

Graham Greene's Sài Gòn

BETWEEN MARCH 1952 AND JUNE 1955, BRITISH WRITER GRAHAM GREENE MADE FOUR TRIPS TO SÀI GÒN AS A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT. WHILE WORKING HERE, GREENE WROTE HIS ACCLAIMED ANTI-WAR NOVEL *THE QUIET AMERICAN*, A PROPHETIC TALE OF A NAIVE YOUNG AMERICAN'S MISGUIDED ATTEMPTS TO BRING DEMOCRACY TO THE FAR EAST.

The book has been filmed twice, on both occasions using Sài Gòn locations. The original 1958 film, directed by Joseph L Mankiewicz and starring Audie Murphy and Michael Redgrave, gave the story a decidedly patriotic twist and was roundly condemned by Greene as being nothing more than "a propaganda film for America." The 2002 remake by Phillip Noyce, starring Brendan Fraser and Michael Caine, was more faithful to the spirit of Greene's novel, as a consequence of which its US release was initially delayed due to concerns that it might give offence in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

While Greene lived in Sài Gòn, his life was focused almost exclusively on the privileged expat world of the city centre, and in particular on rue Catinat

(Đồng Khởi), still at that time the epitomy of colonial chic. Greene is known to have taken a daily constitutional up this street, "to where the hideous pink cathedral blocked the way." The Notre Dame end of Đồng Khởi street makes an excellent starting point for a tour of some of the real-life places Greene used to flesh out *The Quiet American*.

First stop is 164 Đồng Khởi, a colonial-era compound which sits opposite the Saigon Metropolitan Tower at the Nguyễn Du street junction. This was once the *Direction de la Police et de la Sureté*, workplace of Inspector Vigot, the detective responsible for investigating the death of American agent Alden Pyle. Built in 1917, the compound was known in Vietnamese as *Bót Catinat* and during the colonial era it developed a fearsome reputation as a place of cruelty – being so close to the

Cathedral, it was joked that *Bót Catinat* was "Hell next to Heaven." Greene clearly took a disliking to the building, talking of its "dreary walls" which "seemed to smell of urine and injustice." After the departure of the French in 1954, the compound served as the South Vietnamese Interior Ministry. Today it houses the offices of the city's Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, although the block is earmarked for redevelopment.

Walking southeast through the Đồng Khởi/Lý Tự Trọng intersection brings you to another location featured in *The Quiet American* – 213 Đồng Khởi, an art-deco-style apartment building which was once one of the most prestigious addresses in the city. After the departure of his girlfriend Phương, the book's anti-hero Thomas Fowler considered finding a new place



WHILE STAYING AT THE CONTINENTAL, GRAHAM GREENE PREFERRED ROOM 214 ON THE CORNER OVERLOOKING THE SQUARE

THE FORMER SURETÉ HQ AT 164 ĐỒNG KHỎI - "ITS DREARY WALLS SEEMED TO SMELL OF URINE AND INJUSTICE."



to live and came here to view "the *pied-a-terre* of a rubber planter who was going home". During the colonial era, 213 Đồng Khởi was home to diplomatic missions, international corporations, property companies, magazine offices and beauty institutes. It was also a centre of French haute couture, with several up-market fashion outlets including Marguerite, Blessey and Galeries Lafayette. However, most of the building was occupied by luxury apartments. Wealthy French rubber baroness Madame de la Souchère, whose opulent mansion still stands today at 169 Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa, was one of several members of colonial high society who maintained an apartment here. Greene clearly disliked this building too, since Fowler refers to it disparagingly as a "so-called modern building (Paris Exhibition 1934?)." Despite its attractive art deco design, 213 Đồng Khởi is currently threatened with demolition.

Continuing along Đồng Khởi street brings you to Greene's favourite hostelry, the venerable old Grand Hôtel Continental on Lam Sơn square (formerly place Garnier), which historians believe originated in around 1877 under the name Hôtel Fave. Rebuilt in 1904-1905, it quickly established a reputation as the city's premier hotel, while its Terrace became a focus of colonial Sài Gòn's growing colonial café culture. During the Second World War years both *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines set up offices at the Continental, and by the early 1950s it was the hotel of choice for many foreign correspondents.

In 1955, just as Greene was putting the finishing touches to *The Quiet American*, the *Théâtre de Saigon* next

door was converted into the Lower House of the National Assembly and politicians began meeting regularly at the Continental Terrace for drinks, turning it into a centre of journalistic gossip and intrigue which correspondents nicknamed "Radio Catinat."

Greene himself always insisted on staying in room 214 at the corner of the building, which afforded him the best view of all the goings-on in the square below. Perhaps, like Fowler in *The Quiet American*, his nightly ritual was to start the evening with a 6pm drink on the Terrace, where the dice would rattle as the French played *Quatre cent vingt-et-un*.

In Greene's day, much of the hotel's ground floor opened directly onto the sidewalk, so the original Continental Terrace was a spacious area which included both inner and outer seating



THE GRAND HOTEL AT 8 ĐỒNG KHỎI, ONCE AN APARTMENT BLOCK USED AS A MODEL FOR THOMAS FOWLER'S "ROOM OVER THE RUE CATINAT"

areas. Today the hotel is a cocoon of air-conditioned luxury and the few forlorn tables on the sidewalk outside hardly do justice to the Terrace's glory days.

When Greene first arrived in Sài Gòn in 1952, Givral had just opened across the street and he used this café as a model for the "milk bar" where Phương met her friends every day at 11.30am. A much-loved Sài Gòn landmark, the original Givral was renovated for use as a location during the making of Phillip Noyce's 2002 film. It continued to operate until 2009, when it was closed to permit the demolition of the entire block and the construction of the new Vincom Center. A new and luxurious incarnation of Givral has recently appeared in the original location.

In *The Quiet American*, place Garnier/Lam Sơn square is also the location where, with tacit support from the Americans, forces of the sinister General *Thế* detonated a car bomb, killing many civilians. Greene based General *Thế*'s character on real-life warlord *Trình Minh Thế* (1922-1955), who began his career in the army of the Cao Đài church but left in 1951 to form the *Liên Minh* militia, a private army implicated in a series of bombings between 1951 and 1953.

A quick detour one block west of Lam Sơn square brings you to the "Bùng Binh Sài Gòn" traffic circle on the Lê Lợi/Nguyễn Huệ intersection. Here you can still see "the big store at the corner of the Boulevard Charner" -- the Sài Gòn Tax Trade Centre at 135 Nguyễn Huệ, built in 1924 as the up-market Grands Magasins Charner -- where Fowler was invited to witness the events of "Operation Bicyclette."

Returning to Đồng Khởi street, the lower end of the former rue Catinat is home to several other relics of the Greene era.

On the right hand side, close to the Đồng Du junction, is 109 Đồng Khởi, a site now occupied by the Hotel Catina but originally an apartment building where Greene rented a room during one of his visits.

After Phương left him for Pyle, Fowler tried to forget her by making regular visits to an opium den he described as "a good place on rue d'Ormay," now Mạc Thị Bưởi street, which is reached at the next intersection.

THE FOUNTAIN WHERE FOWLER WITNESSED THE EVENTS OF "OPERATION BICYCLETTE" WHILE STANDING OUTSIDE "THE BIG STORE AT THE CORNER OF THE BOULEVARD CHARNER"



Cercle Sportif Saigonnais on rue Chasseloup-Laubat, now the Labour Culture Palace on Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai. Interestingly, he placed Pyle's apartment not far from the *Cercle sportif* on tree-lined rue Duranton, now Bùi Thị Xuân.

Sài Gòn's twin city of Chợ Lớn is mentioned on several occasions in *The Quiet American*. It is the location of Mr Chou's godown, the "House of Five Hundred Girls," the Chalet restaurant and the Grande Monde where Fowler first met Phương while she was working as a "taxi dancer." Despite much conjecture, the original models for these places remain far from certain.

No tour of Graham Greene's Sài Gòn would be complete without a visit to Đa Kao, which the author depicts in *The Quiet American* as being under constant threat from attack by Việt Minh forces based to the north of the Thị Nghè canal. The canal bridge which today connects Nguyễn Văn Giai in Đa Kao with Bùi Hữu Nghĩa in Bình Thạnh district is a modern replacement for the original iron structure which Greene called the "Dakow Bridge." It was underneath this bridge that Pyle's body was eventually found, floating face down in muddy water. Next to the bridge was the fictional Vieux Moulin restaurant where Fowler agreed to meet Pyle, thereby setting him up for assassination.

One of the most gripping parts of *The Quiet American* is the chapter which describes Fowler and Pyle's dangerous night journey back to Sài Gòn after visiting the Cao Đài Pope in "Tanyin" (Tây Ninh). Modern visitors to Hồ Chí Minh City still follow in their footsteps – albeit rather more safely – to tour the extraordinary Cao Đài Cathedral, situated around 90km northwest of the city and described by Greene as "a Walt Disney fantasia of the East, dragons and snakes in technicolour." These days the trip is usually made as an adjunct to visiting the famous underground tunnel network at Củ Chi.

Sài Gòn has changed a great deal in the six decades since Graham Greene walked its streets and anyone looking for seedy opium dens, exotic taxi dancers and world-weary colons will be sorely disappointed. Yet for those in search of the faded colonial charm which Greene knew and loved, modern Hồ Chí Minh City still has a great deal to offer.

TIM DOLING

PHOTOS: TIM DOLING



THE CAO ĐÀI CATHEDRAL IN TÂY NINH - "A WALT DISNEY FANTASIA OF THE EAST"

Two blocks later you arrive at another Greene landmark, the Grand Hotel at 8 Đồng Khởi, which originated as a café run by the Société du Grand Hôtel de Saigon but in 1937 opened its doors as the 60-room Saigon Palace Hotel. Evidently not the most successful hotel in the colonial era, it was converted into rented apartments in the late 1940s. Although Greene never stayed here, he chose it as the model for Thomas Fowler's "room over the rue Catinat," where much of the action in the book takes place.

The final stop on Graham Greene's rue Catinat is the Majestic Hotel at 1 Đồng Khởi, another of the writer's favourite haunts, which appears as one of Thomas Fowler's regular watering holes in *The Quiet American*. After his 6pm drink at the Continental, Fowler would head down the street for "cocktail time" at 7pm in the Majestic's Rooftop Bar, where he could relax and enjoy "the cool wind from the Sài Gòn

River." The hotel was rebuilt in 1968 with two additional floors, but it still has a Rooftop Bar with an excellent view of the river, which remains a popular spot for sunset cocktails.

A brisk walk from the Majestic two blocks south along the quayside and then one block west on Hàm Nghi boulevard takes you to Pyle's place of work, the "American Legation," better known as the first United States Embassy at 39 Hàm Nghi. This yellow building was home to the American diplomatic mission from 1950 to 1967. However, following an NLF car bomb attack in 1965, a decision was taken to build a new and more secure embassy compound on Thống Nhất (Lê Duẩn) boulevard – the compound which in April 1975 would witness the final US withdrawal from Việt Nam.

Although it doesn't appear in *The Quiet American*, Greene is known to have made regular visits to the exclusive