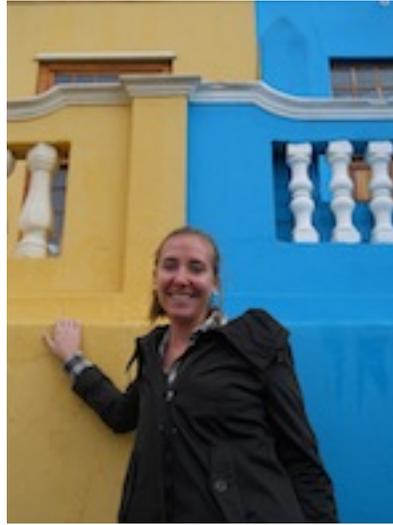


Journey Without Maps by Graham Greene



Review by Claire Kelley

In 1935, English writer Graham Greene set out to explore the Sierra Leone and Liberia interior, of interest because they hadn't been completely colonized. He arrived in Freetown and began his trek into the interior. After penetrating as far into Sierra Leone as was possible on the road (a town called Pendembu), he continued on foot with a large group of porters to cover about 350 miles over a 4week period. His book, Journey Without Maps, chronicles this journey. The West Africa Greene discovers is plagued by poor infrastructure, corruption and poverty. On the other hand, his interest in travelling off the beaten path leads him to discover interesting traditions and a welcoming culture. Many of his observations, both positive and negative, ring true today, almost 80 years later; his humorous anecdotes are especially appreciated by anyone who has spent time living in Africa. Greene's narrative can help us understand some of West Africa's unique history, make us aware of common stereotypes and inspire development in the more rural corners of Africa where poverty persists today.

But first some history.

The area of the West African coast known as "The Pepper Coast" has been inhabited since the 12th century as several large ethnic groups from Sudan and the Mali Empire pushed westward and southward, forcing smaller ethnic groups such as the Kru, Bassa and Dei towards the coast. Portuguese traders called the area the Costa de Pimenta because of the large amounts of pepper growing in the region. The British and Dutch also established trading outposts, which originally traded commodities with the local people but then developed into slave trade.

Further north, the area known today as Sierra Leone's dense rainforest created a boundary between the coastal tribes and influence from other pre-colonial African empires. The Portuguese named the hills surrounding Freetown Harbor Serra de Leao, meaning Lion Mountains. A 1495 Portuguese fort developed as a trading post for the slave trade and the Dutch, French and eventually English all joined.

The Sierra Leone Company was founded to relocate black loyalists who had escaped slavery in the United States by seeking protection with the British Army during the American Revolution. The settlers also included many West Indian, African and Asian people from London. In 1787 they established the "Province of Freedom" and then Granville Town but faced hostility from indigenous people and disease. They were joined by a failed Nova Scotia resettlement and Jamaican settlers and built Freetown in 1792. After Britain's 1807 abolition of the slave trade, thousands of formerly enslaved Africans were liberated in Freetown. These Africans were from many different areas of Africa but most decided to stay in Sierra Leone. With continued immigration from freed black Americans a new combination "Krio" ethnicity was formed.

In 1822, the American Colonization Society, a private company supported by many US politicians, began sending black volunteers, mostly freed slaves, to the Pepper Coast. Liberia became the only African country to be founded by US colonization while native Africans already existed in the region. The ACS believed that blacks would have greater opportunity back in Africa as opposed to emancipation and freedom in the USA; ideas of racial supremacy were also incorporated into the new colony's culture. The Republic of Liberia was established in 1847. It was modeled upon the US government and the capital was called Monrovia, after President James Monroe. Politics were dominated by the colonists and their descendants, called Americo-Liberians for the next 130 years.

Journey Without Maps is a mix between observation and appreciation for what Greene finds, colored by his own prejudices, and personal discovery and growth as he expands his comfort zone.

Greene shows respect for the native communities he encounters, their hospitality, honesty and traditions. "I never wearied of the villages in which I spent the night: the sense of a small, courageous community barely existing above the desert of trees, hemmed in by a sun too fierce to work under and a darkness filled with evil spirits... This never varied, only their kindness to strangers, the extent of their poverty and the immediacy of their terrors" (68). He complains about the grumbles of his porters but ultimately they serve as good guides and Greene reflects that nobody ever takes advantage of him or tries to steal from him, an easy target. He is particularly interested in a tradition of "devils" which he observes. A local community member has one position during the day, such as blacksmith, but he can also be a "devil," leading local children through initiation rites. The devil isn't necessarily someone evil; it just refers to something unexplained and powerful. It is the nature of Greene's lengthy and remote journey which allows him to experience local life.

While Greene puts the interior, indigenous people on a pedestal, he condemns the coastal people and their corrupting European influence. According to Greene, "Everything ugly in Freetown was European," (26). He has no tolerance for the expat's life, "English in Freetown who had electric light and refrigerators and frequent leave, who despised the natives and pitied themselves," (71). And of the people in Monrovia, "Not one of them had been more than a few days' trek into the interior, they had the most meager and mistaken ideas of the native tribes," (224).

He notices some of the socio-economic and political dynamics of these two colonies founded for freed slaves. He observes, "The pathos of a black people planted down, without money or a home, on a coast of yellow fever and malaria to make what they can of an Africa from which their families had been torn centuries before," (219). He is more interested in condemning big corporations harvesting rubber and exploiting local workers. He refers to the day laborers paid a meager salary for road construction, "This was perhaps the meanest economy among the many mean economies which

assisted Sierra Leone through the depression,” (31). He is amused by the pretense of democracy, “The result is always a forgone conclusion, everyone behaves as if the votes and the speeches and the pamphlets matter,” (226).

Greene’s starkly differing perceptions between the virgin native culture and the corrupt coastal dwellers also reveals how his observations often conveniently confirm his expectations. In Paul Theroux’s introduction he points out, “Greene’s Africa... is a landscape of the mind, a set of vivid sometimes stereotypical images which, precisely because they match our own stereotypes in their oversimplification, could account for the success of his vision of Africa as seedy,” (xxii). Despite his efforts to understand the local culture, he is still a conspicuous outsider. An Englishman trooping through the forest with an entourage of porters to carry his bed, chairs and English food. As stores dwindle he describes their discomfort, “There was no longer enough whisky for sundowners and we rationed the last half-bottle in teaspoonfuls, which we drank in our tea,” (204).

Greene’s narrative is just as much about his personal journey of self-discovery as it is about the realities he encounters. He has to let go of certain Western ideas to allow room for self-discovery. For example, he continually struggles with letting go of his English sense of time, program and routes. He realizes, “I was still planning my journey by European time: the listlessness, the laissez-faire of Africa hadn’t caught me. ... I wasn’t confident enough to see the journey as more than a smash and grab raid into the primitive...” (107). Once he really gets into the travel he realizes, “I was discovering in myself a thing I had never possessed, a love of life,” (159). According to Theroux’s Introduction, “But, really, there is no mystery, only the obvious truth that difficult journeys, such as overland trips through Africa, tell us many things about ourselves – the limits of our strength, our wits, our spirit, our resourcefulness, even the limits of our love,” (xii). In addition to his newly discovered *joie de vivre*, Greene has also gained insight and understanding into some of the similarities and challenges that seem to unite us all as humans, “But what had astonished me about Africa was that it had never been really strange... ‘The Heart of Darkness’ was common to us both,” (236).

In the more recent past, Liberia has experienced military coups, authoritarian rule and two civil wars, during which more than 250,000 Liberians were killed. Successful democratic elections in 2005 elected Africa’s first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, but 85% of the population still lives below the poverty line. Sierra Leone also experienced civil war from 1991-2002 resulting in tens of thousands of deaths. After peaceful elections in 2005 and 2012, the Sierra Leone government is focusing on development. Greene’s observations shed some light upon the complex socio-cultural origins of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Some of the challenges which Greene observed in 1935, such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, unemployment and stable government are still present today. Whole Planet is partnered with BRAC in Sierra Leone, focused on bringing economic empowerment through microfinance to women in Sierra Leone.