This book examines the part played by monks of Mount Athos in the diffusion of Orthodox monasticism throughout Eastern Europe and beyond. It focuses on the lives of outstanding holy men in the history of Orthodoxy who have been drawn to the Mountain, have absorbed the spirit of its wisdom and its prayer, and have returned to the outside world, inspired to spread the results of their labours and learning. In a remarkable demonstration of what may be termed ‘soft power’ in action, these men have carried the image of Athos to all corners of the Balkan peninsula, to Ukraine, to the very far north of Russia, across Siberia and the Bering Strait into North America, and most recently (when traditional routes were closed to them by the curtain of communism) to the West. Their dynamic witness is the greatest gift of Athos to a world thirsting for spiritual guidance.

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A HISTORY OF THE ATHONITE COMMONWEALTH

The Spiritual and Cultural Diaspora of Mount Athos

GRAHAM SPEAKE
For Thomas
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Preface

This book is a sequel to my earlier book, *Mount Athos: Renewal in Paradise*, which was first published in 2002. That book was primarily concerned with the monastic revival that took place on the Holy Mountain in the second half of the twentieth century as seen in the context of the history of Athos from when monks first arrived on the peninsula in the ninth century down to the present day. In the introduction I identified four areas of concern for which Athos is important – spiritual, historical, cultural, and environmental – and I tried to do justice to all of them in the chapters that followed. But having written that book, I began to realize that there was more to be said about the importance of Athos, especially about the role that it played in the spread of Orthodoxy, and specifically Orthodox monasticism, throughout Eastern Europe and beyond over the past millennium. Dimitri Obolensky had touched on this in his great work *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, but no one seemed to have pursued it. It is essentially a spiritual story, of a monastic diaspora, but with such broad ramifications that it impacted not just on religious life but on politics, society, and the arts. As the story unfolds, the Holy Mountain emerges in a new light as the chief instigator of what must rank as one of the most significant and wide-ranging movements in the history of the Orthodox Church.

In writing this book I have in mind the same reader as I envisaged for my first book, that is someone who is not necessarily a professional academic or a practising Christian, but who has an inquiring mind and a desire to understand the true meaning and importance of Mount Athos as the spiritual heart of Orthodoxy. You do not need to have visited Athos yourself, or indeed any of the parts of the world over which the text ranges (and they are many), but if any of my readers are persuaded by what I write to do so, then the book will have achieved something. My secondary aim, I should confess, is to convince you that monasteries are worth cherishing as centres of excellence – both spiritual and cultural excellence – and this,
I realize, is a conviction that may not come naturally to those of us who are children of Anglo-Saxon Protestant lands. But if the half-millennium of the Reformation merits celebration, how much more deserving is the millennium and more of the Athonite Commonwealth!

Many friends and colleagues have been generous with their time and their advice. In particular, I should like to thank my spiritual father, Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, who encouraged the project from the start and who provided helpful comments on the entire manuscript. I am also grateful to Fr Andrew Louth, Dame Averil Cameron, and the anonymous publisher’s reader, who all read the whole book and made numerous suggestions for its improvement. Guidance on points of detail was kindly provided by Bob Allison (Maine), John Burgess (Pittsburgh), Nicholas Fennell (Winchester), Aleksandar Golubović (Belgrade), Vladera Janković (Belgrade), Dan Ioan Mureșan (Paris), Fr Romilo (Hilandar), the late Sister Sidonia (Kilifarevo), and numerous members of the Friends of Mount Athos whose conferences and pilgrimages are a continuing source of inspiration on all matters Athonite. I am especially grateful to Sergey Shumilo, Director of the International Institute of the Athonite Heritage in Ukraine, for inviting me to address a conference that he organized in the monastery of the Caves in May 2015 on the theme ‘Athos and the Slav World’. The opportunity to spend the best part of a week in the glorious surroundings of that ancient monastery with its deep-rooted Athonite traditions was a most timely spur to me to complete the writing of this book.

My godson Thomas Small has often played devil’s advocate and coaxed me in the direction of creating a more readable or more convincing text. If I sometimes appeared reluctant to accept his advice, it was entirely due to my own blinkered intransigence. I hope that the dedication of this book is sufficient indication of my repentance and my gratitude.

Transliteration and nomenclature are a nightmare in a work that ranges over so many different languages and alphabets. I am deeply grateful to my friends Nicholas Fennell and Fr Romilo for their kind efforts to put me right on this. I have tried to retain the most familiar forms wherever possible and at the same time to impose some sort of consistency, but for any errors or infelicities that remain I alone am responsible. I am also grateful to the staff of the Slavonic Reading Room and the Theology Faculty Library in Oxford who have dealt patiently and courteously with all my tiresome requests and failures to find things and understand new systems.
As for the illustrations, I am extremely grateful to the Gerald Palmer Eling Trust for covering the cost of reproducing them. Most of the photographs are my own, but I must thank my friend Aleksandar Golubović for the picture of the skete of Bogoroditsa and the monastery of St John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights for the photograph of Fr Sophrony.

It remains for me to acknowledge my debt to my publishers. As a former publisher myself, I know how much work is involved in bringing to birth a book such as this. The staff of the Cambridge University Press have been unfailingly helpful and generous with their time throughout the editorial and production process. Many of their names I shall never know, but I must single out for special mention my commissioning editor, Michael Sharp, who has given the project his wholehearted support and full attention from the very start, my assiduous and most obliging content manager, Lisa Sinclair, and my eagle-eyed copy-editor, Lawrence Osborn, who has saved me from all manner of bêtise. My sincere thanks to all concerned.