South America and the Outbreak of War

Greene’s novels form ... one of the most comprehensive surveys of modern social violence that has yet been made in European fiction. They show clearly the nature of the class struggle in modern society, and also go beyond the Marxists to a realisation of that even more fundamental struggle, in progress throughout the world today, between the individual and the collective, the common man and the State.

Woodcock, Writer and Politics, 143

Mexico: The Lawless Roads (1939) and The Power and the Glory (1940)

Greene’s interest in Mexico was first prompted by his reading of D. H. Lawrence’s The Plumed Serpent on its publication in 1926. Ten years later, in May 1936, he mentioned to his brother Hugh that he was hoping to write a book for the Catholic publisher Frank Sheed on the Mexican Revolution and the persecution of the Catholic Church. However, his editorship of Night and Day, along with Sheed declining to finance the project, meant that he was unable to leave England until late January 1938. South America, although new to him, remained of considerable interest to his extended Berkhamsted family circle. Graham’s uncle Edward (‘Eppy’) had worked in Brazil as a coffee merchant and his children, including Ben and Felix, had grown up there. Felix travelled through South America in 1937, comparing (at the behest of Robert Vansittart, the overseer of British communications abroad) the amateurish BBC Empire service with the more professional
German and Italian foreign language broadcasts to South America. Prompted by Felix’s reports, Clement Atlee, leader of the opposition Labour Party, raised in the Commons Britain’s inadequate profile in South America and the BBC hastily began broadcasting there in Spanish and Portuguese in March 1938.¹

Greene eventually secured a contract for his Mexican book through Tom Burns, an energetic publisher born in Chile to a Scottish father and Chilean mother, who had moved in early 1936 from Sheed & Ward to Longman’s.² He had known Greene since 1929 and from 1936 commissioned book reviews from him for the Catholic journal, the Tablet. He secured a contract from Longman’s for Greene’s Mexican book, including a £500 advance. Burns was a right-wing Catholic who had supported Franco and the Nationalists during the Spanish Civil War. From 1940 until 1944 he was press attaché to the British ambassador to Spain where he collaborated with British intelligence to ensure Franco’s neutrality. He commissioned Greene’s book because he was convinced that the dangers of South American Marxist socialism and its ruthless persecution of the Catholic Church needed to be widely exposed to the British reading public.³ Desperate to leave Europe, Greene also considered, in early 1938, writing about Ecuador and Paraguay where there had been five attempted revolutions since 1935. He even planned an intriguing (but unwritten) book with Malcolm Muggeridge on the civil war in Palestine, exploring Arab and Jewish perspectives.⁴

Greene’s commitment in The Lawless Roads to exposing the ruthless violence of the Mexican suppression of the Catholic Church marked a key moment in the formulation of his perspectives on human rights and international politics. The figures of the persecuted priest and the dispossessed peasant became for Greene universal representatives of the essentially corrupted state of all forms of authoritarian politics – whether Marxist, communist or capitalist – when leaders become too powerful and motivated by self-interest, profit and greed. He was also convinced that all ‘successful revolutions, however idealistic, probably betray themselves in time’ since the Mexican Revolution, founded in ‘cruelties, injustices and violence’, was so obviously ‘phony from the start’.⁵ The politically repressed Mexico of The Lawless Roads provided the ideal landscape for Greene’s sombre meditation upon Cardinal Newman’s apocalyptic warning over the future of a godless humanity, facing an ‘aboriginal calamity’ through the panoramic violence of the modern world. In Greene’s eyes, extreme social inequalities lay at the heart of Mexico’s political problems – and since the 1920s those of Britain and Western Europe too. The standard of living in Mexico was