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Switzerland

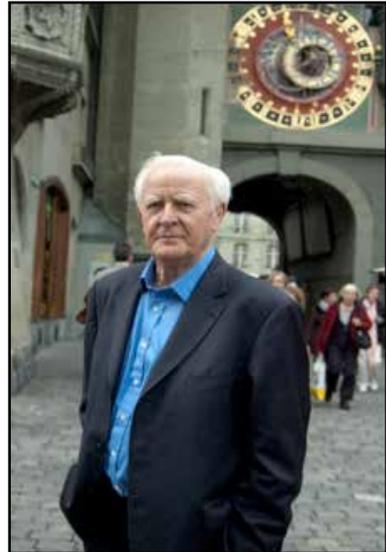
in the Life and Works of . . .

John le Carré (1931-2020)

by Matthias Lerf¹

Translated and annotated by Richard Hacken

John le Carré lived at the southwestern tip of England in Cornwall while his masterful spy novels take place all around the world. Yet he always emphasized that Switzerland was his second home, and he spoke excellent German. During an interview in Bern's Hotel Bellevue in 2010, on which this article is based, he even sprinkled in a few dialect phrases. He said he speaks "*es bitzeli*" [a bit of] Bernese German, but in general he avoided it, since it would call forth a torrent of words in response that he could not handle. In other matters as well, the writer proved himself to be a devotee of the country.



Always on the move: John le Carré in September of 2010 in front of the Zytglogge. Photo rights: Keystone-sda.ch

1. Bern as Refuge

It was absolutely by accident that John le Carré ended up in Switzerland. At the tender age of five he had been “stashed in the gu-

¹ Matthias Lerf is the Culture Editor for the *SonntagsZeitung/Tages-Anzeiger*. This article was published in *Der Bund* (Bern), 14 December 2020.

lags of the British finishing schools,” as he related in his 2010 interview, since “[his] mother had disappeared and [his] father had shown himself to be a petty crook and swindler.” The boy, whose name was then “David Cornwell,” as a result decided at age 16 to flee abroad for a language practicum, to learn German. Since Germany was out of the question in the postwar period, he chose Bern. “That was somewhat comparable, of course,” he said looking back, “to going to New Orleans to learn French.”

Nevertheless, he pursued German Studies and Modern Languages in the Federal City [at the University of Bern] in 1948 and 1949 and retained his ties to the city for the rest of his life.² “I have always felt at peace in Bern,” le Carré said. “When I would wander through the leafy groves by night, I heard the echo of my own footsteps, which somehow seemed to be accusing me [of disturbing the peace].” He claimed to sense that same ambient peacefulness 60 years later—with the *Bundesplatz* (Federal Plaza) as the only thing to have changed. “It is now a hotbed for the business of banking,” he scoffed. “Only the *Café Fédéral* has somehow miraculously survived.

2. Switzerland as Scene and Setting

The Switzerland of banks and international conglomerates is a vital theme in le Carré’s books. Yet for many years he wrote almost exclusively about the Cold War, having achieved his literary

²For further insight into the university years, see “John le Carré’s Life in Bern: Spy Recruitment and Elephant Washing,” as presented by Swissinfo (<https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/university-of-bern-alumnus-john-le-carré-dies-aged-89/462224020>). We learn from Adam Sisman, le Carré’s biographer, for instance, that when the young man enrolled at the university, he met its registrar, who “marveled at his lack of qualifications.” To finance his studies, the young David Cornwell worked as a waiter in a train-station buffet and allegedly washed elephants for Swiss National Circus Knie. His housing was a small room next to the Tobler factory where Toblerone was made and thus always smelled of chocolate. (It is quite possible he became familiar in later years with—and could identify with—the chanson by the Bernese Troubadour Bernhard Stirnemann, “*Mis Käthi schmöckt nach Schoggola*” = “My Cathy Smells like Chocolate,” also involving the factory in Bern that made Toblerone.)

breakthrough in 1963 with *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, thanks to his creation of the English spy George Smiley—a figure admired in the East as well as the West.³ As he revealed: “It’s one of the paradoxes of my life that the KGB collected my novels and sometimes even used them for training purposes. Yevgeny Primakov, for instance, who was once the Director of the KGB, was a great fan of mine. I asked him, ‘But Yevgeny, with whom can you identify in my books?’ He answered: ‘With George Smiley, of course.’” As John le Carré quoted that, he pronounced the last sentence with a strong Russian accent.

He loved to stay publicly involved beyond his writing, having been in small cameo appearances in most film versions of his books, even in his old age. After the end of the Cold War, though, he expanded his themes towards conflicts all around the globe. Thus, he transformed Switzerland into a central setting where the international stories could introduce a narrative arc or bring it to its conclusion. One good example is *Our Kind of Traitor* (2010) which deals with money laundering operations.

Le Carré portrayed Switzerland as the “cradle of [his] writing,” but not merely as a scene of the crime for dirty business transactions. Quite to the contrary, in his opinion: “I love this paradoxical community with its four languages. The Swiss have a reputation for being greedy and egotistical, yet they provide volunteers for relief organizations everywhere on earth. It is a magnificent contrast. The character of Switzerland is not chiseled in stone, though many Swiss think it is. There is a lot happening beneath the surface.”

³ According to Swissinfo (*op. cit.*), David Cornwell was first recruited into the British intelligence services in Bern during his student years, having met with consular officials on Christmas Day in a church. By the time of his literary breakthrough, he had become a member of MI6 and was operating in the hotbed of Cold War espionage: 1960s Berlin. His alter ego of “John le Carré” was more than a vanity pseudonym; as an operative for the Foreign Office, he was forbidden from publishing under his own name.



Le Carré at a 1974 reading of his Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy in Zürich.
Photo rights: Keystone-sda.ch

3. The Evil Pharmaceutical Barons of Basel

John le Carré was an unrelenting critic when it came to the chemical titans of Basel. In his novel, *The Constant Gardener* (2001), he attacked unnamed Swiss multinationals—who, in Africa for instance, used and abused people as guinea pigs and blithely accepted the deadly consequences—as “bastards with nothing but lucrative profits in their heads.”

The book and later the film caused a major stir, particularly since le Carré doubled down on his conviction that the story, when compared to reality, was “as tame as a vacation postcard.” When asked whether the Basel pharmaceutical companies had reacted, he answered in his interview of 2010: “Novartis sent me a very rude letter and asked me in a domineering tone to come to Basel to discuss the matter. I refrained from doing so.”

Hence, the artfulness of John le Carré included his feel for hot topics in the air. In his novel *Our Game* (1995), for example, he foresaw the war in Chechnya before it actually began. Up until his death he involved himself with current events. In his last novel *Agent Running*

in the Field, which appeared in 2019, he dealt with Brexit, which he categorically rejected.

4. The Bellevue

Hotel Bellevue in Bern is an important setting for the action in le Carré's novel on money laundering, *Our Kind of Traitor*. Its luxurious lodgings host the [fictional] abduction of one person and the murder of another. Le Carré had been well acquainted with the venerable edifice since his days as a student. As he put it: "Over 60 years ago I came here as a 16-year-old for the first time. For 2 francs and 50 centimes back then, anyone could buy a ticket for *thé dansant*.⁴ Mothers brought their daughters to the dance events. It was like a stud market." Yet he, of course, as a student with no means, had no chance. "They wanted the sons of rich textile barons."



John le Carré was a very welcome guest at the Hotel Bellevue. Photo rights: Keystone-sda.ch

⁴ A dance held while afternoon tea is served.

Later in life, le Carré stayed at the Bellevue time and again, eventually becoming acquainted with every nook and cranny of the hotel. During the 2010 interview, he alertly observed the happenings in the lobby (“Look over there. Those Russians are likely money launderers!”). For a photo opportunity later, he took us to his suite. There was something he absolutely wanted to show us: he pulled a pair of binoculars from a drawer in the cabinet. Evidently this was something the hotel provided for its guests.

“Just look at that beautiful view,” he said, directing the field glasses in the direction of the Eiger, Mönch, and Jungfrau [mountains], which could be seen in perfect light from the balcony. Then he roguishly added: “But using these, you can also watch the guest on the balcony across the way in quite keen detail, can’t you?”

Le Carré was no voyeur; it’s just that he loved the contrasts, the small absurdities of such locations. And he could describe them captivantly in his novels.

5. Federer, Jeanmaire, Dürrenmatt

Besides Bern, John le Carré had one further Swiss locale where he spent a lot of time: “With the success of my novel, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, I bought a piece of property in Wengen. I had a chalet built there, a small box, nothing sumptuous like Roman Polanski’s place in Gstaad.”

The writer got involved with Swiss personalities from time to time. To Jean-Louis Jeanmaire, the Swiss officer who had been convicted as a spy, he dedicated a book-length report published with the title *The Unbearable Peace* (1991; *Ein guter Soldat*). In it he depicted the “traitor of the century” as a victim instead.⁵

⁵ The text of this work is currently available at <https://granta.com/the-unbearable-peace/> as an open-access site.

A key scene in *Our Kind of Traitor* plays out at the French Open tennis final of 2009 between Roger Federer⁶ and Robin Söderling, at which le Carré himself was present and to which he added his own observations: “That was the match during which some crazy guy stormed down onto the court. For me that was Federer’s John Lennon moment. If the stranger had pulled out a pistol and shot him dead, nobody could have done a thing; the security arrangements were lousy. Since then, I’ve admired Federer even more. He stayed completely cool.”

Finally, there was one last meeting with Friedrich Dürrenmatt⁷ in Wengen. Le Carré related: “Dürrenmatt was depressed and had the feeling that he’d written everything he had in him. Then, when he died, Max Frisch⁸ sent me a telegram with the words, ‘I envy him.’ Not me. I don’t feel the same way. I haven’t gotten to the point of envying the dead just yet.”

On Saturday [December 12, 2020], John le Carré died at the age of 89.⁹

~ *Brigham Young University*

⁶ Roger Federer (b. 1981) is a Swiss professional tennis player, one of the most highly ranked players of all time.

⁷ Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1921-1990) was a Swiss author and dramatist. His epic theatre and satire were internationally celebrated, and he also wrote radio plays and novels.

⁸ Max Frisch (1911-1991) was a well-regarded Swiss playwright and novelist. Along with Dürrenmatt and others, he was a member of the literary circle, Gruppe Olten. The town of Olten was chosen for its central rail access from Basel, Bern, Zürich, Lucerne and Biel.

⁹ His wife, Valerie Eustace, died two months later of what some say was a “broken heart.”