

# —Up Country—

## —The Tweedsmuir—

by Carol Bennett

I sometimes think that one of the best things to happen to this country was the invention of the "Tweedsmuir history". These books are of local history compiled by branches of the Women's Institute, and many of them are excellent pieces of work.

National history books which record battles and political upheaval are all very well in their way. Of more importance to the ordinary person are the small, domestic details in local communities.

Does anyone really care that Granny lived to be 102, or that lightning struck the town hall in 1898? I think that we do care. It is these small human details that make up our daily lives. Discovering how our forebears lived will tell us who we really are.

The history books of the Ontario Women's Institutes were named for Lord and Lady Tweedsmuir, Lord Tweedsmuir being Governor-General of Canada from 1935 until his death in 1940.

Lady Tweedsmuir wrote... "your village histories will be the basis of accurate facts much valued by historians of the future. I am proud to think that you have called them The Tweedsmuir Village Histories."

Well, this is true. I have had a great deal of help, yes, and pleasure too from reading some of these Tweedsmuir books while doing historical research. Strangely enough, some of my enthusiasm for reading and for history stems from another sort of Tweedsmuir book.

Lord Tweedsmuir was also known as the great author, John Buchan. His books have become classics, and perhaps the most famous is *The Thirty-nine Steps*, which has been made into a movie on at least three different occasions.

When I was still quite young, someone gave me a copy of *Prester John*, which was written in 1910. This is an exciting adventure story set mainly in South Africa, and Buchan wrote it originally as a book for boys.

Apart from the story itself, I found the language magnificent. This may be measured by the fact that I learned a poem in which Buchan dedicated the book to a friend, because the words ran together so well. I dreaded having to learn poetry at school, so Buchan obviously made an impression.

Time, they say, must be the best of us capture.  
And travel and battle and gems and gold

No more can kindle the ancient rapture,  
For even the youngest of hearts grows old.

But in you, I think, the boy is not over,  
So that this medley of ways and wars  
As the gift of a friend, and a fellow lover  
Of the fairest country under the stars."

Buchan's work seems to have gone out of fashion these days, but luckily the books are still to be found on the library shelves. Recently I re-read some of these books, and was pleased to find that *Prester John* still holds some of the old magic.

The books are out of date because there is a great deal of talk about the British Empire, and the obligations of the privileged classes. A few years and revolutions have taken place since they were written, and we view life differently today.

However, for those who can keep these things in their proper context — after all, the Empire was a fact of life in 1910 — the books are timeless.

The adventures of the characters are just as gripping as today's modern thrillers. The writing is that of man with tremendous intelligence, and fantastic knowledge. His language is thought-provoking.

Take, for instance, his book *The Island of Sheep*. One of the characters speaks of men who once were full of adventure but who now stagnate among everyday things, all thoughts of peril and hardship forgotten. "The man whom I had thought of as a young eagle was content to be a barndoor fowl."

Later he remarks sadly that he had thought of himself as remaining young and vigorous, but reality is now setting in.

"I kept my body in fair training by exercise, but I realized that my soul was in danger of fatty degeneration... I had all the blessings a man could have, but I wasn't earning them."

It makes you think. People knew all about the mid-life crisis before *Passages* was written! What about you — are you an eagle or a barn door fowl?

I've wondered sometimes why some books become classics while others fade into obscurity. Perhaps it's as simple as the difference between one man and another.

Buchan's books are for people of all ages, for what John Buchan recognized in people are simply the things that we know about ourselves.