

# Standfast and look at Buchan!

## The Interpreter's House

A critical assessment of  
John Buchan

By David Daniell

(Nelson £3.95)

John Buchan had a remarkable career. A son of the manse, he gained a scholarship to BNC, where he won the Newdigate and was President of the Union. Later he worked for Milner in South Africa, practised at the bar, was editorial adviser to Nelson's, occasionally edited *The Spectator*, wrote Atticus for *The Sunday Times*, enjoyed friendships with almost anybody who was anybody—and worked at them—and ended up as Governor-General of Canada. He also wrote 27 novels, seven volumes of short stories and 66 other books ranging from "shockers" like *The 39 Steps* to "serious" historical romances like *Midwinter* and biographies of Montrose, Cromwell and Augustus Caesar. The range of his interests and the extent of his output, astonishing though they are, have tended, I think, to diminish his reputation. We live in an age when it is considered rather bad form for a writer to produce more than, at most, one book in a year. Buchan frequently managed three, had five published in 1915 and another six the following year, and, of course, writing was only part of his life.

A hundred years after his birth he is known mostly as a writer of "rattling good yarns", bracketed, memorably for this purpose by Richard Usborne, with Sapper and Dornford Yates. Dr Daniell disapproves of this and considers Mr Usborne has selected "quite erroneously". Instead, he sets out to prove that Buchan was a serious and significant writer, at times in the tradition of Scott and Stevenson, and once, in *The Gap in the Curtain*, producing a book he considers "Huxleyish, complicated".

Buchan himself would have appreciated the compliment. In his, very good, autobiography, *Memory Hold The Door*, he

tends to disparage the shockers: "... huge fun ... I waited until the story had told itself and then wrote it down, and since it was already a finished thing, I wrote it fast". Of the historical books, he says that he took "a great deal of pains" and that they seem to him "the most successful of my attempts at imaginative creation".

Dr Daniell doesn't entirely go along with this because he thinks *Mr Standfast* Buchan's best book, but he is nevertheless very impressed with the historical ones while making some pretty extravagant claims for the thrillers. He insists, for example, that Buchan is a master of character drawing unlike others practising in the same genre ("Thrillers have shallow characters"). Yet are Hannay and Leithen really more memorable than Bulldog Drummond or Boy Pleydell? More sophisticated, better read certainly, but in their different ways just as stereotyped.

Perhaps because there has been a tendency to denigrate Buchan there are times when Dr Daniell exaggerates the claims for Buchan, which is self-defeating. The charges that Buchan was either anti-Semitic, because of a few anti-Jewish remarks by his characters or a latent homosexual because there are no women in *Prester John* and because his males enjoy each other's company, are surely too fatuous to merit quite the emphasis Dr Daniell gives them. Sometimes, too, his examples are unconvincing, and he uses some particularly trite lines to illustrate "The true Buchan gift; the sense of integration of opposites".

Nevertheless this is a scrupulously well documented book which has the considerable merit of reminding us what a very ambitious writer Buchan was, and what a very literate and literary figure. Its fault, prompted perhaps by the facetiousness of the Usborne approach, lies in taking Buchan a shade too seriously and too uncritically. It will not do, to write as he does in examining Buchan's approach to sex: "We must be careful not to blame Buchan: he is doing his best ...". If his best wasn't good enough then Dr Daniell should say so.

Tim Heald

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