

THIRTY-NINE STEPS TOWARDS WA

John Buchan is rightly famous for writing *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, but that was only one of the many accomplishments of this man from the Borders, who also had strong Edinburgh connections. As John Burnett explains

The *Thirty-Nine Steps* is widely regarded as the world's first spy novel. Set in the months before August 1914 and published in 1915, this classic has now been in print for nearly a century.

John Buchan is rightly remembered for his famous novel, but there was much to Buchan which is less well known. He was an extraordinary man. Born in 1875, he was the son of a Free Kirk Minister: his father was the son of a Peebles lawyer, his mother from a farming family in the village of Broughton. When he left Oxford he seemed to be heading for a career in the law, but he became first a colonial administrator in South Africa, then a journalist, publisher, Member of Parliament and finally Governor General of Canada, where he died in 1940.

During the First World War, he was the Director of Information - making sure that the government's views were known abroad - and wrote a 24 volume diary of the events of the four year conflict, with volumes being published throughout the war at around 2 month intervals. A full set of volumes can be seen at the John Buchan Centre in Peebles.

All through his professional career Buchan was writing - novels, biographies, short stories and poetry - in total, more than a hundred books. His energy was extraordinary, as was his ability to use his time well.

Buchan is connected principally with the Borders, but Edinburgh too played a large part in his life. For twenty years from 1907 he was a director of book publisher Thomas Nelson and Sons, based in their London office, but frequently visiting their headquarters off Dalkeith Road.



'Round-shouldered green hills as smooth as pancakes'

The outbreak of war in August 1914 gave him several large problems. Thomas Nelson had been reshaping the public's reading tastes but the publisher's future was problematic in war. Would there be any demand for books (Nelson's had a large trade with Europe)? If there was a demand, for what books? Would there be men to print them? Buchan, too, was ill, in pain and confined to bed with a stomach ulcer. His health meant that unlike his friends he could not join the armed forces. What was he going to do? How could he serve his country?

With all of this on his shoulders, on holiday at Broadstairs, on the Kent coast, he started to write a novel, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.

Buchan drew extensively from his past, including his formative years in and around Broughton, a perfect example being when his hero Hannay discovers the hills of the Scottish Borders. He is looking down the A701, the Edinburgh-Moffat road, with the headwaters of the Tweed on one side and the Devil's Beef Tub on the other:

As the mists cleared before the sun, I found myself in a wide green world with glens falling on every side and a faraway blue horizon ... I sat down on the very crest of the pass and took stock of my position. Beyond me was the road climbing through a long cleft in the hills,

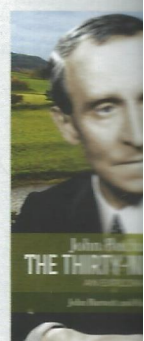
which was the upper gle of a great river. In front was a valley of maybe a mile, all pitted with holes and rough with tussock. To the left and right were round-shouldered green hills as smooth as pancakes. To the south there was a glimpse of heathery mountains, which I had chosen for my sanctuary

The *Thirty-Nine Steps* starts with Richard Hannay alone in his flat and his encounter with a

can journalist who he finds in his flat. Believing that the killer is to murder him too, and that the journalist believes him to be the murderer of the can, Hannay escapes by train to Scotland and after adventures finds a road-mender's cottage near the Tweed valley. He goes south again, convincing the Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Office that the spies are about to vital naval secrets out of the country. The book ends with their capture at Broadstairs.

There is much to be discovered in this vellous little book with its taut, and it becomes all the more enjoyable to re-read, taking into account the full life of John Buchan.

John Burnett and Kate Mackay are the authors of *John Buchan and The Thirty-Nine Steps: an Exploration*, recently published by National Museums Scotland at £8.99. ISBN 978-1905267873



An exhibition in the John Buchan Centre in Peebles tells the story of his life. www.johnbuchanstory.co.uk