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**Janet Adam Smith. John Buchan. A biography. Boston and Toronto. Little, Brown and Company. 1965. 524 pp. \$7.50.**

Ian Campbell  
*University of Edinburgh*

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STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

Janet Adam Smith. *John Buchan. A biography.* Boston and Toronto. Little, Brown and Company. 1965. 524 pp. \$7.50.

To follow *Memory-Hold-The-Door* is an intimidating prospect, as Dr. Janet Adam Smith acknowledges in her very full and readable life of John Buchan. "I have tried to build up his life from letters and documents and other peoples' memories, and to show it as it happened at the time, and not as it appeared in retrospect." [p. 7.]

John Buchan was born into a Free Kirk Manse, and Dr. Smith follows him from Fife to the Border Country to Glasgow, where he found university life congenial and valuable, though the real flowering of his talent and personality came with his removal to Oxford, where Dr. Smith describes very well his combination of academic distinction and his brilliant social career. He partly supported himself by proof-reading and editing; by 1898 his name was in *Who's Who*, his age 22, his occupation "undergraduate." The energy which Buchan devoted to his university work he maintained throughout his unbroken career of success as lawyer, publisher, administrator, member of parliament (for the Scottish Universities), a powerful figure of many interests, governor of Gordonstoun School, moving force in the British Film Institute, even Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and ultimately Governor-General of Canada.

The same single-minded energy he devoted to his literary work, both his serious and intelligent work in poetry and prose, still occasionally read (such as his *Sir Walter Scott*) and his popular novels, his "shockers," which made his name and his fortune. In her most interesting chapter, "Story-teller," Dr. Smith catalogues [pp. 293-298] the sales and returns of Buchan's popular works, and the incredible rate at which they were produced. In 1934 alone Buchan wrote *Gordon at Khartoum*, finished *The House of the Four Winds* and *Cromwell*, and began another two, *The Island of Sheep* and *The King's Grace*. The market seemed endless: *Greenmantel* sold (in hardback, till 1960) 368,000 in Great Britain, over 100,000 in America, and a further 130,000 in paperback in Britain since 1956. "Story-teller" describes the popular novels interestingly, and later (for example, on pp. 463-464) Dr. Smith relates the last novels with Buchan's declining health, especially his fine and little-read *Sick-Heart*

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*River*, written under the twin clouds of illness and approaching world war.

Dr. Smith's biography relates the work most successfully to Buchan's life; what the reader misses is more extended criticisms of the novels themselves, for "shockers" though they were, they form the basis of Buchan's reputation. That he regarded them as pleasant intervals in more serious work is emphasised, and indeed he wrote in the dedication of *Greenmantle* to Caroline Grosvenor that

During the past year, in the intervals of an active life, I have amused myself with constructing this tale. It has been scribbled in every kind of odd place and moment—in England and abroad, during long journeys, in half-hours between graver tasks; and it bears, I fear, the mark of its gipsy begetting.

Buchan himself criticises Scott in his *Homilies and Recreations* and points out that ". . . any man whose business it is to portray life in action and who is caught up in the white heat of his task, is certain at times to seize the first phrase which comes to his hand, and jar on his more fastidious readers."<sup>1</sup> Many of the shockers bear the signs of the "gipsy begetting" in thinness of plot, uneasy switches of style, especially when Buchan treats his native Scotland, unsatisfactory characters such as the German Stumm in *Greenmantle*. Hannay, Leithen and Arbuthnott bear so little resemblance to John Gourlay that it is surprising to see so little made of George Douglas Brown's close similarity to Buchan, his education at Glasgow and Oxford, his being a protégé of Gilbert Murray; surely there can have been few more divergent developments of emigrant Scottish genius. The opening chapters of *Prester John*, well-written though they are, and MacCunn and the Gorbals Die-Hards are difficult to take seriously as Scottish characters like those of *The House with the Green Shutters*, and it would have been interesting to see more made of this. Buchan early attacked the Kailyard and regretfully acknowledged the death of Scots; "To restore the Scots vernacular is beyond the power of any Act of Parliament, because the life on which it depended has gone." (*Homilies and Recreations*, p. 266.) It would have been interesting here, too, to see some discussion of Buchan's verse in Scots and English in the light of such a remark.

But Dr. Smith's biography succeeds in its intention to reconstruct the complicated and many-faceted life of this "romantic young Scot, who wanted both to write books and lead a life of action," (p. 159) his gradual moving away from his early background, and his single-minded

<sup>1</sup> (London, 1926), pp. 16-17.

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devotion to the achievement of the power and authority he so admired in others. Dr. Janet Adam Smith's work has made possible a new understanding of one of the most successful of modern Scottish writers.

*IAN M. CAMPBELL*

*UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH*