

John Macnab

J. Buchan

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Why give John Buchan another chance? Has he not used up his trust by three previous rather weak thriller novels I finished the previous year? Novels, which had some promise of competent writing but degenerating embarrassingly (as TV-dramas they would have served well, how much junk has one not watched on TV?). The reason was that the 19th book coming up in the collection of a year ago was by Buchan, so why not make a Buchan of the 19th in this collection? A kind of neurotic possessive tic. Anyway I had one last Buchan next to the others in my shelf of substandard English fiction (along with Daphne du Maurier and others) why not pocket this one as well.

The book turns out to be a pleasant surprise. The canvas is more limited this time and hence more appropriate to the author's capacity. The author is an upper class Scot, and that shows of course, as we will presently see. One thing is clear, and that is that the author loves the nature of Scotland, and it plays an important role in all his books, at least those I have read. In fact one can see his books as mere excuses to indulge in this fancy of his, this book being no exception, in fact an excellent one devoted to this particular purpose. The setting is not taken from real life, although some of the names do have real life counterpart in Scottish nature¹. The tale comes with a fictional map of the region, which comes in very handily.

The plot can quickly be summarized. Three very substantial and successful men in their forties (the good side of fifty, as the author terms it, turning fifty himself as the book was being written) find themselves bored with life, although very physically fit as there is nothing matter with them, except boredom. The advice given is to do something risky and thus get back their zest for life. They decide to do some poaching and are set up by a young fellow club member, because after all such people often eat out in their clubs. They write to three landlord and also neighbors of the young club member in his Scottish Highland retreat, claiming that between that and that date the character, they name John Macnab' as a collective pseudonym, will lay down a prey and pay for it, and if caught he will pay the double. We are talking about something like a hundred pounds, a sizable sum of money for most people at the time. Macnab is thus a fictional entity to be played by the three bored men in succession. Anyway the set-up, contrived or not gives plenty of opportunity to describe ramblings in wet and misty autumn weather among Scottish hills looking for game and trying to avoid being game themselves. Stevenson does of course do something similar in his 'Kidnapped'. The author loves it, and the impression is vivid enough, but what would not a real writer have been able to do with the material? Does

¹ Such as Sgurr Dearg, meaning red mountain, which can actually be seen in Isle of Skye. Muirtown is part of Inverness and occurs also in another Buchan novel - Mr Standfast, but in this book it seems to be a small town on its own, where a political campaign meeting takes place and served by Frew (a fictional place at least in Scotland) as a so called ticket-station.

not really matter, Buchan is earnest enough and puts his soul into it what more can you expect? He is able to keep up suspense and it all ends very nicely, we will learn, and not that contrived.

One can read such a book in two ways. Either like a plain entertainer, not unlike a detective story, for the amusement of the moment, or as a historical account. The book was written, or at least published, in 1925, and thus almost a hundred years ago, does it tell? A hundred years ago is not as distant as it was when one was a child. Normally I might have come across the books in my teens, and then it would only have been forty years out of date, which means almost contemporary. There are cars and phones and trains of course, and that is taken for granted. There are also cameras, but at that time they were not for everyone but still a rather sophisticated gadget, one of the Macnabs, out to see the lay of the land brings with him a camera in order to look like a tourist, but has no idea how to work it. There is a lot of talk about the Great War, which was still not a First World War, and Bolshevism. The young host is running for a place in Parliament, not because of any political interest let alone real ambition, but this is expected of a man of his standing, and has to give a talk, and never having any experience in public speaking, let alone anything relevant to say, this turns out to be a big ordeal for him. Why the author inserts this digression into the tale I do not understand, it really does not further the plot, but anyway it is not uninterestingly done. The young host also meets a girl, a neighborly daughter, with whom he fells heads over heels in love, she not being the ordinary busy woman, in whom he has no interest, but a tomboy, which seems to cater to his erotic tastes. Once again a puzzling digression you do not feel further the plot. In a real piece of literature such digressions would be taken very seriously and seen as filled with hidden meanings. And after all a real artist is not really in control of his work, the work is greater than him or her, while a supposed hack, is expected to turn things out by a well-worn formula, with well-honed skill and with a detached touch. Now the most revealing parts of the story concern the English class system. One of the poachers, grubby by the hunt and to all appearances a mere bum, is apprehended, but clearly he takes command as if that was the most natural thing.

Macnicol was acutely unhappy. He recognised something in Lamancha's tone which was perhaps unfamiliar to his master - that accent which means authority, and which, if disregarded, leads to mischief. He had himself served in Lovat's Scouts, and the voice of this tatterdemalion was unpleasantly like that of certain high-handed officers of his acquaintance. So he hesitated and shuffled his feet.

Or more poignantly

It is a melancholy fact which exponents of democracy must face that, while all men may be on a level in the eyes of the State, they will continue in fact to be preposterously unequal. Lamancha had been captured in circumstances of deep suspicion which he did not attempt to explain; [...] Yet this outrageous trespasser was not only truculent and impenitent; he was taking it upon himself to give orders to gillies and navvies, and to dictate the use of an expensive automobile.[...] The Truth is , that if you belong to a family which for a good many centuries has been accustomed to command and take risks,[...] If, too, you have never had

occasion to think of your position, because no one has ever questioned it, and you promise to break down somebody else's [neck], your threat may convince others, because you yourself are so wholly convinced of your power in that direction.

On what side is really Buchan? Critical maybe, but yet in sympathy with those who are designed to command. Similar divisions may still very much be in effect, but not so bluntly expressed.

It is a tale to entertain and distract, and hence it has a happy ending. All three of the would-be-poachers have been cured of their ennui and now feel a renewed vigor to attend to their real metiers, be it as lawyers, bankers or ministers of the cabinet. But they have to acknowledge that it was a sham after all, they never really were in danger, of being caught and humiliated and being subjected to the full extent of the law. Maybe there is a moral here too, which Buchan has smuggled in.

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