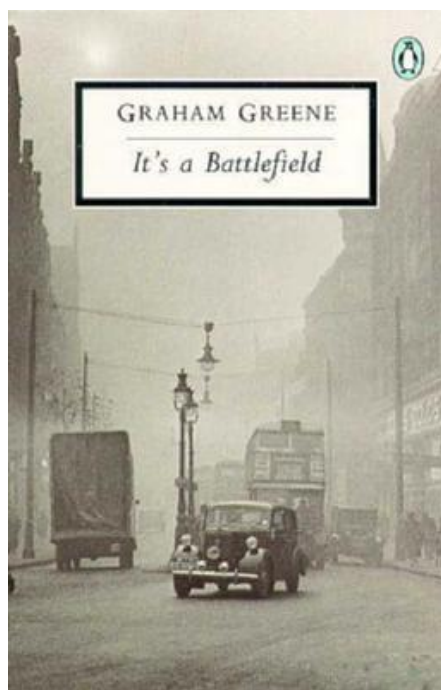




It's a Battlefield

Graham Greene

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It's a Battlefield

Graham Greene

It's a Battlefield Graham Greene

Drover, a Communist bus driver, is in prison appealing his death sentence for killing a policeman during a riot at Hyde Park Corner, a policeman he thought was about to club his wife. A battle rages to save Drover's life from the noose. The Assistant Commissioner, high-principled and over-worked; Conrad, a paranoid clerk; Mr. Surrogate, a rich Fabian; Condor, a pathetic journalist feeding on fantasies; and Kay, pretty and promiscuous — all have a part to play in Drover's fate.

It's a Battlefield Details

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From Reader Review It's a Battlefield for online ebook

Louise says

My least favorite Graham Greene so far, but even a bad Graham Greene book is better than most....

Nicholas Story, solicitor says

I'd be interested in anybody else's views on this book, because it didn't quite do it for me. The plot looks great, but somehow it seems surprisingly dated. I suspect that the interchanging of characters from one paragraph to the next, and with no obvious protagonist was in vogue at the time. But I've always thought that the beauty of Greene's work is his ability to penetrate the human condition and its flaws by the careful study of his leads. Without this, the book lost a lot, and I wouldn't recommend it.

Kathryn Buchanan says

Interesting though not particularly easy read.

Laura says

This battlefield comes equipped with judicial and political wrangling, bacon, melancholy, and extreme Britishness. Mmm, bacon.

Frederick says

While I will stress that a reader should be acquainted with four or five other Graham Greene novels before taking this in, I think any reader will agree that the Assistant Commissioner is a three-dimensional character. The book is at its best when he is in it.

Greene is still finding himself here. IT'S A BATTLEFIELD was published in 1934, and Greene lived (and wrote) until the early 1990s. There are vivid descriptions of buildings, but Greene's famous sense of place is still a bit fuzzy here. It's London, but even with the mention of Trafalgar Square and Piccadilly Circus, Greene isn't guiding the reader through a sense of place, and this is unusual. A typical Graham Greene novel has the effect of relief map. But a scene in a high-end gun shop is wonderfully realized.

Greene's sense of Britain's class system is, perhaps, never better than in IT'S A BATTLEFIELD.

There are a few plot threads here which lack conclusions. This is rather unusual for Greene. He has other novels in which he makes short work of a plot thread or a character, but one doesn't sense that he's not bothered to complete those brief threads and character studies. Here, I have to say, he has left too much unfinished.

This does NOT mean he is doing a rush job. On the contrary, he is making deliberate choices, if unsatisfactory ones. On the whole, though, this is a well-realized book with a lot to say about its era.

Christian says

Graham Greene has given me a lot over the years. In terms of an entire body of work, rather than a particular stand-out novel, he is probably one of my favourite British authors. Whilst some authors produce a dazzling fully-formed debut, though, Greene strikes me as someone who spent a number of years learning his trade and slowly developing into the writer he would become, finally hitting a run of truly impressive form in the late 40s which continued until somewhere after *The Honorary Consul*. As such, I didn't expect too much from this early work. Still, when you've read and enjoyed the majority of a writer's work, it's exciting to stumble across one that you missed.

Only I hadn't missed it. I read this through without a flicker of recognition. Nothing. Only to find, on finishing, an alternative copy of this book sitting on my shelves. Now, it's possible that I may be developing some kind of early-onset dementia I suppose, but it does seem unlikely. Apart from occasionally misplacing the car keys, which is probably just more to do with being a man, the memory seems pretty sharp. I can remember what I had for breakfast this morning; even yesterday morning with a reasonable degree of confidence.

So I'm left with the conclusion that, whilst reasonably interesting and well-written enough, *It's a Battlefield* is just a bit, well, unmemorable.

Judy says

This early Graham Greene novel might be one of his lesser-known works, but it is written at top power, painting a bleak picture of a society where individuals are crushed in the workings of the state. The novel centres on the 'battle' to save Jim Drover, a London bus driver sentenced to death for murder, after fatally striking a policeman who was about to attack his wife during a public protest.

As with his previous book, *'Stamboul Train'*, this novel is told from various viewpoints. The condemned man, Jim, is always kept at a distance, as he is only glimpsed through the thoughts and memories of the other characters. For me the most vivid portrait is of Jim's brother, Conrad, a factory clerk isolated from his colleagues by his white-collar job, and torn between his love for Jim and his hidden passion for Jim's wife, the waif-like Milly. Conrad's fluctuating thoughts and growing obsession build with the inevitability of a nightmare.

I was also impressed by the portrayal of the (nameless) Assistant Commissioner, who has returned from long years of service in Africa and is isolated from his colleagues just as Conrad is. Also, he fears for his physical health just as Conrad does for his mental health. The novel is largely set in down-at-heel, seedy everyday scenes, including the match factory where Conrad and Milly's wilful, beautiful sister Kay work, as well as a newspaper office and Milly's humble lodgings.

All these scenes seem convincing to me, although Greene included an introduction to later editions saying that he felt the Communist party meeting he had included was unrealistic and that he didn't have enough knowledge of such meetings. Maybe so, but the boring, run-of-the-mill business and underlying rivalries between different members ring true. As with the revolutionary Dr Czinner in *'Stamboul Train'*, idealism is compromised and wrecked by a host of confusing rival demands.

Paul O'Prey's 'A Reader's Guide to Graham Greene' says the book was strongly influenced by Joseph Conrad's 'The Secret Agent' - and he points out that this is signalled within the novel, as it is mentioned that Conrad was called after 'a Polish sailor', ie the writer. It's a long time since I read 'The Secret Agent', so I didn't pick up on parallels, but the intense psychological focus does feel like Conrad.

David Russomano says

I've really enjoyed some of Greene's other novels. *Our Man in Havana* was hilarious. *The Quiet American* was powerful. But this seemed to be a dry shell full of miserable characters. I shook it and I didn't like the sound of them all rattling around between the chapters. The only happiness found by the end of the story is a sort of sad, laughable satisfaction with a certain aspect of one's job. I'm not saying books need happy endings, but why is this novel so jam-packed with dysfunction? In all fairness, it is an interesting demonstration of how the most unlikely characters can all be connected by a single common acquaintance. But I was generally distracted from that by all bleakness they also had in common.

Daniel Villines says

I truly enjoy Greene's more serious works and *It's a Battlefield* certainly qualifies as an attempt to be just that. The same poignant, insightful, and serious writing that seeks to expose the human condition to the world is prevalent throughout. Also missing from this book is the film-noir and comedic style that plagued *Brighton Rock* and *Our Man in Havana* (respectively). Therefore, everything that I love about Greene is here and everything that I dislike about Greene is absent.

I found the theme of justice, and how justice affects various people of different classes and positions in society to be enticing. Greene also tackles love and hate and the interplay between these two emotions; a theme that he covers more extensively (and successfully) in his best book, *The End of the Affair*. Greene also illustrates the inherent selfishness of people who are seemingly united in a cause, but yet focus their efforts to achieve that cause in their own self-serving ways. All great stuff for a book and Greene is the perfect writer to undertake such a serious piece of writing.

Greene's typical books seem average about 300 pages in length and his style of writing (at least in his better books) uses the length of the book to gradually reveal his main characters. This approach is worked to its best effect in *The Heart of the Matter*, where the reader is allowed to grow-to-know a limited number of main characters, from first impressions to final evaluation. But 300 pages (or in this case 225 pages) does not allow for a multitude of characters, which is the main issue with *It's a Battlefield*.

The vast portion of life that Greene attempts to cover in this book required the use of many characters. There were at least ten characters, each of which was used to illustrate some aspect of his main themes. Thus, his style hindered his ability to explore any single character or any single theme very deeply. In the end, you're left with only a mental sketch of his original intent and left wishing for more.

Helen says

It's London, between the wars, 1934. A man has killed a policeman during a strike; a riot had broken out, the

bobby was poised to hit the striking workman's wife, and he instinctively defended her with his pocket knife.

The workman's name is Jim Drover. He's been sentenced to hang. An aging Assistant Commissioner, recently returned from the East, has been asked by a Minister to report to him on the pulse of the people; this has nothing to do with sentiment, or justice, he's up for reelection, and he wants to know if the workers will riot if the workman is hanged, or will they feel the Minister is weak if he is reprieved.

Drover's suffering wife has a sister who just wants to find a man and have a good time, and the condemned worker has a brother, Conrad, who loves him deeply, but who is also hopelessly in love with his brother's wife. There is a pompous Communist leader in love with the ideas of Equality and The People, not so much the people themselves. And a reporter who has invented so many lives for himself that he sometimes forgets which is the real one.

This is Greeneland; there are no happy endings waiting for anyone. Instead, there are questions to trouble the conscience. Conrad is the main character in the book, his thoughts laying out the major themes. Jim received a poor defense, the lawyer himself barely cared. If he is reprieved, he will be in jail for 18 years. Who will support his young wife? How can she possibly be expected to be loyal to him, allowed to see him only once a month for all those years? With this kind of justice, is it better for Jim to hang, and free her, or to live on in prison, knowing that his beloved will betray him, again and again? Is the equality for Everyman that Communism promises at meetings a possibility, or a fantasy to keep the worker occupied while the real powers, people with money and influence and connections, blithely keep doing whatever it is they've always done?

This is a beautiful, bitter little story. GG worked as a sub-editor at the *Times*, and in some ways, this is a love letter to London at this particular time in his life. The gifts of his compassion, his sympathy for all victims, and the beauty of his language are all very much on display here. *It's a Battlefield* may not be one of GG's major books, but it's a terrific snapshot of the concerns and anxieties consuming pre-World War II England, full of passions and ideas to stir the heart.

Doctor Moss says

This is a relatively early (1934) book Greene, and I think it is interesting for its variety of characters. I don't think it's ever safe to say what you think an author was "really thinking," but what I liked here was the portrayal of a "battlefield" of characters, some in conflict with one another, but mostly each fighting an inner conflict.

The plot centers on a bus driver, Jim Drover, who, while protecting his wife during a riot, has killed a policeman. Jim, one of a number of characters participating either whole heartedly or perfunctory in the Communist labor movement of the time, has been convicted and condemned to death. Jim may be the least conflicted character in the story. We see very little of him — he seems actually at peace with his own fate and more worried about his wife, Milly. Milly is torn any number of ways, not least by her relationship with Jim's brother, Conrad, who, in turn, fights an unwinnable battle to prove his manhood to Milly and to himself. Other characters fight for dignity, legitimacy, . . . trying to get themselves to become the persons they want to be rather than the persons they may settle to be.

One character, the Assistant Commissioner, fighting his own battle about whether to intervene in the fate of Jim, sums up the "battlefield":

"Everybody's too busy fighting his own little battle to think of the, the next man."

Not only are they too busy fighting their own battles to help each other, they are too busy to even fight with one another. And it doesn't all add up to any sort of transcendent hope or faith — it's just a collection of struggles within each person, each in their own way.

It doesn't sound especially "happy", but I liked the book exactly for that portrayal of inner struggle — it's everyone's life, seen from the inside. Of course you can't help but suppose there is irony here -- that each is fighting an internal struggle in the context of outer struggles that could be the basis for inner victories.

Tony says

IT'S A BATTLEFIELD. (1934). Graham Greene. ***.

Set in London in the 1930s, this novel depicts the conditions of labor and industry in England as the workers begin to unite and form parties linked with Communism. The event that sparks things off occurs at a rally at Hyde Park Corner, where a policeman is stabbed by a man who believed that the policeman was about to hit his wife with a truncheon. After the man is arrested, his co-workers rally around to try and see that he receives justice in his case. Justice, however, is a relative term in that country as its leadership is faced with a power it has not had to deal with before. "Bitter ironies hover the ensuing battle to save Drover (the man who stabbed and killed the policeman): the Assistant Commissioner, high-principled and over-worked; Conrad, a paranoid clerk; Mr. Surrogate, a rich Fabian; Condor, a pathetic journalist feeding on fantasies; and pretty, promiscuous Kay — all have a part to play in his fate." From a comment in 'Life & Letters' on the first publication of this novel in 1934: "It is moving, bitter, tragic, humorous and beautiful. It has as many facets as life."

Leah says

I LOVE Graham Greene, but this one was a struggle to get through. I was surprised and disappointed at this. His usual habit of introspection in his characters seemed to overtake the story, with too much explanation of motive and history and development and hardly any actual events occurring. I found that it dragged on, and took me days to finish, whereas I would normally get through any of his novels (or entertainments) in a maximum of two.

Alex Sarll says

The earliest Graham Greene I've read, and not by much, but here it's much more apparent that we're not dealing with the finished article. The snatches of overheard speech, the constant shifts of perspective, had me thinking at times of dos Passos or Faulkner. One character labours under the unlikely name of Mr Surrogate, which seems more like a Waugh or Dickens moniker than a Greene one; another is named Conrad after a seaman who used to lodge with his family, and the sense of London as one of the dark places of the Earth definitely comes through here. It's a city of crabbed lives, anxiety, failure to communicate; a place dominated by that horrible strain of the British character which fears happiness will always draw punishment. It's said of one character that "there remained, even below the hatred, the belief that if he had been able to love naturally and without shame, if he had been loved with tenderness and permanence, there would have been no need of the pistol in his pocket, the aimless walking and the guilt" - but most of that goes for everyone here. Love is no salvation; even faith mostly lacks the terrible efficaciousness it usually has in Greenland. The closest

thing to a moment of uncomplicated joy comes on the novel's one trip outside the dread city, but even there human weakness spoils the idyll a little before the metropolis' gravity can. The plot centres on a condemned man, Drover, sentenced to hang for killing a policeman he took to be threatening his wife. But as a character he's an absence, perhaps to point up the way that in their own ways all those orbiting him - paranoid brother, fearful wife, the Assistant Commissioner who feels hopelessly out of place, and so forth - are all operating just as much in the shadow of death, simply by virtue of their presence on the smoke-clouded battlefield that is modern life. One or two of the cast - the wealthy Mr Surrogate, the philanthropic Mrs Bury - are more types than characters, but the overall effect is not dissimilar to a Richard Price novel, with a single crime used to expose a society's failings right up and down the social scale. This may not be Greeneland proper quite yet, but it's still a lot better than most writers ever manage.

Serjeant Wildgoose says

A darker novel written in a more complex prose than his later works. I like Greene's work and love many of his books - I could not say that I love this one, but it sticks the great challenges of sacrifice, self-worth and betrayal centre-stage and as with so much of his work, forces the reader to examine their own values.

BrokenTune says

Review first posted on BookLikes: <http://brokentune.booklikes.com/post/...>

“ ‘Yes,’ the secretary said, ‘it was about Drover. Now that the appeal has failed, it all rests on the Home Secretary. The poor dear man is worried, very worried, and all on top too of the licensing.’ The secretary’s wide pale face glistened softly under the concealed lighting and he leant forward with an infinite suggestion of frankness, with an overwhelming effect of guile. ‘To tell you the truth, he’d have been glad, he’d have been tremendously relieved, if the appeal had been allowed.’ ‘Impossible,’ the Assistant Commissioner said, ‘there was no possible – er – line possible – er – line that the Defence could – could take.’ ‘Exactly. I was in Court. The Minister, you see, thought that the L.C.J. might give some excuse for a reprieve. But there was nothing at all to get hold of.’ ‘The policeman died,’ the Assistant Commissioner said stubbornly, ‘we got the man.’ ‘But the Minister, you know, doesn’t want the poor devil’s blood. Nobody does. It was a political meeting. Everyone was excited. Drover thought the bobby was going to hit his wife. He had the knife in his pocket. That, of course, is the snag. Why did he carry the knife?’”

Well, that was ... interesting. It's a Battlefield seems to follow on – in both content and style – from The Man Within and tries to show the discrepancy between what is just in humanitarian terms and what is just in social or legal terms.

The story focuses on the efforts of the Assistant Commissioner to write a report and make a recommendation to the Home Secretary about whether the death sentence handed to Drover should be reprieved. Drover had been convicted of the killing of a police officer during a demonstration. In the course of the investigation by the Assistant Commissioner, it becomes clear that there is a little more to the background of the conviction and that the sentencing may have been influenced by the fact that Drover's is a communist.

It's an interesting book because Greene quite overtly talks about politics and social injustice in Britain (the story is set in London). Written in 1934, around the time that Greene joined the Independent Labour Party, the book seems to reflect on issues that Greene might have pondered on as part of his political activity. However, as with everything with Greene, there is little confirmation of what his motivations were as he constantly revised his memoirs, creating quite a few contradictions.

Nevertheless in true Greene fashion, despite the politically inspired theme there is no clear message to the story other than a realisation that life can be depressing, futile, and unjust.

“When he thought of the heavy sentences passed on men who stole a little jewelry from a rich man’s house, the Assistant Commissioner was more than ever thankful that justice was not his business. He knew quite well the cause of the discrepancy; the laws were made by property owners in defence of property; that was why a Fascist could talk treason without prosecution; that was why a man who defrauded the State in defence of his private wealth did not even lose the money he had gained; that was why the burglar went to gaol for five years; that was why Drover could not so easily be reprieved – he was a Communist. Again, it was not his business; he resented having to report to the Minister that in his opinion neither the reprieve nor the execution of Drover would have any public effect.”

This is still an early work and, as mentioned above, it is very reminiscent of *The Man Within* and I would not be surprised if he had written or drafted *It's a Battlefield* before *Stamboul Train*, just because the characters seemed to be developed better (and applied a dark sense of humour) in *Stamboul Train*. I don't think Greene had found his proper style yet but am curious to discover at what point in time he breaks away from trying to have his protagonists act out social or political struggles and starts to focus on the internal turmoils.

Adrian Curtin says

'It's a Battlefield' is a small but tense drama set in London's inter-war period. It paints a bleak version of society that chews through individuals who act against their own ideals and principles for the benefit of a system they don't really believe in. The story center's around a man who killed a police office during a riot to protect his wife, but his character never plays any real role in the story, instead focusing on the complicated ways in which the other players dance around him. Apparently an early work by the author, it represents an early effort of Graham Greene to explore the dark corners of modern society and our interpretation of justice.

grundoon says

While undeniably Greene in its dark exploration of the human condition, an early one that's probably only worth seeking out in context of his growth as a writer. Set in between-WW England, a man kills a policeman while defending his wife from brutality during a riot and, because he happens to be a communist, his fate lies entirely in the hands of political self-interest. It touches upon many of his themes, however the story itself does not develop beyond the repercussions over the course of a few days for a small handful of family and functionaries involved.

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Lydia says

"Do you believe in the way the country is organized?" asks the character Caroline Bury in *It's a Battlefield*. She is a woman who is connected, who "*had chosen to exercise her passion for charity*" in the territory of politics. The story follows Caroline Bury and others as they try to prevent a London bus driver named Jim Drover from hanging.

Graham Greene described the book as his 'first overtly political novel'. It was published in 1934, when Britain was experiencing the effects of the Great Depression. Although the story references unemployment and poverty, for example when the Assistant Commissioner considers that "*the beggar did not beg because he would not work*", it is not primarily concerned with them (check out Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* for this). Instead, Greene claimed its theme is 'the injustice of man's justice'.

The Assistant Commissioner, perhaps the story's primary character, questions a justice system which allowed a company director convicted of income tax fraud to repay his debt at "*twelve shillings in the pound to save [him] from bankruptcy, to save him from a nervous breakdown.*" In comparison "*men who stole a little jewellery from a rich man's house*" might go to gaol for five years, because laws, he says, are made to protect property.

The book also conjures up the experiences of working class females in a matchbox factory. Greene uses the same phrases with which he had earlier written about life in prison, and I think the women come out worse. Certain prisoners "*have certain privileges*", "*as many library books as they want*", and "*more butter with their bread*", whereas the girls, from eight in the morning until six in the evening stood "*between death and disfigurement, unemployment and the streets, between the cog-wheels and the shafting.*" They worked until they married, like Milly Drover, the condemned man's wife, who one assumes will have to return to the factory whatever happens to her husband. If his sentence is repealed she will face 18 years waiting for him. Would it not be better if he were to hang?

It all seems a bit bleak, apart from the character of Kay Rimmer, Milly's sister, who was determined to have a good time whilst seeking a husband. I particularly enjoyed the episode where Jules takes her away for a night. Greene very briskly gets the sex scene out of the way: "*He was with her, he was in her, he was away from her, brushing his hair before the glass, whistling a tune.*"

The writing style in the first chapter reminded me a little of Mrs. Dalloway in the way in which it follows individual characters as they travel around London between work, home and leisure, exposing their thoughts, worries and hopes. Greene opens a new section to clearly demarcate the shift from one character to another, although I was occasionally confused by the much too similar names of *Conrad*, the condemned man's brother, and *Conder*, the journalist.

This is the first time I've read *It's a Battlefield*, although in my early 20s I used to devour Graham Greene books. What attracted me to the author then was the way in which he juxtaposes religion (Catholicism) and communism, and this book did not disappoint me. I re-read *Stamboul Train* last year and am now determined to tackle all his books again.
