

## Beyond the Law

by G Sherriff\*

# John Buchan

*An occasional series on lawyers and lawyers' clerks who achieved fame in other fields.*

John Buchan, writer of thrillers such as *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Greenmantle*, became Governor-General of Canada. He had a great variety of books published over a period of more than 40 years and was in the Intelligence Service in the First World War. He was born on 26 August 1875 in Perth, and had four brothers and a sister. After a few years his father (who was a Minister of the Church of Scotland) came to serve at John Knox's church in the Gorbals, Glasgow and John attended grammar school. He was later awarded a scholarship to Brasenose College, Oxford.

After Oxford his life was spent mostly outside Scotland but he always loved his homeland. The book written shortly before he died, *Memory Hold-The-Door*, is full of descriptions of places. He clearly loved all aspects of the country, and his sports were fishing, hunting and rock-climbing rather than team games like rugby and cricket. He always associated particular passages in books with specific places he knew: for example, certain hills and streams became the places where individual biblical events had occurred, and others were sites of sequences from *The Pilgrim's Progress* (a favourite of his). This visual interest in scenery is reflected in many of his books.

Buchan's first book, called *Scholar-Gipsies*, was published in 1896 when he was still at Oxford, where he had a very successful career, reading classics and winning two prizes.

In 1900 he turned to the Bar as a career. His first chambers were in Brick Court, Temple, which he did not like, but he later moved to Temple Gardens which he found much more pleasant. He also spent some months with a firm of solicitors in Bedford Row. He was called to the Middle Temple Bar in 1901. In addition to his legal work he wrote articles for the *Spectator*, of which he said he 'came to be a sort of assistant editor'.

However, in August 1901 Buchan was requested to go to South Africa by Lord Milner. He spent two years there and came to love the country. He was involved with resettlement after the Boer War, and came to know many of the local people, as well as foreigners such as Cecil Rhodes (just before he died). One aspect of resettlement was preventing children's diseases: to give the native women confidence in his knowledge he 'had to invent a wife and numerous progeny'.

Buchan travelled widely over South Africa in every manner of transport known in those days (and seems to have visited most countries during his life). He was asked to write a history of the South African Infantry Brigade, which he did, just as while still a student he had been asked to write a history of Brasenose College.

He returned to England in 1903 and his practice at the Bar. However, he began to find the law dull, although he wrote a monograph on the law of taxation on foreign

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earnings in 1905. He left the profession in 1907, to join the publishing firm of Thomas Nelson with, he said, sincere regret: 'There is no more honourable and expert profession, none in which the sinews of the mind are kept in better trim, as [*sic*] there is no more loyal and kindly fraternity'.

With Nelsons he superintended publication of a series of popular books called 'The Nelson Sevenpennies', and in the year he joined them he married Susan Grosvenor. Meanwhile, he continued his own writing, and in 1910 was published his first successful adventure novel, *Prester John*, set in South Africa.

In 1911 Buchan was elected Member of Parliament for Peebles and Selkirk. He did not like speaking in Parliament, although he enjoyed its traditions. He complained that the ventilation in the House left the head hot and the feet cold.

Buchan was ill at the beginning of the First World War and confined to bed, so he amused himself by writing. He wrote the *History of the Great War* in 24 volumes but, more importantly, he also wrote *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. On its publication in 1915 this book gained immediate success and has been popular ever since (and filmed twice). The hero Richard Hannay reappeared in other Buchan novels, and became a much-liked fictional character.

Buchan recovered his health enough to enable him to act as reporter for *The Times* from the war front, and in 1916 he became involved in intelligence work, which took him to France and Flanders. Initially, he seems to have been gathering information, but he was recalled in 1917 to take a post as Director of Information under the War Cabinet. His analytical mind helped to sift masses of facts and use them for propaganda.

Due to the nature of the work it is difficult to establish quite what he did, but his impression of the time was of 'meetings with odd people in odd places, of fantastic duties which a romancer would have rejected as beyond probability'.

Buchan gave up Parliament, partly through ill health, and in 1919 bought a house called Elsfield in Oxfordshire, on a site which had been inhabited since Saxon days. With his wife he wrote a short book, which was published anonymously after the War, called *The Island of Sheep*. It was basically a discussion set in a shooting lodge, on how the

world would develop after the War. He later used the same title for a Hannay novel. Buchan also wrote biographies of Montrose Scott, Cromwell and Julius Caesar, various military histories, and (with Sir George Adam Smith) a book called *The Kirk in Scotland*. His novels included *Mr Standfast*, *Midwinter*, *Witch Wood* (possibly his own favourite), *The Dancing Floor* (with the supernatural *The Magic Walking Stick*) and the delightful *John Macnab*.

Buchan lived at Elsfield until 1935. In the meantime he had again entered Parliament, for the Scottish Universities (1927), and he received numerous honours, including CH in 1932. In 1934 he had been appointed Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, a role of which he was very proud.

In 1935 he received an even greater honour when he was made Baron Tweedsmuir and appointed Governor-General of Canada, a post he held for five years, during which he again travelled widely. Buchan was a popular Governor-General, and was made an honorary Indian chief with the name Eagle Face, which suited his somewhat stern features.

In 1939 there was considerable onus on him as a result of a major royal visit and the impending war. His health again began to fail. With the outbreak of the Second World War there was no chance for him to take a much needed rest, and he died in Montreal in February 1940, aged 64.

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