

1-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

Young, Michael (1989) "The Rules of the Game: Buchan's John Macnab," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1.
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol24/iss1/17>

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Michael Young

The Rules of the Game: Buchan's *John Macnab*



As a prolific and influential writer of prose romance, John Buchan occupies a key position in this genre. He is a major connecting figure between nineteenth-century romancers such as Rider Haggard and Kipling and twentieth-century writers who extend the scope of romance through such popular subgenres as the thriller and other, sometimes more radical attempts to adapt romance in the modern period.

Almost fifty years after his death in 1940, Buchan still has a substantial popular readership. Though literary criticism has been less attentive, there have been recent signs of a serious interest. Both kinds of recognition, however, tend to be one-sided, seeing Buchan primarily as a writer of thrillers. As with the work of Kipling, there is a need for analyses which derive their conclusions from close readings of actual texts, rather than from the author's general reputation.

For such a close reading, I focus on Buchan's *John Macnab*. Published in 1925, when the social changes accelerated by World War I are insistently visible, *John Macnab* is a romance adventure text produced in a period when the easy certainty of the world view vaunted by nineteenth-century romancers is no longer readily available. *John Macnab* demonstrates its author's awareness of social change and his attempt to interpret this through an application of the romance genre to postwar conditions. Thus the text not only addresses social problems but a literary one, too—that of

the viability of a genre which a dynamic history, literary as well as socio-political, threatens to relegate to the status of an anachronism.

John Macnab is a very interesting attempt to meet this double social and literary challenge, and its success as a mixture of comedy and adventure is considerable. Yet it is most interesting for the limitations and failures of its content and form. *John Macnab's* representation of class relationships in postwar British society is backward-looking and ultimately even repellent; its proffered solutions to social problems such as unemployment are similarly regressive, though at least some of the difficulties and their immediate causes are accurately identified. As a text which expresses values recognizably similar to those of its classic romance predecessors, *John Macnab* insists on retaining a highly conventional, mythical design, though it displays self-consciousness in its overt game structure.¹ Yet the subversive and thus investigative potential of such a structure remains unrealized, for the stylization it imposes is never radically challenged. *John Macnab* must finally be identified as an enjoyable but limited revision of the classic romance, useful in a study of the genre's evolution and relationships to historical contexts for its illustration of the limits of the traditional romance adventure text in the modern period.

The story of *John Macnab* is typical Buchan. Three of his recurrent heroes—Sir Edward Leithen, Lord Charles Lamanca and John Palliser-Yeates—are suffering from depression and undertake a romantic adventure as a cure. Their real identities protected by the pseudonym "John Macnab," they issue a challenge to three landowners in the Scottish Highlands: Colonel Raden, a member of the older, landed aristocracy; the Bandicotts, rich American tenants; and the Claybodys, middle-class new rich. The heroes vow to poach game from these people's estates and attempt this with varying success. The text closes with a happy ending appropriate to a comic adventure through which depression—social as well as individual—has been symbolically cured and harmony achieved. Yet, when examined closely, many aspects of the game expose the inadequacy of the text's mythologizing, both as a seriously meant representation of social problems and solutions, and as a means to contain the intrusion of

¹By myth, I mean the concept which Frank Kermode distinguishes from fiction: "Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent" (*The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* [New York, 1967], p. 39). Presenting the dynamic of history as static, or as moving only within a prescribed pattern—progress towards the millennium of empire, for example—the classic romance is highly mythical, both formally and ideologically.

contemporary social reality within a structure which attempts to preserve the credibility of the romance world.

The choice of a game as a structural basis for a romance text is not surprising, for the concept of the game is deeply embedded in the genre and its ethos, as a metaphor for contests based on political, racial and class oppositions. Kipling's mythologizing of the "Great Game" of spying for the British Empire on the Northwest Frontier in *Kim* provides an appropriate example, and the activities of Buchan's espionage-thriller heroes in texts like *Greenmantle* are a generic continuation of this. *John Macnab* develops the ludic metaphor to the point where the text explicitly proclaims the theatricality of the activities it represents, and embraces the melodramatic quite self-consciously. Yet this sophisticated awareness of its own properties does not lead to subversive play. Instead, *John Macnab* cleverly exploits self-consciousness in a reactionary way supportive of the mythical. Foregrounding the artificiality does not undermine the game but controls the kind of attention the reader gives to it. The deliberate highlighting of the melodramatic signals limits, reminding us that this is "only" a game, and thus attempting to anesthetize the reader to receive the text's ideological effect less critically.

As a metaphor for the conflicts of imperial history, the classic romance game is territorial, representing invasions and defenses whose resolutions define possession. The game of *John Macnab* follows this model, but with significant differences. Writing in the 1920s, after the great age of imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century, in a decade marked by the shattering effects of World War I, when domestic problems pull attention back from the frontiers of empire, Buchan shifts the territory of the romance game to a nominally contemporary home space. He has already worked with this in thrillers such as *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and now chooses it as the setting for a representation of a combined double conflict: a war game marked by the vocabulary of World War I, to be played by a cast whose participants express the oppositions which contemporary domestic history most readily presents—the problem of class relationships and identities which have dissolved rapidly from what seems, in the post-war world, to have been the stability of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. The bold incursions of an expanding imperialism firmly in the past, and the expeditions of World War I a recent and hideous reality, the romance game of invasion dwindles to a low-risk exercise fought between two home sides.

Yet this repositioning of a romance game which appears to concentrate on a troubled present and the immediate past that has led to this is also a temporal shift into a nostalgic past based on Buchan's habitual vision of an ideal pastoral society, a social order which was already an

anachronism. The home territory which is the ground of the romance game represented in *John Macnab* is essentially the sacred space of ritual, culturally accepted as the land of no time where history can be transmogrified to the shapes of our desiring. Thus the home territory of *John Macnab* remains the space of mythical romance.

Within this space, the war game takes the form of the duel, which, as Johan Huizinga remarks, is "essentially a play-form," fought on "a playground."² This choice, appropriate to a text overtly structured round a game acted out in a magical space, is reinforced by the conventionality of the duel as an element in romance genres, from the chivalric contests of medieval romance to the sword fights in Dumas and his successors, and the gunfights of the Western, which also feature in the espionage thriller, with suitable adaptations. Buchan exploits the duel's traditional characteristics and function as a culturally familiar form used to structure and resolve romantically represented conflicts. This not only organizes the text but supplies laws which characters observe or transgress, thus defining themselves as insiders or outsiders in relation to the group of romance heroes and the values its actions express. In this way, Buchan uses the duel as an ideological touchstone which defines communal identities.

With its focus on testing and consequent definition of the person, the duel is also a form which enables individual heroism, a concept obliterated in the anonymous, mass land action of World War I. Buchan recreates the possibility of individual heroism in a duel fought as a land action. In the third and climactic part of this, the "attack" on Claybody territory, the individual heroes perform their deeds against the background of an undifferentiated mass of extras, hired by Johnson Claybody to defend his father's estate. This is a scenario influenced by the scale of World War I but, with its insistence on identifiable individual heroes standing out against the mass, its model is closer to Homer than to the Somme. Thus Buchan not only shifts the conflicts of modern war to romance space but metamorphoses them to a romance version.

Yet, as we would expect of a writer who produces a twenty-four-volume history of World War I, Buchan's concern with this conflict is not trivial, and the romantic metamorphosis of its form which he effects in *John Macnab* does have a fundamentally serious purpose.³ Discussing the relationship of war and play, Huizinga states that "Fighting, as a cultural function, always presupposes limiting rules, and it requires, to a certain ex-

²*Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London, 1949), p. 95. Subsequent references appear in the text.

³*Nelson's History of the War* (London, 1915-19).

tent anyway, the recognition of its play-quality" (89). In marking the representation of a contest based on the duel with the vocabulary of a World War I assault, Buchan is attempting to make available once again a vision of war which restores the play-element and thus regains war's cultural function as a proof of the validity of cultural rules even under the most extreme circumstances. But, in the postwar world of the 1920s, the nostalgically anachronistic and aristocratic model of the duel, with its emphasis on absolute rules and individual heroics, is a fragile one for the mediation of modern history, even when the attempt is protected by presentation as a game.

The fundamental atavism of the duel in *John Macnab* is emphasized by the form it takes, that of a poaching contest. In romance, poaching is mythologized in nineteenth-century versions of the outlaw tradition of Hereward the Wake and Robin Hood, and in the public-school stories which are a domestic romance form. As poaching's prominence in nineteenth-century romance mythology indicates, its cultural representations were an area of high ideological energy. They were also a strong influence on Buchan's work, and *John Macnab* reproduces their ethos.

One aspect of this ethos is the importance of style, particularly in killing, a romantic demand which the mass deaths of World War I denied. John Macnab's poaching, however, places great emphasis on the intensely focused single chance for each of his three attempts, made respectively by his original constituent members, Palliser-Yeates, Leithen and Lamancha. Enacted within deadlines set up by the terms of the challenge, this highly stylized structure of three attempts derives from the fairy tale, another romantic genre which strongly influences Buchan's work. The third and of course climactic attempt is Lamancha's assault on Claybody territory, the estate of Haripol, in which he succeeds in killing the most magnificent stag in the forest with a single brilliant shot, all the classic duel allows, for this form and the romance version of poaching fit together well. The hero's Homerically attendant steward points the moral of this demonstration of style, pronouncing the great stag's "epitaph," to the effect that it was not "massacred by ane o' thae Haripol sumphs [or dolts] wi' ten bullets in the big bag. But ye've been killed clean and straucht by John Macnab, and that is a gentleman's death."⁴ Killing and dying as a gentleman are crucially differentiating acts in this social drama, for demonstrations of style are also demonstrations of class.

Generically, the prize of game animals symbolizes an aristocratic ideal of the human relationship with nature, for traditionally only the nobility

⁴*John Macnab* (1925; rpt. Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 186, 187. Subsequent references appear in the text.

were allowed to hunt game. Echoing this tradition, *John Macnab* replays a scenario central to the classic British prose romance—that of the deer-poaching outlaw who robs the rich and is really a nobleman more noble than many of those who claim the title; thus he has more right to the game, or any prizes, which he will distribute as largesse to the people, for he is a folk hero as well as a nobleman.

Translated to a twentieth-century context, this scenario continues to serve an ideological purpose, for in *John Macnab* only the upper-class heroes are allowed to kill. Other characters, such as Lithgow the steward, have a skill at tracking and stalking which exceeds that of the heroes, but it's never suggested that such characters could do the actual killing; in the feudal order of John Macnab's game, this is for gentlemen only.

In conformity with this romantic insistence, John Macnab's core members are not only gentlemen, but occupy powerful social and political positions. Palliser-Yeates is an influential banker, Sir Edward Leithen a prominent lawyer and ex-Attorney General, and Lord Charles Lamanca a Member of Parliament and a Cabinet Minister. It might seem that casting such respectable pillars of society in the role of trespassers and poachers is at least potentially subversive, but the repeated insistence on John Macnab's identity and conduct as a gentleman guards against this, so that these characters' romantic role remains consistent with their everyday identities. As Lamanca says, in a revealing denial, "we must play the game by the rules. We're not poachers" (36). This is not Bakhtin's idealized carnivalesque where the social hierarchy of the everyday is overturned. Rather, it is a holiday game, a ritual in which establishment figures perform central actions that actually reproduce the values of their everyday roles, though in a romanticized context.

Other characters are arranged around this establishment group and its actions and, with apparent inevitability, are absorbed into it in a series of admissions or conversions. Entry into the group hinges on whether or not one qualifies for the generic identity of "sportsman," a synonym for gentleman but less overtly marked by class and therefore more flexible in its application. The term is a key one which sums up the individual's proper relationship to the natural and the social. This propriety consists in the possession of the traditional romance virtues—loyalty, bravery, a respect for and knowledge of the natural world and, most of all, an acceptance of the social order which John Macnab represents, and of one's place within this, an acceptance expressed by observing the rules of the game. Thus the community which John Macnab symbolizes is essentially a homogeneous one; differences of class, sex or nationality are denied any force by the necessary agreement on the central value of "sportsmanship," and the host of conformities this implies.

Superficially, however, the communal identity of John Macnab includes a great deal of variety. His first opponents, for example, are the old aristocratic family of the Radens. They are never radically opposed to John Macnab's challenge, but accept it on its own terms. As soon as their round of the game is over they hope for Macnab's success, and the younger daughter, Janet, eventually becomes an active ally. Thus the concept of sportsmanship enables inclusion of the sexual other in the traditionally male-dominated romance group, though the innovation of this is reduced by an emphasis on the heroine's boyishness, a common tactic in Buchan.

Macnab's second opponents are the Bandicotts, an American family. Buchan characterizes them as the newest offshoots of the Anglo-Saxon world venture, comfortably incorporable into the community that John Macnab represents. Thus the Bandicotts are rich Bostonians, the kind of Americans imagined to be closest to an upper- or upper-middle-class English family. As Agatha Raden says of Junius Bandicott in answer to her sister's teasing, "He talks beautiful English, with no trace of an accent" (62). Junius Bandicott recognizes the "sporting spirit" (30) of John Macnab's challenge, and plays his part in the game according to the rules. It is no surprise when his incorporation is confirmed by his engagement to Agatha Raden.

The owners of Haripol, the third estate which John Macnab invades, are the new rich Lord and Lady Claybody. Although the vulgar ostentation of Haripol House reminds us of their class origins, Buchan does not characterize them crudely as coarse, materialistic tradespeople foolishly attempting to buy their way into an upper class to which they can never belong. Instead, other characters convincingly express their respect for Lord Claybody's financial success and general acumen, and even Lady Claybody's silliness does not preclude critical intelligence and insight. Yet the Claybodys also display an uncritical acceptance of the social and political values rooted in the text's nostalgic vision of an anachronistically pastoral, almost feudal order, incompatible with the industrially based economy and the modern middle class which the Claybodys supposedly represent.

Lady Claybody embraces romantic values and rejects her son's "mercantile creed which conflicted with her notion of Haripol, and of the future of her family" (244). It is the "mercantile creed" which is the basis of the Claybody's power, for they have made their fortune in manufacturing; yet Lady Claybody sees her family's future in the terms of a romanticized past peopled by clichés such as "splendid old Jacobites" (244). This adherence to romance works doubly to support the community headed by John Macnab, for narrative comment mocks Lady Claybody's ersatz an-

tiques, thus reminding us of her new rich inability to discriminate, even as her possessions and opinions express desire for aristocratic status and a romantic historical continuity. Her wish to be accepted into the John Macnab circle may be comical in its form, but the comedy marks a hierarchical social distinction, and the wish still expresses the desirability of membership in this community.

Lord Claybody's membership in this inside group is also incomplete. He recognizes that Colonel Raden and Junius Bandicott are "sportsmen," and admits his own probationary status: "I'm not what they call a sportsman—not yet" (243). Lord Claybody's probationary status is decreed not so much by his individual actions as by his class origin, for it's the newly rich middle class who are on probation. Yet the pressure of change which this class threatens to exert on the older aristocracy is muted by its representation in the Claybodys. Lord Claybody's admission of his probationary status is also a declaration that he has accepted the norms by which this status is identified, as is his "aggressively new" (206) Highland costume which serves the same double function as his wife's antiques and garbled romantic notions, for it mocks the wearer and simultaneously expresses the desirability of the identity it mimics. This duality is epitomized in the incongruous linking of the aristocratic title with the allegorically proletarian name, "Clay-body," with its associations of cloddishness to be realized later in the physical clumsiness of the navvies hired by the son, Johnson. Yet the acquired title signifies acceptance of the social order represented by the inherited aristocracy of Lord Lamancha, and incorporation into an appropriately subordinate level of this order. Thus, despite a class origin and background radically different from those of the central group, Lord and Lady Claybody deviate from this group only in ways which confirm the centrality of its standards and social importance—a confirmation enhanced by the expressions of respect for their judgment. There is nothing in their identity fundamentally disruptive of the idealized romance community.

The assimilation of characters to the norms of this community extends beyond John Macnab's nominal opponents, thus increasing the size of the group and its apparent variety. Early in the game, for example, Leithen tells Fish Benjie, the lovable urchin descended from such characters as Kim, the secret of John Macnab's identity because, as Leithen says, "I think I know a sportsman when I see him" (54). Servants and rural workers are also recruited, and the local, small-town residents, though not immediately active in the game, are sympathetic to John Macnab. Yet all of these fit easily into his community, for they are either traditional romance figures, such as Fish Benjie and the faithful servants, or, like the rural workers and local people, they belong to romanticized social settings fa-

vored by Buchan. Thus, as with the Radens, Bandicotts and Claybodys, both the assimilation and the heterogeneity which succumbs to it are more apparent than real.

Like Kipling, Buchan is aware of the conventional authority of the newspaperman as storyteller, yet unlike Kipling he does not subvert this to investigate the problematic relationship between narrative and history.⁵ Instead, he enlists a journalist as a member of the romance community in a role confirmative of the values and interpretation of history which John Macnab represents. Crosby the newspaperman does have a minor physical part to play in the game, but his main function is bardic. He has arrived in the area to report on the discovery of the tomb of Harald Blacktooth, a Viking chief and ancestor of Colonel Raden. Yet, significantly, the story which interests him concerns John Macnab: "I call it 'The Return of Harald Blacktooth.' Rather neat, I think. The idea is that when they started to dig up the old fellow his spirit reincarnated itself in John Macnab" (104). Thus Buchan's text expounds its own structure and, in a claim of continuity typical of classic romance, reminds us that its eponymous hero is reaffirming our historical identity, our cultural and racial inheritance as symbolized in such figures as Robin Hood and the Vikings.

If Crosby is the bard who sings Macnab's praises, his audience is, ultimately, the nation as a whole. Published in the newspapers, the story of Macnab's exploits has "several million readers," and "John Macnab became a slogan for the newsboy, a flaming legend for bills and headlines, a subject of delighted talk at every breakfast-table" (143). Reading with "enthusiasm" (143), these millions are expressing their acceptance and approval of John Macnab as an accurate representative of the national spirit, and providing the model for an uncritical reading of *John Macnab* itself. Finally, John Macnab's community has expanded to the dimensions of the nation, which, in its adherence to the values and inheritance he expresses, is essentially a homogeneous group anchored in a history which confirms national worth.

Those who accept this identity as a self-definition are Buchan's ideal audience, whether they are the newspaper readers within the text or romance readers outside it. The two groups are not equivalent, for readers outside the text may choose to what extent they accept John Macnab. They may, in fact, altogether reject the social vision John Macnab promulgates. Yet the text exerts great pressure on the reader to accept, for it explicitly defines the "John Macnab proposition" (136) and presents this as serious, accurate and timely social commentary which defines the answer

⁵I am thinking particularly of Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King."

to Britain's postwar malaise and the threat of a rapidly changing modern world.

But, as with the heterogeneity of the John Macnab community, the social challenge this multiple hero meets is more apparent than real, for the social problems the text claims to answer are never allowed their full force, and alternative solutions are not investigated but dismissed. For example, in a centrally important discussion with Sir Archie Roylance, friend of the Macnab triumvirate, Janet Raden makes statements which seem to declare the anachronism of Buchan's romance world: "The old life of the Highlands is going, and people like ourselves must go with it. There's no reason why we should continue to exist. We've long ago lost our justification" (134). Yet the whole movement of *John Macnab* is towards a demonstration of the reasons Janet's class should continue to exist, and dominate, in concert with those "newer" social elements—primarily the moneyed middle class—which renew the older aristocracy by confirming its values through acceptance and repetition, and bringing money and power to their support.

Opposition to this view is set up only to be demolished, and some of the statements which seem to threaten it actually prepare for its confirmation. Thus Janet, commenting on her family's decline, says that "Their only claim was the right of property, which is no right at all" (134), but the pseudo-radicalism of the slogan is immediately doubly undermined: "Nobody in the world to-day has a right to anything which he can't justify. That's not politics, it's the way nature works" (134-35). This denies the specific political interpretation which her remark seemed to invite—she had, in fact, declared herself "a Bolshevik" (134)—and replaces the vulnerable authority of a political position with the unquestionable force of a natural condition. Janet, ostensibly the radical, is soon making such conservative statements as "I'm all for property, if you can defend it," and announcing the "John Macnab proposition," which states that "in the world we live in to-day....you must feel the challenge and be ready to meet it. And then you must become yourself a challenger. You must be like John Macnab" (136).

The text's claim for the political value of this "proposition" is further emphasized when, in his speech as a parliamentary candidate—Tory, of course—Sir Archie regurgitates "the sermon which Janet Raden had preached him" (154), and receives tumultuous applause from an audience which supposedly covers the entire political spectrum. The reference to a "sermon" is significant, for the "John Macnab proposition" is the gospel Buchan's text enshrines and urges on believers and potential converts. This coincidence of the political and the religious is not surprising in a text which is best described by a term *John Macnab* itself makes explicit, when

the narrator tells us Sir Archie "put his case in the form of an apologue—the apologue of John Macnab" (155). As an apologue, an allegorical narrative conveying a moral, *John Macnab* adapts romance to a consciously serious social and political, and ultimately religious, intention. In this, it continues a major impulse of the romance tradition and, as so often in Buchan, looks back to a crucial influence, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Yet the solution to complex social problems requires more than the urge to redemption, and *John Macnab's* announcements of itself as social commentary provoke a critical attention which all the comedy cannot deflect.

As I have already pointed out, characters represented as won over to the community and its beliefs have in fact always been members, waiting only for their formal invitation to join. These players of John Macnab's game pass its test as paragons of moral, social and political probity, whatever their class, though performances are graded to mark differences necessary to the hierarchy the text promotes as a model of the ideal social structure, in which star players are also social and political leaders. Not all players, however, receive passing grades at their first attempt, or are ever fully admitted to the field of play, and it is the cases of these outsiders—Johnson Claybody and the navvies he hires to defend his father's land—which point most glaringly to the limits of the text's claim that it represents a viable interpretation of social problems.

The outside position of the navvies is illustrated by Huizinga's comments on the incompatibility of the world of everyday work with that of elaborate play. Emphasizing the connection between chivalry and feudalism, Huizinga states that "Only in...a feudally constructed society, in which no free man is required to work, can chivalry flourish and with it the tournament. Only under a feudal aristocracy are deadly serious vows made to accomplish unheard-of feats;...*Only a feudal aristocracy has time for such things*" (102, emphasis added). Thus, not surprisingly, Huizinga sees the world created by the Industrial Revolution as inimical to the play-spirit (192).

This fits with Buchan's romances, which habitually idealize the pastoral, identified by Huizinga, along with the chivalrous, as one of the "two play-idealizations *par excellence*, two 'Golden Ages of Play'" (180-81). Thus Buchan locates his romances in societies idealized towards the sphere of play and away from whatever is incompatible with it. When the industrial and the technological do appear, they do not dominate the text, but are subordinated, both by the limits set to their presence and by their subjection to the values of the romance order. They are incorporated, transformed from a threat into further evidence for the validity of this romance order which is a distilled, idealized version of civilization.

In *John Macnab*, part of this incorporation is an effort to present correspondences between the state of the gentlemen-heroes and that of the lower classes, though this is more revealing than convincing. At the beginning of the text, for example, Leithen suffers from—or enjoys—"a special kind of ennui" which is "due somehow to the war" (10), and to "Democracy" (17), which makes life too easy. In this condition, he claims, "I know now why workmen strike sometimes and can't give any reason. We're on strike—against our privileges" (17). While there is genuine recognition of the war as a cause of present problems, Sir Edward Leithen's unqualified equation of his condition with that of the British workman in the 1920s is not persuasive. The 1926 General Strike was hardly due to working-class "ennui" or an excess of democratic privilege. Yet the equation stands unrepudiated either by other characters or the narrator; nothing points to the significance of the vast material differences between the situation of Sir Edward Leithen, ex-Attorney General, and that of the 1920s British workman—nothing except the complete omission of any reference to it.

In line with this conservatism which asserts common ground between the upper and lower classes, is a much stronger impulse to mark their essential difference. This impulse expresses itself in phrases which present the navvies as a different species, as when Leithen thinks of them as "a stiff-jointed race" (172). The language of a popularized Darwinism has already appeared in Janet Raden's exposition of the need to respond to the challenge of civilization, with terms like "survivals" and "adapt" (134). The vocabulary is significant for, as is usual in classic romance, *John Macnab* disguises the social as the natural. In this version of differences, it is not economics and culture which subordinate the navvies to the gentlemen, but nature; thus the class hierarchy is simply an expression of the natural. Yet this naturally decreed social order is not so secure that it can stand without demonstration, and so *John Macnab* provides a spectacle at which the audience sees that Palliser-Yeates "has easily the pace of those heavy-footed chaps" (198), the navvies.

Hired by Johnson Claybody in a shocking breach of the decorum appropriate to the game (162), the navvies represent the newer, industrially based social order, and are an intrusion into the romantic pastoral world, as are the Claybodies themselves. It is one of Buchan's innovations that he should include the navvies at all, yet their position is, quite literally, marked as marginal. As Sir Archie's steward comments, "The navvies will no be allowed inside the forest. They'll be a guaird outside," and the deer will be "in the Sanctuary" (162). This is a fairy tale with the roles partly adjusted to modern society; thus the navvies are not allowed to pollute the

sacred space which only the gentleman-hero and his faithful guide may enter.

Yet marginal admission of the navvies is necessary to complete a pattern which places the newly rich middle class and the urban working class tied to them by an exchange relationship of labor for wages on one side, and the gentlemen, particularly the landed aristocracy, and their loyal retainers on the other, in an opposition of urban and rural, industrial and pastoral. But the pattern is not balanced, for the gentlemen understand all the social orders and, naturally endowed with the power of command, which has been confirmed and enhanced by romantic experiences, they revise the temporary opposition back to the proper arrangement with themselves at the top of a unified society.

The entire text is a demonstration of this gentlemanly predominance in action, but two key episodes are particularly revealing. The first is when Leithen, preparing to act as a decoy for Lamancha, accidentally encounters a group of navvies. "Leithen had not the air of a gillie" (211) and, as a consequence, the navvies are instantly, magically subordinate to him. The narrator provides a sociological explanation which has the ring of the zoologist describing a scientifically dissected specimen: "the navy, working under heavy-handed foremen, is susceptible to the voice of authority" (211). This dehumanizing note is most obvious when Leithen says, "I call it cruelty to animals,...to plant you fellows in a place like this. I hope you're well paid for it" (212). From the viewpoint of the class ethos informing the text, the reduction of the navvies to animals is a case of true words in jest, and the episode exposes the text's claim—a cherished Tory shibboleth—that the British upper class has an instinctive understanding of and sympathy with the working class.

The main episode which attempts to substantiate this textual claim is Lamancha's fight and subsequent alliance with one of the navvies. Caught by this man and unable to escape, Lamancha offers him a bribe. The response develops the previous characterization of the navvies to prepare for their apparent incorporation into a low slot in the hierarchy. Thus the navy answers angrily, "I'm not the kind as sells his boss. I'm a white man, I am" (223). The navy himself accepts and states the class rules of labor relations, and connects these with the racial, a hierarchy central to the classic romance. Part of the navy's compensation for his low place is this racial identity synonymous with high moral status. So, it seems, the upper and lower classes share values that transcend merely economic differences, and thus have a common ground in their recognition that they both belong to the same national and racial community.

Yet the distinction between upper and lower must be maintained, and so we get comparative descriptions of Lamancha and the navy—their

physiques, states of fitness, physical training, modes of life, diet and drinking habits—which mark their fight as a class contest, and therefore one which it is crucial for the upper-class hero to win. Physical victory over his opponent comes quickly when they both fall and the navy's leg is broken, an accident which not only frees Lamancha from blame but sets up a magical reorientation of class oppositions. First, sympathy for the victim displaces the raw physical contest: "as Lamancha looked at the limp figure, haggard with toil and poor living, and realized that he had damaged it in the pitiful capital which was all it possessed, its bodily strength, he suffered from a pang of sharp compunction. He loathed John Macnab and all his works for bringing disaster upon a poor devil who had to earn his bread" (226). This expression of sympathy does show an awareness of social inequality, but the sensitivity is limited by the neutering, dehumanizing pronoun which marks a distance between the aristocratic Lamancha and the object of his regard. The pronoun expresses Lamancha's attitude, though for the text, the reduction of the navy to object is solely the consequence of an industrial society in which gentlemen such as Lamancha are not implicated, an untenable exemption for a party political leader.

But this particular victim is about to be rescued from industrial capitalism and the status of anonymous commodity this has imposed. Looking at his ex-opponent, Lamancha recognizes him as Stokes, "the man who had once been his orderly, and whom he had last known as a smart troop sergeant....the fellow who had been a son of one of Tommy Deloraine's keepers" (226). This is not so much a recognition as a transformation; the cloddish, potentially unruly navy, a caricature of the urban working class, reverts to the significantly named role of orderly, and then to his true, original identity as a faithful servant in the rural hierarchy. Thus, through the activities of John Macnab, Lamancha and Stokes are brought together in their rightful relationship of master and man, which has been temporarily displaced by that of boss and worker in the newer, industrial economy.

It is clear that this text can admit the urban working class to its story only as transformed characters who will not disturb the ideal, romance play-world. Thus the shabby laborer is "really" Stokes, not a navy at all, or, in a version which is parodic anticipation of Stokes' condition, Leithen poses as an "Old Etonian tramp," enjoying a safely masochistic scenario in which the upper class appropriates to its game the identity of the unemployed (125). Stokes is appropriated to the same end, and his story, that of the loyal servant disguised as a navy, is itself a parody of the story of the others—the navvies who are never recognized and remain anonymous. In their cap-touching subservience, which is endowed with value by their

initial aggressiveness, they themselves are a parody of those whose everyday experience is one of exploitation and unemployment, and whose story *John Macnab* cannot tell, because classic romance is unable to deal with such problems except in romanticized versions which subordinate this experience to the ethos of the romance text.

A threat to social distinctions which occupies more of the foreground than the excluded navvies or the transformed Stokes is the newly rich and hence powerful middle class, whose wealth lies in industry and commerce rather than land. As we have seen, this class is represented by Lord and Lady Claybody, whose relationship to the John Macnab community expresses both their incorporation and its limits. These limits, and the threatening difference that underlies them, are much more strongly expressed in the Claybodys' son, Johnson, whose incorporation into the romance community is delayed until the end of the text.

As an unsympathetic representative of the new rich, Johnson undermines the claim of this caste to rival the landed aristocracy and the high-level civil servants. At the same time, he serves as a class scapegoat for views that would traditionally be expected of the landed gentry: "I don't like the spirit [of John Macnab]. It's too dangerous in these unsettled times. Once let the masses get into their heads that landed property is a thing to play tricks with, and you take the pin out of the whole system" (110). Pronouncements like this present snobbery and rigid conservatism as the particular province of the new rich and thus confirm the upper class as the "natural" ally of the lower.

Johnson further promotes the text's support of the upper class with his unpleasant views on the war, in which he didn't serve. His claims that "Every waster,...makes an excuse of being shell-shocked" and that "the war twisted nothing in a man that wasn't twisted before" contrast unfavorably with the understanding comments of the war veteran and landed Tory, Sir Archie Roylance (111). Again, we note *John Macnab's* concern with a contemporary problem. As a romance, the text is an example of a genre often supposed to be merely escapist, uncommitted to immediate social realities. Yet the concept of the "Lost Generation" is no news to Buchan. However, yet again, a problem is admitted only to be incorporated into the romance ethos and the class system this supports. Thus Johnson's attitude towards unemployed ex-soldiers contrasts with Lamancha's concern.

This contrast is highlighted in their respective treatment of Stokes who, immobilized by his injury, has become openly what he always was anyway—a stage prop, on which Lamancha and Johnson Claybody define their relative qualities. In line with the anonymity of labor relations in an industrial society, Johnson doesn't recognize the man he has hired, in marked contrast to Lamancha's redemption of Stokes from namelessness.

Johnson shows no concern at all for the injured man, and even states "that he was hanged if he would have any lousy navy in his car" (232), further confirming snobbery as the quality of the new rich.

Lamancha, of course, is extremely angry at Johnson's behavior, and thinks of him as an "infernal little haberdasher" (233), a phrase which points to the central myth of *John Macnab*: that in a crisis a lord acts like Lamancha and a haberdasher like Johnson Claybody. This is an extension of the point the text makes about the navvies, that the social hierarchy directly reflects the natural order. However, unlike the navvies, Johnson does not know his place, and his humiliation by Lamancha is presented as the result of his trying to fill a social role for which he is not naturally qualified. The rather pompous narrative comment, far from criticizing Lamancha for *his* snobbery in dismissing Johnson as a "haberdasher," makes the lesson explicit: "It is a melancholy fact which exponents of democracy must face that, while all men may be on a level in the eyes of the State, they will continue in fact to be preposterously unequal" (233)—unequal in their abilities, that is, for there is no emphasis on inequality in rights, opportunities and possessions. *John Macnab's* social analysis comes down to this—that Johnson Claybody, the "rising young commercial magnate" (238), simply isn't the man Lord Lamancha, the hereditary peer, is. Thus moral and social identities are presented as exactly equivalent.

Yet, as seen in the case of the working-class characters, exclusion may be converted to incorporation; a character may be beyond the pale and then redeemed. Thus, for such as Johnson Claybody, conversion is possible. Often, Buchan has a wonderful talent for making such conversions credible, for he feels their utopian impulse, the quintessential romantic desire that *everyone* should be included in the romance community, whatever its scale—the John Macnab circle, the nation this represents, or the empire this nation has made. Like all earthly utopias, the romance community is a paradigm of the heavenly one, and thus conversion, an act at the heart of romance, is essentially a magical event.

John Macnab's last specific victory is the conversion of his final opponent, Johnson Claybody. After sustained hostility, and apparently motivated mainly by the imminent necessity of a happy ending—a motivation more cogent for the author—Johnson renders Lamancha an oath of fealty, vowing that "I'm *your* man from this day on—whatever line you take. You're my leader" (247). This oath, an overtly political one made to Lord Lamancha, leader of the Tory party, supersedes that of Stokes (227), the forgotten stage prop who has vanished from the text. It also completes the harmony of the romance community.

Yet, as with all the conversions to the John Macnab community, there's a sense that this one is after the fact. Despite his behavior, there have been hints that Johnson has some decency, that he is "by no means unkind" (231), for example, and though he is a vulgar parvenu who doesn't know the correct dress for a hunt in the Scottish Highlands, he *is* a Tory, ultimately one of ours. But although retrospectively we see that loopholes have been left for Johnson's conversion, somehow we don't believe it. John Macnab represents "the solid structure of society" (243) according to an older model, that of the pastoral world of the landed aristocracy, a model which, in the postwar period, is less solid than ever before, so that the mythologizing text has to work harder to assert it as representing a viable contemporary social order. Yet, unlike the other characters, who are Edwardian, Victorian, or even earlier, Johnson is a twentieth-century figure. He feels more like a corporate businessman than a Victorian captain of industry, and requires a different context, perhaps the thriller in its developed form, more distanced from its origins in nineteenth-century romance than Buchan's thrillers or an adventure story like *John Macnab*. As it is, Johnson exposes the reality of the right to property and the economic basis of class power, for he hasn't learnt to be a good mythologer. Despite a few preparatory comments that allow him some decency, his final conversion seems abrupt, a repression of something more immediately threatening than the powerless Stokes.

There is no admission that repressions, transformations and exclusions are at work, though the text does offer a specific criticism of John Macnab in Lord Claybody's reproach to Lamancha that he "might poach every stag on Haripol, and I should still hold my tongue" (243); Macnab has not been in any danger since Lord Claybody would never expose such important men as Lamancha, Leithen and Palliser-Yeates. Lord Claybody's remark may seem to be a telling criticism, but it is in fact very limited, for it leaves the text's essential claims intact. Even as a game, John Macnab's exploits have demonstrated the same mythical relationship between social class and heroic qualities that, say, *King Solomon's Mines* did forty years earlier. Also, the game appears to discover, confirm and consolidate postwar British society as essentially coherent and politically conservative. Lord Claybody's criticism actually reinforces the centrally important demonstration of social unity, since his reproach to Lamancha affirms their common interests.

To draw attention to John Macnab's activities as a risk-free game is not, in itself, an effective criticism. For this, the text would have to admit the significance of the distinction between a "game" and an "adventure" (243), that the reduction from representation of a "real" adventure in imperial territory to an overt recognition of romance activities as a game sig-

nifies that Britain's imperial history has passed its zenith, that the form-giving play at the heart of romance no longer seems to arise spontaneously, as a "natural" expression of the historical, but is now imposed on history self-consciously.

Even in its admission of limits to the game, the text must recover the possibility of romance. Thus Lamancha can admit, "We thought we had got outside civilization and were really taking chances. But we weren't....It can't be done," yet immediately adds, "not in this country anyway" (243), a qualification that leaves the territory of romance intact, if elsewhere. But in classic versions of the genre, this territory is always elsewhere, for the romance vision depends on transformation, through removal to another time—a "past," a "future," or an alternative present—which is a moment of imaginative freedom apparently beyond the check of historical time, and through removal to another space somehow distant from and marginal to that of the cultural center, and yet crucial as a special area where the culture is tested, recreated and reasserted. Classic romance is always elsewhere in this sense, though the values it demonstrates in action are directly related to the here and now it often seems to shun.

In *John Macnab* this romance transformation is particularly fragile. Thus, despite its attempted simplifications, the text gives us a strong sense of the complexity of the social problems and class oppositions it mythologizes, for these are too strong and too near—geographically and temporally—for the romance mythology to subdue them comfortably and confidently. It is this excess which, for a critical reading, is the most valuable element in *John Macnab*, for the text's failure to convince us of the adequacy of its solutions to social problems is its success in illustrating the limits of the classic romance as a mode of historical understanding.

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