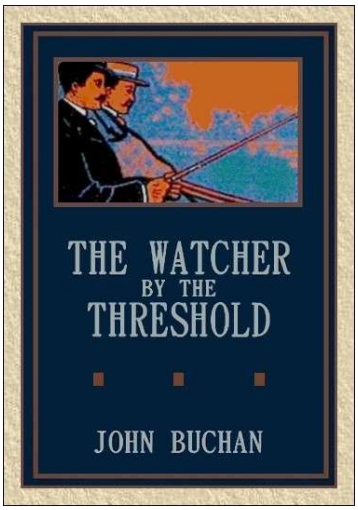
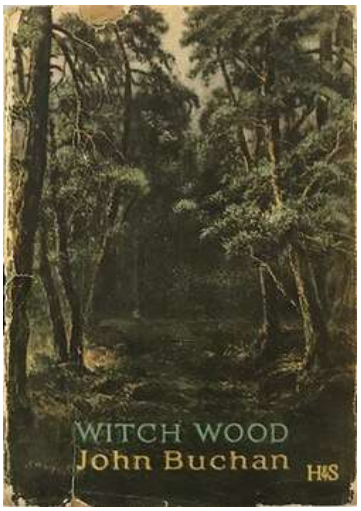
John Buchan and the Supernatural

By James Machin





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In terms of literary provenance, there is of course the indelible stamp of his nationality, specifically in the debt to both Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson. Buchan regarded Scott's 'Wandering Willie's Tale' (1824, from *Redgauntlet*) as 'immortal' and the influence of both Scott and Stevenson is very much evident in Buchan's earlier Scotland-set stories;[3] 'At the Outgoing of the Tide' (1902), for example, is clearly in thrall to Stevenson's 1881 tale of Highlands diablerie 'Thrawn Janet'. Even so, in one of Buchan's two stories for *The Yellow Book*, 'At the Article of Death' (1897), the young author applies a perspicacious and even modernist psychological acuity to the metaphysical drama experienced by the shepherd in his death throes.

Buchan's biographer Andrew Lownie has confirmed Buchan's reading of Arthur Machen, for a meeting of a Brasenose literary society, and Machen is clearly the impetus behind Buchan's 1899 novella 'No-Man's Land' – Machen's conceit of sinister pre-human hominin survival in the Black Mountains of Wales is neatly transplanted by Buchan into the sort of isolated Scottish landscape he grew up in.[4] It is Richard Hannay, rather than Buchan himself, who demonstrates an at least passing familiarity with M. R. James, in *Mr. Standfast*, referring to someone 'reading a book called the Ghost Stories of an Antiquary'.[5]

Buchan's reports as a young reader for the publisher John Lane also reveal a remarkably clear sense of what the modern weird tale should achieve. Assessing a manuscript titled *The Fratricide*, Buchan warned against 'mere horror', insisting that genuine art must rest on 'some mystery, intrigue, or some human passion of love or sacrifice.'[6] He admired Stevenson, Poe and Machen for fusing terror with moral or emotional resonance. By contrast, he praised C. F. Keary's *'Twixt Dog and Wolf* for its 'wonderful power of suggesting vague mystery' – language that anticipates Buchan's own later emphasis on atmosphere over shock.[7] Even in his early twenties he had defined the aesthetic of restraint and psychological suggestion that would distinguish his later supernatural fiction.

As is true of so many of his contemporaries, it is Edgar Allan Poe who not only demonstrated the ideal type of subject matter for the short story, but also how to ideally write them. Buchan writes of Poe that 'to no other American writer has it been given to exercise so profound an influence at once on English and French literature'.[8] For a writer like Buchan to have first appeared in *The Yellow Book* demonstrates very well Poe's profound and variegated influence on both Decadence and the popular short story, from Baudelaire and Huysmans to Stevenson and Conan Doyle. Poe possessed what Buchan regarded as a total mastery of technique, one that grounded his wilder visions, giving his stories 'an imaginative coherence and verisimilitude'.[9] Buchan considered Poe to be not only a 'among the masters of the short story', but 'in his own *genre* perhaps to the highest place'.[10]

If both as a writer and a publisher Buchan took the short story seriously, one should further adduce his novels *The Dancing Floor* (1926) and *Witch Wood* (1927) – both freighted with spectral horror and spiritual threat if not explicitly supernatural. Moreover, Christopher Hitchens, writing in the *Atlantic* in 2004, identified a preoccupation with the occult and the numinous as a thread running through *all* of Buchan's fiction: it 'provides a continual undertone of fascination, attractive and repulsive in almost equal degrees.'[11]

Implicit in Hitchens's observation is the tangled question of genre. Buchan emerged as an author when neat demarcations between literary genres and notions of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow were still in the process of being formulated. A writer of populist appeal, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, could turn

his hand to a domestic drama with one work and then a ghost story the next, but then again, so could a more 'literary' writer like Henry James and before him George Eliot. A further complication to our understanding of the supernatural fiction of the period is the fact that the borders between scientific materialism and metaphysical speculation were as porous as those between this world and 'the beyond' were supposed by some, including Buchan, to be at the time. Buchan remarks approvingly of Edgar Allan Poe that Poe 'reveals all around us the shadowy domain of the back-world, and behind our smug complacency the shrieking horror of the unknown'.[12]

Thus, in several of Buchan's supernatural stories, it is clear (at least to me) that he is writing of what he considers possibilities, rather than the fantastic – inspired by what, in *Mr. Standfast*, Richard Hannay refers to matter-of-factly as those 'unexplainable things that happen to everybody once or twice in a lifetime'.[13] John Buchan's own encounters with the 'unexplainable' included an encounter with the 'goat-foot god, or something of the kind' in the Bavarian Alps in 1910, resulting in a terror-stricken scramble down the mountainside; a literal 'Panic'. The sensation was not a novel one for Buchan, who had in childhood experienced 'fits of panic in the silence and solitude' when on fishing expeditions among the glens. In both fiction and memoir, Buchan alights upon the classical notion of the *temenos* to interpret such experiences, perhaps most strikingly in his South Africa-set 'The Grove of Ashtaroth' (1910). Originally published in *Blackwood's*, it is an excellent demonstration of how Buchan can recast and heighten an actual experience – here, an encounter with 'a place enchanted and consecrate' in the North Transvaal – into an effective dramatic narrative.

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terribly fragile and vulnerable thing; a theme much at odds with the misleading stereotype of Buchan as a purveyor of hearty, uncomplicated boys'-own adventure fiction.

Buchan's anxiety about the 'thinness' of the separation of civilisation and barbarism has been frequently observed in the context of his thrillers, but the breaches were often psychological and subjective as well as social and political. As well as providing him with the framework of the *temenos* with which to interpret his own responses to certain landscapes, his classical education and the early mentorship of Gilbert Murray (1866–1957), author of *The Four Stages of Greek Religion*(1913) are clearly discernible more generally in Buchan's fiction. Regius Professor of Greek between 1908 and 1936, Murray was also twice President of the Society for Psychical Research, a crossover of interests also found in Buchan's fiction. Expanded from a 1914 short story, 'Basilissa', *The Dancing Floor* utilises Buchan's classical scholarship and engagement with Murray's theories to powerful effect. The English characters (including Buchan mainstay Edward Leithen) are drawn into an obscure, pre-Christian religious ceremony on a remote Greek island. The youthful protagonists emerge, after a spiritual ordeal, as somehow transformed by the experience; there is again the suggestion that deep wellsprings of metaphysical agency interact in mysterious ways with our own material world, for ill yet also for good.[14]

Roger John Clarke has identified a further source for *The Dancing Floor* in a book reviewed by Buchan for the *Spectator*, John Cuthbert Lawson's *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* (1910): 'In his review of Lawson's book Buchan highlights "a remarkable story of a human sacrifice in the island of Santorini during the Greek War of Independence" (1821–32), in which "the victim was sent as a messenger to the gods"'.[15] It is difficult today to read this passage and not be reminded of *The Wicker Man* (1973) and the various iterations of 'folk horror' it has spawned. Buchan's *Witch Wood* is similarly difficult not to retroactively place in this genre. It was a novel that clearly impressed H. P. Lovecraft, maybe due to Buchan's mastery of atmosphere over explicitly supernatural incident. Lovecraft lauded the 'tremendous force' of Buchan's depiction of 'a survival of the evil Sabbat in a lonely district of Scotland', commending his 'description of the black forest with the evil stone, and of the terrible cosmic adumbrations when the horror is finally extirpated'.[16] (He also

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Buchan’s final novel *Sick Heart River* is also one of his finest. It was published posthumously in 1941, the year following its author’s death. It is very much a product of his final years as Governor General of Canada, and concerns a dying Leithen on his last adventure into the wilderness of Quebec. Yet again it is freighted with the supernatural and even comparable thematically with ‘At the Article of Death’, written so many decades earlier. Both concern a metaphysical struggle in the face of imminent mortality. Again, too, Leithen’s inner crisis is both mirrored and metabolised through his engagement with the landscape. As with the protagonist of ‘The Grove of Ashtaroth’, the ‘racial’ inheritances of the novel’s characters steer their response to the landscape and its influence on them. *Sick Heart River* is a meditative and quiet novel, though still thoroughly infused with Buchan’s sense of the numinous.

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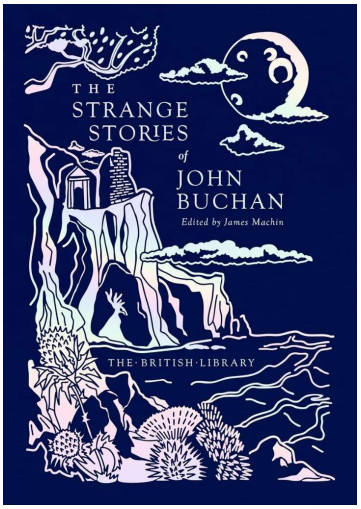

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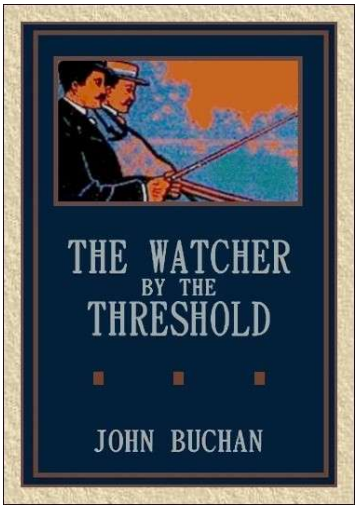

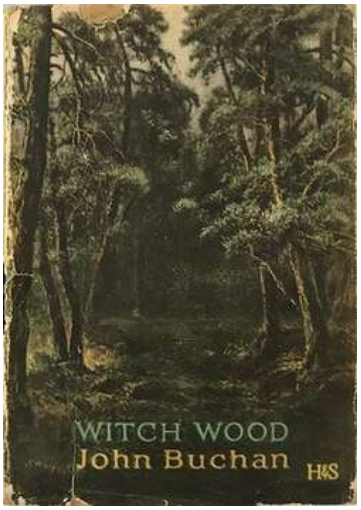

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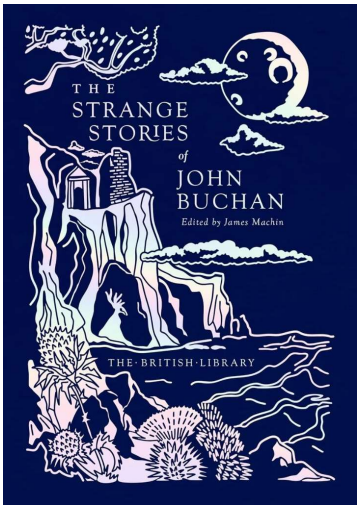

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