

Intelligence in Public Media

John le Carré: The Biography

Adam Sisman (Bloomsbury, 2015), 652 pp., endnotes, bibliography, photos, index.

Reviewed by Hayden Peake

The term “literature,” when not referring to the enduring quality of the narrative, denotes the books, writings, and media presentations devoted to a particular subject. In the case of espionage, the literature is of singular importance since, for most, knowledge of the subject is acquired vicariously through reading or viewing stories. Serious espionage literature leaves the reader feeling the story is closer to reality than fantasy. John le Carré is a master of this genre, and Adam Sisman’s biography of David Cornwell, le Carré’s creator, conveys an elegant portrait of the author and his creations.

Sisman was not the first to consider writing a biography of le Carré. Robert Harris, author of *Enigma*, had been commissioned to do so some 20 years earlier but for various reasons did not and encouraged Sisman to undertake the task. Sisman, already an accomplished biographer of historians A.J.P. Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper^a among others, wrote to Cornwell suggesting that Cornwell be his next subject. After reading the Trevor-Roper book, Cornwell met with Sisman to discuss details.

Writing a biography of a living subject, especially one who has worked to “keep the public at a distance” (xiv) presents unusual challenges. Foremost among them is securing the subject’s cooperation, under conditions imposed by the biographer. Sisman asked for unrestricted access to Cornwell’s papers; interviews with him, his friends and colleagues; and freedom to write without censorship from the subject. Cornwell agreed, “without restraints” (xv), though he proved reluctant to discuss his service with MI5 and MI6 since he was “bound, legally and morally, not to reveal the nature of my work” in these areas. (xvii) Sisman includes these topics using other sources. This qualification aside, one might reasonably ask, why an already-famous author would consent to such scrutiny of his life? Sisman doesn’t answer that question

directly, but he does imply Cornwell may have been motivated by concern that a fair hearing be accorded his views on controversial matters others wrote about him over the course of his 50-year writing career.

While *John le Carré: The Biography* addresses the usual topics about David Cornwell’s life—family origins, education, military service, marriage, and career—Sisman shows how each influenced his writing and the le Carré image. Surprises emerge throughout. For example, Cornwell’s first book, *Call For The Dead*, was originally titled *A Clear Case of Suicide*. And since he was serving in MI6 at the time, it was submitted under the pseudonym “Jean Sanglas.” The publisher—less than enthusiastic—suggested instead either “Chuck Smith” or “Hank Brown,” (217) but Cornwell settled on le Carré (literally, “the square”). Over the years, Cornwell would offer a variety of reasons for his choice but ultimately admitted to Sisman that “none of them was true.” (xiv) *Call For The Dead* also introduced Cornwell’s most famous character, George Smiley, based on his MI5 superior, John Bingham, according to Bingham’s wife and others.^b “She was mistaken,” says Cornwell, as were the others. Like many of his characters, “he was no more than a component.” (208)

Sisman’s account of Cornwell’s path to le Carré reveals many attributes of a well-to-do young Englishman in search of a calling. Public school, study in Europe, national service, Oxford, and his recruitments, first by MI5 and then MI6, are the principal milestones. But this period of his life was anything but normal, and Sisman’s telling is at once stimulating and gloomily captivating. Cornwell’s mother deserted the family when he was five. During “the sixteen hugless years that followed” (25) he and his brother Anthony endured life with his outrageously flamboyant, scheming, unashamed, and charming, con man father, Ronnie. Sisman examines the curious relationship Cornwell worked to maintain with his parents

a. Adam Sisman, *A.J.P. Taylor: A Biography* (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994); *Hugh Trevor-Roper: A Biography* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010).

b. See Michael Jago, *The Man Who Was George Smiley: The Life of John Bingham* (Biteback Publishing, 2013).

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even after both remarried. But it was his unrepentant father who would appear frequently in his life, unexpectedly asking for help, that created a constant dissonance. Ronnie pursued his investment schemes during trips to Ascot, dinners at the Savoy, gatherings at the home he couldn't afford but somehow did, and unsuccessful attempts to become a member of Parliament. He associated with the aristocracy and those of potential influence in the business world, interrupted only by frequent arrests and occasional time in prison for fraud. An embarrassed Cornwell often encountered traces of his father's unpaid obligations in Britain and Europe. Ronnie would become the central figure in le Carré's autobiographical novel, *A Perfect Spy*.

Despite his stressful home life, Cornwell did well at prep school and then public school at Sherborne. Sisman notes that he was "successful in his academic work and on the sports field (he was captain of the junior cricket team), witty, popular with his schoolmates, a charismatic individual." (50) He also wrote poetry, acted in school plays, was an accomplished cartoonist, and made many friends he encountered later in life who would become models for characters in his novels (Sisman provides many examples). At the same time, his tutor realized at the end of the 1948 term that Cornwell was unhappy. Sisman mentions several reasons Cornwell gave. Corporeal punishment and daily regimentation were factors, but his home life, Sisman concludes with ample justification, was the major contributor: in addition to his father's other parenting shortcomings, Ronnie enlisted his son's help in schemes "to diddle widows out of their pensions." (66) Cornwell dropped out of Sherborne after his third year and went to Switzerland to improve his German, though the move didn't entirely free him from his father's schemes. Here and throughout the book, Sisman interrupts the fascinating chronology of Cornwell's emerging talents with Ronnie's escapades and the toxic influence they had on his son's life.

Cornwell's arrival in Switzerland began a seminal period in his life. It was while studying and skiing in Bern that Cornwell had his first contact with the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6). When asked by a diplomat from the embassy, he willingly agreed to report on any student or other contact who had communist views.

This was also the time when Cornwell began to write. On a visit home recuperating from the mumps, he showed

a short story to a German friend who commented, "Promise me you will never write a book." (80) And it was in Bern that Cornwell met Ann. They would marry after Cornwell returned to do his military service. With his fluency in German and French, he was commissioned a second lieutenant and served in Germany, getting his first taste of clandestine operations. While there, he was again approached by an MI6 officer, who expressed interest in him, but only after he had obtained a degree.

Intrigued by the prospect, Cornwell entered Lincoln College, Oxford, in October 1952, reading modern languages—not law, as his father had wished. He was a popular student and made friends easily. One of them arranged an interview with George Leggett, a German linguist and senior MI5 counterespionage officer. Leggett recruited Cornwell to "adopt a left-wing persona . . . [and] infiltrate left-wing groups" and report back on the members activities. (126) The recent defection of Burgess and Maclean had contributed to an increase in surveillance of communist organizations and Cornwell undertook his tasking with gusto, joining the Socialist Club at Oxford. Sisman notes the moral paradox associated with choosing "loyalty to his country over loyalty to his friends. The dilemma continued to trouble him; it was a theme that would recur repeatedly in his fiction." (135)

After two years at Oxford, his father's behavior once again became too much of a burden, and Cornwell left to teach at a public school. But he was soon unhappy there and returned to Oxford, where he completed his degree and married Ann. When no offer from MI5 or MI6 materialized, Cornwell accepted a teaching position at Eton College in 1956. While there, latent thoughts of becoming a writer surfaced, but his first book submission was rejected. Once again, the Eton life proved unsatisfying and Cornwell wrote to MI5 about his desire "to come inside." (184) Officially, he left Eton in 1958 for the Foreign Office, though the rumor among the boys was that "Corny is going to be a spy." (185)

Cornwell's MI5 service was transformative. Sisman reviews Cornwell's training and early agent handling assignments, giving readers a glimpse into the professional background Cornwell used to convey the sense of reality common to the le Carré books. On one point, however, Sisman is mistaken: after noting Cornwell's transfer to the MI5 section "responsible for agent-running," he adds the clarification that the term "agent" as used in Britain dif-

fers from its use in the United States, where “in America an ‘agent’ is used to mean an intelligence officer,” (199) while in Britain it refers to someone recruited to provide information. Of course, the terms are used in the same sense in both Britain and the United States, and most intelligence services use the term in that sense, as well.

During Cornwell’s two years in MI5, day-to-day challenges were less stimulating than anticipated. Originally tasked with vetting former communists, Cornwell eventually characterized MI5 as “a dead-end sort of place” (209), and in the spring of 1960 he applied for a transfer to MI6. But his MI5 time had not been wasted and, in fact, launched his writing career. Sisman hints that his motivation may have come in part from one of his bosses, John Bingham, a superb case officer who also wrote espionage novels (though in his case, under his own name). By mid-year when he joined the sister service, Cornwell had completed his first two novels and begun his third, provisionally titled *The Carcass of the Lion*, which was published as *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*.

After an account of Cornwell’s MI6 training and his assignment in Germany, the focus of *John le Carré: The Biography* shifts to Cornwell’s writings and the consequences of his rapid rise to fame, and its accompanying financial security. Foremost among these consequences—after the demands of Inland Revenue and the Foreign Office’s reluctant approval to publish—was the revelation in the *Sunday Times* of le Carré’s true identity, followed shortly by the MI6 decision that he must resign. (254) Sisman describes how Cornwell’s newfound celebrity required dealing with literary agents and editors and meeting the publisher’s demands for more books. These topics become major issues in the book. Cornwell would ultimately write 23 novels. Sisman discusses the origins of each novel, its plot evolution, and the writing techniques Cornwell developed, all while he attempted to cope with persistent complications imposed on his life by extended family and by the self-inflicted difficulties that arose from repeated extramarital liaisons, which ultimately contributed to his divorce.

Sisman’s account of the events surrounding the publishing of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* in 1963 illustrates how Cornwell achieved financial security. His parsimonious publisher, Victor Gollancz, paid an advance of £150, as he had for his two previous books.

Public interest was spurred by the imprisonment of MI6 officer and KGB spy George Blake (1962), the Profumo Affair in London (1963), and the recent defection of Kim Philby (1963), and the book quickly became the most widely read and “most talked about book of the season.” (248) By 1964, it had reached its 20th impression. Then an American publisher, Coward-McCann offered \$4,500 for the US rights and Paramount Pictures bought the film rights for £7,500. Cornwell’s financial future was secured and he bought a new car. Paramount wanted Burt Lancaster to play Alec Leamas as a Canadian protagonist of the story. Cornwell preferred keeping it British with Trevor Howard or Peter Finch in the role. Richard Burton got the part.

Cornwell’s approach to writing began with research and handwritten drafts on legal pads. An example is Sisman’s account of one of le Carré’s best espionage books, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*—originally entitled *The Reluctant Autumn of George Smiley*. It explores the moral ambiguities of counterespionage, and Cornwell considered it “the most difficult book I ever wrote.” (315) And due to a contract stipulation that allowed Paramount to control use of the Smiley character, the first draft did not include Smiley at all. Legal action corrected the problem.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy was originally conceived as the first of up to 15 books about the struggle between “the Circus [Cornwell’s term for MI6 London headquarters] and the KGB,” (352) between Smiley and his KGB nemesis, Karla. Ultimately, Cornwell would settle for three rather than 15: two became TV miniseries (*Tinker, Tailor* and *Smiley’s People*), and Sisman tells how Alec Guinness became the epitome of Smiley and—Cornwell’s friend. It was in these works that terms like “honey trap” and “mole” became household words and were even “adopted by intelligence professionals.” (357)

As befitting bestselling books—and le Carré novels met that test—reviewers found them fair game. Sisman includes illustrative quotes as he comments on the reviews of each book. Most were positive, but even *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* had its negative critics. A *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer wrote, “The spy thriller in this case just does not seem the right vehicle for him, and his prose style is too thin as fuel.” (294) “David was very hurt by the criticism,” writes Sisman. (295) Even though positive reviews far outnumbered the negative, “they failed to soothe the wounds he received from

the bad.” (295) The wounds deepened when he moved from the espionage genre as in the semi-autobiographical *The Naïve and Sentimental Lover*, which engendered comments like “a disastrous failure,” “the narrative limps along,” “sporadically dazzling, but running to fat.” American David Remnick found *The Night Manager* “a *Goldfinger* for grownups.” (496) Some who fancied themselves guardians of “authentic literature” were even more vindictive and suggested he “stick to the ‘genre’ novel and not aspire to ‘real’ literature,” a topic Sisman explores at some length. (345)

Professional reviewers were not the only ones to comment on the le Carré novels. Some of his former intelligence service colleagues also expressed disparaging views, though not publicly. (296) Official Soviet criticism, writes Sisman, with its distinctive political aroma, publicly “demonized him for ‘elevating the spy to the status of a hero in the Cold War.’” (452) The unofficial reality was selectively different. On a research trip to the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev era, in preparation for his next book—tentatively entitled *The Biggest Toys in the World* and then *Thinking Like a Hero*, ultimately published as *Russia House*—Cornwell attended a reception arranged by Sir Bryan Cartledge, the British ambassador to Moscow with whom Cornwell had once served as an officer cadet. Numerous KGB officers were invited and “they all came . . . [and] were all le Carré fans despite the difficulty of obtaining his books in Russia.” (455) Years later Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov would admit he was also an admirer, adding that he identified “with George Smiley,” not Karla. (505) It was during this trip that Cornwell pointedly declined an invitation to meet Kim Philby.

Sisman’s analysis of the evolution of *Russia House* further illuminates Cornwell’s writing techniques. On his

return from Moscow, Cornwell tore up his first draft and began again to produce the final version. It resulted in a first printing of 350,000 copies. (Initial printings of his first books had been only 3,000 copies.)

Despite a bout with prostate cancer, David Cornwell would go on to write 14 books after *Russian House*. The latest le Carré book, *The Pigeon Tunnel*—a memoir with a title he had contemplated for *Smiley’s People* among others—was published in September 2016. Several novels were made into films in which Cornwell plays cameo roles. The stories they tell reflect Cornwell’s attempts to comment on the topics of the day—terrorism, corporate greed, the Mafia—though several have espionage-related themes. Sisman discusses them all, adding many anecdotes about the famous people with whom Cornwell came into contact.

By the 1980s Cornwell was one of Britain’s premier authors with comfortable homes in Cornwall and London, though still something of an iconoclast. He declined a CBE (Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) and a knighthood with the comment, “Titles do disagreeable things to people . . . I prefer to stay outside the tent.” (587) He also asked that his name be withdrawn from the shortlist for the Man Booker Prize for fiction, noting, “I do not compete for literary prizes.” (588) He did accept an honorary doctorate from Oxford.

Cornwell, who turns 85 in October is still writing, and Sisman asks, rhetorically, why he perseveres; *John le Carré: The Biography* itself strongly suggests the writing continues because of the personal satisfaction it provides. Thus, Sisman considers his book a work-in-progress, to be updated in future editions. For now, readers can enjoy his stimulating biography of an author with a gift for creating haunting phrases and enduring characters, whose subtle pen has contributed so much to literary world.

