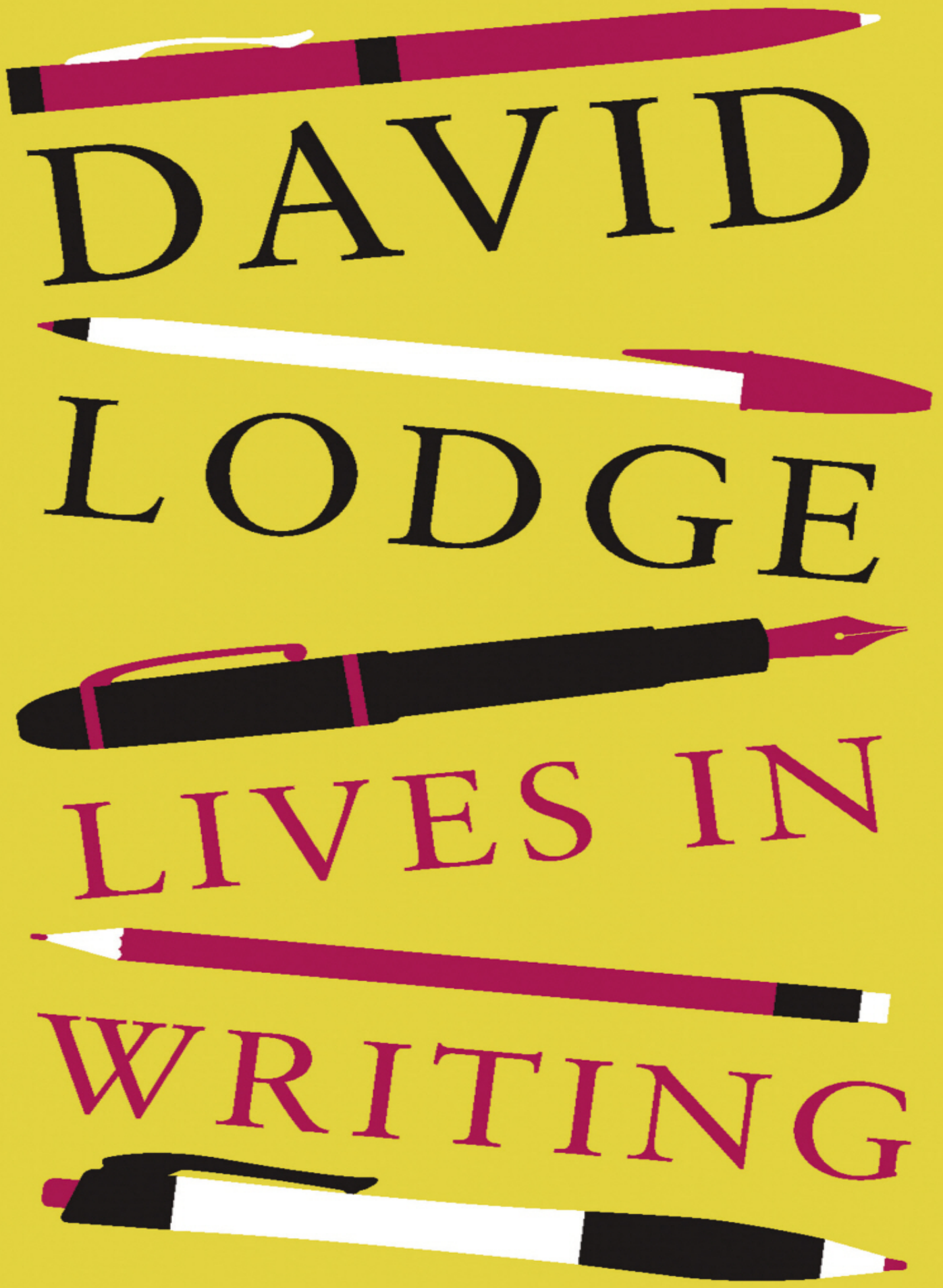
DAVID
LODGE
LIVES IN
WRITING

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About the Book

This thoughtful and enlightening collection by one of our best-loved and most highly respected novelists and critics includes essays on Graham Greene, Kingsley Amis, Terry Eagleton, Muriel Spark and Alan Bennett, as well as pieces on John Boorman and the death of Princess Diana. It also gives insight into Lodge's own writing processes and novels. Full of anecdotes and wonderful observations, *Lives in Writing* is the perfect literary companion.

Drawing on David Lodge's long experience as novelist and critic, *Lives in Writing* is a fascinating study of the interface between life and literature.

About the Author

David Lodge's novels include *Changing Places*, *Small World*, *Nice Work*, *Thinks...*, *Author, Author* and, most recently, *A Man of Parts*. He has also written stage plays and screenplays, and several books of literary criticism, including *The Art of Fiction*, *Consciousness and the Novel* and *The Year of Henry James*.

ALSO BY DAVID LODGE

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To Angela, and in memory of Tom

Lives in Writing

David Lodge

Essays

Harvill *Secker*
LONDON

FOREWORD

I have combined creative writing with the practice of literary criticism for more than fifty years, and I think of myself as primarily a novelist in the former capacity, and a critic and theorist of the novel in the latter. But as I get older I find myself becoming more and more interested in, and attracted to, fact-based writing. This is I believe a common tendency in readers as they age, but it also seems to be a trend in contemporary literary culture generally. These essays variously describe, evaluate and exemplify different ways in which the lives of real people are represented in the written word: biography, the biographical novel, biographical criticism, autobiography, diary, memoir, confession, and various combinations of these modes. The book's title has another meaning: with a single exception, all the subjects are or were by profession 'in writing' of various kinds (though one of them is primarily a film-maker). The connections between their personal lives and the work they produced make a thread that runs through all these essays. Nearly all contain autobiographical passages of my own, and some in the latter part of the book are framed as memoirs. The last essay belongs to a sub-species of autobiography, of which Henry James was the supreme exponent, in which a writer tells the story behind the story of one of his books: the history of its genesis and composition, and sometimes its reception. In the title essay of an earlier book, *The Year of Henry James*, I treated my novel *Author, Author* in this way. 'Writing H.G. Wells' is more polemical. Given the controversial status of the biographical novel at the time *A Man of Parts* was published, an account

of how it was written inevitably became a kind of defence of this hybrid genre.

Although I hope scholars may find things of interest in this book, it is designed primarily for the ‘general reader’. In the interest of readability I have kept footnotes and bibliographical information to a minimum. Books discussed or quoted are identified simply by author, title and date of first publication.

D.L., February 2013

THE LATE GRAHAM GREENE

NORMAN SHERRY'S THREE-VOLUME biography of Graham Greene[1] occupied him continuously and exclusively for twenty-eight years, which may be a record of some kind. Greene died in 1991, having correctly predicted that he would not live to read the second volume, which was published in 1994. He also prophesied that Sherry would not survive to read the third and last volume, eventually published in 2004, a remark in which one might detect some resentment at the ever-increasing scale and scope of the biography, and regret for having authorised its often embarrassing revelations. That prophecy was happily unfulfilled, but at times it was a close-run thing. Sherry promised Greene that he would visit every country that the novelist had used as a setting for a novel, a vow that took him to some twenty countries, entailing danger, hardship, and at least one life-threatening illness. He admits on the penultimate page of the biography that 'reaching the end had often seemed beyond my strength and spirit', and superstitiously left the very last sentence of his narrative unfinished.

It is impossible not to see in the progress of this enormous work a cautionary tale about the perils of literary biography when it becomes an obsessive and all-consuming project, a doomed attempt to re-live the subject's life vicariously and somehow achieve a perfect 'fit' between it and his artistic output. 'No novel can be believable if the novelist does not acknowledge the truth of his own experiences, even when these are disturbing,' Sherry asserts in the course of this final instalment. 'Greene needed to deal with his past: and we, in turn, need to excavate his private history.' There are

several debatable assertions here. What does ‘truth’ mean in this context? If we grant that writers often deal with painful and disturbing personal experience in their fictions (and Greene himself wrote that ‘writing is a form of therapy’) does this not usually involve departing from the empirical facts of such experience – altering them, even inverting them, reinterpreting them, and combining them with purely fictional material? If so, is there not a danger in trying to pin down the sources of characters and events of novels too literally in the writer’s own life? Does a novel become more ‘believable’ when we succeed in doing this? Or less?

These questions belong to a larger debate which has exercised literary critics and scholars since T.S. Eliot declared in 1919 that ‘the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material’. Eliot challenged the Romantic view that the creative process is essentially expressive of the writer’s self, and by implication the legitimacy of biographical interpretation, contributing crucially to the emergence of a new movement in academic literary criticism which regarded the text as an autonomous verbal object, and by the end of the twentieth century had triumphantly affirmed the ‘death of the author’. Meanwhile non-academic readers showed an increasing interest in biographies of authors, which were often written by academics of an empirical and historical bent. The fact is that the appeal of literary biography is undeniable and irresistible but cognitively impure. We are fascinated by the mystery of literary creation, and therefore eager to discover the sources of a writer’s inspiration; but we also take a simply inquisitive human interest in the private lives of important writers, especially if they involve behaviour that is in any way unusual. Graham Greene was a man whose life offered ample opportunity to satisfy both kinds of curiosity –

perhaps so much opportunity that Norman Sherry allowed himself to be overwhelmed and in the end exhausted by it.

His first volume, covering the years 1904–39, was by far the best, convincingly locating the source of Greene's obsession with the theme of treachery in his unhappy childhood, and telling vividly and lucidly the absorbing story of his up-and-down early career as a writer, and his remarkable courtship, marriage and extra-marital sexual life. It thoroughly deserved the praise it attracted. The second volume was less satisfying, because its thematic organisation obscured the narrative line of Greene's life in the period 1939–55, but it did memorably contain the stranger-than-fiction story of Greene's love affair with Catherine Walston, wife of the British Labour politician Harry Walston, which inspired *The End of the Affair* (dedicated 'To C.'). The third volume, at 900 pages, is the longest and also the weakest. Sherry's determination to find a real-life model for every important character in Greene's novels, unweaving their artful blend of observed fact and imaginative invention, becomes increasingly obtrusive, and in spite of the book's enormous length and plethora of facts, there are puzzling gaps. If there was a reference to *Dr Fischer of Geneva* (1980), for instance, I missed it, and there is none in the index. This enigmatic fable was a minor work, but one would like to know something about the background to its composition and its reception. Was it passed over because it had no obvious source in Greene's life?

Apart from what we learn from Greene's letters, which are quoted at length, we get from this book a less vivid sense of what Greene was actually like as a person in later life than from the much shorter and more selective memoirs of the companion of his later years, Yvonne Cloetta, and his friend Shirley Hazzard.[2] Sherry has no anecdote as revealing as, for instance, Yvonne Cloetta's first intimation of *The Honorary Consul*:

> One morning, he appeared in the doorway, looking extremely worried, and announced quite abruptly, ‘It’s terrible to think that from now on I’m going to have to live for three years with a certain Charlie Fortnum.’ And he went back to whatever he was doing, without saying another word.

Greene knew from experience how long a full-length novel would take to complete at this stage of his life, and how much it would cost him. ‘Retirement is always a distressing time for a man. But for a writer it is death,’ he remarked to Yvonne Cloetta on another occasion. So he went on writing although he found it harder and harder, and was seldom satisfied with what he produced, even when his readers were. He was his own harshest critic. ‘I think it stinks,’ he said, sending the manuscript of *Our Man in Havana* to Catherine; and of *A Burnt-Out Case*, again to Catherine: ‘I hate the book. There are bits I like, but I’ve hardly had a moment of pleasure working this time and the result is muddled and shapeless.’ His well-known practice of writing a certain number of words a day (500, later reduced to 300) was a ritual that enabled him to carry on a task that he often found agonisingly difficult. The gradual accumulation of words was reassuring and he attributed to the figures an almost magical significance, cabling Catherine on the completion of *A Burnt-Out Case*: ‘FINISHED THANK GOD 325 WORDS SHORT ORIGINAL ESTIMATE.’ The novelist Shirley Hazzard was friendly with Greene from the late 1960s onwards, when she and her husband lived on Capri where Greene had a villa. ‘When from time to time Graham told us, “I have a book coming out,” he would occasionally add, “Not a specially good one.”’ Hazzard’s own summary judgement of the later work cannot be bettered:

> The inspired pain of the earlier fiction would not recur; or even the intensity of those lighter and livelier works that Graham had once differentiated as ‘entertainments.’ What remained was professionalism: a unique view and tone, a practised, topical narrative that held the interest and forced the pace of the reader. Poignancy was largely subsumed into world-weariness, resurfacing in spasms of authenticity.

The final instalment of Sherry's biography is then – perhaps inevitably, given Greene's long productive life – a story of gradual decline of creative power from a very high peak of achievement. The second volume ended with the composition of *The Quiet American* (1955), Greene's last fully achieved masterpiece. It was also the first novel to hint at the waning of his belief in the Roman Catholic religious doctrine which had underpinned his most powerful and important previous novels, from *Brighton Rock* (1938) to *The End of the Affair* (1951). Politics, rather than religion, provides the ideological frame of reference which defines character and conflict in *The Quiet American*, and it has acquired a justified reputation as a novel prophetic not only of the folly of the American involvement in Vietnam but also of other ill-fated foreign adventures, including the war in Iraq. Greene's play *The Potting Shed*, a hit in London in 1957, but a flop in New York, showed that his imagination was still kindled by the more extreme paradoxes of Catholic spirituality, but *Our Man in Havana* (1958) treated potentially dark and serious matter in a spirit of comedy.

This was a time of great turmoil in Greene's personal life. His grand passion for Catherine Walston was slowly and painfully burning itself out. Though they continued to meet occasionally, Catherine resisted Greene's pleas to leave her husband and children to live with him – in exactly what terms, we don't know, because he burned all her letters; but his letters to her have survived and Sherry quotes them extensively. Greene was now in love with another woman, the Swedish actress Anita Björk, whose husband had recently committed suicide. He visited her frequently in Stockholm, and there was evidently a strong sexual charge between them, but Anita, tied to her career and her children, was no more willing than Catherine to throw in her lot with him. Could this, one wonders, have been the secret attraction of both relationships for Greene, always shy of emotional ties and commitments, even as he agonised over

them? (*The Human Factor* has an epigraph from Conrad: ‘I only know that he who forms a tie is lost.’) He refers openly to his assignations with Anita in his letters to Catherine, perhaps as a subtle form of punishment, but he never wants to break off either relationship. After parting from, and then returning to, Anita, he writes to Catherine: ‘I feel hopelessly muddled. I missed her more than I thought I would, but now that’s healed, it’s you I miss. Am I crazy or do I just happen to love two women as I never have before?’ Several people thought he *was* crazy, including his wife Vivien, who cited his compulsive travelling, never staying in one place for more than a few weeks. There is probably enough material for a book called *Graham Greene, Frequent Flyer.* At the end of one year he calculated that he had flown more than 40,000 miles, quite a lot for someone whose occupation is usually described as ‘sedentary’. His letters to Catherine constantly proposed meetings in various exotic locations all round the globe; and his friend Michael Meyer tells an amusing story of an exhausting trip to Fiji and Tahiti that Greene arranged simply to escape Christmas, a feast he did not enjoy. Because of problems with their flights and weather they crossed the international dateline three times and experienced three successive Christmas Eves.

Greene was still married to Vivien, though living apart from her, and he never sought a divorce, annulment, or legal separation. In the eyes of the Church he was of course committing grave sin. He had his own way of reconciling his conduct with his conscience – or perhaps by the late 1950s he had privately ceased to believe in the validity of Catholic moral theology. To the world at large, though, he was still the great Catholic Novelist (however strenuously he insisted that he was a novelist who happened to be a Catholic) and the experience of being pestered and appealed to for spiritual guidance by various devout and often troubled co-religionists, including priests, was an irony that caused him much embarrassment. ‘I felt myself used and exhausted by

the victims of religion . . .' he complained later. 'I was like a man without medical knowledge in a village struck with plague.' When the affair with Anita finally came to an end in 1958, Greene's appeals to Catherine became more fervent, and his frustration more acute. He was also oppressed by the fear that his creativity was drying up. According to Sherry he came near to suicide, not for the first time in his life. Instead he went to a leper colony in the Congo, seeking material for a new novel.

A Burnt-Out Case (1961) is not a completely satisfactory novel, but it is a peculiarly fascinating one for anyone interested in Greene because of its confessional nature. In the character of Querry, the famous Catholic architect who is praised as much for his spirituality as his artistry, but who in fact reveals himself to be totally lacking in faith in either art or religion, and a cold-hearted failure in personal relationships, Greene deliberately invited a biographical reading of the novel that would be uncomfortable for his Catholic admirers. Sherry, needless to say, finds models for other characters, and without much difficulty, since Greene was more or less making up the story as he did his research, putting in characters and incidents that he observed, as one can see from his journal written at the time, later published in *In Search of a Character: two African Journals* (1961). But Sherry's effort to connect the character of the obnoxious journalist Parkinson with a friend of Greene's called Ronald Matthews seems to me forced and unconvincing. Matthews was a journalist who had written a memoir of Greene, published in French as *Mon Ami Graham Greene*, which Greene disliked enough to prevent its publication in English; but there is no significant resemblance between the two men. What makes Parkinson live as a character, as Sherry's quotations from the novel remind us, is Greene's creative use of language, first, in describing the journalist's gross physical appearance ('his neck as he lay on his bed was forced into three ridges like gutters, and the sweat filled

them and drained round the curve of his head on to the pillow'), and secondly in the wonderfully cynical rhetoric with which Parkinson defends his sensationally fabricated journalism, e.g.: 'Do you really believe Caesar said *Et tu, Brute?* It's what he ought to have said and someone . . . spotted what was needed. The truth is always forgotten.'

During this trip Greene made the acquaintance of a French couple, Jacques and Yvonne Cloetta, and Yvonne probably contributed something to the character of Marie, the young wife of the *colon* Rycker in *A Burnt-Out Case.* Some months later she returned to the South of France with her children, leaving her husband working in Africa, and Greene commenced an affair with her which, rather amazingly, they managed to conceal from Jacques for eight years, after which he seems to have condoned it, on condition that they were discreet. In the mid-1960s Greene made his principal home in Antibes, where Yvonne lived, and they settled down into a relationship which lasted until the end of his life. During this decade Catherine's health began to deteriorate: surgery after an accident was botched, and Sherry thinks she became an alcoholic. Greene told her about Yvonne, for whom he said (in a letter of 1967) he had 'a real quiet love . . . "peaceful as old age"', in contrast to their own 'tormented love – love which made one more happy and sometimes more miserable than I'll ever be again . . . I always remember that never for a moment have I ever been bored by you – enraptured, excited, nervous, angry, tormented, but never bored, because I lost myself in searching for you.' But his letters became less frequent and the relationship slowly atrophied, as Catherine became chronically ill and they met at longer and longer intervals. She died of leukaemia in 1978, her beauty wasted, and refused to let Greene see her in her last illness. Harry Walston wrote a remarkably magnanimous reply to the remorseful letter of condolence Greene apparently sent him: 'You should not have remorse. Of

course you caused pain. But who can honestly say that he has gone through life without causing pain? And you gave joy too.' From then onwards Yvonne was the only woman of consequence in Greene's life.

Though Greene acquired the apartment in Antibes in 1966 in order to be near Yvonne (he already had a flat in Paris), the decision to settle permanently in France at this time was taken for quite other reasons. His financial affairs were in crisis. Greene had entrusted a great deal of his money (and his royalties must have been considerable ever since *The Heart of the Matter* became a world bestseller in 1948, not to mention the income from his plays and films) to his accountant, one Thomas Roe CBE, a well-connected and highly respected man who undertook to protect it from the high rates of British income tax by using foreign tax havens and tax-efficient investment schemes. Greene was not his only distinguished client – Noel Coward and Robert Graves also availed themselves of his services. Roe, however, turned out to be a swindler, with criminal associates and mafia connections. One of the companies he was involved in collapsed spectacularly in 1964. In 1965 he was arrested in Switzerland and charged with abuse of confidence, fraud, and passing counterfeit dollar notes. In 1968 he was convicted and sentenced to six years' imprisonment. Greene not only lost a great deal of money by Roe's perfidy – according to his good friend, the film director Peter Glenville, 'Graham, through Roe, lost *all*, repeat *all*' – he also became liable for a hefty tax bill. And according to Sherry, 'there was a chance that the British authorities, if Greene had not become domiciled in another country, and had he not been willing to pay back what he owed, might have attempted to secure his arrest'. Sherry is irritatingly vague about this matter, as he often is when you most want hard facts from him. But it is obvious that this episode caused Greene much anxiety and despondency, which, as Sherry

observes, seem to be reflected in his troubled visage in the photographic portraits made by Lord Snowdon at the time. It explains a lot, too about his subsequent lifestyle. Many visitors to his Antibes apartment, myself included, were surprised by its modest scale, but at the time he bought it he was hard pressed for cash. ‘I live on a shoestring and a Swiss overdraft,’ he wrote to Catherine on 10 June 1966. In due course his fortunes recovered, and according to Yvonne Cloetta, when towards the end of his life he asked his lawyer for a rough estimate of his wealth he was astonished at its size. For a long time he had arranged to be paid a regular income from a company set up for the purpose. Personally he was never a big spender, and according to Shirley Hazzard he was parsimonious to the point of meanness in trivial matters, taking buses rather than taxis home from Gemma’s restaurant on Capri, and being reluctant to turn up the central heating in his villa *Il Rosario* on chilly days. But he was often generous with gifts to causes and individuals. The value of his estate at death seems to be unknown, perhaps because he died in fiscally secretive Switzerland. In a footnote Sherry quotes the *Toronto Star* (a surprising source) stating that it was only about £200,000, commenting: ‘I doubt that this is the whole story, but I know he gave away vast sums to friends and family through his corporation Verdant.’

The Thomas Roe episode is one of the most interesting revelations in Sherry’s third volume, because Greene’s tax exile had important consequences for his literary career. His visits to England were henceforth severely restricted (he writes to Catherine in 1967 that he will receive an honorary degree in Edinburgh ‘If the tax people allow!’) and he gradually lost touch with, and seemingly interest in, his native country. It is a matter for regret that the acute and eloquent observation of English culture and society in the novels up to *The End of the Affair* is not to be found in the

later ones. When he did set a late novel mainly in England – *The Human Factor* (1978) – his descriptive touch was not as sure as it used to be, and his social focus narrower. Nor did he write very much about his adopted country, France. Instead, the practice established by *The Quiet American*, *Our Man in Havana* and *A Burnt-Out Case* continued: he went hunting for material in exotic locations and trouble-spots: Haiti, Sinai, Northern Ireland, Russia, Argentina, Paraguay, Panama, Nicaragua. He acquired a reputation for anticipating where a political crisis would soon take place, and rather enjoyed it: 'A few days ago *The Times* reported a plot against the President & three colonels arrested – so I seem to have picked right again,' he writes gleefully to Yvonne from Paraguay in July 1968. Not all these trips produced novels, but they usually yielded a non-fiction book, or journalistic articles, or letters to the press.

In later life Greene frequently used his status and celebrity to intervene in international politics. Sometimes this was entirely to his credit, as when he gave support to the Soviet dissident writers Sinyavsky and Daniel in 1967 by publicly requesting that his blocked Russian royalties should be paid to their wives, because he had no desire to revisit the country as long as they languished in prison; but he went on to say that this should not be taken as a criticism of the Soviet Union, where he would choose to live in preference to America. Commentators were quick to point out that in such a case it would not be long before he shared the fate of Sinyavsky and Daniel. Greene's political gestures were seldom free from paradox, inconsistency or internal contradiction. The often-quoted statement in his 1969 Shakespeare Prize acceptance speech, 'The writer should always be ready to change sides at the drop of a hat. He speaks up for the victims, and the victims change', is not the all-accommodating loophole he claimed it to be. At about the same time as the Sinyavsky–Daniel affair, he gave considerable offence in Britain by writing an admiring

introduction to the autobiography of his old Secret Service colleague, the traitor Kim Philby. Greene wrote: ‘He betrayed his country – yes, perhaps he did, but who among us has not committed treason to something or someone more important than a country?’ This is pure sophistry, because ‘country’ in this context was not an abstraction but a human community, including many British agents whom Philby sent to certain death. Sherry recalls that when he pressed Greene to condemn those deeds of Philby, he uncharacteristically became red with anger, and refused to do so.

Greene kept his word and did not return to Russia until 1987, when he participated in a peace conference convened under the regime of Gorbachev, whom he admired and wished to support. He made a speech improbably celebrating an alliance between Catholics and Communists. ‘We are fighting together against the death squads in El Salvador. We are fighting together against the Contras in Nicaragua. We are fighting together against General Pinochet in Chile. There is no division in our thoughts between Roman Catholics and Communists.’ This rhetoric blatantly ignored a division within the clergy and laity of the Roman Catholic Church, between conservatives who often supported oppressive right-wing regimes, and those on the political left influenced by liberation theology. Greene’s tendency to support any Latin American political movement that was ideologically leftist and hostile to the USA often led him into an uncritical alliance with politicians who were as ruthless in their methods as those they opposed. Sherry has done his homework in this area, and even if he tells you more than you really want to know about the political history of Cuba, Haiti, Panama and the rest, he does enable an informed assessment of Greene’s treatment of these matters in his novels and reportage.

Describing the novelist’s surprisingly warm friendship with the populist leader of Panama, General Omar Torrijos, in the

five years preceding his death in a suspicious air crash in 1981, Sherry observes that ‘as Greene got older he seemed to take more risks, made up his mind in favour of those leading dangerous lives’. One might also cite his fascination with guerrillas and revolutionaries in books like *The Comedians* and *The Honorary Consul* (probably the best of the late novels). But one must bear in mind that all this time he was regularly reporting on his travels to the British Secret Service. Sherry adds little to what he revealed in the second volume about this topic, but Yvonne Cloetta is unequivocal in conversation with Marie-Françoise Allain: ‘What I can tell you is that, to the very end, he worked with the British Services.’

This puts Greene’s provocative public support for revolutionary struggle in a rather different perspective. It also raises a question which Sherry largely ignores: Greene’s attitude to British politics. In his second volume Sherry reported in a footnote that Greene voted Conservative in the general election of 1945 – ‘the socialists are such bores,’ he told his mother in explanation – a rather extraordinary fact when one considers that almost everybody in the country of even mildly progressive views voted Labour on that occasion. In the third volume we learn that Greene confessed to Catherine, whose husband was a Labour parliamentary candidate, that he celebrated the defeat of that party under Hugh Gaitskell in 1959 with a slug of whisky while in a plane over Canada. Yvonne Cloetta recalls that he was delighted by Mrs Thatcher’s victory in 1979, explaining, when she expressed surprise, ‘It doesn’t make a great difference with us, Labour or Conservative, in day-to-day life, or even in politics, but I’m pleased mainly because, for once, it’s a woman.’ It’s difficult to reconcile these laid-back attitudes to British politics with those Greene struck on the international stage. I have not changed the opinion I expressed in an earlier essay about Greene, that his interventions in politics, both public and