

## Buchan, John. 2025. *Los 39 escalones; Mantoverde*. Edited by Eduardo Valls. Cátedra. 664 pp. ISBN: 9788437649214

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Espionage fiction still occupies a privileged position in modern culture for its capacity to reflect the anxieties of national identity struggles and to distil the complexities of the geopolitical chessboard. Within this tradition, John Buchan must be acknowledged as the architect of the modern spy thriller, a narrative pattern that has been tirelessly reproduced ever since, from the works of Eric Ambler and Ian Fleming to contemporary authors such as Mick Herron. Eduardo Valls' new critical edition and translation of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Greenmantle* offers a comprehensive and scholarly-rich reassessment of Buchan's early 'shockers', illuminating their cultural resonance and relevance to the evolution of espionage fiction.

Valls' introduction combines historical overview, thematic analysis and reflective scholarship. It opens with a brief section contextualising Buchan's life and the broader transition towards the modern spy novel. The historical mapping proves to be especially illuminating, as it lays the groundwork for the subsequent sections more devoted to textual analysis in depth. The integration of Buchan's biographical details into a wider historical and literary framework enables the author to construct a coherent continuum in the evolution of espionage fiction, positioning Buchan between the imperial geopolitical adventures of Conrad, Childers or Le Queux and the later sophistication of Fleming or Le Carré. This genealogical perspective is one of the introduction's strengths, as it allows the reader to perceive the texts as both the product and the catalyst of the anxieties that shaped early twentieth century Britain and thus to approach them with greater critical precision. Moreover, the prose is written in a lucid and amusing style, communicating complex historical and thematic issues with clarity; a quality especially valuable in making a critical introduction engaging for both specialists and a wider readership.

The following sections are dedicated to detailed analysis of both *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Greenmantle*. The author demonstrates a commendable and extensive command of the material, weaving together textual quotations and secondary scholarship on Buchan and the development of the spy thriller. It delves into the cultural paranoia of modern existence that Buchan reflects in the texts, explaining how the Scottish writer delineated the figure of the contemporary spy; a liminal presence positioned between the ordinary and the extraordinary, navigating the boundaries of the public and the private. The examination of both Hannay and his companions is particularly enlightening, not only for understanding Buchan's narrative mastery but also the wider implications of all the geopolitical conflicts Great Britain partook.

The section devoted to the notion of queer and extravagant novels is perhaps the most rewarding for the specialised reader, as it critically engages with identity theory and performance, key concepts in the study of espionage fiction. Through the explanation of Peter Pienaar's interpretative theory, Valls succeeds in condensing and articulating the essential ideas to understand not only Buchan's oeuvre but also any modern spy thriller. According to this theory, identity is determined by context, which leads Richard Hannay to recreate "the context conforming the life of his character, putting into practice the actions, manners, tastes and habits expected from a subject in that specific context"<sup>1</sup> (102-103). As Valls emphasises, this insight has broader implications because it bridges micro and macro-political dimensions, exposing the instability and contingency of national identity. This idea of the instability of national identity is further connected to the term queer in the author's analysis. The word queer, which Buchan repeatedly employs throughout both novels, denotes here a process of difference and a defiance of the established boundaries. In this context, any practice operating outside the norm, such as espionage, can be considered queer insofar as it reaffirms normative structures precisely by transgressing them.

The author underscores Buchan's continuing critical relevance not only by examining the moral complexity of his works but also by dedicating a section to the authors through whom his legacy has lived on. The discussion of the correspondences and divergences between *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and Hitchcock's cinematic adaptation is enticing, as it offers insights that will appeal to scholars and general fans of the genre alike. Valls also examines authors influenced by Buchan such as Graham Greene, Ian Fleming and John Le

<sup>1</sup> The quotation corresponds to my own translation from the original text in Spanish.

Carré, demonstrating how several of the key ideas first present in Buchan's fiction have been developed and transformed by these writers. Graham Greene took the moral decay and the thin barrier between civilisation and total chaos as central thematic concerns. Ian Fleming expanded Buchan's geopolitical vision, translating Buchan's crisp, Caesarean prose into a Cold War landscape of eroding certitudes threatening Britain's morale. Most revealingly, Le Carré's characteristic existential solipsism of the spy bears a closer resemblance to Buchan than initially expected.

The introduction concludes with a final appendix examining previous translations of Buchan's work into Spanish. This proves to be very valuable from a philological standpoint, as it traces the editorial history of both novels in the Spanish-speaking world. Moreover, it provides Valls with a space for a more detailed commentary on his own translation choices. The editorial method combines textual rigour with interpretative nuance, explicitly curated to preserve Buchan's clear and concise style. Overall, the author succeeds in vindicating Buchan as the forefather of the modern spy thriller. His introduction offers an insightful yet engaging analysis of the author's biography, oeuvre and lasting relevance to the genre. As a result, this new edition stands as a priceless contribution both to Buchan's studies and to a broader understanding of early twentieth century espionage fiction.