

Forgive this long scribe, but sometimes letters are more fun.

– le Carré to his stepmother Jean Cornwell, 4 June 2009

We all write too few letters these days.

– to Al Alvarez, 16 September 2016

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## Introduction

‘I hate the telephone. I can’t type. Like the tailor in my new novel, I ply my trade by hand. I live on a Cornish cliff and hate cities. Three days and nights in a city are about my maximum. I don’t see many people. I write and walk and swim and drink.’ So wrote my father, in a 1996 article-cum-letter, sent to his long-time editor Bob Gottlieb and others, called ‘Talking to My American Publishers’.

I am writing these few words of introduction from the same Cornish cliff. Yesterday a wind was whipping round the stone walls, shaking and swaying the hardy skimmia and veronica bushes of my father’s garden, with a sea as fierce as I’ve seen it, twisting the rollers into white crests. But now the place is bathed in brilliant winter sunshine, bouncing off a rippled ocean, with a magpie hopping on the lawn.

In 1969 my father took on a row of three derelict cottages and an adjoining hay barn, converting and expanding them over fifty years, adding his library and writer’s studio and creating his own artist’s garden, with hidden lawns and sculptures and thick hedges of giant hewn stone.

‘I have very much hibernated down here, see almost no one,’ he wrote to his stepmother Jeannie in 1972, after he bought the buildings and about a mile of untamed cliff from a local farmer. ‘And work seven or eight hours a day on a new book, just a thriller to mark time . . . I get up at seven each morning to a ninety mile an hour gale that hasn’t stopped for four days, and only the bloody power cuts for company – except that I like it very much and enjoy my work, and the fields and the sea, and the potato farm that is part of the place.’ The book, ‘just a thriller’, was *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*.

My father, who died of pneumonia after a fall in December 2020, was brave in the way he spoke for what he believed in, brave in the places and subjects he tackled in his writing, and brave in the way he



faced illness. He invented a language for the cancer he long fought, though it wasn't the cancer that took him. He built a Wodehousian language of medicine, coded like his language for the spies: the prostate doctor was the Rear Admiral; gruelling check-ups were 'the sheep dip'; and doses of a lethal radioactive medicine were 'getting nuked'. He was brave in the way he cared for my stepmother, Jane, already ravaged by cancer as he died, and who followed him two months later.

'Vile weather here: murderous north easterly, sleet and rain, very cold,' he emailed to me a week before he died. It was often our best way of communicating; an email or two brought always a sharp observation, a smile, a line of words to treasure. 'That's after a long spell of sunshine and autumn. We're OK, but Jane is having a tough time with the chemo . . . I fell down in the bathroom like an idiot and cracked a rib, which makes me very grouchy.'

This book of John le Carré's letters, and occasional emails, is intended to share the more private voice of a man widely considered one of the greatest post-war novelists. He elevated the spy into the realm of literature, enticing readers into the characters, the language and the labyrinthine conspiracies of his secret world. There is one obvious omission from the collection: it contains only a smattering of letters to his lovers, of whom there were quite a few throughout his life. It seems that he was mostly attracted – romantically and otherwise – to people of consequence and agency, and inevitably also to those whose anguish was somehow akin to his own. The son of an abusive father and a mother who, for good and sufficient reasons, abandoned him and his brother when he was five, he was predictably wayward in his relationships: inconstant, needy, desperate to please – yet desperate also to retain his own sovereignty over his heart, lest something on which he depended suddenly evaporate. It's tempting to say that genius is complex, but probably truer that trauma is simple. He cannot have failed to inflict emotional wounds in his turn, but a part of him was perpetually and ferociously on watch against the reflection of his father in his own actions. However that may be, he was as scrupulous in keeping his

romantic correspondence covert as he was in recording the rest, and our archive contains little that is enlightening on that score.

Le Carré – which is what I call him in this book – produced internationally acclaimed novels in every decade, from *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* in 1963 to *Agent Running in the Field* in 2019, as well as the posthumous novel, *Silverview*, in 2021. His writing defined the Cold War era and spoke truth to power in the decades that followed, though never – or almost never – putting polemic above a good story. Graham Greene called the younger le Carré the author of the best spy story he'd ever read; Philip Roth and Ian McEwan placed his works among the most important of the twentieth century.

My father spent sixty years in the public eye, after *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* hurtled him from MI6 agent masked as a junior diplomat to global bestselling author of a Cold War publishing sensation. A scholar of French and above all German literature, he knew from early on that his letters would be treasured, archived, potentially publicised, misused, misquoted or sold.

In a letter in these pages my father describes F. Scott Fitzgerald as the 'writer's ultimate writer', a verbal conjuror who can 'keep the light on in the dark', 'make a rainbow out of black and white'. But to his one-time lover Susan Kennaway, he wrote that three quarters of Fitzgerald's letters 'are self-conscious crap, injurious to him and his art alike, and if anybody ever went raking in my desk for that stuff, I hope to God I'd managed to burn it in time'.

There are letters in this book in which David Cornwell is writing intimately and freely, while in others John le Carré is having a good look over his shoulder and laying down his legacy for posterity, as well as having some literary fun. If not self-conscious, thoroughly self-aware. 'I have decided to cultivate that intense, worried look and to start writing brilliant, untidy letters for future biographers. This is one,' he wrote to Miranda Margetson, while still serving at the British Embassy in Bonn, enclosing a caricature of himself doing just that (see p. 109).

The author of twenty-five novels, my father was a prolific and conscientious letter-writer, from thank-you letters to answering

fan letters. The backgrounds of those with whom he corresponded spanned politics, literature, publishing, the arts and his former profession as a spy. The actor and author Stephen Fry and the playwright Sir Tom Stoppard are represented in these pages; so are the former London station chief of the KGB and the former head of MI6. So are the members of his close family, particularly in his early-adult years.

My father was a gifted illustrator who, as a young man, considered a career as an artist. This book includes examples of early drawings, caricatures, and illustrations for books and magazines. They are of mixed quality and might be dismissed as juvenilia, but when my father visited Russia in 1993 he was delighted to find that Pushkin's manuscripts, like some of his own, were occasionally covered in racy doodles – in Pushkin's case, of nymphs playing snooker. Once, left alone in London with several thousand sheets of paper to sign for his US publisher, he chose to illustrate them instead – initially with spies and dogs, but, as his boredom increased, the figures became distinctly risqué. He illustrated his early letters, and for his whole life wrote his manuscripts, his letters and his signature in a distinctive, fluent hand. The last letter in this book, written two weeks before he died, to his old friend the journalist David Greenway, covers four handwritten pages.

Stephen Fry first wrote to my father in 1993, as an admiring fan, and this was the beginning of an intermittent correspondence. 'Those letters, though – such care and engagement in them,' he wrote after my father's memorial. 'Kindly, sharp, detailed – I can almost hear those eyebrows rustle slightly – what a courtesy it is to share so much observation and insight with someone you know so little.'

As a boy I joined my father as we cut through our stretch of the new Cornish coast path in the early 1970s, running just under the house. The Cornish landscape and the weather rolling off the Atlantic are offstage characters in my father's letters, Wagnerian motifs. Cornwall was a place he used for intense writing stretches, and where he went to ground after publication – though also to entertain, and as a backdrop for interviews and photographs.

'I arrived here yesterday – huge, running skies, black cloud, brilliant sun, then daft, sloping showers that catch you in the ear just

when you think you might perhaps build another wing,' he wrote to Sir Alec Guinness in 1981. 'We have been stuck down here all winter, and stuck in most senses: huge storms, on and on, rain, running fog, then huge storms again,' he wrote to his lifelong friend John Margetson in April 1994. 'The result is, I've written  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a very muddy, fog-laden book, very introverted and strange, but I'm rather pleased with it, at least so far.' The novel was *Our Game*.

Guinness came to stay here; so did many of the recipients of the letters in this book, from the writer Nicholas Shakespeare to the actor Ralph Fiennes (drenched along with le Carré in a rainstorm), to the head of the German secret service, August Hanning. George Smiley and Ann walked here on the Cornish coast path, 'the worst time Smiley could remember in their long, puzzled marriage', with a nameless shadow of betrayal. In an early draft of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, Bill Haydon retired here.

My father wrote the vast majority of his letters by hand – typically signed 'As ever, David'. Some were dictated or typed from his drafts – business letters to agents, or to publishers, or letters to newspapers. Sometimes he seemed to treat them like writing exercises; others were fire and forget, a kind of personal Snapchat, with a sense that handwritten letters were safer, more private, less sensitive to hacking or reproduction.

For a number of years my father exchanged letters with Willard J. Morse, a Maine obstetrician, picking him out as a correspondent for no discernible reason, sharing lacerating and highly quotable opinions on Princess Diana, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. These letters started to appear in internet auctions, saucy enough for headlines in the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail*. 'Please don't worry about the publication of my letters,' he wrote to his friend Anthony Barnett, founder of openDemocracy, in December 2018. 'They were written in privacy to a man I never met, a retired US army medic who became disenchanted with his country under Bush junior, settled in the Bahamas and poured his soul out to me in a steady stream of letters over several years. I wrote to him with equal frankness. I don't keep correspondence, or copies of my own letters, so have no idea any more what exactly passed between us. His heirs decided

to make money out of them, and seem to have done so. Agent and lawyer alike want me to proceed against the heirs. I don't need the hassle. And I wrote what I wrote. Finis.'

My father was fiercely aware, however, how his words might be used, and never handed out quotes lightly. Writing to him in 2009, retired lecturer Michael Hall noted how my father had carefully avoided putting anything in their correspondence that could be used as an endorsement of Hall's two books. Hall wrote of the pike in the ponds on Hampstead Heath, with 'one wily old veteran who will not be caught, whatever bait you run past his nose'. 'A wily old Pike thanks you for your wily letter, and was much entertained,' my father wrote back.

This book draws heavily on the main archive of my father's correspondence, now mostly destined for the Bodleian Library, Oxford; it was assembled over several decades, kept by his secretaries and his wife Jane and first put into order in the late 2000s. He did not routinely retain copies of outgoing letters unrelated to business matters, though some early exchanges, for example with Sir Alec Guinness, were carefully copied and kept. The archive is self-curated; my father was making the calls on which letters to file, and which to burn. It has been supplemented by the return of collections of early letters, in particular to his first wife, my mother, Ann; and to the Reverend Vivian Green, his schoolmaster and Oxford mentor, who married them. The correspondence with my father's stepmother Jeannie, second wife to his father, Ronnie, lent by her granddaughter Nancy, was a particular revelation; she was an early confidante of the famously motherless le Carré, whose mother, Olive, had left when he was five.<sup>1</sup>

In the research for this volume, I harvested copies of le Carré letters as best I could from libraries, archives, publishers, agents, family and above all friends. My late godfather Sir John Margetson, one of

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1. Le Carré's brother, Tony, believed their ages to be six and four respectively when their mother left.

six men on my father's MI6 training course, was a correspondent for over sixty years.

My parents' marriage ended painfully, but my mother kept all my father's letters over twenty years, from about 1950 to 1970; they are a remarkable resource on his early life. The same cannot be said about the very sad destruction of certain groups of letters – in particular, my father's letters to his first American publisher, Jack Geoghegan, a vital promoter of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. His stepson sent my father these letters after Geoghegan's death in 1999, and he later shocked Adam Sisman, his biographer, by telling him he had destroyed them. The two men had a close and complex relationship, but that record of it is now lost.

One of my father's oldest and closest friends – his best friend, in his words – was John Miller, the Cornish painter, former architect, and once my father's agent in MI5. Miller's paintings cover a wall at the family home in Cornwall – he first led le Carré to the site – and after his death in 2002 my father wrote to the director John Boorman: 'I never knew I could miss a friend so much.' John Miller treasured my father's letters – 'Those will be valuable one day,' he joked, nodding towards them – but sometime after his death they were destroyed, it appears, by his partner, Michael Truscott, who has also since died.

Almost all the letters to the aid worker Yvette Pierpaoli, who had a long involvement with my father, and to whom *The Constant Gardener* is dedicated, were burned by Yvette's daughter after her death, in the kitchen sink. Yvette had kept them preciously; her daughter felt my father had been so important in her life that 'whatever they had between them had to stay that way'.

Rainer Heumann, described in the *Independent's* obituary of 1996 as 'the most powerful literary agent in Europe', had a long and close relationship with my father, but it appears the letters to him were destroyed after Heumann's death. According to colleagues at Heumann's Mohrbooks Literary Agency, Heumann's letters were kept at home; he and his wife, Inge, died without legal heirs, and items of no apparent sales value in the estate were dumped.

There is perhaps one more 'What if?' related to my father's letters:

the papers of his own father, Ronnie Cornwell, conman extraordinaire, who makes appearances in my father's fiction in *The Naive and Sentimental Lover*, *Single & Single* and, above all, *A Perfect Spy*.

According to Ronnie's last secretary, Glenda Moakes, my father told her he had destroyed many of Ronnie's papers after his death in 1975. Le Carré, in his 2002 *New Yorker* article, 'In Ronnie's Court', describes 'a stack of brown boxes that my father always carted round with him when he was on the run'. In *A Perfect Spy*, Rick Pym, the conman character based closely on Ronnie, has a green filing cabinet. Moakes remembers that Ronnie too had filing cabinets; if they included letters from my father, they have gone.<sup>2</sup> The one apparent surviving letter to Ronnie from my father is included in this collection, as is a group of later letters to his mother.

John le Carré, predictably, received more than his fair share of crank mail. For each letter of the alphabet in the le Carré archive of correspondence there is a separate file marked 'difficult people'. 'What the hell do I do with this one?' my father wrote about a weird and rambling letter from a fan, who told how he had gone mad on a bus and declared *The Little Drummer Girl* to be the finest love story since *Pride and Prejudice*.

One fan submitted a book that appeared to be a thesis about an early internet discussion list. 'Oy – What on Earth?' he wrote on it to my stepmother Jane, using his favourite nickname for her, 'Oysters'. On another letter, addressed in 1994 'To the Great Writer, David Cornwell' at his home address in Cornwall, he notes: 'File under our category of deranged people – he writes and writes and I never answer.'

Mostly, answer he did. 'It is hard to describe the pleasure I derive from the occasional letter from a faithful reader who, overcoming either sloth or inhibition, has the grace to put his thoughts on paper,' he wrote on 29 January 2010 to Ronojoy Sen, writing from Assam, India, to thank him for two and a half decades of 'making the English language come so wonderfully alive,' and the 'exquisite new

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2. Le Carré later assumed they were 'just burned'.

subtleties with each joyful reading' of *The Honourable Schoolboy* in particular.

In 1986, when a British couple wrote about wanting to start a le Carré fan club, it was Jane who replied. 'Sometimes, he has to cut himself off from the rest of the world and I often answer letters for him,' she wrote. 'The thing is that, although sometimes we get quite a lot of letters, they are usually more than just requests for signatures. We have often thought of having a standard letter where you mark the answer you want to give but we've never been able to bring ourselves to do it. It's so impersonal and unfriendly. So in the end one of us usually answers with a proper letter.'

My father's typical working routine was to write early in the morning, walk in the afternoon, and deal with correspondence and other matters later in the day. Letters would be turned around in two or three days, seldom left for more than a week.

In 2011 Jonathan Turner wrote to my father in an effort to find out something about his own father, Edward, who had died mysteriously young and was rumoured to have had an intelligence background. He was startled to get a warm reply almost by return of post, though without anything that promised to breach the Official Secrets Act. 'I met no Turner in my time there, but that means nothing. Your simplest course these days is just to ask them,' my father wrote sympathetically, about 'your Papa', suggesting Turner try the personnel department at the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) in Vauxhall. (I myself have received similar inquiries from people hoping John le Carré could solve a family mystery.) It was his standard answer, though sometimes he might carefully offer more. In *The Secret Pilgrim*, George Smiley finds himself fielding a similar question from a set of grieving parents, and what he ultimately chooses to tell them says a great deal about the man who created him. In *A Legacy of Spies*, it is the children of spies who come demanding answers about the casualties of the Cold War.

The le Carré literary estate made the decision to publish a volume of my father's letters that would appear not long after his death. The publication of *Silverview* in 2021 and a planned documentary feature project with the director Errol Morris suggested the time was



right. My elder brother Simon, as literary executor, kindly set me on what became a journey in my father's company, and I thank him and the reader for allowing me to treasure that, whatever the result. It was a privilege to take it on, and a challenge, as my own modest career has been as a journalist, and not as an academic or biographer. But I came to know him much better, particularly as a young man; and regret that I did not spend more time asking him simpler questions about his life.

I did not set out to select and edit with any particular slant, or story to tell. The letters chose themselves. There's a review on the back of Norman Lewis's book *Naples '44*, my favourite of the many books my father gave me: 'One goes on reading page after page as if eating cherries.' That simile has stayed with me. I would hope every letter here could be eaten separately: fresh, crisp, colourful, tart; or soft, juicy, rich, a little rotten. As much as possible, the letters are published in full; some edits are made for brevity, relevance, and occasionally to protect identities or feelings, as these are mostly private letters being printed soon after my father's death.

Too often in the last months I have simply enjoyed them myself, forgetting that I was supposed to be editing, gone exploring instead. The process of selection began simply by choosing the best, most readable, individual letters; they began to dictate a narrative structure, which was then augmented. There has never been a dull day amid my father's words.

Being John le Carré's son has been part of my identity since boarding school, when his maroon Rolls-Royce came rolling up a country drive very like that of Jim Prideaux's school in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. As a twelve-year-old I read the book in a large-print version, and later wondered which of we sons was Roach. My father came to speak at a school club, and I asked if he'd ever seen a man killed on the Berlin Wall.

This book was always going to be incomplete; I could not hazard a guess as to the number of letters my father wrote. In the files in Cornwall, incoming letters that were kept, and mostly only from the last three decades, are often marked simply 'replied by hand'. There are correspondents overlooked, and there are significant letters that

will be discovered in future years, one hopes – such as those that might exist among my father’s Palestinian contacts in the Middle East, written when he was researching *The Little Drummer Girl* (where my own inquiries into archives have so far gone nowhere), or among the journalists he knew in South-East Asia.

The records of outgoing letters are generally thin until the 1990s, when my father’s frequent use of the fax machine for his most important letters meant originals were kept at home, while photocopiers were ever more accessible. ‘I abhor the telephone and have taken the somewhat eccentric decision to live by the fax and the mail, which at least restores the dignity of the written word!’ he wrote to his old Sherborne schoolmate Gerald Peacocke on 3 August 1994.

My father continued to send handwritten letters by fax until the mid 2000s; he learnt to type with two fingers in order to send emails from his laptop and iPad. ‘This is my day to become an emailist,’ he announced to his half-sister Charlotte on 17 May 2006. But he continued to handwrite letters. The journalist Luke Harding, who immediately framed the note my father sent praising his book *Collusion*, posits that le Carré was ‘the last great letter-writer of the twenty-first century’. He was an orderly correspondent from the beginning; it was as rare for letters to be undated as it was for them to be illegible. His handwriting aged: I still remember it from the 1970s, its flowing, even joyous form on the front of an envelope; late in life it moved scratchily downward to the right side of the page.

My father lived an eventful life, and relationships seldom followed an even keel; letters to important correspondents – of which one or two might appear here from a group of thirty – are often almost novellas in themselves. They form conversations over time, or interrupted dialogues.

In the publishing industry my father demanded high standards of publishers and agents – ‘demand’ is very much the word – and changed them more than once. It was in his gift to form high-intensity relationships fast, with men and women. People who believed themselves intimate friends seemed to fall in or out of favour as they ran up against an author who had moved on from South-East Asia, or the Middle East, or Panama, one with multiple claims on his time.

‘I cannot promise to be available to you socially,’ he wrote coldly to Vladimir Stabnikov – who had helped to facilitate le Carré’s first trip to Moscow – after the Russian took umbrage at being steered away by Jane. ‘I am presently immersed in a new book, and writing is nothing if it is not obsessive. None of my friends expects intimacy of me when I am in this state.’ This to someone whom he would describe two years later as a man whose ‘cultural knowledge, erudition and humanity has impressed me since the day I met him’.

The character of Ronnie Cornwell haunts these letters, as it does the novels. My father remained amazed to the end of his life at the things Ronnie got up to – including, for example, the new details of his early crimes and punishments that were discovered by le Carré’s biographer, Adam Sisman. He was still wrestling with Ronnie’s shadow in his very late letters to his brother, Tony. What one finds in the early letters is Ronnie in real time, unadorned by later recollection, interacting with the young le Carré. He moves in and out of the first twenty-five years of my father’s adult, letter-writing life. The stories, the drama, the pain that sometimes seemed too exotic to be true were not exaggerations or fabrications.

Ronnie Cornwell appears to have thought he taught my father the art of writing, though he boasted of never reading books. C. B. Wilson, who knew Ronnie in Singapore, wrote to my father: ‘He had a very good control of the English language and would write a most polished letter. He felt he had passed on this ability to you.’ Among the letters to Jeannie Cornwell is one from Ronnie written in October 1974, a year before he died. ‘I am sure that I do not have to tell you, how deeply touched I was with your telephone call yesterday morning and the purpose for which it was made,’ he began. ‘Quite apart from what may be the ultimate outcome, of what we may decide to do, it is good to know that there exists that concern for each other’s welfare and I hope you will take it for granted that mine for you will be just as great as yours for mine and that is the nicest way to put it.’

The letter concerned a mysterious picture that Jeannie had found in the house, which he urged them to get valued by Sotheby’s or Christie’s. ‘We could either know that you were sitting on a gold

mine or had to face up to the fact that it was a slag heap after all,' Ronnie wrote, wisely. Quickly he moved hopefully into dividing up the proceeds of the as-yet-undiscovered masterpiece: fifty per cent in trust for their children, Jeannie to receive the income. 'As to the remaining 50 percent I would like to utilise this for my needs which are urgent at the moment,' he wrote, though of course promising a solicitor's undertaking it would be returned after a promised £1 million property deal went through. 'If I may for a moment dwell upon the reasons for the difficulties I am going through they arise not through any lack of realities but purely due to liquidity, by that I mean short of actual cash.'

The letter is an exercise in Micawberish self-parody. With banks reluctant to increase overdraft facilities, Ronnie explained, he had had to get rid of his horses, perhaps his offices, and his apartment in Chelsea. Meanwhile he'd had lunch with the head of the Rank Organisation, trying to offer him the rights to the latest le Carré book, though its author would have nothing to do with him. Little wonder that my father so loved Charles Dickens, that we both loved *David Copperfield*; he bought me two antique sets.

Characters pick themselves out in this volume. The last book that my father gave me was the biography of Graham Greene by Richard Greene. Greene was a fleeting presence in my father's life, rather than a friend – 'We met in Paris & Vienna &, very briefly, in London,' he wrote to Alan Judd – but he constitutes another motif in the correspondence. Greene provided the key author's quote for *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. Aiming for a satirical spy novel in *The Tailor of Panama*, my father wrote in the book's acknowledgements that 'without Graham Greene this book would never have come about. After Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, the notion of an intelligence fabricator would not leave me alone.'

The two men clashed publicly in the 1960s over Kim Philby. Le Carré wrote an introduction to the book by the *Sunday Times* Insight team, *Philby: The Spy Who Betrayed a Generation*, in which he described the MI6 mole as 'vain, spiteful and murderous'. Greene, who had worked under Philby at SIS and counted him as a friend, penned a riposte in the *Observer* against such a 'vulgar and untrue'

depiction. He likened le Carré to E. Phillips Oppenheim, the best-selling pre-war author of easy-reading genre fiction. (Ironically, le Carré had also likened his adventures to those of E. Phillips Oppenheim, in an illustrated letter to my mother describing his days in spy training camp.)

They made up their quarrel. In 1974 le Carré wrote to Greene after his research visits to South-East Asia, to praise the astonishing accuracy of mood and observation in *The Quiet American*, published twenty years before. Outwardly careful of criticising Greene, however, in private he would be increasingly scornful of his Catholicism, his politics, of 'He who lived in Antibes and fell in love with Central American dictators.'

Kim Philby is also an inescapable presence in the letters. My father did not take kindly to certain literary journalists, but Philby was the only man I remember him to have truly hated. In 1989 he ruled out any meeting with Philby on a trip to Moscow; but told his guide, John Roberts, that one day 'I'd like to meet him for zoological reasons', as if Philby were some poisonous reptile.

The uncomfortable relationship with England and its politicians is also explored. My father accepted major awards from France, Germany and Sweden, but declined any honours from the British state. He refused to have his work put forward for literary prizes, and turned down political and royal honours. In his letters, Prime Minister Tony Blair is the 'arch-sophist' and 'intuitive liar'; Boris Johnson the 'Etonian oik'. Only Margaret Thatcher was somehow admirable.

My father wrote to my mother, Ann, from Austria in 1950, of the 'grey indifference of England'. 'I'm sick of England and English institutions, I'm sick of our neuroses and the flesh-eating and the infantilism,' he told her in 1966 – though his sickness had as much to do with the marriage as with the country. He had just published *The Looking-Glass War*, one of his grimmest tales of a British intelligence operation, a novel he deliberately draped in failure. 'Englishness & the box – well, we are all born into boxes, but the Brits perhaps more so than most, which makes them (for me) so interesting – and

quaintly universal – to write about,’ he wrote to his brother, Tony, in 1999.

Inevitably in this book I found myself in the footsteps of a master – Adam Sisman, my father’s biographer. Sometimes I specifically followed his trail to letters. At other times I lighted upon a particularly illuminating passage in a letter – only to find that my choices were the same as his, which was part frustration and part reassurance, in that he had chosen the very letter to extract at length in his book.

My father took against the biography; his supposedly private comments about the book and its author, spread liberally around, amounted to a full-blown campaign. I was unable to read the biography with clear eyes when my father was alive. Rereading it, I feel the full strength of Sisman’s erudition, his painstaking research. I’ve read others’ words on its shortcomings, but it found favour with critics, and is a reference book on my father on which I could not but rely, particularly for the early periods of his life. I have tried in this book to use the letters, and my father’s own writing, as my principal source, but Sisman’s work has always been there as roadmap and backstop.

My father wrote in one early letter that he believed he would be dead when the biography was published; in later correspondence with Sisman he asked for it to be delayed until then; and, by agreement, the book was altered and made acceptable for publication while he lived. He had, after all, negotiated an agreement with one putative biographer, the writer Robert Harris, that the account of his life after 1972 would be published only after his death. ‘I think it was a real mistake,’ one old friend said to me of the Sisman biography. ‘He had lots and lots of secrets.’

Many of those secrets concerned what he called his untidy love life. But I for one had urged him to set a biography in motion, at the last as a means of interviewing the key players, including himself, while they were still alive.

My father mostly covered the tracks of his untidiness. A few years ago I went to visit a woman whom I remembered with vivid, warm affection from my early childhood, who had bounced me on her knee as ‘little Timbo’. ‘He was a one,’ was all she told me. ‘He was a

one.' When I asked my father about the woman, a couple of years before his death, he told me coldly it was none of my business. He had flirtatiously signed first editions to her worth hundreds if not thousands of pounds today.

I have included here the letters to James and Susie Kennaway, though my father objected to their use by Sisman, because I think they mark a watershed in my father's life: a liberation from his marriage to my mother and a (possibly) more naive self. And we see his love letters in full flow.

It would be tempting to make this book a group of celebrity exchanges. But my own interest harks back to the 1950s and 1960s, the making of *le Carré*, although my father never talked, or wrote directly, about his intelligence career, speaking of his loyalty to his sources, and to their children.

The only collection of letters that my father gave me was *Yours, Plum*, by P. G. Wodehouse, published in 1990. Two copies of the longer *P. G. Wodehouse: A Life in Letters*, from 2011, were on a cupboard shelf in the Cornwall offices. There was one set of Wodehouse outside each of the two main bedrooms in the house. It was a delight to find the references to Wodehouse dotted through the letters, more and less obviously. (My father wrote of the MI6 spy Nicholas Elliott that he 'looked like a P. G. Wodehouse man-about-town, and spoke like one'.) When my father packed his suitcase for the hospital, *Wodehouse: The World of Jeeves*, the first omnibus of Jeeves and Wooster short stories, was the one volume he took with him. 'I don't feel any power loss yet,' he wrote to the producer Eric Abraham, about writing, in 2006, 'but it waits, I am sure, like P. G. Wodehouse's Fate, just around the corner, armed with a stuffed eel-skin.' Or to the director Sydney Pollack in 1994: 'As Wodehouse would say, I spit myself of age.'

As well as a caricaturist, my father was a famous mimic, a gift remembered by his schoolfriends; his father would call on him to perform. Alec Guinness was a party piece, while a lunch companion remembered being in stitches over his imitations of a past director of MI5. One of my memories is of a dinner at the British ambassador's residence in Bern, after my father had taken me on a tour of

his old stamping grounds as an impoverished student. He sat next to a titled European lady, and after she left had captured not just her voice but her attitude, her mannerisms, a little of her soul.

As children, we had the joy of my father reading in his many voices. Our favourites were Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories of Caribbean pirates, or the Napoleonic stories, and of course Sherlock Holmes – we thrilled in horror at the scream of 'The Speckled Band', or at the footsteps of a gigantic hound. And he drew – the ceiling of my childhood bedroom was a procession of river creatures, smiling water snakes, a frog and fishes; a dashing pirate guarded my door.

Collecting my father's letters has been an easy task; he left an enormous reservoir of love, admiration and good will. One of the abiding qualities in my father's letters is his generosity of spirit – whether addressed to an emerging author or to a twelve-year-old boy asking how to be a spy. Recipients have been equally generous in sharing them.

My father played games with names in his books, doffing his hat to friends. Sarratt, where his old friend Dick Edmonds lived, became his MI6 training school. Zelide, a designer label on the clothing in *The Little Drummer Girl*, was named for the wife of his friend Rex Cowan. My university girlfriend's name, and perhaps a bit of her character, for Magnus Pym's wife in *A Perfect Spy*. The name of my mother, Ann, for Smiley's wife, glamorous and unfaithful, a sly joke.

My father learnt German from the age of thirteen, from his Sherborne schoolmaster Frank King, who played his boys old gramophone records of Romantic German poetry. After he left Sherborne early for Bern University – which was the closest place to Germany where he could feasibly study – German language and culture became a constant companion on his literary journey, his second soul, to which I have tried to pay tribute in the choice of letters. German, he told *Der Spiegel* in 1989, had 'the fascination of the forbidden. At that time I absolutely refused to speak English and to identify myself as an Englishman.'

The German journalist Yassin Musharbash, who has generously helped with translations for this volume, suggests that German for the teenaged le Carré – on the run from both his father and his



rigidly upright public school – represented something of his own that no one could take away, a source of confidence and pride. ‘Changing into German is like putting on a tail suit,’ le Carré told his Swiss friend Kaspar von Almen in 1955. After 1968’s *A Small Town in Germany*, postulating the rise of a new nationalism, he became a public figure in German discourse.

The last place I looked for letters should have been the first. In eight months of tracking down my father’s letters, I had never gone through his studio or his desk. They remained almost as they were the day he died: left alone, perhaps as a future le Carré museum. We began a cautious search. For the most part, drawers and shelves were remarkably uncluttered, even empty; my father did not hold with messy desks. But in the lower-left-hand drawer, there was a wad of manuscript sheets tied together with string.

It was my father’s account of his MI6 training course, dating from December 2006 – a handwritten manuscript that was transcribed, printed and reworked by hand, again and again. The title was ‘Postcards from the Secret Edge’. It was a draft version, though with more detail, of what would become Chapter 1 of *The Pigeon Tunnel*, published in 2016. ‘We were a class of six, all men, of varying ages, skills, and experience . . . most of us had done time in other branches of intelligence before being selected. One had been a special soldier in Oman, another was a Chinese expert, I myself was a defector from our own hated rival service, better known as MI5.’

My father told me no more of his intelligence work than he did those people who wrote to him, surprisingly often, asking for information about people, mostly parents, whom they thought might have worked for MI5 or MI6. But the training course had a particular fascination for me. His fellow trainees included my godfather, who subsequently left SIS to pursue a distinguished diplomatic career. Another was Rod Wells.

I knew my father admired and revered Rod Wells, about as much as he hated Kim Philby. He was humbled by Wells’s courage under torture by the Japanese, who had caught him constructing a secret radio. There are no records of letters to Wells, but, when my father

visited him in Australia many years later, he wrote, in the family visitors' book, 'The old lion's heart beats as ever.' It was an admiration that perhaps had a later echo in my father's fascination with the case of Murat Kurnaz, the Guantanamo survivor who inspired the character of Issa in *A Most Wanted Man*.

Just as the publication of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* was a fulcrum of my father's life, so too was his MI6 course. It ended, as he has recorded in *The Pigeon Tunnel*, with the new recruits being told by the weeping head of their training course that George Blake had been exposed as a Soviet spy. A succession of British betrayals followed – Burgess and Maclean, Philby. 'It is only recently that I have come to realise how closely my brief career in British Intelligence coincided with the most convulsive years of its history,' he wrote in the manuscript. 'With each revelation that hit the newsstands, with each British double-agent, real or imagined . . . I had a growing awareness of how much I had witnessed, without being aware of it. But that isn't quite true either. I had been aware.' The sensational scandal of Philby's defection to Moscow was playing out in newspapers before the publication of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*.

From that moment, my father's experience of MI6 was stained with betrayal and futility. And it was also as a fresh recruit to MI6 that he received the news that *Call for the Dead* had been accepted for publication. The private spy was on course to become the public writer.

Tim Cornwell  
May 2022

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## Note on Tim Cornwell

*1 June 2022*

Our brother Tim was the curator of this book – it is his formidable journalistic integrity which governs its route and tone. He ordained a strict objective approach, largely without editorial comment, but we believe he would forgive us this one personal interjection.

Tim collapsed and died of a pulmonary embolism shortly before 9 p.m. last night. We have no idea what happened. It is incomprehensible. He was a funny, loving, gentle fellow who suffered for years from depression and other ills, but did his best to meet his troubles with what he had. The book you hold in your hands is his legacy as well as our father's. He dived into the archive even when it hurt, assembled narrative from chaos, and is responsible for all that is excellent about the collection. We're so proud of him for it.

So long, Tim. We'll miss you so much.

*Simon, Stephen and Nick Cornwell*

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## Note on the Text

My father is referred to as John le Carré throughout this book. Of course in his early years there was no John le Carré, only David Cornwell, and he signed his letters almost invariably as ‘David’. However, given that for sixty years he was known in public as John le Carré, I made the decision to keep to le Carré in the notes and introductions to the letters.

I have chosen and edited this selection as both the author’s son and as the book’s editor. My choices are surely more rooted in le Carré’s family than another editor’s might be. In that context, however, I have tried to edit as objectively and unobtrusively as possible, and in the third person, except in the case of a single letter that was sent to me as a schoolboy, and a moment I witnessed around the dining table.

Le Carré was a prolific letter-writer. In order for the book not to become truly unwieldy many letters had to be excluded. Of course, selection is always a subjective business, but, on the whole, decisions were dictated by whether the letter illuminated the period, the subject or the writer himself – either his work or the relationships that meant a great deal to him. Inevitably there will be correspondents who do not agree with the editorial decisions made but that comes with the territory of a book of this nature and a writer like John le Carré.

In transcribing the letters, we have treated the manuscripts as sacrosanct, and included le Carré’s errors and peculiarities. This approach will make for some inconsistencies, but it is intended to provide the most authentic and fluid rendering of his voice. Le Carré was unpredictable in his use of accents, often adding them to words such as ‘suede’, ‘role’ and ‘elite’, with a European flourish; we have retained these. We have silently corrected five place names that were misspelt: Siena, Lots Road, Albemarle Street, Pailin and Caneel Bay.

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# SCHOOLDAYS

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I hated English boarding schools. I found them monstrous and still do, probably because I began my boarding school career at the age of five, at a place called St Martin's Northwood, and did not end it till I was sixteen, when I flatly refused to return to Westcott House, Sherborne, on the solid grounds that I would take no more of such institutions.

– in the new 1991 introduction to *A Murder of Quality*

I wrote to Stalin during the war, while I was at prep school. I promised to do all I could to encourage the opening of a second front, though I was not sure what this meant. I wrote to him again telling him how awful the school regime was, and how I had been beaten unjustly.

– in the *Sunday Times*, 10 November 1985

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*Le Carré moved from his first school, St Martin's, to board at St Andrew's Pangbourne in 1939, close to his eighth birthday. He wrote at the age of thirteen to his future housemaster at Sherborne School, Reginald Stanley Thompson, described in his obituary for the Old Shirburnian Society as a man of 'unusually strong convictions' and 'profound Christian faith'.*

TO R. S. THOMPSON

*St Andrew's School  
Near Pangbourne  
Berks.*

24 June 1945

Dear Mr Thompson,

Thanks so much for your letter; I am very much looking forward to coming to Westcott house next term. I can quite believe what you say about lunch!

We have played several matches and have a good few to come. Our first match was against Elstree School, and owing to rain and some poor batting we were just unable to force a draw in their favour. The second was against Bradfield B House Junior Colts which we won easily. The next, yesterday, was against Ludgrove School, which we won easily once again, though after some absolutely frightful fielding!

Do you see much of Philip Simons?<sup>1</sup> I suppose not.

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1. Philip was a pupil at St Andrew's Pangbourne, but his surname was Simms. He was eight months older than le Carré, so went to Sherborne a year before him. He was in School House at Sherborne, hence le Carré's comment that Thompson probably didn't see much of him. He later worked in the tea industry in Calcutta.

I fully appreciate what you say about the 'birth' of a new house and I will do my very best to help establish a good reputation.

My brother Anthony, whom you saw, if you remember, a long while ago, won a scholarship to Radley about two years ago, and is now flourishing in the first eleven.

Could you please tell me some of the routine and customs of your house, so that I shall be sufficiently prepared for next term.

Yours sincerely,  
David Cornwell



Le Carré's stepmother, Jean Cornwell – always known as Jeannie – went with the thirteen-year-old le Carré to Sherborne. On 22 November 1945 she wrote to Mr Thompson: 'He tells us in his rather staccato letters that he has never seen so much work in his life which has to be done as he puts it "at all costs". In the role of the wicked stepmother I am delighted that he now has to put his nose to the grindstone, and also has to work things out for himself without the guidance of his elder brother.

'I'm glad you find him a friendly and likeable person because I am convinced that your influence on David will be invaluable. Needless to say he wraps me around his little finger and I have to guard constantly against spoiling him!'

Le Carré's adult letters to Jeannie would show a remarkable intimacy and warmth. The fortunes of his father, Ronnie Cornwell, track through his letters to her, as would the fortunes of his own marriage.

Born in November 1916, Jeannie went to an upmarket girls' school and became a studio announcer and manager for the BBC's European Service during the Second World War, a job that included reading bizarre coded messages over the airwaves to the Resistance in Europe. The upshot of a hectic wartime private life, lived under

the existential threat of German bombs, was marriage to Ronnie Cornwell in December 1944. She lived through the Great Crash, and she lived through Ronnie's crashes.<sup>2</sup>

In a 1986 interview for the publication of *A Perfect Spy*, le Carré said he received 'no encouragement to read' at home until a stomach operation at the age of seven, when 'a lady who later married my father read me *The Wind in the Willows*'. Jeannie would have been twenty-two. 'I asked her to read it again and she must have read it two or three times,' he continued. 'After that, I read the book myself and everything seemed to fan out from there . . . A year later, the same lady took me to John Gielgud's *Hamlet* and that was my introduction to live theatre.'

Ronnie, by contrast, boasted of reading no books – telling his sons he was educated in the 'University of Life' – and discouraged his children from reading them.

Le Carré left Sherborne at the age of sixteen, with the support of his father and the fierce opposition of R. S. Thompson. There was an angry confrontation when he came to collect his belongings from the school.

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2. Rupert Cornwell's remarks at Jeannie's funeral.

TO R. S. THOMPSON

*Tunmers  
Chalfont St Peter  
Bucks.*

Thursday morning  
[n.d. but summer 1948]

Dear Mr Thompson,

I am very sorry if I misinterpreted your attitude on Tuesday afternoon, but in view of what had previously occurred you must admit that it was certainly understandable. My omitting to notify you of my arrival was a breach of manners which I deeply regret, but the truth was that, also in view of what had occurred, it seemed to me very difficult to say simply 'I shall be coming down on such-and-such a date to collect my possessions; please make all necessary arrangements.'

If I may, I should like to come down once more to say a slightly more conventional 'goodbye' in the style that I was anticipating on Tuesday afternoon. Would next Saturday be convenient? I would like to leave on the 5.20 or the 6.45 (if they run on Saturday) as I have a friend staying over the week-end.

Yours sincerely,  
David



On 21 September 1948 Ronnie wrote to Thompson to report that he had 'been giving this matter of withdrawing David from Sherborne the most serious consideration'. The Sherborne archives are rare in containing letters from Ronnie, who later claimed his son learnt the art of letters from his epistolary style.

‘I do not disguise the fact that the terms of your letter to me gave me the greatest anxiety and I had to ask myself whether, after all, I was doing the right thing in sending David to Switzerland for the twelve months University Course and taking him away from Sherborne,’ Ronnie Cornwell wrote.

‘You refer to his mental and spiritual immaturity and I agree wholeheartedly with you that he is at a particularly delicate stage in his life. On the other hand you must not misunderstand me when I say that my first consideration in this matter must always be David, and what you have been good enough to say in your letter amounts to practically the same thing. I am satisfied from what he has told me that whatever would be within his power to give the school during the next twelve months, and whatever they may have to give him, it would be a desperately unhappy year for him. Knowing him as I do I must acquit him entirely of the allegation of cowardice, and I was rather inclined to take the view of a used expression that he was “born young”. You said he was impulsive and I know that, too, to be true, and I think that if one is fair to that aspect of the matter much of that impulsiveness could be traced to a desire to acquire knowledge, and with that knowledge some degree of power. I agree with you entirely that he has infinite possibilities and I admit they may be for good or for ill. So it is with other boys, and having given this matter much serious consideration with a full sense of the heavy responsibility which must inevitably rest upon my shoulders finally, I have decided, so far as the visit to Switzerland is concerned, to give the boy his head as I believe in him completely. I sympathise with him in many of the things which he has found irksome during the time he has been at Sherborne. But in fairness to him, you must agree with me, judging by results, that he has not altogether wasted his time from a scholastic point of view. In view of all the circumstances, therefore, he will go off to Switzerland about the 15th or 16th of next month, and he will not be going entirely as a stranger. I have a number of friends there and I have no doubt that he will find other friends on his own account.’

Le Carré long described ‘running away’ from Sherborne to Bern, but it’s clear that Ronnie had a larger hand in this than he



described – though his father failed to come through for both school and university fees.

The Reverend Vivian Green was Sherborne's chaplain and a history master. While he did not teach le Carré, who was already specialising as a modern linguist, he vividly remembered shaking hands with the boy when he left.

In October 1948 le Carré left for Bern.

The manner of le Carré's departure from Sherborne, and the falling-out with Mr Thompson, continued to trouble both school-boy and schoolmaster; and both would describe it as the result of the tension between le Carré's home life, the high-wire existence of 'Ronnie's Court', and the Anglican orthodoxy of Thompson's Sherborne.

On 2 May 1952 Thompson wrote his assessment of le Carré in a lengthy reference letter for the rector of Lincoln College, Oxford: 'I regretted his leaving very much indeed and did my best to stop it, but unsuccessfully. It was all the result of an unsatisfactory home background working unhappily on a very sensitive mind. It was the case of a miniature Faustus story. The boy found a disturbing contrast between his very material home background and what he experienced at school. He was afraid that he would "lose" his family, which he did not want to do. So he thought that the only thing to do was to leave the place which was causing the conflict within him. That is what he told me, with a good deal of distress, and I have no reason to doubt its truth, because it made sense from my own observations. He came down at the end of the holidays to collect his things and annoyed me extremely by "creeping" into the House and trying to get away without seeing me. I found this out and saw him and we had a very sharp interview, which ended unsatisfactorily, largely my fault. However, I wrote to him afterwards and amongst other things told him I would always do anything for him that I could.

'He is an extremely sensitive boy, artistic and a poet – he won the School Prize poem at the age of 16 – and he has a good brain. Perhaps by now he has steadied down, at any rate I hope so, for he has it in him to do very well at anything to which he gives his mind

with conviction. He strikes me as the sort who might become either Archbishop of Canterbury or a first rate criminal!

Le Carré would speak in the documentary *The Secret Centre*<sup>3</sup> of a 'savagely orthodox and brutal early education'. He said: 'The actual gulf between Sherborne and its very High Church orthodoxy as it then was, and the chaos of domestic life and the terribly funny rackety scenes we lived in, that gulf became unbridgeable and absurd and I found myself tending to both extremes so that I went off and stayed with the Anglican Franciscans at Cerne Abbas for one bit of the holiday, because I really wanted to immerse myself in the meanings of Christianity, I wanted to commit to the extremes of the teachings of the school I was in. On the other hand I then suffered a complete revulsion from the Christianity and the orthodoxy and I began to think that I was the plaything of ridiculous forces, on the one hand this rackety criminality, on the other hand this toffee-nosed high-school style and I fled it really.'

Four years later, as le Carré prepared to go to Lincoln College, Oxford, there was another exchange of letters with Thompson. The two would remain in touch until 1968.

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3. BBC Two, 26 December 2000.

TO R. S. THOMPSON

*Tunmers  
Chalfont St Peter  
Bucks.  
Jordans 3152*

5 May 1952

Dear Mr Thompson,

Many thanks for your letter, which, as you may imagine, caused me no little thought. I have of course always known that you would be prepared at any time to help me any way you could. Furthermore I have often thought of coming to see you, not because I have regretted leaving early but because the idea of returning to the place of such unbearable moral conflict has always had a magnetic fascination.

I believe now, more than ever, that what I did was right, though I am sorry that it caused such pain. I have not – as you once suggested – chosen Mammon rather than God. I chose the natural rather than the unnatural; the free rather than the repressed, for the choice was mine as I think you always knew. I have experienced in the years since I left Sherborne so much – pleasant and unpleasant, good and bad, elating and depressing. If I have lingered longer in the ‘Courts of the Devil’, as you would call it, than I have in others, then it was because I was appalled, not enticed. I found what I always looked for – a basis of comparison, a broader foundation on which to form ones views.

I remember the Headmaster devoted a whole term’s scripture to the study of Buddhism. Surely in the light of that fact alone my argument is at least more reasonable?

Neither have I lost from an academic point of view – I studied in Bern most of the things I might have done at Sherborne.

So I am ‘neither black nor white’, but I can say that I have begun to study the need for something, whether I believe in it or not. For in all conscience, the need is there. Surely we have

time to view things objectively? Or must we as immature children, lost in fantasy, be forced into a creche of such fabulous implications? I wish I could start from the beginning! But I am happy to come round to belief in something in my own time, as the result of my experiences – in other words, I want to think it out for myself.

If you will accept me on that basis then I will be delighted to see you again. But I could not endure again, yet, what I went through before, for it nearly drove me mad.

Forgive me if I seem to be quoting improbable conditions, but I believe you will understand a little of what I am trying to say.

Yours ever  
David

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# SKI RACER

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I took part in the Lauberhorn Race when I was an English bloody fool and nearly killed myself.

– to Bernhard Döcke, by email, 20 December 2007

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Le Carré later explained his nine months at Bern University as a stepping-stone to German culture, in the closest place to Germany where he could study; but he formed a lasting relationship with German Switzerland as well. Through his Swiss fellow student Kaspar von Almen, he made his first visit to Wengen, the mountain village that hosts the famous Lauberhorn Ski Races, and where le Carré was recruited to the Downhill Only Club, training British ski racers. He built a chalet there in the 1960s.

Bern was also a stepping-stone for le Carré's life in the secret world, where he was recruited by British intelligence to carry out minor tasks as a student, to attend left-wing gatherings and 'to act as a mule in some operation of which I knew nothing'.<sup>1</sup>

For all his bitter recollections of Sherborne School, it was le Carré's German master, Frank King, an officer in the Military Intelligence Service during the war, who had infected him with the German bug. 'He spoke excellent German and he always reminded us in German class, as everyone was demonising Germany with justice, that there was another Germany, an enduring one and a much older one and a wise and loveable Germany,' le Carré recalled. 'And this got into my head and when I fled my public school I insisted on going to Switzerland. Germany was still under occupation and that was not a feasible project.'<sup>2</sup>

At Bern University, he remembered German-Jewish tutors and the company of exiled German children who formed a kind of German caucus. 'I assumed German identity and German culture as a replacement of my own. That's where it began.'

Le Carré never advertised his past either as a ski racer or an illustrator. In later years he skied gently with an upright, graceful, old-fashioned style and never tried to match his sons for speed. At a time when ski racers averaged speeds of about 50 mph over

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1. 'Berliner Salon' at the German ambassador's residence, London, 3 March 2020.  
2. *ibid.*

downhill courses, with wooden skis and fixed cable bindings, he skied the Lauberhorn Race; he hit the bank of a railway bridge and was laid out unconscious in Wengen's Eiger Hotel.

The nineteen-year-old le Carré wrote from the slopes to his future wife Ann Sharp, the daughter of a senior officer in the Royal Air Force. They first met in St Moritz in January 1950, when he was eighteen and she seventeen, and Ronnie – she would recall – ‘was using David as bait for the daughter of a possible client’. Ten months later they arranged to meet again, at a weekend dance at an RAF group captain's house. Le Carré was by then in the army and going to Austria in the Intelligence Corps. ‘After that, well, David wrote letters,’ she said, in a personal memoir.

Both le Carré and Ann were looking for shelter from torturous home lives – Ann, from her father, Bobby, an irascible, womanising, compulsively brave flier and veteran of Bomber Command.<sup>3</sup> As a child she had counted bombers out and in from an airfield, flying missions to Germany.

Le Carré skied with his friend Dick Edmonds in the Downhill Only Club in Wengen. And it was for the *Downhill Only Journal*, with Edmonds as editor, that he made many of his illustrations, as well as for the department store run by Edmonds's father.

Julie Kentish-Barnes knew the DHO team in Wengen and began a warm friendship with le Carré that would continue to Oxford. He was ‘bar none the best looking thing you have ever seen. They wore white cable stitched sweaters, [with the] blue sky, blue eyes it was devastating. I nearly swooned when I saw them,’ she remembered.<sup>4</sup>

Kentish-Barnes's parents adored le Carré, and he embraced them in turn, writing to her years later that ‘the happiest days of my late childhood (early manhood) were spent in your house, and on your tennis court and in your swimming pool’. He designed a logo for the family's nursery garden business, Waterers, to go on apple boxes, for

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3. Air Commodore A. C. H. ‘Bobby’ Sharp retired from the RAF after an affair with his secretary and went to work in Washington for a defence contractor. He subsequently divorced Ann's mother, and died, aged fifty-one, in 1956.

4. Interview with Tim Cornwell.

twenty-five pounds; it was an apple with a maggot coming out, captioned ‘British to the core.’ The firm used it for years. Kentish-Barnes drove a 1936 Ford 8, which had a bug deflector; ‘He painted a terrific bug with wings on the front of it,’ she said.

Le Carré was happy skiing in Wengen, Kentish-Barnes believed, at a distance from his father’s talk of ‘my Rolls and my silver.’ But he drew dark pictures, as well as his skiing sketches. Decades later le Carré would parlay his skiing days into a film script, ‘Schüss’, intended for his son Stephen, a gifted skier, screenwriter and film-maker. But the sport had changed. ‘Skiing,’ he wrote to Kentish-Barnes in 2016, ‘looks awful now: too fast, too easy, too crowded, and too badly behaved. I’m so glad we had the best of it.’<sup>5</sup>

The drawings for Dick Edmonds would be used in a montage at le Carré’s memorial at Micklefield Hall, the Edmondses’ family home, on 19 October 2021.

TO ANN SHARP

*Palace Hotel  
Wengen  
Oberland  
Switzerland*

18 December 1950

*Please note new address. D.*

My darling,  
‘Après-ski’ – that wonderful feeling of tiredness after a day’s ski-ing, when every muscle aches and shivers. Fatigue, mentally and physically, combined with the satisfaction of having achieved something. And today we have achieved something – for in a temperature of 17°–20° below zero we made four runs of five miles odd, and the snow was blowing with a hard, cold

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5. To Julie Kentish-Barnes, 14 March 2016.



Dere Mister Editer  
I enclose my first  
chapter of a novel for the  
D.H.O. jernal. Plese let me  
have in advance £100 for  
my hollyday in Wengen this  
Yere.....

Le Carré provided illustrations for the *Downhill Only Journal* in Wengen.

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wind that bit into our clothes and bodies. Your goggles clog, and your eyebrows grow stiff and icy, and eventually your trousers grow stiff too, so that every time you bend your knee, it grates against frozen material, like canvas. You can only see a few yards, and you don't know where you are, but you follow the chap in front of you, but keep clear of his track, and woe betide you if you fall. One of the team lost a ski today – it came off on a sharpish turn and went straight on 150 yards down hill and we never found it.

And then to return to the Hotel, sit down by the fire and talk about it all, to tell stories of the day's skiing, of how this corner is with the new snow, or that gully or hill. Net result of the day – one chap with a twisted ankle and another with one ski – and everyone pleased with himself and apprehensive about tomorrow. But tomorrow can wait.

And yet the feeling of loneliness, a sinking empty sort of feeling in the stomach, the knowledge that something is missing and that that something is you – this alone spoils – but only in a way – a perfect day. Yet the stupid thing is, I am happy that that is the case!

Darling, I will see you soon – I must. I will ring up on Christmas Eve at 8.30 British Time and tell you how everything is.

It is conceivable that your letters addressed to c/o DHO Team may take some time to reach me, as the Club-office here is not open yet. But Hotel Palace, Wengen will get me direct from now on.

God bless, my darling; I love you with all my heart  
David



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TO ANN SHARP

*Palace Hotel  
Wengen*

20 December 1950

My darling Ann,

Today we started jumping in earnest – but only 15–20 yards. Each day we will do four or five jumps from now on as part of our training. Believe it or not, it is the most wonderful sensation in the world, for on reaching a certain height you feel as if the air is carrying you – you float as smoothly as a bird. Aesthetically, it is the most satisfactory side of ski-ing perhaps. The sun came out this morning for the first time, and we spent the first half of the day skiing in brilliant sunshine, with new snow up to the knees and higher. It was wonderful, my darling, like riding on the crest of a high wave, with blue sky above and foaming sea below. That is real skiing, that is where the mind, as it were, overflows and inspires the body to achievement – all of which sounds rather stupid, but once you have done it you can never forget it. That is why perhaps I want you with me here more than anywhere else. We raced again at midday – that is, were timed over certain stretches of 5–7 miles, and we all of us did quite well. No injuries! Our team is already depleted from 10 to 6, so we are now ‘at minimum strength’.

I received a wire from Tony,<sup>6</sup> and he arrives here tomorrow – it will be very pleasant having him here although I don’t quite see what he is going to do. Then after Christmas he is going to Grindelwald, near here, to a chalet for 2 weeks, so he should enjoy that.

Again, as at the end of every day, every muscle aches and ties itself into knots – and today we have done more actual ski-ing than before. In the afternoon – slalom (between sticks)

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6. Anthony ‘Tony’ Cornwell, le Carré’s brother, older by two years.

and jumping. This evening we all had massage – which always makes me giggle.

Darling Ann, I will try desperately hard not to break anything, for I do so want to see you again soon. But if necessary I will hobble round Europe with both feet in plaster, if only to be with you for a while. I love you, my darling – you seem to have become my life-blood, the foundation of all my hopes and ambitions.

David x

O darling I don't want to stop writing to you – for it seems the only time when I can tell you I love you – and I do so desperately and sincerely. Does it then seem stupid that I tell you this in every letter and with every breath? My dearest darling Ann, I love you, I love you.



TO ANN SHARP

*Palace Hotel & National Wengen*

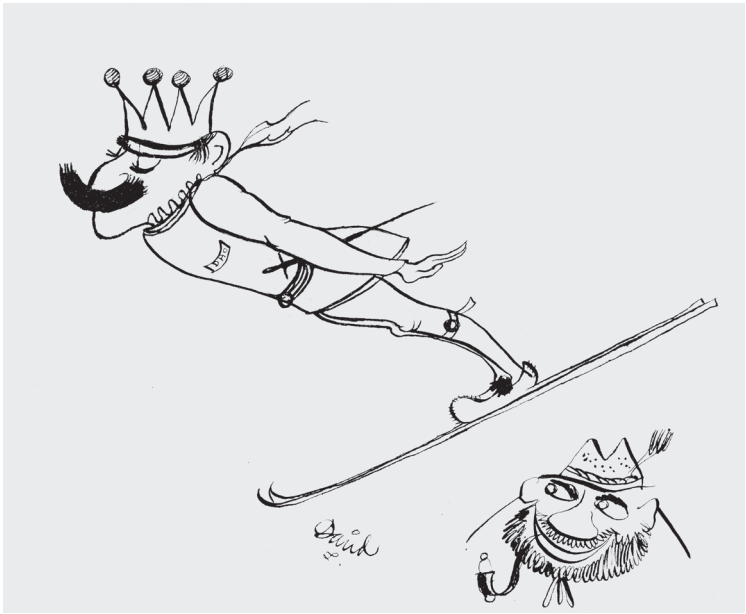
10 January 1951

My darling,

I've been to Zurich for several days on business. This morning I trained again with the team for the first major international meeting which is on Saturday – and had a frightful fall, the result of which is that I am once again in bed, having twisted some muscles in my left thigh. It had to come sooner or later. I may only be in bed for a day or two – in which case the doctor says he can bind up my thigh and I may be able to race on Saturday after all.

Oh my darling, darling Ann, I need you desperately, as I have never needed anyone. Please, please tell me when you are





coming. Write to Rosemary again, if necessary, but please find out, darling, and let me know. It is not long now.

Thank you for your letters – they make me very happy.

The course for Saturday's race is nothing short of amazing. One of the Italian team broke his leg today and knocked himself out. The Norwegian team is here and they go telemarking down the slalom course!

The German Team is also training and they look pretty good. The Americans are chronic and the French are brilliant. The Swiss Team is stolid and will probably win – they know the course like the back of their hand. The course is supposed to be faster than ever before. We have had no snow for ten days so you can imagine it is quite icy.

Sorry my writing is a bit groggy, but I have just been given some pills to make me sleep. But I want to talk to you so much, to think of you & imagine I am holding you in my arms, and you are pressing up against me as if you were really a part of me. I want to dream of your deep, soft eyes and of your voice. To think for a second you are here, talking to me. To suppose you are sitting here beside me.

It won't be long now, darling. Sorry this is rather a peculiar letter – I'll stop now & get it posted. I'm getting up on Friday. Darling, I love you terribly

David



*Back in Britain for his National Service, le Carré did his basic training in the regular army, and was selected for the Intelligence Corps.*

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TO ANN SHARP

*The Intelligence Corps Depot  
Maresfield Camp*

[n.d.<sup>7</sup>]

Ma chère Véronique,

A little letter to amuse, because although I love you no less than usual, but perhaps a little more, it's in a quiet contented way this evening.

Today D. played spies and was caught and put in prison. Escaped in true E. Phillips Oppenheim<sup>8</sup> by laying out an Other Rank guard and removing his braces & tying him up, and stealing his revolver. Masqueraded as a publican from Doncaster. All rather fun, but cut my hand a little in the fight.

But as I was tying up the soldier with his braces, and keeping him still by putting my knee between his legs, he looked up at me and said 'Excuse me sir, but is this all part of the exercise?' All rather sad.

Anyway, I was recaptured – and taken for reinterrogation – which really was rather tough because I was

1 stripped

2 struck

3 confined to Barracks

But I never got my clothes back – so I am writing to you in a state of nature.

Comme toujours

David

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7. Le Carré wrote to Ann from Maresfield Camp in 1950, which is the likely year for this letter, but also in August 1953 and September 1954.

8. Edward Phillips Oppenheim, 1866–1946, a popular English novelist whose stories 'were peopled with sophisticated heroes and heroines, spies, and dashing noblemen' (britannica.com). Ironically, Graham Greene would liken le Carré's writing to Oppenheim's in their 'passage of arms' over Kim Philby.

The Intelligence Corps Depot  
mansfield Camp

Ma chère Véronique,

A little letter to Annie,  
because although I love you no less than  
usual, but perhaps a little more, it's in a  
quiet contented way this evening.

Today D. played Spies. and was caught and



put in prison.  
Escaped in town  
E. Phillips Oppenheim  
by laying out an  
Other Rank guard  
and removing his  
braces + tying him  
up, and stealing  
his revolver.



masqueraded as  
a publican from  
Doncaster. He  
rather fun, but  
cut my hand a  
little in the  
fight.

But as I was tying up the soldier with  
his braces - and keeping him still by putting  
my knee between his legs he looked up at

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*In 1951 le Carré was serving in Austria as a military intelligence officer.<sup>9</sup> He was based at the Palais Meran in Graz, and drew on the experience in *A Perfect Spy*. He arrived in the country less than two years after the release of Graham Greene's *The Third Man*, set and filmed on location in Vienna.*

TO ANN SHARP

[Postmark] 30 March 1951

Darling,

I received your letter this morning – thank you very much. New address – POSTLAGERND (i.e., Post Restante) GRAZ (HAUPTPOST) STYRIA AUSTRIA. Please just put 'D. Cornwell'. I am going to Venice for a few days soon – leaving Vienna tomorrow morning, and going through the Russian zone by car. I am spending today walking around Vienna again. There is a Communist meeting tonight I shall attend. They are very interesting.

Food here is excellent and cheap. Gin is 3d per glass, beer sixpence a pint, Brandy 4d a tot. Just for interest. I'm not exploiting the situation more than usual.

Life is very good – opera and intrigue. What could be more entertaining?

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9. 'In Graz, Austria, as a National Service officer in field security during the quadripartite occupation of the country, I ran my first very own messenger boy: a twinkly, blue-eyed Austrian scoundrel called Freddy with a motorbike and a quick tongue,' le Carré told an audience at the Southbank Centre in 2017. 'Freddy traded pornographic photographs for military gossip with Russian sentries guarding the Soviet airbase at Wiener Neustadt. It is not widely known but, between us, Freddy and I averted a third world war.'

Do you want a secretarial job in Vienna? There is always a chance I could get you one. Perhaps it wouldn't be quite the thing with the family.

Love to all – at least to you, Darling. Must fly, believe it or not. Sometimes one has to work.

David



TO ANN SHARP

*[Austria, presumably Graz]*

[Postmark] 2 April 1951

Sorry – only paper. D.

It has been a warm spring day and a cool summer evening; the weeping willows are rich and green now, and the birch trees silver and shiny in the sun. I travelled down here three days ago in the same compartment as thirty Russian soldiers – the long carriages, that have no partitions. We smoked cigarettes together, but they refused to speak to me, or even say 'Goodbye' when they got out of the train. This afternoon I climbed a hill outside Graz – which is a very beautiful town – and saw the whole fields of red slate rooves spread out underneath me, and the river winding through, and smoke coming up from the chimneys. No people, just the buildings. It seemed impossible that this is the home of practically every underground political movement in Austria, was the seat of Nazism in 1939, is a hot-bed of Communism now, and the up & coming breeding ground for international intrigue of every discription. All you could see was the smoke & the rooves & the river. The sun was warm and bright and everything so peaceful. Funny really. I hope to be able to pick up any letters you have written me

to-morrow, but am not sure when I can write again. Probably soon though. Darling, I love you. You cannot know how much I want you. I am lonely, and at night I long and yearn for you beyond words. And during the day, I suddenly stop and think of you and imagine your face close to mine, and your eyes looking into mine, and I wish like anything you were here. I love you darling, I love you.

Must stop.

D.

P.S. Got the photos yet?



TO ANN SHARP

*Corinthia*<sup>10</sup>

Midday, Monday [23 May 1951]

Darling,

Today, sun and a fresh fall of snow on the Dolomites, a cold sharp wind. A smell of Spring, and 'Vermouth Syphon'. This evening, the night train to Vienna, and with luck by tomorrow morning I should have further news of where I shall go next, for I am still 'en route'.

I wish you were here – it is very beautiful. A small, unspoilt village, with a pub, a couple of shops and a group of houses with wooden walls and steep grey rooves. Cobbled streets, and the vigour and happiness of a real spring day. The river and the lake & the mountains. The fields look young and green, as if they were breathing in the warm sun and letting the wind run across them like spray over the side of a ship. You would never

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10. Presumably Carinthia, the federal state of southern Austria.

think that this land had ever been a battlefield, that these cottages had been pill-boxes, and the rivers tank traps. This is no country for soldiers and war. Rather, for music and painting, for poetry & happiness.

I wonder how Vienna will look now – will the trees that run along the broad streets be in bud yet, the river swollen from the melted snow?

O darling – this is life! I only hope I will continue to think so. I only wish that above all you were here to see it with me.<sup>11</sup> To see this happen – this great transformation from the grey indifference of England to the bewitching colours and the bright rebirth of Spring in Austria. You could half close your eyes and look into the sun, and perhaps you would see, as I do, the myriad of colours, like a live rainbow, or sun on a painted parasol outside a French café in the Champs Elysées. You could drink the air in these clean, smokeless cities, and laugh at nothing, as I do. But one day we will see it, both of us, together. We can wait till then.

Oh I know this is nonsense – it can't all be true. But sometimes I feel as if I had woken up from hibernation in England, and cleared my lungs of the soot of 'dark satanic mills' to breathe again the beauty and the peace of the outside world. And the more I enjoy & love it, the more I miss you, my darling, who are the only person who could ever enjoy and love it with me – who could swim in this great lake of pretence. It must all be an illusion – but I claim for both of us the right to dream until we wake. For wake we must – and I fear that more than death – and believe me, I am afraid to die too.

God bless  
David

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11. The couple met again when le Carré stayed with Ann's family for a weekend on home leave in the summer of 1951.



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# OXFORD AND MARRIAGE

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