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Writing *The War*

John Buchan's lost journalism of the First World War

Kate Macdonald

John Buchan was a man of many activities. He was the inventor of the modern thriller, but his work in First World War propaganda has been severely criticised. Best-known now as a writer of fiction, in 1914 it would have been difficult to categorise Buchan so precisely. By that date he had published six collections of fiction and essays; six novels; eight histories and biographies; a handbook on the taxation of foreign income (he had been a tax jurist); a study of South Africa; and a book of fishing poems. Before the war he was multi-talented but without a clear identity, and without the success he wanted, and was expected to have. During the war those talents found direction.

How did John Buchan make the transition, in 1915, from being an obscure publisher, to a best-selling novelist and war historian, on his way to being the head of government wartime propaganda? His forgotten First World War magazine, *The War*, supplies the missing link. Buchan's creativity with turning fact into fiction in his early wartime journalism led straight to his best-sellers *Greenmantle* (1916) and *Mr Standfast* (1919). The pattern of denial and suppression in his articles for *The War* laid the foundations for his later role as Director of Information for the British government from 1917.

Since 1907 Buchan had earned his living as the London-based literary advisor for the Scottish publisher Thomas Nelson & Sons. When war broke out in August 1914, the immediate concern of Nelson's was how they could keep the presses running and their staff in work. The usual printing orders from German publishers, on which Nelson's relied, were now cut off, and they also expected an immediate drop in domestic book sales. Buchan and George Brown, the production manager, did some rapid brainstorming by post between London and Edinburgh on what Nelson's could sell in the new political and economic climate. They agreed to try a history in parts, the *Nelson's History of the War* (1915-1919), whose 24 volumes Buchan would write almost single-handedly, and also a magazine, *The War*. Both would report the war as it happened. The *History* was planned to appear in biannual volumes, *The War* was to be a weekly.

Buchan's authorship of the monumental *Nelson's History* had not been in Nelson's original plan. Buchan and Brown had wanted a public figure, a prominent writer with sales value, to front their venture. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Hilaire Belloc had both been approached to write it, but neither were available. But the idea of the *History* was too attractive for Nelson's, or Buchan, to abandon, and Buchan began writing the volumes himself. Motivated by the need to do war work,

this was the first time he had attempted to write modern history, and history not tied to one individual or place. It was also a significant venture into modern history for him. His first three novels were set in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Scotland, and his study of Andrew Jameson, Lord Ardwall (1913) had been Buchan's first modern biography. Researching contemporary military history for the *Nelson's History* and *The War* was a new field.

At the beginning of the war, Buchan remarked that he acquired his information from '(1) a careful recension of all newspaper reports, which I am having made. It is curious how near you can get by the method of elimination. (2) The French papers, which often contain inspired articles and have very full quotations from the Russian papers, which know more than any other press. (3) Information from returned officers whom I am always seeing. (4) Reports from friends in France and Petrograd. I have also got a good deal of information about Belgian fighting from Belgian refugees' (16 October 1914).

It is also evident from the *War* articles that Buchan frequently used *The Times* as a source. If the paper itself was not quoted by name, its war correspondent, Colonel Repington, whose writing style was interestingly similar to Buchan's own, was often given credit for an anecdote. Buchan clearly admired Repington's work: he was the only war correspondent whom Buchan cited by name.

On 22 August 1914 the first issue of *The War* came out, edited and printed in Edinburgh. It was a small, heavily illustrated, weekly magazine, 7 x 9.5 inches, selling at 3^d. One of the shortest issues had 24 pages, some of the longer numbers reached 40 pages. The magazine ran for 29 weeks, and disappeared after 6 March 1915. It struggled against considerable competition from other weekly illustrated newspapers and magazines. No daily newspaper would take it on as a supplement, a sure sign of an unsaleable commodity. It is probable that in conceiving and launching the magazine in only a few days at the outbreak of war, little thought had been given to how to sustain and finance it over months or even years. The war itself was popularly supposed to be likely to last only months: the Boer War, the most recent war involving British troops, had only lasted two years. *The War* was only described by Brown and Buchan in their correspondence in terms of the present. As the fighting continued, and continued, other demands from the firm took precedence, like Buchan's increasing amount of work on the *History*. When the magazine began to falter it was quickly abandoned. *The War* vanished into oblivion, and all subsequent biographies of the later, more famous Buchan failed to mention it at all.

Buchan wrote around 40 articles for the 29 issues of *The War*, under his own name and anonymously. These articles fall into two categories: his personal commentary on war events; and his features on war-related

themes. The latter grew more numerous as war news dried up in October and November 1914, but so did the speculative nature of Buchan's news stories. He began by reporting on battles and events of the previous week, but from December 1914, when there was stalemate on the Western Front and little news concerning the British Army, the number of Buchan's weekly articles for *The War* fell by as much as 75%. His engagement with the magazine was faltering, and his articles from December read as if they had had to wait for the drip-release of official reports before any 'news' could be written. We gain a sense of Buchan having to churn articles out every week, with nothing much to base them on, except his repeated speculations. On 13 January Buchan responded without much interest to Brown's suggestion that they stop publishing *The War*. The first volume of the *History* was about to be a sell-out success, and *The War* and its primary problem, of no news to print, had clearly ceased to be of interest to him.

Buchan's focus from August 1914 to March 1915 was not solely on wartime news. As well as reading his sources continuously for the *Nelson's History*, the first two volumes of which were published in January and March 1915, he would have been reviewing the proofs of his lively historical novel *Salute to Adventurers*, which came out in July 1915. As well as writing two or three articles a week for *The War*, he was playing a private joke on friends by writing an epic poem, privately printed in 1915 as *Ordeal by Marriage*. In the first half of 1915 he published two pamphlets on the war, and a preface for Violet Jacob's poems *Songs of Angus* (1915), which he also reviewed in a long article on modern poetry, 'Recent Verse', in *The Spectator* of 27 March 1915. Throughout this period he was writing *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (serialised in magazines from June 1915, and published as a novel in October). At the same time he was still reading novels every week as the literary advisor for Nelson's lists of cheap reprints.

Reading this mix of story and history, in such close juxtaposition, and under continual pressure of time, generated a powerful creative experience. For Buchan, story brought relief, alleviating the alarming and cumulatively depressing detail from war despatches, from British war correspondents, and from the articles by overseas journalists in the French and Russian newspapers which the Defence of the Realm Act could not suppress. In his articles for the magazine, and in the *Nelson's History* Buchan responded powerfully to the romance of war with historical parallels that he re-embedded in heroic myth. War as geographically close to Britain as this war was had not been experienced for a hundred years (Waterloo, 1815), and it was turning out not to be the romantic version of war that he had been reading about all his life.

For Buchan, story mitigated the distressing detail, and mediated the experience of war. He argued that the power of narrative and the personal anecdote should be made better use of in recruitment.

Under the voluntary system half the inducement to recruit is pride in the regiment which is joined. How are we going to awaken that pride in the ordinary man if details of the doings of the foreign battalions of our regiments are not available? ... Let the details of a regiment's service be made known, and you will have the best recruiting advertisement in the world. (14 November 1914)

Telling stories which suspended disbelief by being constructed from believable fact became Buchan's *métier*, the principal aspect of his thrillers which set them apart from those of his predecessors. In his articles for *The War* he was exploring a present-day setting that offered unlimited opportunities for telling stories. The more he read and learned about the war and the web of incident and politics that supported it, the more he was faced with stories that were pleading to be told.

His writing in *The War*, and the good sales of the *Nelson's History* were also making Buchan's name as an authoritative commentator on the war as it was happening. In 1915 he published two pamphlets on the war, one compiled from his articles as a special correspondent for *The Times*, one of five journalists allowed there by the new coalition government. Buchan was sent to the Front again in September 1915, and in 1916 he joined the War Office as a dispatch writer for General Sir Douglas Haig's GHQ. A year later he was Director of the Department of Information at the Foreign Office, and continued in variations of this role until the end of the war.

Buchan's writing style in *The War* was distinctive. His besetting flaw when he wrote with enthusiasm was his passion for hyperbole, at the expense of *douceness*. His extravagant claims on behalf of the qualities of others laid them, and himself, open to ridicule. The best explanation for this unrestrained enthusiasm is Buchan's propensity for hero-worship. This had not been much in evidence in his prewar fiction, but during the war and after Buchan fairly wallowed in the exaggerated veneration of the soldier. If a character in any later Buchan novel or short story was said to have fought in the war, that was the strongest recommendation of character that Buchan could offer: former soldiers could do no wrong.

Overweening statements were standard in Buchan's articles for *The War*. 'The Baghdad Corps has always been one of the best in the Turkish Army' (5 December 1914). 'Let it be remembered that these Russian communiqués are always strictly truthful' (6 March 1915). The problem lies in disentangling them from their context. The statement:

'our Territorial infantry are at the least 50 per cent better than the German reserves which are now fronting us' (21 November 1914), comes at the end of a long passage describing the stalemate on the Western Front and the need for reinforcements. Standing alone, it cannot be taken seriously. As with the other examples, the reader demands how Buchan could possibly know. The let-out clause 'at the least' only magnifies his magnificent assumptions, and increases the hubris. But, in the context of the article, he gets away with it: such amplification without foundation becomes unexceptional.

Buchan released the brakes on his hyperbole when he indulged in hero-worship. This was a notable aspect of his novels. Sandy Arbuthnot, Adam Melfort, Vernon Milburne and Peter Pienaar, routinely described by Buchan's third-person narrative voice, are routinely idolized. When faced with a hero in real life, Buchan simply described him in journalism as he would in fiction.

A tall figure, with the eyes of a student and the shyness of a young girl – that is King Albert of Belgium ... down the coal pits of the Borinage, in the great factories of Liège, on the wharves of Antwerp ... he was living the life of men, learning their trades, familiarizing himself with their problems, studying alternately the arts of peace and the science of war ... he married a Bavarian princess, who, as an oculist, had won her stripes on the battlefield of humanity ... unsigned articles began to appear in the Belgian newspapers that set men wondering who the new thinker was. His themes were as varied as his erudition ... Spartan in simplicity and morals, his first act [as king] was to clear the Augean stables of his uncle's Court ... in his plain dark field uniform, without a single medal or trapping of rank, he is today in the firing-line at Louvain, handling his forces with masterly skill, meeting every danger with a cool determination. (22 August 1914)

This embarrassingly romantic expression of hero-worship was printed in the excited first issue of *The War*. Buchan had never met King Albert. Here he was reacting to the popularly embraced idea of the lone soldier-king, the brave stand of a small heroic force against a larger aggressor. For Buchan the right way, and the most effective way, of defining a conflict, was to tell its story in the story of one person. In presenting his emotional response as an unbalanced character assessment Buchan was certainly not writing accurate journalism.

Buchan wasted little in his war research, and freely recycled war anecdotes into fictional narrative. His compelling narratives are buttressed by history, and the reader is so spellbound by Buchan's storytelling power that all is believed, temporarily. Buchan was supremely competent at invoking the reader's suspension of disbelief. *Greenmantle* (1916) was the principal beneficiary, incorporating events

that are now regarded as minor points in short campaigns, but which at the time were regarded as crucially important. In issue 3 of *The War*, Buchan retold the story of the escape of the German cruiser the *Goeben*, demonstrating the creation of myth during wartime (7 November 1914). He rejected the German spin on the story with his own myth creation, that the *Goeben* may have reached safety at (double-dealing) Turkish Constantinople, but that it was effectively out of the war. Modern accounts show that the *Goeben* escaped by British naval incompetence, and went on to harass Allied shipping for several months further (Strachan 2001, *The First World War: The Call to Arms*, 648, 717). Buchan liked his version of the story enough to repeat it several times throughout the 29 issues of *The War*, and it makes a final appearance as background verisimilitude in *Greenmantle*.

In using common war knowledge to transfer fiction into fact, and fact against fiction, Buchan established a setting readers knew to be true for a fiction that they would want to believe. The anti-Boer and anti-British rebellion by Maritz in Cape Colony on 7 October 1914 was noted as a 'disagreeable incident' by Buchan, but he played it down in *The War*, as, in the long run, a good thing for the Allies. He reused the incident in *Greenmantle*, when his hero needed an anti-British persona, thus subverting and disempowering this Boer betrayal by situating it within fictional pro-Allied espionage. *Greenmantle* received substantial input from Buchan's researches on the Young Turks and Enver, from issues 12 and 23. Buchan described the doings of General von Einem in issues 23 and 25, *pace* his character Hilda von Einem in *Greenmantle*. As he said in his dedicatory note in *Greenmantle*:

Let no man or woman call its events improbable. The war has driven that word from our vocabulary, and melodrama has become the prosiest realism ... some day, when the full history is written – sober history with ample documents – the poor romancer will give up business and fall to reading Miss Austen in a hermitage.

Here Buchan acknowledges a paradox of the war. His fiction used war events as entirely believable settings and events for what he later called 'precipitous yarns'. The real was impossible and fantastical, and he could thus appropriate it for the truly fantastical, 'in these days where the wildest fictions are so much less improbable than the facts'. As a central tenet of Buchan's most commercially successful fiction, his Hannay thrillers, this holds true for the rest of his career.

Buchan's need for story over-influenced his retelling of war events. It is impossible to know how much information he had on the capture of the *Emden*, but his account of it in *The War* is completely overshadowed by his admiration for Müller, her captain, and the romance of the chase. The modern assessment of the event supports Buchan's laudatory treatment, in that 'the exploits of the *Emden* had captured the

imagination of the public, almost as much in Britain as in Germany' (Strachan, 479). Buchan praises the German captain's chivalry to his British enemy ('when he found the captain's wife on board he refused to sink the ship', 21 November 1914) with the same impressed tone that he used for the *Emden's* deadly attacks on Allied shipping. But the admiration is neutered. There is little sense in Buchan that the *Emden* was a terror of the seas that Strachan has described as 'creating havoc' (Strachan, 580). Buchan preferred the romantic approach: 'one of the most spirited episodes of the war ... a gallant and chivalrous foe ... he has played the game with the most scrupulous honour' (21 November 1914).

Buchan did give numbers for how many Allied ships had been captured and sunk by the *Emden*, and he revels in telling the thrilling final episode of the dummy funnel, but his numbers are different from those given in Strachan, who also gives the reasons why the dummy funnel celebrated by Buchan ('her last performance was her best') was a failure (Strachan 480). Buchan may have had less complete information, but it is clear that he preferred, in this case, to ignore the holes and inconsistencies to be able to tell a good story

By December 1914 trench warfare was fully established. Buchan discussed this cautiously in *The War*, again latching on to story and familiarity.

In the west we have gone back to something like the siege warfare of the Middle Ages. Troops on both sides fall into a regular routine. In the old days mercenary armies used to make special arrangements with each other for rest and relaxation. Something not unlike that is happening today. The accounts recently published of the fighting in the Argonne show that both sides have fixed up a time-table, and that firing is confined to certain hours. The time-table breaks down now and then, but on the whole it is honourably maintained. An officer who has returned from Flanders reports something of the same kind in a part of our own line. Our men got into the habit of going at a certain time to a certain place to make tea, and the Bavarians opposed to us followed suit. By and by both lines had the same place for their tea-parties. British and Bavarian officers used to meet and talk quite amicably. Then one day the Bavarians informed us that next day they were to be moved, and that we had better give up the tea-party arrangement. "Prussians are coming in our place," they said, "and Prussians don't understand these civilities. (19 December 1914)

The celebrated fraternization of enemy soldiers on Christmas night 1914, and the idea of a brotherhood of soldiers crossing the barriers of time and nationality, was quintessential Buchan. The powerful attraction of historical resonance gave his fiction continuity throughout

his career. Here the story is homely and familiar. It reassures the reader that in all these months of fighting the men have not turned into beasts, there is still room for the decencies of life, that it was still possible for the boys to have a cup of tea. It was also an interesting dig at the Germans. In opposing Bavarian to Prussian, civilized to uncivilized, an idea of the survival of human rituals in the face of the machinery of war, Buchan was tapping into established awareness of the differences among the foes, and subtly diminishing one by overt criticism, and the other by assimilation into 'our' values and traditions. Good Germans appeared in his fiction from 1916 onwards, because in his own writing, as opposed to the writing he did and authorised for the government, Buchan was not interested in demonising the enemy for propaganda. This passage can be read as diverting attention from the realities of war as practiced by his own government. Telling a story was a technique of persuasion that would distract readers from the fact that these men were going to kill each other.

Buchan's conflation of wartime fact and fiction in his own fiction, during this period and later on, 'gave Buchan a chance – not taken too often – to state his own view of the conduct of the war instead of the official one. The personae of his characters allowed him to evade responsibility for his critical remarks' (Buitenhuis, 110). Buchan was exploring what he could and could not say, and what he wanted to say but was being prevented from uttering.

In palliating his own need for story, he made the transition and transformation between fact and fiction possible by employing the facts of the war embedded within the fiction of his imagination. Once wartime events were safely installed in his imaginary landscapes, further manipulation could take place to suit the needs of his thrillers: fact was suppressed but not denied. This is a mirror-image of his writing for *The War*, where fiction was denied but not suppressed.