

Foreword

G*reenmantle* is one of the very best of John Buchan's novels. Set in the wartime period between November 1915 and February 1916, it tells how a band of intrepid and worldly men – British, Colonial and even neutral American – foil a German plot to foment Islamic jihad across the routes to British India and, through superior decency and fairness, win the Muslims to the British cause.

This is what John Buchan did best. He takes a late imperial anxiety, the stuff of House of Commons committees and leaders in *The Times*, and makes a tale of heroes, action and the open air. Two of *Greenmantle*'s characters, Richard Hannay, South African miner, and Sandy Arbuthnot, footloose Scottish laird, were to serve John Buchan well for the rest of his writing life. A third, the American John S. Blenkiron, receives two of the author's weaknesses: a devotion to games of Patience or Solitaire and a duodenal ulcer.

With the outbreak of the war, and with no chance of being passed for active service, John Buchan threw himself into journalism, propaganda and intelligence work. His leisure moments were taken up with a vast *History of the War* that he was writing in instalments of as much as 50,000 words and at intervals as short as a fortnight for the Edinburgh publishing house, Thomas Nelson. In the course of 1915, he toured the Western Front for *The Times* and, then, the War Office. *Greenmantle* is John Buchan's reaction to the horror and squalor of Ypres and Loos. In place of the industrial killing of the Western Front, with its mud and slag-heaps and lice, he offers a war of movement, ciphers, secret agents, beautiful and dangerous women and a cavalry charge.

Greenmantle was written simultaneously with the events it describes or, as we would say, in real time. Just visible beneath the story as we have it are the traces of fictional false starts or

turns. Chief among those are some sort of story to do with the revolt of the Boer 'bitter enders' against British rule in South Africa, another about German intrigue among the Muslims in West and East Africa and another about the British and Anzac attack on the Gallipoli peninsula.

Leafing through Nelson's *History*, one comes across both premonitions of the language of *Greenmantle* and the ghosts of Greenmantles that were not written. Take these passages, both from volume v: 'German agents had been busy among the Gulf traders, and elaborate preparations had been made for undermining the virtue of the Amir of Afghanistan, and for preaching a Jihad among the Mussulman tribes of the Indian north-west.' And: 'A simple, spectacled gentleman in white ducks and a topi appears on the beach in quest of pearl shells. From a modest shanty on the foreshore he directs his operations, and spends, freely, money which cannot come out of his profits. Presently arrives a German consul, and soon there are little tiffs between the employees of the shell merchant and the natives, which give the consul something to do. Quickly the business grows, but not on commercial lines. Then comes the Hamburg-America line, playing national airs and dispensing sweet champagne . . .'

As it turned out, the Maritz rebellion fizzled out and the African theatre could not provide the stirring events John Buchan needed, only a Boer tracker named Peter Pienaar of somewhat dubious utility elsewhere. Without the reader even noticing, the narrative swerves towards Gallipoli. In a brilliant fictional irony, Hannay and Peter take charge, for a while, of a convoy of German munitions for the Turkish forces on the peninsula. When the Allied troops were taken off from Gallipoli in December and January, John Buchan had a new headache. Chapter Nine closes with Blenkiron, pretending to German sympathies, announcing that the 'English have run away from Gally-poly'.

The narrative swerves again. For the next six chapters, the heroes are heading for Iraq, where a British-Indian army, under Sir Charles Townshend, was under siege by the Turks in the town of Kut al Amara. Alas, the military situation was again too ghastly and desperate for John Buchan's purposes.

He found what he wanted on the morning of February 16 1916 when Russian forces under Grand Duke Nicholas, including Cossack cavalry, captured the heavily fortified city of Erzerum in eastern Anatolia. In Nelson's *History*, John Buchan described this as 'one of the most brilliant strategical episodes of the war' though it was too late to prevent catastrophe on the Tigris. (Reality is much more shameful than fiction. The two men on whom John Buchan drew at different times for Sandy's character, Aubrey Herbert and TE Lawrence, were sent through the lines to offer the Turkish military governor £2m to let Townshend's army go. Enver Pasha, the Turkish leader, refused and 12,000 men passed into a captivity from which less than half came home.)

So Erzerum was to be the climax of the novel. It mattered not at all that John Buchan had never been east of Istanbul and had no first-hand impressions of Anatolia. Professional to his finger-tips, he uses snow and fog to obscure country he had never seen or transforms it into landscapes he had seen, most notably the Western Front, the South African veld and the Scottish borders. He writes of the 'glen' of the Euphrates, as if it were the Biggar Water. In Chapter Twenty, Peter at last finds employment and it is one of John Buchan's greatest pieces of writing.

Greenmantle shows in full measure John Buchan's virtues as a writer, and also his vices. He is without rival at weather, haste, hot pursuit, city streets, moorland, mountain. His clear strategic view, derived from his reading and refined under fire at Ypres and Loos, shows what a military man was lost to his ulcer. In the person of Hilda von Einem, there is rather more sex than is usual in a Buchan thriller. There are hints of deviancy in von Stumm.

The character sketches of the Kaiser, Enver Pasha and Grand Duke Nicholas are quick, sharp and humane.

As for John Buchan's vices, his air of imperial omniscience sometimes slips: Enver was certainly not a 'Polish adventurer'. He also gives to Hannay and Peter the racial and other prejudices of English popular fiction and colonial Africa. Younger readers may wonder why Turks and Arabs are fine and noble people, but Portuguese are not. In his later thrillers, John Buchan abandoned those prejudices.

Published first in magazine instalments in July 1916, *Greenmantle* was an immediate success. In October 1917, John Buchan was shown a letter from Grand Duchess Olga, daughter of the deposed Tsar Nicholas II, who wrote 'that she and her sisters and Papa had been greatly cheered and comforted in their exile by *Greenmantle*.' Though it has never quite achieved the prestige of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, or been filmed for the cinema, *Greenmantle* has never lacked readers.

James Buchan
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