

BOOKS

Delicate truths

The man we know as John le Carré is as slippery as his Cold War spies, his biographer tells *Jake Kerridge*

John le Carré is one of the great English mysteries, like Stonehenge or the Princes in the Tower. "I'm a liar," he says. "Born to lying, bred to it, trained to it by an industry that lies for a living, practised in it as a novelist."

One of the reasons that Adam Sisman's new biography has been so eagerly awaited is that it promised, with its subject's help, to unpick the contradictions and obfuscations in le Carré's own accounts of his life.

Le Carré may be ready to tell the truth. He turned 84 on Monday, and like many people in old age seems to have been visited by a new compulsion to set the record straight. When I interviewed him a couple of years ago and thanked him at the end for answering my questions so fully, he replied: "Yes, I didn't mean to."

Sisman, the author of highly praised biographies of the historians AJP Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper among others, has spent 50 hours interviewing David Cornwell, the man better known to the world as John le Carré, for this book. It is a long, full and revealing work, written in blessedly readable prose, and makes a three-dimensional figure of a subject who can come across as something of a superman – champion skier, lady-killer, spy, record-breaking novelist and finally grand old man of the Left. Sisman's account of Cornwell's espionage work is particularly good, although necessarily far from comprehensive – Cornwell will not be drawn on much of his work for MI6, particularly those parts that, one suspects, most resembled a John le Carré novel.

In le Carré's first book, *Call for the Dead* (1961), there is a memorable passage in which George Smiley outlines his patented techniques for outwitting interrogators. When I meet Sisman over coffee near his home in Bristol, the first thing I want to know is the extent to

which le Carré was channelling Smiley when being interviewed.

"I often found that I'd formulated some kind of biographical idea about David, and then started edging towards it in our conversation, only to realise that David had thought of it long before me and had already, as it were, moved a piece into place to stem my advance. It's good that it's not too cosy a relationship. I've tried to remind myself that although I very much enjoy David's company, we're not friends, and I've got to keep my cold dispassionate gaze on him and not be lulled by his charm."

Sisman stresses that this is not an authorised biography, but there won't be any of the squabbles that have bedevilled the publication of Jonathan Bate's recent life of Ted Hughes. When Sisman wrote to him proposing an outline for the book, le Carré, who had read and admired his biography of Trevor-Roper, agreed to cooperate. "He has given me access to his private papers and also introductions to all the important people in his life, including members of his family, his wife and children, and also old friends – and old enemies."

But le Carré has not found it an easy process. Sisman recalls arriving for the first time at le Carré's home in Cornwall, where his wife, Jane, showed him into the converted garage where his papers were kept. "I'd been there about an hour looking at all these boxes, and I was aware of a shadow in the door and there was David with his spectacles on the end of his nose, and before I could say hello or anything he said, 'It's very odd to have you here, Adam, poking around inside my mind.'"

Le Carré has read the book to check that it does not violate his major stipulation: that Sisman "should pay due regard to the sensitivities of living persons". But he has not given it his wholehearted approval. "I think he thinks I'm not



RALPH CRANE/LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

as much on his side as I should be, and he has said, 'Why do you believe other people and not me?' And I've said I've just tried to present the truth as it seems to me, and actually usually I do believe him, but I know, and he would know and has admitted, that memory is a great deceiver and that often we reconstruct the past."

On the other hand, Sisman thinks that it has suited le Carré to mislead interviewers. "David thinks I think he is more conscious in this process than he admits to. I feel it's served his purpose to be vague about his past, and for people to misinterpret him. The more he protested that he was a simple civil

servant and had never been involved in spying, the more people imagined that the opposite must be true and that in fact he'd been a master spy. So he's kind of had it both ways for a long time."

Why is he still reluctant to talk about his work for MI6? "He says he promised people, agents who worked for him, that he wouldn't reveal their names, and he thinks he should keep that promise even though those agents may be dead. They may have been spying on people who were close to them, who may be still close to them. I can think of one person in Germany who I'm pretty certain that David was spying on. I think that it would be deeply painful and embarrassing if that came out, and I'm sure there are other examples. But of course that's also part of the le Carré mystique, not to reveal everything."

One area where Sisman has had to tread carefully in discussions

with his subject is Cornwell's personal life. The biography deals in detail with le Carré's affair (during his first marriage) with Susan, the wife of his friend James Kennaway, the author of *Tunes of Glory* – a liaison that inspired le Carré's only non-espionage novel, *The Naive and Sentimental Lover* (1971), which was savaged by the critics, and hints at numerous other affairs. "David's infidelities have created a duality and a tension that became a necessary drug for his writing," Sisman writes in his book. "From an early stage in their relationship Jane [his second wife] has suffered David's extramarital adventures, and tried to protect him from their consequences." Did le Carré offer his own comments on the subject? "It's one of those areas he didn't really want to talk about," says Sisman.

Sisman doubts that le Carré will

offer anything new about it in his forthcoming memoir. "But I intend in the fullness of time, if I outlive him, which is by no means certain, to write a fuller version of his life after his death, and that will be very useful material." Sisman is only 61 but his comment about le Carré outliving him is more than a joke: the man is still an incredible life force. And according to Sisman, that's down to his unhappy childhood, in particular his mother, Olive, who left the family home when he was five and broke off contact.

"You may say to yourself, 'Why on earth is he still writing at 84?' He's still driven. He doesn't relax. He has the occasional holiday, but basically he's working as hard as he ever has. He doesn't need to, of course. He's proved everything he needs to prove. He's obviously got enough money. So what's fuelling him? His anger is still burning bright in him, his anger at being abandoned."

But it is his father, Ronnie, a notorious con man, who has loomed largest in le Carré's life, and at times Sisman's book resembles an Evelyn Waugh novel in the way that the larger-than-life Ronnie will pop up long into his son's adulthood, in a variety of bizarre circumstances. "David was appalled by his father but also adored him, and he fears becoming like his father. His father was a

At 84, he's proved everything he needs to prove, but his anger is still burning bright

charming and in a sense beguiling character, but he was also a psychopath who would cheat old ladies out of their life savings.

"I think one of the interesting things that surprised me about David, that shouldn't surprise you really if you read the books, is the extent to which he feels alienated from English society. His public face is urbane, apparently completely self-possessed. He went to public school, went to Oxford, got a first-class degree, served in intelligence services. You'd think he was entirely comfortable, but in fact there's a strong sense of alienation from the institutions of British society, and I think that perhaps stems from his rascally childhood and his sense of not really being what his father was trying to make him become by sending him to public school, coming from a different class background."

He shares this sense of being an "insider-outsider" with Kim Philby, says Sisman, but where Philby took to treachery, Cornwell turned to literature. "I think that edginess, that sense of being inside and understanding how society works but at the same time not being seduced by it, feeds into his work, so he can observe with a dispassionate eye the absurdities of Whitehall, for example."

This may be true or not, but probably nobody will ever come closer than Sisman has to cracking the great le Carré enigma.

Coming in from the cold: David Cornwell in a pedestrian tunnel in Hamburg, 1964; below left, his biographer, Adam Sisman



John le Carré: the Biography by Adam Sisman is published by Bloomsbury at £25. To order a copy from the Telegraph for £20, call 0844 871 1515

Building a bridge over the Iron Curtain

An account of the Cold War's close reveals the steady hand of both leaders. By *Duncan White*

THE END OF THE COLD WAR: 1985-1991

by Robert Service

562PP, MACMILLAN, £25, EBOOK £11.51

★★★★★

On May 28 1987, a skinny 19-year-old German took off from Helsinki in his Cessna and made for Moscow. Flying

into Soviet airspace, Mathias Rust was tracked for a while by a MiG fighter, but carried on undaunted, flying low in a bid to avoid radar. Once over the Soviet capital, he used a map to find his way to Red Square, and took two low passes in an attempt to clear a space for a landing amid the gathering crowd before touching down on a neighbouring bridge. He chatted to the bemused Muscovites in awkward English; he said he wanted to "build an imaginary bridge" across the Iron Curtain. He asked if he might speak to Mikhail Gorbachev. The KGB had other ideas and locked him up.

Gorbachev, it turns out, was not even in Moscow, but at a meeting of Warsaw Pact leaders in East Berlin. When he was informed that an amateur aviator had penetrated what was supposed to be the most sophisticated air defence system in the world, he told the gathered leaders it constituted a grave humiliation for the Soviet Union. Inwardly, though, he was jubilant: Rust had given him leverage over the hardliners in the military who opposed his reforms. Eduard Shevardnadze, minister of foreign affairs and Gorbachev's partner in Perestroika, was so delighted that he celebrated by getting stuck into a bottle of brandy in his hotel room.

The irony was that for all Rust's sentimental nonsense about imaginary peace bridges, his escapade did help to pave the way for major treaties on nuclear disarmament between the United States and the USSR. At a meeting of the Politburo on May 30, the defence minister Sergei Sokolov was forced to resign, and many sackings followed. It was a heavy blow to Gorbachev's opponents. Rust, meanwhile, spent two months in prison before being released in a diplomatic goodwill gesture.

As Robert Service tells us in his authoritative new account of the Cold War endgame, the Rust affair was just one bizarre incident in a larger pattern. No longer were these two superpowers focused



REUTERS

Shared goal: the Gorbachevs with the Reagans at the Reagan ranch near Santa Barbara in 1992

on fighting each other through proxy wars in the Third World, they were now fighting among themselves; the battles were taking place within Washington and Moscow, with reformers pitted against reactionaries.

Service, a professor of Russian history at Oxford, is known for his thumping great biographies of Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky, so it is unsurprising that in *The End of the Cold War* he brings to life the "big four" who he believes did most to bring the conflict to an end: on the American side Ronald Reagan and his secretary of state George Shultz; on the Soviet side Gorbachev and Shevardnadze. Service's analysis is never reductive: at every stage, with every crisis, he shows the inextricable interdependence of these four influential figures in pursuit of their shared goal.

Reagan's role as peacemaker is the most counterintuitive. He won the presidency as a strident anti-communist with a hawkish attitude to foreign policy, and yet he was committed to complete nuclear disarmament. Horrified that the US had no defence against nuclear attack, he was also committed to building a missile-intercept system in space ("Star Wars"). The simplicity of Reagan's position on nukes suited his stubborn temperament. For all his folksy charm and lack of intellectual sophistication, he had survived an assassination attempt and was possessed, in Service's phrase, of a "titanium core".

That toughness helped him not only to hold his line when he ran into public difficulties – the Iran-Contra affair foremost – but also in the unremitting fight with the hardliners on the American political Right (to say nothing of

the incompetence and mischief-making of the CIA). During the Reykjavik summit of 1986, Reagan told Gorbachev that his critics back home were "kicking [his] brains out". The bulwark against these forces was Shultz, the dogged American hero of Service's book, who realised more quickly than anyone else the opportunities presented by Gorbachev's 1985 rise to power. The change Gorbachev made was dramatic. The years of stagnation under Brezhnev had led to the USSR being run by a paranoid gerontocracy that was, as Service puts it, "locked into a condition of collective denial". First Yuri Andropov, then Konstantin Chernenko died, having served just over a year as leader. So decrepit was the leadership in these years that the general secretary's villa in Foros had been equipped with an escalator to the beach.

Then came the sprightly 54-year-old Gorbachev.

He had known the Soviet political and economic system was headed for disaster as early as 1975. He was careful about when and where he expressed his strong opinions and had a meteoric rise through the party. With the dynamic Shevardnadze at his side, he prepared to reform domestic and foreign policy radically. With the clock ticking on the disastrous Soviet economy, he knew he had to act fast and reduce military spending. The war in Afghanistan had proved a disaster, and he was desperate to avoid being dragged into another arms race by Reagan's Star Wars project. The

For all Reagan's folksy charm, he was possessed of a titanium core

fallout from Chernobyl further convinced him of the need to work with Reagan on nuclear disarmament.

With this as the set-up, Service then traces the unravelling of the Cold War in all its Byzantine intricacy, drawing on an exhaustive range of archival materials from both sides. The evidence shows how, at almost every single juncture, it would have been easier to give up on rapprochement and backslide into mutual hostility. Service prefers to draw on diaries, letters and minutes of meetings than on the many self-serving memoirs dedicated to the period. Having this stuff in the raw makes for a riveting read.

Sure, keeping track of the bewildering number of Soviet bureaucrats is enough to make anyone reach for the vodka, but Service, for all his attention to the granular detail, has that rare gift in historians: generating narrative tension about events of which we already know the outcome. He takes a story so frequently warped by triumphalist hindsight and reminds us just how precarious was the path towards "improbable peace".



To order this book from the Telegraph for £20, call 0844 871 1515