



Inventing espionage

The hidden motivations of John Buchan

By William Boyd

Beyond The Thirty-Nine Steps: A Life of John Buchan

Ursula Buchan

Bloomsbury, 512pp, £25

John Buchan (1875-1940) is a member of a very small club: namely that club of serious novelists and poets who had a genuine career as politicians or diplomats (this is not the same as politicians or diplomats who have turned their hand to the odd novel or two). One thinks in this context of WB Yeats (senator), Mario Vargas Llosa (ran for president), Václav Havel (president), Nadine Gordimer (activist) Pablo Neruda (ambassador) and Carlos Fuentes (ambassador) and a few distinguished others.

Buchan, in fact, may have outdone them all. In his extra-literary life he was,

variously, a member of parliament, a lawyer, a company director, a journalist, a publisher, director of intelligence for the War Office, Lord High Commissioner for the Church of Scotland and, last but not least, governor-general of Canada from 1935 until his death. In the process of this very public life he also managed to write more than a hundred books – fiction and non-fiction – and many tens of thousands of words of journalism and correspondence. Buchan's energy makes other prodigies of prolixity such as Charles Dickens and John Updike look positively idle.

Work ethic: John Buchan wrote more than 100 books amid a busy and distinguished career

Buchan came from middle-class Scottish stock – his father was a minister in the Free Church of Scotland – and he went to a grammar school in Glasgow before going to the university there and then on to Brasenose College, Oxford. At Oxford he lost his Scottish burr and developed what was then known as a “Varsity accent”. Oxford marks the beginning of his extraordinary career – he published a novel while an undergraduate – and his semi-exile from Scotland: he chose not to live in his native land again, though he was a regular, enthusiastic visitor.

This exile marks him out, so the designation has it, as a “Red” Scot as opposed to a “Black” one. The categories were invented by the historian Christopher Harvie and fruitfully developed by Angus Calder. Red Scots leave Scotland for voluntary exile, they are cosmopolitan, Anglophile, enlightened. Black Scots are demotic, nationalistic (and therefore tend to be Anglophobic) and stay at home, minding the kailyard. Buchan therefore joins another small club – of Red Scots who were writers (Robert Louis Stevenson and Muriel Spark being the most notable examples). Although in a sense again Buchan outdid them all, not only by his ascent through the British establishment to an eventual hereditary peerage, but also through an aristocratic English marriage. He married Susan Grosvenor – related to the dukes of Westminster and Wellington – whom Virginia Woolf described, with her usual charming asperity, as “flaxen and brainless”. Buchan would seem to illustrate all the aspects of that legendary creature, a Scotsman on the make.

And yet no man provoked more affection and loyalty. Small, spry, modest, kind, open, with tireless energy, Buchan seemed to possess a form of diffident charisma, if such a thing can be imagined, a bit like his friend TE Lawrence, another small man and master of backing into the limelight. However, as this exemplary, diligent biography by his granddaughter Ursula Buchan makes clear, if Buchan had not been a novelist he would be forgotten by history today, consigned to the footnotes of annals of diplomatic life and First World War militaria. Far and away the most interesting thing about John Buchan was that he was a novelist but – the question looms – was he an interesting novelist?

And it's a tricky question to answer. Many of Buchan's novels are unreadable today, similar to the kind of fiction churned out by contemporaries such as E Phillips Oppenheim, Anthony Hope, Sapper, Dornford

Yates and William Le Queux. These were all bestsellers in their era, reflecting that type of Pall Mall clubman's literature: decent chaps getting into scrapes; Johnny Foreigner up to no good; derring-do with a bit of huntin', shootin' and fishin' thrown in. That's a parody, of course, but the genre is recognisable and many of Buchan's novels tick all the boxes.

It should be remembered that Buchan was, in every sense, a late Victorian who, as Ursula Buchan points out, lived for 40 per cent of his life with Queen Victoria as monarch. He embodied all the respectable values of the time – hard work, thrift, pluck, public service, good manners, stoicism, patriotism – and, to a degree, its bad: cheerfully unreflecting racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny and imperial complacency.

Ursula Buchan is very aware of this and makes the best case for the defence she can with as much judiciousness as she can muster, fully aware that Buchan, or JB, as she refers to him throughout, was a “thoroughly assimilated establishment figure – and on the surface a very conventional one”. She has deliberately concentrated on the life, leaving literary assessments for others. The only problem with this is that the narrative of a career of public service, however limpidly recounted, can on occasion be very dull:

In 1928, JB had joined the Central Council for Broadcast Adult Education, which was set up by the British Institute of Adult Education (formed 1921) and the BBC. The following year the BIEA collaborated on a widely consulting commission looking at educational and cultural films.

Andrew Lownie's 1995 biography, *John Buchan: the Presbyterian Cavalier*, while not as exhaustive as Ursula Buchan's, with her privileged access, does attempt to get to the heart of the contradictions of the man. Why does Buchan's name still have a ring to it while, say, William Le Queux is entirely forgotten? Why, when we say “Buchanesque”, do we expect people to understand what we're describing? The short answer is quite simple: *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.

Buchan's novel – a “shocker”, as he described it – was written in five weeks and published in 1915. It has sold millions of copies and is still in print more than a hundred years later. It is a short, passably good, improbable thriller that introduces the character of Richard Hannay – a sporty expat Scot – protagonist of another five novels, including *Greenmantle* (1916) and *Mr Standfast* (1919), whose reputations have also endured. In the case of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* the key benefactor is Alfred Hitchcock, whose 1935 film played fast and loose with Buchan's story – making stark and radical changes.

Most people, when they mention the title, will think of Hitchcock's film and the 1959 remake, starring Kenneth More as Hannay.

Interestingly, Hitchcock was similarly cavalier with Patricia Highsmith's first novel, *Strangers on a Train* (1950). Highsmith, a wholly superior writer to Buchan, was unhappy with the changes. Buchan was more sanguine. He considered the film better than the novel. The film's screenwriter, Charles Bennett, thought the novel was “awful”. So perhaps it is the adaptations that have ensured Buchan's longevity in the same way as the increasingly ludicrous James Bond movies have kept Ian Fleming's name alive however distant the films may be from the original books.

develop himself in *Vertigo* (1958) and *North by Northwest* (1959).

Andrew Lownie declared that Buchan was, “a highly complex and private man who may not always himself have understood his own motivations and abilities”. In certain novels – some of the Hannay stories, *John Macnab* (1925), the so-called Leithen stories (featuring another recurring character, Edward Leithen) and particularly the last, *Sick Heart River* (1941) – one senses, stirring beneath the surface of a comparatively typical adventure, subconscious promptings. These conceptions of the individual on an unknown and hazardous journey, confronting forces that are not fully comprehended, and relying on instinctive

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But there are other explanations. Buchan has a crucial role in the development of the spy novel as we know it today. Early exponents of the genre – Joseph Conrad, Erskine Childers, Somerset Maugham – understood the allure of espionage but it was Buchan who really developed many of its significant tropes: the innocent man, condemned and on the run; the deliberate factoring-in of contemporary history; villainous secret organisations as adversaries; the individual pitted against mysterious state power, and so forth.

This was more unwitting inspiration, I believe, than measured intellectual sophistication (in contrast to, say, John le Carré), but Buchan in his best novels tapped into a particular sense of character and of jeopardy that Hitchcock seized on and was later to

guile or resourcefulness to survive are shadowy simulacra of the human condition that every reader can grasp instinctively.

Unusually for a writer, Buchan kept no form of journal or personal notebooks and he threw away most of the letters he received, so Ursula Buchan informs us. Also, throughout his adult life, he was plagued with chronic and debilitating gastric problems – duodenal ulcers in the main. It was almost as if, in his own body, something suppressed, something he was hiding, was fighting with him. This is fanciful arm-chair psychiatry, I admit, but it gets to the crux of the Buchan paradox, it seems to me, and explains the covert narrative impulses he was drawn to.

In his 1934 biography of Oliver Cromwell, Buchan wrote that his subject was more “instinct and divination than coherent thought.” The same judgement could apply to the author himself. In his public life Buchan was a model of coherent thought but, somehow, in his fiction it was instinct and divination that bubbled up from time to time. This is what takes us back to these clubland heroes and their blithe adventures. Lurking beneath the best of them are mythic, deep concerns – the fraught danger experienced by a man on the run; the vital importance of a secure moral system; the fragility of civilised values – that create the “Buchanesque” and make these strange, somewhat dated novels continue to resonate – curiously, half-comprehended, but tellingly – today. ●

William Boyd's novels include *Love is Blind* (Viking)



“Cabin Crew, doors to manual”