

Graham Greene And The Congo, 1959: Personal Memories and Background of *A Burnt-Out Case*

Michel Lechat

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One morning, some fifty-years-ago in 1959, Graham Greene appeared at Yonda, the leprosy settlement for which I happened to be the doctor. How was it that he came to my place, in the Equateur Province of the then Belgian Congo? It would be nice to say that he emerged one day, stepping down the gangway of the bishop's riverboat as Query does in the novel *A Burnt-Out Case*. This could have occurred: one "travels without maps" in the heart of the jungle and somehow, sometimes, one may run into dancers on a cricket lawn in a missionary outpost, an evening whisky with the manager of a cotton plantation, or even a leprosy colony. One is in the middle of nowhere, and all of a sudden, at the detour of a tree, passing through some sort of interface one penetrates into another universe. But it was not the case. Greene did not come unannounced. His visit to Yonda had been arranged through a common friend in Brussels. In his letter to this friend, he expressed the wish "for the purposes of a book to spend some weeks in

a hospital of the Schweitzer kind in Africa, but run by a religious order."

Of the Schweitzer kind, indeed! I must confess that my first reaction was mixed. Rightly or wrongly, Doctor Schweitzer at that time was not highly regarded by health professionals. He was therefore not the most perfect reference to use. Yonda was very different from the "leprosaria" of yesteryear that Greene had apparently in mind. The place was a large village near the Congo River, with small brick houses along avenues bordered by mango trees and simple technical buildings, housing over one thousand leprosy patients. There was no segregation of the "lepers," this cruel and unnecessary measure meant to prevent the transmission of the disease. Leprosy is not all that contagious, and out of some 100,000 patients at the time in the Congo, no more than ten percent were reputedly infectious. Patients could go freely in and out of the compound. They were accepted with their family, spouses or concubines, and even with their children. There were schools, and children were examined at regular intervals for the possible onset of symptoms, which at an early stage are easy to cure. There were workshops, and families had their plots of land for cultivation, a dozen dugouts, which we called "pirogues," that lay on the banks of the river. Yonda was aiming at becoming the prototype of a modern institution for the care of leprosy. The Sisters called it "*le petit Monaco des Noirs*," the little Monaco of Africans. I felt at that time that this was not a very inspiring context for a novelist.

Hence, I did nothing to prompt him to come. Out of consideration for him, and for the lady friend by whom he was recommended, I did however spend a Sunday preparing a large chart describing a dozen

“leprosoaria” throughout Africa which, in my opinion, were better suited than Yonda to accommodate him and minister to the birth of a novel.

To speak the truth, I was not that eager to shelter such a visitor in Yonda. In spite of its relative remoteness, the place was on its way to becoming if not yet a tourist attraction, at least a show piece. Of course that was not an issue with Greene. What I was more apprehensive of was that our guest, a famous Catholic writer, might upset the delicate balance between the Mission and me. It is not always that easy to be a mission doctor, the more so when one is at the same time a government employee. How would the father superior react, bicycling non-stop through the avenues chewing at his cheroot? What would the father in charge of construction, who in a previous life had taught Greek in a provincial Belgian town, think? And the brother in charge of carpentry who did not speak a word of anything except Frisian, at times mixed with some presumably horrendous expletives in Malay, which he had brought back from his years in a Japanese concentration camp during World War Two. Not to mention the bishop, described in the *Congo Journal* as ‘a wonderfully handsome old man with an 18th-century manner—or perhaps the manner of an Edwardian “boulevardier”?’ What if this “pilgrim of the dry season,” the sarcastic term used by the colonials to designate passer-by travelers, did not go to Mass? Did he even play bridge? The bishop was reputed for distributing his missionaries among the various stations in the bush according to their readiness to play bridge during his pastoral visits.

In any event, after a couple of weeks arrived a letter expressing his wish to come to our place, and then a second letter:

The book that I have in mind has a leper mission purely as a background and I have no intention, I promise you, of producing a roman à clef Nor am I looking for any dramatic material. The more normal and routine-like that I can make the background the more effective it would be for my purpose. (27th October 1958)

and a third letter in December,

. . . I want to see things as they are I want also to reassure you about the subject of the novel. The real subject . . . is a theological and psychological argument which for reasons I can’t go into for fear of destroying this still nebulous idea that should take place against the background of an African hospital settlement.

I went to see the Superior of the Mission in order to make the necessary arrangements for the visit. He did not show reluctance or surprise. He was somewhat accustomed to the visitors I was bringing in, not to say the ones sent occasionally by the colonial administration (‘You cannot miss the Belgian Lambaréné!’): a famous American ornithologist, an honorary Belgian consul in Sao Paolo, a Mister Arnold from the State Department, the manager of a travelling circus, a physiotherapist in training, a renowned doctor who had crossed the Atlantic on a raft, a lady socialist senator, a saxophonist, etc. So, it was all go for our English writer. Let us inspect the mosquito net in the bedroom at the Fathers’ house, fill the jug with water, and check the soap in the soap dish. We forgot to place a coat hanger; cassocks are apparently not supposed to be hung on a coat hanger, and this caused some embarrassment to Greene.

Greene came, and life went on undisturbed. Nobody asked questions, each of us being engrossed in our own tasks. The fathers went their way, busy driving trucks, mixing cement, repairing generators, all interspersed with teaching, preaching and distributing sweets to the children. The sisters cycled from the convent to the school and from the kitchen to the pharmacy. I went my way. He went his. It must be added that at the time of Greene's visit, the whole mission was teeming with frantic building activities. After years of discussions with the colonial authorities, it had been decided to build a hospital in order to replace the four-room dispensary which, since my arrival five years before, had served as consultation room cum laboratory and maternity ward. The fathers were feverishly drawing blueprints; Edith, my wife, was typing orders. I was ordering equipment (we even have electricity). As a consequence, nobody had much time to devote to our eminent guest.

He showed an utmost capacity for creating regular habits. In the morning he would walk down the meadow to the banks of the River, the Congo, sit in an old "pirogue" and read until the heat became unbearable. At various times of the day, habits overlapped. He generally had lunch at the fathers', during which the foursome of missionaries exchanged innocent jokes in Flemish, bursting into laughter that left him nonplussed. At the end of the day he would come to our house for a rest on the veranda and dinner with my wife and children. Now and then he joined me in the dispensary and sat on a chair between the door and the open window, observing the patients and asking questions. Needless to say, he was impeccable in his approach to them. (Twenty years later, he casually mentioned in one of his letters to me the

"fear I have felt the first few hours with you in the leper colony". I had not noticed.)

What a pity that nobody took a photograph of Greene staring at a patient, for example Imbonga Bernard, the man without fingers who had been taught to knit as well as any sister. Or the woman with the palsied eyelids who could not close her eyes or even blink. "The doctor had bought her dark glasses but she would not wear them because they were not a medicine—she had trust only in drugs" (Congo Journal, Febr.10th). Greene added that patients with mutilated feet who were given orthopedic shoes put them on only on Sundays.

That was the way of life at Yonda for all of us, and he was part of the group. He was like everybody else, doing his job, which in his case was struggling to deliver a novel. We had, however, to protect him from people's curiosity. There are Parkinsons everywhere who have a gift for nosing around. At the post office, this British gentleman, Mr. Graham (as he chose to introduce himself), being seen in the company of the doctor of the leprosarium, soon became Mr. Greene. The most obvious nuisance came from the people who were longing to have his opinion on some manuscripts they kept in a drawer. The number of individuals in a colonial town in want of a publisher for their novels is amazing. They usually showed up after five o'clock, "just to have a beer." We had the scenario all prepared and well-rehearsed. As soon as a car was spotted turning off the road and into the long alley of palm trees, Graham rushed back to the house, jumped through the window of our bedroom, and out into the forest.

The settlement at Yonda was beginning to encroach on the equatorial forest whose edges unfolded like huge green cliffs: "The great trees with their roots like the ribs of

ships. From the plane they had stood from the green jungle carpet browning at the top like cauliflowers. Their trunks curve a little this way and that giving the appearance of reptilian life” (*A Burnt-Out Case*, Part 2, Chapter 1). A beautiful description. “These woody spaces would remain unexplored . . . for longer than the planets.” The craters of the moon were better known than the forests at the door.” I am convinced it was while stepping over the rim of our bedroom’s window to run away from the unwanted afternoon bores that Greene imagined the flight of Deo Gratias, Querry’s boy, into the forest at night, on “a rough track which . . . led towards what geographers might have called the center of Africa” (*A Burnt-Out Case*, Part One, Chapter 2) What was there? Clearings in the forest with abandoned villages? Dormant ponds? Hidden paths meandering between the swamps? The smelling exhalations of an uncharted country? For years, at the rear of the house, we had, Edith and I, contemplated this inextricable tangle of greenery extending for hundreds miles on our doorsteps without ever having been able to make way into it.

Greene was, of course, a formidable observer. He seemed inattentive, though always on the lookout, gleaning small bits of trifling information and storing them for further processing.

“I am wondering, does he play bridge?” asks the Bishop of Mrs. Rycker.

“That atheist . . .” said Rycker of the Doctor: “Do you remember when last year I tried to organize a Leper’s Day Four hundred dresses had accumulated . . . and he refused to distribute them, just because there were not enough to go round”, (This

was a true story only were there blankets or tins of sardines? I forget.)

“Father, why are you so against Mr. Querry?” asks Father Thomas of the Superior.

“What other man in his position—he’s world famous, Father, even if Father Paul may never have heard of him—would bury himself here . . . ?”

In a few words transpires the whole resentment of Father Thomas, who is dead wood, towards Father Paul, who is building the hospital, and also some of his discomfort with the missionary work. Who knows? Even when there is no significant event, Greene would create life out of futility.

Greene never looked at people as though they were butterflies or cockroaches. As he stresses in the prologue to *A Burnt-Out Case* it would be a waste of time to try to spot or decode the central characters in the novel. The characters are “formed from the flotsam of thirty years as a novelist.” Marie-Françoise Allain, the French journalist, refers to Greene’s sagacity as though he has a gift as a medium. I would rather say that in general he officiates, so to speak, as an *accoucheur*. He was seeing right through what people could have been or might become, at different times, in different situations, in different universes. We all have virtual personalities which can come out according to the circumstances of life.

The Superior in the novel is a striking illustration thereof. A most inconspicuous character, he is an innocent piece of the *décor* who does not see the difference between a bidet and a footbath. Nonetheless he is led to make *en passant* a number of sharp remarks that nobody in Yonda would have expected from him. Yet, several years later,

the country being in a state of complete upheaval, he actually became archbishop, revealing himself to be much closer to the assertive and robust character displayed in the novel than to the laconic priest he was during his years in the leprosarium.

Greene was nevertheless, in some respect, deceptive. Visitors to Yonda were at times very thought provoking. They could often point out things whose interest for me had eroded after years of routine, which had become casual, and were escaping my attention. Graham, while a most pleasant companion when visiting a retired veterinarian in his cocoa plantation, strolling among the giant bamboo trees in a dilapidated botanical garden, or looking at strange scaffoldings along the road reminiscent of ancient tribal rituals, was also, should I say, concealed, keeping his observations to himself, not sharing them easily, as though they had to mature. Therefore I must confess that he did not bring me that much during his stay in terms of helping me to renew my vision of Yonda. But after all, why should he have done so? I had to wait for the book.

It was between us a sort of tacit pact of mutual reserve: he would have called it a “duty of reticence.” This attitude was not one-sided. I never of course took advantage of his presence, at times for hours in the car going to some distant station, to put him questions about religion. He never asked me about my beliefs, half-beliefs and non-beliefs. Otherwise, life would have become impossible. The nearest we came to discussing religion was on a Sunday driving to Coq’ to attend Mass at the native parish, the church in the African township. He told me “Michel, I hope it is not for me that you are going to Mass.” I returned the question. Otherwise, we never engaged in the subject. It was my way of protecting him. Harassed

by so many people eager to put to him their religious anxieties—and there was quite a bunch of them around—I believe that he appreciated my restraint. It might be the reason he dedicated the novel to me, and explains why we kept our friendship alive until the end of his life.

Let me quote here a letter he sent me before the novel was published (23 March 1960):

I am struggling towards the end of my novel which is now called *A Burnt Out Case* and I am wondering if I don’t as I am inclined to do put it in the fire whether you would allow me to dedicate it to you as a poor return for all your kindness.

I always abstained from reporting to him situations or anecdotes that could have provided the framework of a novel ‘à la Greene’. There were, of course, a number of them. The colonial environment, including the missionary world, is a breeding ground for all kinds of conflicts and entangled situations. How self-gratifying it would be to skillfully suggest a script to a famous author! Thus, during his visit, I avoided whispering in his ear anything which could interfere with his search for an appropriate story. I think it was subconscious on my part, a kind of reflex: a fear of usurping his creative power, sterilizing his freedom to explore and discover.

In this respect, I had a strange experience. When I arrived at the leprosarium as a young doctor, I had a fierce conflict with some the missionary sisters regarding the care of the patients, a quarrel between the ancients and the moderns which, owing to the tropical climate and the stuffy colonial society, reached earthshaking proportions. It was indeed the consummate scenario for Greene. With all the ingredients. At the time of his visit, I did not tell him a word about

it. Twenty-five years later, however, while we were having lunch together at Felix's in Antibes, I raised the subject. He interrupted me, saying that when he was in Yonda, he had heard some rumor about this *affaire*, and that he had always been grateful to me for not having told him about it at the time, because it would have destroyed—I do not remember the exact word he used—but it sounded like: “spoiled the whole thing . . . no book would have come out”.

In the *Journal* Greene describes his morning walk through the meadow down to his “pirogue”:

Egrets like patches of arctic snow stand among the small coffee-coloured cattle. The huge Congo flowing with the massive speed of a rush hour out over the great New York bridges. This had not changed since Conrad's day.

The reference to Joseph Conrad surprised me. Yonda, indeed, was the heart of darkness. As ship's officer, Conrad had maneuvered his wood-burning stern-wheeler, the *Roi des Belges*, on the Congo River, passing by Yonda, which of course did not exist then. (Klein, a commercial agent and his travelling companion, who as Kurtz was to become the hero of *Heart of Darkness*, is buried downstream.) We were at the time, my wife and I, avid readers of Conrad. Although I refrained from talking literature with Greene, I mentioned Conrad once and I immediately got the feeling that I had made a *faux-pas*. I was quite interested to learn, years later, that the book he was reading when lying in his pirogue in the morning dawn was indeed by Conrad, perhaps as a sort of exorcism.

The publication of *A Burnt-Out Case* raised a petty controversy. A few respected leprologists criticized him for having chosen

leprosy as the background of his novel. One of them wrote: “Querry's God is not the God of the Christian . . . This novel will bring pain and distress, and for this reason it would have been better if it had never been written.” Graham had been very affected by this letter. This is of course part of a huge *malentendu*. Provided the subject is treated with respect, which is the case, a novelist has the right to choose any topic he feels appropriate. As I wrote to this most eminent colleague: “Leprosy is part of life, like war, corruption, lost expectations, hatred and love. These are no precincts reserved to the retired generals, moralists, psychoanalysts or sex counsellors, no more than leprosy is the exclusive domain of the leprosy specialist.” I shall of course refrain from embarking here into a semantic debate on the use of the word “leper,” that for decades some people have been trying to eradicate from the English vocabulary. One of Greene's critics reckoned that he used the evil *L-word* no less than fifty-one times in the novel. That undoubtedly is a mortal sin.

I mentioned how tolerant were the missionaries at Yonda regarding moral issues. From the very second day after his arrival, having had dinner the previous evening at the Fathers', Greene raises the point in the Congo Journal (February 4th):

The social problem: the husbands are less inclined to follow their wives than the wives the husbands. The husband will set up in his village with another woman, and when the wife finds a lover to look after her in the colony, the husband descends demanding justice and the return of his 'dot'. The Protestant missions allow this to happen, but the Catholic fathers give the husband short shrift. People here are left alone and there are no moral inquisitions.

This attitude transpires throughout the novel. It is the story (a true story) of the catechist with no fingers nor toes left who brought to church for baptism a baby that he had fathered to a woman crippled from polio: “. . . there were no questions and no admonitions. The fathers were too busy to bother themselves with what the Church considered sin—moral theology was the subject they were less concerned with” (*A Burnt-Out Case*, Part 4, Chapter 1).

The fathers were unconcerned with private lives. Except of course, at least in the book, Father Thomas, who is indignant about the Sisters keeping as teacher in the school Marie, a young woman “having a baby every year by a different man . . . allowing her to teach with her cradle in the class. She is pregnant again. What kind of an example is that?” The Superior replies “We are here to help, not to condemn.”

The more I think about it, the more I imagine Greene’s surprise when he arrived in Yonda, an institution which perhaps did not meet his expectations. Here was a situation where it was not sin, but rather the disease that took precedence. The disease was becoming the sin, and TLC, to use the jargon, was replacing moral theology. He must have been faced with a dilemma. Is it possible that to some extent it hampered his drive to write *A Burnt-Out Case*? Could it explain why, after his visit, he repeatedly complained to me that he was quite unsure a novel would ever surge out of his stay. In *Ways of Escape*, he says that “never a novel proved more recalcitrant [. . .].” In the *Congo Journal*, he confesses:

The priests are more concerned with engineering; electricity, navigation and the like, than with the life of man or God.—(Querry) has come seeking another form of love and is faced with electric turbines

and problems of building, and he fails to understand the priests as much as they fail to understand him (*In Search of a Character*, *Congo Journal*, Febr.12th).

These priests were everyday missionaries for everyday life, quietly doing their jobs, not torn apart between one or another perdition and some ultimate redemption. Greene indeed was apt to adjust to whatever routine there might be, or however unusual the circumstances (and perhaps preferably when those were unusual), he adjusted. Since there were no inspiring events, he was able to instill life into the most commonplace occurrences.

Was Greene satisfied with the four weeks he spent at Yonda? Did he find in the “léproserie” and in the fathers and patients (and the doctor) what he was expecting? I cannot help believing that a great part of the depression, which according to many sources affected Greene during the writing of *A Burnt Out Case*, was not so much due to his unhappy cohabitation with Querry, but to the fact that he had not met the appropriate context in which to breed his novel. He was faced with the thorny dilemma of having to make the best of an inauspicious situation. But at the end, he succeeded. And the result was a superb book.

And then, from the Congo, Greene flew to Douala, in the Cameroons. He wrote us a warm note of thanks, adding:

I forgot to tell you that I went to one other léproserie . . . a mixture of the sentimental and the squalid Altogether it made one to realize all the more strongly what you have accomplished at Yonda.

A couple of weeks later, he sent me an intriguing letter:

I have just received an account in a local Cameroon paper of a meeting with me in Douala and feel extremely annoyed because I am reported as saying that I preferred the little léproserie of Dibamba to those in the Belgian Congo—better built, industrialized and less human! I am quoted as saying that I would have liked to have passed a fortnight at Dibamba. Needless to say I said none of these things.

I did not doubt for an instant that Greene would not denigrate Yonda, especially in front of a journalist. But I wanted to know more about this place in Dibamba. I obtained a copy of the article. It must have been quite an interesting interview indeed, defined forthright by the clerical journalist as “un peu de tout, à la française” (a little of everything, in the French way). Greene was presented as “ce géant aux yeux clairs” (this giant with pale eyes), “qui prend la vie comme un collégien en vacances” (seizing life like a college boy on holiday). It was a sort of lyrical elegy to Greene, comparing him to King Arthur in search of the Grail, a high class Don Giovanni, the bizarre trio of Epicure, Rabelais and Saint John the Baptist, with the robust health of catholic writers like Claudel, and Bernanos, and Mauriac, and also to Chesterton, Mao-Tse-Tung, Maurice Barrès and even Victor Hugo. In this orgy of comparisons and endorsements, the Dibamba/Yonda contest stands out as an insignificant and almost ludicrous footnote.

Graham must have been terribly embarrassed. I was not. I wrote to reassure him:

Please do not worry about the Douala’s article It could well be that the “léproseries” in the Congo are less compassionate than those in the Cameroon Africans are

not children. We are not here to use them for our self-fulfilment, We are here to help the patients into developing their responsibility as human beings . . . We are not looking for gratitude. We want them to get cured, whenever possible, and then to forget us afterwards. I believe that it is the only way to show interest in individuals It would be good that your Jesuit journalist thought about that.

These comments were well translated by Greene in the mouth of Doctor Colin: “A patient can always detect whether he is loved or whether it is only his leprosy which is loved. I don’t want leprosy loved. I want it eliminated”.

With years passing, I cannot, however, help asking myself whether there is not a bit of truth, a little bit of truth in that Douala interview. Later, as a sort of cryptic reply to my plea, Greene wrote a heartfelt review of a book on Lambarene (*Days with Albert Schweitzer*, by Frederick Franck) in which he stresses the human sides of this leper colony, by contrast with the “scientific” ones: “The sentimental hospital offers something to the human mind in pain or despair which the scientific may not be able to do, and the scientific sometimes fails by reason of its own dogmas.”

Greene, of course, uses the term *scientific* for want of a better word. Nowadays, one would talk of management. Yonda was definitely an example of good management. But management has its dangers. Would it be possible that Greene had foreseen the present-day drift of management towards a faceless world of cost-effectiveness, where cure is a return for health investment, people are human resources, partners are stakeholders, and patients will soon become clients, disguised behind statistics and

decimal figures. Doctor Schweitzer was, perhaps, not that wrong after all.

No comments were made after *A Burnt-Out Case* was published, just as no questions were asked while Greene was in Yonda. The fathers and the sisters went on treating the patients. The book, I suppose, joined the few romans policiers and the stock of missionary journals on the chocolate-colored dresser in the fathers' common-room. They probably did not read it. They had no time.

What happened to Yonda afterwards, how, thanks to the sisters who joined me in 1953, it survived in the middle of the chaos, is another story. It could have been the subject of another Greene novel.

Professor Michel Lechat was a renowned Belgian epidemiologist who worked at the Catholic University of Louvain and later at the Tropical Institute at Antwerp. He published more than 300 scientific papers, including more than 200 on leprosy. In 1953 he went to Iyonda in the then Belgian Congo to run the leprosarium. In 1959 he agreed to play host to Graham Greene, who stayed with him and his family for several weeks while the writer was researching for his novel *A Burnt-Out Case*. Subsequently Professor Lechat became a lifelong friend of Greene. He died in 2014.

We are grateful to his widow Edith Dasnoy for granting us permission to use his original lecture notes.