

# On Buchan's trail

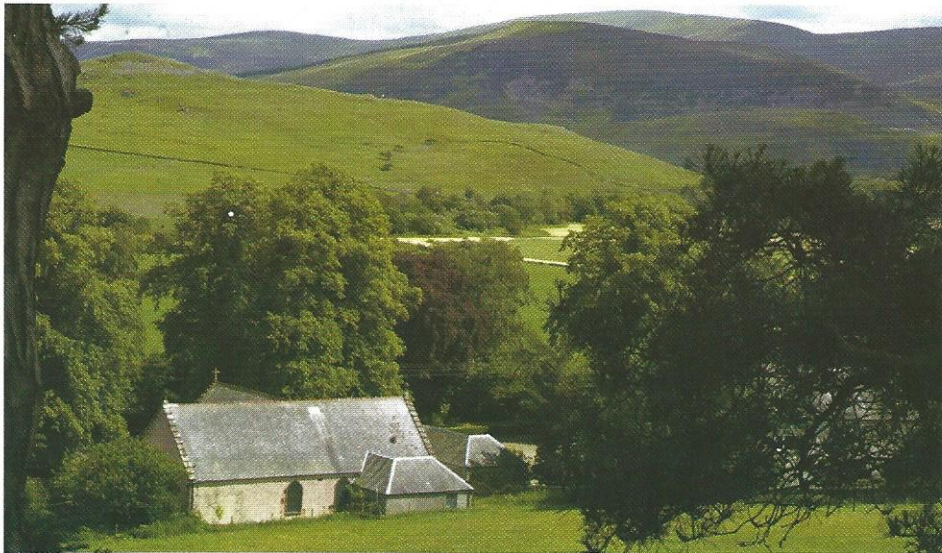
*Thanks partly to the work of a dedicated band of volunteers in Scotland's remote Border hills, the work of John Buchan seems ever more relevant to a new generation of readers, as Katherine Gow discovered*

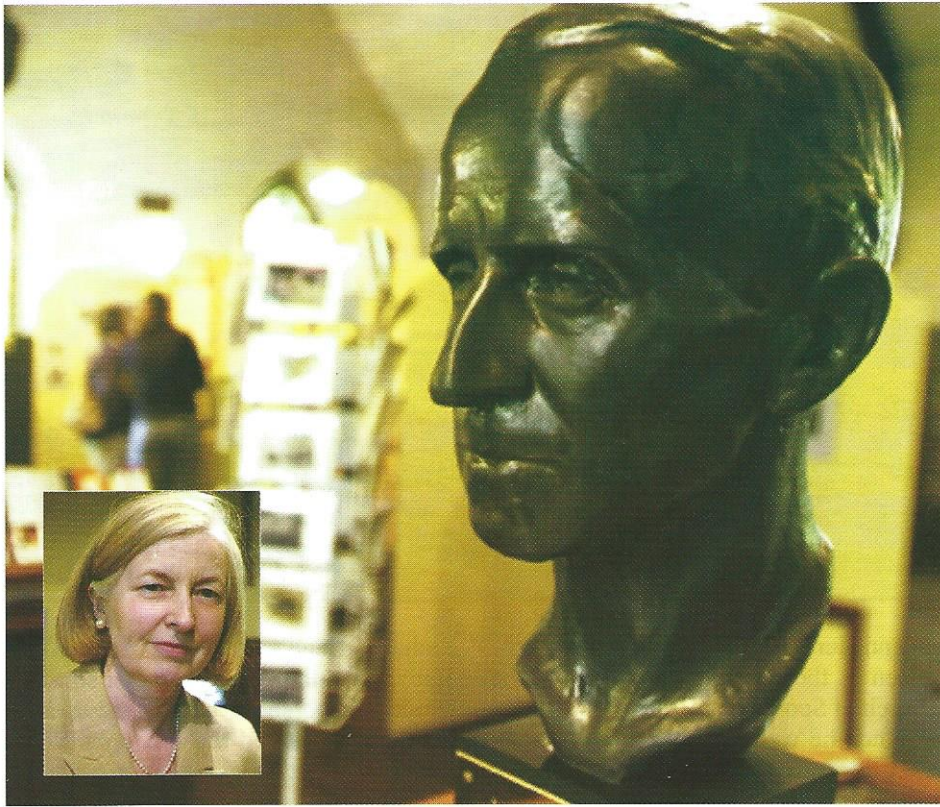
In John Buchan's novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps* – famously turned into a film by Alfred Hitchcock – the hero Richard Hannay spends much of his time being pursued across the Scottish Borders both by fiendish German agents and by British police who wrongly suspect him of murder.

This month amid those same Borders hills, a group of dedicated Buchan enthusiasts will gather in the village hall in Broughton to celebrate the life and work of this astonishing writer and statesman. It is the 21st anniversary year

of the opening of The John Buchan Centre, a small converted church staffed and maintained by volunteers dedicated to keeping alive Buchan's memory.

Broughton village and its surrounding Borders hills constitute the landscape of John Buchan's heart and soul, the beloved place he returned to again and again all of his life. During his childhood, Buchan would spend most of his summer holidays at his grandparents' farm in Broughton. His own parents had met and married in the village. And during those long boyhood summers,





**A bust of Buchan at the converted church in Broughton (pictured left), now a centre dedicated to his memory. Inset, his granddaughter, Lady Stewartby, who has returned to live in the farmhouse his grandparents owned**

Buchan had free range of the Borders hills and developed his lifelong love of country pursuits, especially fishing and hill walking.

“Broughton meant everything to him,” says the author’s granddaughter Lady Stewartby, who has now returned to live in the same village farmhouse his grandparents owned. “Even as a boy, he loved testing himself against the elements, being caught out in bad weather. This love of the countryside stayed with him throughout his life. And when he became Governor General of Canada

towards the end of his life, his happiest times were exploring the Arctic and visiting Indian tribes.

“There was a tremendous romance in his soul.”

Remembered now mainly for his novels, John Buchan in fact wrote a hundred books, including poetry, history and scholarly biography – even a tax guide for accountants. In his lifetime, he was also a barrister, war correspondent, intelligence officer, historian, publisher, MP and statesman. His friends included President Roosevelt, Lawrence of Ara-





bia and Henry James. He represented the Queen at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

When he was made a baron, he took his title from the Borders hamlet of Tweedsmuir near Broughton. And wherever he travelled in the world, his heart always returned to these Lowland landscapes.

Broughton itself was the village 'Woodilee' in Buchan's novel *Witch Wood*, a story in which a 17th century Scottish minister discovers that his congregation still hanker after devil worship in the Borders woods.

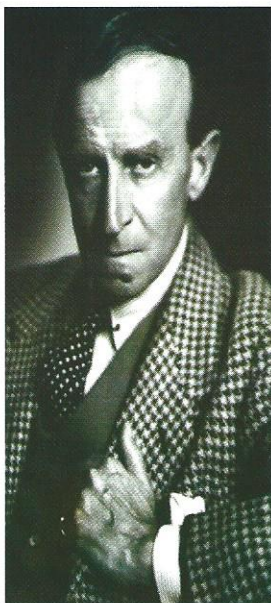
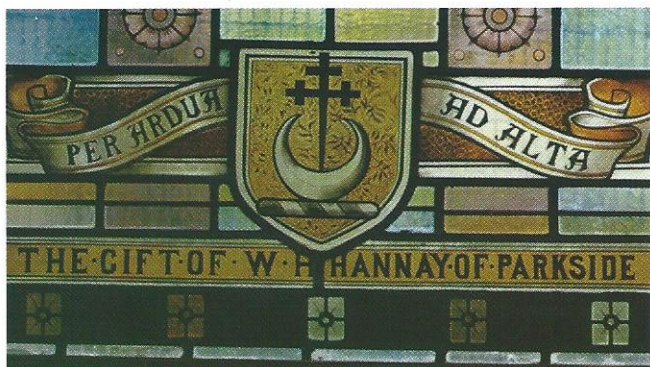
Buchan's father was himself a minister. As a son of the manse, he would spend every Sunday of his summer holidays in the front row of the small church which has now been turned into the John Buchan Centre. Just a few feet from the young boy's pew stood a stained glass memorial window bearing the name 'Hannay'. Was that the inspiration for

Richard Hannay in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*? Certainly, those summer sermons would not be short, and a boy such as Buchan who loved the outdoors would have time to let his imagination roam.

Much of the action in the historical novel *John Burnet of Barns* is set in the area between Broughton and Peebles. The House of Barns itself is sited where Manor Water meets the River Tweed.

Inevitably, there is now a John Buchan Trail – a fine 13-mile walk across these Lowland hills from Peebles to Broughton, very much the country of Buchan's boyhood. (These hills can be exposed in bad weather, so take walking gear.)

*Greenmantle*, the sequel to *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, has been adopted as the name of a rather fine local beer. In the story of *Greenmantle*, Richard Hannay plays a spy who stops the Germans from using an Islamic prophet for their own ends. The action ranges through the



**Man of many parts ...Not just a writer and poet, Buchan – seen with US president Franklin Roosevelt, left – was, at some time, a barrister, war correspondent, publisher, MP and statesman, becoming Governor General of Canada. Above, did this stained glass memorial at Broughton inspire his choice of name for his most famous hero?**

Balkans to the Near East, and it is this uncanny resonance to modern times that attracts many new readers to Buchan's work.

"People are amazed at how relevant a lot of his work is now," says Mary Reid, who is chair of volunteers at the John Buchan Centre. "A new generation are surprised at how far-sighted he was. A lot of what he writes about rings true in this day and age."

Most of Buchan's books are still in print, and many visitors to the centre take a book away with them, so these volunteers are helping a new generation to discover his work. A high proportion of visitors to the centre are Canadian, and Buchan was a much-loved Gover-

nor-General of Canada in the late 1930s. He died there. The Tweedsmuir Park wildlife reserve in British Columbia is named after him. Some of his best fiction is set in Canada, including *Sick Heart River* published after his death.

The John Buchan Centre is a modest enough place in a most spectacular setting. And perhaps that is appropriate to Buchan's memory. "It's part of village life," says centre volunteer Kirk Dobie, "and it is important that we all support local things."

For all his achievements as a man of the world and a writer and statesman, John Buchan was at heart a local boy who loved the Borders countryside more than anywhere else in the world.

The John Buchan Centre is open every afternoon from Easter to mid-October, but enthusiasts can arrange special visits at other times by calling Mary Reid on 01899 880258. The website is [www.johnbuchansociety.co.uk](http://www.johnbuchansociety.co.uk). The village of Broughton lies nearly 30 miles south of Edinburgh on the A701. The centre's 21st anniversary celebrations will be held on September 17.