

John Macnab and his creator

With the fourth *Field* and Hunter Macnab Challenge about to begin, **Alexandra Henton** introduces John Buchan, the author and sporting adventurer who inspired it

WHEN the city loses its lustre in late summer, a sporting blade's thoughts turn north. The anticipation of heather, hills and sporting glory are all that is needed to slough off the carapace of boredom and don fresh tweed.

It's Macnabbing time, and we are throwing down the gauntlet once again for the annual *Field* and Hunter Macnab Challenge. Last year saw a bumper crop of successful adventurers from Sweden, The Netherlands, the US and closer to home. So, as past challengers declare their intentions and gather their kit (see www.macnabchallenge.co.uk) for the fourth challenge, are you ready to join them?

The Macnab Challenge has its roots in the 1925 novel *John Macnab* by John Buchan. The story follows three protagonists: Sir Edward Leithen, John Palliser-Yeates and Lord Lamancha, all desperate to relieve the ennui that has engulfed them. The solution can only be something devilish, with a dash of daring. Under the mantle of John Macnab, they issue a warning to three Highland estates: within 48 hours they will remove a salmon or stag, undetected, and present it at the door of the house. On this, they stake their reputations and the danger proves innervating.

The modern Macnab Challenge: bagging a salmon, stag and brace of grouse within one day between dawn and dusk, is derived from Buchan's tale. It is a thrilling test of sporting skill (with a dash of luck thrown in).

The story of John Macnab holds particular allure for the sportsman because it was written by a consummate countryman. Buchan was imbued with the nuances of the field and the technicalities of the sport. He also had an unparalleled sense of adventure and the ability to write a cracking yarn.

John Buchan (1875-1940) penned more than a hundred books, including historical studies and novels, biographies and the



Above: John Buchan, author of *John Macnab*. Right: *Red Stags, Ben Bue* by Tim Scott Bolton

adventures for which he was best known, including *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. His 40 works of fiction have kept generations in thrall, with characters, including Sir Edward Leithen, often appearing in more than one book. This sense of familiarity is one of the great pleasures of reading Buchan's works. A favourite is *The Runagates Club*, in which 12 Buchan heroes convene once a month at their London club to tell stories of mystery and intrigue.

Buchan's career was multifaceted. Very much a man of his time, he practised at the Bar (after reading classics at Oxford) for a short spell before becoming a publisher. He worked for the government in various roles, wrote for *The Spectator* and was a war correspondent for *The Times*. He was an MP and university chancellor, and became Lord Tweedsmuir in 1935 on appointment to the role of governor-general of Canada. His role in this world was underpinned by his incredible imagination and gift for storytelling.

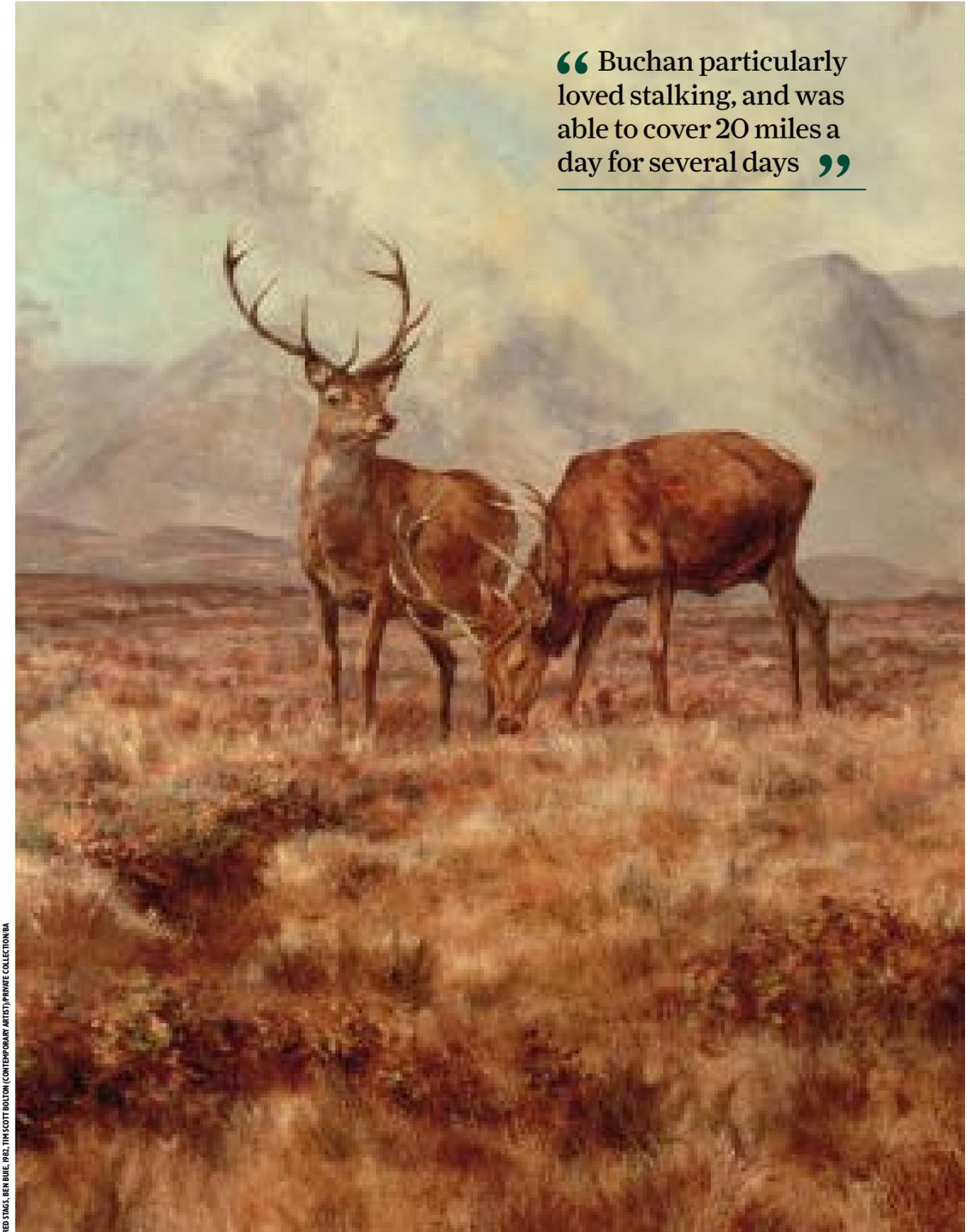
"He was what the Scots call a 'man of parts'," says his granddaughter, Lady Stewartby. "His early life in the Scottish kirk was very disciplined, his father was a Calvinist Presbyterian minister but he also wrote fairy stories."

Buchan grew up in Kirkcaldy and spent his childhood in the hills and valleys he wrote about with such affection. "My grandmother [Lady Tweedsmuir] observed in 1947: 'I began to understand more and more the roots from which John had sprung and from which he derived the romantic and poetic aspects of his character, which ran side by side with his common sense and his ability to grasp hard facts. In the Scotland before 1914 there was an awareness of past history which was woven into the daily life of the people. The glens and woods where the clans had marauded and fought were still haunted with memories of violence and tragedy. Memories went back a long way and curious links with the past were not uncommon.'"

This magic remained with him throughout his life. "As a boy my grandfather spent a year in bed after an accident," says Lady Stewartby. "His mother would read to him every day and encourage him to write." The first chapter in Buchan's memoir, *Memory Hold-The-Door* (1940) "expressed his life-long fascination with and love for the British countryside" says Kenneth Hillier, chairman of the John Buchan Society. "He was in tune with the shooting, hunting and fishing world. He edited a fishing anthology, *Musa Piscatrix*, for John Lane in 1896 (still just 21) and Walton's *The Compleat Angler* for Methuen in 1901," he says. He also rode, walked and stalked all over Galloway, hunting hares on horseback with greyhounds and swimming horses over the Fleet estuary at high tide.

On his return to Oxfordshire in 1919, such high jinks were replaced with fishing on the Glyme and Windrush with his eldest son, Johnnie. Buchan was a fearsome fisherman. His son recalled how the author could

“Buchan particularly loved stalking, and was able to cover 20 miles a day for several days”



RED STAGS, BEN BUE, 1982, TIM SCOTT BOLTON (CONTEMPORARY ARTIST) PRIVATE COLLECTION/BA



MACNAB CHALLENGE

To enter *The Field* and Hunter Macnab Challenge download the entry form at www.macnabchallenge.co.uk, complete and submit with two witness letters by 10 November 2013.

THE RULES

All Macnabs be undertaken in a sporting and gentlemanly fashion.

All Macnabs to be completed within one day.

All entries to be accompanied by a signed letter, with contact details, from two independent witnesses attesting to the achievement: estate owner, gillie, gamekeeper or other unimpeachably good sort.

Post witness letters to:

Macnab Challenge 2013
The Field, 110 Southwark Street
 London SE1 0SU

Exclusive silver Macnab cuff-links and Hunter goodies to the most intrepid Macnabbers of whichever specified variety.

All Real Macnabs to be "poached" in a legal and sporting manner from an owner who accepts the challenge in good sport.

All Macnabs to be undertaken at the competitor's expense.

The Editor of *The Field*, Jonathan Young, will judge the entries. The judge's decision is final.

REAL MACNAB

A salmon on the fly and a stag, as the trio did in John Buchan's *John Macnab*, "poached" in a legal sporting manner (see above).

CLASSIC MACNAB

A stag, a salmon and a brace of grouse. This Macnab epitomises the best of country sports in the Highlands.

SOUTHERN MACNAB

A couple of snipe, a sea-trout and a roe buck.

MACMARSH

A foreshore goose, a pike and a fallow buck.

MACNORFOLK

A bass on the fly, a brace of wild grey partridges and a fallow buck.

MACVERMIN

An impressive rat, a chalkstream pike and a brace of magpies in the bag.

MACSCANDI

A moose, capercaillie and a trout on the fly within 24 hours.

MACARGENTINIAN

A golden dorado, 100 brace of doves and a wild pig. This is the northern Argentinian Macnab.

MACAFRICAN

A brace of sandgrouse, an impala and a tigerfish in one day.

MACCHARLIE

Riding to foxhounds, the harriers and also staghounds.

CORINTHIAN MACNAB

Riding to hounds in the morning, shooting a brace of partridges in the afternoon and then catching a trout on the fly.

easily throw a salmon fly 30yd: "The rod appeared to do his work for him. The perfect curve of his back cast seemed to follow forward with the fly drawing out the long, straight line ahead, independent of his agency. It is the hallmark of all experts that the instrument appears to do its own work."

Family holidays were spent in the Borders or Highlands, fishing for sea-trout, bird-watching on the island of Unst and stalking. Buchan loved stalking, and was able to cover 20 miles a day for several days. Buchan could write about John Macnab's exploits because he knew both beast and fish intimately, and the backdrop was the fabric of his sporting life.

His love of the countryside remained when he went to Canada as governor-general. "I proved the value of trying different patterns of flies, for I got most of my fish after going over the same water with three or four different flies... I fished with fairly fine tackle and I have never had better fights than with these Canadian salmon, for they were fresh from the sea," he wrote in June 1937.

Wherever his career led him, Buchan absorbed the surroundings and mined his life there to create an exceptional body of work. "He drew on his own experiences for much of his work, such as the third Richard Hannay novel, *Mr Standfast*," says Lady Stewartby. "In *Greenmantle* he predicted the rise of Fundamentalism, he explored time travel in *The Gap in the Curtain* and examined history with his *The Marquis of Montrose*. His books remain relevant for all sorts of reasons."

His penchant for storytelling never ceased. He had completed all but two chapters of a book about fishing before he died. The working title was *Pilgrim's Rest*. It begins, "If fishing, as I maintain, be not only a craft but a way of life, then a fisherman must begin young."

Buchan's brilliance was that he could combine the rural, romantic part of his nature with the visceral pleasure of dastardly and devilish plots and heroic deeds. Richard Hannay, on the run in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, tells us as much about the beauty of the landscape the fugitive crosses as about the man-hunt. John Macnab is a paean to the Scottish scenery, spritzed with just the right amount of spirit of adventure. So why not take up his mantle, read *John Macnab* and have your own Buchanesque adventure this year? ■

The John Buchan Society exists to promote a wider understanding of the man and his works. Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in any aspect of John Buchan's life. The new John Buchan Museum in Peebles opened recently and welcomes visitors. There is still £13,000 left to raise, of an overall target of £300,000. To learn more, visit www.johnbuchansociety.co.uk.

For more on the Macnab Challenge

Scan the QR code with a smartphone for suggestions on how you can become a member of this exclusive club. <http://bit.ly/kN306o>

