Le Carré's new novel questions his previous Cold War certainties

John le Carré's The Constant Gardener, Hodder and Stoughton, £16.99 ISBN 0-340-7337-3

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John le Carré's latest novel *The Constant Gardener* tells the story of Justin Quayle, a British diplomat—and the constant gardener of the title—who after the murder of his wife devotes himself to tracking down her killers. It is a simple enough theme, but le Carré develops it into a satisfying novel that deals with a highly topical topic—the giant pharmaceutical companies use of third world countries for drug testing.

In Kenya, Tessa Quayle is found murdered near Lake Turkana. Piecing together the last months of his wife's life, Justin discovers that she was about to expose a drug-testing programme that killed the Africans it had used as unwitting guinea pigs. The pharmaceutical company involved is racing to produce a new drug for tuberculosis, which they anticipate will soon reach epidemic proportions in the West. They are using Africa as a proving ground, because the disease is already rife there and the patients are less able to object. Vast profits hang on the success of their scheme to launch a new treatment in the lucrative Western market ahead of their competitors. When Tessa Quayle and an African doctor threaten to expose the trail of deaths the experiments have left behind, they are murdered. The trail leads not just to the drug company, but also to the drug's Kenyan importers and ultimately to Justin Quayle's employers—the British Foreign Office.

Le Carré is a master of the art of the spy thriller and this book demonstrates all his narrative skills. Yet his books have always been more than just straightforward genre novels. His portrayal of character lifts his writing above the run of the mill. He has the ability to reveal the moral flaws hidden behind an apparently respectable façade and to sum up a character's social origins, status and class outlook with a few deft pen strokes. Few of his leading characters have measured up to George Smiley, the spymaster in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. Justin Quayle is sadly no exception. It is entirely possible to believe that a Foreign Office man could grow perfect freesias, but it stretches credulity to believe that he would go into battle against his employers—even if his wife had been raped and murdered in the African bush. As a result, Justin Quayle never quite comes to life and remains something of a narrative device, but the monstrous characters who populate the world through which he leads us are vintage le Carré, and it is they who persuade us to suspend our disbelief while we turn the pages.

We are introduced to Sir Bernard Pellegrin of the Foreign Office, who takes Justin Quayle for lunch at his club where, “the dining room was a risen catafalque with painted cherubs posturing in a ceiling of blue sky.” His smiles are always of “the same duration, the same degree of spontaneous warmth.” He despises the “red brick achievers from Croydon” who are increasingly filling up the Foreign Office. He speaks in “High Tory telegramese.” The description of him filleting a fish sums up the history and outlook of an entire class: “He put on his reading spectacles in order to work his way to the lower half of his sole. When he had done so he held up its spine with his knife and fork while he peered round like a helpless invalid for a waiter who would bring him a debris plate.”

Through novel after novel, le Carré has pursued his own psychological flaws and obsessions, making the simple genre of the spy thriller into a vehicle that is capable of bearing a much more profound human drama than is common in a form usually based on action. A recurring theme in le Carré's novels is that of betrayal. In the Smiley books it is the betrayal of a Soviet mole, but alongside that, as in *The Constant Gardener*, there almost always runs the betrayal of a woman by a man who fails her emotionally. Judging by a recent television interview, in which he described the psychological impact of his mother walking out on the family when he was a child, le Carré is constantly working through his own feelings of guilt about that experience.

It was once asserted that the door shuts on a writer by the time he is twelve years old and that all the most profound experiences that will shape his writing have taken place by then. In le Carré's case his early experiences prepared him to act as the psychological lightening conductor for his class. As far as every Englishman of a certain class is concerned, le Carré has explained to them why men of their own social standing could betray them to the Soviets.

Burgess, Philby, Maclean and Blunt, the Cambridge spy ring, have left a scar in the consciousness of the English ruling class that still stings. They could not penetrate the mystery of how boorish communists had turned men who had been to the same schools as them and were members of the same clubs, into Soviet agents.

Le Carré's novels offer the British ruling class a sense of absolution by converting the affair of the Cambridge spies into a moral failure, into a betrayal that could be traced back to a childish insecurity incurred in the nursery. Le Carré's “virtue” is that he can explain this betrayal in terms of individual, moral failure, because at bottom, he is like the traitors. In his BBC interview he confessed, or boasted of, a similarity between himself and Kim Philby. Both, he said, came from disturbed and questionable backgrounds in which their fathers had been—shame of shames—sometimes unable to pay the school fees for their sons' private education. Le Carré's father was a conman who kept one step ahead of the law. His home life was chaotic. Like Philby, le Carré responded to this embarrassment by becoming the quintessential high church Anglican Englishman. They both sought the emotional security, which they lacked at home, in the bosom of the church and the English establishment. But the establishment had, like his father, betrayed Philby. His country had sold out to the Americans and so he turned to the Russians, who seemed to offer some alternative to the all-pervading influence of American capitalism, some separate European

perspective.

To see events in this light is in some sense comforting, since it obscures what impelled the Cambridge spies to throw in their lot with the Kremlin. During the 1930s significant layers of liberal thinkers in Britain and around the world, including the alienated sons and daughters of the ruling class, were attracted to the Soviet Union. Some had vague feelings of sympathy for the achievements of the October Revolution. Others were horrified by the growth of fascism and the threat of war, and mistakenly saw the Stalinist regime as a bulwark against this danger—one which also offered an alternative to naked class conflict at home through its profession of support for the "people's front" against fascism.

Britain in the 1930s had experienced a dramatic reversal in fortune. Since the treaty of Utrecht in 1713 it had bestridden the globe like a colossus, but by the 1920s America emerged as the dominant world power. German industry far outstripped Britain's, which only survived because of the protected markets offered by the empire. The class struggles of the time culminated in the General Strike of 1926. By the 1930s mass unemployment threatened to further destabilise a social peace that had been made possible by Britain's world dominance. The attractive power of the Stalinist Communist Party for the four Cambridge scholars, who became KGB agents before later being recruited by the British secret services, was not simply based on a misguided sympathy for socialism. In this increasingly unstable and volatile world, it must have seemed to them that the Soviet Union could be a powerful counterweight to the might of America and other rival imperialist powers; one, moreover, that had in the Spanish Civil War stressed its democratic credentials, anti-fascism and opposition to the struggle for social revolution.

In *Tinker Tailor, Soldier Spy* and *Smiley's People* le Carré offered an explanation of how this betrayal could happen. His was an answer that lay not in politics or the iron logic of economics, but in individual psychology, in the "human condition".

Philby's world was one that was well known to le Carré, who himself had been a professional spy from the age of 17, when as a student in Bern, just after the Second World War, he ran little "errands" for a man at the British embassy. Later he spied on his fellow students at Oxford and was in Berlin when the Wall went up in 1961. He retired from MI6 when the success of his novel, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, made his continued role as an agent impossible. He made the Cold War spy thriller his own, taking it beyond the confines of Fleming's James Bond model. Marcus Wolf, the head of the East German secret police, on whom le Carré's character Karla was based, revelled in the notoriety that le Carré's books conferred upon him and admired the knowledge of espionage they demonstrated.

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 heralding the end of the Cold War, many speculated whether le Carré would survive as a novelist. His success has continued because the novels he wrote were always based on something more than just an expert handling of a well established genre. They always transcended their subject and their form. It is doubtful that Marcus Wolf ever expressed the air of tragic grandeur with which le Carré invested Karla.

Not only has le Carré found new subject matter in the post Cold War world, but his attitude to the capitalist system that he has defended for so long seems to have become more critical. The publication of *The Constant Gardener* was preceded by an article in the *Daily Telegraph* entitled *The Criminals of Capitalism*, in which he condemns "the conviction that, whatever profit-driven corporations do in the short term, they are ultimately motivated by ethical concerns, and their influence on the world is therefore beneficial, and so God help us all." He continues, "It seemed to me, as I began to cast round for a story to illustrate the example, that the pharmaceutical industry offered the most eloquent example."

The new book he has produced is well researched and based on documented cases, such as the trials that Pfizer carried out in Nigeria during an epidemic of bacterial meningitis: Instead of using standard antibiotics, Pfizer treated sick children and babies with an antibiotic that was banned for this purpose in the West, because it was known to cause damage to the joints and could produce arthritis. The company hoped that tests in Africa would persuade the US regulators to allow its wider use. Desperate relatives, who had trekked from country districts, carrying their sick family members, were not told about the nature of the experiment or about the risk of side effects. Normally in cases of meningitis, a doctor would try a whole range of antibiotics, fighting to keep the patient alive. But Pfizer's doctors continued to administer the antibiotic under test even when the patients failed to respond to the treatment. The records show the anonymous deaths of patients who are recorded only as numbers. Those that survived went back to their villages with no follow up treatment or examination. No one knows if they went on to develop arthritis.

Le Carré attempts to take us beyond the anonymity of the official record and puts a name and face to one patient who dies in such a test, so that the reader can connect with the suffering. In itself that makes the book a worthwhile endeavour. But he offers us more. He puts names and faces to the anonymous government officials who connive with and protect these activities and, in his vivid pen portraits of their characters he delineates their inner degeneration as moral beings.

Where has all this come from? We get a clue in an earlier book *The Night Manager*, in which a leading civil servant undergoes an epiphany as he is cycling through London to his desk in Westminster. It occurs to him that the Cold War is over; the enemy has decamped from in front of the gate, but all the crimes that were once justified by the Cold War are still going on as before. He resolves to change things. In a civil servant this is scarcely credible but the experience probably tells us something about le Carré's feelings. He is genuinely outraged by the depredations of the transnational companies, but when it comes to offering a solution he is at a loss. He concludes his *Telegraph* article suggesting that what is needed is, "a great new movement, an international, humanitarian movement of decent men and women, that is not doctrinal, not political, not polemical, but gathers up the best in all of us: a Seattle demo without the broken glass."

Ultimately the solution to the crimes against humanity that he has researched and brought to life in his book must be political, because Western governments of all political complexions back up the companies that carry them out. These governments are not inclined to listen to humanitarian appeals; they ruthlessly defend the interests of the big corporations. Le Carré's political imagination fails him in his *Telegraph* article, but his new book tells a different story. There is no rose tinted ending. Le Carré knows the inner workings of the state too well for it to be otherwise. There is a certain logic in fiction that demands honesty from the author, because he has created a chain of causality in which one action leads logically to another. If the author attempts to break that chain, both reader and the writer are usually aware of it. Impelled by that logic le Carré, the author, knows that a soft focus ending leaving the reader with a warm self satisfied glow would not ring true and he does not offer one.