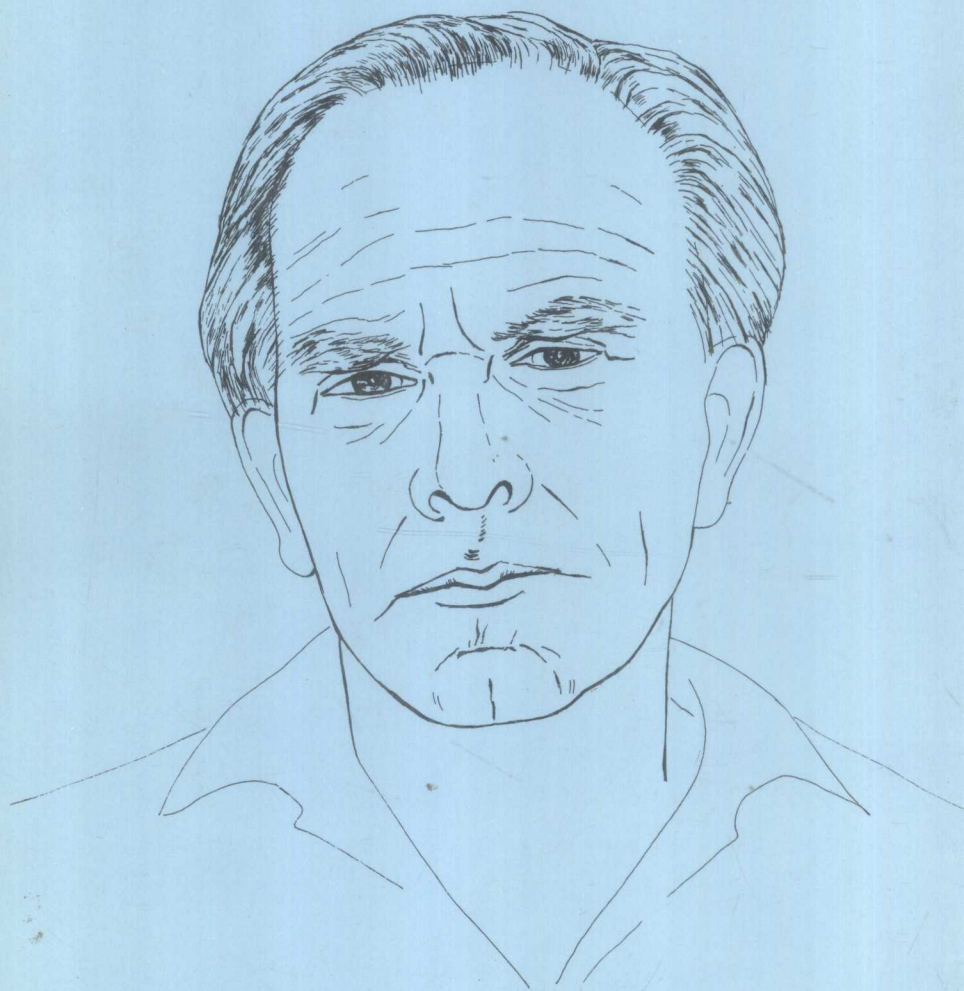


THE QUEST FOR LE CARRÉ



edited by

ALAN BOLD

Critical Studies Series

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VISION PRESS · LONDON

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS · NEW YORK

Vision Press Ltd.
Fulham Wharf
Townmead Road
London SW6 2SB

and

St. Martin's Press, Inc.
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN (UK) 0 85478 266 9

ISBN (US) 0 312 02419 3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Quest for le Carré.

(Critical studies)

1. Le Carré, John, 1931- —Criticism and
interpretation. 2. Spy stories, English—History
and criticism. I. Bold, Alan Norman, 1943-

II. Series: Critical Studies series.

PR6062. E33Z83 1988 823'.914 88-18208

ISBN 0-312-02419-3 (St. Martin's Press)

© 1988 by Vision Press Ltd.
First published in the U.S.A. 1988

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Printed and bound in Great Britain at
The University Printing House, Oxford.
Phototypeset by Galleon Photosetting,
Ipswich, Suffolk.
MCMLXXXVIII

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Acknowledgements

Quotations from the works of John le Carré are reprinted by permission of John Farquharson Ltd., on behalf of John le Carré: the kind co-operation of George Greenfield, director of John Farquharson Ltd., is acknowledged.

The edited extract from Melvyn Bragg's interview with John le Carré—first transmitted on the I.T.V. network on 27 March 1983—is published by permission of The South Bank Show, London Weekend Television plc.

'The Hippocratic Smile', which originally appeared in *The Poetics of Murder* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), edited by Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe, is reprinted by permission of Glenn W. Most.

Introduction

by ALAN BOLD

John le Carré is that rarity, a bestselling novelist who has also won acclaim for the aesthetic quality of his writing: television and film versions of his novels have made him a household name; literary critics have seen in his work a profound analysis of the moral relativism of the western world. Graham Greene and Hemingway, both influences on le Carré's prose style, enjoyed comparable commercial and critical success but the combination eluded, to his chagrin, Somerset Maugham. Significantly, le Carré feels that Maugham, involved with the Secret Service during the First World War, was a 'feeble [agent]', which did not prevent him from dramatizing himself as the seen-it-all observer of the great game'.¹ Le Carré himself referees the great game with immense skill in his writing, always alert to the foul play attempted by both sides—but then, circumstantial and internal textual evidence suggests, he has been a player in his time, and not a feeble one. Just possibly, like his fictional counterpart Magnus Pym, in *A Perfect Spy* (1986), he was once 'king-pin of the Czecho operation and of several other little shows in Eastern Europe besides'.² Le Carré is not saying; apart from a few hints he lets his fiction speak for itself and it deals in dissimulation.

To the general public le Carré is synonymous with spying though his work is more varied than his popular reputation, as the creator of George Smiley, indicates. His eleven novels include a brilliant work of detection (*A Murder of Quality*), a melancholy account of the cynical standards of cold warriors (*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*), an experimental portrait of an artist (*The Naïve and Sentimental Lover*), a chilling portrayal of political rôle-playing (*The Little Drummer Girl*), an autobiographical fiction (*A Perfect Spy*). Though the atmospheric world of

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le Carré is often bleak, his books are suffused with a subtle sense of humour. In *Smiley's People* (1980) the ritual of making oneself inconspicuous is made ridiculous by its ostentatious routine:

Inside the main cabin of the steamer, the boy looked a nobody. He kept his eyes lowered; *avoid eye contact*, the General had ordered. . . . He waited awkwardly, trying to look calm. . . . Clumsily, the boy groped his way between the seats, making for the stern. . . . They suspect me of being a terrorist, thought the boy. There was engine oil on his hands and he wished he'd washed it off. Perhaps it's on my face as well. *Be blank*, the General had said. *Efface yourself. Neither smile nor frown. Be normal.* . . . He felt a fool. The oranges were too conspicuous by far. Why on earth should an unshaven young man in a track suit be carrying a basket of oranges and yesterday's newspaper? The whole boat must have noticed him!³

Le Carré is acutely conscious of the absurd behaviour that passes as normal in the secret world. Later in the same novel, Smiley has a large whisky in a pub called—wait for it—the Sherlock Holmes.⁴

By any standards, secret or otherwise, le Carré has had a spectacular career. Not only is he one of the most marketable novelists of his, or any other, time, but, for a man who shuns personal publicity almost as much as Graham Greene, he has become an obsession of the media. Four of his novels have been turned into feature films—*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* in 1965, *Call for the Dead* (as *The Deadly Affair*) in 1966, *The Looking-Glass War* in 1969, *The Little Drummer Girl* in 1984—and two (*Tinker Tailor* in 1979 and *Smiley's People* in 1981) have been screened as series by B.B.C. Television. He has been interviewed in the popular and quality press, pilloried by *Private Eye* (who disapproved of the reverential reviews of *The Little Drummer Girl*), parodied by Tom Stoppard (whose radio play *The Dog It Was That Died* hilariously recreates the intellectual confusion of double agents), patronized by some unlikely people. Kim Philby, the most celebrated of Soviet agents, found *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963) sophisticated, if basically implausible. Margaret Thatcher, possibly unaware that le Carré is a professed socialist, thinks le Carré compulsive reading and names *The Little Drummer Girl* (1983) as her favourite spy novel.

One of the reasons for le Carré's unshakeable status as the

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literary master of espionage is his apparent ability to anticipate the headlines. *Tinker Tailor* was serialized by the B.B.C. in the same year that Andrew Boyle's *The Climate of Treason* (1979) drew attention to a Fourth Man in the Burgess–Maclean–Philby spy ring. While Smiley (played to perfection by Alec Guinness) unmasked the fictional mole 'Gerald' as Bill Haydon, Boyle provided details about the real mole he code-named 'Maurice'. *Private Eye* drew the obvious conclusion and identified 'Maurice' as Sir Anthony Blunt, former Surveyor of the Royal Pictures and still Adviser of the Queen's Pictures and Drawings. On 15 November 1979 Prime Minister Thatcher made a statement in the House of Commons, naming Blunt as a man who had recruited for the Russians in the 1930s and passed information to them during the Second World War. The expanded edition of *The Climate of Treason* declared that 'the real-life Blunt story put into the shade John le Carré's television fiction *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*.'⁵ Not so: the public were even more convinced that le Carré was a novelist who made fiction from fact, who had impeccable inside information about espionage.

There is an amusing confirmation of the public perception of le Carré as the supreme authority on spies and spying. In 1987 *Spycatcher*, a book banned by the British government, was published in the U.S.A. Written by Peter Wright, a former Assistant Director of MI5, it told of covert plans to assassinate Nasser and to overthrow the Wilson government. As soon as the book was available in the U.S.A. transatlantic travellers bought copies and brought them back to Britain with impunity, thus increasing the embarrassment of a government that had taken legal steps to prevent newspapers from carrying extracts of Wright's book. Both the B.B.C. and I.T.N. reporters were on hand to record the responses of those who might have enjoyed an in-flight perusal of *Spycatcher*. The best comment came from the individual who, when asked about *Spycatcher*, enquired 'Is it the latest le Carré?' Say the word 'spy' and the public will connect it with the name of le Carré.

Born David John Moore Cornwell in Poole, Dorset, in 1931, he had a difficult, not to say painfully complicated, childhood. When he was 6 his mother abandoned the family—'just sort of

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vanished'⁶—leaving him with deep feelings of guilt. The preparatory schoolboy Bill Roach, in *Tinker Tailor*, is partly made in the image of young David Cornwell:

Coming from a broken home Roach was also a natural watcher. . . . In work and play he considered himself seriously inadequate. . . . He blamed himself very much for these shortcomings but most of all he blamed himself for the break-up of his parents' marriage, which he should have seen coming and taken steps to prevent. He even wondered whether he was more directly responsible, whether for instance he was abnormally wicked or divisive or slothful, and that his bad character had wrought the rift.⁷

Seeking a refuge from his domestic predicament, le Carré retreated into a fantasy world in which he was an agent and his father was in the Secret Service. What he did not know, as he passed through various preparatory schools then Sherborne Public School, was that his father Ronnie Cornwell—the Rick Pym of *A Perfect Spy*—was a consummate conman who had served a term in prison for his sins. Le Carré was 18 when he discovered what his father had been up to in the past and by then he was studying German at Berne University. Betrayal and deception, his central themes, have an obvious biographical basis in the agonizing absence of his mother and the painful presence of his father.

While at Berne, le Carré immersed himself in German literature, language and philosophy. Perhaps—again the mysterious le Carré attracts speculation—he was recruited into the Secret Service in Berne because, like Magnus Pym, he was the right type:

Short back and sides, speaks the King's English, decent linguist, good country public school. A games player, understands discipline. Not an arty chap, certainly not one of your over-intellectual types. Level-headed, one of us. Comfortably off but not too grand—how typical that you [Jack Brotherhood] never bothered to check Rick [= Ronnie Cornwell] out.⁸

After Berne, le Carré did his National Service with the Intelligence Corps in Austria from 1949–51, a period that witnessed the defection of Burgess and Maclean to the Soviet Union and made the security service suspicious, for the first time, of

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Anthony Blunt, then publicly established as Director of the Courtauld Institute but privately engaged in his work as a mole who had burrowed deep into the foundations of the British establishment. In Austria le Carré's intelligence work was, he insists, limited to helping an interrogation unit persuade individuals to cross the Czechoslovakian border so they could be tapped as sources of information.

In 1952 le Carré went to Lincoln College, Oxford, to study German but had to leave at the end of his second year when his father was declared bankrupt. He did a year's teaching, returned to Lincoln College on a scholarship, married Ann Sharp, and graduated, in 1956, with a first-class degree. He taught German for two years at Eton, the favourite public school of the British establishment, and left to enter the Foreign Office. At this time, so the consensus of rumour goes, le Carré served in MI5 under Maxwell Knight. Whatever the precise details are, le Carré has emphasized the chaotic condition of Britain's security services:

It is an irony I shall enjoy for the rest of my life that I, who was looking for the impossible, should have entered the intelligence community at a time when it was so wracked with self-doubt that it was practically inert. Of all the vintage years of betrayal the spies have given us since the war, mine, I like to think, will be relished longest. The director general of MI5, Sir Roger Hollis, was under suspicion of espionage inside his own house. . . . Its sister service, MI6, was still stretched out on the psychiatrist's couch trying to admit what MI5, and other friends as well, had been telling it for so long: that Kim Philby, once an heir apparent to its post of chief, was now and always had been a Russian spy.⁹

In 1961, the year he was posted to the British Embassy in Bonn as second secretary, le Carré published his first novel, *Call for the Dead*, featuring George Smiley of the security service—the Circus (because based in Cambridge Circus). In 1963, the year Philby was exposed as Third Man in the Soviet spy ring, le Carré published *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, one of his finest works and popular enough to enable him to resign from the Foreign Office. About this time le Carré met another successful writer, the Scot, James Kennaway, whose first novel, *Tunes of Glory*, had been published in 1956 and who had written stylish screenplays for *Tunes* (1960) and *The Mind Benders* (1963).

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Le Carré was impressed by Kennaway and attracted to his wife Susan.

Susan Kennaway has discussed the relationship between herself, Kennaway and le Carré in *The Kennaway Papers* (1981) in which she tells how her husband met a writer called David who had recently published a very successful novel; when *The Kennaway Papers* was published journalists were not slow to identify David as David Cornwell. Writing to Susan, Kennaway recorded his opinion of le Carré's character: 'I'm truly amazed by David. Believe me, he didn't get there by luck. The head is strong and the heart a much hunted one.'¹⁰ The two men went to Paris, in August 1964, for discussions on a film based on *The Looking-Glass War* (dedicated to Kennaway and scheduled for publication in 1965). There were some problems with director Karel Reisz who resented Kennaway's presence; there was also, as Kennaway admitted, a good deal of late-night drinking. In November, le Carré came to stay with the Kennaways in London and Susan fell in love with him, as she acknowledges in *The Kennaway Papers*:

James [did not anticipate] that I would actually fall in love with David. To complicate matters further I still loved James. I believe also that David fell in love with me and I know now that James and David loved each other in the way that David and Jonathan were brothers. . . . [David and I] had arrived at the same point at the same time and what followed was inevitable. I never considered the rights or wrongs, it was just like coming home.¹¹

Kennaway reacted hysterically to the affair, creating a scene that ended with him in tears at the Haus am Berg, a villa at Zell-am-See, the skiing resort south of Salzburg. Susan knew then that the affair was over. Kennaway recreated the triangular relationship in *Some Gorgeous Accident* (1967) in which he appears as James Link, a scheming Irish-American war photographer who falls in love with Susie Steinberg, a fashion editor with a successful magazine. Susie is, of course, Susan Kennaway whose affair is recreated as the character comes into contact with Richard David Fiddes, a doctor modelled on le Carré. Link's self-destructive personality is contrasted with the positive appeal of his rival, for Fiddes is sleek, charming and assured.

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Kennaway died in a car crash in 1968, at the age of 40, but survived through his books and the verbal portrait le Carré created in *The Naïve and Sentimental Lover*. After *A Small Town in Germany* (1968) le Carré temporarily deserted Smiley and the Circus to write his portrait of an erratic artist. Published in 1971, the year of le Carré's divorce from Ann (he subsequently married Jane Eustace, an editor with Hodder & Stoughton), *The Naïve and Sentimental Lover* was savaged by the critics who expected another spy novel. Drawing on Schiller's distinction between 'naïve' (spontaneous) and 'sentimental' (contemplative), le Carré arranges his novel contrapuntally, initially contrasting the respectable businessman Aldo Cassidy with the outrageous, boozy novelist Shamus. Shamus is evidently modelled on Kennaway: he has written a brilliant first novel, *The Moon by Day*, which has been filmed, and he has an attractive wife, Helen, with whom Cassidy falls in love. The Kennaways liked to think of themselves as the Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald of the British literary scene and le Carré vividly shows them playing games designed to make them the focus of any gathering.

Aldo Cassidy is a satirical self-portrait of le Carré. He has been to Sherborne and Oxford, like his creator; however, he has no gift for writing though he does attempt a spy novel since 'The spy vogue was high at that time, and he thought he might get in on the market.'¹² Le Carré describes Cassidy thus:

In both build and looks he might have served as an architectural prototype for the middle-class Englishman privately educated between the wars; one who had felt the wind of battle but never the fire of it. Heavy at the waist, short in the leg, a squire always in the making, he possessed those doggedly boyish features, at once mature and retarded, which still convey a dying hope that his pleasures may be paid for by his parents.¹³

Ironically, le Carré gradually reverses the rôles of the protagonists in the novel. Shamus, insistently artistic, is actually dependent on the domesticity he claims to despise. Cassidy, who earns his living by manufacturing accessories for prams, is genuinely romantic by nature. For him, Helen is not so much a woman as the embodiment of a romantic ideal:

Her breasts, which despite his simulated myopia he could not help remarking, were unsupported, and trembled delicately as

she moved. Her hips were similarly unbound, and with each balanced stride a white knee, smooth as marble, peeped demurely through the division of her robe.¹⁴

The novel has been neglected mainly because so few have appreciated its comic qualities, its use of parody and reversal: Cassidy is a frustrated writer of romantic novels, while Shamus is a 'failed businessman'¹⁵; the eternal triangle is reduced to the confusion of three individuals pushed into a tight corner together. Le Carré uses modernist techniques complete with streams of consciousness and interior monologues to dissolve reality into dreams. Shamus, the literary lion, even misquotes Joyce:

'The heaventree of stars,' said Shamus. 'Hung with humid nightree fruit.'

'That's beautiful,' said Cassidy reverently.

'Joyce. Old girl friend. Can't get her out of my hair. Hey lover. Watch out for frostbite for God's sake. Nip it off in a jiffy, I warn you.'¹⁶

That exchange takes place while the two men are having a 'pee-break' at the edge of a moat, so perhaps Shamus can be forgiven for forgetting that what Joyce actually wrote was 'The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit.'¹⁷

The Naïve and Sentimental Lover is not so drastically different from the classic le Carré works as has been supposed. In human terms it implies that opposites not only attract: they interact. Cassidy and Shamus see in each other attributes they have suppressed for practical purposes. Similarly in *The Quest for Karla* trilogy—*Tinker Tailor*, *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977), *Smiley's People*—the two antagonists, Smiley and Karla, are two sides of the same coin even if one is burnished, the other tarnished. Smiley undoubtedly has the nobler motives, but he sadly accepts a system that uses atrocious means for a supposedly idealistic end. Early on, in *A Murder of Quality* (1962), 'It was a peculiarity of Smiley's character that throughout the whole of his clandestine work he had never managed to reconcile the means to the end.'¹⁸ However, at the end of *The Honourable Schoolboy*, Peter Guillam quotes Smiley as saying (admittedly in his blue period):

So far as I can ever remember of my youth, I chose the secret road because it seemed to lead straightest and furthest toward