

John Buchan's *Lake of Gold*: A Canadian Imitation of Kipling

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When he was invited to become the Governor-General of Canada, John Buchan listed the pros and cons of the appointment in a personal memorandum. To a long list of reasons in favour of acceptance, he appended only three against it:

- i) Too easy a job for a comparatively young man
- ii) A week further away from Mother
- iii) A country and a people without much glamour

These statements, however likely to offend Ardent Canadians, are in fact no more candid than they are correct. In the interests of simple accuracy, we should note that this "comparatively young man" was a stripling of sixty when he embarked for Quebec City in 1935. And there can be no question that John Buchan gave more than duty required to the country and the people without much glamour. Whatever his initial reservations, the man who was Lord Tweedsmuir of Elsfield, the Governor-General of Canada and His Majesty's personal representative in this country, was also capable of describing himself in his private correspondence as "a passionate Canadian in my love for the country and the people." There is much to suggest that this description is more than one of the platitudes of office. Buchan's genuine interest in Canada is amply illustrated in his public and private life during his term as Governor-General (1935-40), in many of his addresses preserved from this time (*Canadian Occasions*, 1940), and, most abundantly, in the testimony of his friends. Habitual sceptics even have the assurance of the Rt. Hon. Mackenzie King, that John Buchan was thoroughly sincere in "the wish that he might truly be called a Canadian."¹

We also have Buchan's own works, perhaps more congenial than the pious utterances of friendship and politics, as a testimony to his attempt to find in the Canadian scene material for romantic fiction. His books contain fewer references to Canada than one would expect: his position as Governor-General precluded, for instance, any significant references to Canada in *Memory-Hold-the-Door* (1940), the autobiography published in the year of his death. Buchan used a Canadian setting in one novel, *Sick Heart River* (1941), and in one work of children's fantasy, *Lake of Gold* (1941).² Though these books do not represent Buchan at his best, they do illuminate some of the problems faced by any passionate Canadian writer.

Lake of Gold is of particular interest to students and writers of Canadian fantasy for children because in it John Buchan, himself a writer of considerable talent and success, chose as a model a writer yet more talented

and successful, his friend Rudyard Kipling. Buchan said this about his inspiration for *Lake of Gold*: "I am trying to write a Canadian *Puck of Pook's Hill*. You see, Canadian history is obligatory for the schools, but the books are perfectly deadly, and there is really nothing to engage the imagination of a child, and yet there are few more romantic stories in the world."³ In his attempt to follow Kipling's lead, Buchan places himself in a situation characteristic of many Canadian writers – a situation uncomfortably reminiscent of that of the simpleton child in fairy tales, the child over-shadowed by his supremely competent older siblings. For this reason alone, Buchan's endeavour in *Lake of Gold* has a claim upon our interest.

The critical response to *Lake of Gold* suggests that this is perhaps the sole claim the book can make. Sheila Egoff, one of the few critics to take any notice of the book at all, notes in *The Republic of Childhood* that *Lake of Gold* is "rather heavily written . . . gone is the fast and light pace of *Greenmantle* or *The Thirty-Nine Steps* . . . This look at Canada's past through the medium of fantasy is better history than it is fiction, but the overall combination results in dryness." Her judgment is harsh but fair. And yet, we should not dismiss the book out of hand, without learning what we can from its attempts to emulate two of Kipling's most successful works. Buchan's political position, his frequent illness, and his intention to write a book for children are all partial explanations of the weakness of *Lake of Gold*. Whatever the full explanation may be, let us dispose at once of the unworthy suggestion that *Lake of Gold* is a failure because Buchan is an incompetent writer, and the yet more unworthy suggestion that the author, as a Come-From-Away, was not sufficiently sensitive to Things Canadian to snare them in fiction. Buchan's talents as a writer need no new testimony – though we are eternally the poorer that history does not record his response to the Mayor of Quebec City, who wound up his speech congratulating Buchan upon his investiture as Governor-General by observing that "this is the first time we have had a professional poet as Governor-General." Neither can we explain the book's weakness as an effect of unsuitable material. Buchan knew he had one of the most romantic stories in the world to work with, and we can find in *Lake of Gold* motifs and situations familiar from the best of Buchan's work.⁴ Certainly the imagination need not recognize national boundaries; Buchan in Canada may have felt no more alien than Kipling felt in England, a country which Kipling once described as "a wonderful land . . . the most marvellous of all the foreign countries that I have ever been in." In all likelihood, we shall never be sure why *Lake of Gold* is not a better book; we are surely better employed in asking ourselves what is unsatisfactory about the book as it is. What can we learn from the relative failure of an urbane and accomplished writer to reproduce Kipling's success in a Canadian context?

A critic is likely to find this question somewhat embarrassing, because it reveals how very subjective our criteria often are. We can with some justice say of Buchan's *Lake of Gold* what Hal o' the Draft says of a fellow-

craftsman's fresco in Kipling's *Rewards and Fairies*: "'Tis good . . . but it goes not deeper than the plaster.'" What we may well find difficult is specifying the evidence to support such a statement. Whether or not our criteria hold up under critical scrutiny, the attempt is well worth making, not only because it provides a wholesome corrective to the tendency to confuse opinion with judgment but also because it clarifies the relationship of theme to content in Canadian fiction. To see why this is so, we must examine the relationship of *Lake of Gold* to its two models.

The general similarities are obvious. In *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910), Kipling tells the story of Dan and Una, who, through one of the marvellous accidents that befall children in books, encounter Puck, last of the People of the Hills. Puck arranges a series of meetings — all kept prudently secret from adults, of course — between the children and various characters from England's past. During the eight years of their association with Puck, Dan and Una come to know a centurion in Roman Britain, a Norman knight, a Tudor artisan, a Jewish money-lender, and Queen Elizabeth herself, as well as many other characters. In *Lake of Gold*, Buchan has Donald, the son of a mining engineer, witness events in Canada's past through the magic of Negog, a Cree trapper and guide and friend of his father. Both authors emphasize — one might even say catalogue — the complexity of the children's heritage: Normans, Saxons, Picts, Jews, and Roman Provincials in Kipling; Frenchmen, Indians, Vikings, Scots, and Eskimos in Buchan. And each story, as Puck reminds the children, "concerns their land somewhat."⁵

Buchan's borrowing of many of the technical devices employed by Kipling also links their work. Interspersing poems and stories, as Buchan does in *Lake of Gold*, was a favourite practice of Kipling's; Buchan had done this himself as early as *The Moon Endureth* (1912). Both Kipling's Puck and Buchan's Negog reveal to the children the riches of their heritage; in time present, both Hobden and Père Laflamme are mines of local lore. Donald, at the opening of *Lake of Gold*, "seems to be quite unconscious of the past. . . The world for him begins with the creation of the internal-combustion engine. . . . He actually believes that the Romans only left England at the Reformation." Kipling's Dan shows the same healthy indifference to the lessons of history ("only Bruce and his silly old spider"). At times, the similarities may reveal direct influence. In Kipling, the children sing a song also known to the Norman Knight, Sir Richard Dalyngridge; in Buchan, Donald hears a seventeenth-century *coureur du bois* sing *Malbrouck s'en va t'en guerre*, "which he had learned in the nursery."

To point out these obvious resemblances is not to suggest that Buchan can do no more than play the sedulous ape to Kipling. Both Dan and Donald come to grief over Latin, but the general reader cannot be sure, simply from the sophistication of the prose itself, which author describes the boy who

had a holiday task from school, and holiday tasks he regarded as an outrage upon the decencies of life. It was to master a collection of tales

from Greek and Roman history. Now he had a peculiar distaste for those great classical peoples, especially the Romans, for it was in connection with the speech of that calamitous folk that he had suffered his worst academic disgraces?

The description, as it happens, is Buchan's, and it is sufficiently representative to establish that, if *Lake of Gold* is a failure, it is not a failure simply because its author, unlike Kipling, was incompetent as a stylist, or because he made the mistake of writing down to an audience of children. Buchan shows a fine appreciation of the child's point of view, particularly of a child's sense of irony. There is eloquent understatement at the end of "The Faraway People," for example, when Donald, on the basis of superior knowledge, presumes to raise the question of the Toonits with his form-master: "The master was more than sceptical. Donald, I fear, argued his case with such vigour that he was accused of disrespect, and was given a hundred lines of *Paradise Lost* as an imposition to improve his manners!"

Despite these virtues, *Lake of Gold* often does give an impression of going no deeper than the plaster; some of the reasons why this is so are to be found in pursuing our comparison with Buchan's models. If *Puck of Pook's Hill* and *Rewards and Fairies* have an impact and a focus that evade *Lake of Gold*, this is in large measure because Kipling's stories, however individually rich and various, also have an explicit unity of theme. Kipling shows, in linked stories, how "the Sword brought the Treasure and the Treasure brought the Law." Kipling is wonderfully adept at keeping his moral – if so we may term this justification of imperialism – out of his story, and yet, time and again, Dan and Una glimpse something of the lonely heroism of those whose sacrifices through the centuries helped establish the Law making England one nation. The thematic complexity and sophistication of Kipling's art, together with his genius for characterization, make these books deep as well as lucid; Kipling himself said that "these tales had to be read by children before people realized that they were meant for grownups."

If *Lake of Gold* lacks the thematic unity and focus of Kipling's work, this is in part due to Buchan's sense of responsibility. Kipling can dwell lovingly on the story of how the people of England became the English people because the question of whether one is Saxon or Norman is something less than a burning issue in modern Sussex, but no man who had been Governor-General of Canada could risk, even in the innocent pastures of children's fantasy, a Canadian analogue to the prophesy of Kipling's *De Aquila*: " 'In fifty years there will be neither Norman nor Saxon [in this country], but all English.' " Such thematic unity as *Lake of Gold* has, it owes to the fact that each story involves, as so much of Buchan's adult fiction does, the crossing of the frontier between the known and the unknown. But here too we see Buchan's sense of decorum at work. Buchan

is not attempting to write *Heart of Darkness*; he seems to have avoided the deeper implications of the frontier-experience in *Lake of Gold* precisely because he connected the hero's journey into the unknown with a descent into the hero's own dark places and quite probably felt this complexity inappropriate to a children's book. In "The Shining Beaches," for example, the doomed leader of a Viking emigration to Canada prophesies that "the High Gods will exact a price for our good fortune, and I think that price will be myself." He is right, of course, but neither this story nor "Cadieux" (which also tells *en passant* the story of Dollard-des-Ormeaux) suggests that the hero must sometimes pay a price more bitter than death. There is nothing in *Lake of Gold* to touch the awful solitude of the anonymous hero of "The Knife and the Naked Chalk," or of Hugh and Sir Richard in "Old Men at Pevensy," or of Kadmiel in "The Treasure and the Law."⁶ Whatever his motive in keeping *Lake of Gold* free from the shadows which fall across his adult fiction, we can certainly agree on the result: Buchan's work lacks the thematic depth to be found in Kipling.

We can also agree, I think, on a more serious shortcoming: that Buchan fails to match Kipling's success because of demonstrable limitations in his narrative technique. Buchan observes in *Memory-Hold-the-Door* that the young Kipling "interested me more because of his matter than his manner." He would have done well to have paid more attention to Kipling's manner of telling a story, and particularly to Kipling's masterful fitting of his tales to the characters of his narrators. In his attempt to give depth to his Canadian characters, Buchan is restricted most cruelly by the limitations of his narrative techniques. Whatever his general competence as a story-teller, Buchan simply does not tell these stories well enough to make his characters compelling. This is sadly evident in the contrast of Puck and Negog. In creating Negog (who must figure, however briefly, in every story since he is Donald's link with the past), Buchan seems determined to throw away his opportunities. Unlike Puck, Negog is not developed as a personality in his own right. Puck shows wit and humour and intelligence — all strong virtues in animating history for children — while Negog is virtually mute. Puck has a rich and vivid knowledge of history, as well as a fascinating set of friends; Negog offers one stolid observation on his magic: " 'A man's mind is the mind also of his ancestors, and what they saw is hidden away somewhere in his heart.' " While Negog has only one function, Puck has many. At times he is as ignorant as Dan and Una of the tale to be told; at others he knows every detail, and Kipling uses him with great finesse as a sort of one-man Chorus, to supply commentary and emphasis. While the friendship of Puck and the children has its own pleasures for Kipling's reader, we learn almost nothing about Negog's relationship with Donald. For all these reasons, Negog cannot offer the richness and variety furnished by Puck. He appears at the beginning of each story, like a piece of stage furniture which must be lumbered into place before the curtain can be raised and the performance begun. Even if he had chosen to fashion Negog by the homely expedient of dressing Puck in buckskin, it is difficult to imagine how Buchan's imitation of Kipling could have been less successful.

Another major difference in narrative technique is in the relationship established between the children and the historical characters they encounter. We have seen that, while Puck is a fully developed character, Negog is merely a bit of machinery. A similar limitation marks most of Buchan's historical characters in *Lake of Gold*; his heroes are somehow made representative and even admirable without ever being made very interesting. Dan and Una meet and befriend many people from the past. Puck and Parnesius and Sir Richard and Hal o' the Draft return in interconnected stories, and the historical interest is subtly deepened and enriched by the cumulative interest we take in the relationship with the children. No such relationship exists in *Lake of Gold* — Donald observes all its heroes but meets none — and Buchan's work is the poorer for it. Kipling establishes point-of-view with ease, since each of his tales is told by one of its principal characters. Since Buchan's stories have no internal narrators, and since there can be no inter-action between Donald and his "ancestors" — as Negog, with more poetry than accuracy, chooses to call them — Buchan is driven to relatively tedious and clumsy devices (such as eavesdropping on Donald's part) merely to supply the reader with vital information.⁷ Where Kipling offers the rich interplay of tale and narrator, Buchan can do no better than to tell us Donald "was looking at a motion picture. . . . What language was spoken did not matter, for whatever it was, he understood it perfectly . . . his comprehension was so complete and so immediate that he might himself have been the producer." While we may regret Buchan's lack of imagination in this matter, what excuse can we make for the craftsman who has so far forgotten the craft of revealing character that he actually sinks to informing his reader that "Donald felt that he liked the boy whose name was Magnus Sinclair, and he could see right into his heart"? There is nothing so crude anywhere in the two works which Buchan took as his models.

In general, we may say that *Lake of Gold* depends far too much on plot alone to sustain the reader's interest, and that it is a pity that Buchan was not more successful in emulating Kipling's handling of character. Since Buchan's child has no personal relationship with the historical figures, Buchan denies himself even the most obvious and simple opportunities to make history touch the lives of his readers. The narrative technique Buchan elects means that there can be nothing in *Lake of Gold* to match what Kipling does, for example, in "A Doctor of Medicine." Kipling exhibits considerable skill in making vivid Nicholas Culpeper's account of the plague: " 'When the plague is so hot in a village that the neighbours shut the roads against 'em, people set a hollowed stone . . . where such as would purchase victual from outside may lay money and the paper of their wants and depart. . . . I saw a silver groat in the water, and the man's list of what he would buy was rain-pulped in his wet hand.' " But Kipling's mastery reveals itself when the children say they "would like to have seen" the plague-stone, and Puck merely points

to the chickens' drinking trough, where they had set their bicycle lamps. It was a rough, oblong stone pan, rather like a small kitchen

sink, which Phillips, who never wastes anything, had found in a ditch and used for his precious hens.

'That?' said Dan and Una, and stared, and stared, and stared.

Buchan is unable to suggest the strangeness of the familiar with such economy — but this is a weakness inherent in his technique, not in his material. Buchan is continually restricted in *Lake of Gold* not by the limitations of his subject but by the limitations of his way of telling a story. Consider, for example, the fact that Donald hears all the stories in the space of a few weeks, while Kipling's stories span approximately eight years in the lives of Dan and Una. In consequence, Buchan forfeits the emotional power and the pathos to be derived from a certain kind of foreshadowing. At the start of *Puck of Pook's Hill*, we learn that Dan and Una "had made a solemn treaty that summer not to call the schoolroom the nursery any more." By the end of *Rewards and Fairies*, the children are significantly older, and Kipling turns this to his advantage. "The Marklake Witches," for example, is a story in which Una, "now getting on for thirteen," meets a young lady who is soon to die of consumption. Neither she nor Una realises this, though the adults in the story — like Kipling's adult readers — are of course aware of it. The sense of mortality, of *et in Arcadia ego*, is masterfully underplayed — one remembers Kipling's beloved daughter Josephine, dead of pneumonia at the age of seven. Una, who has never even met a doctor, walks home uncomprehending, too young to hear the bell that tolls for another. To the adult reader, the story is almost cruel in its intensity. And this too is a kind of effect that, for reasons of technique alone, it is impossible for Buchan to obtain in *Lake of Gold*.

Puck of Pook's Hill and *Rewards and Fairies* are especially remarkable for this bittersweet quality, their ability to convey both the morning sweetness and the doomed innocence of childhood. This they do in part by juxtaposing the calculating realism of the old and the unreflecting idealism of the young. Sometimes this contrast is in the story itself, as in the wonderful moment in "On the Great Wall" when Maximus, a general on the rise, casually offers young Pertinax the life of an uncle who has cheated him of an inheritance. But this sort of contrast is most powerful and suggestive when story and frame meet, when the children provide one of its terms and an historical personage the other. Consider, for example, the story "Gloriana," in which Elizabeth I tells Dan and Una how she knowingly sent to their deaths two young heroes who so adored her that they believed she had the "power to make a god of a man." Una senses something of the Queen's inner struggle but is utterly unable to appreciate the political realities which the Queen dare not ignore. With the terrible candour of the true innocent, Una demands "Why did you do it? . . . I don't think you really knew what you wanted done." To which Elizabeth replies, with something more than irony and patience: "May it please your Majesty . . . this Gloriana . . . was a woman and a Queen. Remember her when you come to your kingdom." Like so many of Kipling's stories in these two volumes, "Gloriana" evokes the shades of the prison-house. We

may note once again that Buchan's limited narrative technique puts such effects as this contrast of innocence and experience utterly beyond his reach in *Lake of Gold*.

Why then should we bother with *Lake of Gold* at all? Not simply because it is a poor thing but perhaps our own. And certainly not because it has a certain value as a compendium of errors to be avoided. Whatever a Canadian writer is, more must go into the making of one than an unusual readiness – and an unusual richness of opportunity – to profit from the failure of one's peers. *Lake of Gold* is perhaps most valuable to us as a reminder that the “Canadian component” of fiction cannot by itself sustain such fiction. John Buchan was far too honest a writer to stoop to the brassy clichés of what a character in one of his early works calls “comic imperial poetry” (“You simply get all the names of places you can think of and string them together, and then put at the end something about the Flag or the Crown or the Old Land”).⁸ He deserves our respect because, in his attempt to bring Canadian history to life, he rightly shuns the naïveté and the cheap cynicism of such a trick and at least avoids insulting the intelligence of his reader in the name of patriotism. Unfortunately, his narrative technique in *Lake of Gold* rarely allows him to display more positive virtues. The comparison with Kipling suggests that in a fully successful work, the “Canadian” quality of setting and background must express itself through situations and characters having some more potent claim on our attention than that conferred by the accidents of geography and historical coincidence. It is here that *Lake of Gold* fails. If a belief in Canadian content is ever to be anything more than a stubborn, parochial loyalty, it must be a belief that here and now, in our own experience, we confront what a more confident age called the eternal verities of human existence. If a work does not make this connection, if “Canadian content” does not serve a story which would be worth telling no matter what its setting, then it matters little whether that story be set in Quebec, in Coquitlam, or in Cokaigine. If *Lake of Gold* “goes no deeper than the plaster,” the reason is in the inferiority of Buchan's technique, not in the inferiority of his material. Whether he did well or badly in choosing Kipling as a model, it is a pity that Buchan did not heed the advice of Hal o' the Draft to “fight the Devil at home ere you call yourself a man and a craftsman.” Kipling faced the Devil at home, and his success in *Puck of Pook's Hill* and *Rewards and Fairies* demonstrates the wisdom of Hal's assertion that the true test of an artist's mettle is not in the work he does among strangers, but in the work he does on his home ground, among his own people. Buchan's failure in *Lake of Gold* suggests that, for the Canadian writer, the Devil who waits at home may turn out to be surprisingly like the Angel who wrestled with Jacob. The struggle, however long and wearying, must ultimately be fruitful; in it, there can be no defeat, except in surrender. Like Jacob, we must hold fast to our opponent. Like John Buchan, we lose only if we let him go before he blesses us.

¹*John Buchan by his Wife and Friends* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1947), p. 277.

²*Lake of Gold* (Toronto: Musson, 1941), illus. S. Levenson, 190 pp. This edition contains a one-paragraph "Foreword" by the author's widow, Susan Buchan. In Britain, the book appeared under the title *The Long Traverse* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1941), illus. J. Morton Sale, 254 pp. This edition contains an "Epilogue," apparently by Susan Buchan, explaining that the book had been left unfinished, and giving a summary of what was to have been the final story, the story which Buchan did not live to complete.

³Janet Adam Smith, *John Buchan, a Biography* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1965), p. 434.

⁴All the stories in *Lake of Gold* concern heroes who cross some sort of frontier into the unknown; this frontier-experience is also central to Buchan's major fiction. More specifically, "The Faraway People" in *Lake of Gold*, a story of the survival of the primitive Toonits into modern times, looks back a long way to "No-Man's-Land" in *The Watcher by the Threshold* (1902), a story about a modern remnant of the Picts who inhabited Scotland in pre-historic times. Similarly, "The Man who Dreamed of Islands" recalls Colin Raden in "The Far Islands" (also in *Watcher*), and the Islands of the West are likewise an important metaphor in *A Prince of the Captivity* (1933).

⁵Buchan's stories are set in many parts of Canada, thus he lacks the advantage Kipling obtains by connecting each story to the Sussex farm on which Dan and Una live.

⁶The hero of "The Knife and the Naked Chalk" gives up an eye in exchange for an iron knife which will save his people from marauding wolves. Awed by his sacrifice, his tribesmen venerate him as a god, and he learns that he must yield the woman he loves to a mortal suitor. Compare this with Buchan's "Big Dog," in which a Piegan brave makes a perilous journey in order to trade his family's medicine bag for muskets to save his people. The story ends not with the true price, as in Kipling, but with the hero's plans to trade for horses next — a happy ending unhappily reminiscent of Graham Greene's censure of "the Scotch admiration of success" in Buchan's late works.

⁷"The Gold of Sagné," "The Man who Dreamed of Islands," and "White Water" are the egregious offenders.

⁸Lady Flora in *A Lodge in the Wilderness* (1906).

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