An American Abroad: Perceptions of Americans in Buchan’s WWI Thriller, *Greenmantle*

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John Buchan is widely considered to be the father of the spy thriller, and in some respects, there’s no argument against it. Through the development of a character that offers no specialized training and little by way of skills in espionage and warfare, John Buchan’s Richard Hannay represents a form of British ideology that focuses on the strength and perseverance of a common man that is thrown into and subsequently overcomes adverse situations. In Buchan’s first Richard Hannay novel, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Hannay is a marked man because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time as a German plot to start the first world war unfolds. Because he is a man of no special talents, when he teams up with other, more experienced people on his mission in the second Hannay novel, *Greenmantle*, Hannay challenges the perception of foreigners. Although Hannay has several companions on his mission, this talk will focus specifically on John Blenkiron, an overweight American of somewhat ill health. While Blenkiron only appears in two of Buchan’s Richard Hannay novels, he also appears in two novels outside of Hannay’s adventures. For the sake of time and relevance, I’ll limit my evaluation of Blenkiron’s presentation to his role in 1916’s *Greenmantle* as it is the first Richard Hannay novel to feature Blenkiron as well as being set during World War I.

Because of the imminent threat and sheer danger of the mission into Turkey to decipher the secret three-word code hastily scribbled on a scrap of paper, Hannay has, by way of Sir Walter, been teamed up with an old friend, Peter Pienaar, and the American John Blenkiron. While Blenkiron becomes a trusted associate of Hannay as the novel progresses, he is first described as “a sleepy Yankee” who “suffer[s]…from dyspepsia—duodenal dyspepsia. It gets me two hours after a meal and gives me hell just below the breast-bone. So I am obliged to adopt a diet. My nourishment is fish, Sir, and boiled milk and a little dry toast” (Buchan 29). Although Blenkiron’s weak disposition limits what he can eat, readers are encouraged to believe that it is his American ideology that prevents him from serving war efforts. However, he is vocal about his unique desire to participate in the glory of battle: “but these eyes have seen nothing gorier than a Presidential election. Say, is there any way I could be let into a scene of real bloodshed?” (Buchan 29-30). Although Blenkiron plays a significant role in the novel as an expert in espionage with experience and an ability to travel freely through enemy territory, Hannay’s continuous evaluation of his behaviors and actions suggest that, like adventure novels in themselves, Buchan is critically disguising Blenkiron as an American that puts the group and mission at risk with his casual attitude toward the plan because of his American neutrality. Furthermore, while Hannay is skeptical of Blenkiron’s abilities, he is also threatened by them because Hannay is an amateur whereas Blenkiron is not.

Interestingly enough, I’m not the first to suggest that Blenkiron’s presence in the novel is meant to catch the attention of readers. In a 2005 article in the *Telegraph*, Charles Moore writes,
The book appeared in the middle of the First World War, and one of its propaganda purposes was to get America in on our side (which happened the following year, 1917). This explains the otherwise superfluous presence of a character called Mr. Blenkiron, a fat, brave, dyspeptic American, who joins the heroes’ clandestine struggle against Germany.

Moore’s casual assessment of the novel never fully ascertains the full scope of Buchan’s understanding of America’s would-be role or addresses just how Blenkiron’s appearance would usher America into the war. Indeed, it is my argument here that the introduction of Blenkiron suggests that America’s complacency was a cultural code to be unconsciously read into the text while also framing British fears of being overshadowed by that very intervention.

Blenkiron’s portrayal of an American operative without real war experience represents Americans at large, however, the importance of that representation depends on, as Allan Hepburn recognizes, an understanding of spies that “challenge narrow definitions of political agency. Ideology produces spies, but spies…temper ideology” (xiv). If Blenkiron is the representation of tempered American ideology, the issue of authentic ideology cannot effectively be raised. Throughout the novel, Blenkiron is the only American with a real role in the plot, however, he is painfully clear that his actions are his own and do not reflect those of his countrymen. As a result of Buchan’s narrative, Blenkiron is less of a manifestation of ideologies because his character is not an average American in the same way Hannay is an average Englishman. Instead, Blenkiron can be read as a tool to evaluate British ideological perceptions of Americans. This critical evaluation, according to Michael Denning’s work on ideology in spy thrillers, “formulates a theory of disguise, an explanation of impersonation,” that spy novels engage in an attempt to mask the code of ideology (45). After the initial introduction to Blenkiron, mentioned earlier, the novel demands, according to directions of Sir Walter Bullivant, that Hannay must form his own opinion of Blenkiron before learning what others believe: “His name is Mr. John Scantlebury Blenkiron, now a citizen of Boston, Mass., but born and raised in Indiana. Put this envelope in your pocket, but don't read its contents till you have talked to him” (109). Although instructed to form his own opinion, Bullivant’s mere recommendation suggests a skillset that can be helpful to the mission, but skillset is never in question when it comes to Blenkiron.

Bullivant and Hannay’s concerns lie within Blenkiron’s ability to mesh or blend with the group cultural dynamic as well as Blenkiron’s perception of current war effort. Although confronted with existing American war involvement, Blenkiron dismisses it as “some belligerent stunt,” and then goes on to add,

But I reflected that the good God had not given John S. Blenkiron the kind of martial figure that would do credit to the tented field. Also I recollected that we Americans were nootrails—benevolent nootrails—and that it did not become me to be butting into the struggles of the effete monarchies of Europe (Buchan 110).

Although Blenkiron’s assessment of the larger US mindset was not far from reality, the way Buchan frames Blenkiron as a character on the edge of action is a facet of the thriller genre in itself.

In Denning’s Cover Stories, the study of the genre focuses on the perception of reality from within the actions and descriptions of the characters, and although Denning’s work focuses primarily on Cold War era spy fiction, Buchan’s construction of Blenkiron through the lens and perception of Hannay is suggestive of a much larger view of American involvement. In an analysis of Lukacs’
work, Denning suggests “the spy novel, despite its preservation of plot, has a strategic
containment of realism in its short-cut to the totality…its focus on the world of espionage
does not necessarily make it about spies” (29). The question is then, what if any, is the historical
context of Buchan’s inclusion of Blenkiron as a player in the novel? In the planning of their quest,
Blenkiron’s longwinded decision to hide in plain sight as he traveled through Germany alone
demonstrates an awareness of the tension between America and Europe about their position of
neutrality:

If I were to buy a pair of false whiskers and dye my hair and dress like a Baptist parson
and go into Germany on the peace racket, I guess they'd be on my trail like a knife, and I
should be shot as a spy inside of a week or doing solitary in the Moabite prison. But they
lack the larger vision. They can be bluffed, Sir. With your approval I shall visit the
Fatherland as John S. Blenkiron, once a thorn in the side of their brightest boys on the other
side. But it will be a different John S. I reckon he will have experienced a change of heart.
(Buchan 117-118)

Certainly, Blenkiron’s position as ruffled traveler suggests a tension from the authorial
perspective. Indeed, although Buchan’s portrayal of Blenkiron as trustworthy and engaged is never
questioned throughout the novel, it is his appearance and acceptance as an American that exists
outside of the realm of other Americans that fosters an underlying commentary about the American
position in war. This suggests that Buchan is, in essence, writing a novel of encoded meaning in
the writing of Greenmantle.

As I mentioned earlier, Hannay’s entire adventure is built from three hastily scribbled words on a
scrap of paper. Those three words, “Kasredin,' 'cancer', and 'v. I,” represent an encrypted message
that acts as the key to the entire plot (Buchan 107). Using this novel as an example in demonstrating
the qualities of code breaking in espionage and thriller novels, Hepburn suggests that “breaking a
code ushers a reader or a spy over a threshold of ignorance and into the domain of knowledge”
(50). If the novel’s plot can be read as an attempt to bring a resourceful American into the fold to
help break the code, and therefore to bring him over that threshold of ignorance and into
knowledge, then perhaps, to dwell on and expand Charles Moore’s assertion that the novel was an
attempt to draw the US into the conflict, it was more to suggest to readers that the American
neutrality could be an advantage if played from the right perspective. The novel confirms this
advantage when, in a conversation between Sir Walter and Hannay, Blenkiron’s effectiveness is
called into question: “Our friend's motto is ‘Thorough’,” he said, “and he knows very well what he
is about’” (Buchan 121). Indeed, by effectively playing his part well and hiding in plain sight after
the plan has been set, Blenkiron disappears from the novel for nearly one hundred pages only to
reappear in the company of the German officer, Stumm, who has detained Hannay, who is
disguised as a South African Dutchman. While Hannay’s narration conveys a sense of surprise at
Blenkiron’s appearance, the thoroughness of Blenkiron’s attitude never seems to waver.

Blenkiron’s skills in deception play an important role in understanding Buchan’s larger encoded
understanding of the American issue (or lack thereof) in the first World War. While Buchan has
until this point in the novel framed Blenkiron as an American of different pedigree than other,
conventional Americans, the more frequently Blenkiron pops up in the novel without revealing his
mission, the more Hannay has to adapt or change his identity to remain hidden. Perhaps this is a
genre feature, one such as Allan Hepburn notes: “Spy fiction emphasizes problems of racial
integration, threats from other nations, and armament” (52). Even if that emphasis is squarely
placed on Blenkiron’s ability to integrate himself into German society, the problem is that his status as an American has prevented him from working in the right circles when later talking.

I was too high up and refined. I’ve been processing through Europe like Barnum’s Circus, and living with generals and transparencies…. But the thing I was after wasn’t to be found on my beat, for those that knew it weren’t going to tell. In that kind of society they don't get drunk and blab after their tenth cocktail (Buchan 204).

It is at this point in the novel that readers are finally able to crack Buchan’s code because the problem for Hannay was not that he had been unsuccessful in getting through Germany and into Constantinople, but that he was concerned that Blenkiron would be successful; “I was mean enough to feel rather glad. He had been the professional with the best chance. It would be a good joke if the amateur succeeded where the expert failed” (Buchan 205). Although Blenkiron’s success would have been helpful to the mission, because Hannay views him as a professional, or at least a trained spy, the perception of success is different. Because Hannay’s experience as a spy is fundamentally limited, whereas Blenkiron’s is not, the novel’s race to the finish line can be read as a comment on the difference between American experience and politics as set against those of the British in the war.

If Buchan’s novel is to be read as a critique of American involvement in the First World War, then Blenkiron’s role in the novel should also be read as an example of changing evaluations of general involvement. Although Blenkiron is considered to be a parallel figure to the company throughout the first part of the novel, by the climax he is the only one to get hurt and rescued by his fellow British counterparts: “Blenkiron got hit in the leg, our only casualty” (Buchan 287). Because the relationship between Hannay and Blenkiron is strengthened by the experience of violence, the novel suggests that the perception of Americans in the First World War depended on the understanding of neutrality as a concept rather than location. In an article that examines the sportsmanship of spying, Thomas Hitchner reasons, “The chief ideological difference between the genres of counterspy fiction and spy fiction, then, is not over whether or not England is in conflict with its neighbors and rivals, but the nature of that conflict” (421). Hitchner’s claim suggests that the perception of conflict in spy fiction does not depend on the establishment of an enemy to unify allies, instead that it depends on an understanding of the role each other plays in stopping the enemy.

This paper set out to present and understand the perception of Americans in the First World War through the characterization of John S. Blenkiron in John Buchan’s novel Greenmantle. Although Blenkiron appears in other subsequent novels by Buchan, this novel introduces readers to this American for the first time. Through the conventions of the genre, Buchan disguised and encoded Blenkiron as a character that could blend in because of the American neutrality. This was, however, both an advantage and disadvantage for himself and Hannay as they made their way across Europe because although he could blend in, he was only privy to an upper echelon of information. While the argument has been made that Buchan used Blenkiron as a way to draw Americans into the conflict, it seems more likely that Buchan’s characterization and implementation of an American operative among Hannay’s untrained team is geared at unifying an already existing set of peoples.
Works Cited


