

AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW OF EARLY LIBERALISM AND LI IN JOHN BUCHAN'S

The first half of the twentieth century saw the electoral triumph of the Liberal Party in the 1906 election, the struggles of Liberalism to cope with the demands of the First World War, the split between Lloyd George and Asquith, and the collapse of the party through the 1920s and 1930s. That period also formed the backdrop to the novels of John Buchan, in many of which were depicted Liberal characters and Liberal ideas. **Malcolm Baines** looks at Buchan's portrayal of Liberals and what this tells us about the Liberal Party of that period – as seen through the eyes of an outsider who himself had something of a Liberal heritage and outlook.



TWENTIETH-CENTURY LIBERALS LIBERAL POLITICIANS AND FICTION

JOHN BUCHAN is best known as the author of *The Thirty Nine Steps*, popularised through a number of film and TV adaptations. Less well known are not only the large number of other novels and historical biographies that he wrote, but the fact that he was also a Unionist MP between 1927 and 1935 and then Governor General of Canada from 1935 to 1940. Consequently, Buchan was very much part of the governing establishment of the United Kingdom and friendly with most of the leading politicians and other figures of the period. This keen interest and involvement in politics shines through in many of his novels and short stories, and the roles played by the Liberal characters he depicts form a central part of this article.

Many of his characters, both major and minor, appear in more than one book. As a result, they have a holistic quality, with their fictional lives developing and portrayed at different stages of the first half of the twentieth century. The major ones frequently reflected aspects of Buchan's own life and experience. Sir Edward Leithen, the protagonist in five novels, was, like Buchan, a Scottish barrister and Tory politician. Sir Richard Hannay appears as a South African mining engineer in *The Thirty Nine Steps* (Buchan had worked in South Africa after the Boer War) and in subsequent novels as a First World War army officer and secret agent (Buchan was posted to the

Intelligence Corps in 1916). A third series of novels revolved around Dickson McCunn, a romantic, retired Glasgow grocer; Buchan had studied at Glasgow University and had a good knowledge of the Scottish Borders where many of the McCunn stories are set. Common to many of the books, however – whether the thrillers of Leithen and Hannay or the more light-hearted McCunn novels – is the role played by politics as an important part of the background.

Although Buchan was a Conservative, Liberal politicians appear in many of his novels, and this reflects both his upbringing in a strongly Liberal nineteenth-century Scotland and his friendships with leading Liberal politicians such as Haldane¹ and the Asquiths. One of the vignettes in *The Thirty Nine Steps* that survived to grace many of the subsequent adaptations depicts a Liberal by-election meeting in the Scottish Borders. Hannay, the novel's hero, has fled to Scotland, wrongly accused of murder. His car crashes whilst avoiding another vehicle driven by the constituency's Liberal candidate, Sir Harry. Sir Harry says he has 'a meeting on tonight in Brattleburn – that's my chief town and an infernal Tory stronghold.'² (Interestingly, Pelling in *Social Geography of British Elections 1885–1910* comments that because Presbyterian Dissenters were stronger than the Church of Scotland in the towns, the Conservatives were generally weaker

there than in the more rural areas of the Scottish Borders.³) Let down by the colonial ex-Premier he had booked to speak, Sir Harry is looking for a free trader who can tell the locals what a poor deal protection is for the colonies. The candidate's speech is poor – he says to Hannay beforehand, 'I'm Liberal, because my family have always been Whigs' – but Buchan portrays him as a man who can see Hannay is no murderer and who gives him a recommendation to his godfather, the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office, which proves crucial in foiling the German plot.⁴ Buchan's writing captures many characteristics of pre- and inter-war politics, not least the importance of relationships, and this article will look at some of these in more detail as they appear in his novels and with reference to Buchan's own Tory political career and his interaction with his Liberal contemporaries.

It is perhaps surprising that Buchan was a Conservative rather than a Liberal politician. His father was a minister in the Free Church of Scotland, a group that broke away from the established Church of Scotland in 1843 over the role of the state in the governance of the church. According to Pelling, prior to the 1880s the majority of Free Church clergy were Liberal supporters – in contrast to the Church of Scotland where the Conservatives remained strong.⁵ Buchan, in his own memoirs, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, states that his family

John Buchan
(1875–1940)

became Unionist in response to Gladstone's weakness in leaving General Gordon to be killed in Khartoum, as well out of sympathy for the plight of Ulster's Protestants threatened by the Liberal leader's conversion to home rule. This does not appear to have been an unusual response to these events among his father's peers.⁶ His mother's Borders' farming family, the Mastertons, however, had a Liberal background.

Buchan writes in his memoirs that he was a 'professed Tory' at Glasgow University but also that he chose to support Herbert Asquith in the Rectorial election whilst he was there. Moreover, he had many Liberal friends from his time studying at Oxford – including Asquith's son, Raymond Asquith – as well as from his time working for Lord Milner in South Africa and as a publisher in London before the First World War. Furthermore, his wife's father, Norman Grosvenor, who died in 1898, had been Liberal MP for Chester between 1869 and 1874.⁷ Up until about 1910, it was possible for Buchan's political friends to imagine him standing for either of the main parties: Charles Masterman, already by then the Under-Secretary for the Home Department in the Liberal government, insisted to Susan Buchan that he should stand, saying, 'and don't let him be a mugwump, let him join either the Liberals or the Tories, I don't mind which, but one or the other.'⁸ In the event, Buchan stayed loyal to his prior allegiances and chose the Conservatives.

In his memoirs, Buchan sets out his political creed. It is a peculiar mixture of romantic Conservatism, resting on a dislike of unnecessary change, combined with a desire that the community use its communal strength to achieve what are, in effect, the objectives of New Liberalism. He states, 'For the rest, I was critical of the details of Mr Asquith's policy, but approved its purpose – old age pensions, health and unemployment insurance, and most of the famous 1910 Budget. In the quarrel with the House of Lords, I was on the Government's side.' But, of course, Buchan disagreed profoundly with them over Ulster.⁹

Buchan himself had romantic notions of a titanic struggle with Raymond Asquith for election

in Peebles and Selkirk, where Asquith's stepmother's family lived.¹⁰ In the event, Asquith was selected for Derby in 1912. Buchan, however, had been chosen the year before as the Tory candidate for Peebles and Selkirk – which was a Liberal seat, although between 1886 and 1906 it had been represented by a Liberal Unionist.¹¹ There he was to face Donald Maclean, who had only been elected as the Liberal MP in the immediately previous election in December 1910.¹² Pelling comments that most of the Tory strength in the constituency was associated with the landholdings of the Duke of Buccleuch, amounting to over 60,000 acres in Selkirkshire.¹³ The local paper reviewed Buchan's speech at the adoption meeting, which reflected the views expressed thirty years later in his memoirs:

Mr John Buchan is rather advanced in his opinions to please some of the more rabid Tories. Part of his programme is stated to be: Abolition of the hereditary principle of the House of Lords, Free Trade and a scheme of Small Holdings. How the Unionist Tariff Reformers will act with such a programme remains to be seen. Certain it is that some who attended the meeting are not at all keen on such an advanced programme.¹⁴

Indeed, the radical paper, the *Edinburgh Evening News*, went on to say that Buchan was 'a bleating sheep, strayed from the fold, with just enough of the party tar-mak on him to be recognised, and sent kindly home.'¹⁵ From the commencement of his formal political career, therefore, Buchan was not a conventional Conservative, espousing many of the central planks of pre-war Liberalism including free trade, land reform and reform of the House of Lords.

The politics of the early twentieth century is even woven into Buchan's comic novels. *Castle Gay*, for instance, which features as its main protagonists Dickson McCunn and a group of Glasgow youths, the Gorbals Diehards, is set against the background of

a Scottish Borders by-election in a rural seat just like Peebles and Selkirk, although here the action takes place in the 1920s so Labour is also a factor. Two of the Diehards, Jaikie and Dougal, go on a walking tour around the area and meet up with Thomas Carlyle Craw, an unctuous newspaper editor who has been kidnapped by Tory students in error for the Liberal leader and then released without ceremony into the Scottish countryside. Trying to avoid some central-European revolutionaries whose cause Craw had espoused and now regretted, the three are on the run and spend the evening dropping in on the different by-election meetings. The Tory one not seeming very entertaining, they go to the Liberal one at which the candidate and the party leader, Foss Jones, a thinly disguised Lloyd George, speak:

'Let's go there,' said Jaikie [to Craw], 'I have never seen Foss Jones. Have you?' 'No', was the answer [from Craw], 'but he tried several times to make me a peer.'


Craw and Jaikie go on to the Labour meeting where they bump into the local Communist. After telling them how much the Communists respect the Tory enemy, he goes on to add, 'Liberalism is an antique which we contemptuously kick out of the road', before describing the Labour Party's leaders as men treasonable to socialism who will meet the fate of all traitors.¹⁶ Party politics therefore adds entertaining background colour to what is an enjoyable comedy thriller, and the novel portrays many of the attitudes that were commonplace by the time it was published in 1930. Certainly, by that stage, the Liberal Party was a shadow of its former self – scarred by the Asquith–Lloyd George split and struggling for credibility as the third party ground between the class-based millstones of Labour and the Conservatives.

Andrew Lownie, in his biography of John Buchan, speculates that part of the explanation for his Tory Party politics lies in a romantic rebellion against the Liberal Party as the established political party of Scotland while Buchan was growing up, but he also rightly highlights Buchan's views on Ulster

Poster for the film of Buchan's *Thirty-Nine Steps*, made by Alfred Hitchcock in 1935





ROBERT DONAT *and* MADELEINE CARROLL *in*

The **39**



Robert Donat

STEPS



Madeleine Carroll

**GAUMONT
BRITISH
PICTURE**

A THRILLING
SPY DRAMA BASED
ON JOHN BUCHAN'S
FAMOUS NOVEL

DIRECTED
BY
ALFRED
HITCHCOCK

and the Empire as having a crucial impact.¹⁷ Parry, in his essay 'Reflections on the Thought of John Buchan', agrees that Buchan was reacting against parochial Scottish sentimentalism.¹⁸ Such an outlook on the world was not only epitomised in *Craw*, the newspaper editor and central character of *Castle Gay*, but also parodied in his 1910 short story, 'A Lucid Interval'. In this latter example, the politics of a number of Liberal Cabinet ministers are dramatically changed, to general amusement, following consumption of a spiked curry. Buchan satirises that Scottish Liberal sentimentality in the character of Cargill, the Liberal Home Secretary, describing him before he eats the curry with the words, 'There was no appeal too base for him, and none too august: by some subtle alchemy he blended the arts of the prophet and the fishwife.'¹⁹ Throughout the majority of his adult life, Buchan drew on his experience of Scottish Liberals and therefore associated Liberalism in both his novels and his public discourse with those he regarded as rootless emotional intellectuals and secularised Nonconformists. Characters such as *Craw* and *Cargill* who fit that mould appear in many of his novels. Further, Buchan reacted very strongly against what he saw as a change in political tone on the part of the 1905–1915 Liberal government away from the consensual unifying politics of *Hartington* and *Rosebery* and towards a sectional, class-warfare demagoguery exemplified by *Lloyd George*. In his 1909 article 'The Intellectual Bankruptcy of Liberalism', published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, Buchan coruscated the Liberal government for using its parliamentary majority to pass legislation that appealed to the interests of a variety of different groups, while making no effort to integrate the country's energy and aspirations into a progressive national and popular consensus.²⁰ Likewise, Buchan thought the Liberal government's response on Ireland was weak – neither following the constitutional logic of home rule all round, which he claimed he would have supported, nor simply imposing the law. Later, once he was himself an MP, Buchan supported limited devolution to Scotland, including the establishment of a Scottish Office in

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Edinburgh, but spoke firmly in support of the 1707 Act of Union. In that respect he was an enlightened Unionist and therefore less favourable towards Scottish self-government than most Liberal MPs.

Following the success of *The Thirty Nine Steps*, Buchan wrote several more novels set during the First World War and immediately afterwards. Liberals feature unfavourably in several of these, confirming a general hardening of his views against the party as the political temperature rose under the *Asquith* government both before and after the outbreak of war. In *Mr Standfast*, for example, *Hannay* goes undercover to find a German spy hiding in a pro-peace group in an English village. In this novel, the spy is *Moxton Ivery*, a London publisher with impeccable credentials. *Hannay's* American associate, *Blenkiron*, describes him: 'He was Liberal candidate for a London constituency and he has decorated the board of every institution formed for the amelioration of mankind.' *Ivery's* use of a Liberal persona to provide camouflage for his activities as a German spy in wartime England fits into Buchan's increasingly negative view of Liberals. By contrast, however, when the novel's action moves up to Glasgow, *Hannay* encounters *Andrew Amos*, an old Borders radical and trade union official. *Amos* describes his outlook thus:

I'm for individual liberty and equal rights and chances for all men. I'll no more bow down before a Dagon of a Government official than before the Baal of a feckless Tweedside laird. I've to keep my views to mysel', for thae young lads are all drucken-daft with their wee books about Cawpital and Collectivism and a wheen long senseless words I wouldna fyle my tongue with. Them and their socialism! There's more gumption in a page of John Stuart Mill than in all that foreign trash.

Amos is an appealing character in the book and shows Buchan taking one of the many rural working-class Scottish Liberals that he would have encountered in his childhood and making him into a positive figure in this novel.²¹

Buchan had a romantic conception of the nation and its leadership

which shines through in his novels. However he struggled to find political leaders that he admired. Initially Buchan thought highly of both *Rosebery* and *Balfour*: both of these men, he thought, had a real sympathy for the common man, an attractive philosophy and a love of nature. As *Rosebery's* failings became more apparent, Buchan re-categorised him as a Calvinist stoic, too aware of the essential transience of life to become fully involved in politics. Although Buchan admired *Lloyd George* as a war leader, he attacked him as someone who stoked class hatred before the war and preached harshness and vengeance after it, leading to the 1918–1922 parliament being unfitted for post-war reconstruction. In his history of the reign of *George V*, *The King's Grace*, Buchan paid a double-edged compliment to *Lloyd George* by contrasting him with the older liberalism that he, Buchan, had reacted against when he was growing up. *Lloyd George* had:

... unsurpassed demagogic talents, and that rarer gift, a sense of political atmosphere. He might err in his ultimate judgements, but rarely in his immediate intuitions ... he was always human, and had none of the dogmatic rigidity, the lean spiritual pride, of the elder Liberalism ... Now [in the First World War], he had found his proper trade, and was emerging as one of the most formidable figures in the world ... He was a born coalitionist, sitting always loose to parties, a born War Minister, since strife was his element, and a born leader of a democracy, indeed both in its strengths and weaknesses, he was more than a representative – he was a personification.²²

Like many of his contemporary commentators, Buchan found *Lloyd George* hard to comprehend and characterise. After the First World War, Buchan argued that the Liberals had no principles other than outdated ones. The decline of the Liberal Party after the war meant that Buchan was here expressing a commonly held view. In a speech in October 1928, he described *Lloyd George's* speeches as 'trying to find little words to cover vacant spaces' in

the Liberal Party's approach and policy.²³

Exhausted by the war, during which he had worked as both a journalist and a propagandist, as well as writing some of his best-known novels, Buchan had initially no inclination to stand for parliament. In his memoirs he states that:

The Armistice found me at the end of my tether and I straightaway collapsed into bed. I was not fit to stand for Parliament at the ensuing election, nor did I want to, for the pre-war party labels seemed to me meaningless, so I withdrew my candidature and induced my supporters to vote for my previous opponent.²⁴

Although Maclean did not receive the Coupon issued by Lloyd George and Bonar Law, he had a straight fight with Labour, so the fact that he had Buchan's support is not surprising. Buchan himself again turned down opportunities to stand in Peebles and Southern Midlothian in 1920 and then in 1922 in Central Glasgow in succession to Bonar Law. However, following the sudden death of one of the Unionist incumbents, he did stand in a 1927 by-election for the Combined Scottish Universities seat.²⁵ With no political work other than an election address required and with the electors all voting by post this seemed an ideal constituency. One of the other incumbents was Dugald Cowan, a Liberal MP.²⁶ Buchan commented in his memoirs, looking back on his parliamentary career, 'I was elected as a Conservative, for, believing in party government, I disliked the name of Independent. But I held a university member should sit a little loose to parties, and I was independent in fact, if not in name.'²⁷ Whilst this independence of mind fitted with what, for a Tory, were iconoclastic views expressed before the First World War, it was less in tune with his friends' subsequent efforts to obtain him high office in the National Government after 1931.

The 1924 parliament was dominated by the Conservatives, with the Liberals reduced to forty seats following a catastrophic collapse at the general election. Many of the Tory Cabinet members were old friends of Buchan such as Leo Amery, F. E. Smith and Sir Arthur

Steel-Maitland. Following his by-election victory, Buchan made his maiden speech in July on the subject of the government's plans to reform the House of Lords, primarily by returning powers lost in the 1911 Parliament Act. In accordance with his rather maverick views, Buchan attacked both his own government's plans and the Labour criticism of them, to some approbation: '... there was so much applause that it was some minutes before Lloyd George [who spoke immediately afterwards] could begin.'²⁸ One parliamentary commentator described it as 'not only the best maiden speech I had ever heard, but that it was the best speech I had heard in this Parliament.'²⁹ Buchan himself described it in his memoirs as 'against the Government and my own party, and that gave me a filipp. Mr. Lloyd George, who followed me, did me the honour to repeat my arguments in his own words...'³⁰

Like Sir Robert Goodeve, the Tory MP in Buchan's most political novel, *The Gap in the Curtain*, Buchan's maiden speech was probably his most impressive achievement in parliamentary politics. At Westminster he gravitated naturally towards those Tory MPs such as Macmillan, Stanley, Elliot and Boothby who advocated the need for more state intervention in industry, further social reform and the importance of the League of Nations and the Locarno Pact in preventing another European war. He combined these views with a focus on Scottish issues, including opposition to local government reform in that country. During the third reading of the Local Government (Scotland) Bill, Buchan said 'I am a Tory and so have not the Whig distrust of State action. I am ready to admit that many activities are better in the hands of the community than in the hands of individuals.'³¹

Buchan had an easy victory in the May 1929 general election, topping the poll for the Combined Scottish Universities seat (Dugald Cowan, the Liberal, and George Berry, Buchan's fellow Tory, were also re-elected),³² however Labour won the most seats overall in that election despite having polled fewer votes than the Conservatives. The Liberals, reinvigorated under the leadership of Lloyd George and with added impetus from the work

behind *We Can Conquer Unemployment*, made nineteen net gains and increased their representation to fifty-nine MPs. For Buchan, however, the election had proved exhausting (he frequently suffered from ill health) and he withdrew from public and professional life for the remainder of the year.

Unemployment remained the leading political issue with which MacDonald's minority Labour government had to grapple. Buchan made a number of contributions from the backbenches to this debate, including advocating a scheme for Empire resettlement in Canada and criticising Labour's general inability to tackle the matter. *The Nation*, a Liberal newspaper, commented, 'Each of them [Boothby and Buchan] would have spoken with more appropriateness from the Liberal benches, and each, in attacking the record of this Government, was attacking by implication with greater force the far more prolonged failure of their own.'³³ By late 1930, Buchan had begun to argue that the country needed a National Government to deal with the matter. In parliament he said, 'The advantage of such a Government would be twofold. It would pool two things – brains and unpopularity.'³⁴ This echoes a comment by Labour politician Mayot to narrator and Tory MP Leithen in *The Gap in the Curtain*. The latter asks the former what the difference is between a coalition and a National Government: '“A Coalition” he [Mayot] said gravely, “only shares the loot, but a National Government pools the brains.”'³⁵

The Gap in the Curtain, published in 1932, portrays British parliamentary politics in the late 1920s and is the Buchan novel in which the Liberal Party features both most strongly and most favourably. The title refers to a glimpse of *The Times* a year ahead given to five men whose stories are narrated by Leithen. One sees an industrial merger; two, including Goodeve referred to above, see their obituaries; a fourth sees his departure on an exploratory trip to Yucatan; and the last, a former Tory free trader but now Labour Under-Secretary, David Mayot, that there is a new Prime Minister in the form of the Liberal Party leader, Waldemar. Leithen comments that Waldemar was the 'leader of the small,

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compact and highly efficient Liberal group. Within a year's time, therefore, a remarkable adjustment of the parties would take place, and the leader of what was by far the smallest party would be called upon to form a Government.' Mayot's story depicts his attempt to make personal political capital out of that knowledge by working out how such a transformation could possibly occur.

As that story develops, Buchan deals with the parties, factions and characters of the period. In many respects they are caricatures: Waldemar, for instance, combines elements of how a Tory might see Gladstone – 'Waldemar was a relic of Victorian Liberalism, a fanatical free trader, an individualist of the old rock ...' – with Campbell-Bannerman's fondness for continental spas and Sir Edward Grey's love of bird watching. Nonetheless they are well drawn. The narrative develops in such a way that Mayot's hope of a Liberal–Labour right coalition becomes plausible as the country's economic conditions worsen and unemployment soars, causing Labour's left and the Tory right to be marginalised. Mayot himself moves to the right, ruling himself out of the Labour leadership, in order to stay politically close to Waldemar. An election is called following the retirement of the Labour Prime Minister, Trant. He is replaced as Labour leader by Flotter, a compromise candidate between Labour's left, right and centre factions with nothing in particular to recommend him. However, in the course of the election campaign Waldemar discovers the horrors of unemployment for himself – 'went mad, or had a call, or saw a vision like St Paul on the road to Damascus. You can take whichever explanation you choose' – and whilst remaining a free trader proposes a huge loan for emergency public work, which Mayot cannot credibly support as a result of his previous political manoeuvring. Waldemar's subsequent whirlwind oratorical tour makes an enormous impact, winning support from many on the Labour left. Buchan writes:

It was an awful position for everybody else. His own party, with a few exceptions, accepted him docilely, though they had

some difficulty in accustoming themselves to the language. You see, the Liberals, having been long in the wilderness, were prepared to follow any Moses who would lead them across Jordan.

Both Tories and Labour were caught flat-footed – the election resulted in 251 Labour, 112 Liberals, 290 Tories and 12 Independents – and only Waldemar could be Prime Minister. As Buchan speaking as Leithen says, if only Mayot had trimmed without any foreknowledge, then, as a competent centrist Labour leader of the larger party in the coalition, he would have been Prime Minister instead of Waldemar.

In the real world there were some similarities but these only went so far. By summer 1931, Britain's economic crisis had deteriorated further and, in August, Sir George May's report on national expenditure was published advocating huge reductions in government expenditure. MacDonald's Labour government collapsed and the National Government was formed. Despite Liberal opposition to another election, the new government went to the polls in October 1931 and won a landslide victory with 556 seats to 46 for the opposition Labour Party. Furthermore, far from being a 'compact and highly efficient ... group', by the summer of 1931 the Liberals were split three ways and largely ineffectual in the Commons.

Although the National Government's majority, after the October 1931 election, rested overwhelmingly on the 472 Conservative MPs, there were also 33 Liberals following Sir Herbert Samuel, generally committed to free trade, 35 more who followed Sir John Simon, more generally pragmatically pro-government whatever its policies, and 13 National Labour who continued to support MacDonald. The third Liberal faction consisted of Lloyd George and three other MPs who were members of his family, who sat in opposition along with the Labour Party.

Naturally, the National Government reflected its component parts in the make-up of its Cabinet, although there was a greater weighting towards the three minority parties – the Samuelite Liberals, the Simonite Liberals and National

Labour – which was not welcomed by many Conservatives. It is therefore not surprising that Baldwin was lobbied by Buchan's friend Violet Markham (who had contested Mansfield as an independent Liberal in 1918), through Tom Jones, the Cabinet Deputy Secretary, to make Buchan president of the Board of Education. Jones records in his *A Diary with Letters 1931–1950* that he showed Markham's letter to Baldwin. Baldwin's response to Jones was apparently that 'Buchan would be no use in the Cabinet' and that the post had to go one of the Samuelite Liberals. Jones goes on to refer to his discussion with Baldwin about the merits and demerits of Lord Lothian³⁶ for the role and the conclusion that Lothian's Christian Scientist views would make him unacceptable to Roman Catholics. Despite Jones's view that '... of the men available among the Liberals he [Lothian] is clearly the only possible person for promotion',³⁷ it was Sir Donald Maclean – who had been Buchan's putative opponent in Peebles and Selkirk before the First World War – who became the new president. According to the diary of military journalist Basil Liddell Hart, MacDonald had also suggested to Buchan that he might be made Secretary of State for Scotland, but Buchan had declined. Here, again, the post went to a Samuelite Liberal, Sir Archibald Sinclair, who subsequently became Liberal Party leader between 1935 and 1945.³⁸

Following the government's decision at Ottawa to make permanent a system of Empire trade tariffs, thereby abandoning Britain's traditional commitment to free trade, Samuel, Sinclair and the Liberal ministers who followed them resigned in September 1932. Again, Baldwin and MacDonald took the view that party balance within the National Government meant that a Liberal, Sir Godfrey Colins,³⁹ a follower of the other Liberal group led by Sir John Simon, should be appointed Secretary of State for Scotland. Buchan, like many Tories, found this adherence to the demands of party balance galling. Buchan wrote to Markham as follows:

What is the good of kow-towing to the Simonites, who are indistinguishable from the ordinary

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Tories, except that they are more reactionary and who would not exist for a moment in Parliament except by our permission? I gather that the excessive attention paid to them was not Ramsay's doing, but SB [Stanley Baldwin]'s, who is apt to make a fetish of magnanimity. But my real objection is to their second rate ability. If the National Government means anything, it should be a pooling of the best talents ... Scotland is going to be a very difficult post in the near future, and Godfrey Collins, the Scottish Secretary, is simply preposterous.⁴⁰

Here again, in Buchan's view, the real National Government of the 1931–1935 parliament had not met the standards set out in his fiction.

Although never in office, and despite his grumblings, Buchan did assist Baldwin and MacDonald with their speeches, acted as a confidant and provided advice on proposed policies and other political personalities. Both Baldwin and MacDonald were political leaders that Buchan admired. Baldwin was seen as a progressive Conservative – straightforwardly patriotic. He was a believer in social, industrial and international conciliation, something of a scholar-statesman, and willing to believe the best in people – all traits that appealed to Buchan. MacDonald, he felt, possessed both heart and nerves, together with a willingness to seek Buchan's advice; he cited the fact that MacDonald had fought Seaham for National Labour in 1931, when he knew the electoral battle would be very tough. However this approbation did not last long. MacDonald was too ready to despise those politicians who did not share his background (nearly all in practice), and as his fitness to take difficult decisions deteriorated, he became reliant on morning walks round St James's Park with Buchan to steady those nerves, whilst obtaining updates about political gossip and developments. Nevertheless, on MacDonald's death in 1937, Buchan wrote, 'I think he was one of the bravest men I have ever known'.⁴¹ So, although the National Government did not meet the expectations he had of it, Buchan retained considerable faith in its leaders, and their characteristics shone through

Despite his previous approbation, King could not resist commenting on Buchan that 'It confirms the view that where a man is a Tory, Tory instincts are apt to be stronger than almost anything else, no matter how democratic in utterance and appearance one may be.'

in the Labour and Tory leaders, Trant and Geraldine, portrayed in *The Gap in the Curtain*.

Despite not obtaining a government post, Buchan served on a number of bodies including the BBC General Advisory Council and the School Age Council that lobbied to raise the school-leaving age to fifteen. He continued, however, to hope he could become a Cabinet minister and by 1934 had become part of the circle of the political hostess, the Marchioness of Londonderry. Her lobbying of Baldwin and MacDonald however proved no more successful than Markham's efforts on Buchan's behalf. Andrew Lownie discusses in his biography why Buchan never made it to the Cabinet. He dismisses age as a factor, although this was the explanation offered by Lothian: Neville Chamberlain, for example, was first elected at a similar age and promoted to Minister of Health within five years. Likewise, Lownie points out that Churchill continued to write as a journalist and author without hindering his career. Furthermore, as referred to above, Buchan was trusted by both Baldwin and MacDonald as a discreet adviser, rebutting some of the other explanations offered for his failure to become a minister. Lownie concludes that Buchan's ill health and a temperament ill suited to the necessary compromises of peacetime government were more significant factors.⁴² In addition, although he was an assiduous attender at Westminster, his speeches were too polished, too balanced and too intellectual to win the approbation of his MP colleagues. As Lownie says, Buchan's qualities were not those of a successful politician: he was too thoughtful, too courteous and too sensitive.⁴³

However, Buchan had not been overlooked for all governmental roles and it was his appointment to Canada that brought him into contact with Mackenzie King,⁴⁴ arguably the most successful Liberal politician in the twentieth century. In early 1934, the Governor General of Canada, Lord Bessborough, decided not to continue. Mackenzie King, the Liberal Prime Minister of Canada, then lobbied Clive Wigram, George V's secretary, for Buchan's appointment.⁴⁵ By March 1935 Buchan had decided to take

it. He had met Mackenzie King at Chatsworth in the autumn of 1923 at a country-house party organised by the Devonshires. Violet Markham subsequently wrote to Susan Buchan, 'You and John were out and away the nicest people he had met in England',⁴⁶ and so before the appointment, the Canadian held Buchan in very high esteem, although that did not wholly survive his arrival at Rideau Hall in Ottawa.

Buchan's parliamentary colleagues were sorry to see him go. Attlee, Labour leader since October 1935, wrote, 'We shall miss you very much in the House for although you spoke seldom, your influence was pervading and you will leave a gap which will not be easy to fill in the scanty ranks of those who are to large extent above the battle'.⁴⁷ Despite some initial qualms, Buchan eventually agreed to take a peerage to provide him with the requisite dignity to act as Governor General. In July he took his seat in the House of Lords as Lord Tweedsmuir of Elsfield before arriving in Quebec at the beginning of November 1935. The Governor General's role was to perform the function of the constitutional monarch within the Canadian context, which proved challenging for Buchan. During a dispute with Mackenzie King over the awarding of honours to Canadian civil servants, Buchan used the phrase 'I would advise you to consider'. King noted in his diary that providing advice was not the role of the Governor General. Despite his previous approbation, King could not resist commenting on Buchan that 'It confirms the view that where a man is a Tory, Tory instincts are apt to be stronger than almost anything else, no matter how democratic in utterance and appearance one may be'.⁴⁸ And to Buchan, Mackenzie King had many of those characteristics that had turned him against Liberalism in Scotland at the beginning of his career: his unctuousness, his sentimentality, his spiritualism and his devotion to his mother. Significantly, King had placed in Laurier House (his then residence as Prime Minister) an oil painting of his mother reading Morley's *Life of Gladstone*, with the page open at the chapter heading 'The Prime Minister'.

As well as the difficulty of managing the strains and tensions of his

relationship with Mackenzie King, Buchan's appointment as Governor General almost brought to an end his active involvement in politics. However Buchan was visiting Britain at the time of the Munich Crisis in September 1938 and he engaged in long discussions with Chamberlain (Prime Minister since 1937), Halifax and the other key National Government ministers. Like most establishment politicians he supported Chamberlain's course of action, although Buchan thought that Chamberlain's presenting it as a triumph on his return to Britain was a mistake.

Although Buchan had portrayed Liberals and the Liberal Party with a mixture of affection and ridicule in his novels and had never shown any particular sympathy for the party in his public life, towards the end of his life, this changed. Buchan revisited his political beliefs and reread Morley's *Life of Gladstone* (although there is no evidence that this was at Mackenzie King's suggestion). Thereafter, in January 1940, he wrote to his old Liberal friends Gilbert Murray⁴⁹ and H. A. L. Fisher⁵⁰ that he was becoming a Gladstonian Liberal. He quoted with approval to Murray that Gladstone had inspired men to fight materialism, complacency and authoritarianism, values exemplified by Nazism. Having rejected what he had previously seen as meaningless Liberal platitudes, Buchan admitted in those letters that the war and the Nazi threat had given substance to 'just those platitudes about which the world must be again convinced'.⁵¹ A month later he died following a stroke and Buchan's ashes were subsequently returned to the UK and buried at Elsfield, his country home in Oxfordshire.

Parry concludes in his essay that Buchan was a type of Victorian Liberal. He cites the weight Buchan placed on the importance of good, disinterested political leadership to provide moral stewardship and a unifying figure for the nation as a whole.⁵² This, though, was seen by Buchan as coming from the Conservative rather than the Liberal Party, particularly after Gladstone's decision to support the cause of Irish home rule in 1886. Parry's comments, however, reflect his own perspective on Victorian Liberalism and too much should not be read

Buchan comments in his memoirs, 'I longed for someone of prophetic strain, someone like Mr Gladstone, to trouble the waters even at the expense of our peace of mind. I would have been happier if I could have found a leader, whose creed I fully shared and whom I could devoutly follow.'

into them. The origins of Buchan's political views came from the Scottish political culture of the late nineteenth century. His Unionism was as much a reaction against a particular form of Gladstonian Liberalism dominant in much of lowland-Scots political and religious life at that time as it was a positive espousal of any form of ideological Conservatism. It reflected his 'generous liking of men and things as they are, and a thorough impatience with the doctrinaires who wanted to alter them because they did not comply with some arbitrary pattern'.⁵³ Parry goes on to argue that Buchan felt that the pandering to special interests exemplified in the Newcastle Programme, and the splintering of the broad Liberal coalition as a result of the departure of the Whigs and the followers of Joseph Chamberlain, had ended the Liberal Party's ability to appeal to the whole country. By contrast the Unionists of the late nineteenth century seemed more above class conflict and closer to the religious values that Buchan valued. However, forty years later the appeal of Conservatism had itself ebbed following the resignation of Baldwin as Prime Minister in 1937, whilst, paradoxically, as Liberalism declined in popular appeal Buchan became more sympathetic to it. Buchan felt that his own political failure had shown that the Tory hierarchy was just as stuck in the past – and that Baldwin's high-minded rhetoric was no more than that.

Despite Parry's comments, Buchan's politics were those of an enlightened Unionist throughout his political career. Although his views often overlapped with Liberal ones, to the extent that many important Liberals could see him being a leading light in either of the two main parties before the First World War, his Toryism was forged in the reaction against Gladstone's enthusiasm for Irish home rule. Buchan, it is fair to say, never warmed to the character of twentieth-century politics – the politics of party machines and interest groups. His romantic view of causes, the importance of history and leadership was always going to be rebuffed by what he perceived as the mediocrity of most inter-war politicians. Buchan comments in his memoirs, 'I longed for someone of prophetic strain, someone like

Mr Gladstone, to trouble the waters even at the expense of our peace of mind. I would have been happier if I could have found a leader, whose creed I fully shared and whom I could devoutly follow'.⁵⁴ Nevertheless his novels do provide an insight into the Liberal types of the early twentieth century as seen by a humane, insightful outsider, himself brought up in a strongly Liberal rural society whilst being intimate with the high politics of Westminster and Whitehall. This makes his novels and short stories a rewarding read for the historian of the early twentieth century, even if the reality of the National Government's power-broking and balancing of the interests of the different factions was a long way away from the romance of politics as portrayed in *The Gap in the Curtain* and his many other novels.

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- 1 Richard Haldane (1856–1928). MP for Haddingtonshire 1885–1911. Secretary of State for War 1905–1912. Viscount Haldane 1911–1928. Lord Chancellor 1912–1915 and 1924. Buchan discusses his friendship with him in his memoirs, *Memory Hold-the-Door* (London, 1940), pp. 128–133.
- 2 John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (first published 1915), p. 41 of 'Four Tales' edition published 1939.
- 3 Henry Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885–1910* (London, 1967), p. 397.
- 4 Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.
- 5 Pelling, *Social Geography*, p. 374, argues that this was in fact quite common among Church of Scotland clergy of the period.
- 6 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, 1993). Buchan, *Memory*, p. 248.
- 7 Norman Grosvenor (1845–1898). Liberal MP for Chester 1869–1874.
- 8 Janet Adam Smith, *John Buchan: A biography* (Oxford Paperbacks, 1985), p. 180.

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- 9 Buchan, *Memory*, p.147
- 10 Adam Smith, *John Buchan*, p. 180.
- 11 Pelling, *Social Geography*, pp. 396–397.
- 12 Donald Maclean (1864–1932). MP for Bath 1906–1910, Peebles and Selkirk 1910–1918, Peebles and South Midlothian 1918–1922 and North Cornwall 1929–1932. Leader of the Opposition 1918–1920. President of the Board of Education 1931–1932.
- 13 Pelling, *Social Geography*, pp. 396–397.
- 14 Andrew Lownie, *John Buchan: The Presbyterian Cavalier* (Constable, 1995), p. 106.
- 15 Adam Smith, *John Buchan*, p. 181.
- 16 John Buchan, *Castle Gay* (1930).
- 17 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 106. Only in the 1900 general election did the Liberals not win a majority of Scottish constituencies in the elections between 1885 and December 1910.
- 18 Parry, 'Thirty-Nine Articles', p. 226.
- 19 John Buchan, *A Lucid Interval* (1910).
- 20 Parry, 'Thirty-Nine Articles', p. 227.
- 21 John Buchan, *Mr Standfast* (1919).
- 22 John Buchan, *The King's Grace* (1935), pp. 186–187.
- 23 Parry, 'Thirty-Nine Articles', p. 228; reported in *The Times*, 30 Oct. 1928.
- 24 Buchan, *Memory*, pp. 179–180.
- 25 The result was: Buchan 16,963; Labour 2,378.
- 26 Dugald Cowan (1865–1933). Headmaster North Kelvinside Higher Grade School, 1896–1919. Coalition Liberal and then Liberal MP for Combined Scottish Universities 1918–1933.
- 27 Buchan, *Memory*, p. 222.
- 28 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 208.
- 29 Ibid., p. 209.
- 30 Buchan, *Memory*, p. 225.
- 31 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 211.
- 32 The result was: Buchan 9,959; other Tory 9,262; Cowan 6,698; Labour 2,867.
- 33 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 213.
- 34 Ibid., pp. 214–215.
- 35 John Buchan, *The Gap in the Curtain* (1932).
- 36 Lord Lothian (formerly Philip Kerr) (1882–1940). Private Secretary to Lloyd George 1916–1921. Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 1932–1932. Under-Secretary of State for India 1932. Ambassador to the United States 1939–1940.
- 37 Thomas Jones, *A Diary with Letters 1931–1950* (1954), pp. 42–44.
- 38 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 218. Sir Archibald Sinclair (1890–1970). MP for Caithness and Sutherland 1922–1945. Secretary of State for Scotland 1931–1932. Leader of Liberal Party 1935–1945. Secretary of State for Air 1940–1945.
- 39 Sir Godfrey Collins (1875–1936). MP for Greenock 1910–1936. Secretary of State for Scotland 1932–1936.
- 40 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 221.
- 41 Adam Smith, *John Buchan*, p. 329.
- 42 Lownie, *John Buchan*, pp. 224–225.
- 43 Ibid., p. 227.
- 44 Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of Canada 1921–1926, 1926–1930, 1935–1948.
- 45 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 242.
- 46 Adam Smith, *John Buchan*, pp. 246–247.
- 47 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 245.
- 48 Ibid., pp. 252–253.
- 49 Gilbert Murray (1866–1957). Classical scholar and Liberal. Contested Oxford University between 1919 and 1929 as a Liberal candidate.
- 50 Herbert Fisher (1865–1940). Liberal MP for Sheffield Hallam 1916–1918. Liberal MP for Combined English Universities 1918–1926. President of the Board of Education 1916–1922.
- 51 Parry, 'Thirty-Nine Articles', p. 234.
- 52 Ibid., p. 235.
- 53 Gilbert Murray, Preface to Lady Tweedsmuir (ed.), *The Clearing House: A John Buchan Anthology* (London, 1946) p. viii.
- 54 Buchan, *Memory*, pp. 227–228.

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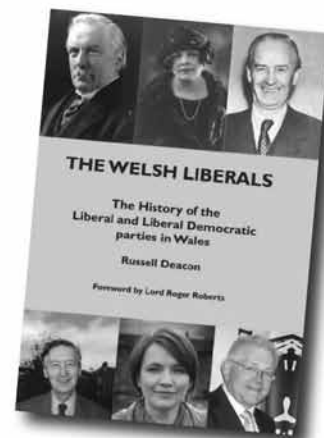
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