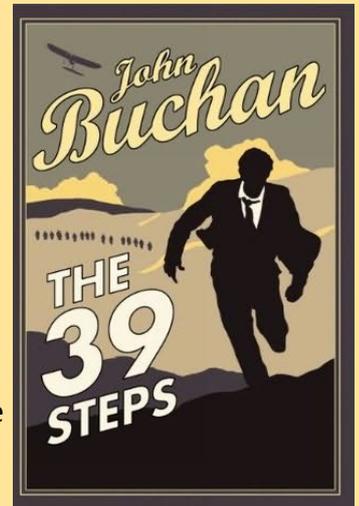


John Buchan wrote *The Thirty-Nine Steps* while he was ill in bed with a duodenal ulcer, an illness which remained with him all his life. The novel was his first 'shocker', as he called it — a story combining personal and political dramas. The novel marked a turning point in Buchan's literary career and introduced his famous adventuring hero, Richard Hannay. He described a 'shocker' as an adventure where the events in the story are unlikely and the reader is only just able to believe that they really happened.



The Thirty-Nine Steps is one of the earliest examples of the 'man-on-the-run' thriller archetype subsequently adopted by Hollywood as an often-used plot device. In *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Buchan holds up Richard Hannay as an example to his readers of an ordinary man who puts his country's interests before his own safety. The story was a great success with the men in the First World War trenches. One soldier wrote to Buchan, "The story is greatly appreciated in the midst of mud and rain and shells, and all that could make trench life depressing."

Richard Hannay continued his adventures in four subsequent books. Two were set during the war when Hannay continued his undercover work against the Germans and their allies *The Turks in Greenmantle* and *Mr Standfast*. The other two stories, *The Three Hostages* and *The Island of Sheep* were set in the post war period when Hannay's opponents were criminal gangs.

There have been several film versions of the book; all depart substantially from the text, for example, by introducing a love interest absent from the original novel. An interesting feature of the phrase 'The 39 Steps' is that its meaning in each of the film versions is essentially different not only from the book, but also among the various films. In the 1935 film and the 1959 remake, the phrase refers to the clandestine organisation itself; in the book and in the 1978 and 2008 film versions, it does refer to physical steps, but located in different places and with different significance to the plot.



The 1935 black and white film adaptation directed by Alfred Hitchcock departs substantially from the book. It stars Robert Donat as Hannay and Madeleine Carroll as the woman he meets on the train. It is regarded by critics as the superior film version. This was the first Hitchcock film based upon the idea of an 'innocent man on the run,' others include *Saboteur* and *North by Northwest*. Scholars of his films regard this film as one of his best variations upon this particular theme. In 1999 it came 4th in a BFI poll of British films and in 2004 Total Film named it the 21st greatest British film of all time.

The 1959 film directed by Ralph Thomas was the first colour version, starring Kenneth More as Hannay and Taina Elg as Miss Fisher. The film is closely based on Hitchcock's adaptation, including the music-hall finale with Mr. Memory and Hannay's escape from a train on the Forth Bridge, scenes not present in the book. It features a musical score by Clifton Parker.

The 1978 version was directed by Don Sharp and starred Robert Powell as Hannay, Karen Dotrice as Alex, John Mills as Colonel Scudder and a host of other well-known British actors in smaller parts. It is generally regarded as the closest to the book, being set at the same time as the novel was, pre-First World War, but still bears little resemblance to Buchan's original story. It is well remembered for its climax (bearing



no relation to the novel's denouement), which sees Hannay hanging from the hands of Big Ben in order to stop a bomb from going off. The film was followed by a spin-off television series, Hannay, starring Powell, featuring adventures occurring prior to the events in The Thirty Nine Steps.



The BBC commissioned a new television adaptation of the novel, scripted by Lizzie Mickery and produced by BBC Scotland's drama unit. The 90-minute film stars Rupert Penry-Jones as Richard Hannay and was broadcast on 28 December 2008. A romantic subplot was added to the story, featuring Lydia Leonard. The storyline only very tenuously follows that of the book, many characters being renamed, or omitted altogether. The film ends with a scene involving a submarine in a Scottish loch, rather than the original setting off the Kent coast, and the apparent death of one character.

There have been that many adaptations of Buchan's original novel that is difficult to know which the definitive version is. Even 'The 39 Steps' themselves have different meanings. In Buchan's novel The 39 Steps refer to the number of steps from the villain's cliff top lair to the sea at low tide. Hitchcock used the phrase as a code name for the spy ring (in the book they were called The Black Stone), whilst the 1978 version introduced us to the 39 steps of Big Ben.

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