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My hero: Patrick Leigh Fermor

'At a time when men were defined by their war, Paddy's DSO shone with a dazzling lustre'

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Patrick Leigh Fermor: his books had a devoted following. Photograph courtesy of Joan Leigh Fermor

Patrick Leigh Fermor once seriously annoyed Richard Burton at a London dinner table with Elizabeth Taylor. Burton was in the mood for quoting Shakespeare but the second he stopped, Paddy would cap the quote and go on for several more lines. Finally Burton kicked back his chair and said "Elizabeth, we're leaving!" Their distraught host accompanied his star guests to the door, urging them not to mind Paddy, who was, after all, a war hero. "F*** war heroes!" roared Burton.

Yet at a time when men were defined by their war, Paddy's DSO shone with a dazzling lustre. In the spring of 1944, he led the Anglo-Cretan team that captured the German general Heinrich Kreipe and whisked him away from occupied Crete under the very noses of the enemy. There was no doubting his courage. One of the young men who had served with him recalled: "While everybody in our company pretended to be a *palikari* [a brave warrior], you radiated a genuine fearlessness." He also possessed a heroic determination. The Kreipe operation nearly ended in disaster, and it succeeded because Paddy refused to acknowledge that possibility. In Budapest decades later he went looking for a sick friend, and spent two days trailing through every nursing home and clinic in the city till he found him. He wrote with painful slowness, going

over every sentence again and again, often discouraged to the point of despair - yet he never gave up.

But what of the famous third volume of his trilogy, that he never finished? Did he give up on that? Not really, but in his 90s he must have known that he no longer had the energy to construct the flights of imagination and memory that had earned *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water* such a devoted following. But he never admitted, to himself or anyone else, that it would never be published. If anyone asked he would reply, "I'm plugging away" - and he was.

. *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure* by Artemis Cooper is published by John Murray.

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