RICHARD WEST joins Richard Hannay, Greenmantle and Dickson McGunn in memories of John Buchan

A walk in the Galloway hills

IT CAN confidently be predicted that this year a great many Christmas book-tokens will go towards buying the novels of John Buchan. He will never perhaps be as popular as he was between the wars, when he, "Sapper" and Dornford Yates vied in the best-seller lists. Even in his native Scotland, Buchan had fallen slightly from fashion, along with his fellow countrymen, Scott and Stevenson.

Yet the popularity of this prince of thriller-writers still persists and seems to be growing. "The Thirty-nine Steps" was recently filmed for the third time and is once more in print. One of the Dickson McGunn books, "Castle Gay," was recently published in paperback by J. M. Dent as one of the first of a series of "Classic Thrillers." Now Hutchinson has reprinted Richard Usborne's delightful "Clubland Heroes. A nostalgic study of the fiction of John Buchan, 'Sapper' and Dornford Yates."

Buchan's finest thriller, "Greenmantle," reappears in the title of Margaret Fitzherbert's biography of her grandfather Aubrey Herbert, whom she describes as "The Man who was Greenmantle." The real Aubrey Herbert was clearly the origin of the fictional Sandy Arbuthnot, a Scottish adventurer in the Balkans and Middle East, whom Buchan describes as "blood-brother to every kind of Albanian bandit."

Buchan's popularity has survived the often repeated but untrue suggestion that he was anti-semitic, a Blimp, a racist and upper-class snob. The received opinion of Buchan came out in Nicholas Mosley's review in the LISTENER of Margaret Fitzherbert's book. Taking objection to the title, Mr Mosley described "Greenmantle" as "a dotty BOY'S OWN PAPER yarn," telling how "pipe-smoking Englishmen" foiled a revolt in the Middle East. He went on to imply that Buchan was one of those politicians who saw things in black and white and wanted to punish the Germans after the 1914-18 war.

Although "Greenmantle" was written and published in 1916, at the height of the war hysteria, Buchan wrote sympathetically of the foe. As Hannay goes through Germany in disguise, he is sheltered by a peasant woman; he meets a German engineer, "clearly a good fellow, a white man and a gentleman"; even the Kaiser is a "human being" and more to be pitied than hated.

Although Buchan was a Tory MP and later Governor-General of Canada, he was no Jingoistic imperialist. His books contain some unpleasant but also pleasant Jewish characters; Buchan was a Zionist. He detested Bolshevism, for its abominable cruelty, but he was not intolerant: "The Scottish Communist is a much misunderstood person. When he is a true Caledonian, and not a Pole or an Irishman, he is simply "the lineal descendant of the old Radical" ("Castle Gay" p160).

Certainly Buchan had weaknesses as a thriller-writer. The scholarly Mr Usborne is right to say that Buchan failed in character drawing. The stories depended inordinately on coincidence and disguise. It is hard to believe that Hannay in Lisbon in 1915 should just happen to meet his oldest friend Peter Pienaar, who had never before left Africa. In the course of his escapades, Hannay disguises himself as a milkman, roadmender, movie producer, a traveller in religious books, a chauffeur (twice), and as Swiss, German, Afrikaner and American.

In the use of coincidence, Buchan followed the artifice of his master, Robert Louis Stevenson, and to some extent Scott. Certainly the disguises used by Hannay to dodge German agents, as well as the Scottish police in Galloway, were no more extraordinary than those attributed to King Robert the Bruce, fleeing the British in just the same hills.

Again, Buchan is often accused of snobbery, in particular with regard to Hannay. Certainly Hannay's career is odd. He first appears in "The Thirty-nine Steps" as a Bulawayo red-neck on holiday in London, and wondering whether to get back to Rhodesia, when quite unwittingly he is involved in murder and espionage. By the end of the book he is on hob-nobbing terms with the head of the British Secret Service and some of the mightiest in the land. In the next two books he becomes a colonel and then a general. Thereafter he is a clubman, friend of dukes and Cabinet Ministers, with a country estate and a boy at Eton.

In some later books, Buchan returned to his roots by introducing the Glasgow retired grocer, Dickson McGunn, and his rather improbable "Gorbals Die-Hards," urchins from Glasgow who rise, like Buchan, through Oxford into grand careers.

Buchan admired success because he had come up the hard way. In all his careers, he worked himself to the utmost. He may have been "a Scotsman on the make" but it was not easy for him.

Because Buchan admired physical fitness, long walks and cold baths, he is often accused of preaching the "public school ethos." But he himself had gone to a village school, walking three miles each way every day, and then to grammar school. His spartan tendency was innately Scottish, owing nothing to English "muscular Christianity."

Nor do I think that Buchan was humourless. There is a hint of self-parody in such famous passages as when Hannay is told of the German threat in the East: "I have reports from agents

everywhere — pedlars in South Russia, Afghan horse-dealers, Turcoman merchants, pilgrims on the road to Mecca, Sheikhs in North Africa, sailors on the Black Sea coasters, sheep-skinned Mongols, Hindu fakirs, Greek traders in the Gulf, as well as respectable consuls who use cypher."

And even if such stuff is ridiculous, it is rather exciting as well. Buchan had a wonderful gift of making you think that you knew, or at any rate might be going to, some of these weird places. He says of Peter Pienaar: "He was prospector, transport-rider and horseman and hunter in turns, but principally hunter. In those days he was none too good a citizen. He was in Swaziland with Bob Macnab, and you know what that means?" And of course we don't.

John Buchan's heroes are sportsmen, respectful of women and chivalrous to defeated foes. These are old-fashioned virtues but possibly none the worse for that.