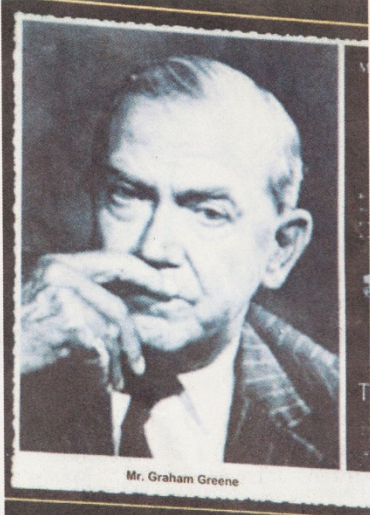


Memories of a Spy Turned Novel Writer



Kazuo Nagata/The Yomiuri Shimbun
Photo of Graham Greene in
the Hotel Majestic

1904-1991

Greene is one of the most prominent British writers of the 20th century. From his youth, he traveled to various parts of the world. During World War II, he served as a key spy in Africa for a British intelligence agency. He wrote many novels, with war and espionage as backgrounds of the stories. His important works include "The Power and the Glory" and "The End of the Affair." "The Third Man" is famous for a movie based on it. "The Quiet American" and some other works were also made into movies.

By Kazuo Nagata
Yomiuri Shimbun Correspondent

HO CHI MINH CITY — A tourist guide I met earlier in the afternoon told me, “The place name of Ho Chi Minh City exists only on paper. Local people still call it Saigon.”

At dusk, as I looked around from a plaza in front of the white building of the Saigon Opera House — into which crowds of people were streaming — I found the name plate of a long-established hotel that opened in 1880. It read “Hotel Continental Saigon.”

Low, French-style buildings are reminders of the city under colonial rule when it was dubbed “the Paris of the East” far long before its lengthy wars.

The hotel’s records showed that in October 1951, a British writer stayed in a corner room, looking down on the plaza. The writer was Graham Greene.

In one of his important works, “The Quiet American,” there is a bloody scene in which the plaza is rocked by a terrorist bombing. The bombing is plotted by a U.S. intelligence agency.

The story is set at some time in the midst of First Indochina War, fought by France and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, which was later called North Vietnam.

A CIA agent, Pyle, works undercover so that “the Third Force,” which is neither colonialism nor Communism, can be established in Vietnam. Fowler, a British journalist stationed there, feels that Pyle’s actions and the U.S. policy toward Vietnam are perilous.

The story, which revolves around the two men, who are also rivals for the affections of a Vietnamese woman called Phuong, has a heavy political tone, reflecting the author’s anti-U.S. stance.

When the novel was published, strong antipathy was voiced toward it in the United States. But today, the novel is highly regarded worldwide as a work that warned early of the quagmire into which the United States was even-

tually drawn in Vietnam.

Greene himself had experience as a spy. In the 1950s, he often visited Vietnam to write articles and sent them to British and other newspapers.

Greene commented he got fed up hearing endlessly from an American who talked about “the Third Force,” while they were in the same car during Greene’s news-gathering activities.

In the novel, bars in the Hotel Continental Saigon, where he stayed, and the Hotel Majestic on the same street appear as places where Pyle and Fowler gather information.

As the years passed, the United States began its full-fledged military intervention in the Vietnam War. During the war, hotels and cafes around the Opera House were spaces foreign correspondents and diplomats stationed in Saigon gathered and exchanged information.

Tran Trong Thuc, 70, a former news agency reporter, recalled those days saying: “Almost every evening, reporters and politicians gathered and exchanged information about the war

situation and the peace negotiations. Sometimes, they spread misinformation to manipulate others.”

Those who frequented such places included one who was later found to be an important spy for North Vietnam.

At dusk in front of the Opera House, I went to a cafe while ruminating about those days of sly maneuvering in battles of wits.

While I interviewed a prominent scholar of literature of the country, I felt a little tense as I was told, “I was once taken away when I was sipping coffee in this seat.” He was suspected by authorities of possible involvement in the anti-China protests that were escalating in the city in May this year.

Even today, when the wars have become part of a distant past, the atmosphere in this country is still tense. I found myself gripping my glass a little tighter. As a correspondent myself, I found I had the same feelings as Fowler.

Nagata is chief of the Asian General Bureau.

Graham Greene IN Saigon



A plaza in front of the Saigon Opera House, front right, with the red-roofed Hotel Continental Saigon nearby

Kazuo Nagata/The Yomiuri Shimbun



Kazuo Nagata/The Yomiuri Shimbun

A bar inside the Hotel Continental Saigon, which was depicted as a place for Pyle and Fowler to gather information in "The Quiet American"