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A Turbulent Personality Discovers Orthodoxy - 1 (Petros Panayiotopoulos)

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Bruce Chatwin (1940-1989).

One of the most enigmatic and contradictory personalities of the last century, the writer, Bruce Chatwin, came to have a close relationship with the truth of Orthodoxy, mainly through the attraction he experienced towards the life of the monks of the Holy Mountain. A constant traveller, a nomad student of nomads, he found in the Orthodox faith a spiritual home. He met and befriended many of the great spiritual fathers of the East, including the late St. Simeon the New Theologian.



Bruce Chatwin (l.), Fr. Luke Majoros (c.) and Fr. Mitrofan (r.), both from Hilandar.

He was born and grew up in Sheffield. He was educated at Marlborough and when he left took a job at Sotheby's. It was here that he quickly revealed his impressively sharp eye for detail and perspicacity and he quickly rose through the ranks and

became an authority on antiquities and the Impressionists. In this capacity, he travelled widely for business purposes. After a few years, however, he was forced to stop because he developed problems with his sight.

His doctor, Patrick Trevor-Roper, advised him to “open his horizons” and Chatwin followed his advice to the letter, travelling all over the world, studying customs and ways of thinking and recording them. For a time, he felt drawn to university life and enrolled at Edinburgh to study archeology, considering himself an “architectural intellectual”. But this involvement lasted no more than two and a half years either. Thereafter he devoted his time exclusively to traveling, writing and his unstable personal life.

His narrative style has been thought to rival that of the great American author Ernest Hemingway and for many he’s the most important modern travel writer. It was said, in fact that he was capable of compressing whole worlds within the pages of his works.

Initially he disliked Greece and took every opportunity to say so. Later he got to know the country and became a frequent visitor. He stayed at the house of his friend and fellow writer Patrick (Paddy) Leigh Fermor († 2011) in Kardamyli in Mani. In 1985, while he was in Greece working feverishly on a book, he interrupted what he was doing and paid a visit to the Holy Mountain.

He must already have had some knowledge of the Mountain from the art critic Robert Byron (1905-1941) the author of *The Station*, one of the best books available in English about the Holy Mountain. For Byron, the wall-paintings on the Holy Mountain were the best in the world. Chatwin respected Byron’s work greatly and his personal questioning may well have been shaped by it.

From as early as 1980, he’d begun to pester his close friends, James Lees-Milne (architectural historian) and Derek Hill (painter) who were regular visitors to the Athonite state, to take him with them. Lees-Milne, whom he asked first, was completely opposed. Chatwin then turned to Hill, who knew Nikanor, the pro-abbot of Hilandar (the monastery was still idiorrhythmic at the time), and who had already visited the Holy Mountain some 25 times. Hill acceded to Chatwin’s request, albeit reluctantly, since he was far from certain how his idiosyncratic nature would respond to the Athonite monks and their way of life. They finally visited the Holy Mountain in May 1985, although others claim that he was accompanied by Leigh-Fermor on the visit.

The writer was greatly taken by the Mountain. In fact, during his visit to one

monastery he became cross with some Greek visitors who were speaking loudly during a service and preventing him from concentrating.

[To Be Continued]