

The Island of Sheep

J. Buchan

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In my youth I turned my nose up when hearing about Buchan, a cheap best-selling writer of entertaining thrillers. As a teenager I would probably have had a more liberal attitude being hungry for any kind of reading, especially in English, and willing to give anything a chance. Thus finding the book on a shelf in my library I was intrigued and ready for some nostalgia trip, reassessing my views and retrieving my teen-age self.

Who was right, me as a teenager, or me as a young adult? Clearly the latter. Snobbism often has some solid foundation, even if its execution leaves a lot to desire in this aspect. Although the book spins an exciting yarn and makes you turn the pages, it is the kind of text, which notwithstanding the skill that went into it, does not survive a good nights sleep. For this the characters are too crude, the plot too contrived, and the general atmosphere too ridiculous, yet not entirely devoid of charm. One should not forget that the book was written in 1936 and depicts times of the late twenties and early thirties, while which were only thirty years back in my youth, now much farther thrust down into the deeper past..

The main characters of the book are already known to prospective readers, which of course helps sales, as nothing like an interminable soap-opera to engage the social instincts of an individual. What does it matter if the plots are unbelievable, as long as the core of them will be held by an old friend whom you are pleased to meet again?

It would be rather pointless to try and recall the rambling plot, so let me be content with pointing out some salient features. This is an adventure stories in which Anglo-Saxon men play the heroes, be it in the darkest of Africa or on the northern shores of their own home-turf. But the English are not really pure, there are people who in some sense are even more English than the English when it comes to brave Germanic myths, namely the Scandinavians, who are a kind of honorary Englishmen sharing in the same Nordic virtues.

In a sense the mythological center of the novel is occupied by an old Dane - Haraldsen - who has made a fortune prospecting for gold in Africa, which provides much of the narrative background of the story. This guy Haraldsen has a thing about Nordic virtues and is immersed in heroic Norse mythology. On an island far north of the Scotland, even further north than the Orkney's and the Shetlands there is a fictitious entity known as Norland, obviously inspired by the Faeroe Islands. The Nordic dreams of Haraldsen are not meant to be conquering, unlike the similar fantasies of the Nazi ideologies, but content to be confined to their ancestral homes in the legendary north, nursing the traditions of the old Vikings.

Here one may well stop and ponder. What kind of sentimental nonsense is paraded here? Does Buchan believe it? That seems far-fetched, but he certainly presents it in a sympathetic light. Is that a supporting theme in all of his writings? I do not know, having only read this book. Does it reflect sentiments which were current at the time? It is hard to tell from just one novel, but the collected oeuvre of the author may provide some clues as to the *Zeitgeist* he was sprung out of.

Now the old Haraldsen is a background prop, who is dead by the time this story sets off. Instead he is survived into narrative by his son, who is a more complicated nature, more scholarly, more timid and racked by nerves, but who in the end is vindicated by a real show of going berserk as a true Viking. The narrative as such is pure adventure with chases, hostage taking, and all that. In some ways it gives off echoes of the 'Treasure Island' by Stevenson, my favorite book along with 'Robinson Crusoe' when I was a child. All the rather infantile ingredients in an adventure story for children are here to be found, as noted, replete with the roles played by the narrators son Peter John and the younger Haraldsen's daughter Anna, reminiscent of the role played by Jim Hawkins in 'Treasure Island', so children would find much to identify with. But, it is important to note, with the slight difference that it has been dressed up in more adult garb, adult not in the sense of Adult movies (as there are, thank God, no sex in it), but in the sense of taking up other adult preoccupations, such as politics, finance, and outdoor play, the latter of course with a strong adolescent touch. But as an adult, I was almost tempted to write 'as a mature adult', the story leaves you a bit frustrated. It is too contrived and unrealistic, without becoming surrealistic. Buchan is out to entertain and please and surely he has some formulas for doing that, although there are some technical deficiencies that goes with a first person narrative trying to cover an objective unfolding of events, requiring not so much an omniscience as an omnipresence. Incidentally Stevenson encounters the same problem in his classical tale, referred to above, and although his solution is not very elegant, it is logical, while Buchan founders; but the sympathetic reader is more likely than not to overlook this, after all the story gives pleasure for the moment, with no further ambition, so no need to worry about it the next day.

So what did contemporary reviewers think of it? Through the ever present Wikipedia I am led to a September 11 review in The Sydney Morning Herald from 1936. The reviewer is filled with praise as to the skill of writing a yarn, filled with suspense (in fact he talks about leisurely skill as to emphasize that this is written by the left hand of someone whose right hand has much more serious things to worry about) although he admits that the story turns out to be rather outlandish but that the nature scene are masterly done, and finally that it provides a homage to the eternal school-boy within us.

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