

IMPERIALISM IN LITERATURE: THE CASE OF JOHN BUCHAN

by

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John Buchan (1875-1940) mixed art and politics to a greater extent than any British writer since Disraeli. As he rose in public life from Lord Milner's staff in South Africa (1901-03) to become Britain's wartime Director of Information (1916-18), a Tory MP and eventually Lord Tweedsmuir of Elsfield, Governor-General of Canada (1935-40), he produced a stream of best-selling novels with explicit political content. His life and work consequently provide a rare opportunity for studying the eternally vexing problem of locating ideas in the hierarchy of historical causes. Buchan's detractors attack the novels for actively propagating unsavoury and outmoded creeds: the capitalist cult of success, the Empire, patriotism, racism, fresh air, cold baths and *Playing the Game*. (1) Buchan's admirers, on the other hand, insist that he was by no means a simple-minded reactionary, that he reflected rather than moulded the prejudices of his era, and that in any case his politics are irrelevant to his literary achievement. (2)

The argument of this paper is that John Buchan's political novels are too complex to be fairly described as either the propaganda or the mirror of the generation of British Tories who witnessed both the Scramble for Africa and the Battle of Britain. At the turn of the century Buchan took up the late-Victorian notion of empire-building as a metaphor for the European psyche, a notion which, in his famous South African novel Prester John, provides unambiguous and effective buttressing for the dominion of white capital. But when, in later decades, Buchan brought his psycho-political metaphor back from the frontier to the centre of the Empire, he produced novels with confused political messages which reflected the disordered condition of post-war Europe and which came perilously close to advocating fascist solutions to the problems of capitalism in extremis. Buchan's novels deserve serious attention not only for their demonstration of the impact of fashionable psychological concepts upon modern political discourse but also for the political linkages they disclose between the late-Victorian novel of imperial adventure and the twentieth-century spy thriller. In a literary way they illustrate Rosa Luxemburg's diagnostic comment on imperialism as a stage of economic development.

What distinguishes imperialism as the last struggle for capitalist world domination is ... the return of the decisive struggle for expansion from those areas which are being fought over back to its home countries. In this way imperialism brings catastrophe as a mode of existence back from the periphery of capitalist development to its point of departure. (3)

Buchan frankly acknowledged his intention to imitate the previous generation of imperial romancers. A young innkeeper who shelters the fleeing hero Richard Hannay in The Thirty-Nine Steps (1915) confesses his ambition to "see life, to travel the world, and write things like Kipling and Conrad". His reaction to Hannay's tale of his own recent perils is, "By God! ... it is all pure Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle". (4) In different ways these writers had used the far frontiers of empire to explore the ancient idea of the divided self - an idea lately given sharp new expression in Stevenson's parable of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and soon to be pronounced scientific by the psycho-analytic school of psychologists. Rider Haggard sent titled gentlemen into battle with naked warriors in lost worlds, then stripped off their civilized "vener" to expose the savage within. (5) Kipling pointed out in Kim that when a man becomes aware of the alternative personalities hidden in his own bosom, he acquires a permanent identity problem. At the same time, his ability to assume many masks makes him the ideal spy to send into the polyglot underworld of a potentially rebellious Empire. Conrad recoiled from practical imperialism because of its perpetual tendency to wake up the horrors lurking in the dark corners of European souls. Then, in The Secret Agent, he brought Kipling's spy home to confront anarchists and diplomats working to awaken those same horrors in ostensibly civilized countries.

In a fictional symposium on imperialism written in 1906 Buchan explicitly set out the theory which linked him to Conrad, Kipling and Haggard, and which would be the foundation of his own fiction for many years to come. One of the characters invited by a Rhodes-like multi-millionaire to an East African lodge expounds an aesthetic theory he calls "romanticism", whose "central doctrine" is that "truth, virtue, happiness, all the ideals" are "attained by a clash of opposites". (6) All human beings are "a strange compound" who can never reach "full stature by starving certain parts of ... nature of their due". Imperialism, with its clash of opposites - civilization and barbarism, brain and brawn, east and west - is analogous to the human soul in this cloudy neo-Hegelian conception. To make his meaning clearer Buchan offered one of his favourite inventions, the story of the upright Victorian statesman with an extraordinary secret life. In public, Sir Charles Weston was the supporter of missionary societies, peace, and liberal reform. In his private fantasies, however, he was Emperor of Byzantium, warlike, cruel and lustful. For every virtue he espoused in the House of Commons there was an equal and opposing dream of vice. On the day on which his publicly expressed statement was, "Every war - I do not care what its pretext - must be a blunder in statesmanship and a sin against the Most High", he wrote in his secret diary:

It is the evening of the greatest day in my life.
The blood is crusted over my eyes, my left arm is
crippled, and I am caked in dust. A quarter of my
men are slain, but the enemy have been ground
between the millstones. (7)

Buchan called his invention "an allegory true of us all". It first appears in a short story published in 1905 ("The Kings of Orion") and is developed in many subsequent variations. Buchan makes several points with his "allegory" of the alter-ego. First, on a superficial level it is both humorous and satisfying for him to imagine that inside every smug, self-righteous anti-imperialist there is a warlike, domineering Tory crying to be let loose. In the second place, Buchan uses the idea to express his awareness that his own political opinions are based on something other than pure reason. Commenting on the effects of a personality-changing drug in "A Lucid Interval", he observes that:

the drug did not create new opinions but elicited
those which had hitherto lain dormant. Every man
has a creed but in his soul he knows that that
creed has another side, possibly no less logical,
which it does not suit him to produce. (8)

The third point Buchan makes with his "allegory" is that popular with social Darwinists who supported imperialism - that the urges to fight, to kill, to dominate are basic human instincts beneficial to progress and in any case impossible to suppress. (9) By identifying this view of the psyche with his "new conception of

empire" Buchan suggests that the real purpose of imperialism is psychological - a release for domineering impulses which happily benefit those who are dominated. By postulating that the most upright and controlled personality has somewhere a written or unwritten secret diary of subversive fantasies, he also makes a comment on himself.

Like many other literary imperialists, John Buchan was an incredibly disciplined personality. He was a man who always dressed for dinner, never missed appointments and invariably finished his work ahead of schedule. He invariably wore a tie which he would never loosen, even when encouraged by his wife and daughter to let a little sun fall on his neck for the sake of his health. (10) The disjunction between his reserved public persona and his dashing fiction invites the conclusion that he used fiction as an outlet for the anxieties and risky impulses he suppressed in every other part of his life. But precisely because Buchan knew what he was doing - as his story of the Emperor of Byzantium plainly shows - it is difficult to specify the content of his own secret fantasies. What he does again and again is to emphasise the existence rather than to reveal the character of an inner self. He takes it for granted that this inner self is a Pandora's box of evil or amoral impulses which ought to remain closed.

Buchan's first South African novel, Prester John, is a good example of the format he employed to dramatize his psychological theory. The entire story depends for its effect on the audience's willingness to identify the African with the inner self of the European - to picture the black man as all id and no super-ego. As a lad in Scotland, David Crawford witnesses the strange, terrifying spectacle of a black seminary student from South Africa secretly performing heathen rites on a secluded beach. A few years later Crawford himself moves to South Africa to seek his fortune by running a rural store. By this time the black seminarian has become the Reverend John Laputa, celebrated for Christian piety and oratorical genius. Nothing much happens for the first two hundred pages of the book. Vague rumours of large-scale diamond thefts by African miners circulate in the back country, but a conspiracy of silence prevents even Captain Jim Arcoll, the famous bush detective and master of disguise, from learning anything very useful. A brush with a nasty "Portuguese" half-breed who deals in "illicit" diamonds puts young Crawford on the scent which leads him eventually to the secret cave in the secret valley where Laputa has gathered thousands of followers in preparation for a rebellion. In the darkness of the cave David miraculously escapes detection and undergoes initiation rites. He is nearly overpowered by an urge to join the magnificently Satanic Laputa in his rebellion, but manages to remember his duty and steals the necklace which Laputa requires to maintain magico-religious authority over his followers. Although David is discovered and pursued across difficult terrain, he succeeds in hiding the necklace before falling prey to exhaustion and illness. Rescued and brought back to civilization, he lies comatose for days. In this condition he dreams of Laputa's hiding place and, after regaining consciousness, is able to arrange for his capture.

In skeletal outline, the formula of Prester John is as follows. First, the hero is menaced by vague and mysterious forces which threaten not only him but the entire social order. The leader of the menacing forces is eventually revealed as a villain of superhuman cunning, who is able to pose as a respectable member of society. In order to triumph the hero must venture into the villain's wild and lawless terrain. There the hero experiences an almost irresistible urge to join his adversary as well as a period of prolonged unconscious delirium. Only after he has passed through this period of temptation and unconsciousness can he join forces with the agents of law and order to secure a final victory. That victory is not only a victory over the enemies of constituted authority; it is a victory over his own unconscious rebellious impulses. This formula gives a powerful dramatic presentation of the theory of the split personality which Buchan had expounded statically in his "allegory" of the Emperor of Byzantium.

It is not incidental, but of the utmost significance, that Buchan gives an overtly political content to his allegory. There is hardly a white South African prejudice that Prester John does not cater to in one way or another. Laputa's clandestine rites reinforce the common belief that heathen savagery lurks just below

the surface of black Christianity. The ability of the Africans to maintain a strict conspiratorial silence about their planned rebellion reinforces the proverb that "you never know what they're really thinking" and that an efficient secret police (Captain Jim Arcoll and his staff) is essential to prevent a general rising. The evil "Portuguese" and the partly Caucasian Laputa represent the perils of miscegenation and at the same time explain the presence of intelligence and leadership ability in negroid skulls. Though Buchan raises Laputa to Miltonic proportions for certain purposes of his own, the picture drawn of him is by no means incompatible with the legendary "big buck nigger" (a phrase which Buchan, like Conrad, could use without embarrassment). He is huge, cunning, potent, nearly irresistible. The diamonds which make Laputa's rebellion possible are not left-overs from King Solomon's Mines; they are stolen by workers in the pits of the De Beers monopoly which Cecil Rhodes built. Jim Arcoll and his secret police stumble upon rumours of rebellion in the course of their ordinary job of tracking down "illicit diamonds". After Laputa's downfall the diamonds are returned to the monopoly and a vocational school is established to ensure that in the future talented Africans will not be over-educated, as Laputa had been. Support for white racism goes hand in hand with support for white capitalism.

While Buchan's purpose in writing Prester John had been to rework his allegory rather than to promote white domination in southern Africa, the result of his labours was the creation of a metaphor of evident utility to conservative forces. It directly equated the struggle of the conscious outward self to maintain control of inward evil impulses with the struggle of constituted political and economic authority to maintain dominion over rebellious elements in society. This equation was also of tremendous utility to Buchan personally. It explained and justified his iron self-control, his over-developed sense of decorum. It excused his espousal of Tory political positions in controversies where he knew the other side had the better arguments. It reverberated sympathetically with the Calvinist orthodoxy of his father's church whose other tenets Buchan had mostly abandoned. At the same time it must be recognized as a new idea which is not attributable to Buchan's early environment or the persistence of Victorian attitudes. Although it was composed of hoary assumptions - the beast within, the survival of atavistic instincts, the innate emotionalism of black men - it combined them to enunciate a characteristically twentieth-century concept.

When Buchan published his next novel five years later he raised the political stakes in the contest between good and evil by making the peace and freedom of the whole civilized world hang on the strength of a single man. In The Thirty-Nine Steps a gang of German spies hopes to precipitate a world war by assassinating the Greek Premier on his visit to London. An American journalist who uncovers elements of their plan is found out by them and killed just after taking refuge in the apartment of Richard Hannay, a wealthy mining engineer just returned from South Africa. Hannay manages to retain the journalist's encoded notebook and as a result becomes the object of a double pursuit. The gang want the notebook and the police blame Hannay for the corpse in his apartment. By fleeing to the wilds of Scotland and adopting a bewildering succession of disguises he succeeds in evading capture long enough to decode the notebook and convince a Cabinet Minister to go after the gang.

Despite the change of venue Buchan had no difficulty in repeating his familiar structure. The hero is pitted against forces of evil who masquerade as respectable members of society. To defeat them he must lose his own status and identity in a savage landscape beyond the reach of the law. He must also pass through a period of sickness and delirium (in this case a spot of the old malaria) and resist a nearly overpowering impulse to join his arch-enemy:

There was something weird and devilish in those eyes, cold, malignant, unearthly, and most hellishly clever. They fascinated me like the bright eyes of a snake. I had a strong impulse to throw myself on his mercy and offer to join his side, and if you consider the way I felt about the whole thing you will see that that impulse must have been purely physical, the weakness of a brain mesmerized and mastered by a stronger spirit. (11)

This particular villain has been supposed by some to be Jewish because of an important speech made to Hannay by the doomed American.

I am giving you what he told me as well as I could make it out. Away behind all the Governments and the armies there was a big subterranean movement going on, engineered by very dangerous people ... I gathered that most of the people in it were the sort of educated anarchists that make revolutions, but that beside them there were financiers who were playing for money. A clever man can make big profits on a falling market, and it suited the book of both classes to set Europe by the ears.

He told me some queer things that explained a lot that had puzzled me - things that happened in the Balkan War, how one state suddenly came out on top, why certain men disappeared, and where the sinews of war came from. The aim of the whole conspiracy was to get Russia and Germany at loggerheads.

When I asked Why, he said that the anarchist lot thought it would give them their chance. Everything would be in the melting-pot, and they looked to see a new world emerge. The capitalists would rake in the shekels, and make fortunes by buying up wreckage. Capital, he said, had no conscience and no fatherland. Besides the Jew was behind it, and the Jew hated Russia worse than hell.

'Do you wonder?' he cried. 'For three hundred years they have been persecuted, and this is the return match for the pogroms. The Jew is everywhere, but you have to go far down the backstairs to find it ... if you're on the biggest kind of job and are bound to get to the real boss, ten to one you are brought up against a little white-faced Jew in a bath chair with an eye like a rattlesnake. Yes sir, he is the man who is ruling the world just now ... (12)

With respect to Buchan's alleged anti-Semitism there are several observations to be made on this passage. First it is not Buchan, it is not even his hero, Hannay, who makes the statement. The second observation is that the only resemblance between the villain of the Thirty-Nine Steps and the "Jew in the bath chair" is the snake-like eye; the man is later identified as a German Junker, the Graf von Schwabing. Third, the fiends behind this particular conspiracy are eventually revealed to be neither financiers nor anarchists; they are agents of Kaiser Bill.

Nevertheless, after all this has been said in fairness to Buchan, the fact remains that the idea of the alliance between Jewish high finance and anarchic, destructive elements in society exercised a continuing fascination for him. The fascination is all the more noteworthy because of the steadfast support he gave to Jews in his public and private life. In 1900 Buchan put the idea in the mouth of the villain in The Half-Hearted who proposed to cure the "sickness" in British society by bankrupting the "whole gang of Jew speculators and vulgarians who would corrupt a great country". (13) The idea crops up again in The Three Hostages (1923). A gang of criminal profiteers (not specifically identified as Jewish) promotes strikes and revolutions in order to reap huge speculative profits.

These fellows were wreckers on the grand scale, merchants of pessimism, giving society another kick downhill whenever it had a chance of finding its balance, and then pocketing their profits. (14)

In the early thirties the idea is still at the centre of Buchan's novel A Prince of the Captivity: "the dictation of masters who were thinking only of their bank balances to a poor devil who was responsible for millions of suffering human beings." (15)

Precisely because the idea of the Jewish-capitalist conspiracy sits oddly in a writer who showed every sign of cordiality to both Jews and capitalists, the place of this idea in Buchan's work needs to be pinned down. Historians of imperialism will recognize in this conspiracy idea a weirdly distorted version of the economic theory of imperialism popularized in England by Hobson and Buchan's old classmate at Glasgow University, H. N. Brailsford. In fact, the blame put on capital with "no conscience and no fatherland", for "things that happened in the Balkan war, how one state suddenly came out on top" and "where the sinews of war came from", is strongly reminiscent of Brailsford's War of Steel and Gold which appeared just a year before the Thirty-Nine Steps. But the idea that the titans of finance capital might be leagued together with anarchists or Bolsheviks would have impressed Hobson and Brailsford as the wildest of economic absurdities. They regarded capital's interests in armaments and international tensions as obstacles, not aids, to the reformation of society. It is on this point that a simple-minded Marxist case for Buchan as the apologist of capitalism (a case which can otherwise be very plausibly made) will break down. It was no service to big business to spread the belief that powerful financiers made money from destructive, anti-social activities and would wreck civilization itself if there were profits to be made in the enterprise. (16)

One plausible explanation for Buchan's constant reiteration of this crazy inversion of the theory of economic imperialism is that it followed logically from his psychology rather than his politics. His allegory of the Emperor of Byzantium implied that every civilized being harbours within himself a powerful alter-ego desiring nothing less than the inversion of all civilized values. The alter-ego, because it is another aspect of the same person, is no howling werewolf, but a being possessed of the same appearance, manners and powers of reasoning as the outward man. Like Stevenson's Hyde, he is accepted as a gentleman in society. The more talented, rich and imaginative the outward man is in his public career, the more talented, resourceful and imaginative the hidden alter-ego will be in his schemes for vice. When Buchan translated this theory into political terms, he identified the conservative top stratum of existing society with the decent, well-behaved individual who is suppressing the evil within himself. This metaphor, if pursued with relentless logic, carries the implication that there are elements working for the revolutionary subversion of the status quo who are indistinguishable in manners and appearance from the most respected, honoured national leaders. The imperatives of his literary conceit - not a slavish, snobbish obsession with success - led Buchan to make top people the protagonists of his stories. Laputa is the least typical of his villains, not only because he is black but because his greatest claim to respectability is his position as an African church leader. Almost all the rest are extremely wealthy men who belong to the most exclusive clubs and dine regularly with Cabinet ministers. Lunatic though it may be as political economy, it is a perfectly reasonable deduction from Buchan's fundamental premises.

If it is treated seriously as a call for political action, it appears to advocate a permanent police state apparatus to maintain the existing order. In this respect Buchan bears out the turn-of-the-century fears of J. A. Hobson that habits of autocracy learned abroad would subvert freedom and democracy at home. This type of literature makes a powerful appeal to imaginations hoping to be confirmed in their belief that the enemy is within. When a villainous gang is exposed in The Three Hostages its tentacles are shown to have reached into every corner of the establishment on two continents. The final police dragnet, which is beyond parody, catches: a gentleman in Mayfair; the directors of a Spanish copper company; "a certain French count of royalist proclivities"; a pious Presbyterian accountant in Glasgow; "decorous bankers in Genoa"; "more than one pretty dancer" and "several fashionable actresses"; an American senator; four members of the French Chamber of Deputies; "a mining magnate in Westphalia"; and a "Prince of the Church" of Rome. This ending demonstrates unquestionably that Buchan selected his villains without respect to race, sex, religion or national origin. Their only common characteristic is inordinate success in life. Jews and non-Jews are allowed to figure as villains (or heroes) only if they first qualify as very important people.

There was, however, one other commonly alleged characteristic of Jews which Buchan found useful in his fiction. That was their reputation as rootless wanderers

endowed with the chameleon's ability to take on a protective local colouring. In Greenmantle (1916) Hannay contrasts the German's abysmal insensitivity with the talents of the adaptable Jew. "In Germany", he observes, "only the Jew can get outside himself, and that is why, if you look into the matter, you will find that a Jew is at the back of most German enterprises." (17) To the ordinary anti-Semitic nationalist of Buchan's day the notion of the mutable man was an abomination because such a man lacked the supposedly fixed national characteristics which constituted the sole legitimate claim to citizenship. But Buchan needed the notion of the mutable man to make his literary format work. Moreover, as a Scot who had succeeded in reaching the stratospheric reaches of the English upper class, he personally identified with the man who could adapt himself at will to new surroundings. He once gave a speech at a Jewish fund-raising dinner in which he drew numerous parallels between Jews and Scots. The same parallels are often drawn in his novels and laid the basis for the creation of perhaps his most distinctive character, Sandy Arbuthnot.

Sandy is preternaturally adept at "getting outside of himself" and "into the skin" of other people - the skill Buchan often singles out as particularly found in Jews. "We call ourselves insular", Hannay muses,

but the truth is that we are the only race on earth that can produce men capable of getting inside the skin of remote peoples. Perhaps the Scots are better than the English, but we're all a thousand per cent better than anyone else. Sandy was the wandering Scot carried to the pitch of genius. (18)

Though he sometimes talks a silly public school slang ("Oh my sainted aunt"; "Oh, well done our side!"), Sandy is a mysterious, brooding character better known on the Baluchistan frontier than in Mayfair. For information on his doings "you must consult very different authorities" from Who's Who:

you will hear of him at little forgotten fishing ports where the Albanian mountains dip to the Adriatic. If you struck a Mecca pilgrimage the odds are you would meet a dozen of Sandy's friends in it. In shepherd's huts in the Caucasus you will find bits of his cast-off clothing, for he has a knack of shedding garments as he goes. In the caravanserais of Bokhara and Samarkand he is known, and there are shikaris in the Pamirs who still speak of him round their fires. (19)

His ability to adopt different disguises, speak different languages, and pretend to espouse alien values exceeds Hannay's and makes him the Empire's most valued secret agent. He alone is able to move into the netherest reaches of the underworld without passing through the obligatory period of sick delirium or drugged unconsciousness which Buchan imposes on all his other heroes.

What is more, Sandy dices with the devil on equal terms. In The Three Hostages he uses his knowledge of the arcane works of a fifteenth-century Scottish wizard to expose the villain masquerading as a Tory parliamentarian. When Buchan reworked the ending of Conrad's Victory in his novel The Island of Sheep, he added Sandy (as an infiltrator) to Conrad's fiendish trio of devil, feline cutthroat and apeman. Sandy's reply to Hannay's query concerning his whereabouts during the previous few weeks is the reply of Conrad's "Plain Mr Jones" to Heist: "Going to and fro on the earth." (20) With the invention of Sandy, Buchan had stretched his psychological metaphor to its limits. This wandering Scot, this endlessly mutable man, so resembles the devils of Buchan's thrillers as to be indistinguishable from them for long periods. He points the way to the favourite conceit of mid-twentieth century spy novels that in the murky world of counter-intelligence work the agents of both sides resemble each other more than they resemble ordinary human beings.

In each of the novels in which he appears Sandy is a working agent of the enemy whose ultimate allegiance to the right side is only confirmed at the very last minute. His assignment in Greenmantle (1916) is to infiltrate a German plot aimed at

raising an Arab revolt against the Turks. He acts the part of a near-eastern necromancer so well that the Germans choose him to impersonate the false prophet who is to begin the jihad. He is adept enough at magic to cast a potent spell over Richard Hamay, with the help of wraith-like assistants who call themselves "The Companions of the Rosy Hours".

In an instant I found myself reft away from the present with its dull dangers, and looking at a world all young and fresh and beautiful ... I was looking at my first youth. I was feeling the kind of immortal light-heartedness which only a boy knows in the dawning of his days. I had no longer any fear of these magic makers. They were kindly wizards who had brought me into fairyland ...

Slowly, very slowly it changed ... There was no mistake about its meaning now. All the daintyness and youth had fled, and passion was beating in the air - terrible, savage passion, which belonged neither to day nor night, life nor death, but to the half-world between them. I suddenly felt the dancers as monstrous, inhuman, devilish. The thick scents that floated from the brazier seemed to have the tang of new-shed blood ... I now realized that these Companions of the Rosy Hours were the only thing in the world to fear. (21)

This trance is virtually identical to the states of unconsciousness or delirium which Buchan's heroes pass through in other books. First comes a tranquilized passage to early childhood, then a nightmarish compound of savage passion, the scent of fresh blood and other terrors too awful to mention. Any man who can induce it is obviously no ordinary mortal. And although he may ultimately side with the angels it is clear that his power to save the day derives from his ability to turn the devil's own weapons against him. It is significant that the greatest of these weapons is psychological warfare - brain-washing.

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The final stage in Buchan's development of his overarching metaphor was his translation of it into the terminology of psycho-analysis. It was inevitable that a well-read man who could write so graphic an account of a descent via unconsciousness to forgotten childhood joys and terrors would sooner or later stumble across psycho-analytic theory and recognize the similarity between its postulates and his own ideas, first enunciated in the allegory of the Emperor of Byzantium and then developed with increasing complexity in his novels. Interestingly, Buchan's first encounter with Freudian theory seems to have been a clinical one. In 1912 he developed a duodenal ulcer which failed to respond to any of the usual treatments and which continued to plague him for the rest of his life. Eventually someone suggested that the illness might have a psychological basis and advised a visit to "a world-famous Continental psychiatrist, a man noted for tracing such physical ailments as duodenal ulcers to psychic disorders in the patient". One of Buchan's friends reports that he

submitted himself to examination and was long closeted with the specialist. The verdict? 'Never in my experience have I met anybody less frustrated or less crippled by inhibitions. He is free from neuroses. His trouble must be wholly of physical origin.' (22)

Whether or not this is a fair account of the psychiatrist's report - it has been seized upon by one of Buchan's shriller defenders as definitive proof that he was not a latent homosexual - the visit introduced Buchan to the ideas of Freud whom he later praised in his autobiography as one of the very few twentieth-century thinkers who had "opened up new avenues of thought". (23)

As soon as Buchan grasped the rudiments of psycho-analytic theory he worked them into his fiction. The first of the post-war Richard Hannay novels opens with a Dr Greenslade instructing Hannay in the bearing of the subconscious on the writing of thrillers.

"Every doctor nowadays has got to be a bit of a mental pathologist. As I say, you can hardly take anything for granted, and if you want detective stories that are not childish fantasy, you'll have to invent a new kind. Better try your hand, Dick."

"Not I. I'm a lover of sober facts."

"But, hang it, man, the facts are no longer sober ..."

"Take all this chatter about psycho-analysis. There's nothing very new in the doctrine, but people are beginning to work it out into details, and making considerable asses of themselves in the process. It's an awful thing when a scientific theory become the quarry of the half-baked. But as I say, the fact of the subconscious self is as certain as the existence of lungs and arteries."

"I don't believe that Dick has any subconscious self", said Mary.

"Oh yes he has. Only, people who have led his kind of life have their ordinary self so well managed and disciplined - their wits so much about them, as the phrase goes - that the subconscious rarely gets a show. But I bet if Dick took to thinking about his soul, which he never does, he would find some queer corners." (24)

Having thus substituted psycho-analysis for the allegory of the Emperor of Byzantium as the theoretical foundation of his fiction, Buchan went on to restructure his political theory accordingly. Dr Greenslade explains to Hannay that in the modern era madness has begun to afflict the world.

"The barriers between the conscious and the subconscious have always been pretty stiff in the average man. But now with the general loosening of screws they are growing shaky and the two worlds are getting mixed ... That is why I say that you can't any longer take the clear psychology of most civilized beings for granted. Something is welling up from primeval deeps to muddy it."

"I don't object to that", I said. "We've overdone civilization, and personally I'm all for a little barbarism. I want a simpler world."

"Then you won't get it", said Greenslade ... The civilized is far simpler than the primeval. All history has been an effort to make definitions, clear rules of thought, clear rules of conduct, solid sanctions by which we can conduct our life. These are the work of the conscious self. The subconscious is an elementary and lawless thing. If it intrudes on life two results must follow. There will be a weakening of the power of reasoning, which, after all, is the thing that brings men nearest to the Almighty. And there will be a failure of nerve."

I got up to get a light, for I was beginning to feel depressed by the doctor's diagnosis of our times. (25)

When the chief of police operations asks Hannay's assistance in tracking down the perpetrators of a triple kidnapping, he begins

by saying very much what Dr Greenslade had said the night before. A large part of the world had gone mad, and that involved the growth of inexplicable and unpredictable crime. (26)

As the result of the weakening of "all the old sanctities" there had been a proliferation of "moral imbeciles", a "hideous untameable breed" found, for example, "among the young Bolshevik Jews, among the young entry of the wilder Communist sects, and very notably among the sullen murderous hobbledehoys in Ireland". All this "degenerate stuff" was "being used by a few clever men who are not degenerates or anything of the sort, but only evil". In other countries brilliant men such as Lenin and Gandhi had organized the "moral imbeciles" in the cause of revolution; in western Europe the masterminds were interested in profits rather than proletarians.

Macgillivray gave me examples of how they used these tools, the fellows who had no thought of profit, and were ready to sacrifice everything, including their lives, for a mad ideal. It was a masterpiece of cold-blooded, devilish ingenuity. Hideous, and yet comic too; for the spectacle of these feverish cranks toiling to create a new heaven and a new earth and thinking themselves the leaders of mankind, when they were dancing like puppets at the will of a few scoundrels engaged in the most ancient of pursuits, was an irony to make the gods laugh. (27)

This analysis of post-war politics is enough to make anybody laugh, except perhaps someone who recollects that the forged "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" began circulating in England and America about the time Buchan was writing The Three Hostages. But Buchan's premise here is in fact different from the infamous Protocols which purported to prove that Jewish conspirators were deliberately corrupting the young for revolutionary purposes. Buchan's premise is nothing more than a rehash of his old inversion of the Hobson-Brailsford theory of economic imperialism: capitalist profiteers are promoting disorder, war and degeneracy in order to fill their pockets. His reason for putting things in this way is, again, his psychological metaphor. The villainous mastermind is required to be an alter-ego virtually indistinguishable from the leaders of the society he intends to destroy. Buchan needed capitalists, statesmen and Presbyterian "elders of the kirk" as villains; Lenin and Gandhi and the Elders of Zion would not do.

In The Three Hostages the master criminal is Dominick Medina (not a Jew, but of indeterminate, partly Irish descent), a rising star in Parliament whose oratorical brilliance, superb marksmanship, and impeccable upper-class manners hide the familiar Satanic purpose of ruling the world. It is interesting and instructive to see how in this novel Buchan adapted the basic structure of Prester John to accord with his new psycho-analytic model. As in Prester John, the villain plans to accomplish his ends by mobilizing the unreasoning passions of mankind. With John Laputa, Buchan could play upon the average reader's belief in the genetically savage nature of Africans. In The Three Hostages, the savagery lies in the subconscious minds of Europeans and must be got to the surface with special techniques. Medina uses hypnotism and Eastern mysticism. Under his spell respectable people forsake their normal world of hunts and garden parties. They paint their faces, dress as flappers, and dance endlessly to the powerful rhythms of a "nigger band" in a dancehall attached to Medina's hideout. In Prester John the villain is pursued into his own mad terrain, a hidden valley, a secret cave. In The Three Hostages the pursuit becomes overtly psychological. The pursuers "search the subconscious" for clues by playing word association games. Hannay and his friends undergo hypnosis and experience the same return to childhood and the same urge to join the villain which Buchan had conjured up in his earlier novels with dreams, drugs, or delirium. (28) Convinced that the partially hypnotized Hannay is truly under his power, Medina treats him "as an Oriental tyrant might treat a favourite slave".

He unbent to me as a relief to his long spiritual tension, and let me see the innermost dreams of his heart. I realized with a shudder that he thought me a part of that hideous world he had created, and - I think for the first time in the business - I knew fear on my own account ... I remember that he talked a good deal of politics, but ye gods! what a change from the respectable conservative views which he had

once treated me to ... By his way of it the War had cracked the veneer [of civilization] and the real stuff was showing through. He rejoiced in the prospect ... Mad, you will say. Yes, mad beyond doubt, but it was the most convincing kind of madness. (29)

In the end the criminal must be defeated by turning his own uncivilized methods against him. Mutable Sandy Arbuthnot acquires influence over him in the guise of a swami and leads him into a trap where Hannay threatens him with blackmail and mutilation.

Buchan continued to use explicit references to psycho-analysis in subsequent novels and stories. (30) Buchan's very clever novel John Macnab opens with three eminent Englishmen - a barrister, a financier, and a statesman - slinking off secretly and independently to consult a doctor about attacks of debilitating world-weariness. The doctor's advice is to "steal a horse in some part of the world where a horse-thief is usually hanged". In other words, live dangerously, go into the underworld, make contact with the underside of your personality. The three conspire to commit offences against property (the game laws) thereby risking loss of status, exposure and disgrace. In a short story on the same theme, a Conservative peer who shows up at a Tory rally looking like a tramp commences his descent into disreputability by being mistaken for a mental patient in a "Kurhaus", "supposed to be the last thing in science outside Germany" where a doctor probes for "the subconscious complexes" which had addled his wits. (31) Another story, "The Loathly Opposite", features a German cryptographer, code named "Reinmar", who turns psychiatrist after the war. By chance two British code breakers who once wrestled with his baffling telegraphic messages turn up as patients at the Alpine sanatorium where he works. The deliberate parallel drawn between the intelligence agents' struggle to decode the enemy's messages and the psychiatrist's probe for the secret springs of madness points up: 1) Buchan's habitual use of the spy as a metaphor for probing the subconscious; and 2) his hostility to the idea of being probed himself. The psychiatrist is the enemy.

In The Dancing Floor Buchan made his most sustained and successful use of the psycho-analytic model. Vernon, the central character, is haunted from earliest childhood by a dream which recurs on the same day every spring. In the dream he waits in a bare room for a terrifying, nameless thing which lurks down the corridor of a huge, rambling house. Each year the thing moves one room closer. He rejects a friend's suggestion that he seek help from "the new Vienna doctrine" in purging the dream; his choice is to meet this threatening destiny with stoic determination. (32) Destiny arrives one spring on a Greek island where a rich young woman is besieged by villagers who believe her to be a witch because her degenerate father had long ago dabbled in obscene mysteries. Blaming her for recent crop failures, they lapse from Christianity and plan a pagan rite of purgation which is to culminate in the burning of her mansion. Vernon arrives to save her at the very time she is engaged in removing incredibly obscene murals from the inner rooms of the house. They manage an escape by dressing up as ancient Greek deities and marching triumphantly out of the burning mansion in shining white robes. The purging of the house and its vile inner chambers is accompanied by the lifting of the fearful despondency which had previously haunted Vernon's life.

Something fell from him - the elderliness, the preoccupation, the stiff dogma of his recent years. He recaptured the spirit which had open arms for novelty. He felt an eagerness to be up and doing ... The vanishing of his dream had left the chambers of his mind swept and garnished, and youth does not tolerate empty rooms. (33)

With this account of sanity regained through a traumatic encounter with the content of a childhood nightmare, Buchan moved from psycho-analytic theory towards psycho-analytic clinical therapy. The obstacle which stood between him and further movement in this direction was his unshakeable conviction that the hidden contents of the subconscious self are irredeemably horrific, as atavistic and vile as the murals in the island mansion. Accepting them as natural and essentially harmless was unthinkable. To linger too long in their presence was to run the risk of madness, a

danger which figures prominently in almost every story Buchan ever wrote and which utterly belies his reputation of healthy, harmless thrillers.

His thrillers are, in fact, anything but harmless. Their danger goes well beyond the casual comments about race, nationality and capitalist success which have caught the attention of his detractors. It is Buchan's direct linkage of derangement in society with derangement in the self that is most fraught with peril. The proximate source of this equation was the fiction Buchan most admired in the previous generation, the imperial adventure stories of Haggard, Kipling and Conrad which had first expressed the idea of a Jekyll-Hyde split in the psyche and given it dramatic expression in encounters between civilization and savagery beyond imperial frontiers. Conrad saw the great crime of imperialism as the bringing of men dangerously close to their interior darkness. Kipling and Conrad made mutable men into spies and secret agents.

Buchan began by exploring his own "allegory true of us all" on the Indian frontier and the South African high veld, then transferred it to war-torn Europe. Whereas his predecessors had displayed the savage within us by stripping off the trappings of civilization in far away places, Buchan dressed the savage as a leader of society, gave him access to Cabinet secrets and put him on the board of directors of big companies. To make his point stronger Buchan inverted the recently devised theory of economic imperialism which singled out little cliques of finance capitalists as the most important force making for national antagonisms and political reaction. In Buchan's version, it was men at the pinnacle of society who were stirring up crime and revolution. Finally, Buchan moved beyond metaphor to postulate a causal connection between discord in society and discord in the psyche. Rebellion against the status quo in the Empire was not merely like the emergence of vile forces from the subconscious; it was actually caused by the emergence of those forces at the behest of powerful men who occupied important positions in society but whose identities were hidden under clever disguises. The only way of defeating the plotters was to enter into their own lawless world and turn their own weapons against them.

If the political message in Buchan's best-selling novels is taken seriously, it has vicious implications in any society where large numbers of individuals fear for their status, safety and sanity. One example of such a society is modern South Africa, where Buchan's novels are still popular with white readers. Other examples can be found in Western Europe after each of the world wars. The message is that The Enemy is Within, that he uses honest idealists as his unwitting dupes and tools, that he must be combatted by spies and secret police and the unrelenting suppression of anything which might open the Pandora's Box of the subconscious (drugs, pornography, free thought, etc.). Buchan's ability to write his own anxieties about his status and his subconscious into his books made this message especially pointed. At best, the message gives aid and comfort to paranoid politicians determined to root out the traitors in high places. At worst, it points the way to fascism.

It must be a lasting comfort to admirers of Buchan the man and literary craftsman that he balked at following that road when it beckoned. His one political novel of the thirties which concerns fascism is A Prince of the Captivity. Although it is full of ominous-sounding warnings about the failings of democracy, the necessity of bosses and workers to abandon the old orthodoxies, and the world's crying need for really strong leaders, it is forthright in its condemnation of the Nazis as well as the communists. It is the Maynard Keynes-like character Warren Creevey who rises up at the end of the book to save democratic capitalism in what must surely rank among the best-ever examples of art prefiguring life. But the fact remains that Buchan played with some very dangerous ideas.

Notes

- (1) See: Graham Greene, The Lost Childhood (London, 1950); Richard Usborne, Clubland Heroes (London, 1953); Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, The English Public School (London, 1978).
- (2) Gertrude Himmelfarb, "John Buchan: the Last Victorian", Victorian Minds (London, 1968); David Daniell, The Interpreter's House (London, 1975).
- (3) R. Luxemburg, "The Accumulation of Capital - an Anti-Critique", in K. J. Tarbuck, ed., Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital (London, 1972), p. 147.
- (4) The Four Adventures of Richard Hannay (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933), pp. 33-34.
- (5) N. Etherington, "Rider Haggard, Imperialism, and the Layered Personality", Victorian Studies XXII (Autumn, 1978), pp. 71-87.
- (6) A Lodge in the Wilderness (London: William Blackwood, 1906), pp. 271-72.
- (7) Ibid., p. 278.
- (8) The Moon Endureth, Tales and Fancies (London: Thomas Nelson, 1923), p. 88.
- (9) Anti-imperialists of the Edwardian era considered this the most difficult of the imperialist fallacies to combat. See Hobson, Imperialism, pp. 162-205, and Norman Angell, The Great Illusion (London, 1910), part 2.
- (10) Susan Tweedsmuir, John Buchan by His Wife and Friends (London, 1947), pp. 102-03. J. A. Smith's recent John Buchan and His World (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979) includes twenty-four pictures of Buchan taken between 1891 and 1939 - indoors or outdoors, hunting, fishing or mountaineering, he is always in a tie except when it is superceded by some ceremonial costume.
- (11) The Four Adventures of Richard Hannay, pp. 72-73.
- (12) Ibid., p. 7.
- (13) The Half-Hearted (London: Thomas Nelson, 1922).
- (14) The Four Adventures, p. 902.
- (15) A Prince of the Captivity (London: Thomas Nelson, 1933), p. 323.
- (16) It might have been a service if all Buchan's financier villains had been identified as Jews. The failings of capitalism could then be based on these scapegoats. But few, if any, are Jews.
- (17) The Four Adventures, p. 211.
- (18) Ibid., p. 153.
- (19) Ibid., pp. 152-53.
- (20) The Island of Sheep (London: Thomas Nelson, 1939), p. 29.
- (21) The Four Adventures, pp. 286-87.
- (22) Tweedsmuir, op. cit., pp. 164-65; Daniell, op. cit., pp. 85, 88.
- (23) Memory Hold the Door (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1941), p. 203.
- (24) The Four Adventures, p. 859.
- (25) Ibid., pp. 860-61.
- (26) Ibid., pp. 871-73.
- (27) Ibid., pp. 902-03.
- (28) See the account of hypnotism given by the Marquis de la Tour du Pin in ibid., p. 1070.
- (29) Ibid., pp. 1125-26.
- (30) However, as psycho-analysis became more and more identified with the hated avant-garde, these references become humorous or slighting.
- (31) The Runagates Club, pp. 58, 64.

- (32) The Dancing Floor (London: Thomas Nelson, 1926), p. 43.
- (33) Ibid., p. 281.