

Spies in the Suburbs

Bringing the Cold War to the suburbs: Re-locating the post-war conflict in Le Carre and Deighton

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Introduction

The suburbs play a conflicted role in the national psyche. They are criticised as uniform but for a middle brow readership, they are places of similarity, separation, stability and security. They are defended places of escape, entered across the commuting moat, whose drawbridge can be accessed through income and inclination.

The suburbs were established as a location for detective fiction. Agatha Christie records the changes from the village to suburbia, safe places where residents had little interest in politics (Light, 1991). In Christie, it is the interiority of the family that holds secrets in suburbia in contradistinction with their outward respectability.

Yet suburban solidity was also a host for the forces that could undermine society. In 1961, the Krogers, Americans living in the London suburbs, were convicted of spying for the Russians. The security services had to engage the Kroger's neighbours to collect the evidence:

'the problem is - how can our people observe without being observed? In Piccadilly at rush-hour couldn't be easier - but here, in these quiet little streets, where everybody knows everybody else, it's really very difficult. The observer has to be concealed. There's no other way.' (Whitemore, 1983, p35)

Before this, Burgess and Mclean had defected in 1950 establishing a significant place in the national psyche as English upper middle class Cambridge educated spies who lived in foreign embassies and had a glamorous lifestyle. The Krogers lived in Ruislip unnoticed by their neighbours. The Krogers were a new type of embedded spy.

George Blake was exposed by the same soviet defector as the Krogers. Blake was sent to Berlin as an MI6 case officer, although he was providing information to the Russians. Blake's spying activities continued on his return to London in 1959,

'He would leave the house... allowing plenty of time to catch the 9.17 from Bickley Station to Victoria. At the age of thirty-seven, to any casual onlooker, Blake would have appeared the archetypal commuting civil servant...for the return journey, the 6.24 would get home just after 7pm. For his KGB work, he might occasionally take the earlier train, the 6.18, which took him into Bromley South

Station. There, or in a nearby street, he might have a brief encounter...handing over some film...under cover of a folded newspaper. He would then pick up the next train to Bickley, perhaps arriving home just after 7.30' (Hermiston, 2013, p 206).

Foreign spies were not the only residents of the suburbs. Maxwell Knight, who has been associated with the role of M in the James Bond novels, grew up in 'genteel poverty' in Mitcham (Masters, 1986, p 14) and later moved to Putney.

The people's Cold War

How could the public be encouraged to be more vigilant about their neighbours without undermining post-war stability? How could neighbourliness be transformed into watchfulness without an overt public information campaign? There had to be new and softer ways of alerting and engaging suburban dwellers without disrupting their way of life.

The start of the Cold War in 1947 affected many families in Britain through National Service. Those stationed in Germany were aware of the increasing militarisation against attack from the east. Following Suez in 1956, Britain's position was weakened and expenditure on defence reduced economic growth. The Defence Review (1957) introduced the end of conscription, providing fewer opportunities to influence the nation's young, an important issue when the 'angry young man' emerged in Osborne (1956), a product of the Kingston Bypass suburbia (Osborne, 1981) and the working class novel (Braine, 1957, Sillitoe, 1958, Storey, 1960).

Suburbanising spy fiction

The success of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels demonstrated Bond could provide exotic opportunities to defeat the enemy on foreign soil. Could new realist fiction address spies at home and next door, possibly as part of a counter-intelligence programme, as speculated by Cameron-Watt (1990)?

Realist spy fiction offered a different approach, where the narrator was aligned with the implied reader (Moore-Gilbert, 1996). In 1961 Le Carré's *Call for the Dead* was published quickly followed in 1962 by Len Deighton's *The Ipcress File*. Deighton (b1929) served in the Special Investigation Branch of the RAF during his national service. His parents worked as cook and chauffeur for Campbell Dodgson, one of the founders of Buchan's Department of Information where war artists produced propaganda (Gough, 2010). Deighton's mother was involved in one of the leading Russian spy cases in 1940, when she worked for Anna Wolkoff, who was part of a USSR spy ring. Deighton witnessed Wolkoff's arrest which was also one of Maxwell Knight's major cases (Masters, 1983).

Le Carré (b1931) also worked for Knight (Masters, 1984). He attended Sherborne School but his father's inability to obtain a regular income rendered Le Carré vulnerable to the financial fluctuations in the payment of

his school fees. He was recruited into intelligence at 15 by the rector at Sherbourne, Vivian Green and worked initially in Switzerland. Le Carré later returned as a student at Lincoln College Oxford where Green was now rector. Following this le Carré worked for the security services in several roles. Deighton has never stated that he worked for the security services after his initial national service period.

Call for the Dead and *The Ipcress File* were both first novels and it is possible to see some similarities. They create a realist spy idiom that relocates Cold War threats to a domestic setting. Both introduce outsiders, George Smiley and Harry Palmer, iconic anti-establishment figures within their own intelligence organizations. These novels are written from their respective class perspectives in ways that resonated with middle class officer workers and former conscripts.

In *Call for the Dead*, Smiley is asked to investigate the death of Samuel Fennan, a Foreign Office official with a German wife, who has been accused of being a communist at Oxford. Following Smiley's interview, Fennan is found dead, ostensibly having committed suicide, leaving a note accusing Smiley of ruining his career. Whilst the opening of *Call for the Dead* is located in central London, the scene of the suicide, at Fennan's home is firmly located just the other side of the Kingston by pass, outside the metropolitan (police) area. Fennan's wife finds Samuel on the return from a trip to the theatre, not in the west end but in Walton. Much of the plot reveal turns on Fennan's commuting habits to his office. As Smiley ponders

'of all the loose ends, that's the loosest. I brood over it, you know and there just isn't any sense in it. I've been though his train timetable. He was a punctual man - often got to the FO before anyone else...He would have caught the eight fifty-four, nine eight or at worst the nine fourteen. The eight fifty-four got him in at nine thirty-eight - he liked to be in his office by a quarter to ten. He couldn't possibly want to be woken at eight-thirty' (p73).

The Ipcress File also starts in central London with a concern for the disappearance of key scientists against the backdrop of in-fighting between sections of the security services. Harry Palmer is introduced as a temporary agent, taken on after three years in Military Intelligence whose provisional status makes his role expendable. Palmer investigates these disappearances leading to his own capture where he is subjected to mind control techniques which he assumes are being undertaken behind the Iron Curtain. On his escape, Palmer finds that he is not in East Germany but in a suburban house in London. His escape raises the wrath of the neighbour, who is angry when Palmer damages his garden, climbing over the fence between the houses.

Using the suburban

Whilst *Call for the Dead* and *The Ipcress File* both start their narratives in the Heritage London, they quickly move to recognisable suburban locations. In *Call for the Dead*, the Fennans live in Merridale Lane 'where the inhabitants wage a relentless battle against the stigma of suburbia' [p 17]

that is a half-hearted, un-planned development. The Fennan's house is a 'low Tudor-style house with bedrooms built into the gables, and a half-timbered garage'. Yet Smiley sees Fennan as 'Hampstead and au-pair foreign girls' not Merridale; his life is at odds with his residential location. Immediately le Carré is encouraging readers to consider if they have any neighbours who do not fit in.

Cold war intrusions

Following the publication of these novels, the role of the embedded and internalised spy became familiar. The spy was on the train or living next door. Once it was established that spies preferred to live in suburbia then its safety and security was breached. Whilst detective fiction set in suburbia reinforced its internalised image, its choice as a location by spies was more shocking. It encouraged people to be more vigilant of their neighbours. The Cold War had intruded into the suburbs and perhaps the counter intelligence services had completed their objectives.

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