

# *The Thirty-Nine Steps*

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Jump to: [navigation](#), [search](#)

For other uses, see [The 39 Steps \(disambiguation\)](#).

## *The Thirty-Nine Steps*



1st edition

<b>Author(s)</b>	<a href="#">John Buchan</a>
<b>Country</b>	<a href="#">Great Britain</a>
<b>Language</b>	<a href="#">English</a>
<b>Series</b>	<a href="#">Richard Hannay</a>
<b>Genre(s)</b>	<a href="#">Thriller</a> , <a href="#">Novel</a>
<b>Publisher</b>	<a href="#">William Blackwood</a> & Sons
<b>Publication date</b>	1915
<b>Media type</b>	Print ( <a href="#">Hardback</a> & <a href="#">Paperback</a> )
<b><a href="#">ISBN</a></b>	NA
<b>Followed by</b>	<a href="#">Greenmantle</a>

*The Thirty-Nine Steps* is an [adventure novel](#) by the [Scottish author John Buchan](#). It first appeared as a serial in [Blackwood's Magazine](#) in August and September 1915 before being published in book form in October that year by [William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh](#).<sup>[1]</sup> It is the first of five novels featuring [Richard Hannay](#), an all-action hero with a [stiff upper lip](#) and a miraculous knack for getting himself out of sticky situations.

The novel formed the basis for a number of film adaptations, notably: [Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 version](#); a [1959 colour remake](#); a [1978 version](#) which is perhaps most faithful to the novel; and [a 2008 version for British television](#).

# Contents

[\[hide\]](#)

- [1 Background](#)
- [2 Plot introduction](#)
- [3 Plot summary](#)
- [4 Literary significance and criticism](#)
- [5 Characters in \*The Thirty-Nine Steps\*](#)
- [6 Contents](#)
- [7 Radio, Film, TV or theatrical adaptations](#)
  - [7.1 Radio](#)
  - [7.2 1935](#)
  - [7.3 1959](#)
  - [7.4 1978](#)
  - [7.5 2006–2010](#)
  - [7.6 2008](#)
  - [7.7 Robert Towne remake](#)
- [8 The real thirty-nine steps](#)
- [9 References](#)
- [10 External links](#)

## [\[edit\]](#) Background

[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.<sup>[2]</sup>

Buchan's son, William, later wrote that the name of the book originated when the author's daughter was counting the stairs at a private nursing home in [Broadstairs](#), where Buchan was convalescing. "There was a wooden staircase leading down to the beach. My sister, who was about six, and who had just learnt to count properly, went down them and gleefully announced: there are 39 steps." Some time later the house was demolished and a section of the stairs, complete with a brass plaque, was sent to Buchan.<sup>[2]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) Plot introduction

The novel is set during the [July Crisis](#) in 1914; [Europe](#) is close to war and [spies](#) are everywhere. [Richard Hannay](#) has just returned to [London](#) from [Rhodesia](#) in order to begin a new life, when a freelance spy called Franklin P. Scudder calls on him to ask for help. Scudder reveals to Hannay that he has uncovered a [German](#) plot to murder the [Greek Premier](#) and steal British plans for the outbreak of war. Scudder claims to be following a ring of German spies called the Black Stone.

A few days later, Hannay returns to his flat to find Scudder murdered. If Hannay goes to the police, he will be arrested for Scudder's murder. Hannay decides to continue Scudder's work and his adventure begins. He escapes from the German spies watching the house and makes his way to [Scotland](#), pursued both by the spies and by the police.

The mysterious phrase *Thirty-Nine Steps* first mentioned by Scudder becomes the title of the novel and the solution to its meaning is a thread that runs through the whole story.

## [\[edit\]](#) Plot summary

Richard Hannay, the protagonist and narrator, an expatriate Scot, returns from a long stay in [southern Africa](#) to his new home, a flat in London. One night he is buttonholed by a stranger, a well-travelled [American](#), who claims to be in fear for his life. The man appears to know of an [anarchist](#) plot to destabilise [Europe](#), beginning with a plan to assassinate the [Greek Premier](#), Karolides, during his forthcoming visit to London. He reveals his name to be Franklin P. Scudder. Hannay lets Scudder hide in his flat, and returns later the next day to find that another man has been found shot dead in the same building, apparently a suicide. Four days later Hannay returns home to find Scudder dead with a knife through his heart.

Hannay fears that the murderers will come for him next, but cannot ask the police for help because he is the most likely suspect for the murders. Not only does he want to avoid imprisonment, but he also feels a duty to take up Scudder's cause and save Karolides from the assassination, planned in three weeks' time. He decides to go into hiding in Scotland and then to contact the authorities at the last minute. In order to escape from his flat unseen, he bribes the [milkman](#) to lend him his uniform and exits wearing it. Carrying Scudder's pocket-book, he catches the next express train leaving from London St. Pancras station; its destination happens to be [Dumfries](#) in Scotland, and Hannay, remembering for some reason the nearby town of [Newton-Stewart](#), names this as his destination when he buys his ticket from the [guard](#).

Arriving at the countryside somewhere in [Galloway](#), Hannay lodges in a [shepherd's](#) cottage. The next morning he reads in a newspaper that the police are looking for him in Scotland. Reasoning that the police would expect him to head for a port on the West Coast, he doubles back and boards a local train heading east, but jumps off between stations. He is seen but escapes, finding an [inn](#) where he stays the night. He tells the innkeeper a modified version of his story, and the man is persuaded to shelter him. While staying at the inn, Hannay cracks the substitution [cipher](#) used in Scudder's pocket-book. The next day two men arrive at the inn looking for Hannay, but the innkeeper sends them away. When they return later, Hannay steals their car and escapes.

On his way, Hannay reflects on what he has learnt from Scudder's notes. They contradict the story that Scudder first told to him, and mention an enemy group called the *Black Stone* and the mysterious *Thirty-nine Steps*. The United Kingdom appears to be in danger of an invasion by Germany and its allies. By this time, Hannay is being pursued by an aeroplane, and a policeman in a remote village has tried to stop him. Trying to avoid an oncoming car, Hannay crashes his own, but the other driver offers to take him home. The man is Sir Harry, a local landowner and prospective [politician](#), although politically very naive. When he learns of Hannay's experience of South Africa, he invites him to address an election meeting that

afternoon. Hannay's speech impresses Sir Harry, and Hannay feels able to trust him with his story. Sir Harry writes an introductory letter about Hannay to a relation in the [Foreign Office](#).

Hannay leaves Sir Harry and tries to hide in the countryside, but is spotted by the aeroplane. Soon he spots a group of men on the ground searching for him. Miraculously, he meets a road mender out on the [moor](#), and swaps places with him, sending the workman home. His disguise fools his pursuers, who pass him by. On the same road he meets a rich motorist, whom he recognises from London, and whom he forces to exchange clothes with him and drive him off the moor.

The next day, Hannay manages to stay ahead of the pursuers, and hides in a cottage occupied by an elderly man. Unfortunately, the man turns out to be one of the enemy, and with his accomplices he imprisons Hannay. Fortunately, the room in which Hannay is locked is full of [bomb](#)-making materials, which he uses to break out of the cottage, injuring himself in the process.

A day later, Hannay retrieves his possessions from the helpful roadmender and stays for a few days to recover from the explosion. He dines at a [Public House](#) in [Moffat](#) before walking to the junction at [Beattock](#) to catch a southbound train to England, changing at [Crewe](#), [Birmingham New Street](#) and [Reading](#), to meet Sir Harry's relative at the Foreign Office, Sir Walter Bullivant, at his country home in [Berkshire](#). As they discuss Scudder's notes, Sir Walter receives a phone call to tell him that Karolides has been assassinated.

Sir Walter, now at his house in London, lets Hannay in on some military secrets before releasing him to go home. Hannay is unable to shake off his sense of involvement in important events, and returns to Sir Walter's house where a high-level meeting is in progress. He is just in time to see a man, whom he recognises as one of his former pursuers in Scotland, leaving the house. Hannay warns Sir Walter that the man, ostensibly the [First Sea Lord](#), is about to return to Europe with the information he has obtained from their meeting. At that point, Hannay realises that the phrase "the thirty-nine steps" could refer to the landing-point in England from which the spy is about to set sail. Throughout the night Hannay and the United Kingdom's military leaders try to work out the meaning of the mysterious phrase.

After some reasoning worthy of [Sherlock Holmes](#), and with the help of a knowledgeable coastguard, the group decide on a coastal town in [Kent](#). They find a path down from the cliff that has thirty-nine steps. Just offshore they see a yacht. Posing as [fishermen](#), some of the party visit the [yacht](#), the *Ariadne*, and find that at least one of the crew appears to be German. The only people onshore are playing tennis by a villa and appear to be English, but they match Scudder's description of the conspirators, The Black Stone. Hannay, alone, confronts the men at the villa. After a struggle, two of the men are captured while the third flees to the yacht, which meanwhile has been seized by the British authorities. The plot is thwarted, and the United Kingdom enters the [First World War](#) having kept its military secrets from the enemy.

A few weeks later, Hannay joins the army with a captain's rank.

**[[edit](#)] Literary significance and criticism**

*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.

## [\[edit\]](#) Characters in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*

- [Richard Hannay](#) – an expatriate Scot recently returned from Southern Africa, protagonist and narrator
- Franklin P. Scudder – freelance spy
- Karolides – Greek Premier under threat of assassination. He never appears and is alluded to only.
- Sir Harry – a Scottish landowner and would-be politician
- [Sir Walter Bullivant](#) – Sir Harry's relation at the Foreign Office

## [\[edit\]](#) Contents

I. The Man Who Died.

II. The Milkman Sets Out on His Travels.

III. The Adventure of the Literary Innkeeper.

IV. The Adventure of the Radical Candidate.

V. The Adventure of the Spectacled Roadman.

VI. The Adventure of the Bald Archaeologist.

VII. The Dry-Fly Fisherman.

VIII. The Coming of the Black Stone.

IX. The Thirty-Nine Steps.

X. Various Parties Converging on the Sea.

## [\[edit\]](#) Radio, Film, TV or theatrical adaptations

There have been several film versions of the book; all depart substantially from the text, for example introducing a love interest absent from the original novel. For the films, the title is often abbreviated to *The 39 Steps*, but the full title is more commonly used for the book and for the 1978 adaptation.

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.

## **[[edit](#)] Radio**

On August 1, 1939 [Orson Welles](#) starred in a radio adaptation of the novel with the [Mercury Theatre](#) .

[Glenn Ford](#) starred in an adaptation on the March 23, 1948 broadcast of *Studio One* with [Everett Sloane](#), [Mercedes McCambridge](#) and [Kathleen Cordell](#).

[Herbert Marshall](#) starred in a radio adaptation on the March 3, 1952 broadcast of [Suspense](#).

The [BBC](#) has broadcast two different adaptations: an hour-long version in 1992 starring [David Rintoul](#) as Hannay and directed by [Patrick Rayner](#), and a two-part adaptation on [BBC Radio 4](#) in March 2001 starring [David Robb](#) as Hannay with [Tom Baker](#) as [Sir Walter Bullivant](#) adapted by [Bert Coules](#).

## **[[edit](#)] 1935**

Main article: [The 39 Steps \(1935 film\)](#)

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.<sup>[3]</sup> It is regarded by critics as the superior film version.<sup>[4]</sup> This was the first Hitchcock film based upon the idea of an "innocent man on the run," such as [Saboteur](#) and [North by Northwest](#). Scholars of his movies 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 movie of all time.

## **[[edit](#)] 1959**

Main article: [The 39 Steps \(1959 film\)](#)

The 1959 film directed by [Ralph Thomas](#) was the first colour version starring [Kenneth More](#) as Hannay and [Taina Elg](#) as Miss Fisher.<sup>[5]</sup> The film is closely based on Hitchcock's adaptation, featuring the music-hall finale with "Mr Memory" and Hannay's escape on the [Forth Rail Bridge](#), scenes not present in the book. It features a musical score by [Clifton Parker](#).

## **[[edit](#)] 1978**

Main article: [The Thirty Nine Steps \(1978 film\)](#)

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.<sup>[6]</sup> It is generally regarded as the closest to the book, being set at the same time as the novel was, pre-[World War I](#), 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](#). 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*.

## **[\[edit\]](#) 2006–2010**

A [comic theatrical adaptation](#) by [Patrick Barlow](#) opened in London's [Tricycle Theatre](#), and after a successful run transferred to the [Criterion Theatre](#) in [Piccadilly](#) where it has been running for over five years as of September 2011. Although drawing on Buchan's novel, it is chiefly influenced by Hitchcock's 1935 film adaptation. On 15 January 2008, the show made its US [Broadway](#) premiere at the [American Airlines Theatre](#); it transferred to the [Cort Theatre](#) on 29 April 2008 and then moved to the [Helen Hayes Theatre](#) on 21 January 2009, where it ended its run on 10 January 2010. It reopened on Stage One of [New York's Off-Broadway](#) venue [New World Stages](#) on 25 March 2010 and closed on 15 April 2010.<sup>[7]</sup> The Broadway production received six [Tony Award](#) nominations, winning two—Best Lighting Design and Best Sound Design with the London show winning an [Olivier](#) in 2007 and two Tony Awards in 2008. The play also won the [Drama Desk Award](#), Unique Theatrical Experience.<sup>[8][9]</sup>

## **[\[edit\]](#) 2008**

Main article: [The 39 Steps \(2008 film\)](#)

The BBC commissioned a new television adaptation of the novel, scripted by [Lizzie Mickery](#) and produced by [BBC Scotland](#)'s drama unit.<sup>[10][11]</sup> The 90 minute film stars [Rupert Penry-Jones](#) as Richard Hannay and was broadcast on 28 December 2008<sup>[12]</sup> 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.

Also, in 2008, [Penguin Books](#) adapted the story as [interactive fiction](#) under the authorship of [Charles Cumming](#) calling it *The 21 Steps*.<sup>[13]</sup>

## **[\[edit\]](#) Robert Towne remake**

A second remake of the Hitchcock version by director [Robert Towne](#) was announced in 2004, although he had since commented that this project is, "sort of on the back burner." After initially being planned for release in 2006, 2011 was proposed as a release date on IMDb, and is since listed as being in development.<sup>[14]</sup>

## **[\[edit\]](#) The real thirty-nine steps**



Buchan wrote the book while he was recuperating from illness at a house called St Cuby, Cliff Promenade, [Broadstairs](#). As mentioned in the Background section, the original steps were demolished, and a part of them were sent to Buchan. They were replaced by concrete, and this set of steps still runs from the garden to the beach.<sup>[15]</sup>

## **[[edit](#)] References**

1. <sup>^</sup> <http://www.johnbuchansociety.co.uk/samples/stepsdw.htm> The Thirty-Nine Steps first edition dustwrapper
2. <sup>^</sup> <sup>*a*</sup> <sup>*b*</sup> ["Lord Tweedsmuir: novelist and son of John Buchan"](#), obituary, *The Times* of London, July 4, 2008 ("In 1990 [William] Buchan published a memoir of his own early life, *The Rags of Time*, in which he described his family life [...]"), retrieved December 8, 2008
3. <sup>^</sup> [The 39 Steps \(1935\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
4. <sup>^</sup> [The BFI 100](#)
5. <sup>^</sup> [The 39 Steps \(1959\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
6. <sup>^</sup> [The Thirty Nine Steps \(1978\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
7. <sup>^</sup> [New York Theatre Guide](#)
8. <sup>^</sup> [Internet Broadway Database listing, "39 Steps"](#)
9. <sup>^</sup> Jones, Kenneth. ["The 39 Steps Will Step Into the Helen Hayes in January 2009"](#), [playbill.com](#), October 17, 2008
10. <sup>^</sup> [The 39 Steps \(2008\) \(TV\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
11. <sup>^</sup> Rushton, Katherine (2008-08-20). ["BBC plots 39 Steps remake"](#). *Broadcast Now* (EMAP). Retrieved 2008-08-21.
12. <sup>^</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/proginform/tv/wk52/bbc\\_one.shtml#bbcone\\_39steps](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/proginform/tv/wk52/bbc_one.shtml#bbcone_39steps)
13. <sup>^</sup> [The 21 Steps](#), interactive fiction
14. <sup>^</sup> [The 39 Steps \(2011\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
15. <sup>^</sup> ["The 39 Steps - Thanet Area"](#). [undergroundkent.co.uk](#). Retrieved 2009-06-30.<sup>[*dead link*]</sup>

## **[[edit](#)] External links**

- [The Thirty-nine Steps](#) at [Project Gutenberg](#)
- [A review of the book](#) from [MysteryGuide.com](#)
- [The 39 Steps \(1935\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
- [The 39 Steps \(1959\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
- [The Thirty Nine Steps \(1978\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
- [The 39 Steps \(2009\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
- Free audio recording of [The Thirty-Nine Steps](#) from [Librivox.org](#).

**[[hide](#)]**

- [v](#)
- [t](#)
- [e](#)

**[Richard Hannay](#) novels by [John Buchan](#)**



<b>Novels</b>	• <i><a href="#">The Thirty-Nine Steps</a></i> (1915)
	• <i><a href="#">Greenmantle</a></i> (1916)
	• <i><a href="#">Mr Standfast</a></i> (1919)
	• <i><a href="#">The Three Hostages</a></i> (1924)
	• <i><a href="#">The Courts of the Morning</a></i> (1929)
	• <i><a href="#">The Island of Sheep</a></i> (1936)
<b>Adaptations</b>	• <i><a href="#">The 39 Steps</a></i> (1935)
	• <i><a href="#">The 39 Steps</a></i> (1959)
	• <i><a href="#">The Three Hostages</a></i> (1977)
	• <i><a href="#">The Thirty Nine Steps</a></i> (1978)
	• <i><a href="#">Hannay</a></i> (TV series)
	• <i><a href="#">The 39 Steps</a></i> (play)
	• <i><a href="#">The 39 Steps</a></i> (2008)

View page ratings

Rate this page

[What's this?](#)

Trustworthy

Objective

Complete

Well-written

☐ I am highly knowledgeable about this topic (optional)

[Categories:](#)

- [1915 novels](#)
- [Thriller novels](#)
- [Novels set in Dumfries and Galloway](#)
- [Novels set in London](#)
- [Novels by John Buchan](#)
- [Novels adapted into films](#)
- [Scottish novels](#)
- [Novels first published in serial form](#)
- [Works originally published in Blackwood's Magazine](#)

• [Log in / create account](#)

• [Article](#)

• [Talk](#)

• [Read](#)

• [Edit](#)

• [View history](#)

• [Main page](#)

• [Contents](#)

• [Featured content](#)

- [Current events](#)
- [Random article](#)
- [Donate to Wikipedia](#)

#### Interaction

- [Help](#)
- [About Wikipedia](#)
- [Community portal](#)
- [Recent changes](#)
- [Contact Wikipedia](#)

#### Toolbox

#### Print/export

#### Languages

- [Galego](#)
- [Italiano](#)
- [Türkçe](#)
- [中文](#)

- This page was last modified on 20 March 2012 at 08:43.
- Text is available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License](#); additional terms may apply. See [Terms of use](#) for details.  
Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the [Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.](#), a non-profit organization.
- [Contact us](#)