

# ILYA YEFIMOVICH REPIN

(Chuguyev, Ukraine 1844 - Kuokalla 1930)

## *Portrait of Sir George Buchanan, the British Ambassador*

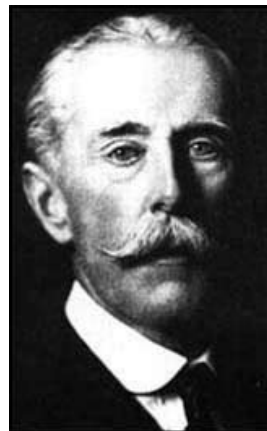
signed in Cyrillic and dated '1916' (lower left);  
with later inscription in Russian 'Sir George Buchanan' (lower left)  
pencil and crayon on brown paper  
47 x 30 cm (18½ x 11¾ in)

**B**ORN IN COPENHAGEN, DENMARK IN 1854, GEORGE William Buchanan, GCB, GCMG, GCVO, PC, see figure 1, was the son of British Ambassador Sir Andrew Buchanan (1807-1882). Following in his father's footsteps, Buchanan was appointed Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to The Hague between 1908 and 1910. Sir George then became the British Ambassador to Russia. His role was to keep abreast of the political developments in Russia: critically his period of service covered the time of the Russian Revolutions of 1917, this portrait of Sir George having been completed just one year before.

Although there is no record of Ilya Yefimovich Repin completing a portrait of Sir George, a preparatory oil sketch dated 1917 has been sold at Sotheby's (28<sup>th</sup> November 1991, lot 407). It seems likely therefore, that a portrait was planned, but was forestalled by the February Revolution of 1917.

Sir George had developed a strong bond with Tsar Nicholas II (1868-1918), and made a valiant but futile attempt to convince the Tsar that granting constitutional reform would stave off revolution. Unfortunately, Nicholas' opinion of him was negatively influenced by the Tsarina. Sir George formally requested an audience of the Tsar in the troubled early days of 1917 to warn him of plots to stage a palace coup. At his last meeting with the Tsar he beseeched him: 'I can but plead as my excuse the fact that I have throughout been inspired by my feelings of devotion for Your Majesty and the Empress. If I were to see a friend walking through a wood on a dark night along a path which I knew ended in a precipice, would it not be my duty, Sir, to warn him of his danger? And is it not equally my duty to warn Your Majesty of the abyss that lies ahead of you? You have, Sir, come to the parting of the ways, and you have now to choose between two paths. The one will lead you to victory and a glorious peace - the other to revolution and disaster. Let me implore Your Majesty to choose the former'.<sup>1</sup> The Tsar, however, was swayed by his wife's opinions and did not take heed of the prophetic and well-meaning advice he had been given by Sir George.

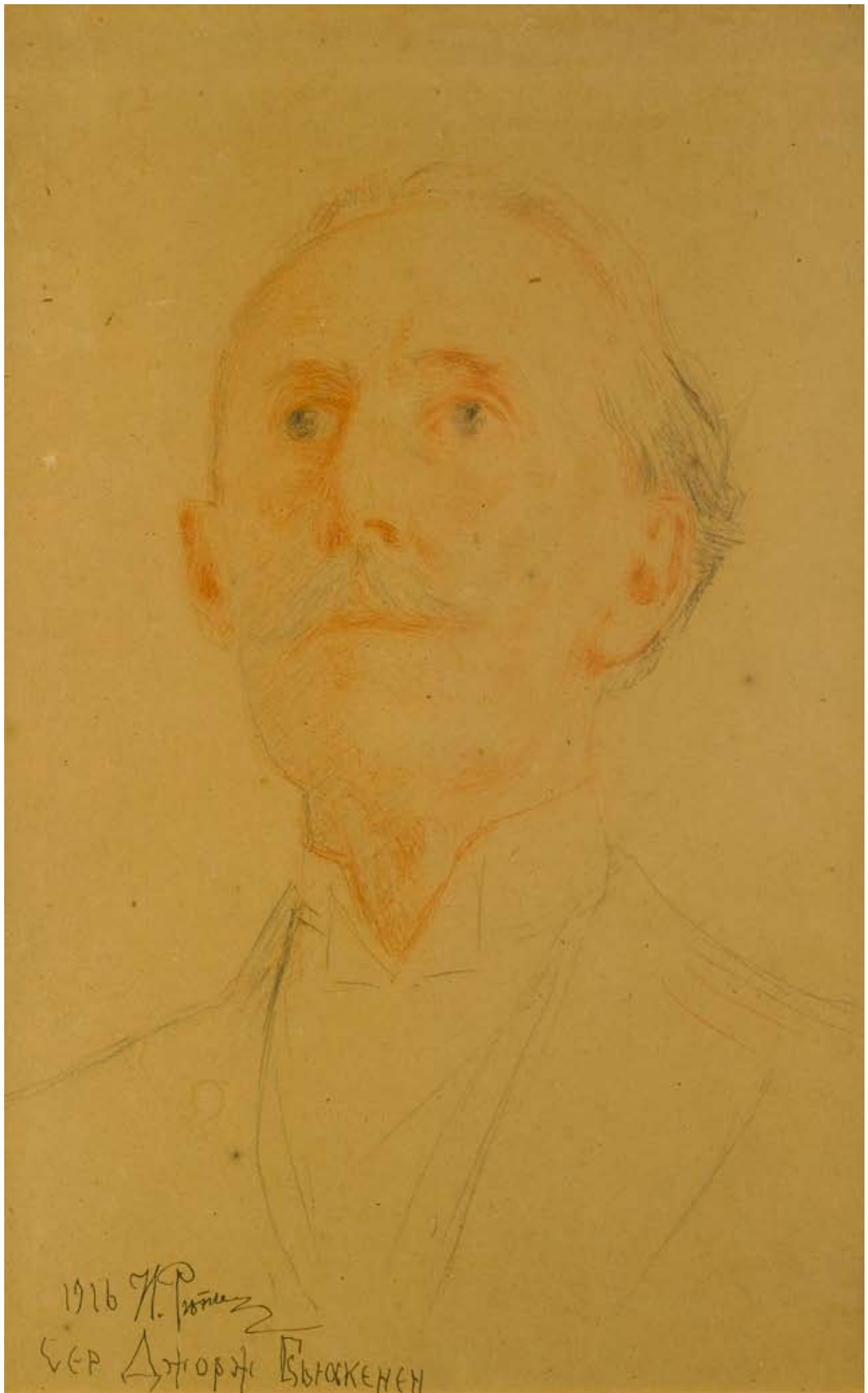
<sup>1</sup> Buchanan, Sir G., *My Mission to Russia and Other Diplomatic Memories* (1923, Cassell & Co., Ltd., London), vol. II, p. 49.



Photograph of Sir George Buchanan  
(Figure 1)

After the collapse of the autocracy in 1917, Sir George developed close relations with the liberal Provisional Government that formed after the February Revolution. However, after the events of the October Revolution and the Bolsheviks' ascendancy to power, he was widely criticised for the failure to ensure that Tsar Nicholas II and his family were evacuated from Russia before they were taken and imprisoned in the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoye Selo, prior to their execution by the Bolsheviks in 1918. It is, however, now known that it was the British government, then under the leadership of David Lloyd George (1863-1945), who made the political decision to withdraw the offer originally made, under the persuasion of King George V (1865-1936), to provide sanctuary for the Imperial Family.

Sir George finished his distinguished career as Ambassador to the Holy See from 1919 to 1921 and published his autobiography, *My Mission to Russia and Other Diplomatic Memories*, in 1923. It is believed that he had to leave out some of what he knew under threat of losing his pension; he died in 1924.



1916 Ж. Р. [signature]  
БЕР АГОРЖИ БЫАКЕНЕН