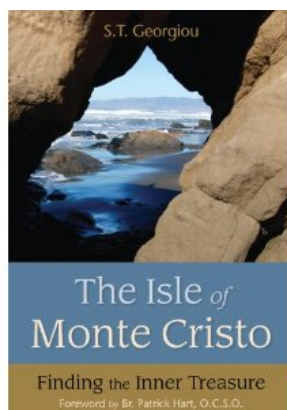


# Steve Georgiou and the Isle of Monte Cristo: A Review

By Paul Fromont



**S**teve Georgiou wonderfully concludes his extremely accessible **trilogy** (begun in 2002 with *The Way of the Dreamcatcher: Spirit Lessons with Robert Lax, Peacemaker, Sage* (dedicated to his father); and followed by *Mystic Street: Meditations on a Spiritual Path* in 2007 (dedicated to his mother)) with his 2010 publication ***The Isle of Monte Cristo: Finding the Inner Treasure*** (Toronto: Novalis, 2010. 299 pages plus endnotes). This final book is dedicated to his sister Maria.

All three books have a foreword by Thomas Merton's former secretary Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. All three are woven through with the thread of Georgiou's "mentorship" by Trappist Monk Thomas Merton's best friend, American poet / mystic / sage / hermit **Robert Lax** (b. 1915). During the latter period of his life Lax, born in the US, was resident on the island of Patmos, Greece. It was here that Georgiou met Lax in 1993. He would make the trip regularly until 1999, not long before Lax's death on September 26<sup>th</sup> 2000.

In each case the subtitle succinctly captures the core focus of each book: "Spirit lessons" (under the tutelage of wisdom, i.e. Robert Lax), "meditations" (centered on finding God in the ordinary and every day), and the "inner treasure" (the way of the heart).

If a corollary of "*The Way of the Dream Catcher*" was Georgiou's experience of the healing power of love in his own life, then in *The Isle of Monte Cristo* love (Gk "agape") is primarily engaged as love for God, love of the "other", and love of creation. *Patmos* is referred to as "The Isle of Love" (p.43). And so it should be, for as Georgiou reflects, it was on Patmos that he opened himself to a reversal and the healing power of love:

*"...When I first arrived on Patmos [1993], I felt like ashes. Stressed out and disillusioned, I had nearly lost faith in love, in the possibility of finding lasting joy in life, and put myself at the mercy of God..."*  
(p. 116)

Additionally *The Isle of Monte Cristo* continues themes common in the two earlier books: holiness, passion, Jesus Christ, resurrection and new life, aesthetics, art, seeing with new eyes, experiencing God in all things, and journey: "God will always have something new to teach us **en route to the Kingdom**" (Robert Lax). This quote sits on the opening page under a photograph looking toward land, "far-off" in the distance, from the bow of a yacht; the sense of journey, of wind (Spirit) and of destination (Kingdom?) is unmistakable.

The book is divided into what I call four tributaries: "Gates of Entry", "Spirit Currents", "Riding the Waves" and "Kingdom of the Heart". Or, if you will, beginning the journey,

the journey, and the anticipation of arrival. All in their own ways feeding into the implicit question at the heart of this book: “What does it mean to be human beings?”

The “journey” is Georgiou’s and it’s a fascinating journey, clearly specific to him, but in another sense, it’s the journey of any life lived **slowly** (“those who hurry never arrive”, p.82), attentively, fully, deeply, and Godwardly.

He is surely right when he suggests that “...Oftentimes our personal *theognosia* (knowledge of God) begins without our even knowing it, especially [but not limited to] when we are very young, open, empty of preconceptions and prejudice, living innocently, spontaneously.” “At this time”, he continues, “A certain “inner sensibility” may be catalyzed through images, sounds, sensations, encounters, and dreams.” “We quicken”, he notes, “To a *deeper rhythm* permeating life – a “conscious communion” with God mysteriously begins...” (p. 61). Indeed, one can’t escape the sense that this has been the path for Georgiou, and likely too it’s a path that continues to draw and invite him.

No matter ones relation or otherwise to “God” one cannot easily dismiss the sense that it is mystery and a profound longing for transcendence (for something *more*; for something deeper; for something larger than our small lives and ‘worlds’) that lie near the heart of what it means to be a human being.

Georgiou’s journey is fascinating because it’s a very human journey; one we can all relate to, albeit without necessarily taking from it the same “Spirit lessons” or bringing to it the same questions, longings, and experiences.

*“...Prayer and love are learned in the hour  
when prayer has become impossible,  
and hearts have turned to stone...”*

Thomas Merton, quoted on page 170

He invites us to see in his life possibilities for our own. For ours too can be lives woven through by greater joy, mystery, discovery, growth, ongoing conversion(s), and surprise – and this is a great appeal of the book. It’s humanity and its rootedness in the ordinary and the everyday will resonate with his readers. Yes, he’s a practicing Christian – in the Greek Orthodox tradition – and “yes” Christianity, and religion more generally, are important to him, but this in no way diminishes or detracts from its sheer humanity.

Hearts that have “turned to stone” might just be transformed. I thought of the scene in the 2005 film adaptation of CS. Lewis’ *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Aslan breathes life into lives cast in stone by the witch

Indeed, I think Georgiou’s “Christian” narrative actually enhances an understanding of the human person and gives to it a significance that enriches and genuinely humanizes.

Important too is that Georgiou doesn’t shy away from the feelings that can beset any of us, the all too human experiences of lostness and hopelessness, stress, deep disappointment, frustration, joy, sadness, the questions of vocation and meaning, wonder, discovery, guilt, and sadly also tragedy. During the planning / early thinking & writing phases of this book Georgiou tragically lost his young and very much-loved first cousin Alexandria who had died as a result of a blood clot following the birth of her third child (p. 102).

While my favourite book remains the first in the trilogy *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*, in *The Isle of Monte Cristo* I again found myself drawn into the stories and recollections that Georgiou shares. For example, in his reflection titled “Dream House” (my mind went to the house on the coast in the Paul Verhoeven directed 1992 movie *Basic Instinct*. I was thinking of the scene when police detective Nick Curran (Douglas) visits Catherine Tramell (Stone) to question her at her Stinson Beach house perched on the coast, From that scene my mind then went to my own “dream” house and its location. If only I was financially wealthy!).

I also learnt new things about Rublev’s *Trinity* icon in Georgiou’s “Communion of Love”. His “Toward the Far-Off Land”, “Dark Night”, “Night Becomes Light”, “Fishermen” and “Lost and Found were also deeply evocative for me. As was his opening reflection (Prologue) on Alexandre Dumas’ 1844 novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* (to which he later brings Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace* briefly into conversation with it, p.77).

As with the earlier titles the text is given greater depth by the inclusion of (often) meditative black-and-white photographs of Patmos; Georgiou himself (with Lax and Demetrios); the Cave of Revelation within which St. John witnessed the Apocalypse; Ocean Beach (San Francisco – particularly p. 126); Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church (San Francisco); icons of the Trinity (Rublev), my favorite icon of the Resurrection (Gk ‘Anastasis’), and the stunning Pantocrator (see “In the Sanctuary of the King”) from the inner dome of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church. The iconographer, Robert Andrews, completed the dome at 85 years of age in 2008. It is apparently the biggest mosaic face of Jesus in the Western Hemisphere.

The inclusion of excerpts from Lax’s poems and the occasional pencil drawing by Georgiou also add something special to the book.

Overall, this is a beautifully presented and richly evocative little book (19.10cm X 13.30cm X 2.50cm) that encourages its readers to put themselves “in a place where grace can flow” (Lax) and to take the path of the heart. Relevantly too it invites us to live deeper lives and to not succumb to living on the surface of life, a reality all too common to those of us who live in the so-called West. I highly recommend the adventure that is *The Isle of Monte Cristo* and encourage you to see where it takes you in terms of your own life journey. And while you’re journeying with the narrative, and the excursions you take, have U2’s song *One* playing in the background.

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