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# **‘Englishmen could be proud then, George’: Echoes of Empire in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (BBC 1979)**

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## **Abstract**

This article considers attitudes towards the British Empire as depicted in the BBC television mini-series *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (BBC 1979). Broadcast at the end of 1970s, the decade in which the post-empire era drew to a close, the series shares with its mass audience complex emotions which relate to a pervading sense of national decline. The substance of this exchange – the message of the text and the nature of its reception – indicates a multi-faceted response to the empire grand narrative, especially its final chapter and postscript. How does *Tinker Tailor* broach the theme of post-empire loss? To what extent does series protagonist George Smiley represent a particular attitude towards empire? In answer to these questions, the article maintains that meditations on the past helped television audiences make sense of their fractured, post-empire present. And that in his quest to unmask a traitor within MI6, or Kim-Philby-esque ‘mole’, Smiley is as much concerned with conserving aspects of tradition and identity as he is with conflict in purely ideological and geopolitical terms.

**Keywords:** 1970s television; empire; post-war; espionage; conservatism; Cold War

## **Introduction**

My aim in this article is to consider 1970s attitudes towards the earlier post-war era, particularly that transitional period (1946–59) in which the sun set over the British Empire. In short, I wish to listen to the voices from one point in time talk of echoes from another, still more distant past. By positioning the BBC’s 1979 adaptation of John le Carre’s *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1974) at the heart of my enquiry, I identify television as a medium through which these voices can be heard – and espionage and detection as genres through which they speak. Series producer Jonathan Powell called le Carre’s best-selling novel ‘a sort of elegy for empire’ (McNaughton 2018: 378). It is a fair description. Director John Irvin made much the same point about the television series itself (MacInnes 5 September 2019). Like the le Carre original, the television *Tinker Tailor* exudes a feeling of what Paul Gifford calls ‘post-imperial melancholia’ (2004: 106). But it does so some five years later, just as this sentiment reached a peak in the country (see below). The series confides in its mass audience; it shares with them complex emotions which revolve around the familiar theme of national decline. My primary concern here is to capture something of the substance of this exchange: the message of the text and the nature of its reception. How does the *Tinker Tailor* espionage-detective narrative broach the theme of post-empire loss? To what extent does series protagonist George Smiley represent a particular attitude towards empire?

My answers to these questions spring from an analysis that is ‘post-imperial’ rather than ‘post-colonial’. The focus, in other words, is the effect of decolonization on the colonizer, not the colonized. Joseph Oldham (2017; 2018) and Douglas McNaughton (2018) have produced

excellent work in a similar vein, their cold-war-themed studies placing the *Tinker Tailor* television mini-series in broad empire contexts. This article contributes to the literature by flipping the picture, as it were: it is an empire-themed study that places *Tinker Tailor* in a cold war context. The reconfiguration of these integrated grand narratives offers an opportunity to see with fresh eyes the ways in which 1970s television put the past to work. And empire itself, as a subject, serves to illustrate the point neatly, not least because it crops up frequently and in various guises – docu-drama (*Edward and Mrs Simpson* [ITV 1978]; *Philby, Burgess and Maclean* [ITV 1977]), costume drama (*Upstairs, Downstairs* [ITV 1971–5]; *The Onedin Line* [BBC 1971–80]; *The Edwardians* [BBC 1972–3]), documentary (*British Empire: Echoes of Britannia's Rule* [BBC 1972]; *The World at War* [ITV 1973–4]), and so on. As *Tinker Tailor* demonstrates – and as this article will show – reference to the empire past, whether oblique (contemporary drama) or more direct (history-based drama and documentary), inevitably invited comparison to the 1970s present.

That present was all but unrelenting in its day-to-day socio-economic decline (a 1973 rise in GDP the only notable exception to an otherwise strict rule). The 1970s was a period of political turmoil: the well-documented Crisis Decade. It is the era in which the post-war consensus, as Paul Addison (1975) termed it, finally breaks down. And it is with the onset of the Winter of Discontent that the true extent of the chaos forces itself on the national consciousness. Indeed, the government-trade unions stand-off at the turn of 1979 dominated news in all media, its coverage depicting a country frozen in every sense of the word. The close of the decade not only signalled an end for Keynesian social democracy, it also drew a line under the first post-empire era. A palpable feeling of finality – of fatality – grew out of these circumstances, and with it a compulsion to look back, to rake over the imperial past (Hyam 2010) – to audit history. It is in this context that retired intelligence officer George Smiley returns to the fray, in order to unmask a Kim Philby-esque ‘Red’ traitor operating within the Secret Intelligence Service. A man out of time, Smiley walks among the ruins of 1970s Britain; and his pursuit of the mole ‘Gerald’ is as much concerned with conserving aspects of tradition and identity as it is with conflict in purely ideological and geopolitical terms.

## **Reflections in the 1970s: Empire and Britain**

The end of the 1970s saw the publication of James (Jan) Morris’s *Farewell the Trumpets* (1978), the final instalment of the *Pax Britannica* (1968–78) trilogy. In the Introduction to the revised edition, added some twenty years later, Morris recalls her original purpose in writing the book. ‘I have not been concerned so much with what the British Empire was or meant’, she states, ‘as what it felt like – or more pertinently, perhaps, what it felt like to me, in the imagination or the life’ (Morris 1998: 9). Bernard Porter (2004: 345) sees Morris’s ‘lyrical’ treatment as indicative of a mindset peculiar to the decade – ‘a warm but distant and consequently unregretful nostalgia’. Reasons for such sentiment present themselves readily enough. For those of the older generation who had once served the British Empire and, like Morris, seen value in their work, 1970s Britain offered little by way of return for the effort. At best it pointed to a miserable kind of vindication: proof that post-war socialism and the cultural revolution of the 1960s had failed to deliver on their utopian dreams. With straightened circumstances at home and an increasing acquiescence abroad, the imperial past might well have seemed glorious by comparison, even in its 20<sup>th</sup> century twilight. In the final analysis,

though, most old colonialists recognised the partiality of this view.<sup>1</sup> Morris certainly did. There is nothing simplistic or naïve about her narrative, nostalgic though it undoubtedly is. Contradictions are writ large across the pages of *Pax Britannica*: they sharpen the soft focus of selective memory and invite the reader to revel in the endless complexities of the human drama. Like *Tinker Tailor*, it is an elegy of some depth, and the *feeling* of Empire stretches across all three volumes.

Early in the decade D.A. Low had touched on a similar theme (1973: 2). Unlike Morris, however, his concern was not so much his own experience but that of those at the sharp end. '[T]here is an arresting question of what it was actually like to be subject to imperial rule,' he wrote in 1973. 'What did it *feel* like?' The question strikes right to the heart of what would become the thorniest of post-colonial identity discourses, of course, and is taken up on those terms later in the decade by Edward Said (1978). Like Said and other post-colonialists, Stuart Hall (1980) positioned his own ethnicity at the centre of the debate and drew similar conclusions from a New Left perspective. Most British scholars were more tentative in their dealings with the subjective (unable as they were to call on what might now be termed 'lived experience'), but their treatment struck a similar chord. And their contributions were nonetheless significant. Their sheer number, moreover, indicates the value of the new historiographical currency. Familiar names in the empire historiography – Edward Grierson (1972), the aforementioned Porter (1976), and John Bowle (1977) – each offer accounts which respond in one way or another to Low's question of what it felt like.

This willingness to embrace abstraction reveals as much about the context of empire study as it does about the subject itself. The writing of the imperial past, then, reflects the fragmentation of the post-imperial 1970s. Morris's attempt to connect with a flawed yet meaningful past, and to commune with the younger self inhabiting that world, is as much an expression of alienation as it is a desire to belong. The other empire works listed above, along with Martin Green's later entry, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (1979), offer similarly charged, if slightly more oblique, parallels. The dynamic between the context of writing and the past as constructed is best illustrated by a brief comparison to the earlier historiography. Leftists R.P. Dutt (1957) and John Strachey (1959) are famously critical of British rule, and area specialists Vincent A. Smith (India [1958]), Alan Burns (West Indies [1954]) and Lewis H. Gann (Central Africa [1964]) are by no means unsympathetic to their subjects. But none of these historians is self-consciously empathetic. While all the works in question consider empire in social and cultural language, only those published in the 1970s seek to assess the impact of rule in expressly human terms, across various contexts and scenarios, and on peoples, communities and individuals. It is a distinction worth noting because it indicates the growth of what of Pascal Bruckner (2010) has since termed 'empire guilt'. Sweeping across all European post-empire cultures, this current of feeling gained momentum as the decade progressed; it motivated the dominant strand of empire re-appraisal, moreover, and sat somewhat uncomfortably alongside nostalgia-inflected reminiscence.

Day-to-day opinion echoed the multifaceted nature of the written response. For student radicals and the broader revolutionary left (key participants in the active debate) empire was all things for all occasions: an object on which to pour general political scorn, a totem around

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<sup>1</sup> Enoch Powell provides the best illustration of how, with relative ease, the transition could be made from colonialist to nationalist. See Simon Heffer (1998), *Like the Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, pp. 625–75.

which to dance grievance. A lever, in other words, with which to prise open any and all agendas. Looking back across the decade, W. Ross Johnson (1980) touched wearily on this kind of weaponization: ‘During the 1970s the vilification of imperialism has been the automatic password of the student and the handy slogan of the protestor.’ For some, though, the emotion ran deeper: it focused intensely on the object at hand and was complex enough to defy easy articulation. Akin to the aforementioned ‘guilt’ syndrome but closer in actuality to Morris’s alienation, it crystallized in a quiet introspection; and it found poetic expression through the unlikely figure of George Smiley. Like Smiley – and irrespective of political persuasion – many looked to the past in order to make sense of a new world they neither liked nor understood. Career diplomat Sir Kenneth Blackburne (1976: 198) voiced this disappointment in his decidedly right-leaning memoirs:

In a world beset by greed, envy, racial conflict, and marked differences between the rich and the poor, it is surely a matter of pride that our former colonies and territories, whilst not withholding their criticism of Britain, still wish to be associated with us in the building of a better world.

Marxist Raymond Williams (1979) touched on a similar theme. But for him, Blackburne’s ‘better world’ was as distant at the end of the 1970s as it had been at the beginning of World War II. Despite ‘managed and profitable transitions from colonialism’ (post-war reconstruction and its attendant optimism) the decade in which the first post-empire era drew to a close also represented ‘a widespread loss of the future’ (208). That was the nature of its tragedy – and a point on which to reflect.

*Tinker Tailor* was an ideal vehicle for such contemplation. ‘How do you feel, Peter?’ Smiley asks Guillam in Part 4, just as they are closing in the mole Gerald. ‘I’m alright’, comes the terse reply. This brief exchange gains little more by way of traction and is easily overlooked as a consequence. But Smiley’s question is nevertheless pertinent. Guillam’s primary function is to act as audience to the old spy, to play Dr Watson to Smiley’s Sherlock Holmes; he listens, reacts and absorbs – and in this respect is a proxy for the viewer at home. By voicing his concern for Guillam the Everyman, Smiley not only hints at an affection hitherto left unsaid, he all but breaks the ‘fourth wall’ convention. The wider audience, for the most part, are clear in their response to his enquiry; they know how they feel. As the next section will show, they demonstrate a willingness to meet the story on its own terms, to look beyond thrill-of-the-moment espionage and adventure in order to see the bigger picture of history and human drama. *Tinker Tailor* is ‘quality television’ (Jancovich and Lyons 2003: 44) and its dealings with empire help define it as such.

## **A Brief History of a Series of Quality**

Smiley is introduced in le Carre’s first novel, *Call for the Dead* (1961). In the book’s opening chapter, ‘A Brief History of George Smiley’, he is described by his wife of all people as ‘breathtakingly ordinary’.<sup>2</sup> Le Carre sketches a character barely present in his own narrative, a man defined by what he is not rather than who he is. ‘[W]ithout school, parents, regiment or trade, without wealth or poverty’, this tragically anonymous figure ‘travelled without labels in

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<sup>2</sup> For a further, detailed appraisal of Smiley’s character on these terms, see Phyllis Lassner (2018), *Espionage and Exile: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Spy Fiction and Film*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

the guard's van of the social express, and soon became lost luggage, destined, when the divorce had come and gone, to remain unclaimed on the dusty shelf of yesterday's news' (1961: 2). The Smiley of *Tinker Tailor*, though altered slightly in age (the fifty-five-year-old of 1961 is only fifty-eight in 1974), is similarly unprepossessing. Half-forgotten in retirement and semi-dedicated to solitary scholarly pursuits, he seems as obscure as the 17<sup>th</sup> century German literature that is the object of his study. Yet this 'disappointed romantic'<sup>3</sup> (to borrow Joseph Oldham's epithet) caught something of the mood of the moment. He is the anti-Bond, of course: a lower-key, more complex kind of hero, but no less evocative as an image of empire than Fleming's 'blunt instrument' (Fleming 1958: 4).

*Tinker Tailor* was an overnight success, selling 52,000 hardback copies during its first print run (Sisman 2015: 281). It reversed Le Carre's fortunes as a novelist, which had been in steady decline since the enormous success of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1963). Indeed, his previous publication, *The Naive and Sentimental Lover* (1971), had marked a career low-point, ushering in the 1970s on a wave of dismal sales and scathing reviews.<sup>4</sup> No-one at that point, least of all Le Carre himself, could have predicted the renaissance he was shortly to enjoy, nor could they have gauged the lasting impact of Smiley's return to the field. A follow-up book, *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977), which again featured Smiley, profited from *Tinker Tailor*'s success, selling over 78,000 copies in UK hardback alone (Manning 2018: 53). The second instalment of the Karla Trilogy, it meditates on the transition of power through depictions of British informal imperialism and American post-war hegemony (ibid.).<sup>5</sup> Paperback sales went on to top the half-million mark, an impressive feat even by the high-selling standards of the day. By the October of 1977, Le Carre's reputation as a master storyteller had been fully restored, a point illustrated by his appearance that month on the cover of *Time* magazine. Another measure of prestige was the fact that the BBC was adapting *Tinker Tailor* to the small screen.

It was London Weekend Television, however – not the BBC – who optioned the novel in the first instance, back in summer of 1975.<sup>6</sup> Keen to follow up on his investment, Director of Programmes Cyril Bennett immediately commissioned producer Richard Bates and screenwriter Julian Bond to develop a 12-part script.<sup>7</sup> The pair set about straightening the twists and turns of the Le Carre original, eventually producing something that resembled a television-friendly linear narrative. But the LWT series was destined never to materialize. It had been 'the brainchild [...] of Bennett', remembered columnist Charlie Catchpole (8 September 1979), 'and when he fell to his death from the balcony of a London flat three years ago, the ITV version of *Tinker Tailor* died with him.' The strange circumstances surrounding Bennett's death did indeed play their part in causing the LWT interest to lapse, but there was more to the story than human tragedy. Le Carre disliked the Julian Bond treatment, a fact he was at pains

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<sup>3</sup> See Joseph Oldham (2013), 'Disappointed Romantics: Troubled Heritage in the BBC's John le Carre Adaptations', in *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, Vol. 10, No. 4. pp. 727–745.

<sup>4</sup> See Adam Sisman (2015: 252–3).

<sup>5</sup> For a nuanced exploration of these themes, and also for later treatments, see Robert Lance Snyder (2017), *John le Carre's Post-Cold War Fiction*, Missouri: University of Missouri Press. Also see Snyder (2011), *The Art of Indirection in British Espionage Fiction: A Critical Study of Six Novelists*, North Carolina: McFarland and Company.

<sup>6</sup> The project was announced on 1 November 1975, in the read all about in *Screen International*'s 'Read all about it' column (No.9, p.18).

<sup>7</sup> *Screen International*, 4 January 1976.

to point out.<sup>8</sup> And it was his veto, as much as anything else, that signalled the end for the production.

The BBC simply picked up where LWT left off. And there was never any doubt in producer Jonathan Powell's mind that his version would stick avowedly to the spirit of the source novel. Working in close consultation with Le Carre, Powell sought to enhance the already seductive *Tinker Tailor* brand by offering the role of Smiley to Alec Guinness. But 'Guinness didn't do television', remembered Le Carre years later, and the task of securing a contract was complicated by the fact that 'he was enormously distinguished, and we were diffident.'<sup>9</sup> He had in the past expressed respect for the novelist, however – and had 'always liked the Smiley character' (Reid 2003: 296). It was in a spirit of cautious optimism, then, that le Carre, Powell and director John Irvin set out to 'woo' their star. Once Guinness had agreed to play the role, the team (which included screenwriter Arthur Hopcraft) quickly assembled a formidable supporting cast. Shooting took place between October 1978 and March 1979, post-production followed in late spring and early summer. BBC2 broadcast Part One between 9–9:50pm on Monday 10 September.

Predictably enough, the series enjoyed huge exposure. Substantial essays from both Hopcraft and Le Carre, each published in Sunday supplements at key points during the September-October programming schedule, helped maintain a high profile.<sup>10</sup> The series was reviewed exhaustively throughout the whole of its seven-week run. Many television critics noted its remarkable qualities. The *Daily Telegraph's* Sean Day-Lewis (11 September 1979), for example, called it 'a standard-raiser for all', while for Patrick Stoddart (31 August 1979) of the *Evening News* it was 'the most elegant and potentially absorbing series the BBC has attempted for a very long time'. Richard Afton (13 September 1979) – again in the *Evening News* – concluded his review: 'If *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* doesn't top the rating next week there is no justice.' There were many more similar notices. Chris Kenworthy (8 September 1979), as one further example, predicted in *The Sun* that audiences would be 'hooked' for the duration of the series. Mixed and hostile reviews mingled with the raves, however: 'I wish I could share the general enthusiasm for the Corporation's current television drama flagship,' noted Richard Last (18 September 1979) in the *Daily Telegraph*, while the *Daily Star's* Ken Easthaugh (13 October 1979) dismissed the series as a 'meaningless bore'. Herbert Kretzmer's *Daily Mail* review conveys the complexity of the response – and the nature of *Tinker Tailor's* impact:

Described as turgid by some, masterful by others, it is already clear that this remarkable serial intends to go its own way, following few established procedures in story-telling, playing its cards very close to its chest and being singularly unhelpful to dozy viewers who may lose their concentration along the way (18 September 1979).

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<sup>8</sup> BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham, R CONT 20: John le Carre. Memo from Assistant Head of Copyright to HBC Tel, 6 July 1977.

<sup>9</sup> See 'The Secret Centre' documentary film, available in the Special Features section of the BBC DVD of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2003).

<sup>10</sup> *The Observer Magazine* published Hopcraft's 'Who is Smiley, what is he?' on 16 September 1979. le Carre's piece, 'At Last, It's Smiley', appeared in the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine* on 21 October 1979. Both essays are available as clippings at the British film Institute archives.

The BBC's Audience Research Reports offer a more direct insight into reception.<sup>11</sup> 8.3 million (15.9% of the UK population) tuned in for Part 1 (11 October 1979). Part 4 managed to match this number (22 November 1979). Part 5 attracted the smallest audience – 6.2 million (6 November 1979). Sunday repeats managed between 1.6–4.6 million viewers (22 November 1979). These are impressive figures, especially given the 'high-brow' nature of the programme and the Monday evening viewing alternatives of the BBC1 News and the feature film. In qualitative terms, audience reactions were overwhelmingly positive, with respondents remarking: 'I've been looking forward to it for weeks and wasn't disappointed'; 'I wouldn't have missed it for anything'; 'The best TV series I have seen'. (22 November 1979) However, a substantial minority did express bewilderment: 'I never did discover what it was all about'; 'I couldn't make head nor tail of it'; 'Too many deadpan voices and expressionless faces' (ibid.). Production and acting were found to have been almost universally 'excellent' and 'first class' (ibid.).

*Tinker Tailor* draws on several television traditions, each evolving significantly during the 1970s. Not least was the 'gritty' detective narrative (Kiszely 2019) and its closely associated practice of location shooting (Sexton 2013). But there are other, more direct parallels. The first is the theme of espionage, of course, which had long been a staple of glamorous adventure series like *The Avengers* (ITV 1961–9), *The Saint* (ITV 1962–9), *Department S* (ITV 1969–1970), and latterly *The Adventurer* (ITV 1972–3) and *The Protectors* (ITV 1972–4). While *Tinker Tailor* bears almost no resemblance to these mostly ITC productions, it does in some respects echo the realism of *Spy Trap* (BBC 1972–5), the first series-format show to re-imagine a spy figure for the new decade. *Traitor* (BBC 1971) was another precedent in that, like *Tinker Tailor*, it took as its inspiration the machinations of double agent Kim Philby. Featured as part of the *Play for Today* (BBC 1970–84) series, this Dennis-Potter-penned drama starred John le Mesurier as defector Adrian Harris. Later in the decade *Philby, Burgess and MacLean* (1977) told essentially the same story, but this time the action revolved around Philby's real-life relationships with Guy Burgess and Donald MacLean. The decade marks a clear transition, then – from genre espionage to espionage drama.

*Traitor* and *Philby, Burgess and Maclean* were high-profile broadcasts notable for their formats – one-off play and two-part docu-drama respectively. They belonged to a second television tradition: the quality drama. It is in this context that *Tinker Tailor*'s reflective end-of-empire narrative reads most clearly. Television's quality output during the previous decade had dealt primarily in contemporary issues like homelessness and poverty. Confining itself almost exclusively to the one-off play format, it honed its expression via anthology series like *The Wednesday Play* (BBC 1964–70) and *ITV Playhouse* (1967–83). The one-off play proved ideal as a vehicle for clearly delineated social realism, as Lez Cooke (2003: 49) has noted, but it struggled to do justice to the deep, extended kind of introspection that was fast becoming the hallmark of the newer drama. It was only with the development of the mini-series format, during the middle years of the decade, that quintessentially 1970s preoccupations would find their natural home. Prestigious 'classics' and 'modern classics', such as *The Nearly Man* (ITV

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<sup>11</sup> Statistics and qualitative materials taken from Audience Research Reports for Parts 1 and 5, and also from a final overview of the series. Available at the BBC Written Archive Centre at Caversham Park. For a detailed explanation of how such reports were compiled, see Billy Smart (2014), 'The BBC Television Audience Research Reports, 1957 – 1979: recorded opinions and invisible expectations', in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 34: 3. pp. 452–462.



1975), *Hard Times* (ITV 1977) and *Out* (ITV 1978), all brood on the past in one way or another, and in a variety of genres.

The seven-part *Edward and Mrs Simpson* (ITV 1978) dealt specifically with the final years of empire, seeing decline through the lens of abdication. Written by Simon Raven, author of the *Alms for Oblivion* (1964–76) novel cycle, it dovetailed private life and public responsibility, playing out both against a melancholy backdrop of change. It anticipates *Tinker Tailor* in this regard (although the respective protagonists could hardly be more different). With its in-depth character study and sophisticated depiction of political process and intrigue, the series represents a development – a highpoint – in television history. In terms of scripting, then, the medium matures with the appearance of the mini-series format. This process begins proper with *Elizabeth R* (BBC 1971), the standard by which subsequent productions would be measured. From 1978 until well into the next decade the colonial past dominates the cycle of quality drama. The most prestigious productions on British television contemplate the setting sun of empire, from the contemporary treatment of *Tinker Tailor* to the espionage-themed history of *Reilly, Ace of Spies* (ITV 1983), through the historical sagas of *Brideshead Revisited* (ITV 1981) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (ITV 1984). The end of empire lingers in popular memory and, as textual analysis in the next section will demonstrate, it orientates Smiley's 'mole' enquiry.

### **Beggar Man – Smiley**

Smiley pursues the mole 'Gerald' back through the Circus files, re-tracing Control's steps while simultaneously seeking new avenues of exploration.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Control, however, whose solitary journey was office-bound and paper-based, Smiley is prepared to venture into the wider world; his enquiries extend from London to Oxford and involve a variety of colleagues, some inside the Service, others affiliated or having left. The quest eventually leads to Sam Collins, officer on duty the night Jim Prideaux was shot. Collins recounts a meeting with Control, on the night of Operation Testify, in which he was asked to act as 'cut-out' for the rest of the building. 'It was like opening a coffin lid', he tells Smiley. In illustrating the circumstance of his glimpse into Control's world, Collins unwittingly touches on Smiley's role in the wider scheme of things. Smiley's task, after all, is to examine the hollowed-out carcass that is the Service. But, if his post-mortem is to strike at the root of the burrowing (and so expose the mole Gerald), then it must scrutinize every other aspect of the whole sorry affair.

At first, Smiley is reluctant to face the truth. 'After a lifetime of living on my wits, and on my memory, I shall give myself up full-time to the profession of forgetting,' he says in an uncharacteristic fit of pique. Fixing on Peter Guillam, whose visit has prompted the outburst, he warms to his theme:

I'm going to put an end to some emotional attachments which have long outlived their purpose, namely the Circus, this house, my whole past. I shall sell up and buy a cottage – in the Cotswolds, I think. Steeple Aston sounds about right.

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<sup>12</sup> Le Carre's in-text vernacular: for Circus, read Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), or MI6; for Control, read Head of SIS.

Yet his following pronouncement – ‘I shall become an oak of my own generation’ – belies the protestation. It is the direct expression of a desire not only to belong but to exemplify (and echoes the famous ‘wooden walls of empire’ imagery). This sentiment, while clearly rooted in nostalgia, is less straightforward than it might first appear. Certainly, Smiley is of a recognizable vintage: the Englishman who came of age during the inter-war years and stood for empire as it crumbled about his feet. But Smiley ‘the Oak’ answers to none of the usual descriptions. He would, for instance, be miscast in the role of ‘colonial oppressor’ – as he is at pains to point out: ‘Percy, yes. Bill, certainly. But not me.’ He would be unconvincing too, in the guise of the ‘professional, progressive administrator’, as typified by the ‘Furse men’ and other, similarly reluctant colonialists (Misra: 2008: 152–3). Finally – and perhaps most strikingly – he would fare badly as that well-worn empire cliché, the ‘machine-like bureaucrat’.<sup>13</sup> He aligns more accurately with broad philosophical notions of reason and truth, or what might otherwise be termed Western culture in the abstract. It is a position informed by the broad principles of the European Enlightenment: by the ideas of Spinoza and Kant – and signified in shorthand by an enthusiasm for Goethe.<sup>14</sup>

Smiley eventually consents to ‘clean out the stables’ (as civil servant Oliver Lacon puts it), having carefully weighed the implications of Ricki Tarr’s ‘traitor’ claim. The decision to cooperate is arrived at only after Lacon has put the case in the strongest of terms. Walking Smiley around the grounds of his Hampshire home, Lacon summons all his persuasion in pressing the ex-operative back into service. His exhortations build steadily to the ‘age-old’ question: ‘Who can spy on the spies?’ It seems, practicably, that only a retired officer will do. But the reasons why the task should fall to Smiley specifically are as much about ‘balancing the books’ of the past as they are ‘trade craft’ in the present. Like Simon Templar in ITV’s *The Return of the Saint* (1978–9), he is anachronistic. But unlike ‘the Saint’, whose benign adventures begin and end with escapism, Smiley is an emissary of the past. His compliance with Lacon’s request, reluctant though it is, consolidates his status as such – and lends definition to a hitherto fractured identity. On a practical level, then, and despite his Enlightenment credentials, Smiley might best be described as Burkean (see below); he is driven by an impulse to *conserve*, after all, and – despite his many misgivings – by a desire to work on behalf of nation.

Smiley’s undertaking, therefore, in addition to unmasking the mole Gerald, is to salvage the reputation of an era. The idea that the past had somehow been sullied in the name of espionage was a familiar one, given the events of recent history. Cambridge Five spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean were still the subject of considerable popular interest some two decades after their double defection, a point illustrated by the publication in 1977 of John Fisher’s *Burgess and Maclean: A New Look at the Foreign Office Spies*. Other traitors made their mark too, of course, not least the conspirators of the Portland Spy Ring and George Blake. But it was Kim Philby, another member of the Cambridge Five<sup>15</sup>, who would capture the public imagination. The charming Foreign Office official had first come under suspicion in the wake

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<sup>13</sup> In 1933, inter-war diarist and traveller Greta Stark famously branded such a class of administrator as ‘a magnificent *average* type of Englishmen’. Quotation in Morris (1998: 399).

<sup>14</sup> In *Smiley’s People*, for example, he quotes directly from Goethe’s *The Elvenking* (part of *Die Fischerin* [1782]). Broadly speaking, his character hints at a rationalism that can be traced back to Spinoza (*Ethics* [1677]). At the same time, he represents a connection between rationalism and empiricism that acknowledges Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason* [1781]) but ultimately aligns with Burke (See the following section).

<sup>15</sup> The other two being Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross.

of Burgess and Maclean affair. It was not until 1967, however, that an outcry would ensue, when journalist Phillip Knightley reported the full extent of the Philby scandal in the national media.<sup>16</sup> Among other journalists and historians, Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville (1973), Norman Gelb (1976) and Andrew Boyle (1979) continued to supply the demand for the Philby story. Smiley's attempt to correct the post-war chaos resonated deeply with television viewers who, according to BBC Audience Research Reports, preferred *Tinker Tailor*'s home-grown realism to 'the usual comic strip American spy dramas' (22 November 1979). 'It's your generation, after all', Lacon reminds Smiley; and it retained a fascination for 1970s audiences.

Smiley's investigation works in two ways. On one level, it responds to a particular initiating event and its associated context: Operation Testify and the disastrous, Jim-Prideaux-fixated recent past. The scenes involving Jerry Westerby serve as an example of how, functioning on the 'whodunnit' principle, it trades in the traditional currency of clues and red herrings. This line of enquiry poses direct questions. Who betrayed Prideaux? Who is the mole Gerald? More complex is a second level which, in addition to the 'Who' puzzle element, tackles the vexed question of 'Why'. Here, Gerald's treachery is framed in broader, historical terms, his motivation cast in sharp relief against the backdrop of the imperial past. It begins in earnest with Smiley's drive out to Oxford, to visit Connie Sachs, ex-Head of Research in the Circus. It is her tearful lament for the 'halcyon days' that offers the first real pause for thought.

The build-up to this scene is meticulous. It gains pace through the dynamic of the 'Who-Why' duality, which itself crystallizes during the pre-titles sequence for Part Three. Here, Guillam resigns himself to breaking into the Circus – 'playing Burglar Bill' – in order to properly pursue the 'Who' line. Smiley, meanwhile, in announcing his intention to see Connie, applies himself to the 'Why'. If at first glance these lines of action appear to run separately, then a conspicuous, one-off use of voiceover works immediately to correct the impression. 'You must assume, Peter, that the Circus has the dogs on you 24 hours a day', intones Smiley's disembodied voice. 'Think of it as a foreign country.' A direct reference to the famous opening line of *The Go-between* (1953), this instruction contains the first hint that the answers to the present crisis are to be found buried in a dark corner of the past. Guillam's destination may well be 'a foreign country', but then so is the past into which Smiley steps via the portal of Connie's front door.

Wallowing in nostalgia, in a house that is an early-20<sup>th</sup>-century-England time-capsule, Connie tearfully makes her lament. 'Poor loves. Trained to empire, trained to rule the waves. All gone. Taken away. Bye-bye, world.' It is cloying sentiment even by the empire-nostalgia standards of 1979. Anxious to loosen her tongue with the quickest expediency, Smiley plies Connie with whisky. The exercise proves fruitful. In Connie's 'Englishmen could be proud then' statement Smiley discerns a fragment of motive for treachery. Gerald the mole is disdainful of Britain's shrinking status and wants no part of it; he seeks to be on the right side of history, to fulfil his ambition. From here, Smiley need only assess personality types and then consider times, places, events – run-of-the-mill procedure for the fictional investigator. It is behind Connie's front door, then, that the enquiry becomes a matter of when rather than if; and empire provides a key to the solution.

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<sup>16</sup> As part of the 'Insight' investigative team, Knightley broke the Philby scandal in *The Sunday Times*. For details, see Phillip Knightley (1989), *Philby: KGB Master Spy*, London: Andre Deutsch.

Less misty-eyed is Smiley's own empire-themed recollection, detailing his interrogation of Karla. Rooted firmly in the present – a glorified transport café – the scene features Smiley and Guillam picking over the remains of a dubious supper. It provides a relatively unexpected snapshot of 1970s Britain, in some ways replicating the newly dominant Euston Films aesthetic (Alvarado and Stewart 1985). It is a rare occasion, moreover, in which the scenario is cheap and unattractive in its ordinariness, rather than dusty and austere in its institutional remoteness (McNaughton 2018). This frame makes the flashback it contains all the more remarkable; and it is of more than passing importance that the scene within the scene – Smiley's interrogation of Karla – takes place in Delhi. Smiley talks Guillam back in time, to India at the end of empire, and to the cell in which he confronted his Russian nemesis. He shares with the younger man not only the substance of the encounter but also his feelings surrounding it.

'Karla was in England from '36–'41,' Smiley begins. 'We can assume that it was some time during that period that he recruited our mole Gerald.' The juxtaposition between the end of empire and the end of the post-war era indicates a degeneration, of sorts, but the nature of the contrast is at first vague. It is only with the inclusion of a second comparative element – the West versus East dynamic – that its meaning becomes clear. And by extension, the meaning of *Tinker Tailor's* empire narrative suggests itself properly for the first time. 'I'm not going to make any claims about the moral superiority of the West,' Smiley tells Karla during the interrogation. 'I'm sure you can see through our values in the West just as we can see through yours in the East.' It is a telling statement, and the contemporary context of the Smiley-Guillam framing conversation lends weight to its assertion. Despite his commanding position as inquisitor, Smiley confides in Guillam his reticence during the exchange, a doubt not only in himself on a personal level but also in his belief system. It is this unsureness that ultimately affords him moral authority. Karla, by contrast, is a 'fanatic', unyielding either to reason or compromise; and it is his 'lack of moderation', as Smiley puts it, that will eventually result in his downfall. The next section considers this brand of fanaticism, its source and consequences.

## **Tailor – Haydon**

Shocked but defiant in capture, Bill Haydon – the mole Gerald – displays a bravado that is almost admirable, given the circumstances. 'It was necessary!' he shouts in response to Smiley's question of why. But the assertion fails to ring true. And elucidation only serves to cast further doubt. He tries to justify his treachery by presenting it as an act of retribution: a payment in kind that acknowledges (as it were) the deceit of history. 'We were bluffed,' he tells Smiley.

You, me, Control... all of us. The Circus talent-spotters all those years ago... they picked us when we were golden with hope. Told us we were on our way to the Holy Grail, a lifetime of glory in front of us. [Exasperated] Service to the great cause...!

In some respects, the Haydon confession scene echoes the Connie Sachs interview. Like Connie, Haydon weeps as he talks of empire; and he is similarly capricious in his reminiscence, brooding one minute, blaming the next. But there the similarity ends. While Connie yearns for a past that seduces in the soft glow of nostalgia, Haydon mourns a bright future that never happened. 'I suppose that's when it began,' he reflects. 'Turning my eyes to the East, I mean.

When I saw how trivial we'd become as a nation... Say, the mid-forties.' His descent into treachery was slow at first, it transpires, but quickened as the glory of war faded – and thwarted ambition set in. An oblique reference to the 1956 Suez Crisis illustrates the point: 'Until the mid-fifties, I still had hopes – lingering loyalty to what WE represented. Self-delusion, of course.' A further, final observation – 'We were already America's streetwalkers' – sheds any pretence of regret. And it affords a first clear glimpse of the hidden self, naked in its contempt.

The left was widely understood to be the main culprit when it came to the undermining of national security.<sup>17</sup> Smiley's instinct to invest in traditions and institutions, therefore, rather than in people and ideology, reflects a popular response to contemporary history (Clarke 1999). Nowhere is this reaction seen more clearly than in the every-day attitudes of ordinary, working-class people, a point explored in relation to aspiration and optimism by Jaung Hoon (2001) and Aled Davies (2013). They still celebrated high-profile individuals, it must be noted, just as they had always done, and it would be inaccurate to claim that the political consensus was anything more than partial at best; but the 1977 Silver Jubilee and 1979 General Election hinted at a resurgent sense of 'Britishness' that went beyond the Queen and Margaret Thatcher. If the Haydons of this world – the Philby-esque Etonian Establishment – were shown to have feet of clay and held in contempt accordingly, then the institutions at least still retained some semblance of public confidence and affection.

This emotional attachment was at once justified and misplaced; and one of *Tinker Tailor*'s strengths as a quality drama is that it projects the precarity of such a mindset back onto the viewer. If, as Haydon maintains, 'The secret services are the only true reflection of a nation's character', then the presence in the mirror offered little by way of reassurance. And the image redoubled on the television screen: by looking at Haydon, the viewer was forced to see Philby. In finding the 'rotten apple', Smiley saves the barrel. But who is to say when the rot set in? And how? And what is the cost of complacency? With the imminent revelation that Anthony Blunt, the Keeper of the Queen's Pictures, was not only a spy of long-standing but also immune from prosecution, these questions are as pertinent as Smiley's aforementioned 'Why'.<sup>18</sup>

And their answers read clearest along the lines which connect the investigator to his quarry. The Smiley-Haydon contest is initiated in a context of national decline, as noted above, which in turn offers some basis for motivation: Haydon does offer some explanation as to why. But it is only by taking a longer view of history that their respective positions can clearly be understood. Empire provides a useful lens through which to view the central tussle in *Tinker Tailor*: the pull between traditional continuity and revolutionary change. It is the classic conundrum, of course, and identical to that addressed by Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790). Indeed, just as Smiley's conservatism orientates the viewer and therefore frames their judgment of Haydon, Burke's consideration of empire informs Smiley.

Iain Hampshire-Monk (1987: 30) has pointed out that Burke's political philosophy grew, in part, as a response to the problems brought by the growth of empire. It is an

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<sup>17</sup> That is not to say, however, that the practice was theirs alone: evidence that the right could indulge in destructive behaviour can be seen readily enough in the vendetta against MI5 Chief Roger Hollis, which found broad exposure in the eventual publication of Peter Wright's *Spy Catcher* (1987).

<sup>18</sup> On Thursday 15 November 1979, Prime Minister Margaret revealed Blunt's status as an ex-Soviet Spy to the House of Commons.

observation that has been repeated elsewhere and in a variety of contexts by scholars such as Dennis O’keefe (2010), Robert A. Smith (1968) and L.G. Mitchell (1993). Smiley’s position, ironically enough, springs from a corresponding set of problems, all of which relate to the *end* of empire. When historian David Gibbon said of Burke, ‘I approve of his politics’ (Mitchell 1993: xiv), he was endorsing a pragmatic, empirical response to the challenge of altered circumstances. It was an acknowledgement, moreover, of Burke’s alienation from the working methods of the Enlightenment, whose intellectual project started with the ideal and descended to the practical. Like Burke, Smiley counters a utopian revolutionary vision by looking at reality as it presents itself. ‘It is with infinite caution,’ wrote Burke (ibid.: 45) in *Reflections*,

that any man ought to venture on pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purpose of society, or on building it up again, without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.

This observation – essentially a warning from Burke to Jean-Jacques Rousseau – would serve equally well as an admonishment of Haydon from Smiley.

Haydon embodies excess on an individual level, but he also illustrates the mania of the collective. His blind commitment to Karla serves as a warning that, when pursued at the expense of humanity and utility, adherence to ideology becomes pathological. It is the verdict on 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarianism and one that Smiley, in some heat, delivers on Karla with the word ‘fanatic’. Haydon is a revolutionary in general terms, and a Marxist specifically; but it would be a mistake to view him solely as an approximation of Philby, whose damage begins and ends (at least in the public imagination) with the duration of his treachery. Haydon’s political identity, while of an inter-war provenance, has a parallel in the post-empire era. Indeed, if the ‘Cambridge radical’ of the 1930s was long gone, then a newer approximation, the plate glass university revolutionary, was young, powerful – and there to stay. The ever-youthful Haydon signified a combination of the two in his powerful presence.

By 1979, the young activists of the 1960s had started on their long march through the institutions (Sidwell 2020). Haydon the civil servant represents as much of a threat to the conservative status quo as Haydon the revolutionary, primarily because the cause of the latter equates to action of the former. Antonio Gramsci (1971: 425) had realized, on his return from Russia in 1923, that a revolution in Bolshevik terms could never happen in Western Europe. But a Kierkegaardian revolution could – and did. ‘An age that is revolutionary but also reflecting and devoid of passion changes the expression of power into a dialectic tour de force,’ wrote Kierkegaard (1978: 68) in 1846:

it lets everything remain but subtly drains the meaning out of it; rather than culminating in an uprising, it exhausts the inner actuality of relations in a tension of reflection that lets everything remain and yet has transformed the whole of existence into an equivocation [...]

The invisible transition of power that occurred behind the facades of empire, from the old Etonian Establishment of the right to the young, cosmopolitan elite of the left – the followers of Michel Foucault (2002), Jacques Derrida (1981) and other continental philosophers of the Marxist and post-Marxist traditions – took place in remarkably short order. By the middle of the 1990s, with the election of the ‘New Labour’ government, theirs were the dominant ideas in education, welfare and cultural policy. Haydon, then, when considered in this context, represents a quiet revolution. The buildings still stood but much that had led to their

construction, to their meaning and design as institutions, had vanished. So, on these broader terms, Haydon's loss does not equate to Smiley's gain because the substance of his victory is a source of ambivalence, rather than of glory. Like Haydon, Smiley was disillusioned before the change properly took place, and the result of the post-empire project only served to intensify the feeling of loss.

## Conclusion

*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* was commissioned, developed and broadcast at the end of the post-empire era. In many respects, the very idea of empire was as alien to the British public of the late 1970s as the cottage industries might have been to its late-Victorian colonialist forebears. Half-forgotten in the post-war dash from 1945, it was of little or no consequence to the majority of Baby Boomers who had, in an era of mass communication and cultural revolution, fixed their sights firmly on a future that seemed to be theirs for the taking (Marwick 1998). Yet, as high 1960s boom-time crashed into early 1970s decline, the empire past crept back into the periphery of the national consciousness. In the popular culture sphere – as this article has shown – television played a large part in resuscitating an erstwhile moribund empire narrative.<sup>19</sup> Other media played their parts too – and in various ways. In 1972, for example, Heron Books published a lavish 52-volume set of Dennis Wheatley's canon of work, rekindling interest in his dashing empire-adventurer Gregory Sallust. *Clubland Heroes* (1974), Richard Usborne's seminal survey of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century empire adventure yarn, also found its way back into hardbound print for the first time since its original publication in 1953. Dealing with the fiction of Dornford Yates, John Buchan and Sapper, it prefigures a cinematic re-make of *The 39 Steps* (1978). This in turn provided the inspiration for a high-profile television series, *Hannay* (ITV 1988–9), which featured Robert Powell as its eponymous hero. But there was more to the historical turn than mere nostalgia. Disappointment, confusion, fear, anger, all of these emotions churned in the uncertainty of the 1970s. And they fuelled a re-appraisal of the end-of-empire moment and its aftermath. *Tinker Tailor* considered history on these terms: its meditations on a complex past reflect the precarious present.

Looking back from a 1981 vantage point, Abraham Rothberg reads John le Carre's 1970s 'Karla Trilogy' as a commentary on declining British power and its knock-on effect for British life. For him, Smiley's aristocratic wife, Ann, signifies among other things the threadbare nature of British tradition, a point illustrated by the image of her family's decaying country seat (383). Similarly, the literary George Smiley represents 'a quality of English decency that has faded with time' (ibid.). The 'decade of violence' (DeGroot 2011: 13) context of the mole hunt lends credence to the assertion, but there is more to Smiley than good manners. He is a multi-faceted hero, in spirit a representation of Enlightenment values, in practice a

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<sup>19</sup> There is always James Bond, of course. But by October 1962, with cinematic premier of *Dr No*, the character is as much a representation of a nascent 1960s pop culture. And the same can be said of other long-established literary characters in the same mould, like Desmond Cory's Johnny Fedora (See Cory's *Fermantov Quintet* [1962–71]). By the late 1960s, the espionage agent was either self-consciously 'swinging', as in Adam Diment's Philip McAlpine novels (1967–71), or a victim of the sinister State (See the *Callan* [1967–72] television series and its spin-offs).

Burkean empiricist. This is as true of the television incarnation as it is of the le Carre original.<sup>20</sup> The Guinness Smiley is a champion of the Western cultural tradition and its broad social identity; he acts on behalf of an historical continuity in which the imperial past features prominently. This position would seem difficult to justify in the wake of Suez (Dockrill 2002), the over-arching themes of decline and post-empire loss (Murphy 2012; Stewart 2008; Boucher 2014; Clarke 2007), and a burgeoning post-colonial identity assertion (Spivak 1988; Shohat and Stam 1994). And yet, for all the problematics and contradiction, Smiley's impulse to conserve is understandable given the Cold War arena in which he confronts the mole Gerald. As this article has illustrated, Smiley's motivation stems not from an affection for empire – and certainly not from a residual desire for colonialism – but from an innate distrust of revolution, be it physical or hegemonic. A concern in *Tinker Tailor* is that the lesson of 20<sup>th</sup> century history – the concentration camp *and* the gulag – remains unheeded in some quarters.

For 1970s television studies, the analysis of grand narrative remains fertile ground. Small screen treatments of domestic attitudes towards the British Empire, whether represented historically or embedded in contemporary drama, offer a tantalizing glimpse into the anxieties and desires which surround identity. In other words, the *reconstruction* of the historical grand narrative is an important process. A nuanced understanding of the macro on its own terms offers a means through which to measure the micro, at various levels and within temporalities. This article has made a case for such an approach. More specifically, it has attempted to gauge something of the reception to *Tinker Tailor's* post-empire narrative. Its success in this respect lies in the clear identification of an engaged and sympathetic response to Smiley's post-imperial melancholia. The evidence points to an element of empathy with such a mindset, moreover, but its extent might more accurately be measured by further work on the quality drama of the era. Smiley struck a chord with audiences who were eager to engage with a past that was at once tangible and remote, and which demanded complex answers to its difficult questions. At the close of the 1970s, this kind of dialogue was as important as it ever had been.

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<sup>20</sup> Gary Oldman's austere Smiley (*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* [2011]) makes for an interesting comparison, as does James Mason's Charles Dodds, the original cinematic Smiley (name changed for copyright reasons), in Sidney Lumet's *Deadly Affair* (1966).



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