

Making Sense of Greene's Panama: A Fuliginous Process

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“Whom the gods wish to destroy,” wrote Cyril Connolly, “they first call promising.”¹ A promising idea is in similar peril, as evident in Graham Greene’s writing about his various trips to Panama from 1976 to 1983. His “promising idea” started out as a diary, which among its copious details includes plans for a novel to be entitled *On the Way Back*. However, despite his numerous plans, the novel proved so imperiled that it was never written. Instead, Greene eventually published two books based on his experiences in Panama, both of which defy generic expectations: a memoir, *Getting to Know the General*, and his final novel, *The Captain and the Enemy*, a work that Michael Shelden described as “a confused story that tries to combine the world of Berkhamsted with that of violent Panama.”²

The reasons for his failure to complete *On the Way Back* are complex and opaque—“fuliginous” one might say, to use the word that “The Captain,” the hero of Greene’s final novel, would have used. Incarcerated with only the first half of a dictionary to read, the Captain acquired a wide vocabulary of words beginning from A to G. Known by a series of aliases and a master of disguise, the ethically challenged Captain is somewhat fuliginous himself, a typical

inhabitant of Greeneland. “Fuliginous” can also be applied to the works that eventually took shape: Greene’s memoir and final novel. Not only does neither fulfil the expectations of its genre, they also suffer from the complex and opaque issues that Greene faced transforming his experiences in Panama into fact and fiction. The difficulties occurred despite the promise to tell the story as recorded faithfully in the diary, rendered from experiences made possible by his privileged position, having been invited to the country by its ruler and provided with a driver and guide, flown when necessary across the difficult terrain, and able to speak to anyone he chose, from those in the administration to the inhabitants of remote villages.

So what went wrong with the aborted novel, *On the Way Back*? What prevented the completion of the novel that he announced would be set in Panama, when he already had the skeleton plot and the title in mind? The title came early, as he was taken on a journey through Panama; when a famous haunted house was closed, he and his guide resolved to see it on the way back. There was title and theme—a return that would be a discovery, a re-examination—a triumphal return or a regretful one. Words and phrases, whole snatches of conversation, even an appropriate epigraph, were coming to him readily—and recorded in his usual fashion, in note form to be written up later. Even the tone of the novel seemed to be established when Greene, having finally allowed himself to read Conrad again, found an epigraph in *Heart of Darkness*: “It seems I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can

¹ Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (London: Macmillan, 1938), 109.

² Michael Shelden, *The Enemy Within* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), 395.

convey the dream's sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment and a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible."³ With this comparison Greene indicates his awareness of the perils he faced in creating his ideas, even though when he began visiting Panama in 1976, he had already successfully completed twenty-three novels.

Indeed, the perils to promising ideas abound. *Enemies of Promise*, Connolly's masterly examination of the writing process first published in 1938, catalogs the various preoccupations, distractions, experiences, and dilemmas that endanger creativity: politics, "day dreams, conversations, drink and other narcotics, ... the clarion call of journalism, worldly success, escapism, ... sex with its obsessions, ... the ties of duty and domesticity."⁴ Yet this list sounds like a synopsis of Graham Greene's existence. After all, his second autobiographical work was called *Ways of Escape*. Domesticity he had abandoned thirty years before. Describing himself to his wife as having "a character profoundly antagonistic to ordinary domestic life,"⁵ he left her and their two children, but the other "enemies" persisted: journalism, success, drinks, and another—politics—became a growing preoccupation.

In fact, Greene had long established a pattern of visiting far-flung places and finding literary inspiration there. Though he described Panama as "this

bizarre and beautiful little country," it was the danger that enticed him. Earlier in 1976 he had "skipped off to Belfast for a cold whiff of fear."⁶ Greene's friend, *Life* magazine journalist Bernard Diederich, knew that Panama's volatile political situation would appeal and had spent some time acquainting its head of state with the English writer's literary reputation and political sympathies. He had also kept Greene informed of events in Panama. It was Diederich who led Greene to write his novel *The Comedians*, set in Haiti; and ultimately it was Diederich who introduced General Torrijos and Greene.⁷ Quickly assessing the Panamanian leader as complex—a benign dictator intent on a form of direct democracy, an autocrat who dreamed of relinquishing power—Greene found a paradoxical character ideal for his fiction. After all, the epigraph he chose for all of his writing was a quotation from Robert Browning: "our interest's on the dangerous edge of things. The honest thief, the tender murderer, the superstitious atheist."⁸ He had found just such a man. No wonder he liked him.

Politics was central to Greene's interest in Panama and the notes reveal the extension of his concerns for Nicaragua. The reference to the torture of a Sandinista female points to his wish to include the conflict there in his writing. Like Fowler in *The Quiet American*, Greene became involved both in Panama and back in Antibes. There

³ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* [1902] (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), 24.

⁴ Connolly, 85-86.

⁵ Graham Greene, Letter to Vivian Greene, 3 June 1948, *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters*, ed. Richard Greene (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007).

⁶ As fellow writer V. S. Pritchett described it, qtd. in Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene*,

1955-1991, vol. 3 (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), 604.

⁷ However, Greene did not acknowledge this in *Getting to Know the General* to protect Diederich's role as a journalist.

⁸ Graham Greene, *A Sort of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 85.

was no safe way of doing this that could have protected his creative process. As Connolly argues in *Enemies of Promise*, the wrong turns and bitter traps that seem to endanger the literary are also—simultaneously—the very conditions through which art thrives. Writing will never fully outstrip or elude its enemies; it doesn't succeed by transporting itself into the realm in which difficulties and dilemmas have disappeared. The writing process exists “on the dangerous edge of things.”

The Panama diaries enjoy a richness of details of the political, yet they have issues in their recording of Greene's “day dreams, conversations, drink and other narcotics.” He relates how the diaries began early on during his first trip: “I felt again a certain sense of adventure. Why otherwise would I have made trivial notes in a diary from the moment I arrived in Amsterdam?”⁹ As “the sense of excitement grew,” he compares “a sense of fun” to the emotions he experienced leaving Vietnam, Malaya, Kenya, and the Congo: “These had been serious journeys—this one was not. I thought of it as only a rather comic adventure, inspired by an invitation from a complete stranger which had come to me out of the blue.”¹⁰ Greene then admits that “the sense of fun, however, faded on arrival” before he meets with others.¹¹

That all changes as new feelings set in upon meeting others. After several rum punches with his friend Diederich, in rapid succession Greene meets both Chuchu and General Torrijos. Both prove to be walking contradictions. The General immediately defies the stereotypical as Greene describes being

captured by his fixed look and then admitting that “through the next four years I got to know those eyes well; they came to express sometimes an almost manic humour, an affection, an inscrutable inward thought and more than all other moods.”¹² It is in the early moments of their meeting that Greene becomes aware of his own vulnerability as stereotype in the nascent friendship as he recounts their first conversation: “Perhaps he was painting a self-portrait to the stranger whom he had been rash enough to invite to his country—for what reason he may well have been wondering now himself—as a plain simple man of action, which was very far from the truth. With a sidelong look at me he attacked intellectuals.

“Intellectuals,’ he remarked ‘are like fine glass, crystal glass, which can be cracked by a sound. Panama is made of rock and earth.” I won the first smile out of him when I said that he had probably saved himself from being an intellectual only by running away from school in time.¹³

Likewise, he records the contradictions of the driver and guide supplied to him; with the innocent-sounding nickname of Chuchu, Professor Jose de Jesus Martinez is no normal soldier. “A poet and a linguist who spoke English, French, Italian and German as well as Spanish,” Chuchu is a former professor of philosophy who had returned to Panama as a professor of mathematics and army sergeant, a Marxist devotedly loyal to the social democrat General.¹⁴ Chuchu, Greene explains, “became my guide, philosopher and friend and remains so to this hour.”¹⁵ Their friendship becomes the key to understanding not only

⁹ Graham Greene, *Getting to Know the General* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

Greene's experiences in Panama but also his writing process for the novel.

It is Chuchu who suggests the theme for Greene's writing about Panama. During their travels, they continually miss opportunities to visit places they pass through. For instance, when Greene wants to visit the Haunted House, he is stymied. Chuchu promises that they will see it "On the way back, ... but," as Greene explains, "a year was to pass before I had my way. It proved easier getting to know the General than the interior of the Haunted House."¹⁶ Because so much is promised "on the way back," Greene makes plans to write a novel with that name, explaining: "In my book the promised return would never be fulfilled—there would be no going back for my chief character."¹⁷

So the creative process began. The diaries that Greene kept throughout his trips to Panama show that he had been there only a week when he began working on the idea. By 21 December he was writing notes marked *On the Way Back*. Here are those from a page marked "O.T.W.B.":¹⁸

No - the story begins through the Sergeant's eyes. "He was using one of the General's cars because his own had been blown up by an insignificant bomb which had only shocked the thief who had tried to steal it"

Try and write the whole book on the surface: dialogue and acts and environment—no thoughts revisited. Or beginning through woman's eyes.

"She felt the uneasiness she always felt before an interview—she lacked the brazenness of the male

reporter, but not, so she believed, his cynicism."¹⁹

Chuchu contributed to the novel in other ways. He proved to be a womanizer with a love life that put even Greene's in the shade. He was flamboyant, dramatic, comical, pleasure-loving, and sincerely committed to the Panamanian cause. He was such a gift for a writer like Greene that he was soon taking a role in *On the Way Back*. This turned out to be the mistake, as Greene later recognized: "For the first time as a novelist, I was trying mistakenly to use real characters—the general, Chuchu—in my fiction. They had emerged from life and not from the unconscious and for that reason they had stood motionless like statues in my mind—they couldn't develop, they were incapable of the unexpected word or action—they were real people, and they could have no life independent of me in the imagination."²⁰ Greene had used real-life individuals before, but crucially had allowed himself to change, omit, and modify their characteristics. Even more importantly, he had not used his friends and told them of his intention beforehand. Chuchu, in Diederich's judgement, had tried to micro-manage the novel.

It is this sharing of the creative process that was damaging. In another sort of notebook, Greene made an intriguing entry which seems to confirm this. During the time he was making occasional trips to Panama, he was also making annual journeys across Spain with his friend Father Leopoldo Durán. The priest had purchased a fine quality exercise book and given it to Greene

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁸ Greene's Panamanian diaries, at Georgetown University. From notes taken by his bibliographer, Dr. Jon Wise.

¹⁹ "and" is an abbreviated squiggle; "the" as he writes it, is almost totally illegible, but it is exactly the same illegible structure elsewhere where "the" can be deduced from the context.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

with the request that he write a sentence or phrase on every page. Greene took seven years to complete the labor of love for his friend. One page has a quotation from Miguel de Unamuno: "If you write, let no-one know how you write, nor at what hours, nor your way of doing it."²¹ By announcing his intention to write *On the Way Back* to Chuchu, the General, and others, he shared his idea too soon.

Conversations had been the enemy of promise. But the ties of duty and domesticity were also returning with force. Panama diaries one and two, written in 1976 and 1977, are labeled "with my love to Yvonne to show what I was up to in those periods of separation."²² Yvonne Cloetta was his mistress from 1959 until his death in 1991, and as he aged Greene rediscovered some of the appeal of having a home—his was near Yvonne's, not with her. Duty too was calling him from Panama, albeit in a particularly dangerous form as he sought to protect Yvonne's daughter during a bitter divorce from a man who had connections with organized crime. This would lead to a battle with the French mafia and the publication of *J'Accuse* in 1982.

Because of all the perils, Greene ultimately resisted the impulse to turn experiences recorded in his Panama diaries into *On the Way Back*. However, the recursive "on the way back" had become a theme for his travels informing both his memories and his writing. Rather than writing the novel he was planning, Greene turned the tricks of memory into the memoir and his final novel, which become a study of how memory works, particularly Greene's.

²¹ "Known and Not So Known Literary Outcomes of Graham Greene's Travels with Father Leopoldo Durán"—a paper given at the Graham

Memory is extremely important to Greene, especially in regard to Panama and his friendship with Torrijos. He remarks about the dangers of memory: "When I had heard of Omar's death in August 1981, it was as though a whole section of my life had been cut out. It was better, I thought, not to revive memories."²³

Memory works differently in each of the two genres. Fiction demands that the process of remembering transforms memories: details become mutated to flesh out characters, enhance theme, and advance plot. Even though this possibility of making fiction of the experience brings the immediacy of the experience into an even sharper focus in the memoir, readers realize that the problem with creating fiction is that it has the opposite effect from how memoirs work. In a memoir reality is recreated by reading diaries and the memories that made the events are re-remembered, all the while supplying the details, which had not been previously recorded, from the vividness of the recall. It is as if this very act of leaving open the opportunity to visit a place "on the way back" keeps the immediacy of the memory alive, even if revisiting never happens. The remark calls into question how memory works, particularly with the immediacy of revisiting familiar places.

In its recursiveness, Greene's memoir about Panama, *Getting to Know the General*, defies its genre, which is usually more journalistic. Instead it is more oriented toward conveying the worldly success of Torrijos as well as Greene's escapism. The memoir's opening itself is recursive, with its news

Greene Festival by Dr. Beatriz Valverde Jiménez, 23 September 2018.

²² Notes taken by Dr. Jon Wise.

²³ Greene, *Getting to Know the General*, 185.

that his fifth transatlantic visit to Panama will not occur as planned: “In August 1981 my bag was packed for my fifth visit to Panama when the news came to me over the telephone of the death of General Omar Torrijos Herrera, my friend and host. The small plane in which he was flying to a house he owned at Coclesito in the mountains of Panama had crashed, and there were no survivors.”²⁴ He follows with his plan to publicize Herrera’s worldly success in response to sharing his loss with Chuchu: “At that moment the idea came to me to write a short personal memoir ... as a tribute to a man whom during that time I had grown to love.”²⁵ However, even that idea is interrupted by his memories and a larger realization of the politics involved:

But as soon as I had written the first sentences after the title, ‘Getting to Know the General’, I realized that it was not only the General whom I had got to know over those five years—it was also Chuchu, one of the few men in the National Guard whom the General trusted completely, and it was this bizarre and beautiful little country, split in two by the Canal and the American Zone, a country which had become, thanks to the General, of great practical importance in the struggle for liberation taking place in Nicaragua and El Salvador.²⁶

As Greene slowly realizes why he is in Panama and agrees to continue his annual visits because of the General and Chuchu, he also realizes the commitment to recording their struggles with the injustices of American imperialism. The process of his growing

awareness of the extent of the political issues, however, is related in a jumbled manner in the memoir. Early on Greene writes: “A friend asked me, as I was writing the closing passages of this book, ‘But why this interest which you seem always to have shown in Spain and Spanish America?’”²⁷ Rereading his notes and remembering his experiences, he crafts an answer:

Of those poor Spanish exiles the acknowledged chief was General Torrijos, a man of high qualities and fortune, still in the vigour of his years, and in these desperate circumstances refusing to despair.

The General Torrijos whom I had grown to love had been killed in the vigour of his years and I had been close to him in the desperate circumstances from which he suffered, the closing stages of the long-drawn-out negotiations with the United States over the Panama Canal Treaty, and the disappointing aftermath. He too refused to despair and he even seriously contemplated a possible armed struggle between his tiny country and the great power which occupied the Zone.²⁸

When pressed further, he adds: “Perhaps the answer lies in this: in those countries politics have seldom meant a mere alternation between rival electoral parties but have been a matter of life and death.”²⁹

He remembers just how Torrijos, whom he calls “a lone wolf,” works:

In his diplomatic struggle with the USA he had no support from ... the authoritarian generals who held their power with the aid of the United States, and who only existed

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

at all because in the eyes of the Americans they represented anti-Communism. Torrijos was not Communist, but he was a friend and admirer of Tito and he was on good personal terms with Fidel Castro. ... His country had become a haven of safety for refugees from Argentina, Nicaragua and El Salvador, and his dream, as I was to learn in the years that followed, was of a social democratic Central America which would be no menace to the United States, but completely independent. However, the nearer he came to success, the nearer he came to death.³⁰

It is only when Greene is halfway through the memoir that he admits: "I was beginning to appreciate what he had done and what he had risked in trying to achieve his dream for a Central America which would be Socialist and not Marxist, independent of the United States and yet not a menace to her. I felt for him as for a teacher as well as a friend."³¹

In general, the associated "clarion call of journalism, worldly success, escapism," enlarged the problems involved in rendering reality into specific genres, particularly vis-à-vis the problems with memory. Greene often commented on the chicanery of memory in his works. For instance, in *A Sort of Life*, he again uses the image of trying to relate a dream: "Memory is like a long broken night. As I write, it is as though I am waking from sleep continually to grasp at an image which I hope may drag in its wake a whole intact dream, but the fragments remain fragments, the

complete story always escapes."³² In *The Heart of the Matter* his narrator muses how "he couldn't tell that this was one of those occasions a man never forgets: a small cicatrice had been made on the memory, a wound that would ache when certain things combine—the taste of gin at mid-day, the smell of flowers under a balcony, the clang of corrugated iron, an ugly bird flopping from perch to perch."³³ And in *The Captain and the Enemy*, his narrator succinctly sums up the issue: "Memory cheats."³⁴

The memoir twists and turns as it moves forward through each yearly visit, also moving back and forth through time to add context from the past and to explain the significance of events within the context of future events. Despite its obvious memoir form, the book leans toward the novel as time blends to add coherence to the events, to make them story. Even though the memoir is based on notes that were mostly chronologically recorded, it doesn't follow typical generic conventions; his recollections are neither straightforward nor presented in chronological order, as most memoirs are structured. The memoir is as much about his various attempts to stay linear, but the nature of his Panamanian trips is recursive, so much so that the last time he leaves Panama while the General is alive, he is comforted by the thought that he will return in a year. After the General dies, he does not return the next year; however, he does return two years later, using the unused ticket that the General had purchased for him.

In writing the memoir, Greene admits that "so much that happened in

³⁰ Ibid., 32-33.

³¹ Ibid., 112-13.

³² Greene, *A Sort of Life*, 33.

³³ Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter* [1948] (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 5.

³⁴ Graham Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy* [1988] (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 25.

Panama during the next four years proved as unexpected as the events in a dream.”³⁵ In addition to the dreamlike quality of the visits, part of what makes the memoir so non-linear is the culture of Panama, where even the best-laid plans suffer from miscommunication or are made impossible because of the acts of others. At times readers are left wondering if the sole purpose of the visits is to find places serving an acceptable planter's punch fortified with the proper amount of rum, or to frequent restaurants serving passable food. Yet another part of the difficulty of making sense of events is the smallness of the country, causing people to reappear unexpectedly, as Greene explains: “nobody in Panama City only turns up once. Like a play with a small cast the same actors were always reappearing in different roles.”³⁶

Also disorienting is the very nature of travel in Panama, made difficult because of its terrain. Greene comments that often the only way to travel overland is by the same road going and coming, and when traveling by air, the steep terrain is made even more dangerous by the unpredictable weather with heavy fog, strong winds, and torrential downpours. Even the geography of the country defies the linear. Greene writes that “points of the compass in Panama can be confusing even to a geographer. Who for example would guess that the canal runs from the Atlantic to the Pacific more or less west to east?”³⁷ Another complicating geographical feature is the country's five borders, the extra created by the Canal Zone bisecting the country, which Greene explicates in his memoir:

“Panama is not the Canal, and the Zone was a whole world away from Panama. You could tell the difference the moment you entered the Zone from the neat well-built unimaginative houses and the trim lawns. There seemed to be innumerable golf courses and you felt the jungle had been thrown back by a battalion of lawn mowers.” He adds an epigraph for the Zone:

*And the wind shall say: here were
decent godless people:
Their only monument the asphalt
road
And a thousand golf Balls.*³⁸

Perhaps even more revealing are Greene's own memories of his childhood reading that complicate the memoir. He becomes obsessed with visiting the romantic legendary places that he remembers including Portobello, the historic ending of the gold route from Panama City, Nombre de Dios, “the Harbour of Provisions” for Drake, and Bocas del Toro where Columbus turned around, starting on his way back.

When Greene does fictionalize Panama, it is in the second half of his problematic last novel, *The Captain and the Enemy*. The first half, written as a memoir by an adolescent, is specifically problematic in how it deals with “the ties of duty and domesticity.” After all, the first scene depicts his abduction as a child and yet suggests only the slightest disapproval of it by anyone, including the child, who himself—now adolescent—feels no grievance. Nor is there a grievance when the Captain haphazardly renames him Jim. The world is decidedly one without love. The Captain has taken the child to replace an aborted child, and the “love story”

³⁵ Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* [1980] (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 48.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁷ Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, 117.

³⁸ Greene, *Getting to Know the General*, 42-43.

between the Captain and Liza (whom Jim is instructed to call “Mother”) is so problematic that neither involved will call it that, which perplexes the child even in his recollections as the adolescent narrator. Like the memoir published earlier, the eventual novel challenges the boundaries of its genre, transforming the memories detailed in the memoir into caricatures. Greene’s exaggerations create both the grotesque and the comedic.

His use of Panama as the setting for the novel’s second half, narrated by Jim as a young adult, invokes mythical images of wealth and gold, again the romantic images from Greene’s childhood reading, which he claims “had persistently haunted my imagination,”³⁹ but which are quickly discarded as sham by the narrator. For instance, when Jim narrates his flight to Panama, he claims his motivation is “towards a team of mules laden with gold riding along a rough track from the Pacific.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, as the plane descends for landing, reality intrudes as “the forest yielded to the ruins of that old Panama which the pirate Morgan had destroyed and a few moments later the plane was rolling smoothly along the tarmac towards buildings which resembled any airport anywhere.”⁴¹ Similarly, his description of Panama City invokes the grotesque reality:

It was a city of steep hills and torrential rainstorms which lasted for less than a quarter of an hour and yet made miniature Niagaras down the streets, leaving cars stranded. ... In the quarter which was called ironically Hollywood it was a shocking contrast to see the

tumbledown shacks on which the vultures lodged and in which whole families were crowded together in the intimacy of complete poverty only a few hundred yards from the banks, where the high windows glittered in the morning sun, and it was even more of a shock to gaze into the American Zone across the mere width of a street, and see the well-kept lawns and the expensive villas on which no vulture ever cared to settle.”⁴²

The comedic is also created from exaggeration as Jim and the Captain drive “into the American Zone, past all the golfers and the barracks and the churches—” and

the captain named a few of the churches as we went by them—the Coco Solo Community Church, the Cross Roads Bible Church the Nazarene, the Latter Day Saints, the Four-Square Gospel—“more than sixty of them,” he told me confirming Pablos’s mathematics, though not so many as the banks.

“Coco Solo,” I protested, thinking of Coca-Cola, “you must have invented that.”

“Not invented, but perhaps I pointed to the wrong building. It may have been the Jehovah Witnesses or the First Isthian. A very religious people, the Yankees. I forgot to show you the Argosy Book Stall. That is really unique. The only bookshop in the Zone. Of course with so much religion, not to speak of military duties, they have very little time to read.”⁴³

Through Greene’s creation of a jaded narrator and a host of stereotyped

³⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁰ Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, 88.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 93.

⁴³ Ibid., 117.

characters, he invokes black humor to comment on American imperialism. Two of the strongest statements to this effect are made by the narrator's would-be "guides" as they control his movements in the country, restricting what he sees. His "guardian" Pablo remarks, "This is not only Panama. This is Central America. Perhaps one day ... ' He patted the holster at his side. 'One needs better weapons than a revolver, you understand, to change things.'"⁴⁴ (94). Mr. Quigly, his "guide" clearly explains the imperialism evident in everyday life: "Panama is a curious place. A little capitalist state with a socialist general, split in two by the Americans. You and I as Englishmen can understand the difficulties which might arise here. It's as though England were split between the north and the south with the Americans in between. Somehow the Americans can't understand the resentment, because they bring in a lot of money. Panama would be poor without them, they expect to be loved, but they have enemies instead. Money makes enemies as well as friends."⁴⁵

Although fiction permits Greene a wider variety of characters to voice his concerns with authorial distance, he understands that once he transforms his diaries into fiction, he has lessened the potential to recall the memories and link them to real people. As he says in *A Sort of Life*, "for in the course of sixty-six years I have spent almost as much time with imaginary characters as with real men and women."⁴⁶ Jim, the narrator of *The Captain and the Enemy*, articulates the problem, which although he is speaking of the Captain and his woman

could be equally true for Greene and the General and Chuchu:

I cannot pretend that all these details which I am trying so hard to reconstruct from my memory are necessarily true, but I feel myself today driven by a compulsive passion now that we are separated to make these two people live before my eyes again, to bring them back out of the shadows and set them to play their sad parts as closely as possible to the truth. I am only too well aware of how I may be weaving fact into fiction but without any intention of betraying the truth. I want above anything else to make the two of them clear to myself so that they will continue to live as visibly as two photographs might seem to do propped up on a shelf beside my bed, but I don't own a single photograph of either of them. Why am I so possessed by them?⁴⁷

However, his last visit to Panama two years later convinces him otherwise. As an unofficial ambassador of Panama, he visits Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Cuba, reigniting his memories and causing him to "feel a little closer to the country which had produced Omar Torrijos."⁴⁸ It is only at the end of the memoir that Greene suggests why writing the novel could never happen: he is reluctant "to close finally the pages of a book and relegate to a shelf all the memories which it contains of a dead man whom I loved, Omar Torrijos."⁴⁹

Greene's final visits to Panama become parts of larger trips with visits to other countries, including Cuba and the United States. He uses the occasions to convey the political situation he

⁴⁴ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁶ Greene, *A Sort of Life*, 11.

⁴⁷ Greene, *Getting to Know the General*, 38-39.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁹ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 217.

encountered in Panama. By focusing on the politics of his visits in such overt political writing, the rendering of those trips into memoir defies the “norms” of travel writing. In fact, his desire to remember and record the injustices of American imperialism in Panama seems to become his sole motivation for writing these works on Panama. They reflect his larger sense of injustice that informs the concern of his writing and his life choices. The concern was fostered early on by his childhood reading; as he recollects of his childhood memories, “a child learns about injustice early.”⁵⁰

As he relates in *Getting to Know the General*, when the General was forming the delegation to travel to Washington to sign the new treaty, he suggested to Greene that he disguise himself as a colonel of the Panamanian National Guard and appear before President Carter as a special envoy. Despite a love of practical jokes, the writer declined. But he did agree to go as part of the delegation. And so, traveling on a Panamanian passport, he flew into Andrews Air base with Gabriel García Márquez. Both had previously been refused entry to the United States, “for reasons that even the president had been unable to explain,” said García Márquez.⁵¹

Greene emerged with a status that transcended even that of a world-renowned writer: he became a symbol for the struggle of the weak with the strong. *On the Way Back* had not developed as he had planned, but he himself was “on the way back” to a country that had once refused him entry and was now receiving the casually

dressed writer with “a 21-gun salute and the martial notes of the US national anthem.”⁵² His presence alone could disconcert a tyrant. When Márquez and Greene later mingled at a reception at the Organization of American States attended by dictators such as Pinochet of Chile and Stroessner of Paraguay, Greene wrote to his friend Diederich: “A girl introduced me to one of his [Stroessner’s] ministers who directly when he heard my name froze, said ‘You once passed through Paraguay,’ and turned on his heel without a handshake.” Greene commented in a letter written to Diederich, “I was pleased to find I got under Stroessner’s skin as I got under Duvalier’s.”⁵³

By being part of the Panamanian delegation Greene showed the world where his sympathies lay. As he said to Castro when they finally met, “I am not the messenger. I am the message.” There was nothing fuliginous about that.

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⁵⁰ Greene, *A Sort of Life*, 61.

⁵¹ Qtd. in Bernard Diederich, *Seeds of Fiction*, (London: Peter Owen, 2012), 189.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.