

John Buchan's Amicable Anti-Modernism

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*This article considers the novelist John Buchan's changing responses to literary modernism in the inter-war period. It argues that although Buchan has generally been taken as a straightforward opponent of modernist writing, careful study of his oeuvre discloses a more complex scenario in which an antagonism to certain modernist "excesses" is mixed with a qualified attraction to particular modernist innovations. The article's central assumption is that a key part of Buchan's worth to the New Modernist Studies lies in his querying—in novelistic as well as in essayistic forms—of the vocabularies now used to elaborate such literary-historical oppositions as high vs. low, for instance, or old vs. new. The article breaks new ground by moving beyond familiar Buchan texts—e.g. *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915)—into the less appreciated territory of his novel *Huntingtower* (1922), his literary criticism and his cultural commentaries.*

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The study of inter-war writing has in recent years produced a number of reinterpretations of previously marginalized figures. Margery Allingham, Elizabeth Bowen, Warwick Deeping, Stella Gibbons, Walter Greenwood, Rosamund Lehmann, Rose Macaulay, Somerset Maugham, Nancy Mitford, J. B. Priestley, Dodie Smith, Gordon Stowell, Elizabeth Taylor, Angela Thirkell, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Dornford Yates—all these and more have been given attention by critics (e.g., Ardis, Grover, Humble) looking to salvage the historical and cultural validity of such writers in the face of the predominance bestowed upon high and late modernism by the mid-twentieth-century New Criticism. Two literary-historical categories—"intermodernism" and "the middlebrow"—have proved crucial in this regard.

Intermodernism has emerged as a way of more accurately differentiating inter-war texts in terms of "the

web of sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious associations between the writers, institutions, and cultural forms of the middle years of the twentieth century” (Bluemel 1–2) than is possible within modernism/non-modernism binaries.<sup>1</sup> The middlebrow has been retrieved as a positive explanatory term that can help shed light on the diverse natures of popular transatlantic literary discourses between the First and Second World Wars (and beyond). Recent scholarship has not sought to translate inter-war middlebrow literature or those writers and texts retrospectively identified as intermodernist into a matrix of new critical hegemonies. On the contrary, scholars working in this field have made claims for the distinctiveness of what we might want to call middlebrow and intermodernist writings in terms of the socio-economic and historical statuses of their creators and with regard to the affective demands of their readers.

The matter of “textual pleasure,” to use Humble’s suggestive phrase (11), has been key in these debates, as literary historians increasingly have come to esteem narratives designed to delight, thrill and entertain—sometimes, though not always, in opposition to the snobberies of certain creators (e.g., T. S. Eliot, Woolf), and self-appointed arbiters (e.g., the Leavises), of modernist fiction. At the same time, inseparable from the issue of literary gratification has been the question of tiered divisions between “high” and “low” modes of literary production in the cultural commentaries of inter-war critics, and particularly with respect to those critics—Theodor Adorno, Clement Greenberg and William Kurtz Wimsatt, Jr. especially—whose assessments largely were shaped by the modernisms to which hierarchies of this kind gave such literary-historical dominance. Maria DiBattista in the mid-1990s rightly noted that up to that point in history the academy generally had elided the impact of “convergences, interminglings, and ecumenical tastes” within pre- and inter-war literary culture, and instead had adhered “to the protocol of separate spheres in determining the artistic value, social import, and historical impact of literary works in the days of early and ‘high’ modernism” (3). Renewed attention to inter-war literary minglings and mixings has shown that this protocol gets us only so far because it hides linkages between writers ostensibly poles apart, on the one hand, and camouflages questionable evaluative assumptions beneath a veneer of scholarly objectivity, on the other. Robert Scholes, for instance, has stressed “the importance of

being earnest about pleasure” (xiii) when considering those “apparently clear and simple binary oppositions—high/low, for instance, or old/new—which turn out, upon examination, to be far from simple and anything but clear” (xi–xii). And other critics working in this field have, in Michael North’s words, exposed “the larger social and cultural connections between popular culture and literary modernism at the moment”— the 1920s and thereafter—“when both emerged as distinct entities in the public consciousness” (141).<sup>2</sup>

Consider, then, the following passage, which is extracted from the writings of one of Britain’s most famous middlebrow novelists:

[L]et me say frankly that I believe that Freud’s discoveries are of high importance for the art of fiction. You can see how a fine artist can handle them in the delicate psychology of a writer like Virginia Woolf. But the mere digging out and heaping up of material from the subconscious has no value. It is not art, but the raw stuff of art—*Ta pro tragodias*. It is crude ore which has to be smelted and refined before it is precious metal.

Unrationalised instincts must find a place in a rational scheme before they have any serious meaning for literature. (Buchan, “Integrity” 255–56)

To those who know him only as the author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) or as the creator of its protagonist, the bold Establishment hero Richard Hannay, the fact that the above words were written by John Buchan (1875-1940) may come as something of a surprise. The Grecian flourish ought not to seem out of place for a figure educated in the Humane Letters at the University of Oxford. But what about the admiring reference to Woolf, a modernist writer from whom Buchan could not, at first glance, be more dissimilar? Hugh Walpole’s professed desire to be a male counterpart “to a female Virginia Woolf” (qtd. in Hart-Davis 328) finds no echo in Buchan’s commentary. But why might a popular fictionist—one recently dismissed as an author of “robust quest-thrillers” whose many other writings and accomplishments are simply “forgettable” (Weintraub 372)—praise Woolf’s “delicate psychology” or her

artful handling of literary representations of the subconscious mind? And what, more importantly, might such praise tell us about that progressively less dependable literary-historical opposition between “experimental” and “conservative” modes of cultural production in the years between the First and Second World Wars?

These are some of the questions I want to consider in this article. My argument comes in two parts. The first looks at Buchan’s retrospective descriptions of modernist culture in his autobiography *Memory Hold-the-Door* (1940), at his pamphlet *The Novel and the Fairy Tale* (1931) and at his novel *Huntingtower* (1922). Buchan in this novel engages with the implications of early 1920s modernist writing through the character of the poet John Heritage, whose transformation from pretentious, arty intellectual to heroic champion sets the stage for a more complex negotiation with modernist writing on Buchan’s part in the quite obscure essay “The Old and the New in Literature” (1925). The second part of my argument places this under-examined piece of prose in the context of Buchan’s inter-war writing on the nature of fiction and explores this essay’s function as a prime contributor to his amicable attitude towards the literary avant-garde in the latter half of the 1920s. Here I reflect on Buchan’s critical questioning of precisely those binary systems that have relegated his work to the shadowy realms of the “merely” popular, as well as on his attempt to reconcile modernist and romantic forms through the dialogic potential of the essay. Constructed around a pair of imaginary dialogues between a lightly fictionalized Buchan, a young, pro-modernist intellectual called Theophilus and the much older, more traditional Septimus, “The Old and the New in Literature” indicates that Buchan’s creative management of the seemingly light-hearted “entertainment” fiction to explore modernist culture did, in fact, develop further in his nonfiction. This point has important consequences for scholarly ruminations on not only Buchan’s work—because his nonfiction was (and is) barely read compared to his fiction, with his philosophy probably being the least-read of all—but on the middlebrow contexts from which his writing emerged.

### **Inter-war Experiment and *Huntingtower***

Connections between popular and modernist culture in the inter-war period took a range of forms. They included: personal relationships between popular writers and their modernist counterparts; side-by-side placement of modernist and popular writings in journals and magazines; institutional and publication linkages (e.g. Gilbert Seldes's backing of Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *The Seven Lively Arts* in the early 1920s); formal imitation and literary pastiche (e.g. Wyndham Lewis's parodic rendering of the detective thriller in his 1932 satire *Snooty Baronet*); and critical questionings of modernist culture by popular writers (and vice-versa) in books, novels, essays and lectures. This last mode of exchange saw vitriol articulated on both sides. Indeed, the representatives of the dominant model of modernism created in retrospect by twentieth-century scholars—the Ezra Pounds, the James Joyces and the Virginia Woolfs—were criticized as much from without as from within, as much by figures hostile to an emergent highbrow modernism as by those whose literature was inseparable from the growth of that modernism in its pre- and inter-war phases. Gilbert Frankau's assault on modernism's perceived highbrowness involved a rejection of the view that “the book or play or picture which educates and entertains and pleases and uplifts ninety people out of every hundred cannot possibly have any real artistic merit” (qtd. in Baxendale, “Popular Fiction” 560). Others, like E. M. Delafield, Stella Gibbons, Storm Jameson and Rose Macaulay, criticized the modernist highbrow—those Jameson in *Three Kingdoms* (1926) termed “effete young men who write about nothing” (qtd. in Briganti and Mezei 79)—in their fiction as well as in their critical prose by writing novels that poured scorn on the Olympian pretensions of intellectual and aesthetic *litterateurs*.

Buchan ought to be viewed in the context sketched out above. However, Buchan's sincere, if skeptical, interest in the modernist writings of his contemporaries has largely gone unrecognized, even if in his careers as scholar, historian, statesman, politician, author, poet, journalist, war reporter, propagandist and editor he often engaged with modernist narratives in order to more carefully situate his own ideas about art within a twentieth-century cultural context. Attention to this interest gives us a chance to look again at modernist writing from the unusual perspective of a novelist who played a central role in creating the imperial modernity with which modernism so fundamentally took issue.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, such attention forces us to reevaluate the nature of “popular” responses to modernism at a twenty-first-century scholarly

juncture in which the latter's ostensible hegemony over alternative kinds of modern literature has been decisively problematized. Such quintessential Buchan texts as his articles for *The Scottish Review* and *The Spectator*, the speeches collected in *Homilies and Recreations* (1926) and *Canadian Occasions* (1940), and his autobiography *Memory Hold-the-Door* evidence his sensitive understanding of the textual cultures of his time and of the connections between their extremities, connections that Buchan himself frequently played a significant part in enabling. Intriguingly, the Establishment circles in which Buchan operated led to a number of associations with major modernist figures, be it through the impersonal route of shared outrage—for example, the letter protesting against the censorship of Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* (1928) that Buchan signed along with T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster and others (Lownie 296)—or via more direct avenues, such as his role in the abortive attempt to have Jacob Epstein exempted from conscription in the First World War (Ferguson 256), or his correspondence with Ezra Pound in the 1930s (Adam Smith 382).

Buchan's approval of Woolf's literary craft in "The Integrity of Thought" (1937), quoted above, seems less out of the blue if viewed in light of the affiliations just mentioned. And it was no meager approval, either. In *Memory Hold-the-Door* Buchan wrote that Woolf's critical writings were "the best since Matthew Arnold—wiser and juster indeed, than Arnold" (202). Woolf, for her part, seems to have had a more critical grasp of Buchan's character, given that, as Kate Macdonald notes, Woolf privately mocked him "for his prolific production rate and his boastfulness" (27)—a tendency complicated, perhaps, by Woolf's friendship with Buchan's wife, Susan (Lownie 234). Even so, Woolf's nod to Buchan as an authority on history in *Three Guineas* (1938)—indicated by an allusion (Woolf 282) to his memoir of the courageous Grenfell twins, *Francis and Riversdale Grenfell* (1920)—divulges at least some level of public endorsement of his eminence, in her eyes, if not necessarily of his temperament as she had experienced it behind closed doors. However, Woolf's estimations of Buchan are less significant than his of Woolf, in the context of inter-war perceptions of modernist culture, at any rate, because they tell us something about how best-selling writers like Buchan positioned themselves in relation to their "advanced" contemporaries. Whereas in his later writings Buchan generally distanced himself from

modernist culture (Woolf being a key exception), his work of the inter-war period discloses a more complex scenario in which an antagonism to certain modernist “excesses” is mixed with a qualified attraction to particular modernist innovations.

If Tommy Deloraine’s appraisal of the “artistic temperament” in Buchan’s *The Power-House* (1913) as one “perfectly capable of starting a revolution ... merely to see how it feels like to be a revolutionary” (12) is a good indication of Buchan’s lukewarm response to modernism’s broad cultural rebelliousness, then observations of this kind need to be weighed against those moments in his work in which modernism functions as a more complex site of debate in Buchan’s understanding of artistic and cultural modernity. Buchan’s distaste for the “youthful” artistic coteries of the early twentieth century, a distaste for “melancholy cases of arrested development” that covered *fin de siècle* aestheticism as well as Bloomsbury in its field of affect, went hand in hand with a desire for reconciliation between what he saw as the revolutionary artifacts of avant-garde “immaturity” (Buchan, “Old and New” 63) and the “infinitely elastic yet inexorably binding” canons of “genuine” (62) creativity, canons he described in “The Muse of History” (1914) as “the artistic graces of precision, an adequate design, a wise proportion, and an attractive style” (106). Buchan never hid his loathing for what in “The Judicial Temperament” (1922) he called “the faded and weary mannerisms of the self-conscious litterateur” (225). But still he saw the most sincere labors of his modernist contemporaries as the necessary, youthful counterpart to those literary typologies that left upon him, as he wrote in “Sir Walter Scott” (1923), “the impression which the great classical writers leave, of seeing things on a grander scale, of clarifying life, of observing justly and interpreting nobly, of possessing that ‘stellar and undiminishable something’ which was Emerson’s definition of greatness” (12).

Such views remind us that debates between the First and Second World Wars about the direction literature ought to take were not the sole preserve of modernist writers. In addition to the famous discussions of this key topic by T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, among many other modernists, numerous authors questioned the nature of literary art in the wake of a war that, in Buchan’s words, weakened principles “which seemed fundamental” and made men question “the cardinal

articles of their faith” (*King’s Grace* 119). The science-fiction novelist and critic J. D. Beresford echoed Buchan in saying that the First World War produced “an increasing body of people who [were] losing their faith in the old Institutions,” a broad crisis of belief that included suspicion of “society, government, [and] religion” in addition to skepticism regarding “life and letters” (51). Modernism frequently was a target of such skepticism. Its critics ranged from such working-class writers as Sid Chaplin, James Hanley and Fred Urquhart, to such middlebrow writers as Buchan, Rosamund Lehmann, Rose Macaulay and J. B. Priestley, to those authors who questioned modernist forms while remaining committed to the experimental representation of modernity.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Aldous Huxley, in “What, Exactly, Is Modern?” (1925), rejected the “trivially eccentric” experiments of Dadaism, the “smartly cynical and heartless” work of Ronald Firbank (172), and the “obstreperously gross and blasphemous” narrative of Joyce’s *Ulysses* as “off the main line of progress, which is towards increasing subtlety of mind, increasing sensitiveness of emotion, [and] increasing toleration and understanding” (173). H. G. Wells echoed Huxley in his strident attack on those perceptions of the writer’s craft that repositioned literary fiction “away from every natural interest towards a preposterous emptiness of technical effort, a monstrous egotism of artistry, of which the later work of Henry James is the monumental warning” (38). In both these instances—and in many more—the introspective prominences of modernism came under fire, as different kinds of writer viewed modernism as a turning-away from “lived” problems into a solipsistic obsession with artistic details at the expense of a committed social conscience.

Buchan’s retrospective descriptions of “high” modernism resonate with those of Huxley and Wells. Looking back at this period at the end of his life, Buchan claimed in *Memory Hold-the-Door* that the inter-war years were difficult “for those who called themselves intellectuals” (184). In what is surely a retrospective dig at T. S. Eliot, Buchan asserted that “just as many of the boys then leaving school, who had escaped war service, suffered from a kind of *accidie* and were inclined to look for ‘soft options’ in life, so the interpreting class plumed themselves wearily on being hollow men living in a waste land” (183–84). Such tendencies as “the belief in the perfectibility of man, the omnipotence of reason, and the certainty of progress” had, in Buchan’s mind, “more or less ended with the War” (184), a conflict which a



decade earlier he represented as “a new element added to a chemical mixture” that “changed all [his generation’s] problems” and, therefore, “made theories which had belonged to these problems no longer applicable” (Untitled Speech). The scientism of these remarks encourages comparison with Eliot’s metaphor of the platinum filament in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), but whereas Eliot’s essay implies that literary production is at its most innovative when re-ordering past traditions through the intervention of present novelties, Buchan adhered to a more linear model of tradition as “a continuous thing” in which the heritages “bequeathed by others” represent “a potent legacy to those who follow after” (“Two Ordeals” 151).<sup>5</sup> The differences between Buchan and modernists like Eliot and Pound comprised the bedrock of Buchan’s attacks upon that literature of the 1920s in which, as he saw it, “a dull farmyard candour became fashionable, an insistence upon the functions of the body which had rarely artistic value” and which was symptomatic of a flawed anti-humanism: “The new rebels did not greatly admire humanity, seeing chiefly its animal grossness, they did not believe in progress, and they had no high-pitched dreams of a coming golden age” (*Memory* 186). Part of Buchan’s critique included a refusal of the new verse of the era—“unmelodious journalism”—and an iciness towards the “immense, shambling novels that poured steadily from the press in Britain and America,” which used “method[s]” and represented “whole world[s]” that were, in his view, “ineffably dismal” (201).

Quite whom Buchan had in mind when he rejected post-war poetry in *Memory Hold-the-Door* isn’t clear (although Eliot seems a likely candidate), but as far as fiction is concerned he was especially troubled by Proust’s “hothouse world” (*Memory* 201) and by a general tendency for experimental novelists to produce what he saw as “vast shapeless works which were simply a rubbish-heap of stuff which they believed they had dug out of the subconscious” (“Integrity” 255). Buchan was consistent throughout his life in what he believed comprised a “good” work of fiction—as he put it in “The Definition of a Novel” (1908): “a representation of life in all its complexity, with a variety of characters and a complexity of detail” (210)—but he was against literature that in his view merely accumulated details to put weight on “immoral” narratives which evidenced “a return to the sourness of puritanism without its discipline and majesty” (*Memory* 186). Buchan’s representation of “psychological”

modernism in *Memory Hold-the-Door*, even if he praised the work of Woolf in that volume, certainly is dubious. But it is worth making the point that Buchan's critique of such "vast shapeless works" as *Ulysses* (implied in his cultural critique but never specifically identified) ignored the key counter-objection that such writers as Joyce and Proust accumulated impressions, sensations and atmospheres in their fiction in order to represent life in exactly Buchan's terms (in all its difficulty, through a variety of perspectives and with a complexity of detail) but from a point of departure that focused on the subject matters he spurned. Buchan's *The Novel and the Fairy Tale* (1931) is the central witness for the prosecution in this last respect, as in this text he complained that the tendency of certain twentieth-century critics of the Victorian novel to attach value to a literary methodology that allows life "to speak for itself, and not be selected and winnowed by the arbitrary will of the novelist" signified a valuing of "the irrelevant, the inessential, [and] the inorganic" (5). Buchan, by contrast, appreciated novels that aim for "a convincing picture of the whirl and march of life in its central aspects" ("Literature and Topography" 200) and that are based on a principle of "selection," since, he argued, "a great deal of life is off the point" (*Novel and the Fairy Tale* 5). Again, we might want to question what those "central aspects" of life were, for Buchan, but even so the fact remains that, however inaccurately in the final years of his life he constructed the bulk of 1920s modernist writing, he nonetheless experienced a "radical defeat of sympathy" (*Memory* 201) for those "psychological" textual forms that were, in his eyes, victories of style over substance.

And yet why should the Buchan of *Memory Hold-the-Door* have the last word? Although in this important text Buchan notes that after 1918 he "did [his] best to get on terms with [his] contemporaries" (201), the fact that it was written some twenty years after the post-war modernist "moment" had passed invites us to respond with justifiable skepticism to some of its more exaggerated rejections of modernist culture. This becomes especially apparent when reading the broad anti-modernism of *Memory Hold-the-Door* alongside the more harmonious viewpoint Buchan embraced in "The Old and the New in Literature" (1925), in which he adopts a dialectical understanding of the necessity of modernism at a time when he was resistant to the view "that an imaginative temperament and a creative mind [gives] a plenary

indulgence to transgress” (26) accepted cultural limits. If in *Memory Hold-the-Door* this period is remembered as one in which Buchan was “overpowered” by his modernist peers, then “The Old and the New in Literature” suggests not only a greater level of resistance on his part but also a conciliatory viewpoint that his memoir all but erases. This was the same vantage point that led Buchan in 1931 to criticize the “contemporary palimpsests of sensations and emotions” written by “the new iconoclasts” as something of an entirely different order to “the kind of book which the great Victorians produced,” but which were, even so, viable as aesthetic objects inasmuch as they were “based on a different theory of art, on a different conception of the novel” (*Novel and the Fairy Tale* 4).

Buchan’s turn to a kind of fairy tale aesthetic in his novel *Huntingtower* (1922) shows that he was practically interested in the twin terms of *The Novel and the Fairy Tale*’s title long before that pamphlet appeared. But this turn also demonstrates his growing concern with modernist writing during the inter-war period, one that has a bearing on the more nuanced understanding of modernism Buchan elaborated in the nonfiction to which I will turn in the second part of this article. *Huntingtower*—an under-appreciated narrative that has been overshadowed by the more famous Hannay stories—chronicles bourgeois triumph over Russian revolutionism. Dickson McCunn, a grocer from Glasgow, holidays in southwest Scotland and finds himself entangled in a mythic conspiracy involving, to use Lownie’s words, “a beautiful princess locked up in a tower, a lovelorn suitor who is a poet who rescues her, and a mysterious villain who is ‘the devil incarnate’” (169). The gloom of the First World War, as well as the ghosts of those who died in it, infuses the novel, although material markers of the conflict—bodily injury, trauma—are plentiful. Such physical disruptions serve as an objective correlative for the wider social scars unleashed by Bolshevism, a phenomenon criticized by Buchan at length in his *Nelson’s History of the War* (1915–19) and dismissed in *Huntingtower* as “a government of the sick and fevered, [which] cannot endure in health” (141). Revolutionary politics are depicted in the novel, à la Sapper’s *The Black Gang* (1922), as giving free rein to a criminality that threatens democratic civilization, although Bolshevism’s “great work” is applauded by one character, the modernist poet John Heritage, as a “truthful” quest on behalf of the only class “that matters, the plain man, the workers, who live close to

life” (*Huntingtower* 28). Heritage’s opinions disgust the rather naïve McCunn, but if Heritage initially takes shape as a silly contemporary—implied by his clothing, “a symphony of colour which seemed too elaborately considered to be quite natural” (24)—then his association with the wartime dead through his front-line soldiering hints at the novel’s multifaceted treatment of old and new “dyad” that would so concern Buchan in his inter-war cultural commentaries.

Heritage’s war service allies him with Theophilus in “The Old and the New in Literature.” In the same way that Theophilus impresses Buchan’s essayistic narrator-figure because he “had a roughish time in France” (“Old and New” 46), McCunn re-assesses Heritage “with a new respect” having learned of his participation in the Battle of Pozières in 1916 (*Huntingtower* 23). Heritage’s key function in the novel is to introduce the specter of artistic iconoclasm to the resolutely conservative McCunn, whose narrative tastes echo, but cannot simply be equated with, Buchan’s. Participating in the age-old strife of “classic and modern” later invoked in “The Old and the New in Literature,” *Huntingtower* uses imagery and narrative structure to explore the same issues of newness versus tradition and ugliness versus beauty that invigorated inter-war accounts of modernism’s supposedly degenerative effects upon modern culture. But whereas in Sapper’s *The Black Gang* artists are portrayed as “dissolute rascals” (81), Buchan’s novel adopts a more careful perspective in which Heritage’s dissoluteness is depicted as a complex product as much of wartime trauma as of a primeval difference, “some grim old business tucked away back in the ages” (*Huntingtower* 34). Heritage’s goal of distilling poetic beauty “out of rottenness” (27) aligns him with T. S. Eliot, who in *The Sacred Wood* (1920) urged that “the contemplation of the horrid or sordid or disgusting ... is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty” (143). And yet whereas in *Memory Hold-the-Door* Buchan spurned Eliot’s “hollow” psyche, in *Huntingtower* Heritage is wholesome, picturesque and companionable, attributes that foreshadow his metamorphosis from “child-like” modernist poet to pragmatic hero come the novel’s end.

The spiritual and cultural journey made by Heritage in *Huntingtower* can be interpreted in several ways, but in one sense it represents a containment of the dangers he poses to McCunn’s and to Buchan’s conservative aesthetic principles. The imagery deployed in the novel supports this view. That Heritage

burns his first volume of poetry—*Whorls*, named in imitation, perhaps, of the Sitwellian poetry anthology *Wheels*—at a moment of need clearly indicates his rejection of the aesthetic values he earlier defends.<sup>6</sup> But this textual rebuff to Heritage's modernism is not as clear-cut as it might at first seem. The process of reconciliation between his rebellious aesthetics and the more romantic attitudes of McCunn that is firmly placed in the novel's final chapter is not just a suppression of aesthetic experiment but instead represents a negotiation with such experiment in which aesthetic principles are dramatized in order to explore their inner workings. When Heritage states that he is "reconciled" (207) he points to the "betterment" of his manliness that his participation in McCunn's exploits has facilitated. But such reconciliation entails in the first instance an acknowledgement of Heritage's role, as his name suggests, as an agent of heritage, of tradition and continuity. The point is not merely that Heritage stands opposed to McCunn's, as much as to Buchan's, conservatism, but that his difference nonetheless operates within a doubling of attitudes appropriate for youth (Heritage) and for maturity (McCunn). It is no mistake that, as we will see in "The Old and the New in Literature," Heritage's principles are drawn out through discussion and debate, precisely the dialogic processes that Buchan upholds in the essay.

Heritage's quite reductive modernist anti-traditionalism is not enough to implicate him in the more complex arbitrations between the old and the new that "actual" modernism undertook at the moment of *Huntingtower*'s appearance—what Andrea Zemgulys describes as "its efforts to break with the past, to alter the past through new traditions, [and] to retell the past in ways transformative of the present" (1). Moreover, Heritage's role as an "agent" of modernism discloses the same homogenizing tendencies that Buchan displays in "The Old and the New in Literature," in which a heterogeneous modernist culture is reduced to a small selection of only generally related attitudes. Finally, Heritage does not in the end receive sufficient space to develop as a character; his "modern edges," in Macdonald's words, "intrude briefly and are then smoothed away by romance" (96). But the fact that he appears at all in the fictional work of a writer ostensibly so opposed to modernist practices is revealing, primarily because it gestures forward to the less frosty comprehension of such practices that Buchan disclosed in his 1920s non-fictional prose. At the same time, the "demented" (46) Heritage introduces into *Huntingtower* a

psychological emphasis that can usefully be compared with Buchan's praise of Woolf's novelistic handling of man's "unrationalised instincts" ("Integrity" 255). Buchan explored the idea of the unconscious more copiously in his fourth Hannay novel, *The Three Hostages* (1924), but his bringing of psychological themes into *Huntingtower* is inseparable from the novel's own formal attempts at exploring the minds of its characters in ways that once again point to a nearness between purportedly "radical" and "popular" forms at this moment in literary history.

Buchan conceded that he lived in a time in which literature had "many modes and fashions," a concession that made him grant the further point that sometimes one mode or fashion "is in vogue and sometimes another" ("Certain Poets III" 282). But while in his essay "Style and Journalism" (1925) he lamented the fact that the literature of the early twentieth century tended "to follow a hundred different models" and so created a "great deal of writing which [was] careless, fantastic, shapeless, and, to [his] conservative mind, undeniably bad" (238), even so he could admit that his model of the "artistic graces"—precision, an adequate design, a wise proportion and an attractive style—was "superior" to such writing only insofar as it belonged to one end of a dialectic between two equally truthful creative principles. This was for Buchan a war that might end with "an ultimate harmony and peace" even though "the victory of either side would be disastrous, for each is in the right" ("Old and New" 43). The point is not that Buchan took an apathetic stance *vis-à-vis* the modernisms he rejected, but rather that he was cautious in situating his own artistic values and ideals above those of his modernist contemporaries for the suggestive reason that he saw this opposition as an antinomy, as a tension between "opposites but not necessarily contradictories" (43). The importance of this insight for our understanding of the linkages between radical and traditionalist forms of twentieth-century narrative needs acknowledging, because it demonstrates that those scare-quoted "experimental" and "conservative" textualities of the inter-war years, as Jonathan Freedman has suggested in a slightly different context, "seem closer to one another than either are wont to admit" (179).

### **Embracing the Literary Avant-garde**

Buchan was openly Victorian in his tastes as far as the novel is concerned, as *The Novel and the Fairy Tale* makes clear. It was from Victorian writers that he derived the core of his own novelistic principles. Dismissing the claim that the “true artistry of the novel” resides in its being “a thing of infinite delicacy and precision, which can catch and register the faintest whispers of the sub-conscious” (4), Buchan turned to those novels—his examples being Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848), Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1874) and Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891)—which in his mind dealt “with ordinary life” but, “without ever losing touch with the ground,” somehow gave a picture of that life that lifted “it into the skies” (5). Buchan saw these texts, and others like them, as possessing five basic narrative characteristics: a good story; a cast of characters “recognizable as real types,” some of whom are regarded by the storyteller as definitely good and others as definitely bad; a realism based on “a judicious selection,” as opposed to an “inventory,” of details; a lack of impressions (“the story-teller is primarily interested in the events he has to tell of, and not in what the jargon of to-day calls his ‘reactions’ to them”); and a didacticism that entails “a dominant purpose, a lesson ... to teach, a creed to suggest” (7). Elsewhere Buchan made it clear that he felt it difficult, if not impossible, “to pin the greatest imaginative writers down to one moral, or even to a code of morals” (“Walter Scott” 34), but his admiration for the Victorian writers mentioned above primarily was based on what he saw as the homiletic undercurrents of their narrative styles.

It was the Victorian novel’s tendency to read life “in a hopeful spirit” that disclosed its links with the fairy tale, in Buchan’s eyes, as in so doing it showed “the capacities for evil in man’s breast, the cruelty and callousness of life, the undeserved suffering of the good, and the undeserved fortune of the evil” (*Novel and the Fairy Tale* 14). Contrary to this was modernism’s “egocentri[sm],” which for Buchan played second fiddle to the “sublimely unconscious” (6) nature and “self-forgetfulness” (6) of Victorian creativity. Again, the shadow of the First World War hangs over Buchan’s account of these problems, for in his words the modernist’s habit of writing like “a showman exhibiting a set of puppets, boring his audience by telling it constantly what he felt about it all” was at odds with what he saw as the “noble

renunciation of self” (6) implied by the War and sensed by those who had fought in it (even if such a position ignored the fact that many modernists had fought between 1914 and 1918 as front-line soldiers). Yet running through Buchan’s assessments of literary modernism, as I have already suggested, is a peace-making spirit that admits that many of the novels and poems from which his own literary ideals diverged were “brilliant and valuable” (6). This, in turn, was linked to an impression on Buchan’s part of modernism’s alterity, of its undoubted “literary value” (4), if not of its status as Literature, as a dynamic other (among many such others) to his own work and that of his literary heroes. Buchan admitted in *Memory Hold-the-Door* that his conservative aesthetic tastes, which emerged in his twenties, “constituted a strict, dry and rather priggish canon, which kept [him] from taking any real interest in the literature of [his] own day” (200). But, again, such comments ignore the more sensitive point of view that Buchan held a decade earlier, an attitude that didn’t just erect a divide between those works of literary art “close to the earth and yet kin to the upper air,” at one extreme, and those “tremulous with meaning” (*Novel and the Fairy Tale* 16), at the other, but instead surveyed and investigated binary models of artistic culture on their own terms.

“The Old and the New in Literature” represents Buchan’s most important achievement in this last respect. Through the dialogue format noted above, the essay takes a multi-sided view of conservative and radical tendencies in the literary arts with an eye to the truism that “the strife of old and new, classic and modern, has been going on merrily since the cave-man discovered a new way of making pictures on bone” (42). Theophilus, an ex-soldier and a journalist, speaks for the modern literature of the 1920s, which to him is good in itself “and full of an infinite promise” (47). The Buchan-esque Septimus, a distinguished classical scholar, represents the conservative temper “found chiefly among those who in politics have been lifelong Liberals” (53), a disposition evidenced by his claim that “we human beings are what many generations have made us, and even if we want to we cannot divest ourselves of the past and march naked into a new world” (59). Theophilus, we are informed, “is not one of those pallid, whiskered people” (45) of the kind scoffed at in Buchan’s *The Courts of the Morning* (1929)—chattering Bloomsbury intellectuals who sit about “discussing Freud” (*Courts* 6)—but nonetheless he defends



aesthetic freedom from “earlier conventions” (“Old and New” 49) as well as the calling of the artist to explore “the living breathing world around [him]” rather than “the dead” (51). Septimus, for his part, takes issue with the majority of Theophilus’s ideas about literature—in particular his defenses of aesthetic anti-traditionalism, free indirect discourse, stream-of-consciousness writing and sexual explicitness—and, even if he grants the young’s almost inevitable enmity towards “conventions,” stands up for the argument that ““if a fellow has any real stuff in him, he will come to see that the only freedom is that which comes from the willing and reasoned acceptance of discipline, and the only true originality that which springs from the re-birth of historic tradition in a man’s soul”” (59).

On the face of it, as its title suggests, “The Old and the New in Literature” maintains exactly the kind of reductive opposition that I have been claiming is problematized in Buchan’s critical prose. Indeed, even if the essay is read extremely carefully, various weaknesses on Buchan’s part present themselves, predominantly with regard to the essay’s usage of such general terms as “conformism” and “tradition” (as well as their contrasting postulates) as if they are self-explanatory or as if they have a single, invariant meaning. Another problem the essay throws up is the question of precisely which works of literature Buchan has in mind when he makes Septimus subordinate “wayward” and “slack” narrative techniques to those forms of art that demand “shape and selection and infinite labour” (53). It isn’t difficult to recommend the contenders Buchan probably had in mind for such “bad” techniques (the impressionist novel, for instance), but without his clarification it is hard not to see the paradigms that the second part (Septimus’s half) of the essay privileges (form, structure, planning) as equally as descriptive of the modern narrative styles endorsed by Theophilus. This drawback manifests itself markedly at the instant when Septimus argues that ““life and art can never be the same thing”” (55), a viewpoint that evokes the metamorphic aesthetic defended in the first issue of the avant-garde journal *BLAST* (1914), in which Pound defined true works of art as the resultant forms of “DIRECTING a certain fluid force against circumstance” (153). If the dramatized “Buchan” of “The Old and the New in Literature” admits to having read “quite a number of novels of which [Theophilus] specially approved” (48)—thereby emphasizing the point, already touched on above, that Buchan grasped the terrain of modernist literature

in some depth—even so this does not exempt the essay from an unsatisfactorily differentiated exercise of its organizing literary-historical categories.

However, to criticize Buchan in this way is too heavy-handed. Buchan was far from alone in viewing modernism—and especially the modernist novel—as a monolithic entity that stressed the subjective self at the expense of eternal reality. Jacob Wassermann’s critique of the inter-war modern novel in Germany could well have been Buchan’s reproach of its British cousin: “if I do not conceal my doubts as to the likelihood of a new efflorescence of the novel, those doubts are directed above all to the intellectual radicalism of the younger generation, which not only stifles all tradition, not only exposes the artist’s trade as such to any casual intromission, but also veils the horizon, distorts our picture of the world and switches moral responsibilities on to the wrong lines” (76–77). But this, once more, would be to invoke the Buchan of *Memory Hold-the-Door* instead of the Buchan of “The Old and the New in Literature.” If the latter can be mapped onto the former inasmuch as both Buchans tended to think about the literary modernisms of the inter-war period in loosely uniform terms, then the Buchan of “The Old and the New” stands apart in being not only more sympathetic to inter-war modernist culture, but also by being more sophisticated in his account of its relations with other kinds of literary production. For instance, the conflict he builds between the radicalism of Theophilus and the conservatism of Septimus represents an opposition between “moods and attitudes and inclinations of mind” (45), one that discloses a form of resistance between figures who, even if they are not completely in disagreement with one another’s principles, nonetheless are ironized as “opposites” by the literary method through which they are focalized. Not only is Theophilus depicted as uninterested in the objections of the fictional “Buchan”—and so, it is suggested, as indifferent to the challenges that, if answered, would give his outlook greater theoretical effectiveness—but Septimus is shown to be smugly superior—Arnoldian, even—in his concern at the fact that the inter-war period has ““too many bright young Hebrews, male and female, trying their hand at the novel’” (59).

Septimus’s Arnoldian flavoring is significant because it reveals that Buchan was quite able, and willing, to examine critically his own artistic principles in the cold light of day. Arnold (a key figure for Buchan,

as his praise of Woolf as the best critic since Arnold implies) is in “The Old and the New in Literature” associated with a somewhat haughty, hot-headed grouch whose resistance to the aesthetics of Theophilus echoes Buchan’s own resistance to those modernist narratives that, as he put it in “The Most Difficult Form of Fiction” (1929), focus on the “trivialities” of life instead of “life” itself (5). But Buchan’s decision to make Septimus at least in part an object of criticism—a process accomplished through characterizing him as an eloquent but all too easily incensed and “crusted” (“Old and New” 58) bachelor—relativizes the latter’s opinions just as the opinions of Theophilus are given added credence by the key fact that, however distinct from Buchan’s values they might be, they are nonetheless an “outcome of reflection and not of natural bias” (51). That Theophilus and Septimus are characters, rather than dry mouthpieces for one-dimensional viewpoints, implies that Buchan to some degree saw the artistic emphases to which they are attracted as living ideas that could not easily be pigeonholed into either side of the conservative/radical binary. The closing part of the essay suggests as much, as the fictional “Buchan” begins “to suspect that the whole dispute might be largely a bogus one” (60). “The Old and the New in Literature” proposes, as I have already quoted, that the jittery rapport between “conservative” and “radical” tendencies in narrative art might best be understood as a conflict between “opposites but not necessarily contradictories,” a kind of parley between “two legitimate attitudes, the one proper for youth and the creative artist, and the other for maturity, the scholar and the critic” (60). The characterization of Septimus and Theophilus corroborates this view. As the essay proceeds it becomes apparent that the argument being defended is, as “Buchan” states at the essay’s end, that radicalism is a necessary counterpart, a necessary forerunner, to the measured wisdom that only age and experience, in Buchan’s eyes, can bring. Thus the modernism to which Theophilus is drawn is not simply dismissed, but incorporated into a more complex dialectic between points of view that recognize “the same fundamentals, but from slightly different angles of vision” (60).

## **Conclusion**

“The Old and the New in Literature” indicates Buchan’s nuanced consideration of modernist culture in the early 1920s. However, the essay’s relative inconspicuousness has meant that its insights have yet to have any meaningful impact upon critical understandings of Buchan’s response to artistic experiment in the inter-war period, or, for that matter, upon broader considerations of the links between modernism and popular culture at this moment in history. Simon Glassock, for instance, has argued that Buchan’s writing offers an important marker of how “recovery and continuity”—as opposed to fragmentation and rupture—informed Britain’s inter-war “social, political, and cultural climates,” one which complicates “the emphasis which is traditionally given [in literary-historical accounts of the period] to the rise of modernism” (51). Glassock is correct to maintain that Buchan decried “the self-absorbed and deliberately exclusive elitism of modernism” (thus emphasizing the point, which I have touched on already, that Buchan found certain aspects of modernism more disagreeable than others), but he is wrong to say that Buchan’s writing can in any simplistic sense take the side of anti-modernist “continuity” against modernist “rift and fissure” (44). This way of articulating things ignores precisely those modernisms (e.g. Ford Madox Ford’s, H.D.’s, Pound’s, and Woolf’s, among others) that were founded on principles of aesthetic recovery and continuity and pays inadequate attention to those tendencies in Buchan’s work that show him seeking a reclamation, albeit a problematic one, of the modernist impulse as a counterpart to the more “unyielding” narrative techniques he most prized.

Buchan noted in “Style and Journalism” that he often turned “with comfort from the freakish, stuttering, self-conscious rigmarole of too many modern litterateurs to the clean-cut, efficient prose of a newspaper article” (239), an “urbane” prose which he believed “need fear no comparison with the past” writings of such figures as Addison, Hazlitt and Cobbett (238). And yet, as I have shown here, this view represents only a partial truth, for Buchan positioned himself and his writing in relation to modernism’s “mercurial,” “stammering,” “over-elaborate” styles in complex, and often conciliatory, ways. The cultural commentaries advanced by best-selling writers such as Buchan are hard to disentangle from what Baxendale has called the appearance of the “language” of brows (low, middle and high), a language that “first came to prominence not as part of a critique of popular taste but as an expression of populist

hostility towards the new culture of modernism” (Baxendale, “Popular Fiction” 559). However, Buchan’s relevance to these issues lies less in his ability to be described as a “middlebrow” or “intermodernist” writer (although cases can be advanced for thinking about his novels, short stories and poems in the languages of either framework), and more in his own querying—in novelistic as well as essayistic form—of the vocabularies which are now used to elaborate such literary-historical terms. While Buchan’s dialectical account of these issues may not be entirely unproblematic, it is, even so, highly informative with regard to the effort to bring together conservative and experimental literary styles that it discloses.

Mary Grover rightly argues that Buchan within his novels was as hostile to what he saw as the highbrow aspects of his contemporary culture as were such middlebrow novelists as Gilbert Frankau and Warwick Deeping (91). But Grover’s claim, like Glassock’s, invites attention to precisely that aspect of Buchan’s output—his nonfiction—that has in the majority of critical responses to his work been sidelined. Buchan’s view of modernism in “The Old and the New in Literature,” as we have seen, made allowances for those “candid” youths who were drawn to experimental narratologies because of their “motive power,” “gusto” and “impetus,” each of which, in Buchan’s opinion, was “the foundation of achievement” (61). At the same time, the essay shows Buchan remaining unsympathetic to “coteries which never change, youth which never grows up, and which carries its crudities noisily into middle life” (63). For Buchan, youthful revolt against the established canons of art invigorated the cultural landscape inasmuch as it signified a creative spirit “which has first to assert itself against the world before it can accept and remodel the world so as to make it its own” (60). But this genuine “immature” vitality, as he understood it, eventually would have to shift into a more restrained emphasis if it was to maintain the reconciliatory conjunction “between old and new, age and youth” (62). Hence his approval of “honest youth” and his denunciation of artists who attempted to retain a spirit of exuberant rebellion into their middle and old ages, a “senile and decaying youth” upon which, Buchan argued, “we need not waste our charity” (64). He criticized the efforts of the young to offer “wise” judgments of immature narrative forms—“the solemn interpretations of youthful work written by youth in the serious weeklies” (61)—but he was no less impatient with hasty dismissals of the literary styles of his fledgling contemporaries on the

principle that “a certain arrogance and revolt at one stage are proof of a vigorous personality” (60). Hence Buchan’s defense of those who live “the life of [their] contemporaries, even if these contemporaries are rather silly,” and his claim that “it is a great deal better to be silly than to be dead” (61).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See also Hubble 167–69.

<sup>2</sup> See Ardis, Baxendale, *Priestley’s England*, Earle and Turner.

<sup>3</sup> I think here of Buchan’s participation in Lord Milner’s “kindergarten,” his role as a propagandist and War Office executive during the First World War and, later on, his position as a deputy director of Reuters (Lownie 70–85, 104–44, 153).

<sup>4</sup> For “common” and middlebrow criticisms of modernist culture see Hilliard.

<sup>5</sup> Although Buchan’s account of tradition insists on continuity, Eliot, as Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding explain, “contended that the real originality of a gifted or ‘individual talent’ was to be found in the reanimation and redirection of tradition—only a factitious originality could result from disowning or ignoring the efforts and achieved excellence of previous generations” (4).

<sup>6</sup> For this probable link to Sitwell see *Huntingtower* 218. There is also in the term “wheels” an idea of inward-looking form that lacks substance, an interpretation I owe to Kate Macdonald. My thanks to Kate for this insight and for offering valuable advice on an earlier version of this article.

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