

Envoi I last met Hamish McInnes at a reception at the Palace of Holyrood some years ago. My younger son Kenneth was receiving his Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award for mountaineering and Hamish was doing the presentations. I asked him if he remembered Glenbrittle in 1953. He replied, very politely, that he did. The infamous had by this time dropped the “in”. When I retired aged 50 and returned to my beloved Scotland, I felt I was too old and rusty for rock climbing. I bought a small yacht, a Westerly 22 built in 1965, and based her at the Lochaber Yacht Club, Fort William. For many years I sailed “Kelpie” around most of the West Coast Islands with some of my old climbing mates as crew. The island we missed was St. Kilda, but you always have to leave a target for the future!

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The Glamour of High Altitudes

John Buchan

An article for the *Spectator* magazine first published in 1904, with an introduction by **Roger Clarke**

Introduction John Buchan is today best-known as a writer of popular fiction and the author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), his most famous novel. This established the genre of the spy thriller and influenced subsequent espionage writers such as Graham Greene, Ian Fleming and John Le Carré. His literary work is also notable for its historical novels and biographies.¹ In addition, Buchan had a distinguished career as a public man of affairs. Born in Perth in 1875, his early education was in Glasgow before graduating from Oxford with a first in Classics and qualifying as a barrister in London. He then joined the so-called ‘kindergarten’ of bright young men

¹ The popularity of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* has endured and it has never been out of print since it was first published a hundred years ago. It has also been filmed several times, first by Alfred Hitchcock in 1935, and most recently for BBC television in 2008.

assembled by the High Commissioner for South Africa, Lord Milner, to administer the reconstruction of that country after the Boer War. He spent two years in South Africa, returning to Britain in 1903, when he resumed his career as a barrister specialising in foreign taxation before joining the Edinburgh publishing firm of Nelson's as chief literary advisor at the beginning of 1907. During the First World War he was appointed Director of Information, responsible for Government propaganda and press relations both at home and abroad. After the war he became Deputy Chairman of Reuters news agency in 1923. He also had a career in politics, which began as President of the Oxford Union, continued as Conservative candidate for the Peebles and Selkirk constituency before the First World War (although he did not have the opportunity to fight an election), and eventually came to fruition when he was elected MP for the Scottish Universities in 1927. A political insider on close terms with Prime Ministers Baldwin and Macdonald, though never a member of the Cabinet, his political career culminated in his appointment as Governor-General of Canada in 1935, when he became Lord Tweedsmuir. He died in Canada in 1940.

Underlying these public aspects of Buchan's career is his lesser-known work as a journalist, beginning in the mid-1890s and continuing intermittently until his appointment to Canada in 1935. His most prolific period was between 1900 and 1914 when he was on the staff of the *Spectator*, eventually becoming its assistant editor. At this time the *Spectator* was one of the most influential weekly magazines in Britain, aimed at an elite readership such as statesmen and politicians, academics and the professional classes – the leading opinion-formers of the day. Buchan wrote a large number of articles and book reviews for the *Spectator* (around 800 in total) covering a wide variety of subjects: literature and poetry, history and biography, philosophy and religion, politics and society, imperial and foreign affairs, travel and exploration, mountaineering and other sports.

The article reprinted below is Buchan's first on the subject of mountaineering for the *Spectator*. It was originally published on 9 January 1904 (pp. 45-46) and has not been reprinted since. Mountaineering as a sport had been steadily growing in popularity over the previous fifty years since the formation of the Alpine Club in 1857. The highest peaks of the Alps and other mountain ranges in

Europe had been climbed, and expeditions were now being organised in attempts to conquer the greatest peaks of more distant continents, such as those in Central Africa, the Andes and the Himalayas. But the increasing popularity of the sport in Europe had brought its own problems. The *Times* had published a leading article on 1 September 1903 (p.7) following the recent deaths of an English vicar and a local guide in a fall, which commented on the increasing number of Alpine accidents and the reasons for them. This article by Buchan, which may have been prompted by a very recent *Times* report on 5 January 1904 (p.4) of another accident to an Englishman in the Alps, discusses the problem of Alpine accidents in similar terms to the *Times* leader. The following year Buchan protested against the continuing development of tourism in the mountains of Europe, which he called the 'vulgarisation' of the Alps (*Spectator* 19 August 1905, pp. 249-50); and later he commented on the Access to Mountains Bill, which attempted to reach a compromise between the public's right of access and the landowner's right of protection in respect of the hills and mountains of Britain (*Spectator* 23 May 1908, p. 820).

Buchan's own experience of mountaineering at the time of writing this article was rather limited. He had enjoyed hill-walking in the Borders and Highlands during the holidays of his childhood and youth, but his first serious climb was not until the spring of 1898 when, during a walking tour with his school and university friend, John Edgar, he ascended the same Buachaille Etive that he mentions in this article. However, given his inexperience, their route was almost certainly 'an easy scramble from Glen Etive' rather than a difficult direct climb.

After Oxford Buchan did some mountain scrambling in the Drakensburg and the ranges of the Northern Transvaal during his time on Lord Milner's staff in South Africa, but he did not take up the sport seriously until his return to London in October 1903. Then he found that he missed the outdoor life involved in his work for Milner on land settlement after the Boer War. He hinted at the contrast he was experiencing in this article: 'Few sports are more refreshing and invigorating', and 'the intellectual *ennui* which the life of cities induces is driven out by such manly absorption'. He resumed his climbing in Scotland, but his first visit to the Alps was

not until June 1904, five months after this article, when he went to Zermatt with his sister Anna. Afterwards, he wrote two articles on the Alps for the *Spectator* in July, which were therefore the first about those mountains which he wrote from personal experience. Two years later he visited Chamonix with Anna and was elected to the Alpine Club. But despite the attractions of the European mountains, his preference was for rock-climbing in Scotland, especially in the Cuillin mountains on the island of Skye, which feature in his 1919 novel *Mr Standfast*. He was to use his experience of the Cuillins in a subsequent article for the *Spectator* ('Rock-Climbing in Skye', 23 May 1908, pp. 831-32).

Buchan's serious period of mountaineering lasted until his marriage in July 1907, but he maintained an interest in the sport for the rest of his life, and was particularly fascinated by expeditions to climb the highest unconquered peaks. He even became involved in a proposal for an expedition to Everest, but the outbreak of war in 1914 put an end to the plan. Much later, towards the end of his life, while on a tour of the Arctic in July 1937 as Governor-General of Canada, he climbed Bear Rock at Fort Norman in the North West Territories by the most difficult route.

The full text of Buchan's article is reprinted below from the original magazine. Readers who wish to follow up Buchan's other *Spectator* articles mentioned in this introduction can do so via the *Spectator* archive on the internet. This provides full copies of the magazine dating back to Buchan's period and beyond, which can be read online free of charge. It may be accessed simply by typing 'Spectator archive' into an internet search engine such as 'Google'.

The Glamour of High Altitudes

Scarcely a month passes without news of some mountaineering fatality, and in the summer and at holiday seasons the number of accidents is yearly on the increase. Not only the higher Alps, but even the more homely hills of our own country, have a share in the melancholy list. The reason is, no doubt, the increased popularity of the sport among all classes. Formerly it was the perquisite of a few,

either people whose lot was cast in mountainous districts, or enthusiasts who could afford the money and time to seek a difficult and laborious form of pleasure. And being the preserve of a few, it was pursued with the caution and forethought which pioneering demands. But now that the mountains are better known, and climbing is a recognised science, some of the old caution can be relaxed, and, after the fashion of human nature, too much of it is dispensed with. People light-heartedly undertake ascents, neglecting the most ordinary precautions, and forgetting that mountaineering can never be a perfectly safe amusement. Even on the best known peaks, which are despised by eminent climbers as too staled for true sport, there is a chance of a thunder-storm or a fall of rocks, which may be the end of a practised mountaineer, quite apart from the dangers which must always attend those whose nerves or physique are unsuited for the game. But the popularity of mountaineering, in spite of the long tale of casualties, points to something perennially attractive in high altitudes, which makes even timid men forget the perils. It is part of the same attraction that the snowfields of the Arctic Circle possess for explorers, and that such a mountain expedition as Colonel Younghusband's Tibetan Mission (1) has for everybody with any imagination. Take any dozen young and active men, and ask them where they would prefer to be at this moment, and the odds are that the general answer will be, "On the road to Lhasa." A mission into lowland jungles or across an African desert, though it might have far greater political significance, would not take an Englishman's fancy like the attempt to enter the highest and most mysterious country in the world. It is part of our Northern heritage, which even the lowlander of the North shares with the mountain-dweller elsewhere. The old cry of Paracelsus still rings in the ears of youth:

"Shall I still sit beside
 Their dry wells, with a white lip and filmed eye,
 While in the distance Heaven is blue above
 Mountains where sleep the unsunned tarns?"

What is the reason of the fascination? Partly, no doubt, the mere hardness and danger of it, the sense of achieving something by one's own courage and endurance in defiance of Nature, who made the

smooth valleys for men to dwell in and kept the hills for herself. Partly, also, that ingrained curiosity of man, which is perpetually seeking to look over hill-tops and discover the "something lost behind the ranges." Were there no climbing in the technical sense in it, mountaineering would have fewer votaries. There is a type of athlete to whom the climb is everything, and who is equally happy worming his way up some rock in Cumberland or Skye, where there can be no special object in getting to the top, as in pulling himself up to the needle of Skagastölstind or surmounting the last snows of Aconcagua. There is a great deal to be said for climbing for its own sake. Few sports are more refreshing and invigorating to the man who has the bodily and mental strength for it. The senses are quickened, the nerves are at perpetual tension, the whole nature is absorbed in one task, and the intellectual *ennui* which the life of cities induces is driven out by such manly absorption. There is also in a high degree the pleasure of conquest, which may be measured by the difficulty of the task rather than by the relative importance of the summit. But that climbing is not the whole of the fascination of mountains is shown by the feeling, common to all except a few enthusiastic young men, that a climb is best when it forms also the only or the chief way to the summit. Otherwise a quarry in Derbyshire, which may give as difficult climbing as the Dolomites, would have to take rank with a great peak. The famous Crowberry Ridge on the Buachaille Etive loses much of its charm when we remember that the summit can be reached by an easy scramble from Glen Etive; and Ben Nevis would be a better mountain were there not twenty ways to the top for those who cannot ascend the steep southern face. The real attraction is the summit, and the higher and lonelier the summit the greater the attraction. It is well if the way up is hard; but to all save athletes the way up is not the chief thing.

The real glamour of high altitudes is found, not in the means of attaining them, but in their intrinsic character. There we have Nature pure and primeval, a sphere in which worldly ambitions and human effort have no part, a remnant of the world as first created. Every healthy man has in him a love of the wilds and the savage elements, a feeling which is not at war with the pleasure in homely scenes, in towns and gardens and lowland meadows, but complementary in human nature. It is a relic in civilised man of the primitive creature

who first tried to adapt the earth to human needs, or, it may be, some trace of that infinite within us which cannot content itself with the work of our hands, and hungers every now and again for the bare simplicity of Nature. High mountains give us Nature in its most elemental form, - snow, rock, wind, and sky, an austere world in which man counts for little: and in the realisation of his insignificance there is much refreshment for the human soul. They have always been the chosen haunt of people who were not quite satisfied with life, not only estranged hermit souls like the author of "Obermann," but sane men who wished to get rid of the incubus of mundane cares and arrive at a clearer perspective. We have all in our own way written our hymns before sunrise, and -

"Heard accents of the eternal tongue
Through the pine branches play -
Listen'd, and felt ourselves grow young."

But the mountains have not only loneliness, they have height. The world is stretched out beneath them, with its rivers shrunk to brooks, and its towns little patches of smoke and colour. In a mountain view the ordinary world of men is brought close to the mind, but seems small and inconsiderable compared to the august spaces around. It is an illusion, but a priceless one, for by it a normal, healthy man can attain what the opium-eater gains from his disease, and look down from an immense height upon his fellows and their works, and achieve a supreme moment of detachment. In every man, as the saying goes, a poet died young; and not only a poet, but kings, prophets, and conquerors. But there are *revenants* (spirits) from that past, and the most prosaic of men may find them on mountain-tops, and return with a clearer vision and a sturdier heart. "*Éternité, deviens mon asile*" ("*Eternity, become my refuge*") was the cry of Senancour, (2). That way madness lies, for no disease so dominates and absorbs the soul as the disease of "immensity." But to a sane man there is value in that exaltation of the spirit which high altitudes give, when, so to speak, Nature lifts a corner of the curtain, and shows us a cosmos in which our life plays but a little part.

- (1) Colonel Francis Younghusband was currently leading a Government mission to Tibet.

- (2) Senancour was a French philosopher and writer (1770-1846) who left Paris in the revolution to seek alpine solitude in Switzerland.

POSTSCRIPT The Editor

There is a need, from time to time, to reflect head on rather than obliquely, on the philosophical and spiritual aspects of walking and climbing. Buchan's article achieves that, but entertains us as well. Perhaps because it was written more than a hundred years ago, it confirms that the attractions (Buchan's glamour) of high places are fundamental to the human condition. In Scotland that became understood, both for the toffs and the ship yard worker, quite early in the development of climbing.

The Cairngorm Club Journal was well into its stride when the *Spectator* article appeared but A. I. McConnochie, an outstanding editor, did not review it, which is surprising. At the time poetry and articles such as *In Praise of Walking* were reviewed along with selections from the *Alpine Club Journal*, for example the *Alpine Death Roll* for 1903. (The total was 136 and plant collecting more dangerous than climbing). The regular articles in the *Club Journal* at the time are of a very high quality and well worth reading. They are available in bound volumes which are kept in the Club Library, more a collection, which is housed in the Special Collections section of the University of Aberdeen Library, Kings College. The bound volumes are shelved and advance notice is not required, but nevertheless the practical advice is to telephone in advance; 01224 272598. The Website is www.abdn.ac.uk/library/about/special/.