

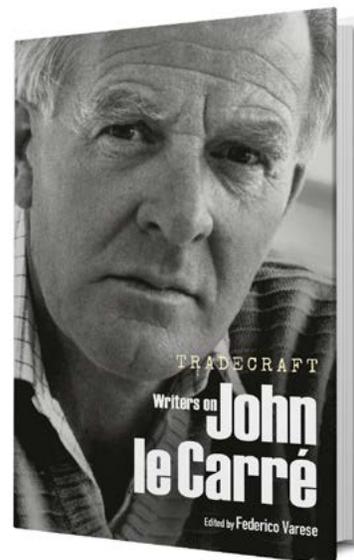
intelligence in public media

Tradecraft

Writers on John le Carré

Reviewed by Dr. David Robarge

Author: Federico Varese
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This eclectic collection of essays offers personal perspectives from authors of varied backgrounds on their experiences working with John le Carré (true name David Cornwell) in very different situations. A companion volume to the exhibit of le Carré's papers at the Bodleian Library at Oxford University (he attended Lincoln College there), *Tradecraft* comprises several categories. Some describe his research trips, the locales where some of his novels are set, and the gradual geographic expansion of their scope. Others discuss his collaboration with an academic; the process of developing screen adaptations of his memoir and one of his novels; perceptions of his novels by the Soviets and Russians; and the polemical features of some of his later works. Lastly, one of le Carré's sons explains why he decided to take up his father's legacy and craft his own le Carré-esque novel.

Overall, *Tradecraft* accomplishes its purpose of giving insights into the methods le Carré used to craft his works and how a novelist can employ history and social geography as a grounding for the development of fictional plots and characters. As with many anthologies, the quality of

the essays varies, but nearly all of them provide new views on previously unexamined aspects of le Carré's personal and writing lives.

The volume's editor, Federico Varese, is an Italian academic based in France and England, who has written books on the Russian Mafia. As a doctoral student at Oxford in the 1990s, he assisted le Carré with the novel *Our Game*, about irredentist intrigues in the Russian-controlled Caucasus region just after the end of the Cold War. He became involved more deeply with le Carré's own examination of the Russian Mafia, *Our Kind of Traitor*. One of le Carré's sons, Simon Cornwell, describes Varese as "the perfect collaborator, someone who not only knew the world of which he spoke in unrivaled depth but could also anticipate the avenues that would be of most interest to an author of fiction, offering up connections and anecdotes that from a narrow academic perspective were surely irrelevant but that to a novelist were gold." (viii)

Varese introduces the collection by focusing on three themes that most of the other essays at least touch on:

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“the way David went about collecting information, how the evidence collected is used for the purpose of creating an artistic truth, and how he depicts human motivations in subtle ways that echo the most advanced thinking in the social sciences.” (3) Along with interspersing memories of le Carré and his wife, Jane, Varese notes the importance le Carré placed on traveling to the geographic settings of his novels—notably after getting caught using an out-of-date guidebook to craft a scene in one of them—and his skill at interviewing local residents to add color and texture to his stories. Recounting his own conversations with le Carré, Varese delves into the methodological differences between a scholar’s pursuit of accuracy and a writer’s search for realism; one seeks factuality and objectivity, the other immerses himself in made-up people living through credible but unreal events. “When he went into the field, David was many people; he was constantly accompanied by the fictional characters taking shape in his head”—yet “Everything that came from David’s pen should be interpreted as an artistic truth, no more and no less.” (16–17)

Varese ends his introduction with a touching remembrance of le Carré’s memorial service in October 2021:

Halfway through the event, extracts of the yet-to-be-released film The Pigeon Tunnel [a documentary about le Carré based on his memoir of the same title that would be released in 2023] were shown to the audience, sitting in religious silence. We heard David talking about his craft with unusual candour. At one point he whispered, with typical circumspection and modesty, what seemed to be a confession: “I dare hardly use the claim, but I’ll make it here. I am an artist.” (25)

In the first essay after the introduction, “David Cornwell and the Hopeless Uncertainties of History,” Errol Morris, the director of *The Pigeon Tunnel* and many other documentaries, picks up on one of Varese’s points when he discusses perceptions of truth and the respective roles of the documentarian and the author of historical fiction.^a Morris first asserts that “David’s

view of truth is very close to mine. Of course, there’s such a thing as truth. In any historical event, we’re trying to find out what the underlying reality might be.” But then he goes on to state the historian’s perpetual quandary:

That there is a truth of the matter underlying history doesn’t mean that we can ever find it out. There’s so much arrayed against the discovery of an underlying reality. People lie. People are self-deceived. People are confused. People forget. Documents are lost. The context that gives meaning to the documents is lost. And so on. (37)

Or, as Varese concisely puts it in his introduction to Morris’s chapter, “history does not come to us already narrated but is told differently by different people.” (30) Morris closes with this apt observation about le Carré’s tradecraft:

In many ways, David was a documentarian. To write his books, he submerged himself in history and culture. He went to the places he was writing about. He became friendly with people he was depicting either directly or indirectly. There is an observational element in virtually everything he did. His work—the fictional universe he built—is the product of pure mind in combination with extensive investigation and empirical observation. It’s something that we don’t necessarily associate with novel writing but it’s a very important thread in his work.(38)

That “observational element” in le Carré’s novels is the subject of two essays with slightly different focuses. Author Lawrence Osborne looks at how well le Carré captured the geography and atmosphere of Phnom Penh and Hong Kong in his eighth book, *The Honourable Schoolboy*, set largely in Southeast Asia. It was the first novel le Carré based on research on site: “I adopted the guise of a field reporter to garner my experiences and information.” In Osborne’s judgment—he wrote novels based in both cities—le Carré’s depictions are “exact and true.” (58) Osborne notes that le Carré adopts different tones in describing the two cities: “the writing [about Phnom Penh] somehow does not seem as deeply felt as le Carré’s

a. See this author’s review of *The Pigeon Tunnel* in *Studies in Intelligence* 61, no. 1 (March 2017).

depictions of British Hong Kong. It is rapid-fire, hectic ... all a bit rushed somehow and taken in as from a distance.... It's as if the city le Carré really longed for and found and loves was Hong Kong." (61)

Why? "Hong Kong is where le Carré's eye really did do the talking. It was also where his social background enabled him to make subtle sense of the colony's power structure. At its core, *The Honourable Schoolboy* is a novel about—and a love letter to—Hong Kong." (67) One can see le Carré embodied in the protagonist, Jerry Westerby, a journalist who occasionally runs operational errands for the Circus, as he "wanders by himself through the city, discovering it as if for the first time." (71) During his travels around the region, le Carré met two real-life personalities who became models for figures in the novel: British journalist Peter Simms ("Westerby's incessant cries of 'sport' and 'supah!' certainly derive from Simms") and Richard Hughes ("perhaps the ultimate in the genre of the spy-correspondent ... slightly Falstaffian ... a raconteur's raconteur") on whom the memorable William "Old" Craw probably is based. (69)

Journalist Michela Wrong, author of an excellent book on Congo, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster*, accompanied le Carré on a trip to Rwanda and Congo (Kinsasha) while he was researching *The Mission Song*. He had asked her to look over a draft of the novel, she provided extensive suggestions, and he then offered to pay her to join him on the excursion. Ground truth in the story would be important because, Wrong writes,

For the kind of person who wanted to be intelligently entertained rather than worthily educated, who scanned bookshop tables rather than scouring the shelves behind—in other words, much of the Western public—the only book they would ever read about contemporary Congo was likely to be The Mission Song.... And, as time had passed, the impetus to pass from the imagined to the concrete by visiting the DRC had become overwhelming. (104–105)

During the trip, Wrong worried about le Carré being kidnapped, him making major changes to a book already being typeset, and her having to serve

as his photographer because he hated traveling with professional ones. She watched le Carré's tradecraft in action through his interviewing technique, his rambles around the cities they visited, and his empathizing with his surroundings and their residents. "For a reporter, a good day on a research trip means four or five interviews and a notebook full of quotes. With David I had to relearn my modus operandi.... Mostly David wanted to wander, in what seemed an almost aimless fashion. The fewer meetings ... the happier he seemed." (114) The most moving scene in Wrong's essay involves le Carré's visit to a school where the exhumed and preserved bodies of hundreds of genocide victims were displayed as vivid testimony to the horrors that had been committed during the tribal civil war in 1994. "That day in Murambi, surrounded by contorted, spindly white statues, the English gent looked shattered. You could see the shock on his face. 'I just kept thinking "Maybe there was something I could have done,"' he said; 'Where was I, what was I doing when this happened?'" (113)

Echoing a theme that recurs several times in the anthology, Wrong's encounter with le Carré gave her "a glimpse of the creative chasm that lies between the recorder of fact that I still was at the time—fixated with dates, names, places—and the spinner of fantasy who knows that a sudden spark of emotional insight is worth a hundred interviews. I won't forget that fountain pen and that diminutive notebook, which at the end of a day of meetings, drives and interviews only ever contained a few comments and the occasional quote." (118)

After reading *The Mission Song*, Wrong found it somewhat off-key and not one of le Carré's best books because he did not fully escape his Cold War mindset.

David had spent so much time living and working in Communist Europe that the mannerisms, moods and foibles of its intelligence services and the citizens they monitored came to him almost effortlessly. He'd not had time to develop those instincts in Africa and as a result his writing about the continent always seems to me too careful, too polite. (118)

In contrast to that critical appraisal, literary scholars Elleke Boehmer and Steven Matthews find commonalities between le Carré's pre- and post-Cold War works that place them in the category of "world literature"—"writing that circulates across national borders both through translation and through the exchange of influence and techniques" and "whose themes resonate beyond their contexts of origin." (44) "His fiction was fundamentally *world-making* ... in that he gave memorable expression to the experiences of betrayal that defined people's lives in the second half of the twentieth century," whether he was writing about espionage, terrorism, illicit finance, crime, business corruption, or the demise of empire. As his geographic sweep expands, le Carré remains "watchful of how singular motifs and images capture larger swirling global concerns, and how relationships of both empathy and enmity between individual characters can mirror national and international disruptions." (45)

As a complement to that examination of le Carré's "world making," exiled Russian investigative journalist Andrew Soldatov looks at how le Carré's Cold War oeuvre was received by the West's main intelligence adversary of the time, the KGB, and then by its successors after the Soviet Union collapsed. Le Carré, he writes, "has an impressive list of fans in the top echelons of the KGB," which initially seems odd because only two of le Carré's novels—*A Murder of Quality* and *A Small Town in Germany*—were published in the Soviet Union before 1991, and the former is more a detective story than an espionage tale. What the KGB used le Carré for was "to promote its own narrative about Soviet and Russian intelligence agencies." (87) During the Cold War, they were depicted internally as morally superior to their Western counterparts. As censorship loosened under *glasnost* and more spy novels became accessible, Soviet intelligence leaders needed to devise a new image to protect themselves and their services from the fate that befell East Germany's Stasi. The new narrative used selective and decontextualized quotes and paraphrases from le Carré's books to demonstrate that Soviet intelligence

was "professional, intelligent and rational." (102) Its operatives were open-minded because they had spent most of their time in the West, and therefore could not have taken part in persecutions of dissenters in the Soviet Union and Soviet intelligence had abandoned the practice of assassinations abroad decades before. "The striking conclusion was that Soviet intelligence officers were in the same business as their Western counterparts, that Soviet intelligence operatives and Western spies were essentially colleagues since they use a similar set of tools and methods."^a (97) This use of le Carré's name to justify actions by the Soviet and Russian governments continued well into the 20th century.

Many of le Carré's books have been adapted to film and television, and Oscar-winning scriptwriter and director Hossein Amini details his involvement with the author in moving *Our Kind of Traitor* from page to screen. They worked diligently for three straight days at le Carré's home near Land's End in Cornwall. Le Carré was profoundly aware of the differences between prose and screenplay from prior experience:

David had gone over my script, was graciously complimentary, then told me that I'd been too faithful to the book. He was a film lover and had witnessed so many adaptations of his novels that he knew slavish fidelity would lead to cinematic disaster. He took off his author's hat and became a filmmaker. We decided that the structure of the novel, with its multiple timelines, would be too confusing in a two-hour film, so we agreed on a linear structure and a single timeline. Similarly, multiple points of view often work better in a novel than in film. In a book, you can return to a previous chapter or reread a passage to reorient yourself, but in a film there's no time to stop. If an audience loses focus for a minute, you've lost them for good. (127)

They worked through the structure, voices, and details in an "exhausting and exacting but invaluable"

a. This positive claim of moral and operational equivalence ironically echoes the cynical observation that Control, le Carré's fictional head of the Circus, makes in *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold*: "We do disagreeable things so that ordinary people here and elsewhere can sleep safely in their beds at night.... Of course, we occasionally do very wicked things.... I would say that since the war, our methods—ours and those of the opposition—have become much the same. I mean you can't be less ruthless than the opposition simply because your government's *policy* is benevolent, can you now?... That would *never* do." (Coward-McCann, 1963, 23–24.)

manner and produced, in Amini's estimation, the best draft in the whole process of adaptation. (129) Successful versions followed, and then it came time to choose a director. The profound changes in the script that the first director made to location and characters were unacceptable to le Carré, so a second director entered the scene. To Amini and le Carré, the result was even worse. At the first screening, Amini recalls:

Nothing was shot as I had imagined it in my head.... I was reeling at first, then I lost concentration.... When the screening was over I felt utterly despondent. I've directed myself and know how lonely it can be, so I put on my bravest face for Susanna [White]. Directors are never more paranoid than after a first screening, so she saw straight through my attempt to hide my despair. David didn't even bother to hide his. We both sat staring into space, looking devastated, as Susanna bravely asked us what we thought of the cut. (133)

The sum of Amini's recollection is that creating film adaptations entails a complex mix of art within art within art: a novel transformed into a screenplay and then a movie:

There is no right or wrong way to adapt a book, but the same book can be turned into a dozen completely different screenplays, and those scripts can be turned into a dozen different films. The process of adaptation of a film involves far more people than just the screenwriter. The director, actors, producers, cinematographer, designers, composer, editor and others interpret the source material in their own way and put their individual stamp on the finished film. (134)

Andrea Ruggeri's chapter titled "The World Has Gone Mad: International Relations in the Work of John le Carré" looks at him less as a writer and more as a committed intellectual. The title is a play on a piece he wrote in the *Sunday Times* in January 2003, "The United States of America Has Gone Mad," in which he denounces the Bush administration's Global War on Terror and the militarization of US foreign policy, notably toward Iraq. During those years, le Carré

became a caustic public critic of US and UK handling of international relations, attending protests and writing denunciations in the press. He did not confine himself to recent events in his reproaches. In an article in *The Nation* in April 2001, le Carré asserted:

The Cold War provided the perfect excuse for Western governments to plunder and exploit the Third World in the name of freedom; to rig its elections, bribe its politicians, appoint its tyrants, and, by every sophisticated means of persuasion and interference, stunt the emergence of young democracies in the name of democracy.^a

Le Carré made a similar, equally bitter observation in his novel *Our Game*, written several years earlier:

All through the Cold War it was our Western boast that we defended the underdog against the bully. The boast was a bloody lie. Again and again during the Cold War and after it, the West made common cause with the bully in favour of what we call stability, to the despair of the very people we claimed to be protecting. (80)

Ruggeri's essay is the least useful contribution to the anthology, however. Its shortcoming is that he uses le Carré's polemical writings as a platform for expressing his agreement with them and making political arguments to substantiate them. He regularly veers from discussing le Carré's work into contemplations about the woeful state of international affairs and the hypocrisy of powerful nations, sometimes expressed in political science jargon. Ruggeri would have better served the purposes of the collection by more deeply analyzing le Carré's political beliefs as an influence on his literary output.

Tradecraft ends fittingly with a sometimes poignant reflection by one of le Carré's four sons, Nicholas Cornwell, who explains why he, a popular writer in a very different genre under the pen name Nick Harkaway, decided to partially follow in his father's footsteps and craft an espionage novel featuring le Carré's best-known character, George Smiley. The preposition in the essay's title—"Writing with My Father"—is significant because, as Cornwell notes,

a. John le Carré, "In Place of Nations," *The Nation*, April 9, 2001.

Tradecraft

“We are not—were not—the same. We could not have the same voice, did not have the same experiences, the same competences, the same horrors. Why should I sit in his chair and wear his shoes?” Yet he did just that, first by putting the final touches on le Carré’s last, posthumously published novel, *Silverview* (“an act of filial piety for me and a comparatively easy task”) (143–44), and then, responding to the encouragement of his brother Simon, writing what became *Karla’s Choice*, a chronological gap-filler between *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*.^a

Cornwell addresses a challenge that can confront other writers who assume the authorial responsibilities of a literary estate: what style to adopt, their own or their predecessors? In this instance, le Carré complicated matters by shifting his style in the earlier novels from that of the Civil Service he worked for—“stark, simple and declarative, with bursts of emotion derived from event rather than self-examination”—to one with “flourish and ornamentation ... Byzantine and immersive.” Cornwell says the answer seemed obvious: “The

stark noir style ... is not the Smiley we are looking for. Tonally the book must be closer to *Tinker Tailor*. ... I love the sheer, clean prose of *The Spy Who*, but I also love the more reflective *Tinker Tailor*, and I can hear my father—and Smiley—more clearly in the latter.” (148–49)

In *Karla’s Choice*, Cornwell, who grew up surrounded by the atmosphere of the Smiley-Karla conflict, listening to audiobooks of his father’s novels and hearing him and his mother discuss the latest draft, has “manage[d] the same trick” as creators of the film versions: “to steal Smiley from his creator and make him just enough my own.” And “to open the gates of the Circus so that other writers can, with due deference and due fearlessness, tell new stories into this same world.” (150) In the meantime, Cornwell says that his novel “comes from the place where sons and fathers share space in one another’s heads” and touchingly ends his contribution with a declaration addressed to his father who was with him as he wrote: “This book is a gift: to me—and to you.” (150–51) ■

a. See this author’s review of *Karla’s Choice* in *Studies in Intelligence* 69, no. 1 (March 2025).