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A class act, not a class warrior

By Robert Dawson Scott

BY THE TIME Len Deighton left Britain in 1969 he was everywhere. He had just written and produced the film of *Oh! What a Lovely War*. He was travel editor of *Playboy*, his cookery books, illustrated by himself, were being issued as boxed sets, his dinner guests ranged from David Frost to Valery Fedorov, the military attaché at the Soviet Embassy. His spiky, spicy spy novels with their chippy, working-class heroes, had caught the mood, especially of the early part of that decade, when it seemed for a while that the whole edifice of the English class system would be overturned by pressure from below.

He has not been back since, apart from a few personal visits and even rarer media appearances. When he turned to Second World War history, in books such as *Bomber and Fighter*, he had to defend himself against former combatants who could not understand why he wanted to describe what it was like on the German side as well. His last appearance was on *Wogan* in 1985 when the Bernard Samson stories were on television with Ian Holm doing for ITV what Alec Guinness had done for the BBC in their adaptations of John le Carré's George Smiley stories. With a fan-base more or less happy with whatever he issues, and fed up with lazy journalists who could not be bothered to read his books in advance, he has kept his own counsel since, spending most of his time in southern California.

So it is a most fortuitous coincidence that he has chosen to break his long silence with an in-depth interview in a documentary for "Len Deighton Night" on BBC Four tonight, just as the National Film Theatre has decided to make a brand new print of the film of his first novel, *The Ipcress File*. The NFT is not celebrating Deighton's contribution to film — although he has certainly left his mark as a producer and screenwriter — but that of Michael Caine who brought Deighton's anonymous hero to life as Harry Palmer, first in *The Ipcress File* and then in two subsequent films, *Funeral in Berlin* and *Billion Dollar Brain*.

Caine, who is interviewed in the documentary, recalls the colossal impact of the books: "What you've got to remember," he says, "is that the literature of the time was all about middle-class people. And suddenly there was this working-class dialogue and working-class characters and Harry, as he became known, was one of them."

Legend has it that it was the first hardback that Caine had bought, long before he was cast in the role, and that he kept his flatmate, Terence Stamp, awake by reading out bits, saying: "Listen to this, this is me, I could play this." Stamp told him to stop fantasising and to get some sleep.

It was not Caine's first leading film role. That was the patrician Lieutenant Bromhead in *Zulu*, not a part that showcased his working-class roots. Film buffs will also know that he was not first choice for Palmer. Harry Saltzman, the producer, offered it first to Christopher Plummer (mercifully, he opted for *The Sound of Music*) and considered Harry H. Corbett. On such twists of fate do careers depend. It became a defining role for Caine, so much so that when Mike Myers had to cast Austin Powers's dad nearly 40 years later, Caine was his knowing choice.

Deighton, who looks chipper and at least ten years younger than his 76, savours the memory of his extraordinary arrival on the literary scene with a twinkle in his eye. “There was a time,” he says, “it’s difficult to believe now, but before the film came out, Michael was still a struggling actor and I was a famous writer. Of course, he overtook me like a skyrocket but there was brief period of time when I was more famous than Michael.” Deighton’s friend Peter Evans, a former Daily Express man who published the first, enthusiastic interview with the writer, having read that first book in proof, once told him: “I go to parties and I see you and Michael eyeing each other and saying ‘Where would I be now without him’.”

“I think perhaps there’s an element of truth in that,” Deighton reflects. “Michael and I, we don’t see each other regularly but we’re Londoners, we understand one another very much.” Deighton insists that he never intended to be a writer, that *The Ipress File* was written just for “a fun thing to do to pass away the time on holiday” (which makes you wonder what sort of holidays he took).

“If I hadn’t gone to that party, if I hadn’t met Jonathan Clowes (his life-long agent), I wouldn’t have become a writer,” he says. With the help of a demobilisation grant after National Service, he had studied at Central St Martins and the Royal College of Art, and had a reasonable career as an illustrator at the beginning of the 1960s (a mainstay of his work was book covers; among his credits are the first British edition of *On the Road*). “I’m still an art student really. I’m not a writer. Anything that is good in my books tends to be descriptions that an art student would provide.”

He maintains that if that first novel had not been such a success, he might not have pursued writing. Given that we would have been robbed of at least one unforgettable character, at least one world-class novel (the magnificent *Bomber* is rich with historical detail but all the characters are invented) and at least one book of military history that revolutionised thinking about the Battle of Britain in a way that has not been seriously challenged since, not to mention a definitive history of zeppelins, we must be grateful that the public latched on to Deighton.

The documentary tries to draw together all these strands. With Palmer and Samson’s bolshie attitude, the sympathy for ordinary soldiers and criticism of their leaders in the military history, not least in *Blood, Tears and Folly*, a sweeping overview of the main campaigns of the Second World War, it is tempting to construct some sort of class warrior, especially given Deighton’s relatively humble origins.

He will have none of it, refusing to line up with the left or the right, although he is enthusiastic about the “social mobility” of the United States.

“I was born in a workhouse,” he says. (He was, in Marylebone, in 1929, although his parents were by no means destitute; his father was a chauffeur and mechanic, his mother a cook.) “So I feel free to criticise anyone I choose. I’m not a member of any political party. I’m not a member of any group. I hesitate before I join hands, as the old saying goes. What I say is based on my own experience.”

It just happens that his experience is very, very broad.

The Truth about Len Deighton, produced and directed by Robert Dawson Scott, is on BBC Four tonight at 9.10pm. *The Ipress File* is at the NFT from January 13.