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Obituary: Arthur Hopcraft: Journalist, author and TV scriptwriter who wrote a classic on football and brought George Smiley to the small screen

BYLINE: Ronald Atkin, Peter Preston and David Lacey

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Among the wealth of words and images created by Arthur Hopcraft, who has died aged 71, two achievements stand out: his adaptation of John Le Carre's Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy (1979) into one of the most successful serials ever made by BBC television, and his masterpiece among sports books, The Football Man, People And Passions In Soccer, published in 1968.

Alec Guinness was persuaded to play the spy, George Smiley, in Tinker, Tailor, despite initial reservations about his suitability for the part and Hopcraft's script. "Much of Smiley's dialogue I find incomprehensible," he grumbled. On its completion, the great man had cheered up. "Think I've enjoyed it more than any job I've done," he noted in his diary. That enjoyment was shared by millions.

In the opinion of Jonathan Powell, then head of BBC drama, the presence of Guinness and the adapting skills of Hopcraft were key ingredients. "Arthur wrote a really brilliant script," said Powell. "Everybody says how complicated a book it is, but also it is very simple; a man tracking down one of four people. One of the things Arthur was so marvellous at was in giving you a crystal clear line through things, honing it down to diamond-like clarity. Arthur became a king of that kind of work. The only other one in his class was Dennis Potter."

However, Hopcraft declined the invitation to adapt a sequel, Smiley's People. "He felt he had done Tinker, Tailor and didn't want to go back there," said Powell. An unusual decision, certainly, but one typical of Hopcraft, who was never in much doubt about what, and who, he liked or disliked. Betty **Willingale** , the TV producer, said, "He was a meticulous worker. It was great to be with him and remain friends with him."

Born in Shoeburyness, Essex, Hopcraft soon moved to Cannock, Staffordshire; days which were recaptured in his autobiography of that childhood, The Great Apple Raid (1970). He started work on local newspapers at 16 and within a year was reporting Stafford Rangers' semi-professional matches in the Birmingham Combination under the pseudonym "Linesman" - and turned his back on what would have been his first scoop.

When Stafford found themselves a man short at an away match, the gap was filled by the club's youngest director, who assumed the absent player's name. Hopcraft and "The Cobbler", the reporter for the rival weekly, agreed to the chairman's plea to ignore the fraud after consulting their editors.

After national service Hopcraft joined the Daily Mirror in Manchester before moving to the Guardian, establishing a reputation as a fine feature writer, especially on assignments to west Africa, India and Brazil, trips which formed the basis for his first book, Born To Hunger in 1968.

After going freelance in 1964, he contributed, among other publications, to the Observer as a football writer, and it was there that I first got to know him in 1968. On becoming sports editor in 1972, I was faced with a dilemma. Our top man, Hugh McIlvanney, had just moved to the Daily Express, and Arthur told me he wanted to give up reporting. Faced with the loss of our two best football writers, I offered to increase his match fee from £25 to 30 guineas. He agreed to stay, but made it plain that friendship, not the six quid rise, was the reason.

Arthur explained to me that, while he still enjoyed watching and writing about football, he could no longer bear going into stadiums and being among crowds. This was a significant clue to his personality, a self-described loner whose claustrophobia extended to refusing to use the London Underground.

In later years one of his favourite TV programmes was Dinner Ladies, "because it's about loneliness." Nor did he ever marry. "I tried both sexes, but ended up wishing they would all just go away," he said.

He was introduced to TV writing at Granada by Peter Eckersley and made an immediate impact with plays such as The Reporters (1972), an autobiographical view of the joyful seediness of provincial journalism, and The Mosedale Horseshoe, as well as a political serial, The Nearly Man (1974). One of Hopcraft's lines in The Reporters, delivered by the grizzled hack (Robert Urquhart) to the tyro (Michael Kitchen) was, "All you need to know about journalism you can get from Dickens." He proved the merit of this by doing TV adaptations of Hard Times (1977) and Bleak House (1985).

In the early 1970s Hopcraft moved from his bungalow home near Stockport to a Twickenham semi. His study was dubbed the Richard Tauber Suite, and he and I would sit there, post-prandially, to indulge our worship of the great tenor's early scratchy recordings.

He wrote another espionage series adaptation, A Perfect Spy (1987), as well as screenplays for the film Agatha (1979) and for the TV Rebecca in 1997. He won the Bafta Writer's Award in 1985, but eventually found it difficult, as the millennium neared, to come to terms with the new demands of TV writing, what he called "being alternately patronised and bullied by girls called Fiona flourishing clipboards." A neat dresser, fastidious diner and devotee of wine and champagne, Arthur bought a property near Grasse, in Provence, and visited it frequently, preferably when he could watch English football on the satellite dish with a link provided, he claimed, by "a man in a Leicester attic."

Last week a kidney ailment worsened and he was admitted to Kingston Hospital, where he suffered a heart attack. His last words to Jo Apted, to whose two sons he was godfather, were, "I've had enough of this." It was a closing line that belonged in one of his plays.

Ronald Atkin

Peter Preston writes: It was a different sort of Manchester reporters' room I joined in 1963: bright and brilliant graduates - such as Michael Frayn - came through one door, tough nuts who'd learned their trade on a thousand doorsteps came through another. But the tough ones were also brilliant, trained in regional journalism's school of hard knocks; erudite, incisive, eloquent testimony to what higher education was missing. And Arthur Hopcraft was a master of that class.

He was balding even in youth, a little bent and a little brooding over his typewriter so they seemed joined in intensity. He could make wry jokes and become expansive after hours in the bar, but he wrote with dedicated seriousness, weighing and polishing every phrase. When Arthur did "colour pieces" you knew you were in for a treat.

I went to Ghana with him for a fortnight, monitoring a Nkrumah referendum - because Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's ruler, had challenged the Guardian to pronounce his vote clean - and saw the other side of Arthur: the dogged reporter trudging from booth to booth and site to site vetting a poll which disintegrated into farce at the end. Rigged? Of course it was rigged. But Hopcraft, a professional on the hunt, tracked it every fiddle of the way.

Those were Manchester days of flux as the Guardian's centre of gravity moved to London. Many of us went that way, but Arthur, of course, stayed north, plunging into the pool of talent that Granada still replenished then. He became one of the great scriptwriters of his day, and we in the London news room felt a surrogate warmth: we'd shared a desk and a wastepaper basket with Arthur.

I heard from him out of the blue a few years ago when I wrote a piece saying how wonderful Charles Trenet was - and there, suddenly, at the end of the phone, was Arthur, sharing that precise enthusiasm. He was unexpected, punctilious, northern to his roots but endlessly fascinated by a wider world: the kind of reporter, you might say, that we don't breed any more - except that we only bred one Arthur then.

David Lacey writes: For several years Arthur Hopcraft wrote regularly and eruditely about football and never more so than in his classical study of the game as it was in the late 1960s. The Football Man (1969), examined, through case studies of players, managers, directors, and the press, the way the sport was evolving in the triumphant aftermath of England's 1966 World Cup triumph.

Footballers were beginning to realise their earning power following the abolition of the wages ceiling, and although full freedom of contract was still some way off, the George Eastham case had ended the iniquitous retain-and-transfer system.

Hopcraft was scathing about "that piece of nonsense trotted out mindlessly by the fearful every now and again which pleads : 'After all, it's only a game.' It had not been 'only a game' for 80 years; not since the working classes saw in it an escape route out of drudgery and claimed it as their own."

Nevertheless, the game was becoming an entertainment business and no player reflected the change more than George Best. Yet Best, for all the girls and glamour surrounding him, was a pauper compared to today's multi-millionaires.

"Best is not fundamentally ostentatious," Hopcraft wrote, "he is merely young, popular and rich by lower-middle-class standards. It is only because the pay and conditions of leading professional footballers were so recently those of moderately skilled factory helots that Best and his contemporaries look so excessively and immodestly affluent."

For a different type of director Hopcraft sought out the chairman of Oldham Athletic whom he described as "one of the new breed of postwar tycoons, impatient with established practice, keenly aware of his own acumen, bold in scope." Name of Ken Bates.

And for his press box contemporaries Hopcraft offered this scathing observation: "It is curious that football reporters very seldom use the same language in talking about the game that they employ in writing about it. No reporter has ever in his life . . . said in all seriousness that a forward line moved as if younger than springtime."

Arthur Hopcraft, author, journalist and TV playwright, born November 30 1932; died November 22 2004

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