Christopher Hull's *Our Man Down in Havana: The Story behind Graham Greene's Cold War Spy Novel* recoups the sources of events, descriptions, and themes in British author Graham Greene's prescient 1958 Cold War novel *Our Man in Havana* and places the novel in the context of Greene's decades-long interest in Cuba during a period when the Caribbean island played an outsized role in international affairs. Hull, a senior lecturer in Spanish and Latin American Studies at the University of Chester, comes well suited for the task. A previous work, *British Diplomacy and US Hegemony in Cuba, 1898-1964* (2013) examined the longer historical record of Cuba's prominence in British and American affairs, while his archival research in Greene's papers and numerous visits to Cuba and interviews with those who knew Greene there provide the literary foundation. As a result, *Our Man Down in Havana* excels on two levels: one, as a work of literary history and source analysis, and, two, as a reflection on Cold War spy-vs-spy machinations as they played out in Cuba. It also serves as a referendum on the ascendency of Fidel Castro, whom Greene came to know and admire, though not uncomplicatedly so.

The phrase “our man in Havana” has become a cultural catchphrase, often revised and repurposed to refer to far-flung agents of government endeavor or business enterprise, but the novel that popularized the phrase is not as well remembered, or perhaps even read today. A literary source study might seem a curious enticement for either a history scholar or a general reader, so a brief recap of Greene's novel helps lay the foundation for deeper consideration of Hull's achievement. *Our Man in Havana* is generally grouped with Greene's previous novels *The Third Man* (1950) and *The Quiet American* (1955) as vivid and trenchant explorations of Cold War international intrigue, but where *The Third Man* and *The Quiet American* are serious in tone, *Our Man in Havana* is a satirical spy spoof. Set in Havana in the 1950s, it concerns an innocuous British expatriate vacuum-cleaner salesman named James Wormold who is enlisted into the British intelligence service to provide on-the-ground information about Cuban governance, economy matters, military affairs, and the political-social climate. Possessing no insider contacts and barely vetted by his British handlers, Wormold, to earn his pay, begins sending invented reports of a military build-up that are taken seriously in London. Chief among the fabricated intelligence are reports of missile bases under construction in the Cuban mountains, the drawings of which Wormold bases on vacuum-
cleaner parts. Events, treated comically, transpire that reveal the ineptitude of the British intelligence bureaucracy, while foreshadowing the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. As Hull writes, Our Man in Havana "mirrors the paranoia of the period and expresses a universal truth about mistakes committed by decision-makers when irrationality dominates their thinking" (p. 292). The novel was popular in its time but in the long run has lost out to Ian Fleming's James Bond series—spy thrillers that projected fantasies of continued British skill and relevance—in terms of cultural impact. Similarly, a movie based on Greene's novel appeared in 1959, with a script written by Greene and directed by British director Carol Reed. The movie version of Our Man in Havana has its merits but, as Hull concedes, is not as accomplished as the Greene-Reed movie version of The Third Man (1949), which is widely acclaimed. Hull does not overstate the artistic achievement of either the book or movie version of Our Man in Havana; instead, he uses them as vehicles to parse the historical circumstances they reflect.

The first half of Our Man Down in Havana describes the events of Greene's life that shaped his outlook and in many cases made their way into the novel Our Man in Havana. Source analysis and literary biography are not modes of scholarship with the most valence in contemporary English departments, but in skilled hands they remain fascinating. Hull excels in locating details big and small in Greene's life that reappear in Our Man in Havana in fictional form. Often documented by Greene in his diaries, letters, and published works, some of these events predate the novel by decades, such as a chance meeting on his first visit to Havana in 1938 with a colorful and mysterious German traveler who reappears in Our Man in Havana as a roguish German bon vivant who may or may not also be a spy. Other details, such as a visit to a bank on the first day of a return trip to Havana when he began to write Our Man in Havana in 1957, were quickly incorporated as scenes in the novel. Most formative was Greene's World War II service in British intelligence, both on a posting to Sierra Leone and then back in London helping to run espionage networks in Spain and Portugal. The most salient aspect of the latter endeavor was the creation of misinformation campaigns to deceive German agents and decision-makers. The program worked successfully in many cases but with notable failures as well. For example, even as British agents used their Iberian network to delude Germany about the intended D-Day landing sites in France, they failed miserably in detecting the presence of the Soviet KGB agent Kim Philby in their own ranks. Greene was close to the center of all this, and Hull asserts that the "prevailing environment of mutual suspicion and paranoia" as well as tendencies toward gullibility and overconfidence, both alarmed him and suggested possibilities for satire (p. 55).

Following Greene's first short visit to Havana in 1938, he set foot in the Cuban capital twice in 1954, first in transit to Haiti and Puerto Rico and then, more auspiciously, after he was deported from Puerto Rico by US authorities when they learned of his brief membership in the Communist Party while a student at Oxford. It was on this unplanned return to Havana that Greene fell in love with Cuba in all its complexity as a Las Vegas-style tourist destination for rich Americans, as a colonized exporter of much of the world's sugar supply, and as a social-cultural-political mélange that blended the authoritarian leadership of Fulgencio Batista and a vibrant mixed-race populace who seemed to live up to First World stereotypes of licentiousness and permissiveness. Hull does not mince descriptions of the appeal of Havana's louche side for Greene: his journals and letters are full of references to burlesque stage shows, nights on the town, sumptuous eating and drinking, pornographic movies, and the omnipresent availability of prostitutes. Early on, Greene was only slightly concerned by the aspects of empire that tied Cuba to the United States or with the oppression and corruption that characterized the Batista regime. Most importantly, though Greene later
came to admire Fidel Castro and Cuba’s turn to socialism, he was largely oblivious of Castro's brewing insurgency in the years before it succeeded in ousting Batista. Even after Castro cleansed Cuba of its former trappings of colonial decadence, Greene combined praise for reform with nostalgia for the Shanghai Theater, the Mambo Club, and a legendary sex-show performer known as “Superman” (p. 276).

In the last third of Our Man Down in Havana, Hull charts and assesses Greene’s continued interest in Cuba through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. We learn that Greene first saw Castro in person when watching him give a public speech in 1963, a three-hour performance that Hull describes as being for Greene “mesmerizing, despite Greene’s only rudimentary comprehension of Spanish” (p. 244). Greene finally met Castro in 1966 and then again in 1984; by Hull’s account the two men hit it off: “The pair got on well, understood each other—albeit through a translator—and shared a sharp political intuition” (p. 275). Even after learning of Castro’s crackdown on free speech, dissidents, and homosexuals, Greene remained approving. Hull quotes a Greene letter in this regard: “I must say I remain firmly a pro-Fidelist after what I saw of the Batista regime and what I have found wandering around Cuba recently” (p. 264). Hull comments, “It is true that Greene viewed left-wing authoritarian regimes in a much rosier light than their right-wing counterparts” (p. 279). While the last third of Our Man Down in Havana may be largely anecdotal and the contour of events already well studied by historians of Cuba, Hull's observation points to the work’s possible use in helping track the intellectual Left’s fascination with Castro in the 1960s and 1970s. Adding complexity to such a project is Hull’s suggestion (on scant, ambiguous evidence) that Greene in this period was probably still in the employ of British intelligence even as he posed publicly as an independent journalist and author. The implication is that Greene's many visits to Cuba may have served to collect intelligence and his articles about Castro may have had ulterior motives, to include creating the impression that he was “Castro-friendly” in order to preserve access. Hull does not build an extended argument out of this, but toward the end of Our Man Down in Havana he connects the misinformation dynamics recorded and perhaps participated in by Greene as they resounded in the years after Greene died and the Cold War ended, in particular in the fabricated intelligence used by the United States to justify invasion of Iraq in 2003.

One lacuna in Our Man Down in Havana's exploration of Greene and his novel is Hull's lack of extended engagement with race-related matters in the novel, Greene's papers, or Cuba at large. This is unfortunate, because the first sentence of Greene's novel includes a brutal racial epithet—expressed as quoted speech from one of the novel's characters—that might leave an unprepared reader wondering what other unpleasantness will come next. Black Cubans in fact do not play a large part in the story that follows, but they certainly played a large part in Cuban affairs during the period and they must play a larger part in Greene's thought than Hull offers. It is not a matter deciding whether Greene or Our Man in Havana should be “cancelled” because of the epithet; it is that the striking opening sentence is an invitation to explore a subject preeminent in historical scholarship today, and readers might appreciate Hull's ability to articulate in detail and depth Cuba's racial dimensions as they were perceived by Greene.

That said, Our Man Down in Havana is an enjoyable read for fans of Greene’s many novels and an intriguing read for historians of the Cold War as it played out in the Caribbean. A savvy retelling of events with an emphasis on how they were personally experienced by an interesting and important observer-participant, Our Man Down in Havana is also a good introduction for readers with little knowledge of Greene and the era.
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