

## John Buchan and Yousuf Karsh

By Jerry Fielder

In 1935, the paths of two great men crossed in a way that would have a lasting impact on the legacy of them both.<sup>1</sup> The career of one, Yousuf Karsh, was on the ascent. In six years he would take a portrait of Winston Churchill that would launch his international fame and lead to his success as a master portrait photographer for the next six decades. The career of the other, John Buchan, would come to a sudden end five years later when he lost his life after a tragic fall.

For Karsh, this association honed his interpersonal and professional skills and expanded his clientele to those who wanted to have their portrait taken by the man who had earned the honor of “Appointment to Their Excellencies, The Governor-General and Lady Tweedsmuir.” It was through Lord Tweedsmuir that Karsh met and formed a close friendship with Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, and it was through Mackenzie King that Karsh was invited to photograph Winston Churchill in 1941. Each door opened another. However, it was Karsh’s talent more than his connections that made this possible, and Lord Tweedsmuir was one of the first to appreciate his artistic gifts.

For John Buchan, this association left a photographic legacy for his family, friends, and admirers of the multi-faceted life of a remarkable man. The portraits show him not only in the regal and dignified aspects of his life, but also in many of the most personal, including photographs with his wife, his mother, and his children. They leave an artistic record of Lord Tweedsmuir -- the Governor General of Canada--and also John Buchan--the thinker, writer, husband, father, and son.

*“ ...I first met him as Lord Tweedsmuir, the day after he and Lady Tweedsmuir arrived in Canada. As photographer-by-appointment, I was commanded to appear at Government House to make an official portrait, an event usually weighed down with solemn dignity. Except on official occasions, it vanished in Lord Tweedsmuir’s presence. Although he wore an habitually grave expression, a gay sense of humor lay behind the the mask, and he had the best and largest fund of Scotch stories of anyone I have ever known. On the first occasion, he greeted me with, “I hear you’re quite an expert at this job. You’ll need to be—to make me look the part.”<sup>2</sup>*

At 17, Yousuf Karsh had sailed alone to Canada, speaking some French and a little English. It is extraordinary that this young immigrant came to the position of making the official portrait of the Governor-General just ten years later.

Yousuf Karsh was born December 23, 1908 in Mardin, Turkey. His family was Armenian and Yousuf grew up midst the horrors of the genocide. Food was scarce, and their daily existence was insecure at best—two of his uncles had already been murdered. In 1922, his family was able to flee to safety in Aleppo, Syria, and three years later his parents saved enough to send Yousuf to safety with his Uncle Nakash, a portrait photographer in Sherbrooke, Québec. Yousuf worked in the studio alongside his uncle, who quickly realized his nephew was gifted with talent and intelligence and deserved an opportunity to expand his art and his life. Nakash arranged for an apprenticeship with a friend of his in Boston, the distinguished photographer John H. Garo. Yousuf spent three years with Garo, who was not only the photographer of choice for Boston’s cultural and social elite, but also a master printer. Yousuf possessed a natural talent for light and composition, and he developed an ease with people much like Garo’s. They became like father and son, and Garo had hoped that Yousuf would stay in Boston to become a partner in the studio. As much as he admired Garo, the seeds of independence, artistic

curiosity, and ambition had already been planted and he felt they could only grow if he struck out on his own.

Karsh opened his Ottawa studio in 1933. He soon became involved with the Ottawa Little Theatre, the venue where he would first experiment with incandescent light. It was there that he became friends with young Lord Duncannon, the dashing 21-year old son of the then Governor General, Lord Bessborough. Like their son, Lord and Lady Bessborough were keenly interested in the stage and even had a miniature theatre in their Scottish castle. Lord Duncannon was starring as Romeo, in the Ottawa Little Theatre's production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and Yousuf took a meticulously composed and beautifully lit photograph of Romeo at the entrance to the room where he finds Juliet and believes her to be dead. It was published in both Canada and in the British press, with great success.

As a result of his delight with the photograph, Lord Duncannon encouraged Karsh to make a portrait of his parents and recommended the 27-year-old photographer to Lord and Lady Bessborough. They came to his Sparks Street studio and their portraits, like the one of their son, were well received and widely published in both Canada and England, including a full page with good reviews in *The Tatler*. Lord Bessborough was so pleased that Karsh soon received the following letter from the Comptroller of the Household at Government House:

*“Dear Sir,*

*I am desired by Their Excellencies to inform you that you are authorized to use the words, “By Appointment to Their Excellencies the Governor-General and the Countess of Bessborough” in connection with your business.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*Lieut.-Col. Eric D. Mackenzie, C.M.G., D.S.O.*

*April 20, 1935”<sup>3</sup>*

Mackenzie retained that position when the 15th Governor General of Canada, Lord Tweedsmuir, took up his position on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, and remained Comptroller until late in 1939, just a few months before Lord Tweedsmuir's death. This is important in the tale of Yousuf Karsh and John Buchan because during those crucial years from 1935 until 1940, all of the correspondence in the Karsh Archive (more than 50 letters) are between Karsh and the Comptroller, not Karsh and the Governor General. It was the protocol of the day.

We can, however, know that while not recorded on paper, they enjoyed a warm and collegial relationship. Part of this is documented in Karsh's own writings and memoirs, and part of it I can share through my conversations with him about his early years in Ottawa. The photography of Lord and Lady Bessborough opened many doors of opportunity for Karsh. The Appointment to Their Excellencies gave his work a certain cachet, but their association had only been for a year or so and the sittings were just a few. With Lord Tweedsmuir, the association lasted from the day after he took office in 1935 until the occasion of the opening of Parliament, January 25, 1940, just 17 days before his death on February 11<sup>th</sup>.

The patronage of Lord Tweedsmuir, however, was not automatically granted. On March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1936, Karsh wrote Colonel Mackenzie to ask that his name be submitted “as that of a suitable recipient for the honour of Appointment to Their Excellencies, The Governor-General and Lady Tweedsmuir”. He pointed out that this distinction had been granted by The Earl of Bessborough and added, “I venture to

hope that recent work entrusted to me may have recommended itself sufficiently to Their Excellencies as to merit continued confidence.”

The reply came from Colonel Mackenzie two days later. “Dear Sir, I am afraid it is not possible for you to be granted Their Excellencies’ Patronage until they have dealt with you for a period of at least six months. If you will, therefore, resubmit your application after the necessary time has elapsed, I am sure there will be no difficulty in your being honoured with their Patronage.”

There is no record of further discussion of the matter, but a short two months later, on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1936, Karsh wrote Colonel Mackenzie to say, “I deem it a great honour that Their Excellencies, the Governor-General and Lady Tweedsmuir, have been so gracious as to extend their Patronage to my business. It is my earnest desire that my work shall constantly merit their approval.” Yousuf told me that the speed of this was both welcome and a surprise.

We do know that a number of finished proofs of Lord and Lady Tweedsmuir were delivered to Government House on May 4<sup>th</sup>, and that on May 8<sup>th</sup> three photographs of His Excellency with the Dominion Drama Festival Committee were delivered as ordered in April. Karsh also photographed Alastair Buchan on April 29<sup>th</sup>, and young Mr. Buchan wrote a personal note to Karsh saying, “I have received the nine prints which I like very much indeed.” We can only surmise that in his personal and professional dealings with Karsh during these few weeks, Lord Tweedsmuir had come to the conclusion that waiting a full six months was not necessary. In fact, an official portrait session with Lady Tweedsmuir had already been booked for May 18<sup>th</sup>.

In early July of 1936, Karsh wrote to Colonel Mackenzie to say that he had learned that the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was going to make a trip to the Citadel at Québec City on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July to meet with Lord Tweedsmuir and Prime Minister Mackenzie King. A sitting President had never before visited Canada, and it was an historic occasion. The Canadian, American, and international press would be there in force and Karsh asked if he could also be included. The Comptroller replied the same day with an invitation and the necessary credentials and passes.

After a festive state luncheon, the principals gathered outside and posed for photographs—Lord and Lady Tweedsmuir, Prime Minister Mackenzie King, President Roosevelt, and his son James Roosevelt with his wife Betsy. The photographers’ shutters snapped and bulbs flashed, but Karsh lingered in the background. When the press had dispersed, he asked if the group would pose again. They did and the result is a very nice, but somewhat stiff photograph of the six of them. As I would see him do so often in later years, he pretended he had finished and then everyone relaxed. The two Roosevelts and the Prime Minister chatted informally as the Governor General told one of his amusing Scottish stories. That is when Karsh got the photograph he wanted. The President and his son are caught up in the conversation, the Prime Minister is laughing, and the Governor General is in the midst of being his raconteurish best.

Not all portraits Karsh took of Lord Tweedsmuir were in official dress. The next year, 1937, Karsh took a much more informal portrait which Lord Tweedsmuir liked very much, and which graces the cover of this 50th edition of the John Buchan Journal. It was of him in a native headdress, that of a Chief. Tweedsmuir loved the history and culture of Canada, and he had been presented this by a tribe as a treasured gift. He was touched and took the honor very seriously. In his 1962 autobiography, *In Search of Greatness*, Karsh recalls an amusing story about the photograph, as told to him by Buchan. “Tweedsmuir related to me once with enjoyment how Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, now the Queen

Mother, on her first visit to Canada, had requested from Lady Tweedsmuir a copy of my photograph of Lord Tweedsmuir in his headdress as Chief of an Indian Tribe, 'to show the little Princesses what a real North American Indian looks like.' In fact, Buchan's lean aquiline Scottish face was not too much unlike that of some Red Indians I have seen."

It is difficult to determine exactly how many times Karsh photographed Lord Tweedsmuir, because some of the sittings were listed under the names of occasions, ceremonies, or guests at Government House. Karsh photographed each opening of Parliament in the Tweedsmuir years, which of course included the Governor General, but they are listed under Opening of Parliament. There is a reference in a June 1936 letter to Karsh concerning the photographs taken at Government House of His Excellency with the St. John of Jerusalem group, but how the session was filed is a bit of a mystery. Another letter references a photograph of Lord Tweedsmuir with the Dominion Drama Festival Committee, but records are also filed under something other than Tweedsmuir or Dominion Drama Festival.

Karsh kept excellent records throughout this 60-year career, but this was in the beginning of his studio's operation. His filing system was a work in progress. We can document at least 30 sittings with Lord Tweedsmuir and his family, but there were obviously many more. We can tell from correspondence and Karsh's personal recollections that Lord Tweedsmuir and Government House kept the Appointed Photographer very busy.

And yet, there are relatively few original photographs from this period in the Karsh Archive, even though the records show that a great many were ordered and printed. One of the main reasons is that photographic paper was expensive and Karsh was just beginning his career. If eight photographs were ordered, eight were printed. As Yousuf told me much later, he didn't make extras prints to keep. If he wanted more, he could always make them. In the 1930's, photography was still not widely considered an art form, and he had no idea that in the future there would be so much interest and study of his work from this era.

Because so many prints were ordered from so many sittings over the years of their association, it is my hope that, perhaps as a result of this article, some will surface that have been in private collections or institutional holdings for all these years, and that they can be shared with us.

*"This was his favorite portrait and one that shows him as he would like to be remembered—as John Buchan, the writer and thinker, dressed for a morning's walk on his Scottish moors or the Canadian Gatineau Hills he came to love as greatly.*

*No other Governor-General ever won more respect or affection throughout Canada, but while he served his important post with dignity and devotion, he was a simple democrat at heart; a worshipper of Abraham Lincoln, whose pictures and biography occupied a conspicuous place in the study at Rideau Hall, the official residence of Canadian Governors-General."*<sup>4</sup>

It was my honor to work with Yousuf Karsh as his colleague and friend for almost 25 years. He hired me in 1979 to be his photographic assistant. When he closed his studio in 1992, he asked me to be his Curator, and when he died in 2002, I became the Director of the Karsh Estate, a position I still hold today. He spoke with me often of the early years of his career and the important part Lord Tweedsmuir played in his success. He also had fond memories of his admiration and affection for the man behind the position.

In his 1946 collection of portraits entitled *Faces of Destiny*, he wrote,

*“...Of the many times I enjoyed his company, two stand out vividly in my memory. One was on a morning in my studio when Tweedsmuir and his sons were to be photographed together in their uniforms. The boys arrived first and I shall never forget them spring to attention and saluting when their father came into the room.”*

*“The other time was only a few weeks before his death, when there came a telephone call from Rideau Hall and I was asked if I would help him choose the photographs for his latest book, Memory Hold-the-Door, spread out around him. The two hours I spent with him are among my most cherished memories.”<sup>5</sup>*

How fortunate for those of us who are admirers of John Buchan or Yousuf Karsh or both, that their paths crossed on that November day in 1935 and that they found each other at this pivotal and historic point in their lives.

### Bibliography

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Dr. Jill Delaney and the staff of Library and Archives Canada for their great support in helping him to locate and access the document and negative material which added so much to this article.

<sup>2</sup> Karsh (1946), p146-7.

<sup>3</sup> Karsh papers, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

<sup>4</sup> Karsh (11946), p146-7.

<sup>5</sup> Karsh (1946), p146-7.