

Obituary of the 2nd Lord Tweedsmuir,  
(Johnnie Buchan)  
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OBITUARIES

LORD TWEEDSMUIR

**Lord Tweedsmuir, CBE, soldier, explorer, writer and businessman, died in North Berwick on June 20 aged 84. He was born in London on November 25, 1911.**

JOHN BUCHAN dedicated his novel *The Island of Sheep*: "To J. N. S. B. who knows the norlands and the way of the wild geese." This was his son, Johnnie, later the 2nd Lord Tweedsmuir, who appears in an early chapter of the book as a 14-year-old "who didn't care a rush for the public school spirit", who "spoke to his masters as Dr Johnson might have addressed a street arab", but who cast a perfect dry fly, loved animals and was already an expert on birds.

To be typecast so early as a character in the Buchan mould might have defeated a less resilient youth, but Johnnie Buchan went on to fill the role in ways that even his father could never have anticipated. As a colonial administrator in Africa, an explorer in the Arctic and a naturalist in Scotland, he could have effortlessly held his own with Richard Hannay, Sandy Arbuthnot and the other Buchan heroes. But it was as a soldier that he outstripped even his father who never himself saw action.

Commanding a Canadian infantry battalion in Sicily in July 1943, he led a dramatic assault on Assoro, a village on a 1,000ft hill, held by the Hermann Goering SS Regiment, which was considered impregnable. Remembering a lesson taught him in the Scottish Borders by his Uncle Walter, who always said that you could gauge the steepness of a hill by aligning it with a walking stick, he borrowed a rifle and looked along its barrel at the slope of Assoro. It was, he judged, no more than 45 degrees. "We're on!" he announced, and prepared for a flanking movement up the hill by night to take the Germans by surprise from above. Before leaving he recited to his men as much of Henry V's Agincourt speech as he could remember. The attack was described by a fellow-officer as "so daring that failure meant not only the end of Tweedsmuir's career, but the end of the

regiment as well". By the following day, however, a great victory had been won, which General Montgomery reckoned took five days off the Sicilian campaign. Tweedsmuir was twice mentioned in dispatches and appointed OBE (military), though many considered his achievement merited the DSO.

John Norman Stuart Buchan was born in London, but, like his father, always considered himself a Border Scot. He was educated at the Dragon School, Eton, and Brasenose, Oxford, where he founded the university falconry club and rowed for his college. He was, by his own admission, a poor scholar, gaining a Fourth in History, a degree which, he said, was "so lowly that it was afterwards abolished".

He then went into the Colonial Administration Service, and was for two years an assistant district commissioner in Uganda. While there he contracted an almost lethal bout of dysentery, and was so ill that he lost three stone in weight. He travelled to Canada, where his father was Governor-General, in a state of near-collapse. "When I arrived on a ship at Halifax," he later recalled, "I had to introduce myself to Mummy as I was almost unrecognisable." He joined the Hudson's Bay Company with the idea of living in the Arctic, and drove a dog team over 3,000 miles across uncharted territory, an experience which, remarkably, aided his recovery. He took a small box of watercolours and taught the Eskimos to paint. He learnt their language, adding Inuit to his existing Swahili.

On returning, he learnt that war had been declared. He joined the Governor-General's Footguards, the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, and then the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, where he was second in command until the commanding officer was killed on the eve of the assault on Assoro. The following day he was wounded when a mortar shell exploded a few feet away from him. Later he served on the Army Commanders Tactical Staff in Italy under General Sir Oliver Leese and General Sir Richard McCreery. After the war he was involved in



arresting members of the Dutch SS and confiscated their standard, which is now in the Imperial War Museum. For this he was awarded the Order of Orange-Nassau with Swords.

He had succeeded to the title of Lord Tweedsmuir on the death of his father in 1940, and on returning to Britain he took his seat in the House of Lords and made his maiden speech in the same year, 1945. He served for four years on the opposition front bench, then, when the Conservatives came to power he was sent, with Anthony Eden, to the United Nations when it met in Paris. He later served on the UK team of the

Council of Europe at Strasbourg.

In 1948 he married Priscilla Lady Grant, widow of Sir Arthur Grant, Bt, of Cullen, and they lived for the next 30 years at Balmedie in Aberdeenshire, a part of the country which he wrote about eloquently in his memoirs, *One Man's Happiness*. His wife was MP for South Aberdeen from 1946 to 1966, a Minister of State at the Foreign Office and was elevated to the House of Lords in 1970 as Baroness Tweedsmuir of Belhelvie.

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Much of Tweedsmuir's life during this time was spent supporting her. He was offered the Governor-Generalship of New Zealand, but felt that

he would prefer to assist his wife in her political duties. He helped to pilot the Protection of Birds Bill, which is still the model for much of today's conservation law, through both Houses, describing the experience of dealing with one particularly tricky amendment as "like sailing between Priscilla and Charybdis".

In 1948, the year of his marriage, he had been elected Rector of Aberdeen University, beating Malcolm Sargent by 14 votes. He relished the post, refounding the Aberdeen University Boat Club, and starting an Exploration Club which mounted a successful expedition to Libya, where they found a hitherto unknown tomb and four species of plant unknown to science. They also helped to uncover the fabulous St Ninian's Treasure in Shetland, now in the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh. He was given an honorary LLD by the university in 1949.

Lord Tweedsmuir was also a businessman, serving on the boards of BOAC, Dalgety and Sun Alliance, and as chairman of the Advertising Standards Authority. He was appointed CBE in 1964 and CD (Canadian Forces Decoration) in the same year. Among his published works were *Always a Countryman* (1953), and *Hudson's Bay Trader* (1951) based on his Arctic diaries which John Buchan also used to give authenticity to *Sick Heart River*.

After the death, in 1978, of his first wife, he married in 1980 Jean, widow of Sir Francis Grant. They moved to Oxfordshire, where they spent 15 years together before returning to Scotland when his health began to fail. Always charming company, a fund of splendid stories about his richly varied life, Lord Tweedsmuir was a physically imposing figure who seemed at times, with his dark complexion and his beaked nose, a figure from another era. He was, however, full of warmth and was particularly popular with children, who would listen entranced to his reminiscences.

He is survived by a daughter, Susan, who is married to the Conservative minister Lord James Douglas-Hamilton.