

Traveling in Greenland

Quentin Falk

More than thirty years after the publication of my first book, *Travels in Greenland: The Cinema of Graham Greene* (and even more poignantly at the Silver Anniversary of Greene's death,) I now find myself in, of all places, America's Deep South, heart of the Bible Belt, writing the great man's name and dates on a white board in a classroom at the campus of the University of North Georgia (UNG), about seventy or so miles from Atlanta.

Writing and talking about Greene, with whom I had a short but fascinating acquaintance in 1983/84, has not only brought me here, for the third time, to this rather beautiful institution, sited picturesquely near the start of the 2,150-mile-long Appalachian Trail, but also helped to introduce me to the wider Greene "family" of friends, fans, and academics who have kept the flame lit for, arguably, the finest of twentieth-century English novelists.

That "family" became further, and very happily, extended for me in these halls of academe with the arrival as Spring began of Bernard Diederich, this year's Visiting Author at UNG (I had that honor in 2013), whose brilliant and revealing—albeit much too belated—memoir, *Seeds of Fiction*, about "Greene's Adventures in Haiti and Central America 1954-1983," to coin the book's subtitle, gave me new and revealing insights into the great man's colorful life and times.

I had the privilege of moderating three Q&As for Diederich, whose amazing recall and quiet humor belied a man on the cusp

of ninety (he actually passed the milestone three months later), including one with my Creative Non-Fiction Writing class, who were clearly fascinated by his life as a journalist in some of the world's hottest spots as the bullets were flying. For his part, you could see how, in between teenager stories of four-masted ship voyages during wartime and a recital of various dictator oppressions, he still retained perhaps his fondest memory for his long friendship with Greene.

As Greene's latest biographer, his namesake Professor Richard Greene, puts it in an elegant Introduction to *Seeds of Fiction*: Diederich was "a guide and political adviser" to the author, more than 20 years his senior, as well as being, in Greene's words, "a figure of quiet heroism" who endured imprisonment and exile on account of his fearless journalism.

Although I did not realize it at the time, my first association with Graham Greene's more immediate family actually began when I was about fourteen or fifteen. Concerned especially about my lack of height, my father took me to see the country's leading endocrinologist, Dr. Raymond Greene, none other than Graham's older brother. Possibly taller than his younger brother, the good doctor—also a very accomplished mountaineer—was very encouraging, said something about slow-maturing bones, told us "not to worry," and sent us on our way. Some pills may also have been involved. At 17, I grew seven inches in the next year and a half.

I cannot remember whether I ever told his brother this either when we first met in Antibes in 1983 or, eighteen months later, at our brief reunion for an interview on stage at the National Film Theatre (NFT) on London's South Bank to celebrate both the publication of my book and Greene's impending 80th birthday. Also neither of

us knew that the NFT occasion was being secretly if crudely filmed—flagrantly without Greene’s permission—from the projection booth for, eventually, a wider television audience around the writer’s Centenary in 2004, thirteen years after his death.

As for maintaining any sort of association after our collaboration on *Greenland*, that never really seemed to be even remotely in the cards, remembering that Norman Sherry was still—to Greene’s increasing annoyance—dogging his footsteps before the publication nearly five years later of what would be the first of three huge volumes of authorized biography.

As I wrote in the fourth and most recent edition of *Greenland*, serendipitously published a couple of years ago by the University of North Georgia Press (now with the addition of a new chapter and a thoughtful Afterword by my latest boss, UNG English Department Head, Dr. Joyce Stavick), if I had hoped for “some obvious sign of approval [for my book], I was to be disappointed.” In a polite but fairly terse letter about arrangements ahead of our NFT date, Greene added in a P.S., “Please, if your book is to be reprinted in paperback, correct the mistake on page 4 or it will be endlessly repeated. *Brighton Rock* sold 8,000 not 80,000 copies.” Clearly the British taxman, who had apparently driven Greene into his French exile from 1966, still cast a very long shadow.

Happily, the book enjoyed some decent reviews at publication and, sometime later, even inclusion on a major Film Book of the Year Award shortlist—no, it did not win, sadly—before it began to recede from my memory as I took on, irregularly, new book projects, principally more conventional, showbiz-related biographies in between the bread-and-butter of film reviewing and various magazine editorships.

Then, in 1998, a summons arrived out of the blue from the organizers of the inaugural Graham Greene Festival asking if I would like to introduce a screening of *The Third Man* (incidentally, two years before it would be voted The Greatest British Film of the Century in a new millennium poll of film critics arranged by the British Film Institute (BFI); *Brighton Rock* was number 15). The venue, in the impressive 22-story Kodak UK headquarters, situated just off the town’s famous “Magic Roundabout,” was the first—and actually smallest—of a number of theatres, which would, over the succeeding years, host Festival screenings.

The following year, we were back in Hemel Hempstead where I introduced a screening of . . . well, perhaps not surprisingly, *Brighton Rock*, part of a four-pronged focus on the novel at that Festival, including talks on “Darkest Greenland” by Professor Cedric Watts and “The Making of The Film” by Maire McQueeney, who also led a guided day visit of the town itself.

Over the next fifteen years, in a variety of venues ranging from the Elgiva Centre, Chesham to The Civic Centre, Berkhamsted via The Rex Cinema and the school’s own Deans’ Hall, I had a succession of ever delightful late autumn Festival assignments, introducing various films in the Greene canon. These included the remakes of *The Quiet American*, *The End of the Affair*, *The Honorary Consul*, *Across the Bridge*, *Dr. Fischer of Geneva*, and *England Made Me*.

Even more memorable, certainly from my point of view, were various close encounters with articulate filmmakers who had embarked on their own travels in Greenland, explaining to me in front of very appreciative audiences, the pleasures and potential pitfalls of adapting Greene’s work for the cinema and television:

writer-director Peter Duffell (*England Made Me*), the late writer-producer Richard Broke (*Dr. Fischer*), and, on two occasions, separated by more than a decade, producer Stephen Woolley (*The End of the Affair*), not to mention fine British actors such as Ian Hart and Greta Scacchi.

Away from the Festival, our paths would indirectly cross again some years after Greene had died when I was commissioned to write a new biography of Alfred Hitchcock. The more I researched Hitch's life, desperately trying to find something to say that had not been said a hundred times before in numerous previous memoirs, the more I kept thinking what a perfect fit he and Greene would have made, and not just because of their shared Catholic faith.

It was probably something to do with what another filmmaker, Neil Jordan, had sagely opined in his generous Foreword to the 2000 3rd edition of my book when he linked "those two poets of English criminality and bad conscience," while bemoaning their "lack of contact." Writing about the so-called "Master of Suspense" gave me a chance to re-examine Greene's "strange miasma," as Jordan put it, about the work of Alfred Hitchcock which began when he was reviewing some of Hitch's work in the Thirties: "How unfortunate it is that Mr. Hitchcock, a clever director, is allowed to produce and even write his own films. Though as a producer he has no sense of continuity and as a writer he has no sense of life" Years later, Greene would admit to me that he actually did like some of Hitchcock's later work (after he went to Hollywood).

But clearly he had not quite yet acquired that more forgiving retrospect when, in the late fifties, Hitchcock approached him about acquiring the rights to *Our Man in Havana*. "I refused to sell them to

him," Greene told me. "I felt the book just wouldn't survive his touch."

However, I personally still like to fantasize from time to time just what Hitch might have fashioned from titles like *The Ministry of Fear*, *A Gun for Sale*, or even *The Tenth Man*. Criminality and conscience, indeed.

I write this during my final days of lately acquired academe in North Georgia wondering what Greene, with his often mordant views of many matters American, might have made of the current "Race for the White House," which day-by-day more resembles a chillingly tacky Reality TV show. Yet, the dawning possibility that America's next Commander-in-Chief might conceivably be a ruthless international businessman with strange hair, whose even stranger policies make *The Quiet American's* Alden Pyle seem like a boy scout in comparison, is, happily for me at least, temporarily eclipsed—trumped?—by one of Greene's most outrageous creations, Augusta Bertram.

I am "teaching," as they say, both the book and film of *Travels With My Aunt* as part of a Film and Literature course I have called 'The Absurd'—an excuse for me to punctuate appropriate texts like Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, Kafka's *The Trial*, and Carroll's poem *Jabberwocky* with some favorite movies such as *Dr. Strangelove*, Woody Allen's *Love And Death*, and the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*. *Travels* is the only specific book-to-film example I have chosen, not just to introduce second-year American college students probably for the first time to a playful Greene but also to highlight graphically how Hollywood could so fatally mangle such an exhilarating text.

Ironically—befitting elements of my course subject—some of the students seem to find the screen adaptation rather beguiling,

perhaps to do with the fact that the then 38-year-old Maggie Smith appeared to be auditioning for the ancient Dowager Lady Grantham from *Downton Abbey*, which has been a huge hit in the States and exposed the now officially veteran Dame Maggie to a whole new generation who know absolutely nothing of her earlier and much younger, Oscar-winning performances.

For me, this latest stopover in Greenland brings to mind—maybe fulfills is a better word—not one of Aunt Augusta’s more extravagant claims but rather the words of the Brighton fortune-teller Hatty when she predicts: “You are going to do a lot of traveling. With another person. You are going to cross the ocean. You are going to have many adventures.” My travels in Greenland have helped me have all that, and more.

Quentin Falk is the author of nine books including *Travels in Greenland: The Cinema of Graham Greene*, shortlisted for the Mobil BFI Film Book of the Year, and biographies of Anthony Hopkins, Alfred Hitchcock and Albert Finney. He has also been a film reviewer for the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Sunday Mirror*, and *Catholic Herald*, as well as Editor of the trade paper *Screen International and Academy*, journal of the British Academy of Film & Television Arts (BAFTA). In 2016, he was a Visiting Professor of English at the University of North Georgia.