



A Time to Keep Silence

Patrick Leigh Fermor , Karen Armstrong (Introduction)

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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."

A Time to Keep Silence Details

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From Reader Review A Time to Keep Silence for online ebook

Bob says

In a scant 100 pages including multiple forewords and afterwords, Fermor visits four monasteries in the early 1950s (three active in France, the other a millennium-abandoned in Turkey) and writes about the monastic life and its settings.

His beautiful and invigorating prose makes all his work extraordinary - the subject hardly matters. This one has added appeal for enthusiasts of esoteric vocabulary; both that of "conventual" architecture (a word learned in the course of reading) and the terms for the many rituals that punctuate the monks' days. After its publication, some abbot wrote to the Times Literary Supplement or its equivalent, critiquing Fermor either for having presumed to write on the subject at all, or with relatively brief experience of it. Fermor still sounds apologetic about this in an afterword written 30 years later and far be it from me to accuse him of abdicating some kind of writer's responsibility but it does seem that in a work which is really about the writing and not some sort of magazine article purporting to report on a subject, that is scarcely an issue. His sympathies are clearly with those who choose that life.

Josh Friedlander says

PLF's two great gifts - boundless, obscure knowledge, and an infectious enthusiasm - are brought to bear on the sombre beauty of monastic life, in France and (now abandoned) in Cappadocia. Even if you think you're not interested in the topic, Fermor will rope you in.

Diane says

This book was not what I expected. Other authors had referenced it, and I thought it was going to be a 96-page meditation about the power of silence and how rejuvenating it can be to take time away from the hassles of modern life.

While there was some of that, most of the book was about the history and routine of venerable monasteries in France and Turkey. In the 1950s, Patrick Leigh Fermor had wanted to find somewhere cheap and peaceful where he could write, so he became a guest at the Abbey of St. Wandrille in Normandy. He had to learn the routine of the monks and obey their rule of silence. His first few days and nights there he struggled to adapt: "I had asked for quiet and solitude and peace, and here it was; all I had to do now was to write. But an hour passed, and nothing happened."

Fermor felt restless in his solitary room and had insomnia. Then he spent several days where he slept almost constantly. Finally, he was revived and felt refreshed: "No demands, once I had emerged from that flood of sleep, were made upon my nervous energy: there were no automatic drains, such as conversation at meals, small talk, catching trains, or the hundred anxious trivialities that poison everyday life. Even the major causes of guilt and anxiety had slid away into some distant limbo and not only failed to emerge in the small hours as tormentors but appeared to have lost their dragonish validity. This new dispensation left nineteen hours a day of absolute and god-like freedom."

Fermor spends many pages sharing the history of the Abbey and of some of the monks who live there, and describing their daily routine. Fermor also visits three other monasteries: Solesmes in France; Cappadocia in

Turkey; and the ascetic Trappist monastery of La Grande Trappe in France.

While the information was interesting, it was not the insight that I had hoped for. If you do seek out this book, I recommend finding the 2007 edition which has a thoughtful introduction by Karen Armstrong on the significance of monasteries in history: "Very few of us can be contemplative nuns or monks, but we can learn to appreciate their way of experiencing the sacred and integrate something of this gentle, silent discipline into our own lives."

Jacob says

When one thinks of Wisconsin, the Dalai Lama (probably) doesn't come to mind. Imagine His Reincarnatedness milking a cow or drunkenly cheering whatever our football team is called, cheesehead clashing with his robes. But it's true! The Wisconsin bit, I mean: there's a Buddhist monastery near Madison, about an hour's drive from where I live, and the Dalai Lama stops by occasionally to crash on their couch.

(Man, that guy needs to get a job, or else our new Lord Governor might not let him back into the state. Wisconsin: ~~Open for Business~~ Bring Money!)

I discovered this monastery, Deer Park Buddhist Center, back in the spring of 2006. At the time, I wanted to run away and become a monk. I'm still not sure why, really--I mean, the economy was somewhat decent, and Sarah Palin hadn't yet ridden down from the frozen North upon her gilded war-grizzly to rape and pillage the Lower 48, so things weren't *that* bad yet--but I had this great, deep desire to hide away from the world and to dedicate my life to silence and solitude and poverty and, yeah, even chastity (which in those days was hardly a struggle). I wanted to disappear, but not *completely*--I'm too hopelessly incompetent to survive as a forest-dwelling hermit--so I figured finding a place with like-minded people would work better. But not a *Christian* place; I was hopelessly agnostic at that point, and had no interest in dedicating my life to a god I wasn't sure existed--and although I wasn't spiritual either, I figured Buddhism was worth a try. Imagine my surprise when I found a Buddhist monastery in my state, and less than a hundred miles away. The Dalai Lama had already come and gone, but I noticed on their visitor's page that another monk, possibly a lama but maybe not, was visiting soon, and was holding a class on peace or serenity or whatever Buddhism was about. Seemed like an opportunity, so I decided to visit...

I got lost on the way there. I got lost on the way back. Even when I found the place, I was still lost: somehow it hadn't occurred to me, in all the time I spent thinking about visiting, that I should probably learn a thing or two about Buddhism before showing up. In between all the bowing and the kneeling and the meditating and the listening to the tiny old Tibetan-or-maybe-Nepali monk speak about I-can't-remember-what, I was completely, shamefully, hopelessly, *embarrassingly* lost. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't belong there.

Monasteries: apparently not for me.

Not so for Patrick Leigh Fermor. L. F., the Dalai Lama of travel writing (and the New York Review of Books' favorite Buddha), may have felt a little lost and confused when he visited the Abbey of St. Wandrille de Fontanelle in Northern France, when he journeyed from Solesmes to La Grande Trappe, and when he went to the abandoned rock monasteries of Cappadocia while travelling through Turkey--but while I slunk away in embarrassment and never went back, *he* wrote this beautiful little book instead.

And what a book. [A Time to Keep Silence](#) is an exploration of some of Europe's oldest monasteries, a

history of some of the monastic orders and their ways of life, and a meditation on the nature of silence and solitude--all in 96 pages. The stark, almost brutal beauty of the places and lives Leigh Fermor describes is almost--*almost*--enough to make me reconsider my fear of monasteries, but I would probably benefit more from rereading (and rereading again, and again, and again) this little book. And the rest of Patrick Leigh Fermor's travel writing. Most of it's been published by the New York Review of Books, so it's not like I need an excuse...

Scott says

By the mid 1950s, Patrick Leigh Fermor was living in France, drinking abundantly, enjoying the company of friends, and reading everything he could get his hands on – all of which severely distracted him from the real task at hand: writing a book. In ‘search for somewhere quiet and cheap to stay’, he retreated to the abbey of St Wandrille, a Benedictine foundation in Normandy known for its hospitality, the purity of its plainsong, and most importantly, its vow of silence. The book that emerged from this sojourn, *A Time to Keep Silence* (1957), may not be the book Leigh Fermor intended to write when he entered the abbey; but this short, sober meditation, drawn mostly from letters he wrote during his stays at St Wandrille and other monastic communities, remains a favourite with many readers who delight in its gentle insights on the rigours and rewards of the cenobitic life.

‘A novice advanced with a silver ewer and a basin; the Abbot poured a little water over our hands, a towel was offered, and our welcome, according to Benedictine custom, was complete’. In spite of this warm welcome, Leigh Fermor can’t at first shake a painful feeling of living in a catacomb: silence and insomnia torment him, followed by regret and boredom. After a few days, though, his mind begins to clear of worries, his system starts to dry out, the distractions of life outside the abbey’s walls gently drift away; and refreshed by deep, uninterrupted sleep, he finds that his work has become a pleasure. For the next couple of months he lives among the abbey’s residents, rising with them in the early morning hours appointed for the Divine Office, dining with them in silence while the lector reads aloud in Latin from the *Martyrology*, and studying extensively in the abbey’s excellent library (even calling occasionally for books from *Enfer*, a depository of works considered ‘damaging to monastic life’ – alas, he names no titles).

A short time later, seeking a more severe monastic experience, Leigh Fermor takes a ‘plunge into the depths of a Trappist monastery’ known for its ‘fierce asceticism, cloistered incarceration ... abstinence, fasting, humiliation, the hair shirt, the scourge’. The dip leaves him a little more bewildered than refreshed. Unimpressed by the Cistericians’ emphasis on physical asceticism and intellectual simplicity, he goes so far as to describe his stay there as fruitful only insofar as he took ‘masochistic enjoyment’ in its ‘sad charm’. A third monastic visit, this time to the abandoned subterranean churches and hermitages of Cappadocia, likewise proves almost as perplexing as inspiring. Unable to determine who exactly the former inhabitants were or what their mode of spiritual exercise entailed, he at least finds some philological satisfaction when he notes that, judging from the inscriptions on the frescoes, the 11th-century community there pronounced Greek in much the same way as a modern Athenian.

While *A Time to Keep Silence* is a book about the quiet, contemplative life, it is also to a surprising extent a book about words and their use. During his long walks with the Benedictine abbot, Leigh Fermor confesses to feeling a ‘spasm of delight’ whenever the abbot slips into the ‘Latin of the Vatican’. This delight in arcane, foreign, and unusual words (*noctambulism*, *giaour*, *villeggiatura* are a few I had to look up) reverberates throughout the book in a way that would have made Corvo green. ‘*Dans le monde hors de nos murs, on fait un grand abus de la parole*’, the abbot opines. Leigh Fermor may have nodded in agreement at the time, but this book, like much of his work, is nevertheless best read with a thick dictionary and a set of

encyclopaedias at your side.

‘The secret of monastic life, that entire abdication of the will and the enthronement of the will of God which solves all problems and trials and turns a life of such acute outward suffering into one of peace and joy, is a thing that is given to few outside a cloister fully to comprehend’. Leigh Fermor never claims to have been one of the lucky few. Even thirty years after writing the book and after countless other visits to monastic communities scattered across Europe and the New World, he felt himself ‘unqualified still to deliver a verdict on the conditions and possibilities of life in that hushed and wintry solitude’. What he does come to understand, though, is his own ‘capacity for solitude’ coupled with an undeniable sorrow for the sight of empty monasteries. Not exactly earth-moving revelations. And to be sure, *A Time to Keep Silence* isn’t a profound spiritual autobiography, or even a particularly religious book. But it does offer a brief, interesting look at the world of mid-century monasticism; and in the end, you’ll probably take away not only a greater sympathy for those who have chosen to pursue the conventual life, but also a deeper appreciation of Patrick Leigh Fermor’s geniality, humanity, and wit.

João says

Patrick Leigh Fermor, numa daquelas fases de bloqueio mental, em que não consegue escrever, decide passar umas semanas de "desintoxicação" no convento da abadia beneditina de Saint Wandrille. Nos primeiros dias, na sua cela, sente-se deprimido e angustiado, com o isolamento, a falta de distrações, a vida rigorosa e austera, as regras bem definidas que mesmo os visitantes devem cumprir. Mas depois começa a dormir bem e a acordar cheio de energia. E começa a sentir-se livre das responsabilidades do dia-a-dia, dos compromissos sociais, dos pensamentos e cogitações que se sucediam antes, ininterruptamente, na sua cabeça. E começa a apreciar a calma e boa educação dos monges, a beleza dos bosques que rodeiam o mosteiro, e o silêncio, que só é interrompido pelos sons da Natureza. E começa a escrever, de novo, e com prazer! E tão simples e óbvio parece tudo, que nos dá vontade de experimentar também, de entrar, por uns tempos, para um convento beneditino ou budista...

Outro dos motivos de interesse do livro é a resposta que o autor nos dá para a pergunta que se nos coloca a todos: o que levará estes homens e mulheres a aceitarem uma vida dura de oração e trabalho e isolamento, abdicando dos "prazeres" da vida, do amor, do casamento e do sexo? Se os beneditinos levam uma vida rigorosa, os trapistas, que o autor visita a seguir, são ainda mais "radicais" e despojados, mas ambos o fazem pela mesma razão que, obviamente, não irei aqui revelar. É que vale mesmo a pena ler o livro!

Geoff says

~~~~~

*...the troubled waters of the mind...*

Here’s a cathedral: a rocky stream flowing from distant hidden sources in the blue mountains, mountain-cold and crisp on my reddening ankles which bend to accommodate footholds among the slippery stones, I am little more than a child and my swimsuit is speckled with spray, the light drifts down through the bending trees (a verdant heliocanopy where breeze plays and sings, there it is mirrored and turned to shards where the water breaks around the bank), and have you ever smelled the wind filtered through mountain-forest and swept across pastures where dung piles and hay bales perfume its breath, its freshness made pungent and

then herbed with leaf sap, so that the many smells settle into just this one memory's moment? Here's a monastery: that river runs by an old farmhouse long abandoned, where the one who begot the one who begot myself used to rest in evenings, when cricket songs ascended and aching muscles were reprieved- the walls are logs from the surrounding forest, and have been shaped and made by the same winds that sing and the same soil that brings vegetables and grasses and makes the animals and the men. So the house is made of the sun and the water and the earth and so are the men. Now rooms stand empty and open to a kind of reclamation, shattered window panes and weeds through the floorboards, vines on rotting wood and long tendrils on the skeletal stairs. I am little more than a man and here is a picture (let your vision traverse the landscape like a wind): across the pastureland and across the stream where as a child I waded looking for crayfish and minnows and across the rising blue hills late afternoon light is ladled into the crevices of the forested mountains, and bare rock stands out at places, bleached and ancient like bone. The one uniting factor in these words attempting at a recollection should be this: only death is silent. Other than that the wind makes music in tall grasses, trees creak with breeze, leaves are tongues and crickets sing infinite timeless sad accompaniment, stones sizzle and boom, and all rivers whisper of their travels, hide choruses in their basins and falls, even blood in the veins is a resonant hymn and the spinning of the earth is an aria that you can locate only in memories and deliberately stilled moments...

*...and much that is hidden away and all that clouds it floats to the surface and can be skimmed away...*

~~~~~

Christopher McCaffery says

This is just a stunning, slim volume which, like every encounter with Fermor's prose, leaves me wanting more and with the need to tell everyone who will listen that this book is beautiful. I have no complaints, and the lists of friends and acquaintances who need to read this book is exhaustive.

Kelly says

Full photo-illustrated review at my blog, Shoulda Coulda Woulda Books.

Patrick Leigh Fermor is best known for adventure. First, his incredible journey backpacking across Europe in the dawning years of Europe's best effort so far to blow itself to smithereens, as he recorded the last vestiges of a world dying and the restless busyness of the one being born. And second, his escapades during the war itself working with the Greek resistance (his stint as the ringleader of the band who captured a German general has even been made into a movie, wonderfully dramatically called *Ill Met By Moonlight*). Indeed, his biographer, Artemis Cooper, could come up with no better title for his story than *An Adventure*. I wouldn't have titled it anything different myself.

As is fitting for this subject matter, his writing is lush and multilayered and memorable. Although of course, the most fascinating layers were always the threads of the man himself woven into the story as he created his Self for his readers and for himself. One of the things I loved so much about *A Time of Gifts* was that he seemed to be indulging in an exercise that benefited him as much as the reader, but without it ever feeling confessional or like I was inappropriately attending someone's therapy sessions- he actually withheld more than I would have liked at times. But it always felt like he was being open with me... which doesn't always mean the same thing as truth- not if you're a writer of Fermor's caliber.

Not everyone likes that sort of thing. I understand that. But he's got something else up his sleeve to keep you hooked, which is the other thing, the primary thing I loved about my experience of Fermor: his capacity for what I can only call awe. I've read very few things more genuine or affectingly felt than when he circles off a space for the divine. When he was taken with something, it shone off the pages in a way that could make a plotless description seem like you'd just been momentarily swept away entirely into a tale older than anyone could remember. His literary and historical resources are vast, his mind constantly working, which means these wonderful flights of fancy could go on for pages as he followed the thought down his seemingly never ending path of ideas. To me, more than the boundless charm, more than the stories, this divine sense of joy and otherness is the most precious thing he offers.

And *that* is what *A Time to Keep Silence* is about, ultimately. This piece is a tripartite essay, with a coda. Each essay covers Fermor's sojourns to different monastic communities during the 1950s. While this sounds like typical Fermor travelogue fare, this volume actually differs greatly from his most famous series. This book is not about him almost at all. And when it is, it isn't to point the finger at himself, but generally serves to illustrate the point he is making or shed light on the place where he is.* It's a surprisingly modern collection of short essays that would not be out of place as a series in *The Atlantic*.

The first essay covers his writing retreat to the great Benedictine Abbey of St. Wandrille in Normandy, the second his stay at the Abbey of La Trappe, the origin point of the very different Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance. The third is something quite different and covers his journey to Turkey to explore the remains of a long abandoned group of Christian temples, churches and decorated hermitages hewn into the desert rock of Cappadocia many centuries before. Through all of them, Fermor seeks to understand the monastic way of life and ultimately, what would motivate someone to leave behind the world and everything in it for another world that may or may not exist.

Fermor's intellect is challenged by his attempt to understand the seemingly unforgiving philosophy and harsh way of life of the Cistercian order. His imagination is captured by the fading paintings of Christ and the saints so incongruously leaping to life inside darkened caves the Turkish desert. But it is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the gentle, cultivated, scholarly Benedictines who capture his heart and come the closest to helping him to understand the monastic way of life. He starts his monastic inquiry with them at St. Wandrille and it is with them we find him three years later in the afterword, having not only revisited the abbey several times in the intervening years, but having apparently become the regular guest of the three revived Benedictine cloisters of England as well.

Although it is clear he comes to appreciate the monks, Fermor does not start off doing so. On his first stay with the Benedictines, Fermor has serious difficulty with adjusting to the strict routine and isolation that comes with their lives. (Extensive metaphors about walking corpses are used- I suspect many of them crafted after he first ran out of his emergency-extensive- stash of alcohol. Dark comparisons to the evil monks of Ann Radcliffe's Gothic imagination I suspect not-coincidentally shortly followed.) But eventually he undergoes a change. At first it is because he sees the benefits of monastic life that many of us might expect- regular and plentiful sleep, a removal of distractions, sharpened focus, encouragement to think less selfishly, exercise. But then, after the shock treatments to the body are complete, a true imaginative expansion of thought occurs that allows him to see not only practical benefit of this life, but also its beauty:

"The chanting became steadily more complex, led by a choir of monks who stood in the middle of the aisle, their voices limning chants that black Gregorian block-notes, with their comet-like tails and Moorish-looking arabesques, wove and reweave across the threads of the antique four line clef on the pages of their graduals. Then, with a quiet solemnity, the monks streamed into the cloister in the wake of a jewelled cross. Slowly they proceeded through the cylinders of gold into which the Gothic tracery cut the sunlight. Their footfalls made no noise and only the ring of the crozier on the flags the the clanging of the censer could be heard across the Gregorian. The procession reached the shadow-side, pausing a few minutes while the sixty voices sailed out over the tree-tops; and then back through the church door, where arcs and parentheses of

smoke from the burning gums, after the sunlit quadrangle, deepened the vaulted shadows..."

As you see, what many readers love about Fermor's writing is still intact. While journalistic in nature where appropriate, his classic ability to paint a picture has lost nothing and is still capable of sweeping his audience away along with him when he is transported by discovery. Although he has difficulty reaching his place of supernatural awe with the Cistercians (which makes sense- although I admire him for seeing that as his own failing and not theirs), he finds a similar place of joy in the still lingering, still beautiful mysteries of Cappadocia:

"The churches can be numbered in the dozens, and the neighboring hermitages by the score. Every second cone is chambered and honeycombed till it is as hollow sometimes from peak to base as a rotten tooth. Occasionally, where the rock is thin, the brittle sides have fallen away to expose the painted prophets and seraphim to the open air. But most of them, posturing in stiff heiratic attitudes, are hidden in the cold half-darkness. Saints Constantine and Helen supporting the True Cross between them, St. John Prodromos bearing his haloed head in a charger, while an obliging curve in the foliage of a miniature tree redeems from scandal the nakedness of St. Onouphrios. The personage who appears most frequently-for Cappadocia was his birthplace- is our own island-patron, St. George. Armored, red-clocked, heavily helmed, and reproduced ad infinitum, he cranes from the saddle of his white charger to drive his lance through the serpentine coils of innumerable dragons. Eternal twilight surrounds these prancings and death-throes. But each time we we emerged, the same incandescent glare was beating down. Out of the shadowy churches, we were once more in the kingdom of accidie, in the land of the basilisk and the cockatrice, of Panic terror and the Noonday Devil..."

Beyond this, Fermor's prose offers other attractions. He is more focused in his writing than I've ever seen, and his descriptions of each place are lucid and thoroughly well-intentioned, even when offered temptation not to be (oh man, those Trappists would have tempted me to some less than kind adjectives for sure). And his historical anecdotes are well-chosen, colorful, and memorable as always. (Did you know that the founder of the Cistercian order was originally a libertine of a courtier in the court of Marie de Medici who became a zealot, harsh religious reformer after he saw the chopped off head of his mistress in her coffin? Explains a lot!)

There are gifts enough in this slim volume, then. But I think ultimately what touched me was thinking about the underlying question: Why was he doing this at all? Of all subjects he could have chosen? On the snap judgment face of it, it does seem odd and out of character for our typically dashing hero. Why does the leader of dashing nighttime raids and haver of hijinx with teenage girls in prewar Bavaria, who admittedly isn't sure that he believes in God, suddenly seek out a cloister? And then why does it he do it again and again and again later on? In a throwaway comment early in the book, he talks about the "quiet and healing spell" that he experienced at St. Wandrille once its lifestyle forced him to stop self-medicating with alcohol (joking from earlier aside, he comments on the "the usual flood" he drinks daily) and constant socializing and movement. It reminds me of all the walking clubs that formed after the Great War, about the interest in Eastern meditation traditions that would follow in the 1960s, and about all the counter-revolutionary movements that cycle through after upheaval. With a moment of thought, his fascination with the way that the various abbeys and orders he visited rose from the dead over the centuries** becomes understandable and his repeated insistence on reviving centuries-old English guilt for the destruction of the great abbeys of the British Isles doesn't seem so strange.

I don't know if he ultimately found the certainty about the divine he never seemed comfortable with, but he did find something. And so, I think, will readers of this book.

*The one exception to this being his sometimes melodramatic worry about the fact that he is a guest of people who have devoted their lives to a God that he isn't quite sure that he believes in. Which is always

funny to me that people think that Catholic monks or priests have never encountered people who doubt their faith- as if they don't doubt it within themselves, to start with.

******Seriously, the story of St. Wandrille is pretty amazing. Being situated in Normandy will ensure you always live in very interesting times- the same order of brothers lived through the recruitment for William's invasion of England and through the landings on D-Day. You guys. History! And the brief notes on the English Benedictine abbeys thrown in in the afterword were incredible on their own- did anyone else know that Napoleon III, Empress Eugenie and their son are buried at a Benedictine abbey in Hampshire? Where their son was only brought after dying for England in their South African wars? Is there a book out there that's just about the lives of leaders after they lose power or go into exile? I need to read it if so. Fascinating.

Sunny says

A very neat short book in which the author describes a few monasteries in around Europe / Asia and he also describes the lives of the monks who lived there and what that was like. Fermor stayed at the monasteries themselves so got a living version of what it was like to be there so was able to describe in intricate detail the spiritual magic of the place. In many ways the book reminded me of the challenge the west sometimes has with Islam being a religion which is circa 1400 years old. Some of these monasteries were built in and before the 1400s also. Much of what Fermor describes would seem too many in the west to be extreme asceticism which to me, as a Muslim anyway, didn't seem too alien in fact. The contemplative silence, the fasting, the self-denial, the focus on God and the attempted focus on prayer and good is not something totally alien to devout Muslims in the world (I couldn't tick all those boxes unfortunately :(In places the book was beautifully descriptive and there was a beautiful simplicity to Fermor's writing style that is very refreshing. He has taken a potentially very dull subject and brought it to life beautifully. The book raised an interesting point about the triple unction of the soul which is worth mentioning. The first is the lightness and buoyancy that the soul gets by shedding all of its earthly possessions, vanities and ambitions. The second is the positive effect on the soul from the praying for all of humanity at large and the third and arguably the most important is the benefits to the soul from the prayers the monks administer at multiple times during the day for God. Very short book and worth a read.

Jeremy says

I'm most familiar with Patrick Leigh Fermor through his charming, erudite memoirs of travel through Europe. *A Time to Keep Silence* is a fundamentally different sort of book, concerning time he spent as a guest in various monastic orders throughout Europe.

The tone of this short book is, by nature of its subject, contemplative, and he does a brilliant job not only of elucidating the obscure histories of these monasteries, but also of conveying the ambiance and inherent peacefulness they present to a modern, secular sensibility: the sheer otherness of their routines, rhythms and missions.

It's a lovely recollection of an ancient, vanishing way of life, which is the kind of theme that Fermor seems to specialize in.

Miguel says

É, tanto quanto sei, a primeira edição em PT de um dos nomes maiores da literatura de viagens em língua inglesa. Um verdadeiro clássico. Trata-se de uma das obras mais conhecidas de PLF, que reúne relatos de estadias do autor em mosteiros na zona francesa da Normandia, bem como da visita às ruínas de um mosteiro cristão na Capadócia, abandonado há cerca de mil anos.

A escrita de PLF é de uma qualidade extraordinária, a sua capacidade de descrever características artísticas e arquitectónicas, de contar a história e as histórias associadas aos lugares, de relatar as suas impressões e as suas experiências pessoais, tudo qualidades que tornam a leitura uma experiência de luxo.

Destaque para a tradução de Alda Rodrigues, que mantém o texto a um nível de qualidade literária muito elevado.

Justin Evans says

A few quick little bits about monasteries, one Benedictine, one Trappist, and some monasteries carved out of stone in Cappadocia. This may not seem like much, and it's not, but it's also perfectly done; Fermor's prose (this is my first encounter) is wonderful and wonderfully English (syntax! clauses! subordination!). You get a bit of local color, a bit of the history of monasticism, and of the individual monasteries in question, and a bit of meditation on what a monastery could mean to a twentieth century visitor.

Just as importantly, Fermor treats the monks with respect but not unquestioning awe. He's obviously a little uncomfortable at La Trappe, which seems reasonable--whereas the Benedictines offer splendor, an obvious path back to the history of Christianity and, indeed, Western Civilization, the Trappists seem to offer little of anything other than suffering. But even then he's willing to see that there could be some attraction.

Karen Armstrong's preface is solid, too--she avoids the vaguely new-agey 'let's all just love one another' stuff that sometimes ruins her writing.

I only wish there'd been some pictures, particularly of Cappadocia, which is on the cover.

Jim says

With every book by Patrick Leigh Fermor that I read, I become saddened that there are so few left for me to read, especially as what remains were written so many years ago. Fermor's effortless erudition and flights of verbal fancy are without equal in our time. Take, as an example, this description of a Cistercian service at La Grande Trappe:

In church there was a kind of minstrels' gallery from which the guests, like Moslem ladies in a zenana, gazed down at the Trappists. The Victorian Gothic architecture of the church had none of the Romantic splendour of Solesmes; it was a great, dark north-Oxford nightmare, a grey sepulchre in the depths of which, hour upon hour, the chanting monks stood or knelt. The glaucous light was drained of colour. Fathoms below, columns of beard and brown home-spun, were the foreshortened lay-brothers. Beyond, their white habits and black scapulars covered by voluminous cowls, evolved the choir-monks. Each topiariied head was poised, as it were, on three cylinders of white fog: the enveloped body flanked by two sleeves so elongated and tubular that their mouths touched the ground, flipping and swinging, when the monks were in motion, like the ends of elephants' trunks.

Ostensibly, **A Time to Keep Silence** is about visits to four monastic communities over a three-year period in the 1950s: St Wandrille de Fontenelle, Solesmes, La Grande Trappe, and finally, the remains of the Byzantine tufa rock monasteries of Cappadocia in present-day Turkey. Fermor provides some interesting comparisons between the Benedictine (St Wandrille and Solesme) and Cistercian (La Grande Trappe) orders of Catholic monks and the former Byzantine monks.

I was astonished when I came to the end of this book in something less than an hour and a half. The concluding "Postscript," which covers the remaining monasteries in Britain, expresses profound regret that so little remained after the ravages of Henry VIII of what Fermor considers to be a profound and viable religious life completely divorced from the noise and distractions of the 20th century.

Hadrian says

A Time to Keep Silence is a short book, but that does not mean it should be read quickly. It is slow and poetic, and Fermor's style is attentive and respectful. He takes a slow tour of three monasteries - two in France, one in Cappadocia in what is now Turkey. He is alienated at first by the silence - he thinks it silent like a tomb - but eventually he begins to have some grasp, if not total understanding, of the silent devotions which takes place here, and how such a life so alien to our modern existence could continue. But I'll let him do the talking.

But here, in the Abbey's boreal shadows, there was never a smile or a frown. No seismic shock of hilarity or anger or fear could ever, I felt, have disturbed the tranquil geography of those monastic features. Their eyelids were always downcast; and, if now and then they were raised, no treacherous glint appeared, nothing but a sedulously cultivated calmness, withdrawal and mansuetude and occasionally an expression of remote and burnt-out melancholy. The muted light in the church suspended a filament between us, reproducing the exact atmosphere of an early seventeenth-century Spanish studio in which — tonsured, waxen, austere and exsanguinous — were bowed in prayer the models of Zurbarán and El Greco. Not for nothing had these painters followed so closely after St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross, and so faithfully portrayed the external stigmata of monastic obedience, prayer, meditation, mortification and mystical experiment — the traces left by the soul's dark night, by the scaling of heavenly mountains and the exploration of interior mansions.
