

# Cynic, Moralist, Novelist, Spy

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Mark Tooley

*John le Carré: The Biography*

By Adam Sisman  
(Harper, 2015)

*The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories from My Life*

By John le Carré  
(Viking, 2016)

*A Legacy of Spies: A Novel*

By John le Carré  
(Viking, 2017)

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John le Carré changed my life. As a boy in the late 1970s, I gobbled up his trilogy of novels about British spymaster George Smiley's largely nonviolent but ferocious battles with his KGB counterpart Karla. The first of the trilogy, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, and the conclusion, *Smiley's People*, became BBC/PBS dramas, with Alec Guinness perfectly cast as Smiley. They were superb.

In contrast, I hated James Bond movies, with their vaguely corporate villains and absurd story lines. The grittiness and apparent realism of le Carré's mercurial world, full of shabby offices, dank alleys, trysts at dusk, and muttered secrets, were far more captivating. Smiley's career as a dutiful and patriotic public servant—not to mention a devotee of

the “special relationship” between Britain and America (a devotion le Carré himself didn't share)—inspired my own desire to work in intelligence. I had not anticipated that the Cold War would end early in my career and so I left the CIA as a young man.

Amazingly, le Carré, now a distinguished-looking octogenarian, remains an active writer. He recently published a sort of memoir composed of vignettes, *The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories from My Life*, along with a new novel, *A Legacy of Spies*. The literary biographer Adam Sisman has also published a life titled *John le Carré: The Biography*. Le Carré seems as central today to the overlapping worlds of politics and literature as he did five decades ago.

That seems an unlikely achievement for a person of le Carré's checkered background. Born David Cornwell, le Carré had an unhappy childhood defined by his mother's abandonment of her family for another man. Le Carré's father was a professional con man who, according to Sisman, sexually abused young David and spent time in prison. Sisman suggests that George Smiley, the sensible pillar of rectitude cuckolded by a promiscuous wife, is a replacement figure for le Carré's flamboyant scoundrel of a father. The novelist seems to have bonded with Alec Guinness over the actor's own hideous upbringing.

Yet le Carré has often suggested that circumstances marked by concealment and disappointment prepared him for a life in and around the secret world. He worked for MI5, Britain's counterintelligence agency, and MI6, its foreign intelligence service, while writing spy novels under the pseudonym by which he's best known. In both careers, he was expert at playing and creating fictional roles, a craft he evidently perfected as a boy, when he faked serious illness to gain attention, persuading even physicians.

Whatever le Carré lacked in attachment to his loveless family, he at least initially compensated for in loyalty to his country. As a student at Oxford, he agreed to pose as a leftist and report on potential student subversives. This steely reserve would continue into le Carré's own marriage and parenting. After leaving him, his first wife referred to le Carré as an "emotional eunuch."

The success of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* in 1963, popularized further by a film starring Richard Burton, allowed le Carré to quit intelligence work and become a full-time writer. The decision was not entirely voluntary: his cover had been compromised, like that of many others, by the British defector Kim Philby. Philby's treason and flight to the Soviets would heavily inform le Carré's work. The plot of *Tinker*,

*Tailor*, which revolves around the hunt for a deep-penetration agent or "mole" in MI6, was loosely inspired by Philby's career. Le Carré never lost his anger at Philby's betrayal of his country and service. Even when older and more cynical, he righteously declined a chance once to meet the aging traitor in exile.

The author can afford such scruples, but the intelligence agent cannot. In his early career, le Carré dealt with shady characters, including former Nazis. An appreciation for moral ambiguity is among the most striking features of le Carré's Cold War novels and of his memoir.

Young le Carré was bored with MI5 and moved on to MI6, which was somewhat more challenging. His trajectory vaguely echoes that of a young William F. Buckley, who briefly worked for the CIA in Mexico City after he graduated from Yale. Like le Carré, Buckley had literary aspirations and wrote his own series of spy novels, although he found greater success as a political commentator and popularizer of conservatism. Le Carré, who remained in intelligence longer than Buckley, never became as ideological. Instead he devoted himself to duty and tradecraft, skills that seemed to have successfully transferred into his career as novelist. To the extent he has become political, it has taken the form of increased cynicism about his own country—and even more for her chief ally, the United States. In the process, le Carré's books have lost much of the shadowy quality that had once made them so exciting, substituting instead contrasts of black and white.

Le Carré's novels nearly always had negative portrayals of British intelligence's partners in the CIA. As early as 1952 at Oxford, he impressed a communist friend with his anti-Americanism and passionate reaction to the execution of the Rosenbergs for atomic espionage. (Possibly, le Carré was trying to win the communist's confidence on behalf

of MI5.) Le Carré's negativity about America expanded after the Cold War. Even before the Iraq War, which le Carré hotly opposed, his fury was on display in novels such as *The Constant Gardener*, which became a 2005 film with Ralph Fiennes. In it, a British diplomat's wife, working for Amnesty International, is murdered by an international drug company that is testing unsafe drugs on unsuspecting Kenyans. Conservative reviewers and others panned the angry, conspiratorial tone, with the *New York Review of Books* calling it "strident" and "furious" as well as "embarrassing," but the novel and the film were commercially successful.

Le Carré's next novel, *Absolute Friends*, was equally artful yet more politically zealous, focusing on a British activist and his German wife who campaign against American influence and globalization. For their efforts they are killed by American and German intelligence services, who claim they are members of al-Qaeda. A reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* pronounced that the book's "indictment of the United States so overshoots reasonable levels of credibility that it undermines the very political message it pretends to send." The *New York Times* reviewer said it was a "clumsy, hectoring, conspiracy-minded message-novel meant to drive home the argument that American imperialism poses a grave danger to the new world order."

During the 2004 U.S. presidential election, le Carré joined Richard Dawkins and Antonia Fraser in a letter-writing campaign against George W. Bush, targeting a swing county in Ohio, whose voters, le Carré insisted, must reject an American president most "universally hated abroad." Predictably, the campaign by British activists did not provoke a positive response. The county went for Bush. Le Carré's controversies included a public spat with Salman Rushdie, whose challenge to Islamic beliefs le Carré regarded as asking for trouble: "Nobody has a God-given right to insult a great religion

and be published with impunity." Recent novels have targeted neoconservative American think tanks for their collusion with the Bush-Blair era and for "calling the shots and appointing the state of Israel as the purpose of all Middle Eastern and practically all global policy."

Le Carré has also been accused of anti-Semitism. Sisman describes him as an early supporter of Israel and admirer of Jews but one who later, after visiting Palestinian refugee camps, regretted the "grave injustice" done to Palestinians by the giving away of a "country that was not ours to give." A *New York Times Book Review* article, examining le Carré's *The Tailor of Panama*, complained about a Jewish character as "yet another literary avatar of Judas" and was distressed by reference to "rootless cosmopolitans." The implication "deeply wounded" le Carré, he recounted, as he had always been "fascinated, enchanted, drawn to and horrified by the plight of middle European Jews."

As a young man, le Carré was patriotic and "vaguely left-wing," he recalled. By the 1980s he was attending a pro-Sandinista rally at Piccadilly Theatre. In 2001 he inveighed against American policy as an expression of "gross corporate power cloaked in demagoguery," unfit to run the post-Cold War world, especially under George W. Bush. Le Carré was similarly hostile to Blair for perpetuating the Thatcherite legacy of privatization and abetting the "ecological ruin that George W is promising in the United States." He told one interviewer: "I thought Blair was lying when he denied he was a socialist. The worst thing I can say about him is that he was telling the truth." By 2005 le Carré suggested that "corporate power" with "god power and media power" was tilting Britain toward fascism.

After publication of his 1983 novel, *Little Drummer Girl*, about the Israeli assassination of a Palestinian terrorist, le Carré was invited to lunch with Prime Minister

Thatcher, whom he sometimes admired although he was always a Labour voter. He urged her to extend more sympathy to the Palestinians. She replied: "They were the people who trained the people who killed my friend Airey Neave," whom the IRA, PLO collaborators, had assassinated. The younger le Carré, who had been shocked by Philby's betrayal, might have understood Thatcher's resistance.

In his latest novel, *A Legacy of Spies*, le Carré returns to his old recipe of traditional intrigue, even reviving George Smiley and some Smiley associates, full of memories about their KGB nemesis Karla and other good times. At the end, an aged Smiley recalls how there had been a time when his work had been for England, but he was now a European and dreamt of "leading Europe out of her darkness towards a new age of reason." So evidently Smiley didn't vote for Brexit, as most other British elderly did.

Le Carré's work no longer captivated me after I entered adulthood and had my own professional experience in intelligence. His

specialty was the Cold War, and his classics remain from that era. Yet I remain grateful for his influence, his later political ramblings aside. The earlier Smiley, devoted public servant to England, remains a trusted hero.

Whether or not Smiley was truly a stand-in for le Carré's execrable father, he did represent the old England, the old Anglo-American special relationship and old Western civilization, united against totalitarianism on behalf of the remaining shadows of the old Christendom. Religion is overtly absent from le Carré's stories and apparently from his life. But one trusted mentor on whom he apparently based Smiley in part was an Oxford professor and Anglican clergyman who apparently never tried directly to influence le Carré religiously. So perhaps Smiley also represents the verities of biblical faith, which le Carré doesn't fully embrace but still possibly admires from afar.

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