



Witch Wood

John Buchan

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Set against the religious struggles and civil wars of seventeenth century Scotland, John Buchan's *Witch Wood* is a gripping atmospheric tale in the spirit of Stevenson and Neil Munro.

As a moderate presbyterian minister, young David Sempill disputes with the extremists of his faith, as all around, the defeated remnants of Montrose's men are being harried and slaughtered.

There are still older conflicts to be faced however, symbolised by the presence of the Melanudrigall Wood, a last remnant of the ancient Caledonian forest. Here there is black magic to be uncovered, but also the more positive pre-Christian intimations of nature worship.

In such setting, and faced with the onset of the plague, David Sempill's struggle and eventual disappearance take on a strange and timeless aspect in what was John Buchan's own favourite among his many novels.

Witch Wood Details

Date : Published February 1st 2003 by Replica Books (first published January 1st 1927)

ISBN : 9780735105874

Author : John Buchan

Format : Hardcover 380 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Classics, Fantasy, Cultural, Scotland, Adventure

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From Reader Review Witch Wood for online ebook

Christopher says

A solid, captivating book. Never has a book with so little supernatural activity been able to stun me so much.

Max Nemtsov says

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Jan Szczerbiuk says

This was a Goodreads recommendations based on having read Old Mortality, and while they cover the same historical period, there is a vast gulf in quality. While the latter is an excellent novel, Witch Wood is a bit "simple" without actually becoming the children's story that its title might suggest. The two major flaws were that all of the characters were one-dimensional, being representatives of an interest or viewpoint rather than being of any interest themselves, and that the dialogue was primarily delivered in an opaque 17th century Scottish peasant dialect that was more or less gibberish. However, the simplicity of the novel's thesis (i.e. that putting political power into the hands of an idiot fundamentalist theocracy is a bad idea) meant that you generally didn't need to know what they were babbling on about. In a world where Islamic State is committing lunatic barbarism on the basis that the only book they have ever read says they can, it is interesting to see that a bunch of daft Scotsmen came to the same conclusion after picking the words they liked best (primarily "smite") out of the Old Testament.

Matthew Miller says

When I started reading this book, I wasn't so sure. There was a lot of dry dialogue and a bit of a language barrier.

As I continued it got better and better until I was reading quite a bit every day. It's both encouraging and thought provoking. It is also theologically sound. The main character is likable (A pastor that isn't a wuss? How cool is that?) and not too perfect, leaving room for moral dilemmas.

Definitely read it.

Dan Clore says

The plot may be slow-moving, and the Scots dialect is pretty thick, but this is a powerfully atmospheric novel set in 17th-century Scotland with the horrors not only of a witch-cult (drawing on Margaret Murray) but of hypocritical witch-prickers.

The novel is realistic rather than supernatural, the fantasy being in the beliefs of the characters. But it is effective enough in the mood created by (e.g.) the descriptions of landscape and weather that it seems quite believable that a woman who frequents a particular forest area is taken for a fairy by the Scottish peasants.

I found the novel engrossing throughout; it should appeal to fans of H.P. Lovecraft, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, etc. It should also interest fans of James Hogg's *Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.

In the Epilogue Buchan cites a Reverend John Dennistoun, whose work *Satan's Artifices against the Elect* he says was written in 1719 but only published in 1821 by Sir Walter Scott. Dennistoun seems to be a fictional author invented by Buchan and cited in other works of his. (Probably inspired by Robert Kirk, whose 17th-century book about fairies *The Secret Commonwealth* was published by Scott in 1815. Buchan seems to have known this book.)

william ellison says

Pagan rights

Buchan has taken the hint of a childhood tale and turned it into a gripping adventure story, the like of which he does so well. But this is largely an adventure of the spirit as a 17th century Presbyterian minister wrestles with pagan stirrings in his own session: the disapproval of the Kirk authorities: the rights and wrongs of warring factions and not least his own conscience. He finds and then loses resolution in human romantic love before taking up his true calling. The action is page turning, though the descriptions of settings is from an earlier, Victorian age when words were still supposed to conjure up visual images and don't demand closer reading. So too the Laelan' Scots dialogue may mystify some though there is a glossary. The psychology is all the minister's but other characters are colorfully drawn. All in all it's a fine critique of politics and religion while reverberating within the individual psyche.

Ancestral Gael says

Synopsis: *Witch Wood* is a story of seventeenth-century witchcraft in the Wood of Caledon in the Scottish Borders. The parish minister tries in vain to prevent devil worship and protect his protestant congregation. Meanwhile, civil unrest of the Scottish Wars of the Covenant divides the minister's loyalties. Buchan also weaves in a romantic love story.

Review: I bought this book from Treadwells Esoteric Bookstore and was immediately captured by its writing style. It is set in Scotland and, for the most part, deals with a young minister's trials in dealing with the local witches in his village.

The "wars" referred to in the synopsis are those that divided the church and, eventually, led to the almost complete eradication of superstitions and pagan practices that continued under the more lax provisions of the Catholic (papist) and other churches.

Aside from all this, the story is engaging and Mr Buchan has a very distinctive and somewhat old-fashioned writing style. The reader will notice that all the characters speak with a heavy Scots accent - a dictionary of slang may come in handy.

I loved it as a work of fiction and will be keeping my copy to read on dark, windy and wintry nights (oooh, spooky).

Sharon says

John Buchan has written a masterpiece of fiction dealing with human fear and superstition and the strangeness of courage. The story is of a small village in Scotland during the rule of the "Kirk". Complete with witch hunts, both faithful and farcical, Pharisees and prophets, soldiers and cowards, the story follows a young minister trying to lead his little flock out of many kinds of idolatry and into the light. Buchan's character development is perceptive and careful, which always makes a story more worthwhile. When I can find myself empathetic even to the antagonists in the story without compromising my loyalty to the protagonist, I believe I have found an author who understands mankind.

Bettie? says

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05pmjb6>

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3* Witch Wood

2* The 39 Steps
3* Greenmantle
2* Mr Standfast
2* The Three Hostages
2* Prester John
3* Huntingtower
4* Sick Heart River

AVid_D says

Gave up after 30% - so much time spent trying to understand the Scots spoken that I was beginning to hate the book.

Anne Gibney says

Covenanters, witches covens, woodland orgies , battles and plague (with a wee romance thrown in). It's all happening in the tiny borders village of Woodilee in the mid 17th century. David Semple is the naive young minister with a sneaking sympathy for the royalist Montrose, and a fancy for the local posh bird. John Buchan manages to turn all of this into an entertaining but poignant tale of the conflicts and miseries heaped on the ordinary people of this time.

E says

Best book I've read in a long time.

Fiona says

It occurs to me, having read this last year and recommended it to another couple of people only this week, that I never got around to telling you why I loved *Witch Wood* quite so much. Which is to say, to the extent that if I were John Buchan, I'd be kind of annoyed at only being remembered for *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Let it be known that I adore *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. It's just that I think *Witch Wood* is better, cleverer, and way more important. Apparently it was Buchan's favourite of his own novels. It's a crying shame it's been overlooked so much.

It's seventeenth century Scotland. The Civil Wars are in progress, and the King is still doing pretty well for himself; this being a matter not very long after the National Covenant was signed in Scotland, nobody north of the border is very happy about it. Leading the discontent is the Presbyterian Kirk, which at this point is militantly anti-Royalist. In the Scottish Borders, a new minister finds himself caught between loyalty to his own Kirk and the de facto government of the King, trying to do the best he can for the people of his parish.

At the same time, he discovers that some of his church elders are performing devil worship in the woods.

Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* discusses similar themes: if you could do anything at all, and still be guaranteed a place in heaven, what would you do? Hogg's character embarks on a grand career of serial killing people he doesn't like. (It's a great book, you should totally read it. Scared the crap out of Edinburgh when it was published, on account of James Hogg using the idea of found footage a clear 170 years before *The Blair Witch Project*). In *Witch Wood*, for the parishioners, their membership of the Kirk and consequent access to heaven is great news: they can carry on doing all the pagan rituals they used to engage in for generations, now with added Christian-tinged devilish theme. They're a poor, uneducated people, torn between the old and the new, and the Kirk represents both of those things and neither of them. Sure, the *Game of Thrones*-style history is fun, but someone has to live under the rule of this stuff, and nobody thinks to explain to them what any of it means. Also, they're probably dying of typhoid.

What's a young, inexperienced priest to do? There are souls at stake here! Is it worth sacrificing yourself, with all the material good you could do in such a difficult, politically charged time -- just to save a few immortal souls? Is David Sempill brave, or cowardly? Doing the right thing, or desperately ineffective? Seeing the bigger picture, or missing what's really important? Did he make the right decision?

Buchan writes Scottish lowlands that he knows well; he writes them beautifully and without the Walter Scott romance we see in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. *Witch Wood* is dark. It's fascinating. It intelligently explores things that are important and interesting today, as well as being the part of Scottish history that -- let's face it -- is one of the reasons I moved up here. This stuff is like catnip to me. You can get it on Kindle for cheap. I swear you won't regret it.

"What do your Presbyteries and Assemblies or your godly ministers ken o' the things that are done in the mirk? What do they ken o' the corps in the kirkyairds buried o' their ain wull wi' their faces downwards? They set up what they ca' their discipline, and they lowse the terrors o' Hell on sma' fauts like an aith, or profane talk on the Sabbath, or giein' the kirk the go-by, and they hale to the cutty-stool ilka lass that's ower kind to her joe. And what's the upshot? They drive the fold to their auld ways and turn them into hypocrites as weel as sinners."

(Edited December 2016 to fix my heinous historical inaccuracies. I should read this again, it was fab.)

Mitsu says

1.5?? Urgh made it to the end but seriously could not understand anyone speaking in Scottish. The witches didn't actually feature much at all and it was more of an actual devil worship big coven #falseadvertising

Nathan says

I'm a young minister in a Reformed Church. This book is terrifying. It's real. I think I should change my name to David Sempill. Don't read it. It's too good.

