
Short Note:

**Covenanting citations from
George Buchanan**

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In her PhD thesis (2004), Caroline Erskine drew attention to a curious change or mistake that David Calderwood made in his *History of the Kirk of Scotland* in citing material from George Buchanan's *Rerum Scoticarum Historia*.¹ Where Buchanan gave the date of 330 B.C. for the supposed coronation of Fergus I, Calderwood gave 33 B.C.² Furthermore, from this change or mistake he apparently derived a further mistake: that the kingdom of Scotland had been an elective monarchy for 1025 years – from 33 B.C. to around 992 A.D. when Kenneth III (or Kenneth II in modern numbering) introduced primogeniture.³ In this error of naming 1025 years (rather than about 1330 years), Calderwood was followed by John Brown of Wamphray in his *Apologeticall Relation* (1665) and by Alexander Shields in his *Hind Let Loose* (1687).⁴ This led the thesis to suggest that where Brown of Wamphray and Shields were claiming to quote from Buchanan, possibly they were simply copying Calderwood.

¹ Caroline F. Erskine, 'The Reputation of George Buchanan (1506–82) in the British Atlantic World before 1832' (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2004). The thesis has not been published but the submitted version (from which our quotations are taken) is available on the Glasgow University website. The observations made in this note may well have been made by others – not least by Erskine herself – in the course of the last twenty years, but we have not been able to find them in print.

² D. Calderwood, *History of the Kirk of Scotland* (8 vols., Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1842–49), Vol. 1, p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 8.

⁴ J. Brown, *Apologeticall Relation* (Rotterdam, 1665), p. 121; A. Shields, *Hind Let Loose* (Utrecht, 1687), pp. 317–318.

Here are Erskine's words:

The Problem of Citations

It can be questioned how far the scholarly Covenanters engaged with Buchanan, or even whether they read his work directly or absorbed it indirectly, as some mistakes and misinterpretations of Buchanan have crept through the Covenanting canon from one author to the next. For example, Buchanan dated the coronation of Fergus I in 330 B.C.; however David Calderwood's *History of the Kirk of Scotland* mistranslated it as 33 B.C. He erroneously stated that the period in which the Scottish kingdom was elective was 1025 years, from 33 B.C. to around 992 A.D., when Kenneth III introduced primogeniture. Both Brown and Shields followed this error from Calderwood, and quoted this figure of 1025 years, apparently without noticing the discrepancy in Buchanan and Calderwood's dates. Shields, indeed, followed Calderwood's mistake, while claiming that his citation was from the life of Kenneth III in Buchanan's *Historia*.

Buchanan's habitual reticence in giving dates may have been one reason why such mistakes crept in, however not in this case, as Buchanan gave the exact year of Kenneth III's death as 994 A.D. This would put the period of elective kingship as Buchanan described it at closer to 1320 years than 1025. This example serves as a warning about the scholarly Covenanters, suggesting that they were not always so scholarly as they wished to appear, and may have borrowed citations from other sources. In this instance, either Brown and Shields took their citation of Buchanan from Calderwood, or, it is not too implausible to imagine, Brown copied from Calderwood and then Shields copied from Brown.⁵

In this note, we try to clarify the matter a little. We cannot fully explain Calderwood's thinking behind the change from '330 B.C.' to '33 B.C.', but we do at least exonerate Brown of Wamphray and Shields from the charge of merely copying from Calderwood without consulting Buchanan's *Historia* for themselves.

⁵ Erskine, 'Reputation of George Buchanan', p. 100. An even more derogatory statement about the Covenanters appears earlier (p. 77): 'It might be expected that the usage of the ideas of the unfanatical Calvinist George Buchanan by the distinctly fanatical Covenanters would be problematic, and indeed, it will be argued that this was the case. Many examples can be produced of citations and silent appropriations of Buchanan by Covenanting theorists, particularly by those authors with scholarly pretensions, namely Rutherford, Brown, Steuart and Shields. Although the mere dropping of Buchanan's name and parroting of some of his ideas cannot be considered as evidence of serious engagement with his texts, the desire to do this is still indicative of Buchanan's stature in seventeenth-century Scotland.'

I. Calderwood's date of 33 B.C.

One's immediate thought is that Calderwood's '33 B.C.' was probably a copying error for 330 B.C. However, his subsequent correct computation of 1025 years from the coronation of Fergus I to Kenneth III's introduction of primogeniture in 992 A.D. precludes this possibility. We will return to this issue below. In her thesis, Erskine makes a rather different suggestion – that Calderwood 'mistranslated' Buchanan's 330 B.C. as 33 B.C. This suggestion, too, can be ruled out, partly because Calderwood was a perfectly competent Latinist; partly because Buchanan made his date of 330 B.C. abundantly clear;⁶ and partly because the date 330 B.C. was already a commonplace of Scottish history.⁷ There is no way that Calderwood could have misread it as '33 B.C.' Why then did he deliberately change the date? To consider this, we need to move to the next point.

II. The origin of the '1025 years'

Erskine thought that the number '1025' originated with Calderwood's computation of the number of years 'from 33 B.C. to around 992 A.D., when Kenneth III introduced primogeniture', but in fact the number '1025' goes back before Calderwood to Buchanan's day. Under the reign of the second king, Feritharus, Buchanan states (Aikman's translation):

At last, after long disputation, a rule was laid down by which the authority should neither be entrusted to a boy at an age incapable of reigning, not yet their oath violated – that when the children of a king were infants, the next in kin who appeared best qualified for managing the affairs of the realm should be advanced to the chief government, and upon his decease, the succession of the kingdom should revert to the children of the former king; this afterwards passed into a law, which was observed for almost 1250 years, till the reign of Kenneth III.⁸

⁶ 'The time of [Fergus I's] arrival in Albion is placed about the taking of Babylon by Alexander the Macedonian, nearly three hundred and thirty years before Christ'; G. Buchanan, *History of Scotland*, trans. J. Aikman (4 vols., Glasgow, 1827), Vol. 1, p. 158.

⁷ The standard date 330 B.C. was given in the chronicle of Fordun and in the printed histories of John Major (1521), Hector Boece (1527 and 1574), John Bellenden (c. 1537), and John Lesley (1578); see W. F. Skene (ed.), *Johannis de Fordun Chronica Gentis Scotorum* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1871–2), Vol. 1, p. 45; Vol. 2, p. 42; John Major, *A History of Greater Britain* (Scottish History Society, Edinburgh, 1892), p. 56; Hector Boece, *Scotorum Historia a prima gentis origine* (Paris, 1527 and 1574), Book I, Section 20; John Bellenden, *Hystory and Croniklis* (Edinburgh: Thomas Davidson, c. 1537), fol. 6r; John Lesley, *De Origine Moribus et rebus gestis Scotorum* (Rotterdam, 1675), p. 79.

⁸ Buchanan, *History of Scotland* (Aikman), Vol. 1, p. 159.

In all the early Latin editions, however, the number which Aikman's translation of Buchanan's *Historia* adjusts to '1250' is given as 'CIO XXV', i.e. '1025'.⁹ Erskine mentions that for her thesis, she was using the Latin text of the *Historia* in Thomas Ruddiman's 1715 edition of Buchanan's *Opera Omnia*; but this contained a number of editorial changes, one of which was to alter Buchanan's '1025' to 'MCCLXXIV' (1274).¹⁰ In his 'Annotationes' on the text, Ruddiman indicated that while all editions [*omnibus libris*] (apparently including the MS copy of Buchanan's *Historia*) read '1025', he had made the change to '1274' because '1025' gave an 'anachronism' of at least 249 years.¹¹

This change was one of the many points taken up by James Man in his attack on Ruddiman's edition:

This [i.e., Buchanan's '1025'] is plainly a slip of the pen or the press, the cypher having been put in the place of hundreds, instead of the place of units, 1025 for 1250: which Ruddiman has magnified into an anachronism of 249 years, and for which he reads 1274.¹²

Man notes that, later on, Buchanan gave the figure of 'nearly 1300 years' for the period in question.¹³ Ruddiman did not respond to this particular comment of Man's and seems therefore to have conceded the point.¹⁴ In his own 1762 edition of Buchanan's *Historia*, Man corrected '1025' to '1250', and presumably it was from this that Aikman derived his '1250'.¹⁵

⁹ This is the case in all four sixteenth-century editions (1582, 1583, 1584, and 1594), and also in the two seventeenth century editions (1643, 1668) that we have been able to check. The 1690 English edition also gives '1025'.

¹⁰ Thomas Ruddiman (ed.), *Georgii Buchanani Opera Omnia* (2 vols., Edinburgh: Robert Freebairn, 1715), Vol. 1, p. 54. In his study of *Thomas Ruddiman* (Edinburgh, 1965), Douglas Duncan says that he found 'only one instance...where an error of fact [in the *Historia*] has been corrected [by Ruddiman] in the text', but here we have a second instance (pp. 105-6 and n. 27).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 418. The manuscript of Buchanan's *Historia* is Edinburgh University, EUL MS Dc.6 40; see H. Trevor-Roper, 'George Buchanan and the Ancient Scottish Constitution', *English Historical Review*, Supplement 3 (1966), pp. 51-53 and D. M. Abbott, 'George Buchanan's *Rerum Scoticarum Historia*' (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1977), p. 66 for a brief account of this. Ruddiman's 'Annotationes' include a collation of this MS and a large number of printed editions (listed in Vol. 1, pp. 24-25).

¹² James Man, *A Censure and Examination of Mr. Thomas Ruddiman's Philological Notes on the Works of the Great Buchanan, more particularly on the History of Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1753), p. 527.

¹³ See Ruddiman, *Georgii Buchanani Opera Omnia*, Vol. 1, pp. 375, 462.

¹⁴ Thomas Ruddiman, *Anticrisis* (Edinburgh, 1754) and *Audi alteram partem* (London, 1756).

¹⁵ G. Buchanan, *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* (Aberdeen: James Chalmers, 1762), p. 79.

Roger Mason, likewise, adopted '1250' in a recent paper, presumably from Aikman, and suggested that '1025' was an 'arithmetical error'.¹⁶ This seems much less likely than Man's suggestion of a transposition error, although it should be noted that a transposition error is only possible if at some stage in the production of Buchanan's *Historia*, Arabic numerals were used rather than Roman numerals (for which there is no similarity between the numbers '1025' and '1250').

It would seem, then, that Calderwood and Ruddiman were both aware of the discrepancy between the date 330 B.C. and the number of years '1025', but they tried to resolve this in different ways: Calderwood by adjusting the date and Ruddiman by adjusting the number of years.¹⁷ Why Calderwood should have thought that the date was at fault is rather puzzling.¹⁸

III. Brown of Wamphray and Shields

From the occurrence of the number '1025' in early printed editions of Buchanan's *Historia*, the suggestion that Brown of Wamphray and Shields were copying from Calderwood loses all its force. Indeed, there is no reason to think that either Brown or Shields ever saw Calderwood's manuscript.

Calderwood's *History* exists in three versions of different lengths, and it is only the longer two that include the material about the early kings of Scotland. This material did not appear in print until the Wodrow Society edition in the 1840s. The shortest version was printed in Rotterdam in 1678 but it omits all the early matter. From the accounts of the various Calderwood manuscripts, it is just possible that Brown of Wamphray saw one of the longer ones while he was still in Scotland, but virtually impossible that Shields ever did.¹⁹

Shields' *Hind Let Loose* was probably written partly in prison in Edinburgh, partly on the Bass Rock, and partly during the course of a few

¹⁶ R. A. Mason, 'How Andrew Melville read his George Buchanan', in R. A. Mason and S. Reid (eds.), *Andrew Melville (1545–1622): Writings, Reception, and Reputation* (Ashgate, 2014), pp. 11–45 (pp. 33–34).

¹⁷ A couple of pages after his reference to '1025 years', Calderwood mentions the death of Kenneth III in 994 A.D., so he can hardly have missed the arithmetic anomaly; *History of the Kirk of Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 10. Thomas Craufurd seems to have missed it, however, in his numerous explanations and corrections; see *Notes and Observations on Mr George Buchanan's History of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1708), pp. 21, 189.

¹⁸ William Ferguson wondered if Calderwood's alteration was 'simply a scribal error or possibly the first glimmer of a more sceptical approach to the remote unrecorded past'; W. Ferguson, *The Identity of the Scottish Nation* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 111.

¹⁹ For accounts of the MSS, see Calderwood, *History of the Kirk of Scotland*, Vol. 8, pp. ix–xiii, 3–5, 127–132.

months in Utrecht.²⁰ A comparison of Shields' examples from Buchanan's *Historia* on pages 8 and 9 with those given in Brown's *Apologeticall Relation*, pages 142 and 143, shows that Shields was not simply copying from Brown. On occasion, he did copy and develop material from Brown, as Erskine notes,²¹ but this is hardly surprising given the circumstances in which Shields was composing and the fact that Brown's book had long been prohibited in Scotland.

To conclude, therefore: David Calderwood's date of '33 B.C.' remains a puzzle, but there is no reason to think that John Brown of Wamphray and Alexander Shields derived their period of '1025 years' from Calderwood rather than from George Buchanan.

²⁰ H. Macpherson, *The Cameronian Philosopher: Alexander Shields* (Edinburgh, 1932), pp. 157-158.

²¹ Erskine, 'Reputation of George Buchanan', pp. 104-5.