

*“Queers, wimin and other forms of alien life”*

**Recommended reading for your next hols - *Greenmantle* by John Buchan - reviewed by Verity Smith**

I saw a copy of *Greenmantle* by chance in my local library and so took it out as light reading. Although, like everyone else, over the years I've seen several film and TV versions of *The Thirty Nine Steps*, I knew nothing about this particular novel. It lies at the quality end of the ripping yarn sub-genre and since it was published in 1916, concerns spies working behind enemy lines and in other exotic locations, and fascinates by the light it sheds on the ideology of those in authority in our islands at that time. The characters are Hooray Henry to a degree, lovers of daring-do who are scared stiff by women, and possessed of a lofty and unselfconscious sense of superiority over every other nation on our planet. Reading it made me feel immensely grateful to be a member of a European Community which, as it continues to expand, forbids me from hating or feeling superior to an ever increasing number of ever more disparate peoples. This said, it isn't possible to read *Greenmantle* with a sustained sneer on one's face. For a start it's nothing if not well written and is also a page-turner. Buchan was a highly intelligent and sophisticated man who was to be our Governor General in Canada between 1935-1940. He worked for British intelligence in World War I and *Greenmantle* is, among other things, an example of integration propaganda: how else could you account for the protagonist exclaiming after the carnage at Loos (September 1915) that he was "looking forward to being in at the finish with Brother Boche." Such a comment can only astound present-day readers who have been taught to regard World War I as the nadir of modern warfare, with its wanton disregard of young human life, crude weapons of mass destruction and obsolete military strategy.

One disconcerting feature of *Greenmantle* is that it manages to be at one at the same time so dated as to make one laugh aloud, but also disturbingly prophetic and disturbingly topical. The last of these to the extent that after the July 2007 London massacres, the BBC cancelled its plan to broadcast *Greenmantle* in its Book at Bedtime series. What then causes this very mixed reaction in contemporary readers? Well, for a start one of the more prominent German characters, Colonel von Stumm, has homosexual tendencies. At one point, our hero Major Hannay is in von Stumm's castle and, invited into an inner sanctum, is taken aback by what he sees:

At first sight you would have said that it was a woman's drawing-room [ ] But it wasn't. I soon saw the difference. There had never been a woman's hand in that place. It was the room of a man who had a passion for frippery, who had a perverted taste for soft delicate things. It was the complement to his bluff brutality. I began to see the

queer other side to my host, that evil side which gossip had spoken of as not unknown in the German army.

This, though, is not the only form of gender 'evil' apparently rampant in Germany at the time. There is also the beautiful, mesmerising, slender, blond (etc, etc) figure of Hilda von Einem, mad and bad but chiefly the latter. Nietzsche's notion of the Superman needs rectifying, says Buchan, because such a figure could never come into being; however, the notion of a Superwoman is just possible. Why? Well, gentle and perspicacious reader, because unlike men, women do not have a sense of humour which would rein them in and prevent excesses: "Women have got a perilous logic which we never have, and some of the best of them don't see the joke of life like an ordinary man." Why did Buchan feel so threatened by women at this moment in history? Not by chance in *The Thirty Nine Steps*, the female protagonist is a suffragette. During World War I the appearance of London and of other British cities was feminized because all the younger men were at the front. There were London tube stations that were entirely "manned" by women. Women were to be granted a partial suffrage in 1918, just two years after the publication of *Greenmantle*. Because Hilda von Einem represents "the enemy," Buchan can pour his prejudices and fears into this figure without being taken to task by the more progressive men and women back home.

Supposedly, and unsurprisingly in the context of the period, Buchan was anti-semitic, and it is true that there are instances of casual anti-semitism in this novel as there are, for that matter of anti- Dutch, anti-Boer, anti-Turkish, etc. sentiments. Despite these prejudices Buchan shows shrewdness when he addresses what he sees as qualities to be found in the German Jew that his Aryan equivalent lacks: " He [the German Aryan] may have plenty of brains ...but he had the poorest notion of psychology of any of God's creatures. In Germany only the Jew can get outside himself, and that is why ... you will find that the Jew is at the back of most German enterprises." Somewhere in a trench on the Western front, a young German corporal was brooding over this and related subjects ...

Another key form of alien life is Greenmantle himself, an Osama Bin Laden figure who is dying of cancer and is being manipulated in his dying days by Hilda von Einem. Greenmantle is a Moslem prophet with a message of renewal and a call to the simple life for his fellow Muslims. The Germans plan to use him to destabilize the British in the Middle East. It is hardly surprising that in late 2007 the BBC should have dropped its plan to serialize *Greenmantle* on Radio 4!

The late Victorian and Edwardian periods are particularly rich in quality popular fiction which sheds much light on this imperialist era: Kipling (for *Kim*), Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard Erskine Childers (for *The Riddle of the Sands*), Buchan, and among more serious

literary texts, Conrad's *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*. It is hardly surprising that these texts should figure prominently in university courses on cultural studies.

*Greenmantle* addresses (with inevitable disapproval) two important strands in our community here at St James's, namely women and gays. However, it is a ripping yarn that does not address Africa. Any volunteer readers for *King Solomon's Mines* or *She*?

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