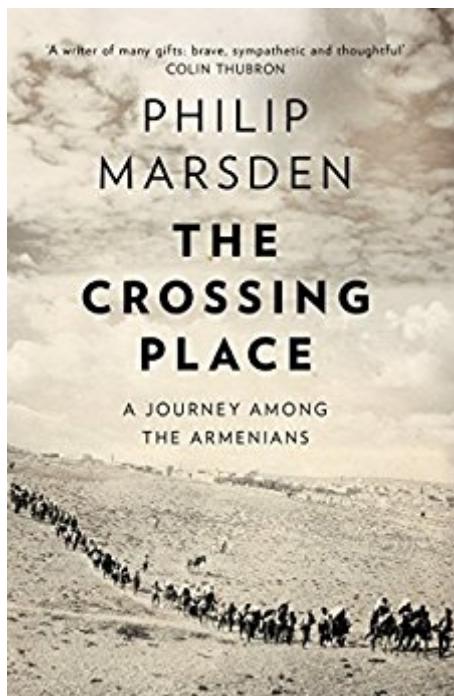


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# The Crossing Place: A Journey Among The Armenians



## Synopsis

Ebook edition of Philip Marsden's classic travel book, published to coincide with the centenary of the Armenian massacres. After centuries of prominence as a world power, Armenia has withstood every attempt during the 20th century to destroy it. With a name redolent both of dim antiquity and of a modern world and its tensions, the Armenians founded a civilization and underwent a diaspora that brought many of the great ideas of the East to Western Europe. The Crossing Place is Philip Marsden's gripping account of his remarkable journey through the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus in a quest to discover the secret of one of the world's most extraordinary peoples. Caught between opposing empires, between warring religions and ideologies – at the crossing place of history – the Armenians have somehow survived against the odds. This is their story – told by one of the finest travel writers at work today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Fascinated with the Armenians, their civilization, and their resilience in the face of numerous efforts

throughout history to eradicate them, Philip Marsden toured Armenia and some of the places the various Armenian diasporas took them. His book, *THE CROSSING PLACE*, can be given a modest recommendation to anyone interested in travel writing and a somewhat heartier recommendation to those interested in the Armenians. Most of Marsden's trip occurred around 1991. His travels and account take place in three general regions: the Near East (Cyprus, Jerusalem, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey); Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, and the eastern shore of the Black Sea); and, finally, Armenia itself. The book contains a history of sorts of Armenia and the Armenians, albeit in somewhat disjointed fashion. A little known fact is that Armenia was the first country to make Christianity the state religion (in 301 CE). Located on the frontiers of clashing empires and religions, the Armenians have been overrun and expelled time and again. If possible, many return, and most of those who don't stubbornly maintain their Armenian identity and character in exile. Over the millennia they have been the victims of several genocides, the most recent large-scale one, in 1915, at the hands of the Turks (something that most Turks deny more vehemently than all but the worst Holocaust-deniers). In his travels, Marsden visits several sites of the worst massacres -- Shadaddie, Deir az Zor, and Ras ul-Ain -- and he talks to several survivors of the Turkish genocide. Even though I have become rather inured to twentieth-century man's inhumanity, some of these Armenian tales nonetheless provoked a feeling of nausea. Violence against the Armenians continues to this day. While Marsden was travelling in Armenia, he witnessed or was close to attacks by the Russians, the Turks, and the Azeris. And in the years since 1991, Armenians have been removed (either through murder or flight) from some of their places of refuge in Syria. *THE CROSSING PLACE* also contains much about the cultural achievements of the Armenians, again, however, in somewhat haphazard fashion. Of those cultural highpoints, the area that receives the most attention is architecture (and the extraordinary masonry that makes that architecture possible). The overarching question about the Armenians that Marsden tries to address in the book is: What makes them endure as Armenians, even after being alienated from their homeland for generations? Unfortunately, Marsden never reaches a satisfactory answer. About the best he comes up with is: "Sometimes it seems to me as if long ago, far back in a collective past that pre-dates most of the world's existing ethnic groups, the Armenians discovered a secret, and swore never to disclose it but hand it down from generation to generation, wherever they happened to be. It's a secret that's been so closely guarded for so many centuries, that what remains is less the secret itself than the habit of keeping it." About six months ago, I read Marsden's *"Rising Ground: A Search for the Spirit of Place"*. It was one of the ten best books I read in 2016. *THE CROSSING PLACE* is not as good. The Philip Marsden who wrote it (back in 1993) clearly is less mature both

as a writer and a person. Too often the writing lapses into the melodramatic or mushy; a few of the conclusions seem facile and pat; and, as mentioned, the book is rather disjointed. Still, not enough is known or written about the Armenians, and on that score the book is to be heartily commended.

"The Crossing Place" must have been a very demanding book to write. Philip Marsden went almost to the ends of the earth to track down and record every detail of the Armenian diaspora in Europe. He spent months (perhaps even years?) pouring over manuscripts, tracking down leads and learning to speak the language. The Armenian story is one that desperately needs telling and Marsden does his very best to capture the many facets of learning, religion, culture and of course tragedy that characterised this extraordinary nation over the centuries. I rate Marsden as a travel writer and a man of exceptional sympathy and understanding in his interactions with people, but I really struggled with this book. I so wanted to be immersed and carried away as I have been by his other books, but it just didn't happen. Perhaps it was a case of a writer knowing and caring too much to be able to share it effectively.

Detectives and divorce lawyers like to probe into their cases, pulling out causes and motivations, faults and crimes. They talk about "getting to the bottom" of it all. Maybe they can do it too. When authors of novels build characters, tell their stories, they can succeed in getting to the bottom of everything---if they want---because, after all, they've created everything from scratch. On the contrary, I know as an anthropologist that you can never, ever get to the bottom of an entire people or culture. You can hardly even get close. Large groups of people are just too diverse. History is too complex, particularly if that history extends over several thousand years. So, what I'm saying is that you can find out what makes a clock tick, you can learn if such and such a people produced pottery or not, but you can't discover what has kept Armenians going through centuries of trouble. Reading Marsden's *THE CROSSING PLACE* only confirms what I think---he doesn't even get close. On the other hand, maybe that desire was only an excuse to travel around Europe and the Middle East to see what remained of the ancient communities of Armenians that once traded, lived, and built churches from Europe to China. If so, then fair enough, it was a good idea which has produced an interesting, well-written book of travels. Marsden visits not only the scenes of the 1915 genocide, weirdly quiet in Syria and Lebanon just before the first Gulf War in 1990, but also Venice, Israel, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and several parts of the former USSR. He meets the last remnants of the Armenian population, most of which has left for greener pastures with the fall of Communism or because of the Lebanese civil war. At last Marsden arrives in Armenia itself, just emerging from the

ruins of the Soviet Union, fighting for its survival as a nation with Azerbaijan, which was backed by Soviet forces at the time. Marsden travels through the country, eventually reaching the very bottom, by the southern frontier with Iran. He DID get to the bottom of Armenia, but only physically. The author's approach is extremely haphazard, extremely romantic. He meets a number of important Armenians, but gets little substantive information from them. He visits sites of massacres and seiges, interviews a few ancient survivors, but says nothing new. He meets a number of people he didn't like--and they always speak pidgin English, unlike his own well-modulated tones. Everything American earns his special disdain. Marsden's travails with visas, bad transport, scarce food, or dirty hotels loom large, as does the hospitality of the Armenians everywhere he goes. The Armenians are indeed a hospitable people; they are tough; they are survivors, like the Jews, they have had to use their wits to get by for centuries; despite the genocide they are very much still around. But why them when other peoples have disappeared ? Marsden offers no clue. Armenian readers may warm to the author's attentions, but he doesn't fill in the gaps for others. He ignores works of history, anthropology, or any academic subject whatsoever. Being academic is certainly not required, but you must have SOME facts, some kind of argument, otherwise, you wind up with travel episodes--"I went here, I went there". Why ? Maybe because Philip Marsden likes to travel rough in out of the way places. In short, THE CROSSING PLACE may reveal many facts about Armenians, about Armenia in 1989-90, about the genocide, for readers who aren't aware of them, you may enjoy vivid scenes and some intelligent philosophical musings but don't expect to get to the bottom of anything.

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