

Sir John Scarlett has had a life at the 'heart of history' and current affairs that will be remembered as shaping both the present and the future. He was Station Chief in Moscow during the chaos after the USSR collapsed; head of the US/UK Joint Intelligence Committee during 9/11; and Head of MI6 during the 'dodgy dossier', the Invasion of Iraq, and the David Kelly affair. All of these are synonymous with the War on Terror, western imperialism or government scandal- depending on whose side you take. They are also the events that many predict will be remembered as the most significant of the last two decades.

He went from nearby Epsom College (where he is now a Governor alongside our own Keith Budge) to Oxford University, where he studied history. He proceeded directly into the Intelligence Services in 1971 after a clandestine interview with the Foreign Office for a service that 'provided support for people who do support'. Subsequently he served all over the world, especially in Russia where he was Station Chief for MI6 until 1994. After a life in the Secret Service, he became the official 'C' or Head of the SIS- signing in the traditional green ink of his predecessors.

His talk at Bedales on 16th November was organised by our Head of History, Jonathan Selby, and Alex McNoughton, who is Sir John's nephew. It focussed on the later history of the Cold War, but with the rare touch of someone who had experienced it all first hand, and whose talk was laced with illuminating anecdotes from tearful KGB Generals to the Soviet worries about the size of Japanese toilets and their potential impact on national pride. Half the time was devoted to questioning- where some have commented that we 'let him off lightly'. However, it included answers to "How far can interrogation go?" and "What did it feel like to send servicemen and women into what could have been life and death situations?" as well as questions directed at his time as a 'Cold War Warrior'

A fortunate group of 6.ii. historians and teachers enjoyed supper with Sir John before his talk, in the house at 52 Church Road, which has featured so many previous speakers. An interview was also conducted, which has been transcribed and edited for our readers' benefit below:

Sir John Scarlett looks like any other businessman - black suit, leather briefcase, pink shirt and patterned tie. What is not immediately obvious is that this man once held the position immortalised by Dame Judy Dench and featured in every James Bond film. He has also had unparalleled behind-the-scenes influence over the recent modern politics. Frank Macpherson was offered at short notice 20 minutes with the man once known officially only as 'C' - but barred from "current affairs". Slightly frustrated, I continued to dip my toes into the murky waters of international espionage...

FM: How much of a formative effect did your time at Epsom have on you?

JS: If you spend 5 years as a boarder somewhere, especially in your teens, it's going to have a formative influence on you. Whether you can explain easily, well, it's a different matter and hard to articulate. But it's where you learn your relationship skills, where you learn about yourself and learn how to deal with different types of situations. So of course it's a very formative period.

FM: Do you believe in the 'lessons of history', and did you keep them in mind- especially as you went higher up in the organisation?

JS: The first lesson is that history never repeats itself. But in my view it is very difficult, or impossible to have good understanding of international affairs, diplomatic conduct and of foreign relations and British foreign policy unless you have some understanding of their context. You don't have to be a historian, you certainly don't have to be a history graduate. But an ability to place current affairs in context makes a very big difference. I can't really imagine doing the job I did if I hadn't been able to do that.

FM: Do you have a license to kill?

JS: No. Of course we can't - people can't get this image out of their heads. I think I have been asked that in almost every interview.

FM: Do you consider yourself a patriot of sorts?

JS: Yes. Not of sorts. You can't be a patriot of sorts. If you work for MI6 and you're not patriotic I just don't see how you can do your job.

FM: Was this feeling present when you joined MI6?

JS: Yes. I think virtually all my colleagues would have felt the same. Of course in those days you might argue people's attitudes were different - it was 25 years after the Second World

War when I joined. But actually I find that motivation for working in the service now is precisely the same as when I joined: a combination of excitement, a strong sense of public service and a sense to do useful things for your country. That is what people are like. I used to find out, without exception, right up until the last year that, talking to new entrants, that was what was felt.

FM: What are your feelings towards double agents? When a Russian Cold War double agent visited here in 200? he was asked how he felt being regarded by some as a Traitor to his country and was very offended.

JS: Who was that? I probably know him... Gordievsky? You have to know what you think in these situations, and of course it's possible to say that someone who betrayed your own side is a traitor, while somebody who works for you and betrays his own side is a hero. That sounds like a ridiculous thing to say, but in my experience it is very often true. I can think of no valid reason why a member of the British Services would betray their country or their service. The cases I have known, there hasn't been a good reason. It's been twisted ideology, self-deception, or money. In the days of the Soviet Union, someone who betrayed the KGB to work for the West might have done it for not-very-reputable motives. But Gordievsky is a real hero and he definitely did not do it for money. He took amazing risks and was extremely brave and I can give no good reason to say that someone like that is not a hero. Just like someone who betrayed Nazi Germany - you wouldn't criticise them, would you?

FM: As Head of MI6 the choices you made had a huge and indelible international impact, and although I may not ask you with reference to 'current affairs', are there any choices you regret?

JS: Of course there are things that I would have done differently, let's leave it like that. It would be very odd if it were not so. But I don't go around, you know, with lots of worries and things on my conscience in that way because I will always try to do my best and always try to behave in a straightforward way. I think that's what you have to say to yourself. No-one can go through life and say that they have not made mistakes, no one can reach the end of their career- whatever they have done- thinking everything they did was right. But you do have to be able to say to yourself that you have done your best to be honest and you have done your best to do a good job.