From cold warrior to Tory radical

THE release of the Anglo-French film version of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* late last year revived interest in John le Carré’s fifty-year career as a novelist (and the release next year of Australian director Justin Kurzel’s version of his latest novel, *Our Kind of Traitor*, not to mention Adam Sisman’s forthcoming biography, will undoubtedly fuel that interest). Based on the seventh of his twenty-two novels, *Tinker Tailor* evokes the bleak landscape of Cold War espionage that le Carré has explored over the decades with such sharp-eyed precision. To capitalise on the film’s release, his publisher reissued *Smiley Versus Karla*, the epic trilogy of which *Tinker Tailor* was the first part. That trilogy crowned a body of work that has given him pre-eminence in the spy thriller genre.

There is a gritty realism in le Carré’s world of spooks that straddles the boundaries between documentary observation and literary imagination, posing hard questions about how his people navigate the perilous shoals between trust and loyalty, deception and deceit, all the while struggling to find meaning and certainty in a sea of doubt and danger. It is fiction with a serious political undertow that draws the reader into a chilling contemplation of lives adrift on great tides of political ideology that are utterly indifferent to individual conscience.

Novelists and spies live by fiction. Whether it’s by telling stories to engage readers or using fictional identities to deceive their enemies, occasional spies like W. Somerset Maugham, part-timers like Graham Greene or professionals like David Cornwell (John le Carré’s real name) of necessity become masters in the art of verisimilitude. Their parallel professions demand analytical acuity with precise attention to detail, the emotional intelligence to sustain an empathetic imagination, a generous measure of mendacity and the guile to craft a plausible “legend.” In applying these to his own experience of the Cold War, le Carré has done more than anyone else to lift spy fiction from the derring-do fantasies of Ian Fleming into the realm of serious literature.

While it is difficult to fathom the myriad public and private obsessions that animate novelists, in the case of David Cornwell there were at least two incidents that propelled his literary persona John le Carré to the forefront of the spy genre. As a cold warrior employed by the British intelligence services, he was, along with many colleagues, outed to the KGB by Kim Philby, compromising his work at the British embassy in Bonn. In the afterword to a recent edition of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, he explained the other incident. “It was the Berlin Wall that got me going… we stared back at the weasel faces of the brainwashed little thugs who guarded the Kremlin’s latest battlement… [T]he Wall was perfect theatre as well as a perfect symbol of the monstrosity of ideology gone mad.” That same passion drove his subsequent novels until, as he had implicitly predicted in *The Russia House* (1989), written after a visit to Gorbachev’s thawing USSR, the Wall came down.

Although his first two books, *Call for the Dead* (1961) and *A Murder of Quality* (1962) are engaging excursions into his shadowy world, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963) established his reputation for sharply observed, gritty stories of deceit and betrayal. In short, finely etched chapters he draws the attentive reader into an evocative narrative of private desperation and professional duplicity driven by the hard-eyed political imperatives of co-dependent superpower brutality. The moral ambiguities embedded in his stories give le Carré’s books an overarching thematic coherence. How is the West to defend its liberties without resort to Soviet methods? How are George Smiley and his people at the Circus to recover from the depredations wrought by the mole Bill Haydon, at the behest of Karla in Moscow Centre? Are they, in that great battle of will and wits, to succumb to a debilitating slide into moral equivalence born of operational necessity? Rather than resolve the ethical dilemmas in a self-righteous allegorical homily, le Carré poses sharply focused questions at the end of his novels. At the last chilling moment, Alec Leamas, so long isolated in his world of multiple deceits, finally decides to come in from the cold. As George Smiley’s people complete their quest for Karla, a pointedly discarded cigarette lighter symbolises the exquisite tangle of Smiley’s professional and private obsessions. Le Carré concludes his most recent novel, *Our Kind of Traitor* (2010), with an incident that poses an upwardly inflected question to which we think we know the answer, but cannot be absolutely sure. It is a mark of respect for his readers that he only suggests answers to such questions, preferring to engage rather than instruct.
Le Carré draws readers into his world of intrigue through a distinctive narrative structure that casts us as privileged observers of small vignettes that slowly build a bigger picture. The novels typically begin with introductory sketches of the protagonists at significant moments in a journey towards their part in the larger narrative. In *The Russia House* we follow the dog-eared, slightly dipso Barley Blair from his familiar routine at a Moscow book fair to the centre of an operation that promises to expose the Soviet Union's crumbling military infrastructure and, by implication, its whole system. We meet *The Honourable Schoolboy* Jerry Westerby first as a reclusive, rather decrepit exile in an Italian village. From there we follow him into a labyrinthine saga that spans Hong Kong, South East Asia and Britain, ending when he is shot by a British agent as the CIA, aided by compliant bureaucrats in British Intelligence, capture a prized Chinese defector. Much of the tension in the novels is sustained by the slow building of narrative momentum that grows to a dramatic climax as le Carré’s lens steadily zooms back to a now complete picture of a landscape littered with the debris of scruffy idealism and perfidious ambition.

There is a forensic precision in the lean, taut prose as he dissects meetings, interrogations and the private exchanges of his protagonists. Even his sex scenes are evocatively minimalist. Of Peter Guillam and Molly Meakin’s long-anticipated tryst he simply observes, “She surprised him with a refined and joyous carnality.” He has a finely tuned ear for simple but suggestive dialogue and resonant imaginings where readers can hear the harmonics for themselves. The novels are replete with scenes where apparently simple exchanges conjure up a subtext of byzantine motives, personal ambitions and bureaucratic chicanery. Indeed, one of le Carré’s great strengths is his capacity to lay bare the venal banality of bureaucratic politics beneath the veneer of decorous patriotism. The sprawling saga of George Smiley’s dogged pursuit of redemption after the fall of the Circus is littered with passages that chronicle this very process. In quiet back rooms and closed committees shadowy civil service mandarins do battle in a confusion of pomposity and gravitas that mocks the sorry fate of many an active agent. There are few writers who can scrutinise with such chilling clarity the wood-panelled killing fields of Whitehall sub-committees and working parties. It is in places like these, just as much as on the ground, that le Carré explores the ethical ambivalence and moral relativism of Cold War espionage, where your own side can be as lethal as your ostensible adversary and it is often difficult to know which is which. Perhaps that is the point, that deceit is systemic not partisan. Lurking beneath that is the larger, unasked epistemological question of how it is possible to know anything to be true.

WHEN the Soviet Union disintegrated it seemed that le Carré might have lost his raison d’être, but he disagreed. “If an era is dead, the genre faces a long and boisterous renaissance… The spy writer can turn to almost any corner of the globe, knowing for a certainty that the spooks, arms dealers and phony humanitarians will be there before him.” Even before the Cold War ended he ventured into another long-running conflict in the Middle East. The story of *The Little Drummer Girl* (1983) centres on Charlie, a pro-Palestinian English actress who is seduced, emotionally and politically, by Joseph, a Mossad operative, into an elaborate plot to kill Khalil, a leading figure in the Palestinian resistance. Their plan eventually succeeds but Charlie’s deep ambivalence over the politics of it pushes her to a breakdown, and a conflicted but disillusioned Joseph comes to her aid. Personifying the terrible dilemmas inherent in that conflict, they walk away together into the unknown. In doing so they register a recurring theme in le Carré’s work; how personal relationships and common decencies can be disfigured by power politics and ossified ideology.

Although his settings have become more peripatetic in subsequent novels, he has stuck to his metier. In *Our Game* (1995) Cranmer pursues his larcenous ex-agent and friend Pettifer who has stolen both his mistress and millions from the Russian secret service to support the Ingush independence struggle in the Caucasus. Following a litany of heroic folly and hard-eyed bastardry the venture fails and it all ends badly for the idealist Pettifer whose fate, for le Carré, only serves to confirm the hollow hypocrisy of the West’s posturing about national self-determination in the post–Cold War world. *The Tailor of Panama* (1996), an instructive satire on the veracity of “intelligence” written in homage to Graham Greene, has the dissembling tailor Harry Pendel trapped in a self-inflicted, escalating deception of British and American spy agencies who are impelled to the point of disaster by their anxiety over future control of the Canal. *The Tailor* is a rare example of le Carré’s exploring the dimensions of deceit through gently humorous satire.

As the bipolar certitudes of the Cold War adversaries dissolved, le Carré’s focus shifted to the clandestine
alignances between mendacious governments, brutally acquisitive corporations and international criminal organisations. He has explored in forensic detail the shift from a tussle between liberty and tyranny to the anarchy of unrestrained, amoral power in a chaotic global capitalism. All the while, his heroically hapless protagonists are crushed by its inexorable machinations. After his wife is murdered when she discovers recklessly injurious drug trials being conducted on Kenyan villagers, Justin Quayle – the “constant gardener” in le Carré’s 2001 novel of the same name – unravels a convoluted conspiracy involving a pharmaceutical company, a compliant aid organisation, a corrupt regulatory agency and compromised British bureaucrats. In full knowledge of the systemic evil that killed his wife Tessa, he returns to Kenya calmly determined to await his fate and join her in death. In The Mission Song (2006) Salvo, a talented, illegitimate son of a Catholic missionary in the Congo becomes a much sought-after interpreter who is employed by the British Ministry of Defence to translate at a secret meeting between Western financiers and East Congolese warlords to engineer regime change supposedly towards a more liberal democracy. Having discovered that the syndicate of financiers is only interested in establishing a puppet government so it can exploit the region’s mineral resources, Salvo and his lover Hannah attempt to stop the process. Although the plot fails for other reasons, he is stripped of British citizenship and awaits deportation to the Congo to rejoin Hannah. As ever, those who would enter this morass of greed and brutality are isolated or destroyed as many of their lives chart a tragic course from passionate innocence to impotent worldliness.

Our Kind of Traitor is cut from the same political template as most of his post–Cold War novels. It begins in his customary way with the main characters presented in an apparently commonplace setting. Perry, an Oxford tutor and accomplished amateur tennis player, is on holidays at a resort in Antigua with his lawyer girlfriend Gail. He is challenged to a tennis match by another guest, Dima, a stocky, bullish Russian accompanied by his extended family and an entourage of ominous minders. After some preliminary circumspection, it becomes clear that Dima is a senior Russian mafia operative involved in money laundering for the brotherhood. He has had a deadly falling out with his associates and wants to seek anonymous asylum for his family in exchange for information about the criminal networks that have enmeshed themselves in capital markets. The sums are so large that financial institutions, regulatory agencies and governments are secretly complicit in the laundering for fear that public exposure might imperil not only them but also an already fragile global financial system. Dima wants Perry to broker the deal with British intelligence. Gail, meanwhile, begins to develop a trusting relationship with the family, especially the girls, who are traumatised by the family’s violent history.

Perry makes contact, initially with Luke, a junior diplomat sidelined for minor indiscretions who in turn introduces him to his “handler,” Hector, a crusty Cold Warrior clinging to his superannuated certitudes in the face of more contemporary realists now running the secret service. Hector’s problem in “telling truth to power” is that he doesn’t trust the powerful, or the relativist, post-modern world of murky political contingency that they occupy. In deciding what to do about Dima’s offer, the debates between Hector and one of those superiors, Matlock, are the occasion for le Carré to present an instructive dialogue on the way that “intelligence” has been prostituted to sordid political purposes. In Hector’s view, speaking for le Carré, governments and their agencies no longer have a political centre of gravity, nor any interest in finding a moral compass. Indeed, they have become part of the problem, as have the intelligence services. Despite doubts on all sides, a deal is struck. Le Carré leaves it to us, the privileged observers, to come to our own conclusions about what happens in the end, but we know that the nefarious network of criminal brotherhoods, money launderers, financial institutions, government officials and intelligence agencies was ultimately responsible.

APPEARING as David Cornwell on the US television program Democracy Now on 11 October 2010, le Carré explained the political views that informed his most recent novels. The whole point of writing, he suggested, is to engage readers with an entertaining story that has a real world foundation. Of Our Kind of Traitor, he said, “So, money laundering is not some distant fantasy. It’s actually how you handle the profits of extortion, tax evasion, criminal conspiracy and huge quantities of drug money.” Once in the system it gets blended with the nefarious nest eggs of corrupt dictators and is circulated through leading financial institutions into mainstream money markets. Bankers, regulators, governments, even intelligence agencies are complicit in this. Referring to The Constant Gardener, he deplored the way pharmaceutical companies ruthlessly manipulate the development, testing and marketing of their drugs. The Mission Song has a message about how rapacious multinationals can corrupt and devastate resource-rich countries like the Congo.
In his catalogue of crimes against civilised standards Cornwell has a special place for Tony Blair who, at the bidding of his US allies, went to war in Iraq and justified it by suborning legitimate intelligence. Blair made it all the worse by cloaking his mendacity in the garb of unctuous religiosity. All this was enough to drive Cornwell to join the millions of others on the streets to demonstrate against the war. Although, on some matters, he has joined them in common cause, that does not mean he had shifted over to the left. “I’m not suggesting we make some sudden lurch into socialism; that isn’t the case at all. I think it’s more to do with the exercise of individual conscience.” This is the precise issue that has troubled so many of his novels’ leading characters. In many ways, it is a central theme in all his writing, the individual struggling against overweening powers.

As David Cornwell, and several of John le Carré’s characters, rail against a corrupt and corrosive global capitalism and its accomplices, we can hear distant echoes of an older voice. Some of the things that Cornwell and le Carré’s characters say are reminiscent of William Cobbett’s tirades against early capitalist relations displacing ancient reciprocities, “stockjobbers” corrupting markets in the City of London, and pusillanimous governments betraying the interests of decent common folk of good conscience. After some fifty years of making a living exploring the multitude of ways in which good, courageous people can be disfigured or destroyed by the systemic corruption of civilised values, Cornwell has steadily shifted his position from Cold Warrior to Tory Radical. He told his Democracy Now interviewers that he is finished with public appearances and will return to his Cornwall cliff-top to write more novels. More power to his pen.