IN MEMORIAM

JOHN BUCHAN, LORD TWEEDSMUIR
(1875-1940)

He had so many interests and activities that it is hard to picture him as one man. But to see him as he saw himself, at daybreak, "high up in a snow ridge when the world seems to heave itself out of night into day,"[1] is to know the real John Buchan, Lord Tweedsmuir—statesman, author and mountaineer.

Taking this description in a figurative sense, few men can boast of having made a longer, more difficult ascent than did John Buchan. Born in Perth, Scotland, in 1875, in his father's simple, small and busy manse, John Buchan climbed to the top of his twin professions and scaled the pinnacle of recognition and renown. In its literal meaning, the passage is equally apt. Buchan was never happier than when he was in the mountains; his personal life was largely shaped by this passion for the hills, especially the Scottish hills, and his writing owes much of its body and flavor to his intimacy with the mountains and heaths he loved so to describe in his fiction and in his biographies and histories.

Buchan's fondness for the Scottish country-side dates back to his childhood, when, for days on end, he roamed through Tweed Valley, his mind quick to absorb the details of his favorite woods and streams and to identify them with his father's religious teachings, until he finally arrived at the understandable notion that, for example, "the Soul, a shining cylindrical thing, was linked with a particular patch of bent and heather, and in that theater its struggles took place, while Sin, a horrid substance like black salt, was intimately connected with a certain thicket of bramble and spotted toadstools."[2]

From his love of the woody patches in Tweed Valley, Buchan grew to love the Borderland hills where he spent his summers with his maternal grandparents. He explored every stream, crag, scarp and mountain meadow within hiking distance of his home, and, by time he was twelve, his curiosity had lured him across the Tweed and over bog and bent to the range that towered above the gentler Borderland hills. From the day of his first ascent into those moun-

[1] *Pilgrim's Way* (Houghton Mifflin, 1940), 133.
[2] *Ibid.*, 6.

tains—of his first sight of the country stretching far below him, the river a shining cord, the meadows, patches on the rolling earth, his enthusiasm for the hills dominated his private life. During his years at Glasgow University it served as a link between his wild untrammeled childhood and the world of scholarship and logic. It turned his interests and sympathies towards other countries, and it inspired his later years of travel and exploration. It gave his writing the authenticity that characerizes all of his work—an authenticity that shines through every word of this vigorous passage from *The Thirty-Nine Steps.*

> I woke very cold and stiff about an hour after dawn. It took me a little while to remember where I was, for I had been very weary and had slept heavily. I saw first the pale blue sky through a net of heather, then a big shoulder of hill, and then my own boots placed neatly in a blackberry-bush. I raised myself on my arms and looked down into the valley, and that one look set me lacing up my boots in mad haste. For there were men below, not more than a quarter of a mile off, spaced out on the hillside like a fan, and beating the heather. . . .
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> I crawled out of my shelf into the cover of a boulder, and, from it gained a shallow trench which slanted up the mountain face. This led me presently into the narrow gully of a burn, by way of which I scrambled to the top of the ridge. From there I looked back, and saw that I was still undiscovered. My pursuers were patiently quartering the hillside and moving upwards.
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> Keeping behind the skyline, I ran for maybe half a mile till I judged I was above the uppermost end of the glen. Then I showed myself, and was instantly noted by one of the flankers who passed the word along to the others. I heard cries coming up from below, and saw that the line of search had changed its direction. I pretended to retreat over the skyline, but instead went back the way I had come, and in twenty minutes was behind the ridges overlooking my sleeping place. From that viewpoint I had the satisfaction of seeing the pursuit streaming up the hill at the top of the glen on a hopelessly false scent. I had before me a choice of routes, and I chose a ridge which made an angle with the one I was on, and so would soon put a deep glen between me and my enemies.[3]

During his years at Glasgow University, he could often escape to the hills, but after he entered Brasenose College, Oxford, he had to limit his outings to his spring holidays. Every year,

[3] *The Adventures of Richard Hannay: The Thirty-Nine Steps* (Houghton Mifflin, 1939), 119, 120.

alone or with a college friend, he explored and re-explored the Borderland hills, or practiced the stiffer ascents in Skye and in the Coolins. He grew as familiar with the ranges as he was with his home climbs. Skye was his favorite, and he soon knew every cranny of its ascents from Sgurr-nan-Gillian to Garsheinn. He loved particularly the sharp transitions of Skye, when, "after a course among difficult chimneys or over faces with exiguous holds, one reached the ridge and saw the Minch, incredibly far below, stretching its bright waters to the sunset and the ultimate isles. Such moments gave me the impression of somehow being outside the world in the ether to which clouds and birds belong, or being very nearly pure spirit—until hunger reminded me that I still had a body"[4]

The Coolins, too, he knew intimately, and his awe at their majesty finds echo in his description in *Mr. Standfast.*

> Mountains have always been a craze of mine, and the blackness and mystery of those grim peaks went to my head. . . . I began to have a queer instinct that that was the place, that something might be concealed there, something pretty damnable.
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> I remember I sat on a top for half an hour raking the hills with my glasses. I made out ugly precipices, and glens which lost themselves in primeval blackness. When the sun caught them—for it was a gleamy day—it brought out no colours, only degrees of shade. No mountains I had ever seen—not the Drakensberg or the red kopjes of Damaraland or the cold, white peaks around Erzerum—ever looked so unearthly and uncanny."[5]

During the Oxford term, Buchan kept himself in condition by covering as much of the neighboring territory as time would allow. On Sundays, he and his friends would join in the traditional "booms" or all-day outings. His favorite "booms" were the point-to-point horse-back rides which carried him across miles of hills, woods, pastures, stream beds, town streets, and back again at sundown to Oxford to compare adventures with his colleagues.

In 1900, Buchan went down from Oxford with high honors and established himself in London to study for the bar. His plans were interrupted, however, by the Boer War; in 1901 he set sail for South Africa to serve as secretary to the High Commission. Far from his home ranges, Buchan nevertheless found limitless

[4] *Pilgrim's Way, op. cit.,* 132, 133.
[5] *The Adventures of Richard Hannay: Mr. Standfast, op. cit.,* 105.

ground for exploration; he covered most of the northern plateau, the ranges of Northern Transvaal and the kloofs of Drakensberg.

His work in South Africa done, and well done, Buchan returned to London in 1903 and resumed his legal career. He found London life stale and rather tasteless after his vigorous, rough-and-tumble life in South Africa, and he turned to mountaineering to relieve the monotony. In 1904 he visited the Alps, did the usual groups including those of Chamonix and Zermatt, and in 1906 he joined the Alpine Club, a fitting climax to those mountaineering days to which he pays tribute in his autobiography, *Pilgrim's Way*.

> We have many confessions of faith from those who have lifted their eyes to the hills. I like best Hilaire Belloc's in his *Path to Rome*. "Up there, the sky above and below them, part of the sky, but part of us, the great peaks made communion between that homing, creeping part of me which loves vineyards and dances and a slow movement among pastures, and that other part which is only properly at home in Heaven." The wittiest thing ever about mountaineering, I think, was by George Meredith, that "every step is a debate between what you are and what you might become." For myself, it brought me again into touch with the wild nature with which I had lived so intimately in South Africa. My other sport, fishing, did not do that in the same degree; it was essentially a "slow movement among pastures," even when it was pursued in March on the Helmsdale among scurries of snow. Just as sailing a small boat brings one close to the sea, so mountaineering lays one along-side the bones of Mother Earth. One meets her on equal terms and matches one's skill and endurance against something which has no care for human life. There is also the joy of technical accomplishment. I never took kindly to snow and ice work, but I found a strong fascination in rock-climbing, whether on the granite slabs of the Chamonix aiguilles, or the sheer fissured precipices of the Dolomites, or the gabbro of the Coolins. A long rock-climb is a series of problems, each one different from the rest, which have to be solved by ingenuity of mind and versatility of body. I was fortunate to have the opposite of vertigo, for I found a physical comfort in looking down from great heights. Bodily fitness is essential, for there are always courses which you must have the strength to complete or court disaster. In any mountaineering holiday there are miserable days when the muscles are being got into order by training walks; but when these are over, I know no physical well being so perfect as that enjoyed by the mountaineer."[6]

[6] *Pilgrim's Way, op. cit.*, 132, 133.

Buchan felt compelled to give up mountaineering soon after his marriage to Susan Grosvenor in 1906. Although he had never suffered any accident or injury from his climbs, he thought that the sport was too dangerous for a man with his responsibilities. But he found it impossible entirely to forswear his favorite pastime; he chose deer stalking as a safer sport than mountaineering, but, to bring himself as close to the peaks as possible, he concentrated on the high runs—the peaks of Torridon, Glencoe, Dalness and the Black Mount.

In 1906, too, Buchan gave up his law practice to enter the publishing firm of Thomas Nelson and Sons. War again interrupted his plans; during the World War he served first at the front as a correspondent for the *Times*. He was then annexed by the Foreign Office. In 1916 he was commissioned as an officer in the Intelligence Corps, and in 1917, he was recalled from France to fill a post under the War Cabinet. This position, however, he was forced to surrender because of his increasingly poor health, but he remained active in intelligence work in England until the armistice. Many of Buchan's best-known books are the product of his war and post-war years. Most of the Richard Hannay stories, including *The Thirty-Nine Steps* he wrote while he was recovering from his illness; his health would not permit him to indulge in the strenuous exercise he loved, but probably by way of satisfying his hunger for the wind-swept heights, he published in 1923, *The Last Secrets*.[7] This book, one which deserves far more attention than it has received, is, in Buchan's usual fresh and lively style, an account of the famous mountain climbing expeditions of modern history: Sir Francis Younghusband's conquest of Lhasa in Tibet; Capt. F. M. Bailey's trips into the gorges of Brahmaputra in the Himalayas; the Duke of Abruzzi's successful scaling of the Mountains of the Moon. He describes, too, some of the heart-breaking failures of these gallant explorers: General Bruce's expeditions, the ill-fated attempts to climb Mt. Everest, and Captain Rawling's efforts to ascend Carstensz in Dutch New Guinea. Buchan had the greatest admiration for Captain, later Brigadier General, Rawling. At the time of Rawling's death in 1918, Buchan wrote a tribute to him for the *Times* which was reprinted in the *Alpine Journal* of February, 1918.

[7] *The Last Secrets, The Final Mysteries of Exploration* (Nelson, 1923).

But not even the pleasure which such writing must have given him could fill Buchan's need for the woods and the hills. In 1927 he moved with his family to the town of Elsfield, four miles from Oxford. Here he renewed his knowledge of the Oxford country and continued with his writing of fiction and an increasing number of biographies. These biographies retain the vigor and anthenticity of his novels and short stories. His famous biography of Cromwell is characteristic of the life which Buchan could breathe into his biographies by painting a vivid picture of the localities which figure in the lives of the characters he described. His quick sketch of Marston Moor, the scene of Cromwell's famous battle, is the work of a scholar and an outdoorsman.

> Marston Moor lay seven miles west of York city between the roads to Boroughbridge and Wetherby. In length it was about a mile and a half, much overgrown in its western parts with furze and broom, and sloping gently northward to Wilstrop wood, a point some fifty feet above the sea. Along its southern rim lay a ditch with a hedge on the far side, boggy and difficult at the center and western ends, but in the middle largely filled up. . . . At the Tockwith end of the ditch was a piece of marshland with a rabbit-warren to the south of it. . . ."[8]

In 1935, King George V appointed John Buchan to his last post and bestowed on him the title, Baron Tweedsmuir of Elsfield. As the Governor-General of Canada, Lord Tweedsmuir's days were probably the fullest of any he had known, but they were not so full but that he could find the time to study Canada as he studied every country he visited. He traveled hundreds of miles by boat down the Mackenzie River to Aklavik in the sub-Arctic, and he crossed the northern part of British Columbia mostly on foot—loyal to the last to his responsibilities as a servant of the Crown, and loyal to his own intense love of the beauty and wonders of "the bones of Mother Earth."

With Lord Tweedsmuir's death last February, England lost one of her finest statesmen, and the world lost a truly great author, scholar and sportsman.

W. S. L.

HARRY PIERCE NICHOLS
1850-1940

In the death on November 15th, 1940, of our beloved past president, Harry P. Nichols, at the age of ninety years, the club mourns an outstanding personality. A member of the small but courageous

[8] *Oliver Cromwell* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1934), 183.