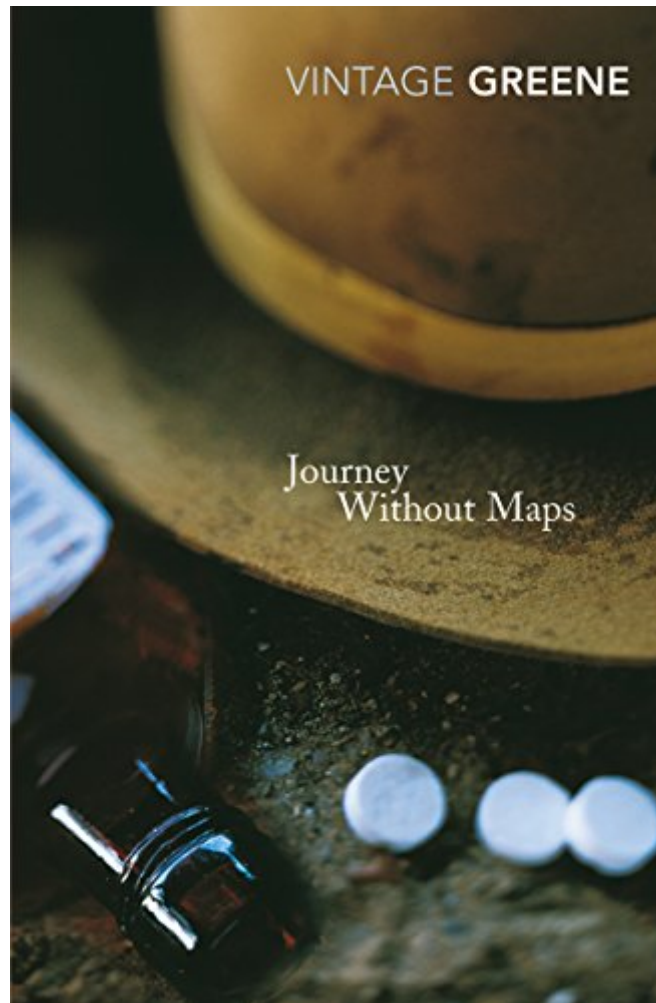




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Journey Without Maps (Vintage Classics)



Synopsis

WITH A FOREWORD BY TIM BUTCHER In 1935 Graham Greene set off to discover Liberia, a remote and unfamiliar West African republic founded for released slaves. Crossing the red-clay terrain from Sierra Leone to the coast at Grand Bassa with a chain of porters, he came to know one of the few areas of Africa untouched by Western colonisation.

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Customer Reviews

Graham Greene is a famous 20th C novelist ("The Orient Express") who also wrote a few travel accounts. This is his first, when he was 31 years old and left Europe for the first time in his life to experience the uncivilized "dark heart of Africa" by traveling through the back country of Liberia in 1935. It was a 4-week, 350-mile walk, mostly through an unchanging tunnel forest path, ending each day in a primitive village. He had about a dozen black porters who would carry him in a sling, although he walked much of the way. It's written with a very "old school" perspective, with one foot in the 19th (or 18th) century of romantic colonial imperialism, and one foot in the pre-war 1930s perspective of deterioration, rot and things falling apart. Heavy whiskey drinking, descriptions of the festering diseases of the natives, and plethora of bothersome insects, the run down European outposts and a motley cast of white rejects fill many descriptive pages. It reminds me a lot of Samuel

Johnson's "Journals of the Western Isles" (1770s) when Johnson, who had never left England in his life, decided to go to Scotland to see what uncivilized people were like. Just as Johnson brought Boswell who would go on to write his own version of the trip, Greene brought his female cousin Barbara Greene (who remains unnamed in the book and largely unmentioned), who went on to write her own version of the trip in the 1970s called "Too Late to Turn Back", which mostly contradicts Grahams version. I can't say I totally enjoyed this book, I found Greene's attitude irritating - but therein lies its value, as a snapshot of prewar European zeitgeist. It is reminiscent of "Kabloona" (1940), another prewar travel account to an uncivilized place (Arctic Eskimos) by a young European aristocrat, who also is deeply inward looking and finds a new perspective and appreciation for the "cave man" people he meets. It's very much a transition period between prewar and post-war attitudes and the fluctuation's back and forth, the sense of things falling apart, but also new-found perspective, make it a challenging but interesting work.

Graham Greene was weary and appalled by the world atrocities of the early 20th century. He decided to go looking for life as basic and unspoiled as it was in the beginning. He chose to do so in Liberia, the African nation that had always been under black rule and not colonized or fleeced by Europe in modern times, though even it was a western construct, carved out of the continent by Americans as a homeland to repatriate freed slaves (or, as Greene says, a place to hide mulatto offspring). His trek on foot lasted the month of February 1935, and JOURNEY WITHOUT MAPS is his account of what became a transformative experience. The title is derived from the fact that there were no true maps available of Liberia at the time. He relied on a caravan of native porters and a lot of guesstimations as to what direction and how far it would be from village to village. Once leaving the ragged European communities near the coast, he and his party plunged into that virgin world he sought. What he describes in exquisite detail is now familiar to us via decades of National Geographics but was then, to someone who had never left Europe at that point, a culture shock. He learned to leave behind his English insistence on time table and surprise at naked, ritually scarred bodies, the persistent sound of drums and the utter poverty of villages. He did not let go his own clothes or whiskey or discomfort over rats and insects. He is eventually waylaid by sickness, and in the healing process comes out with a new, more life affirming personal vision. Though it seems as if the details of the daily marches, the insects and discomforts are so much of the same, by the end you see the impact of the experience. He found what he went looking for and more, and he was not afraid to leave some mysteries unsolved. Greene's prose is clear as a bell and graceful. His observations of contemporary politics and missionaries, as well as the elasticity of truth in such a

setting are valuable today, even seasoned with his candid biases.

In 1935, in the first flush of success of his first acclaimed novel, Greene took off to explore the concept of Africa, building on his notions of adventure from childhood reading. Identifying never-colonized Liberia as the most authentically uncivilized of African destinations, he set off, with his 23-year-old female cousin, a troop of native bearers and virtually no knowledge or experience of trekking. His four weeks of walking a twelve-inch path through the Liberian wilds, stopping at villages overnight, makes an interesting and engaging account, never sentimentalized, and with much thoughtful insight. He gives plentiful narrative detail, but always is overwhelmingly concerned with the psychic reverberations of Africa, and his perceptions of primitivism, in his own life and outlook. He is not unaware of the irony of his deliberate quest for un-self-consciousness flowing from external reflections on the "natural" human world. This book is an interesting counterpoint to observations of modern-day Liberia, for which progress over the ensuing seven decades remains elusive. A few more of the roads have been paved, but most of the country remains bare soil, now soaked in more blood and mayhem than the quaint natives and masked, raffia-skirted tribal "devils" of 1935 could have dreamed of.

interesting insight into liberia/sierra leon from many years ago

Fabulous book so interesting and imaginative. Grahame Greene is a master of literature in every sense. Vibrant exciting prose fluid style that expands fiction. Have enjoyed his books again and again. Recommend this book.

I've read a number of Greene's novels, but this little travel book was equal to his other publications. As usual, his attention to detail, people, and culture creates wonderful images that bring us right to the Liberia of the 1930s. I shared the book with my sister who lived in Liberia for 27 yrs. and she was astonished at the accurate reporting. His prose is the best I've read for a book devoted to travel experiences.

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