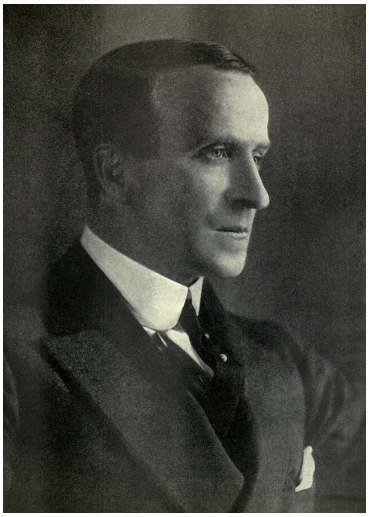
The Reign of Saturn

By The Unreliable Narrator



John Buchan (1875–1940).

The life of John Buchan reads like one of his adventure stories: as a storyteller and statesman, intelligence officer and international thinker, he roamed both continents and careers alike, leaping from one cliffhanger to the next. For all his public success, however, Buchan remains a curiously elusive figure. Was he the stiff Edwardian man of Empire or the imaginative Scots storyteller who poured the Border hills and glens into his prose? Was he a propagandist, a moralist, or simply a born yarn-spinner, unable to resist the thrill of the chase? In truth, he was all of these – a figure whose contradictions are just as compelling as his stories. It is precisely this complexity that makes Buchan, in his 150th year, so ripe for rediscovery.

But how, exactly, do we pin down an international man of intrigue? Or perhaps the question should be: how do we stop chasing the decoy to find the real Buchan beneath? Ever since hard-hunted hero Richard Hannay first burst onto the scene, his creator has been distilled into a similarly high-octane image: the tireless thriller-writer, forever mid-stride, collar up to the wind, pursuing spies, smugglers, and shadowy conspirators over the next ridge. A dashing portrait, undeniably, but one that risks leaving the many sides of Buchan half-hidden in the shadows.

Delve deeper into the Buchan bookshelf and one discovers a different story:

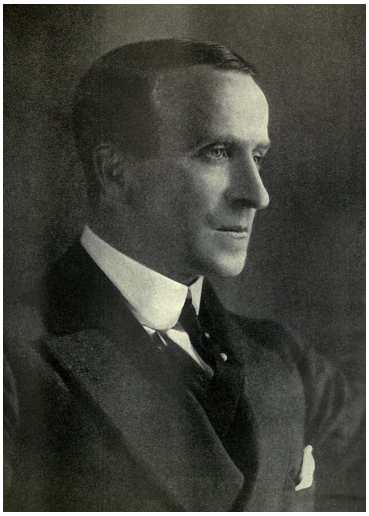
adventure tales, yes, but also histories, political essays, poetry, biographies, meditations on landscape and belief – an appetite for the world both literal and intellectual, yet unmistakeably inflected with the rhythms of home. For Buchan never quite slipped the knot that tethered him to Scotland, and nor did he want to. That taut, twanging tie ran straight to the Tweeddale summers of his boyhood, fishing the bright burns, tramping the hills, and storing away landscapes that would later resurface, transfigured, in fiction. Indeed, it is a very Borders-bred blend of liminality – hovering between the known world and the one that lurks just out of sight – that gives his stories their bite.

Perhaps this is why, 150 years on, Buchan still feels contemporary. His negotiation of different worlds, and awareness of the thin veil separating society from chaos, proved uncannily suited to the century he inhabited – an age rattled by upheaval, where old certainties were falling away. A world, in other words, not so different from our own. In an age jittery with crisis and conspiracy, Buchan's tales of trust and treachery, public duty and private doubt, still have questions to ask – and answers we might not entirely expect.

In this special issue of *The Bottle Imp* we track the many paths of one of Scotland's most surprising storytellers. Setting off into the eerie unknown, James Machin follows the uncanny currents of Buchan's fiction to argue his rightful place among the great writers of the weird in John Buchan and the Supernatural. Over in the Borders, Ursula Buchan revisits the rolling hills of her grandfather's youth, tracing how place shaped a lifetime of writing in John Buchan and Tweeddale. Greg Michaelson maps the shifting contours of a Jacobite trail in Midwinter, Waverley, and Kidnapped: Tangled Tales of the '45, followed by Kate Macdonald, whose visit to The Runagates Club uncovers the fear that drives Buchan's tales of derring-do. Drawing our final adventure to a close is Dr Kate Armond, who leads us into the shadowy world of kirk and coven in Witch Wood: The Impossible Task.

Upon Another Point, we travel north to Aberdeenshire, where Alison McCall investigates an author's early literary endeavours and high-school hi-jinks in Nan Shepherd's Schooldays. And for those eager to roam still further across Scotland's literary landscapes, our new book reviews are ready to guide the way.

"Class-conscious we are, and class-conscious wull be
Till our fit's on the neck o' the Boorjoyzee."



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