

A PRIZE-WINNING NOVEL FIRST TIME FOR THE GREAT JOHN'S GRANDSON

A new Buchan follows the Thirty Nine Steps

JAMES Buchan's first novel has earned him the coveted £2,000 Whitbread literary prize and resounding acclaim as an exciting new author. One chapter of *A Parish of Rich Women* is set on a Scottish isle. As a choice of location it was a self-confessed act of defiance.

'If they were going to accuse me of riding on my grandfather's name,' he said wryly, 'then I thought we might as well get the Scottish connection over with right from the start.'

To Debreth devotees, grandfather was the first Lord Tweedsmuir, barrister, MP and latterly Governor-General of Canada. To generations of frustrated adventurers, he was John Buchan, whose intrepid and unashamedly British hero, Sir Richard Hannay, pursued the (inevitably foreign) ungodly across the bens and braes of his native heath.

Suspicious

They were hell-for-leather tales of an age when Empire, nobility and gratuitous anti-semitism were regarded as lovable traits of the privileged classes and somehow *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Greenmantle and *Presler* John have survived.

Today, Jamie Buchan, 30, is uncertain whether such enduring popularity is for him a good thing or bad.

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Jamie Buchan, taking on the mantle of his famous grandfather whose hero, Richard Hannay, was played by Robert Donat (pictured with Madeline Carroll, top) and Kenneth More in the 1935 and 1959 versions of *The 39 Steps*.

by WILLIAM GREAVES

wrote books about NATO and the biography of Walter Bagehot.

'Then my sister Mouse—she's Ursula, really—is gardening correspondent of *The Spectator* and is writing a book on plants and two other brothers are publishers.

'So as soon as I got over wanting to be a writer, I started looking

'I knew Persian and I knew about carpets but I never got the hang of buying cheap and selling expensive—I always managed to get it the wrong way round. I was fired after six months. I think everyone should be fired once, don't you?'

Jamie found a job on a newspaper in Jeddah, 'as reporter, sub-editor

made it impossible to go on working.'

While he was in Jeddah Jamie met Dr Richard Arnot and his wife Penny, later to host the fugal party during which nurse Helen Smith fell to her death. I used to go skin diving with Richard. But I wasn't at that party. Another journalistic miss.

The financial Times gave him a job—I think they felt a bit guilty about what happened—and Buchan was soon back in his beloved Beirut

The great man himself, Lord Tweedsmuir, better known as John Buchan.

one bigger one, but it left me angry with the unnecessary devastation of it all.

'In Beirut I became equally angry about a very different form of devastation — what was happening to the town and the people I had previously fallen in love with.

'So when I came to write my first book I just knew it had to be about

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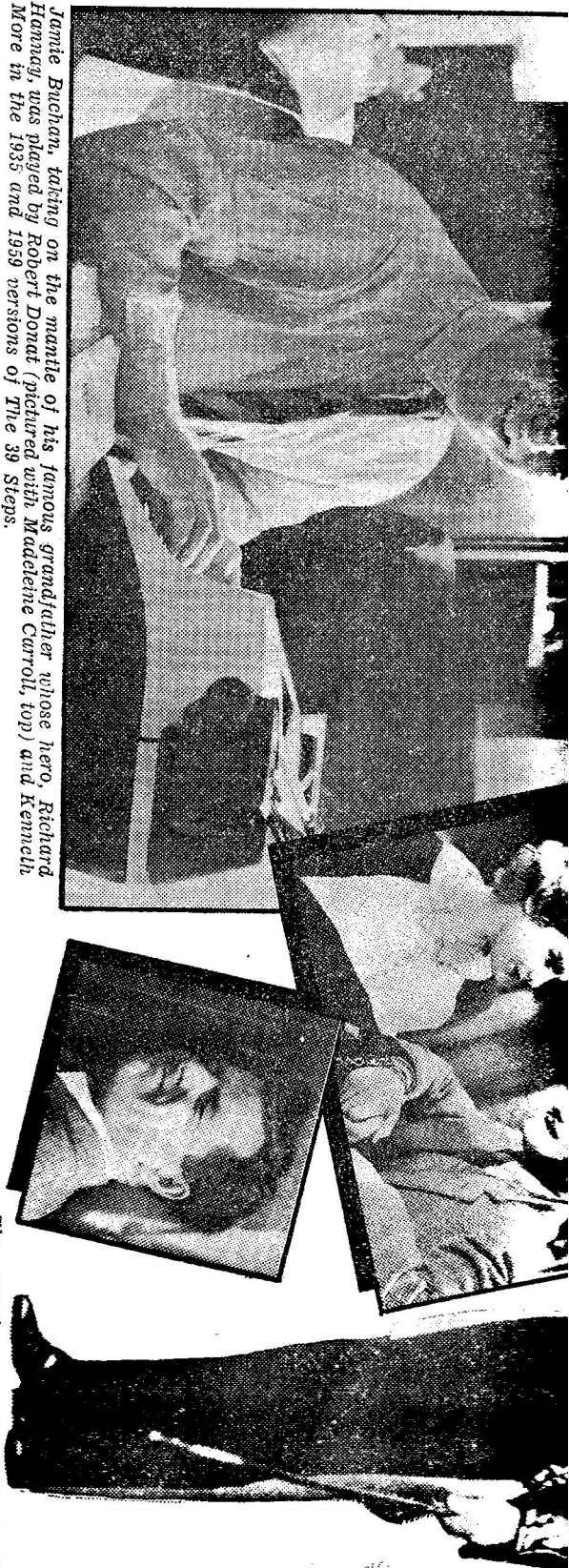
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Publishers are only concerned with whether a book is going to sell but some critics have been suspicious of the family connection and I suppose I must have got some extra sales because the name sounded familiar," he says.

Either way, he had no choice. The sixth child of William Buchan was born with the written word in his blood.

All my grandfather's books were in the house. My father was a writer too—one of his books, Kumari, set in India, was quite brilliant — and my uncle Alshair



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"Then my sister Mouse—she's Ursula, really—is gardening correspondent of *The Spectator* and is writing a book on plants and two other brothers are publishers.

"So as soon as I got over wanting to be a train driver I always knew I had to be a writer one day."

At Oxford, Jamie studied Arabic and Persian. He had already taken a year off to pay homage to the hippy era, knocking around Lebanon working on building sites and plucking apricots. After university, he tried dealing in Persian carpets. It was a disaster.

"I knew Persian and I knew about carpets but I never got the hang of buying cheap and selling expensive—I always managed to get it the wrong way round. I was fired after six months. I think everyone should be fired once, don't you?"

Jamie found a job on a newspaper in Jeddah as reporter, sub-editor and Linotype operator and became local correspondent for the *Financial Times*. He was the only reporter around when a mosque in Mecca was taken over by rebels. The story won him a story across eight columns in the FT—and his marching orders from Jeddah. "The Saudis are too polite to kick you out, they just

made it impossible to go on working." While he was in Jeddah Jamie met Dr Richard Arnot and his wife Penny, later to host the fatal party during which nurse Helen Smith fell to her death. "I used to go skin diving with Richard. But I wasn't at that, party. Another journalistic miss."

The *Financial Times* gave him a job—I think they felt a bit guilty about what happened—and Buchan was soon back in his beloved Beirut as foreign correspondent.

Adventures

"In London I had fallen into a useless party-going set and had seen three friends die of heroin. I was never in danger myself. They were just replacing many problems with

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one bigger one, but it left me angry with the unnecessary devastation of it all.

"In Beirut I became equally angry about a very different form of devastation—what was happening to the town and the people I had previously fallen in love with.

"So when I came to write my first book I just knew it had to be about the two subjects that I needed to get out of my system. Real life doesn't switch from the trendy and valueless drug scene in London to spies and adventures in Beirut, so I knew it would have to be a novel."

The result was *A Parish of Rich Women*, the £2,000 Whitbread First Novel Award, the David Higham Award—again presented to first time novelists—and a short list for the Betty Trask award for romantic literature.

Now James Buchan has got his two pet hates out of his system and into a book which is bound to hit the bestsellers list—it is soon to be published in paperback by Penguin—will he revert to the wholesome-ness of his grandfather?

"I like fishing and I love Scotland," he says, but John Buchan lived in the age of Sapper and Bulldog Drummond and his was a world of certainties.

"Those wouldn't apply today, would they? I think it will be Len Deighton and John le Carré and that sort of thing for me. Something a bit more shadowy."

But there is nothing shadowy about the way in which James Buchan is following in the thirty-nine footsteps of a family tradition.