

JOHN BUCHAN AND BRITISH PROPAGANDA IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Taylor Downing tells the largely forgotten story of Buchan's role as a war propagandist

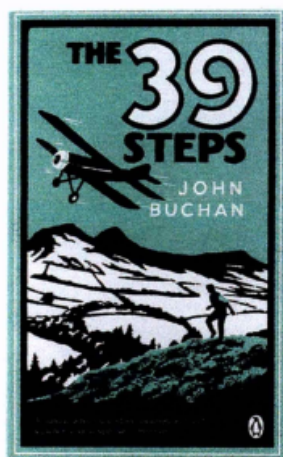
In August 1914, the War Office had a thoroughly antiquated view about the need to inform the public as to what was going on, and most generals held journalists in utter contempt. The appointment of Lord Kitchener as Secretary of State for War was immensely popular, but he was used to small-scale wars on the fringes of empire that were usually over quite quickly. He took the view that reporters were a nuisance and it was far better if people were not told much about what was happening; just a few paragraphs about troop movements here and there released through an occasional official communiqué. So the press was not informed that the British Expeditionary Force was even preparing to go to France until three days after it had arrived. Journalists and photographers were banned from going anywhere near the front and were threatened with being shot as spies if found in military areas. In the war pictorials that were published to cater for the enormous popular interest in the war, artists had to try hard to imagine what the first encounters with the enemy looked like. But with no photographs and only bland communiqués from the front, the publications came out more like boy's own comics than as considered journalism.

This attitude could not last and, as the

war continued and the realisation dawned that it would not be 'over by Christmas', a growing awareness developed of a 'Home Front' in which public opinion and morale were going to play an important role in sustaining the fighting front. So in 1915 a small number of correspondents were accredited to the army's General Headquarters (GHQ) in France. One of

them was the 40-year-old Scottish novelist John Buchan, who during that same year published one of his most successful novels, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, a gripping thriller with a central character named Richard Hannay. Buchan began to write regular articles for the *Times* and the *Daily News* that were soon highly regarded. Leo Amery, the Conservative MP and journalist wrote that his articles in the *Times* were 'excellent', and that Buchan 'can sense a situation quickly and can with the minimum of effort make a vivid story of it'.

This was not Buchan's first contribution to the war effort. For ten years he had been a director of the Edinburgh publishing house Thomas Nelson and Sons, for whom he edited a set of popular encyclopaedias and commissioned contemporary writers for a series called Nelson's Sixpenny Classics. Soon after the declaration of war, Buchan suggested to his partners at Nelson that they should publish a *History of the War*. Although he realised that the full story would not be known for years, Buchan felt it was possible to write an intelligent narrative to come out in several volumes roughly three to six months after the events. Both Arthur Conan Doyle and Hilaire Belloc were approached but were too busy. So Buchan ended up writing the *History*



John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915),
Penguin Classic edition 2007.

himself and brought his remarkable energy to the project. Published between February 1915 and July 1919, it eventually ran to 24 volumes and more than one million words. Buchan was supremely well suited for the commission. He summarised vast amounts of information including a great deal that he picked up and learned at GHQ. Reading the volumes today, they are lively, convey a real sense of the fighting and have a cracking narrative drive. They present a well-informed first draft of history.

The situation with regard to supplying information to overseas countries, particularly to neutrals like the United States, was totally different. Before 1914, no British government had ever felt the need to launch a large-scale propaganda campaign overseas. Yet within a month of the declaration of war, a top-secret organisation was established 'to inform and influence public opinion abroad and to confute German mis-statements and sophistries'. Formally titled the War Propaganda Bureau, it was better known by the name of its base at Wellington House in London. It was led by the reforming liberal MP Charles Masterman. He had a sophisticated view of the way official propaganda should work. He did not want to spread unconfirmed rumours about dreadful German atrocities against women and children, but instead wished to promote Britain's cause and its commitment to the war in the guise of press articles and literature by well-respected figures, apparently written independently and without government backing. This was the best way, he believed, to influence opinion overseas.

The literary establishment rallied round and in September most of the leading authors of the day pledged their support for Wellington House. They included Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, John Galsworthy and H.G. Wells. By the end of 1914, Wellington House had produced dozens of learned articles and books about the war for distribution overseas. It was all pretty highbrow and not directed at the public at large, but was an attempt to get Britain's point of view across to the sort of people who influenced popular opinion abroad: newspaper editors, writers and politicians.

Buchan's multi-volume *Nelson's History of the War* was the sort of project

that appealed to Masterman. He offered a welcome subsidy to *Nelson*, which was struggling with difficult wartime conditions and the high cost of paper. In return, he asked Buchan to write various spin-offs from his *History* that could be translated into different languages and distributed internationally. Although the books were government-sponsored, no one reading them would imagine that they were anything other than an objective account of the war describing the massive effort of the entire British Empire on land and sea, written by a leading author and published by an independent publishing house. This was just the type of 'propaganda' that Masterman wanted. Buchan moved seamlessly from imparting informed news to the Home Front to writing official propaganda for the international market.

In early 1916, after Sir Douglas Haig became Commander-in-Chief in France and Belgium, Buchan's status changed again. Haig, a fellow Scot who had been to the same Oxford college as Buchan, knew and admired the author's work, so Buchan was invited to join the team that wrote official army communiqués. He was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps and joined GHQ just in time for the start of the Battle of the Somme. He prepared communiqués and wrote weekly summaries of the battle that were sent out by Wellington House to British embassies around the world. Later, when he came to write up the full story of the battle, he did so not only for his *Nelson's History of the War* but also in the form of two separate volumes for Wellington House, simply titled *The Battle of the*



John Buchan. Lebrecht Music and Arts Photo Library/ Alamy Stock Photo.



Somme First Phase and Second Phase, also published by Nelson. These subsidised volumes were then translated into Dutch, Danish, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish. The books convey a good sense of the battle and its horrors. They certainly do not come across as obvious propaganda. On the other hand, they are not critical of any senior officers who repeatedly sent men in human-wave assaults against well-entrenched enemy machine guns. Reliant upon casualty figures supplied by GHQ, they repeatedly underestimate British and exaggerate German losses, but are still consulted today and remain an excellent read.

When David Lloyd George replaced Herbert Asquith as Prime Minister at the end of 1916 he decided to shake up the whole propaganda effort. He created a new Department of Information and, in February 1917, Buchan was appointed as its Director reporting directly to the Prime Minister. He now had influence over all aspects of reporting the war. Immensely gifted though he was as a writer, however, Buchan was not attuned to the role of a

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bureaucrat. There was constant sniping from the Foreign Office, which regarded the supply of information abroad as their territory. The War Office created a new department, MI7, to keep strict control over the release of military information. Now Buchan found himself also in charge of Wellington House, with Masterman reporting to him. He decided to give

priority to the distribution of news, and Roderick Jones of Reuters was put in charge of a new service that sent out daily news cables in French and English. An office was opened in America to try to better present Britain's position there.

But it was not a happy time for Buchan. He was increasingly attacked in the press for not doing more. Because so much that he was doing was secret he felt he could not properly defend himself. It also turned out that Lloyd George was always too busy to see him. In the summer, Sir Edward Carson joined the War Cabinet with the task of supervising the Department of Information. He was a powerful figure but was too preoccupied with the affairs of his beloved Ulster to have time to defend the propaganda team. The attacks continued. Buchan replied: 'We welcome such criticism when it is not merely ignorant gossip, for propaganda is not an occult science ... Moreover, there is no finality to it; it may be improved but it can never be perfect.'

In January 1918, Carson resigned from the Cabinet. Lloyd George decided on

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another reorganisation and created the last new ministry of the war, the Ministry of Information. He put Lord Beaverbrook, the Canadian press baron, in charge. Lord Northcliffe, the owner of the *Daily Mail*, the *Times* and a host of other publications, was brought in to run propaganda directed at the enemy. This marked a complete turning of the circle from the start of the war when Kitchener saw the newspapers as little more than an irritation. Now the greatest press moguls of the era were in charge. A vigorous campaign was started to tempt soldiers from the different ethnic groups within the Austro-Hungarian army to desert. Film was used with great effect to communicate the government message to the twenty million people in Britain who went to the cinema each week. From the summer of 1918, tens of millions of leaflets were dropped over German lines and in Germany itself, pointing out how hopeless their struggle had become and that the war was as good as won by the Allies.

In the reshuffle, Buchan was made Director of Intelligence and put in charge of processing information for the propaganda departments. He was also responsible for inviting foreign journalists

to tour British war factories. One American journalist he met was Lowell Thomas, who was searching for an individual whose dramatic wartime story could be promoted to help lift morale. Buchan put him in touch with General Edmund Allenby's headquarters in Palestine where stories were beginning to circulate about a young intelligence officer who was leading an Arab Revolt in the desert. Thomas went to the Middle East with a cameraman, where he met Colonel T.E. Lawrence and wrote up his story in a series of illustrated lectures and in two films entitled *With Allenby in Palestine* and *With Lawrence in Arabia*. They proved hugely popular and made the reputation of both Thomas and 'Lawrence of Arabia'. Buchan had helped to give birth to one of the enduring legends of the war.

After the war, the Germans were in no doubt about the effectiveness of British propaganda. Field Marshal Hindenburg wrote: 'The enemy seeks to poison our spirit ... He bombards our front, not only with a drumfire of artillery, but also with a drumfire of printed paper. Besides bombs which kill the body, his airmen throw down leaflets which are intended to kill the

soul.' General Ludendorff, Commander-in-Chief on the Western Front in 1918, wrote in his memoirs: 'We were hypnotised by Allied propaganda as a rabbit is by a snake. It was exceptionally clever and conceived on a grand scale ... many people were no longer able to distinguish their own impressions from what enemy propaganda had told them.' The lessons were not forgotten in Germany. When Hitler came to power 15 years later, Joseph Goebbels' propaganda ministry held a central place in the Nazi state.

In Britain, Information was the first wartime ministry to be closed down within days of the Armistice. Buchan supervised the process and passed on tens of thousands of its assets, including all the official films and photographs, to the newly established Imperial War Museum.

Somehow, despite the pressures of war, writing his mammoth *History* and countless weekly news digests, as well as running the Department of Information and playing a senior role in the Ministry, Buchan had still found time to write two novels. The most successful of these, *Greenmantle*, published in 1916, again centred on the exploits of Richard Hannay, who is described tracking down Muslim extremists inspired by Germany into organising a jihad against British rule in the Middle East. The book was informed by much that Buchan had learned in office and was so successful that it outsold *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.

After the war and the dismantling of the Ministry of Information, Buchan collapsed in exhaustion. He decided to turn away from public affairs and bought a house in Oxfordshire where he wanted to cut himself off and concentrate on his writing. He had lost several of his best friends along with his youngest brother during the war. For years he lived in the shadow of the Great War and wrote books of remembrance and tribute. Along with many others of his generation in the 1920s, he felt an overriding sense of guilt that he had survived when others had not.

But Buchan's contribution to the war effort, although largely forgotten today, had been great. In a total war, it is not just bullets and shells that bring victory, it is words and pictures as well. Buchan had brought his prodigious energy to the war effort and had proved himself again to be a supreme master of words. ●



Opposite Soldiers marching to the front, Battle of the Somme. Buchan had to write about massive casualties without making the Battle appear a disaster. © IWM. Left Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief in France and Belgium from December 1915. As a fellow-Scot he was a great admirer of Buchan and his writings. World History Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.