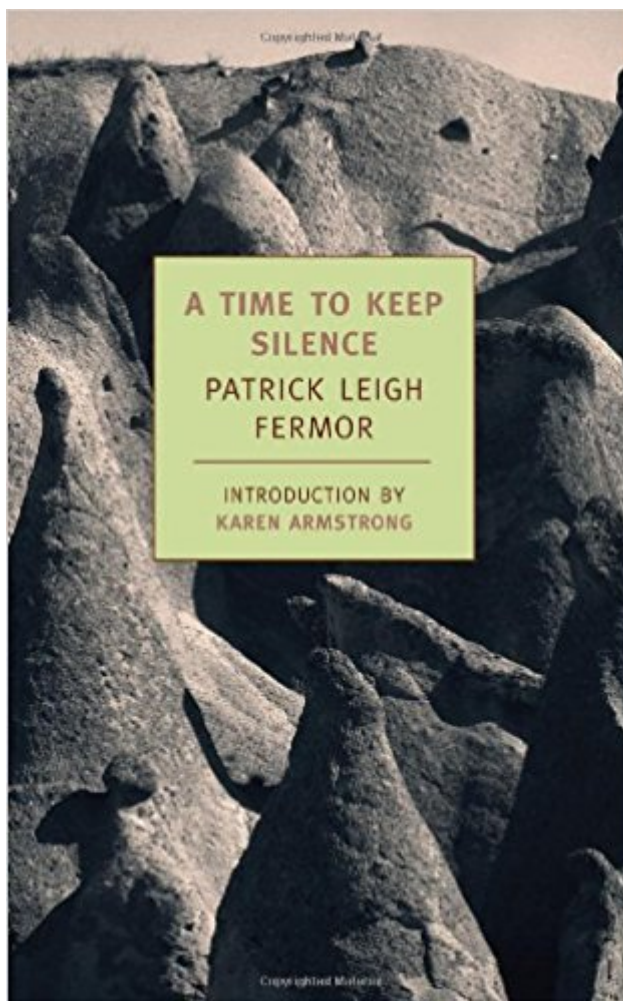


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# A Time To Keep Silence (New York Review Books Classics)



## Synopsis

While still a teenager, Patrick Leigh Fermor made his way across Europe, as recounted in his classic memoirs, *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*. During World War II, he fought with local partisans against the Nazi occupiers of Crete. But in *A Time to Keep Silence*, Leigh Fermor writes about a more inward journey, describing his several sojourns in some of Europe's oldest and most venerable monasteries. He stays at the Abbey of St. Wandrille, a great repository of art and learning; at Solesmes, famous for its revival of Gregorian chant; and at the deeply ascetic Trappist monastery of La Grande Trappe, where monks take a vow of silence. Finally, he visits the rock monasteries of Cappadocia, hewn from the stony spires of a moonlike landscape, where he seeks some trace of the life of the earliest Christian anchorites. More than a history or travel journal, however, this beautiful short book is a meditation on the meaning of silence and solitude for modern life. Leigh Fermor writes, "In the seclusion of a cell an existence whose quietness is only varied by the silent meals, the solemnity of ritual, and long solitary walks in the woods the troubled waters of the mind grow still and clear, and much that is hidden away and all that clouds it floats to the surface and can be skimmed away; and after a time one reaches a state of peace that is unthought of in the ordinary world."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Delightful|His book is not only an admirable piece of travel writing; it is also a brilliant piece

of human exploration." *The New Statesman* "Prose lapidary and evocative enough to please even the hardest skeptic." *The Washington Post* "His shortest book (and to my mind his best) its hammered terseness is a good match for the sobriety of the subject." *Anthony Lane, The New Yorker* "Fermor writes logbooks of discovery, keenly meandering through architecture, music, art, history and the minutiae of everyday life [His] erudition and courage are matched by his discerning compassion, which shapes the probing character sketches that populate his books, including *A Time to Keep Silence*." *Los Angeles Times* "A most successful attempt to portray the reactions of the man of the world (in the literal sense) when confronted with the monastic life." *Daily Telegraph (UK)* Praise for Patrick Leigh Fermor: "One of the greatest travel writers of all time" *The Sunday Times* "A unique mixture of hero, historian, traveler and writer; the last and the greatest of a generation whose like we won't see again." *Geographical* "The finest traveling companion we could ever have . . . His head is stocked with enough cultural lore and poetic fancy to make every league an adventure." *Evening Standard* If all Europe were laid waste tomorrow, one might do worse than attempt to recreate it, or at least to preserve some sense of historical splendor and variety, by immersing oneself in the travel books of Patrick Leigh Fermor." *Ben Downing, The Paris Review*

Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915-2011) was an intrepid traveler, a heroic soldier, and a writer with a unique prose style. After his stormy schooldays, followed by the walk across Europe to Constantinople that begins in *A Time of Gifts* (1977) and continues through *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), he lived and traveled in the Balkans and the Greek Archipelago. His books *Mani* (1958) and *Roumeli* (1966) attest to his deep interest in languages and remote places. In the Second World War he joined the Irish Guards, became a liaison officer in Albania, and fought in Greece and Crete. He was awarded the DSO and OBE. He lived partly in Greece in the house he designed with his wife, Joan, in an olive grove in the Mani and partly in Worcestershire. He was knighted in 2004 for his services to literature and to British-Greek relations. Karen Armstrong, a historian of religion, spent seven years in a Roman Catholic religious order; she has written about this experience in *Through the Narrow Gate* and *The Spiral Staircase*. She is also the author of many books, including *A History of God*, *The Great Transformation*, and, most recently, *The Bible: A Biography*.

I had to read this book for a book group and absolutely loved it. It's like a little

retreat that you can carry around in your pocket. Fermor describes the physical effects of being temporarily secluded in a cloistered monastery rather than the spiritual ones, but even those are very powerful, and they produce a deep effect on the reader. To his great surprise, the only regret that he ever heard from any of the monks was that they waited too long to join. Unusual in that it was written by an agnostic, it has the beauty of seeing through the eyes of a true outsider. But agnostic though he was, Fermor was a poet with a keen eye and an appreciation for love and beauty that is not sullied by cynicism. My book came via Sweden Post, and is evidently the UK version. It lacks the pompous, bland, and nearsighted introduction by Karen Armstrong (which accompanies the American version). That intro has about the same effect as trying to visit a beautiful cathedral with someone who won't stop talking. This book does not need an introduction.

Another great book by a great travel writer. This is a very quick read, but absolutely stuffed with erudition. For all but the most educated, it wouldn't hurt to read this with Wikipedia as a companion piece. As with his other travel books, the mix of architecture, history, linguistics, and an obvious personal touch lend an air of familiarity which, in the end, help give the impression that you have experienced these things yourself. I once read a review which stated this book concluded that the vow of silence and other retreats from secular life were not effective or warranted in some circumstances. In my opinion, this conclusion was not reached by the author. The opposite appears to be true - Fermor's return to secular life seemed to be more traumatic than his adjustment period during his first visit. His understanding is remarkable and serves as a good lesson to the casual reader - his hosts honestly believe they are suffering in order to atone for the sins of the world, and they ask for nothing in return.

Fermor's tales of journeys are strongest as a look into lost worlds that were either erased by war or time. In his time among the monastic orders, he acknowledges his limited perceptions and understanding of the silent lives of abbeys. His honesty about the boundaries of his understanding make the essays very readable.

I'm a big fan of Fermor's writing and this little gem of a book is a departure from the classic travel works he has given us. In this short book, Fermor describes life in several monasteries where silence defines the world of the monk. Fermor stipulates that as a guest in these places he will never achieve the level of faith and monastic practice that the monks do, but he shines a light on their world, giving the reader a glimpse of an existence we've always wondered about but rarely got

to know.

It is an incredible read that quiets the noise of the world. Wonderful to read in the evening before closing the day! If I were only fifty years younger I would venture to follow in Fermor's footsteps. The world is a very different place today, albeit still dangerous, he had the invincible spirit of the young and followed his dream. Successfully, I might add. Great read!

Actually the fourth time I've purchased this book as I keep giving it away but want to still have a copy at home. It is a charming and seductive presentation of a life living in the reality that underlies the distractions we give our lives to.

because it's so beautiful. Lovely, inspiring, all too brief. I want to know much more about this man and these monasteries. I tried to read Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* because I'm interested in monastic life and I couldn't get through it. Leigh Fermor, on the other hand, isn't on a faith journey. He's a writer looking for a quiet place to work. Yet he manages to tell me more about why one might choose to leave the world and become a monk than I got from Thomas Merton.

Patrick Leigh Fermor needed quiet to write so he retreated to a French monastery, and thereby hangs the tale . . . It is a wonderful meditation and description of monastic life with addenda expanding his basic subject. Fermor did not begin with an allegiance to monastic life, and I don't think he ended with one--but his appreciation is another thing. I read his book and came away with complete admiration for the lives of the monks; a great desire to participate in their services; and a respect for their motives. All of Fermor's books are worth both the read and then the study they provoke, but if one does due diligence, they may take time. This is a little easier than most. I read it in one day, and will read it again. It is easy to recommend this book as a rewarding exploration of the holy calling as practiced by monks, and a melodic Fermor read.

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