

Shadows on the clouds

THE INTERPRETER'S HOUSE: A Critical assessment of the Work of John Buchan

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different narrative points of view, in so many different accomplished styles that the whole Buchan corpus comes close to interpreting and clarifying a large piece of life and in the grand manner too. He worked in units of experience which move towards the constituents of myth and everywhere, in whatever style, the prose is easy: the reader is always welcomed.

It is now more than twenty years since Richard Usborne's entertaining but outrageous "Clubland Heroes" set the fashion in literary guilt by association by bracketing Buchan with Dornford Yates and Sapper and the rest of the "swine-have-got-Phyllis" circus. Daniell reminds us that Usborne's book was sub-titled "A Nostalgic Study." Already Buchan was being waved out of sight. In Dr Daniell's short but very necessary study Buchan's slight figure, pawky and douce in youth, worn to a trim proconsular thinness during his last five years in Canada, takes on a new dimension.

Unlike Yeats in Auden's poem, Buchan, despite his years of crowded effort and achievement, "became his admirers" in his lifetime. Now, at thirty-five years' distance, his stature has grown again. He is no longer dwarfed by the mythical

heroes of his own creation—not just the Hannays and Leithens, the Clanroydens and Runagate clubmen by themselves but the not so "ordinary men and women" of the earlier fiction and historical novels—he can be seen for what he creatively was, the father of them all, the Free Fishers, the Gorbals Diehards, the Spoon-bills and Clyde Sweet-Singers. Buchan's power of characterisation was copious, and Dr Daniell responds to it intelligently and without exaggeration. He even finds variety in the sexuality of his subject's heroines.

Dr Daniell is good on Sir Edward Leithen in "Sick Heart River," Buchan's last novel. His secretary had reported that "H.E. is writing a very odd book . . . very introspective." It appeared after his death, and describes Leithen's expedition to the Canadian North. Graham Greene and Janet Adam Smith have both argued that in this book Buchan was analysing himself through the person of his most identifiable hero, the first emphasising "the vast importance Buchan attributed to success, the materialism," the second believing that the novel is some kind of a personal confession: "He is saying something about himself . . . he had been successful, but he had not reached the heights he had once aspired to: had not been a Milner or a Cromer, had not sat in the Cabinet."

Dr Daniell thinks that Buchan was here on a different and more creative track, that Leithen's adventure is his creator's final and successful attempt to achieve

inner peace and self-discovery for his hero. It is a moving work with a narrative tone, one might cautiously say, more like St John than St Luke, deeply meditative rather than classically cool.

We are in danger of getting one important matter wrong, of failing to realise that the position of the novel's successful people is that they

are failures . . . everyone is the cleverest this or the most influential that. The novel appears, on a superficial reading, to be saying that the world needs an Augustus—or many such—and if you can't be at the top of the tree it's better to crawl away and die in solitude. Yet the brief social heightening, by a device already noticed in the Leithen books, is simply to point the contrast with the real truth at the heart of the matter.

Running all through Buchan's fiction are the words of the inscription at Fatehpur-Sikri which he used as the epigraph for "A Prince of the Captivity" (1933), perhaps the most mysterious of all his novels: "Thus said Jesus upon whom be peace. The World is a bridge; pass over it, but build no house upon it." That book certainly mystified Buchan's friend T. E. Lawrence:

. . . he takes figures of today and projects their shadows onto clouds, till they grow so inhuman and grotesque . . . it sounds a filthy technique, but the books are like athletes racing: so clean-lined, speedy, breathless. For our age they mean nothing: they are sport, only: but will a century hence distinter them and proclaim him the great romancer of our blind and undeserving generation?

Perhaps. Meanwhile, here is Dr Daniell to remind us of Buchan's great unappreciated qualities as a storyteller and to suggest that we may have gone wildly astray in our estimate of the ideals that lie behind his world of strenuous adventure.

JOHN BUCHAN was born five years after Dickens died and if he had lived until next Tuesday, he would have been 100 years old. His centenary has caught his legion of admirers off-guard and unaware. So David Daniell's eloquent and lively salute to his work and re-examination of its content—not to speak of the inspired John Bunyan title—could not have appeared at a better moment.

The man whose work appeared in "The Yellow Book" of the 1890s, wrote "The Thirty-Nine Steps" and ended up as Governor-General of Canada, has a powerful claim on our imagination. Buchan was historian, biographer, essayist, poet and politician; Dr Daniell's book surveys his whole achievement. On his fiction, he writes at length.

Several generations of readers have taken Buchan's genius as a storyteller so much for granted that they have failed to recognise his singular and manifold merits. There is a diversity about his novels and tales, a rich complexity about his heroes, their characters and adventures, but it is hardly recognised in anything that has been written about him during the last thirty years—beyond, of course, what Janet Adam Smith has to say about his fiction in her fine and definitive biography.

Dr Daniell takes the bull firmly by the horns. Having listed and answered the usual rigmarole of sneers and charges habitually levelled against Buchan by his detractors (and by some of his admirers also!)—charges of racism, anti-Semitism, the arrant purveyance of "snobbery with violence," Georgian careerist values and so on, he concludes:

Over the twenty-seven novels, the simple situations of the oldest storytellers . . . are used with such variety, from so many