

### **Boarding School Years**

Born, Henry Graham Greene, in October 1904 in Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire, England. Boarded at age 13 in Berkhamsted School where his father taught and became headmaster. Tall and bony, he was acutely shy, spoke with a faint defect, and showed no aptitude for games. It did not help that he was susceptible to bad attacks of hay fever. Few boys could resist tormenting a headmaster's son whose many weaknesses were compounded by watery eyes and a runny nose. He made an easy victim. Nothing had prepared him for the communal struggle of dormitory experience.

### **Early Years**

Greene was the fourth child of six children: his younger brother, Hugh became Director-General of the BBC, and his elder brother Raymond, an eminent physician and mountaineer. His parents, Charles Henry Greene and Marion Raymond Greene were first cousins, both members of a large, influential family that included the owners of Greene King Brewery, bankers, and statesmen. His mother was cousin to Robert Louis Stevenson.

Profoundly depressed at Berkhamsted School, he made several attempts at suicide, including one by Russian roulette. In 1920 at age 16, he was sent for 'psychiatric treatment' for six months in London, with an "inspired amateur" who practiced his own version of psychoanalysis, but who had no medical qualifications or formal training. Graham was "delighted to find himself in the company of such an unconventional man" and perhaps because he was given the freedom to do whatever he liked for much of the day. Afterwards he returned to school as a day student.

In 1922, Greene was for a short time a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. In 1925, while he was an undergraduate at Balliol College, Oxford, his first work—a poorly received volume of poetry was published. Greene suffered from bouts of depression while at Oxford, and largely kept to himself. Of Greene's time at Oxford, his contemporary Evelyn Waugh noted that "Greene looked down on us as childish and ostentatious. He certainly shared in none of our revelry." He graduated in 1925 with a degree in history.

## Writing Career

After leaving Oxford, Greene worked for a period of time as a private tutor and then turned to journalism – first on the *Nottingham Journal*, and then as a sub-editor on *The Times*. While he was working in Nottingham, he started corresponding with Vivien Dayrell-Browning, who had written him to correct him on a point Catholic doctrine. When he later began to think about marrying her, it occurred to him that, as he wrote in *A Sort of Life*, he “ought at least to learn the nature and limits of the beliefs she held.”

Greene’s first published novel was *The Man Within* (1929). Favorable reception emboldened him to quit his sub-editor job and work as a full-time novelist. The next two books, *The Name of Action* (1930) and *Rumour at Nightful* (1932) were unsuccessful. His first genuine success was *Stamboul Train* (1932) which was taken on by the Book Society and adapted as the film *Orient Express* in 1934.

He supplemented his novelist’s income with freelance journalism, book and film reviews for *The Spectator*, and co-editing the magazine *Night and Day*. Greene’s film review of *Wee Willie Winkie*, for *Night and Day* – which said that 9-year old film star, Shirley Temple, displayed “a dubious coquetry” appealing to “middle-aged clergymen” – provoked 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox successfully to sue for 3,500 plus costs – which resulted in the magazine folding, and Greene leaving the UK to live in Mexico until after the trial was over. While in Mexico, Greene developed the ideas for the novel, *The Power and the Glory* (1940).

As his career lengthened, both Greene and his readers found the distinction between entertainments and novels increasingly problematic. The last book Greene termed an entertainment was *Our Man in Havana* (1958). Greene also wrote short stories and plays, which were well received, although he was always first and foremost a novelist.

A lifelong friend of Green and later his editor at Simon & Schuster once observed that Greene wrote in a small black-leather notebook with a black fountain pen and would write approximately 500 words. Once he reached that count he would put his pen away and be done for the day.

## Travel & Espionage

Throughout his life, Greene travelled far from England, to what he called the world’s wild and remote places. The travels led to his being recruited into M16 by his sister, Elisabeth, who worked for the agency. Accordingly, he was posted to Sierra Leone during WWII. Kim Philby, who would later be revealed as a Soviet agent, was Greene’s supervisor and friend at M16. As a

novelist Greene wove the characters he met and the places where he lived into the fabric of his novels. Note: The City Hotel in Freetown (Sierra Leone) named the Bedford Hotel in *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) came to symbolize the withering ambitions of an empire in decline.

His 1938 trip to Mexico to give witness to the effects of the government's campaign of forced anti-Catholic secularization was paid for by the publishing company, Longman. That voyage produced two books, the factual *The Lawless Roads* and the novel *The Power and the Glory*. In

1953, the Holy Office informed Greene that the latter publication was damaging to the reputation of the priesthood; however, later in a private audience with Greene, Pope Paul VI told him that, although parts of his novels would likely offend some Catholics, he should ignore the criticism.

Greene also travelled to Haiti in 1954, where *The Comedians* (1966) is set, which was then under the rule of dictator Francois Duvalier, known as 'Papa Doc.' And, in the late 1950's, as inspiration for his novel, *A Burnt-Out Case* (1960), Greene spent time travelling around Africa visiting a number of leper colonies in the Congo Basin.

In 1957, just months after Fidel Castro began his final assault on the Batista regime in Cuba, Greene played a small role in helping the revolutionaries as a secret courier transporting warm clothing for Castro's rebels hiding in the hills during the Cuban winter. Greene was said to have a fascination with strong leaders, which may have accounted for his interest in Castro. In 1983, Greene did voice his doubts about Castro's Cuba, telling a French interviewer, "I admire him for his courage and efficiency, but I question his authoritarianism."

### **A Cinematic Writer**

Greene was one of the more 'cinematic' of twentieth-century writers. Many of his novels and plays and short stories have adapted for film or television. One Internet data base lists 66 titles between 1934 and 2010 based on Greene material. Some novels were filmed more than once, such as *Brighton Rock* in 1947 and 2011, *The End of the Affair* in 1955 and 1999, and *The Quiet American* in 1958 and 2002. The 1936 thriller *A Gun for Sale* was filmed at least five times under different titles. Greene received an Academy Award nomination for the screenplay for the 1948

Carol Reed film *The Fallen Idol*. He also wrote several original screenplays. In 1949, after writing the novella as 'raw material', he wrote the screenplay for the classic film noir, *The Third Man*, also directed by Carol Reed and featuring Orson Welles. In 1983, *The Honorary Consul*, published ten years earlier, was released as a film under its original title, starring Michael Caine and Richard Gere.

### **A Spiritual & Humanist Perspective**

Suffering and unhappiness are omnipresent in the world Greene depicts, and Catholicism is presented against a background of unvarying human evil and doubt. Greene concentrated on portraying the characters' internal lives – their mental, emotional, and spiritual depths. His novels often portray the dramatic struggles of the individual from a Catholic perspective. In this fictional world, sin is omnipresent to the degree that the valiant struggle to avoid sinful conduct is doomed to failure. Nonetheless, the spiritual realities that characterized his earlier work declined and were replaced by a humanistic perspective.

According to Ernest Mandel, "Greene started out as a conservative agent of British intelligence services, upholding such reactionary causes as the struggle of the Catholic Church against the Mexican revolution (*The Power and the Glory*) and arguing for the merciful function of religion in a context of human misery (*The Heart of the Matter*). The better he came to know the socio-political realities of the third world where he was operating, the more his novels shifted away from a singular spiritual perspective. Years before the Vietnam War, he prophetically attacked the idealistic but arrogant beliefs of Alden Pyle, in *The Quiet American*, whose certainty in his own virtue kept him from seeing the disaster he inflicted on the Vietnamese.

### **Personal Life**

Greene was baptized in the Roman Catholic faith in 1926. Late in life, Greene took to calling himself a 'Catholic agnostic.' He married Vivien Dayrell-Browning in 1927 at Hampstead, North London. The Greens had two children: Lucy Caroline (b.1933) and Francis – a boy (b. 1936). Greene left his family and his wife in 1947, although Vivien refused to grant him a divorce. They remained 'husband and wife' in name only until Greene's death in 1991.

Beginning in 1946 Greene had an extended extramarital affair with Catherine Walston, the wife of Harry Walston, a wealthy land owner and future peer of the realm. This relationship is thought to have informed the writing of *The End of the Affair*, published in 1951, when the affair came to an end. Her husband, 'Harry' Walston discovered the one thing that made her very happy was to sleep with all manner of men.

From 1966 to 1991, Greene has an extended affair with Yvonne Coletta whom he had met in Africa in 1959. Yvonne, it is said, was intrigued by the reserved manner of the famous writer. Although she was the principal interest in the last thirty years of his life, he was not one to restrict his interests to only one person. Whenever he was in Antibes, she would come to see him nearly every day.

Aside: Vivien once remarked, "With hindsight, he was a person who should never have married." He remained estranged from his wife and children.

### **Final Years**

Greene chose to leave Britain in 1966, moving to Antibes. He lived his last years of his life in Vevey, on Lake Geneva in Switzerland. By March 1991, it was clear that Greene's blood transfusions were losing their effectiveness. Near the end of the month, he could no longer move beyond the confines of this apartment. On Sunday, March 31, at five in the morning, an ambulance was sent for, and he was rushed to the Hopital de la Providence. He lapsed into a coma on Tuesday and did not awaken from it. Greene was not conscious when Father Duran—who had flown from Madrid-- gave him the last absolution. Although he had ceased going to mass and confession in the 1950s, he had begun in his final years to receive the sacraments again from Father Leopoldo Duran, a Spanish priest.

The cause of death is not given on his death certificate. His fatal ailment was described by Yvonne, as a blood disease in which the bone marrow fails to produce enough red cells.

Commenting on turning 80 years of age, he said, "The big advantage...is that at 80 you are more likely these days to beat out encountering your end in a nuclear war," adding, "the other side of the problem is that I really don't want to survive myself (which) has nothing to do with nukes, but with the body hanging around while the mind departs."

He died in 1991 at age 86 and was buried in Corseaux cemetery, Switzerland.

### **Yearly Conference**

The Graham Greene International Festival is an annual four-day event of conference papers, informal talks, question & answer sessions, films, dramatized readings, creative writing workshops, and social events. It is organized by the Graham Greene Birthplace Trust, and takes place in the writer's home town of Berkhamsted on dates as close as possible to the anniversary of his birth.

Read By: **C. J. Henry, Jr.**

