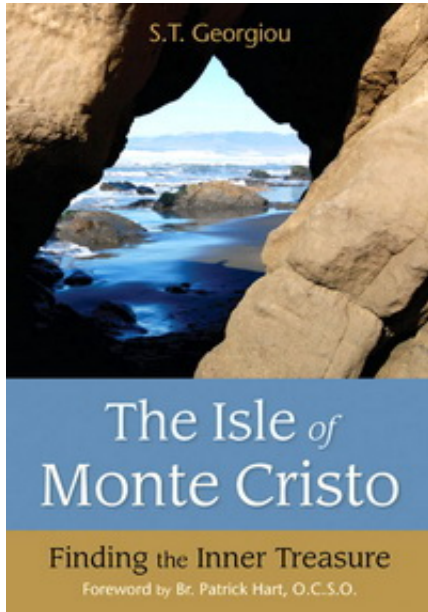


Fiction and faith converge

9 September 2011 | by Michael Shackleton

THE ISLE OF MONTE CRISTO: Finding the Inner Treasure, by ST Georgiou. Novalis, San Francisco. 2010. 299pp.

Reviewed by Michael Shackleton



A Californian in his thirties, Steve Georgiou, has a sense of disillusion. Being of Greek ancestry, he roams to the Greek island of Patmos, where St John traditionally wrote the book of Revelation, hoping to find some inner peace. The year is 1993.

By chance he meets Robert Lax, a white-bearded octogenarian, a convert to Catholicism from Judaism, who has a name for being the island's hermit, poet and holy man. The unexpected encounter is a revelation, a jolt to Georgiou's listlessness, setting him on a new course of spiritual adventure and satisfaction. Lax tells this Californian surfer to go with the flow of creation, that going with the flow means he can see the whole sea and not just each rolling wave he may briefly focus on. He can lose his sense of self and become open to what happens around him and experience the sense of God's presence in everything. The two men become good friends and Georgiou often pays return visits to Patmos until Lax's death in 2000.

Georgiou, a doctor of theology, published the fruit of that experience in his book *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*, [which I favourably reviewed in this newspaper in 2004](#). I was impressed by the insights he drew from Lax's simplicity, and how the same spiritual path is open to anybody. I recommended the book and described it as a powerful piece of spiritual writing. The fact that it went into its second edition last year supports this opinion. In 2007 I welcomed and reviewed [Mystic Street](#), Georgiou's second volume on his reflections on what he had learned from Lax.

The title of this third book, *The Isle of Monte Cristo*, comes from Alexandre Dumas' classic novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Dumas' hero, Edmund Dantes, is falsely accused of a crime he did not commit. Imprisoned in the Chateau d'If, he is befriended by the Abbé Faria, a fellow prisoner who encourages him to escape. The Abbé reveals where a magnificent treasure is to be discovered on the Isle of Monte Cristo. In time, Dantes finds it, becomes wealthy and gets revenge on his enemies. Then comes remorse, contrition and peace.

Georgiou sees his life and the Christian life itself in a similar perspective. Stuck in his own personal Chateau d’If, feeling victimised, Georgiou understands that it is Robert Lax who becomes his Abbé Faria. Lax helps him escape from the prison of worldly and self-centred thinking and gives him the map to a treasure called agape, the all-embracing love of God for us and the whole of creation.

Questing for the treasure entails an inward journey, a soul-search that can reveal the depths of human life and love and their relationship with the created world. Georgiou’s firm belief that “the entire universe is a kind of spiritual school, a cosmic classroom designed to ready us for our entry into paradise, our bright eternal home”, is evident throughout.

This approach to spirituality is removed from the older, more austere, kind that sought to shun the things of the world as temptations away from life in God. It is rooted in the things, places and people that are present to us at any moment, as elements of a lesson preparing us for the eternal kingdom.

Appreciation of this way of finding the treasure within ourselves comes out as Georgiou describes events in daily life, extracting from the commonplace the pointers to the treasure of the life to come. Each chapter presents a situation in which Georgiou has found himself, on the beach, in the classroom, always Christ-centred and thought-provoking.

Now the same book is a 2011 Catholic Press Association winner in the field of books in paperback (read more about the author on his website, spiritcurrents.com).

Georgiou has utter confidence that the kingdom of God awaits us, and, although he may write from within the framework of a Californian academic, he makes his points plainly and with obvious sincerity, subtly egging the reader on to a profound Christian optimism.

The Isle of Monte Cristo, along with its two predecessors, reveals what the great contemplatives knew, and what Robert Lax has humbly emphasised through Georgiou: that we must accept God’s kingdom like little children, otherwise we shall never get into it (Mt 18:3). This energising optimism can be summed up in Lax’s own simple maxim: “We’ll get there”.

Spiritual reading and Christian contemplation of God’s limitless love, his agape, can be rejuvenated and made more intimate by Georgiou’s efforts to present them again in fresh form for 21st century Christians.

Michael Shackleton is former editor of *The Southern Cross*.

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