

*Modern Tales of Knight Errantry:  
John Buchan and Chivalry*

The present article proposes to address the problematic of genre of John Buchan's adventure stories which are usually classed as spy fiction, historical romances and an occasional Bildungsroman. I would argue that there is a broad generic term to encompass them all, as to a smaller or greater degree they all can be classed as romances of modern knight errantry. Deeply rooted in the Victorian cult of chivalry, chivalric elements and motifs abound in Buchan's novels and short stories. Traditionally masked by other concerns which have attracted researchers who have tended to label the Buchan oeuvre rather narrowly as spy fiction, with some half-hearted attempts at realism and a rather unfortunate entanglement in Ruritania, plus a handful of old-fashioned historical romances, a consistent reading of all his books, I would argue, would locate them, for all their modern concerns, firmly in the tradition of Victorian chivalry which appropriated and reworked the ideas of medieval chivalry to answer contemporary needs. Buchan's generation, as the two preceding ones, had been raised in the spirit of chivalry to which many Victorian thinkers had contributed. Thus we can find in Buchan's works beside the Ruskinian close observation of nature a strong dose of Carlylean chivalry of work, Tennyson's *Idylls* reinterpreted, chivalry in the guise of imperial paternalism and Victorian courtly love. For reasons of space, I have chosen to concentrate mostly on Tennysonian echoes at the expense of other, equally interesting themes related to chivalry in Buchan's works.

The broad generic term for Buchan's books could be modern romance. They are more than adventure stories, containing elements of chivalric romance, boys' adventure story, colonial romance, spy fiction, invasion scare story, Bildungsroman, a touch of Ruritanian romance, visionary romance, mystical romance, meditative romance, the novel of ideas and the Condition of England novel. There is also

a large dose of romantic escapism in the otherwise closely observed realism of his books which allows the classification romances of truancy suggested by C. Baldick (2005: 213), for they are mostly narratives of holiday escapade or exotic truancy when for a brief period of time the hero escapes from the routine of everyday reality into a world of romantic adventure. Differently from the purely fabulous visionary or mystical romances, these are modest romances of the semi-realistic kind where the action verges on the probable and the world the protagonist inhabits is recognizably our own.

The immediate predecessor of romances of this kind in the English canon would be the picaresque novel in its eighteenth and nineteenth-century guises. The ultimate source, however, from which all other modifications spring would be the medieval romance of knight errantry. This is nowhere more evident than in their structure. Similarly to the medieval tale of a knight's adventuring, their essential formal medium is adventure. The medieval romance itself follows a clear pattern and addresses concerns already familiar from the folk tale. As W. R. J. Barron has shown (1987: 3–5), the central concerns of both are maturation through struggle, manifestation of one's independence from parental influence, self-realization, the establishment of a wider network of personal relationships than was available at home and closer integration with society through marriage and assumption of roles of public responsibility. The traditional form of such journeys of self-discovery has been the quest. Buchan's romances, both the historical and modern ones, have been seen as latter-day tales of George and the Dragon (Kemp et al 1997: 48) and indeed, one of the ways to approach them would be to treat them as modern romances of knight errantry. Below are delineated some aspects of such an analysis, selected to give an inkling of what can be found when looking at Buchan's novels with chivalry in mind.

Predictably, the then hugely popular *Idylls of the King* by Tennyson would have impacted Buchan's senses when growing up in a household which was steeped in poetry and song. Tennyson had defined for the mid-Victorian years the ethos of the modern gentleman as a moral crusader in his struggle against worldliness and contributed to updating courtly love as Victorian woman worship.

His presence can be strongly felt in Buchan's first novel *Sir Quixote of the Moors* (1895), the love triangle of which and the hero's predicament bringing strongly to mind Tennyson's *Idylls* and especially the quandary of Lancelot. Jean, Sieur de Rohaine's symbolic quest into the moral waste land of worldliness to find regeneration through love and self-denial which closely mirrors the Tennysonian battle between Sense and Soul is projected onto the landscape which sublimely mirrors the mental and emotional states of the hero. Jean, a man of honour who has lost his bearings in the untrammelled riot of the senses, embarks on a journey to regain his lost virtue and in his directionless wanderings in the Scottish Borders stumbles upon a household of Covenanters. This seemingly virtuous household, like King Arthur's in the *Idylls*, is seen to harbour a temptress and Jean makes his soul in battling his senses in a love triangle where his host Master Henry can be seen as bearing a close resemblance to King Arthur in his moral high-mindedness and his betrothed Anne being ascribed the role of Guinevere. Jean's predicament closely mirrors Lancelot's when Anne's future husband takes to the hills to avoid capture and entrusts Anne to Jean's care. Bound by a pledge to protect his lover, Jean is put in a difficult position by a word of honour which he finds increasingly difficult to keep when he falls in love with Anne who under his guidance has awakened to sensual pleasure. Anne's innocent awakening to the joys of worldliness also brings to mind Tennyson's Elaine whose awakening desire for Lancelot made her want to break out of the bounds of her domestic sphere. The desecration of the domestic sphere by lust was the great crime of Guinevere and Jean fears a similar fate as Anne's growing sensuality undermines his resolve to stay chaste. Adultery, if only in the mind, being a mortal sin, would harm Jean's prospects of salvation and as a true Victorian soldier of Christ he fights heroically to withstand Anne/Guinevere's lure very much like Lancelot in his lonely struggle to control his lust, Soul finally winning over Sense. Honour having been preserved, he leaves the 'fallen' Anne to her fate and rides off into the wilderness in great mental anguish.

Buchan returns to Arthurian echoes repeatedly in later books, notably in *Mr Standfast* (1919) where the pacifist Lancelot Wake is

made to enact his quest for meaning in the context of the First World War. Pitched into a contest with the famous Richard Hannay of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* fame for the hand of the latter's future wife, the love triangle highlights the legendary Lancelot's famous quandary of trying to reconcile the service of the state/Arthur/Hannay to his desire for Mary Lamington/Guinevere. Wake overcomes his momentary sensual weakness by attaining the 'rarefied', transcendental state reached by Sir Galahad in his quest for the Grail, his being the selfless service of his country. Galahad, so loved by the Victorians for his single-minded, virginal pursuit of the abstract ideal delineated by Tennyson in 'Sir Galahad', can be glimpsed also in other characters. Vernon Milburne in *The Dancing Floor* (1926), in his single-minded dedication to his quest and singular chastity amidst the hedonism of London in the 1920s is a ready example, as, incidentally, is his fiancé, the Anglo-Greek maiden Koré, who is on a quest to wash off the ancestral stigma of sexual depravity, bringing to mind Galahad's similar predicament vis-à-vis Lancelot. We can glimpse Galahad's shining presence even in the make-up of Buchan's more elevated, Luciferan villains, i.e. Medina in *The Three Hostages* (1924). In his fallen aspect Miltonian, in his elevated aspect he is Galahad-like in his ascetic, single-minded pursuit of a superhuman goal which is not of this world. Galahad readily gave up the world once he had attained his quest. Medina, who is described in the end as sustained by heavenly radiance alone, dreams of a similar fate.

After the blast of desire and anguish in his first novel, Buchan gradually shied away from experimenting with the treatment of naked lust, donning the cloak of modern courtly love, at first rather hesitantly, feeling his ground, and later with powerful conviction.

In *A Lost Lady of Old Years* (1899) which traces the moral regeneration of a born aristocrat whose ancestral nobility has been compromised by middle-class domesticity, the protagonist is awakened to the meaning of chivalry and virtue when he enters the service of the controversial Lady Murray whom Buchan has cast as a true lady of romance whose function is to guide the hero on his path of true self-knowledge. Francis Birkenshaw passes through all the stages of a questing knight in love and attains its highest and purest

form. The crucial element in courtly love would be the period of prolonged emotional turmoil which helps to suppress vice and enhance virtue. In this early book there are passages of startling sensuality which would be muted in later books. However, lust is firmly suppressed and sublimated into the refined *fin' amors* of the troubadour kind, the hero choosing self-imposed restraint and the non-consummation of the relationship not to taint his love and hold on to his recovered nobility of the soul.

The progress of the lover from the sensual to the spiritual appreciation of his loved one in the courtly love tradition is peaked by transcending earthly love to embrace an altogether more refined spirituality in dedicating oneself to the service of the Virgin Mary, the Queen of Heaven. This entails the realization that earthly love is a feeble substitute for a higher calling but a necessary stage in the recognition of the presence in one's life of such a mission nevertheless. This is demonstrated eloquently in *Midwinter* (1922) where sensual love is a delusion which detracts the protagonist on his mission of state and brings utter ruin to his cause, his prince and himself in the context of the Jacobite uprising of 1745 in Scotland. The disillusion with the spirit of chivalry which had set in with the Great War is very noticeable here, especially in contrast with *A Lost Lady of Old Years* which deals with the events of the same year. Alastair Maclean's quest into England to enlist support for Bonnie Prince Charlie's planned invasion in *Midwinter* is full of paradoxes and irony. He comes from a culture which is more archaic and chivalrous than England which has grown placid and pragmatic with commerce and refuses to stir to his calls to heroic action. Individualistic and calculating, the upper classes have exchanged the heroic spirit for fatted ease, while the labouring classes only desire peace, being indifferent to the claims of princes. Maclean has come to seduce England into rebellion but is seduced by England in turn, his mission aborted by the lure of England in the guise of love. This ephemeral lure of England is embodied by a Lady Norreys whose feeble misguided innocence could be read as a critique of the whole Victorian woman worship idea were she not treated with such a solemn authorial reverence. A pawn in the hands of an equally enfeebled yet evil husband, together they stand for the distortion of

the spirit of chivalry which has accompanied the rise of middle-class mercantilism. Ironically, while the upper classes have sold out to trade and financial speculation, the only truly chivalrous person Maclean can find in all England is a middle-class clerk whose gauche friendship has to serve as a substitute for the kind of intense sublimated passion which in the earlier book sustained the hero to his lonely end and despite the tragedy gave the book a moral uplift which is completely missing in *Midwinter*. Maclean regains his confidence and moral perspective the moment he rejoins his prince's forces in retreat to be present at the final defeat, having opted for service of the state over courtly love, the siren song of Lady Norreys quite forgotten.

The futility of the whole human ambition is the central topic of the *The Blanket of the Dark* (1931) where the high-born protagonist is lifted by a whim of fate out of complete obscurity and given a chance to attain aristocratic perfection and win great power, only to turn his back on it, seeking a nobler existence in the world of the spirit. The book traces Peter Pentecost's evolution as a soldier of Christ by pitching his moral struggles against the greater struggle between old and new faith in reformation England. He is made to stand for the commonalty of England and the religious and moral choices he makes establish him as the carrier of the true spirit of the land. His rite of passage also entails complete mastery of the code of chivalry which, fully attained, prevents him from participating in the self-seeking power games of the aristocracy with whom he becomes completely disillusioned. Raised by the people and having found true chivalry only among the lowest of the low, the beggars who are the real masters of the land, he chooses to make his life among them, having chosen soul's salvation above power and rank. *The Blanket of the Dark* offers also the most thorough treatment of courtly love in Buchan's oeuvre, the hero's progress being traced through all the stages of the sublimation of erotic desire into the love of the Blessed Virgin, the Queen of Heaven.

Peter, though a scholar, is a child of the woods. He is noble-born but unaware of his ancestry, having been raised in a cottage in the forest by his stepmother. He is the fictional younger son of the executed Duke of Buckingham, Henry VIII's rival, and has been

hidden in the depth of the woods by the servants of the family to conceal his identity. He is the last of the once mighty Bohuns, has royal blood in him and is thus a true contestant for the throne of England. This is the prize with which he is tempted out of anonymity. However, the ironies of his position are present from the start, for he is already king of all he surveys, only he does not realize it and has to make a bid for the crown to recognize the ephemerality of temporal power. The England over which he presides, which he actually *is*, is the elder England indifferent to kings and pretenders, governed by the endless cycle of the seasons. *Natura Maligna* and *Natura Benigna* which rule men's destiny are rendered in the book through the complex symbolism of the Painted Floor, a Roman mosaic depicting the four seasons and presided over by Nature herself. She can manifest herself in a number of ways and is the beginning and end of all journeys. Above all, she is a tender mother whose lap of a sanctuary Peter leaves to test his manly prowess in the world of men, to return, chastened, to her green embrace.

His struggle is for us an already familiar one. It is the Tennysonian battle of Sense with Soul and its chief concern is the refutation of the spirit of worldliness in all its beguiling forms. In this context Peter's relationship with Sabine is played out according to the canons of courtly love, both Tudor and Victorian.

Sabine's first manifestation on the Painted Floor, which marks Peter's sexual awakening, is a very Victorian temptress – the elf – her traditional power to bewitch and delude signalling the ephemerality of Peter's quest for love and power and his misguided notions of love. Her next, very Tudor considering the later period context of the worship of Elizabeth I the Virgin Queen as Cynthia/Diana, manifestation as Diana/Artemis highlights the dangers inherent in sexual pursuit, for the chaste temptress was known to wilfully destroy men. But in her Moon Goddess aspect, she is also Nature personified, youthful love with the potential of bearing fruit. Her white, virginal robes bring to mind the Virgin Mary and her symbolic abode, the chaste enclosed garden, the pure spirituality of which would be the fitting end of a journey of refinement of one's moral nature through courtly love.

Sabine's next manifestation as a voluptuous worldly Aphrodite, pure sexual allure without the spiritual dimension, is one of a series of tests on Peter's way to the renunciation of power and wealth and the sordid, mercantile aspect of this sex for a title deal alerts Peter to the dangers posed by such an alliance to the salvation of his soul. Besides, if he is to stand for the commonalty of England, the very spirit of the land, his sensual love for Sabine should be transformed into a love that would encompass the whole of God's creation. When he turns away resolutely from all forms of worldly temptation, including sensual, he is rewarded with a supremely poetic vision of the Mother of God, the Queen of Heaven. She appears to him in a howling snowstorm, reminiscent of Victorian canvases showing Sir Galahad battling the elements in the wilderness in search of the Grail. All through Peter's progress also another Grail knight has been hovering in the background – Percival/Parzival. His journey was that of humility, very similar to Peter's – from humble beginnings to a brief delusion of worldly glory and back again to humility, tempered by understanding and compassion.

The beatific vision and the understanding of divine purpose mark the end of the quest for self-knowledge for Edward Leithen in Buchan's last book *Sick Heart River* (1941). Like the pilgrim Dante at the end of *The Divine Comedy*, Leithen merges with his Creator and the creation in the supreme realisation of what completely selfless love means. Having cut his ties with his former, highly successful, life in England, he goes to the Canadian Arctic to die, but instead of fading fatalistically away, he, the former soldier, is metaphorically called to arms to strike a blow for life in saving the lowest of the low – a miserable little tribe of Indians on the point of extinction. Gladly giving up his life in exchange for theirs, he attains the high plateau of completely selfless love which is in essence divine. His Galahad-like quest into the wilderness comes to an end in a gaudy ramshackle chapel on an Indian reservation where he attains his Grail, his journey, crowned by the ultimate reward of coming face to face with God, in so many different ways bringing together all the different quests of Buchan's heroes in a fitting conclusion to a long literary career.



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