

Sick Heart River by John Buchan Macdonald Publishers £6.95

THE story of John Buchan in Canada is one of the strangest tales of the interaction of politics and literature since it began; which means, I suppose, since the first poet produced the first recital of his chieftain's exploits to make it more heroic than it was. Buchan had been that kind of poet, although his inspiration was that of Tory imperialism.

His achievement had always been one of lucidity rather than of profundity. He was one of that long line of confident Scots who had partaken of the benefits of participating in the Union and the Empire, and had expounded the delights of a robust history and a rewarding present. His writings breathed a sense of assurance with a capacity for winning wide audiences.

Like Carlyle, he knew his heroes and what lessons to draw from them. Like Scott, if on a more limited scale, he saw what the art-form of the novel could do to win back social history to public view where the historians had failed. Like Stevenson, he could tell a memorable yarn and carry his audience despite the fact that his narrative voice occasionally sounded from the preacher's pulpit when it was not beckoning readers forward in the heat of the chase or thick of the fight.

Yet at the point when confidence found its reward and the boy from the Perthshire manse became the King's representative as Governor-General of Canada, he entered on a deeper, apparently more self-questioning mood. It brought him to write his one really great novel, *Sick Heart River*. Buchan had produced work before which was great of its kind, but whose kind does not claim greatness. But *Sick Heart River* is great, and merits an outstanding place in any list of Canadian or of Scottish novels of the century. And in the making of that greatness we have to look at two new visions which had powerfully invaded Buchan's horizons, and were growing more and more prominent in his vision. One was Canada. The other was death.

Buchan, like his hero, Leithen, was dying: would be dead, when *Sick Heart River* was first published in 1941. Like Leithen, the conjunction of Canada and imminence of death was to give him that depth of intellect and spirituality his writings had hitherto lacked. With a new confidence, about mankind rather than the earlier brash salesmanship of the imperial idea, he casts off his old hero Sandy at the beginning. He makes him complain about the younger generation of 1938. It

was an odd kind of grace-note, for the whole book suggests that it is Sandy, and Buchan's old world, and not the challenges of the future which now seem inadequate. And in 1938—very much at the moment when he may have been having his first vision of *Sick Heart River*—Buchan as Chancellor of Edinburgh University was telling the students of his confidence in their generation.

Canada was playing its part, but the Governor-Generalship was less and less important as success symbol and more and more as vantage-point. A ceremonial post is traditionally the summit of a career: it was Buchan's achievement that he made it the threshold of a new and greater height, but his last journey was intellectual and spiritual, rather than political. Intellectually, Canada assumed to him the different priority of testifying to a new future and a new magic, where the survival of a single man and a lost Indian tribe took the place of ancient school-boy dreams of imperial geopolitics.

Buchan had used small corners of Scotland as means to lay down the law in telling the world how it wagged; he now used the vastness of Canada as the means by which one man reached a knowledge of his own soul.

He had selected his hero very carefully. Sir Edward Leithen is the most intellectual of Buchan's 20th C. heroes. He has been built up over several books as being interested in people, and being more ready to talk to them, than any of his fellows. In *John Macnab*, for instance, he is the one of the three gentlemen poachers who confides their enterprise to hitherto unknown allies. Leithen responds more to people, likes them more, trusts them more. He is the major protagonist with whom we would find it most natural to be in conversation. But does he love people?

Sick Heart River's achievement is to show how he learns to do so, and to convey the fact with credibility and grandeur. He learns of his imminent death, and gives himself a quest to find a vanished Canadian. It is important that although the missing Galliard is connected to friends of Leithen—specifically, he is married to Sandy's sister-in-law—the quest is simply a therapeutic exercise for the dying man.

The Canada that emerges in this book is a Canada with recognizable features but with certain additional qualities Buchan has been original in discerning. One of the major themes of *Sick Heart River* is that nothing fails

like success, and that emigration from one's own culture is a betrayal for which a price will ultimately be demanded. A revealing preoccupation for lad o' pairs become pro-consul. It constantly reflects strengths in areas where Buchan in the past had been vulnerable. It is not only the symbolism of fighting for Nature's losers that marks a change: the whole book reeks of symbolism extolling inter-racial parentage, championship of alien cultures and much else that went against the grain of Buchan's old Tory imperialism.

Canada, and the Northland in particular are the vehicles by which this is done, and here again lies something singular. At first glance Buchan's frozen wastes might seem to have something in common with Robert Service, not to say *Biggles Flies North*. "Folks come down here thinking the North's a pretty lady, and find that she can be a cruel, bloody-minded old bitch, and they scurry away from her like jack-rabbits from a forest fire", Leithen is told at an early point. But in fact this sort of thing, and the characteristic descriptions of heroic triumphs over Nature, are merely the foothills of Buchan's own argument. Adventure against harsh obstacles was once his entire preoccupation in his thrillers: now, even with the gloss of the adventurer being a dying and exhausted man whose companions exhibit various forms of mental illness, at one point with homicidal side-effects, the adventure still remains only the vehicle on which Buchan's major concerns are kept moving.

One of the strongest aspects of the imagery and power of *Sick Heart River* lies in the fact that Buchan built up the background to it through his official air journeys through the Canadian Northland in his official capacity. His pilot has testified to his fascination with what he saw, and in a sense the fact that his vision derived from air voyages gives a three-dimensional quality to the book's use of landscape. "In these bleak immensities the world of man had fallen away to an infinite distance, and the chill of eternity was already on him." "But unlike the Rockies the scene was composed as if by a great artist—nothing untidy and shapeless, but everything harmonised into an exquisite unity of line and colour." "A part of the globe which had no care for human life, which was not built to man's scale, a remnant of that Ice Age which long ago had withered the earth." And from there came its effects. "Here was a place where one could be reconciled to the North—where the North ceased to be a master and became a comforter." "He was reacting to the external world. His mind had feelers out again to its environment. Therefore Galliard had assumed a new meaning. He



John Buchan, 1st Baron Tweedsmuir.

was not a task to be plodded through with, but a fellow-mortal to be helped, a companion, a friend." "Leithen saw in Lew and Johnny at that moment something finer than the duty of kinship. It was the brotherhood of all men, white and red and brown, who have to fight the savagery of the North." "There was a plain task before him, to fight with Death. God for His own purpose had unloosed it in the world, ravaging over places which had once been rich in innocent life. Here in the North life had always been on sufferance, its pale slender shoots fighting a hard battle against the Elder Ice. But it had maintained its brave defiance. And now one such pathetic slip was on the verge of extinction. This handful of Hares had for generations been a little enclave of life besieged by mortality. Now it was perishing, hurrying to share in the dissolution which was overtaking the world. By God's help that should not happen—the God who was the God of the living. Through strange circuits he had come to that simple forthright duty for which he had always longed. In that duty he must make his soul." "The North had not frozen him, but had melted the ice in his heart."

That last sentence alone is symbolic of the wonder of *Sick Heart River*. At the heart of the greatest work Buchan wrote is an image, and indeed a message. This expresses Buchan's new spiritual confidence.

So one view of Buchan's relationship with Canada will testify that the first Baron Tweedsmuir served gallantly and industriously in the office of Governor-General, said inspiring words, and strengthened links between Canada, Britain and the U.S.A., and died in office. The more important story is that Canada transformed John Buchan from a good popular writer into a great novelist.

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