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Toiling up the steps

By FRANCIS KING

The Interpreter's House BY DAVID DANIELL. Nelson, £3.95.

DAVID DANIELL has subtitled *The Interpreter's House* "A Critical Assessment"; but "An Uncritical Assessment" would be an apter description.

John Buchan, born 100 years ago on Tuesday, has certainly been underrated in the years since his death in 1940, even though his books continue to be read in prodigious numbers; and there has no less certainly been a great deal of uninformed and unjust criticism of him, usually from the other side of the Atlantic. But by persistently overrating him and dismissing all criticism out of hand, Dr. Daniell may, in fact, be doing a disservice rather than a service to an admirable, if limited, man and an admirable, if limited, writer.

I prefer the more judicious tone of Janet Adam Smith's 1965 biography—on which Dr. Daniell has obviously relied for many of his facts.

It is fruitless to claim, as Dr. Daniell does, that Buchan is an outstanding stylist. The merits of his writing are lucidity and elegance; but there is a kind of delicate and fussy enervation about it—not for nothing was he an admirer of Pater.

Dr. Daniell quotes the following sentence ("Tennysonian") with enthusiasm: "Here Tweed was still and sunless, showing a level of placid black water, flecked in places with stray chaits of light." But though unexceptionable, this is

hardly the sort of writing to demand a place in anyone's anthology of Great Modern Prose.

It is even more fruitless to claim, as Dr. Daniell does by implication, that Buchan is one of the important novelists of the first half of the 20th century. He is no more than that than are Edgar Wallace, A. E. W. Mason or E. Phillips Oppenheim—all writers who have also given an enormous amount of pleasure to an enormous number of readers.

Where Dr. Daniell is absolutely right is in stressing Buchan's ability to create myth through the "great symbols of . . . height and depth . . . dark and light, youth and age, movement and sleep." In this he is akin to his fellow Scotsman, J. M. Barrie.

What Dr. Daniell seems reluctant to acknowledge is the dark underside of Buchan's nature out of which, as in the case of Barrie, this mythologising emerged. Outwardly Buchan impressed everyone with his balance and calm; but the facts of his life and a reading of his books suggest that both were achieved with difficulty and strain.

In all the adventure stories we are continually reminded of how frail are the dykes that hold back the flood of irrationality and evil that may, at any moment, submerge our civilisation. Women seldom figure (it was Hitchcock who created the character of the beautiful blonde in literal bondage to



JOHN BUCHAN
Paranoia beneath the calm.

Hannay in the film of "The Thirty-Nine Steps") and when they do, they are ciphers. The most intense emotion is not love between men and women but comradeship between men sharing dangers and privations.

Again, though Buchan can be acquitted of charges of "snobbery with violence," this son of the manse was so obviously fascinated by birth, wealth and political power that it is difficult not to suspect that he had some deep-seated sense of social inferiority.

We may laugh now at a passage like:

"I got the first hint in an inn on the Achensee in Tyrol. That set me enquiring, and I collected my other clues in a fur shop in the Galician quarter of Buda, in a Strangers' Club in Vienna and in a little bookshop off the Racknitzstrasse in Leipsic. I completed my evidence ten days ago in Paris."

But Buchan's paranoid fantasies of conspiracy spreading its secret tentacles around the world is a reflection of our own paranoia about the K.G.B., the C.I.A., the Red Army and so on. It is this, combined with his brilliant sense of how to pace a narrative, that ensures that we go on reading him.

Dr. Daniell has performed a real service in drawing attention to Buchan's early books, now difficult to obtain and amazingly accomplished for the age at which he wrote them. But though he is critical of both Richard Osborne's view of Buchan in "Clubland Heroes" and of Gertrude Himmelfarb's in "Victorian Minds," I am not sure that, for all their occasional miscalculations, they do not, in company with Janet Adam Smith, get closer than he does to the man and the writer.

Tax Guide in John Buchan exhibition

TO mark the centenary today of the birth of John Buchan, whose adventure stories are still popular throughout the world, the National Library of Scotland is putting on a special exhibition.

It includes a copy of one of Buchan's least known works, "The Law Relating to the Taxation of Foreign Income." Published in 1905, this is dedicated to the then Attorney-General, Sir Robert Finlay, and was written at the suggestion of R. B. Haldane.

It is not widely remembered today that Buchan, who was called to the Bar in June 1901, specialised in tax cases.

Indeed his ability to cope with intricate legal detail led to his being asked by Sir John Simon to go over the technical evidence in the inquiry into the R101 disaster.

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