

# The Furthest Escape Of All: Darkness And Refuge In The Belgian Congo<sup>1</sup>.

**Michael Meeuwis**

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## Introduction

Graham Greene's *A Burnt-Out Case* (1960)<sup>2</sup> is set in the Belgian Congo, the colony in Central Africa over which Belgium ruled from 1908, the year in which it took it over from the private hands of King Leopold II, to 1960, when the Congo gained its independence. In the first months of 1959, Greene spent five weeks in the Congo in preparation for this novel. My intention here is to contextualize Greene's Congo trip in more detail than what is available in the literature so far (i.e., Hulstaert 1994<sup>3</sup>; Lechat 1991, 2007<sup>4</sup>; Sherry 2004; Meeuwis 2013).

I will do so among others on the basis of information found in the personal archives of Dr. Michel Lechat (1927–2014), the Belgian leprologist who was Greene's main contact during his stay, whose discourse and insights he transposed to Dr. Colin's in *A Burnt-Out Case*, and to whom he also dedicated the book. Shortly before Lechat's death in February 2014, his wife Edith Dasnoy handed me the Greene-related part of his archives. This included photocopies he had made of the documents he had donated to the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas at Austin in 2007, such as letters between Greene and himself, but also a number of documents he had newly discovered after 2007, as well as his private and unpublished memoirs, which Edith Dasnoy found on his computer and in several printouts only in 2013–2014. A second major source for me is the original manuscript of the diary Greene kept while traveling in the Congo, in possession of the Harry Ransom Center. The diary was published in 1961 as *In Search of a Character: The Congo Journal* (Greene 1961)<sup>5</sup>, but this published version diverges in significant ways from the diary manuscript, revealing many deleted bits of sensitive information as well as wholly different perceptions Greene had of events and people he had

1 A first version of this paper was presented in 2014 at the Graham Greene International Festival in Berkhamsted, UK, under the title "Merriment or Make-Believe? Reflections on the *Congo Journal*, Missionaries, and a Home Video Showing Graham Greene in the Belgian Congo." I am grateful to the members of the audience for their feedback. My special gratitude goes to Honoré Vinck for his suggestions, and to Mike Hill and Jon Wise for their invaluable help with identifying the right archives and, not a minor challenge, with decrypting Greene's handwriting.

2 Greene, G. (1977 [1960]). *A Burnt-Out Case*. London, Penguin.

3 Hulstaert, G. (1994). *Graham Greene et les Missionnaires Catholiques au Congo Belge*. *Annales Équatoriales* 15: 493-503.

4 Lechat, M. (1991). "Remembering Graham Greene". *The Bulletin: The Newsweekly of The Capital of Europe* 18 April 1991: 14-16.

Lechat, M. (2007). Diary: Graham Greene at the Leprosery. *London Review of Books* 29(15): 34-35. Meeuwis, M. (2013).

5 Greene, G. (1961). *In Search of a Character: Two African Journals*. London, The Bodley Head.

met in the Congo. In addition to Greene himself, another important ‘censor’ of the diary manuscript was Dr. Lechat, who, asked by Greene to correct the galley proofs, beseeched the writer to omit or change quite a number of unfavorable descriptions of persons still living and working in the Congo before the diary went to print. I intend to list and critically interpret the discrepancies between the consecutive versions of the diary in a future study. Thirdly, I also draw information from additional literature and from other, minor archives, all of which will be identified in due course. Lastly, I rely on the many conversations I continue to have with Edith Dasnoy, who has become a dear friend, as well as with several members of the Belgian branch of the congregation of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, the priests among whom Greene spent almost all of his time in the Congo.

My account is organized chronologically, following Greene’s itinerary. In section 1, I first try to come to grips with Greene’s choice of the Congo when looking for a suitable background for his new novel. For that, I will be referring to the help he requested in 1958 from the Belgian Baroness Hansi Lambert, to whose *beau-monde* circle Greene belonged, as well as to Lechat’s invocations of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in his first letters to Greene. I will also discuss the remarkably apolitical intentions with which Greene went to the Congo. In section 2, I explain how all these preparations and intentions culminated in Greene’s spending

the last week of January in Brussels, with a mistress he nicknames “Tony” in the diary manuscript, waiting for his departure by airplane on 30 January 1959. Greene spent his first two days in the Congolese capital Leopoldville (31 January–1 February), after which he traveled on to the city of Coquilhatville, some 600 kilometers to the north, in the heart of the equatorial rainforest. His final destination was Iyonda, situated only 15 kilometers south of the center of Coquilhatville. Iyonda was a small village and station of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, which included the leprosy<sup>6</sup> colony and hospital managed by Dr. Lechat.

Greene spent two periods in Iyonda, namely from 2 through 11 February and again from 26 February through 5 March 1959. As I discuss in section 3, during the first term he was torn between on the one hand an escapist comfort offered by the Iyonda priests’ unconcern with his celebrity, and on the other the disappointment of not finding among them the deep religious reflexivity he had hoped. I also consider the exasperating attention Greene received from those colonials who did take an interest in the personality that he was. In section 4, I relate how, from 12 through 25 February, he traveled the Ruki-Momboy river, a tributary branching off from the main Congo river at Coquilhatville, in order to visit two other mission stations and leprosariums. This two-weeks’ river journey, which Greene made by steamer, is of importance for several reasons. First, during the

6 I avoid the term “leper,” which, as Brandsma and Deepak explain (2012: 326), is nowadays deemed offensive towards leprosy patients. Other terms for “leprosy hospital and colony,” indicating the settlement where leprosy patients are treated and isolated from the rest of the population, are “leprosarium” and, borrowed from the French, “leproserie.” Brandsma, J. W. and S. Deepak (2012). “Surgical and Social Rehabilitation”. In: *Leprosy: A practical guide*. ed. E. Nunzi and C. Massone. Milan, Springer: 321-327.

idle hours on the steamer, Greene took to rereading *Heart of Darkness*, the long novella Joseph Conrad had written on the basis of his own steamer journey on the Congo river in 1890. This rereading allowed Greene to come to a thorough reinterpretation of the novella's merits. Secondly, much of the narrative in *A Burnt-Out Case* revolves around a leprosarium situated on the banks of a river that likewise is not the main Congo but one of its smaller tributaries. Greene's journey on the Ruki-Momboyo and the individuals and localities he saw on its banks thus served him as an important source of inspiration for the book. Finally in section 5, I deal with Greene's second term in Iyonda (26 February–5 March 1959), during which a remarkable home video was shot of him, for which I provide background information and an interpretation, as well as with his last days back in Leopoldville (5–6 March), his brief visit to Brazzaville in French Equatorial Africa (7–8 March), and to Douala in Cameroon (8–12 March), where he visited a fourth leprosarium.

## 1. Finding a destination for an apolitical trip

Already while writing and finalizing *Our Man in Havana* (1958), Greene was conceptualizing his next novel, envisaging to set it in a leprosy hospital and colony somewhere in the tropics: "a new novel [was] already beginning to form in my head by way of a situation—a stranger who turns up in a remote leper settlement for no apparent reason".<sup>7</sup> The traveling author that he was, Greene

planned to spend some weeks in such a remote leprosarium, in order to personally collect all contextual and technical information needed to compose a background, and maybe also some dramatic material. For this purpose, in September 1958, he contacts his Belgian friend Baroness Johanna "Hansi" von Reininghaus-Lambert (1899–1960), widow and heir of the famous Brussels banker Baron Henri Lambert (1887–1933)<sup>8</sup>. Hansi Lambert was a lady of the Belgian high society, collecting art, among which paintings by no lesser names than Miró, Chagall, and Picasso, and always keen on inviting, in old salon-style, famous artists, writers, composers, and politicians for lunch or dinner. As her son Philippe Lambert (1930–2011) remembers, Greene was one of the celebrities in Hansi's entourage:

"My mother [. . .] was the product of a world where appearance and demeanor mattered, and had a great savoir-faire combined with an irresistible charm. [. . .] Hansi was lucky to have financial means to support her strong need for friends and influence. She dreaded being alone and took every opportunity to expand her social circle and surround herself with interesting people. Whether it was in her homes in Fudji, Avenue, Marnix or Gstaad, [. . .] she gathered around her writers and poets like Nicholas Nabokov, Graham Greene, the Spenders".<sup>9</sup>

In his letter of 15 September 1958 to Hansi, Greene specifies that he wants to spend some weeks "in a hospital of the

7 Greene, G. 1981 [1980]. *Ways of Escape*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 269.

8 Lambert, Philippe. 2013. *Long Ago (and Far Away)*. Brussels, Editions Racine.

9 Ibid., 138-139.

Schweizer kind in West or Central Africa (because already I have certain knowledge of the background)."<sup>10</sup> With "knowledge of the background" we can suppose he refers to his earlier West-African experiences, i.e. his 1935 trip to Liberia, leading to *Journey Without Maps* (1936),<sup>11</sup> and his life as an MI6 officer in Sierra Leone in the early 1940s, the basis for *The Heart of the Matter* (1948). He continues his letter explaining that he has already located a possible leprosarium, namely in Bamako, Mali, but adds that it is situated in the Sahara, "which I don't know," and that it is not run by priests but by nuns "and I wouldn't feel at ease with them!" Greene knew that Baroness Hansi's late husband as well as her two sons had connections in the Belgian Congo, where they traveled widely and were engaged in large-scale business investments. With that knowledge, he concludes his letter by suggesting to Hansi: "It occurred to me that there might be some place in the Belgian Congo. If you could help me I would be very grateful."

A week later, on 27 September 1958, Hansi Lambert forwards Greene's letter to Dr. Michel Lechat, who had been working in Iyonda since 1953. Lechat and Hansi knew each other through Hansi's son Léon, with whom Lechat had been very good friends since their student years in the 1940s. Lechat was a regularly invited guest at Hansi's society dinners; in fact, there is a note in Lechat's personal archives, in his hand, saying that

on 6 November 1950 Greene and he were both present at one of the Baroness's dinners, but they hardly exchanged words on that occasion. On 27 September, as mentioned, Hansi forwards Greene's letter of 15 September to Lechat, adding a note in which she requests him to contact Greene directly and comments that "Greene is a very agreeable and very problematic man. It would be amusing if the Belgian Congo would offer him a background for a novel."<sup>12</sup>

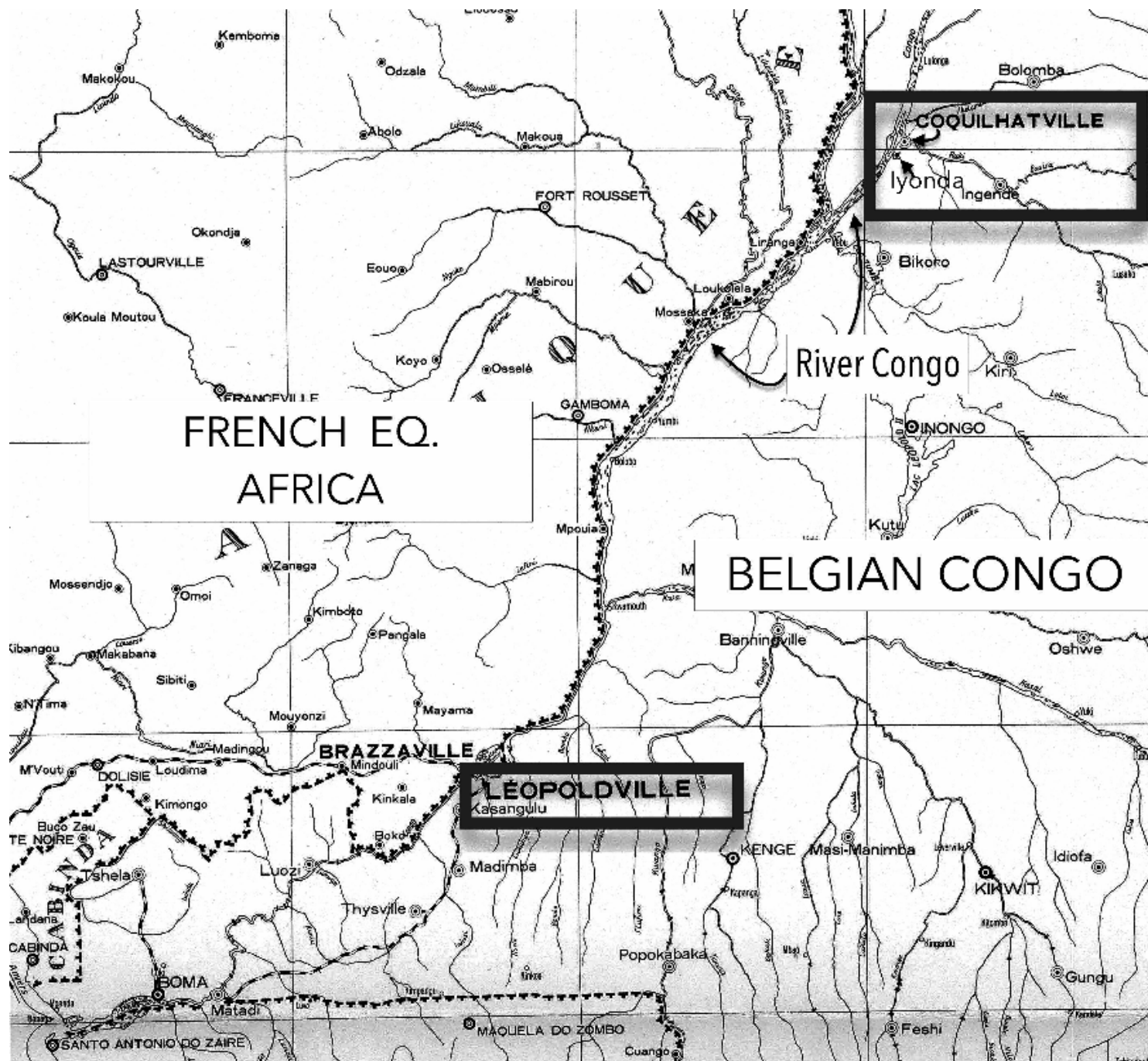
A correspondence between Graham Greene and Michel Lechat quickly ensues. Lechat already writes a first letter to Greene on 3 October 1958. He provides him with a long list of Catholic leproseries in Africa, with details on organization, infrastructure, and the like. He adds that the "most interesting ones"<sup>13</sup> are to be found in Nigeria, Spanish Guinea, Cameroon, and in the town of Tshumbo, the Belgian Congo, but strikingly he does not mention his own leproseries of Iyonda. At first Lechat was not very enthusiastic about hosting a celebrity staying over for research, fearing that this would demand too much of his time and attention (Edith Dasnoy, pers. comm.). But he certainly also wanted to anticipate any unrealizable illusions Greene was entertaining. In his letter Lechat makes subtle efforts to downplay Iyonda as a suitable destination, stressing that the medical infrastructure is not finished, that the hospital and research center are still under construction, that everything human and

10 Letter Greene to H. Lambert, 15/9/1958 (photocopy in Lechat archives, author's possession).

11 Greene, G. 2010 [1936]. *Journey Without Maps*. London, Random House.

12 Letter H. Lambert to Lechat, 27/9/1958 (photocopy in Lechat archives, author's possession). My translation from the French.

13 Letter Lechat to Greene, 3/10/1958 (photocopy in Lechat archives, author's possession). My translation from the French.



Map 1, indicating the major cities and towns visited by Greene.

Information added by author to a base-map from the Belgian Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences, publicly available on [http://kaowarsom.be/en/online\\_maps](http://kaowarsom.be/en/online_maps). Congo belge.

Ministère du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi (1940-1941). *Annuaire Officiel-Officieel Jaarboek*. Brussels, Lesigne.

cultural has been sacrificed for the sake of efficacy, and that therefore there is nothing picturesquely African left about it, all in order to preempt Greene's hopes to find a leprosarium "of the Schweizer kind." Lechat also mentions that there are two other leprosariums in the region, namely at the mission stations of Imbonga and Wafanya-Lombolombo, but underscores that they are "situated in a zone hardly penetrated" and can therefore only be reached with difficulty, by steamer. In order to emphasize the loneliness and sordidness of the three locales together, he characterizes them as situated "in full Heart of Darkness," a qualification with which he hopes to dissuade Greene from choosing this region.

But all this information, not in the least the references to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, have exactly the opposite effect on Greene. In four consecutive letters, Greene shows his excitement about the prospect of visiting the Belgian Congo for the first time in his life, where he "was at one time nearly stationed during the war."<sup>14</sup> In a letter of 2 January 1959, Lechat makes another reference to Conrad and again typifies as a gloomy heart of darkness the difficult environment in which he and the missionaries have to work: "five kilometers from my place there is the seat of a commercial company

that holds in its archives a dossier of Joseph Conrad, and I think he described the heart of darkness admirably."<sup>15</sup> Greene replies: "I am very intrigued by what you say about the dossier of Joseph Conrad and would very much like to see it."<sup>16</sup>

In his four letters, Greene also stresses that he hopes not to be a trouble, that Lechat should not worry about his comfort, and that with his visit he is neither "looking for any dramatic material" nor plans on "producing a roman à clef,"<sup>17</sup> but only needs to compose a background in order to arrive at what will fundamentally be a "theological and psychological argument."<sup>18</sup>

*A Burnt-Out Case* has indeed proven to be such a "theological and psychological argument," and, Greene's Congo experience as a whole, one of his most solipsistic undertakings. As many commentators have explained (van Dalm 2002<sup>19</sup>; Foden 2004<sup>20</sup>; Sherry 2004<sup>21</sup>; Aitken 2005; Brearley 2011<sup>22</sup>), around 1958 Greene found himself eaten away by his culminating success, which he himself qualified as "a mutilation of the natural man"<sup>23</sup> He was overwhelmed by a great sense of inner emptiness, and felt depressed by frustrations in his personal life, not in the least the extinguishing relationship with Catherine Walston. He was in dire need of getting away from

14 Letter Greene to Lechat, 7/10/1958 (photocopy in Lechat archives, author's possession).

15 Letter Lechat to Greene, 2/1/1959 (John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Massachusetts).

16 Letter Greene to Lechat, 16/1/1959 (photocopy in Lechat archives, author's possession).

17 Letter Greene to Lechat, 27/10/1958 (photocopy in Lechat archives, author's possession).

18 Letter Greene to Lechat, 15/12/1958 (photocopy in Lechat archives, author's possession).

19 van Dalm, R. E. (2002). *A Burnt-Out Case: An Autobiographical Suicide* (Occasional Paper number seven). Berkhamsted, The Graham Greene Birthplace Trust.

20 Foden, G. 2004. Introduction to *A Burnt-Out Case* by Graham Greene, 2004 Vintage edition. London, Vintage.

21 Sherry, N. 2004. *The Life of Graham Greene*, Volume 3: 1955-1991. New York, Viking.

22 Brearley, M. 2011. "Graham Greene and *A Burnt-Out Case*: A Psychoanalytic Reading." In: *Dangerous Edges of Graham Greene: Journeys with Saints and Sinners*. ed. D. Gilvary and D. J. N. Middleton. New York, Continuum: 166-180.

23 Burstall, C. 1992. "Graham Greene takes the Orient Express." In: *Conversations with Graham Greene*. ed. H. J. Donaghy. Jackson, University Press of Mississippi: 46-62, 52.

the attention and societal shallowness, and of finding a refuge where he could come to terms with his inner struggles. The Congo offered exactly that, a place of escape. Before his departure, he wrote to Catherine Walston: “the Congo will be a good escape”.<sup>24</sup> And 20 years later, with all the benefit of hindsight, he again qualified his trip to the Congo as “the furthest escape of all (and I don’t mean geographically)”.<sup>25</sup>

The corollary of Greene’s inward-looking state of mind in these years was that his Congo trip turned out to be a remarkably apolitical enterprise, that is for the political traveler and author that he was known to be. In the first week of January 1959 there had been violent demonstrations for independence in the Congolese capital Leopoldville, accompanied by riots and acts of aggression against Westerners. When the news that Greene, known to like to travel to troubled places and to set his novels in countries in political turmoil, was to visit the Congo at the end of that month, many Europeans in Leopoldville believed he came exactly for these reasons. This explains the armies of journalists that besieged him from the first hours of his arrival in the capital, as well as during his last days in Brazzaville. In the published *Congo Journal* he added a footnote making it clear how much the journalists were mistaken: “There had been bad riots

in Leopoldville two weeks before and nothing could persuade the journalists that my journey planned months ago was not occasioned by them”.<sup>26</sup> In the entire diary, references to the incidents or to key political actors and upcoming ideologies are not absent but strikingly few in number, and they are all comments from hearsay. Nowhere does he show any genuine interest in encountering a Congolese political leader or organization in person. Greene travels in his own bulb, primarily occupied with the demons and abyss of his own soul.

*A Burnt-Out Case*, with its almost a-historical and a-contextual atmosphere, is in fact a perfect reflection of Greene’s mindset during the trip. Anti-colonial riots or politics in general are hardly used as a functional theme in the drama, and if they are,<sup>27</sup> they are backgrounded as very remote from the protagonists’ environment and daily concerns: “[the Fathers] were not interested in the tensions and changing cabinets of Europe, they were barely interested in the riots a few hundred miles away on the other side of the river”.<sup>28</sup> Query, moreover, also stresses that he “didn’t believe in politics”.<sup>29</sup> The Congo in which the novel is set is not a historical or geopolitical place; it is, as Greene poignantly summarized in his introduction, merely “a region of the mind”<sup>30</sup>—a troubled mind.

24 Sherry 2004, 159.

25 Greene, Graham. *Ways of Escape*. 1981, 147.

26 Greene, Graham. *Congo Journal*. 1961, 14.

27 Greene, Graham. *A Burnt-out Case* 1977 [1960], 12,43.

28 *Ibid.*, 14.

29 *Ibid.*, 114.

30 *Ibid.*, 5.

## 2. In Brussels with “Tony” and in Leopoldville (26 January–1 February 1959)

With regard to the days before Greene’s departure for the Congo, biographer Norman Sherry, judging from the telegraph correspondence between Greene and Catherine Walston, suggests that Greene spent one night in Brussels.<sup>31</sup> Yet, a letter Greene wrote to his friend and confidant John Sutro,<sup>32</sup> on letterhead of the Palace Hotel in Brussels and dated “Friday” (Friday 30 January 1959), contradicts this. Greene explains to Sutro that “I couldn’t ring you on Monday because I (we) overslept. [. . .] A wild scramble, then four hours waiting at London airport, a drive to Gatwick, arrived in Brussels six hours later, without luggage.” This leads me to conclude that Greene was in Brussels not just one night, but five days, namely from Monday 26 through Friday 30 January.

We also learn that Greene was not there alone: the “we” he added between parentheses and as an insert refers to the fact that he spent those five days in Belgium with a woman whom he brings up more than once in his handwritten diary, but all of whose mentions he eliminated for the 1961 publication. Even in the manuscript, he first wrote her name in full but then crossed out each instance and put the nickname “Tony”

above it. He describes her as a 29-year-old married woman, and reveals that she has traveled with him from England to Brussels, i.e. on that Monday 26 January. He had an affair with her, equally described in more than one place in the diary manuscript, while still involved with Catherine Walston (which explains why in his telegram to the latter he pretended to have spent only a night in Brussels). In my follow-up study of the diary versions, I will attempt to probe more deeply into Tony’s identity and the extent of the affair. Suffice it here to add that in his letter to Sutro, Greene writes that he sees Tony off at Brussels train station on Friday 30 and that he qualifies his past five days with her, which included an excursion to Bruges, as “all very pleasant.”<sup>33</sup>

In the diary entry of Saturday 7 February 1959, Greene writes “A week ago at this hour I was still in Brussels,”<sup>34</sup> which would suggest that his plane left Brussels on Saturday 31 January. But Greene is confused here. In his prior letter to Lechat of 16 January 1959 he had announced that he would arrive in Leopoldville on Saturday 31 at 9:20 a.m., which means that he boarded a night plane leaving Brussels in the evening of Friday 30. This is also corroborated by the sequence of events narrated in the diary, by a letter of Michel Lechat to the Governor General of 21 January 1959, informing him of Greene’s arrival date and time, and by Greene’s own remark “Now for Leopoldville” in his letter of Friday 30 to Sutro.

<sup>31</sup> Sherry 2004, 164.

<sup>32</sup> Letter Greene to Sutro, 30/1/1959; Sutro archives, Bodleian Library, Oxford UK. Kindly indicated to me by Jonathan Wise.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Greene to Sutro, 30/1/1959.

<sup>34</sup> This and all other quotations that are not identified otherwise, are from the manuscript of Greene’s Congo diary. Courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin.



The first impression Greene has of Leopoldville upon arrival on 31 Saturday is that it is “a brand new city with miniature skyscrapers.” During the rest of this Saturday, he has lunch, does press interviews with the many journalists wrongly construing his visit as motivated by an interest in the political situation, and later has dinner with a businessman. The morning of the next day, Sunday 1 February, the same man gives him a tour of the city, after which he has lunch with an information officer, followed by another “intrusion of the press.”

### 3. First term in Iyonda (2–11 February 1959)

#### 3.1. *Acquiring a routine*

On Monday 2 February, Greene finally leaves Leopoldville on a domestic flight to Coquilhatville, the capital of the northern Equateur province and in those days abbreviated to “Coq” in Belgian colonial parlance, which would become “Luc” in *A Burnt-Out Case*. Greene is collected at Coquilhatville’s little airstrip by Dr. Lechat, who immediately drives him to Iyonda (then often spelled “Yonda” or “Ionda”). In addition to the leprosy hospital and colony, Iyonda consisted of a house for the missionary Fathers, another house belonging to the missionary Sisters who assisted the doctor nursing the leprosy patients, a few technical buildings, and the house where the Lechat couple lived with their children. Greene occupied a room in the missionary Fathers’ house. Most of the days he also had his dinners with them and his lunches with the Lechat family in their

house, but this was sometimes reversed or lunch or dinner were had at the same place.

Throughout this first period in Iyonda, Greene’s daily routine was to do his reading of the pile of novels he had carried with him, in the morning on the bank of the Congo river, which he reached by crossing the road linking Iyonda to Coquilhatville and passing through a meadow where the Fathers kept their cattle. In his unpublished memoirs, Michel Lechat remembers how “Every morning, he walked down to the Stream, settled into an old pirogue, and started reading until the heat became unbearable.”<sup>35</sup> Greene himself in his diary writes that it was “an old tin ship” rather than a pirogue, and that he did this in order to be safe of ants. There is, interestingly, a home video showing Michel Lechat revisiting Iyonda in February 1988 and standing on the very spot where Greene did this daily reading, as he explains to the person holding the camera. We see in fact a rusty old little boat, which could well be the one in question.

#### 3.2. *Between healthy unconcern and disillusionment*

The rest of the day at Iyonda, Greene would spend walking around the mission and the leprosy, conversing with some Fathers, occasionally a leprosy patient, such as Deo Gratias, whose person and real name he would retain for the novel, and observing the doctor’s medical activities and asking him technical questions. In Iyonda, no one changed their routines

<sup>35</sup> Lechat memoirs, author’s possession. My translation from the French.

in any way because of Greene's presence. Lechat describes how everyone in Iyonda was friendly towards Greene, but went on with their lives and work as before. The conversations over lunch and dinner, too, were never rendered uncomfortable by Greene's fame or status as a successful author, and were shallow and unconcerned in an easy way. In fact, most of the Fathers at Iyonda, of the unworldly type, were not really aware of, let alone interested in, Greene's position in literature. In a letter Greene wrote to Lechat eight years after the publication of *A Burnt-Out Case*, he asked the doctor whether the priests in Iyonda "are very cross with me" on account of their being depicted in not so flattering terms in the novel, which in a return letter the doctor answered in the negative.<sup>36</sup> Lechat, in his memoirs, later explained this as follows: "[at Iyonda] the novel did not provoke any immediate reaction. I take it that the book was not even read and was simply added to the few detective stories and the pile of missionary magazines lying on the dark brown sideboard in the Fathers' communal room."<sup>37</sup> In this sense, Greene succeeded in finding among the unconcerned Fathers in Iyonda "the furthest escape of all (and I don't mean geographically)"<sup>38</sup> which he so direly needed. In fact, in *A Burnt-Out Case* Greene fully developed this healthy unconcern he enjoyed in Iyonda into a

very similar relationship the priests in the novel maintain with Querry:<sup>39</sup> like Greene, Querry is very pleased that almost all the Fathers, in contrast to Rycker, Parkinson, and Father Thomas, never question him about his past as a successful and widely known architect, but hospitably leave him undisturbed.<sup>40</sup> Greene writes: "[Querry] became very aware of his own safety among them [the Fathers]—they would ask no intrusive questions",<sup>41</sup> i.e. exactly the kind of questions Greene himself was peacefully safeguarded against in Iyonda.

This is not to say that Greene, who in these days experienced a serious belief crisis—"the vision of faith as an untroubled sea was lost for ever"<sup>42</sup>—had not hoped to engage in meaningful conversations with the Iyonda Fathers on doubt, maintenance of faith, redemption and the like. He had expected that the deathly and secluded atmosphere of a leprosy, with a disease epitomizing, at least in popular consciousness, loss of human dignity and what could be experienced as God's utter abandonment, would give rise exactly to such conversations. In fact, the reason for Greene's choice to set his new novel against the background of leprosy must have been related to the sense of deepest divine relinquishment this disease represents, as well as to the romantic idea that living among and helping these reprobates and outcasts of society, especially

36 Letter from Greene to Lechat, 24/6/1968, and letter from Lechat to Greene, 5/7/1968 (photocopies in Lechat archives, author's possession).

37 Lechat memoirs, author's possession. My translation from the French.

38 Greene, *Ways of Escape*. 1981 [1980], 147.

39 For more lists of obvious resemblances between the experiences and mental states of Greene and Querry, see van Dalm (2002); Lechat (1991, 2007); Sherry (2004); Brearley (2011); Meeuwis (2013).

40 See also: Brearley, M. "Graham Greene and a Burnt-Out Case: A Psychoanalytic Reading." 2011, 173.

41 Greene, *A Burnt-Out Case*. 1977 [1960], 14.

42 Greene, *Ways of Escape*. 1981, 271-272.

if motivated by religious zeal, is one of the strongest forms of self-sacrifice, certain to lead to personal salvation. In this sense, Iyonda was a disillusionment for Greene. From his diary it becomes clear that he was often irritated by the Fathers' lack of religious reflection on what they were doing. He noted how they were easily amused by college types of humor and immature games, how they occupied themselves with all sorts of logistics, such as constructing buildings, running schools, laying in provisions, but hardly made any deeply religious connections between their work in the leprosy environment and the higher goals of truly committed Christianity. Greene noted in his diary that in Iyonda he had "never yet found in a missionary priest either the naivety which I want for certain of them, nor the harshness towards human failing, nor the inquisitiveness." And Lechat summarized it again expressively when he wrote in his memoirs: "those practically minded missionaries were not torn between one or the other perdition and some redemption. Greene must have been very disturbed by this. To tell the truth, I think he must have been terribly disappointed not to find in Iyonda what he had hope to find, a Schweizer type of hospital."

### 3.3. *Unhealthy concern*

Compared to the rustic Fathers in Iyonda, most of the higher clergy and white colonials living in Coquilhatville and other towns

were much more aware of who Greene was and what he represented in literature. In a provincial town where nothing sensational happened and rumors went fast, many of them were excited by his presence and more than eager to meet him, which his initial attempts to travel under the name "Mr. Graham"<sup>43</sup> could not prevent.

In Coquilhatville, Greene received unwelcome attention from the burgomaster, whose golden book he absolutely needed to sign before returning to Leopoldville on 5 March. Another dreaded dignitary was Monseigneur Hilaire Vermeiren (1889–1967),<sup>44</sup> Bishop in the region for the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. The reader of the published *Congo Journal* is given a positive image of this Bishop, but as I plan to describe in my future study, this is a result of Lechat's most severe cleansing of the journal's galley proofs. Greene was very impressed by Lechat's reprimands, and did not only delete the passages identified by Lechat as unacceptable, but added or replaced many of them with positive ones, some of which involved no less than complete about-faces. In the diary manuscript we learn how in reality Greene was greatly disparaging about the Bishop's sense of pomp and rank and affected 18th century manners, describing him as "a man who could not stand being alone, who read little and liked cards: as a Bishop dignified and immaculate with the big cross round his neck . . . who had never really done anything at all." Twenty years after the events,

43 Lechat, M. "Remembering Graham Greene." 1991, 2007.

44 For biographical information, see Hulstaert (1989) and Van Hoorick (2004).

Hulstaert, G. 1989. Vermeiren (Hilaire). In: *Biographie Belge d'Outre-Mer - Belgische Overzeese Biografie*. ed. Brussels, Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer - Koninklijke Academie voor Overzeese Wetenschappen. 7(C): 365-368.

Van Hoorick, W. 2004. Hilaire Vermeiren: De tweede Beverse missiebisshop (1889–1967). *Land van Beveren* 47(1): 11–30.

in a letter to Lechat of 5 September 1980, Greene still made fun of Vermeiren's shallowness, sarcastically asking if his death in 1967 had been caused by his passion for Bridge. The fictitious Bishop in *A Burnt-Out Case*, vainglorious, unspiritual, and fond of Bridge, in fact resembles Greene's real perception of Vermeiren much more closely than the euphemizing depiction in the published *Congo Journal*.<sup>45</sup>

Greene also mentions at least six occasions in which admirers among the colonials went far out of their way to meet him, many of them carrying a copy of one of his books under their arm for him to sign, some even with the desire also to discuss characters or plot turns. Lechat recounts the anecdote of how Greene, upon spotting from afar one such admirer driving in the direction of the leprosy, would dash into the Lechat couple's house, jump out of the rear window of their bedroom, and run away into the forest.<sup>46</sup>

Even more aggravating for Greene were those admirers impatient to approach him for literary advice. The Province Governor and his wife, Alphonse De Valkeneer (1898–1973) and Suzanne De Valkeneer-Briard (1903–1964), are a case in point. He hated the repetitive calls by and invitations from this couple, for which he had to force himself at least five times during his stay

in Iyonda. Suzanne De Valkeneer-Briard was an amateur writer who published her collections of colonial short stories at her own expense<sup>47</sup> and whose over-enthusiastic conversations about authoring annoyed Greene greatly, as appears from the diary.<sup>48</sup> She once naively gauged if Greene would be interested in translating her stories into English, and on two occasions unwarily gave him advice on a writer's vision and methods, fanatically showing him the notes she was taking for her next story. One day she sent him a letter, signing it off with "*salutations confraternelles*" (Edith Dasnoy, pers. comm.), which in English would translate as "with collegial greetings." Greene boiled with anger. This woman was not the only one to approach Greene with their own writings. On 11 February, Greene notes "a local mail brings a letter from another local writer and a copy of his book—like Mme V's published at his own expense. Why should this dream of writing haunt so many? The desire for money—I doubt it. The desire for a vocation in a life they haven't really chosen?" He then complements this ponderation with the rhetorical question "The same instinct that drives some people to desire rather than to feel a religious faith?" It is not improbable that this last contemplation emerged from Greene's self-analysis, in a period of his life

45 In April 1961 already, which is very soon after the publication of *A Burnt-Out Case*, Hilaire Vermeiren requested one of his confreres in Belgium to send him a copy of the book (letter of Petrus Wijnants to the Superior Jules Wijnants, 15/4/1961; archives of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Borgerhout, Belgium), which shows how curious, maybe anxious, he was about whether and how Greene had used him as a model. Heraly. Edmond, R. 2006. *Leprosy and Empire: A Medical and Cultural History*. New York, Cambridge University Press.

46 Lechat, M. "Remembering Graham Greene." 1991, 2007.

47 See for instance her collection of colonial short stories, De Valkeneer-Briard, S. 1950. *Au bout du sentier: Nouvelles congolaises*. Charleroi, Heraly.

48 Again, all the negative descriptions of this couple are changed to blatantly positive ones in the published *Congo Journal*.

in which, as mentioned, he found himself in a deep belief crisis.

Another important intruder on Greene's peace in Iyonda was the schoolmaster R. Van den Brandt (birth and death dates unknown), who taught at a school in an American Protestant mission near Iyonda and who had written a novel in English. Not later than the day after Greene's arrival in Iyonda, i.e. 3 February, Van den Brandt disturbed Greene at the end of his siesta, seeking advice on literary agents: "a rather ratlike man, a Fleming and a teacher in the Protestant school. He had written a novel in English and wanted advice about an agent. Is there any part of the world, in the most remote corner, where an author who is known will not encounter very soon one who wishes to be a writer? Do doctors encounter middle-aged men who still have the ambition of becoming a doctor?" Having given him a few names, Greene hoped to have brushed him off for good. But the next day Greene received a note from him, asking not only for the agents' addresses but also begging for another meeting in order, this time, to discuss spiritual matters. Familiar with some of Greene's books and understanding well how they developed notions of Catholic faith, Van den Brandt wished to talk to Greene about his own recent loss of belief,

which "I don't see how I will ever be able to come back to."<sup>49</sup> He wished to link this, in a private discussion, to Greene's literary renderings of Christian premises: "I cannot understand in your book "The Heart of the Matter" how you let your hero commit suicide . . ." <sup>50</sup> Greene interpreted this request irritatingly as "spiritual blackmail" and reports in his diary to have replied to the man "that I am not competent in matters of faith: he should apply to a priest." As Sherry also indicates<sup>51</sup> Van den Brandt's unhealthy concern with Greene's private faith struggles inspired him when developing part of the character of Rycker in *A Burnt-Out Case*. Rycker, a former seminarian and devoted Catholic, refuses Querry's silence about his belief and insists on forging a meaningful spiritual bond with him.

For the sake of completeness, for other aspects of the Rycker character Greene found inspiration in the retired Belgian veterinarian Albert Jussiant (1898–1971),<sup>52</sup> to whom Lechat and Greene paid a visit on 4 March 1959 in his house on a peninsula in Lake Tumba. As Lechat writes in what he calls his "tardy exegesis" of *A Burnt-Out Case*, a noteworthy new analysis he made of the novel in 1996,<sup>53</sup> it is during this visit to Jussiant and his much younger wife that the latter recognized Greene from a picture in *Time* magazine. This scene is

49 Letter Van den Brandt to Greene, undated, attached to diary manuscript; Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin.

50 Letter Van den Brandt to Greene, undated, attached to diary manuscript; Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin.

51 Sherry 2004, 194.

52 Biographical information can be found in Ministère du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi (1940-1941:928). Jussiant published some articles on topical veterinary medicine.

Jussiant, A. 1944. L'organisation de Coopératives en Milieux Indigènes. *Aequatoria* 7: 137-142.

Jussiant, A. 1948. Notes cliniques sur quelques maladies du bétail: La piroplasmose du porc au Congo belge. *Bulletin Agricole du Congo Belge* 39: 631.

53 Lechat memoirs, author's possession.

amply revived in Part 2 of *A Burnt-Out Case*, where Querry is recognized exactly by Rycker's equally younger wife Marie exactly from a photo on the cover of *Time*.<sup>54</sup>

## 4. On the Ruki-Momboyo river (12–25 February 1959)

### 4.1 Greene distrusted

On Monday 9 February 1959, Greene takes steps to be allowed as a passenger on the congregation's river steamer, the *Theresita*, in order to visit other mission stations with leprosariums along the banks of the Ruki-Momboyo. His attempts are difficult: in Coquilhatville, Father André Beke (1912–1970), in charge of the logistics of the entire congregation, tells him that due to technical problems the boat cannot sail for the next weeks or month. But Greene senses that Father André is only trying to thwart his plans. Returning to Iyonda in the evening disappointed, he writes that he finds Father André "egregious and ambiguous" and adds that "I distrust the whole affair. I don't believe in a favourable decision." A question that remains unanswered until today is what exactly may have happened on this occasion, and in particular why Greene qualified Father André as ambiguous. Sherry quotes Greene giving Father André this epithet, but does not elaborate on it.<sup>55</sup> In 1994, Father Gustaaf Hulstaert (1900–1990), belonging to the same missionary congregation, published an article in which he identified with

great detail each missionary mentioned in the *Congo Journal*.<sup>56</sup> Like Sherry, Hulstaert is at a loss as to Greene's mistrust of Father André. He surmises that Greene accuses him of collaboration with the German occupier in Belgium during World War II—in Belgium in post-war years, the qualification "ambiguous" was often used with this denotation. But Hulstaert is wrong. In his own handwritten memoirs, Father André notes that he has read Greene's *Congo Journal* in French translation, and has seen Greene's not-so-positive depiction of him. Beke explains, in Flemish, "this was about whether our boat, which was out of order, would sail or not. Because it was out of order, I didn't give him [Greene] a straight answer, I still had to wait and see."<sup>57</sup> Yet Edith Dasnoy showed me a letter she had written from Iyonda to her father in Belgium on 11 February 1959, i.e. only two days after Greene's unsuccessful attempt. It appears that Father André was very skeptical of Greene's presence among the priests in general, suspecting that he would write scornful things about them in his eventual novel. Father André indeed pretended the boat to be inoperative: distrustful, he wanted to protect his fellow missionaries in the other mission stations and leproseries from Greene's great perspicacity in matters of human character and behavior.

In the evening of the same Monday 9 February, the Bishop let Greene know that the boat was in perfect order and gave him the green light to board it two days later:

<sup>54</sup>see also Sherry 2004: 194.

<sup>55</sup> Sherry 2004, 176.

<sup>56</sup> Hulstaert, G. (1994). *Graham Greene et les Missionnaires Catholiques au Congo Belge*. *Annales Æquatoria* 15: 493-503.

<sup>57</sup> André Beke's personal notes; archives of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Borgerhout, Belgium. My translation from the Flemish.

“Just as I sat down to dinner L[echat] came in to say he had had a telephone call: all was well. I go on board Wednesday evening.” The steamer lay in Coquilhatville on the Congo river, near the Bishop’s residence. Although not explicitly stated, it can be deduced from the diary that Greene spent the night of 11 February on the moored steamer and was awakened at 5 a.m. of Thursday 12 February by the boat’s starting engines, after which it raised anchor and left, immediately leaving the main Congo river and entering the Ruki-Momboyo.

The itinerary was simple: for the next 14 days, the boat was to head upstream on the Ruki-Momboyo, visit the leprosy of Imbonga on the way, then continue until it reached the mission and leprosy near Wafanya, called “Lombolombo,” after which they would return downstream back to Coquilhatville. The turning point, Wafanya, was reached on 19 February. They arrived back in Coquilhatville on 25 February.

During the journey, the *Theresita* housed four passengers: Greene, Father Henri Vanderslaghmolen (1921–2014), whom Greene knew from Iyonda and who was one of the only ones with some knowledge of English, and two other priests, one of them the steamer’s captain. The boat would generally keep close to one bank, making

regular stops in order to rest, load and unload goods, or pay visits. Some nights were spent on the boat, others in the mission stations on the banks.

#### **4.2. “That blasted Pole makes me green with envy”: Re-reading Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness***

This two-weeks’ journey reminded Greene so much of Joseph Conrad’s days as a steamer captain<sup>58</sup> on the Congo river in 1890, that he considered it to be an appropriate context to start rereading *Heart of Darkness*, which he did from the very first day on the boat, 12 February. In this context, Rod Edmond’s account that “[Greene] is also repeating part of the river journey that Conrad had made in 1890”<sup>59</sup> is slightly inaccurate: Conrad had traveled the main Congo river, not the Ruki-Momboyo tributary. Incidentally, this confusion is also made, but of course willfully and maliciously, by Parkinson in *A Burnt-Out Case*, who regularly vexes Query with his boasts of finding himself on soil once trodden by Conrad and the explorer Stanley. Query insistently but to no avail attempts to correct Parkinson about these mistakes.

58 For the sake of historical accuracy, it is appropriate to mention that Conrad went to the Congo with the promise from a Belgian company that he would be made captain of a river steamer (the *Roi des Belges*), that, due to the petty politics and distrust on behalf of some of the company’s local agents in the Congo, he was never officially given the promised post but instead always remained second-in-command, and that it was only due to the real captain’s serious illness that he was allowed to act as captain for a short period of time (Sherry 1971; Najder 1978; Stengers 1992). Conrad’s bitterness and anger about this incident informed much of the atmosphere he constructed for *Heart of Darkness*.

Sherry, N. *Conrad’s Western World*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1971.

Najder, Z., Ed. *Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces* by Joseph Conrad. New York, Doubleday. 1978.

Stengers, J. 1992. Sur l’aventure congolaise de Joseph Conrad. In: Papier blanc, encre noire: Cent ans de culture francophone en Afrique centrale (Zaïre, Rwanda et Burundi). 2 vols. ed. M. Quaghebeur and E. Van Balberghe. Brussels, Labor: 15-34.

59 Heraly, Edmond, R. *Leprosy and Empire: A Medical and Cultural History*. New York, Cambridge University Press. 2006, 233.

As mentioned above, Michel Lechat's description of the leproseries of Iyonda, Imbonga, and Wafanya as "situated in full Heart of Darkness" had already been one of the triggers convincing Greene to choose the Congo as the place to visit for preparing his new novel. Sherry (2004: 154), Foden (2004: vii), and Stape (2007),<sup>60</sup> among others, remind us of the fact that Greene in general admired Conrad greatly, to the point of experiencing a sense of inferiority when comparing himself with him. Greene is on record for having referred to Conrad as "that blasted Pole [who] makes me green with envy".<sup>61</sup> Edith Dasnoy recalls how in a conversation with Greene in Iyonda she and her husband once mentioned their great admiration of Conrad's work and style, and how his reaction was unusually evasive and crabby—so crabby that the three never raised the subject again. In Greene's diary, we find several appropriate and spontaneous citations from *Heart of Darkness*. When contemplating Leopoldville during his first days, he briefly cites, without any identification of the self-evident source: "'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.'" And when admiring the Congo river at Iyonda on 3 February, he notes "This has not changed since Conrad's day. 'An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest.'" In *A Burnt-Out Case* there is Parkinson's literal

mention of Conrad's novella: "I was carried on shore from my pirogue, the frail bark in which I had penetrated what Joseph Conrad called the Heart of Darkness, by a few faithful natives",<sup>62</sup> as well as his mimicking of Conrad's style when typing "The eternal forest broods along the banks unchanged since Stanley and his little band . . ."<sup>63</sup> as the first sentence of his sensationist column. In addition, I also wish to draw attention to Foden's noteworthy observation that Marlow and Query both share the same "sense of moral disgust"<sup>64</sup> and that Query dismisses evolution theory as an "old song of progress",<sup>65</sup> a reference to Conrad's rejection of scientism and, I think, to that other Congolese short story of his, *An Outpost of Progress*. Finally, in his fascinating book on the sociology of leprosy in colonial contexts, Rod Edmond devotes a long section to a critical comparison of *A Burnt-Out Case* with *Heart of Darkness*, going as far as to identify the latter as "the foundation text" for the former.<sup>66</sup>

On 12 February, when he starts rereading *Heart of Darkness*, Greene reports to have read it for the first time in 1932, i.e. at the age of 27 or 28. He confesses in his diary that after that first reading he had abandoned reading Conrad altogether, as it filled him with a strong sense of inferiority: "Reading Conrad—the volume called Youth for the sake of The Heart of Darkness—for the first time since I abandoned him about

60 Stape, J. *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*. New York, Bond Street Books. 2007.

61 Keulks, G. Graham Greene. In: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*. ed. D. S. Kastan. New York, Oxford University Press: 466-471. 2006, 466.

62 Greene, Graham. *A Burnt-Out Case*. 1977 [1960], 133.

63 Ibid., 97, see also Sherry 2004: 199.

64 Ibid., ii.

65 Ibid., 124.

66 Heraly, Edmond. *Leprosy and Empire*. 2006, 233.



1932 because his influence on me was too great and too disastrous. The heavy hypnotic style falls around me again, and I am aware of the poverty of my own.” At that young age, Greene thus stopped reading Conrad in order to avoid the risk of being too much influenced or overshadowed by him. But, as Greene progresses further in the book, he makes a new assessment of the novel: “Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* still a fine story, but its faults show now. The language too inflated for the situation. Kurtz never comes really alive[. . .]. And how often he compares something concrete to something abstract or vague. Is this a trick that I have caught?” What we are witnessing here looks very much like a moment in Greene’s life at which he overcomes his earlier, self-degrading veneration of Conrad. The 54-year old, mature Greene, now rereading *Heart of Darkness* “as a sort of exorcism” as Lechat put it,<sup>67</sup> has made demystifying discoveries that enable him to free himself from the burden of Conrad’s indelible shadow.

With regard to Greene’s thoughts on Kurtz, Greaney<sup>68</sup> takes analyses such as Greene’s to task for not understanding that Conrad’s underdevelopment of this character may have been deliberate, namely an attempt to stress that Kurtz is nothing more than a myth, the product of a sort of

urban legend about whom the other characters in the story have heard and exchange the wildest speculations. Yet, Greene’s appreciation is remarkably similar to a confession Conrad himself had made about Kurtz 58 years earlier, namely in a letter to Ford Madox Ford’s wife Elsie Hueffer of 3 December 1902: “What I distinctly admit is the fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic or rather symbolic at all. But the story being mainly a vehicle for conveying a batch of personal impressions I gave the rein to my mental laziness and took the line of the least resistance. This is then the whole [apology] for the tardiness of his vitality”.<sup>69</sup> Thus, Conrad had admitted a certain literary languor in developing the character of Kurtz, unintentionally resulting in a too symbolic sort of anti-protagonist. Greene was aware of the fact that Conrad had kept a diary while traveling in the Congo in 1890,<sup>70</sup> quoting from it in *Journey Without Maps*.<sup>71</sup> But what Greene was unable to have knowledge of, at least as far as I can discern, are Conrad’s letters, of which a collection and edition only appeared in the 1980s,<sup>72</sup> also containing the one to Hueffer of 1902. It is striking, and I believe indicative of Greene’s great literary understanding, that his critique of the Kurtz character so accurately matched a plea of guilty Conrad had made in 1902, unknown to Greene.

67 Lechat 1991, 16.

68 Greaney, M. 2002. *Conrad, Language, and Narrative*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 72-76.

69 Conrad cited in Karl, F. R. and L. Davies, Eds. (1986). *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, Volume 2: 1898-1902*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 460.

70 Najder 1978.

71 Greene 2010 [1936]: 8.

72 Karl and Davies 1983, 1986, 1988.

Karl, F. R. and L. Davies, Eds. 1983. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, Volume 1: 1861-1897*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Karl, F. R. and L. Davies, Eds. (1988). *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, Volume 3: 1903-1907*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

### 4.3. Lovesickness, Lipscomb, and the two other leproseries

The tedium of the river journey, combined with the insupportable humid heat and with as only company the three Fathers whose “euphoria,” “continual jests and laughter,” and “raillery in incomprehensible Flemish” continue to tire Greene, driving him more inward than ever during his entire stay in the Congo. He increasingly loses himself in melancholy, most of all in reminiscing about his love affairs in Europe. Nowhere else in the diary does Greene mention so many thoughts and dreams of his mistresses as during these 14 days of *ennui* on the steamer: as soon as the second day on the boat, 13 February, he observes “Melancholy shows signs of returning . . . . Anita [Björk] too much in mind. The relationship with Tony too superficial to act as an anodyne when she is not there, and C.[atherine Walston] too far away.” None of these dreams is pleasant: all carry uncomfortable sexuality, jealousy, and anger. In true Leporello-style, he takes inventory of the “fifteen ‘honest’ women I have been to bed with,” concluding that only Catherine Walston and Anita Björk “stay in my blood,” and that maybe Tony can be added to the list. He comes to the sad realization that Anita Björk “remains the unattainable dream of peace” and that Catherine Walston is “the only person in my life who has given me everything to its height—even unhappiness.” He also

ponders the mystery of his very recent affair with the 29-year-old Tony, attempting to understand what may have driven a young and married woman like her into his arms. He realizes how Tony “lifted me out of the hopeless broken-backed state I was in after leaving Anita” but also points to her “juvenility” and lack of sophistication and wisdom. It does not appear unreasonable to hypothesize that, in the same way as Querry in *A Burnt-Out Case* strongly resembles Greene, the character of Marie, Rycker’s much younger, unsophisticated wife, who invents an affair with Querry, is in fact inspired by this Tony.

During the trip, the river taking the passengers slowly through the thick equatorial rainforest, he is told that “Incidentally Martin Bormann’s son is somewhere here in the bush.” This refers to Martin Adolf Bormann Jr. (1930–2013), who was the first-born son of Adolf Hitler’s private secretary Martin Bormann, and Hitler’s godson.<sup>73</sup> Converted to Catholicism at the age of 17, Bormann Jr. studied theology and was ordained a priest in 1958, in the Austrian-German branch of the same congregation of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. Strangely, Bormann went to the Congo for the first time only in May 1961, which means that he could not have been in the region during Greene’s 1959 visit. An explanation for this anachronism in Greene’s diary is to be found in the fact that Bormann’s entrance in the congregation in Europe and his being prepared for work in the missions in the

73 MSC, M. d. S.-C. d. J. 1963. *Album Societatis Missionariorum Sacratissimi Cordis Jesu, A Consilio Generali Societatis ad modum manuscripti pro Sociis editum*. Rome, MSC. 255; see also Bormann 1965, 1996. Bormann, M. 1965. *Zwischen Kreuz und Fetisch: Die Geschichte einer Kongomission*. Bayreuth, Hestia. Bormann, M. 1996. *Leben gegen Schatten: Gelebte Zeit, geschenkte Zeit. Begegnungen, Erfahrungen, Folgerungen*. Paderborn, Bonifatius.

Belgian Congo had already raised some dust among missionaries and colonials in and around Coquilhatville. Either the priests or Greene himself picked up the news and misinterpreted it, believing Bormann had already arrived.

On 14 February at Flandria, one of the towns along the tributary where the steamer halts, Greene meets the Englishman Chris Lipscomb,<sup>74</sup> whom he will visit again on the down-river return trip on 25 February. Lipscomb was manager of a palm-oil factory at Flandria. The factory of Rycker in *A Burnt-Out Case* is closely modeled on this factory, with its mill where nothing is wasted and with its distinct smell of “stale margarine”<sup>75</sup>. The character of the unsympathetic Rycker, by contrast, is in no way inspired by Lipscomb, whom Greene found very likable. Greene enjoys the company of Lipscomb and his wife very much, if only for the pleasure of “talking English to two intelligent people again.” The relief and contrast Greene expresses here are indicative of his general weariness after weeks of linguistic and cultural alienation in the environment of mostly Flemish-speaking priests and colonials.

His visits to the two leprosariums on the Ruki-Momboyo, i.e. the one at Imbonga on 15–16 February and the one near the village and mission of Wafanya on 19–21 February, were not unsuccessful. In Imbonga he is struck by the efficacy with which villages have been built around the leprose, as well as by their general cleanliness. He notes in his diary: “very well laid out with room for three lines of traffic . . . with a

wide alley of palm trees down the middle.” Of Lombolombo he also praises the layout, which provides a “great sense of width and airiness in spite of the heat.” Noting the good organization and beneficial patient treatment, he cannot help making a comparison with what he had found in Iyonda: “So much more psychological help given here than at Yonda.” Again, Greene’s disappointment with the lack of spirituality in Iyonda surfaces.

The voyage back to Coquilhatville begins on Saturday 21 February at noon. Although traveling downstream and thus faster than on the outward journey, it constitutes a real ordeal for Greene. He grows more and more irritated by the heat, sleeps badly because of it and because of the livestock the Fathers have loaded onto the steamer to take back home, and is frustrated by accumulated delays caused by technical problems with the boat. On top, the trip on this small and somewhat secluded tributary did not allow Greene to disappear from the radar of attentive and admiring colonials, who at times went through much trouble to meet him. On the up-river journey already, while seeking shelter for a storm at the mission house in Imbonga, Greene had been taken by surprise by the sudden appearance—copied in the novel to Parkinson’s sudden appearance—of a regional officer and a young doctor, carrying a copy of *The Third Man* for him to sign. The two, who lived elsewhere on the river banks, had braved the storm in an open motor boat on the blustery river to meet the famous author. On the way back, other colonials

74 see also Sherry 2004, 182.

75 Greene 1977 [1960], 35.

also took advantage of the stops the boat had to make, rushing into their cars or onto their bicycles to greet Greene on board. Trapped and cornered on the small steamer, there was no other possibility but to put his signature on the produced copies of *The Power and the Glory* and *Orient Express*, and wait for the guests to leave.

## 5. Second term in Iyonda (26 February–5 March 1959), and leaving the Congo (7–12 March 1959)

### 5.1. Finding a model for Father Thomas

Back in Iyonda on 26 February, Greene picks up his former routine of reading novels in the morning, except that he does not go to the river bank anymore but does his reading on the loggia of the Fathers' house. On 27 February he writes "The old routine except that I no longer bother to go to the Congo to read." The rest of day he spends with the Iyonda Fathers and especially with the Lechat couple, whose company he more and more appreciates, resulting in a deep and lasting friendship with Michel Lechat, whose wisdom, discretion, and parsimony with words he greatly esteemed. Indicative of this friendship is not only the fact that Greene dedicated

*A Burnt-Out Case* to him, but also the duration of their correspondence, which lasted at least until 1988, the fact that the Lechats visited Greene in Antibes in 1980, and especially Lechat's support for Greene in the context of the very negative review of *A Burnt-Out Case* the leprologist Dr. Robert Cochrane published in 1961. Cochrane dismissed the book as sensationalism and as highly disrespectful towards leprosy patients, concluding that "it would have been better if it had never been written".<sup>76</sup> As Lechat wrote in his memoirs, Greene was much affected by this, as well as by the steaming letters he received from Cochrane. Lechat, in a long letter of 1 March 1961 to Cochrane, took up Greene's defense, arguing that a novelist has the right to choose any subject he likes, including leprosy, which is no one's prerogative territory, for "leprosy is part of human life in the same way as war, corruption, scandals, lost hopes, hate and love."<sup>77</sup>

Greene continues his silent observation of the Iyonda Fathers' unsophistication and petty sides, he is again several times invited for "awful duty drinks" in Coquilhatville, and is once more bothered by amateur writers, this time including a poet who wants to show him his volume of verse. He also, on 28 February, meets a certain "Father Joseph", i.e. Joseph 'Jef' Jacobs (1924–2003).<sup>78</sup> Both Lechat in his above-mentioned "tardy exegesis" of *A Burnt-Out Case* and Sherry in his biography<sup>79</sup> maintain that there was no specific model for the anxious, doubting,

<sup>76</sup> Cochrane, R. 1961. Review of *A Burnt-Out Case* by Graham Greene. *The Star* 20(4): 10-11.

<sup>77</sup> Letter Lechat to Cochrane, 1/3/1961, quoted by Lechat in his memoirs (Lechat archives, author's possession). My translation from the French.

<sup>78</sup> For biographical information, see Paradijs, M. (2006). *Wij gedenken*. Borgerhout, Misano, 47.

<sup>79</sup> Sherry 2004, 187.

egocentric Father Thomas in the novel, the only priest who annoys Querry with higher spiritual questions and faith doubts and whom Greene himself later typified as representing “an unsettled form of belief”.<sup>80</sup> My conviction is that it is Joseph Jacobs who inspired Greene for building the Father Thomas character. Lechat’s and Sherry’s oversight must be due to Greene’s deletion of his description of Father Joseph from the diary for publication. Note also that Hulstaert, who also worked on the published diary, does not list Father Joseph either.<sup>81</sup>

In the diary manuscript, Greene described Father Joseph as suffering from tropical neurasthenia, which Belgian colonials subsumed under the more general label *cafard*, i.e. a depressed state of mind occurring among whites chronically stressed by the humidity and heat in the tropics. Greene adds: “he doesn’t work with the others: a discontent. He has been told that he can choose his own work and that he can even return to Belgium . . . . A failed vocation?” Among the other priests of the congregation, too, Father Joseph Jacobs was generally known as a complainer who suffered from character instability and probably also from doubts about the meaningfulness of his vocation.

Greene leaves Iyonda and Coquilhatville on Thursday 5 March 1959: he is driven to the Coquilhatville airstrip by the Lechat couple accompanied by their two small children and Father Henri Vanderslaghmolen. Four other colonials meet them at the airstrip to see him off, among whom was the

amateur writer De Valkeneer-Briard. This bonus company is not how Greene had envisaged his send-off: “an awful woman from the Service Social whom I had been avoiding, the Governor’s wife whom I had hoped I would never see again.”

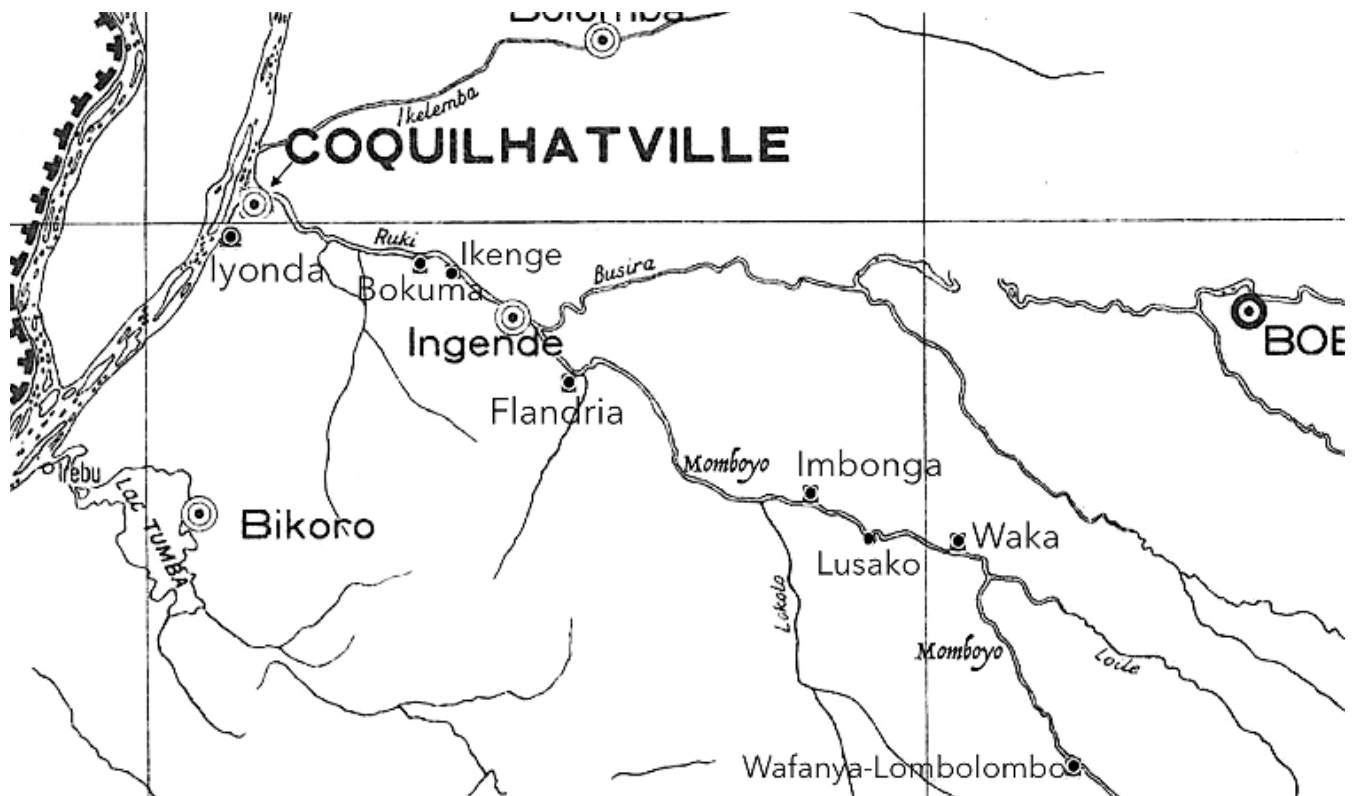
## 5.2. *Greene on film: Merriment or make-believe?*

In the morning of Greene’s last day at Iyonda, Thursday 5 March, Father Paul Van Molle (1911–1969) realized that neither the Lechats nor the priests had taken any picture or other kind of visual record of Greene. With Greene’s departure imminent later that day, Father Paul, an amateur filmer, hastened to make a recording of Greene on his 8mm camera. This five minute ‘home video’ can be viewed online, as part of my article *Tiny Bouts of Contentment* (Meeuwis 2013),<sup>82</sup> in which I describe the contents of the film in more detail. The original film is in possession of Edith Dasnoy, who had it transposed to DVD-format. Before my own use of the film in the online publication, to my knowledge it left its hiding place only twice. The first time was in the early 1990s, when Donald Sturrock prepared his documentary on Greene for the BBC, *The Graham Greene Trilogy*. Sturrock used only a small selection of fragments of the footage; also, the order in which he presented them did not respect the original course of the film. Secondly, when Norman Sherry was

80 Aitken, T. 2005. Ways of Affirmation and Ways of Escape: Graham Greene in Mexico and the Congo (Occasional Paper number 10), 14.

81 Hulstaert 1994.

82 *Tiny Bouts of Contentment: Rare Film Footage of Graham Greene in the Belgian Congo, March 1959. Rozenberg Quarterly* (December).



**Map 2** indicating the mission stations where the Theresita halted during Greene's journey on the Ruki-Momboyo tributary of the Congo river, between 12 and 25 February 1959. All place names visible on the map along the banks of the tributary (Bokuma, Ikenge, Ingende, Flandria, etc.) are mentioned by Greene in his diary as places he visited, although he misspells most names.

Information added by author to a base-map from the Belgian Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences, publicly available on [http://kaowarsom.be/en/online\\_maps](http://kaowarsom.be/en/online_maps). Congo belge.

preparing the third volume of his Greene biography, the Lechats lent him a copy of the film. Sherry, however, mentions the film only once, and for that matter in not more than a cursory fashion. He writes: “We have an example on film of Greene entering in the fun, dancing when ‘the tall cadaverous joker’ Father Henri pulled him from his seat. To screams of pleasure from Dr Lechat’s children, Greene, gloomy no more, and Father Henri put on a performance.”<sup>83</sup>

The film from start to ending shows a gay, merry Greene. Yet, as already explained, the second half of the 1950s represented one of the darkest periods in his life. In the BBC documentary, relations of Greene’s narrate how he was a master in masking away his gloominess, concealing it under the exact opposite. Appearing in off-screen voice, his wife Vivien Greene declares: “I’ve discovered, and I’m sure I’m right, that people who are great on practical jokes are very unhappy. And I think it was when Graham was most unhappy that he started all these practical jokes . . . . It was I’m quite sure when he was most deeply unhappy that he had this spell of practical joking, which people think of as high spirits but I don’t think it is.” Her off-screen voice is heard over those parts of the film where Greene is doing a mock waltz with Father Henri Vanderslaghmolen and is looking happily entertained at lunch with the Lechat family. Sturrock’s message is clear: Greene’s gaiety visible on this footage is make-believe, a shallow pose that when scratched away

reveals a deeper, lurking despondency.

In my opinion, this interpretation confuses Greene’s stay in the Congo with the later gestation and writing of *A Burnt-Out Case*. Greene on more than one occasion described this writing process as utterly abysmal. In *Ways of Escape* he remembered: “Never had a novel proved more recalcitrant or more depressing. The reader had only to endure the company of the burnt-out character called in the novel Querry for a few hours’ reading, but the author had to live with him and in him for eighteen months”<sup>84</sup> and “I had assumed, after *A Burnt-Out Case*, that my writing days were finished.”<sup>85</sup> Likewise, to Marie-Françoise Allain he once confided that “my last bout of depression, my worst, I think, coincided with the gestation of *A Burnt-Out Case*.”<sup>86</sup>

His stay in the Congo, on the other hand, and regardless of the lack of meaningful religious reflexion in Iyonda, was marked by sparks of genuine merriment. First of all, as mentioned above, Greene felt very much at ease in the company of the Lechat couple, admitting to be able to really relax with them.

Secondly, we have a number of statements by Greene himself, made later in his life, pointing in the same direction. In a letter of 13 April 1959 to Edith Dasnoy, Baroness Hansi Lambert related how Greene, just recently returned, had reported to her about his trip, writing that “Graham Greene has been enchanted by his stay in Yonda and finds you two charming!”<sup>87</sup> Also, in 1988 Greene reacted to the brief, nostalgic trip

83 Sherry 2004, 180.

84 Greene. *Ways of Escape*. 1981: 75.

85 Ibid., 87.

86 Allain, M.-F. 1983. *The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene*. London, The Bodley Head, 143.

87 Letter Lambert to Dasnoy, 13/4/1959 (original in Lechat archives, author’s possession). My translation from the French.

Michel Lechat had made to Iyonda earlier that year. He wrote “I rather envy you your return for a short visit [to] Iyonda. I would like to see the place again and my little hut there and the river going by. But it wouldn’t be the same without our lunches together.”<sup>88</sup>

Finally, in the commentaries Greene added to Paul Hogarth’s book with drawings of “Greeneland,” Greene remembered his time in Iyonda, 25 years earlier, as follows: “Most of my memories of the léproserie are happy ones—the kindness of the fathers and friendship of Dr. Lechat to whom the book is dedicated”.<sup>89</sup> And he again made the clear distinction between his stay with the Lechats and the Fathers on the one hand, and the gestation of the book on the other: “It was not a depressing experience. What was depressing was writing the novel and having to live for two years with a character like Querry. I thought it would be my last novel.”<sup>90</sup>

### **5.3. Leaving the Congo: Brazzaville (7–8 March 1959) and the Douala incident (8–12 March 1959)**

Arriving back in Leopoldville on the same 5 March 1959, he is again, as during his first days there, troubled by sensation-seeking journalists whom he has to oblige with interviews, and by another “would-be writer,” this time the head of the government’s library, who reminds Greene of a fan letter his son had once written to him

about *The Little Train*. In the morning of 7 March, Greene traverses the Congo river by boat, leaving Leopoldville and the Belgian Congo behind for good and entering the directly opposite city of Brazzaville, in French Equatorial Africa. Brazzaville immediately appeals to him: “a far prettier and more sympathetic place than Leo—Europe weighs down in Leo on the African soil in the form of skyscrapers: here Europe sinks into the greenery and trees of Africa. Even the shops have more chic than Leo.”

He stays in Brazzaville until 8 March, when he boards a plane to Libreville (now the capital of Gabon), the evening of the same day traveling on to Douala, Cameroon. As Sherry suggests that Greene was already back in England by 12 March,<sup>91</sup> he must have spent at most four or five days in Douala. In his brief diary entry of 9 March, Greene only offers information on the cafés and bars he went to in this city. Yet we know that he visited another leprosy hospital and colony, situated near Douala and called after the river Dibamba that flows through the city. In a letter to Lechat written from London on 25 March, he related “I went to one other leproserie outside Douala—a curious mixture of the sentimental and the squalid. The leproserie has been built on a hill top so that there was no proper room between the buildings which were dreary in the extreme. No African infirmiers—only nuns. Altogether it made one realize all the more strongly what you have accomplished at Yonda.”<sup>92</sup> Remarkably, this negative

88 Letter Greene to Lechat, 4/11/1988 (photocopy in Lechat archives, author’s possession).

89 Hogarth, P. 1986. *Graham Greene Country: Visited by Paul Hogarth*. Foreword and Commentary by Graham Greene. London, Pavilion Books, 108-112.

90 Ibid., 108.

91 Sherry, 2004, 209.



depiction of the Dibamba leprosarium and the attendant positive one of Iyonda stand in sharp contrast with what Greene is supposed to have stated in a conversation he had with the French Jesuit Henri de Julliot in a bar in Douala between 9 and 12 March. In his report of this conversation, published in *La Presse du Cameroun* of 17 March 1959, de Julliot wrote that Greene “has preferred our small leprosarium of Dibamba . . . to those of the Belgian Congo, which are too well organized, too industrialized, less humane,” and quoted Greene for having said that “Had I known this in advance, it is here that I would have spent those 15 days!”<sup>93</sup> The publication of de Julliot’s report in the press embarrassed Greene a good deal. In two consecutive letters to Lechat, he took great pains to deny having said or thought anything of the kind. On 2 April he urged Lechat to believe that “I am reported as saying that I preferred the little leproserie of Dibamba to those in the Belgian Congo—better built, industrialized and less human! I am quoted as saying that I would have liked to have passed a fortnight at Dibamba. Needless to say I said none of these things—in fact I was rather repelled by the atmosphere of Dibamba.”<sup>94</sup> On 12 May he even sent Lechat a photo of the Dibamba leprosarium, attaching the note “I enclose a not very good photograph of the leproserie outside Douala, but it may give you an idea of the squalor of the place. It doesn’t

seem likely that I would have preferred this spot to Yonda does it.”<sup>95</sup> Lechat, on 8 April 1959, reassured Greene that he was not at all annoyed, adding that there was, in fact, some truth in his descriptions: at Iyonda, he and his staff strove first and foremost for convenience and dignity for the leprosy patients and refused to seek the picturesque or give way to patronizing sentimentality. In his memoirs, Lechat later related how, if the incident itself did not disturb him in any way, the excessively defensive and denying stance Greene assumed later did manage to provoke some irritation in him: “He defended himself for an incident of such little importance by means of an about-turn that to my taste was a little bit too easy . . . . This left me perplexed, if not irritated. Why these denials? All the more since I am not convinced that he did not send me this article, whose existence otherwise I would have remained unaware of, on purpose in order to let me know, in an indirect way, what he really thought of the leprosarium of Iyonda. This would have been a tiny perversity that would not have surprised me from him.”<sup>96</sup> It seems to me that this “tiny perversity” can well be understood when considering how much Greene’s Congo trip combined the contradictions of finding a greatly needed place of refuge, being disillusioned by failing religiosity in the face of leprosy, and inescapably having to confront the Conradian darkness of his own heart.

92 Letter Greene to Lechat, 25/3/1959 (photocopy in Lechat archives, author’s possession).

93 de Julliot, H. (1959). “Rencontre de Graham Greene.” *La Presse du Cameroun* 2668(17 mars 1959): 1-3. My translations from the French.

94 Letter Greene to Lechat, 2/4/1959 (photocopy in Lechat archives, author’s possession).

95 Letter Greene to Lechat, 12/5/1959 (photocopy in Lechat archives, author’s possession).

96 Lechat memoirs, author’s possession. My translation from the French.

**Dr. Michael Meeuwis** (born 1968) studied African philology and history at Ghent University and general (socio-)linguistics at the Universities of Amsterdam and Antwerp. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Antwerp in 1997. He is presently Full Professor at the department of African Languages and Cultures of his alma mater, Ghent University. His domains of interest and publication include the missionary and colonial history of the Belgian Congo, the languages and cultures of the western Congo, and the ideological backgrounds of scientific knowledge production in colonial contexts.