

How Books Can Influence One's Life

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This isn't a "book review" in the traditional sense. I would like to tell you about one particular writer and his family (which included an author sister) and how they influenced my life. Then, with that as the example, I would like to touch briefly on the challenge we have as Christians to be selective in our reading.

I would like to venture the thought that books read in the teenage years can set the pace of one's reading for life. And also that these same books do have a definite influence on the life of the reader – even without them being aware of it. It is only now in retrospect that I can sit with these Buchan books and see where they fit into my life.

When I was 16 I picked up and read my first autobiography. The name of it was *Memory Hold the Door* and it was written by John Buchan, Lord Tweedsmuir, the recent Governor General of my country, Canada. I can remember to this day the excitement that I experienced as I read this book. It opened up a new world to me and I liked to refer to John Buchan as a "kindred spirit".

John Buchan was a very popular Governor-General. You may wonder what that term means – to be a Governor General. Although Canada was completely self-governing, the office of Governor-General was established as a link with Britain and the throne. The Governor-General was a representative of the King or Queen as the case might be. Throughout his term in Canada John Buchan was working quietly on his autobiography which he intended to publish on his retirement. The manuscript reached the publishers only two weeks before his death. Because of the small population of Canada such a public figure was very well known.

When you read a person's last book and are attracted to his style of writing you immediately search for his earlier writings.

Perhaps I should fill in a bit on my background for those of you who don't know anything about me. My home town – Portage la Prairie, Manitoba – was the fourth largest in that vast prairie province – and yet it only had 8000 of a population! I wish you could picture our library facilities. Two rooms in the downstairs of a gloomy-looking brown frame house. The walls lined with books to the ceiling so that you had to use a step-ladder. Book dividers down the center of the room as well. New publications were kept out of reach behind the librarian's desk and only handed out on request. Children were simply not catered to and the junior section was very, very small. The books in the second room seemed all to have been printed in the 1800's. Soon after reading *Memory Hold the Door* I discovered most of John Buchan's adventure series and eagerly read them. He actually had specialized in biography himself – writing about Cromwell and Montrose – but I have never been able to get hold of these books, and his adventures were written more for his own relaxation and as an outcome of the research which one has to do to write a good biography.

Let me read part of a paragraph close to the beginning of the book and perhaps you will realize what was so special about his family.

“Our household was ruled by the old Calvinistic discipline. That discipline can have had none of the harshness against which so many have revolted, for it did not dim the beauty and interest of the earth. My father was a man of wide culture, to whom, in the words of the Psalms, all things were full of the goodness of the Lord. But the regime made a solemn background to a child’s life. He was conscious of living in a world ruled by unalterable law under the direct eye of the Almighty. He was a miserable atom, as compared with Omnipotence, but an atom, nevertheless, in which Omnipotence took an acute interest. The words of the Bible, from daily family prayers and long Sabbath sessions, were as familiar to him as the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. A child has a natural love of rhetoric, and the noble scriptural cadences had their own meaning for me, quite apart from their proper interpretation. The consequence was that I built up a Bible world of my own and placed it in the woods.”

There was another series of books by a writer called O. Douglas and these became my special favorites – O. Douglas turned out to be none other than Anna Buchan – and her stories were unlike her brother’s because she based her stories on the events of their family life.

The Buchan’s home was a parsonage. They weren’t rich but they had a wonderful father and mother who provided them with a fine Christian upbringing and a tremendous love of mankind. To me they are the personification of that command which we hear every Sunday in our churches – “To love God with all our hearts and our neighbor as ourselves”. When John Buchan went to Oxford to study he found that he had already done all his required reading from his father’s extensive library. And Anna Buchan adopted a style of writing in her novels in which each chapter began with some quotation from a favorite author. (Illus. – so from both of them you felt their love of good books also.)

This thread of Calvinistic-Presbyterian upbringing had its influence on me. I am confident of that because I admired this family so much that I know I deliberately set out to learn from them – if they admired a book – then I tried to get hold of it and read it too. I too was brought up in a Christian home but our small prairie town did not offer much in the way of books. Being an avid reader I was forced to re-read old favorites, and I don’t suppose I could count how many times I read every Buchan book.

Five years after *Memory Hold the Door* Anna Buchan wrote a biography of her brother entitled *Unforgettable, Unforgotten*. A beautiful title. This homey book gave one a chance to become closely acquainted with the whole Buchan family. To quote the preface:

“To my gentle readers. You who read so faithfully my books may, perhaps, be interested in this family chronicle. It was written in an effort to lighten dark days by remembering happier ones. My brother John used to say that when he wrote stories he invented, but that I in my books was always remembering. Here in this chronicle is the fount of all my memories.”

In 1948 I set out for the British Isles to realize a dream that I had saved for since I was a little girl. I wanted to meet my cousins and to see my parent's homeland. After visiting with relatives in southern England I traveled north to friends in Edinburgh. My heart seemed to be a Scottish as it was English. I fell in love with the Scottish countryside and the friendliness of its people. One day we visited Peebles, a small village in the border land between Scotland and England. This was the part of the country where the Buchan children spent every summer vacation at their grandparents. Many of the O. Douglas books were written about this locality. I wondered if I would recognize anything. Can you imagine how excited I was to find that I did recognize a certain house from its descriptions in a book called *Jane's Parlor*, and then I purchased the town's guide book (every town has a guidebook) and found I was correct. One other day we went across the Firth of Forth to the county of Fife and I found myself at the very spot which gave John Buchan the idea for the title of his first book *The Thirty-nine Steps*.

Within the pages of both these sets of books lived very real people who loved God, loved life, respected the elderly, saw something important in everyone (even the social climber, or the unlovely) people who were content with their hum-drum lives, and people who loved to read. It was like having a private tutor. I tried to absorb it as much as possible.

And I really believe that this is partly why when my husband and I were reading *The Banner* and enjoying *The Church in History* by R. B. Kuiper; when we were reading the Back to God Hour sermons – in those first years of our married life – while we were still living in Syria – while we were thrilling to the discovery of this church which still preached the Word of God and which had such splendid publications – I could feel that I had found “my” church.

The church of my childhood was anything but the true church. We had so many liberal preachers and so very little “teaching” ministry. It wasn't till my teenage years and the hearing of an English evangelist that I discovered the verse “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should have everlasting life”. Believe it or not it was possible to attend church faithfully, and never miss Sunday School and come out of it all with very little knowledge of the contents of the Bible. I am still handicapped by the fact that we never even memorized the Ten Commandments.

To get back to John Buchan. Several years later there was another volume entitled *John Buchan, by His Wife and Friends*. No one wanted to forget John Buchan. I should mention here that in his own autobiography you were most struck with the fact that it really was more about his own friends than himself. John Buchan enjoyed some tremendous friendships and so many of his age were killed in the First World War. Now it was the turn of other friends to write what they remembered. One of them, G. Trevelyan, said this:

“Whenever I saw John Buchan, even in later years when illness did what illness could to clog his activity, I always felt ashamed in his presence that I was not more active, that I did not make more of the wonderful and variegated world of nature and of man, of past and of present, that was our common heritage. One's own little fire was feeble beside his sun like warmth, but it was part of the world which meant so much to him, and his interest in one seemed to add to one's value. How many men and women of all sorts and

conditions have come away from seeing John Buchan feeling just like that, going back the stronger to meet the world and wave of men.” (Trevelyan was a famous British historian and writer!)

Another quote (164-165)

“When he had been repeatedly ill, baffling physicians and surgeons, John Buchan was persuaded to visit a world-famous Continental psychiatrist, a man noted for tracing such physical ailments as duodenal ulcers to psychic disorders in the patient. He submitted himself to examination and was long closeted with the specialist. The verdict: ‘Never in my experience have I met anybody less frustrated or less crippled by inhibitions. He is free from neuroses. His trouble must be wholly of physical origin.’

“Out of my own later and different knowledge of him I believe this to be true. In John Buchan’s lifelong, dual activity (as an author and as a public servant) there was no confusion, no impoverishing conflict, but rather a recreative interplay between realism and romance, between fact and fancy, between the business and the dream But there was more to it than that. He recognized the essential strangeness, the tragedy, the pathos in things. But he submitted all ultimate questions to the ruling of the Christian faith, which he accepted absolutely. It was no more than the truth that was spoken of him by Kenneth de Courcy when he said, ‘He was a supremely honest Christian gentleman, whose faith was simple, unshakable and inspired.’”

How different from some of our present-day public servants. This meant a great deal to me. I have always been convinced that Christians can seek the highest offices and still be known as Christians.

I considered myself early to belong to the great circle of Buchan friends. It was as if they invited this feeling. To illustrate this I would like to read part of a chapter now from his sister’s book in which she remarks on this very fact.

“Mr. Ferris Greenslet, writing of his old friend in his book says, ‘He made quite literally a million friends. When I went to Ottawa, the week of his death, porters, conductors, small shopkeepers, men in the street, spoke of him with broken voices.’

“That is what strikes one most in all that was said and written of him, the note of personal affection and loss.

“To take two instances:

“‘It is the simple unadorned truth to say that we loved this man. There was that about him which made a universal appeal. We saw in him an emergence of that quality of life which in our own best moments we all long to possess.’”

“A leader in *The Ottawa Journal* begins:

‘This extraordinary grief for Lord Tweedsmuir, bowing alike the heads of the great and humble, coming from all races and classes and creeds, what does it tell? Surely that life today, plagued though it be by demagogues and dictators, afflicted by strife and hate, and cursed by false philosophies and ideologies, still gives its heart in affection and homage to the best in man.’ . . .

“Many beautiful things were said to us in the thousands of letters that came from all over the world, and they helped, for lovely words have a healing quality, but nothing touched me more than the simple sentence of a girl in a Princes Street shop. [Princes Street is the Michigan Avenue of Edinburgh] I had been sending some cake and sweets to my nephews and she asked me to put my name and address on the back of the order. I scribbled ‘Buchan, Peebles,’ and she said:

‘Are you John Buchan’s sister?’

“The tears that sprang to my eyes at the unexpected question answered her, and for a moment in that crowded shop we looked at each other sorrowfully, as she said

‘He must be an awful miss.’”

And I still don’t read those words without tears coming to my eyes too.

But to come back to *Memory Hold the Door* – and my own introduction to serious writing. I hope you will suffer me to read one more quotation – and I would ask you to think what an influence such writing could have on a teenager. I am still looking for more positive writing to come out of our circles. Original and wholesome – writing which is a kind of sharing of all the blessings which we enjoy.

John Buchan said: (p. 306-307)

“Today the quality of our religion is being put to the test. The conflict is not only between the graces of civilization and the rawness of barbarism. More is being challenged than the system of ethics which we believe to be the basis of our laws and liberties. I am of Blake’s view: ‘Man must and will have some religion; if he has not the religion of Jesus he will have the religion of Satan, and will erect a synagogue of Satan.’ There have been high civilizations in the past which have not been Christian, but in the world as we know it I believe that civilization must have a Christian basis, and must ultimately rest on the Christian Church. Today the Faith is being attacked, and the attack is succeeding. Thirty years ago Europe was nominally a Christian continent. It is no longer so. In Europe, as in the era before Constantine, Christianity is in a minority. What Gladstone wrote seventy years ago, in a moment of depression, has become a shattering truth: ‘I am convinced that the welfare of mankind does not now depend on the State and the world of politics; the real battle is being fought in the world of thought, where a deadly attack is made with great tenacity of purpose and over a wide field upon the greatest treasure of mankind, the belief in God and the Gospel of Christ.’”

Now I think you will be surprised to find that I am not recommending that you yourselves should try to read all the Buchan books. I really doubt that you would like them. They belong to a different age and certainly to a different environment. They are so British that they might be rather annoying.

But there is a command in the New Testament which many of us think relates to our choice of reading matter. It is the passage from Philippians 4:8

“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

We have an exciting responsibility to provide ourselves with reading matter which will assist our Christian growth and also to lead our children into the delights of selective reading. There is so much more to choose from nowadays. And with it the necessity of making choices.

There are some authors popular today which I can imagine having a very deep influence on those who read them. In the children’s section there is a very homespun goldmine in the rather recent Laura Ingalls Wilder books. Here is a delightful series of very true stories which actually portray a definite time period in American history. I was fortunate enough to discover them early and spend many Sunday afternoons reading them aloud to our children.

Another author who has earned a very excellent reputation for her Christian novels is Grace Irwin. Now Miss Irwin has not written a biography but one of her novels entitled *In Little Place* seems to be very much the story of her own life. It is always exciting to find out more about a favorite author and understand better how they get to write as they do. She has written a trilogy in a different kind of way. *Least of All Saints* appeared in 1952 – then some years later there was a follow-up to that book with one called *Andrew Connington*. And in about 1969 she wrote a third book with a strange title *Contend With Horses*. The time lapse in the writing of these books makes them seem more like true stories because there is that kind of a time lapse in the books. They are all about a minister and the last one is of the minister after his family has grown up – and you get to see his growth in grace – his strength of faith – and a very beautiful portrayal of lasting love for his wife. Books you can build on.

Perhaps the most rewarding author to get to know for this day and age is C. S. Lewis. If you were to start with his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy* – then you would appreciate all the more the series of children’s stories that he wrote – the famous *Narnia* books. This brilliant author has given us so many books which can strengthen one’s faith. *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*, *The Screwtape Letters* etc. His adult science fiction isn’t for everyone as not all of us can take that much imagination. But there is much non-fiction which is very, very clear and easy to read.

We are all aware of the hazard of recommending books. Sometimes that which touches us the most will not appeal to our friends. But, I would like to return to the original theme of this talk – that books can really have an influence on one’s life.

I am fond of quoting verses from *Ulysses* a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson which I had to memorize in school and which I must have taken very much to heart:

I am a part of all that I have met,
Yet all experience is an arch where thro
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end
To rush unburnished, not to shine in use!

I took that so seriously that I have always been consciously testing both books and publishers. I would far sooner read one favorite book over again than force myself to wade through something which I find to be theologically unsound or simply not uplifting in any way.

We will be doing our young people a favor if we can get them attracted to the biography section of our church library. Instinctively we all like to learn from the lives of others. We are looking for good patterns for our life – just as we hunt for a dress pattern! I thank God for providing me with this pattern – you have your heritage – if only we could begin to share it.