

Greene, Chipping Campden and J.B. Priestley

As an adult Greene's chose to live in urban or predominantly urban settings: Oxford, Clapham, the Albany, Capri, Antibes. The exception was Chipping Campden in the Cotswold Hills where he and Vivien rented a cottage from 1931-33. The remote, rural life in a distant part of Gloucestershire, described in Chapter 11 of *A Sort of Life*, is a far cry from the large and very smart village of today: the beautiful honey-coloured stone buildings a magnet for tourists from all over the world.

The cottage on Hoo Lane, Back Ends has been fully renovated and modernised and is now a highly desirable holiday rental. When the couple arrived in March 1931 they found a two-bedroomed dwelling with rats in the roof and a paraffin lamp for lighting rather than mains electricity. 'Little Orchard', where Greene harvested the apples and grew lettuces, is now surrounded by modern houses, their designs tastefully echoing the older buildings.

There were compensations, however, in the form of fine walking country, the eccentricities of village life and the seclusion which allowed Greene to concentrate on his writing career. Indeed, at that stage Greene



needed all his powers of concentration to sustain a literary career which was faltering following the failure of his two novels, *The Name of Action* and *Rumour at Nightfall*. After the miserably poor reception and sales of the latter work, he made a conscious decision for the first and last time in his life – as he notes in *Ways of Escape*, to write a novel which aimed to 'please' the reader.

The result was *Stamboul Train* which, in the Autumn of 1932, he was told had been chosen by the Book Society as their Book of the Month for December. In terms of income this was significant for the poverty-stricken couple as it guaranteed sales of around 10,000 copies. However, with the novel already printed and bound, he received an urgent telegram to call his publisher

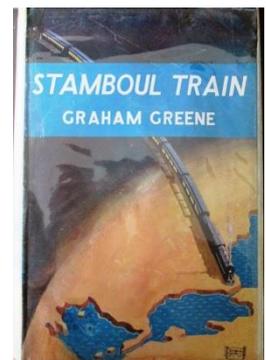
Charles Evans at Heinemann. J.B. Priestley, at the time already a famous and celebrated Heinemann author, had read an advance proof-copy of *Stamboul Train* and was threatening to sue for libel, even criminal libel, citing the fact that one of the characters, Savory, was nothing short of a parody of himself. Evans insisted that Greene made changes there and then. Since it was a Book Society choice, some fifteen thousand copies had been bound already; these would need to have their covers stripped off and about ten of the affected pages reprinted. Half the cost of this operation would be deducted from Greene's account. As a junior writer, with no 'track record' of success, he was forced to acquiesce.

The story of how Greene had to use a public phone box to call his publisher and to dictate the changes over the telephone line is well known as it is recounted in both volumes of his autobiography and by Norman Sherry in *The Life of Graham Greene, Volume 1*. However, the most detailed account of this incident is to be found in a passage Greene wrote for the introduction to the novel for the German Collected Edition of his work which was published in October 1962. Later in the decade he re-worked parts of the same introduction for *A Sort of Life* but decided to delete some of the description of that fateful late November day when he telephoned Charles Evans.

The amended typescript of this introduction is in the Graham Greene Collection at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. The deleted passage gives the most complete account of what must have been an extremely stressful day. The telephone box was in the High Street, quite close to their cottage, not in the village square as Vivien recounted to Sherry. Greene complains that Chipping Campden's post-office lacked a telephone booth which might have provided greater privacy. He was forced to feed in a series of shilling coins; he notes that no-one thought to reverse the call which would have relieved one obvious source of tension as the money ran out at Greene's end.

He was told to return an hour later with his proofs; any alterations made would have to fit exactly into the spaces left blank in order not to upset the pagination. In a letter to John Carter of Sotheby's Auction House in 1969, he notes that in the intervening hour he had made changes to the text in the village post-office. When he called Evans again, at one point Greene was forced, on the spot, to think of the name of another English writer of seven letters to substitute for Dickens, whose name Evans was adamant must not appear in the text. In desperation, he remembered Chaucer and the name was substituted, somewhat inappropriately in the context of the relevant passage. Greene's account tells of Charles Evans' voice sounding 'melancholic' and 'sad' as he methodically and insistently went through the offending section line by line. Savory's pipe had to go; likewise his cockney accent which was one of Greene's chief arguments against the allegation that his character was based solely on the Yorkshireman Priestley.

In *A Sort of Life*, Greene confesses that he always found it hard to re-read his old books and impossible to do so in the case of *Stamboul Train*. He claimed that the pages were too redolent of the anxieties of the time and of his own sense of failure. However, when the prospect of moving to Oxford became a reality following a lucrative deal with Twentieth Century Fox for the film rights to the novel (*Orient Express*, 1934), Greene became instantly nostalgic for their life in Chipping Campden. He wrote in his diary how he would miss the countryside and the 'quiet aesthetic pleasure' of simply walking down the High Street.



Jon Wise