THE INNOCENCE ABROAD:
GRAHAM GREENE IN WEST AFRICA

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There exists in our collective imagination an indelible image that emerges with a certain frequency, sometimes as tragedy and sometimes as farce. It is of the pink, sunburnt face of the white expatriate. Trapped in a squalid colonial backwater, his sweat wrung from him by an oppressive tropical heat, his body pickled by drink, and his soul worn down by moral temptations and primal barbarities, the wretched creature cowers, at all times, before an omniscient and judgemental God, whose unsleeping presence is never far from mind.

This figure is immediately recognisable, for those who have ventured there, as a citizen of Greeneland. This colourful locale, a "combination of the exotic and the romantic with the sordid and the banal," is the common source of the works of English author Graham Greene. The contradictions inherent in Greeneland's description apply to both its physical characteristics, as well as the complex moral and psychological milieu in which its residents live and struggle.[1] Greeneland was made up from bits and pieces of the author's

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[1] Christopher Hitchens, *Love, Poverty and War* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005), 71.

long experience, in various guises, as a world traveller. Greene found the first great addition to this mythical country in the West African nation of Liberia, which he visited in 1935. This taste of Africa was groundbreaking for Greene, exposing him to a world far away from his own sheltered upbringing and instilling in him a lifelong love for the continent. "Altogether a trip which altered life," he later wrote.[2]

Greene's trip to Liberia also produced a book, *Journey Without Maps*, a travelogue describing Greene's expedition from its beginnings on a Liverpool pier, overland from Sierra Leone through the Liberian jungle, to its conclusion in the capital city of Monrovia. But the book is much more than a straightforward account of a journey. It is strewn throughout with political commentary, literary allusions, images and stories produced through free association, and philosophical musings. What emerged from this mix was the spiritual outline of Greeneland, along with its first province: the Africa of *The Heart of the Matter* and *A Burnt-Out Case,* more of an idea or a state of mind than a real physical location. This mythical Africa had long held a place of importance in Greene's imagination:

> When I say that to me Africa has always seemed an important image, I suppose that what I mean is, that it has represented more than I can say. 'You dreamed you were in Africa. Of what do you think first when I say the word Africa?' and a crowd of words and images, witches and death, unhappiness and the Gare St Lazare, the huge smoky viaduct

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[2] Quoted in Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene: Volume One* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), 566.

> over a Paris slum, crowd together and block the
> way to full consciousness.[3]

It is important to distinguish between this imaginary
conception of "Africa" and the entirely separate reality that
existed, and exists, on the continent itself. Indeed, at times in
Greene's writing the two bear little, if any, resemblance to
one another. Just as Greeneland is a place of myth, so too is
Greene's Africa shrouded in fable and mystery, captivating in
its sensuality, full of irony and contradiction, and redolent of
Victorian stereotypes. It is this Africa that is of primary
interest here.

Greene is today recognised as one of the seminal
authors of the twentieth century. His work influenced a
generation of writers, including John le Carré, P.D. James,
and Monica Ali, who read and assimilated his stories of
betrayal, corruption and espionage. Greene was a man of
voracious appetites, both sexual and intellectual, likely
exacerbated by his lifelong affliction with manic depression.
He converted to Catholicism in his early twenties, and to the
end of his days he struggled with the realities of sin and
redemption in ordinary life and everyday experience. In his
lifetime he enjoyed considerable commercial success, as well
as widespread critical acclaim. Greene himself was mindful of
the distinction between those two levels of achievement as an
author, and often referred to what he saw as the two separate
classes of his writing: his literary work, and his
"entertainments." He thought of the latter as little more than
ephemera, produced solely for a paycheque, and implicitly
less worthy of serious consideration. This modesty was

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[3] Graham Greene, *Journey Without Maps* (New York: Penguin, 2006),
   16.

unnecessary.[4] A large part of Greene's genius lay in his synthesis of the suspense and thrills of a potboiler with an intense interest in the emotional, spiritual and religious disarray that plagued man in the twentieth century. His unique powers of observation and perception complemented his gift for storytelling, and vice-versa.

Greene did his travelling in several guises: as a journalist, as a novelist in search of inspiration, and as a spy for MI6.[5] His journeys took him to the distant and dangerous corners of the globe, among them Haiti, Argentina, Cuba, Vietnam, Mexico and Africa. He was an extremely prolific writer, producing novels, short stories, plays, screenplays, film and literary criticism, and travel writing, and few of his experiences abroad went unused in his work. Indeed, the vision of the well-travelled, well-seasoned, enigmatic freelancer is integral to Greene's present-day image, and it goes some way towards explaining his enduring mystique. He was the perpetual and quintessential Englishman abroad.

Greene's reputation was built up over lifetime of travel and exploration, but it was not until the age of thirty-one that he attempted his first trip into untested and dangerous territory. At the time Greene had travelled out of England on only a few occasions, and never outside of Europe. It was perhaps more than a little reckless, then, that he proposed a trek through the West African republic of Liberia, then as now one of the most hazardous countries on the continent, as his first substantial foray into the wider world beyond England's shores. Greene's lack of experience did not seem to concern him; he noted casually in *Journey* that "I could never properly

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[4] See Kevin McGowan, "Graham Greene, The Major Novels: A Centenary," *Eclectica* 8, no. 4 (October/November 2004).

[5] MI6 is the British foreign intelligence agency, roughly equivalent to the CIA.

remember the points of the compass."[6] This incompetence would, in any case, be of little import on the journey. Any attempt at navigation would be hampered by the fact that no reliable map of Liberia's interior had ever been produced. Ultimately, however, all of these shortcomings and limitations mattered little. Paul Theroux describes well the character of the times for the aspiring neophyte traveller:

> It was 1935. Young, presentable, confident, well-educated, well-shod, and presumptuous Englishmen were showing up in remote corners of the world, boasting of their amateurishness, wearing comic headgear…with the assurance that all would be well. People would respect them for them for their Englishness and would fall in line and be helpful.[7]

Greene's plan was to attempt an overland expedition through the wild hinterland of Liberia, entering through British Sierra Leone, and gradually making his way through the jungle, from village to village, until he had reached the coast.

Greene's voyage was precipitated by several factors. He was, at the time, in the process of establishing himself as a serious and successful novelist. After producing a series of poorly-reviewed works that did not sell well, *Stamboul Train*, Greene's first "entertainment," was released in 1932 to critical and commercial acclaim. Despite this success finances were still tight, and became tighter still with the birth of his first child in December 1933. Greene felt immense pressure to write a new novel, but he dreaded the enormous exertion required.[8] Needing to get back to work but reluctant to begin a

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[6] Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 44.
[7] Paul Theroux, introduction to *Journey Without Maps*, by Graham Greene (New York: Penguin, 2006), viii.
[8] Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene*, 510.

new piece of fiction, a travel book seemed to Greene to be an ideal solution.

Greene was something of a reluctant father anyway, and he welcomed the opportunity to escape the stresses of home life.[9] He had secured financial backing for a voyage abroad from his publisher, who had reason to be enthusiastic about the plan: travelogues by several of Greene's contemporaries were selling briskly. Not just any relaxing jaunt or European tour would do, however, as Greene explained, neatly echoing Theroux:

> It was a period when "young authors" were inclined to make uncomfortable journeys in search of bizarre material–Peter Fleming to Brazil and Manchuria, Evelyn Waugh to British Guiana and Ethiopia. Europe seemed to have the whole future; Europe could wait…We were a generation brought up on adventure stories who had missed the enormous disillusionment of the First World War, so we went looking for adventure…[10]

There was no doubt that Liberia was a place to find adventure, not to mention uncomfortable journeys and bizarre material. The country was founded early in the 19th century by the American Colonization Society, a philanthropic organization with a number of slaveholders serving on its board of directors. The society was formed to encourage and facilitate the immigration of freed slaves from the United States to Western Africa, and over the subsequent decades tens of thousands had made the journey from America, settling on land purchased from the unsuspecting native

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[9] Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene*, 503.
[10] Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1980), 32.

population.[11]   In   1847   Liberia   formally   declared   its
independence, instituted a constitution based on that of the
United States, and made its claim to greatness: it was the first
independent African state, and was held up to all as an
example of black self-government.

In 1935 the majority of the Americo-Liberian elite
was concentrated along the coast, mainly in the capital city of
Monrovia. The native population lived in the vast, sprawling
hinterlands,   still   for   the   most   part   outside   of   direct
government control. "Civilization stopped within fifty miles
of the coast," Greene wrote with approval.[12] Despite this, in
the decades following independence the ruling class of
Liberia, those descendents of slaves, showed themselves to be
every bit the equal of contemporary European colonialists.
They gradually encroached on indigenous land, engaged with
the native majority in intermittent warfare of often shocking
brutality, imposed ever-increasing taxes, took women as
concubines, and sold natives workers to cocoa plantations on
the nearby island of Fernando Po in a system of modern
slavery, to cite only a few examples.[13]

Greene's contemporary Evelyn Waugh never travelled
to Liberia, but he captured some of its absurdity and
heartlessness in his depiction of the fictional nation of
Ishmaelia. This passage from *Scoop* offers a near-perfect
evocation of the westernized Liberian ruling class's style of
governance:

> It had been found expedient to merge the functions
> of national defence and inland revenue in an office
> then held in the capable hands of General Gollancz

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[11] I.K. Sundiata, *Black Scandal, America and the Liberian Labour
crisis, 1929-1936* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human
Issues, 1980), 7.
[12] Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 56.
[13] Sundiata, *Black Scandal*, 9

> Jackson…Towards the end of each financial year the General's flying columns would lumber out into the surrounding country on the heels of the fugitive population and returned in time for budget day laden with the spoils of the less nimble.[14]

Greene, like Waugh, enjoyed the irony of Liberia's history, and he was encouraged by the British government reports that seemed to confirm this general impression of shabbiness, cruelty and depravity. "There was something satisfyingly complete about this picture," he wrote. "It really seemed as though you couldn't go deeper than that; the agony was piled on in the British Government Blue Book with a real effect of grandeur."[15]

There was a simplicity and honesty in this cruelty and suffering that appealed to Greene, a baseness that pointed towards an earlier, lost time, one that he wanted to rediscover. Just what he hoped to find in this distant past remained vague and intangible:

> There are a thousand names for it, King Solomon's Mines, the 'heart of darkness' if one is romantically inclined, or more simply…one's place in time, based on a knowledge not only of one's present but of the past from which one has emerged…[M]y journey represented a distrust of any future based on what we are.[16]

The brutality and tawdry corruption of the ruling class, together with the pitiless jungle and its ageless native population, fit with his general, rather abstract preconception of Africa as a land of danger, darkness, innocence and

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[14] Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop* (London: Penguin, 2003), 76.
[15] Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 14.
[16] Greene, *Journey Without Maps,* 16.

anarchy. Greene's fascination with this image of Africa can be traced to various childhood encounters with sources like the "Boy's Own" line of adventure stories, the writing of Kipling, and *King Solomon's Mines* with the heroic Allan Quatermain and the ancient witch Gagool.

Greene's journey was taken, in part, to chase after these boyhood fantasies. We can see some of the childish impulsiveness that inspired the trip in his amateurishness and obvious lack of preparation, of which he was fully aware: "I was a complete amateur at travel in Africa. I intended to walk across the Republic, but I had no idea what route to follow or the conditions we would meet."[17] Rather than bringing along an experienced hand to complement his status as an absolute beginner, he invited his young cousin Barbara to accompany him, a London debutante with even less experience than Greene as a traveller. "To involve my cousin Barbara, a twenty-three-year-old girl, in the adventure was, to say the least, rash," he would later write.[18] Despite this seemingly inauspicious decision, Barbara turned out to be a fine companion.[19] She was patient and uncomplaining throughout, even as the going became increasingly rough and Greene himself began to go to pieces.

Despite his and Barbara's general incompetence as travellers the journey proceeded generally free from disaster, succeeding through a combination of luck and a reliance upon the kindness of strangers. Greene set himself a ruthless schedule of at least eight hours of marching per day, and he kept to it, despite the cries of "too far! too far!" that issued incessantly from his team of African porters. The gravest

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[17] Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 44.

[18] Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 33.

[19] She was more than a fine companion, in fact. A recent headline in the *Telegraph* claims she was "The unsung heroine who saved Graham Greene's life." *Daily Telegraph*, September 5, 2010.

moment came about halfway through the journey, when Greene became seriously ill with fever and Barbara more or less gave him up for dead. He made a dramatic overnight recovery:

> The fever would not let me sleep at all, but by the early morning it was sweated out of me…I had made a discovery during the night which interested me. I had discovered in myself a passionate interest in living. I had always assumed before, as a matter of course, that death was desirable. It seemed an important discovery. It was like a conversion, and I had never experienced a conversion before.[20]

He had hit rock bottom, and in those depths he had found an unexpected strength. But all revelations of this sort fade, as Greene came to understand:

> If the experience had not been so new to me, it would have seemed less important, I should have known that conversions don't last, or if they last at all it is only as a little sediment at the bottom of the brain…[21]

Greene was originally drawn to Africa, in part, because of the powerful memories he retained from childhood adventure stories and their common, bewitching stereotypes of darkness, menace and primitiveness. The milieu in which Greene was raised still venerated the British Empire, and tales mythologizing the imperial story held a central place in popular culture. The Empire was, to the general public, a

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[20] Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 206.
[21] Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 207.

"mythic landscape of romance and adventure."[22] The exploits of Henry Morton Stanley, Mungo Park, David Livingstone and other explorers and adventurers were held as the epitome of British enterprise and ingenuity. The year Greene embarked for Liberia, *Sanders of the River* was released, the first in a landmark trilogy of popular films by Alexander Korda that trumpeted the Empire as a guiding light and hope for mankind. Imperialism, as propagated in these stories and myths, was the expression of an essentially altruistic impulse.[23]

Colonialism in Africa was generally seen not as a system of economic exploitation, but as a humanitarian project—even a duty—to civilize a benighted land.[24] "The White Man's Burden," Kipling's paean to imperial selflessness, warned that the only reward of Empire would be "The blame of those ye better, The hate of those ye guard," and praised those who worked to uplift the "new-caught, sullen peoples, Half-devil and half-child" of Britain's overseas dominions.[25] This conflation of innocence and wickedness, so common in imperialist literature, fascinated Greene and is a common theme throughout *Journey*. Other works, read later in life, shaded and deepened Greene's "Boy's Own" image of Africa, notably Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *The Inner Journey*, a novel by Kurt Heuser that
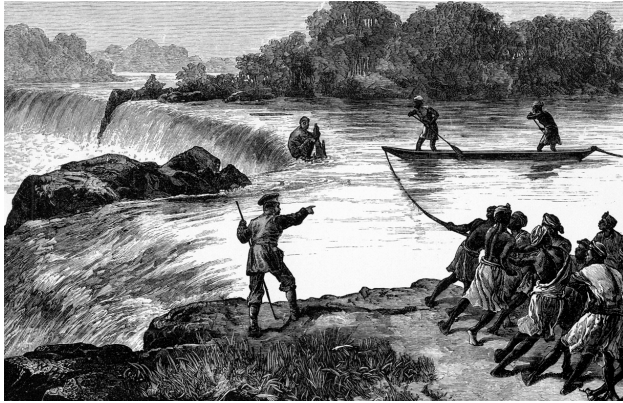
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[22] Jeffrey Richards, "Boy's Own Empire: Feature Films and Imperialism in the 1930s," in *Imperialism and   Popular Culture*, ed. John M. MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 143.

[23] Richards, "Boy's Own Empire," 150.

[24] See the speech given by Stanley at Swansea in 1892, quoted in Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), 120.

[25] Rudyard Kipling, *The White Man's Burden* (1899), accessed September 13, 2010, www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/kipling.html.

Greene read immediately before his Liberia trip.[26] The journey forced him to confront these stereotypes, to see and

Antecedents and archetypes: Greene's journey was made in conscious emulation of the great explorers of the past, among them Welsh born Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904), depicted here during his voyage in Central Africa, circa 1871. Source: Henry Morton Stanley, *Through the Dark continent: or, The sources of the Nile around the great lakes of equatorial Africa, and down the Livingstone river to the Atlantic ocean* (Harvard University, 1878).

feel and taste the realities of Africa. By and large, Greene was not disappointed with what he found. The seediness that he had hoped to find certainly was there, at least in the squalid seaside towns where Western civilization had been clumsily planted. For Greene "seediness has a very deep appeal…It seems to satisfy, temporarily, the sense of nostalgia for something lost; it seems to represent a stage further back." In this way it complemented the primordial appeal of the bush.[27]

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[26] Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene*, 564.
[27] Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 16.

This was, then, in many senses a journey backwards. For Greene it was a trip back to prehistory, to the beginnings of civilization, to simplicity. And it was something more: a personal, Freudian journey to the beginnings of conscious thought, to a pre-cerebral Eden of innocence. At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, a journey such as this offered a confrontation with the ancestral demons that haunt childhood and those still in the grip of superstition and witchcraft. For Greene, these demons had not disappeared with the march of progress; they had merely taken on new and subtler shapes. Better, surely, to confront them squarely, in the heart of the wild bush, where they had remained in their most elemental form.

A passage from *Journey* helps to illustrate the primal nature of Greene's experience. In the middle of the Liberian jungle, after a particularly tough day of hiking over steep and rocky terrain, he and his party finally reached Zigita, the town where they were to spend the night. It was a local centre of sorcery, and the home of the Big Bush Devil, an evil spirit of whom the villagers lived in constant fear. That night his carriers begged him not to go outside, for the Bush Devil would be about and anyone who laid eyes on him would at once be struck blind. Laying back in a tiny hut, a fierce storming raging about him, Greene felt the magic and menace of the village, though a part of him knew better: "It was not that I believed in the Devil's power so much as in the power of my own mind. The suggestion of malice and evil here was so great that I could imagine it influencing my mind until I half believed."[28]

Years later, in an essay entitled "The Lost Childhood," Greene speaks of having been spellbound as a boy by the evil Gagool from *King Solomon's Mines*. He admits that this fascination with the wrinkled witch stayed

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[28] Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 136.

deep within his imagination, and that it was the memory of her that had driven him inexorably to Africa. Greene then returns to that surreal night in Zigita, and presents it as a sort of fulfilment of that childhood prophecy:

> Once I came a little nearer to Gagool and her witch-hunters, one night in Zigita on the Liberian side of the French Guinea border, when my servants sat in their shuttered hut with their hands over their eyes and someone beat a drum and a whole town stayed behind closed doors while the big bush devil moved between the huts…
>
> Gagool I could recognize – didn't she wait for me in dreams every night in the passage by the linen cupboard, near the nursery door? and she continues to wait, when the mind is sick or tired, though now she is dressed in the theological garments of Despair and speaks in Spenser's accents:
>
>> The longer life, I wote the greater sin,
>> The greater sin, the greater punishment.[29]

The psychological architecture of Greeneland, so suffused with fatalism, spiritual dread and religious shame, was forged during experiences such as these. Greene perceived the visceral connection between the demons of paganism and the crushing moral burdens of Catholicism, and was faced with the possibility that these twin abysses represented the same eternal and inescapable aspect of the human condition. This brief glimpse into the void furnished Greene with the emotional context of his most powerful fiction, from Major Scobie's ethical torments in *The Heart of the Matter* to the

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[29] Graham Greene, *The Lost Childhood* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1954), 15

Whisky Priest's faltering bid for redemption in *The Power and the Glory*.

Conrad imparted much the same insight in *Heart of Darkness*. The "horror" that so haunted Mr. Kurtz at the novel's conclusion was not the comforting and progressive notion that Europeans had mischaracterized Africa as a land of darkness and savagery, but that they had mischaracterized *themselves* as its antithesis and antidote. "The 'heart of darkness' was common to us both," Greene wrote.[30] The European posture of bringing light and progress to Africa was, in Conrad's estimation, little more than vanity or self-delusion. Africa, at least, was innocent of its nakedness, was unashamed. Waugh made similar use of his experience in Ethiopia to attack the pretensions of those who tried to bring 'civilization' to Africa, as in this passage describing the fate of those early missionaries who imprudently ventured into Ishmaelia:

> They were eaten, every one of them; some raw, others stewed and seasoned – according to local usage and the calendar (for the better sort of Ishmaelites have been Christian for many centuries and will not publicly eat human flesh, uncooked, in Lent, without special and costly dispensation from their bishop).[31]

This lightness of touch distinguished Waugh from the bleakness of Conrad and Greene, but his use of Africa was much the same. His scorn was likewise informed as much by his disenchantment with the tenor of modernity as by any racism or chauvinism.[32]

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[30] Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 241.
[31] Waugh, *Scoop*, 74.
[32] See Evelyn Waugh, *Black Mischief* (Back Bay Books, 2002); see also Waugh, *Scoop*.

There was, then, more to Greene's trip than an attempt to substantiate long-held stereotypes of African barbarism, and like many journeys of its kind it revealed more about the traveller than the land travelled. The end of Greene's exploring was, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, to arrive where he started and know the place for the first time. Africa was abstract before Greene set out and remained in the abstract upon his return. It could represent the dark and untamed recesses of the human psyche when necessary, or an unfallen and virginal Eden when Greene required an emotional counterpoint to the moral decay of Western society. Whether this dual view of innocence and savagery reflected the reality of life and culture on the continent was irrelevant. As Greene wrote on *Journey*'s final page: "it is only…when one has appreciated such a beginning, its terrors as well as its placidity, the power as well as the gentleness, [that] the pity for what we have done with ourselves is driven more forcibly home."[33]

Greene finished *The Lost Childhood* by confessing his wish that he had never moved beyond *King Solomon's Mines* to more complex and nuanced fare, that he had not lost the stark morality, simplicity and romance of Allan Quatermain. Greene went into the jungle, in a way, to search for Quatermain, but it was the ancient hag Gagool who greeted him there. One suspects that she was all he ever imagined he would find.

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[33] Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 242.