

The Deighton File - BBC Radio 4 - 1130h

[Privately transcribed by R Mallows].

Narrator: Patrick Humphreys (PH)

PH - I think it was during the school holiday of 1966, and I'd run out of James Bond books to read. My name's Patrick Humphreys, and in those long days before the Internet and High Street book stores that opened on Sunday, Foyles on London's Charing Cross Road was the place you went to browse and buy your books. I'm pretty sure my purchase that day was a five shilling Penguin paperback version of Len Deighton's *Funeral in Berlin*.

I don't know why; maybe it was Michael Caine staring menacingly from the front cover. Or more probably it was the blurb: Len Deighton was bracketed with the Beatles, Jean Shrimpton and ejector seats in Aston Martin, as part of the new British image. Well, I figured, if Len Deighton was up there with the Beatles....

For over half a century, Len Deighton has occupied a curious plateau in the landscape of popular fiction with his iconic spy thrillers and his acclaimed world war two histories. He began his career as a book illustrator before finding fame as a cookery writer, before becoming what one critic called 'the poet of the spy story' with 1962's *The Ipcress File*.

[music]

Another feature of Deighton's story is the air of mystery that surrounds him. For most of his writing life this is one author who has shunned the limelight, deliberately avoiding the celebrity circuit. For Len Deighton, fame is anathema; he'd rather hide behind the chat show sofa than sit on one. And as for literary festivals...

Len Deighton (LD) - "I don't do anything like that, no; in fact, I had a letter once from a guy that said, would you like to come to the Toronto, or Montreal ... something like that, literary festival and read passages from your latest book. And I wrote back and I said, the only thing I would like less than going to your festival and reading from my latest book is to be at your festival and to hear other writers reading from their latest books. I didn't get a response [laughs]".

EMO - "Deighton is often thought to be elusive, but I've never found that to be so. I think its largely because he doesn't put himself onto the chat show circuit. He doesn't do a lot in terms of personal appearances to promote his books."

PH - Deighton's biographer Edward Milward-Oliver (EMO).

EMO - "There's a certain shyness there; but I think he considers himself just another Joe, just another ordinary person. For him it's much more interesting for him to be able to talk to people without the burden of being a celebrated figure. And actually, he doesn't think himself he's led a terribly interesting life.

LD - "I wasn't this person I kept on reading about...there would be very nice complimentary things but they weren't me! You see, well, I love compliments as much as anyone, but I felt that everywhere around me there were people expecting things that I wouldn't be able to fulfill, so it made me very neurotic. I think that's why I just removed myself from the whole publicity thing."

PH - Deighton prefers the solitude of writing and even after half a century of being a professional writer he stills find the creative process challenging.

LD - "It was an endless, gruelling thing for me. I don't mean it was unpleasant, but each time you get a feeling you moved, a feeling of achievement and so on, but I decided I would have a year off from... It was wonderful, you know, talk about stopping beating yourself over the head with a hammer, it was absolutely wonderful. And I'd only intended to have a year off; I never intended to stop writing; I wanted to have a year off, but at the end of the year I thought, this is a mugs' game. If I can eke out my savings. I'm not going to go back to this.

PH - Polymath is an overused word these days, but the range of Deighton's interests is exhaustive; and somewhat esoteric. As I speak he is currently engaged in writing his first books for a decade, histories of the aeroplane engine and the fountain pen.

Leonard Cyril Deighton was born in 1929.

LD - "I was born in Marylebone Workhouse. My father was a chauffeur; my mother, she wasn't really a cook, she was a part-time cook. We lived in Gloucester Place Mews and my father's employers live in Montague Square in a big house there, sort of an 'Upstairs Downstairs' situation. And my mother walked up to the hospital on the night I was due to be born and the hospital was full, so she walked up Marylebone road and turned right along to Madam Tussauds there and facing Madam Tussauds, where the university is now, was the Marylebone Workhouse."

PH - He grew up in London as the Blitz raged overhead.

LD - "There was just one night when the weather was too bad and they didn't come. But they came every other night. I mean, I can remember going into an air raid shelter and

wondering why no-one was talking to each other, and they were all dead. You know, twenty people were dead and there wasn't a mark on them, I poked my head in and someone said 'Come out of there, son;'. But, you know, these things, which now are tremendously dramatic, fell into proportion in the war. It was very exciting. And if you were a child you listened to what was going on, you were a privileged spectator of what's going on. All children are very curious, you know, very curious about the lives of their parents and grown up and so on. I was soaking all this in and I found out after the war when I was reading about the war that I was surprised by just how much I'd absorbed as a child, well, a teenager I should say, growing up in the middle of it all."

PH - At the end of the war, the teenaged Deighton did his obligatory National Service in the RAF. Edward Milward-Oliver.

EMO - "Len went to St Martins and the Royal College of Art after he did his National Service and he went to the States for a number of months in 1957, and he came back in 1958. He was an art director for a short and very unhappy period, but otherwise he pursued a living as a commercial illustrator. He did a lot of work: he did book jackets, he worked for advertising agencies. He worked for *Vogue*, *Esquire*, *House & Garden*, *Lilliput*. His book jackets were mainly for André Deutsch and Penguin. Probably the most famous one of those is the one he did for the British edition of Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, which is still one of the top five best-selling posters of book jackets. So it has a long life."

PH - A life-long interest in food led to Deighton launching his innovative cookery strips in *The Observer* in March of 1962.

LD "The thing that appealed to me and the thing that could appeal to men was that if I said to a man, look ,warm an oven up to 350 degrees, what is 350 degrees? Open the oven, and put your hand inside and you'll find it warm, and so on. Meanwhile, you've got a vat of water here that's only at 212 degrees, boiling ferociously. Try putting you hand into that! And you'll realise the relationship between heat and temperature! And that relationship between heat and temperature is the driving force behind all plans and recipes about cooking food.

Now, if I say that to a man, he's interested; if you say that to a woman, she'll say let's get onto the recipe [laughs]. So what happened was that I was able to hit a particular nerve with men who like to approach cooking from a laboratory kind of way."

HG - "When I look back at the cookery strip you see just how knowledgeable he was about food. I mean, looking back into the context of then, that was the sixties, these were so different."

PH - Henrietta Green (HG), founder of foodloversbritain.com.

HG -" The other thing of course is that men rarely cooked. It wasn't a manly thing to do; it was always the woman in the kitchen, with the pinny. And I think it was probably the vestiges of the end of the era when quite wealthy people still had living-in cooks. So it was a huge change, and in his books ... I mean, to me, it's a wonderful photoshopped of just a particular time, but actually his knowledge shines through, and there are a lot of things which are very, very forward thinking."

PH - Through the 1950s Deighton hopped through careers as designer, book illustrator and cookery expert. But it was a chance encounter when he was in his early thirties that led to a sea change for Len Deighton.

[music]

LD - "Sometime then, I think it must have been 1960, I wrote *Ipress File*, just for fun, just for my own amusement, and then I put it on the shelf or something. And I met a man at a party and I said, 'what do you do for a living?', and, er, he said 'I'm a literary agent', and I said, 'Oh, I've got a treat for you', and his face dropped, and I realised afterwards that probably ten thousand people said that to him. Anyway, he was very good tempered about it and he took it and it got rejected and so on, but eventually it got printed. When it came out, by sheer good luck, it came out about the time of the first ... when the first James Bond came out, and one of my close friends said 'the critics used you to beat Ian Fleming over the head(laughs) which I think is a pretty accurate description."

[Extract of Beatles music - Love Me do.]

PH - A week before the *Ipress File* was published in the UK, the Beatles had released their debut single *Love Me Do* and the first James Bond film *Dr No* was premiered. Unwittingly, and inadvertently, Len Deighton found himself on the cutting edge of the swinging 'sixties.

EMO "You had a large number of people who were keen to try new things, who were exploring the new consumer spending power, which started to grow at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the 'sixties. So you had a small group of people who were recasting art, advertising, photography, fashion, music, newspapers, magazines, publishing, film and television right across Britain. So Len was, I wouldn't say he was at the centre, but he was one of a crowd of people."

PH - A new name in the espionage labour exchange is spy writer Jeremy Duns who has used Deighton's sixties guidebook the *London Dossier* as source material for his own new Cold War spy novel, *Free Agent*.

JD - "Free Agent is set in 1969, so I really had to put myself back into that world. And it is very difficult to find out, even though it was only forty years ago; there's a lot of tiny details

about life in the sixties that's it's very difficult to find out about now. And one thing which helped me enormously was a book called *London Dossier* which is a guide book that Len Deighton edited in 1967 and he got lots of people he knew who were experts on London to write different essays about different aspects of London. And he has written essays introducing each of them in between. And it is a brilliant slice of life, and it had an enormous amount of fantastic details about how particularly London obviously worked. And I used it a lot and it was very useful to me. But apart from that the tone of *Free Agent* owes a lot I think to the tone of Lend Deighton's earlier novels."

PH - By the mid sixties the success of *Ipcress* and the subsequent *Horse Under Water*, *Funeral in Berlin* and *Billion-Dollar Brain* saw Len Deighton established as Ian Fleming's only true rival.

[Music from film].

PH - Deighton's unnamed spy, who was renamed Harry Palmer on the cinema screen, was lined up alongside Sean Connery's James Bond, and Richard Burton's *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold*, Dean Martin's *Matt Helm*, David Niven's *Jason Love* and James Coburn's *Our Man Flint*. Not many people know this, but it was the 1965 film of *The Ipcress File* that made Michael Caine a star.

EMO - "There's no question - and Len recognises this - that the success of *The Ipcress File* and Michael Caine's performance of Harry Palmer had a tremendous impact on the success of Len's novel."

PH - The unnamed spy, who will always be associated with Michael Caine, is described here by his American counterpart:

[Voiceover] "The first time I saw him was in Frankfurt. He was sitting in a new Jensen sports car which was covered in mud, with a sensational blond. He was wearing very old clothes, smoking a Gauloises and listening to a Beethoven Quartet on the car radio. And I thought: 'Oh God, how many way can you be a snob simultaneously?'

PH - It seems inconceivable now that Christopher Plummer was originally cast as the unnamed spy. But when Plummer dropped out to serenade Edelweiss in *The Sound of Music*, it was Caine's chippy working class attitude which brought Harry Palmer to life and led many to place Len Deighton on the other side of the class divide.

LD - "I think at the time someone said, 'you're against the class system,' and I said, 'Well, I'm not against the class system, it's just I'm recording the fact there's a class system, and I think I might be more against it if I noticed around me anyone who was against it.' But I don't see that - I see that everyone loves the class system in England. Well, I don't see anyone rally trying to overturn it, so I did want to record it; I did think it was a subject of

humour, but I'm not a Marxist ... I've always been a capitalist, right from when I was a small child and I saw the Americans over here and I found I could have a conversation with an American and find greater accord than I could with my parents.

MH - "I wouldn't go so far as to say that many of the British upper classes wanted the Germans to win the war; but I would say, that the British upper classes, a lot of them were far less hostile to the Nazis than they were to the Russian communists. And a lot of them, for a surprisingly long time during the war, continued to be bitterly hostile to Winston Churchill."

PH - Military historian Sir Max Hastings (MH).

MH - "And so Len's class fixations are by now means wrong; I mean, there's absolutely now doubt, the British class system did Britain an awful lot of harm in those years and even in the 1960s, when you look back at the Profumo scandal and the Macmillan era and so on, Len's relentless mockery and, of course, I think, deep dislike of the British upper class. People from humble backgrounds had jolly good reasons for that dislike and mockery; there there was an awful lot to mock about the upper classes and there was an awful lot to hate about them, and I've re-read several of Len's sixties thrillers recently and they still read terribly well."

PH - As well as the thrilling sensation of being on the inside of a secret world, what really elevated Deighton's Harry Palmer novels was their witty, Chandler-esque dialogue. *Billion-Dollar Brain* for example begins:

"It was all very well telling oneself that Humphrey Bogart has that sort of face. He also had a hair piece, half a million dollars a year and a stand in for the rough bits."

PH - And later the spy reflects,

"Everyone feels trapped. Its our way of rationalising our leaden lot in the face of our golden potential". "That reminds me", said Jean, "I must renew your subscription to the reader's digest."

PH - Almost as remarkable as the quality of Deighton's work during the he 1960s was the sheer quantity he produced.

EMO - "Through that period, 1962, when *Ipccress* was published, and in the next eight years through to 1970, you know he wrote seven novels, two cookbooks, he wrote two travel guides, he wrote two screen plays - an early draft of *From Russia with Love* and a screen play for *Oh! What a Lovely War*, he spent a year as the Playboy travel editor and did seven travel features for the magazine, and he co-produced two movies."

PH - With what seemed almost insouciant ease, Deighton switched styles, In 1970 he moved away from the murky world of Espionage with *Bomber*. This epic novel chronicled a 1943 bombing raid from the perspective of everyone involved - the RAF crew, German civilians, even Luftwaffe pilots. At nearly 180,000 words, it was nearly twice as long as any previous novel that Deighton had attempted.

MH - "The bomber offensive was still not pretty much understood in Britain in 1970. First of all, a lot of people didn't realise how dangerous it was, that aircrew had a better chance of dying than they did of surviving. Secondly, he was a complete master of all the technical aspects of it, he understood everything about radar, and radio, and target marking devices and all sorts of other, to some people rather esoteric aspects of it all, but it gave this terrific authority to his account. Len has this absolute mastery of how people thought, how people talked, how people were, and of course, above all, about the technology of the period."

PH - Sir Max Hastings. Anthony Burgess selected *Bomber* as one of the most important books of the twentieth century. And recently *The Guardian* described it as 'frequently underrated, drawing out the full terrifying intensity of Deighton's writing'.

[Read extract]. 'As the intelligence officer got out it was quiet enough to notice the sounds of the countryside. A chestnut tree moved abrasively. Swifts called. A blackbird sang and thrushes were learning to fly. The scent of newly cut hay came on the warm breeze. It was hard to believe, here in this pastoral backwater, plans were being made to destroy a town. This was history being made. Last week he had sent these men to destroy Cologne. Cologne. Why it was beyond belief, a thousand years of history shattered to fragments in less than two hours by these young kids.'

EMO - "The novel's been adapted for radio and the BBC did a very innovative broadcast transmitted in realtime throughout the day to great critical and audience response. David Puttnam wanted to film the novel, but he found eh couldn't get any airworthy Lancaster bombers so he ended up making *Memphis Belle*. And curiously rock group Mötörhead were inspired by the novel to produce their third album in 1979, which is called *Bomber*, so the power of that novel to reach across readers, radio listeners, movie-goers, music lovers, is quite extraordinary."

[Extract of *Bomber* by Mötörhead.]

PH - Mötörhead's *Bomber*. In 1972, *Close-Up* appeared. Inspired by Deighton's dispiriting experience producing Richard Attenborough's 1969 film of *Oh! What a Lovely War*, it remains one of the best books ever written about the film industry.

I still find Richard Attenborough's evocation of the horrors of war very powerful, but Deighton remains unimpressed. He had bought the film rights from Joan Littlewood and had persuaded a major Hollywood studio to finance it. All he needed was a director.

[Tune - Oh! What a Lovely War]

LD - "Basil Dearden had directed 158 films, so I was at a disadvantage when I was arguing with Basil; so I thought, that's not a good idea. And I'd also had a message from Gene Kelly, who wanted to direct *Oh! What a Lovely War*. The idea, even now, makes me cry to think of saying no to Gene Kelly, but I thought, I'm going to be trying to explain all sorts of things about the nuances of the English, 1914-18.

Whereas anyone who is English will understand. I thought it must be someone English, and then Sir John Mills said, I know you said ... I lent him the script because he looks a bit like Haig ... behaved like him as it turned out! Anyway, I said don't show it to anyone, and he said, well, then he showed it to Dickie Attenborough, and so Dickie came and said, 'I've never directed a film before,' and I said, that's right, now Dickie, you've never directed a film before, so I want to tell you that I want every word of this kept in, except those I cross out. And I'm going to give you a story board artist and he won't confine you, he'll give you alternatives. So you'll still be directing the film, but he'll be drawing out a storyboarding so you can plan what you're going to film later; we're going to minimise delays, cos there's going to be so much outdoor shooting here.

At first I thought, maybe a circus and conjuring acts and all sorts of things like that, and I was in Brighton and I thought, wow! when you think of it, you've got that pier going there, and then you've got all that mud underneath it, and the guys are going to be digging their trenches and barb wire, and we can have people and things on the pier and they look down and there are the people shooting each other in the thing there, it was absolutely natural.

Well, I thought, you've just got to get hold of the pier and so Paramount said 'okay' on Dickie, and so we went ahead and then Dickie said, 'I think it would be good for me if on the daily sheets it had my name as the producer because then I would get more respect from the crew, do you mind that?' And I thought, well, no, so I put it in; of course, you should never do things like this, and I put his name down on the sheets as producer, and gradually I stepped back, expecting I suppose people to be motivated by their honour and their conscience and was sadly disappointed."

PH - A tantalising glimpse of just how different *Oh! What a Lovely War* might have been comes from Deighton's friend and biographer, Edward Milward-Oliver.

EMO - "Paul McCartney came over for dinner in fact and ... Er ... Len cooked him a curry dinner and indeed he suggested to McCartney that the Beatles might like to play the Smith family; in the film the Smith family was the core group of characters that Deighton had devised for the film. McCartney was intrigued, but I think they ultimately felt that they

wanted a film that was set in a more recent time; the First World War was a bit too far away, and they wanted to make it stridently an anti-war film.”

PH - Towards the end of the 1970s Deighton's interests focused almost exclusively on World War Two. The novel *SS-GB* imagined Britain under Nazi occupation. While *XPD* controversially speculated that Hitler and Churchill had actually met to negotiate an armistice in 1940. But it was his non-fiction *Blitzkrieg* and particularly *Fighter*, his 1977 history of the Battle of Britain, which really put the cat amongst the military pigeons.

MH - “Len was one of the first writers about the second world war who was determined to get a way from nationalistic stereotypes that for quite a while after the war ended ... not surprisingly the generation who lived through it and felt they'd won, they didn't want writers writing about the bad bits. And the historians who wrote about a lot of the things that did not go right for the British in the Second World War were not only very unpopular, but the people who'd been there, the veterans of the war, often gave them an absolute roasting in print. But Len wasn't frightened by that; Len wasn't bothered about being accused of being unpatriotic or accused of being iconoclastic, Len wanted to tell it like it is; course nowadays there are a lot of us doing that and adopting that approach. But when Len started, it wasn't like that. Len was a true original.”

PH - Throughout the late eighties, as the Berlin Wall was toppling, Deighton produced three spy trilogies - *Game, Set & Match*; *Hook, Line & Sinker*, and *Faith, Hope & Charity*. Since then there have been sporadic novels, but you sense that turning 80 in February 2009, Len Deighton is happier sinking back into the shadows. At his very best, Len Deighton has carved an indelible path through popular fiction, as well as illuminating the darker byways of military history.

But it is to the enduring spy novels of the 1960s that I return most frequently. Still trying to unravel the complexity of the plots; revelling in the seedy atmosphere and feeling that this truly is an insider's view on the world of spying. When *Horse Under Water* was first published, the Daily Express reviewer enthused: ‘I felt I was breaking the Official Secrets Act every time I opened this book’. Jeremy Duns.

JD - “I think something that Len Deighton did and which Ian Fleming did, but he expanded upon, was that he had this idea of the spy novelist as a spy, in a way, by which I don't mean he was a former intelligence officer, because Len Deighton wasn't, but that he was a spy in that he was an observer of the spy world and that he was a sort of journalist-novelist-investigator, who was giving you the inside track on what was really going on in espionage, that you wouldn't really be able to know, so you learnt all of these incredibly interesting and obscure, but very very authentic-sounding facts about the spy world.”

PH - Throughout his writing, Deighton has displayed a real wit, and I'd like to end with this wonderful exchange from *Funeral in Berlin*, the third of Deighton's sixties spy novels. The Russian Colonel Stok instructs Deighton's spy:

"When your government has positively agreed to the payment of the money you will signal so by having Victor Silvester play 'There's a small hotel' on his overseas programme on the BBC'.

'I'm not sure I can do that', replies the spy.

'Not sure if you can make this man Silvester play There's a small hotel?' asked Stok, incredulously.

'I'm not sure if I can stop him.'

Ends. 28.5 mins duration

Programme written by Patrick Humphries; produced by Neil Rosser (c) BBC