

# A Monastery Built for Two

— The Patrick and Joan Leigh Fermor House —



by Duncan JD Smith

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Patrick Leigh Fermor rarely stayed long in one place. The fêted travel writer had no fixed abode until he turned fifty. By then an avowed philhellene, he settled with his photographer wife Joan on the edge of the Mani, the rugged middle finger of the Greek Peloponnese. There at a place called Kalamitsi they designed and built a home. Lauded as being among the most beautiful in all

**ABOVE:** A bust of Patrick Leigh Fermor looks towards his former home and beyond to Crete (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

Greece, it serves today as a scholarly retreat and summer holiday residence.

## HISTORY OF ADVENTURE

By the time the Leigh Fermors moved to Kalamitsi, Patrick (known to all as Paddy) had a long history of adventure. Born in London in 1915, he was wayward during his school years in Canterbury, but showed a penchant for classical literature. At the age of 18, already sure he wanted to be a writer, he packed a rucksack and set off from London to

RIGHT: The Patrick and Joan Leigh Fermor House is situated in the southern Peloponnese on a west-facing coast where Mt Taygetos drops down to the Messiniakos Gulf. The house location is marked by a green dot on our map.



walk to Istanbul. His experiences along the way eventually furnished the material for a trilogy of books on which his literary reputation rests.

After Istanbul, Paddy pressed on into Greece, where his affection for the country blossomed. Later, during the Second World War, his command of Greek saw him parachuted into Crete to help with the resistance. The Cretans' love for Paddy after he helped kidnap German General Heinrich Kreipe made him a local celebrity. Thereafter he continued his peripatetic existence, accompanied this time by new love Joan Rayner (née Eyres Monsell) whom he met in Cairo.

It was only now that Paddy got down to some serious writing. Beginning in 1950 with *The Traveller's Tree*, a book detailing a journey through the Caribbean, he penned a handful of eclectic titles for publisher John Murray, including a novel, a short work on monasticism, and two books on Greece. Of these, *Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese* (1958), with photographs by Joan, clearly excited him the most. Its elaborately constructed expositions on tower houses, blood feuds, Maniot myths and funeral dirges are magical.

### OLIVES AND ASPHODELS

By the early 1960s, and having decided to put down roots in Greece, the Leigh Fermors opted for Paddy's beloved Mani. Initially he considered Kardamyli, a seaside village mentioned in Homer at the foot of the Taygetos Mountains. Still without electricity, the place would have deterred most newcomers, but not Paddy. Indeed he upped the

ante by straying south of the village to Kalamitsi. There, between a bend in the road and the sea, he found a small headland. Blanketed in olives and asphodels, it was love at first sight. After some negotiating, in 1964 the Leigh Fermors made it their own.

With help from Athenian architect Nikos Hatzimichalis, the couple drew up plans for a

An arched gallery gives the house an axis, leading off from which are the principal rooms (photo © Aria Hotels & Studio Reskos).



building in which they could work, relax and entertain. In part two storeys to accommodate the natural slope, the low, L-shaped house is accessed by means of a track beneath a high boundary wall designed to afford some privacy. That the house appears from a distance to have been standing for centuries is down to mason Niko Kolokotronis, who used the local honey-coloured limestone. Paddy described the finished structure as “a monastery built for two”.

A gatehouse in the boundary wall opens onto a decorative pebbled path and, on the left, the main entrance. Inside, a shaded, eight-arched gallery gives the building an axis off which lie a rustic kitchen and Paddy and Joan’s separate bedrooms, both equipped with an area for study. Joan had a panel of her door removed to grant access to an army of much-loved local cats. At the end of the gallery, heavy beech doors open onto the so-called Main Room. Drawing room, dining area and library all rolled into one, this is the heart of the building. Illuminated by tall shuttered windows on three sides, it has bookshelves sunk flush

Joan Leigh Fermor’s former bedroom looks out to sea (photo © Aria Hotels & Studio Reskos).

*The house at Kalamitsi was also a creative magnet. Each year an assortment of writers and artists made the journey along dusty roads to spend time with the Leigh Fermors.*

into the metre-thick walls, with ample seating for guests. Special features include a latticed pine wood ceiling, a conical Persian-inspired fireplace, grey-green Pilion flagstones, a Venetian inlaid marble dining table, and a glazed Ottoman-style exedra known as a *hayáti*.

French doors continue this inspiring space out into a Mediterranean garden planted with clumps of cypress, olives, oleanders and banks of rosemary. Stone seating areas encourage *al fresco* dining, with pebble mosaics laid by Paddy, and sundry archaeological fragments for decoration. At the far edge of the headland, a stone staircase winds down to a cove from where Paddy swam out daily to the nearby islet of Merope.

#### A CREATIVE MAGNET

Safely ensconced in their new home, the Leigh Fermors soon integrated with the understandably suspicious locals and their marriage in 1968 was celebrated with considerable gusto. Paddy was known as Mihali, the pseudonym he adopted during the war, and on his name day (8 November) everyone gathered for the Divine Liturgy at Kalamitsi’s tiny chapel of SS Michael and Gabriel.

Afterwards they proceeded to the house for *mézé* and drinks, singing and dancing.

The house at Kalamitsi was also a creative magnet. Each year an assortment of writers and artists made the journey along dusty roads to spend time with the Leigh Fermors. They included Lawrence Durrell and literary critic Cyril Connolly, John Betjeman, Nancy Mitford and artist John Craxton, who designed Paddy’s book covers, as well as Greek luminaries such as Cubist painter Niko Ghika and the poet Giorgos Seferis.

Perhaps the most extraordinary guest was Bruce Chatwin. Credited with reinventing the travel writing genre, when he arrived in Kalamitsi in 1985 he had already made a name



with his *In Patagonia*. Craving a peaceful place in which to complete *The Songlines*, he took a room at the Theano Hotel (today part of the Kalamitsi Hotel). From there it was only a short walk through the olive groves to the Leigh Fermors' house. Despite his pared-down prose being the opposite of Paddy's baroque writing style, the two got on famously well and enjoyed long walks in the surrounding hills.

Paddy always took his time with writing. The first two volumes of a projected trilogy on his walk to Istanbul, *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*, were only published in 1977 and 1986 respectively. Easily distracted by travel, friends and correspondence, he had a separate writing studio built in the garden at Kalamitsi to hasten the process. Although he managed to generate several compendium works there for his ever-patient publisher, he never himself completed the long-awaited third volume of the trilogy.

### THE HOUSE REINVENTED

With the new millennium, life at Kalamitsi began winding down. Joan's death after a fall in 2003 was a great blow to Paddy, one made worse by his own failing health and writer's block. Friends still visited and letters were written but the house fell into disrepair and the folder marked 'Volume 3' remained as such. Paddy's own death in 2011 aged ninety-six brought the Leigh Fermors' time at Kalamitsi to a close.

It was not, however, the end for the house nor for Paddy's written legacy. In old age, the couple had bequeathed the house and its contents to the Benaki Museum in Athens for reinvention as a writers' retreat. With their passing, the building's future was safe and even Paddy's unfinished third volume was pieced together by others for publication as *The Broken Road* (2013).

Worries that the economic situation in Greece might scupper the Leigh Fermors' plan for the house were banished when the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, a Greek-based philanthropic



The view from the garden looking north towards Kardamyli, with the islet of Merope on the left (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

organisation, stepped in with funding. Now conservators from the Benaki set about meticulously restoring the property, taking care not to detract from its original ambience. The russet roof tiles, salvaged originally from earthquake-damaged buildings elsewhere, were refitted; wooden lamp stands designed by Paddy were rewired; English furniture was reupholstered in similar fabrics; and the library of six thousand books was cleaned, catalogued and returned to its shelves in the house. The finishing touch came with the taming and, where necessary, replanting of the

### VISITING PADDY'S HOME

Between October and May, the Patrick and Joan Leigh Fermor House serves exclusively as a writers' retreat, with hour-long guided tours for the public on Mondays and Thursdays at 11.00. E-mail [leighfermorhouse@benaki.gr](mailto:leighfermorhouse@benaki.gr) for details. From June to September, public tours are available on Mondays, and stays can be arranged through Aria Hotels: [www.ariahotels.gr/en/the-patrick-joan-leigh-fermor-house](http://www.ariahotels.gr/en/the-patrick-joan-leigh-fermor-house). The property lies just outside Kardamyli in Kalamitsi, twenty-five miles south of Kalamata Airport.

## LITERARY REFUGES

Patrick Leigh Fermor's one-time home at Kalamitsi is a chance to inhabit the very space where a celebrated writer once lived and worked. In our travels, we have run across a number of other instances.

For many years, visitors to Sussex could book to stay in the cottage in Rodmell where Virginia and Leonard Woolf once lived. No longer, unfortunately, though the house is still open to the public, and it's a chance to see all sorts of memorabilia associated with the couple's lives. It was of course at Rodmell that Virginia Woolf ended her own life by drowning in 1941.

Aspiring writers can apply to spend up to three months at the neat clapboard house near Orlando in

Florida where Jack Kerouac wrote *The Dharma Bums*, his 1958 sequel to *On the Road*.

The memorialisation of a writer's life and work through preserving their home and workspace is now commonplace. There is a huge public appetite for visiting the one-time homes of writers, but the possibility of being able to stay has special appeal, all the more so if many of the writer's books and possessions are still in place, as they are at the Leigh Fermor residence in Greece. We naturally wonder what will become of Trefan Morys, the book-laden Welsh farmhouse which the late Jan Morris, who died in 2020, shared with her lifelong partner Elizabeth Tuckniss.

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overgrown garden, with the addition of drought-tolerant lavenders and salvias. The garden is now adorned with a bronze bust of Paddy by Tinian sculptor Praxiteles Tzanoulinos, surrounded by white freesias which come to bloom with autumn rain.

The restored property reopened as the Patrick and Joan Leigh Fermor House on 19th October 2019, in the presence of Greek President Prokopios Pavlopoulos. The first guests hosted were scholars from Princeton University. The Leigh Fermors'

The Main Room, with its offshot hayáti, is the heart of the house (photo © Aria Hotels & Studio Reskos).



bequest, however, also stipulated that during the summer months their home be made available to non-academics to help with running costs.

Those with deep pockets can choose between a handful of exquisitely furnished double suites spread across the main building, Paddy's former studio, and a guest house perched on a rock outside the gatehouse. Each contains original furniture and personal effects, including Paddy's battered trunk from the Travellers Club in London. Guests also have access to the Leigh Fermors' well-stocked butler's tray. Hospitality services are expertly and discreetly laid on by Aria Hotels, a company that specialises in the provision of comfortable accommodation in idiosyncratic Greek properties. Paddy and Joan would undoubtedly approve. ■

*This article could not have been written without the kind assistance of Fotis Laskaridis and Eva Soulia of Aria Hotels, Myrto Kaouki of the Benaki Museum, and members of the Mediterranean Garden Society.*

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