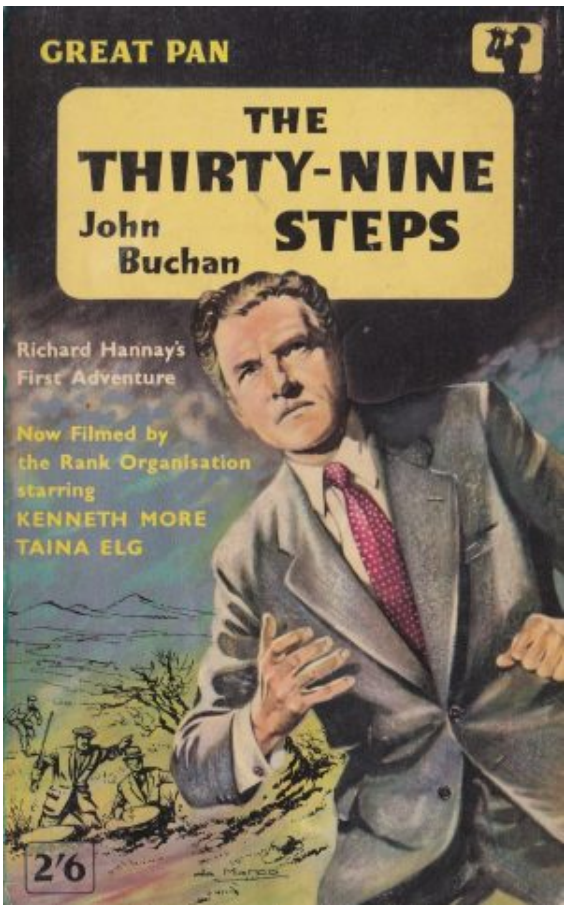
Lost in the Landscape: From Balfour to Bond

By Kirsti Wishart

One of the recurring and somewhat less tragic headlines that appeared during the early stages of the pandemic was Covid-19's ability to lockdown the most famous of wandering Scots, James Bond. That even such an international man of action didn't have the might to open up our empty cinemas brought home the cultural reach both of the icon and the virus. Bond's jet-setting, the lust for the exotic, suggests a nostalgia for Empire and a time when the white male hero had freedom to roam and take full advantage of the stretches of pink marked on a map of the world. His lineage – along with the likes of MacGyver and Jason Bourne, those supremely capable men able to extricate themselves from dead ends using whatever means come to hand – can be traced back to John Buchan's Richard Hannay.

A significant factor in regarding Buchan's work as an important contribution to propagandising the Empire is the narrative drive of his fiction, which sees his protagonist overcoming any obstacle placed in their path. The train decorating the front of Oxford World's Classics and Wordsworth Classics editions of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is appropriate not only due to it being Hannay's means of travelling to and from Scotland in the novella but also emblematic of his ease of travel on foot across the Galloway landscape. Although he runs the continual risk of being captured and undergoes instances of physical hardship, what adds to a curiously comforting narrative thrill is that the reader has little doubt Hannay will succeed.



The Thirty-Nine Steps (1960)

His ability to emerge from every life-threatening situation, to carry on until his goal is achieved despite insurmountable odds, suggests there is some higher authority on his side. He is the embodiment of the Western imperialist hero who, with Providence and the might of the Empire behind him, is able to traverse any terrain, accessing all areas. Freed from the blurred boundaries of urban life, Hannay finds his time in the wilds of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* revitalising, munching on ginger biscuits and, at thirty-seven, frequently referencing how he feels like a boy again. Although he spent his adult life in South Africa, he is completely at home in the Scottish landscape. Throughout his adventures, he has absolutely no difficulty in mastering any landscape he faces, exercising instant control over unfamiliar territory. This reaches almost parodic levels in the sequel, *Greenmantle*, when he travels with almost supernatural ease from Germany to Turkey thanks to a passing barge.

In his memoir, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, Buchan describes the potentially re-invigorating effects of the opportunities afforded by the British Empire when he recounts his travels to South Africa, working with Lord Milner to help with the reconstruction following the Boer War:

> *In London I had slipped into a sort of spiritual middle age. Now, at the age of twenty-five, youth came back to me like a spring tide, and every day on the voyage to the Cape saw me growing younger. As soon as we have passed the Bay of Biscay, I seemed to be in a new world, with new scents, new sounds, new sights. I was intoxicated with novelties of which hitherto I had only glimpses in books. The blue days in tropical waters were a revelation of bodily and mental ease. I recovered the same exhilaration which long ago, as a boy on the Fife coast, I had got from the summer sea.*[1]

Here, as with Hannay, physical and mental satisfaction become one and the same. What is also striking is the solipsism apparent, the absence of any sense of the possibility of coming into contact with the unknowable, a difference that might prove physically or mentally challenging. Despite the invocation of 'new scents, new sounds, new sights', everything is mediated through or absorbed into either Buchan's prior reading or childhood memory. As in Hannay's adventures, the author becomes the imperial 'I/Eye', the single source of narrative authority responsible for mapping out the territory he encounters.

It is perhaps surprising then to discover the extent to which Buchan's approach contrasts with the work of his literary forebear in the romantic adventure tradition, Robert Louis Stevenson. In Stevenson's travel writing there is an apparent desire to lose the 'I', to become at one with the landscape rather than seeking to command it. His early writing demonstrates a disavowal of the persona of the Victorian traveller claiming an all-knowledgeable position in relation to any new land. One of the most singular passages in *An Inland Voyage* relates to his pleasure in achieving a complete loss of Self while canoeing, remarking, 'There was less *me* and more *not-me* than I was accustomed to expect.'[2] In this sense, Stevenson's work bears comparison with Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain*. Rather than focusing on the mountain as a challenge to be conquered, Shepherd's memoir plants the reader within its textures, suggesting we would benefit more from appreciating it mindfully, sinking into the environment rather than marching across it.

Later, when Stevenson ventured to the South Pacific and set about attempting to produce an overarching non-fiction account of the area, he soon realised the folly and hubris of such an encyclopaedic aim. So overwhelming was the amount of

material he accumulated, he despaired of ever completing it, writing to Sidney Colvin, 'I want you to understand about this South Sea Book. The job is immense; I stagger under material.'[3] The work's original title was to have been *The South Seas*, promising a definitive rendering of the islands dotted about the Pacific Ocean. The title change to *In the South Seas* draws attention to the presence of the traveller as author within the landscape and so to the subjectivity of the account rather than claiming objective, comprehensive knowledge.

This admission that an author might become lost in a landscape, granting only one particular perspective to be challenged by any number of other voices, is carried through into Stevenson's fiction. When reading *Kidnapped*, the extent to which David Balfour falls short of Hannay's Bear Grylls-like competency is remarkable. David is far less sure-footed than Richard Hannay, the ground constantly shifting beneath his feet – literally so when he nearly falls to his death in the House of Shaws – and his lack of command makes him all the more sympathetic and identifiable as a result.

In contrast to Hannay, the colonial outsider who feels immediately at home in the Scottish landscape, David is an exile in his own land. This is amply demonstrated in the chapter 'The Islet' which he describes as 'the most unhappy part of my adventures'.[4] After finding himself stranded on the tiny island of Erraid, his experience is far removed from a Crusoe-like sense of self-sufficiency with Defoe's work knowingly referenced by Stevenson:

> *In all the books I have read of people cast away, they had either their pockets full of tools, or a chest of things would be thrown upon the beach along with them, as if on purpose. My case was very different. I had nothing in my pockets but money and Alan's silver button; and being inland bred, I was as much short of knowledge as means.*[5]

Here Balfour is all at sea, pathetically so, until rescued by the 'Other', in this case a small boat containing a crew of Gaelic-speaking fishermen. They take great delight in informing him that instead of miserable days vomiting up shellfish and pining for the warm fires of Iona he could simply have waded to comfort.

Statue of Alan Breck and David Balfour in Edinburgh, photo credit: Ronnie Leask

Rather than ably conquering the rough landscape he finds himself in and using it to his advantage, the chapters dealing with his and Alan Breck's flight across the heather have a visceral immediacy in the intensity given to the description of the physical and mental hardship David endures:

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Stevenson further wrong-foots the reader by subverting the expectation of the hero's triumphant return at the end of *Kidnapped*, suggesting that the true value of a quest lies not in any material or financial reward but rather the friendships and experience gained along the way. The ending is striking in its bleakness: David, far from experiencing the joy we might expect of a hero returning to claim

his inheritance, is devastated at losing the companionship of his best friend, Alan Breck, and freely admits he could break down in tears. Rather than Hannay's robust sure-footedness, Stevenson offers an alternative, vulnerable vision of masculinity, one that admits doubt and frailty and acknowledges that suffering and supposed weakness can lead to a deeply felt understanding of the need for the emotional support of others.

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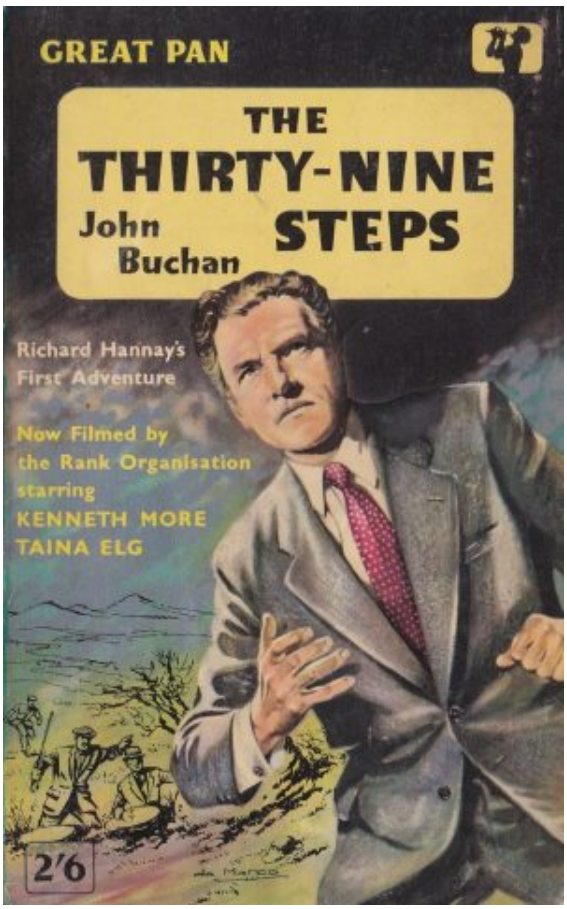

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