

MOUNT ATHOS

A PILGRIMAGE, 1969



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Mrs Loch's castle

Prologue

At last we reached the end of the trail at the beginning of the Athos peninsula, where we would take the ferry in the morning. We were the only campers, and I think the old man in charge of the site was quite glad to have someone to chat to; unfortunately he spoke no English or even German. We did manage to extract a promise that he would alert us when the ferry arrived at the quayside. But what time would that be? Different people gave us different times – seven o'clock, eight o'clock, nine o'clock...

As we cooked and ate our supper, we admired the huge medieval tower close by. We later discovered that an English lady, a Mrs Loch, lived there in solitary splendour with her ancient Greek housemaid. Apparently the village nearby was not an ancient Greek village but a settlement established in the 1920s for refugees from Turkey, for the new Turkish state expelled from their lands the Greek Christians who had lived there for centuries – at least, they expelled those they hadn't already massacred. The Greeks responded by expelling all their Muslim citizens; it was the largest movement of peoples in modern Europe prior to World War II.

These unfortunate exiles had not been settled here for long when there was a massive earthquake, which destroyed their homes, killed and injured many. There was a generous international response, especially from the Quakers – hence the arrival of Dr and Mrs Loch to minister to the wounded. They had stayed on, bought the castle, and lived there until eventually Dr Loch died. He had written a book on Mount Athos, which was published by his widow.

It had been quite an exciting day, and we collapsed into bed exhausted – but it was too cold to sleep properly. Next morning we were up early so as to be ready at whatever time the ferry came. We packed our bags, and at 6.30 we were just about to start breakfast when the Old Man arrived shouting “*KAIKE! KAIKE!*” and waving in the direction of the pier. We had just time to grab our bags and run.

The boat set off with much shouting and fussing from the crew, and as we headed along the peninsula the sun began to light up the hills and we got our first glimpse of the monasteries. I was frozen and exhausted, and there was nowhere to sit. However, I discovered what appeared to be a heap of tarpaulins and sank down gratefully upon it. Sank down surprisingly far. I was just dozing off when a member of the crew spotted me and began to scream abuse. A young passenger explained in excellent English that the ferry brought with it loaves of freshly baked bread to be delivered to each of the monasteries. I had just squashed the day’s supply of bread for the entire peninsula.



Mount Athos

Our destination, Mount Athos, is the easternmost of the three “legs” of the Chalkidiki peninsula in north-eastern Greece. It is about fifty kilometres (thirty miles)

long. At its end is the mountain itself; its steep, forested slopes rise to over 2000 metres (6,500 feet).



Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos

According to legend, the Blessed Virgin was sailing with St John to visit Lazarus in Cyprus, when their ship was blown off course and they were forced to land on the peninsula. She was so overwhelmed by its beauty that she blessed it and asked her Son to make it her garden. A voice from heaven was heard saying: “Let this place be your inheritance and your garden, a paradise and a haven of salvation for those seeking to be saved.”

Monks have lived here since at least the time of Constantine the Great. In the Middle Ages they worked out a *modus vivendi* with the Muslims and survived various attacks by Catholic crusaders. There is a variety of communities, from huge monasteries down to hermit cells. By 1900 there were over seven thousand monks living on the peninsula. It survived intact the Balkan Wars, World War I, World War II (when it was placed under the personal protection of the Führer), and even the very bloody Greek civil war that followed it.

The Athos peninsula is a self-governing community within the state of Greece. It is administered by an assembly consisting of representatives from the twenty major

monasteries based at Karyes; the Greek Republic is represented by a civil governor. There is no official land route via the isthmus; access is only allowed by boat, from Ouranoupoli on the mainland to the port of Dafni, whence you travel by bus up to the capital.



Karakalou Monastery, Mount Athos

Several well-known westerners have written of their visits to Mount Athos. Patrick Leigh Fermor, later a war hero following his capture of a German general in Crete (see *Ill Met by Moonlight*), celebrated his twentieth birthday there in 1935; his account, written at the time, was only published in 2014. The diarist James Lees-Milne visited it with the artist Derek Hill in 1977.

Access is severely restricted. Traditionally, “no female creature or beardless person” may ascend the Holy Mountain. Of course several silly women have obtained a brief notoriety by smuggling themselves in, disguised as men. But even for men, it is not easy. You must apply in writing well beforehand and obtain the necessary documentation.

Unlike the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church is not one unified entity but consists of fourteen independent national churches, mainly among the Slavic nations, Romania, Greece and the Arab Christians. In this it is quite like the churches of the

Anglican Communion. It has no pope, though the Patriarch of Constantinople has a “primacy of honour”, rather like the Archbishop of Canterbury.

After the fall of the western empire, the two halves of the Church grew further and further apart, culminating in the Great Schism of 1054. Since then relations between the two halves have varied between bad and very bad. The Last Gospel that used to be read at all Catholic Masses before Vatican Two was introduced as a prayer for the conversion of Russia – not from Communism but from Orthodox Christianity!

Preparations

In 1969 I was teaching Modern Languages at the Salesian College in Cowley, the industrial part of Oxford. It was the Catholic boys’ grammar school for the Oxford area, and most of our pupils were the sons either of Irish factory workers, or of World War Two Polish exiles, or (of course) of native English Catholics.

During my last year as an undergraduate, in my Anglican days, I had boarded at Pusey House, the hostel and study centre for High Church Anglicans. I still had friends there, one of whom was Father Bernard Costello, an American priest of mixed Irish and German parentage. Bernard was the principal (or headmaster, as we used to call it in those days) of a large Episcopalian school for boys in a mainly black quarter of New York, and I’d say he was a charismatic teacher.

For Bernard was an amazing man – a short, squat bundle of energy and enthusiasm, a keen scholar, a *bon viveur* who liked his food and wine, an entertaining companion quite openly at ease with his homosexuality, but also a mass of prejudices, as I was to discover. In 1969 he was on a sabbatical in Oxford finishing his PhD thesis on a sixteenth-century English Catholic bishop, Stephen Gardiner. He was supplementing his income by teaching part-time at Magdalen College School. He had brought with him a pupil named Angelo, whom he enrolled as a pupil there. Unfortunately, Angelo was no longer the endearing little black boy of whom I had heard so much but a large, lazy, grumpy seventeen-year-old. As soon as I set eyes on him, my schoolmasterly instincts told me he’d be trouble.

Over the course of some good dinners, Bernard and I concocted a wild plan. We would go to Greece for the Easter holidays and travel round, finishing with Easter on

Mount Athos. To secure our entry to the monastic republic, he procured from his superior, the Metropolitan of New York, an impressive document, written in Latin on vellum and sealed with the archiepiscopal seal, requesting the monks to admit to their care these two holy pilgrims in search of spiritual sustenance.

Nowadays, everybody flies everywhere, stays in hotels and eats in restaurants. Back then few people travelled abroad, even to Greece, which was then languishing under the brutal dictatorship of the Colonels. Travelling by plane was expensive before the days of Ryanair (Aer Lingus charged £300 for the flight from Dublin to London, about €3,000 in today's money), so we drove in Bernard's little Austin Mini, crossing from Dover to Calais. There were few hotels outside the main tourist spots, and they were expensive; so we would camp. For the unlikely event of emergency repairs being needed to the car, Bernard brought with him a sheaf of tokens which could be cashed at any Shell garage.

In those days it was quite normal for any northerner travelling in the Mediterranean to go down with at least one bad bout of diarrhoea – what Americans touring Mexico called “Montezuma's Revenge”. Friends warned us that the food served in the cafés of Greek villages would simply blow our insides to bits; they advised us to ignore the menu (if there was one) and go into the kitchen, lift the lids on the cooking pots and give instructions along the lines of: “Give me some of that stuff, a little of that and that, and in no circumstances any of THAT!” On the whole, however, we would bring, buy and cook our own food.

This was long before the days of credit cards. We had to go equipped with travellers' cheques. Cashing these generally involved long queues in the local bank, interrogation by a supercilious official who implied that he knew we were criminals but was too well-bred to say so, and eventually money would grudgingly be handed over.

In those days I had no car and very limited driving experience, and I could not cook. So it was agreed that Bernard would do the driving and cooking, while my jobs would include packing and unpacking the car, erecting and dismantling the tent, navigating the route, and negotiating with the locals. I therefore had to prepare myself by learning Greek. But should it be classical or modern Greek? You need modern Greek to communicate with people, but it's not much use for reading ancient Greek literature. But

to go there speaking classical Greek would be like a pilgrim going to Canterbury speaking the English of Chaucer's day. I decided to compromise. I bought *Teach Yourself Classical Greek* and proceeded to work my way through it, but I learned the modern Greek pronunciation. Getting used to the alphabet was the first hurdle and I had to learn the capital letters as well as the small ones – street names and notices are generally written in capitals.

I felt it was only common politeness to have the Greek for yes, no, hello, goodbye, please, thank you, how much, too much, and where is the lavatory. I did learn a little more than that, and very useful it proved too. Bernard learned no Greek and most Greeks spoke no English, but we both spoke fluent German and so did the older Greeks – a relic of their country's occupation in World War II.

Greece – at last!

It was a romantic plan, and not a bad one. Unfortunately, Bernard now began to change it, and I had little option but to agree.

The first modification was that we were to bring Angelo with us as far as Germany, where he would be dumped on an unsuspecting landlady to improve his German; we would pick him up on the way back.

The second change was that we would take in Italy as well as Greece. We would drive down through Italy to Brindisi in the very south-east, then cross by ferry to the Greek port of Patras. This was a bad idea. I already knew Italy – my brother lived there. We would now have very little time in Greece, particularly on Mount Athos. If you want to visit a place, soak yourself in its atmosphere, and meet the people, it's not a good idea to go at the busiest time of the year – in the case of a monastery, the Easter weekend.

Italy was not a success. It rained every day. The daily routine of having breakfast, dismantling the tent and loading the car, driving for most of the day, finding a campsite, unpacking the car, putting up the tent, cooking and eating supper – all in the rain – was no fun. I was impatient to get to Greece. We ran out of Lire over the Easter weekend, the banks were of course shut, and we got very, very hungry.

Eventually we reached Brindisi exhausted and rather cross, and drove on to the ferry. As it was an overnight voyage we had berths, and for the first time since we had

left home I fell into a deep sleep. At dawn I was woken up by a terrible fit of sneezing. We had anchored off Corfu, and whatever was pollinating on that island gave me the worst bout of hay fever I've ever had.



The author, Julian, and Father Bernard Costello at the Parthenon, Athens

From Patras we drove to Athens, where Bernard had decided we should blow a few drachmas on dinner and a night in a hotel, where we could get clean and relax before continuing our journey. Unfortunately, over dinner Bernard took a fancy to our waiter, a

young man named Costos, and insisted on driving him home after he had finished work. As Costos lived in a remote mountain village, this was obviously going to take some time. Off they went into the night, leaving me to pay the bill under the supercilious gaze of the manager (the “I know your type ...” look). Eventually, as there was no sign of the wanderer’s return, I went up to our room and fell into a deep and glorious sleep – from which I was awakened in the early hours by Bernard pounding on the door, which I had forgotten to leave unlocked.

Next day we explored the Parthenon. Yes, it’s very impressive. It was always full of tourists. We didn’t find anything else to detain us in Athens, and that includes the Athenians (Greeks outside their capital are a different matter).

Driving north, we visited Delphi, former home of the famous oracle. We drove through the pass of Thermopylae, where in 490 B.C. Leonidas and his Spartans held back



the mighty Persian host. We camped at the foot of Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece and home of the gods.¹ There was no rain during all the time we were in Greece. The days were blistering hot, the nights bitterly cold – well below freezing, too cold to sleep properly. Our huge campsite was at least open – but only literally, not officially. That’s to say, we could camp there, and what passes for lavatories in Greece were unlocked, but the camp shop was closed and there were no other campers.

1. But not the site of the Olympic Games. They were held at Olympia in southern Greece.

On to the city of Thessaloniki (the “Salonika” of World War I), and then we set off through the Kalkidiki peninsula towards Athos. The little road wound alarmingly round the mountains, with a cliff above us on one side and a sheer drop on the other. As we approached a particularly sharp corner my eye was caught by a notice (in Greek lettering only, of course). Idly, I began to decipher it. It read “Kindunos Thanatou.” The day before, I just happened to have learned the word *kindunos* – it means Danger. And *thanatos* is the Greek word for Death. “Danger of Death” suddenly seeped into my fuddled brain and I shouted, “STOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOP!!!!!!!!!!” Bernard jammed on the brakes, cursing me roundly, and I got out and peered gingerly round the corner. There had been a landslide. Where the road had been, there was now a sheer drop. If we had driven round the corner we would have ended at the bottom of a precipice. Gingerly, Bernard turned the car and we headed back the way we had come, eventually finding an alternative route.

To the Holy Mountain



Having managed to reach the Athos peninsula, we camped overnight and now were on our way to Mount Athos on the boat. Our new young friend who had explained that I had been lying on the day's supply of bread for the monasteries proved surprisingly chatty, and so did his companions. They explained that they were naval

officers heading to Athos for the Easter liturgy. Bernard had read that the Colonels who ran Greece were in the habit of using the services of attractive young naval officers to gather intelligence of the goings-on at Athos by chatting up the monks. Whether this was true or not, our friends gave us a great deal of information that we would not have got from any other source.

The once-great monasteries, they said, were now occupied by very few monks. A big monastery that had once housed a thousand might now only have a dozen. These monks were old, lonely, and demoralised – and the pilgrims who visited them brought comforts from the modern world that they greatly coveted. To get their hands on these the monks were prepared to barter – and they had an inexhaustible supply of ancient treasures which they could neither eat nor wear but on which the visitors apparently set great store. An illuminated manuscript might be exchanged for a packet of cigarettes, a medieval icon for a pair of jeans. The Colonels were determined to stamp out this illicit export industry, and we were severely warned not to accept such gifts from the monks, for we would be subjected to rigorous searching on our return, before boarding the ferry for the mainland, and if caught we would be sent straight to prison.

From time to time, they said, the government would send in a team of inspectors to check the inventory of treasures. Warned of their approach, the monks would burn down part of their monastery and claim that the missing treasures had been destroyed in the conflagration. There would be plenty of monastery left for their needs.

Moreover, the monks in the different monasteries hated each other, and from time to time national rivalries would erupt into open warfare. The monks in the Romanian monastery might attack those in the Bulgarian monastery, or they might both gang up and attack the Greeks. Battles would be fought, and more bits of monastery burned down.

The government had tried to bring electricity and phone lines to the major monasteries, but the monks had united to resist this intrusion; the poles had been felled and the cables destroyed very time an attempt was made. Eventually, a compromise was reached. The council of abbots agreed to allow one line of electricity and one phone line from the port to the capital; no more.

We asked our friends to suggest the best monastery for us to stay. They all agreed in recommending Stavronikita (St Nicholas). It was a Russian monastery, derelict for

many years but recently reoccupied by a group of White Russian exiles from Paris. These were intelligent folk with whom we could converse. Moreover, their cook was a former Cordon Bleu chef, and we would eat well. The food in the other monasteries, they assured us, was disgusting if not inedible. We decided to take this excellent advice, and studied the map carefully to find the route to Stavronikita.

The wrong monastery



On arrival at the port we were subjected to a severe grilling by the monks on passport duty. Bernard produced his scroll, but they seemed singularly unimpressed by it. Our friends interpreted for us, explaining that the trouble was that it was written in Latin, a language which the monks did not understand and heartily despised, rather than in Greek. After a great deal of pleading, they reluctantly accepted the scroll, pocketed our last remaining drachmas, and issued us with passports. On the next page is a picture of mine. Note that Athos still uses the Julian calendar, which is 13 days behind ours; the date was actually 12 April.



We now boarded a rickety old bus, which drove us at an alarming speed up a rickety old road, round acute bends and up what looked like cliffs, to the capital. Here our friends pointed us in the direction of Stavronikita and said good-bye. We set off along a bewildering network of paths through scrubby broom, and soon got lost.



Before leaving home, I had foolishly decided that if I was to visit an august monastery I should dress smartly. It was not a good idea. Moreover, it was now midday,

the sun beat down mercilessly upon us, and we had had neither food nor drink since the night before.

To our relief we saw heading towards us an ancient monk riding a mule. I pointed to the monastery we could now see below us and asked: “Stavronikita?” “Ne ne,” he grunted, and passed on his way.² An hour later, we staggered through the gate of the monastery.



We found ourselves in a beautiful courtyard, which was occupied by an orange tree laden with fruit, some young men, and a cat. The young men turned out to be students who were here for the Easter liturgy, and to our relief we found that they spoke English fluently.

But where were the monks? They had been up all night in the church, we were told, and were now sleeping it off before embarking on another night of worship. In the evening, we were assured, they would arise, and we would be allocated rooms and FED.

² “Ne”, confusingly, is the Greek word for Yes. The Greek word for No is “Okhi”, said with an upward nod of the head.

We said we were looking forward to the meal as we had been told the cook at Stavronikita was good.



Stavronikita Monastery in the distance

“Stavronikita?” they cried. “But this isn’t Stavronikita – it’s Pantokrater (the Almighty Father). That’s Stavronikita, over there.” And they pointed to another monastery farther down the coast, several miles distant. We were far too exhausted to continue walking. In despair I plucked an orange from the tree and tried to eat it, only to spit it out rapidly – it was disgustingly sour.

We passed the time by exploring the monastery. We wandered round the outside; everything was old, dilapidated, beautiful, unspoiled by modern accretions, and locked - but we did get into the porch of the church, where I lay on my back and photographed the mosaic of the monastery’s patron.



Bearing in mind the prohibition against all female creatures and beardless men from entering the peninsula, you may well wonder what this small boy is doing here. We were told he was the son of the caretaker, and indeed he did seem to be vaguely attached to an ancient and appallingly filthy old man who was wandering around. As soon as he saw me, the boy began to shout at me, but of course I couldn't understand what he said.

"He wants you to take his photograph," said one of the students, "and he says that if you don't he will throw himself off the balcony and kill himself." I hastened to oblige, whereupon the boy rushed down and demanded to see the photograph, being apparently used to instamatic cameras. When I explained that my Brownie 620 had no capacity for instant development, he shook his fist at me and scampered off in disgust.

At last the monks emerged and we were allocated beds. Then off to the refectory for supper, to which we were looking forward after nearly twenty-four hours without food or drink in blazing heat. It consisted of – dry bread, olives, and water: Holy Week fare. It was not my favourite meal, but it probably saved our lives.

Then there was the Easter Vigil to look forward to. The students told us that it would begin at 8 p.m. and continue until ... 4 a.m. But they assured us that none of the pilgrims were expected to last the full course. We should arrive at about 11.00, there would be Communion at midnight, and then after a decent interval we could retire to bed.

It was an endurance test. Greek chanting is quite different from the mellifluous Russian polyphony that I had expected – it's more like listening to non-stop *sean-nós*

singing. And all unintelligible. We did at least have seats, but I was exhausted and crossed my legs to make myself more comfortable. Suddenly a monk rushed across the church and leapt at me, shouting and flinging my legs apart – I had not realised I had been guilty of gross disrespect in crossing them.

Eventually we withdrew and collapsed into bed. But it was now freezing cold and my sleep was only fitful. I had a nightmare that I was being woken by someone shouting and banging on the door. Eventually we emerged at about eight o'clock, looking forward to breakfast. We found the students preparing to depart. There was no breakfast to be seen, and the monks were back in bed for the day. Breakfast had been served at the end of the Easter Eucharist, at 4 a.m., and the noise I had heard had been the summons to come and eat.



Gloomily we accompanied the students back up the mountain to the capital. It was Easter Sunday morning, the bank was of course closed, and although the only restaurant was open and crowded we had no money to buy food. At this stage the students took pity on us and bought us our breakfast. The only dish being served was the traditional Greek Easter meal, which consisted of something closely resembling... haggis! I have never eaten so much sheep's guts in my life.



We now had time to explore the capital before catching the bus back down to the port. I had been strictly warned not to try to photograph any of the monks, or they would smash my camera and probably me as well. However, when I saw this one I reckoned that from my vantage point I could probably outrun him if necessary, so I cheerfully called out the traditional Easter greeting: “Christos anesth, Kyrie Pater!” (Christ is risen, holy father) – and pressed the button. He let out a roar of rage, but by then I had a good head start.

After that, the return journey was without incident – the headlong descent to the port in the rickety bus, and the rigorous customs examination by Greek officials. Our twenty-four-hour visit back to the Middle Ages was over. Then the ferry back to the little pier at Mrs Loch’s castle, back to the tent – and back to the breakfast we had left in such a hurry the morning before.

The return journey

Next morning after breakfast I carefully packed the car for the long journey northwards. At last we set off - and Bernard, impatient at the delay, reversed the car at full speed over a rock, wrecking the petrol sump. So there we were on Easter Monday in the middle of nowhere with a broken car. The Old Man, however, had a solution to offer – the solution to all the community’s problems – Mrs Loch.

So we gingerly approached the castle and knocked on the door. It was opened by the ancient housemaid, who ushered us into the presence of a courteous and refined old lady. She barked orders at the maid in a sort of classical Greek delivered in a British public school accent, and the crone, on seeing the look of astonishment on my face, burst into fits of giggles behind her back.

Mrs Loch listened to our tale of woe, and informed us that there was a small garage in the village, though she doubted if they would be open on a public holiday. Bernard proclaimed that as I had taken so long to pack the car it was my fault that he had run the car over a rock, therefore it was up to me to sort out the mess. I left him regaling Mrs Loch with our adventures, accompanied by the tantalising aroma of coffee – real coffee, not the minute cups of liquid mud served in the cafés we had visited.

I now walked to the village, and again the day was overpoweringly hot. I found the garage, and the family that owned it. They were just sitting down to their midday meal. With difficulty I explained our problem, and there was much animated discussion which I could not follow. Eventually the son of the house, a youth in his mid-twenties named Maki, announced that he would attend to the car. Easter Monday is a special family day for Greeks, but this wonderful man spent the afternoon slaving in the garage with hammers, soldering irons, blow-lamps and the like. His family offered me some refreshment, but I envied Bernard his real coffee and the company of someone who spoke our language.

At last Maki announced that the work was finished. Now we would go for a test drive. He drove the mini at lightning speed round the hills, and announced that all was well. Feeling rather faint, I thanked him profusely and returned to the castle.

Maki was not very pleased when Bernard offered him some Shell tokens instead of solid drachmas, but as we had no money he had no choice but to take them.

At last the car was packed and ready to start. But now we encountered a further problem. In racing over the hills, Maki had jammed the gears, which had stuck in second. We could only start our journey by being pushed by Maki's family and me, and once we had started we couldn't stop; if we did, we'd never start again. At least we did start, I leapt in at the last moment, and we began a perilous journey back over the mountains to Thessaloniki. It was now evening, and at every village along the Mediterranean the crowds were out for their *passagiata*. And so, as we approached every village, Bernard would put his hand on the horn and I would lean out the window shouting and gesticulating. Crowds scattered amid much fist-waving and execration.

And thus, as night fell, we entered Thessaloniki, found a Shell garage, and collapsed in exhaustion. Bernard slept in the car; I chose the back of an empty lorry.

In the morning the gearbox was fixed, more Shell tokens were exchanged, travellers' cheques were cashed, food was bought and consumed, and we recommenced our journey. Not southwards this time, but northwards through Macedonia and into Yugoslavia.

At this stage I was struck down with a severe bout of Montezuma's Revenge, and we had to spend an extra day on a campsite until I was well enough to travel. I soon learned the Serbo-Croat for "I need a lavatory – quick!"

And so up through Yugoslavia along the Autoput, into Austria, and up the Alps. However, there had been a cold snap, a fresh fall of snow, and the wheels of our car thrashed helplessly at the high altitude. It was quite scary. There was nothing for it but to turn with care, come back down the pass, and head eastwards for the Brenner, which is at only half the altitude. This time we were successful, and were able to proceed on through Germany to collect Angelo, an event which I anticipated with some foreboding.

Angelo was very pleased to see us, though not half as pleased as his landlady was to get rid of him. He was edgy and nervous, as if dreading what she might reveal. What he had been up to we never did discover; he certainly had learned no German.

The three of us now headed in a rather squashed Mini towards Calais. Now, one of Bernard's eccentricities was an irrational contempt for France and the French. He

refused to get any French francs, refuel the car, or even buy food in the country. And so we arrived at the dockside in the evening tired and hungry and with only a few drops of petrol left in the car.

But no ship awaited us - just a notice saying that services were discontinued for the time being owing to a dockers' strike. If we drove on to Le Havre, we were assured, another shipping line would with pleasure convey us to Portsmouth the next morning. This, however, was of scant comfort to three weary travellers who by this time were tired of each others' company and who were stranded in Calais with no petrol, no money, and nowhere to stay.

Of course, we were not alone in our misery. The main victims of the strike were the English lorry-drivers, who quickly made friends with us and invited us to join them in the local café. We guiltily confessed to our lack of finance. No problem, they assured us: the manageress was well used to such situations and would actually cash our travellers' cheques, though they warned us that she would charge a crippling rate. She did indeed seem to be made of steel, but we did pretty well out of her, for in addition to her banking services she provided a good meal and lashings of drink. We had a convivial evening and then bunked down in the back of a vacant truck. I had my best night's sleep since leaving home.

Nowadays you can cross the Seine by the magnificent suspension bridge at Tancarville. In those days it was a much longer route. But to our relief we got there in time, our tickets were accepted, and we duly set sail for England, arriving back in Oxford without further incident.

Epilogue

In the following September I arrived back at school from Ireland to find myself faced with a *fait accompli*. Things had not turned out well for Angelo at Magdalen College School (why was I not surprised?) and he had been "asked to leave". Using my name, Bernard had enrolled him at the Salesian College. I was aghast. Should I warn the headmaster? I decided to let the hare sit. Luckily he would not be my pupil. In the middle of the Easter Term Angelo was expelled for dealing in drugs.

The following June, Bernard stayed up all night with a friend quaffing wine and discussing lofty matters. As dawn broke they decided to drive out to greet the sun. As they drove over a hump-backed bridge they met head-on a lorry coming in the opposite direction. The friend was seriously injured and remained in a coma. Bernard was killed outright. Angelo appeared at the funeral, sobbing his heart out – then disappeared.

A few weeks later the Salesian College closed for ever, a victim of the Labour government's educational reforms. I returned to Ireland to continue my teaching in this country.

And what of Mount Athos? When we were there it was at its lowest point, the community consisting of only 1100 mainly elderly monks. But the fall of the dictatorship of the Colonels in 1974 eased access with the outer world, and the collapse of the “Evil Empire” of Soviet Russia and re-emergence of nation states in eastern Europe produced a revival of religious practice and an increase in vocations. The monasteries of Athos have acquired new life. Over two thousand monks now live there, mostly Greek, and mainly young, well-educated men with practical skills. The entire peninsula is recognised as a World Heritage Site and money has been found to restore the monasteries. There is a Friends of Mount Athos society, sponsored by Prince Philip and Prince Charles. Work is underway to catalogue and conserve the vast deposits of medieval art treasures – icons, vestments, crosses, chalices, manuscripts, relics ... though it will be decades before this is finished.

But access is still very restricted, and a notice at the isthmus forbids, under the gravest penalties, “the entrance of women”.



For further reading

Sydney Loch, *Athos the Holy Mountain* (1957).

John Julius Norwich & Reresby Sitwell, *Mount Athos* (1966).

James Lees-Milne, *Through Wood and Dale: Diaries 1975-1978* (1998), pp 189-204.

Patrick Leigh-Fermor, *The Broken Road* (2013), pp 268-349.

Mount Athos in Wikipedia.