotten for *ages*!

Alors, mon petit Adrien, te voilà déjà presqu'un petit officier dans la Garde Galloise! Ce que vous devez rigoler là-bas, vous autres. Oh la la! Je me rouge *de jalousie. Je vous emmerde! Et royalement!*[5]

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My address during my sick leave is at my sister's: c/o Mrs Fenton, St Arild's House, Kington, near Thornbury, Gloucestershire. *Don't forget* to send your civilised address when you write. I will be a day or two in London before going to my bucolic retreat. We might meet and make whoopee. Helen Hardinge[6] suggested I might go and stay a bit at Windsor, but it isn't supposed to be frightfully healthy there, so I don't think I will. May go to the Sitwells for a bit.[7]

Remember me affectionately to Desmond and Trevor and Iain[8] and Hal & Michael, Nevill, Douglas, Jeremy, and all the boys. I can't tell you how I will miss being with you all there. Pity Holland[9] & the wicked Baron aren't there too!

Every kind of good wish to yourself, *mon petit*, and very much luck for a successful course at Sandhurst.

Love Paddy

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It is in time of war that the public school system that so many of you laugh at, is really put to the test. You may scoff at Latin and Greek, Virgil and Homer, but its value is character training …

1 In hospital.

2 Flying Officer Guy Rawstron Branch (b. 1913) and his wife, Lady Prudence, née Pelham, daughter of the 6th Earl of Chichester. They were married the previous March. PLF and his Rumanian lover, Princess Balasha Cantacuzène, had stayed with Branch's family when they visited London in 1937. Just over six months after this letter was written Branch would be dead, killed in action over the English Channel during the Battle of Britain.

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3 The Rumanian Princess Anne-Marie Callimachi, a cousin of PLF's lover, Balasha Cantacuzène.

4 The Greek photographer Costa Achillopoulos, later PLF's collaborator on *The Traveller's Tree* (1950).

5 'Now, my dear Adrian you are already almost an officer in the Welsh Guards. What fun you lot must be having down there. *Oh la la!* I am *red* with envy. Up yours. And royally!'

6 The wife of Sir Alec Hardinge, Private Secretary to King George VI. The Hardinges had an apartment in Windsor Castle. It was through them that PLF had wangled his way into the Irish Guards.

7 After PLF had been introduced by Costa Achillopoulos to Sacheverell 'Sachie' Sitwell and his wife Georgia in 1937, he spent many happy weekends at Weston Hall, their Jacobean house in Northamptonshire.

8 Iain Moncreiffe (1919–85), later Sir Iain Moncreiffe of that Ilk, MP and genealogist.

9 Antony Holland (see note 5 of letter to Diana Cooper, 22 March 1954).

On his recovery, Paddy expected to become a regular officer with the Irish Guards. But it did not turn out this way. 'When I was finishing my recruit time at the Depot, I had tempting promises of future exciting intelligence work in Greece, and like a fool, talked about it.' The Intelligence Corps was very interested in the fact that he spoke French, German, Rumanian and Greek, despite his 'below average' record. 'The Col. of the Micks, who I knew quite well (Tom Vesey), had me up to Birdcage Walk (Wellington Barracks) and asked me if this was true. I said it was, and he was very cutting about it. "What's the point of us training you as an ensign if you go buggering off on some ghastly Intelligence rubbish?" I was given a week to decide. If I hung on with the Micks as an officer, I would, morally, have been bound to eschew all tempting "I" offers. So, most reluctantly, I went into the Intelligence Corps. Very unhappy, because I loved the Irish Guards. But I was much more use where I went, as it turned out, than I would have been as an ensign in the Brigade' (PLF to Rudi Fischer, 2 February 1982). Paddy was posted to Greece, and, after the Axis invasion, to Egypt, from which he was infiltrated on to the island of Crete, to work with the resistance against the German occupiers.

Natalie Moss was the mother of Paddy's wartime comrade Billy Moss, his second-in-command in the daring and successful operation to capture General Kreipe.

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To Natalie Moss
15 November 1944 In the Wilds[1]

Dear Mrs Moss,

I do hope you got a letter I wrote to you this summer in hospital,[2] and thank you very much for your kind telegram. It *was* nice of you to send it, and I do hope Billy thanked you for it as I asked him to, as I couldn't write at the time.

Unfortunately, when I was let out of hospital, Billy had left on a fresh adventure, that we had planned to carry out together, but which I was too ill to take part in. He carried it out most brilliantly and bravely, and, as you will have heard, has been recommended for a very well-deserved bar to his MC. Meanwhile, I went to stay with Lady Spears, our minister to Syria's wife,[3] in the cool mountains near Beirut, and just as I was finishing my stay, who should arrive by plane but Billy, just arrived back from our island hunting-ground,[4] where he had ambushed a German column, knocked out ten trucks, killed forty Germans, and taken fifteen prisoners. Finally an armoured car appeared, which Billy put out of action by climbing on the back and throwing hand-grenades down the turret until the cannon stopped firing. It was a really splendid and brave achievement.

From Beirut we drove off to Damascus together, and spent a very happy and gay five days there and in Beirut, after which we flew back to Cairo, and returned to our home – 'Tara'[5] – of which you must have heard so much! We share it with Sophie Tarnowska,[6] Billy McLean[7] and David Smiley.[8] But Bill had to leave soon, and I a month later, so now poor Sophie is holding the fort all alone. She is a most charming girl and looks after our comic household of rather wild young men like a very responsible younger sister. I left for the place where Bill and I caught the Hun General three weeks ago, and am writing from there. Billy is absolutely all right, and will probably be back in 'Tara' soon. I hope to meet him there for Christmas.

Billy is a really magnificent chap, and it would be hard to think of anyone more universally loved in the Middle East. He is one of the few really great friends I have made during the war, and this island seems very bleak without his gay company.

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You must not get worried if you hear from him only irregularly, as posts are sometimes difficult from these out of the way places. Perhaps you have news of him already. If not I'm sure you very soon will. Thank you again for your kind sympathy while I was ill, and every kind wish.

Yrs very sincerely

Paddy L-F

1 Soldiers on active service were forbidden to reveal their location.

2 'The rigors of a year and a half of Cretan cave life, it seems, suddenly struck me with an acute rheumatic infection of the joints, akin to paralysis. After two months in a Cairo hospital – where King Farouk once kindly sent me a magnum of champagne – I was sent to convalesce in Lebanon.'

3 Lady Spears (1886–1968), the American novelist Mary Borden. Known as 'May', she was married to Major-General Sir Edward Spears (1886–1974), diplomat, army officer and MP, noted for his role as a liaison officer between British and French forces in two world wars.

4 Crete.

5 A spacious villa on Gezira Island, inhabited by a group of high-spirited Special Operations Executive (SOE) officers and named by them 'Tara' after the title used by the High Kings of Ireland. 'With its ballroom and a piano borrowed from the Egyptian Officers' Club, and funded by our vast accumulations of back pay, it became famous – or notorious – for the noisiest and most hilarious parties in wartime Cairo. At one of these, fired by the tinkle of a dropped glass, everyone began throwing their glasses through the windows until not a pane was left.'

6 Countess Zofia Roza Maria Jadwiga Elzbieta Katarzyna Aniela Tarnowska (1917–2009), known as 'Sophie', later Mrs Billy Moss. She and her first husband, a cousin, had been forced to flee their native Poland after the German invasion in 1939. She lived at Tara with a fictitious chaperone, Madame Khayatt, who supposedly suffered from 'distressingly poor health' and thus was always indisposed when visitors called.

7 Lieutenant Colonel Neil Loudon Desmond 'Billy' McLean DSO (1918–86), SOE officer, and later an MP.

8 Colonel David de Crespigny Smiley MC and Bar (1916–2009), special forces and intelligence officer.

In 1935, at the age of twenty, Paddy had fallen in love with Marie-Blanche Cantacuzène, known as 'Balasha'. Sixteen years his senior, Balasha was a princess from one of the great dynasties of eastern Europe, married to a Spanish diplomat, who had left her for another woman. She and Paddy met in Athens, and spent the next eighteen months in Greece, before making their way by steamer to Constanța, on the Black Sea, and thence by train and coach inland to the dales of eastern Moldavia, where Balasha's

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family owned 'a rambling, down-at-heel country house' called Băleni. 'It was surrounded by hills and trees and full of books, there was snow on the windowsills all winter, and outdoors meant sleighs or horses: a Tolstoy or Turgenev kind of life. The family were Moldavian Cantacuzènes, and, as in certain spheres in pre-revolutionary Russia, French was the language used. They were civilised, warm-hearted, amusing people, and devoted to literature …'

'It was a magical house, and the time I spent in it seemed to take the place of the university I was missing; I read more there, and in several languages, than anywhere else in my life. I don't think it is entirely the decades of patina which may have accumulated between now and my early twenties which makes me say that the charm, intelligence, humour, fun, and range and stimulus of conversation at Băleni equal anything I can remember since.'

Paddy wrote the letter that follows on a table by the water's edge, overlooking the narrow channel that flows between the Greek island of Poros and the mainland of the Peloponnese; on the other side of the channel a path runs uphill to the watermill of Lemonodassos, where he had spent two 'blissful summers' with Balasha ten years before, reading, painting and swimming. The two lovers had last seen each other in September 1939. Now, almost seven years later, he was in love with another woman, though he still felt loyal towards Balasha. This letter tries to make sense of his conflicting feelings. It seems probable that it was never sent.

To Balasha Cantacuzène
Easter Saturday 1946 Poros

My own darling,

The clock has suddenly slipped back ten years, and here I am sitting in front of our café in the small square, at a green-topped iron table on one of those rickety chairs. The marble-lantern, with its marine symbols – anchors and dolphins – is within reach of my arm; the drooping tree has been cut down. But the same old men, in broad shady hats, snowy *fustanellas* [skirt-like garments

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wood where the white horse used to gallop aimlessly, and I used to talk of half-submerged vessels. Then through that sloping golden glade to the minute church, the narrow path till the place where the donkey used to pace round and round, drawing up the water, and up through the lemon-groves, to the mill. My darling, it was a moment I had been aching for, and, of course, dreading, for the last six years but, Boodle,[2] there it was, as if nothing *had* changed; I stood and watched through the branches: Marina busy at the oven, Spiro, cheeks puffed with feigned and endearing exertion, emptying lemons into huge baskets – τὰ καλάθια – and a boy and a girl that I recognised as Kosta and Katrina, helping him. You can imagine the cries of welcome when I ventured onto the terrace, Marina smiling with her hands crossed on her apron, Spiro laughing and gesticulating with clownish glee. Evtychia is a thoughtful little girl of ten with dark bobbed hair and a mauve jersey. When kisses and greetings were over, all the talk was of you. 'When is she coming?' I said, Soon. We sat on the wall and talked for hours, (Kosta, still with those affectionate eyes and sweet smile, holding my hand proprietorially in his) of our old life: your pictures, my illness, the rat-bite, the night Hector got lost, climbing the walnut-tree, the Panegyri of St Panteleïmon, the autumn storm. The *magazí* [shop] is closed, as Spiro can get no wine, and as it got dark, I reluctantly said goodbye to them till the morrow, Easter Sunday, and wandered down through the trees to the Plaka where Mitso was waiting with his βάρκα [boat], and over the still water to Poros. On the way down under the lemon leaves, I kept looking back for your long shadow, in blue trousers, white shirt and *bélisaires*, asking me to sing the Raggle Taggle Gypsies. Yanni our boatboy was waiting at the quay, and we went out fish-spearing with a carbide lamp on the front of the boat for a few hours, across that stretch of water between the Dragoumis and Tombazi houses. The bottom of the sea looked fascinating in the bright glare of the lamp – rocks feathered with anemones and prickly with urchins, octopuses and cuttle-fish coiled in the rock crevices, silver troops of fish lying silent two fathoms below, or darting off in alarm at the sudden lunges of Yanni's long, bamboo-shafted trident. He speared masses of them, and each catch was greeted with shrieks of delight by the two barefooted boys who were rowing. I got one *barbouni* [red

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mullet]. We got back in time to brush our hair, and join the swarm of Poriots [inhabitants of Poros] in the church for the Anástasis. There must have been 1,000 people in the square up the hill for the Resurrection, each eager face lit by its own candle. At the ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ ΑΝΕΣΤΗ! ['Christ is risen!'] a great jangle of bells broke out, and the sputter and swish of fireworks, cannons firing at the fort, and all the candles danced up and down. *Adevărat a înviat!* ['Truly he is risen!'][3] Then to Yanni's house at the end of the village, a giant meal with clashing eggs, and back to bed, a bit drunk and very happy.

Today has been perfect too. I got to the hill early in the morning, having drunk two okes [carafes] of retsina with Yorgo and Stamatina, the shaggy little shepherd couple from the Vonnò, at the Plaka. We talked of our boiling day in that high desert, of all the water we drank as we lay panting under the plane-tree by the spring and the oleander bushes. They are as shaggy and small and brown and sly as ever, Yorgo with awkward hands resting on the shaft of his crook, Stamatina's pretty wrinkled face smiling out of its black headdress. She has a new papoose slung in a sort of leather sling from the saddle of her mule. They are as scorched and penetrated by the sun as a couple of cicadas.

At the mill, we had a huge banquet under the vine-trellis – paschal lamb and retsina and πατάτες φούρνου [baked potatoes] and onions and more retsina, and sang for hours. I made a fresh entry in our big white book (jealously hidden throughout the occupation, now the mill's pride and future heirloom), your health was most feelingly drunk by us all, Marina sang 'Kolokotrones' in her thin, true little voice, blushing like a girl at our applause. We danced terrific *Syrtos* and *Tsamikos* [traditional folk dances] (my hands still *ache* from the foot-slapping!), and all the time, the sun slanted down on us through the young vine-leaves overhead, and through its frame of vine and fig-leaves, our amphitheatre of orange and cypress and olive wavered down to the glittering sea and the island and monastery, and remembered bits of rock – lionlike and smoky as ever – on the blue looking glass that stretched away till it melted hazily with the sky.

I dived overboard and swam for a while in the cold sea on the way back and now sit at the old table, with the caïque masts thick in front, the salt flaking on my new-burnt arms, the sunlight still

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warm in my relaxed limbs and bones. This is where I wrote that first sonnet when you went to Athens, and I almost feel that tomorrow I will see you walking down the gangway of the Pteroté, in your grey wool Athens suit, silk shirt, blue-and-white tie, and small round white hat. The night is still and warm, friendly figures cross the golden light of the café windows like Karagosi men in their crisp *fustanellas*, and a mandoline and a zither sound their small tinkling cascade of music into the quiet air, answered by a lazy half audible *amané* [an improvised song in the Turkish style] from the steep white arched and staircased labyrinth of houses behind.

This is a kind and happy and simple corner of the world. All the misery and murder and *pumpute* [upheaval?] of the last seven years have shed themselves away like a hateful dream, and I am back for a few precious days in a *glâbre* [innocent], beautiful world inhabited by people like you and Pomme and Constantin[4] and the two Alexanders[5] and Guy and Prue [Branch]. I send you, darling, all this. We must continue to hide here sometime, and feel that love and friendship are something separate after all, impregnably so, from the passage of time and its horrors and cruelties and callousnesses. I got your lovely letter, and am answering it when I get back to Athens tomorrow – many pages are already written. This is a parenthesis in it, designed to bring you the smell of the sea and of lemon-trees, and the love and greetings of all your friends in the island and Lemonodassos, and mine.

Hugs and kisses and *gouffis*[6] to Pomme and Constantin and Ins [their daughter Ina], and quite special *bessonnades* and hugs to Alexander M.; and to Alexander V., and all, all that and more to you, my dearest darling, from

Paddy

1 The Good Friday custom of priest and congregation processing around the parish carrying a bier upon which is an icon of Christ (often in the form of a cloth) adorned with spring flowers.

2 A term of endearment.

3 This is a standard form of Easter greeting and response in the Orthodox Church, except that PLF has provided his response in Rumanian.

4 Balasha's younger sister Hélène (1900–83), always known as 'Pomme', and her husband Constantin Donici.

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5 Balasha's cousin, Alexander Mourouzi, with whom PLF had explored the Danube delta in 1936; unidentified.
6 A term of endearment – as is '*bessonnades*'.

This letter was written after Paddy had visited Corfu as part of a lecture tour on behalf of his employers, the British Council. In 1946 Greece was volatile, and would soon ignite into civil war between left and right. Paddy's tour was part of a policy to counter the anti-Western propaganda of the Communists. To the delight of his audience, he had spoken not on cultural subjects, but instead about the wartime operation to kidnap General Kreipe.

Paddy and his companion Joan Rayner had been staying with Marie Aspioti (1909–2000), a writer, poet and publisher who ran the British Council Institute in Corfu, an island with strong British links. (From 1815 it had been a British protectorate, until sovereignty was transferred to Greece in 1864.) According to one of those who knew her, Aspioti 'loved England', and 'gave her whole life to the Institute'. Like Paddy, she would be dismayed by British policy in Cyprus in the mid 1950s.

Almost thirty years later, on 5 August 1973, she wrote to tell him that 'your letter of July 1946 brings me back with a rush those delightful times and is as fresh and alive as when you wrote it. Only the ink has faded.'

To Marie Aspioti
12 July 1946

Zante
British Council
Corfu

Marie dear,

Here we are still wandering your sleepy seas, malingering in island after island, as if delayed by those spells that always hindered travellers 'round the coasts of Greece; here in Zante, our Circe (or Nausicaa, Ariadne, Calypso) is Miss Crowe, and I am writing from her terrace at (guess what time?) seven in the morning, under a huge mulberry tree, overlooking the bay, and it's surrounded by trees and churches and palazzos, and sprinkled with ships. Miss Crowe is a magnificent old English woman of about seventy, and comes of one of those families that

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remained behind after the Heptanese was returned to Greece.[1] She looks like a retired British Admiral in an eighteenth-century picture, with high-bridged nose, husky frowning eyebrows and severe blue eyes; an array of telescopes hang among the prints on the walls, and as she paces the terrace – which becomes the quarter-deck of a frigate – stick in hand, only slightly stooping, and followed by a rippling wake of old and half-blind dogs, you can almost hear the distant booming of broadsides. She sits up late drinking her wine and chain-smoking with a dog on her lap, telling long travel stories in a racy Edwardian idiom. She is a die-hard Tory, and has long arguments every day with Mr Chronopoulos, who lives in Solomos's house next door, a violent Whig who has spent most of his life in England. He is 84 years old, thin and wiry as a hawk, but alert and argumentative and charming, though I believe he is a tyrannical demon to descendants that vaguely surround him in an awed and much less intelligent swarm. He reminisces, and gets angry about, parliamentary debates that he attended in his youth, at which the speakers were Gladstone, Disraeli, Bright, Parnell and Sir Charles Dilke, and Miss Crowe rattles testily on the ground with her walking-stick.

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week' with Paddy and Xan, he told Miller. 'Can't tell you what a wonderful time I had talking books – first time for years.'

To Lawrence Durrell
18 December 1946 Athens

My dear Larry,

I'm very ashamed of myself and live for the days we spent virtually as your guests in Rhodes. With you, Eve,[1] Joan and Xan altogether, it was [the] perfect ending of a lovely summer. But it was the end, and it has been autumn and winter weather till we got back to Athens last week, except for a week or so of the καλοκαιράκι τοῦ Ἁγίου Δημητρίου [Indian summer] in the islands.

I found Joan a week after leaving you, entwined like a sleeping beauty in the island of Patmos, and stayed there several days, rainy and thunderous ones like those described in your story. I thought very seriously of settling down there this winter. It is one of the most extraordinary places I've ever seen. We left for Samos by caïque, but a storm blew up, and we were forced to put in at a tiny island called Arki. As Joan and I stepped ashore, our bags were grasped in silence by a fisherman, who led us up a winding path through laurels to a large white house, quite alone among vineyards, but with all chimneys smoking. An old gentleman with white whiskers welcomed us gravely on the threshold, as though he had been expecting us, and led us into a great flagged kitchen, where in the shake of a lamb's tail, we were seated with ouzos and mezés. A huge handsome old wife was clanking pots over the fire aided by an army of daughters of outstanding beauty, the son of the house cleaning his fowling-piece with a bunch of partridges beside him. Dogs and cats were everywhere. Any amount of shepherds and fishermen were sitting about talking or eating, and we were soon given a delicious meal – *avgolemono* [egg yolk and lemon juice] soup, fish, jugged hare, and a splendid wine. All this with scarcely an enquiry as to where we had come from. In fact we were addressed by our names with a gentle, incurious courtesy. It was very strange, and a bit eerie, like the arrival of Odysseus at the palace of Nausicaa's father,[2] or the way-laying and entertainment of travellers by lonely magnificoes in Hungary. It turned out that ships are washed up

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there so often that their entertainment had become a matter of course. ‘One day last year,’ Mr Kalantakis said (he’s a Cretan) ‘the sea brought us seventy-two guests’. We stayed there four days, living in lovely rooms and eating and drinking like heroes, and when the wind changed, said goodbye to our charming and munificent host with real intentions to return another summer. One of our fellow *naufragés* [castaways] was a *Karaghioziman* [shadow-puppeteer], unfortunately without his gear, but [he] gave quite a good conjuring display to a kitchen crammed with neighbours and dependants, ending up with the most frightening bit of magic I’ve ever seen. He made us clench our hands tightly together, saying he would turn them to wood; shouted ONE! TWO! THREE! Up till ἐννέα! [nine!] Τὰ χέρια σας εἶναι ξύλο – δὲν λύονται πιά! … ΔΕΚΑ! [‘Your hands are stiff as wood! – you can’t bend them! … TEN!]’[3] And well over half of the company remained with their hands glued palm to palm, tugging and straining till the sweat poured down them, till at last they fell apart when he touched their knuckles with his forefinger. He did it again and again, on my insistence, and once linked a daisy chain of half-frightened, half-giggling peasants helplessly together arm in arm. It had all the excitement, and all the unpleasantness of *Mario and the Magician*.[4] It had to be stopped in the end because the children were screaming.

Our travels took us thence to Samos, Chios, Mytilene, Kavalla, Salonika, and all western Macedonia to the Serbian and Albanian frontiers, where the villages are inhabited by Greeks, Macedonian-Slavs, gypsies, Sephardic Jews, Koutsovlachs, Karakatchamis, Albanians, an occasional Pomak or Turk, and refugees from the Pontus – Trapezuntines and Anatolians, and Caucasians. In the same *kafenion* [coffeehouse] you hear Greek, Lázika [Pontian], Rumanian, Turkish, Bulgarian, Romany, Ladino [Judaeo-Spanish], Russian, Georgian and Gheg [an Albanian dialect]. I hadn’t been in those parts since the Albanian war, and long to go again. It is wild, muddy, snowy and Balkanic; and quite unlike anywhere else in Greece. No time now to talk about the *klephtopólemos* [guerrilla war].

I’m leaving in about a fortnight, feeling angry, fed up, and older than the rocks on which I sit. Fucking shits.[5] But I am writing quite a lot, and enjoying it enormously. I have, not very originally,

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written a long thing about the islands, which I am sending you for criticism.[6] Please do so, could you Larry, if it is not too much of a bore for you. Write here if it will get me before the new year, if later, to the Travellers Club, Pall Mall, London SW1, Xan's and my address. Have had two letters and some sample poetry, very good, from him.

Here are the photos, and very funny they are. Xan as Eros is brilliant. Don't forget copies of the ones you took.

I am writing this from the stove-side in Joan's room. We both think nostalgically of you and Eve among your turbaned monoliths, and send love and kisses and every kind wish for Christmas. Write quickly.

Love Paddy

1 Yvette (Eve) Cohen, the model for the character of Justine in Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* novels (1957–60), whom he would marry in 1947 after his divorce from his first wife.

2 Nausicaa's father is Alcinous, King of the Phaeacians (*Odyssey*, Book VII).

3 The magician is counting up to ten.

4 Thomas Mann's *Mario and the Magician* (1929) is an allegory of the rise of fascism. The sorcerer Cipolia uses his hypnotic powers to mesmerise the people into subjugation.

5 The British Council had decided that it no longer needed PLF's services. Durrell would begin working for the British Council in 1947.

6 This 'long thing about the islands' may never have been published.

The publisher 'Jock' Murray took an early interest in Paddy's writing. Late in August 1947, Paddy called on him at the firm's offices, No. 50 Albemarle Street, off Piccadilly, to discuss the possibility of a book based on his travels in Greece. 'There is no doubt that he can write though somewhat incoherently,' Murray wrote in an internal memorandum afterwards. 'The main problem will be to get such a book into some shape and give it a sense of purpose.'

First Paddy had another task to complete: he had agreed to write the captions and text for a book of photographs by his friend Costa Achillopoulos. As was often the case with Paddy, he exceeded his brief, captions usurping pictures, so that the work would eventually become a long travel book with accompanying photographs, published in December 1950 under the title The

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Traveller's Tree: A Journey through the Caribbean Islands*. This letter was written while Paddy was travelling in Central America with Joan Rayner to collect material for the book.*

To Jock Murray
4 May 1948

El Vale
Panama

My dear Jock,

It was a lovely surprise, getting your Christmas greetings, and thank you so much for them. Owing to our erratic itinerary they arrived in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, in Holy Week: a wonderful baroque capital entirely, while we were there, populated by the images of saints, moving slowly along the streets on the shoulders of thousands of Indians, followed by the Doñas de Maria [devotees of the Virgin Mary], half-Indian, half-Spanish girls in black mantillas, thousands of them, smelling of camellias and incense, the young ones all doe-eyed and beautiful, but the older ones Goya abortionist hags. For a whole week the town was one enormous wound, and every itch in the palm seemed to herald the stigmata.

In Nicaragua, we sailed across the enormous lake of the same name, dotted with volcanic islands, and then for 200 miles down the Rio San Juan, running through a loathsome forest full of jaguars and parrots and toucans, to the Mosquito Coast, where, owing to the Costa Rican civil war,[1] we were marooned in a sodden little village of the delta called Barro de Colorado. This was beastly, the air was almost solid with insects, and we felt quite lost in the remote, desolate, sharky place. Joan and I found two horses, and went for rides along the reefs between the jungle and the sharks, splashing through the inlets and longing for the spikes with which the White Knight equipped his charger's fetlocks,[2] indispensable for horsemen in these parts. We compared ourselves to Byron and Trelawny tittupping through the sedge of the Lido in mid-winter, quarrelled as to who was which, and ended up in furious silent gallops, speechless with affronts … Costa slipped away down the Caribbean coast while we were on one of these *ausflugs* [excursions], thinking we would follow next day. But the civil war stopped all sea-traffic, and his launch was kept out to sea by the revolutionary guns at Puerto Limon, while

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we made our way to the capital of Costa Rica for the last days of the war, and then to Panama, where we re-agglomerated for a day before he flew home. We leave on an Australian ship in three days' time, and should be in England within three weeks.

Alas, I have not written another word of the Greek book since leaving England, and have had a terrible time keeping up to date with notes and diaries about the Caribbean and Central America Balkan[s] and a series of articles. But as soon as I have sloughed the literary commitments of this journey, I long to resume writing about Greece, and will certainly do so.

We must meet and dine as soon as we get back. Joan sends her love, and every kind wish to you both from me and to Peter upstairs.[3] Hoping to see you soon,

Yours ever

Paddy L. F.

1 Approximately two thousand people are estimated to have died in this civil war, which lasted for only six weeks (12 March–24 April 1948).

2 *Alice in Wonderland*, Chapter 6.

3 As editor of the *Cornhill* magazine, PLF's friend Peter Quennell had an office in the John Murray building.

*Paddy had first met Joan Rayner in Cairo during the war. He was not the first to be struck by her beauty, and impressed by her calm, her good sense, and her intelligence. 'Like all adorable people Joan Leigh Fermor had something enigmatic about her nature which, together with her wonderful good looks, made her a very seductive presence,' wrote the artist John Craxton in an obituary published after her death in 2003 (*Independent*, 10 June 2003). 'She was also naturally self-effacing. Even in a crowd she maintained a deep and private inner self.' She did not share Paddy's love of society, often choosing to stay with her beloved brother Graham rather than join Paddy in house parties. 'Paradoxically, she loved good company and long and lasting friendships,' continued Craxton. 'It was her elegance, luminous intelligence, curiosity, understanding and unerring high standards that made her such a perfect muse to her lifelong companion and husband Patrick Leigh Fermor, as well as friend and inspiration to*

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musical voice and scarcely ever a gesture, except, very occasionally, a slow marking time to his discourse with his right hand, out of an innocent kind of vanity, I suspect, because of his very long white fingers and enormous ring. His other hand vaguely toys with the gold cross round his neck. He is a doctor of philosophy, and has spent many years in Rome. Occasionally he lapses into Latin as if it is quite a normal procedure. It is the first time I have ever heard it spoken as a living language, and while he does this, I flog my brains to construct a sentence, feverishly trying to get the syntax right, usually a question that at last I enunciate with as much nonchalance as I can muster, to keep going the flow of this silvery monologue about the nature of Divine Grace, or how every action is ontologically good, and only morally good or bad … All this sounds as if he is an elaborate, perhaps affected creature, but he is, as a matter of fact, rather diffident and shy until he gets interested. These conversations take place walking from urn to urn under the beech-trees, in the library or walking round the cloisters. His theory about Marie de l'Incarnation[4] is that her writings look like love-letters because there is no vocabulary to express the intensity of divine or spiritual love, so all the mystics have been forced, by the violence of their feelings to resort to this equivocal kind of language, as there is no other. I suppose that is true, and may apply to Saint Teresa; but Marie de l'Incarnation! And if it's true, what an appalling poverty in Christianity, not to have hacked out a convincing terminology for their most pressing needs. There is so much in Christianity that is unconvincing for the same reason. For instance, in its symbolism how vague and boring and unconvincing heaven, the prize and mainspring of the whole thing, is! Cities with jewelled streets, clouds, harps, angelic choirs – it doesn't sound like a place one could tolerate for more than a week; and 'oneness with God', 'the inexpressible felicity of the Divine Countenance in Eternity' is not, except for a real mystic, much of a draw either. How very much better the Buddhists have managed here. And, to a certain extent, the wretched Mohammedans. And yet (in spite of the lameness and insipidity of the terms of reference) for religious people, the monks for instance, heaven *is* a real, infinitely desirable thing, and not just a non-hell. There has certainly been no fumbling about the

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terminology and the symbolism here; in fact hell is so real and charming that celestial symbolism, and all we can grasp about heaven, is, next to what we feel about hell, as pale and unreal as a toy ship beside a blast furnace. I suppose this is why death is always represented by scythes, skulls, hourglasses, flames, devils and pitchforks. Because the threat of hell carries weight for everybody who believes in the whole set-up, while the promise of heaven, except for an initiate, doesn't. How negative and sloppy a predicament for a religion of love! It is this lame inadequate terminology that has turned so much of Christianity into a sad and forbidding thing.

Does the possibility of spending Eternity in the arms of your Maker excite you? Not particularly, as I understand it. Does burning forever in a lake of brimstone frighten you? Yes, yes, yes!

Saint Teresa and Marie de l'I, and people like that are positive, are on a better track, obviously: anyway, for a more exciting religious life in this world than the overwhelming mass of negative hell-funks. But after death they are swallowed up in the same nebulous 'peace which passeth all understanding' as any bourgeois who manages to skip hell, purgatory or limbo. *Needed*: somebody to make heaven as real as hell.

A thing that strikes me as really new and noble, and, as it were, aristocratic, is Saint Teresa in her absolute refusal to bargain with God. She did good and led a saintly life, not for the boring reason of doing good for good's sake, nor above all, to stake a claim in heaven and avoid hell, but out of *love* for her divine sweetheart because good pleased Him, and [she] simply didn't want to discuss or hear about what the rewards and risks were. Nor is there any of the tacit 'I'll leave it to you, and I'm sure you'll behave handsomely and do the right thing by me when the time comes' – to such an extent, that one almost feels she would feel happier if Hell, or intense suffering, or a sort of long-drawn-out Harikiri, would be the price of her love. *Vivent les âmes bien-nés* ['Long live the noble souls'] …

Life in La Grande Trappe [monastery] sounds pretty odd. Their day starts at 1 a.m. and ends at 8 p.m. Only five hours' sleep. They sleep on two planks in minute cubicles with two blankets and pillows stuffed with hay, and are forbidden to undress. They work in the fields all day, and are not allowed to put on extra, or

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remove a garment, in snow or midsummer. The rule of silence is absolute. They eat standing up, and never have meat, eggs or fish, but live entirely off roots, salads, potatoes etc. They dig their own graves when they join, and live to tremendous ages. When they are in the infirmary, on the point of death, they are lifted from their beds onto a heap of straw scattered on the ground, as a final gesture of humility. All the monks come to assist at the last rites, and watch over the corpse in chapel all night, lowering it into a nameless grave with ropes round the shoulders and feet; no coffin. Chateaubriand wrote a tremendous description of 'la Mort d'un Trappiste'. I'd rather like to go there for a day or two as an adventure in masochism[5] … There's not enough Mortification here!

The library has a mass of stuff about Stylites,[6] which I am devouring. It's too enthralling and insane; all the details of their life, food, sanitary arrangements, fasts, mortifications, hair shirts, flagellations, etc. There were lots of them – St Symeon Stylites the Ancient, S. Sim. Styl. the Younger, St Daniel, St Alypius, St Luke, St Lazarus the Galiziote. Then there were Dendrites that lived in trees, with a chain round their ankle, in case they fell, sometimes for 60 years. The Stylites used to stand nearly all the time, with or without a leaning post, and never left their pillars even in the snowiest winter, with nothing except a goat-skin tunic to protect them, though some built a little shelter, in the Decadence. St Symeon was nearly blind from the Sun. There was one who hung in mid air by a rope under his armpits from the cupola of a church. This is something I *would* like to write an article about – 'The Stylites, and certain extremes of Oriental Christian Monasticism', for instance. I knew a very old woman in Athens whose father had been alive when a Stylite was living on top of one of the pillars of Olympian Zeus.

Darling, I'm afraid you wouldn't be allowed to take photographs here, as no women are allowed actually inside the precincts of the abbey. Only in the chapel, the ruins and a part of the gardens. I would like to write something about this abbey, though, and must try and get some photographs from somewhere. One gets so used to 'life in a monastery' being something conventionally strange, that one files it away in one's mind and leaves it at that. I had very little idea of what it was going to be like, how very

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individual and odd and disconnected from ordinary life. What I would like to do (but it would take months) would be a short biography of each monk – age, position in secular life, married or single, education, age on taking vows, *reason* for vows etc., for all sixty.[7] I can't do it, because they are so shy and inaccessible, and would close like oysters if I set about it at all briskly. But what interesting material it would be at the end.

All the monks I have dared to touch on the subject with so far are beatifically happy, and their only regret is that they waited so many years in the world. Most of them began as *oblats seculiers* – 'secular offerings', as civilians, meaning that even then they dedicated themselves to God. The next step is joining the monastery as a postulant for a period of months, then becoming a novice for two or three years. A novice is ceremonially invested with a black habit, hood and scapular (a sort of long black oblong with a hole in the middle for the head, reaching the ground at the back and in front). And their hair is cut short but not tonsured. Then they are either accepted as *frères convers* or trained as priests – 'choir monks' able to administer the sacraments. These are all tonsured, leaving a thick band of hair round their shaven crowns to represent the crown of thorns. Two postulants were accepted as novices yesterday, one aged twenty, the other twenty-eight, recently returned from ten years soldiering in Indochina. It was a very striking ceremony, in the seventeenth-century rococo chapter house, a vast room with a painted ceiling, twirly grey panelling, black and white chequered marble floor. The abbot sat on an elaborate throne with a white stole over his flowing black robes, wearing a tall white mitre, and holding a long gold crozier in his left hand, the ringed one resting on his pectoral cross, and his right foot on a purple velvet footstool. The monks sat round the walls in their stalls. The two young men, one in tweeds, the other in pin-stripe, were led in, and fell flat on their faces on the marble, where they remained while the abbot delivered a homily over them in Latin. After a while they were allowed to kneel up. Their coats were removed (one wore a belt, the other braces) and, in the middle of an outburst of chanting, black habits were slipped over their heads, a rope round their middle, then the scapular and at last the hood. After this the abbot gave another sermon in French, describing the rigours of

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monastic life. *Rien ne change dans la vie monastique, mes chers enfants. Chaque jour est exactement pareil à l'autre chaque année comme celle qui la précédait, et ainsi jusqu'à la mort* ['Nothing changes in monastic life, my dear children. Every day is exactly the same as any other, each year like the one that went before, and so on until death'] … I had a sudden intuition of what the sermons of Fénelon or Bossuet[8] must have been like, the voice, décor, atmosphere, mood etc. Then we all processed out into the cloisters, leaving the two hooded figures still kneeling there. That evening in chapel, their hair had been cropped level with the scalp. They were indistinguishable.

***

The curé of the village is an impassioned royalist. Signed photographs of the Duc de Guise and the Comte de Paris[9] everywhere. He never refers to the latter except as Sa Majesté Henri VI and his son as Monseigneur le Dauphin. He used to be a frequent contributor to l'Action Française,[10] and I suspect was a near-collaborator during the war. His favourite pastime, when not writing erotic poems about Sicily or composing on the harmonium, is to work out the quarterings of the Comte de Paris, proving how many times he is descended from Hugh Capet, Saint Louis, Henri IV, Louis XIV etc., and marshalling his arms in their full achievement, on yard after yard of artistic deckle-edged paper. Ten years too late for me, whatever you pretend!

The whole of this part of Normandy was very heavily occupied, and collaboration was pretty general. Five women had their heads shaved in Caudebec, by the Maquis, such as it was (two miles away).

Apart from the werewolves, the region, it seems, is troubled by Wills o' the Wisp.

Darling, I've suddenly heard the bells ring, it's 4 o'clock! (in the morning!) I'm nearly asleep, in a sort of trance, and if I don't stop now, I'll go on gently raving till dawn. 4 a.m! It's just about now the Inspector[11] might be dropping in. Wish I was there to help lock him out. I've made you out a little charm, which I'm sure ought to work.

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becoming as clear as porcelain, and bones are slowly emerging. I can't quite remember what a hangover feels like.

My darling pet, don't stay in England forever, and above all, don't run away with anyone, or I'll come and cut yer bloody throat. This is on the road between Havre and Rouen. You might come and pick me up here, or we might meet at Amy's,[5] or in Paris.

All my love, dear little Joan, & kisses & hugs, from

Paddy

P.S. I brought the *130 Journées*[6] here by mistake, but sent it back to Paris by registered mail before actually *entering* the abbey. If I hadn't, either the suitcase and I would have gone up in a sulphurous cloud, or the abbey would have come crashing down like Jericho.

1 The Chaldeans were a Semitic people, said to possess occult knowledge, who emerged in Mesopotamia in the tenth century BC, and disappeared from history four centuries later.

2 An esoteric method, discipline, and school of thought originating in Judaism.

3 Purported author of the *Hermetic Corpus*, a series of sacred texts written in ancient Hellenic times, popular among alchemists.

4 A symbol associated with Rosicrucianism.

5 Amy, Lady Smart, the Egyptian wife of the British diplomat Sir Walter ('Smartie') Smart, who had a house at Gadencourt, Normandy.

6 Possibly *Les 120 journées de Sodome ou l'école du libertinage*, written in 1785 by the Marquis de Sade.

To Joan Rayner

13 October 1948, 10 p.m. Abbaye de Saint-Wandrille

Darling,

I've just had such a shock. After compline, I went to the library to make some more notes about Stylites, and stayed there till a few minutes ago, all the monastery being in bed and asleep. I put all the lights out, locked it up, felt my way through the dark refectory (full of the noise of rats gnawing and scuttling,) and out into the cloisters, a square pool of icy starlight. At the other side of the cloisters is a dark Gothic doorway opening onto a passage that leads to my part of the abbey. Still thinking about the deserts of Chalcedon and Paphlagonia,[1] I walked through the archway, and happening to look to my left, saw a tall monk standing there, his face invisible in his cowl, his hands folded in his sleeves, quite

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silent. It was so frightening, I nearly let out a scream, and can still feel my heart thumping. Phew!

Sweet darling, thank you so much for your telegram, about the broadcast. I managed to hear it on the Curé's wireless set – there are none in the Abbey. I would never have recognised my voice, if I hadn't known who it was. Does it really sound like that? I thought it sounded rather affected and la-di-da and frightfully gloomy, as if I were about to collapse in floods of tears. Did you manage to hear it? I don't expect you did in London. You didn't miss a great deal. Oh, darling, in case it came gobbled by telegram, the Cephalonian Saint is St Gerasimos.

Joanaki, about these Stylite saints. I have got the material in the utmost detail for a history of column-dwelling ascetics from St Symeon Stylites the Elder down to modern times (they only came to an end in the last century), with absolutely enthralling racy sidelights on their way of life, deaths, beliefs, biographies, sores, mortifications etc. I would very much like to write an article about them. The only two publications I can think of that are suitable, and that I would like to publish it in, are *Horizon* and *Cornhill*. Now if the H.[2] really wants the Voodoo article, he obviously won't take another, so I think I ought to write to Peter, and suggest it. What do you think, darling? I don't want to write it *blind*, as it were, without knowing where to place it, because it means quite a lot of work and I've got masses already; and one knows far better *how* to write something if you know what it's destined for. If you see Robin Fedden, could you ask him if he knows anything about the *base* of Symeon the Elder's column, still in existence at Quala'at Sema'an in Syria? Does he mention it in his book?[3] Also – I'm sure Cyril has got it – are there any details in E. M. Forster's Guide to Alexandria about *Pompey's Column* in that city? It was apparently a Stylite's perch at one time. An Arab climbed up it in the eighteenth century, by shooting an arrow on a string through a loop in the moulding of the capital, hauling a rope up, and then himself. Some British sailors also managed to get up it by somehow attaching a rope to the top by flying a kite, in 1773. The top is hollowed out, they discovered, and there is room for eight people there with ease, which is enormous …

You won't forget the *paper*, my angel, will you? The best place for it is Rymans, in Albemarle Street. If they say they'll take ages

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to get the holes punched in the right places, don't worry, and I'll do it myself with a machine the librarian has …

A curious thing *que je constate* [that I notice] is that the Humanist's devotion to you makes him much more sympathetic to me than before. It's about our only thing in common. But, please, my darling, I think it's absolutely essential – I'm studying *his* interests, as a writer – that it should be an *unrequited* devotion … I wonder how it's all going. Any obstacles can be overcome by dogged perseverance. *Parturit ridiculus mus et nascuntur montes*.[4] And if not the Humanist, what about the unknown [illegible] stranger? Eh? Do tell me all about your London life. I'm afraid it's dreadfully exciting … Oh, oh, oh! … And tell me all about your new clothes. I wish you were in France …

I forgot to tell you, my friendship with the abbot bore, about a week ago, the most magnificent fruit: I was changed from my cell to an enormous room across the passage, a really splendid one, about fourteen yards long, with three tall eighteenth-century windows, rounded into gracious cockle-shells at the top; one overlooks the courtyard, the library, the well of the cloisters and the Gothic ruins, the two others the sloping garden and the village, whose beamed cottages I can just see through the leaves of a dozen mammoth chestnut trees; a 'charmille' [an alley formed by hedges] with a Louis XV figure in its green alcove – actually the Virgin, but looking more like Pomona or Ceres;[5] and the abbey wall, pierced by a stately, armorial rococo gateway surmounted by a carved stone Pelican in its Piety, pecking its breast to feed its three craning chickens. The room itself is the sort of thing you would expect a cardinal to inhabit, except for the tin wash-hand stand. The *lit à baldaquin* [four-poster bed] is enormous, curtained with rather threadbare gilt-fringed crimson velvet, and the wall it backs onto is covered by a tapestry, where Actaeon is being devoured by the hounds of Diana. The ceiling is high and moulded with every possible volute, while the white walls, apart from the usual crucifix, are adorned with two sooty oil paintings, one (how nice!) of Saint Teresa, a skull, and a lot of shadows – a bad Murillo, it might almost be – the other (school of Luini) of Christ dripping with blood, crowned with thorns, his head flung back, stripped to the waist, with his hands tied together holding a bullrush; but both so dim and smoky as to be almost

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effaced and quite un-depressing. The rest of the furniture is a big metal stove with its tin tunnel piercing the plaster, a pontifical looking *prie-dieu* [prayer-stool], and two tables, one of them a giant escritoire on which I am writing now, seated in a high-backed embroidered armchair. And lastly, standing inexplicably in the middle of the pink tiled floor, a wooden fluted Corinthian column, supporting nothing, exploding three yards up in a riot of carved acanthus leaves. It looks as though it were awaiting a minute Stylite. I wonder what on earth it's doing here. It must be part of the canopy of some enormous high altar. No curtains on the windows which is all the better, because it bares the lovely shelving white planes through the thick walls and the elliptical moulding at the top. Occasionally a monk comes in and talks for a bit, a pale waxy figure lost in his black robes and cowl. They are restful company – they have soft voices and beautiful manners, and are as gentle as girls.

The room is an extraordinary mixture of austerity and splendour – the tiles, the bare white walls, and then the four-poster, the arras, the peculiar column. It has some slight analogy to the disparate elements of some Guatemalan churches. It's a wonderful room to wake up in. The sunlight streams in through all three windows, and from my bed, all I can see through them are layer on ascending layer of chestnut leaves, like millions of spatulate superimposed green hands, and then the pale crystalline October sky, framed by this reflected blue-white, or thick milk-white, or, where the sun strikes, white-gold surfaces of the walls and window arches or embrasures. A miraculous, feather-light, innocent, clear awakening!

My darling angel, I meant this to be a short, brisk letter, I see it's straggled over several pages already. I'm so alone here at night, I can't stop talking to you; it's such a luxury. Darling, don't feel *ever* obliged to write long letters, and put them off, *in my way*, because you haven't got time to settle down to a whopper. You're in a capital city, I'm in an abbey, don't I know what it means! I do enjoy and look forward to your letters so, you've sent some lovely long ones. But do write *often*, even if terribly shortly. I wake up in a dither about the postman. And don't you think these accounts of cenobitic [monastic] splendour mean I'm OK here alone! I miss you the whole time, my dearest angel, and launch armadas of

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