ENGLISH STUDIES

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BOOK REVIEW

Graham Greene: Political Writer, Michael G. Brennan, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xxiv + 208 pp., £58.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-137-34395-6

For Graham Greene politics were "in the air we breathe, like the presence or the absence of a God" (p. ix). Given the events of the past year, Michael G. Brennan might be tempted to argue how little has changed since Greene's observation. Indeed, as a result of the shifting governmental and geopolitical circumstances of our own contemporary moment, Brennan's consideration of the political and literary thought of Graham Greene is possessed of a particular timeliness and relevance in its suggestion that writers of fiction, occasionally in spite of their best efforts, might struggle to remain separate from the national and international political affairs and events of their time. Even a writer such as Greene, so often typically assessed in relation to his fictive address of religious themes, and who, as Brennan asserts, was initially keen to avoid the label of "political writer" and its connotations, was nonetheless galvanised in reaction to the political currents of his age. Having overcome his initial reticence, Brennan argues, Greene would go on to develop and refine an approach to writing in which the personal and political, as well as religious and secular humanistic concerns, were all inextricably bound.

As Brennan's book makes clear, however, such a qualified and changeable approach to political life is often fraught with complication, especially when these various spheres collide. Brennan presents a detailed narrative of Greene's life in letters, and his exploration of how Greene's idiosyncratic, if not downright inconsistent, political tendencies developed through his writing is compelling. In his reading of Greene's fictional output alongside his experiences and shifting circumstances, Brennan makes much use of Norman Sherry's three-volume work on Greene's life and career, in addition to his own research into the Greene family tree and its deep and sometimes knotty roots in public life. As such, he adopts a tone that lies midway between the analysis of literary criticism and the authority of popular biography; the book is thus all the more accessible as a consequence, supported by the decision to structure chapters around discrete phases of Greene's life and literary career, breaking them into short sections that allow for ease of reference and navigability. However, despite the advantages of this commendably user-friendly format, I occasionally found myself longing for more sustained analysis in places, particularly of Greene's mid-century works, and the juncture at which his political and literary maturation appear to occur.

Similarly, there are sections where the biographer appears to win out over the critic that consequently feel a little under-explored, and where the book is more concerned with Greene's own narrative than its impact on his work. Some notable omissions in Brennan's bibliography here are the work of Adam Piette, particularly the incisive *The Literary Cold War: 1945 to Vietnam* (2009), and Allan Hepburn's *Intrigue* (2005). Brennan rightly pinpoints Greene's personal experiences in Vietnam and the resultant *The Quiet American* (1955) as a moment of decisive shift in Greene's political and literary register, acknowledging too the process by which the propaganda work of Greene's brother Hugh at the anodyne-sounding Information Research Department and Emergency Information Service in Malaya were instructive to the subversive politics of the novel. However, he does not, as Piette does, explore these in comparative detail, and consider how the developing Cold War lexis of neutral, euphemistic language detached the individual from the realities of this political world, and drove Greene to produce such a visceral work in response. Such stylistic and

textual appreciation might have more satisfyingly bridged the disciplinary and analytical distance between literary studies and biography here, and rounded out Brennan's appreciation and application of historical lenses to this crucial period in Greene's career, and the novels that came after.

Similarly, it is at this point that factors of literary genre are more pressing than perhaps Brennan gives them credit for. Hepburn acknowledges how a rush of literary works arose in response to the unsettled context of deteriorating US/UK and Soviet relations post-war, consolidating the image of the spy, his overlapping professional and private selves, and espionage fiction more generally, within the public consciousness. In such a climate, Greene's decision to fill *The Third Man* (1949) with stark allegorical intersections of the political and personal as expressed in Rollo Martin and Harry Lime's friendship betrayed seem telling, though they, and the novella to film adaptation, are here barely glossed.

Brennan's overarching thesis, however, is irrefutable. Concurrent with the two major totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, Greene's life, thought and literary accomplishments were conducted in an age where politics became more and more the foundation, and qualification (were we to reflect upon Giorgio Agamben's understanding of the period), of modern existence. This authoritative volume illustrates how, despite his reluctance and changeability, Greene sought to approach, interpret and, on occasion, actively resist this process through his literary fiction. Brennan's work acts as a reminder too that it is the "duty of the publically engaged writer", especially those with the platform and connections to the corridors and levers of power such as Greene had, to "interrogate the 'distribution of power in society" (p. 174) and offer cogent and articulate responses to extremes of political or nationalistic fervour in their literary output. Greene's key advantage, argues Brennan, is that he never saw his spirituality as antithetical to such discussions, nor lost them. It is perhaps the retention of such a human factor that our own political life might now benefit from.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2018.1497826