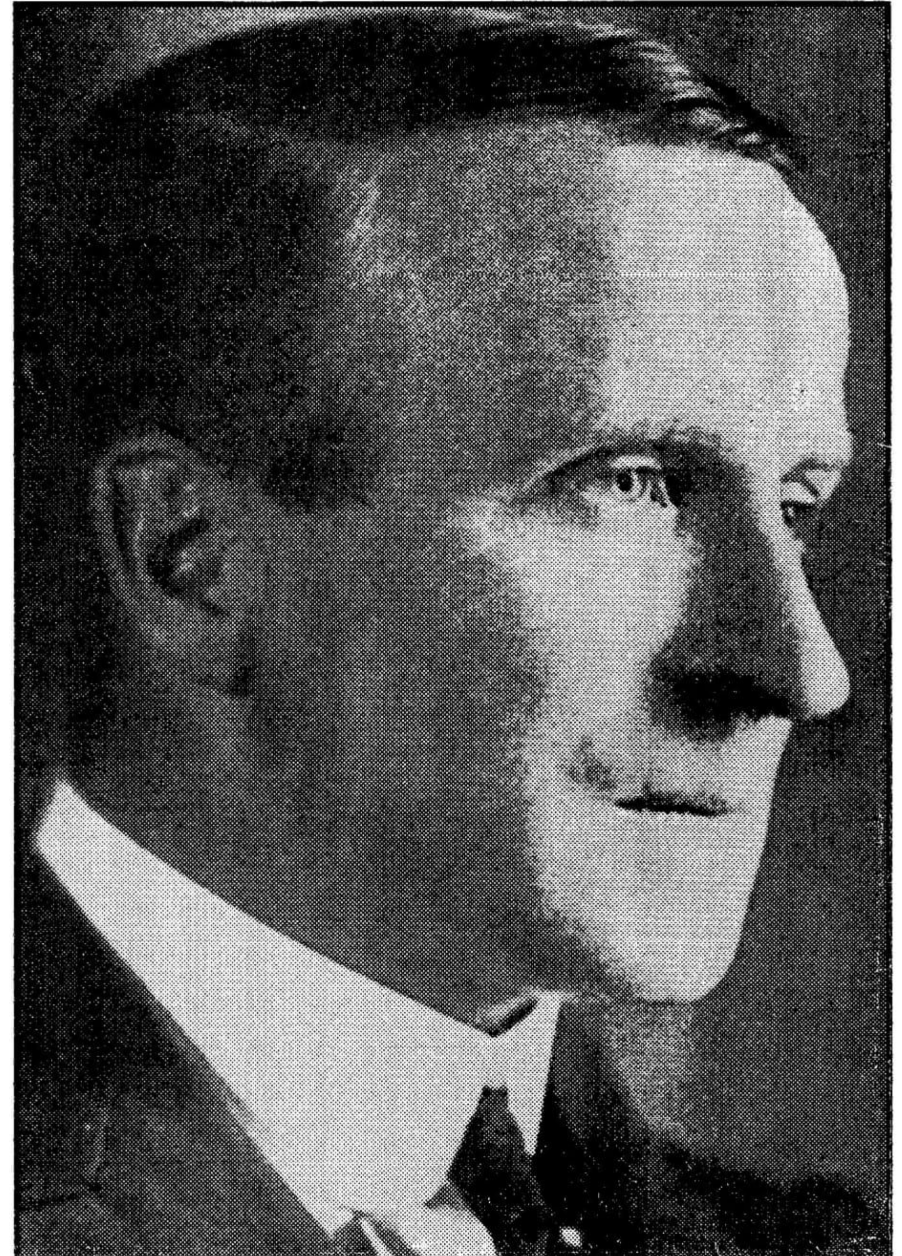
Six steps to Buchan

There's a lot more to the creator of Richard Hannay than meets the reader's eye, claims ***Christopher Harvie****, who has spent a lifetime plumbing the surprising depths of 'the Buchan enigma'*



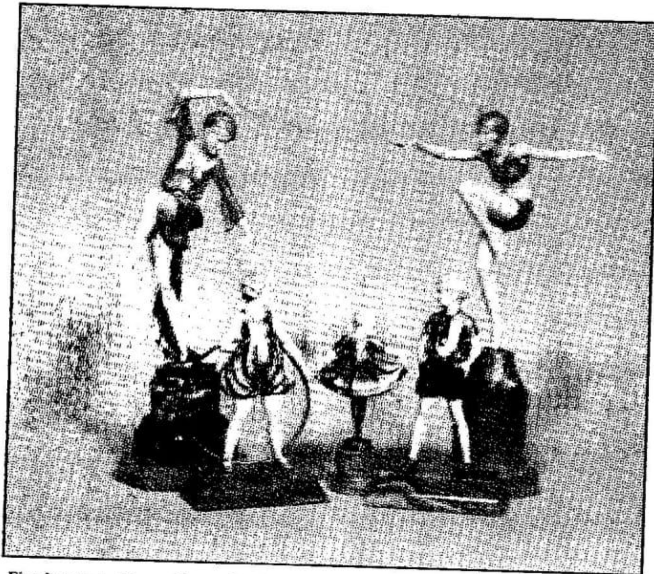
I MUST have read my first Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, at around 11, and remember identifying with Hannay fleeing across the Galloway moors, the Black Stone's aircraft wheeling overhead. Even at that stage it was the writer's engagement with his landscape — my landscape — of the Southern Uplands that mattered: the peat-hags, the bleached grasses, the endless, convex hills with their ribbons of roads and dykes. Thereafter, Buchan's novels became as much part of my regular habits as pipe-smoking, wearing old tweeds until they fall apart, and walking everywhere.

I am, however, disposed to differentiate between a "good" and a "bad" Buchan. The good Buchan was the man with the ability to suggest the grey distances of the Border hills or the smell of wood-smoke from an inn at evening in the Bavarian woods, *and* the anticipation of an omelette, ham and steins of cool beer. This and the possibility of *something happening*, the prospect that the road, smelling of an early-morning shower, would lead to "escapes and hurried journeys".

The "bad Buchan" was the habitué of West End clubs, where men with hyphenated names, titles and remarkable reputations got together to save civilisation (themselves) from dastardly Communistic agitators, cosmopolitan intellectuals, and the lower orders.

And Buchan on sex did not seem very instructive to those of us trying to catch up after a Scottish adolescence. All he could offer were girls with boyish figures to whom "getting in the club" meant getting Archie Roylance to admit that they had bags of pluck, and were as good as the chaps who were members. At the beginning

PHILLIPS SELL DECORATIVE ARTS



Five bronze and ivory figures by Ferdinand Preiss, estimate £3,000 - £5,000 each, (at back) and £1,000/£1,500 each (medium size) and £500 - £800 (centre).

Last-minute selected entries can still be accepted for our May sale of

20th CENTURY DECORATIVE ARTS

to include: **Lalique, Sabino, Daum, Galle, Martinware, Doulton, Moorcroft, Wemyss, Clarice Cliff, Wedgwood Fairyland, Art Deco & Art Nouveau Jewellery and Metalware, Arts & Crafts Furniture, Rugs, Figures by Preiss, Chiparus etc.**

Enquiries to **Neil Froggatt** on 031-225 2266.

Closing date **next Tuesday 18th April**. Please note: we are closed on Holiday Monday 17th.

NEXT WEEK'S SALES

Thurs. 20th April: General Furniture & Effects.
Fri. 21st April: FINE SILVER.
Glasgow: Tues. 18th April: Furniture, Ceramics, Glass, Pictures, Silver & Jewellery.

PHILLIPS SCOTLAND

65 George Street, Edinburgh EH2 2JL. Tel. 031-225 2266
207 Bath Street, Glasgow G2 4HD. Tel. 041-221 8377

Thirty five salerooms throughout the United Kingdom. Members of the Society of Fine Art Auctioneers.

adolescence. All he could offer were girls with boyish figures to whom "getting in the club" meant getting Archie Roylance to admit that they had bags of pluck, and were as good as the chaps who were members. At the beginning of *A Prince of the Captivity* there occurs the line (regarding the errant wife of the hero): "There were always plenty of men eager to mount her" — meaning "to loan her a horse". You see what I mean.

So although I'd read and admired Janet Adam Smith's fine biography, Buchan tended to remain what the Germans refer to as *Unterhaltungsliteratur* — entertainment literature — until well into the 1970s. I remember flipping through David Daniell's *Interpreter's House* when it first came out in 1976 and thinking that he took Buchan a bit too seriously by drawing parallels with Bunyan's imagery. But almost immediately on leaving Britain for Germany, I was commissioned to do an essay on Scott, and found Buchan's biography not just a model of what a critical biography should be, but one which suggested a man of immensely wide reading and judicious selectivity, with an eye for the obscure gem.

Another thing that got me under way was my interest in political fiction. Themes to do with political ideals and behaviour and organisation occured frequently enough in his novels to suggest that Buchan ought to be considered a major performer. During and after 1983 I re-read most of the "contemporary" novels with an interest which grew with every book I picked up. This took me back to the secondary literature, to my own reading in the history of Buchan's Scotland, and the following deductions from the evidence on offer began to emerge.

One: Buchan was an enormously erudite and allusive writer and the allusions were not inserted for fun. They work at a deeper level than the "good read" of the text.

Two: Buchan's attitude to the boundary between the civilised and the primitive was much more complicated than his character Lumley's "a thread, a pane of glass" in *The Power House* (1913), which Graham Greene believed to represent Buchan's own views.

Three: The business of story-telling was very important to Buchan and was bound up with a formal knowledge of philosophy, psychology and anthropology.

Four: Buchan's own efficient and undemonstrative personality masked tensions and ambivalences, personal and political.

Five: In a cultural sense, these crystallised in his ambiguous attitudes to Scotland, Britain and the Empire.

Six: Buchan had a highly-developed facility for irony and wit, a delight in double-bluff and an ability to conceal his tracks.

Let me give some examples in support of each:

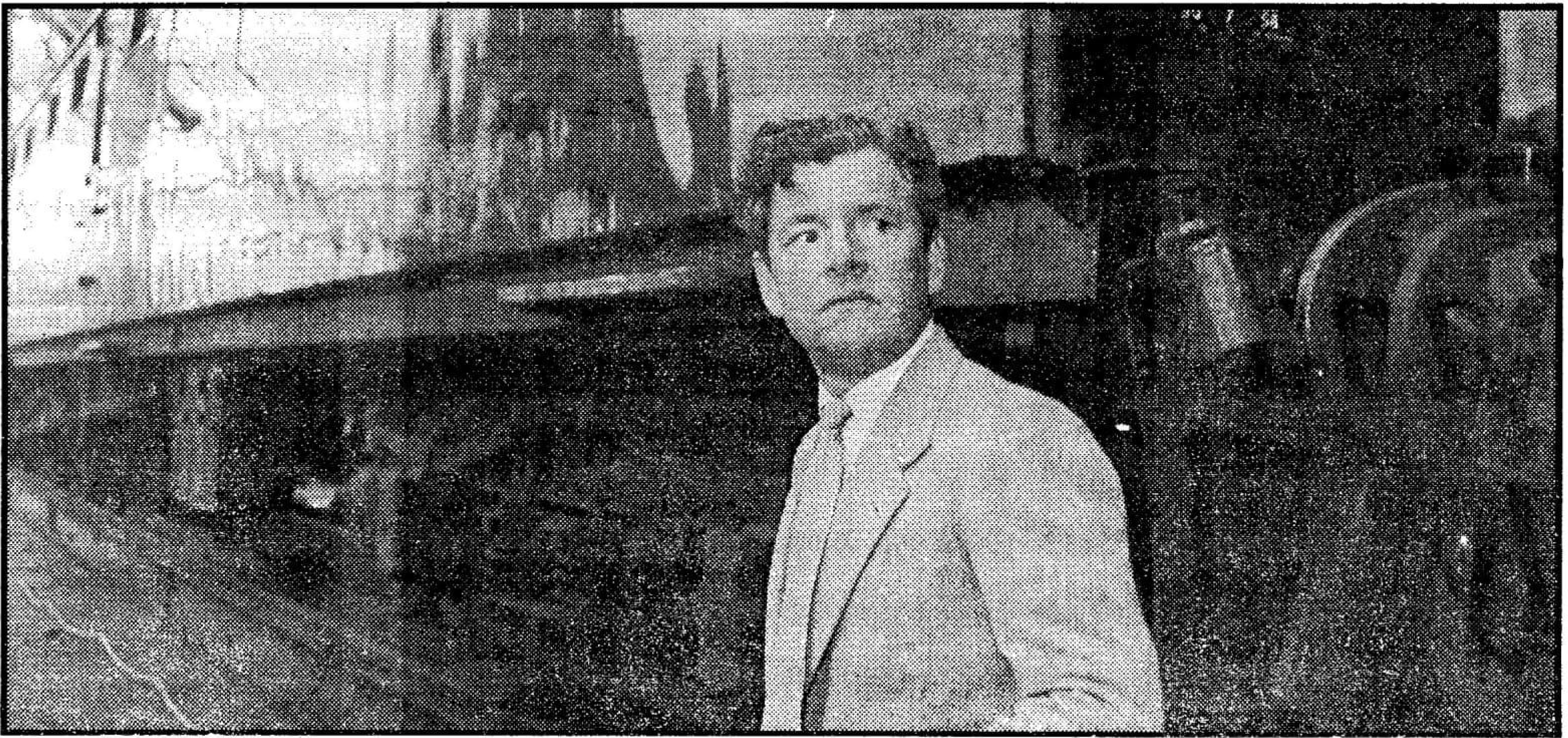
One: Buchan's allusiveness: "You think that civilisation is as solid as the earth you tread on. I tell you it is a thread, a pane of glass." This is perhaps the most famous line in all of Buchan, though we must remember it's the view of an arch-villain, not of the narrator: where did it come from?

I'd seen it before, in a bizarre scene ending H G Wells' *The New Machiavelli* (1910), in which Tory politicians discuss the collapse of civilisation while a London house burns about their ears. Mr Evesham (a thinly-disguised Arthur Balfour) speaks: "But what is civilisation? A mere thin net of habits and associations."

Is Lumley Balfour, to whom *The Power House* is dedicated? Lumley's conversation is everything that Buchan said Balfour's was — ingenious, super-cerebral, ruthless. But the allusion goes even further back, to Disraeli's last novel, *Falconet*, where a nameless Nihilist uses a similar line about modern civilisation "resolving itself into its constituent parts". We know that Buchan wanted to write a study of Disraeli, viewing him with a kind of fascinated horror as an example of Lumleyite "pure intellect" let loose in politics. And if we study Disraeli's own reading-matter, we end up with Carlyle's *Characteristics* of 1831 and his vision of the "thin crust" of civilisation giving way and plunging France into the revolution.

Two: "The civilised and the primitive" is a recurrent theme in Buchan, but it is the starting-point of further complexity, not a simplifying formula. In *The*

More than an entertainer: Buchan was not all evocative imagery



Buchan's most famous hero: Richard Hannay as he has been played on the screen by Kenneth More (above) and Robert Donat

Three Hostages (1924) Hannay encounters a psychologist, Dr Greenslade, who assures him that "the civilised is far simpler than the primeval". Buchan believed the "elementary and lawless" subconscious remained a complicating and irrationalising factor.

The theme is constant and can be related to the juxtaposition in 19th century Scotland of the advanced and the primitive: the railway porter who could chant the old ballads, the sailor returning from a modern steamer to a community still controlled by Old Testament religion.

Matters changed after World War I and Buchan realised that social breakdown had unleashed an enormous potential for atavistic destruction, through the rise of individuals unlimited by traditional social constraints. Civilisation really was under threat. I think he realised this particularly acutely because he had been at the centre of wartime intelligence and propaganda which acted on lines of total *Realpolitik*, and thus were a sort of barometer, indicating the precipitate decay of old conventions.

After the war, he set out in quest of a new point of social balance, in which ritual, locality and leadership would balance the class politics of industrial society, and such atavistic threats to it.

Three: One of Buchan's chief tools in this enterprise was his grounding in philosophy and anthropology. The fascination with psychoanalysis and anthropology is a common theme in the Scottish Renaissance, constantly recurring in Edwin Muir, Neil Gunn and Lewis Grassic Gibbon. Buchan's ultimate point of rest in *Sick Heart River* (1940), when the autobiographical Sir Edward Leithen decides to stay with the Hare Indians and organise their hunting at peril of his life, replicates the same idea of a "golden age" of human and ecological balance found in Gibbon and Gunn.

Thus Buchan's position is ecologically "holistic" and casts back to the philosophical system-building of the Scots tradition — away from utilitarian atomism and what (I've no doubt) he would have denounced as the linguistic nit-picking of the logical positivism which was coing to underlie English cultural life.

Four: Given Buchan's views about the England which sustained him, it would be very surprising if our auld acquaintance the *Doppelgänger* didn't make his appearance at this point. Buchan after World War I was so eminently the epitome of Unionist capitalist rationality that some-case the support offered to the infant Scottish Renaissance through his editing of *The Northern Muse* (1924) and his championing of MacDiarmid's first vernacular collection, *Sangschaw* (1924).

Was he, in fact, as well-adjusted as Janet Adam Smith and Catherine Carswell made out? Was his persistent ill-health totally physical, or was it partly psychosomatic? Did his Jungian remedies conceal a full-blown Freudian casebook of hang-ups, mainly concerning a domineering mother who nearly outlived him, and whom he had to write to — even while Governor-General of Canada — *daily?*

Five: "Is he a patriot for me?" the Austrian Emperor had remarked of an intelligence man in his multi-national empire. Where did Buchan's real loyalties lie? Richard Hannay appears to "touch base" at Fosse, his Cotswold home. Did Buchan, at nearby Elsfield, do the same?

Let me take one central symbol of "England under threat" from the inter-war years, and set it against the "Englishness" that Buchan expressed. This is the image of the mansion-house menaced by the new order — and one thinks of its use in Joyce Cary,

YET there's a Buchan short story, *Full Circle* (1928) involving Leithen, in which a beautiful Caroline mansion in the Cotswolds corrupts its new Fabian socialist owners. They start by being activists, rather silly but basically well-intentioned. They end selfish, fat and credulous, and Leithen/Buchan's dismissal of them is totally without sympathy. The "wicked little house" has done its work.

By the time of *Sick Heart River*, England seems to have dropped completely out of what Janet Adam Smith has called the "root of the matter" of Buchan's moral universe. Leithen has returned to an ecumenical version of his ancestral Calvinism; the businessman Galliard, whom he has travelled into the heart of the Canadian north to save, has come to terms with what it is to be French-Canadian; his guides the Frizell brothers — Highlander-Indian half-breeds — have like the Gaelic hero Sweeney gone mad in the forests, but have returned to sanity and a sense of their own worth. Offered the chance to go back to wartime England, Leithen refuses . . .

Buchan's continual invocation of that classic document of English religious radicalism, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress.* This still seems to function in late Buchan, but the pilgrimage leads *away* from England — just as it has done with another writer who has made the spy novel into a commentary on the Condition of England, John le Carré.

Six: One Chinese box, once opened, reveals another, and so on; but the range of the man, his continuing popularity, the way in which he remains a key to our understanding of the peculiar national experience of Scotland in the epoch of Union and Empire, makes it important to crack the enigma.

Buchan's was an odd, and in many ways an unsatisfactory career, and he seems to have realised this, in a tight-lipped way. He had recognised the role that creative writers had played in the Scottish identity — Scott most of all, and MacDiarmid in his own day — but his own interventions had limited success. But neither had he succeeded in English politics, while his translation to Canada (which he probably could have managed in the 1920s) came as his health was failing.

So my hunch is that, in his later novels, he communicates his critique — of his own career, of the causes he served — in code. The imagery, as ever, is that of the test. The competitor, in apparently good shape, is none other than the British character. The landscape to be struggled over is faultlessly drawn, but the code suggests a further, subterranean dimension: the green roads, the caves, the secret places of *Midwinter* (1923). And the competitor?

There's a short story, *The Loathly Opposite* (1928) which he wrote about cryptographers in World War I — I think one of the first ever stories by any writer which deals with the "shop", the hard graft of intelligence work — in which the leading British decrypter envisages his German opponent as a ruthless, sensual woman. Long after the war a colleague discovers the German to be a humane and sensitive medical man, the death of whose young son Reinmar in the "starvation months" led to his making the mistake which enabled the Englishman to crack his cipher . . .

The German doctor now has the Englishman under psychoanalytic treatment, but is not prepared to unmask himself. The Englishman needs the illusion, the "necessary lie", if his character is to hold