

John Buchan

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The Rt Hon. The Lord Tweedsmuir



15th Governor General of Canada

In office

November 2, 1935 – 11 February 1940

Preceded by	The Earl of Bessborough
Succeeded by	The Earl of Athlone

Born	August 26, 1875 Perth, Scotland
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Died	February 11, 1940 (aged 64) Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Spouse	Susan Charlotte Grosvenor
Profession	Author
Religion	Presbyterian

John Buchan, 1st Baron Tweedsmuir, GCMG, GCVO, CH, PC (26 August 1875 – 11 February 1940), was a Scottish novelist, best known for his novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and Unionist politician who served as Governor General of Canada.

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Early life

Buchan was the eldest child in the family of four sons and one surviving daughter (the novelist Anna Buchan) born to a Free Church of Scotland minister, John Buchan (1847–1911), and his wife Helen Jane (1857–1937), daughter of John Masterton, farmer, of Broughton Green, near Peebles. Born in Perth and growing up in Fife, he spent many summer holidays with his grandparents in the Borders, developing a love of walking and the Border scenery and its wildlife that is often featured in his novels. One example is *Sir Edward Leithen*, the hero of a number of Buchan's books, whose name is borrowed from the Leithen Water, a tributary of the River Tweed.

After attending Hutchesons' Grammar School, Buchan won a scholarship to the University of Glasgow where he studied Classics and wrote poetry and first became a published author. He then studied *Literae Humaniores* at Brasenose College, Oxford, winning the Newdigate prize for poetry. He had a genius for friendship which he retained all his life. His friends at Oxford included Hilaire Belloc, Raymond Asquith and Aubrey Herbert.

Life as an author and politician

Buchan at first entered into a career in law in 1901, but almost immediately moved into politics, becoming private secretary to British colonial administrator Alfred Milner, who was high commissioner for South Africa, Governor of Cape Colony and colonial administrator of Transvaal and the Orange Free State—Buchan gained an acquaintance with the country that was to feature prominently in his writing. On his return to London, he became a partner in a publishing company while he continued to write books. Buchan married Susan Charlotte Grosvenor (1882-1977), cousin of the Duke of Westminster, on July 15, 1907. Together they had four children, two of whom would spend most of their lives in Canada.

In 1910, he wrote *Prester John*, the first of his adventure novels, set in South Africa. In 1911, he first suffered from duodenal ulcers, an illness he would give to one of his characters in later books. He also entered politics running as a Tory candidate for a Border constituency. During this time Buchan supported Free Trade, woman's suffrage, national insurance and curtailing the

power of the House of Lords.^[1] However he opposed the Liberal reforms of 1905-1915 and what he considered the "class hatred" fostered by demagogic Liberals like David Lloyd George.^[2]

During World War I, he wrote for the War Propaganda Bureau and was a correspondent for *The Times* in France. In 1915, he published his most famous book *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, a spy thriller set just before the outbreak of World War I, featuring his hero Richard Hannay, who was based on a friend from South African days, Edmund Ironside. The following year he published a sequel *Greenmantle*. In 1916, he joined the British Army Intelligence Corps where as a 2nd Lieutenant he wrote speeches and communiques for Sir Douglas Haig.

In 1917, he returned to Britain where he became Director of Information under Lord Beaverbrook. After the war he began to write on historical subjects as well as continuing to write thrillers and historical novels. Buchan's 100 works include nearly 30 novels and seven collections of short stories. He also wrote biographies of Sir Walter Scott, Caesar Augustus, Oliver Cromwell and James Graham, 1st Marquess of Montrose, but the most famous of his books were the spy thrillers

and it is probably for these that he is now best remembered. The "last Buchan" (as Graham Greene entitled his appreciative review) is *Sick Heart River* (American title: *Mountain Meadow*), 1941, in which a dying protagonist confronts in the Canadian wilderness the questions of the meaning of life.

The Thirty-Nine Steps was filmed (much altered) by Alfred Hitchcock in 1935; later versions followed in 1959 and 1978.

In the mid-1920s Buchan was living near Oxford - Robert Graves, who was living on Boar's Hill whilst attending Oxford University, mentions Colonel Buchan recommending him for a lecturing position as a lecturer at the newly founded Cairo University in Egypt. Buchan became president of the Scottish Historical Society. He was twice Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and in a 1927 by-election was elected a Scottish Unionist MP for the Scottish Universities. Politically he was of the Unionist-Nationalist Tradition that believed in Scotland's promotion as a nation within the British Empire and once remarked "I believe every Scotsman should be a Scottish nationalist. If it could be proved that a Scottish parliament were

desirable...Scotsmen should support it". The effects of depression in Scotland and the subsequent high emigration also led him to say "We do not want to be like the Greeks, powerful and prosperous wherever we settle, but with a dead Greece behind us" (Hansard, November 24, 1932). During the early months of the Second World War Buchan read John Morley's *Life of Gladstone*, which had a profound impact on him. He believed Gladstone had taught people to combat materialism, complacency and authoritarianism; he wrote to H. A. L. Fisher, Stair Gillon and Gilbert Murray that he was "becoming a Gladstonian Liberal".^[3] The insightful quotation "It's a great life, if you don't weaken" is also famously attributed to him. Another memorable quote is "No great cause is ever lost or won, The battle must always be renewed, And the creed must always be restated."

Buchan's branch of the Free Church of Scotland joined the Church of Scotland in 1929. He was an active elder of St Columba's Church, London and of the Oxford Presbyterian parish. In 1933–4 he was lord high commissioner to the church's general assembly.

Life in Canada

In 1935 he became Governor General of Canada and was created **Baron Tweedsmuir** of Elsfield in the County of Oxford. Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King had wanted him to go to Canada as a commoner, but King George V insisted on being represented by a peer.

Buchan's writing continued even after he was appointed Governor General. His later books included novels and histories and his views of Canada. He also wrote an autobiography, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, while Governor-General. His wife was a writer, producing many books and plays as Susan Buchan. While pursuing his own writing career, he also promoted the development of a distinctly Canadian culture. In 1936, encouraged by Lady Tweedsmuir, he founded the Governor General's Awards, still some of Canada's premier literary awards.

Lady Tweedsmuir was active in promoting literacy in Canada. She used Rideau Hall as a distribution centre for 40,000 books, which were sent out to readers in remote areas of the west. Her programme was known as the "Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library Scheme". Together, Lord and Lady Tweedsmuir established the first proper library at

Rideau Hall.

Tweedsmuir took his responsibilities in Canada seriously and tried to make the office of Governor General relevant to the lives of ordinary Canadians. In his own words, "a Governor General is in a unique position for it is his duty to know the whole of Canada and all the various types of her people".

Tweedsmuir travelled throughout Canada, including the Arctic regions. He took every opportunity to speak to Canadians and to encourage them to develop their own distinct identity. He wanted to build national unity by diminishing the religious and linguistic barriers that divided the country. Tweedsmuir was aware of the suffering experienced by many Canadians due to the Depression and often wrote with compassion about their difficulties.

Tweedsmuir was recognized by Glasgow, St. Andrews, McGill, Toronto and Montréal Universities, all of which conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Laws, and he was made an Honorary Fellow and an Honorary D.C.L. of Oxford.

When King George V died in 1936, the front of Rideau Hall was covered in black crepe and Lord Tweedsmuir cancelled all entertaining during the period of mourning. The new heir to the throne, King Edward VIII, soon abdicated to marry Wallis Simpson – creating a crisis for the monarchy. However, when the new King, George VI and Queen Elizabeth travelled throughout Canada in 1939; the regal visit – the first visit to Canada by a reigning Sovereign – was extremely popular.

Like many people of his time, the experience of the First World War convinced Tweedsmuir of the horrors of armed conflict and he worked with both United States President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Mackenzie King in trying to avert the ever-growing threat of another world war.

While shaving on February 6, 1940, Tweedsmuir had a stroke and injured his head badly in the fall. He received the best possible care – the famous Dr. Wilder Penfield of the Montreal Neurological Institute and Hospital, operated twice – but the injury proved fatal. On February 11, just 10 months before his term of office was to expire, Tweedsmuir died. Prime Minister Mackenzie King reflected the loss that all Canadians felt when he

read the following words over the radio, "In the passing of His Excellency, the people of Canada have lost one of the greatest and most revered of their Governors General, and a friend who, from the day of his arrival in this country, dedicated his life to their service."

This was the first time a Governor General had died during his term of office since Confederation. After the lying-in-state in the Senate Chamber, a state funeral for Lord Tweedsmuir was held at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Ottawa. His ashes were returned to England on the cruiser HMS *Orion* for final burial at Elsfield, where he had bought the Manor in 1920.

Reputation

In recent years
in common

with some of his contemporaries, Buchan's reputation has been tarnished by the lack of political correctness, e.g. the anti-semitism and racism expressed in some passages from his novels, such as the opening chapter of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. (It should, however, be noted that he was active on behalf of the Jews during the 1930s

and, for this reason, his name appeared on Adolf Hitler's "hit list".) A thoroughly engaging storyteller, his work stands the test of time, and he is currently undergoing a resurgence in popularity.



Lord Tweedsmuir.

Buchan had a reputation for discretion. He was involved with the Intelligence Corps as a propagandist during World War I and may have had an involvement with British intelligence later; he is cited as having some involvement during the years leading to the Second World War by Canadian-born British spymaster William Stephenson.

In the 1930s Buchan gave financial and moral support to the poor, young academic Roberto

Weiss, as Buchan was fascinated by the classical antiquity period Weiss studied, and wished to support this.

His autobiography *Memory Hold-the-Door* (published in the United States as *Pilgrim's Way*) was said to be John F. Kennedy's favourite book although a list given to *Life* magazine in 1961 quoted *Montrose* at the head of the list.

John Buchan is commemorated in Makars' Court, outside The Writers' Museum, Lawnmarket, Edinburgh.

Selections for Makars' Court are made by The Writers' Museum; The Saltire Society; The Scottish Poetry Library.

Bibliography of principal works

Fiction

- 1898 *John Burnet of Barns*
- 1899 *Grey Weather* (stories and poems)
- 1899 *A Lost Lady of Old Years*
- 1900 *The Half-Hearted*
- 1902 *The Watcher by the Threshold* (stories)
- 1906 *A Lodge in the Wilderness*

- 1910 *Prester John*
- 1912 *The Moon Endureth* (stories and poems)
- 1915 *Salute to Adventurers*
- 1915 *The Thirty-Nine Steps*
- 1916 *The Power House*
- 1916 *Greenmantle*
- 1919 *Mr Standfast*
- 1921 *The Path of the King*
- 1922 *Huntingtower*
- 1923 *Midwinter*
- 1924 *The Three Hostages*
- 1925 *John Macnab*
- 1926 *The Dancing Floor*
- 1927 *Witch Wood*
- 1928 *The Runagates Club* (stories 1913-28)
- 1929 *The Courts of the Morning*
- 1930 *Castle Gay*
- 1931 *The Blanket of the Dark*
- 1932 *The Gap in the Curtain*
- 1932 *The Magic Walking Stick* (for children)
- 1933 *A Prince of the Captivity*
- 1934 *The Free Fishers*
- 1935 *The House of the Four Winds*
- 1936 *The Island of Sheep*
- 1941 *Sick Heart River* (also published as *Mountain Meadow*)
- 1941 *The Long Traverse* (also published as *Lake of Gold*)

Non-fiction

- 1896 *Scholar-Gipsies* (essays)
- 1903 *The African Colony*
- 1905 *The Law Relating to the Taxation of Foreign Income*
- 1908 *Some Eighteenth Century Byways* (essays and articles)
- 1911 *Sir Walter Raleigh*
- 1912 *What the Home Rule Bill Means*
- 1913 *The Marquis of Montrose*
- 1913 *Andrew Jameson, Lord Ardwall*
- 1915 *Britain's War by Land*
- 1915 *The Achievement of France*
- 1915 *Ordeal by Marriage*
- 1916 *The Future of the War*
- 1916 *The Battle of the Somme, First Phase*
- 1916 *The Purpose of War*
- 1916 *The Battle of Jutland*
- 1917 *Poems, Scots and English*
- 1917 *The Battle of the Somme, Second Phase*
- 1919 *These for Remembrance*
- 1919 *The Battle Honours of Scotland 1914-1918*
- 1920 *The History of the South African Forces in France*
- 1920 *Francis and Riversdale Grenfell*
- 1920 *The Long Road to Victory*

- 1921-2 *A History of the Great War*
- 1922 *A Book of Escapes and Hurried Journeys*
- 1923 *The Last Secrets* (essays and articles)
- 1923 *A History of English Literature*
- 1923 *Days to Remember*
- 1924 *Some Notes on Sir Walter Scott*
- 1925 *The History of the Royal Scots Fusiliers 1678-1918*
- 1925 *The Man and the Book: Sir Walter Scott*
- 1925 *Two Ordeals of Democracy*
- 1926 *Homilies and Recreations* (essays and addresses)
- 1930 *The Kirk in Scotland* (with George Adam Smith)
- 1930 *Montrose and Leadership*
- 1930 *Lord Rosebery, 1847-1929*
- 1931 *The Novel and the Fairy Tale*
- 1932 *Julius Caesar*
- 1932 *Andrew Lang and the Borders*
- 1933 *The Massacre of Glencoe*
- 1933 *The Margins of Life*
- 1934 *Gordon at Khartoum*
- 1934 *Oliver Cromwell*
- 1935 *The King's Grace*
- 1937 *Augustus*
- 1938 *The Interpreter's House*
- 1938 *Presbyterianism Yesterday, Today and*

Tomorrow

- 1940 *Memory Hold-the-Door* (published as *Pilgrim's Way* in the United States)
- 1940 *Comments and Characters*
- 1940 *Canadian Occasions*



Honorary degrees

- University of Toronto in 1936 (DD) [1]

Yale University, Doctor of Laws in 1937
Harvard University, Doctor of Laws in 1937

This list is incomplete; you can help by expanding it.

Parliament of the United Kingdom (1801–present)		
Preceded by Henry Craik	Member of Parliament for Combined Scottish Universities 1927–1935	Succeeded by Sir John Graham Kerr
Political offices		
Preceded by	Governor General	Succeeded by Chief Justice Sir Lyman

The Earl of Bessborough	of Canada 1935–1940	Poore Duff as administrator and The Earl of Athlone
Peerage of the United Kingdom		
Preceded by New Creation	Baron Tweedsmuir	Succeeded by John Buchan
	Governors General of Canada	
Monck Lisgar Dufferin Lorne Lansdowne Stanley Aberdeen Minto Grey Connaught Devonshire Byng Willingdon Bessborough Tweedsmuir Athlone Alexander Massey Vanier Michener Léger Schreyer Sauvé Hnatyshyn LeBlanc Clarkson Jean		

Notes

1. ^ J. P. Parry, 'From the Thirty-Nine Articles to the Thirty-Nine Steps: reflections on the thought of John Buchan' in Michael Bentley (ed.), *Public and Private Doctrine: Essays in British History presented to Maurice Cowling* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 226.
2. ^ Ibid, p. 227.

3. ^ Ibid, p. 234.

Further reading

- Andrew Lownie: *John Buchan: The Presbyterian Cavalier* (David R. Godine Publisher, 2003) ISBN 1-56792-236-8

External links

- Buchanalia *For All Things Buchan*
- Biography from Governor General website
- Works by John Buchan at Project Gutenberg
- John Buchan at the Internet Movie Database
- Works by John Buchan at Project Gutenberg Australia
- *The Power-House*
- The John Buchan Society
- Exhibit on John Buchan by Queen's University Archives
- John Buchan fonds at Queen's University Archives
- full text downloads in HTML, PDF, text formats at ebooktakeaway.com

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