

REVIEW

“Greene on Greene”

Mike Hill

Richard Greene, *Russian Roulette: The Life and Times of Graham Greene*. London: Little, Brown, 2020.

Richard Greene, *Unquiet Englishman: The Life of Graham Greene*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2021.

In 1923 Graham Greene played Russian roulette on six occasions. He loaded a bullet into a revolver, spun the chambers round, put the gun to his ear, and pulled the trigger. He did this not to kill himself, but out of boredom and for the thrill of the experience. Each time the bullet was not fired, and Greene was spared. It is a story told in Greene’s 1971 autobiography *A Sort of Life*, and it may not be entirely true. A new biography of the writer marshals evidence to suggest that Greene may well have done this using blanks (perhaps even using a live bullet but believing it to be blank), or “more likely, empty chambers.” Getting the facts straight is the starting point of any biography.

Writing an account of Graham Greene’s life is no easy task. Purely as a writer, Greene wrote, over seventy years, an astonishing range of material—novels, short stories, plays, book and film reviews, essays, journalism, travel books, autobiography, biography, memoir, diaries, children’s stories, poetry, film screenplays, a dream diary, and a vast output of letters. Greene himself once advised that the best way to understand him as a person was simply to “read my books.” But Greene managed also, among other things, to be

a publisher, MI6 agent, Catholic convert, tireless traveler, and espouser of left-wing causes—and that is before one considers his turbulent private life and his bipolar disorder. He crammed a lot into his eighty-six years.

Unfortunately, Greene has not been well served by his biographers. There have been a number of attempts to cover part or all of his life, with varying degrees of success. The two accounts of his whole life have been Norman Sherry’s monumental three-volume biography (1989, 1994, and 2004), and Michael Sheldon’s 1994 single volume. Both attempts have serious flaws, and it has been obvious for many years that a balanced, thoroughly researched, well-written, single-volume biography of Graham Greene is needed.

Now we have one. Richard Greene must tire of saying that he is no relation to Graham, but he has a pedigree which promises much in writing about his namesake. He is a Professor of English at the University of Toronto, and he has previously written a well-received biography of Edith Sitwell and edited a wonderful collection of Graham Greene’s letters.

Apart from other failings, previous biographies now suffer from being seriously out of date, and Professor Greene’s new book takes full advantage of new material now available on Graham Greene. He has made use of a mass of newly available letters and papers, interviews with Graham’s daughter Caroline, and an unpublished memoir by Oliver Walston of his mother Catherine. An important book by the late Bernard Diederich has told us much about Greene’s involvement with Haiti and Central America; studies within the last ten years or so have shed important new light on Greene in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Vietnam, Cuba, the Congo,

Spain, and on Kim Philby; two volumes of bibliography have also been published. Richard Greene has made full use of this material and his scholarship is impeccable.

There is new information throughout the book. Almost entirely new is the detail here on Greene's children, Caroline and Francis. Sometimes the new material is a fuller version of what is only touched on in other works: this is true of the account of psychiatrist and therapist Eric Strauss, a man who diagnosed Greene as manic depressive and was probably responsible for keeping him from suicide in the 1950s. Sometimes the detail amounts to a scoop, as when a scriptwriting contract is used to help explain why Greene resigned from MI6 in 1944.

The general tone of the book is not judgmental, but it is not hagiography. It mentions Greene's many acts of generosity toward family, friends, and fellow writers, but also refers to "those acts of insensitivity of which he would often be guilty." There are sometimes pointed comments on Greene's political stances—as with his 1963 *Sunday Telegraph* article "Return to Cuba," which "contained no reference to the hundreds of political executions that had taken place there, or to other human rights abuses." And, as in the case of Russian roulette, the book is willing to challenge Greene's own later account of things, particularly in *A Sort of Life*, where a poor memory and/or a degree of mythmaking may be at work. But these are matters of setting the record straight; the book is not prosecutorial, as Sheldon's unfortunately is.

There are interesting insights into Greene's make-up in the book, as when it advises us not to take the cynicism and world weariness of his later life at face

value: "There is a core of nostalgia, even sentimentality in him that he worked to conceal and discipline." The biography emphasizes how often Greene saw issues in terms of belief—Greene "characteristically" saw even Kim Philby's career as "a problem of belief." As one would expect from a Professor of Literature, there are insightful comments on Greene's writings and on the theology behind some of them. There is interesting discussion throughout on the nature of Greene's religious beliefs and on the author's claim that he was "not a Catholic writer but a writer who happens to be a Catholic"; Richard Greene comments that "it is more accurate as a description of the second half of his career than of the first."

In deciding what to include and what to leave out, the author's judgment is generally very sound. Where Sherry quotes endlessly and tediously from Greene's letters to his future wife Vivien, Richard Greene briskly comments that the letters are "now embarrassing to read—as if one were listening in on thousands of hours of adolescent phone calls." There is a deliberate emphasis on the important middle years of Greene's life—the 1950s, a tumultuous decade for the writer, takes up around a quarter of the book. There are areas of Greene's life one would like to know more about, like his relationship with Anita Björk and his continuing shadowy involvement with MI6 beyond his resignation from the service, but this is not a criticism of this book; these are areas where, for now at least, simply too little evidence exists.

Then there is the question of Greene's restless traveling and political commitments: how much contextual information is it appropriate to include? This is a particularly extreme problem for the biographer of a writer who had

involvements in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mexico, Malaya, Vietnam, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Kenya, Congo, Haiti, Spain, USSR, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Panama, El Salvador, Belize, and Nicaragua, many of which form settings for his fiction. "There is no understanding Graham Greene," Professor Greene writes, "except in the political and cultural contexts of dozens of countries." There is, in consequence, a good deal of such contextual information here, and in this respect, it is more successful than previous biographies of Greene. On occasion, some readers may find the context a little overdone.

Exploring Graham Greene's very full life in a little over five hundred pages involves a brisk style and pace, and no fewer than seventy-eight chapters. The very many people who made up Greene's life—family, friends, colleagues, foes—are often captured wonderfully in brief pen portraits. And as befits the biography of a man with a manic side and much given to practical jokes, Richard Greene employs a nice line in wit: there is a morally censorious studio boss "whose own adulteries would have led to remarks in Gomorrah," and a professor "who liked to explain things and spoke in full paragraphs."

Richard Greene's book is clear, well-researched, balanced, sympathetic but not uncritical, and witty. His new biography was well worth the wait; for anyone with an interest in Graham Greene, it is essential reading.

Mike Hill is a retired teacher. He edits *A Sort of Newsletter*, the quarterly magazine of the Graham Greene Birthplace Trust. He is currently organizing his sixth Graham Greene Festival, to be held in Berkhamsted in September 2021. The 2011 volume *Dangerous Edges of Graham Greene* included his essay 'Greene and Hitchcock'. He has co-authored with Jon Wise two books on Greene: *The Works of Graham Greene: A Reader's Bibliography & Guide* (Continuum 2012) and *The Works of Graham Greene Volume 2: A Guide to the Graham Greene Archives* (Bloomsbury 2015).