

Modern John Buchan

Modern John Buchan:
A Critical Introduction

By

Nathan Waddell

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Modern John Buchan: A Critical Introduction, by Nathan Waddell

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Mum and dad: this is for you, with much love, appreciation, and sympathy. It's also for Alice, who means more to me than I can say.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Where possible, all references to Buchan's works are to the Oxford World's Classics edition (David Daniell, general ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993-6)). Italics are as in the original source, unless stated otherwise.

AC	<i>The African Colony: Studies in the Reconstruction</i> (William Blackwood, 1903)
CC	<i>Comments and Characters</i> (Nelson, 1940)
CG	<i>Castle Gay</i> (1930) (House of Stratus, 2001)
CM	<i>The Courts of the Morning</i> (1929) (B & W, 1993)
CO	<i>Canadian Occasions</i> (Hodder, 1940)
G	<i>Greenmantle</i> (1916) (OUP, 1993)
H	<i>Huntingtower</i> (1922) (OUP, 1996)
HR	<i>Homilies and Recreations</i> (Nelson, 1926)
KG	<i>The King's Grace</i> (University of London Press, 1935)
LL	<i>A Lost Lady of Old Years</i> (1899) (B & W, 1995)
LW	<i>A Lodge in the Wilderness</i> (Nelson, 1906)
MD	<i>Men and Deeds</i> (Peter Davies, 1935)
MHD	<i>Memory Hold-the-Door</i> (Hodder, 1940)
MS	<i>Mr Standfast</i> (1919) (OUP, 1993)
NFT	<i>The Novel and the Fairy Tale</i> (English Association, 1931)
OC	<i>Oliver Cromwell</i> (1934) (Sphere, 1970)
PH	<i>The Power-House</i> (1913/1916) (House of Stratus, 2003)
PJ	<i>Prester John</i> (1910) (OUP, 1994)
SEB	<i>Some Eighteenth-Century Byways</i> (Blackwood, 1908)
SHR	<i>Sick Heart River</i> (1941) (OUP, 1994)
TH	<i>The Three Hostages</i> (1924) (OUP, 1995)
TNS	<i>The Thirty-Nine Steps</i> (1915) (OUP, 1993)
WW	<i>Witch Wood</i> (1927) (OUP, 1993)

Adam Smith, *JB*

Janet Adam Smith, *John Buchan: A Biography* (1965) (OUP, 85)

Lownie, *PC*

Andrew Lownie, *The Presbyterian Cavalier* (1995) (Pimlico, 2002)

Macdonald, *CMF*

Kate Macdonald, *A Companion to the Mystery Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009)

Macdonald, *RJB*

Kate Macdonald, ed., *Reassessing John Buchan: Beyond The Thirty-Nine Steps* (Pickering & Chatto, 2009)

All references to Buchan's short stories are to the Thistle edition (Andrew Lownie, ed. (1996-7)):

SS1 *The Complete Short Stories*, Vol. 1 (1996)

SS2 *The Complete Short Stories*, Vol. 2 (1997)

SS3 *The Complete Short Stories*, Vol. 3 (1997)

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In a commendatory account entitled *The “Wreath’d Trellis”* (1955) William Buchan writes of his father:

There are many different ways in which people write; my father’s way was just one, but possibly not the most usual. He never, to my knowledge, ever burnt any midnight oil. He wrote in prescribed hours of work. He worked from nine till one and between five and seven in the evening. He never worked in the afternoon, and all his life he never struck a tap of work after dinner.¹

This compressed schedule produced a massive body of literary and non-literary work. John Buchan wrote over twenty-five novels, over fifty short stories, a twenty-four volume history of the Great War written as it was unfolding, over ten biographical studies, poetry, assorted military and historical chronicles, and more besides. All of this was churned out while Buchan worked at full tilt in a variety of literary and non-literary contexts, among them journalism, propaganda work, war reportage, editing, and the civil service. He was also a husband, and a father to one daughter and three sons.

Buchan was born in Perth in 1875, and attended Glasgow University and Brasenose College, Oxford. Raised as a Calvinist, in 1901 he was called to the Bar in London, much like Thomas Carlyle Craw in his novel *Castle Gay* (1930), who went to the capital “according to the secular fashion of ambitious Scottish youth” (*CG* 20). Unlike Craw, Buchan’s education was certainly distinguished. He achieved a First Class Honours degree at Oxford, and in addition to the Stanhope he won the Bridgeman and Newdigate prizes as well (Lownie, *PC* 62). After working as Alfred Milner’s private secretary in South Africa between 1901 and 1903, in 1907 Buchan joined the publishing house Thomas Nelson and Sons, an

¹ William Buchan, *The “Wreath’d Trellis”: John Buchan the Writer by His Son* (1955) (Special Collections, Douglas Library, Queen’s University at Kingston, 1985), 12.

association that would last for over twenty years. During the First World War he worked as a war correspondent and wrote two of his best-known novels, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) and *Greenmantle* (1916). By 1935 he had been made a Deputy-Chairman of Reuters, a Member of Parliament for the Scottish Universities, a Companion of Honour, and Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. In 1935 Buchan was appointed Governor-General of Canada and appointed Lord Tweedsmuir of Elsfield, after the parish near Oxford where Buchan had been living since 1919. In 1937 Buchan was elected as Chancellor of Edinburgh University and made a Privy Councillor. He died in February 1940.

It is important to bear in mind that while Buchan did not conceive of himself as an “artist,” he was exceptionally well read, took great care over his literary craft, and was consciously in dialogue with those written traditions that he particularly admired. In this last regard, Robert Louis Stevenson was a significant influence on Buchan’s views on style (*MHD* 42-3), as were Walter Pater, Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, Rudyard Kipling, John Henry Newman, and T. H. Huxley (*MHD* 41, 42). For Buchan, a sound doctrine of writing entailed “the virtue of a clean bare style, of simplicity, of a hard substance and an austere pattern” (*MHD* 35), qualities which he discovered in abundance in the prose of Arthur Balfour (*MHD* 159). Some of the figures Buchan esteemed as masters in the art of fiction included Walter Scott, Alexandre Dumas, père, Victor Hugo, and Honoré de Balzac, among others (*HR* 11), but of these four Scott ranked the very highest: “he left upon me more than the others the impression which the great classical writers leave, of seeing things on a grander scale, of clarifying life, of observing justly and interpreting nobly, of possessing that ‘stellar and undiminishable something’ which was Emerson’s definition of greatness” (*HR* 12). Buchan’s attitude towards the aestheticists and modernists who occupied the literary pinnacles during his lifetime was generally disparaging. He looked on them as “porters without luggage” (*HR* 15)—that is, as fixated on form at the expense of content—and noted that he often turned “with comfort from the freakish, stuttering, self-conscious rigmarole of too many modern litterateurs to the clean-cut, efficient prose of a newspaper article” (*HR* 239). As Buchan saw the early twentieth-century literary field, “in our literature to-day prose tends to follow a hundred different models, and since it has no canon and each writer desires to make his style the expression of his temperament, we get a great deal of writing which is careless, fantastic, shapeless, and, to my conservative mind, undeniably bad” (*HR* 238).

These views underpin a literary corpus which has ensured that Buchan has been understood within the still ambiguous category of the “middlebrow” writer. The *OED* defines “middlebrow” in two senses: as a “person who is only moderately intellectual or who has average or limited cultural interests,” and as an object “of limited intellectual or cultural value; demanding or involving only a moderate degree of intellectual application, typically as a result of not deviating from convention.” Virginia Woolf’s view of the middlebrow as a “man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige” lurks behind these definitions’ depiction of middlebrow writers and artworks as neither this nor that, things parasitic and materialist.² But the Buchan now confirmed by academic symposia and scholarship as “middlebrow”—and by general readers throughout the twentieth century as “popular,” “thrilling,” and “beloved”—cannot be made to conform to these definitions without serious distortions of both his own life and his literary practice. John Baxendale’s view of J. B. Priestley as “a serious writer, but a popular one” is, with regard to his would-be place in the literary canon, as good a description of Buchan as one is likely to find, for he combined literary craftsmanship, wit, philosophical acuity, and a committed social conscience with a far-reaching presence in the market that outsold the high modernists against whom he was positioned in complex ways.³ Buchan was no moderate intellectual: he studied Classics at Brasenose; was widely read in philosophy, history, and the literature of many different national and cultural traditions; and, as his wide range of textual production clearly indicates, was adept at moving between scholarly and creative identities.

That Buchan’s fictions themselves are of intellectual and cultural value is the central assumption of this book. It presents Buchan as a writer who wrote in generic forms but who was not unduly constrained by generic conventions. A key postulate of the readings that follow is that if the endings of Buchan’s fictions occasionally impart an atmosphere of “neatness” upon the action they describe, that fact should not preclude us from taking seriously the socio-cultural commentaries provided by those fictions before such closures are activated (or, in some cases, after they have occurred). One of the challenges facing sceptical modern readers of

² Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), 115.

³ John Baxendale, *Priestley’s England: J. B. Priestley and English Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 1.

Buchan is precisely this seeming conflict between a strong socio-cultural conscience and a repeated attraction to the expediently unequivocal ending in which all loose ends are tied up, all ideological difficulties resolved. But, again, this is only half of the story. As we will see, Buchan invokes equivocality and elusiveness in ways that may seem surprising to readers accustomed to the complexities of the so-called “highbrow,” to readers who have been encouraged to appreciate difficulty and ambiguity as the sole preserve of modernist writing. Buchan’s work has its fair share of simplistic caricatures, but in what follows Buchan is endorsed as a key figure in the evolution of certain kinds of formulaic written modes, but also one capable of challenging them from within. Buchan may be the father of the twentieth-century spy thriller, or he may not, but he is not only that. What should emerge from these pages, it is to be hoped, is a view of a writer committed to *various* forms and styles, to *numerous* ways of thinking.

Take Buchan’s literary representations of women, for instance. That Buchan saw women through an equitable lens is borne out in large part by his championing of Woman’s Suffrage. That said, it should be pointed out that he had nothing but disdain for Suffragette militancy, which he described as exemplifying “how advocacy should not be conducted” (CC 372). In Buchan’s literary works women are treated as imaginatively as Buchan’s men. His women are frequently powerful figures, either as awesomely potent matriarchs—for example, the “queenly” Margaret Murray in *A Lost Lady of Old Years* (1899), who is described as “a goddess from the void” (LL 46) and as an “avenging Amazon” (LL 57)—or as unexpectedly formidable ladies who mix prettiness with professionalism, beauty with backbone.⁴ Princess Saskia, the ostensibly helpless but in fact accomplished aristocrat in *Huntingtower* (1922), is a stunning girl and a stunningly capable specialist, one whose medical vocation both provides her with skills not possessed by others and renders her incapable of being ostracized through gender rejection: “She was the professional nurse now, absorbed, sexless” (H 128). Saskia is in the same line of Buchan women as Mary Lamington, who becomes the wife of Richard Hannay after her first appearance in *Mr Standfast* (1919). On the side of good, Lamington is first encountered as a war nurse but is eventually revealed to be in the employment of the British Government as a secret agent. By the time of her “domestication” through marriage in *The*

⁴ There are, of course, *powerless* women in Buchan’s work. For an extended discussion of Buchan’s literary representations of women, see Kate Macdonald, “Aphrodite rejected: Archetypal Women in Buchan’s Fiction,” in Macdonald, *RJB* 153–69.

Three Hostages (1924) she has seemingly turned to the fold of the meek and mild, but her unchallenged comparison of her own character to the Girondin assassin Charlotte Corday (*TH* 192), plus her astounding psychological torture of Dominick Medina, mark her out as something beyond the expectations of the male society by which she is surrounded. As Hannay notes: “Her presence dominated everything, and the very grace of her body and the mild sadness of her eyes seemed to make her the more terrifying. I know now how Joan of Arc must have looked when she led her troops into battle” (*TH* 258). Lamington is seen in this guise only once, but the fact that she is seen in it at all tells us that this “figure of motherhood and pity rather than of awe” (*TH* 259) contains an inimitable force with which to be reckoned.

This is the lesser-known Buchan, who is popularly recognized either for the male heroism of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) or for Alfred Hitchcock’s filmic adaptation of the same work in 1935, *The 39 Steps*. This is in itself a reductive view of the frequency with which Buchan’s most famous text has been adapted for the screen. In addition to the Hitchcock movie, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* was filmed in 1959 (dir. Ralph Thomas) and in 1978 (dir. Don Sharp). A remake of Hitchcock’s film was planned for 2006 (dir. Robert Towne), but is now due in 2011.⁵ The BBC produced an adaptation of Buchan’s text in 2008 (dir. James Hawes). The 1978 adaptation, starring Robert Powell, produced a spin-off mini-series called *Hannay*, which ran from 1988-9. Buchan’s other work, in turn, has frequently been adapted for the screen and radio. *The Three Hostages* (1924) was adapted for television in 1952, as was *Witch Wood* (1927) in 1954. *Huntingtower* (1922) received similar treatment in 1954. Both *The Three Hostages* and *Huntingtower* were re-adapted for television in 1977 and 1978 respectively. In addition, the following novels have been adapted for radio: *Witch Wood* in 1954 and 1992; *The Three Hostages* in 1960; *The Island of Sheep* (1936) in 1983; *Huntingtower* in 1988; *The Thirty-Nine Steps* in 1989; and *The Courts of the Morning* (1929) in 1993. Alongside all of these treatments, documentaries about Buchan’s life and works have appeared at a steady rate.⁶

There is a sense, then, in which *The Thirty-Nine Steps* can be seen as the most inopportune book Buchan ever wrote insofar as it has deflected attention away from some of his more interesting and substantial texts. If it brought him near-universal popular acclaim (an acclaim that extends to our contemporary moment) and sizeable financial reward, then it has

⁵ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0393017/> (accessed 8th June 2009).

⁶ For more detail about these documentaries, and for further remarks about the above adaptations than I have space for here, see Lownie, *PC* 292-3.

bedevilled his reputation by providing an easy, because frequently misread, target for those unsympathetic towards its narrative craftsmanship and care, and for critics of Buchan's alleged anti-Semitic worldview. In this context, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* has worked as a fulcrum around which broader engagements with the problem of anti-Semitism in Buchan's writing have pivoted.⁷ The charge of anti-Semitism typically turns on the objection that Richard Hannay's first-person reportage of the views of one of the novel's key characters, the American agent Franklin P. Scudder, stands in for, or in some way straightforwardly speaks on behalf of, Buchan himself. But by conflating author and narrator in this way, a mix-up that goes unquestioned in some quarters because of Buchan's literary-historical standing, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is read as anti-Semitic at the expense of what its narrative actually contains. What of the fact that Scudder's anti-Semitism is later contradicted by other characters? What of the fact that this *reported* view *remains* "second-hand" by going unendorsed as a narrative event? By deliberately distorting what Buchan wrote, an injurious fiction is created that still refuses to go away from scholarly circles. Likewise, a tendency of literary historians after the Second World War to focus on his fictional writings, and then only on a small sampling of those, as a central influence upon the twentieth century spy thriller, has contributed to the view of Buchan as little more than a genre fictionist who wrote books about prim and proper gentleman heroes, freezing bathtubs, and crude success-seekers. Outside of Buchan's core audiences, both popular and academic, his writings tend to fall into one of two categories: on the one hand, he is fondly viewed as a well-liked but marginal literary figure; and, on the other, he is seen as a Jew-hating, homophobic, racist dogmatist, one whose fictions advocate his apparent ideological and political conservatism.

Gertrude Himmelfarb's infamously critical account of Buchan puts these points in representative terms. "There is indeed matter for embarrassment in Buchan's novels," she writes:

There is the clean, good life which comes with early rising, cold baths, and long immersion in fog and damp, in contrast to the red-eyed, liverish, sluggish, dissolute town dweller. There is the casual bravery, classically understated, of his heroes. [...] There is the blithe provincialism and amateurishness of the spy-adventurer who complains that the natives in a Kurdish bazaar do not understand any 'civilised tongue,' or the member of

⁷ See, for example, Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of "the Jew" in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875-1945*, new edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Parliament who cannot pronounce ‘Boche’ names and confuses Poincaré with Mussolini, or the cabinet minister who will not be bothered to read the newspapers while on vacation. There is the penchant for sports that requires every hero (and every respectable villain) to be a first-class shot, and looks upon politics, espionage, and war alike as an opportunity to practice good English sportsmanship. [...] The most serious item in [an] indictment of Buchan is his preoccupation with success, his top-of-the-form ethic.⁸

That said, even Himmelfarb (writing in the 1960s) is prepared to admit that Buchan’s fictions are more complex than they might appear. Buchan’s heroes and villains may be startlingly success-fixated, yes, but such markings “are the preconditions of their being heroes or villains at all, much as the characters in fairy tales are always the most beautiful, the most exalted, the most wicked of their kind. They are the starting points for romance, not the termination.”⁹ Buchan’s heroes may appear absorbed by action, but they are more than capable of reflection, intellectual debate, and psychological self-torment. Buchan’s fictional writing may occasionally seem generically confined, but it is able to switch from sentiment to articulate brilliance, just as Buchan’s speeches can switch in a paragraph from questions of national education to those of philosophical nominalism (e.g. *CO* 106).¹⁰

Buchan’s allegedly inflexible Toryism is another fiction imposed upon him by careless reading and grapevine rumour. Edward Leithen’s description of “the Tory” in *John Macnab* (1924) as one who believes “that the old buildings were still sound, but they must be swept and garnished, that the ancient weapons were the best, but they must be kept bright and shining and ready for use” closely matches Buchan’s own identity as a Tory who “regarded change as a thing undesirable in itself” (*CC* 16), one who argued that “the State is an organism, the slow creation

⁸ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Moral Imagination: From Edmund Burke to Lionel Trilling* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 135-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁰ Buchan can also be fabulously sarcastic, as in the following remarks on stylistic precision: “The other day I read in a reputable newspaper, in a report of Parliamentary proceedings, that the Government ‘literally escaped by the skin of their teeth.’ I can only say that I wish I had been there to see. My imagination boggles at the picture of the Government beset by a horde of fiery enemies intent upon their bodily destruction, and only separated at one moment by less than the breadth of a hair from death; or another picture of Ministers violently assaulted in the face, and in their escape leaving behind them some indescribably fragile dental covering” (*HR* 246).

of Time; that changes to be organic must be gradual and well considered; that, in short, it is not good to change boats till you have the new one quite ready" (CC 17).¹¹ This Toryism was far from naïvely fixed on rigid continuities. Buchan defended a form of radicalism which left room for self-criticism and change (MHD 166), and which was committed to "holding to what was worth holding to in the legacy of the past, but always prepared to jettison lumber" (MHD 228). Neither was Buchan uncritical of his own views, taking Toryism to task "when it is used to defend the indefensible privileges of a class, or to oppose all reform." As he put it, if Toryism "is democratic, and looks to the national interests, it will perform a useful public service, and cautious patriots will be attracted to it, just as sanguine and eager patriots will be attracted to Liberalism" (CC 17). Class discrimination moved Buchan to passionate rhetoric on a number of occasions, and he refused to fall in line with a traditionalism that upheld class differences derived from outdated feudal infrastructures.¹² As Buchan noted, it "would be a strange anomaly if the class which ultimately controls the decision of the legislature, which is the backbone of our industrial system, and which gives us the personnel of our army and navy, were to be warned off nine-tenths of the soil of the country by an arbitrary minority" (CC 45).¹³ Buchan defended the rights of the ordinary man, abhorred capitalist exploitation, and articulated accommodating views wherever he felt he could. As we will see more than once in this book, Buchan's politics were insistent but always open to redrafting.

Indeed, it is precisely the act of revision with which Buchan scholarship itself has been busy over the past few decades. Buchan was well-regarded during his lifetime as a writer of entertaining, well-constructed fictions, and his popularity has only increased since his death in 1940. However, the Academy has been slow to permit Buchan's entrance into its areas of concern. Thankfully, this situation is now much changed. If he is not yet canonical he is certainly viewed as one of early twentieth-century British culture's most interesting and thought-provoking popular writers.¹⁴ Janet Adam Smith, Buchan's first biographer, showed in

¹¹ Buchan, *John Macnab* (1924) (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007), 146.

¹² See also SS2 95-6.

¹³ Writing in 1907 Buchan contended that land "is too often regarded like personal property—something towards which the owner has no obligation save to get the maximum profit out of it for himself. At the same time the country has become thickly peopled, and this land-owning individualism tends to clash with the good of the community" (CC 41-2).

¹⁴ To describe Buchan as a "British" writer only draws attention to the fact that he was in fact persistently occupied with the tensions and interrelationships between

John Buchan: A Biography (1965) that his work was worthy of and receptive to scrupulous critical consideration, and David Daniell's excellent *The Interpreter's House: A Critical Assessment of John Buchan* (1975)—which addresses the full range of Buchan's *oeuvre*—proved the point in no uncertain terms. The appearance of the John Buchan Society in 1979, which also inaugurated the *John Buchan Journal*, decisively legitimated this interest. The articles published in the *Journal*'s pages have looked into an enormous range of issues that evince the complexity of Buchan's writings. In 1995 there appeared a second biography, Andrew Lownie's *The Presbyterian Cavalier*, and for the past thirty years or so there has been a steady trickle of Buchan research in a wide range of journals, essay collections, and monographs.¹⁵ 2009 saw published the first essay collection dedicated to Buchan's work: *Reassessing John Buchan: Beyond "The Thirty-Nine Steps"*, edited by Kate Macdonald. This present book aims to complement these studies. As its title suggests, *Modern John Buchan: A Critical Introduction* presents an introductory slice of Buchan's writing and thinking—with a particular emphasis on his engagement with early twentieth-century modernity—as well as offering scholarly interpretations of a representative sampling of his work for those who might already be familiar with his output. It is "critical" in that it tries to toe a line somewhere between a prelude to Buchan's writing and a scholarly investigation of the assumptions informing it. This book is principally concerned with Buchan's fiction, and it offers extended interpretations of Buchan's literary writing in order to underline its identity *as literature*, a status that has largely been denied to it by conservative literary historians.

Buchan did not view himself as a "great" writer, and I will not be making any claims here for him along these lines either, but he was unarguably a *knowledgeable* writer who poured the benefits of wide and reflective reading into the craft of literary production. Both his thrillers and his more introspective fictions are finely produced, combining a profound skill at storytelling with a deep erudition, historical sensibility, and philosophical acumen. Buchan was indubitably one of the twentieth century's finest thriller writers, as well as one of its most interesting, literary critics. Accordingly, I take his fictions as worthy of marked critical attention and as capable of sustaining the same kinds of readings extended

his Scottish heritage and English interests. I have not pursued this aspect of Buchan's life and writing in what follows. For an excellent account, see David Goldie, "'Twin Loyalties': John Buchan's England," in Macdonald, *RJB* 29-39.

¹⁵ Kate Macdonald gives a definitive critical history—with which I am entirely in accord—of Buchan scholarship in her *Companion*. See Macdonald, *CMF* 11-14.

to some of his more famous contemporaries. This introduction takes Buchan's fictional work as a route to the political and historical issues he explored in his non-fictional publications. History was particularly significant for Buchan (*CO* 107), and he saw his chief non-literary interests as existing in two main phases: philosophy prior to the Great War, and history in the period thereafter (*CO* 171). With this in mind, I make a number of links between Buchan's literary fictions and his philosophical and historical views, laying especial emphasis on the latter (particularly in Chapter Five, which discusses Buchan's views on history, relativism, and historiography in some detail).

I have not attempted to cover the full range of Buchan's work here. Late works such as *Midwinter* (1923), *The Gap in the Curtain* (1932), and *A Prince of the Captivity* (1933) are mentioned only in passing. Rather than trying to discuss everything I have aimed to familiarize readers with some key aspects of Buchan's literary concerns within the available word count while placing those concerns within the broader context of Buchan's intellectual outlook as a whole. Throughout this book I have tried to discuss texts (such as *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Sick Heart River* (1941)) that must be covered in order to give a representative overview of his key literary achievements, as well as consider those texts or literary issues which have not received sustained scholarly or public interest (such as *Huntingtower* and Buchan's relationship with literary modernism). In all cases I have been guided by the relative availability of Buchan's fiction and non-fiction, deciding in some instances to discuss material which is not easily accessible to the general or even the specialist reading public. This has resulted in what some may see as a curious selection of works. For instance, I have said relatively little here about Buchan's short stories and his historical romances, although I have offered a brief account of the artistic and epistemological categories upon which those romances depend. In my view, Buchan is a writer whose commitment to critically engaging with twentieth-century modernity is still underplayed by a significant proportion of his readers and critics. Throughout this book I have tried to show the various ways in which his fictions can be thought of as "modern" as well as part of his broader assessment of the modernity in which he lived. While arguments can be made for the "engaged" properties of Buchan's historical fictions, I opt here for a selection of works explicitly concerned with the modernity of the twentieth century in which Buchan himself played so many key roles.¹⁶

¹⁶ Excellent discussions of Buchan's historical romances can be found in David Daniell's *The Interpreter's House: A Critical Assessment of John Buchan* (1975) and Kate Macdonald's *John Buchan: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction* (2009).

After this opening “Introduction,” the remainder of this book is split into five broadly chronological chapters and a final “Conclusion.” Chapter Two, “Early Work and Empire,” discusses Buchan’s youthful novels, as well as his early polemical accounts of empire and imperialism, with reference to *The Half-Hearted* (1900), *A Lodge in the Wilderness* (1906), and *Prester John* (1910). Chapter Three, “Invasions, Spying, Conflict,” locates Buchan’s most famous works, the Hannay books, in the contexts of the invasion novel tradition and the First World War, and discusses *The Power-House* (1913), *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), *Greenmantle* (1916), and *Mr Standfast* (1919). Chapter Four, “War’s Shadow,” argues that during the 1920s Buchan makes a sustained effort to come to terms with the effects of the Great War upon modern life, and gives accounts of two texts in which these effects are most keenly felt: *Huntingtower* (1922) and *The Three Hostages* (1924). Chapter Five, “History and Modernism,” begins with a run-through of Buchan’s views on history and historiography, relates this to the historical romance *Witch Wood* (1927), and then moves on to an extended account of Buchan’s critical relationship to literary modernism. Chapter Six, “The Press, Life-Writing, Spirit,” discusses *Castle Gay* (1930) with regard to its presentation of newspaper culture, makes links between Buchan’s autobiographical *Memory Hold-the-Door* (1940) and literary impressionism, and reflects on the spiritual emphases of Buchan’s last great work, *Sick Heart River* (1941). The last chapter, “Conclusion: Secret Agencies,” critically teases out some of the ambiguities of Buchan’s development of the thriller with close reference to *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and considers the implied tension between paranoid narrative and paranoid textuality in Buchan’s usage of the thriller form.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY WORK AND EMPIRE

The initial stages of Buchan's literary career were propitious. By 1900, the year of his first "empire" fiction *The Half-Hearted*, he had published three novels: *Sir Quixote of the Moors* (1895), *John Burnet of Barns* (1898), and *A Lost Lady of Old Years* (1899). In 1894 he edited and introduced *Essays and Apothegms of Francis Lord Bacon* for the Walter Scott publishing house, and in 1896 he published his own collection of essays and brief fictional pieces, *Scholar Gipsies*. Buchan did not come down from Brasenose until 1899, but in 1898 he wrote a short history of the college emphasizing its development of good character, its athletic traditions, and its history of scholarly achievement. *Grey Weather*, a collection of short stories, was published in 1899. Buchan edited a fishing anthology, *Musa Piscatrix*, in 1896, and he won the Stanhope essay prize for a piece on Sir Walter Raleigh which was published in 1897. Buchan described his purpose in writing the essay itself as an attempt "to build up from the multitudinous records of the time the vigorous, complex character of the man [...] to sketch his character roughly and crudely, to trace the war of motive which at all times beset him; to find, in short, in his temper and talents some explanation of the cruel circumstances of his fate."¹ Buchan recalled setting up an Ibsen society during his time at Oxford, "which got on well enough until *Ghosts* was read aloud, upon which the members in disgust rejected the name of Ibsen and turned themselves into a dining club called the Crocodiles" (*MHD* 50). His short story "A Captain of Salvation" appeared in the *Yellow Book* in 1896 (alongside stories by George Gissing, Kenneth Grahame, and H. G. Wells), and other stories appeared in the magazine in 1896 and 1897 (Lownie, *PC* 43). In 1898 he became a publisher's reader for John Lane.

Sir Quixote of the Moors is quite clearly the work of a young man. When it was put forward for reprinting by George Brown in 1918, Buchan replied by saying: "On no account think of bringing out a cheap edition of 'Sir Quixote.' It is a very short book and was written at the age of

¹ Buchan, *Sir Walter Raleigh: The Stanhope Essay* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1897), 4, 5.

seventeen. I don't ever want it republished."² It is a short book, as Buchan says, but a good, brief read. It concerns the adventures of Jean de Rohaine, the Quixote-esque "Sir" of the book's title, as he journeys through late seventeenth-century Scotland. He meets religious fanatics and a beautiful maiden, and has to grapple with the problems caused by conflicts between self-image and external duty. In addition, *Sir Quixote* establishes one of Buchan's recurrent, self-reflexive themes: the problem of storytelling. Thus Rohaine's confession:

When I set out to write this history in the English tongue, that none of my own house might read it, I did not know the hard task that lay before me. For if I were writing it in my own language, I could tell the niceties of my feelings in a way which is impossible for me in any other. And, indeed, to make my conduct intelligible, I should forthwith fall to telling each shade of motive and impulse which came to harass my mind. But I am little skilled in this work, so I must needs recount only the landmarks of my life, or I should never reach the end.³

This is hardly a "strong" self-reflexive concern with story-telling, but it brings into play that sense of the *constructedness* of narration which recurs throughout Buchan's subsequent novels, such as the moment in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* when Richard Hannay notes that he "seemed to be another person, standing aside and listening to [his] own voice, and judging carefully the reliability of [his] tale" (TNS 45). In the end, *Sir Quixote* is a fine example of Buchan's desire "to write fiction in the grand manner, by interpreting and clarifying a large piece of life" (MHD 194), a desire he would go on to fulfil in far more successful ways with historical romances such as *Midwinter* (1923), *Witch Wood* (1927), and *The Free Fishers* (1934).

Buchan's time at Oxford followed a trajectory of steadily increasing wealth and literary success: "I must have been at that time an intolerable prig. Consequently the friends I made at first were chiefly hard-working students like myself, or older men in other colleges. Also I was very poor. For two years I could not afford to dine in hall. My Oxford bills for the first year were little over £100, for my second year about £150. After that, what with scholarships, prizes and considerable emoluments from books and articles, I became rather rich for an undergraduate" (MHD 48). By the

² Buchan to George M. Brown, 7th January 1918, B/8/4: *Thomas Nelson Papers*, Edinburgh University Library.

³ Buchan, *Sir Quixote of the Moors* (1895), ed. Kate Macdonald (Kansas City: Valancourt, 2008), 61.

time Buchan arrived at Oxford he was already considerably well versed in the writings of such philosophical greats as Plato, Kant, and Hegel, and through the work of Arthur Balfour he took on board a pragmatism which made him “judge systems by their historical influence and practical efficiency rather than by their logical perfections” (*MHD* 39). This outlook was soon extended in Oxford to incorporate the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche (*MHD* 49). Oxford prepared Buchan for what might best be described as a “lettered” life of action that combined sweeping material achievement with intellect, scholarship, and philosophical insight. Indeed, in this respect Buchan’s life echoed that of one of his earliest fictional creations, John Burnet: “I was born between two stools; for, while I could never be content to stay at home and spend my days among books, on the other hand, the life of unlettered action was repugnant.”⁴ Most importantly, Buchan’s undergraduate years were for him a time in which strong friendships were made with such key individuals as Auberon Herbert, Tommy Nelson, and Raymond Asquith, among others. “Oxford was for me a stabilising influence, but still more was it a mellowing of character through friendship. In my time there was no urgent political or religious question to divide people into militant fraternities. We sought not allies in a cause but friendships for their own sake” (*MHD* 52). Buchan’s quasi-Aristotelian extolling of companionship extends throughout his literary work, in which time and again he champions the bond of friendship not only as a primary sort of collectivity but as a virtue in itself, a conduit for the Right and the Good.

The flipside of these moralities, the Wrong and the Bad, provide the points of departure for Buchan’s third novel, *A Lost Lady of Old Years* (1899), which was written when he was just twenty-four years old. The book’s first chapter masterfully establishes the Birkenshaw family as a miserly collective whose “penuriousness made their lives frugal and their toils gave them health, so that, a race of strong men, they ran their imperious course, feared in their faults and hated in their virtues” (*LL* 5). This emphasis on “race” is key. As the book’s narrator maintains: “It was indeed their pride of race, their inherited spirit, and their greater wealth which alone marked them off from the burly farmers of the countryside. [...] Somewhere in the heavy brow and chin of a Birkenshaw there lurked passion and that ferocity which can always awe the born retainer” (*LL* 4). A family of strong physical nature, “[t]here were no weaklings to spoil the family credit, and like a stripped unlovely pine the stock survived, abiding solitary on its hilltop and revelling in storms” (*LL* 4). Precisely how far

⁴ Buchan, *John Burnet of Barns: A Romance* (London: Bodley Head, 1898), 138.

this pseudo-Darwinian “credit” extends is something of a moot point, for the narrative of *A Lost Lady* opens with a strong emphasis on racial identity underpinned by phrenological characteristics, in which facial features stand in for apparent moral degeneracies. Thus the elder Francis Birkenshaw has “the Birkenshaw high cheekbones, the fleshy chin and the sunken eyes” (LL 6); “his father’s long limbs and broad back, but in him the former were feeble and knoitering [*sic*], the latter bent in an aimless stoop” (LL 6); and an alcohol problem. In the end, “[p]overty and dram-drinking so wrought upon him that soon he was little better than an enfeebled idiot, sitting melancholy on tavern benches and feeding the fire of life on crude spirits” (LL 9). Eventually, “a mere wreck of his former wreckage, a parody of a parody” (LL 9), the elder Francis dies.

However, there is some light in the gloom, for the elder Francis Birkenshaw does possess “shreds and rags of quality unperceived by his kinsfolk” (LL 6), and he acts during a matter of controversial parentage with “an indistinct sense of honour, a certain ill-defined compassionateness of heart, which he scarcely realized and would not have sought to defend” (LL 7). His son Francis the younger, with which the novel is centrally concerned, inherits these tensions. A violent child, “as ugly as sin in face, though well-grown and straight in body” (LL 11), Francis grows up to be a young man defined by conflicting oppositions. Whereas his two sisters are “honest, fresh-coloured, hearty, and forthcoming to all” (LL 12), Francis is “woefully out of place” (LL 12) in a home environment in large part defined by charity. At the age of eighteen he retains a violent identity, stabbing (though not killing) a landlord (LL 17) and stealing gold from an inebriated gentleman (LL 19), thus outgrowing “any vain schemes for a reputable life of citizenship” in “the comedy of life” (LL 19). Set in 1745, the year of the second Jacobite Rebellion, *A Lost Lady* charts the adventures of Francis as he struggles with “sudden yearnings towards virtue” (LL 28) and betrayals “into compromise, into honesty” (LL 35). The novel’s true story, in David Daniell’s words, is Francis’ “own shifting nature, capable of betrayal even when inspired by visionary loyalty, and it finds different shapes in the outside world.”⁵ Having broken into a house with a fellow ruffian, Francis encounters the disarmingly beautiful Margaret Murray (the wife of Sir John Murray, Secretary to the Young Pretender), who, after mistaking him for a groom, entrusts him with a letter for the rebellious Simon Fraser, the Eleventh Lord Lovat. Francis gets caught up in Prince Charles Edward Stuart’s failed pretensions to the

⁵ David Daniell, *The Interpreter’s House: A Critical Assessment of John Buchan* (London: Nelson, 1975), 67.

British throne, and lives to see Lovat executed and the end of the Jacobite uprising.

A crucial issue here is the relationship between Francis and Margaret Murray, which serves as an index for Birkenshaw's recognition of a "world unknown to him and eternally beyond his reach, mock[ing] him to despair" (LL 57). This world arguably is the world of intimacy, a sphere he finds himself placed in contact with by fortune—"Now it chanced that Fate took it upon her to order events for the saving of Francis' soul" (LL 15)—but finally one from which Francis remains disconnected, as the end of the novel makes clear: "For a second, he felt an overpowering, jealous craving for this woman, a repugnance to the greyness of his lot. And then it passed, and he could look on her and be thankful for this final spirit" (LL 207). Margaret consistently frustrates Birkenshaw's expectations, as in the scene where "[t]he exquisite freshness of her beauty forbade her a place in a gallery of harlots, and to his disgust he found himself forced to regard her with decency" (LL 50), and her attractiveness disrupts his comfortable sense of lonely contempt: "At one moment he hated her with deadly vehemence; at the next he would have undergone all humiliation for a sight of her face. The inflated romance which had first driven him out on his travels was centred for the time on this one woman, and with it there followed the bitterness of despair" (LL 59). That this world remains beyond Birkenshaw's reach at the conclusion of *A Lost Lady* is a testament to Buchan's ability, already in place by this early stage in his career, to confound the expectations of his readership, and to mix a study of disreputable character with an account of human passions and desires. Indeed, it is more than this, for in denying romantic closure to his acerbic anti-hero Buchan intriguingly calls into question the genre within which the book functions: the broader category of the romance novel itself. As we will see, Buchan returns to this issue more fully in *Huntingtower* in 1922, but it is worth signalling here as evidence of the complexity with which he could weave a tale even within the confines of an uneven and hastily-penned work of youth.

Francis' story plays out against the backdrop of momentous historical events, and so too does the personal narrative of Lewis Haystoun, the protagonist of Buchan's fourth novel, *The Half-Hearted*. Unlike Birkenshaw's story, which, broadly speaking, leads to alienation and death, Haystoun's leads to a death that regenerates himself and saves an empire. Haystoun, initially something of a pathetic figure, travels to India where he foils a Russian invasion of the British Empire's easternmost frontier; in David Trotter's words, Haystoun "dies defending a pass

against the entire Russian army, half-hearted no more.”⁶ Like *A Lost Lady of Old Years*, Buchan’s *The Half-Hearted* is an uneven work, quickly written and soon superseded by other fictions, but it is of note for anticipating Kipling’s *Kim* (1901) in its choice of setting, its dialogue, and its use of imperial espionage as narrative subject (Macdonald, *CMF* 90). *The Half-Hearted* is also symptomatic of a more general trend in British fiction from this era: that of metropolitan decay. Buchan would argue in “Modern Life and Unrest” (1907) how one could see “a resemblance between the Roman decadence and certain features of modern life as lived in London and New York and other great cities” (*CC* 70-1) at the Edwardian *fin de siècle*, features that for Buchan took the form of municipal over-immigration and rural population decline, extreme differences in class identity, commercialism, hedonism, and forms of vicarious exercise, “which is not so very unlike the old Roman craze for the circus” (*CC* 71).⁷ Similarly, *The Half-Hearted* is concerned with a decaying London whose pallid materiality is used to represent a fast-declining, enervated populace. In the heat of summer the capital contrasts sharply with the regenerative airs of the countryside, its paving stones splintered and the window-boxes in Mayfair discoloured and stained, its citizens moving through urban space as tortured, languid souls.⁸

The Half-Hearted enacts the fictional fulfilment of not dwelling “in a churlish and half-hearted manner in the outlying lands,” the recommendation Buchan had put forward at the end of the eponymous opening essay to *Scholar Gipsies* (1896).⁹ It is a text that marks the beginning of an explicitly “imperial” decade in Buchan’s writing that neatly stretches from 1900 to 1910. *The Watcher by the Threshold*, another short story collection, was published by Buchan in 1902. This was followed in 1903 by *The African Colony*, a detailed account of the reconstruction of South Africa following the Boer War that falls somewhere between “a sober political document promoting ‘New imperial’

⁶ David Trotter, “Modernism and Empire: Reading *The Waste Land*,” in Colin MacCabe, ed., *Futures for English* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 143-53, at 146.

⁷ See on this point Lord Appin’s reporting of Luke Simeon’s attack upon imperialism in *A Lodge in the Wilderness* (1906) as “the ‘worship of force.’ It represents, [Simeon] says, that tendency of a decadent age which may be observed in the Roman ladies who took their lovers from the prize-ring” (*LW* 59).

⁸ Buchan, *The Half-Hearted* (1900) (Teddington: Echo Library, 2006), 26.

⁹ Buchan, *Scholar-Gipsies* (London: John Lane, 1896), 24.

consolidation” and “a piece of impressionistic travel writing.”¹⁰ It is a long document that imposes upon the African landscape a sense of Scottish identity by means of an “imperial gaze,” but it is also a mature assessment of a country’s needs during a period of difficult renewal. “South Africa has been in the world’s eye for half a century,” Buchan writes, “and in the last few years her problems have been so complex that it has been difficult to separate the permanent from the transitory, or to look beyond the mass of local difficulties to the abiding needs of the sub-continent as a whole” (AC xi). In 1905 Buchan wrote a legal textbook, *The Law Relating to the Taxation of Foreign Income*, which emerged in part from his experience at the Bar before he joined Milner’s so-called South African “Kindergarten” in 1901. His South African years were of decisive importance for Buchan, especially with regard to the practical side of life. “My approach to practical life had been from the side of theory,” Buchan remarks of his pre-Africa period: “Now my duties were to be concerned with things for which my education had in no way prepared me, and my daily associates were to be for the most part drawn from worlds of which I had no experience” (MHD 96). During his time with Milner Buchan dealt with Boer refugee camps, became head of a special Land Settlement Department, worked as a finance officer, and played a role in establishing plans for the Orange River Colony (Lownie, PC 74, 75).

In early 1906 Buchan became an assistant editor for the *Spectator*, and he regularly contributed to its pages on a number of varied topics (Lownie, PC 88-9). In February 1907 Buchan took on the editorship of the weekly *Scottish Review*, which he controlled until the paper closed in late 1908. Buchan’s articles for the paper fluctuate between domestic and foreign politics, travel writing, socialism and industry, literary criticism, book history, and biography. There is even an article on “Flying Machines and Motor Cars” (1908), in which Buchan takes to task Wells’ *When the Sleeper Awakes* for its “gruesome picture” of a human race “driven to revive the habits of their first progenitors, and spend most of [its] life underground” (CC 378).¹¹ Buchan’s literary criticism for the *Scottish Review* includes discussions of Shakespeare and Raleigh, the novel, George Meredith, the making of books, journalistic hysteria, the philosophy of reprinting, the Scots tongue, and a comparison between “old” and “new” journalistic techniques. Articles such as “The Making of Books” (1907) and “The Philosophy of the Reprint” (1907) reveal Buchan

¹⁰ Jeremy Foster, “John Buchan’s ‘Hesperides’: Landscape Rhetoric and the Aesthetics of Bodily Experience on the South African Highveld, 1901-1903,” *Ecumene* 5: 3 (July 1998), 323-47, at 325.

¹¹ For an intriguing reference to Wells’ *The Time Machine* see SS3 66.

to be firmly in tune with the effects of modernity upon literary and non-literary production, while “The Old Journalism and the New” (1908) discusses the influence of tabloid journalism upon public opinion, an area of debate to which he returned in *Castle Gay* (1930).

A number of Buchan’s articles for the *Spectator* were published in book form as *Some Eighteenth Century Byways* (1908), which also reprinted Buchan’s writing from Blackwood’s *Maga*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Quarterly Review*. It is an important text, which includes a key discussion of John Bunyan, one of Buchan’s life-long influences, and his early rejection of Tolstoy’s philosophy of pacifism, which he criticized in his “London Letters”—a section of the *Scottish Review*—for what he saw as its ruinous oversimplifications of human identity and experience: “[Tolstoy] preaches a quietism which shows so false a conception of human nature that it is difficult to realize that this crude preacher is the shrewd critic of life who wrote the novels. He suffers not from too much, but from too little, idealism, for he cannot see beyond the horrors of war and the occasional follies of nationalism to the great fact of patriotism” (CC 387). In “Count Tolstoi and the Idealism of War” Buchan objected to Tolstoy on several grounds: he found fault with the naïvely optimistic streak he felt Tolstoy’s position implied, arguing that it had little purchase on contemporary realities; he opposed the view that the problem of war could be eliminated by appealing to a universal spiritual morality; he accused Tolstoy of an apathy the consequences of which remained uncertain and potentially ruinous; and he insisted that Tolstoy’s denunciation of war rested at bottom upon a materialism solely contrived to mitigate psychological and physical torment.¹²

Buchan answered Tolstoy’s idealism by suggesting that conflict contains an ennobling quality of its own, and he claimed that the most appropriate sense in which to conceptualize warfare is not through the language of atrocity but “to emphasise the spiritual and idealist element which it contains” (SEB 298). Buchan suggested elsewhere that despite “all its cruelty and futility [war] has a power of raising men to their highest and exhibiting human nature at its greatest” (HR 178). To Buchan’s way of thinking, for all its tragic loss of life and catastrophic upheavals, war accentuates the dignity of the human condition by drawing attention to mankind’s capacity for self-sacrifice on behalf of values beyond the realm

¹² In *The Island of Sheep* (1919)—the book written by Buchan and his wife under the double pseudonym ‘Cadmus and Harmonia’—Buchan would write: “‘A great idealist often finds it hard to understand other idealisms than his own, and ends by being rather specially *terre-à-terre*’” (Cadmus and Harmonia, *The Island of Sheep* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 103).