
CURRENT BOOKS

Two Reports from Greenland

THE LIFE OF GRAHAM GREENE, Volume II: 1939–1955. By Norman Sherry. Viking. 672 pp. \$34.95

GRAHAM GREENE: The Enemy Within. By Michael Shelden. Random House. 442 pp. \$25

It seems certain by now that the work of Graham Greene (1904–91) is, after that of Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence, the last expression of what F. R. Leavis once called the “great tradition” of the British novel.

Surely, no other storyteller of the period managed to be at once as popular and as respected by “serious” readers, in the grand manner of the Victorian novelists. (It was a point of pride for Greene that a distant cousin had been that consummate entertainer, Robert Louis Stevenson.) No writer of comparable genius concentrated as fiercely on the *craft* of narrative and representation, eschewing the involuted experiments of the modernists.

Some feel that Greene’s traditional approach is unremarkable, coming as it does after such works as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Yet no one else so caught—or was so caught by—the spirit of paradox that both protected and undermined the modern temper between the rise of the Third Reich and the evaporation of the Soviet Union. (The period coincided almost exactly with the years of Greene’s flourishing.) He was a Catholic whose strongest novels were disapproved of by the Vatican, and who liked to call himself, in later years, a “Catholic atheist”; an avowed leftist contemptuous of the blandness of socialism and fascinated with the intricacies of realpolitik; an eloquent analyst of love and fidelity who could also detail the awful compulsions of betrayal.

The locales of Greene’s fiction—from Central Europe to Africa, Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, and Vietnam—include some of the

most troubled spots of our troubled age, and Greene himself, indefatigable wanderer and sometime secret agent, knew them all intimately. He is a figure whose biography should enthrall at least as much as his work.

Alas, that’s not the case with these two new offerings by Norman Sherry and Michael Shelden. They are both disappointing and both more than faintly annoying—indeed, disappointing and annoying in complementary ways. Sherry’s biography is a studiously awestruck piece of hagiography; Shelden’s, a bitter, elbow-nudging exposé. I begin with Sherry, whose sins are (as Dante would say) of excessive rather than deficient charity.

Greene appointed Sherry, a distinguished Conrad scholar, his official biographer in 1975. Given access to letters and journals, entrée to personal interviews, and *lettres de crédit* for surviving old friends, Sherry embarked on a 20-year (and counting) quest to understand Greene and present him to the world. The first volume of *The Life of Graham Greene* appeared in 1989, and the second, covering the years 1939–1955, this year. A third, presumably final, volume is still to come—if Sherry lasts, that is, for he has turned the writing of the biography into a one-man, personal-best literary endurance contest. One is both impressed and distressed by his substitution of athletics for judgment. The dauntless Sherry has visited most of the venues familiar to his quarry. He relates with pride how he caught dysentery in the same Mexican village Greene did while writing *The Power and the Glory* (1939). He has suffered malaria, temporary blindness, and all manner of unpleasantness on Greene’s trail. Thank God, one thinks, he didn’t choose Malcolm Lowry or William S. Burroughs as a subject.

This is biography by total immersion.

Sherry's hunger to share the Greene experience is equaled only by his diligence in walking every blind alley of the man's life. One begins to wonder if there are any letters, journals, or trivialities he *doesn't* quote. The net effect is like living in a house where everything is painted red: all details are equally significant, so none is really salient. Sherry should have studied his man's own talent for concision and judicious observation.

Nevertheless, this second volume of the biography is better than the first, mainly because Greene published his greatest books, including *The Power and the Glory* and *The End of the Affair* (1951), between 1939 and 1955. These years span the failure of his marriage; the great, consuming affair of his life with the brilliant Catherine Walston; and his growing obsession with the moral ambiguities of the Cold War world. Sherry performs a real service in limning both the macro- and microhistorical context of Greene's golden decades.

There is a worse way to write a biography than to be in awe of your subject, and that is to dislike him. Michael Shelden's *Graham Greene: The Enemy Within* seems written out of a variant of that worst of feelings, unrequited love. "When I began work on this biography," Shelden says, "I intended it to be an affectionate portrait of a novelist who deserved all the prizes the world could give him. . . . But . . . I kept uncovering unpleasant facts, and my understanding of Greene's life and art gradually changed." "Gradually," perhaps; "changed," for certain. Here, at length, is the conclusion to Shelden's discussion of Greene's 1938

masterpiece, *Brighton Rock*:

Some readers . . . cherish the author's works as noble political and religious statements; they recommend him for Catholic literary awards, the Jerusalem Prize, the Nobel Prize. . . . And all the time they refuse to listen to the record. They do not hear—or do not want to hear—the anti-Semitism, the anti-Catholicism, the misogyny, or the many jokes made at their expense.

This litany of offenses is partial. Among the other things readers do not want to hear—which Shelden hears quite clearly—are the homosexuality, pederasty, drug addiction, and probable high treason. Robert

Louis Stevenson's cousin would have been amused: Sherry finds him a troubled but kindly Dr. Jekyll; Shelden sees only the abominable Mr. Hyde.

I hesitate to accuse Shelden, who has done a very good book on George Orwell, of the worst kind of literary naïveté, mistaking the tale for the teller (as if the author of *Richard III* were himself a nihilistic, infanticidal schemer); but he forces one's hand. Greene is

no more one of his characters than Milton is Satan. And while Shelden repeatedly cites "interviews" and "conversations" with people who can verify or at least support suspicions of Greene's sneaky dealings, his references provide only the vaguest, most marshmallowy indications of who these people actually are.

Shelden was specifically denied access to Greene's estate, and it seems that much of his critical apparatus is either borrowed



from Sherry's authoritative book or is wishful thinking. Scobie, the tormented hero of *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), believes himself guilty of a mortal sin and is led to commit suicide out of his deep desire to serve God and do good. The action evokes the quite serious problem of what Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, called "the teleological suspension of the ethical." Yet Shelden sees the book as yet another instance of the writer's melodramatic posturing, and cites Orwell's prim review as back-up. "Unlike Orwell," he sniffs, "[Greene] was not trying to make the world a better place. He was engaged in a private dance with sin."

Greene was a friend and colleague of the master spy Kim Philby. To his cost and honor, he defended their friendship even after Philby's scandalous defection to Moscow, and he wrote a controversial introduction to Philby's memoir, *My Private War*. Asked late in life what he would have done had he known his friend was a traitor, Greene replied that he probably would have given him a week to get out of the country, then turned him in. For Sherry, this story is a sad, honest reflection by one old man on a friend who has terribly erred. For Shelden, however, it is proof—contrary to the findings of British intelligence (MI 5), whose agents interviewed Greene extensively—that the writer may have known his friend was a double agent and kept silent for the sheer perverse joy of vicarious treason.

Shelden is intrigued by Greene's fascination with espionage and declares that the writer's family "had no shortage of spies." At various points, he suggests that Greene spied for the Soviet Union in the 1930s or—contradictorily—that he used his loudly proclaimed leftist sentiments in the '50s and '60s to cover his MI 5 activities while traveling to Moscow, Kenya, and Haiti. Yet again, Shelden's strongest sources for these assertions seem to be Greene's novels themselves. Greene did serve as an intelligence agent during World War II, as did virtually every smart person the British could recruit,

and never blushed to admit it. The man's morals may have been questionable. But it is more likely that he wrote about whoremasters, addicts, traitors, and perverts because, as writers from Dostoevsky to Auden to Mailer have known, such figures—especially the double agent—are apt metaphors for the jumbled morality of our age. "Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things," says Robert Browning in a poem Greene loved to quote.

The Enemy Within, as it builds up steam, progresses from distaste to malice to whatever is on the other side of malice. Why all this studied outrage? Yes, the "real" Graham Greene got a kick out of espionage, liked drink and opium, had numerous affairs, and enjoyed prostitutes. These were open secrets, despite Shelden's constant harping on his man's duplicity. Greene was a stern, complex moralist in his fiction but a sensualist in real life.

And yet, for all its unfairness, I can't help thinking that Greene would have enjoyed Shelden's book more than Sherry's. Greene had an appetite for scandal, and a biographer such as Shelden, who gets the scandal of every novel, is a much more compelling companion than the bland, wide-eyed Sherry.

What is missing from both books, however, is the principal gift a literary biography should deliver: a formula for mapping the chaos of the life onto the achieved order of the work. This is what Maynard Mack did with Alexander Pope, Leon Edel with Henry James, and Richard Ellmann with Joyce, Yeats, and Wilde. Someday Greene's prince may come, but not yet. Until then, the "real life" rests in a handful of imperishable tales, crafted, passionate, ironic, and holy. Not a bad resting place, that.

—Frank D. McConnell, a former Wilson Center Fellow, is professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara.