



Graham Greene's real and imaginary French Riviera

by François Gallix

In one of his autobiographical texts, *Ways of Escape* (1980), Graham Greene compared novelists to spies (and he knew what he was talking about!) Both observe what is going on about them, listen to conversations and analyze characters in order to draw them. This is also the aim of this article about Greene and several literary connections related to the Côte d'Azur, Antibes and artistic creations associated with Greene and a few other English-speaking authors. The phrase "Côte d'Azur" was coined in 1887 by the French Préfet Stephen Liégeart, a poet who was Alphonse Daudet's friend. It was juxtaposed with 'the French Riviera' following the touristic Italian coast. As for "la Baie des Anges", this was the name given to the harbour by 19th century fishermen, the "angels" (angel fish) being small inoffensive sharks whose pinions look like angel's wings.

In his introduction to *The French Riviera – A Literary Guide for Travellers* (2007), Ted Jones wrote: "The Riviera has been a magnet for writers for seven hundred years": and he gave a long list including Tobias Smollett, Katherine Mansfield, W.B. Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, Vladimir Nabokov, H.G. Wells, P.G. Wodehouse, and Alan Sillitoe. He also, quite rightly devoted a large space to Francis Scott Fitzgerald, whose *Tender is the Night* is possibly the novel in English that encapsulated the Riviera in the twenties the most brilliantly. Strangely enough, Fitzgerald had asked his publisher never to use the word "Riviera" about his book, in order not to be accused of triviality and of suggesting clichés! (69). Yet here is how it starts:



On the pleasant shore of the French Riviera, about half way between Marseilles and the Italian border, stands a large, proud, rose-colored hotel. Deferential palms cool its flushed façade, and before it stretches a short dazzling beach.

Indeed for centuries, The “Côte d’Azur” has been considered as a meeting place, a proper literary hub for artists and creators. Amusingly, for instance, in *The Rock Pool*, the critic Cyril Connolly’s only novel, first published in 1936 in Paris by Obelisk Press (because of alleged obscenity), if Antibes and Juan les Pins are specifically named, Cagnes sur mer, where the story takes place and where Connolly used to be staying became: “Trou sur mer”!

Greene’s near neighbour, Somerset Maugham – ‘the British Maupassant’ – as he was sometimes called, bought the “Villa Mauresque” at St Jean Cap Ferrat from King Leopold II of Belgium in 1926 (nicknamed “he King of Cap Ferrat”) where he had his famous icon printed: “the Moroccan hand of Fatima” to ward off the evil eye (see *The Summing up*, 1938), still visible on the gatepost and on the spine of most of his books. For years, Maugham used to spend six months a year there until his death in 1965. He had a cook, a butler, a footman, a chauffeur, two maids and seven gardeners – writing can sometimes be rewarding! For years he was the patron of the American and British Library in Nice, followed by Greene in February 1990. Nadine Gordimer now holds this honorary function.

Maugham had his own room propped up on top of the house and the window bricked to block off the view, so that it wouldn’t distract him from his writing! The luxurious villa was totally ruined during the war, after being looted by the Germans, the Italians, the British and the French. The grounds were even mined and Maugham had to rebuild it from scratch. There, he wrote the humorous short story, “The Three fat women of Antibes”. Three middle-aged wealthy women (one is a widow, one divorced, the other a spinster) are trying to get on a very strict diet while staying at Antibes. A fourth one – a recently-widowed woman, joins them and eats so much and with such relish that the three fat women then indulge in gorging themselves with very rich and fattening food!

More than 2000 years ago Antibes was called by the Greeks, “Antipolis” – “the city opposite” across the bay from their original settlement, Nice (*Nikaia*, ‘the victorious’). Built in the 12th century, its château Grimaldi has become the Picasso museum near the battlements. Surprisingly, it seems that, though both men lived in such a small provincial town, Greene and Picasso never had any contacts. [Greene settled in Antibes in 1966 and Picasso died in Mougins in 1973, so they could have met]. In *Graham Greene Country, visited by Paul Hogarth* (1986), one can read:

The statues by Giacometti outside the Musée Picasso remind me of my only meeting with the artist in his Paris studio where he showed me the origin of many of his works – the Roman statuettes a few inches high fished out of the Seine (127).



The artist was obviously Giacometti, not Picasso. At Antibes, Jules Verne wrote his adaptation of *Le Tour du monde en 80 jours* and Guy de Maupassant, *Mont Oriole*. The novelist, poet and playwright, Jacques Audiberti was born there and he situated many of his books in the area. An annual prize for authors of books dealing with the Mediterranean was created under his name by the Irish consul in Cannes, Pierre Joannon. Lawrence Durrell was the first to get the award, followed by Jacqueline de Romilly, Jean d'Ormesson and in 2010 by Michel del Castillo.

GREENE'S GENIUS LOCI

All of Greene's novels are marked by a very powerful sense of place that often takes on a mythical dimension – far away places all over the world that Greene had visited, often as a reporter, "Graham Greene country" or "Greeneland" (a word he hated): Mexico in *The Power and the Glory*, the Belgian Congo in *A Burnt-Out Case*, Haiti in *The Comedians*, Cuba in *Our Man in Havana*, Saigon in *The Quiet American*, but also in post-war Vienna in *The Third Man*, Brighton in *Brighton Rock*, London in *It's a Battlefield*, *The Ministry of Fear* and *The End of the Affair*, Nottingham in *A Gun for Sale*. Many of his short stories take place in Berkhamsted, his native town, near Watford, in the North West of London, where he went to school, his father being the headmaster and where every year in October is held the Graham Greene Festival. In his foreword to his short stories, Greene ironically excused himself for not having written any books on Kenya and the Mau Mau, on Malaya, Israel, the Nicaragua of the Sandinistas – all places where he had been!

As for Antibes, it is the setting of three short stories in *May we borrow your husband?* (1967): the title story, "Beauty" and "Chagrin in Three parts". He wrote many of his books there, including *The Comedians* (1966), *Travels with my Aunt* (1969), *The Honorary Consul* (1973), *Lord Rochester's Monkey – a biography* (1974), *The Human Factor* (1978), *Dr. Fisher of Geneva or the Bomb Party* (1980), *Monsignor Quixote* (1982), *Getting to know the General* (1984) and *The Captain and the Enemy* (1988). Characteristically, those include at least four comedies: Greene considered humour as an escape from incoming death allowing him to take an ironic point of view about old age and death, mixing up comic and nostalgic themes. At Antibes, he said he was then ready to contemplate his life with a smile. About *Travels with my Aunt*, for instance, he declared the book had been written "in a single mind of sad hilarity." The stories of *May we borrow your husband?* were "as an escape from the thought of death – certain death" (West, 205). In the introduction to the collected edition, he added: "I felt above all that I had broken for good or ill with the past".

For almost twenty years, from 1966 to 1990, Greene lived in Antibes, "résidence des Fleurs", avenue Pasteur at the fourth floor, in a two-roomed flat, near the rampart overlooking the harbour. There he had brought the painting by Porto Carera which had been given to him by Fidel Castro when he visited him in 1964. He agreed that the



mayor, Pierre Merli could put a small plaque outside his apartment after his death, but refused to have a street named after him; he once declared: "please, no memorial!".

WHY ANTIBES?7

After living mostly in residential districts: St James's street, Albany in London, Bd. Maeshherbes in Paris, Capri where he had bought a house, why did the very successful British author decide to spend the rest of his life in a two-roomed flat in this small French provincial town? The question deserves being asked and suggests several possible answers. The first ones, given by Greene himself are part of those "clouds of smoke" that he created all his life so as to remain out of the public eye. They could be summed up in a few simple words: "good wine and cheese", "to escape the braying of the English middle-class", health problems (he had had a bad pneumonia in Moscow, but had recovered long ago and lived until the age of eighty-six.), to visit his friend, Alexander Korda, who had produced *The Third Man*, and who had a yacht there, the proximity in Juan les Pins of Yvonne Cloetta, the French married woman he had met in 1959 in Cameroon, and who was his last loving companion for twenty-five years.

The reality is to be found in Greene's answer to a letter from Evelyn Waugh, written in January 1966 to congratulate him for being made a Companion of Honour by the Queen and to thank him for sending him an inscribed copy of his novel, *The Comedians*. Greene wrote back on January 5th: "1965 was bad for me too. Someone like Jones [in *The Comedians*], claiming a CBE did away with all my savings so I've had to leave England and establish myself in France." (Waugh Archive, British Library, in R.Greene, 2006) 957-70).

It was Thomas Roe – a seedy financial expert who not only succeeded in swindling Graham Greene, but also Charlie Chaplin, the actor Noel Coward and James Hadley Chase, the British author of "noir" novels. Roe was arrested at the Swiss border with 100,000 counterfeit dollars in the boot of his car. It is revealing that Greene, who had in fact, been forced to leave Britain, being considered as *persona non grata*, first transformed this real crook into the fictitious character of Jones in *The Comedians*. This is confirmed by Paul Theroux, in his introduction to the Vintage edition of the book:

Greene conceived and wrote *The Comedians* at a time of crisis in his life. He had been dealt a severe financial setback through the mismanagement of his accountant. He had decided to move to France, claiming health reasons, but it was in fact tax-avoidance. (VIII)

Living in Antibes did not mean isolation for Greene. His flat was five minutes away from the station and not far from Nice airport, so he continued to live his life of a globe-trotter, always travelling to the most dangerous places in the world. The actor Alec Guinness, who played the part of Wormold, in the film adaptation of *Our Man in Havana*, used to say that whenever he heard about a place in the world where Greene



was going, he would, at all cost avoid travelling there because he was sure that a war or a revolution would take place in the area! For instance, from Antibes, Greene went to Israel for the first time in 1967, just after the Six-Day War. He was trapped in the sand dunes for over five hours while shells burst around him and he feared being killed. In 1969, he went to Argentina and Paraguay in search of new material. The second part of *Travels with my Aunt* takes place in Paraguay. He had many visitors: authors, publishers and journalists: Robert Laffont, Maurice Druon, Olivier Todd, Charlie Chaplin, Heinrich Böel, R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, John Updike. In his diary for 1st November 1972, Greene wrote, with an exclamation mark: "film with Truffaut!" It was *La Nuit Américaine (Day into Night)*. Truffaut needed an Englishman to play a cameo: the part of the insurance representative. Truffaut did not know the identity of his new actor until after the scene had been shot but he was delighted by the deception. They met again on 5th November and on the 10th had a party in Antibes to celebrate the amusing event.

CHEZ FÉLIX

The café "Chez Félix", in Antibes, became a small literary haven where, for many years Graham Greene was a regular client, he even had his mail delivered there. About "May we borrow your husband?", he wrote:

Taking my dinner nightly, in the little restaurant of Félix au port, some of the tales emerged from conversations at other tables (even from a phrase misunderstood), though the title story had been in my mind for a number of years. I had brought this idea with me to Antibes as part of my baggage, and I set the scene in Antibes, though in fact I had seen the incident happen under my eyes (or so I imagined) at St Jean-Cap Ferrat while I worked on a very different subject [A Burnt-Out Case, x.]

He told his Spanish friend and confessor Leopoldo Duran: "I go there because Félix saves any wine that I leave in the bottle for my next visit." A plaque where he used to sit was placed by the owner, M. LeMen. Lunch was always preceded by his famous High and dry Martini cocktail: one part of Martini and fifteen parts of dry gin, or as he put it to Pierre Joannon: "pour Martini into a glass, turn it round, then throw it and put fifteen parts of gin!" Greene once said he would call his next novel "High and dry", but he never did! He thought that his short stories were like holiday snapshots reproducing conversations he had heard while having lunch at Félix: As he put it in "May we borrow your husband?":

All along the Côte the summer restaurants were closed, but lights shone in Félix au Port...This was the Antibes I always enjoyed, and I was disappointed to find I was not alone in the restaurant as I was most nights of the week. (57)



The restaurant became a wonderful observation point and a source of his inspiration: "Since 1959 'Chez Félix' was my home from home. I found short stories served to me with my meal".

MAY WE BORROW YOUR HUSBAND?

The narrator is not Greene, but a middle-aged scholar, William Harris, who resembles Greene (aged sixty-five when he wrote the short story). Harris is engaged, while in Antibes, in writing a biography of the 17th century rake and poet, the Earl of Rochester. Greene was here playing an impossible literary game with his readers who could not know then that he had himself written a life of Rochester that had first been rejected by Heinemann thirty years before, but that an American Publisher – the Viking Press – had recently come forward with an offer to publish it as an illustrated coffee-table book. The book did not appear until 1974. Harris watches two homosexual interior decorators who have decided to seduce a young man, Peter, on his honeymoon with his bride, "Poopy". The short story also contains a few direct addresses to the reader echoing 18th century authors like Sterne (*Tristram Shandy*) and Diderot (*Le Neveu de Rameau*) and an allusion to Baudelaire: "Let the reader make his own image of a wife [...] But if I didn't bother to convey [the colour of her hair, the shape of her mouth] to her, why should I bother to convey them to you, *hypocrite lecteur.*" (17)

Being in Antibes did not stop Greene's provocative declarations: about *The Human factor* and the friendship he had kept with the spy Kim Philby. He said to Marie-Françoise Allain: "I never believed in the importance of loyalty to one's country. Loyalty to individuals seems to me more important".

J'ACCUSE.

On 1st March 1982, Greene sent a letter to *The Times* entitled "Corruption in Nice" and wrote a letter to General Salan to back up his request. On 26th, aged seventy-eight, he published *J'accuse, The Dark side of Nice* in London, in English and in French (it was banned in France by Jacques Médecin). It begins like this: "Let me issue a warning to anyone who is tempted to settle for a peaceful life on what is called the Côte d'Azur". On television (ARTE), he proclaimed in French: "Je dis, je l'affirme et je le répète, je dis la vérité, rien que la vérité: 'J'ACCUSE!'" It is a bitter and violent pamphlet about Guy George – a member of the Corsican maffia who had married the daughter of his mistress, Yvonne Cloetta. As a consequence, Greene had to face the burglary of his flat and even a bomb explosion. Unhappy about the lack of enthusiasm from the French officials, he returned his légion d'honneur given to him by Pompidou. It was given back to him by Mitterand.



SPYING FROM ANTIBES

Greene became a member of the Secret Service. In 1941 when he was recruited in the MI 6 by his elder sister, Elizabeth Denny. Between 1941 and 1944, he was at the head of a SIS office at Freetown in Sierra Leone, in constant contact with the London head-office where he sent his reports. In his introduction to *A Quiet American*, written in 1963 Greene reported a conversation he had with de Lattre, during a cocktail in Saigon when the General told him that people suggested that nobody ever left the British secret service and Greene answered: "it may be true of the French *deuxième bureau*, but it is not, for us. "Yet, as the saying goes about being a member of the secret service: "once in never out", it is very likely that Greene still occasionally sent information from Antibes, for instance about his trips to South America, notably in Panama for the signature of the treaty and in Nicaragua where he met General Ortega. There were many interventions from the CIA, between 1957 and 1968 and Greene was prevented several times from entering the USA.

It seems clear that the twenty-five years spent by Greene on the French Riviera left a much deeper mark than the mere background for a few of his stories. They permanently transformed the man and a large part of his work. Like his neighbour on the Côte d'Azur, Somerset Maugham, Greene can be considered as the most French of British writers.

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