



## JOHN BUCHAN (1875-1940)

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*John Buchan.* Photograph, 1911. Queen's University Archive.

John Buchan was born on 26 August 1875 in Perth, Scotland. The eldest son of a Free Church of Scotland minister (also named John) and his wife, Helen Jane Masterton, Buchan gained considerable fame as a creative writer and historian. He also devoted major portions of his career to the law, publishing, and government.

For 12 years beginning in 1876, Buchan lived at Pathhead, on the east coast of Scotland, where his father served as minister at the West Church. In 1888, the family moved to Glasgow, where Buchan's father began leading the congregation of the John Knox Free Church in the Gorbals – a working-class neighbourhood south of the Clyde.

Buchan studied at Hutchesons' Grammar School until 1892, at which time he won a John Clark £30 bursary to enter Glasgow University.

“I suppose I was a natural story-teller” (*Memory*, 193), Buchan reflected towards the end of his life. His first concerted literary efforts began during his years at Glasgow. Balancing academic pursuits with personal writing projects, Buchan made time to

contribute numerous articles and stories to periodicals, including *Blackwood's*, *Macmillan's*, and the *Gentleman's Magazine* (which printed his first article, "Angling in Still Waters," in August 1893). During this period, Buchan also edited Francis Bacon's *Essays and Apothegms* (1894) and wrote his first novel, *Sir Quixote of the Moors* (1895). Buchan dedicated the latter to Gilbert Murray, a Glasgow professor who had a profound influence on his knowledge of Classical literature and philosophy.

In January 1895, Buchan gained a Junior Hulme scholarship to Brasenose College, University of Oxford. He therefore left Glasgow without taking a degree, and began his Oxford studies in fall 1895. Buchan's desire to study at Brasenose arose to a large degree from his interest in Walter Pater, a fellow of that college who had passed away in 1894. Buchan had written a review of his *Greek Studies* for the *Glasgow University Magazine*, and later recalled of Pater, "I was glad to go to a college where he had lectured on Plato, and which was full of his friends" (*Memory*, 46).

At Oxford, Buchan excelled in his studies. In 1897, he was awarded the Stanhope Prize for his essay on Sir Walter Raleigh, in 1898 he won the Newdigate Prize for a poem on the Pilgrim Fathers (the English settlers who travelled across the Atlantic on the *Mayflower* in 1620), and in 1899 he was elected president of the Oxford Union. His studies culminated in 1899 with a first in Greats. Buchan's years at Oxford were also highly social, and he forged close friendships with a circle of similarly energetic, talented men, including Raymond Asquith, Harold Baker, Aubrey Herbert, and Thomas (Tommy) Nelson. Buchan later wove threads of this masculine demi-monde into his tales of gentleman-adventurers.

Buchan's time at Oxford also coincided with his connection to John Lane. The Scottish visual artist D.Y. Cameron had given Buchan an introduction to the publisher, on whom he called in London in 1895 while on his way to take up residence at Brasenose (Cameron was a family friend of the Buchans and the illustrator of several books for Lane). A few weeks later, Lane visited Buchan at Oxford and offered him, over breakfast with John Davidson, the position of literary adviser (i.e., manuscript reviewer) at his firm (replacing Richard Le Gallienne). Among Buchan's contributions was the

recommendation to publish Arnold Bennett's first novel, *The Man from the North* (1898; originally titled *In the Shadow*).

Volume 8 (January 1896) of *The Yellow Book* marked Buchan's first appearance in Lane's periodical, which Paul Webb characterizes as "one of the last places one would expect to find John Buchan" (43). The short story "A Captain of Salvation" is an intense psychological portrait of a formerly dissolute man turned evangelical soul-saver among prostitutes and drunkards. It is set amidst gritty urban tenements and alleyways, a location likely informed by Buchan's first-hand experience of the Gorbals. Buchan followed this piece with two more *Yellow Book* publications, both of which are set in Scotland. The fantastical tale "A Journey of Little Profit" in volume 9 (April 1896) features a drunken shepherd's midnight feast with the Devil (named Mr. Stuart). "At the Article of Death" in volume 12 (January 1897) is a grim realist account of a humble shepherd's agonizing last days. In 1899, Lane published these last two stories, along with other of Buchan's fictions and poems, in *Grey Weather: Moorland Tales of My Own People*. Buchan dedicated the collection to his sister Anna, who in 1912 reinvented herself as the novelist O. Douglas.

"A Journey of Little Profit" and "At the Article of Death" are important markers of Buchan's growing interest in depicting Scottish landscapes, characters, and voices. The inspiration for this derived in equal measure from his own youthful explorations, particularly of the Upper Tweed region, and earlier Scottish writers, especially Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson. As the author of a biographical sketch in *The Bookman* noted in 1912, Buchan was a "literary disciple" of the latter, "essentially Stevensonian both in the matter of literary style and in his outlook on life" (142). Indeed, one of Buchan's more thoughtful contributions to the *Glasgow University Magazine* was his obituary essay on Stevenson. In spring 1898, he and his Oxford friend John Edgar included as part of their Scottish walking tour a route inspired by Stevenson's novel *Kidnapped*.

In 1896, Lane published Buchan's *Scholar-Gipsies* as part of the Arcady Library series. This collection of essays and short stories documents various facets of the author's beloved Tweeddale and its inhabitants. *Scholar-Gipsies* includes etchings by Cameron,

who also designed the neo-pagan cover image depicting Pan piping to three nymphs. Of Tweeddale, Buchan later observed, referencing Robert Burns, “Pan playing on his aiten reed’ has never ceased to be a denizen of its green valleys” (*Memory*, 34). The same year as *Scholar-Gipsies* appeared, Buchan edited a poetry anthology for Lane called *Musa Piscatrix* (Buchan was an avid angler most of his life). In 1898, Lane published Buchan’s second novel, *John Burnet of Barns*, followed in 1899 by *A Lady of Lost Years*. This latter novel was Lane’s final publication of an original Buchan text; however, his company continued to issue new editions of *Scholar-Gipsies* and *John Burnet* well into the twentieth century.

Buchan was called to the bar in London in June 1901, and in August of that year Lord Milner hired him to assist in the post-Boer War reconstruction of South Africa. Buchan’s work involved extensive travel throughout that country, and the South African landscape fired his literary imagination, most notably realized in the popular boys’ adventure novel *Prester John* (1910). He returned to London in October 1903, whereupon he resumed his legal career and continued to augment his income by penning articles and reviews for the *Spectator*.

On 15 July 1907, Buchan married Susan Charlotte Grosvenor. The couple had four children between 1908 and 1918. During this period, Buchan served as chief literary adviser for Thomas Nelson and Sons, the publishing firm managed by his Oxford friend Tommy Nelson; Buchan became a director in 1915 and continued working for Nelson’s until 1929.

The First World War saw the publication of Buchan’s arguably most famous works – *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) and *Greenmantle* (1916) – “shockers” that feature the heroic exploits of Richard Hannay engaged in fighting German espionage activities. During these years, Buchan also regularly wrote and published instalments of *Nelson’s History of the War*, which ultimately ran to 24 volumes. Buchan’s wartime writings were deeply informed by, first, his experiences as *The Times* war correspondent and, from 9 February 1917, as director of the Department of Information (eventually a ministry), the government body responsible for propaganda. The war also affected

Buchan on a deep personal level, as he lost his brother Alastair and several close friends (including Raymond Asquith, Auberon Herbert, and Tommy Nelson).

In 1919, Buchan purchased Elsfield Manor, located four miles from Oxford. In Elsfield's book-lined library, Buchan continued to pen successful shockers, including *Huntingtower* (1922), *The Three Hostages* (1924), *Castle Gay* (1930), and *The House of the Four Winds* (1935). He also devoted considerable energy to writing popular biographies, among them *Montrose* (1928), *Julius Caesar* (1932), and *Oliver Cromwell* (1934). Literary guests at Elsfield included T.E. Lawrence, Henry Newbolt, Hillaire Belloc, George Trevelyan, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Graves (who dedicated *The Meaning of Dreams* to Buchan and his wife).

While today Buchan's adventure novels are likely his best-known achievements, the final fifth of his life was also devoted to considerable public service. In 1927, he was elected to Parliament as a member for the Scottish Universities. In 1935, Buchan accepted the appointment as governor-general of Canada, at which point he was invested as the first Baron Tweedsmuir of Elsfield (the same year Alfred Hitchcock directed a film version of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*). In this vice-regal role, Buchan travelled over vast stretches of Canada, including the Arctic in 1937 (the first governor-general to do so). In 1936, he also organized the first official visit to Canada by a United States president (Franklin D. Roosevelt), and he helped plan the 1939 royal tour by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. In 1937, Buchan founded the country's Governor General's Literary Awards and, in 1939, signed Canada's declaration of war with Germany. Buchan died in Montreal of a cerebral thrombosis in 1940, and his memoirs were published posthumously as *Memory Hold-the-Door* later that year.

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