

Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: Beyond Holy Russia

Book Subtitle: The Life and Times of Stephen Graham

Book Author(s): Michael Hughes

Published by: Open Book Publishers

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vjtr4.6>

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Introduction

On 17 April 1975 a small congregation assembled on a drizzly grey day at St Margaret's Church, in Central London, to attend a memorial service in honour of the writer Stephen Graham. Graham had died a few weeks earlier, just four days before his ninety-first birthday, and his passing had been marked by substantial obituaries in *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. It is perhaps odd that they appeared at all. Both obituaries suggested that Graham would be best remembered for the books he had written before 1917, describing his time in pre-revolutionary Russia, which in the words of *The Times* made him "probably more responsible than anyone else in this country for the cult of Holy Russia and the idealization of the Russian peasantry that were beginning to make headway here before 1914".¹ Although the two obituary writers acknowledged that Graham had in later life written numerous novels and travel books, as well as a series of biographies and historical works, he seemed in death to be frozen as a thirty-year old figure tramping across the vast spaces of the Tsarist Empire, in search of a half-mythical world of icons and golden cupolas. Recollections of him were bound up with hazy memories of the *Ballets Russes* and the cult of Tolstoy, which transfixed a swathe of the British intelligentsia on the eve of the First World War, convincing numerous artists and writers that Russia could become an unlikely source of a cultural and spiritual renaissance destined to sweep the world. Graham had certainly spent much of his time as a young man trying to persuade readers that Russia possessed a richness of spirit that had long since vanished in the industrial west. The photographs that appeared of him in the British press, dressed in a peasant blouse with soulful face turned away from the camera, hinted at an elusive *persona* bearing words of truth from another world. But Graham had, even

1 *The Times*, 20 March 1975.

when writing about Russia, always been a more complex and multi-faceted figure than his obituaries acknowledged. Nor did he disappear from public view for the last sixty years of his life, instead retaining his popularity as a writer long after the Bolshevik seizure of power, which separated him forever from the country that dominated his imagination as a young man. Graham's half-forgotten life consisted of much more than acting as a cheer-leader for the religious rituals of a sprawling autocratic empire falling apart in the face of its own contradictions.

Graham first visited Russia in 1906 and spent much of his time there over the next ten years, writing a total of eight books about the country, along with countless articles in publications ranging from *Country Life* to the *Daily Mail*. He did not invent the term 'Holy Russia', which had been in use in the British press since at least the 1880s, and was for centuries a staple of debate in Russia itself about the country's imagined status as heir to the authentic tradition of Eastern Christianity. Nor was Graham alone in falling in love with a romanticised conception of the Russian Orthodox Church, one that revelled in the beauty of its architecture and liturgy, which seemed to hint at mysteries more profound than anything that could be sensed in the faintly suburban world of the Church of England. The Russian Church was for him, as for many other Britons, just one element in the picturesque tapestry of a land whose tantalising strangeness appeared as an intriguing enigma rather than a sinister threat. Russia was for Graham never just another country like France or Germany. It was instead a place that held out the hope of personal epiphany. He first travelled there in the years before the Great War as thousands of young hippies later went to Tibet and Nepal, seeking to overcome their sense of estrangement from the world into which they had been born. Perhaps all those who fall in love with a foreign country are to some extent prompted by dissatisfaction with their ordinary lives. Graham was no exception. Whilst it took him some time to realise it, he went to Russia as a pilgrim, searching for something that he could not name until he found it.

The Russia that Graham created for his readers in the years before 1917 was above all a kind of vast sacred space, a world whose people lived their lives attuned to metaphysical echoes that resonated through the landscape they inhabited. He certainly acknowledged that such awareness did not turn all Russians into saints – he was throughout his life powerfully attracted by Dostoevsky's belief that it was through experience of sin that true humility was found. Nor did Graham deny that the vast social

and economic changes taking place in Russia by the start of the twentieth century were threatening to erode its unique spiritual heritage. He was nevertheless convinced that there could be found in the mundane lives of the ordinary Russian peasantry a precious kernel, an intuitive understanding of wholeness that transcended the material conditions of everyday life, and brought together the here and now with a sense of the eternal. The simple practices of popular piety – the light in front of the ikon, the urge to go on pilgrimage – were evidence for Graham not of superstition but of a rich interior religious life. During his massive tramps across the Tsarist Empire, which took him from Archangel to the Caucasus and Warsaw to the Altai Mountains, he was himself a wanderer in search of meaning. When he travelled with hundreds of Russian pilgrims to Jerusalem in 1912, he was convinced there was a powerful symbolism in the fact that his companions were drawn from the ranks of the peasantry, noting in the book he wrote about his experiences that “it is with these simple people that I have been journeying”.² A tall blonde man, often to be found with a pipe in his mouth, Graham must have cut a strange figure when dressed in the costume of those he travelled with. He was nevertheless always an acute observer of the people he met and the places he visited. Much of his popularity can be explained by his skill at providing readers with colourful portraits of life in far-away and exotic countries. His books about Russia were not, however, simply works of descriptive travel literature. They were instead suffused by meditations on the sense of unease that defined the atmosphere of life in Britain during the years leading up to the cataclysm of the Great War. Graham unwittingly carried within himself many of the contradictions of the age into which he was born. An intensely individual man, who in his early years felt most at ease when walking alone through an empty landscape, he idealised the kind of community whose members would have frowned at his thoroughly modern desire to cross the world in search of new horizons and experiences.

There still remains the danger of reducing Graham’s long life to the ten years that he spent travelling to and from Russia. Within months of the February 1917 Revolution, he was conscripted into the Scots Guards, seeing action as a private soldier on the Western Front, before publishing a book about his experiences that was sufficiently critical to earn censure from Winston Churchill in the House of Commons. Over the next few years,

2 Stephen Graham, *With the Russian Pilgrims to Jerusalem* (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 12, available at <http://archive.org/details/withrussianpilgr00grahuoft>.

Graham made several trips to America, walking through the South in 1919 in order to see at first hand the legacies of slavery, following up his trip two years later with a massive hike through the Rockies accompanied by the self-proclaimed "Prairie Troubador" Vachel Lindsay. A year later he spent six months exploring Mexico and the American south-west, mourning the death of his travelling companion Wilfrid Ewart in a freak accident, when the young novelist was shot through the eye on his hotel balcony by revellers firing into the air to celebrate New Year. In between these visits Graham established himself as something of a celebrity in New York, giving numerous lectures about his travels, and making friends amongst the city's literary elite. His trips to the United States were interspersed with a visit to the bleak battlefields of France and a long journey to the capitals of the new states of central Europe created by the Treaty of Versailles.

Before the 1920s were out, Graham had made four more visits to New York, and travelled down the eastern frontier of the USSR, as well as spending time with the various Russian émigré communities that sprang up across Europe after 1917. He also found the energy to write a number of novels and sketches about life on the streets of London, as well as publishing an elaborate *Credo*, setting down a new spiritual vision for life in the post-war world. Graham subsequently spent much of the 1930s in Yugoslavia, walking and fishing in some of its remotest regions, as well as retreating to the mountains of northern Slovenia to write several more novels. He spent the Second World War back in London working for the BBC, possibly on the fringe of operations carried out by the Political Warfare Executive to spread black propaganda in occupied Europe, as well as editing a newsletter designed to act as a clearing house for information about the Orthodox Churches in war-time. Although his pace slowed down following the end of hostilities in 1945, he still found time to publish another three books, as well as producing manuscripts of several more that never appeared. By the time he died, Graham had published more than fifty books, including nine novels and five biographies, as well as numerous travel books and a three-hundred page autobiography. He also found time to write a number of short fantasies on subjects ranging from the ghost of Lord Kitchener through to an imaginary war in which French and Italian airplanes bombed the heart out of London.

Graham once observed that no biography could capture the truth of a life. There was certainly something unrevealing about his own autobiography, *Part of the Wonderful Scene*, even though it is full of anecdotes about the

countless people he met throughout his long life. Whilst much of Graham's writing was characterised by a confessional tone that made no effort to hide its author's emotions and sensibilities, he was always adept at concealing his private life from his readers. Graham's own background was decidedly un-Victorian, since his father abandoned his young family to set up a new home with a younger woman, whom he never married despite having two more children with her. Graham's own first marriage disintegrated in the late 1920s, with considerable anguish on both sides, although the marriage itself only formally ended in 1956 with the death of his wife. He was himself from the 1930s closely involved with a young Serbian woman, whose family looked askance at their relationship, and the two of them effectively lived together as man and wife until they were free to marry after Graham was widowed. No mention of these events appears in any version of Graham's autobiography (published or unpublished). This may in part simply have been the reticence of a decent man who had no desire to cause pain to anyone still alive. It may also have been that such irregularities sat uneasily with his conscience. They are in any case essentially private affairs, which appear in the following pages only to the extent that they cast light on the way that Graham's work reflected the concerns and preoccupations of the man himself. No person is ever fortunate enough to be taken solely at their own evaluation. But nor should a study of the achievements of any writer or artist automatically feel the need to delve too deeply into the private life of friends and family, except where the material can help to illuminate the public world of books and paintings.

It is in any case no easy matter to recreate Graham's life in full, even though this biography draws extensively on his private papers, which are scattered in numerous archives and libraries around the world. Most of his letters have been lost (particularly those written in Russian and Serbian). His surviving diaries and journals generally relate only to the years from 1918 to 1929. The manuscripts of his books give little away beyond showing that he was a remarkably fluent writer, who seldom felt the need to write detailed plans of his work before launching into a sea of prose. Graham's private papers do nevertheless provide insights into his life and work that could never be culled from his written works alone. In some cases this concerns little more than matters of basic chronology. There are numerous errors in the dates of Graham's own accounts of his travels, whilst he was in any case inclined to conflate different incidents and events in his books, redrawing their sequence in order to create a better story. His diaries and

letters help to restore the jangled complexity that was sometimes missing from his published work. Graham's papers also help to gently undermine some of his own self-mythologising, perhaps most notably by showing how he was before the mid 1920s far more interested in the New Age world of Theosophy than he was later ready to acknowledge. They also show how the dramatic change in the tone of his writing during the second half of the 1920s was shaped by a deep sense of crisis in his personal life. There is by contrast little material available for the 1930s, although some of the documents hidden in the archives do show the extent of Graham's connections with the Yugoslavian political elite, which he used extensively when writing his study of the assassination of King Alexander in 1934. Graham never made any secret of his sympathy for the Serbian national cause, which meant that he was during the Second World War a strong supporter of General Mihailović's *Chetniks*, whose rumoured collaboration with the Nazi occupying forces caused huge controversy in London during the years before 1945. Although Graham never abandoned his Serbian loyalties, they may have been controversial enough to encourage him to say little about Yugoslavia in his memoirs, even though he readily acknowledged in *Part of the Wonderful Scene* that he spent almost as much time there as he did in Russia. He said still less about the final years of his life, which were mostly spent at his long-time home in Soho, a period when he was dogged by ill health and found it increasingly hard to come to terms with the changing landscape of modern Britain.

Graham has, like so many writers, suffered the indignity of becoming a forgotten person. It was indeed a fate that he suffered when still alive, for in the final decades of his life the market largely disappeared for the kinds of books he wanted to write. The middle-brow fiction he specialised in during the 1930s seemed almost unbearably quaint when he tried to reproduce the formula twenty years later. Word pictures of London appeared positively archaic when the British public could watch the coronation live on television. The ultimate indignity for Graham's legacy came at the end of the twentieth century, when the Spanish novelist Javier Marias wrote a book *Negra espalda del tiempo* (*Dark Back of Time*) which was largely woven around the relationship between Graham and his friends Wilfrid Ewart and John Gawsword. It was precisely the fact that these characters had all but disappeared from memory, lurking only in the recesses of unread books, that intrigued Marias enough to weave a complex narrative around a trio who had lost their flesh and blood substance and been reduced to

names on a page. Graham has on occasion attracted the attention of some other contemporary writers, including the environmentalist Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek*, whilst Robert Macfarlane devoted several pages of his wonderful book *The Wild Places* to an affectionate review of Graham's descriptions of the joys of walking. In the 1990s, *The Times* journalist Giles Whittell followed the route of Graham's 1914 trek through central Asia to the Altai Mountains when writing his book *Extreme Continental*. Such references are, however, the exception rather than the rule. Graham has not even figured much in the dry pages of academic tomes, cropping up as the subject of a few articles by western and Russian scholars, and appearing in a few anthologies of travel-writing.³ Numerous copies of his books still reside on the dusty shelves of libraries across Europe and North America, but their author has largely faded into obscurity, a name in a card index or an entry in a computerised catalogue linked to the keywords 'Russia' and 'tramping'. All of which raises the question of why Graham should still be of interest today?

The previous few pages have started to provide an answer. Graham had a high profile as a writer for much of his life. His articles in the press were almost invariably published with a note that he was a "famous" or "celebrated" travel writer; he was a familiar enough figure to appear as a caricature in some of the cartoons which appeared in the literary magazines of the inter-war years; and, of course, he was a hugely significant figure in shaping British attitudes towards Russia during the years before the 1917 Revolution. Graham's complex and at times convoluted philosophy of life is also of interest, since it illustrates neatly how the discontents of modernity can stimulate a search for ideas and ideals that offer a compensating sense of harmony. His descriptions of landscape, and his ruminations on the role of rural life in compensating for the artificiality of the city, speak directly

3 For recent Russian discussions of Graham see S. Nikolaevna Tret'iakova, 'Angliskii pisatel'-puteshestvennik Stefan Grekhem o Rossii nachala XX veka', *Voprosy istorii*, 11 (2002), pp. 156-60; S.N. Tret'iakova, 'Rossiia v tvorchestve i sud'be Stefana Grekhema', in A. B. Davidson (ed.), *Rossiia i Britaniia: Sviazi i vzaimnye predstavleniia XIX-XX veka* (Moscow, 2006), pp. 220-27; Olga Kaznina, *Russkie v Anglii* (Moscow: Nasledie, 1997), 104-06. In English see, for example, Michael Hughes, 'The Visionary Goes West: Stephen Graham's American Odyssey', *Studies in Travel Literature*, 14, 2 (2010), pp. 179-96; Michael Hughes, 'The Traveller's Search for Home: Stephen Graham and the Quest for London', *The London Journal*, 36, 3 (2011), pp. 211-24. Some of Graham's writings on New York have appeared in Philip Lopate (ed.), *Writing New York* (New York: Library of America, 1998), pp. 487-96. A valuable overview of Graham's publications can be found in Marguerite Helmers, 'Stephen Graham', *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 195, pp. 137-54.

to a contemporary world familiar with the imperatives of a green agenda that seeks to build a new relationship between humanity and the natural world. His ruminations on matters spiritual have a remarkable symmetry with many contemporary New Age preoccupations. Perhaps above all, though, Graham simply had a fascinating and incident-filled life. He was born at a time when William Gladstone was Prime Minister and Queen Victoria had yet to celebrate her golden jubilee. He died when Harold Wilson was in Downing Street and Queen Elizabeth II had been on the throne for more than twenty years. During that time Graham travelled on four continents. He met monarchs and politicians, bishops and authors, prostitutes and vagabonds. He survived a hit on his house in the London Blitz. He enjoyed, in short, both the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Graham's prodigious output as a writer is staggering even in an age of word processors and the internet. The life he both chronicled and concealed deserves a new audience.

The writing of a 'Life' is, it goes without saying, an intensely personal process. Any biographer who seeks to tell the story of someone they never met will know how their quarry manages to be both deeply familiar and strangely elusive at one and the same time. The challenge they face in recreating their subject is not simply the lack of sources capable of yielding definite insights and perspectives. It is instead the difficulty of entering into a private mental realm of assumptions and values that are by their very nature inchoate and uncertain. Nor is it ever a straightforward business to recreate a world – social, cultural, intellectual – whose contours have changed so greatly over time. In the words of Richard Holmes, that most distinguished practitioner of the biographer's art, you can pursue your quarry but never hope to catch them, but must instead be content to sketch out the "fleeting figure" who never stands still long enough to be caught.⁴ This project started out, at least in its early stages, as a kind of modern travelogue designed to return to the places Graham knew in order to reflect on the changes that have taken place since the days he toured the world. It soon became apparent that such a bold plan was doomed to frustration. Graham travelled astonishing distances in an age before the dawn of widespread air travel (his first long-distance flight did not take place until he was in his eighties). To follow in his footsteps – from western

4 Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 2

Russia to Siberia, from Europe to Africa, from Canada to Mexico – would be the work of years even in an age of motorways and jet aircraft. But, and perhaps more importantly, the world that Graham knew has in many respects changed so greatly that to follow his footsteps in such detail would constitute an exercise in mere cartography. It would give precedence to the idea of ‘place’ as a set of coordinates over ‘place’ as a complex amalgam of history and story refracted through the vision of the people who experience it. Graham was in his travel writing adept at painting vivid portraits of the people he met and the landscapes he passed through. But he was also always searching for a ‘spirit of place’ that lay beneath the surface, a spirit shaped both by the past *and* by a strong sense that the richness of human experience rested on something more profound and elusive than its material substratum. Much of his early travel writing in particular was less about place as a location in time and rather about place as a meeting of the eternal and the temporal. It was only after he left Russia behind – or rather that Russia left him behind – that his work began to focus more immediately on the things he heard and saw on his long journeys through Europe and North America.

I have been fortunate enough down the years to travel to many of the places Graham visited. Russia is, so to speak, at the heart of my professional *oekumene*, the place I have written about over many decades, living in and visiting the country many times in both its Soviet and post-Soviet guises. The cities of Europe and North America about which Graham wrote so copiously – Prague, Vienna, Warsaw, Berlin, Chicago, New York – have also countless times been on my itinerary. The south-western states of America similarly feature in the mouldering collection of airline tickets hidden away somewhere in a storage cupboard. Only the Rocky Mountains and the mountains of central Asia have remained for me entirely *terra incognita*. It would nevertheless be untruthful to claim with much passion that I have been able to find Graham in the places he visited. The worst slums of Chicago’s West Side and the New York Bowery have long since disappeared. Soviet planners swept away much of old Moscow, leaving Red Square and the Kremlin as glorified museums, echoes in brick and stone of a world that has long vanished. The vagaries of time and war have changed places like Berlin, Prague and Constantinople beyond all recognition. Even Graham’s long-time home at 60 Frith Street, in London’s Soho, has been through so many incarnations since his death that its brick facade and black front door seem now to have no memory of his presence. If ghosts

are – as some believe – electronic emanations of people long departed, then Graham seems to have had no desire to haunt the world. He lives instead in the numerous books and journals he left behind.

There is one exception to this rule. Not long before the completion of this manuscript, I was lucky enough to visit the Old Believer settlements that stretch along the shore of Lake Peipsi in modern Estonia. The Orthodox Old Believers, religious dissidents who rejected the church reforms introduced by Patriarch Nikon in the seventeenth century, fled central Russia in search of more remote areas where they could live their lives free from persecution. Their descendants who live today on the banks of Lake Peipsi maintain many of the Old Believer traditions, both secular and religious, and to wander through the wooden houses of their villages is to get a sense of the old Russia. Even the presence of cars and electric light – *de rigueur* in such a determinedly modern country as Estonia – cannot conceal altogether the shards of the past. At one point during the visit I stood on a rock on the shore of the lake, looking out across the water towards Russia, which remained stubbornly invisible in the haze of a fine September day. When Graham was a young man in London, Russia became for him a half-mythical place, a “Somewhere-Out-Beyond”, where he believed that he could find a life more fulfilling than one that involved a daily commute from Essex into London where he worked as a junior civil servant. By the time he visited the Old Believer settlements in 1924, seven years after the Revolution, Russia was closed to him and he could do no more than search for echoes of the country he had loved so dearly. As I peered towards the horizon across Lake Peipsi, trying to catch a glimpse of the Russian shore, it occurred to me that Graham had like all true pilgrims spent his life in search of something that he was doomed never to find. Much of his work was driven by a desire to make actual in the world the ideals he saw in his imagination. The visions that he sought to portray sometimes seemed to him tantalisingly close. At other times they seemed far away. The following chapters will show that Graham was despite his much-vaunted ‘idealism’ – his sense that the world was shaped by forces more profound than could be discerned in the rhythms of ordinary life – surprisingly adept at using his pen to capture the foibles and idiosyncrasies of the people he lived amongst. Aware of two worlds, but at home in neither, Graham’s story was in the deepest sense of the term a religious one.