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# The Stronghold: Four Seasons In The White Mountains Of Crete



## Synopsis

"A splendid new edition." —James Campbell, Times Literary Supplement

Xan Fielding was a gifted, many-sided, courageous and romantic figure, at the same time civilized and Bohemian, and his thoughtful cast of mind was leavened by humour, spontaneous gaiety, and a dash of recklessness. Almost any stretch of his life might be described as a picaresque interlude.

—Patrick Leigh Fermor

During the Second World War, Xan Fielding served for two years as an officer in the British Special Operations Executive on German-occupied Crete, where he ran an intelligence network in cooperation with the Cretan resistance movement. Seven years later, Fielding returned to Crete to spend a year traveling in the island's White Mountains (the "stronghold" of the title), revisiting sites of his wartime exploits and seeking out former comrades who had returned to their peacetime lives. His sojourn resulted in this remarkable memoir, a documentary-like record of days spent among Cretan peasants blended with history and literature — a travelogue like no other.

The Stronghold is a blending of "history and culture with experience, but one wedded to fidelity. Fielding never arrives; there is no great journey of self. There is just a question answered about the war and youth — he can't shake Crete, as no man can shake the formative experience of his youth."

—from the new foreword by Robert Messenger

"This book of mine does not claim to be a serious sociological work; it is simply the account of a more or less carefree year spent among people who seem to fit so perfectly into their startling surroundings that at times I imagined it was not the landscape that conditioned their lives but their personalities that had conditioned the landscape."

—Xan Fielding

Xan Fielding (1918–1991) was a British writer and traveler, and a lifelong friend of Patrick Leigh Fermor, who served with him in Crete during World War II. (The introduction to Fermor's *A Time of Gifts* is written as a "Letter to Xan Fielding.") Fielding also translated many novels from French, most notably, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *The Planet of the Apes*. Robert Messenger is the books editor of the Wall Street Journal.

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## Customer Reviews

The first and most important point that must be made about "The Stronghold" is that it is not a book for everyone. In fact, I would go further than that and say that it is book that will appeal to only a small subset of readers--mainly those who have visited Crete and have some appreciation for its geography and its people. I myself have visited Crete only once (and mainland Greece on one other occasion). When in Crete, for 2 weeks, I stayed on the coast, mainly in Chania (spelled 'Canea' in the book) and experienced the White Mountains only as a looming presence above the coastal plain. Still, that presence was enough to induce me to buy and read "The Stronghold," and even to enjoy the story told by the book's author, Xan Fielding, who himself spent much of World War II in Crete as a British commando whose field of operations was the White Mountains, and who returned years later to tour the area in peace time to renew old guerrilla fighter acquaintances and visit the towns and mountain hideouts of his time at war. Fielding himself finds his return to the White Mountains less than thrilling--in fact, often quite dull--and this reader often felt the same as he read Fielding's narrative. That's not to say that the book lacks interest. Fielding is good on the Byzantine, Venetian, and Turkish conquests and occupations of Crete and their legacies. He is also good at describing the Cretan characters (almost all male) he renews acquaintance with in his travels in the mountains. If you've seen the film "Zorba the Greek," you have a pretty good idea of the Cretan (male) national character. The trouble is there's not just one Zorba-like character here; there's a whole string of villages full of the type: loud, boastful, hard-drinking, brave, and warlike to a fault. (They all miss the 'good old days' when the Nazis were there to be tricked, betrayed, kidnapped,

and murdered.) It eventually got old for Xan Fielding, and for this reader as well.

Fielding blends historical knowledge with his exploration in hard-to-reach places. This book is a must read for Cretans as it allows us to perform a journey in time; the time that our grandfathers were of our age.

An interesting, though slightly pointless, account of the history and culture of Crete.

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