

The topography of fear: geographical space as an element of tension in John Buchan's detective novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps*

Hanna Tabakova¹  , Viktoria Zarva² , Ellina Tsykhovska³ 

¹ and ²Department of Ukrainian and Foreign Literature and Comparative Literature, Berdiansk State Pedagogical University, Kyiv, Ukraine.

³ Department of Advertising and Public Relations, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine.

hi_tabakova@bdpu.org.ua

Abstract: Literary studies increasingly turn to the “spatial turn,” examining how geographical locations cease to be mere background and become active agents of plot. Drawing on the geocritical methodology of Bertrand Westphal and Robert T. Tally Jr., this article examines the topography of fear in John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, a foundational spy thriller in which space generates anxiety and suspense. Applying Westphal's concepts of transgressivity and referentiality, the study treats the novel's locations, from metropolitan London to the Scottish moorlands, as places whose literary representation interacts with their real-world referents, and traces how the narrative transgresses the boundaries between the familiar and the hostile. The protagonist, Richard Hannay, embarks on a journey that turns Great Britain's geographical map into a labyrinth in which every location conceals a threat. Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of “landscapes of fear” remains a conceptual reference point but is reframed within this geocritical framework, while elements of psychopoetics connect landscape to the protagonist's inner state. The Scottish moorlands, conventionally associated with freedom, become a trap in which the lack of cover intensifies the fear of exposure, while the alternation between enclosed spaces (trains, rooms) and open landscapes produces a sense of entrapment and paranoia. The article concludes that geographical space is the primary vehicle of suspense: Buchan's literary cartography turns real topography into a map of fear, a spatial strategy that shaped the development of the twentieth-century political and espionage thriller.

Keywords: *spy thriller; transgressivity; John Buchan; geocriticism; spatial turn.*



University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series

<https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/>

Volume 16 | Issue 1 | 2026 |

EDITURA UNIVERSITĂȚII DIN BUCUREȘTI



BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY PRESS

<https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.16.1.7>

ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)

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Introduction

Interest in the work of the Scottish author John Buchan, who made a major contribution to the development of the spy-novel genre, has grown significantly in recent years. In 2019, for instance, his great-granddaughter, Ursula Buchan, published a biographical study of the writer and political figure's life (*Beyond the Thirty-Nine Steps*, 2019). Then, in 2025, to mark the 150th anniversary of the writer's birth, two further studies were published at once: one edited by Marcus Paul, *John Buchan Reconsidered: Thirty-Nine Years of War and Peace, 1901-1940* (2025), and the other by James Machin, *The Strange Stories of John Buchan* (2025). Such studies not only renew interest in the writer's work but also prompt a reassessment of his contribution to the development of one of today's most popular genres of popular literature – the spy thriller. The chosen topic is further motivated by the need to reconsider classic early-twentieth-century popular literature through the lens of contemporary geocritical studies. Rather than the traditional analysis of plot, the focus here shifts to the “topography of fear” – the mechanism by which geographical locations (from the enclosed spaces of London to the open but trap-ridden landscapes of Scotland) generate suspense and convey society's anxious premonitions on the eve of the First World War, along with the British public's real fears of German espionage, expansion, and the destabilisation of Europe.

The Scottish writer and statesman John Buchan (1875–1940), a contemporary of Maurice Leblanc, the author of the Arsene Lupin novels, is regarded as one of the first masters of the spy thriller. He helped establish scenarios that remain the standard for spy stories today, including the “man-on-the-run” plot, in which the protagonist must unravel the mystery of his own flight. This dynamic chase finds its classic early embodiment in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), which holds an honoured place on the BBC's list of the 200 best-loved books (“The Big Read”, 2003). The novel is considered a genre pioneer and a vivid example of the British adventure thriller, in which space serves not merely as a backdrop but as an active participant in the plot, an instrument of psychological pressure, and a source of anxiety. As David McVey puts it, “Buchan was – unconsciously, perhaps – carrying out preliminary studies in the espionage novel for all who would come after him” (“Bringing Back Buchan” n. pg.).

A spy novel's text is always inflected by political context, its action closely bound up with world politics, geopolitics, and the security of the British Empire, as in Buchan's work. *Written in the first months of the First World War*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* captures society's fears and mood with remarkable precision, offering the reader a fast-paced journey across Britain. The writer did not merely describe events; he built his own experience into the genre's architecture, lending it intellectual weight and socio-political depth.

The novel first appeared in serialised form: initially in the American All-Story Weekly (5 and 12 June 1915), and then in Blackwood's Magazine (July–September 1915) under the pseudonym H. de V. The American serialisation preceded the British. The novel was first published as a standalone book in Edinburgh in October 1915 under the author's real name by the well-known Scottish publishing house William Blackwood and Sons. It became an instant bestseller.

Drawing on a gift for adventure fiction in the manner of Arthur Conan Doyle, John

Buchan conceived the book as a light entertainment, whose main purpose was to distract readers from the grim realities of the Western Front. This was Buchan's first novel to feature Richard Hannay, who would later become a recurring protagonist in subsequent novels. Hannay is a man of action who finds himself, by chance, at the centre of the international political secrets and intrigues of pre-war Europe in the mid-1910s. The character is thought to be based on a real-life prototype: the British intelligence officer Edmund Ironside, a master of counter-espionage.

The novel proved so influential that in 1935 the eminent director Alfred Hitchcock released a film adaptation, adding a romantic subplot and cementing the story's status as the definitive thriller of a lone man standing against the whole world. John Buchan later called Hitchcock's film "better than the book," as Taylor Downing notes (Downing n. pg.).

The study of spatial structures in literature is a leading direction in contemporary literary studies, developing within the framework of the geographical, or "spatial turn." Within literary studies, research on geographical space and its role in shaping human fears and narrative tension is currently experiencing a renewed flourishing. Among the foundational works are those of the Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (1974) and *Landscapes of Fear* (1979), in which the author develops two concepts, "topophilia" and "topophobia," accounting respectively for a person's love of a given space or place and their fear of, or aversion to, it. Topophobia can arise from natural forces, invading armies, and even crowds in urban space. For Tuan, topophilia is the opposite of fear, embodied in the desire to find shelter ('haven'), a home, or a safe place within space. This explains the human impulse to cultivate the surrounding environment – for instance, clearing a field amid wilderness or creating a park in place of overgrown terrain (Tuan, *Topophilia* 7).

Geocriticism has likewise become a popular method for analysing literary works today. Bertrand Westphal's study (*Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*) outlines the geocritical approach to literary analysis, while Robert Tally elaborates the concept of "literary cartography" (see Tally, "Mapping Narratives"). Of particular interest for the analysis of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is the theorisation of "paranoid space". Maria Teresa Teixeira explores the interrelation between space, perception, and fear, adopting a phenomenological approach to spatial experience (Teixeira 115), and Clive Bloom links the spy-novel hero's condition to pervasive paranoia. As Bloom observes in *Spy Thrillers: From Buchan to le Carré* (1990), "[...] the only real freedom allowed a 'hero' of a spy novel is the freedom of fear and of being hunted, following from an ontological precondition to experience – that of totalised paranoia, for there is no knowing who is the enemy (therefore presume all are the enemy)" (Bloom, "Introduction" 4). In Buchan scholarship, foreign literary studies have long been dominated by a historical-biographical or ideological approach focused on analysing imperial discourse. In recent years, however, British and American scholars have increasingly turned to the "literary geography" of Buchan's work, treating the Scottish landscape not as romantic decoration but as a space of political paranoia and alienation. Sean Fitzpatrick's essay "The Importance of the Impossible" examines the novel's psychological elements and how the writer moves beyond the typical pulp adventures of his era. Jordan Poss's essay on *The Thirty-Nine Steps* was published on the author's personal blog and emphasises the novel's "dime novel"

shocker: the narrative balances on the edge of the possible, conveying the atmosphere on the eve of the First World War, when fear of foreign agents and spies permeated British society. As Poss rightly observes, the novel's topography of fear is a geography of paranoia, in which safe landscapes turn hostile and geographical spaces mark the boundary between pursuit and refuge (Poss n. pg.).

In scholarly usage, the concept of "paranoid space" (particularly in horror literature, thrillers, Gothic geography, and urban studies) is most often associated with the theoretical work of the British scholar of mass culture and the Gothic, Clive Bloom. Bloom examines paranoia and the psychological experience of space, especially urban space. He also criticises London's occult pseudo-stories, which rely on conspiracy theories: "The problem with para-history is that it can easily lead not just to nostalgia, but to paranoia" (Bloom, *Gothic London* 193).

Maria Teresa Teixeira, by contrast, examines philosophical-spatial categories through phenomenology, the psychology of perception, and Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy – particularly the concept of "il y a," an anonymous, threatening space that underlies the formation of paranoid spatial fears (Teixeira 116).

In 1991, Kate Macdonald defended a doctoral dissertation at University College London titled "The Fiction of John Buchan with Particular Reference to the Richard Hannay Novels". She is today regarded as one of the world's leading experts on the writer's work. In her dissertation, Macdonald examines Buchan's identity as a Scottish writer, the publication history of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and the status and readership of the writer's early bestselling thrillers, drawing on primary sources from publishers' archives as well as unpublished letters and memoirs from the First World War period. She analyses the narrative structure of the Richard Hannay novels and their Scottish context, proposes a classification of narrative types across Buchan's novels, and stresses the importance of the shift that took place in his work in 1915, when his novels were reoriented toward the thriller and the emergence of the new protagonist, Hannay, proved decisive in shaping the new spy-novel genre. Macdonald also notes the writer's limited use of female characters, who play secondary roles in plots dominated by men. The spy thriller is constructed as an exclusively male adventure world, centred on masculine solidarity, professional ties, and the milieu of the army and the club. Substantial female characters enter the story only through Alfred Hitchcock, who reworked the plot for his 1935 film adaptation to add romantic tension, humour, and dynamism (Macdonald 258–324).

The topography of fear as a functional component in creating tension in Buchan's detective fiction still requires more detailed elaboration, since it opens up possibilities for a closer examination of the spy-thriller genre's construction, including its techniques for generating narrative tension. To our knowledge, Ukrainian literary studies have addressed Buchan's work only in passing.

Accordingly, our study aims to outline and analyse the poetics of space in John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* as an important element in creating an atmosphere of fear and tension. The objectives of the study are: to analyse the specific artistic devices by which geographical coordinates are transformed into psychological factors of tension (suspense); to reconsider Roland Barthes's "reality effect" within the fictional space of the thriller; to analyse the particular ways in which "paranoid space" is conceptualized in the novel; to

trace the semantics of liminal zones (the boundary between London and rural Scotland); and to demonstrate that the wild landscapes of Scotland (bogs, moors, hills) become, in the text, a kind of psychological trigger, transformed into an “index” in Barthesian terms.

Examining Buchan’s spy novel, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, through the lens of the “topography of fear”, geopoetics, and spatial psychology offers a new perspective on the work as a space of paranoia, in which the Scottish landscape functions as an active vehicle of emotional impact. This approach yields a fresh interpretation of landscape-based sources of tension and of the semanticisation of the border-topos as a spatial equivalent of suspense. For the first time in Buchan scholarship, the Scottish landscape is examined not as a passive backdrop (mere decoration) for adventure, but as a narrative mechanism – mediated by the protagonist’s first-person, paranoid focalisation – that actively generates psychological tension. The novel’s topographical parameters are analysed for the first time through the lens of Barthes’s concept of the “reality effect.” It shows that excessive geographical names, detailed descriptions of the Scottish landscape, and mundane moorland details lose their purely referential function (creating an illusion of verisimilitude) and, within the text’s structure, are recoded as active semiotic signs of fear. In Buchan, the “reality effect” becomes an “effect of paranoia”, in which every topographical detail becomes a potential source of threat, intensifying the novel’s suspense.

The literary concept of the “topography of fear”, proposed by Tuan in *Landscapes of Fear* (1979), describes the spatial organisation of a literary work in which fear is the principal structuring element. It explains how emotions of dread, anxiety, and alienation attach to specific locations, forming the work’s emotional-spatial model. The term took shape at the intersection of psychoanalysis, spatial poetics, and reception aesthetics, designating the range of emotions, reactions, and psychological states (such as fear, anxiety, and dread) that specific spaces or locales evoke in readers of literary texts.

B. Westphal’s geocriticism shifts the focus from the perceiving subject to space itself. It requires attention to space’s transgressivity (the constant crossing of boundaries), its heterogeneity (the coexistence of multiple, often conflicting meanings within a single place), and its referentiality (the dynamic relationship between the represented place and its real-world referent). In Westphal’s geocriticism, transgressivity is one of three theoretical premises, along with spatiotemporality and referentiality, that form the method’s conceptual framework (*Geocriticism* 6). Transgression crosses a boundary into a marginal space of freedom, and “when it becomes a permanent principle, it turns into transgressivity” (47).

Robert T. Tally Jr.’s concept of literary cartography complements this approach by examining how the text itself “produces” geography. He initially conceived of geocriticism as the critic’s counterpart to the writer’s literary cartography: “Using literary cartography, a writer maps the social spaces of his or her world,” whereas the geocritic reads these maps, attending to the spatial practices involved in literature (“On Geocriticism” 1). Tally also defined narratives as “mapping machines,” devices for charting the real and imagined spaces of human experience (“Mapping Narratives” 3). This relation is dialectical. A narrative is both a map and an object to be mapped, since readers inevitably place it within a spatiotemporal framework that gives meaningful shape to their own world (3). As a result, the spaces represented in literary texts become part of the real-and-imagined places we

inhabit (11–12).

Applied to *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, these geocritical perspectives reveal dimensions of the novel's topography of fear that a purely phenomenological reading leaves aside. In Westphal's terms, Hannay's flight is a chain of transgressions that, through its continuity, becomes a state of transgressivity: crossing a boundary ceases to be an isolated act and becomes a permanent principle (*Geocriticism* 47). Hannay crosses not only the geographical boundary between metropolitan London and rural Scotland but also social ones, adopting the disguises of a milkman and a roadman. Space in the novel is thus defined by the protagonist's ability to pass through it unrecognised. Referentiality is equally significant. The Galloway moorlands are a real and recognisable landscape, yet Buchan reshapes them into a space of pursuit, and the familiar map of Britain acquires a hidden, threatening layer. Literary cartography is most explicit in the novel's central enigma. The "thirty-nine steps" first exist as a textual code and only later as a physical place: stairs leading to the sea on the Kent coast. Geography is literally produced by the text: a place must be read before it can be found.

The man-on-the-run plot and the paranoid imaginary of pre-war Britain

Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* unfolds in the spring of 1914, a few months before the outbreak of the First World War. Richard Hannay – a thirty-seven-year-old former mining engineer and retired officer, a Scot who spent his childhood in Africa – has just returned to London from Rhodesia. By chance, Hannay learns of a secret spy organization, the "Black Stone," plotting to assassinate the Greek Prime Minister Constantine Karolides and steal secret military plans to destabilize the situation and provoke a war between Britain and Germany. This event is the novel's central plot-generating factor; through it, the author raises important questions about geopolitical threat and societal blindness (criticising the naivety of Europeans and the British establishment, who underestimated the scale of covert subversive activity and the threat of espionage), as well as about the fragility of the political system and the precariousness of the international balance of power. Constantine Karolides is an entirely fictional character created by Buchan, though this does nothing to diminish the genuinely anxious atmosphere of the pre-war period. In the plot, Karolides is assassinated, and when Hannay learns this by telephone, his task changes: he must now prevent the removal of British naval plans.

The protagonist finds himself in a situation classic to the man-on-the-run novel: the freelance American agent Franklin Scudder is found murdered in Hannay's flat, which puts him outside the law — he becomes the chief suspect in the murder — and forces him to flee from both the British police and foreign agents alike, to go into hiding, to rely on his own resources, and to unravel the web of an international conspiracy. In doing so, he becomes Britain's chief hope at a moment when the country teeters on the brink of war. The protagonist's survival depends on his skill in "veldcraft" — the tracking and concealment techniques of hunters on the South African veld. Hannay flees London precisely because his veldcraft is of no use there: "My notion was to get off to some wild district, where my veldcraft would be of some use to me" (J. Buchan 17).

The novel's dynamic plot creates a sharp division between "us" and "them." It breaks

with classic detective conventions through breakneck plotting, with action unfolding rapidly through disguises, a life-or-death chase, concealment, and decryption. The novel borrows a thematic element from the “invasion novel”, a genre that explored alternative scenarios for the outbreak of war. This genre emerged before the First World War and remained popular through its early years. Buchan captures the acute Edwardian-era fear of the German threat. As the scholar Nathan Joseph Waddell observes,

The Thirty-Nine Steps is a backwards-looking text, one that engages with the threat of war and violence as signalled by the late-Victorian invasion scare novel and its metamorphosis during the Edwardian period into what literary historians now label the early spy thriller. (*Paranoia, Power* n. pg.)

The key contrast here is between Hannay’s skills and a “complacent England”, which, through its complacency and bureaucracy, has become vulnerable to foreign agents. Hannay is not a professional intelligence agent in the mould of the legendary, invincible super-spy James Bond – a fictional character created in 1952 by the British journalist and novelist Ian Fleming (who, incidentally, like Buchan himself, spent time working within intelligence structures). The chief weapons of Richard Hannay – a charismatic, physically robust, and patriotic representative of the middle class – are common sense, resourcefulness, luck, the experience he gained in Africa, and a talent for impersonating other people: “If you are hemmed in on all sides in a patch of land there is only one chance of escape. You must stay in the patch, and let your enemies search it and not find you. That was good sense, but how on earth was I to escape notice in that tablecloth of a place?” (J. Buchan 51)

Jordan Poss identifies the following traits of Buchan’s hero: “Richard Hannay, an unsuspecting man framed for murder by foreign agents, it has a high-speed, high-tech pursuit, a hero who survives through improvisation, stamina, and guts” (“Toward a John Buchan Revival” n. pg.). What emerges is a gentleman-adventurer, capable of bold, decisive action, yet lacking the professional traits of a spy. This well-bred manner would later become a kind of hallmark of the genre.

Britain at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries needed new, dynamic plots and images as Europe stood on the brink of the First World War and decadence, and the age’s prevailing mood swept through the artistic sphere. At the end of the nineteenth century, the theory of paranoia emerged, its understanding quickly moving beyond medicine to become a tool of public discourse and laying the foundation for the rhetoric of “conspiracy theories” in the spy novel.

Nathan Joseph Waddell analyses the paranoid imaginary in Buchan’s fiction in detail in *Paranoia, Power, and Male Identity*. Waddell reads the topos of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* as a space of “paranoid imagination,” in which Britain’s internal cultural and social fears of the First World War era – fear of imperial decline, degeneration, and the loss of masculinity – are projected outward onto foreign enemies, spies, and international conspiracies: “That is, I claim, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* can only be seen as paranoid in the sense that the novel itself is a kind of paranoid imaginary in which cultural fears (particularly fears relating to decadence and degeneration) are projected outwards to return

as hostile foreigners bent on annihilating imperial England, an England as convinced of its own grandiose centrality as of the chinks and weak-spots in its frankly impressive armour” (Waddell n. pg.).

The chief catalyst of tension and of the paranoid imaginary in the spy thriller *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is geographical space. An examination of this spatio-temporal matrix reveals several fundamental elements of tension, such as the effect of contrast, traceable in the alienation of the metropolis (“The weather made me liverish, the talk of the ordinary Englishman made me sick, I couldn’t get enough exercise, and the amusements of London seemed as flat as soda-water that has been standing in the sun” (1) and the temporary calm found in the countryside: “The air had the queer, rooty smell of bogs, but it was as fresh as mid-ocean, and it had the strangest effect on my spirits. I actually felt light-hearted. I might have been a boy out for a spring holiday tramp, instead of a man of thirty-seven very much wanted by the police” (24).

Buchan portrays London as the nerve-centre of global paranoia. Once seen as a bastion of safety, the city becomes a labyrinth where hostile agents pass themselves off as respectable citizens. Here, danger lurks not in dark alleyways but on sunlit streets and in crowded public places, undermining the very concept of public safety. Buchan had already explored this panoptic effect in *The Power-House*, where the hero senses a threat on the West End’s most crowded streets. The protagonist’s flat on Portland Place instantly becomes a trap once he discovers the murdered body of Franklin Scudder there. Hannay finds himself caught in a double ring of pursuit: on one side, he is hunted by agents of the “Black Stone” spy network; on the other, by the British police, who regard him as the chief suspect in the murder. The familiar city of London appears as a labyrinth, its everyday scenery concealing a hostile network beneath. Within this paranoid space, the peaceful streets no longer feel safe.

Moreover, the visible physical world ceases to be neutral. Buchan’s fear becomes paradoxical here: the rural landscapes that initially offer calm soon turn threatening and suspicious. Buchan skilfully transforms the vast expanses of Great Britain into a dynamic arena in which landscape and topography directly shape the protagonist’s emotional state, narrative pace, and plot development. The hero draws on a particular skill – the ability to decode the environment and natural signs as manifestations of hidden threat. This spatial rupture serves as an important device for unfolding the plot, marking the hero’s shift from passive urban isolation and boredom to active dynamism and pursuit outside the city: “There was not a sign or sound of a human being, only the plashing water and the interminable crying of curlews. Yet, oddly enough, for the first time I felt the terror of the hunted on me” (J. Buchan 29). The ordinary, familiar environment loses its idyllic character; the peaceful landscape becomes a fragile stage set, ready to collapse at any moment under the pressure of hostile forces.

Scotland as a frontier: veldcraft, railways and liminal space

The shift from paved city streets to the wild, untouched corners of southern Scotland (the historical region of Galloway) forces the hero to adapt to extreme conditions. Hannay’s experience in southern Africa enables him to “read” the Scottish landscape as a frontier.

Where a metropolitan Briton would see only pastoral scenery, Hannay perceives vectors of pursuit and opportunities for concealment. His survival on the veld fundamentally transforms his perception of danger, turning it from panicked terror into something he can control rationally. This hardening in a harsh environment reshapes his emotional relationship to danger: rather than passive numbness or urban apathy, he now sees threat as an athletic challenge or game, in which will, concentration, and cold-blooded analysis play the leading role. This allows him to avoid fear of the unknown and act decisively even in total isolation.

The novel's spatial dichotomy is traced in the opposition between the urban landscape (London, country estates) and the natural, untamed environment of the Scottish Lowlands, creating a dynamic contrast between London and Scotland. On one side stands urban space – artificial, overcrowded, where fear is generated by anonymity and the impossibility of picking out the enemy from a crowd: “My notion was to get off to some wild district, where my veldcraft would be of some use to me, for I would be like a trapped rat in a city” (J. Buchan 17). Fleeing his pursuers to the wild heather moors of southern Scotland, Richard Hannay hopes to find refuge in nature, but the Scottish landscape proves deceptive.

In the text, a railway topography offers only the illusion of escape. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the railway symbolised civilisation and safety, but Buchan deconstructs this myth: the northbound train journey first seems to promise Hannay salvation, but quickly becomes an enclosed space full of spies and police. The hero boards at St. Pancras, travels through Leeds, and gets off “at a little place whose name I scarcely noted, set right in the heart of a bog” (J. Buchan 24) – the station remains unnamed. In these wild border regions, the novel's action unfolds: the pursuit across the moors and the novel's greatest tension in Galloway. This is a liminal space – between land and water – where the hero must leap into the unknown to survive. Civilisation pushes him out into the wilderness. Scotland's wild, natural space becomes a realm of trial, freedom, and self-discovery as Hannay sheds his disorientation in urban London. The heather moors, hills, mountains, and ravines save him from his pursuers, letting him blend into the terrain and transform from victim to hunter. The hero's constant movement marks the spatial boundary between these two worlds, as he adopts disguises while overcoming both artificial borders and harsh landscapes.

The Scottish wilderness offers the hero a temporary space for reflection and respite, though the demands of the chase constantly interrupt these moments of calm. Hannay is forced to hide, suffering from cold, hunger, and physical exhaustion in the rough terrain: “It was as well, for the weather changed before midday to a thick drizzle of rain. I found shelter below an overhanging rock in the crook of a burn, where a drift of dead bracken made a tolerable bed” (J. Buchan 80). Buchan deliberately saturates and details the text with specific local toponyms, the names of local flora (heather, peat), and descriptions of minute features of the terrain: “I wheeled the machine a hundred yards from the highway, and plunged it into a moss-hole, where it sank among pond-weed and water-buttercups. Then I climbed to a knoll which gave me a view of the two valleys. Nothing was stirring on the long white ribbon that threaded them” (50).

For Barthes, such details do not advance the plot (Barthes, “Reality Effect” 141–48). Instead, the deliberate introduction of landscape and spatial detail into the spy plot's

headlong pace creates a sense of retardation. Within this topography of fear, every realistic detail can signal danger. A trickle of loose scree (a realistic landscape detail) might give Hannay away to his enemies. The roughness of the heather he presses himself into conveys a physical sensation of fear. The moss-hags and gullies are not mere scenic details but deadly traps. Hannay is forced to press himself literally into the wet Scottish earth, to hide in filthy ditches – a symbol of the psychological degradation of a man hunted like an animal. On the rocky crags, the hero's constant changes in elevation – climbing and descending – create a jagged narrative rhythm; the fear of heights, or of being trapped between rocks, intensifies the chase's dynamics. The artistic detail materialises danger at the level of touch, shifting from an informant into an index (Barthes, "Structural Analysis" 92–93). The excessive detailing of space, while retarding the narrative, begins to press on Hannay's psyche: the more real and detailed the space, the stronger the paranoia, because danger becomes physically palpable.

Paradoxically, open space here functions claustrophobically. Waddell notes that the First World War period saw a shift from informal, amateur espionage to institutionalised forms of global surveillance (*Paranoia, Power* n. pg.). Richard Hannay finds himself on bare hillsides, where the sky itself becomes a source of threat: "Low down in the south a monoplane was climbing into the heavens. I was as certain as if I had been told that that aeroplane was looking for me, and that it did not belong to the police" (J. Buchan 29). Buchan is among the first writers in the spy-novel genre to use the monoplane as an instrument of pursuit. The landscape is transformed into a flat chessboard, on which Hannay is an exposed, defenceless piece under the surveillance of the enemy's quasi-divine eye. Space itself becomes hostile because it makes the hero visible from a distance, generating paranoia and agoraphobia in the reader.

Buchan masterfully deploys natural phenomena – sudden fog, driving rain, blazing sun – that abruptly transform the topography: a familiar path vanishes, and the ground becomes a hostile substance. Sudden fog (the "Scotch mist") instantly alters the geometry of space; fixed landmarks disappear, and the world contracts to the few metres immediately around the hero. Space constantly disorients him, forcing him to hide in the most unexpected places, where the boundary between shelter and trap dissolves: "I pass over the miseries of that night among the wet hills. No stars to steer by, I had to do the best I could from my memory of the map. Twice I lost my way, and I had some nasty bumps against dykes and boulders" (*The Thirty-Nine Steps* 80).

These extreme weather conditions exhaust the hero, deepening his inner despair and fear of not surviving until morning, producing the classic effect of detective-story blindness and helplessness. Disorientation in space, when nothing is visible through the fog, makes every sound, rustle, or silhouette seem a mortal danger. The hero, accustomed to being in control (we should recall he is a former officer), suddenly finds himself face to face with a force he cannot calculate or buy off. Wind and rain disorient him, turning the surrounding space into a series of hazardous trials. Hannay can hide, but doing so reduces his ability to watch his enemies, leaving him vulnerable to a blow from behind. Nor does a clear, sunny day help: when the sun shines, Hannay is exposed to hostile eyes, increasing the risk of being spotted from the monoplane. The weather "switches on" a state of maximal stress in the hero, sharpening his survival instinct. At the same time, we might argue that the

wilderness also cleanses the hero's urban paranoia and prepares him for the final confrontation on the English coast. Thus, the hero's perception of the wild landscape is dual: a trap where the lack of cover intensifies fear, and a place of purification that transforms him from victim to hunter. The Scottish weather intensifies this "victim and hunter" syndrome, constantly changing the rules of the game and triggering the shift between these psychological roles.

The turbulent, unpredictable Scottish weather serves not only as a trigger for paranoid experience but also as a reflection of what is happening inside Hannay's mind: fear, doubt, panic, and inner chaos, all projected onto the landscape. The foul weather makes the reader feel the same psychological pressure as the character. In literary studies, this device is known as psychological parallelism: nature conveys the hero's emotions.

Counting the steps: topographical precision as a source of fear

We see topography as a device that preserves secrecy and heightens tension in the novel's plot. The region's geography becomes a genuine cypher and a central element of suspense. The novel's very title, and the site of its final action, are bound up with the number thirty-nine. Why thirty-nine specifically, rather than simply "many" or "steep steps"? In our view, the number thirty-nine carries no mystical or symbolic significance in the novel. Yet it is precisely this precision – "Thirty-nine steps, I counted them" (J. Buchan 38) – that creates a sense of absolute reality at the climax. Space narrows to pure geometry, where every step can be counted, and this mathematical realism makes the final suspense almost tactile. The mysterious "thirty-nine steps" of the title are the steps beside the villa "Trafalgar Lodge," on the coast of a fictional Kent seaside resort town. This location becomes the epicentre of the novel's resolution. Incidentally, while convalescing in real life at Broadstairs, Buchan himself saw the steps that became the novel's prototype. The author employs deferred revelation, in which geographical coordinates lead the reader through the plot's full tension toward the final destination.

In Buchan's topography, then, we see the skilful deployment of what Roland Barthes called the "reality effect" – the saturation of the text with excessive, dry topographical and everyday detail. In *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, however, these signs of reality become instruments of suspense: the precise rendering of the Galloway landscape, or the counting of steps at the climax, makes space physically palpable, turning indifferent geography into a material source of threat and fear.

Each new region brings a fresh peak of excitement, an emotional surge, and the need to change survival tactics (from disguise to confrontation). His journey through the British countryside forces Richard Hannay to reconsider his values as he joins forces with ordinary people and is transformed from a passive observer into a genuine patriot. Buchan saturates the novel with real geographical names and detailed descriptions of routes – railway stations, toponyms, and the like. This device produces Barthes's reality effect. Throughout the novel, Hannay continually registers precise topographical and everyday minutiae: the make of a train, the name of a particular Scottish village or farm, the exact time on his watch, the colour of a rock or the type of soil underfoot. The reader is presented with a thoroughly grounded, real, familiar world – Britain in 1914. When a lethal espionage threat

intrudes on this ordinary, documented space, the fear it produces feels real: the reader fears because they believe these hills and railway stations are genuine. They believe in the geography and therefore begin to believe the threat is real. Fear becomes tangible because it is anchored to specific, recognisable points on the map of Great Britain, which intensifies the reader's own anxiety.

Hannay describes the chase not in elevated literary style but as a practical man, an engineer: he notes mile-posts, wind direction, the depth of ditches, the particular character of the Scottish peat bogs (moss-hags). These dry geographical details, stripped of metaphor – a pure “reality effect” in Barthes's sense – underscore the hero's loneliness and vulnerability. The space around him intensifies his helplessness and isolation, and this parallelism between landscape and psyche heightens the rendering of his state.

In John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, the paranoid space is characterised by several key features: the absence of any safe place (spaces familiar to Richard Hannay, such as London, become, after the murder of his neighbour, a territory of death); the hostility of nature and infrastructure (fleeing across Scotland, Richard Hannay finds no refuge even in the emptiest wilderness – the mountains, moorlands, and railway network, an important space for the hunt for spies, all become part of the “hunt,” in which every stranger appears to be an agent of the Black Stone); and a labyrinth of mystification (the protagonist's paranoia is intensified by the fact that his enemies are not isolated monsters but socially integrated members of society – the British establishment, the police, respectable citizens). Space is saturated with hidden signs, and the mysterious “thirty-nine steps” become the central symbol of this conspiracy.

The hero is forced to act under constant strain, disguising himself as an ordinary workman. Sean Fitzpatrick observes that the novel “invites – indeed requires – the reader to share the mental challenges of Richard Hannay as he plays part after part for his very life” (“The Importance of the Impossible” n. pg.). Hannay continually dons the masks of the people he encounters, becoming a milkman, a Free Trade radical, a dusty road-mender, a fashionable motorist, and a rustic Scottish cattle driver. These disguises involve not merely a change of costume but the assumption of a character – a thorough transformation into his subject to avoid detection. This element of disguise, both physically and psychologically, is pivotal to the suspension of disbelief and to the acceptance that nothing is impossible (Fitzpatrick n. pg.).

The climactic location is a seaside villa; the novel ends on the coast: “I saw Trafalgar Lodge very plainly, a red-brick villa with a veranda, a tennis lawn behind, and in front the ordinary seaside flower-garden full of marguerites and scraggy geraniums. There was a flagstaff from which an enormous Union Jack hung limply in the still air” (J. Buchan 114).

The enemy chooses not a gloomy lair but a typical English seaside town. The threat hides behind the mask of an ordinary game. The steps become a symbol of the return to the “civilised” shore, which nonetheless proves the most dangerous zone of all, since evil is fully integrated into the social fabric. This closes the topographical circle: from the body discovered in the London flat, through purification in the wilderness, to the final confrontation at the heart of English leisure. The cozy seaside villas, which seem like places of peace and rest, turn out to be the enemy's last outpost. This spatial point concentrates the novel's central fear: the imminence of war and the need to stop the sprawling criminal

network before its members can escape by sea. The topography of fear culminates in the very space named in the novel's title. The steps down to the sea, the "thirty-nine steps", form a classic liminal space, a boundary between land and water, between Britain's safety and the threat from across the sea. Here, the steps symbolise a vertical axis of danger: each step downward brings the hero closer to solving the mystery, but also to a deadly trap on the shore. The novel's ending marks a symbolic culmination of the premonition of war, as the protagonist went to the regiment to enlist in the active army.

Conclusion

In *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, John Buchan effected a fundamental transformation of the detective genre, converting Holmes's classical deduction into Hannay's dynamic "increasingly multi-levelled thriller" (Macdonald 148). Through the geocritical methodology of Bertrand Westphal and Robert Tally, the novel reveals that this transformation is, above all, spatial. Suspense arises not from investigative logic but from the hero's movement through a territory whose meanings constantly shift.

The study shows that Hannay's flight embodies what Westphal calls transgressivity. Boundary crossing ceases to be an isolated episode and becomes the narrative's permanent condition (*Geocriticism* 47). These boundaries separate London from Scotland, the metropolis from the wilderness, and the social roles Hannay assumes through disguise. The topography of fear is therefore produced not by a fixed opposition between "own" and "alien" spaces but by the instability of every boundary: each threshold the protagonist crosses promises refuge and conceals a threat.

Tally's concept of literary cartography makes it possible to describe *The Thirty-Nine Steps* as a narrative map, a text in which narrative functions as one of Tally's "mapping machines" ("Mapping Narratives" 3). Buchan resolves the tension between narration and description that Tally identifies in a way specific to the thriller (2). Description never interrupts the chase but is subordinated to it: the landscape appears exclusively as a set of obstacles, hiding places, and lines of sight.

A key mechanism in the novel's transformation of the reality effect is the shift of a detail's function from informant to index (in Barthes's sense): a topographical detail that appears, at first glance, neutral – a distance, a stretch of terrain, a wind direction – and whose sole apparent purpose is to lend the narrative verisimilitude, acquires, under the pressure of retardation and Hannay's paranoid focalisation, the status of a sign of danger. It is precisely this dual nature of the detail – at once "real" and "threatening" – that constitutes the mechanism by which the novel converts a neutral landscape into a topography of fear. The article shifts its focus from a purely plot-driven analysis of the spy thriller towards its geospatial and psychopoetic structure. It uncovers the poetics of emotiogenic geography by defining the specific character of the artistic modelling of the "topography of fear", demonstrating that climatic factors (sudden Scottish fogs, downpours) and the particularities of the landscape (open moorlands versus enclosed spaces) function not merely as elements of scenery but as autonomous instruments for generating artistic tension (suspense), dictating the hero's shift of roles between "hunter" and "prey". Space in the novel is not, in any literal sense, an autonomous anthropomorphic

subject; rather, it functions as a narrative device mediated by Hannay's first-person, paranoid focalisation: the threat the reader senses in the landscape is a projection of the protagonist's psychological state, made material through the accumulation of realistic details (indices).

The study demonstrates that the landscape absorbs the narrative's emotional charge, converting objective geography into a "topography of paranoia", in which realistic space becomes the principal generator of the hero's inner tension and fear. It notes that in the thriller, the "reality effect" operates differently from classical realism: Buchan takes random, "mute" details and compels them to generate fear. The Scottish terrain becomes a physical dimension of fear: Buchan's geography is material, forcing the hero to suffer physically, a suffering that, in turn, is transmitted to the reader. Buchan's "topography of fear" rests on the deconstruction of safe spaces (the transformation of Scotland's landscape – the author's own native country – into hostile territory) and on the paradoxical conversion of boundless landscapes into claustrophobic traps. The study shows that Buchan's topography is inseparable from climate: Scottish weather functions as a blind threat, a psychological trigger of helplessness that sets off total paranoia and isolation, revealing the deep connection between external natural chaos and the protagonist Richard Hannay's inner state. The wild landscapes of Scotland (bogs, moors, hills) function in the text as psychological indices that materialise this "blind threat" and mirror the hero's inner disorientation, panic, and paranoia. The combination of hyperrealistic geographical precision with the metaphors of liminal spaces (the steps, the fog) allows the author to create a new type of spy thriller, one in which landscape mirrors the political paranoia and anxiety of the era on the eve of the First World War, and in which the entire surrounding world is transformed into a hostile trap.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Hanna Tabakova  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9687-6290>

Viktoria Zarva  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9100-7440>

Ellina Tsykhovska  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2524-9991>

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Notes on Contributor(s)

Hanna Tabakova is associate professor at the Department of Ukrainian and Foreign

Literature and Comparative Literature of Berdiansk State Pedagogical University. Her main research interests are detective stories, cli-fi literature, and ecocriticism.

Viktoria Zarva is professor at the Department of Ukrainian and Foreign Literature and Comparative Literature of Berdiansk State Pedagogical University. Her main research interests include Ukrainian literary studies, comparative studies of Ukrainian and world literature of the 18th–19th centuries, and literary disability studies.

Ellina Tsykhovska is professor at the Department of Advertising and Public Relations, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Her main research interests are media representation and media reception, political rhetoric and PR, narrative structures of television formats, self-presentation in new media, and media psychology.

Citation: Tabakova, H., Zarva, V. and Tsykhovska, E. The topography of fear: geographical space as an element of tension in John Buchan's detective novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 16(1), 2026: 106-121. <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.16.1.7>

Received: August 10, 2026 | **Accepted:** October 12, 2026 | **Published:** October 18, 2026

