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The manse and the Empire

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JOHN BUCHAN, A MEMOIR
by William Buchan
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Buchan : A Calvinist awareness of evil.

IT IS difficult for a famous man to be a good father. Even admiring sons are likely to have it tough ; one hardly needs to think beyond the case of Randolph Churchill to realise that. It says much for John Buchan, as he is revealed in this memoir by his second son William, that he did not try to force his pleasures or ideas on his sons. William Buchan writes of his father as ' a lovable, fascinating, mysterious man '; yet he doesn't feel obliged, by a sense of guilt such as Randolph Churchill obviously felt, to relapse into adolescent hero-worship.

Not many people would fasten the adjective ' mysterious ' on John Buchan. Despite Janet Adam Smith's splendid biography—a work to which William Buchan rightly pays tribute and with which he does not try to compete—the picture still holds of Buchan as a social climber in love with success, a half-trashy novelist to be compared to Sapper, and a political figure whose assiduity never quite brought him to the top of that greasiest of poles. Add that Buchan was an imperialist, that he is popularly supposed to have been anti-Semitic, and that his world is a clean-cut public school one of cold baths, stiff upper-lips and sexless living, and one arrives at a figure so clear in outline that it can only be caricature.

Of course there is something in it. Buchan did rise from a decent middle-class Scottish family—his father was a Free Kirk minister—to be Governor-General of Canada. On the way he made lots of influential friends, and, as Janet Adam Smith reported, would be found calling ' all the dukes by the wrong Christian names.' In his youth he must have seemed a good enough example of that Victorian and Edwardian phenomenon, the Scotsman on the make. His friends, however, don't seem to have felt that way about him, and in his social rise he never lost his ability to talk man to man : when he became Conservative and Unionist candidate for Peebles and Selkirk a shepherd applauded him as ' the richt sort of candidate. Your predecessor was an awfu' nice man, but he was far ower much of a gentleman and far ower honest.'

Nor was Buchan as ambitious as is supposed. From his early days in Milner's Kindergarten he reckoned the job to be done to be far greater than the man who did it. He retained to the end the Calvinist conviction that work was its own justification. His snobbery was no more than a Romantic affection for great names ; a real snob would have taken far more trouble to get them right. The figures he admired most were the plain men, like Peter Pienaar in ' Mr Standfast ' (his most self-revelatory novel except for the last, ' Sick Heart River '), who were steeped in the ' Pilgrim's Progress ' and stood humbly before God and Man.

Buchan was hot for moderation and admired historical figures—Cromwell, Montrose, Augustus—with a similar zeal for the middle-way. In Augustus particularly, subject of his finest biography, he saw one who represented that decent order without which civilisation cannot be maintained. It was a peculiarity of Buchan, stemming from his ever-lively Calvinist awareness of the reality of sin, that he knew instinctively ' how thin was the protection of civilisation,' how tempting destruction is, with what siren voices the old pagan gods call to our innermost nature.

William Buchan, noting that ' his villains, albeit loathly, are never without one redeeming feature,' attributes this to ' his habit of seeing all round questions.' It went further than that (and further than his novelist's tactful awareness of what is needed to make a character live). Buchan knew as well as Milton did that there is an element in nature that responds to evil. Time and again—in ' Witch Wood,' and ' The Dancing Floor,' and ' The Three Hostages,' for instance—he conjures up the attractive promise of spiritual liberation that is evil's bribe.

Such knowledge on his part makes it all the stranger that he should have been blind in the Thirties to the nature of Fascism. William Buchan finds this hard to account for, but it would seem that the carnage of the First War had sickened him of Europe ; he preferred to shut his eyes to what was happening on the Continent and to turn again to the old (but fresher) vision of Anglo-Saxon hegemony that had been fostered by Rhodes and Milner. It was a cruel irony that Buchan, so quick to apprehend the forces of disintegration, should have been slow to see that they had manifested themselves in Fascism.

William Buchan doesn't dodge such criticism of his father, and fills in family and domestic background admirably. He does not pretend to have fathomed his father's nature, but he presents the man to us as he appeared to him. It is done fairly, sympathetically, judiciously, and is intensely interesting.