
Opening Extract from...

The Island of Sheep

Written by John Buchan

Introduction by Andrew Lownie

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Introduction

John Buchan's *The Island of Sheep* – published by his regular UK and US publishers Hodder and Houghton Mifflin in July 1936 – is the forgotten Richard Hannay novel. Written and published a decade after the fourth Hannay adventure *The Three Hostages* (1924), it is often omitted from Hannay omnibuses and understandably so because it has more in common with the novels he was writing in the 1930s than the earlier Hannay adventures.

Although the book features many of the regular characters in the Hannay novels – Sandy Arbuthnot now married with a daughter, Archie Roylance, the spy chief Sir Walter Bullivant now Lord Artinswell, and policeman Macgillivray, the faithful servants Geordie Hamilton and Andrew Amos – it is really a sequel to *The Courts of the Morning* (1929), in which Hannay only briefly figures, and is an opportunity for Sandy and Jacques D'Ingraville to settle their differences.

Hannay's role in *The Island of Sheep* is passive, one of recounting events. The central characters are two teenagers, Hannay's son Peter John and a young girl Anna Haraldsen, and a middle-aged businessman called Lombard whom Hannay had first met when a mining engineer in South Africa. The story revolves around honouring a promise made thirty years earlier by Hannay, Sandy Arbuthnot and Lombard to a wealthy Danish mineralogist Marius Haraldsen to defend his interests and family against a vendetta mounted by aggrieved former business partners.

Buchan had a habit of noting when he started and finished his books at the front of his manuscripts, so we know it was 'Begun

Feb. 1934. Written at Elsfield and finished with difficulty in May 1935 after my appointment to Canada.' However, some material is earlier than that: for example, the first chapter 'Lost Gods' had appeared in an Eton school magazine edited by Buchan's second son William in June 1933.

The book was dedicated to Buchan's eldest son Johnnie, born in 1911, 'who knows the Norlands and the ways of the wild geese', and who appears in the guise of Peter John. Part of the book was inspired by a fortnight's trip that father and son had made to the Faroe Islands, here called The Norlands, in July 1932, but the book also draws on Buchan's youthful memories of his upbringing in the Scottish Borders, his time as a young man in South Africa just after the Boer War, holidays in Norway and his undergraduate interest in the Norse Sagas.

Johnnie Buchan, like Peter John, was a fine naturalist with a particular interest in falconry, and the book, in which even the falcon Morag (Johnnie's was called Jezebel) has an important role in the plot, is a literary meditation on nature. Rich in imagery drawn from nature – the two villains Troth and Barralty are described at one point as 'young rabbits in the badger's jaw' – and with some of Buchan's best descriptive writing, it is a book about regeneration, memorable not so much for its action scenes but its descriptive passages about country life, weather, landscape and place.

Written against the backdrop of the Great Depression and the rise of Hitler and Mussolini, it is an optimistic book, a call to arms that even the most ordinary men, such as the middle-aged financier Lombard can regain their youth and make a difference. As with many of Buchan's books, the characters begin by exhibiting a Calvinistic sense of guilt and duty. They feel a need to be tested in order to prove their worth. *The Island of Sheep*, like *John Macnab*, is about the need for privilege to be earned, about middle-aged men being shaken out of complacency and regaining a zest for life by an important mission. Just as *The Thirty-Nine Steps* opens with Hannay bored with life and *The Courts of the Morning* with Sandy assessing the purpose of

life, *The Island of Sheep* starts with Hannay feeling he is 'too comfortable. I had all the blessings a man can have, but I wasn't earning them'. He is dismayed that his old friend Lombard has been 'absorbed into the great, solid, complacent middle class which he had once despised, and was apparently happy in it. The man whom I had thought of as a young eagle was content to be a barndoor fowl.'

Many of Buchan's characters are men of gypsy temperament forced by need, convention or a sense of duty to take up sedentary occupations and become lawyers, bankers or politicians, from which they can only be freed by exposure to the wilds. It is a further refinement to the continuous border in Buchan's work between the primitive and the civilised. It was something that Buchan himself felt strongly. As he admitted in his memoirs, his real fear as a young man was that 'even a perverse career of action, seemed to me better than a tippling of ale in the shade, for that way lay the cockney suburbanism which was my secret terror'. Gertrude Himmelfarb in an influential essay on Buchan wrote that 'all Buchan's heroes are periodically beset by fatigue and lassitude, a "death-wish" that is overcome by divesting themselves of their urban identities – success being an urban condition – and donning the shabby, anonymous clothes of the countryman'.

So, in *The Island of Sheep*, as with Lewis Haystoun in *The Half-Hearted*, Dickson McCunn in the Huntingtower trilogy, Adam Melfort in *A Prince of the Captivity* and Peter Pentecost in *The Blanket of the Dark*, the characters, most notably Lombard, undergo a spiritual journey with each searching for their Island of Sheep. At the end of the book Lombard concludes: 'The Norlands are a spiritual place which you won't find on any map. Every man must discover his own Island of Sheep. You and Clanroyden have found yours, and I'm going to find mine.'

A strong theme of the book is the search for a sanctuary in a rootless world. The three sections of the book – Fosse, Laverlaw and The Island of Sheep – are respectively the sanctuaries of Richard Hannay, Sandy Arthbuthnot and Lombard but

sanctuaries susceptible to hostile penetration, just as Britain remains exposed to malign outside forces. It is a sanctuary that can only be achieved atavistically in a reclamation of primordial identity as when Haraldsen reverts to 'some wild ancestral type' and temporarily is possessed of great strength in his fight with D'Ingraville and when Anna becomes 'a Viking girl in the Shield-ring': 'Something had been re-born in her out of the ages, some ancient power of domination; and something too had been re-born in her hearers, an ancestral response to her call.' Ironically Buchan now seems to be supporting the very atavism and primitivism he had deplored in *The Three Hostages* ten years earlier.

Buchan had already used the title 'The Island of Sheep' for a fictionalised symposium on the postwar condition of Britain set at a country house on a Hebridean island published in 1919 – one reason for the US title of the 1936 book being changed to *The Man From The Norlands*. Just as that island represented an idyllic refuge after wartime storms, so too the 1936 'Island of Sheep' is a Blessed Isle. Buchan, especially in his early short stories such as 'Fountainblue' and 'The Far Islands' but also in the glades of the Caledonian forest in *Witch Wood*, the Roman mosaic floor in *The Blanket of the Dark*, the arena for the pagan rites of spring in *The Dancing Floor*, was fascinated by the Ancient Greek theme of *Temenos*, a sacred place which is a reservoir of ancient primitive energies in the modern day, and he was to return to further exploration of the concept in his novels of the 1930s such as *A Prince of the Captivity* and *Sick Heart River*.

A criticism of the book has always been that it is difficult to categorise – a hybrid of thriller and rumination on the pull of place in a rootless world. Though there are scenes of great adventure, not least a whale hunt, a car chase from Northamptonshire to the Borders and a cliff top tussle, there isn't the pervading sense of threat found in the earlier Hannay books and it shows signs of being written quickly. As *The Times Literary Supplement* in its review noted, 'John Buchan occasionally requires us to shut our

eyes and swallow some rather tough morsel; but his freshness and ingenuity in the invention of solutions to his crises are unrivalled . . .'

And yet it is also classic Buchan. The villains may be a rather lacklustre lot but they are classic Buchan villains – ordinary, even respected, members of society but with dual personalities and capable of redemption. Barralty 'looks like a half-pay colonel who inhabits the environs of Cheltenham . . . the English country gentleman. In another light he is simply Don Quixote' while though Troth, 'a cross between a Chancery barrister and a Newmarket trainer', is 'a ruffian . . . I don't think he's altogether a rogue . . . in the War he was a really good battalion officer, and very popular with the men . . . he is more of a buccaneer than a swindler.'

Graham Greene, in a famous review of *Sick Heart River*, noted that 'John Buchan was the first to realise the enormous dramatic value of adventure in familiar surroundings happening to unadventurous men', and that is certainly the case in *The Island of Sheep*. Danger can be found anywhere from Norfolk marshes to the roads of Britain. Greene writing about the same novel in the *Spectator* also noticed that 'what is remarkable about these adventure-stories is the completeness of the world they describe. The backgrounds . . . are elaborately worked in.' Buchan's fictional world is a fully realised one covering an enormous range of characters but whose lives interconnect, and *The Island of Sheep* is particularly dense in references to characters and incidents not just from previous Hannay novels but other Buchan series and short stories.

Increasingly critics have become aware of the depth and complexity of Buchan's writing and the hidden subtexts, literary, geographical and historical, and Classical references which here range from Homer, Matthew Arnold and Robert Browning to episodes in African history and the Norse Sagas. A strong influence on the book was Robert Louis Stevenson. Buchan's thrillers had hitherto not featured children as central characters but *The Island of Sheep*, especially the last part, is dominated by

the adventures of Peter John and Anna, placing the book very much in the tradition of *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. Buchan had just finished writing a biography of Walter Scott (1932) and *The Island of Sheep* is replete with Scott references. This is not coincidental. One of the themes of the book, the recovery of an ancestral Northern culture, that fascinated Buchan the politician as well as the writer had also been an important inspiration for Scott and was currently being mobilised by the Nazis. There is also a conscious borrowing as a literary conceit from Joseph Conrad. Just as there are similarities between *Courts of the Morning* and *Nostromo* (1904) – San Tome is the name of the mine in both books – *The Island of Sheep* reaccentuates motifs from Conrad's *Victory* (1915).

The Island of Sheep is one of Buchan's least known books (though in fact there have been four radio productions in 1955, 1966, 1975 and 1983), but, with its various layers of meaning, excellent descriptive writing and several wonderful set pieces of action, it is a book well worth reading after the early Hannay adventures. As *The Times Literary Supplement* wrote in its review:

> If we sometimes feel that John Buchan brings gifts of too high an order to the adornment of stories of mere plot and counterplot, it is his own generosity that prompts the criticism. He is so evidently very much more than a yarn-spinner; and yet as a yarn-spinner so complete a master.

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ONE

Lost Gods

I have never believed, as some people, in omens and forewarnings, for the dramatic things in my life have generally come upon me as suddenly as a tropical thunder-storm. But I have observed that in a queer way I have been sometimes prepared for them by my mind drifting into an unexpected mood. I would remember something I had not thought of for years, or start without reason an unusual line of thought. That was what happened to me on an October evening when I got into the train at Victoria.

That afternoon I had done what for me was a rare thing, and attended a debate in the House of Commons. Lamancha was to make a full-dress speech, and Lamancha on such an occasion is worth hearing. But it was not my friend's eloquence that filled my mind or his deadly handling of interruptions, but a reply which the Colonial Secretary gave to a question before the debate began. A name can sometimes be like a scent or a tune, a key to long-buried memories. When old Melbury spoke the word 'Lombard', my thoughts were set racing down dim alleys of the past. He quoted a memorandum written years ago and incorporated in the report of a certain Commission; 'A very able memorandum,' he called it, 'by a certain Mr Lombard,' which contained the point he wished to make. Able! I should think it was. And the writer! To be described as 'a certain Mr Lombard' showed how completely the man I once knew had dropped out of the world's ken.

I did not do justice to Lamancha's speech, for I thought of Lombard all through it. I thought of him in my taxi going to the station, and, when I had found my compartment, his face

came between me and the pages of my evening paper. I had not thought much about him for years, but now Melbury's chance quotation had started a set of pictures which flitted like a film series before my eyes. I saw Lombard as I had last seen him, dressed a little differently from today, a little fuller in the face than we lean kine who have survived the War, with eyes not blurred from motoring, and voice not high-pitched like ours to override the din of our environment. I saw his smile, the odd quick lift of his chin – and I realized that I was growing old and had left some wonderful things behind me.

The compartment filled up with City men going home to their comfortable southern suburbs. They all had evening papers, and some had morning papers to finish. Most of them appeared to make this journey regularly, for they knew each other, and exchanged market gossip or commented on public affairs. A friendly confidential party; and I sat in my corner looking out of the window at another landscape than what some poet has called 'smoky dwarf houses', and seeing a young man's face which was very different from theirs.

Lombard had come out to East Africa as secretary to a Government Commission, a Commission which he very soon manipulated as he pleased. I met him there when I was sent up on a prospecting job. He was very young then, not more than twenty-five, and he was in his first years at the Bar. He had been at one of the lesser public schools and at Cambridge, had been a good scholar, and was as full as he could hold of books. I remembered our first meeting in a cold camp on the Uasin Gishu plateau, when he quoted and translated a Greek line about the bitter little wind before dawn. But he never paraded his learning, for his desire was to be in complete harmony with his surroundings, and to look very much the pioneer. Those were the old days in East Africa, before the 'Happy Valley' and the remittance man and settlers who wanted self-government, and people's hopes were high. He was full of the heroes of the past, like Roddy Owen and Vandeleur and the Portals, and, except that he was a poor horseman, he had something in

common with them. With his light figure and bleached fair hair and brown skin he looked the very model of the adventurous Englishman. I thought that there might be a touch of the Jew in his ancestry – something high-coloured and foreign at any rate, for he was more expansive and quickly fired than the rest of us. But on the whole he was as English as a Hampshire water-meadow . . .

The compartment was blue with pipe-smoke. My companions were talking about rock-gardens. The man in the corner opposite me was apparently an authority on the subject, and he had much to say about different firms of nursery gardeners. He was blond, plump and baldish, and had a pleasant voice whose tones woke a recollection which I could not fix. I thought that I had probably seen him at some company meeting . . .

My mind went back to Lombard. I remembered how we had sat on a rock one evening looking over the trough of Equatoria, and, as the sun crimsoned the distant olive-green forests, he had told me his ambitions. In those days the afterglow of Cecil Rhodes's spell still lay on Africa, and men could dream dreams. Lombard's were majestic. 'I have got my inspiration,' he told me. His old hankerings after legal or literary or political success at home had gone. He had found a new and masterful purpose.

It was a very young man's talk. I was about his own age, but I had knocked about a bit and saw its crudity. Yet it most deeply impressed me. There were fire and poetry in it, and there was also a pleasant shrewdness. He had had his 'call' and was hastening to answer it. Henceforth his life was to be dedicated to one end, the building up of a British Equatoria, with the highlands of the East and South as the white men's base. It was to be both white man's and black man's country, a new kingdom of Prester John. It was to link up South Africa with Egypt and the Sudan, and thereby complete Rhodes's plan. It was to be a magnet to attract our youth and a settlement ground for our surplus population. It was to carry with it a spiritual renaissance for England. 'When I think,' he cried, 'of the stuffy life at home!

We must bring air into it, and instead of a blind alley give 'em open country . . .'

The talk in the compartment was now of golf. Matches were being fixed up for the following Sunday. My *vis-à-vis* had evidently some repute as a golfer, and was describing how he had managed to lower his handicap. Golf 'shop' is to me the most dismal thing on earth, and I shut my ears to it. 'So I took my mashie, you know, my *little* mashie' – the words seemed to have all the stuffiness of which Lombard had complained. Here in perfection was the smug suburban life from which he had revolted. My thoughts went back to that hilltop 3,000 miles and thirty years away . . .

All of us at that time had talked a little grandiloquently, but with Lombard it was less a rhapsody than a passionate confession of faith. He was not quite certain about the next step in his own career. He had been offered a post on the staff of the Governor of X—, which might be a good jumping-off ground. There was the business side, too. He had the chance of going into the firm of Y—, which was about to spend large sums on African development. Money was important, he said, and cited Rhodes and Beit. He had not made up his mind, but ways and means did not greatly trouble him. His goal was so clear that he would find a road to it.

I do not think that I have ever had a stronger impression of a consuming purpose. Here was one who would never be content to settle among the fatted calves of the world. He might fail, but he would fail superbly.

'Some day,' I said, 'there will be a new British Dominion, and it will be called Lombardy. You have the right sort of name for Empire-making.'

I spoke quite seriously, and he took it seriously.

'Yes, I have thought of that,' he said, 'but it would have to be Lombardia.'

That was not the last time I saw him, for a year later he came down to Rhodesia, again on Government business, and we went through a rather odd experience together. But it was that hour in the African twilight that stuck in my memory. Here

was a man dedicated to a crusade, ready to bend every power of mind and body to a high ambition, and to sacrifice all the softer things of life. I had felt myself in the presence of a young knight-errant, gravely entering upon his vows of service . . .

I looked round the compartment at the flabby eupeptic faces which offered so stark a contrast to the one I remembered. The talk was still of golf, and the plump man was enlarging on a new steel-shafted driver. Well, it required all kinds to make a world . . .

I had not seen Lombard for more than a quarter of a century. I had not even heard his name till that afternoon when Melbury mentioned him in the House. But at first I had often thought of him and waited for his *avatar*. I felt about him as Browning felt about Waring in the poem, for I believed that sooner or later – and rather soon than late – he would in some way or other make for himself a resounding name. I pictured him striding towards his goal, scorning half-achievements and easy repute, waiting patiently on the big chance and the great moment. Death alone, I was convinced, would stop him. And then the War came . . .

The compartment had nearly emptied. Only my *vis-à-vis* remained. He had put up his feet on the seat and was skimming a motoring journal . . .

Yes, I decided, the War had done it. Lombard would of course have fought – he was the kind of man who must – and in some obscure action in some part of the world-wide battle-field death had closed his dreams. Another case of unfulfilled renown. The thought made me melancholy. The fatted calves had always the best of it. Brains and high ambitions had perished, and the world was for the comfortable folk like the man opposite me.

We passed a station, and the next was obviously my companion's destination, for he got up, stretched his legs, and took down a parcel from the rack. He was carrying back the fish for dinner. He folded up his papers and lit a cigarette. Then for the first time he had a proper look at me, and in his face I saw slowly the dawning of recognition. He hesitated, and then he spoke my name.

'Hannay?' he said. 'Isn't it Dick Hannay?'

The voice did the trick with me, for I remembered those precise tones which he had never managed to slur and broaden after our outland fashion. My eyes cleared, and a response clicked in my brain. I saw, behind the well-covered cheeks and the full chin and the high varnish of good living, a leaner and younger face.

'Lombard!' I cried. 'I haven't seen or heard of you for twenty years. Do you know that the Colonial Secretary referred to you in the House this afternoon? I have been thinking of you ever since.'

He grinned and he held out his hand.

'What did he say? Nothing uncomplimentary, I hope. We've been having a bit of a controversy with his department over Irak. I've often heard of *you*, and read about you in the papers, and I've been hoping to run across you some day. You made some splash in the War. You're a K.C.B., aren't you? They offered me a knighthood too, but my firm thought I'd better stand out. Bad luck we didn't spot each other sooner, for I should have liked a yarn with you.'

'So should I,' was my answer. 'We have plenty to talk about.'

He replied to the question in my eye.

'Those were funny old times we had together. Lord, they seem a long way off now. What have I been doing since? Well, I went in for oil. I wish I had taken it up sooner, for I wasted several years chasing my tail. My firm made a pot of money in the War, and we haven't done so badly since.'

He was friendly and obviously glad to see me, but after so long a gap in our acquaintance he found it difficult to come to close quarters. So did I. I could only stare at his bland comfortable face and try in vain to recapture in it something that had gone for ever.

He felt the constraint. As we slackened speed, he dusted his hat, adjusted an aquascutum on his arm, and looked out of the window. I seemed to detect some effort in his geniality.

'I live down here,' he said. 'We mustn't lose sight of each other now we have foregathered. What about lunching together

one day – my club's the Junior Carlton? Or better still, come down to us for a week-end. I can give you quite a decent game of golf.'

The train drew up at a trim little platform covered with smooth yellow gravel, and a red station house, like a Wesleyan chapel, which in June would be smothered with Dorothy Perkins roses. There was a long line of fading geraniums, and several plots of chrysanthemums. Beyond the fence I could see a glistening tarmac road and the trees and lawns of biggish villas. I noticed a shining Daimler drawn up at the station entrance, and on the platform was a woman like a full-blown peony, to whom Lombard waved his hand.

'My wife,' he said, as he got out. 'I'd like you to meet her . . . It's been great seeing you again. I've got a nice little place down here . . . Promise you'll come to us for some week-end. Beryl will write to you.'

I continued my journey – I was going down to the Solent to see about laying up my boat, for I had lately taken to a mild sort of yachting – in an odd frame of mind. I experienced what was rare with me – a considerable dissatisfaction with life. Lombard had been absorbed into the great, solid, complacent middle class which he had once despised, and was apparently happy in it. The man whom I had thought of as a young eagle was content to be a barndoor fowl. Well, if he was satisfied, it was no business of mine, but I had a dreary sense of the fragility of hopes and dreams.

It was about myself that I felt most dismally. Lombard's youth had gone, but so had my own. Lombard was settled like Moab on his lees, but so was I. We all make pictures of ourselves that we try to live up to, and mine had always been of somebody hard and taut who could preserve to the last day of life a decent vigour of spirit. Well, I kept my body in fair training by exercise, but I realized that my soul was in danger of fatty degeneration. I was too comfortable. I had all the blessings a man can have, but I wasn't earning them. I tried to tell myself that I deserved

a little peace and quiet, but I got no good from that reflection, for it meant that I had accepted old age. What were my hobbies and my easy days but the consolations of senility? I looked at my face in the mirror in the carriage back, and it disgusted me, for it reminded me of my recent companions who had pattered about golf. Then I became angry with myself. 'You are a fool,' I said. 'You are becoming soft and elderly, which is the law of life, and you haven't the grit to grow old cheerfully.' That put a stopper on my complaints, but it left me dejected and only half-convinced.