

The Cultures of the Suburbs International Research network  
2014 Conference: Imagining the Suburbs  
19<sup>th</sup>-21 June 2014 University of Exeter

### **Spies in the Suburbs**

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

Janice Morphet

Visiting Professor, Bartlett School of Planning, University College London

[j.morphet@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:j.morphet@ucl.ac.uk)

*The development and recognition of the Cold War as a major shift in world conflict from 'over there' where battle was conducted in uniforms by the armed services to one that was to be fought on the new home front through spies was a significant plot component in the first novels of both John Le Carre, 'Call for the Dead' (1961) (later filmed as *The Deadly Affair*) and Len Deighton's 'The Ipcress File' (1962). In both novels, the sleepy suburban milieu becomes the centre of Cold War espionage discovered and resolved by two iconic outsider characters, George Smiley and Harry Palmer, introduced in these works.*

*Smiley and Palmer were seemingly dissimilar in almost every way including their age, class and war records. However these characters were united in their metropolitan provenance and experience and there has been little consideration of them in relation to each other and in their role together in re-situating the potential threats of the post-war period into a UK domestic setting from mainland Europe. An examination of the fiction of Deighton and Le Carre suggests a different world where the locus of external danger was in the suburban midst of Surrey or Wood Green. This paper will argue that these novels formed an essential role in reawakening the Home Front and alerting people to the removal of the safety and security once promised by the suburbs.*

## Introduction

The suburbs play a conflicted role in the national psyche. They are criticised as uniform (Harris and Larkham, 1999), ribbon development, places without real centres, by those who prefer definition between the town and country but for a middle class and middle brow readership, they are places of similarity, separation, stability and security. The suburbs offer no surprises and sit in mono-cultural distinction from garden cities and new towns, in their aversion to locations of employment, government and different social classes. They are defended places of escape, entered across the commuting moat, whose drawbridge can be accessed through income and inclination.

Yet their solidity was also a host for the forces that could most undermine their undisturbed way of life. In 1961, Peter and Helen Kroger, two Americans living in the London suburbs, were convicted of spying for the Russians. The security services had to engage the Kroger's neighbours in order to collect the evidence to convict them as collecting evidence on their movements had been difficult because:

'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, *Pack of Lies*, 1983, p35)

This case was an outward and visible turn in the vulnerability of the suburbs that had begun to be understood by the security services in fighting an emergent phase in the Cold War. George Blake who was also convicted in 1961, lived in Bickley in Kent and arranged his intercepts on his return commute at Bromley South Station between the 18.18 and the 18.24 from Victoria (Hermiston, 2013). These new spies were no longer the Oxbridge elite, secured within the networks of the centre, at home in 'Heritage London', but living life in the unassuming periphery. How could the public be encouraged to be more vigilant about their neighbours without undermining post-war social cohesion and stability? 'Careless talk costs lives' was understood in wartime and but surely the habit was no longer needed in a united and victorious Britain? Yet whilst the allies were relying on SIGINT, that is technological signals intelligence by building a tunnel under Berlin to eavesdrop on the Soviet Army's landline in 1956, their enemies had invested in HUMINT, or human intelligence, embedding their spies in quintessential England. 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.

One mechanism for transmitting these messages was through popular media including fiction. The success of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels demonstrated that the post-war, post-conscription and post-Suez generation were ready to engage in spy fiction. The removal of paper rationing meant that paperback books were more readily available and expenditure on books increased from £24m in 1949 to £85m in 1970 (Laing 1983:123). Whilst James Bond could provide exotic opportunities to defeat the enemy on foreign soil, could new realist fiction address the issues of the

spies at home and next door, possibly as part of a counter-intelligence programme, as speculated by Cameron-Watt (1990)?

In this paper, I want to look at the nature of the security provided by the suburbs and how its attributes were engaged to create a new home guard, always on call and alert to dangers in the next house and across the street. Much of the apparatus of the Cold War before 1961 was characterised as technical, 'scientific' and in isolated locations which could only be countered by organized mass citizen protest such as CND and the Aldermaston marches. However if enemies intended to operate using the platform of a suburban railway station as a drop, an individual response was needed.

### **The people's Cold War**

The start of the Cold War in 1947 affected many families in Britain if their sons were called up for National Service. Those stationed in Germany were aware of the increasing concerns about militarisation and the defensive measures being taken against attack from the east. Following Suez in 1956, Britain's position was weakened. This meant not only a change in UK's Prime Minister but a fundamental review of defence policy. Macmillan decided that expenditure on defence was reducing growth in the economy and that this needed to be addressed. The Sandys Review in 1957 introduced major changes including the end of conscription, relying instead on a nuclear deterrent, a technical solution (Cabinet Paper, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1957). This review also placed greater emphasis on civil defence in case of nuclear attack which included a reinforcement of the regional seats of government in home defence regions together with new or extended buildings in a new brutalist and non-domestic style (Cocroft and Thomas, 2003).

The reduction in defence expenditure and the end of conscription meant that there was less opportunity to influence the nation's young men. The rise of the 'angry young man' in Osborne (1956), a product of the Kingston Bypass suburbia (Osborne, 1981) and following working class fiction provided an alternative route to that offered by James Bond. As the working class novel was invented (Braine, 1957, Sillitoe, 1958, Storey, 1960), so the spy novel could also be re-imagined for this new audience.

### **Post-war suburban security**

The role of the suburbs in providing a safe, secure and unsurprising place to live was already established by the time Britain went to war in 1939. The development of railway and later Metroland suburbs was followed by those on the arterial roads and bypasses in the 1930s. The suburbs represented a separation from work, and provided comfortable homes for a growing middle class. Lettice Cooper records this shift in her novel 'The New House' (1936). Housing estates were developed in the grounds of larger houses (Hollingshurst, 2011) and over 1200 country house had been demolished. At one point in the 1950s, a country house was demolished every five days (Barnett, 2014).

The growth of the suburbs was a challenge to the prevailing social order in the countryside. The rise of development was resisted by the right and the left (Forster, 1910, Thirkell, (1939) and Orwell, (1939). The loss of the distinction between the town and the country mirrored the loss of deference and the blurring of prevailing social relations. This was more severely felt before 1939 (Carey, 1992), not least when as Waugh (1940) records in *Put Out More Flags*, those returning from the colonies wanted an England of their memory not as it now was.

Yet the suburbs were also established as a location for detective fiction or the middle brow 'whodunnit' as Q. D. Leavis (1932) calls this genre. Agatha Christie's Miss Marple records the changes in the village both in the new peripheral development and the changing jobs that the village residents held. Light (1991) argues that between the wars, the suburbs were seen as a safe place to live and middle classes had little interest in the politics of the day. In Christie, it is the interiority of the family that holds secrets in suburbia and they are places that look respectable from the outside but are not like that at all. After 1945, suburbia represented a return to a new normal. Some of the class distinctions had been lost. Those living in the cities aspired to move to suburbia. Increases in car ownership and the post-war investment in roads widened the gap between workplace and home and shortened working hours gave more time for leisure pursuits such as gardening (Cooper, 1980)

### **The spy in the suburbs**

In 1961, the Krogers were convicted of spying for the USSR. Before this, Burgess and Mclean had defected in 1950 establishing a significant place in the national psyche as upper middle class Cambridge educated spies who lived in foreign embassies and had a glamorous lifestyle. These spies were the product of the 1920s and 1930s and were English. The Krogers lived in Ruislip unnoticed by their neighbours. Ruislip's growth was part of the development of the Metropolitan railway, when a station was opened in 1904 and by the 1960s Ruislip was a settled community. The Krogers were a new type of embedded spy.

Like the Krogers, George Blake was exposed by the same soviet defector (1959-61). Blake was born in the Netherlands and had a Portuguese father who had been naturalised. He worked for the UK from 1939. When he first came to Britain in 1943, Blake lived with his Dutch mother in Northwood, a suburb close to Ruislip. In 1948 he was posted to the British Embassy in Seoul and in 1950 he was captured and held in North Korea for three years, during which time he became a spy for the USSR. Following his return to the UK Blake was sent to Berlin as an MI6 case officer with the role of recruiting Soviet spies, although he was providing information to the Russians about the allies' tunnel. Blake's spying activities continued on his return to London in 1959,

'in the morning, Blake's routine was to read the papers in bed, shave and sit down to breakfast at 8.30. He would leave the house half an hour later, 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

In Bickley, Blake and his wife lived in a flat in Laureston House, larger mansion built in 1868 as part of the development that followed the opening of the railway to London. Since then it has remained a commuter suburb comprised entirely of housing with few other amenities.

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 with his sisters.

### **Suburbanising spy fiction**

Realist spy fiction offered a different approach from that of Fleming, 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 was born in London in 1929 and served in the Special Investigation Branch of the RAF during his national service. His parents worked as cook and chauffeur for Campbell Dodgson, the keeper of drawings at the British Museum and one of the founders of Buchan's Department of Information in 1916 where the war artists were used by Beaverbrook as a means of producing propaganda and counter information (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 spy ring accessing US Ambassador Joe Kennedy's letters and sending them to the USSR. Deighton witnessed Wolkoff's arrest that was also one of Maxwell Knight's major cases (Masters, 1983).

Le Carré, born in 1931, also worked for Knight (Masters, 1984). He was born in Poole where his grandfather was mayor. He attended Sherborne School but his father's inability to obtain a regular income (le Carre, *A Perfect Spy*, 1990) rendered Le Carré vulnerable to the financial fluctuations in the payment of his school fees. He was recruited into the intelligence services at 15 by the rector at Sherbourne, Vivian Green and worked initially in Switzerland (as set out in *The Night Porter*, 1993). Le Carré later returned as a student at Lincoln College Oxford where Vivian Green was now rector. Following this le Carré worked for the security services in several roles although he initially denied this. 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 of le Carré and Deighton in these, as well as their next two books, it is possible to see some similarities. In this first pairing, the preoccupations are with establishing a realist spy idiom that would relocate the Cold War threats to a domestic setting. Both introduce outside characters, George Smiley and Harry Palmer who become iconic representations of

anti-establishment figures within their own intelligence organizations. The novels are written from the perspective of their respective social classes in ways that would resonate with both middle class officer workers and former conscripts.

In *Call for the Dead*, (later filmed as *The Deadly Affair*, 1966), Smiley is asked to investigate the death of Samuel Fennan, a middle ranking Foreign Office official with a German wife, who has been accused in an anonymous letter of being a communist at Oxford. When Smiley interviewed Fennan he found him agitated but reassured him that no action would be taken. Fennan is later 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, St James Park and Cambridge Circus, 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. The subsequent investigations lead to an Eastern European cover trade organization located in Primrose Hill whilst the final chase, is through the back streets of Fulham. 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, this time in Trafalgar Square. Its central concern is 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 Wood Green in London. His escape raises the wrath of the neighbour, a proud gardener who is angry when Palmer damages his runner beans climbing over the fence between the houses. *The Ipcress File* reinforces its realism through the book's paraphernalia including files, footnotes and appendices to immediately engage the reader in its own world and language, making the unknowable available in a familiar office format from the outset.

### **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 domestic locations more familiar to readers and their identification in the narrative makes them both specific and generic. The working class locations of Battersea and Fulham used in *Call for the Dead* and Shoreditch in *The Ipcress File* are clearly industrial and criminal, not associated with domestic activities.

The primary locations for the narratives are in lower middle and middle class suburbia. In *Call for the Dead*, Smiley stays within the security of Mitcham, in his police investigator's house when he is attacked in his own home in Chelsea

“ ‘And that’s your room. If you want it.’ He (Mendel) turned to Smiley. ‘I wouldn’t stay at your place tonight if I were you. You never know, do you? Besides you will sleep better here. Air’s better.’ ” (*Call for the Dead* p 45)

The middle ‘middle’ class suburbs are represented in *Call for the Dead* by Merridale. The Fennans live in Merridale Lane ‘where the inhabitants wage a relentless battle against the stigma of suburbia’ [p 17] and after a long description of the suburban development of Merridale as a half-hearted, un-planned development; the Fennan’s house is described as a ‘low Tudor-style house with bedrooms built into the gables, and a half-timbered garage’. Yet immediately, Smiley takes the view that having met Fennan, he is ‘Hampstead and au-pair foreign girls’ not Merridale; his life is at odds with his residential location. Immediately le Carré is encouraging readers who live in these kinds of suburbs to consider if they have any neighbours who are somehow different or do not fit in.

	Type of suburbia	CftD	Ipcress File
1	Off centre London	Chelsea, home of Smiley;	Southwark, home of Palmer
2	Passing over points	Kingston by pass	Kingston By pass
3	Working class suburbia	Mitcham	Wood Green
4	Middle class suburbia	South of Kingston Bypass (Stoneleigh/Hinchley Wood); Walton	Wimbledon,
5	Upper class suburbia	Hampstead	Putney; Surrey
6	Heritage London	Cambridge Circus, St James Park	Trafalgar Square
7	Inner industrial	Battersea, Fulham	Shoreditch

In the Ipcress File, Palmer’s boss describes his home: ‘its pretty now; at the bottom of the garden are three lovely old chestnut trees...why you could be in the heart of the countryside. Except for the house next door of course. ...when I bought the place...end of ’34, the builders would have cleared the site bald. It was country then, not a house for miles – behind us, I mean next door was there. Didn’t have a bus service, nothing...a three-bedroom one only seven doors away, not a patch on ours...’ (p96).

In both *Call for the Dead* and *The Ipcress File*, the Kingston bypass is used as a central plotting device, as it leads to the spies who are seeking to undermine the British

state. In *Call for the Dead*, the spy lives where the Kingston bypass peters out into to the London Road. In *The Ipcress File*, on his way to confront the spy inside his own organization, Palmer reaches the Kingston Bypass through the prosperous suburbs of Putney where 'rich stockbrokers in white Jaguars and dark green Bentleys played tag' [p 217], past the Ace of Spades and Robin Hood roundabout into the upper class suburbia in southern Surrey. As readers we know that Dalby, the spy, lives in suburbia rather than the country, through the middle brow references to women's magazines and attempts to create a uniform style for the exterior of the house:

'it was a small converted farm-house with a décor that writers in women's magazines think is contemporary. Outside the mauve front door there was a wheelbarrow with flowers growing in it. Fixed to the wall was a coach lamp converted to electricity, not as yet lit' (*The Ipcress File*, p218)

### Cold war intrusions

Following the publication of these novels and their translation into film by directors associated with the new realism, Sidney Lumet and Harry Saltzman (who also produced James Bond films), the role of the embedded and internalised spy became familiar. The spy was the colleague in the office, 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.

### **References**

- Barnett, S. (2014) 'Ideology, Class and the Challenge of Bi-Textuality in Agatha Christie's *Dead Man's Folly*', paper to Queens of Crime conference, IES 12-13 June
- Braine J. (1957) *Room at the Top*
- Cameron-Watt, D., 1990 'Critical afterthoughts and alternative historico-literary theories', *Intelligence and national Security*, vol 5, no 4, pp 212-225
- Carey J. (1992), *The Intellectuals and the Masses*
- Cocroft, W. D. and R. J. C. Thomas, (2003) *Cold War Building for Nuclear confrontation 1946-1989*, London: English Heritage
- Cooper L. (1936) *A New House*
- Cooper L. (1980) *Desirable residence*
- Forster, E. M. (1910) *Howards End*
- Gough, P. (2010) *A Terrible Beauty British artists in the First World War*, Bristol: Sansom and Co
- Harris, Richard, and Peter Larkham, 1999, eds. *Changing suburbs: foundation, form and function*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hermiston, R., (2013) *The Greatest Traitor*, London: Aurum
- Hollinghurst A. (2011) *The Stranger's child*



Laing Stuart, 'The production of literature', in Alan Sinfield, (ed.), *Society and Literature 1945-1970*, (London: Methuen, 1983), 121-172

Leavis Q. D. (1932) *Fiction and the Reading Public*

Le Carré, J. (1961) *Call for the Dead*, (2012) edition), London: Penguin

Le Carré, J. (1986) *A Perfect Spy*

Le Carré, J. (1993) *The Night Manager*

Light A. (1991) *Forever England Femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars*, London: Routledge

Masters A. (1984) *The Man Who Was M.: Life of Charles Henry Maxwell Knight*

Masters A., (1987) *Literary agents; the Novelist as Spy*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell

Moore-Gilbert B. (1996) 'The Psychic Price of Class Mobility in Post-War British Fiction' in *The European Legacy: Towards New Paradigms*, pp 1042-1047

Orwell G. (1939) *Coming Up for Air*

Osborne J. (1956) *Look Back in Anger*

Osborne J. 1981, *A Better class of person*

Sillitoe, A. (1958) *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*

Storey , D. (1960) *This Sporting Life*

Thirkell A. (1939) *Before Lunch*

Waugh E. (1940) *Put Out More Flags*

Whitmore H., 1983 *Pack of Lies*, (2012 edition), London: Oberon