Chapter 2

In Search of Roots

Contemporary is a country which we all inhabit, and among contemporary writers Graham Greene's position is paramount. There is hardly a genre\(^1\) he did not touch, and all that he touched he tinted in a uniquely personal way. The experiences he lived through seem stunning if not staggering, and these experiences form the collective consciousness of his age; its \textit{zeitgeist}\(^2\) has absorbed and exudes it. A brief survey of his early life and influences, therefore, would be much rewarding in understanding him, his world, and even ourselves, better.

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\(^2\)\textit{Zeitgeist} (from German): the general mood or quality of a particular period of history, as shown by the ideas, beliefs etc. common at the time. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. 6\textsuperscript{th} ed. Great Clarendon Street: Oxford University Press.
Graham Greene was born as the fourth of the six children of Charles and Marion Greene on October 2, 1904 at Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire. The same day thirty five years ago, Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Indian Nation was born. Until Greene became a boarder in the school house, his childhood was comfortable and happy: plenty of toys, an army of maids and servants, uncles, aunts, and cousins. It was a happy time.

But school was painful for Greene. As son of the headmaster he was not fully accepted by his peers, and he was not skilful enough at extra curricular activities to redeem himself, at least partly. He felt as if he was an isolate in this wide world. Over and above this, some boys found a sadistic delight in teasing him and they played upon his ambiguous position. Carter and Watson were the chief among them, and Greene never forgot them. Hopeless at games, butt of bullies, and compared unfavourably to his successful cousin and athletic brother, the sensitive boy’s self-confidence and self-concept as a male, rapidly disintegrated. He even tried to run away from school once pained and disturbed deeply. On the advice of Greene’s elder brother who was a medical student at that time, Greene’s father sent Greene, then sixteen, to undergo psychoanalysis. Six months life with
Kenneth Richmond who practised his own version of psychoanalysis without any qualification for the job, transformed Greene. After treatment he returned to school to follow an undistinguished academic career.

At eighteen he fell in love with a woman about eleven years his senior. When this very serious, though innocent love affair came to an end, he played Russian roulette with his brother’s revolver. Greene denied that these were attempts at suicide and asserted that they were gambles calculated to relieve the boredom he felt.

At Balliol College, Oxford, Greene sought a new relief from boredom and lost love. He lost himself for drink for a whole semester and went to bed intoxicated every night, only to resume drinking the next morning. Thereafter, he turned to communism for a while with the object of securing a free trip to Russia. He also toyed with the idea of espionage for Germany against France.

While still an undergraduate, Greene met the girl who was his wife-to-be, – Miss Vivien Dayrell Browning. A subtle error in ‘unbelievable theology’ (Greene, 1971, p.118) in an article he
published\(^3\) brought Greene and Vivien together. In her company, Greene thought he owed it to her, to learn more about her religion.

Soon after graduation, he came to work in the *Nottingham Journal*. At the Cathedral there, Greene began instruction for becoming a Catholic. His instructor was Fr. Trollope, a man who had given up the stage he loved, to enter priesthood. Their chats and discussion often on the upper deck of a Nottingham bus led Greene to become a Catholic in 1926. As in his ambiguity over his situation in his father’s school, his ambiguity was evident here also – he took the name of Thomas after the Doubter\(^4\). (Greene, 1971, p.121).

Greene left the *Nottingham Journal* where he worked without salary in January 1926, and began as sub-editor for *The Times*, London, on a handsome pay. There he learned the writer’s craft – to prune the cliches of reporters and to condense their stories without loss of meaning or effect. His work hours were

\(^3\) In a film review Greene wrote about the ‘worship’ Roman Catholics gave to Virgin Mary. Vivien, a newly turned Catholic, protested against the inaccuracy, in a note to Greene. According to her the correct expression would have been ‘hyperdulia.’

\(^4\) One of the twelve apostles of Jesus, Thomas, doubted Jesus’s resurrection but upon seeing Jesus believed. John 20:24-28, Holy Bible, New King James Version.
also congenial; he had to work only in the afternoon. His mornings were free to do his own writing.

Not long after he had a comfortable income to support his bride, Greene married. October 15, 1927 was a greater day to Greene than the wedding day at Cana. On that day all the water in the world was going to be turned into wine, according to Greene (Sherry, 1989, p.353). Their prolonged courtship ended, and marriage mellowed Greene. He slowly realised that Vivien was ‘no longer all beauty, all mystery and all wonder’ (Sherry, 1989, p.444), and it did not take much time for ‘a splinter of ice’ (Greene, 1971, p.134), to enter his heart. He now wanted to escape domesticity badly.

In the meantime, in the winter of 1928, Heinemann called Greene to say that they had accepted The Man Within for publication. A successful first novel thrilled Greene. Too rashly he decided to quit The Times, and decided to make his living as a writer. Two of his next novels proved disasters, and Greene regretted the lack of a job. He was desperately in short of money,

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5 Cana: the place where Christ first manifested His glory. He there turned water into wine. Matthew 2: 1-11, Holy Bible, New King James Version.
and was constrained to leave London to seek cheaper accommodation in the country.

Nineteen thirty-one was the worst year of Greene’s life. The year that followed saw the publication of Stamboul Train, a landmark in Greene’s career as a novelist. He ‘watched and listened’ (Greene, 1971, p.134), and used what he saw and heard as compost for his writings. Significantly it was the first of his novels that was made into a film. The sea change in him from romanticism to realism with his newly developed view of the novelist’s right and need to use his own and others’ experience, “sowed the seeds of the break-up of his marriage” (Sherry, 1989, p.444). The novel frankly deals with lesbianism, a terrible taboo of the time.

Greene’s favourite novel England Made Me published in 1935, carried with it Greene’s portrait of the woman who he had “drawn better than any other” (Donaghy, 1986, p.31). In it he boldly broke another taboo by dealing with incestuous love. Set in Sweden, the novel would have been his last, had he not returned after undertaking his dangerous journey into an unmapped area of Liberia. It was a journey in which he pushed himself to the limit, physically and mentally. Recorded in Journey without
Maps the trip in the company of his twenty-three year old cousin, *Barbara*, was clearly a rash one for someone who knew nothing of Africa. Though Barbara’s resources and stamina were superior to Greene, — she nursed him when he seemed close to death — the book makes remarkably few references to her. Had she been ill, Barbara recalled in her book, Greene would have been noting the situation, rather than come to her aid. Up to that time Greene had always thought death desirable, but the journey changed his perspective: “I was discovering in myself a thing I thought I had never possessed: a love of life” (Greene, 1936, cited in Donaghy, 1986, p.14).

In 1938 Greene visited Mexico on a commission. He was asked to report on the religious persecution rampant in the country. The second of Greene's travel books, *The Lawless Roads* was the result. There he saw in the name of revolution, “the fiercest persecution of religion anywhere since the reign of Elizabeth” (Greene, 1980, p.81). The book furnishes the genesis of *The Power and the Glory*, perhaps the best known of Greene’s novels.

That year, 1939, with the prospect of war before him, Greene thought that the income from *The Power and the Glory*
he was writing, would not be sufficient to support his family. A wife caught up in mothering his two children worried Greene. Money was needed for their sustenance, and he thought of writing an entertainment as quickly as possible.

To avoid the distraction at home, he rented a studio at London which belonged to a woman named Dorothy Glover. There, he succeeded in finishing The Confidential Agent in six weeks. The entry of Dorothy into his life, however, signalled disaster in his personal life.

During the blitz\(^6\) on London which sent shivers of chill down every Londoner’s spine, Greene worked as a fire warden with Dorothy as a station warden. In late September 1939, Greene was called before a Draft Military Board. He eluded the army for some time by taking a position at the Ministry of Information. Dorothy too was with him. Greene worked there with Dorothy as his secretary, only to be dismissed from that overstaffed office after six months.

In 1940, The Power and the Glory appeared, and Greene was acclaimed “. . . the finest English novelist of his generation” (Sir Hugh Walpole, cited in Sherry, 1994, p.42). But

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\(^6\) blitz: The German air attacks on Britain in 1940
on being appointed as a member of C I D Special Branch in MI 6, he was forced to sail from Liverpool to Freetown in December 1941. At Freetown, Sierra Leone, he worked as a counter-espionage agent. While there, he felt “misery and remorse” (Greene, 1970, p.20) when he learnt about his father’s death after many years of diabetic illness.

At Freetown he had a row with his boss, and was recalled from Africa on his request. He arrived in London in February 1942 to work under Kim Philby who would later be exposed as a traitor paid by Moscow. Back in London he lived with Dorothy, visiting Vivien and children only occasionally. During these years Greene felt that he was in the position of “loving two people as equally as makes no difference.” In the summer of 1944, he suddenly resigned from MI 6. Greene then became a part-time editor for the publishing firm, Eyre & Spottiswoode, and after the war, continued there as Managing Director, until 1948. It was while he was there that he brought India’s R. K. Narayan to limelight.

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7 Greene, letter to his sister Elisabeth Greene, 15 October 1942, cited in Sherry 1994, p.145.
In the post-war decade Greene's *fame and success* rose to a zenith. *He became internationally lauded, and debated.* He was so prosperous that he could roam as he wished. During this time *Catherine Walston*, happened in his life. Married to one of the richest men in England, she wrote to tell Greene that she wanted to become a Catholic having been enthralled by his books. She desired Greene to be her godfather at her reception into the Catholic Church. Although too busy to attend the ceremony, Greene sent his wife, Vivien, as his deputy. Catherine proved to be Greene's "greatest love and greatest torment" (Sherry, 1994, p.215).

Two of his best novels resulted after his encounter with Catherine — *The Heart of the Matter*, and *The End of the Affair*. Both deal with *adultery* at length. *The Heart of the Matter* was highly acclaimed and controversial, and became an enduring best seller. In *The End of the Affair* Greene suggested that adultery may lead to sainthood for an erring wife, and boldly recruited God as a miracle working character. While writing it, Greene was expecting the end of his affair with Catherine to come any moment. But it continued for a long time more. What
actually came to an end was his affair with Vivien, his wife for twenty years. On 20 November 1947, Greene left Vivien.

Dorothy continued to remain loyal; but her hard fighting to retain Greene failed, and the vision of the lurking and lingering figure of Catherine forced Greene to make his escape from Dorothy also. In June 1948 he left her too.

In 1952 Greene published his first play, *The Living Room* and it proved to be an enormous success. The play was dedicated to Catherine, and in response to the calls of ‘Author, Author’, in a curtain speech, probably with Catherine at the back of his mind, Greene sombrely told the audience:

> Do not call me a success. I have never known a successful man. Have you? A man who was a success to himself? Success is the point of self-deception. Failure is the point of self-knowledge. (Greene, 1953).

Greene did everything in his power to persuade Catherine to leave her rich, agnostic, kind and tolerant husband, and marry him. But the staggeringly beautiful, seductive, uninhibited Catherine did not reciprocate Greene’s love in the same way. With her character and wealth, she was not an easy conquest for

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8 Daily Express, 17 April 1953.
Greene. In spite of many romantic and passionate reunions, their relationship slowly cooled.

Greene always displayed an increasingly voracious appetite for attractive young women. Even though he continued his relation with Catherine and assured her that he felt truly married to her, he began to enjoy a sexual relationship with Jocelyn Rickards, a young artist from Australia who was an inmate of the harem of A. J. Ayer, the eminent sceptical philosopher. Jocelyn and Greene liked to fornicate in public places. She subsequently became an adulterous lover of the playwright John Osborne.

Greene continued to compound his adultery with pretty women. In 1955 he began a relationship with Anita Bjork, a very attractive Swedish actress who had recently been widowed. He frequently visited her at a house he bought for her near Stockholm, and they vacationed at his villa in Anacapri. This relationship lasted for several years and The Complaisant Lover, a play Greene wrote during the time, referred to an incident in Anita's personal life. This created quite a lot of trouble for Greene, and to a great extent it was responsible for the denial of the Nobel Prize to him.
In 1959, yet another young attractive married woman found the blue-eyed author appealing. It was in the Cameroons that Greene met and made friends with Yvonne Cloetta and her husband, Jacques. In *A Burnt-Out Case*, a novel Greene published after their meeting, Querry, the burnt-out character says, “Fame is a potent aphrodisiac. Married women are the easiest” (Greene, 1961). This was truly Greene’s own experience. When Greene settled in Antibes, Yvonne became a near neighbour. She would spend afternoon and evenings with Greene, returning to her husband at night. It was an arrangement which suited Greene admirably. For the remainder of his life, Yvonne continued to be Greene’s companion and chief support.

During 1963-64 Greene made trips to Haiti, Santo Domingo and the United States. His Haitian experiences were reflected in *The Comedians*. The novel shook the Haitian President rudely, and his ministry published an elaborate brochure on Greene, calling him a “liar, stool pigeon . . . a perfect ignoramus . . .” (Greene, 1980 p.270).
The year **The Comedians** was published, Greene “burned a number of boats and in the light of the flames” (Greene, 1980 p.287), he began to write another novel – **Travels with My Aunt.** The subject matter of the novel is ‘old age and death’ (Greene, 1980, p.287), and it was dutifully dedicated to HHK, his happy, healthy kitten. It is worthy of note here that while his liaison with Yvonne was developing Greene called her HHK. Such *feline* terminology was employed by Greene only during the initial years of his marriage with Vivien. He later began to hate it, as is attested in many of his writings. Its re-employment is therefore significant. While writing the novel Greene himself recalled later, he “had broken for good or ill with the past” (Greene, 1980, p.287).

In 1971 Greene published the *first* volume of his autobiography. Considering every *autobiography* to be a *sort of life*, he called it, **A Sort of Life.** It took nine years for him to publish its second volume. Seeing all his attempts in life to be attempts at *escaping from boredom* of some sort, he titled it **Ways of Escape.** While writing these volumes he considered that his later years belonged as much to others’ as to himself. Thereafter he wrote under a *self-imposed restriction* “not to infringe the copy
right of others’ lives” (Greene, 1980, preface). Efforts to cull out
details of his private life would be futile from these
autobiographies. Few writers have patrolled the perimeter fence
of their privacy (McCrum, 1994), as vigilantly as Greene.

Greene had made his flat in Antibes his main base for some
years now, and Yvonne Cloetta continued to make regular visits
there as his main stay. From the very beginning of their
relationship, Greene had developed a special affection for
Martine, Yvonne’s daughter, who called him ‘uncle’. On her
behalf, Greene wielded his pen as a weapon of offence to protect
her from her divorced husband Daniel Guy. The bi-lingual
pamphlet he wrote, running to 69 pages, J’ Accuse, landed
Greene on a field of spirited legal battle. At the end of it, the
pamphlet was banned in France, and Greene was forced to pay
libel damages of 52,000 francs. After the law suits Greene helped
Martine to move to Switzerland where his own daughter was
settled. He also got her a job at his lawyer’s in Lausanne.

The last of Greene’s novels to be published in his life time
was The Captain and the Enemy. Curious though it may seem,
the setting and the hero of the novel have a lot in common with
the first novel that Greene published, some sixty years ago.
Greene never got tired of travelling and even in his last years he extensively travelled. He made several visits to Moscow, and visited Siberia. In 1989 he flew to Ireland with Yvonne, to be the presiding judge in a GPA Book Award competition. His health failing, Greene moved from Antibes to an apartment at Corseaux, in Switzerland. Yvonne accompanied him to nurse him, assisted by her daughter Martine, and by Greene’s daughter, Lucy. Greene’s health deteriorated fast, and on 3 April 1991, at the age of eighty-six the end came. It was Yvonne who heard and remembered Greene's last words, “Why must it take so long to come?” (Shelden, 1995, p.487).
References


_Holy Bible. New King James Version._


