

EDWARD ENFIELD
GREECE
ON MY WHEELS



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About the Author

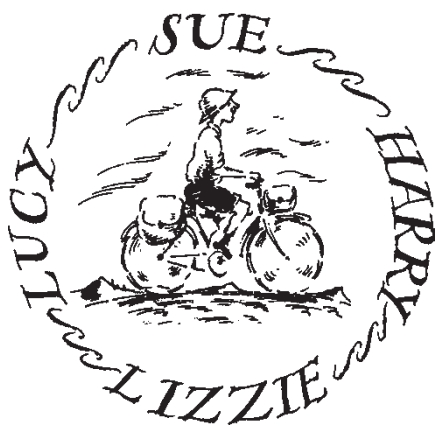
After completing a degree in Classics at Oxford and National Service in Germany, Edward Enfield spent five years in the Far East. On his return to England he worked for West Sussex County Council. His first act on retirement was to cycle from the Channel to the Mediterranean and write his book *Downhill All the Way*. He writes a regular column in *The Oldie* magazine and has forged what he calls ‘a little mini-career’ in journalism, radio and television.

His son Harry likes to call himself a Man of Letters, but this may be one of his jokes, as he is also a comedian.





To my four children









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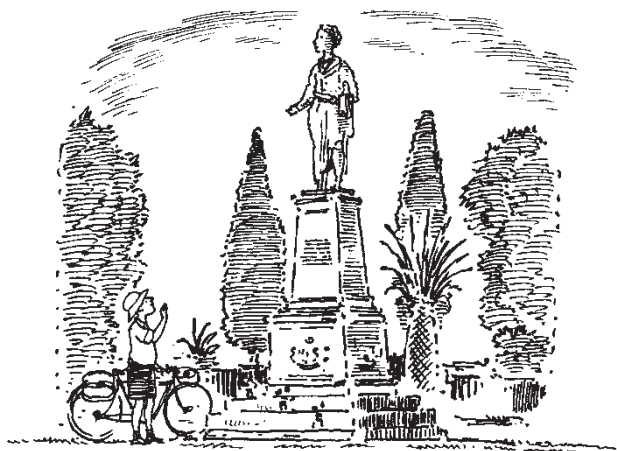
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Foreword by Harry Enfield

I was quite surprised at how agreeable I found this book upon first reading it. Surprised only because I don't really think of my father as a very agreeable man. Not that I think of my father very often. One doesn't really, does one? I mean, a father flits through the brain five or six times a month, buried safely in the middle of a thought: 'What should I get Mum and Dad for Christmas?' or 'I must ring Mum and Dad.' Sometimes he is allowed his own thought-sentences: 'I wonder how Dad is? Obviously not dead or Mum would have rung.'

But when was the last time you, I, or anyone other than Woody Allen sat down and had a good long think about their father? For the purposes of this foreword I have had to do just this, and I have discovered that he is actually an agreeable man. The only reason I've been thinking otherwise is because I have a distant memory of his being disagreeable fifteen or twenty years ago. Since then I have vaguely noticed him becoming agreeable, but I'd forgotten to think about this phenomenon and update my mind. I have now done so. It is therefore of little surprise how agreeable I found this book upon reading it.

My father has taught himself that the secret of agreeability in old age is to keep himself away from other humans as much as possible. It is they who make him disagreeable, with their vile looks, hideous gaits and propensity to misuse the English language. In his disagreeable days society made him seethe. Now it makes him sleep. These days he is mostly in fine form, and when we start to annoy him he simply nods off. Recently he came to visit us in London to spend, so he thought, an agreeable hour or so with his latest granddaughter. But

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after half an hour, two older grandchildren and at least eight other three- to five-year-olds descended on our house and, with high voices and plastic swords, declared war upon his sanity. My father sat very still for the half hour they were there, removing himself from notice as a stoat will when an owl circles overhead. Upon their exit, he sprang backwards onto the sofa like a startled elf and sank into a deep sleep. Ten minutes later he awoke, once again in agreeable mode. Where once he would have felt trapped and become grumpy, now he is agreeable, unconscious, and agreeable again.

This book has a beautiful pace. It has the pace of a bicycle powered by an elderly man with a bicycle-powered elderly mind. A mind that is peaceful, in part because the humans he meets can be bicycled swiftly away from at the moment of his choosing, and in part because he is in Greece, the country that has been at the forefront of his affections since childhood. He reaches such a pitch of tranquillity that his thoughts occasionally resemble those of a hairy oriental guru, as when a Hellenic lady tries to kill him with her car thrice in an hour: 'I acquit her of any malicious intent though, I just think she lived in a world of her own in which there were no elderly Englishmen on bicycles and she had no idea I was there.'

One of my father's greatest wishes is to die before he becomes a burden to my mother or his children. It is with this at least somewhere in his mind, I believe, that he seeks ever greater mental tranquillity on ever longer cycle rides, so that one day in the not-too-distant future, while cycling along peacefully on some foreign road, he can nod off and literally be bumped off by the nearest passing vehicle. The driver would perhaps be traumatised by dispatching an old

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man in such a fashion, and I am sorry about this, but I think that Dad would like it.

One of the things that still makes him cross is the use by the English of American euphemisms. It would thus amuse him to know that he lay under a gravestone containing a euphemism made literal:

Here Lies Edward Enfield
Who Fell Asleep
And Was Promptly Squashed By A Lorry



Preface

This is not a guidebook to the Peloponnese and Epirus, but it is, I suppose, a travel book – an account of a number of expeditions made on a bicycle by a man of advancing years with a smattering of Greek learnt from a tape. Conversations in this book were conducted in that language unless I make it plain that they were in English.

Many interesting and important travellers appear in these pages, such as Lord Byron, Benjamin Disraeli and Edward Lear. They travelled on horseback, but I by bicycle. Baedeker's *Greece* of 1894 says that:

the horses are generally docile, sure-footed, and possessed of great powers of endurance. Distances are stated in this Handbook in terms of the time taken to traverse them on horseback. As the pace is invariably a walk, an hour rarely means more than three English miles, and frequently means less. A day's journey, as a rule, should not exceed 7–8 hours.

For me, in a hot and hilly country like Greece, eight miles an hour is a fair average, and three or four hours' cycling a comfortable stint. Short of actually hiring a horse, I like to think I could not have followed these travellers more closely by any other means.

When I have quoted from earlier travellers and historians, I have often shortened what they wrote by leaving bits out. The convention is that you should put dots where the bits have been omitted; this can be distracting, so I haven't done it, but I thought I should tell you. I should also say that I have sometimes taken liberties with their punctuation by leaving out superfluous commas.

You may notice some inconsistent spelling of place names. This is partly because the Greeks themselves are

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not always consistent, but mainly because different interpretations are possible when moving into English from Greek, and from their alphabet to ours. I have tried to give the most common English versions unless I am quoting someone else, when I follow the original.

My thanks are due to Mary Price, then of the BBC, who produced the radio programme *Enfield Pedals After Byron*. This took me into a part of Greece that I had previously neglected. My thanks also to Dr Peter Jones, who read the proof on a train. His great classical learning saved me from a number of errors.

If any of the mixture of which this book consists gives it anything of an original flavour then it would, in the words of Edward Lear, 'be something in these days to be able to add the smallest mite of novelty to the traveller's world of information and interest'.

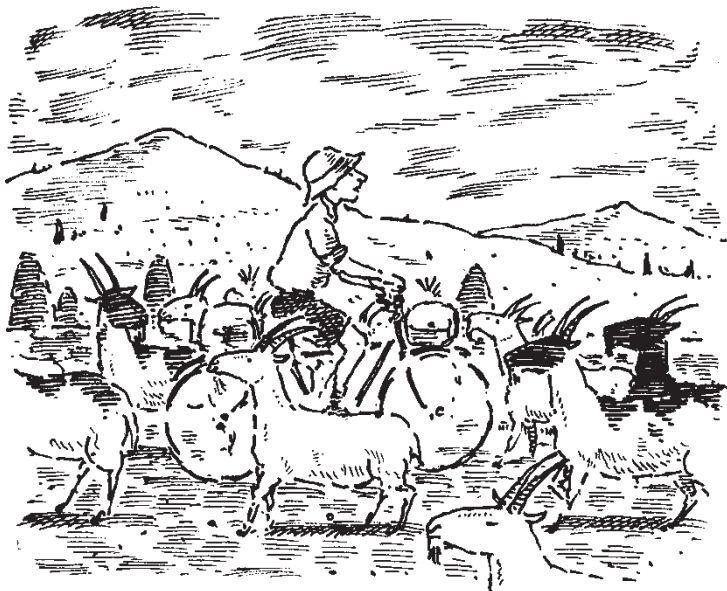
Part I

The Peloponnese

I am at last determined to go to Greece: it is the only
place I was ever contented in.

– Lord Byron to E. J. Trelawny, 15 June 1823





From Sussex to Chlemoutsi

It might be thought that for a man approaching 70 years of age to go bicycling in Greece by himself is a rash act. I would say it is rather like marriage, which the prayer book says is not to be taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly; but discreetly, advisedly and soberly. It further says that matrimony should be entered upon in the fear of God, which is also something you may experience in Greece when squeezing the brakes of your bicycle beside a precipice and hoping not to go over the edge.

Well, I wanted to do it so I prepared myself with care. I had ridden across France on a Dawes Tourer with six gears, and in my book about that I poured scorn on the idea that there was any need to have any more gears than six. Then

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my daughter arrived on a new Peugeot bicycle with eighteen gears, and I found I could not keep up with her. Being unwilling to think that this had anything to do with the difference in our ages, I assumed that bicycle technology must have moved on, so I bought a bicycle that was neither a tourer nor a mountain bike, but was called a hybrid. It was a Raleigh Pioneer Elite, with twenty-one gears, and as far as I am concerned, beyond the Pioneer Elite the law of diminishing returns must set in. It is such a good machine that although you can pay vast amounts more for other bicycles there is very little extra that they can possibly do.

When I cycled round the Peloponnese I took with me a sleeping bag and a body-bag. Actually it was called a bivvy bag, but would have done as a body-bag if I had expired on top of a Greek mountain, which seemed to be a possibility. Its purpose, though, was more to keep me alive than to cope with me dead. It was made of Gore-Tex, and was therefore waterproof. If I wanted to sleep in it I would put my sleeping bag inside, climb in and zip it up, then however much it rained I should be all right. There are two reasons why I might want to do this. The first was that I should be in Greece throughout October when the people who ran hotels or let rooms in their houses might have closed for the winter. The second, and more compelling, reason was that I planned to cycle right round the Peloponnese, which would take me into parts which, from the map at least, looked fairly wild.

The Mani, which is the central of three southern prongs, has a particular reputation for being rugged and formidable. It is a place of treeless and barren mountains where people live in small villages and traditionally have a great liking for blood feuds. Pirates from this area nearly captured Lord Byron, and in the Greek War of Independence the Mani