



The Four Adventures of Richard Hannay

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The Thirty-Nine Steps: "A bored, well-to-do Englishman, Richard Hannay, returns home to England after growing up in South Africa. Drifting between his club and the sights of London, he is drawn into the confidences of a secret agent in the thick of espionage. The agent is murdered in Hannay's apartment and Richard finds himself on the run from Scotland Yard and the cult of the 'Black stone'.

The Four Adventures of Richard Hannay Details

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From Reader Review The Four Adventures of Richard Hannay for online ebook

Phrodrick says

Success has many fathers so it is with the title of first modern espionage books. Among the contenders would be Erskin Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) Joseph Conrad's *The Secret agent* (1907) and John Buchan's *The 39 Steps* (1915). It will not be my purpose to make the case for only these or ignore any others. We are here to praise the Buchan series.

This volume gives you four books of the Richard Hannay sequence. Arguably the first such case of an espionage based series. Author John Buchan had British Foreign Office experience to inform his portrayal of secret operations. Among other things he wrote propagandist in WWI and ultimately a Governor General of Canada (serving as his lordship the Right Honorable John Buchan, 1st Baron Tweedsmuir, PC GCMG GCVO CH - no less); that is an adept of politics at a high level.

The first of the four books, *The 39 Steps* is the most famous. It has since been made into several movies. The second of these was made by Alfred Hitchcock who would later borrow heavily from the plot for the movies *North by North West* and *the Man Who Knew too Much*.

We are introduced to Richard Hannay, a South African Mining Engineer returning to England where he falls in with a soon to be dead lady spy. Armed with the most minimal of clues and wanted by both sides, he tours much of the countryside of the British Isles. Along the way he pieces together a sinister plot and in the nick of time... Well it is always in the nick of time and were he not in the nick of time, he would miss the rest of his books.

Next up is *Greenmantle*. The internet assures me that this was the preferred novel for Alfred Hitchcock, however he could not reach a deal with Buchan. Who is the mysterious Greenmantle? Will this figure cause violence among Middle Eastern religious fundamentalists? How do we keep the Germans and Turkish government from forming an alliance against England? What of Richard friend, lost, sick and perhaps a prisoner?

Greenmantle, more than the other books is more deliberately about spy craft. There are parallels between the Middle East pre WWI and today but that is for another essay. What may matter is the pitch battle that ends this selection.

Mr. Steadfast is book three. Richard barely forty is now a Major General posted to the front in the weeks just before the outbreak of WWI. He is pulled from his command for more espionage work and again finds himself traveling and collecting clues. In this book the traveling about feels rather too much like book I. He finds himself in the conscientious objector community and there is a Jewish suspect. This brings us to an unexpected aspect of Buchan's Hannay. He rarely seems to need the kinds of racial epithets that would have been normal conversation of his day. Most often the casual disparagement of darker skinned, and 'the not like us' is from the mouths of the bad guy. Even the objectors get a sympathetic hearing.

The last selection is *The Three Hostages*. Here we do find Hannay giving over to the occasional epithet, but perhaps less so that was common among he set. For Buchan it was 1924 and he was socializing among an aristocracy glutted with the assumption that the peoples of Great Britain were the best of civilization. The novel is not Buchan at his best. He is somewhat prophetic in realizing that the extremes meted out on the defeated Germany were likely to promote extremist elements in Germany. More immediately, a retired and reluctant Hannay is drawn into a case involving the kidnapping of three children, all from important families. Once again a select few working in shrouded corners save us all from a fiendish master mind.

To some degree these books can be considered as formulaic. However in the 1900 - 1920's many of the formulas were just being minted. Hannay has few gadgets and frequently minimal resources. Success is to those quickest of mind and not with the best technology. There is something of a preference for the characters that are best in using the natural environment, but this is not because Buchan was 'green' or would have understood the term. Buchan liked nature.

Taken together these books are certainly what the British would call rattling good yarns. They make good adult light reads. Adult reads not because of naughty language, or bared flesh, or even because of 'blood and guts violence'. These are adult reads because they tend to be somewhat deeper and more sophisticated in construction.

If you like a good yarn and have an interest in how the spy novel developed over the years, this collection is highly recommended.

Jerry says

Read 39 Steps and Greenmantle Again. Really fun. "I fancy it isn't the men who get most out of the world and are always buoyant and cheerful that most fear to die. Rather it is the weak-engined souls, who go about with dull eyes, that cling most fiercely to life. They have not the joy of being alive which is a kind of earnest of immortality. . . . I know that my thoughts were chiefly about the jolly things that I had seen and done; not regret, but gratitude. The panorama of blue noons on the veld unrolled itself before me, and hunter's nights in the bush, the taste of food and sleep, the bitter stimulus of dawn, the joy of wild adventure, the voices of old staunch friends. Hitherto the war had seemed to make a break with all that had gone before, but now the war was only a part of the picture. I thought of my battalion, and the good fellows there, many of whom had fallen on the Loos parapets. I had never looked to come out of that myself. But I had been spared, and given the chance of a greater business, and I had succeeded. That was the tremendous fact, and my mood was humble gratitude to God and exultant pride. Death was a small price to pay for it. Dick Hannay on what he thinks is the cusp of his death. Greenmantle, pp. 435-6.

I read Greenmantle, but my edition is a really spiffy cloth cover, Stodder and Houghton, 1963, I think from Britain. Nov. 2008

Gretchen McNeil says

I love spy fiction. I love early 20th Century fiction. So the Richard Hannay novels of John Buchan were a no brainer. *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is the most well-known, and justifiably so, but *Greenmantle* is his masterpiece. If you like Tom Clancy, if you can't get enough John Le Carre, run out and read these novels because John Buchan started it all.

Mysteryfan says

I loved reading his books when I was a teenager. A friend loaned me this compilation so I could reread them. Mostly they have aged well (NOT the fourth one). They are very much of their time and now that seems so long ago.

Note: The 39 Steps is NOTHING like the Cary Grant movie. Beware.

K. says

Reread Dec 2016. Including "Island of Sheep" and "Courts of the Morning"

Buchan is such a lovely way to pass time. Enjoyed all of them immensely, except, perhaps, for "Courts of the Morning" which got really boring when the talk was all about fictional politics and war, and didn't really have Dick Hannay in it except as an introduction. The "Four Hostages" is my second least favorite. It's sort of a conspiracy theory/bad guy effort at world domination and it's not where Buchan shines.

However, at the spy thriller, he does excel. "The Thirty-Nine Steps," "Greenmantle," and "Mr. Standfast" go together...all revolving around the first World War. They all have some still-applicable truisms about socialism and other things going around at that time. Conversely, they also have some marks of their time, such as a bit of anti-Semitism and a few "N" words. While I do not love such things, I also do not condemn Mr. Buchan for being a product of his time.

Some thoughts from these 3 books that give just a little taste of the personality of the author and time:

"I may be sending you to your death, Hannay—Good God, what a damned task-mistress duty is!—If so, I shall be haunted with regrets, but you will never repent. Have no fear of that. You have chosen the roughest road, but it goes straight to the hill-tops." (Mr. Standfast)

"Them and their socialism! There's more gumption in a page of John Stuart Mill than in all that foreign trash. But as I say, I've got to keep a quiet sough, for the world is gettin' socialism now like the measles. It all comes from a defective eddication." (Mr. Standfast)

"It's easy enough to be brave if you're feeling well and have food inside you. And it's not so difficult if you're short of a meal and seedy, for that makes you inclined to gamble. I mean by being brave playing the game by the right rules without letting it worry you that you may very likely get knocked on the head. It's the wisest way to save your skin. It doesn't do to think about death if you're facing a charging lion or trying to bluff a lot of savages. If you think about it you'll get it; if you don't the odds are you won't. That kind of courage is only good nerves and experience...Most courage is experience. Most people are a little scared at new things....You want a bigger heart to face danger which you go out and look for, and which doesn't come to you in the ordinary way of business. Still, that's pretty much the same thing—good nerves and good health, and a natural liking for rows. You see...in all that game there's a lot of fun. There's excitement and the fun of using your wits and skill, and you know that the bad bits can't last long. ...But the big courage is the cold-blooded kind, the kind that never lets go even when you're feeling empty inside, and your blood's thin, and there's no kind of fun or profit to be had, and the trouble's not over in an hour or two but lasts for months and years. One of the men here was speaking about that kind, and he called it 'Fortitude.' I reckon fortitude's the biggest thing a man can have—just to go on enduring when there's no guts or heart left in you. ...the head man at the job was the Apostle Paul." (Peter Pienaar in Mr. Standfast)

"Why, women aren't the brittle things men used to think them. They never were, and the war has made them like whipcord. Bless you, my dear, we're the tougher sex now. We've had to wait and endure, and we've been so beaten on the anvil of patience that we've lost all our megrims." (Mary in Mr. Standfast)

"You keep your mind on the game and forget about yourself. That's the cure for jibbers." (Mr. Standfast)

"The Three Hostages" is set after the war and is more a giant conspiracy theory. It's fun to read because it's well done, but it's not on par with the others. There are a couple of interesting character studies though.

(Speaking of the press) "They are masters of propaganda, you know. ...Have you ever considered what a diabolical weapon that can be—using all the channels of modern publicity to poison and warp men's minds? It is the most dangerous thing on earth. You can use it cleanly....but you can also use it to establish the most damnable lies." (The Three Hostages)

"But hate soon becomes conceit. If you hate, you despise, and when you despise you esteem inordinately the self which despises." (The Three Hostages)

"Pessimism, you know, is often a form of vanity." (Can't remember which)

"The Island of Sheep" is set about 14 years later. This is an interesting one because it's sort of a Norse saga/revenge tale being spun out in the second generation. So there's quite a Northern feel to it, the scenery is great. It's loads of fun to read.

I found it interesting that for some reason Buchan tries to make Sandy Arbuthnot (Lord Clanroyden) the mysterious hero of both this story and the "The Courts of the Morning" and sort of bombs it. In "Greenmantle" Sandy is a fascinating character. But he just falls a bit flat in these two. Which doesn't mean the books fail, it just means we like the other characters so much more. I love Buchan's down-to-earth, semi-self-deprecating heroes more than this James Bond/Indiana Jones/The Saint-ish guy. I like him, but he's a bit to glamorous and mysterious for me.

Anyway, fun, got the set of 6 books on kindle for .99 cents so it kept me busy through the holidays. Good times.

See my review to "Prester John" for more info on the author, John Buchan.

This review also includes "The Island of Sheep" which is the 5th book to the Richard Hannay series.

John Buchan is a master of the short adventure novel. These books a total delight from beginning to end, in fact, you don't want them to end. Number 3, "Mr Standfast" is particularly good, powerful, in fact.

Richard Hannay is a mining engineer who spent a lot of time in South Africa. If I remember right, In "The Thirty-Nine Steps" he's only been home a short while when he becomes accidentally embroiled in international intrigue and comes out of it with high honor. After that he becomes a general in WWI, but is most often working on special missions. The entire character cast is excellent, finely drawn, and believable. Buchan was not a fan of socialism or communism and so many of his comments are actually very applicable for today.

His heroes are always humble, hardworking, industrious, courageous and upright. I love it.

*****g

Continued article about books for boys that I promised to paste here per my review to "Beau Geste."

The great tradition - books and authors that promote family values

National Review, April 18, 1994 by Digby Anderson

AFTER what John Buchan calls a "star turn" at Arras, General Hannay is ordered back out of the trenches of the Great War to England. He is to become Cornelius Brand. His orders are to pose as a pacifist and to mix with pacifists, the "shirkers," in order to find among them those who are betraying their country to her enemies. Buchan's views on the pacifists are, shall we say, robust. Hannay must "sink into the life of the half-baked . . . people who split hairs all day and are engrossed in . . . selfish little fads . . . and nauseous follies?" He finds these people not in proper old English manors but "gimcrack arty little houses" in a town called Biggleswick.

Among them are the Weekses, "three girls who lived in a house so artistic that you broke your head whichever way you turned in it. It was their fashion never to admire anything that was obviously beautiful, like a sunset or a pretty woman, but to find loveliness in things which I thought hideous They hadn't much use for books, except some Russian ones [especially:] Leprous Souls." They had a novelist friend, "the worst sort of blighter [who:] considered himself a genius whom it was the duty of the country to support... He sought 'reality' and 'life' and 'truth,' but it was hard to see how he could know much about them as he spent half the day in bed Tuberculous in mind and body [he took his joy in:] making jokes about the war."

There was Dr. Chirck, who lectured on "God"... a new name he had invented for himself [and:] a terrible woman who had come back from Russia with what she called a 'message of healing.'"

Hannay is to join with a U.S. agent, John S. Blenkiron, to find the evil genius at the center of a spy ring giving secrets to Hun submarines. The adventure takes them to Glasgow among both treacherous socialists ("Them and their socialism. There's more gumption in a page of John Stuart Mill than in all that foreign trash") and the decent working men who "hate three things, the Germans, the profiteers, and the Irish." Then on to the Scottish isles, hidden messages, mysterious submarine landings in secluded bays, and chases across the hills, a change of disguise into an ordinary soldier, and flights and fights across Europe until the traitor is nailed.

John Buchan's Mr. Standfast is one of more than a dozen adventure novels he wrote, including the better known Prester John, Thirty-Nine Steps, and Greenmantle, and the less known Courts of the Morning and Prince of the Captivity. They are books essentially of the Twenties and Thirties but they stand in a much longer tradition.

Arguably, it starts with Harrison Ainsworth and G. A. Henty's historical novels in the mid nineteenth century, for instance Windsor Castle and A Cornet of Horse. A slightly later figure is Robert Louis Stevenson, with such stories as Kidnapped; another, Conan Doyle and The White Company. But it got into full swing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The key figure who is said to have influenced the Thirties writers was Anthony Hope (Rupert of Hentzau, The Prisoner of Zenda, and some ten others). Then came Rider Haggard, who was much more prolific than readers of King Solomon's Mines and She know, and Baroness Orczy, author of at least 25 and best known for her Scarlet Pimpernel novels.

Add in P. C. Wren (Beau Geste), Percy Westerman (Wilmshurst of the Frontier Force), Rafael Sabatini (Sea Hawk and twenty-odd more), then later Russell Thorndike (creator of the pirate-parson Dr. Syn), Dornford Yates with his Bentley car chases across Europe to Transylvania to dig for buried treasure while consuming vast quantities of champagne, and Sapper, and you have the main part of the tradition. The last figure is probably C. S. Forester with his Hornblower books.

But what a tradition. The total output must be over three hundred novels, a glittering treasury of reaction, just the thing to form the character of any conservative boy and to reinvigorate conservative men. Girls too may read some of the tradition, but not Henty and Westerman.

What sort of tradition is it? Strong stories--yarns--and adventure: moral adventure. Good against bad. The heroes are brave, truthful, and usually--Dornford Yates is the exception here--self-deprecating. Hornblower

has his nervous cough and shyness. The Scarlet Pimpernel's alter ego, the fop Sir Percy Blakeney, is the ultimate in playing down secret manly achievements. The values are patriotism, decency, friendship, honor, and, more than courage, a sort of recklessness in pursuit of duty, but a recklessness that does not put others at risk. Rider Haggard's heroes are always deciding to go on against all odds even when the Kaffir bearers have deserted them, taking away supplies and ammunition. Hornblower is forever cooking up schemes to "cut out" some vessel the Dons have anchored in an "impregnable" harbor. There is much wry humor in the face of adversity.

This combination of strong adventure narrative, morality, and ironic self-deprecation has, as far as I know, no obvious equivalent in American literature.

As a boy, one read them for all this, the adventure and the morality. As an adult too, but for something else as well. For these books are the ultimate in political incorrectness. That is the point of the Buchan quotations above. They are incorrect on gender, class, nationality, progress, and multiculturalism. That does not mean they take the opposite view to the politically correct, or what the politically correct commissars would set up and then denounce as the opposite view. (Incidentally, how like Robespierre and his Committee of Public Safety today's PC police are.) Ladies, while decidedly ladylike, are not weak foolish things. They are plucky, jolly loyal, and in Buchan's novels capable of walking across mountains at a steady pace. Hope's Queen Flavia is as much concerned to do the honorable thing as his hero, Rudolf Rassendyl; her duty as Queen comes before her love for Rudolf. Sir Percy's wife, Marguerite, is as plucky as he.

In some books, ladies hardly figure and romance is rare. If you want all fighting and no love-business, the general rule is go for the sea. Girls are not supposed to go on boats, and the pirate-parson Dr. Syn even seems to avoid them on land. It is, however, noteworthy that the only bit of sex I can remember is when Hornblower is on land--but that is with a French lady, which is rather different. Nor are Africans all cowardly Kaffirs. Both Buchan and Haggard have black heroes, of a sort, in Prester John and Chaka. Chaka's Zulu military organization, says Haggard in *Nada the Lily*, is "the most wonderful in its way the world has seen." Chaka was a "colossal genius" though "a most evil man who slaughtered more than a million human beings" including his mother.

Which author in the tradition is the most incorrect? Buchan is probably incorrect about more things than anyone else. But Baroness Orczy goes further on one topic, one particularly commendable to Americans. She is quite good on the foul mob dancing the carmagnole and singing the everlasting "Ca ira" round the rouged and painted idol of the Goddess Reason. But her supreme achievement is the wonderful episode in which Sir Percy rescues the Abbe Edgeworth. When the foul zealots have set their hand on Louis, the Lord's anointed, it is Edgeworth who confesses him and prays with him at the guillotine. It is Edgeworth who raises the crucifix and cries out, "Son of St. Louis ascend to Heaven," as "the crime that can never hope for forgiveness, the sin against the Holy Ghost," is committed. The Republican mob pulls hairs from their dead king's head and dip them in his blood. And it is only their bloodthirstiness, their eagerness to bid as the executioner auctions off first the breeches for twenty louis, then the coat for thirty, that distracts them from the Scarlet Pimpernel spiriting away the faithful priest to safety.

Mr. Anderson mentioned some of these authors in an earlier review of William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* and received many requests for further information on them. This column is a response to those requests.

Jessica says

After hearing that Masterpiece Theater was remaking the classic Hitchcock "The 39 Steps," I thought I

should pick up the book that inspired it all. I was not disappointed. It's fun to know that this book is credited with being the first spy novel. And although it was written almost 100 years ago, it didn't come off as old fashioned or outdated. It was also really short and easy to read -- I found myself thinking that I would love to have my son read it someday. (Oh, interesting to note that both the Hitchcock and the Masterpiece remake have made it into a love story...and there is no love interest in the book at all.)

Susan says

An oddity about my edition of this Richard Hannay omnibus--rescued by a brave friend from the 25 cent pile of a public library sale: the type face gets progressively smaller from one novel to the next. Either a holdover from each book's original print edition or someone's idea of fairness, trying to give each of the 350-or-so-page novels equal weight. The fairness idea suits me best, as I think that ultimately none outdoes the others in the tradition of spy novel. The 39 Steps is a fast-paced mystery to stop the outbreak of WWI, Greenmantle a bizarre quest to keep the Germans from fabricating a long-awaited Mehdi who will lead the Muslim throngs against the Allies, and Mr. Standfast a race to discover and destroy a chameleon-like German spy who seems to turn up everywhere. The horrors of World War I are never so clear as in The Guns of August (but GoA's brevity helped make it a masterpiece--who could endure 1,000 pages of such enormous and senseless death?), still they build up to an ending in Mr. Standfast in which the speed and constancy of death are felt deeply, mitigated by a romantic tribute to friendship and heroism.

Like everything I seem to be reading from this era, the ability to hide one's identity seems a constant and critical factor in the mysteries. Not by elaborate costumes, but simply by knowing languages, accents and, well, acting natural. While this is reassuring for those of us lacking an ability for facial recognition, it seems to be a fact of life in a time when photographs were hard to come by, populations were mixing so quickly and there were so many young men gone missing.

All three frequently drip with propaganda (not surprising, given Buchan's wartime job as a writer for the War Propaganda Bureau). Generally, I prefer the kinds of sweeping generalizations made about the evils of a race (in this case, of course, the Germans, usually referred to as "Boche") when they are used for cleaner targets--Balrogs, say, or Orcs--even if Buchan does grant kindness and humanity to a handful of Hannay's foes. And when he makes a conscientious objector and pacifist one of the greatest war heroes in the end, you suspect that the author saw a need to smooth out some domestic resentments at the close of the war.

Nonetheless, a little propaganda makes for some of the most page-turning adventures and I only wish I'd paused once or twice to consult an atlas.

Joyce says

A departure from my genres of choice (spy novel vs chick lit or historical romance) ... again, prompted by curiosity about omissions made or liberties taken by last year's BBC adaptation of the first adventure (The 39 Steps).

And partly because it is a departure and partly because it was published "before my time" - I had a difficult time "absorbing" it. So much so, that I only got through "The Thirty-Nine Steps" (which the TV adaptation did not seem to retain too much of?) and "Greenmantle" before I reached the "no-more-renewals-allowed" 7-week deadline at the local library. Or maybe it's just 'cause I'm a lazy reader - when it's not work-related, I

don't really want to have to think too much, I have realized.

Kathryn says

I've only read Thirty-Nine Steps and Greenmantle, but I know the others would be great too.

Ann says

An interesting read--for the stories and to better understand the context of the early 20th century and its attitudes.

Christopher Sutch says

The beginning of the thriller genre. _The 39 Steps_ is the most famous, though the best of the novels here is _The Four Hostages_. And despite the attempts of the scholar who wrote the introduction to downplay Buchan's imperialism and racism.... phrases like "nigger band," and general discourse about how childish non-white societies are ARE both racist and imperialist. Yes, historical context explains a lot, but it doesn't really excuse anything, especially by the 1920s, when the last of these books appeared. Once you get past that crap, these are good reads.

Beth says

I was introduced to this author by some friends in the late 90's. I have read and re-read them every since. They are great historical fiction tales, and are easy to read yet will challenge your vocabulary. One of my favorite words from John Buchan is "aquascutum." There is a reference in the back for anyone curious to understand.

Don't let that daunt you....it's nothing compared to reading Hawthorne. These are hard to lay down.

John Jackson says

The first two novellas (The Thirty-Nine Steps and Greenmantle) lay out the pattern for a century-long series of spy/persecution stories. They do so with such a blistering lack of any self-awareness on the part of Buchan himself, much less his hero Hannay, that they leave us breathless. The appearance of Woman at the heart of the Greenmantle plot staggers every one of the boys playing their boy games. Even the author seems baffled and deeply troubled in her presence. Pure comedy. As Greenmantle sweeps its spies through the mystical East, it offers us a peek in on a dear, departed generation of blithe, breezy adventurers unfettered by political nicety. But at least they spoke the language.

Rita Marie says

Important to bear in mind that these stories were published almost 100 years ago. And told from the POV of a a white, upper-class, Englishman. That said, they are terrific boys-adventure stories, a little dull for the modern reader, since there is absolutely NO character development, but tons of hearty outdoor chasing about, and also much mystification as to who the bad guys really are and what they might do next. I liked 'The 39 Steps' best, because it seems about the right length. Second choice would be 'Mr. Standfast'. The others tended to drag on a bit, with slow intervals of weighty political and philosophical discussion.

Steve says

Just the first few for now, but reading this on Pynchon's recommendation...

The 39 Steps was great and fun, pretty interesting that it isn't anything like the film. Hitchcock had some fun with that!
