

Foreword

I feel certain Graham Greene would have approved of the setting in which I first read *Journey Without Maps*. I was locked down in a dank hotel after curfew in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, trying to work out whether the noises outside were thunderclaps from rainy season storm clouds, or mortars going off as rebels circled the dying regime of the West African warlord, Charles Taylor. It was June 2003 and I had flown in as a reporter to cover what was the latest spasm in the cycle of decay that had bedevilled Liberia since 1980. Before I got on the plane, the only title I could find about the country was Greene's first travel book, the account of his 1935 journey by train and truck through Sierra Leone and then on foot for roughly 350 miles through Liberia and Guinea.

Writing about conflict and crisis for newspapers was something Greene would do extensively later in his career. Months after Israel's victory in the Six Day War of 1967, Greene was commissioned by the *Sunday Telegraph* for a piece on the new and supposedly peaceful landscape of the Holy Land. After coming under Egyptian artillery fire close to the Suez Canal he wrote dryly that perhaps the war had been misnamed. Later that year, the *Observer* would fly him to Sierra Leone to write about a place that he had come to know well and which had just suffered the first of many post-independence coups. For generations of outsiders, Greene's resulting essay framed the former British Colony perfectly as the 'Soupsweet Land.' The term 'soupsweet' was printed within the design of a cotton dress worn by a young woman whom Greene sat behind at Midnight Mass in

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Freetown, capital of Sierra Leone. He borrowed the term because, in his words, ‘what better description could there be of this poor lazy lovely coloured country?’ And even back in 1935, when he headed to Africa as a thirty-year-old novelist who had never before ventured beyond Europe, he did so with an undertaking from *The Times* that it would consider publishing articles about what he found.

I still have the paperback copy of *Journey Without Maps* that I took to war. The cover is stained with insect repellent, the pages encrypted with layers of marginalia and the spine collapsed through rereading, but the reason I cherish it is not as a piece of reportage. Indeed, close reading shows it contains enough errors to give palpitations to a Fleet Street sub-editor. Greene records incorrectly the national anthem of Liberia and misdates both the start and the endpoint of his own trip. When he meets an American missionary called George Harley upcountry in Liberia, he makes a mistake about the years Harley has been there.

I love the fact Greene could get it wrong. To my eye it makes him mortal, it earths him, and the point is the occasional errors of fact do not in any way diminish the central power of *Journey Without Maps* as a book that allowed me to learn more both about Greene and about myself.

In essence it is a book of two journeys. The first is the genuinely arduous trek Greene made through remote Africa with his travelling companion and cousin, Barbara Greene, four servants and twenty-six bearers. In 2009, long after the war finished in Liberia, I followed every blistering inch of their trip and came to see a very different side to Greene from the creative, literary one I had previously dwelt on. After struggling for weeks with the withering climate and the chokingly enclosed atmosphere of jungle-covered terrain, I came to see Greene as a man not just of considerable physical toughness, but also of enormous mental strength. What he did in 1935 was a significant travelling achievement, something that demanded both practical nous and spirited determination.

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Strictly speaking this first trip is not a 'journey without maps', more a 'journey without good maps'. Greene took two maps with him, rather rosey ones produced for military planners from Britain and America and although they marked the outline of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, the inner details were scant.

The second journey touched on in Greene's book is one for which truly there are no maps, a metaphysical trip searching inside himself for private ideas and memories of quintessential importance. Several times within the book he borrows from the vernacular of psychoanalysis, drawn from his own experience as a young man when he underwent psychiatric treatment. He writes of being taken back to 'repressed ideas' and 'primal memories' and for this internal journey Liberia is not important as a destination but as a means to unlock the mind. It is not so much a case of going back physically *to* Africa but going back mentally *by* Africa.

And this is why the book inspires me. Back in 2003, reading of Greene's own personal troubles dealing with the hinterland of Liberia, gave me a degree of comfort as I struggled to make sense of the particularly chaotic and brutal war then raging in the country. And on reading the book more recently, it has made me consider the prejudices that I, as a white outsider, sometimes seek to project, not just onto Liberia but wider Africa as well. The snapshots of seediness from his own youth that Greene weaves into the book can appear troubling and even indecipherable but this has had the effect of drawing me back to the book. Each time I have read *Journey Without Maps* I have taken something new from the experience, truly the hallmark of the best writing.

Tim Butcher, 2010

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Journey Without Maps is such an assured trip, so portentous in its Conradian shadings, that you keep having to remind yourself that the book is a young man's balancing act. Come to think of it, Conrad's own inspirational trip, his piloting the *Roi des Belges* up the Congo River in September 1890, was also a balancing act: Conrad (still Captain Korzeniowski) was thirty-two, he needed money, he was thinking of ditching the sea forever, he was making tentative progress on his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*. African travel changed both men's careers by offering them epic subjects and jungly ambiguities. Long afterwards, Greene called the nervous journey he had taken at the age of thirty, 'life altering'. Conrad said something similar about his own hectic river trip.

Greene's book is one of many on the travel shelf that suggests a mythical penetration of Africa to its essence, much like its predecessors, *Heart of Darkness* and Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent* and *In Darkest Africa*, as well as its many successors, among them Laurens van der Post's *Venture to the Interior*. The quest-myth elaborated in these books has its parallel in a boy's adventure story – the ordeal that the white traveler must endure and overcome (with all the stereotypical obstacles of primitivism) in order to find life-changing revelation at the remote heart of Africa. This fanciful supposition of the heroic-romantic in a pith helmet, that *l'Afrique profonde* contains glittering mysteries, is one of the reasons our view of Africa has been so distorted. In Conrad's case the revelation was 'The horror, the horror,' in Greene's it was nuisance, homesickness, African porters wailing 'Too far!' and

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psychoanalytic confirmation. But, really, there is no mystery, only the obvious truth that difficult journeys, such as overland trips through Africa, tell us many things about ourselves – the limits of our strength, our wits, our spirit, our resourcefulness, even the limits of our love.

Greene's book is an ingeniously worked-up account of only four weeks in the Liberian bush by an absolute beginner in Africa. Greene admits this early on. 'I had never been out of Europe before; I was a complete amateur at travel in Africa.' Amazingly, he brought his young female cousin Barbara along for company. 'You poor innocents!' a stranger cried at them in Freetown. He didn't know the half of it.

Out of his element, Greene is gloomy, fidgety, nervous; and Barbara has no discernible skills. But the pitying man in Freetown can see from their helpless smiles and their lack of preparation that theirs is a leap in the dark. *Journey in the Dark* was one of the rejected titles for the book. How innocent was Greene? Here is an example. Just before setting out from Freetown on the trip, he confides, 'I could never properly remember the points of the compass.' Can a traveler be more innocent than that?

Greene and his cousin are not deterred by their incompetence. They seek guidance. They hire porters, two servants and a cook. They board the train for the Liberian frontier and start walking around the back of the country. They have twenty-six poorly paid African porters carrying their food and equipment. They have a pistol, they have a tent (never to be used), they have a table and a portable bath and a stash of whisky. They even have trinkets to hand out to natives – but the natives prefer gifts of money or jolts of whisky to trinkets. The trip is eventful: the travelers suffer fatigue, Greene falls ill with a serious fever, there are misunderstandings and wrong turns. There is a great deal of foot-dragging on the part of the porters. A little over a month after they set off, the Greens are back on the coast, and in a matter of a week or so (the book skimps on dates) they are on a ship heading back to Britain.

It was 1935. Young, presentable, confident, well-educated,

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well-shod and presumptuous Englishmen were showing up in remote corners of the world, boasting of their amateurishness, wearing comic headgear (Greene sported a pith helmet), with the assurance that all would be well. People would respect them for their Englishness and would fall into line and be helpful; and if they didn't fall into line, if the natives were cranky and colorful and mangled their English idioms, the trip would be a hoot. Back home the book would get written and talked about. That was the case with the travels and writings of Greene's contemporaries Evelyn Waugh, Robert Byron, Peter Fleming and others whose works over the past decades have been much praised, even (to my mind) over-praised.

Journey Without Maps is seldom lumped with those books, perhaps because it lacks humor, it is dark, it is broadly political. (It is frankly appreciative of half-naked African women, though.) The book had an unlucky publishing life. Eighteen months after it first appeared, it was withdrawn because of a threatened libel action. This killed its chances at the beginning. As for his being a tenderfoot, it seems to me that Greene's nervousness and inexperience contributed to his memory of battling with the challenges of the trip, enlarging them perhaps, making more of a drama; and his fears heightened his consciousness of every passing hour, making the journey seem something of a saga. It is Greene's first and best work of travel.

At some point in the early 1930s Greene conceived his idea of walking through the African bush. When he set out for West Africa he was young man, seven years married and with a thirteen-month-old baby girl. He had never written about travel, which is not surprising – he had hardly traveled. He had made jaunts out of England, but in a hilarious, weekending way, and had never ventured beyond Europe. He knew nothing of Africa, had never camped or slept rough or been on a long sea voyage or a long hike of any consequence – certainly not a trek through the bush. Probably influenced by the journeys his friends and contemporaries were taking, he got it into his head to hike with porters and carriers through an unmapped part of

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the Liberian hinterland. He did not know exactly how many miles he would have to walk, or how long it would take, or what his actual route would be.

Much odder than this vagueness – to me, at any rate: this impulse, not to say batty notion, has never been seriously questioned – was Greene’s decision to take his young female cousin Barbara with him. She was twenty-seven, she had never been anywhere, she’d had a privileged upbringing and she was not much of a walker. But Greene was lucky – though Barbara was a socialite she was also a good sport; she learned how to hike and how to cope, and the trip hardened her to the rigors of travel. Though she was self-effacing in her role as part of the team – she hardly appears in *Journey Without Maps* – Barbara was his equal on the trail, if not on the page. Her own account of the trip, first published in 1938 as *Land Benighted*, and reprinted (with my introduction) in 1982 as *Too Late to Turn Back*, is a modest but helpful gloss on Greene’s allusive and at times ponderous book.

Why Greene took Barbara, why he did not go alone, why he did not choose an experienced man, are questions he does not answer in his book, nor are they seriously addressed in any biographies of the man. In an aside, Greene put the invitation down to his impulsiveness – too much champagne at a party. It is hard to imagine anyone so casual, not to say reckless, in choosing a partner for such a daunting journey. An inexperienced young traveler, lacking the ability to use a compass, and his younger debby cousin in Africa, with (so she said) a volume of Saki’s stories in her luggage, sounds like satire. Or was Greene infatuated? He could be impulsive where women were concerned. Barbara was lovely; Greene had been unfaithful to his wife Vivienne within months of his wedding. There have been whispers of his having an affair with Barbara. His largely excluding her from the narrative could be interpreted as a sheepish reflex, adulterer’s remorse, a mood that afflicted the womanizing Greene for much of his life.

We don’t know, and it probably does not matter, but if we are aware that Greene was sharing his hardships with this

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young woman then much of the mystique falls away. Imagine Kurtz with his Intended by his side at the Inner Station and he at once seems less of a loner, less of a leader, less of a problem-solver and mystery man – as Greene does with Barbara. Towards the end of the trip, Greene became feverish, took fewer notes and began to hurry. ‘I remember nothing of the trek to Zigi’s Town and very little of the succeeding days. I was so exhausted that I couldn’t write more than a few lines in my diary.’ For detail on that last part of the journey the reader has to turn to Barbara’s narrative. She was not ill – on the contrary, she claimed in her book that she became stronger on the journey, as Greene grew weaker.

A male companion might have challenged Greene; might have ridiculed his sketchy plans and all his improvisations. At the outset Greene did not have a clear idea of where he was going or how he would get there. He says he had only a hazy notion of his journey. ‘I intended to walk across the Republic [of Liberia], but I had no idea of what route to follow.’ Yet he saw it through to the end, with the help of his cousin. He penetrated the hinterland; he reached the coast. The reason this book is one of his best is perhaps that he was desperate the whole way through, and in some important aspects the trip was the fulfillment of his childhood fantasies.

In later life, Greene often spoke of how he had been deeply influenced as a child by stories of adventure, of derring-do, of pirates and exiles, the colorful ordeals of travelers, of swordsmen and sinners. Most of us leave these books on the nursery shelf, but Greene never forsook them or their bright colors, their themes, their stark moralities, their preoccupation with heroes and villains, their exotic settings. Before he left for Africa, he read a British government report about atrocities in Liberia, which caused him to remark, ‘The agony was piled on . . . with a real effect of grandeur.’ He is not shocked – he is excited; and the judgment is not a bad description of, say, *King Solomon’s Mines*. In his essay ‘The Lost Childhood’ Greene was to reflect on that book, saying it was the ‘incurable fascination of [the witch] Gagool with her bare yellow skull,

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the wrinkled scalp that moved and contracted like the hide of a cobra that led me [to Africa].’

Greene was a dreamy, at times brooding, boy. He was feared to be suicidal. He so alarmed his parents with his dark withdrawals that he was psychoanalyzed while still in his teens, an early candidate for the then novel treatment of talk therapy and the interpretation of dreams. *Journey Without Maps* is crammed with evidence that it was written by someone who had spent time on a psychiatrist’s couch. Speaking of his fear of rats and mice, moths and other flying creatures (‘I shared my mother’s terror of birds’), he explains, ‘But in Africa one couldn’t avoid them any more than one could avoid the supernatural. The method of psychoanalysis is to bring the patient back to the idea which he is repressing: a long journey backwards without maps, catching a clue here and a clue there, as I caught the names of villages from this man and that, until one has to face the general idea, the pain or the memory.’ His African trip, he is saying, is therapeutic; a fresh-air confrontation with his fears.

His boyhood was a humdrum existence (but with a terror of birds and moths) in an unremarkable English market town noted for its boys’ school and its furniture making. Greene was unwillingly conspicuous. A gawky, failure-prone student at the school where his father was headmaster, he was too tall and too morose, a natural target of bullying and taunts, not only from other boys but also from his own rivalrous siblings. Greene fantasized escaping into the remoter and more vivid struggles of a hero out of Rider Haggard, Kipling, Captain Marryat, Robert Louis Stevenson or G. A. Henty. He yearned to be someone else and to be elsewhere – a writer’s yearnings; but the fulfillment of them made Greene the writer we know.

He seems to have settled on Liberia because it was the sort of setting he had encountered in his early reading. Or at least that was what he imagined: jungle, mud huts, natives, witch doctors, talk of cannibals. He managed the trip in an old-fashioned way, leading a file of heavily-laden porters down a foot-wide path. On his return to England in April 1935, he

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began writing the book. That same year, he also put his Liberian experience into one of his best short stories, 'A Chance for Mr. Lever.' In addition, he was working on a thriller, *A Gun for Sale*. He finished both books by the new year and they appeared in 1936.

In spite of mediocre sales and the threat of a libel action, the story of his Liberian trip secured Greene's reputation and became part of his personal myth, setting his life on course, fixing this melancholy and evasive soul in readers' imaginations as a stoical adventurer. Never mind that he could not read a map or use a compass or drive a car, or that he was afraid of moths. People still read the book in order to understand his cast of mind, in which none of those deficits figure. Greene found a setting and a way of writing about travel that was quite different from his literary contemporaries. His book is self-consciously strewn with literary allusions, with many tags and quotations, from Conrad, Burton, A. E. Housman, Henry James, Celine, Baudelaire, Firbank, Santayana, Kafka, Sassoon, Saki, Milton, Thomas Paine, Samuel Butler, Walter Raleigh and the Bible. On the subject of travel he compares the relative merits of two of his near contemporaries, Somerset Maugham and Beverly Nichols.

In the book he dismisses Soviet junkets and (an odd assertion for Greene) Soviet-inspired hypocrisy. And he opted for the disorderly West African coast rather than the more orderly farming towns of British East Africa. Though a questionable claim, it seems like praise for him when he writes that in Liberia, 'Civilization ends fifty miles from the coast.' He would have correctly guessed that in East Africa, hundreds of miles from the coast, there were towns with coffee growers, cattle raisers, polo players, tea plantations and gymkhana clubs. And Liberia had been in the news. Not long before, in 1926, the Firestone rubber company leased – for a pittance – a million acres of the republic for its production of latex. In 1930, the League of Nations investigated allegations that Firestone, and the Liberian government, practised unfair labor and exploitation, forced labor and slavery – the precise abuses Conrad had witnessed

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in King Leopold's Congo in 1890. These facts got Greene's attention.

Greene claimed that the maps of Liberia were largely blank, with the tantalizing white spaces that Marlow speaks of early on in *Heart of Darkness*. Writing almost fifty years later Greene seems to be promoting the notion (as he does throughout the book) that much of Liberia is terra incognita. But Liberia had been an independent republic since 1847. Until 1919, the country was beset by continual border disputes from the neighboring French colonies of French Guinea and the Ivory Coast. Greene's blank-map claim seems extraordinary, since to meet such territorial challenges accurate mapping would have been essential.

Greene also maintained that the American maps he examined were designated in certain places *Cannibals*. Fanciful claims of this sort appear on eighteenth-century maps of Africa, but are improbable in the twentieth, for the very good reason that cannibalism was not practiced except in the minds of timid fantasists whom one does not normally lump with modern cartographers. Still, you can see what Greene is driving at. The country is blank, the bush is trackless, it is filled with magic and devil dancers and anthropophagous tribes; it is *l'Afrique profonde*. Because he is so scared, he is emphatic about dangers. Even in his own book he alludes now and then to cannibalism. This is a libel on his hosts, of course, but it puts him firmly in the company of Conrad, who made cannibalism one of the insistently whispered motifs in his own richly ambiguous narrative of the Congo.

But even though he later lived for a year – a miserable year, so he said – as a British spy in Freetown, Greene was essentially a visitor to Africa. He dropped in, he did some journalism, he wrote pieces; he romanced Africa and, like many another ardent suitor, was uncritical. Africa rewarded him by showing him her drama and her ambiguities, but seldom her ordinariness or her true virtues – flourishing family life and self-sufficiency come to mind. Greene loved Africa in the way only a visitor can – never as a long-term expatriate,

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the long-suffering alien, the belittled missionary, the over-worked doctor, the despised schoolteacher.

Greene would have found it hard as a resident writer in the African bush had he chosen to live there for any length of time. He was unable to drive a car. He did not know how to use a typewriter. His exasperation with the details of bush life shows in his book. Halfway through the trip – that is, a mere fourteen days into it – he is sick and impatient for the thing to end. ‘Now all I wanted was medicine, a bath, iced drinks, and something other than this bush lavatory of trees and dead leaves . . .’ A few days later, ‘I was happy with the sense that every step was towards home.’ On the seventeenth day: ‘I felt irritated with everyone and everything . . .’ Soon after that: ‘I felt crazy to be here in the middle of Liberia . . . It was like a bad dream. I couldn’t remember why I had come.’ In his diary at Bassa Town, he referred to ‘This silly trip’, but this – and his more serious apprehensions – he kept out of his published book. Less than a week later he is at the coast and the whole thing is a memory.

In retrospect, rationalized on the page, the journey was both breezier and more profound, with suspenseful highlights and shaped to seem as though it was plotted; an unexpected ordeal for this unprepared traveler. Yet his struggle elevated the trip in Greene’s mind. He realized that what he had accomplished was unique and difficult – and of course it was: the amateur had broken through and acquired experience. ‘I wanted to laugh and shout and cry; it was the end, the end of the worst boredom I had ever experienced, the worst fear and the worst exhaustion.’ His instinct had been right: this was a trip he needed to take.

Claims are made that Greene was a superior sort of traveler, that his trips were monumental, even ground breaking. I don’t see this at all. He was a fortunate traveler. His life had been sheltered, he was rather fearful, and manic-depressive, as he himself confided in his autobiography. He always had a taxi waiting. His achievement was that such a nervy soul was able to succeed in such challenges, for he was

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essentially an urbane man who boasted of disliking exercise and valuing his privacy and his comforts.

His fears made Africa vivid – for himself and for the reader. The uneasy traveler, the dilettante, which Greene was (always looking up contacts, always dependent on being shown the way), tends to invent the landscape he is traversing. Out of muddle he imagines it as much wilder than it is. There are robust assertions of cannibalism in *Journey Without Maps*. But there are no cannibals in Liberia. He mentions at one point ‘a tribe, about a week ahead . . . still supposed to practise cannibalism’ and traveling ‘in the land of the Manos, where ritual cannibalism practised on strangers has never been entirely wiped out’ and in Ganta: ‘Human sacrifice had once been offered at the falls.’ Equally unlikely, in a country that a few years earlier had made the important deal with Firestone for rubber plantations (and considering the eagerness of Firestone to possess the country), are ‘the places where I and my cousin were the first white people to be seen in living memory.’ But these are the endearing self-deceptions of a man inventing a landscape he first imagined as a child in England scaring himself rigid with images of the witch Gagool.

Greene’s Africa is worth studying because so much of it is in his head. He sees the bush as hostile – not neutral. If the ants and the rats and the cockroaches fail to nibble you to death, then answering a call of nature at the latrine you are likely (so he says) to be bitten by a poisonous snake. Yet the snakes can be decorous: ‘Once, a beautiful little green snake moved across the path, upright, without hurry, bearing her bust proudly forward into the grasses like a hostess painted by Sargent, poisonous with gentility, a Faberge jewel.’

Greene’s Africa is a place for an outsider to go to pieces, a dramatic backdrop, not always as specific as a landscape but often an atmosphere – heat and dust, insects and birdcalls. It represents romance and the possibility of reinvention. There is no big game in Greene’s Africa but there are predatory people – whites usually – and there is illness, there is betrayal, there is adultery and lost love. Politics hardly figure at all, and

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except for Deo Gratias in *A Burnt-out Case* and a couple of the carriers in *Journey Without Maps*, few Africans are delineated or have personal histories.

Returning to Freetown in 1942 to do wartime intelligence work, Greene got better acquainted with Sierra Leone. Even so, he stuck to the city. The novel that came out of his experience, *The Heart of the Matter*, is largely theological in its theme, set in the coastal capital with excursions to Pende in the bush. Africa is not the subject but the shadowy backdrop for this essentially inward-looking novel that questions the elements of belief and damnation, heaven and hell.

A Burnt-out Case (1961) was an even more deliberate book, the result of an African trip which Greene described in the short non-fiction account he entitled *In Search of a Character*. Many parts of the novel are direct transcriptions from his notebook and portraits of people he met on his stay at a leprosarium in the Belgian Congo. By the time this novel appeared, Greene was well established as a describer of tropical decay and disorder, of drunken expatriates, and as a writer whose prose was never lacking in an uneasy awareness of the judgmental presence of the omniscient Christian God, the Deity peeping especially into the humid bedrooms of Greene's wayward characters. Africa looms large in these two novels, but Christian faith looms much larger. Africa is the stage on which adulterers wonder if they have spoiled their chances for salvation. Africa suits Greene because it is unformed, suggestive of risk and danger and disease; something like a war zone without the shooting. Such is Africa's power to bewitch the credulous.

When Greene finally found a true rebellion in Africa, reporting the events of the Mau-Mau uprising in colonial Kenya in 1953, he was less inclined to sympathize with the rebels than with the British farmers in the so-called White Highlands. He did not stay long enough to understand the exploitation, the political unfairness and fundamental racism of British Kenya, yet by inclination he was fair-minded himself and a well-wisher in the cause of African independence.

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Greene's Africa, unlike the more particular landscapes of London, Brighton, Saigon and Port-au-Prince, is a landscape of the mind, a set of vivid sometimes stereotypical images which, precisely because they match our own stereotypes in their oversimplification, could account for the success of his vision of Africa as seedy. 'The deep appeal of the seedy' is adumbrated in his Liberian journey, but it seems to me that 'seedy' describes little more than the down-at-heel coastal communities of expatriates, a far cry from the sense of everlastingness of the bush, which is the true heart of Africa.

Greene was an admitted sentimentalist where Africa is concerned. This sentimentality occurs very early in his work, indeed it first surfaces in *Journey Without Maps*. One of his memories of England is of sitting in a bar where a young woman is crying. Drinking and watching her, 'I thought for some reason even then of Africa, not a particular place, but a shape, a strangeness, a wanting to know. The unconscious mind is often sentimental; I have written "a shape", and the shape, of course, is roughly that of a human heart.'

This thought is unlikely to occur to the long-term expatriate in an African country, who would never think of a map of the whole continent. Such a person, unsentimental for reasons of survival, would think of Africa as the small town or clearing he is working in. Any map he thinks of would be a map of his district, or at the very most, his province.

Greene's reaction to Africa is literary and somewhat abstract, derived from Conrad, who though he had strong views on Belgian colonialism hardly knew Africa at all beyond the banks of the river. Yet, in his typically virile and spontaneous way, and perhaps as a side effect of his anxiety in the bush, Greene is highly responsive to Africa. In this respect he was ahead of his time, unprejudiced, and true to the spirit of his boyhood adventure stories. In a word, for Greene Africa is naked. Some of the women greatly entrance him. The book is a compendium of brown breasts. The unforced and, I should say, unconscious way Greene notices the pretty women, is a like a grace note in the book. Only Sir Richard Burton – in East Africa – demonstrated

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an equal connoisseurship of brown breasts.

Though he could be contradictory, for *Journey Without Maps* is a moody book in which he changes his mind about Africa a number of times, in general Greene regards Africa as representing life and hope and vitality. Greene's shipboard observations of the green continent contrast with Marlow's in *Heart of Darkness* as his ship approaches the Congo, for, while the vantage point is the same, the conclusions are different. Marlow saw a continent beset, possessed, fired upon and spooky; Greene sees on the lush coast a happier place, 'a sense of warm and sleepy beauty' that reminds him of Baudelaire at his most sensual.

For Greene, Africa also represents visceral excitement, freedom, 'the life one was born to live.' At this early joyous point in the book he has glimpsed his first African women in a market, with 'lovely features . . . young and old, lovely less from sexual attractiveness than from a sharp differentiated pictorial quality.' In a bright memory farther down the coast he refers to 'the neat tarts of Dakar'. His gaze lingers in Freetown when a young woman approaches the car he is riding in: 'her bare breasts were small and firm and pointed; she had the neat rounded thighs of a cat.' A few days later, peering from the train as he travels up country, he sees 'the women pressed up along the line, their great black nipples like the centre point of a target.' Arrived at the border of Liberia and French Guinea, he fastens onto a figure as the very embodiment of the place, 'something lovely, happy and unenslaved, something like the girl who came up the hill that morning, a piece of bright cloth twisted above her hips, the sunlight falling between the palms on her dark hanging breasts.'

He had gone to some trouble to arrange a meeting with Liberia's President Barclay, but on the day Greene is less impressed by this powerful man than by a woman who is present, looking 'more Chinese than African . . . She was the loveliest thing I saw in Liberia; I couldn't keep my eyes off her.' In a bush settlement Greene calls 'The Horrible Village' he measures the village by its women and concludes, 'Only a few

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of the women broke the monotonous ugliness of the place . . . there was one small girl in a turban with slanting Oriental eyes and small neat breasts who did appeal to European sexual tastes even in her dirt.' Detouring through French Guinea he approves of the women who 'lived up to the standard of a country which provides the handsomest whores and the most elegant brothels' – and he goes on to provide a minutely detailed description of their coiffures and their distinctive make-up.

Greene's response to the nakedness of African woman is clearly an aspect of his relief at being liberated as well as tantalized. At these times Africa seems Eden-like. Farther on in the French colony, Greene is entertained by a chief whose daughter is present and is slightly drunk. Greene eyes the girl: 'her thigh under the tight cloth about her waist was like the soft furry rump of a kitten; she had lovely breasts; she was quite clean, much cleaner than we were. The chief wanted us to stay the night, and I began to wonder how far his hospitality might go.' Even at the end of his tether, sick and impatient and staggering near the conclusion of his journey in Bassa Town, noticing hardly anything in his feverishness, he is aware of women watching him. To his now practiced eye, he sees one woman as representing an advanced culture, 'a sign that we were meeting the edge of civilization pushing up from the Coast. A young girl hung around all day posturing with her thighs and hips, suggestively, like a tart. Naked to the waist, she was conscious of her nakedness; she knew her breasts had a significance to the white man they didn't have to the native.'

The 'tart' is an exception to Greene's equating African nakedness with innocence. As a spectator at a village dance that sounds like a ghastly rigadon ('emaciated old women slapping their pitted buttocks') he is happy: 'the freedom of Africa began to touch us at last.' In the next paragraph he presses this point about the attraction of a country – and he quotes: 'that hath yet her maidenhead, never sacked, turned, nor wrought . . . the mines not broken with sledges, nor their

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images pulled down out of their temples.’ This quotation is unattributed – I had to ask a scholarly friend to identify it, which he readily did: Sir Walter Raleigh – but the message could not be clearer. It is still early enough in his journey (about ten days) for Greene to be fascinated by the notion of Africa as undefiled. He believes he has gone deep. His notion is that he is in virgin territory and ‘There is not so much virginity in the world that one can afford not to love it when one finds it.’

This was not a final judgment. Later, muddled and ill, he confessed that Liberia was hellish and that he could hardly wait for the trip to end. He hated the last two weeks and was glad when it was all over. So the book is contradictory, but the contradictions are truthful reflections of Greene’s traveling moods. Greene is scrupulous in dramatizing all the stages of his emotional journey, from anxiety to fear to bewitchment to romance to disillusionment and back again (reflecting in tranquility) to fascination.

Now, seventy years later, Liberia is more dangerous than it was when Greene walked through with his cousin, depending on the kindness of strangers and receiving hospitality. For decades, not much changed in Liberia’s political system, which was characterized by patronage, corruption, nepotism, top hats and frockcoats. When President William Tubman, who was backed by the US, died of natural causes President William Tolbert succeeded him. After nine years he was overthrown by a young upstart soldier, Samuel Doe, who presided over a reign of terror. In his turn Doe was overthrown, captured, had his ears cut off and was brutally killed. After a few years his murderer was forced to flee to exile in Nigeria.

The country was plagued by armed gangs, child soldiers, and self-appointed leaders. In 2005 Liberia had an interim government, anticipating free elections in 2006, but the country was (as in Greene’s time) one of the poorest in Africa. There are roads (though bumpy ones) where Greene had encountered bush tracks. You can trace his route on a modern map. Peace Corps Volunteers staff the schools in some of

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the very settlements Greene mentions – for example Tapeta (Tapee-Ta) where he and his cousin spent ‘a Victorian Sunday’ and met Col Elwood Davis (‘Dictator of Grand Bassa’). Even in its distress, Liberia remains a stronghold of the Firestone rubber empire and a continuing source of illegal diamonds.

Greene only returned to Liberia once, briefly stopping off in 1942 as he flew to Freetown for his wartime service as a spy. His trip – like many difficult trips – remained glamorous in retrospect. Yet it turned him into a more ambitious traveler. Within a few years he was in Mexico, riding on a mule for *The Lawless Roads* (1938). He began to explore more of Africa, and other equatorial places in South East Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America; he developed an instinct for troubled countries with dramatic landscapes, where the women (whom he never stopped scrutinizing) were lovely. In his seventies, on an anniversary of the trip, he wrote to Barbara, ‘To me that trip has been very important – it started a love of Africa which has never quite left me . . . Altogether a trip which altered life.’

Paul Theroux, 2006