The Spy Novels of John le Carré

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Balancing Ethics and Politics

Myron J. Aronoff

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THE SPY NOVELS OF JOHN LE CARRÉ

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For Rita, Miriam, Matt, Yael, Eric, Maya, and Natalie

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Preface/Acknowledgments

Robert McNeill: "*Is spying an honorable profession?*"

John le Carré: "*I am sure it can be, yes. I think it probably can be.*"

(McNeill-Lehrer Report, May 1989)

This book examines the spy novels of John le Carré, focusing on key ethical dilemmas that confront citizens, particularly of democracies, when their states engage in espionage. Le Carré's unique ethical critique, a kind of ambiguous moralism, and his skeptical outlook are firmly grounded in his liberal political temperament. This book is written for a broader audience than just my fellow academics—it is for le Carré buffs as well as for those who may not have read many (or any) of his novels.

Readers unfamiliar with the main characters may need to occasionally refer to the *dramatis personae* I have provided as a reference. For avid le Carré fans, they are old friends. I have provided only enough plot summary in each chapter to put into context the examples I draw for the discussion of a specific topic. Those who are only interested in the main discussion may wish to ignore the notes, which are for readers who wish to check my sources and to pursue the finer points of argumentation. The same goes for the bibliographical references. I sincerely hope that readers who decide to follow this suggestion will have pleasure in reading the main text and suffer no guilt from ignoring the rest.

The genesis of this book was a series of seminars I taught in the Rutgers College general honors program and one that I taught aboard the *S.S. Universe* for the University of Pittsburgh's Semester at Sea program. I thank my students in these seminars, whose enthusiastic reactions and comments stimulated me to write "Intelligence and the Dilemma of Democracy: Themes in the Work of John le Carré," a paper I delivered at the 1994 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. I am grateful to the discussants of the panel in which this paper was presented, Michael Zuckert and Barbara Allen, as well as to Kathleen Gerson, Irving Louis Horowitz, Richard Lau, Carey McWilliams, Gerald Pomper, and Joseph

Romano, for their comments on this paper. Their generally positive reactions reinforced my determination to expand the paper into a full-length book.

I acknowledge my debt and my gratitude to the two institutions and the many individuals who contributed to making this book possible. A key individual in each institution that supported the research and writing of this book is an avid reader of *le Carré*. My personal thanks to Richard Foley, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, and to H. L. Wesseling, rector of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NIAS), where I was a fellow in residence for the academic year 1996–97, for their personal interest and support. My profound gratitude goes to the institutions they represent, particularly to the staff of NIAS (especially librarian Dinny Young), who provided an ideal environment for living in the wonderful Netherlands and working in a stimulating intellectual environment. I thank collectively those many colleagues with whom I interacted during my year at NIAS, particularly the participants in the Philosopher's Group, to whom I gave presentations of the first two chapters of this manuscript for their useful comments.

I especially wish to express my sincere gratitude to two colleagues who have read and commented on drafts of the entire manuscript. Where their suggestions provided a new insight or line of analysis, they are also credited in the notes. Gerry Pomper's careful reading produced particularly insightful comments. I owe a very special debt to Richard Trahair, whom I met only once many years ago. Through the wonder of e-mail, from Australia to the Netherlands he has been my secret sharer on this project. As a devotee of *le Carré*, a good soul, and a collegial intellectual, he has provided ongoing commentary and encouragement as this book was being written. I am especially grateful to him.

I wish to also express my sincere thanks to my editor at Palgrave, Karen Wolny, both for her enthusiastic support and her thoughtful reading and many helpful suggestions. I have never had an editor who made so many valuable recommendations for revision. The book is much better for her assistance, as well as all of the other suggestions I received from the meticulous copyediting of Wendy Jacobs and those named here. I also appreciate Rick Delaney's assistance during the production of this book.

Although David Cornwell (John *le Carré*) declined my request to interview him, he kindly answered questions I raised in several letters over the course of a year. I wish to express my gratitude for his thoughtful and graciously handwritten personal replies and for the untold hours of reading pleasure and intellectual and moral education his novels have provided me over the past 35 years. The time spent rereading, contemplating, and

writing about his work has been an exceptionally stimulating and enjoyable experience. Although the writing of this book might be called a labor of love, it has been too much fun to call the writing of it labor. Since Cornwell claims never to read anything written about him, I hope that if someone close to him reads this, they will pass on this expression of my thanks.

This project was very much a family affair. My spouse (and best friend) Rita, my daughters, Miriam and Yael, my sons-in-law Eric Wallach Aronoff and Matthew Cohn, and my sisters, Aida Berenson and Marcia Aronoff, all contributed by searching for books and articles, and/or by reading and commenting on drafts of the manuscript. They all, but especially Rita, encouraged me to carry on the project at times when (because of many obligations and obstacles) it seemed as if I would never succeed in completing it. Rita, Miriam, Yael, and Eric made numerous helpful comments that were incorporated into the book. Words are insufficient to express my gratitude to them for their help, support, and most important, their love. I therefore dedicate this book to Rita, Miriam and Matt, Yael, Eric, Maya, and Natalie (the first of the next generation of our family) as an expression of my deep love for them.