

SOCIETY OF NEO-LATIN STUDIES: ANNUAL LECTURE, 2013

The Poetry of George Buchanan 1973-2013

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In this lecture I will look at studies of Buchanan's poetry over the past forty years, with especial attention to the contributions of our late colleague and friend Philip Ford, whom we remember today with affection and sadness, and appreciation. I will also, much more quickly, think about the future, though of course I know nothing for certain about the year 2023, not even in terms of projected new railway lines and perhaps another English power station or the venue of the next but two World Cup. As for the date 1973, it tallies with the present year, 2013, of course, but is not plucked out of thin air. Philip began his Cambridge Ph. D., researching on Buchanan, in 1972, but perhaps (I am guessing) it was in 1973 that the remarkable synergy between him and his supervisor, Ian McFarlane, began to gel. Both were to make outstanding contributions to Buchanan studies, as I will try to explain; the same is true in the area of French studies, but you will not expect me to stray into that field and away from my own competences.

A point to be made at the outset is that before 1972 there had been very little study of Buchanan as a poet. Indeed, we have to go back to 1906, when there were two conferences commemorating Buchanan's birth, one in St Andrews and one in Glasgow. Although the published proceedings of these, especially the former, have a remarkable range, testifying to Buchanan's manifold presences and reputation, there is almost nothing of lasting value on his poetry. One paper did have a continuing effect, an unfortunate one in my opinion, which is not irrelevant to something that I will say later: I refer to a piece by the St Andrews Professor of Humanity, W. M. Lindsay. After careful consideration of the issues I believe that Lindsay got out of bed on the wrong side on the relevant morning, and made a demonstrably unjust attack on Buchanan as poet and classicist. He began his paper, entitled "Buchanan as a Latin scholar", by saying "Buchanan was not a scholar..." and went on in that curmudgeonly vein, giving only occasional signs that he had looked at the works he criticised. But I have ventilated my thoughts on that matter elsewhere; enough of the distant past. Suffice it to say that when McFarlane and Ford set out, there was little work of any merit, except perhaps in the biographical field, and that has now long been superseded.

I first met McFarlane during his St Andrews decade (1961-71), at first on the cricket pitch. At that time, in the late 1960s, I had no aspirations to be a neo-Latinist, and perhaps I was unaware even that a subject called neo-Latin existed, or, if I did, what its apparently few practitioners might be getting up to. I remember being mildly surprised that in the University of St Andrews the new modern language building was named, as it still is, the Buchanan Building; presumably this was due to Ian McFarlane, Professor of French, stamping his enthusiasm for Buchanan on the university and, quite reasonably, pointing to the contribution of Latin to early modern studies. (By the way, the city of Glasgow also has the Buchanan bus station, and the Buchanan Galleries – a new shopping mall – but these commemorate another person, a tobacco magnate of two centuries later). McFarlane was indeed a man of great enthusiasm, and I believe he had the nickname “Stromboli” (which is not to say that he was not a highly amiable personality); at least that soubriquet is more plausible than the one attributed in an obituary in the Scotsman newspaper some eleven years ago, that everyone called him “Mac”. In Scottish St. Andrews that would be a little surprising with so many people around who might answer to “Mac”. I suppose the obituary writer knew him in his next incarnation, in Oxford from 1971 to his retirement in 1981.

But it is of course his Buchanan book of that year, 1981, not his personality, that I want to speak of. In his introduction he tells us that he found the name of Buchanan cropping up so often as he worked on French literature that to research him seemed a thing he must do; and of course Buchanan was a fellow Scot, and the University library of St. Andrews held a lot of Buchanan editions and also many works once owned by Buchanan. McFarlane’s book, called sensibly just “Buchanan”, is not only a biography, going into full detail on the vicissitudes of Buchanan’s life, whether in Scotland, France, or anywhere else that he went. It is also a study in great detail of Buchanan’s varied and voluminous poetry, and indeed his often controversial prose works. Although today’s biographies of literary figures of the early modern period certainly delve into the poems as well as into more directly biographical material, they do not do so, in my experience, to anything like the same extent as McFarlane. And although no-one judges a book by its Appendices, there are 50 pages of these, the most useful of them, in Appendix G, being a transcript of Buchanan’s *Life*, the short Latin document always thought to have been written by the man himself – with the exception of the final line recording his death. At the other end of the book, so to speak, McFarlane has given us an excellent seventeen-

page introduction, skilfully guiding and preparing the reader, whether scholar or layman, for this feast of sixteenth century history and literature. If you can't read the whole book, at least read the introduction.

The book is all written in the typical lively, even jaunty, McFarlane style. A friend who back in 1981 brought the book to my attention led me to believe that somewhere, in McFarlane's words, Buchanan had "missed the bus". I've never found that particular phrase, and have read the work at least twice, and some parts of it perhaps ten times (none of my books has more slips of sticky paper to mark important pages). But I can vouch for the fact that somewhere McFarlane described Buchanan's life at one point as "not all roses". I think that this refers to Buchanan's experience of the Inquisition in Portugal; if so, it's certainly a contrast with some modern interpretations which suggest the torture chamber, of which there is no sign at all in the records or the poetry. So whether you need to know about Buchanan's life, or some episode of it, or the literary works, or even the difficult history of the time, especially the first decade of Reformation Scotland (I mean the 1560s), it's a most readable book, as well as a very learned one. I fully expect similar admiration will be being expressed in 2023.

I have yet to mention the fact that an important landmark in Buchanan studies was a neo-Latin conference held in the University of St Andrews in 1982, the quatercentenary of his death. At this conference one day was devoted to papers on Buchanan. Ian McFarlane, who was very solidly behind the conference, in a sense anticipated it by one year with his *magnum opus* that I have just described, but the date of 1982 was exactly met by the next book I mention, which emerged just a few weeks before the conference. This is of course Philip Ford's "George Buchanan, Prince of Poets", published by Aberdeen University Press. Though Philip owed a lot to Ian McFarlane's supervision, as he says, his much smaller book is not at all a pale reflection of the McFarlane biography. The traffic between supervisee – and after that Ph. D. Cambridge and then, fairly briefly, lecturer in the University of Aberdeen – and his Oxford-based supervisor was, as one can see at various points, two way. Their approaches were complementary, and their styles independent. The Ford style – and this goes for his latest book as well as his first – is straightforward, sober, clear, and sure-footed; and in comparison with many authors of the present time, it is totally free from jargon or obfuscation or pretentiousness. Philip never had Buchanan missing the bus, and when necessarily speaking of roses he duly kept within the bounds of sixteenth-century literary or

metaphorical usage, meaning the flowers themselves or, if not, such flowery things as women's lips.

If you have ever put this book in a bibliography, as many of us often do, you may have wondered, momentarily, whether to add the fact that part of it was written in combination with the late Professor W. S. Watt of the University of Aberdeen, whom I once heard described as Scotland's leading Latinist. I have done this in the handout, on this occasion, but perhaps some clarification is necessary. This part is the edition (text, translation and commentary) of the set of Buchanan's poems known as the *Miscellanea* ('miscellaneous works'). In this section I cannot tell exactly who wrote what (or should I say, "what Watt wrote"?). At the time, I heard a rumour that the combination was not a great success, for whatever reason, although I must say that this text and commentary is a good starting point for students, and indeed for any one wishing some kind of introduction to Buchanan's range of topics and styles. Anyway, I know that Philip was intending to do another edition of these important poems, one of several projected tasks that his tragic death has made impossible.

A second, perhaps smaller point, before we open the book, as it were, and look inside. This is really a request for information and illumination. Without looking very hard, I have been keeping an eye open for a sixteenth century parallel to the description of Buchanan as "prince of poets of our age". This goes back to an edition of the Poetic Psalm Paraphrases printed by the brothers Henri and Robert Estienne in either 1565 or 1566 and in either Paris or Geneva (I can't help the vagueness; it derives from the title page, as you can see from the handout, and remains a problem). The editor or editors there describe the author as a Scot, and then as "easily the prince of the poets of our age". (The Latin, which is *poetarum nostri saeculi facile princeps*, is usually slightly misquoted, but harmlessly). The translation "prince" is of course perfectly reasonable, and probably the best one for this period (alternatives would be "chief" or "leader"). I wish I knew if titles like this were given frequently, as a matter of common politeness, or not: I suspect not. I know that the poet Pierre de Ronsard, closely contemporary with Buchanan, enjoyed that title, in French form, but not at what point of his life it was given him. I have come across phrases like *philosophorum princeps* ("prince of philosophers"), but that refers to Aristotle, from the ancient world, not a modern.

Philip's book, as many of you know, is compact (128 pages, excluding the commentary I have just mentioned). It is in no way a mini-McFarlane, but goes into various new aspects of Buchanan's poetic career as well as being an

excellent survey. I have found it a useful *vade mecum*, and a great help in teaching students, as it is a fine presentation of Buchanan's various works with appropriate description, contextualisation, and evaluation. I also know of its high regard among scholars. One such is the Scottish scholar and poet Robert Crawford, who, as some of you will know, not long ago published a volume of verse entitled "Apollos of the North", a book devoted to the translation or representation of selected poems of two poets: Buchanan, and a Scottish admirer of the seventeenth century named Arthur Johnstone. (Johnstone, by the way, is one of the authors excerpted on your SNLS website, along with Buchanan.) Crawford says in his introduction how "wonderfully helpful" he found Philip Ford's book when he came across it in the old bookshop in St. Andrews, alas no longer there.

Like McFarlane, Ford has a brief and helpful introduction on neo-Latin poetry in France, and on the varied career of Buchanan; in what follows he will link the two themes, very effectively contextualising the kaleidoscopic verse. This, of course, shows his deep background knowledge of France and French literature; but he is also good on the Portuguese and Scottish backgrounds to his writing. For example (notwithstanding his early departure from Aberdeen, which for him, a Londoner, was not, I believe, entirely his cup of tea), he makes a valuable comparison between a short poem of Buchanan's entitled *Somnium* ('Dream'), and its model, a poem in Scots by the Scottish poet William Dunbar, entitled, "How Dumbar wes Desyred to be ane Frier". Both poems narrate, and mockingly undermine, a call to supposedly greater religious devotion. There is a sizeable corpus of mainly scurrilous, or controversial, religious poetry by Buchanan, including the *Franciscanus*, eventually his longest single work and perhaps the most famous of them all, much of it was written in Scotland in a few years in the late 1530s. To this corpus, also, Philip was hoping to return.

The nub of this 1982 book – the first two chapters – is a study of the theoretical background to neo-Latin Poetry, and a study of how Buchanan's poetry was informed by this. The first of these chapters is a detailed account of manuals of verse composition from about 1470, including the important and popular work of Jan Despauter (Janus Despauterius) that appeared first in 1511 or 1512, but also various others. The importance of books like this, once successfully digested (I note in passing that one such writer rejoiced [or not] in the name Nausea; he may have been less palatable), lay in the fact that writing acceptable Latin verse depends on getting things right, on knowing how to recognise short or long syllables and locating them suitably in the metres you

choose. Words must click in exactly, and errors such as so-called ‘false quantities’ in your verse must be avoided. To quote a sentence from Philip’s latest book, “Scholarly credibility, especially at an international level, depended on such things” (‘The Judgment of Palaemon...’, page 163). Latin verse was not just for the classroom, or for light entertainment, or for formal occasions when you could with impunity bore the pants off your listeners, but often important for social, diplomatic, and political ends. Careful composition was part of what we would call “fitness for purpose”, and this was true both in Scotland and in France. Ford refers to fifteenth-century legislation from both countries about the teaching of Latin, though in Scotland it was only eldest sons of burgesses and freeholders who received such an education, and that was for law. We know that Buchanan studied Latin verse composition in Paris, where he first went at about the age of fifteen, and what he learned in Scotland, though it may have been considerable, can only be guessed. Nothing, unfortunately, is known about his early schooling, not even where it took place; he was born just north of Glasgow – then a small town, albeit with a tiny university – but Stirling or Dumbarton may have been equally easy to reach. But in Paris he lapped it all up, being very much (if I may for a moment use a McFarlanism) “in the swim” in regard to intellectual studies.

The book’s second chapter outlines in considerable detail Buchanan’s own practice in writing Latin verse. The point here is not an assessment of Buchanan’s care and accuracy in writing Latin verse (the question, to my mind, would be whether it was 100% or very slightly less) so much as an exposition of the problems that necessarily beset any writer of neo-Latin – which is, of course, Latin that meticulously imitates the classics in many formal respects. But, and this may go against our ideas of Latin as a language whose practice was set in stone, buttressed with firm girders of theory, there are difficulties in wait for the budding neo-Latin poet. In particular, what if the poetic practice of the classical writers changes over time – between Augustan Latin and immediately post-Augustan Latin, for example; or what if classical writers of the same generation, and writers considered equally fit for imitation, follow slightly different practices? In the first category, to mention a particular item, but one important to writers of the time and to modern critics, there is the point of how to treat final ‘o’ in a Latin word; a choice has to be made, and Buchanan’s very reasonable choice did not please the Lindsays of this world. In the second category, also highlighted in Ford’s book, there is the fact that as a rule, Latin writers avoided having a short syllable at the end of one word if the

next word began with two consonants of which the first was ‘s’. A Latin example would be *mea spes* (‘my hope’), where you have a short vowel ‘a’ before the word-division, and the consonant ‘s’ and the consonant ‘p’ then follow. (An English one would be the ‘a’ in the phrase “tuna steak” and countless others, some more poetical; but of course English verse is not governed by ‘long and shorts’). What do you do? Interestingly, Buchanan does not, like Vergil and others, avoid words that create this problem, seemingly following the rare examples in classical writers of non-avoidance or perhaps overlooking the problem that classical writers had; it is harder to notice that something is avoided than that something is clearly practised. In sum, it seems unfair and unreasonable to blame Buchanan for the necessity of making a choice or for not noticing a small detail, but, as I say, he has been blamed for it, notably by Lindsay, whom I mentioned earlier. Although Lindsay is only mentioned once in Ford’s book, and that in an end-note, I suspect that he is in some ways the spectre at the feast, and that his paper lies behind the defence mounted here by Ford.

Philip Ford’s book does not concern the learning of Latin grammar, and did not need to. Buchanan’s grammar, for which the foundations were laid early, seems to be as perfect for a man of his time as it could be. But there is one more thing in the chapter I’ve been expounding, something else considered relevant, indeed vital, to the composition of Latin poetry. This is *copia*, the supply, or “abundance” as it is usually translated, of words available to the writer. You had to choose the right words, not only words that would fit the metre, but words that would be deemed elegant or beautiful in Latin verse. I can remember from the 1950s that there were books for pupils who wrote Latin verse to tell us what words were useful in certain contexts: for example, what words or phrases you could use for ‘horse’ or ‘sword’ or ‘living’ or ‘sleeping’ – the vital point being that they had to be both metrical and elegant and, in a somewhat outmoded phrase, have ‘authorities’. Early in the sixteenth century there was a very popular and practical book – no, I do not refer to Erasmus’ book *De Copia*, popular and practical though it was – compiled by Ravisius Textor with the title *Specimen Epithetorum*. The title may actually be intended to mean “display of epithets” or something like that, but it could be translated “specimens of epithets”, for that is what it is; it gives appropriate epithets for a vast list of nouns, and tells you what classical or neo-Latin author they were taken from. It was undoubtedly useful, and very popular, to judge from the steady growing number and size of editions. But did Buchanan use it? Philip

Ford was to my mind judicious in qualifying the enthusiasm of his former supervisor in this regard. He points out that many of such noun-adjective combinations could have been read and learned by pupils from reading the classics direct, remembering them from the original context, or from vocabulary acquired in some other way. For some writers this *Specimen Epithetorum* may have been necessary – think of thousands of hacks who for various reasons, including career development, had to write at least passable poems in Latin. But Buchanan (in my opinion) was not such a person, and had no need of such prompting. I think I have demonstrated this for the Poetic Psalm Paraphrases, but those who study the other poems will be able to assess it for themselves, and not of course by simply and pointing to coincidences here and there.

Another important product of this short period in the early eighties is the edition, with text and commentary and introduction, of Buchanan's dramas – all four of them, including the two plays translated from the Greek, *Alcestis* and *Medea*. The other two are *Jephthes or the Vow*, and the *Baptist or Calumny*. This edition was produced collaboratively by Peter Sharratt, who dealt with the French side, and Peter Walsh, a classicist and in fact my predecessor in Glasgow (Peter Walsh also died this year). He told me more than once that they had to work very hurriedly, because they feared that the press would go out of business. Their edition is indeed somewhat hasty in parts, but does justice both to the theological background and, on the literary and linguistic side, to the diction and Latinity of Buchanan's writing, and also the accuracy of his translations from the Greek. Both Sharratt and Walsh also produced conference papers discussing further points on the effect of classical models, especially Greek tragedy, but I cannot go into this now. Their book is, obviously, an essential contribution to Buchanan studies.

We now jump to the mid-nineties, where first I salute a major work of a different kind, no less vital: this is the bibliography of all editions of Buchanan's works, compiled by John Durkan, indefatigable collector of material of all kinds on Scottish life and literature in the late medieval and early modern periods. In this excellent resource every edition of anything by Buchanan from the earliest days is represented with a photographic reprint of its title page, with careful, indeed punctilious, description beneath, with one page to every edition. If I now say that this work is 263 pages long (or 300 pages including its introduction), it will give you an idea of how many times the various works of Buchanan have been edited. Every work of Buchanan is included, including for example his tracts on Prosody and on Latin grammar

(this last was translated from Linacre), his denunciation of Mary Queen of Scots (both Scots and Latin versions), his work on kingship, and his vast History of Scotland. McFarlane had led the way with much detail about the many editions, but in this area Durkan takes the cake.

Up to now in my chronological journey there is not a great deal, except for the dramas, by way of detailed, line-by-line commentary, philological or otherwise. The following year, 1995, saw a commentary under the title of “George Buchanan: the Political Poetry”, by Paul McGinnis and Arthur Williamson. Their selection of some seventy poems has an orientation that is emphatically historical, and the poems are presented in classifications such as “anti-imperial poems”; “reforming poems” (this is much the longest); “anti-clerical poems”; “imperial poems”. The editors ignore almost totally the traditional system of classification by genre or metre (such as *Iambi*, *Hendecasyllabi*, *Elegiae*, *Silvae*), which dates back to 1566, and was confirmed in the important 1715 edition of Ruddiman. So if you are looking for the poem familiar to you as *Silvae*, number 7, for example, you will eventually find it as poem 51/3. You might also be surprised at the way the poems have been classified. Not every poem written to Henry VIII was a “reforming poem” as such; not everyone will agree that a certain epigram on Dido is “anti-imperial” or that Buchanan’s poem on the recovery of Calais from the English is “anti-imperial” (but, to be fair, the notes do remind us that Philip and Mary were sovereign in England at the time). The notes on each poem are interesting and informative from the historical point of view, while the interpretation of the classical intertexts, sometimes steered to back up the historical agenda, may need to be taken with a pinch of salt.

We move on. During these years, I suppose, my own contribution could be described as chugging along, at best. I had originally been asked to participate in 1975 or thereabouts, at a time when I was pretty clueless about neo-Latin. If my contribution was intended for the 1982 conference, then I have been twenty-nine years late; but in my defence I could say that the edition of the *Poemata* (that is, the ‘secular’ ones) envisaged by Ian McFarlane and the late Jozef Ijsewijn of Louvain never, as far as I know, got off the ground, though there may have been some early drafts. In fact, as the years passed, it seemed increasingly unlikely that an edition of the Poetic Psalm Paraphrases, the part assigned to me, could ever be published. Publishers might not grasp it with both hands. But with the new millennium there came a *deus ex machina* – or rather a phone call from Clare College, Cambridge. Philip’s request that I should

seriously develop it, as part of a series, for which there seemed to be a good prospect of a publisher, was the necessary catalyst. And, he asked, with the quincentenary coming up in 2006, what about a conference – for which the University of Glasgow was the obvious location? This duly took place, a week or so after a conference on Buchanan and his political works (I mean the various prose treatises), which was held in St Andrews. The Glasgow papers were transformed into a collection of essays on his poems and dramas and their reception, which duly came out in 2009. Philip’s own address, which was given in the church hall in Killearn, a town where Buchanan is still very much remembered, forms the introduction; it is an accessible overview entitled “George Buchanan’s Poetic Achievement”, giving a good clear coverage of his stylistic and other qualities. The other papers cover a wide field, including musical settings of the Poetic Psalm Paraphrases, the reception of Buchanan in the Enlightenment and other periods, and a description of a staging in modern times of his major play, *Jephthes*.

Since 2006 people have not been inactive. A number of important papers on poems of Buchanan given in a neo-Latin Congress of 2012 have been written up and are expected to appear in 2014. They include an important paper by Philip Ford on some of the works that, for various reasons, were not published in Buchanan’s lifetime. After all, in 1567, a year in which so much of his secular poetry first saw print, he was chosen as moderator of the Church of Scotland. (However, not all of them were obscene). Work is also proceeding on new editions of the poems, and these various enterprises will provide good access for scholars, and indeed for general readers, to the various sets of poems. One must not forget the dramas, and here, though I am not involved, I wonder if the plays, at least the two that are not translations, could be taken separately and examined more fully, as there is so much to discuss about the plays as drama, merely hinted at in the 1983 edition. This may apply more to *Jephthes* than to *Baptistes*, which to my mind has a rather broken-backed plot and is heavily and uncreatively dependent on the Bible. We shall of course miss the projected reworking of the *Miscellanea* by Philip, and his treatment of the many satirical poems, the long anti-Franciscan satire *Franciscanus* and the many smaller anti-religious squibs that Buchanan wrote.

By taking 2023 as my terminus I did not wish to suggest that progress would be slow, though I realise that a date like that is going into an era that seems distant, notwithstanding the topicality of the HS2 rail project or the planning for the next but one English power station, or discussion of the best

climate for a World Cup in this or that sport. I am certainly not suggesting that we will be able to travel even faster from London to Birmingham, or from Glasgow to Edinburgh, before the full poetic Buchanan has appeared. I trust that finance will be easier, for one thing. There will no doubt be a need for constant discussion and reappraisal, for academe does not stand still as some railway trains do; and just as railway trains and tracks are bound to degenerate, so received scholarly ideas need to be revised and debated. It is always difficult to estimate how long a research project will take, and my implied estimate may well prove too pessimistic. I hope it does. But it is certainly an exciting prospect to have the entire poetry of the Scotsman Buchanan, perhaps I should say the Scoto-Frank Buchanan, or *l'humaniste écossais* as French colleagues like to call him, finally edited and translated with introduction and commentary. This will be a great tribute to Buchanan, a monument to neo-Latin scholarship, and a very fitting memorial to our late colleague Philip Ford and the various other workers in the field.

Roger Green, December 2013.