

# GEORGE SMILEY: A REAL HERO

JEFF SCOTT



“Thrillers,” says Ayn Rand, “are the last refuge of the qualities that have vanished from modern literature, life, color, imagination; they are like a mirror still holding a distant reflection of man.”<sup>1</sup> In thrillers, we are aroused by the intricate adventures of intelligent, sharp-witted heroes and villains. We are held in suspense by struggles for greater stakes which bring the competitors to the limit of their endurance, courage and sometimes, to the brink of their integrity. Just as the dangerous villains are bigger than life, so too is the struggle to hold values. Because in relinquishing a value to be successful, the achievement of victory can bring tragedy to the hero. Hence, some thrillers do not merely dramatize the good versus the bad, the best dramatize the crucial abstraction of moral conflict within one’s own soul.<sup>2</sup>

John le Carré dramatizes both conflicts and therefore transcends the espionage/thriller genre with which he is often associated. His spy world is a microcosm of a world where most people have given up the search for values, opting instead for ambivalent philosophical postures. Only one man shines through: George Smiley. By his continual “moral search”,<sup>3</sup> that is, his capacity to live guided by his values of reason, purpose, and responsibility, George Smiley dramatizes universal moral conflict by battling the Soviets, the bureaucracy, and his own inner soul. Le Carré illustrates elegantly how the other characters rationalize their behavior with reasons such as duty to the Empire, nostalgia for the ‘Hot’ War, or the inevitability

of “History”. They are empty people who have led themselves to painful paradoxical lives as manipulators, power brokers, and traitors. George Smiley, therefore, is a man alone in a treacherous world where “love means you still have something left to betray”.<sup>4</sup>

## SMILEY’S EXCEPTIONAL QUALITIES

John Le Carré introduced the world to Smiley in *Call For The Dead* in 1961. Smiley’s profile has changed only with age, the essentials remain intact. Le Carré lets George unravel as he meets the challenges set forth in the sweeping trilogy *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, *The Honourable Schoolboy*, and *Smiley’s People*. (In two earlier novels, *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold* and *The Looking Glass War* Smiley leaves the foreground but plays a powerful role nonetheless.) The trilogy involves a long, laborious pursuit by George for his Soviet rival who has destroyed the effectiveness of the British Secret Service - the “Circus” - by burrowing a “mole”. George comes out of retirement to capture the double agent. He restores the Circus, is “shelved” in a power struggle, and comes out of retirement again to take one last shot at a “rogue elephant”. Le Carré’s labyrinthine plots derive their power from George Smiley’s exceptional qualities.

To understand the nature of Smiley’s heroism, one examines the three elements which shape conflict: the approach, the conduct, and the resolution. Smiley’s approach to conflict is based on his values, which are revealed by his views and emotions. His values are made clearer when compared to those of the other characters. Smiley’s conduct is the full expression of his sensibilities and purposes. The way in which Smiley overcomes the obstacles put in his way by those around him, and the way he must deal with his own doubts, lest they undercut him, shows how his values are put to the test. When Smiley achieves his life-long ambition of ending conflict with his Soviet counterpart, his outer battle is resolved. When George reflects on how his approach and conduct have brought him to victory, the ultimate resolution of his inner conflict is jeopardized. Through George’s searching questions of himself and his values, whether his means are consistent with his ends, Smiley becomes an inspirational hero who can keep our own fires burning.

“George”, says Oliver Lacon, liaison to the Minister in Whitehall for the Circus, “we are not keepers of some sacred flame.”<sup>5</sup> Be-

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cause George has lingering loyalties to those “liberated” by the Soviets, Lacon thinks he is an idealist with “anachronistic fixations”. Lacon is of course a “realist”. However, the loyalists, the obedient field men such as Jerry Westerby “the honourable schoolboy”, see George as a dedicated professional, a true mover. Other glassy-eyed understudies fawn over Smiley’s legendary accomplishments. On the one hand, Smiley is viewed by the pragmatic types as a romantic while at the same time he is viewed by the “idealistic” as a man of great accomplishment, unbeset by the burden of ideals. Smiley is neither, or rather, both.

Smiley rejects the false alternative. He sets himself apart from the pragmatists who swing from one whim to the next and at the same time makes clear his purposes as distinct from the duty-oriented, unquestioning loyalists. Though never stated explicitly, Smiley’s approach is not a compromise of practical actions and moral actions as are his associates’. Smiley never thinks about his pursuits in these terms. As Le Carré’s innuendo implies, Smiley has a “balance” or an integration which baffles those near him because his extraordinary efficiency is matched by his ability to wait patiently for the right opportunities. Smiley’s uncompromised intelligence allows him to sort out the nearly impenetrable web of betrayals.

### COMPASSION AND CONCERN FOR MORAL VALUES

As Smiley knows, and as John Le Carré tells us in frequent interviews, we’re double agents of the soul first. Our world, just like the spy world, contains an unbearable number of “natural betrayers”:<sup>6</sup> those who have abandoned their inner selves, giving up the “moral search” in order to function publicly. Le Carré’s spies are on the frontlines literally and philosophically. They are trapped in compromising positions between conflicting loyalties of home and work, of God and Marx, of war and peace, of practical and moral, of real and ideal. Amid the delicate psychological equilibriums, George must sort out the ones who have gone over the line and not merely jeopardized lives or the Circus, but the fate of the West.

George cuts through the clues and reveals a spectrum of personalities all paralyzed by their respective philosophies. As George frequently complains, “We always have an excuse to do nothing”. That is, the people with whom George shares power prefer indecisiveness, the pain of living in paradox, to that of making a choice in the face of conflict.<sup>7</sup> Le Carré’s portraits are vivid accounts of men who cannot relinquish the ideal for the real, the Cold war for the Hot war, the Russians for the Germans and vice versa. But it is the stagnation of intellectual pursuits which stands at the root of these men’s destruction and not the forces exerted by declared and undeclared enemies.

George Smiley’s philosophical jungle is populated by Connie Sachs, the ex-Head of Research with a computer-like memory:

“It’s not a shooting war anymore, George. That’s the trouble. It’s gray. Half angels fighting half devils. No one knows where the lines are.”<sup>8</sup>

And by Jerry Westerby, the obedient agent, well trained for action but resistant to Smiley’s searching questions:

You point me and I’ll march, Okay? You’re the owl, not me. Tell me the shots I’ll play them. World’s chock-a-block with milk-and-water intellectuals armed with fifteen conflicting arguments against blowing their blasted noses. We don’t need another. Okay? I mean, Christ.<sup>9</sup>

And then Control, the man in charge in the early years whose destruction of Alec Leamas, *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold*, is unforgettable and unforgivable. Control’s manipulation of shifting loyalties puts Leamas on the top of the Berlin Wall looking with horror at the equal ruthlessness of both sides. And then Smiley, imploring Alec to jump to safety, symbolically offers the apology of the West, representing its saving graces to Alec, a man sacrificed for the “greater good”. This moral impasse or spy paradox, that we must fight with a will and a technique equal to or stronger than our aggressors while remaining essentially good, is one of Le Carré’s central themes, and one of Smiley’s critical concerns.

Because of Smiley’s unique intelligence, the spy paradox does not leave him disabled emotionally as it has many others. Some depart the Circus unwilling or unable to perform the mental gymnastics and become “part of the wastage rate that gets everyone so worried these days.”<sup>10</sup> Others become cold and hardened, trying desperately to uphold the distinction between deskmen and fieldmen. But Smiley neither bails out nor becomes an unfeeling bureaucrat. One brief incident from *The Honourable Schoolboy* illustrates the depth of George’s emotion. An American escape line was passing the two British agents, a couple, who had covered the Ukraine and Georgia. The “exfiltration assignment” had fallen through as the couple was shot dead leaving a harbor on the Black Sea. The American local station chief told Smiley not to take it too hard, that “generalship” meant preserving the detachment of office agents from field agents; “otherwise, we go crazy.” Smiley grabbed his makintosh and walked until dawn in the pouring rain. That morning, when Guillam (Smiley’s Watson) brought tea, he found Smiley “sitting rigidly before an old volume of German poetry, fists clenched either side of it, while he silently wept.”<sup>11</sup>

George Smiley’s great compassion and concern for moral values take many forms; they are ultimately what separates Smiley (hence Le Carré) from second rank romantic heroes. Smiley’s actions, of course, tell us the most about his character. But George’s open intellectual pursuit of abstract moral values through German poets (such as Goethe and Opitz) tells us he is not willing to let the inner conflicts or the paradox wear him down.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the admiration that Smiley expresses for certain qualities in people - the integrity of General Vladimir, the shrewd insights of Connie Sachs, the methodology of Jerry Westerby - show us Smiley’s consistency. Smiley’s values are neither superficial nor insignificant to the dramatic action Le Carré creates. As Ayn Rand describes first rank Romanticists:

They are moralists in the most profound sense of the word; their concern is not merely with values but specifically with *moral* values and with the power of moral values in shaping human character.<sup>13</sup>

### KARLA

The human characters of the spy world which Smiley inhabits are men lacking a clear sense of moral purpose. When the unresolved conflicts which these men operate by (or in spite of) are manifest, the action becomes frightening on a global scale. As Smiley trudges through the incompetents, the loyalists gone away, the pragmatists, and other undeclared persons whose purposes are rarely identified explicitly - vanity, power, duty - he must find the persons who exploit the weaknesses of their compatriots. George Smiley directs himself toward the destruction of a declared enemy who vows to corrupt all that George holds dear. He is the focus of George’s purposes, sometimes an obsession, always his “black grail”, taunting George from a monastic dacha outside Moscow. He is Karla.

Smiley’s desire to defeat Karla is an extension of George’s sense of purpose. But this enemy is not as discernible as were the Nazis. The World War II threat was unequivocal. Now, the Soviets have pretenses which are obstacles for those in the Circus who cannot define aims. Oliver Lacon reveals this anxiety to George as he attempts to dissuade Smiley from his Karla fixation offering of course, nothing in its place.

I once heard someone say morality was method. Do you hold with that? I suppose you wouldn’t. You say that morality was vested in the aim, I expect. Difficult to know what one’s aims are, that’s the trouble, specially if you’re British. We [government officials] can’t expect you people [the Circus] to determine our policy for us, can we? We only ask you further it. Correct? Tricky one, that.<sup>14</sup>

Lacon is in a fog, trying to sort ends from means while Smiley’s ends are clearly defined and his means therefore appropriate.

Smiley is driven unrelentingly by the behavior of the Soviets. While many people overlook their conduct, George recognizes its significance. Because in turning a moral blind eye to Soviet bru-

tality and authoritarianism, we show that we're ready to be taken over, that we're incapable of resisting. Smiley can't help thinking the Soviets may be winning. As we witness the plight of Russian emigrés, symbols of mass oppression, confronted by their ex-masters, the ruling class, we are horrified. General Vladimir, the Estonian freedom fighter, draws our greatest sympathy when the words he lives by are quoted by his surrogate son, Villem: "Enemies I do not fear. But friends I fear greatly."<sup>15</sup> Vladimir makes profoundly clear the mental and moral perversion engendered by Communism. It is Smiley who must find the man who protects the Communists.

Karla is a man to whom "the killing comes first, the questioning second."<sup>16</sup> Smiley is not simply doing the job of eliminating foreign spies; his purpose has a personality. Smiley has a hidden motive which he perceives in himself:

He called it Karla, and it was true that somewhere in him like a left over legend, there burned the embers of hatred toward the man who had set out to destroy the temples of his private faith, whatever remained of them: the service that he loved, his friends, his country, his concept of a reasonable balance in human affairs.<sup>17</sup>

Karla is George's black grail, an absolute fanatic who is not, "fire-proof ... [I]t is precisely that lack of moderation which will be his downfall."<sup>18</sup> George is taunted by Karla, who uses the spy paradox to disorient George: "In the pursuit of peace, not a single stone will be left standing."<sup>17</sup> There are many enemies to defeat before Smiley can reach Karla.

Smiley must battle the bureaucrats. It is the exhortations to "duty", desires for clean balance sheets, and fear of scandal which, to the extent that Smiley cannot ignore them, undercut his efforts. It is Lacon again, who wants George to "put the milk back in the bottle, to pour oil on the waters [and not] muddy them".<sup>20</sup> They castrate George, they virtually punish him for his talent and competence, and at the same time depend on his abilities. "You have a duty. A loyalty,"<sup>21</sup> says Lacon, whose specious reasons and lack of principles leave Smiley cold.

"George" Lacon intoned gravely, as if he had belatedly found his place in the prayer book. "We are pragmatists, George. We adapt."<sup>22</sup>

And as a pragmatist, Lacon adopts the philosophy of "action now", dispensing with guiding principles that would tell him in advance the results of his aimless pursuits. Lacon drives himself to paralysis and neuroses: incapable of being effective, complicated by the choice of being undecisive. Smiley reflects on his own professional life under Whitehall doctrine as one spent being

... witness or victim - or even reluctant prophet - of such spurious cults as lateralism, parallelism, separatism, operational devotion, and now, if he remembered Lacon's most recent meanderings correctly of integration.<sup>23</sup>

But each "new fashion, each panacea" left in its wake the familiar haze.

### WINNING THE COLD WAR

George is the only one who sees the disastrous consequences of the pragmatism in Whitehall. It is George who is concerned with the idea of a Cold War and what it means to fight without the option of a "Hot" War. A "Cold War without the option"<sup>24</sup> is a contradiction, and in Smiley's view, bad government policy. Though his reasoning is never explicit, his view point is distinct. Since tension exists and cannot simply be set on a shelf, and since neither side will relinquish their convictions, then conflict must be either open or covert or both. Brinkmanship in this sense simply means that one must draw the line between East and West, between slavery and freedom *or* acquiesce. And Cold War without the option - when, means become ends - is a product of pragmatist "flexibility" from those who want neither Hot War nor Collectivism and prefer the agony of not being able to choose between the two.

Smiley's fight is against, not convictions, but the lack of convictions. It is the void, the absence of values, where Karla slips in with an invitation. When Smiley is ferreting out the mole, one of

the suspects Roy Bland, a left-wing intellectual, represents this void by his comments to George:

An artist is a bloke who can hold two fundamentally opposing views and still function ... And I'm definitely functioning, George. As a good socialist, I'm going for the money. As a good capitalist, I'm sticking with the revolution, because if you can't beat it, spy on it. It's the name of the game these days: you scratch my conscience, I'll drive your jag right?<sup>25</sup>

The traitors are virtually indistinguishable from the others. To make matters worse, Smiley's own lingering doubts are aggravated by these betrayers who are collectively an expression of the political health of Smiley's country.<sup>26</sup>

Taking the spy paradox a step further, Le Carré asks whether the things we must do to protect our country are making our country not worth protecting. Again Smiley offers no explicit answer. But it is only Smiley to whom the problem of collectivizing to protect individualism has importance. Others are debilitated by the paradox of being "inhuman in our defense of humanity, harsh in defence of compassion, single-minded in defence of our disparity."<sup>27</sup> Smiley has witnessed a slow erosion of people's capacities to live freely and prosperously. The British have collectivised to fight *against* something, possibly losing what they are *for*, therefore jeopardizing the security of their country by embodying this double standard in the Intelligence Service. Smiley must live with the gnawing thought that he is fighting for a lost cause. His struggle to defeat Karla is intensified.

As Smiley comes closer in his quest for Karla, his inner world is in torment. At one point, he thinks that his obsession with Karla has gotten the best of him, that he's mad, chasing phantoms. His thoughts betray General Vladimir: "A senile General had a dream and died for it. He remembered Wilde; the fact that a man dies for a cause does not make that cause right."<sup>28</sup> It may be that George is losing grasp of the reasons that brought him to Karla's doorstep. George contemplates his bitter contest against a man to whom "Killing had never been more than the necessary adjunct of a grand design":

How can I win? he asked himself; alone, restrained by doubt and a sense of decency - how can any of us - against this remorseless fusillade?<sup>29</sup>

How can Smiley win? How can he deliver himself to victory? His skill and work ethic have given him alone the advantage. Smiley is a man who works tirelessly, whose "bags beneath his eyes turn to bruises."<sup>30</sup> He rebuilt the Circus after the mole burrowed through and left absolute destruction. He worked with no resources: funds frozen, staff shorn, networks exposed and "not a friend in Whitehall or Washington to call his own."<sup>31</sup> Smiley's ears are so sharp, that he can hear "the sound of barriers being erected ... from the cadence, from the tightening of the voice, from the tiny physical things which make up an exaggerated show of throwaway."<sup>32</sup> Smiley can close in on the defenses of his witness with unmatched abilities. Smiley's ethic is "to act, not merely to react."<sup>33</sup>

Smiley is the workhorse of the Circus, the Atlas on whose shoulders all rest. He is the source of everything that keeps the Lacons and Westerlys behaving properly. "He toils in the back rooms while shallower men hold the stage."<sup>34</sup> George's private universe is incomprehensible to those outside and inspirational to those inside. Smiley's individuality is an expression of his rational philosophy.

### A CREDIBLE ROMANTIC FIGURE

While Le Carré lets Smiley's actions tell most of the story, he teases us by allowing fragments of Smiley's profound thinking to surface. Smiley, at every turn, rejects all those who imply that practicality requires the betrayal of one's values. He casts aside "the real versus the ideal"; in one potent scene he breaks the will of someone during a questioning: "What dreams did you cherish that had so little of the world in them?"<sup>35</sup> And Smiley rejects soundly the notions of duty ("Duty to whom?") and loyalty ("Loyalty to what?"). Smiley's obligations, whether they are to the service, to

his generation, to his country, are always chosen; they are loyalties to something dear to him. George has known too many people to whom loyalty, detached from proper reason, has left a trail of dead bodies. "Gentlemen, I have served you both well, says the perfect double agent in the twilight of his life."<sup>36</sup>

Smiley is clearly a man of superior initiative, always directing his actions in terms of his moral values, ultimately being of heroic proportion. That he is not Bondlike simply restates the crucial observation that fighting for values is *not* the exclusive domain of those from Central Casting. In the spy world, anonymity rather than flamboyance is the key asset. Smiley is not cardboard, nor derived from fantasy, but is a credible, romantic figure who represents values on a grand scale. If Smiley's heroism is the stuff that makes mythology, then we need more "myths" like George Smiley.

In a nightmarish spy world, George is armed only with his reason, doubting even it sometimes, when faced with overwhelming treachery. He's not superhuman; he has no comic book attributes, no special contrivances. He knows his responsibilities *before* he acts - and accepts what he does. He doesn't allow floating "duties" to be thrust upon him. George Smiley is fighting for the good while someone else is fighting for the opposite at the same time, and he does not give us an excuse to do nothing.<sup>37</sup> But can George Smiley live with himself if he does the things to his enemy that his enemy wants him to do?

Karla is the fanatic. Smiley is restrained by decency. But Karla's lack of moderation leaves a trail of dead bodies. An attentive Smiley comes out of retirement to get one last shot at the "rogue elephant". But Karla has resorted to the methods of his trade to protect a loved one, and Smiley gets a faint notion that Karla may be human after all. It is Smiley who reflects on the warrior inside, whose obsessions have brought him to the frontlines to look into the face of the fanatic, but who will instead see the face of a man. Smiley discovers his own trace of "fanaticism"; that of a soldier who must kill real people, not personifications of evil, with purposes and families and feelings of their own. George's realization of his own "lack of moderation" in pursuit of his "black grail", imperils the final resolution of his inner conflict. As Karla and Smiley stand on the brink of their two frontiers, it is Smiley who must decide whether he can live with victory - or without it.

Few of us will ever stand at the Berlin Wall waiting for our life's ambition to be fulfilled, much less for our very souls to be validated. Most of us achieve different forms of gratification; the "getting there" is universal: we all face the same essential obstacles. We take a certain approach to our struggles, conduct ourselves accordingly, and resolution follows logically. When our means are consistent with our ends, and our ends represent all that is good, then our self-made souls become towers with sacred flames. We can stand next to an anonymous looking man, who cleans his glasses with the fat end of his tie, and say, "I've done it too. I've guided my life by reason, purpose, responsibility. I've overcome self-doubt, discouragement by my "peers" and stilled those who would have me want less out of my life than you ... . You've been an inspiration, George Smiley."

## FOOTNOTES

1. *The Romantic Manifesto*, New American Library, New York, 1975, p. 133.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
3. Le Carré's phrase, used frequently in interviews.
4. *The Looking Glass War*, Coward-McCann Inc., New York, 1965.
5. *Smiley's People*, Bantam, New York, 1979, p. 56.
6. Interview with Robert McNeil, PBS, n.d.
7. Thomas Szasz, *Heresies*, Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1976, p. 147.
8. *Smiley's People*, p. 207.
9. *The Honourable Schoolboy*, Bantam, New York, 1977, p. 106.
10. *Smiley's People*, p. 70.
11. *The Honourable Schoolboy*, pp. 50-51.
12. Goethe and Opitz are the only German poets referred to by name. In *Smiley's People*, George tries "loyally to distinguish true passion from the tiresome literary convention of the period." p. 26
13. *The Romantic Manifesto*, pp. 107-108.
14. *Smiley's People*, p. 70.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
19. *Honourable Schoolboy*, p. 461.
20. *Smiley's People*, p. 66.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
24. George uses this phrase in Le Carré's screenplay of *Smiley's People*.
25. *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, Bantam, New York, 1974, p. 152.
26. McNeil interview.
27. *Honourable Schoolboy*, p. 461.
28. *Smiley's People*, pp. 147-148.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
30. *Honourable Schoolboy*, p. 41.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
34. *Smiley's People*, p. 156.
35. *Call For The Dead*, Penguin, Harmondsworth Middlesex, 1961, p. 101.
36. *Smiley's People*, p. 134.
37. I am indebted to Mikel Smith for these observations.

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