

John le Carré (1931–2020): Spy novelist and “inside-outside” man

Stefan Steinberg
20 December 2020

British author and former intelligence agent John le Carré died of pneumonia December 12 aged 89 years. Le Carré leaves behind an intriguing body of literary work set against a background of some of the key political and social developments of the past half-century. In the course of his career, le Carré was able to draw from experiences made during and after the Cold War to attract millions of readers with his carefully researched spy novels.

Born in 1931, David John Moore Cornwell—he adopted the name John le Carré as an author in the early 1960s—was the son of Ronnie Cornwell, a conman with upper class airs who was permanently in debt due to his criminal business ventures. David Cornwell had a generally miserable childhood. The boy could hardly admit to his well-heeled, upper class fellow students his father was a convicted criminal. At a young age, he already felt himself to be somewhat of an interloper within the ranks of Britain’s privileged elite, someone with the “need to cobble an identity for myself,” as he writes in *The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories from My Life* (2016).

In one of his finest novels, *A Perfect Spy*, le Carré creates a picture of his father, or someone like him, in the form of conman Rick Pym. Deceit, double lives, betrayal and the conflict between personal, social and political relations, both on a small and large scale, are at the heart of virtually all of le Carré’s novels.

Unhappy at the boarding school to which he had been sent by his errant father, David Cornwell fled to Europe at the age of 16 and, in his own words, managed to wangle a place at the University of Berne in Switzerland where he studied foreign languages. His years in Switzerland, Austria and later Germany were to prove formative for his development.

Based on his experiences in Germany and his study of its history, le Carré writes that he was not surprised when a new generation of Germans reacted strongly against their forebears. Le Carré rejected the methods of the Baader–Meinhof terrorist group, but he could sympathise with some of its arguments. Like “large sections of Germany’s middle classes” in the 1960s and ’70s, “I too am disgusted by the presence of former high-ranking Nazis in politics, the judiciary, the police, industry, banking and the Churches” (*The Pigeon Tunnel*).

In 1949, at age 19, Cornwell was identified by British intelligence as a potential recruit and began working as a German-language interrogator of individuals passing over from the Stalinist countries to the West. His language skills plus his unstable past made him an ideal recruit for the secret services. He returned to England in 1952 to study at Oxford before going on to teach at Eton. During this time he continued to work covertly for the British domestic secret service, MI5, spying on left-wing groups.

Cornwell was dissatisfied with the hypocrisy of the MI5 leadership and the routinism of his work. He comments: “Spying on a decaying British Communist Party twenty-five thousand strong that had to be held together by MI5 informants did not meet my aspirations.” The remark, however, hardly amounts to a repudiation of his dirty work as a spy. His superiors had no reason to fear the British Stalinists, but the ruling elite is always keenly attuned to the possibility of social revolution, even in relatively stable periods. For all his undoubted acuity, Cornwell-le Carré never understood the full significance of his own intelligence work.

In 1960, Cornwell transferred to MI6, Britain’s foreign-intelligence service, and was sent to Germany to work at the British Embassy in Bonn.

While still in service, le Carré wrote his first two spy novels *Call for the Dead* (1961) and *A Murder of Quality* (1962), which introduced one of his most remarkable characters, the bespectacled, balding, somewhat overweight and assiduous secret service agent, George Smiley.

Smiley is “old school.” In the parlance of the “The Circus” (le Carré’s nickname for the headquarters of MI6—the British foreign intelligence service—in London), he is an “Owl.” Classically trained at some of Britain’s leading elite institutions, Smiley has learnt his “tradecraft” running agents during World War II. In the early 60s his job is to analyse the data obtained by field agents working undercover. Smiley who, unlike many of his fellow agents, possesses a conscience, plays a leading role in five of le Carré’s novels, which throw a great deal of light on the machinations of the British intelligence agencies.

Le Carré’s own career in MI6 came to an end when he discovered his name on a list of agents handed over to the Soviet Union by its most valuable postwar double agent, Kim Philby. Philby, from an upper class background, was a member of the Apostles, a small group of elite students at Cambridge University who reacted to the threat of fascism in the 1930s by swearing allegiance to the Soviet Union and what they misguidedly regarded as socialism.

The theme of betrayal is taken up by le Carré in one of his best known novels, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1974), in which a thinly disguised alter ego for Philby is uncovered as a mole in the secret service due to Smiley’s relentless efforts. The role of Smiley is wonderfully played by Alec Guinness in the watchable BBC television production of the book.

Smiley also plays a lesser role in le Carré’s third novel, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963), once again mainly set in Germany. In le Carré’s novel, the secret services of both the Western powers and the Stalinists are presented as unscrupulous and amoral, prepared to sacrifice their own agents (two idealistic Communists, not

coincidentally both Jews) in the interests of political expediency. The book became le Carré's first bestseller, enabling him to live on his income as a writer.

It was later made into a gripping film by US director Martin Ritt. Ritt had been blacklisted in 1952 in the course of the McCarthy witch-hunts and le Carré writes that Ritt "made no secret of the fact ... that he saw in my novel some kind of crossing point from his earlier convictions to his present state of impotent disgust at McCarthyism, the cowardice of too many of his peers and comrades in the witness box, the failure of communism and the sickening sterility of the Cold War." Richard Burton offered an impressively low-key performance as the film's central character.

While checking the proofs of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* in 1974, le Carré noticed a small error too late to correct before the printing of the book and drew the conclusion that "in midlife I was getting fat and lazy and living off a fund of past experiences that was running out. It was time to take on unfamiliar worlds. A dictum of Graham Greene's was ringing somewhere in my ear: something to the effect that if you were reporting on human pain, you had a duty to share it."

Le Carré packed his bags and "fancying myself as some sort of wanderer in the German Romantic tradition, set out in search of experience: first to Cambodia and Vietnam, afterwards to Israel and the Palestinians, then to Russia, Central America, Kenya and the Eastern Congo."

Le Carré's wanderings over the course of the next forty years included trips to war zones, dinner with the head of a Russian Mafia clan and meetings with such diverse figures as Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, German intelligence service (BND) head August Hanning, Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

The ruthlessness of the Israeli intelligence agency in its suppression of the Palestinians is the main theme of his novel *The Little Drummer Girl* (1983), also made into a film and recently a very good television series.

The unscrupulousness of Western pharmaceutical companies (le Carré allegedly had Pfizer in mind), quite prepared to dump their deadly medicines on innocent victims in Africa, takes centre stage in *The Constant Gardener* (2001), both book and film.

The provocations launched by the US and Britain to go to war against Iraq and their efforts to intimidate all opposition are central to the plot of *Absolute Friends* (2003).

In a review of the film adaptation of *The Tailor of Panama*, we wrote: "The writing was on the wall for Smiley and his ilk with the election as prime minister of the grocer's daughter from Grantham, Margaret Thatcher. She was succeeded by John Major (whose father at one point was a performer in a real circus) followed by Tony Blair. The final nail in the coffin of Smiley and the old school came with the collapse of the Stalinist Eastern bloc and the end of the Cold War."

Le Carré disliked Thatcher and her assault on his notion of Britain's social contract. In *The Pigeon Tunnel* he relates how he received invitations, two of which he declined, the third he accepted, from the prime minister's office inviting him to dinner with Thatcher.

At the lunch in question, Thatcher turned to her literary guest and asked if he had anything to say to her. Le Carré used the opportunity to plead the cause of stateless Palestinians oppressed by Israel. "Don't give me sob stories," Thatcher retorted angrily. The lunch ended on a sour note and no more invitations were sent.

Le Carré turned down an honour from the Queen, but gratefully accepted the Olof Palme prize in 2019, just one year prior to his death.

He used his speech at the annual ceremony honouring the assassinated Swedish prime minister to castigate the current Tory leadership and the Brexiteers, declaring: "The rats have taken over the ship." Equal venom was directed at the British press, which he described as an "Orwellian lie machine that would make Goebbels blush."

During the course of his career, le Carré was branded (perhaps half in jest) a "communist spy" by former Labour Defence Secretary Denis Healey. Secret service colleagues loudly accused him of betraying his country, and various heads of the British intelligence services complained his novels had made it much more difficult to recruit agents. Far more helpful for the service was James Bond with his guns, gadgets, women and generous expense account.

In fact, le Carré described himself as a compassionate conservative. The severe limitations of his political outlook were clear from his Olof Palme speech in which he accused Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn of "student-level Marxist Leninism" and anti-Semitism. Both claims are absurd, and revealing.

The weaknesses of le Carré's approach are revealed in a preface he wrote for a new edition of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* published half a century after the novel's original appearance. Le Carré quotes Control (nickname for the head of MI6) in the book who declares: "I mean, you can't be less ruthless than the opposition simply because your government's policy is benevolent, can you now?"

Le Carré proceeds to make the following comment: "Today, the same man, with better teeth and hair and a much smarter suit, can be heard explaining away the catastrophic illegal war in Iraq, or justifying medieval torture techniques as the preferred means of interrogation in the twenty-first century, or defending the inalienable right of closet psychopaths to bear semi-automatic weapons, and the use of unmanned drones as a risk-free method of assassinating one's perceived enemies and anybody who has the bad luck to be standing near them." He concludes: "What have I learned over the last fifty years? Come to think of it, not much. Just that the morals of the secret world are very like our own."

In regard to the final assertion, one is obliged to respond: Speak for yourself! The "morals" of the overwhelming majority of the world's population have nothing in common with those of MI6, the BND and the CIA. Le Carré's "collective guilt" thesis allows many of his middle class readers to share his disgust with the "smarter suits" and "closet psychopaths," while, at the same time, nodding their heads in agreement with his misanthropic and pessimistic conclusions.

Despite his failings, le Carré, seeking to make up for the years of deceitful malice on the part of his father and his country, honestly addressed in his entertaining novels many of the ills plaguing society. In the course of his 25 novels, le Carré charted some of the dilemmas and painful conflicts of the postwar era, including the debilitating, distorting, deforming impact of all the establishment's lies.

This is surely why he was able to win such a wide international audience for his work. There are few contemporary authors who could make the same claim.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact