

A look at some Scottish fiction reprints

Dashed good yarn

SICK HEART RIVER, by John Buchan. Macdonald: 6s. 6s.

By WILLIAM HUNTER

JOHN BUCHAN in 1936 first invited softy sedentary novel readers to go with a gun with his hero into the white jungle of the Canadian Arctic. Modern readers, even softer if less gentle, may be given pause by the picture of the author which glowers from the back cover of this reissued Sick Heart River.

There is the look of a man who does not much approve of the world he is staring out at. The eyes are afire with a fervour that may be evangelical. There is about them a thundering sense of moral purpose. There is a quest for virtues which are old-fashioned, meaning uncomfortable. Here's a chap who, like his hero, enjoys a cold tub every morning, if it means breaking the ice first.

It is the picture of a blighter who sensibly would leave a loading straggler to perish in the snow if it meant the greater safety of the stout chaps who could keep up a manly pace.

Either all that, or it is a photo that it's possible to read too much into. Perhaps he only had a pain in the tummy at the time.

Historically, this last novel by Buchan (Lord Tweedsmuir) followed a trek he made as Governor-General of Canada into the North West Territories. He believed that Canadians, becoming a tribe of bungalow liveries and grown mushy with supermarket shopping, should dice with nature at its most devilish, learn how to shoot for the pot, and go north by west, young men.

There is a decent and dated way with the language. One character is applauded for having in him the stuff of a "swell diplomatist." When the heroic Sir Edward Leithen (an honest lawyer and a politician, yet) charts an aeroplane into the wild lands, the pilot is permitted his full name in the narrative but the mechanic rates only the reference of "one Murchison."

When Sir Edward gazes upon a denuded forest hillside he is made to see that: "Now all the loveliness had been butchered to enable some shoddy newspaper to debauch the public soul."

Fair's fair, though, even if it ain't easy after that mouthful. It is a yarn that has to be called cracking. The telling is spare and economical. The story marches. The action is packed. Bangs are banged. It is one dashed mysterious thing after another.

Sir Edward hikes with a sense of mission into the wilderness, and with the promises of his doctors in his pack that he is surely dying of an incurable illness.

Will the cruel clean life of the mighty outdoors cure him? How will he fare among the he-men mountain men? Can he out-grizzle the grizzlies? Will he find truth in the bare mountains?

Sick Heart River first appeared in serial bits in Blackwood's Magazine. For new readers there is the treat of taking it at one hearty gallop, worthily got up by its modern printers, albeit at a new-fangled price.

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SUSAN HILL

On a Buchan adventure

THE GREATEST works of literature are sexless—that is, they transcend mere sexual differences. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Dickens, their novels are read and understood by men and women equally. But on all the rungs of fiction below the topmost, there are, as well as novels that appeal to both sexes, those which very definitely are preferred by male or female readers—though not, of course, exclusively. And this is not any intention of the authors, either, for all authors write, not for men or women, but for themselves.

When we arrive at what I shall call, in the best Graham Greeneian sense, entertainment literature, there is very decidedly a sexual divide; Greene himself is read by both sexes, but most pure adventure stories are preferred by men.

So, although I like to read for entertainment, as well as more serious purposes, I rarely read the very masculine adventure books. It is partly that the macho activities of their typi-

cal Penguin Books have recently re-issued several of his books, and bought a handful of a pleasing little Cotswold bookshop. I then remembered that I had bought a couple of others at a bazaar last Christmas, for five pence each, and not yet got round to reading them. But a reason lay even nearer to home. The village in which I now live is in Buchan country. About these fields and in these woods and across the mysterious tract of land called Otmoor, Buchan used to walk; he lived in the Manor House of the village next-door, past which I drive almost every day—he was created Baron Tweedsmuir in 1935, and took the title of the village, Elsfield; he is buried in the churchyard there.

I recalled how greatly I had enjoyed the only Buchan story I had previously read, when I was only 13 or so, the most famous of all—"The Thirty-Nine Steps." So, through a week of October cold wind and heavy rain. I had a marvellous orgy of Buchan. I read "The Three Hostages," "Greenmantle," "The Island of Sheep" and "Mr Standfast"—all Richard Hannay

the First World War, to the East, to Scotland; often, his hero is in disguise, and travelling uncomfortably and dangerously (and romantically) by cold night steam train or dirty tugboat up the Volga. For example in "The Dancing Floor" he travels in an old boat through storms, with a crew of hired mercenaries, to an idyllic Greek island—but arrives there not in glorious sunshine but in terrifying, sinister fog.

But he is as good at creating an atmosphere of fear, danger and tension in London as in Istanbul. Greene puts it well in an essay on Buchan, written in 1947.

"John Buchan was the first to realise the extraordinary dramatic value of adventure in familiar surroundings happening to unadventurous men... Who will forget the first thrill in 1916 as the hunted Leithen, the future Solicitor General, ran like a thief in a London thoroughfare on a June afternoon?"

I am at once reminded, reading that, of the pursuit of the young man called Pinky through the civilised Regency resort of "Brighton Rock."