

REVIEW

Jon Wise

Graham Greene's *The Last Interview and Other Conversations*. Ed. John R. MacArthur. Melville House Publishing, 2019.

For a writer who supposedly avoided the limelight, Graham Greene agreed to be interviewed on more than eighty occasions, not counting the book-length series that comprises *The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene*.

This book, edited by an American journalist, is a compilation of four that took place during the last decade of the author's life. Three of the interviewers, Anthony Burgess, John Mortimer, and Martin Amis, were or are noted writers. The fourth, conducted by the editor of this book, is of note as it is almost certainly the last interview Greene undertook. It is also the first time it has appeared in print in a totally unabridged form. It occupies 89 of the 129 pages of this slim volume, part of an extensive *The Last Interview* series that covers a diverse range of famous, but predominantly male, subjects.

In his introduction, MacArthur describes at length his difficulties at gaining access to Greene's flat in *Résidence des Fleurs*, Antibes. He finally succeeds in early October 1990. MacArthur is clearly on a mission. The United States had invaded Panama in December 1989, overthrowing the dictator Manuel Noriega and restoring American dominance of the strategically vital Panama Canal. MacArthur wants to gauge Greene's reaction to this in the light of his close association with President Torrijos of Panama a few

years earlier. He pursues this topic relentlessly throughout.

A glance at other interviews in the book will tell you immediately that "The Last Interview" is very different. Elsewhere, Greene appears quick witted, opinionated, and totally lucid. Here he is hesitant, mostly led by the voluble MacArthur, and openly hopeless at remembering names. The conversation quickly becomes confused and random. At one stage it suddenly switches from Panama and Noriega to the writing of *The Quiet American*. MacArthur wants Greene to describe the type of Americans he had encountered in Vietnam. Instead, after struggling to recall the name of Fowler, Greene remarks that the character was entirely fictional. By the time MacArthur has caught up with the writer's train of thought, Greene has moved on to his inspiration for the plot, the "third force" and Caodaism. At other times his memory partially clears but one realizes, sadly, that his anecdotes are being lifted, almost verbatim, from passages found in his autobiography *Ways of Escape*. It comes as a relief, therefore, when he switches yet again to give a perfectly plausible explanation as to why, in the late 1940s, he wrote in support of the colonial planters who were suffering during the Malayan Emergency.

Of course, Greene was a very sick man at the time of the interview. He was enduring regular blood transfusions and vitamin injections to counter leukemia. MacArthur had caught up with him during October 1990 when he was briefly in Antibes before leaving for Switzerland for the last time. It is little wonder, therefore, that deep in the interview, Greene suddenly breaks the flow of his interviewer's questioning to offer him more Bols gin, asking if they can stop soon as he was getting tired and

needed to prepare his supper. Seemingly unaware of this obvious signal, MacArthur ploughs on with his next question. A while later, when Greene makes another plea, he is again ignored despite the fact that he is trying to explain that it is his birthday the next day and that he has to travel abroad for his next blood transfusion.

All this appears to fall on deaf ears. It is probably a measure of Greene's exhaustion that he does not protest, let alone lose his temper, remaining invariably polite throughout. The transcription of the interview peters out with MacArthur still in mid-flow.

Do we gain any fresh insights into Graham Greene as a result of this interview? Not really. Should it have been published in the first place? The completist might argue its relevance; otherwise, one is left with a deep sense of sadness at a once great mind rapidly losing its way and struggling to cope.

(This review appeared in a slightly adapted form in *A Sort of Newsletter*, May 2020.)

Jon Wise taught 11–19-year-old students English Language and Literature for over thirty years and later supervised trainee teachers. He holds a PhD from the University of Exeter, UK. He has published books and articles about Graham Greene and also on naval history. He has co-authored two bibliographic guides to the works of Greene and a third is in preparation. He is website manager of the Graham Greene Birthplace Trust as well as a Trustee. He is married and lives with his wife in Herefordshire on the borders of Wales.