BUCHAN COUNTRY

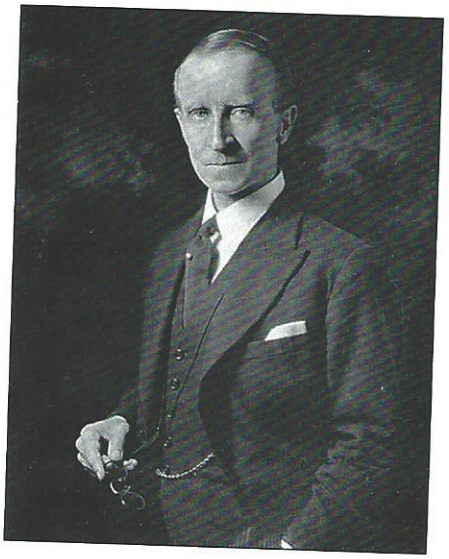
Nick Channer follows the steps of Richard Hannay.

I SNAPPED the switch but there was nobody there. Then I saw something in the far corner which made me drop my cigar and fall into a cold sweat. My guest was lying sprawled on his back. There was a long knife through his heart which skewered him to the floor.

If you have read John Buchan's classic adventure yarn *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, you will no doubt recall the chilling moment at the very end of the first chapter — aptly named "The Man Who Died" — when Buchan's hero, Richard Hannay, discovers the body of Franklin P. Scudder in his Portland Place apartment. So begins what Buchan devotees and thriller readers the world over have come to regard as quite possibly literature's definitive manhunt.

On the run, wrongly accused of murder and in possession of coded information from Scudder concerning a conspiracy which he claims will *get Russia and Germany at loggerheads*, Hannay flees to south-west Scotland where he believes he can elude both the killers and the police while he attempts to convince the government that there is a plot to assassinate the Greek premier.

Set in the early summer of 1914, much of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* takes place in the Dumfries & Galloway and Tweeddale regions — parts of the country Buchan knew intimately. As a youth, he had explored this romantic, undulating landscape, roaming the hills and glens and filling his mind with stories of border raids and Jacobite adventure. By adulthood, he was a true countryman and a keen angler.



Born in 1875, the son of a Scottish church minister, John Buchan spent his formative years in Fife, Glasgow and the Borders. After graduating from Oxford, he began what was to become an enormously varied career. He edited *The Spectator*, became the director of a publishing company and during the First World War worked for the government as Director of Information. Buchan was also a prolific writer, specialising in fast-moving adventure yarns, biographies and historical studies.

Originally entitled *The Black Stone* — a reference to the ring of German gentleman spies who are close on Hannay's heels and hell-bent on plunging Europe into war — *The Thirty-Nine Steps* was published 90 years ago in October, 1915. To mark the anniversary, I have attempted to recreate Hannay's thrilling adventure. Following in his footsteps, I discovered some of the loneliest and least accessible landscapes in this corner of Scotland, though parts of the journey I completed by car — just as Hannay did. Many of the roads are almost as quiet today as they were in 1914 and it was a joy to steer my way across vast open moorland, beside broad, fast-flowing rivers

Above: John Buchan.

Nick Channer

The disused railway line at Mossdale. After alighting from the train, Hannay crossed this rugged moorland country on foot.

and between towering hillsides.

Of course a trip of this kind requires careful planning and research. That involved reading the book — something I hadn't done for over 20 years. Inevitably, with the passage of time, I had forgotten some of the story, but from the first page I was hooked. What comes across so effectively are Buchan's descriptions of the Scottish landscape and the brilliant evocation of the countryside "tinged with the menace of man the enemy" as military historian and author Sir John Keegan puts it in his introduction to a recent edition of the book.

Before beginning my trip, I enlisted the help of the John Buchan Society, founded in 1979. Its former secretary Russell Paterson sent me a copy of an article he had written for the winter 1987 edition of the Society's journal suggesting the route Richard Hannay may have taken in the story. Russell carried out his research over the actual terrain, using an Ordnance Survey map to try to establish exactly where the action takes place. He admitted to me that Hannay's course is open to conjecture, though, having studied the piece and used it exhaustively on my travels, I now believe that his interpretation of Hannay's route is pretty much spot on. I defy anyone to do better.

Inevitably, Buchan uses poetic licence in the story, modifying and manipulating buildings and natural features to suit the plot. He combines real places with imaginary landmarks. Much of the book was written on the Kent coast, just about as far from the Scottish hills as you can get, while Buchan convalesced from a recurring illness. The circumstances necessitated writing from memory which tends to blur and romanticise the reality somewhat. Yet for all that, close scrutiny reveals a plausible scenario, a journey that, despite the conjecture, has some basis in reality.

My Hannay adventure begins at Mossdale, a tiny settlement on the now disused Dumfries to Newton Stewart railway, between Kirkcudbright and New Galloway. It's quite possible Buchan was thinking of this place when he describes Hannay's railway journey. *I got out at the next station, a little place whose name I scarcely noted, set right in the heart of the bog. It reminded me of one of those forgotten little stations in the Karroo. A child of ten received my ticket, and I emerged on a white road that straggled over the brown moor.*

From here Richard Hannay almost certainly heads north-west towards Cairnsmore or Black Craig of Dee, eventually turning south-east and back towards the railway. On reaching the old halt at Loch Skerrow, I spotted the remains of the

platform and nearby piles of rubble — all that is left of a house whose occupants no doubt regarded the railway as a lifeline in this vast, remote wilderness. The spirit of the book is very strong here. I certainly didn't expect to find somewhere that resembled Buchan's fictional setting so closely. Buchan writes: *The station, when I reached it, proved to be ideal for my purpose. The moor surged up around it. There seemed no road to it from anywhere, and to increase the desolation the waves of a tarn lapped on their grey granite beach half a mile away.*

The scene is much the same today, the bare, roadless moorland unchanged save for the distant glimpse of trees, the sense of isolation almost tangible. Now, as then, there is the sound of birdsong and the sigh of the wind in the grass. In 1914 there would have been the familiar chug and whistle of an approaching train, but today the railway is quiet, a casualty of the Beeching axe of the mid-1960s.

Hannay catches a train here and heads back along the line to Mossdale, then south-east beside the Dee. Today the river is part of an operational reservoir which can cause the water levels to fluctuate. It is a scenic stretch of waterway nonetheless, and a haven for wildlife with the highest breeding density of barn owls in Britain. In *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Hannay flees the train when it comes to an unscheduled stop beyond Mossdale. *My plan had been to get out at some station down the line, but the train suddenly gave me a better chance, for it came to a standstill at the end of a culvert which spanned a brawling porter-coloured river.* Russell Paterson is convinced that Buchan is referring to the Loch Ken viaduct.

Hannay heads away from the water, making for the B794 and then the A712. He turns left for about a mile, then north along a minor road towards the A702. Near a bridge over the Fell Burn and on the edge of remote moorland is an isolated dwelling set amid trees. This is Waterhead — possibly the model for the literary innkeeper's abode. It is against this isolated setting that Hannay tricks his pursuers and makes off across country in their car.

From here his probable route takes him along moorland roads to the A702 and then north-east towards Thornhill, passing through Moniaive and Penpont. Buchan refers to a long, straggling village with a post office. Penpont would seem to fit the bill. The post office is still trading and, appropriately, includes a photograph of the village taken around 1920 — about six years after Hannay came this way. Driving through this area, he spots *a great castle*, most likely Drumlanrig, though today the widespread afforestation makes any chance of glimpsing this magnificent 17th-century stronghold unlikely — if indeed it was ever possible. Hannay also refers to *the broad haugh of a river* — probably the Nith.

Near Thornhill, I turned north, following the valley of the Penpont Burn to Auchenbainzie. Crossing the Nith at Eliock Wood, I took the A76 to Mennock and then headed east along the winding B797. Hannay's route here takes him *into a glen with steep hills, and a corkscrew road at the end which climbed over a pass.* Farther on, he meets *a big double-line railway*, almost certainly the London-Glasgow mainline at Elvanfoot.

This stretch of Hannay's journey is glorious — a land of expansive moorland, dramatic sheep-strewn passes and clear tumbling burns. Typical Buchan country. Inevitably, this region of Scotland has been touched by the modern world. Where Hannay crashes his car in a glen is now blighted by the M74 motorway.

On foot once more, Hannay heads north where he finds himself *in a wide green world with glens falling on every side and a far away blue horizon. I was on the central boss of a huge upland country and could see everything moving for miles . . .* Today, dense plantations would restrict Hannay's splendid vantage point. Below this high ground is Tweedshopefoot, no more than a couple of whitewashed dwellings

beside the A701 Edinburgh to Moffat road. Experts within the John Buchan Society believe this is the setting for the home of the "Spectacled Roadman". The cottage closest to the road has been demolished in recent years but the two remaining properties a few hundred yards to the north are also worthy contenders. Only a stone's throw from here is the source of the Tweed.

One of the less plausible aspects of Buchan's great yarn is its sequence of somewhat improbable coincidences. While at the cottage, Hannay spots a passing motorist who turns out to be an old acquaintance, Marmaduke Jopley. With his adversaries still in pursuit, Hannay requisitions Jopley's car and dons his clothing before driving off towards Tweedsmuir and the Stanhope valley, eventually handing the car back to Jopley. Hannay then tramps over the moors radiating from the high point of Dollar Law, stumbling at length on a deserted homestead.

The setting is remote and spectacular, the scene calm and inviting. Inside the house a man watches Hannay through the windows of a glass veranda. But the picture of rural bliss is deceptive. Unbeknown to Hannay, it is a deadly trap.

Outside Peebles, at the end of a lengthy eight-mile single-track road, I discovered Manorhead — no more than several dwellings surrounded by steep hills, lush pasture and rolling moorland. You couldn't wish for a lonelier place. Here too there is a strong sense of the book. With typical ingenuity and very much in the vein of the traditional *Boys' Own* adventure hero, Hannay manages to escape the damp chamber where he is being held, blasting his way out by using conveniently stored lentonite as an explosive. Back at the roadman's cottage, he rests for 10 days before following tracks and drove roads to Moffat where he catches the south-bound express.

I rounded off my visit by stopping for a drink at the 16th-century Black Bull in the town. The walls of its adjacent Railway Bar are adorned with photographs of nearby Beattock

Right: An atmospheric Moffat, where Hannay catches the south-bound express. Inset: A scene from Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 version with Madeleine Carroll and Robert Donat.
Main Picture: South West Images

Station which closed in the 1960s. From this station Hannay begins the next stage of his journey. He heads for London, armed with enough evidence to seek help at the highest level and clear his name in the process.

The Thirty-Nine Steps is one of the world's best-loved thrillers. It was an instant success when first published in 1915 and by the start of the 1960s, Buchan's biographer, Janet Adam Smith, estimated its sales had reached more than 350,000 copies. Today the figure is much higher. There have been three movie adaptations of the story — the most famous being the Hitchcock version in 1935.

Visitors to south-west Scotland find there is much to remind them of Buchan and his celebrated book. The Murray Arms Hotel at Gatehouse of Fleet sells copies of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* at reception and if you are staying the night you might even find you have been booked into a bedroom of the same name. I spent a night there and stayed in the "John Buchan" room. At Broughton, near Peebles, you can visit the John Buchan Centre, housed in a former church building. On view are various editions of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and a piece of the actual staircase that inspired the title and provided a nail-biting climax to the story.

If you've read the book, you will be familiar with the ending. If you haven't, I won't spoil it by revealing what happens in the closing pages. However, there are no secrets surrounding its enduring appeal, that of the time-honoured theme of triumph over evil. Ninety years after it was published and more than 60 years after John Buchan's death, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* continues to enthral.

For more information on the John Buchan Society visit www.johnbuchansociety.co.uk