John Buchan and Tweeddale

By Ursula Buchan

In John Buchan's book of reminiscences, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, written in 1939, he wrote about his teenage years, towards the end of the nineteenth century:

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It was not to be; there were not enough openings for a very clever and ambitious son of the manse in the Lowlands, but Tweeddale never lost its deep appeal for him, and it haunts much of his fiction.

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Tweeddale was never, in fact, his childhood home, but the Reverend John Buchan and his wife, Helen, née Masterton, had been brought up there, and summer holidays, first from the coast of Fife at Pathhead and then from Glasgow, were spent at Broughton Green, where Helen had been born, and the couple first met.

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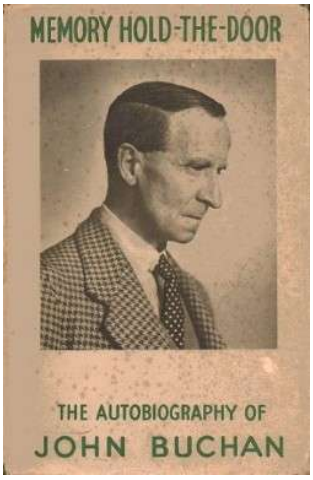
Spending summer holidays in Broughton taught Buchan to love the green, rounded hills, and sparkling waters of upper Tweeddale, not only for its quiet beauty and solitude, but for its clashing, stirring past. The countryside was full of the echoes from legend: Merlin, the sixth-century political leader rather than wizard, supposedly had been killed at Drumelzier and buried under a thorn tree where the Powsail Burn flows into Tweed, while the roughly contemporary Arthur may have fought a battle around Cademuir Hill, close to Peebles. In the Middle Ages, the ferocious clans of Tweedie and Veitch had stolen each other's cattle and fought bloody skirmishes. The Jacobite army had marched past the door of Broughton Green on the way from Edinburgh to Derby in 1745. For centuries, almost down to Buchan's day, hardy, hard-fighting men had driven cattle along the drove road from Falkirk to the English markets over the bridge in Peebles and across the lonely hills.



Buchan described those summer holidays in *Memory Hold-the-Door*. He was, by then, Governor-General of Canada, chronically ill with a duodenal ulcer, weighing only eight-and-a-half stone, and having to spend at least one day a week in bed, but his memories of his childhood holidays in Peeblesshire seem to have been particularly bright and pleasant to him: 'In those [summer] weeks we never gave our home a thought, and with bitter reluctance we returned to it. The Borders were to us a holy land which it would have been sacrilege to try to join on to our common life' (p. 21). He describes the country round Broughton that he remembered from early childhood:

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> *mill-dam lined with yellow flags, a water-meadow full of corncrakes [alas no more], the confluence of the burn and the 'water' and the progress of the said water by fir-clad knolls and young plantations and bracken down to Tweed. (p. 22)*

The Buchans had six children in all, and they were a markedly lively and adventurous bunch, regularly getting into mischief, led by their eldest brother, but they were extremely devoted and affectionate, both to each other and to their parents, their dreamy father and their daemonically energetic mother. The children were brought up in the shadow of the pulpit, with religion playing a major part in their lives, but it was not the gloomy Calvinism of stereotype that Mr Buchan preached, but a joyful wonder in the greatness and glory of God and the natural world that He created. Buchan considered that he had had a rigorous, organised, cultured and very happy upbringing.

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In May 1907, not long before the couple were married, Susan Grosvenor visited the Buchans in Peebles for the first time and stayed at Bank House, where by now Buchan's siblings, Walter and Anna, lived. It was quite a culture shock for her since, although Buchan had tried to teach her some Scots dialect during their courtship, she had the greatest difficulty in understanding his farming uncles. But she took most warmly to the Buchans, and in correspondence and later her memoirs she left a vivid picture of her first visit to Bank House.

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On the Governor-General's frequent travels across Canada, his aides were briefed to be in on the look-out for people originally from the Borders. When he was visiting a remote community in southern Saskatchewan, to look at a new dam, he was told that there was an elderly Tweeddale couple, who had emigrated decades before, and who had driven a hundred miles in an old car to 'take a look at John Buchan'. He talked to them in Lowland Scots, while the tears rolled down their cheeks.

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where a number of short stories as well as three historical novels are set. The novels are *John Burnet of Barns* (the wanderings of the eponymous hero show how much the young Buchan was influenced by Robert Louis Stevenson)*, The Lost Lady of Old* Years, (the lost lady is the wife of the man, Mr Secretary Murray of Broughton, who turned King's evidence and betrayed Bonnie Prince Charlie) and *Witch Wood*, which is set around Broughton in the time of the Covenanters in the seventeenth century. Buchan considered *Witch Wood* his best novel, and many people agree. Nor should we forget his very fine biography of *Sir Walter Scott*, published in the centenary of Scott's death in 1932, which showed how well he knew the country that had nurtured the great Scottish novelist.

Buchan wrote a dozen or so war poems in the summer of 1917, while grieving for his brother Alastair, who had died at the Battle of Arras, and they are all written in Borders dialect, which indicates to me that, when expressing heartfelt emotion, he found it easier to write in the language he had learned on his youthful holidays.

And he set a number of short stories in Peeblesshire. When Buchan was only twenty-three, his first collection of short stories, *Grey Weather: Moorland Tales of My Own People*, was published by The Bodley Head. The fifteen stories are hymns of love and praise to the loneliest parts of Tweeddale and the people who inhabited it. He drew directly on the speech patterns, phrases and dialect words of the shepherds and drovers he met at market and on the hill, and on tales they told him. The plots are sometimes thin or incredible, but the writing is robust, and, best of all, they are fragrant with the scent of heather and gale in hot summer days, when they are not chilling from the nightmarish terror experienced by a traveller benighted in the hills.

These stories show how much he had absorbed in his youth of his environment. Even when so young, he was already exhibiting the marked 'nympholepsy', that is love for water, that he confessed to in his last, unfinished work on fishing, *Pilgrim's Rest*.[2] He had learned to describe everything from a deep salmon pool to a raging torrent to a dripping mossy stone.

I began with *Memory Hold-the-Door*, since the book most obviously holds the key to how Buchan felt about Tweeddale.

> *Most of us have certain childish memories which we can never repeat, since*

> *they represent moments when life was in utter harmony and sense and spirit perfectly attuned. Such memories for me are all of Tweedside, and I have welcomed with delight any maturer experience which had a hint of their magic. (p. 28)*

He writes about moorland wandering on a hot July morning, of a long tramp on a drove-road in the teeth of the wind and rain, and of Sabbath evening prayers in his grandparents' house. He goes on,

> *All my life I have been haunted – and cheered – by these recollections: the green summit against the unclouded blue above a populous friendly world, the buffets of rain on the moorland road, the drone of my grandfather's voice in the Sabbath twilight. Each was a summons to action. But there was a fourth which spoke only of peace. This was the coming down from the hills, very hungry and foot-sore, to a whitewashed farm on the brink of the heather, where, in a parlour looking out on a garden of gooseberries and phloxes, with a glimpse beyond of running water, I was stayed with tea and new-baked scones and apple-and-rowanberry jelly. Then I demanded nothing more of life except to be allowed to go on living in that quiet world of pastoral. The dying shepherd asked not for the conventional Heaven, but for 'Bourhope at a reasonable rent' and, if Paradise be a renewal of what was happy and innocent in our earthly days, mine will be some such golden afternoon within sight and sound of Tweed. (p. 29)*

When his brother Willie died in 1912, Buchan wrote what is probably his most famous, certainly his most anthologised, poem, 'Fratri Delectissimo' or 'most delightful brother'. He used the poem as the dedication to both his biographies of Montrose, in 1913 and 1928. And whenever I read it, I think of a particular spot, on Broughton Heights, which is part of the John Buchan Way. It is a wonderful walking route of thirteen miles from Broughton to Peebles via Stobo across the hills and valleys of Peeblesshire.

'Fratri dilectissimo' seems to me to contain so much of how Buchan felt about his youth in Tweeddale, and his early-learned historical sensibility, which is so evident to anyone who reads him.

> *When we were little, wandering boys,*

And every hill was blue and high,
On ballad ways and martial joys
We fed our fancies, you and I.
With Bruce we crouched in bracken shade,
With Douglas charged the Paynim foes;
And oft in moorland noons I played
Colkitto to your grave Montrose.

The obliterating seasons flow–
They cannot kill our boyish game.
Though creeds may change and kings may go,
Yet burns undimmed the ancient flame.
While young men in their pride make haste
The wrong to right, the bond to free,
And plant a garden in the waste,
Still rides our Scottish chivalry.

One boon the fates relenting gave,
Not where the scented hill-wind blows
From cedar thickets lies your grave,
Nor 'mid the steep Himalayan snows.
Night calls the stragglers to the nest,
And at long last 'tis home indeed
For your far-wandering feet to rest
For ever by the crooks of Tweed.

Dear heart, in that serener air,
If blessed souls may backward gaze,
Some slender nook of memory spare
For our old happy moorland days.
I sit alone, and musing fills
My breast with pain that shall not die
till once again o'er greener hills
We ride together, you and I.

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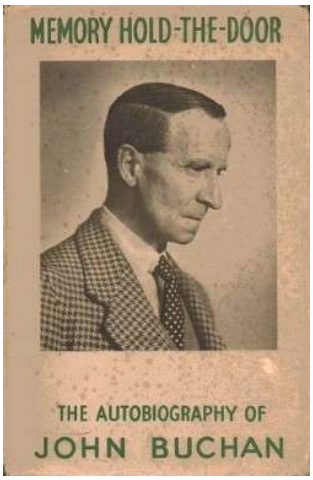

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he knew the country that had nurtured the great Scottish novelist.

Buchan wrote a dozen or so war poems in the summer of 1917, while grieving for his brother Alastair, who had died at the Battle of Arras, and they are all written in Borders dialect, which indicates to me that, when expressing heartfelt emotion, he found it easier to write in the language he had learned on his youthful holidays.

And he set a number of short stories in Peeblesshire. When Buchan was only twenty-three, his first collection of short stories, *Grey Weather: Moorland Tales of My Own People*, was published by The Bodley Head. The fifteen stories are hymns of love and praise to the loneliest parts of Tweeddale and the people who inhabited it. He drew directly on the speech patterns, phrases and dialect words of the shepherds and drovers he met at market and on the hill, and on tales they told him. The plots are sometimes thin or incredible, but the writing is robust, and, best of all, they are fragrant with the scent of heather and gale in hot summer days, when they are not chilling from the nightmarish terror experienced by a traveller benighted in the hills.

These stories show how much he had absorbed in his youth of his environment. Even when so young, he was already exhibiting the marked 'nympholepsy', that is love for water, that he confessed to in his last, unfinished work on fishing, *Pilgrim's Rest*.[4] He had learned to describe everything from a deep salmon pool to a raging torrent to a dripping mossy stone.

I began with *Memory Hold-the-Door*, since the book most obviously holds the key to how Buchan felt about Tweeddale.

> *Most of us have certain childish memories which we can never repeat, since they represent moments when life was in utter harmony and sense and spirit perfectly attuned. Such memories for me are all of Tweedside, and I have welcomed with delight any maturer experience which had a hint of their magic. (p. 28)*

He writes about moorland wandering on a hot July morning, of a long tramp on a drove-road in the teeth of the wind and rain, and of Sabbath evening prayers in his grandparents' house. He goes on,

> *All my life I have been haunted – and cheered – by these recollections: the green summit against the unclouded blue above a populous friendly world, the buffets of rain on the moorland road, the drone of my grandfather's voice in the Sabbath twilight. Each was a summons to action. But there was a fourth which spoke only of peace. This was the coming down from the hills, very hungry and foot-sore, to a whitewashed farm on the brink of the heather, where, in a parlour looking out on a garden of gooseberries and phloxes, with a glimpse beyond of running water, I was stayed with tea and new-baked scones and apple-and-rowanberry jelly. Then I demanded nothing more of life except to be allowed to go on living in that quiet world of pastoral. The dying shepherd asked not for the conventional Heaven, but for 'Bourhope at a reasonable rent' and, if Paradise be a renewal of what was happy and innocent in our earthly days, mine will be some such golden afternoon within sight and sound of Tweed. (p. 29)*

When his brother Willie died in 1912, Buchan wrote what is probably his most famous, certainly his most anthologised, poem, 'Fratri Delectissimo' or 'most delightful brother'. He used the poem as the dedication to both his biographies of Montrose, in 1913 and 1928. And whenever I read it, I think of a particular spot, on Broughton Heights, which is part of the John Buchan Way. It is a wonderful walking route of thirteen miles from Broughton to Peebles via Stobo across the hills and valleys of Peeblesshire.

'Fratri dilectissimo' seems to me to contain so much of how Buchan felt about his youth in Tweeddale, and his early-learned historical sensibility, which is so evident to anyone who reads him.

> *When we were little, wandering boys,*
> *And every hill was blue and high,*
> *On ballad ways and martial joys*
> *We fed our fancies, you and I.*
> *With Bruce we crouched in bracken shade,*
> *With Douglas charged the Paynim foes;*
> *And oft in moorland noons I played*
> *Colkitto to your grave Montrose.*
>
> *The obliterating seasons flow–*

They cannot kill our boyish game.
Though creeds may change and kings may go,
Yet burns undimmed the ancient flame.
While young men in their pride make haste
The wrong to right, the bond to free,
And plant a garden in the waste,
Still rides our Scottish chivalry.

One boon the fates relenting gave,
Not where the scented hill-wind blows
From cedar thickets lies your grave,
Nor 'mid the steep Himalayan snows.
Night calls the stragglers to the nest,
And at long last 'tis home indeed
For your far-wandering feet to rest
For ever by the crooks of Tweed.

Dear heart, in that serener air,
If blessed souls may backward gaze,
Some slender nook of memory spare
For our old happy moorland days.
I sit alone, and musing fills
My breast with pain that shall not die
till once again o'er greener hills
We ride together, you and I.

(c) The Bottle Imp