

John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

I have long been a fan of the books of John Buchan (1875-1940), the 1st Baron Tweedsmuir, the son of a Free Church of Scotland minister, and Governor-General of Canada from 1935 until his death in 1940. He was a remarkable man in many ways, not the least being his awesomely prolific pen (check out the entry on him in Wikipedia to see the massive list of his publications).

I recently re-read his *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), written in the midst of World War I, and what he called a “shocker”—we would call it a “thriller.” It is a quick read in the edition I read, the Oxford World’s Classics edition. The hero, Richard Hannay, a South African, would go on to feature in a number of Buchan’s fictional works. Describing himself as a “very ordinary fellow,” he gets swept up into intrigue of the highest international order and is the key means for foiling a dastardly plot to do damage to the national interests of the United Kingdom.

There are a number of reminiscences to the Bible, which the editor Christopher Hawe notes, “was never far from Buchan’s mind” even in his shockers (p.116). Moreover, the entire worldview of the book is informed by Scottish common-sense realism, that dominant philosophical worldview of 19th century transatlantic Evangelicalism. Although novels were deeply frowned upon by many in Buchan’s Scottish Presbyterian tradition, his writing demonstrates how a child of that tradition can nevertheless produce fiction in overall harmony with this Christian tradition. Buchan, it should be noted, was also the author of one of the finest biographies of one of my personal heroes, Oliver Cromwell.

Not long after reading the book, I watched the earliest film version of the book—there have been three films made of the story. This is the 1935 version, starring Robert Donat and directed by the renowned Alfred Hitchcock. It departs considerably from the novel, making Hannay a Canadian (he sure didn’t sound like a Canadian to this Canuck!), introducing a love element (typical Hollywood even in the so-called golden age of film-making), changing the meaning of the thirty-nine steps, and trying to solve one of the implausibilities of Buchan’s book (the way in which Hannay stumbles into the very centre of the spy ring in Scotland). To be honest, though the film is enjoyable, I was disappointed by the way in which it departed from Buchan’s book.

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