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## A Convivial Excursion, “Blending experience with imagination”—A Review of *The Pigeon Tunnel*

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**“Le Carré takes us on a selective and convivial excursion into most of the eight decades-plus of his life, providing along the way many engaging insights.”**

***The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories from My Life*, by John Le Carré**  
(Viking, 2016), 310 pp.

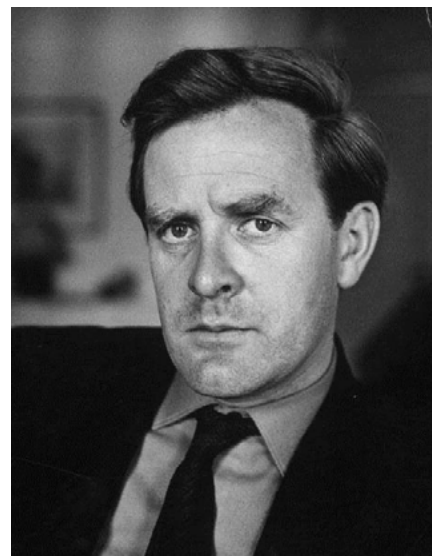
John le Carré has produced a memoir-of-sorts, *The Pigeon Tunnel*, that is a timely companion to Adam Sisman’s excellent and comprehensive study of him published in 2015.<sup>a</sup> This ramble through Le Carré’s “perhaps...irresponsible” life (11) is not a full autobiography but instead a compilation of 38 illustrative vignettes, eight of them previously published in whole or in part, others composed earlier and set aside until now, varying widely in length, roughly in chronological order.

In these vignettes, Le Carré (true name David Cornwell) recounts experiences and travels, sketches personalities, some whimsically, some dramatically, and comments on the intelligence business and his role in it, the novelist’s craft, and what he has elsewhere called the British “social comedy.”<sup>b</sup> Throughout, he adopts a conversational tone, as if he were recounting the stories from an armchair in his Cornwall home,

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a. Reviewed by Hayden Peake in the September 2016 issue of *Studies in Intelligence*.

b. See the insightful interview with Le Carré that accompanies the DVD version of the BBC production of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. He worked for British Army intelligence in the early 1950s and MI5 and MI6 in the late 1950s and early 1960s.



John Carré pictured in 1967. Photo © Horst Tappe/LIFE Images Collection

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and his carefully constructed prose is variously evocative, humorous, sardonic, and self-deprecating. “These are true stories told from memory,” he tells us, but then adds, “Was there ever such a thing as *pure* memory? I doubt it.” With that caution, offered “after a lifetime of blending experience with imagination,” (6) Le Carré takes us on a selective and convivial excursion into most of the eight decades-plus of his life, providing along the way many engaging insights into the character of the world’s foremost creator of espionage fiction.

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**Le Carré states at the outset what will not be in *The Pigeon Tunnel*: rationalization of his personal shortcomings and revelations about his secret life.**

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***In and Out of the Shadows***

The book's odd title, which Le Carré says he often unsuccessfully proposed for his novels, derives from an unsettling scene he witnessed as a teenager with his disreputable father, Ronnie, who was on a gambling spree in Monte Carlo:

*Close by the old casino stood the sporting club, and at its base lay a stretch of lawn and a shooting range looking out to sea. Under the lawn ran small, parallel tunnels that emerged in a row at the sea's edge. Into them were inserted live pigeons that had been hatched and trapped on the casino roof. Their job was to flutter their way along the pitch-dark tunnel until they emerged in the Mediterranean sky as targets for well-lunched sporting gentlemen who were standing or lying in wait with their shotguns. Pigeons who were missed or merely winged then did what pigeons do. They returned to the place of their birth on the casino roof, where the same traps awaited them.*

"Quite why this image has haunted me for so long is something the reader is perhaps better able to judge than I am." (vii) Readers of Sisman's book or Le Carré's semi-autobiographical novel, *A Perfect Spy*, know how apt the metaphor is, for Le Carré, like the pigeons, has spent much of his life escaping from the psychological damage his dysfunctional parents, and especially Ron-

nie—"conman, fantasist, occasional jailbird" (255)—inflicted on him for nearly half his life. Le Carré sees his youth as a training ground for his stint with the British services and, it seems safe to say, his views about it afterward: "Spying did not introduce me to secrecy. Evasion and deception were the necessary weapons of my childhood. In adolescence we are all spies of a sort, but I was a veteran. When the secret world came to claim me, it felt like coming home." (23)

Le Carré states at the outset what will not be in *The Pigeon Tunnel*: rationalization of his personal shortcomings and revelations about his secret life. "I have been neither a model husband nor a model father and am not interested in appearing that way....Of my work for British Intelligence, performed mostly in Germany, I wish to add nothing to what is already reported by others, inaccurately, elsewhere." (11) He adheres to the first disclaimer, offering no ruminations on his relationships with his wives and children, but not the second, for he does recount several episodes from his handful of years with the services. He joined MI5 in 1956 at age 25 "with high expectations," but "when I entered their citadel ... I came smartly to earth."

*Spying on a decaying British Communist Party 25,000 strong that had to be held together by MI5 informants did not meet my aspirations. Neither did the double standards by which the Service nurtured its own. MI5, for better or worse, was the moral arbiter of the private*

*lives of Britain's civil servants and scientists.... Meanwhile, young spy hunters such as myself, thirsting for stronger fare, were ordered not to waste their time looking for Soviet controlled "illegals," since it was known on unassailable authority that no such spies were operating on British soil. Known to who, by whom, I never learned. (20, 21)*

After a few years, Le Carré decamped to MI6, and, soon after, the treacheries of George Blake and Kim Philby were exposed and left indelible marks on him, especially the latter's. "When I came to write *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, it was Kim Philby's murky lamp that lit my path." (22)

Le Carré was posted to West Germany and tells about encounters with ex-Nazis in the government, German official visitors to England he was assigned to shepherd, and a Soviet "diplomat" who might have been a potential defector or a dangle. His tour inspired one of his more underrated works, *A Small Town in Germany*, "which spared neither the British Embassy nor the provisional Bonn government" as he "contrived a conspiracy between British diplomats and West German officials which led to the death of an Embassy employee bent on exposing an inconvenient truth" (55-56) about the brittleness of democracy in that recently reconstructed but still fragile country. "Amid all the other preoccupations of my time in Bonn and later Hamburg, Germany's unconquered past refused to let me go." (31)

Le Carré resigned from MI6 in 1964, after *The Spy Who Came In*

from the Cold became an international bestseller, to devote himself to novel writing. Although he tried to deny he had worked in intelligence, his foreign service cover quickly eroded. Ever since, he has been amused at the reactions he evokes and the frequent attempts to tap his purported intelligence expertise or traffic in his presumed continuing connections with his former employers.

*One person refuses to trust me another inch, the next promotes me to Chief of the Secret Service and, over my protestations that I was only ever the lowest form of secret life, replies that I would say that, wouldn't I? After which, he proceeds to ply me with confidences I don't want, can't use and won't remember, on the mistaken assumption that I will pass them on to We Know Who. (9)*

### The Writer at Work

A sizable portion of *The Pigeon Tunnel* concerns Le Carré as a “literary defector”—what he calls the other former MI6 operatives-turned-writers such as Somerset Maugham, Compton Mackenzie, and Graham Greene. (17) Several chapters cover trips Le Carré made to reconnoiter the settings for projects he had underway. Careful research into the physical and cultural topography of his novel’s settings has been one of his hallmarks, especially in his later works. He admits the reason why: he made an uncorrectable mistake about Hong Kong’s transportation infrastructure in *The Honorable Schoolboy* because

**“The lesson I learned wasn’t just about research. It told me that in midlife I was getting fat and lazy and living off a fund of past experience that was running out.”**

*[t]o my everlasting shame, I had dared to write the passage here in Cornwall with the help of an outdated guidebook.... The lesson I learned wasn't just about research. It told me that in midlife I was getting fat and lazy and living off a fund of past experience that was running out. It was time to take on unfamiliar worlds. (70)*

He did so enthusiastically and profitably. On a visit to Cambodia after it fell to the Communists, he shared a shallow foxhole with *Washington Post* reporter H.D.S. Greenway while Khmer Rouge sharpshooters waited across the Mekong River. On another to the Middle East in 1982, just before the Israelis invaded Lebanon, he embraced and danced with Yasser Arafat (“the beard is not bristle, it’s silky fluff. It smells of Johnson’s baby powder.”) (90) Trips to Russia before and after the Cold War enabled him to see the Soviet Union in its decline and the new Russia after organized crime became rampant. In Panama, he “was looking for the sort of crooks, smooth talkers, and dirty deals that would brighten the life of an amoral English arms seller.” (193) In eastern Congo, he saw hundreds of preserved corpses of genocide victims carefully tended to by a local woman in a former secondary school. “When will you bury them?” “When they have done their work.” Their work as the proof that it had really happened.” (207–208)

On some of these travels, Le Carré ran across people who later appeared in his novels. A benefac-

trous of sick children in Cambodia became the humanitarian nemesis of Big Pharma in Africa in *The Constant Gardener*. The Russian gangster Dima in *Our Kind of Traitor* is just like the Dima of the same vocation Le Carré sought out on his visit to early 1990s Russia. On the same trip, he met a Chechen named Issa and later combined him with a Czech defector he knew before who had aspirations to be a doctor and created the émigré and unwitting terror suspect in *A Most Wanted Man*. He came across the intractable, pro-Palestinian, female terrorist in *The Secret Pilgrim* when he tried to interview a radicalized German activist in an Israeli prison. One of Le Carré’s most memorable characters, Alec Leamas from *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold*, grew out of an otherwise forgettable occurrence at a London airport:

*[A] stocky man in his forties plopped onto a barstool beside me, delved in his raincoat and poured a handful of loose change in half-a-dozen currencies onto the bar. With a fighter’s thick hands, he raked through the coins till he had enough of one currency. “Large Scotch,” he ordered. “No bloody ice.” It was all I ever heard him say, or so I now believe, but I fancied I caught a whiff of Irish in his voice. When his glass came, he ducked his lips to it in the practiced movement of a habitual drinker and emptied it in two gulps. Then he shuffled off, looking at nobody. For all I’ll ever know, he was*

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**“Out of the secret world I once knew I have tried to make a theater for the larger worlds we inhabit. First comes the imagining, then the search for the reality. Then back to the imagining, and to the desk where I’m sitting now.”**

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*a commercial traveler down on his luck. Whoever he was, he became my spy, Alec Leamas. (197)*

Other characters are modified or composite versions of people Le Carré knew in other ways. Probably the strangest case concerns journalist and operational stringer Jerry Westerby, who appears briefly in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and centrally in *The Honorable Schoolboy*. He was “loosely descended” from “an upper-class drifter of vaguely aristocratic origin whom my father had relieved of his family fortune.” Then, “in surely one of the eeriest encounters of my writing life,” at a Singapore hotel soon after the latter novel’s publication, Le Carré meets “not a pen-portrait but the man himself, right down to the huge cushioned hands and enormous shoulders.” He was a veteran British foreign correspondent who, just like Westerby, “was six foot three with sandy hair and a schoolboy grin, and a habit of barking *Supah!* when he fervently shook your hand in greeting.” (79)

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### Similar Professions

One of Le Carré’s friends, writer Michael Herr, has said that “David is a spy—the ultimate observer, the ultimate gather of data.”<sup>a</sup> Herr’s comment relates to a recurrent theme

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a. *Conversations with John le Carré*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and Judith S. Baughman (University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 94.

in *The Pigeon Tunnel*, which is the conflation of truth, memory, and imagination as Le Carré makes the transition from spy to novelist to autobiographer and which to him represents one of the inherent flaws of the intelligence enterprise.

*[W]hat is truth, and what is memory to a creative writer...? To the lawyer, truth is facts unadorned.... To the creative writer, fact is raw material, not his taskmaster but his instrument, and his job is to make it sing. Real truth lies, if anywhere, not in facts, but in nuance. (6)*

With Le Carré’s life comprising time in the conventional and clandestine worlds, along with his frequent and unwilling inclusion in his father’s tawdry *demimonde* that featured aspects of both, applying that fusion of roles to the intelligence business is natural for him.

*Out of the secret world I once knew I have tried to make a theater for the larger worlds we inhabit. First comes the imagining, then the search for the reality. Then back to the imagining, and to the desk where I’m sitting now.... Spying and novel writing are made for each other.... Born to lying, bred to it, trained to it by an industry that lies for a living, practiced in it as a novelist. As a maker of fictions, I invent versions of myself, never the real thing, if it exists. (12, 23, 272)*

To Le Carré, the spy is just another form of creative artist, living with dim half-truths and some outright fabrications. What he said about giving interviews might also apply to writing novels and, he would likely say, spying: “First, you invent yourself, then you get to believe your invention. That is not a process that is compatible with self-knowledge” (8-9)—including intelligence organizations, often shown in his novels as coming to believe in their own deceptions. Despite that tendency, they can still provide insights into the character of the nation they serve: “If you are a novelist struggling to explore a nation’s psyche, its Secret Service is not an unreasonable place to look” (19); as he observed elsewhere, intelligence professionals “are the infantry of our ideology.”<sup>b</sup>

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### Never Upstairs

On a few occasions in *The Pigeon Tunnel*, Le Carré—like Leamas, ever the lonely outsider—disparages the British social class system he grew up in and has so often criticized, although he does so here with a light touch. Earlier, he described himself as “a mix of traditions—son of a criminal, working-class kid, sent to a smart school, learned to speak proper”—in short, “fake gentry”<sup>c</sup>—and he advertises his estrangement from the traditional British order by eschew-

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b. *Ibid.*, 35. In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, Le Carré speaks similarly through Bill Haydon the mole, who “took it for granted that secret services were the only real measure of a nation’s political health, the only real expression of its subconscious.” (Knopf ed., 1980, 342.)

c. *Conversations*, 157, 65.

ing titles, official honors, and literary awards. He describes how in 1986 he listened to a lengthy soliloquy from Nicholas Elliott, Kim Philby's most loyal friend in MI6 who heard the turncoat admit his treachery before defecting to the Soviet Union in 1963. Le Carré calls Elliott's account "the cover story of his life" (178) and, with credit to Ben Macintyre's *A Spy Among Friends*, which tells how the British governing elite closed ranks to guard one of its own and itself, he concludes that "ever since Philby had come under suspicion, Elliott had fought tooth and nail to protect his closest friend and colleague. Only when the case against Philby could no longer be denied did Elliott exert himself to obtain a confession—and a partial one at best—from his old pal." (188) Although Le Carré graduated from Oxford and taught at Eton, one can detect his disdain for the public school/Oxbridge culture that bred the arch attitudes implicit in Elliott's remarks in this exchange they had:

"So what were your sanctions if he [Philby] didn't cooperate?  
 "What's that, old boy?  
 "Your sanctions, Nick, what you could threaten him with in the extreme case. Could you have him sandbagged, for instance, and flown to London?  
 "Nobody wanted him in London, old boy.  
 "Well, what about the ultimate sanction then—forgive me—could you have him killed, liquidated?  
 "My dear chap. One of us."  
 (180)

In another essay, Le Carré tells how, after finding the model for the title character in *The Tailor of*

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***"The legacy of that early immersion in things German is now pretty clear to me. It gave me my own patch of eclectic territory; it fed my incurable romanticism and my love of lyricism"***

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*Panama*, Harry Pendel, at a London haberdashery, "[a]ll I needed now was a decadent, well-born British rascal who could recruit my Pendel and use him to line his own pocket. But for anyone who has taught at Eton, as I had, there were candidates galore." (199)

Le Carré's early sense of alienation from the British upper and upper-middle classes led to his lifelong fascination with German literature and culture. He chanced upon them when he fled from an English public school to Bern, Switzerland, as a teenager: "It strikes me now that everything that happened later in life was the consequence of that one impulsive adolescent decision to get out of England by the fastest available route and embrace the German muse as a substitute mother." (3) He attributes his early intelligence work, his language studies at Oxford, his posting to West Germany, and his literary style to that brash act.

*The legacy of that early immersion in things German is now pretty clear to me. It gave me my own patch of eclectic territory; it fed my incurable romanticism and my love of lyricism.... And when I came to study the dramas of Goethe, Lenz, Schiller, Kleist, and Büchner, I discovered that I related equally to their classic austerity and to their neurotic excesses. The trick it seemed to me, was to disguise the one with the other. (4-5)*

Le Carré later infuses that element of his character into George Smiley: "Germany was his second nature, even his second soul. In his youth, her literature had been his passion and his discipline. He could put on her language like a uniform and speak with its boldness."<sup>a</sup> Le Carré's intellectual and cultural affinity for Germany has prompted him to see it as a touchstone for the Britain he has never comfortably fit into:

*We have long ceased to compare ourselves with Germany. Perhaps we no longer dare. Modern Germany's emergence as a self-confident, non-aggressive, democratic power—not to speak of the humanitarian example it has set—is a pill too bitter for many of us Brits to swallow. That is a sadness that I have regretted for far too long.*  
 (33)

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### ***From Page to Screen***

Fifteen of Le Carré's 23 novels have been made into movies or television series,<sup>b</sup> and some of the more

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a. Smiley's *People* (Penguin paperback ed., 2000), 221.

b. Movies: *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*; *The Deadly Affair*, an adaptation of *Call for the Dead*; *The Looking Glass War*; *The Little Drummer Girl*; *The Russia House*; *The Tailor of Panama*; *The Constant Gardener*; *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; *A Most Wanted Man*; and *Our Kind of Traitor*. Television series: *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; *Smiley's People*; *A Perfect*

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entertaining chapters in *The Pigeon Tunnel* deal with how they came to fruition. Le Carré did not always find the experience pleasurable, particularly the loss of control of his creative product. His first brush with that phenomenon was the casting of Richard Burton as Alec Leamas in *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold*. He had preferred Trevor Howard or Peter Finch (if the latter played English rather than Australian), but director Martin Ritt chose Burton, and their relationship grew so fraught that the film's completion came under risk. "Moviemaking is the enforced bonding of irreconcilable opposites," Le Carré noted. (218) Burton's drinking and Elizabeth Taylor's drop-bys to the set did not help, and the situation became so tense that Ritt had to summon Le Carré to placate the leading man, who was refusing to read his lines. "Richard needs a friend," Ritt told Le Carré. After a while at the studio, however, he concluded instead that Burton had plunged himself into the role of the book's protagonist.

*He was being Alec Leamas. And as Alec Leamas, he was a prowling solitary going to seed, his career had hit the buffers, and the only people he could talk to were strangers like me.*

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*Spy*; *A Murder of Quality*; and *The Night Manager*. Le Carré has appeared in five of them: *The Little Drummer Girl*; *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (movie); *A Most Wanted Man*; *Our Kind of Traitor*; and *The Night Manager*. Several have been reviewed in these pages.

*Though I scarcely realized it at the time, I was undergoing my initiation in the process of an actor plundering the darker regions of his life for the elements of the part he's about to play. And the first element you must plunder, if you are Alec Leamas going to seed, is solitude. Which in a word meant that as long as Burton was being Leamas, the entire Burton court was his avowed enemy. (222)*

Le Carré similarly observes the inveterate skill with which Alec Guinness immersed himself in the character of George Smiley in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and *Smiley's People*, studying and fashioning mannerisms and expressions with an eye toward both suppressing and emphasizing his own personality: "Watching him putting on an identity is like watching a man set out on a mission into enemy territory." (229) Le Carré recalls a luncheon he had with Guinness and Maurice Oldfield, the former chief of MI6, from whom the actor adopted some of the traits of his version of Smiley.

*Unable apparently to get enough of our departing guest, Guinness gazes fondly after him as he pounds off down the pavement: a small, vigorous gentleman of purpose, striding along with his umbrella thrust ahead of him as he disappears into the crowd.... It is a matter of entertainment history that Oldfield's suede boots ... and his rolled umbrella thrust forward to feel*

*out the path ahead became essential properties for Guinness' portrayal of George Smiley, old spy in a hurry. (15, 16)*

In another chapter mockingly titled "Lost Masterpieces," Le Carré describes instances when renowned directors' efforts to make movies out of his novels went nowhere. (He no doubt wishes that *The Little Drummer Girl* was one of them; its director, George Roy Hill, blames its shortcomings on the bad casting of Diane Keaton in the title role, and Le Carré does not disagree.) Approaches from Fritz Lang for *A Murder of Quality*, Sydney Pollack for *A Small Town in Germany* and *The Night Manager*, Francis Ford Coppola for *Our Game*, and Stanley Kubrick for *A Perfect Spy* never got past the initial phases for various reasons. Le Carré depicts the parallel universe those flamboyant celebrities abide in with adroit understatement.

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**Mordant Perspectives**

Scattered throughout *The Pigeon Tunnel* are trenchant observations about the intelligence business that carry a ring of truth—at least enough so from history that intelligence professionals would do well to be armed with rebuttals if they are confronted with them or similar ideas. For example:

*If your mission in life is to win over traitors to your cause, you can hardly complain when one of your own ... turns out to have been obtained by someone else. (22)*

*Nobody can do corporate rot more discreetly than the spies.*

*Nobody does better mission creep. Nobody knows better how to create an image of mysterious omniscience and hide behind it. Nobody does a better job of pretending to be a cut above a public that has no choice but to pay top price for second-rate intelligence whose lure lies in the gothic secrecy of its procurement rather than its intrinsic worth. (58)*

*Intelligence services, somebody clever said, are like the wiring in a house: the new owner moves in, he drops the switch, and it's the same old lights that come on again. (146)*

Other than repeating one German's observation that "the right side lost, but the wrong side won" the Cold War, Le Carré goes easy on the notion of the "moral equivalence" of East and West—at least on the operational level, where expediency rules, the work justifies itself, and success makes one good—that underlay many of his Cold War novels.<sup>a</sup> He also reins in his vituperative side, which came to the fore after 9/11, when he grew evermore aghast at what he considered Anglo-American overreach in the global war on terror. He declared in the *Times of London* in 2003 that "The United States Has Gone Mad" and participated in rallies and wrote articles denouncing the

a. In 1974, just after *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* was published, Le Carré lamented "one tragedy of our present age... the fact that we have been forced into a position where we have to adopt the methods of our aggressors. There seems no way around this. But it does raise the question of how long we can go on defending ourselves by these methods and remain a society worth defending." *Conversations*, 16.

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Labor government's collaboration with the United States in the war in Iraq, and his 2004 novel *Absolute Friends* is partly a diatribe against that invasion. In *The Pigeon Tunnel*, however, besides a swipe at James Angleton as a "delusional alcoholic" and a reference to "the days when the United States was supporting every narco-tyrant in the [Latin America] region in its fight against whatever passed for communism," he keeps his political pen in the drawer. (182, 194)

Le Carré closes *The Pigeon Tunnel* with a wry story that serves as a parable about the intelligence world and encapsulates his jaded view of its efficacy.<sup>b</sup> With the set-up title "The Last Official Secret," the chapter details how

*when I was a young and care-free spy, it was only natural that I should believe that the nation's hottest secrets were housed in a chipped green Chubb safe that was tucked away at the end of a labyrinth of dingy corridors on the top floor of 54 Broadway ... in the private office of the Chief of the Secret Service.... What on earth could it contain? I had heard that there existed documents so secret that they were*

b. "I entered it [the intelligence profession] in the spirit of John Buchan and left it in the spirit of Kafka," he said in 1993. "[W]hat espionage looks like now is what it always was: a side-show got up as major theater." *Ibid.*, 131, 130.

*only ever touched by the Chief himself.<sup>c</sup>*

When MI6 moves to new quarters, "after a debate at the highest levels, it is reluctantly ruled that the safe, however venerable, is no longer fit for purpose in our modern world. It will be opened.... So who's got the bloody key?" Nobody, it seems. "So did [Stewart] Menzies [head of the Service from 1939 to 1952] take the key with him? Was he buried with it?" A Service safecracker is summoned.

*With disconcerting speed, the lock yields. The burglar hauls back the creaking iron door. Like the treasure seekers Carter and Mace before the open tomb of Tutankhamun, the spectators crane their necks for a first glimpse of the marvels within. There are none. The safe is empty, bare, innocent of even the most mundane secret.*

The assembled, thinking that it is "a decoy safe, a dummy, a false grave, an outer bailey to protect an inner sanctum," send for a crowbar.

*The safe is gently prized from the wall. The most senior officer present peers behind it, gives out a muffled exclamation, gropes in the space between*

c. In *A Perfect Spy*, a chipped green file cabinet houses the secrets of Rick Pym's crooked existence and produces a comparable fascination in his son Magnus. The two characters are stand-ins for Le Carré's father and himself.

safe and wall, and extracts a very dusty, very thick, very old pair of grey trousers, with a label attached to them with a nappy pin. The typed inscription declares that these are the trousers worn by Rudolph Hess, Adolf Hitler's deputy, when he flew to Scotland to negotiate a separate peace with the Duke of Hamilton in the mistaken belief that the Duke shared his fascist views. Beneath the inscription runs a handwritten scrawl in the traditional green ink of the Chief: Please analyze because may give an idea of the state of the German textile industry. (304-07)



Le Carré (in gray) in a procession at Oxford University on 20 June 2012, when he and Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi (foreground) received honorary degrees. Another recipient, walking beside Le Carré, was Eliza Manningham-Buller, a former chief of MI5. Photo © Ben Stansall/AFP/Getty Images

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### ***His Last Bow?***

Le Carré has written 23 novels dating to 1961, along with many non-fiction essays and some short stories, and *The Pigeon Tunnel* may well be his last work. Now 84 years old, he reportedly put aside working on his

last novel—supposedly based on a short story by Joseph Conrad, one of his favorite writers<sup>a</sup>—to prepare it, possibly inspired by Susman's sometimes critical narrative. "A recently

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a. Robert Lance Snyder, *John le Carré's Post-Cold War Fiction* (University of Missouri Press, 2017), 148.

published account of my life offers thumbnail versions of one or two of the stories, so it naturally pleases me to reclaim them as my own, tell them in my own voice and invest them as best I can with my own feelings." (7) Devotees of Le Carré's work will be glad that he took the time so late in life to do so.

