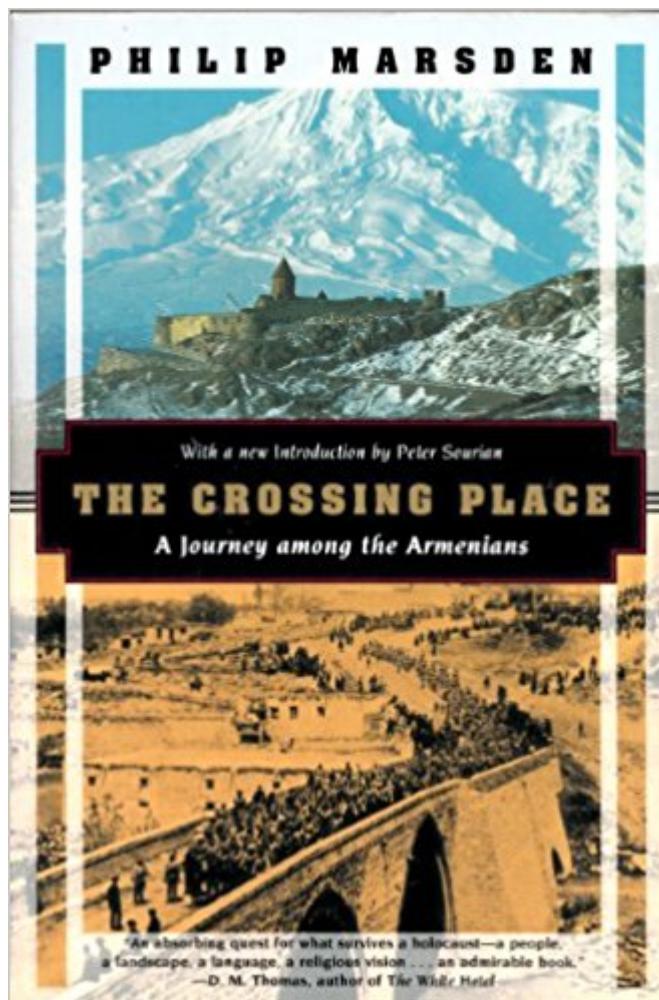


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# The Crossing Place: A Journey Among The Armenians (Kodansha Globe)



## Synopsis

Describes the history and culture of the Armenians.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Nothing makes a better case for comparing the executions of Turkey's Armenian population during WWI to those of Europe's Jews in WWII than Hitler's dictum ``After all, who now remembers the Armenians?'' Well, Marsden, for one. In his search for the Armenian diaspora, the English author of *A Far Country: Travels in Ethiopia* traveled through the Levant at the height of the Gulf War and through Eastern Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain--17 countries in all. After visiting Armenian communities in Venice and Jerusalem, Marsden went to Beirut, long ``Armenia's unofficial capital-in-exile'' (that Beirut is a haven itself speaks volumes). The Armenian network in the Middle East proved enormously resourceful, helping Marsden across dangerous borders with uncanny efficiency. By contrast, the Eastern European Armenians were less cohesive--in part, no doubt, because many trace their exile to 1064 and because, as Christians in Christian countries, their integration was easier. There is much history here, added layer by layer, but Marsden's real strength is in his descriptions and in his willingness to put himself at the mercy of circumstances during a raw and tumultuous time. Copyright 1995 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Originally published in England in 1993, this is the first American edition of a haunting book on the devastation of an ancient culture. After the 1915 genocide by the Turks, many of the remaining

Armenians were scattered throughout the Middle East. Marsden, a British journalist, wanders through this Armenian diaspora, from the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem to the former Soviet Republic of Armenia. In his search for the Armenian spirit, Marsden encounters Armenian descendants in a variety of situations with an abundance of stories and memories. A powerful introductory essay by Peter Sourian provides the historical and cultural background to Marsden's journeys, and the book is generously illustrated. As a personal memoir, this work is a worthy companion to Michael J. Arlen's *Passage to Ararat* (LJ 11/1/75) and complements David Marshall Lang's standard work, *The Armenians: A People in Exile* (Unwin Hyman, 1989). Recommended for public and academic libraries. Thomas Karel, Franklin & Marshall Coll. Lib., Lancaster, Pa. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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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