



## Elspeth Buchan and the Buchanite Movement

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### Origins of the Buchanite Sect

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Elspeth Buchan (1738–91), the wife of a potter at the Broomielaw Delftworks in Glasgow, Scotland, and mother of three children, heard Hugh White, minister of the Irvine Relief Church since 1782, preach at a Sacrament in Glasgow in December 1782. As the historian of such great occasions puts it, 'Sacramental [ie Holy Communion] occasions in Scotland were great festivals, an engaging combination of holy day and holiday', held over a number of days, drawing people from the surrounding area to hear a number of preachers. Robert Burns composed one of his most famous poems about them, entitled 'The Holy Fair' (Schmidt 1989, 3). Consequently, she entered into correspondence with him in January 1783, identifying White as the person purposed by God to share in a divine commission to prepare a righteous people for the second coming of Christ. Buchan had believed she was the recipient of special insights from God from as early as 1774, but she had received little encouragement from the ministers she had approached to share her 'mind' (*Divine Dictionary*, 79).

The spiritual mantle proffered by Buchan was willingly taken up by White. When challenged over erroneous doctrine by the managers and elders of the Relief Church there within three weeks of Buchan's arrival in Irvine in March 1783, White refused to desist from preaching both publicly and privately Buchan's claim of a divine commission to prepare for the second coming of Christ. Their doctrine was centred around a notion that God's Spirit had been absent from the earth since the passing of the last of the Apostles. It was not that God had removed his Spirit but that the 'world' had destroyed the last of those who possessed it. For her adherents, Buchan was the restoration of God's Spirit, the messenger in whom dwelt God's light, so she restored the possibility of salvation. (*Divine Dictionary*, 79). On 8 October 1783, the congregation of the Relief Presbytery deposed White from the ministry of their church (Session Book).

If it was envisaged that White's expulsion would bring the so-called Buchanite 'delusion' to an end, this was not to be the case. White with Buchan, now known as 'Friend Mother in the Lord', formed a society of the Buchanite adherents and held meetings in White's house in The Seagate, Irvine. Here on a daily basis, White provided instruction, and his preaching was followed by an account by Buchan of her visionary insights. These meetings attracted considerable attention and many of the townspeople came to observe White and Buchan's enthusiastic type of worship, during which, according to Robert Burns, Buchan

'pretended' to give them 'the Holy Ghost by breathing on them' using 'scandalously indecent postures and practices' (Ferguson 1931, 19). But, once their unusual doctrine and enthusiastic manner of worship became known, they were often disturbed by hecklers and angry townspeople.

## Membership

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Of the forty members who can be named, half were women, mostly wives or relatives of male members. In addition to a minister (White) and a merchant (Patrick (Peter) Hunter), the males included a carpenter, two clerks, a butcher, a farmer's son who had studied law, a builder, a servant, a wheelwright, a shopkeeper, two farmers, a merchant tailor, and a former marine lieutenant.

## Opposition

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Andrew Innes, a devoted follower from Muthill in Perthshire, recorded that the townspeople did everything they could to discourage the new society. Merchants refused to deal with them, followers lost their employment, and relatives of those who had joined the society encouraged sailors and vagrants to molest members as they travelled to meetings. Continued outrage over the sect and a lack of any direct intervention by the authorities prompted, some five months later, mob action forcibly to remove Buchan from town. Local men captured her on her way back to The Seagate after an evening meeting, ripped off her clothes, and dragged her almost naked through the streets towards the village of Stewarton, some seven miles away. Their intention was to throw her over the Stewarton bridge but, changing their minds, they set her on the road to Glasgow with instructions to return to her husband. The confusion caused by the unruly crowd in Stewarton made it possible for Buchan to return to Irvine unnoticed. But the sect was not able to conceal her presence for very long and the burgh authorities, fearful of further outbreaks of violence, ordered her return to Glasgow (Train 1846, 137).

Her removal did not, however, bring the society's activities to an end and they continued to meet with White and maintain contact with Buchan in Glasgow. Buchan now made her way to Muthill, where she held a number of meetings with the villagers, being invited by a local wheelwright. Her initial friendly reception, facilitated by Innes, was brought to an end by the arrival of White in November 1783; he, according to Innes, proceeded to preach in a very 'severe' manner, particularly against the teachings of the recently formed Bereans, who promoted assurance of salvation. Given that Buchan and White both held that God's Spirit had been absent from the earth since the last of the Apostles, and that through Buchan (as the woman of Revelation 12) and White as her 'man-child' they were to restore lost salvation to the earth, White was intolerant of such rival aspersions (*Divine Dictionary*, 79). Forced to flee the anger of the villagers, White returned with Buchan to Irvine (Train Papers, 26-27).

During their absence, Elspeth's husband, Robert, had visited their daughter in Irvine; she worked as a servant with the White family. Angered by the way in which his wife had been treated, Robert threatened to bring legal action against those in charge over the lack of protection afforded his wife. The disquiet over these potential charges was sufficient for the local authorities to permit her return (Train Papers, 27). There appears to have been a hiatus in actions against the sect between November 1783 and early April 1784, and it was not until contingents of converts, complete with their possessions, arrived in Irvine from

Muthill that the hostilities resurfaced. The people of Irvine now launched violent attacks on the Buchanite meeting place. Fearful of further outbreaks endangering lives and property, the local magistrates again ordered Buchan's eviction. At noon on the day of the May Fair 1784, the baillies (Scottish local government officials) arrived to effect her removal from Irvine. While the decree had only been taken out against Buchan, her disciples felt compelled to leave with her. The consequent procession that made its exit through hostile crowds comprised some forty men, women, and children (Train Papers, 33–34).

## Development of the Sect

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Their departure from Irvine in 1784 catalysed the millenarianism of the sect. Their forced exodus severed ties with their past and facilitated the introduction of a new order. A slow pilgrimage through Auchinleck, New Cumnock, and Thornhill to New Cample Farm in Closeburn parish in Dumfriesshire provided time to adjust to their new circumstances. On reaching their final destination, the Buchanites had determined an alternative way of living. Marriage was no longer recognized and they adopted a celibate lifestyle, living together as brothers and sisters. Seeking to separate the evil 'lusts of the flesh' from the purity of the Spirit, they required married women to separate from their husbands and revert to their single state (*Divine Dictionary*, 70). They held all monies and possessions in common. Paid work was forbidden, and they were exhorted to give no thought to tomorrow but to live at the Lord's expense. To work to provide for their material needs was to conform to the values of the 'children of this world', who depended on 'their own industry and activity' (Anon. 1785, 6).

The Buchanites based themselves at New Cample Farm by necessity rather than by choice. Their hasty departure from Irvine had thrown the business interests of some members into disarray, and, while they waited for these members to return from settling their affairs, the remaining members procured lodgings in an empty barn. Although this was to be a temporary arrangement, the group stayed on as the farm's tenant, Thomas Davidson, offered them land on which to build a house, which later became known as Buchan Ha (Train 1846, 65, 104).

It was not long, however, before the people of Closeburn parish, in which New Cample was situated, were as determined as the people of Irvine to drive them away. Again their property came under attack, culminating in a night 'raid' by about one hundred armed men. A change of tactics by the locals brought 'libels' to the parish authorities on account of blasphemous doctrine. But Buchan and White disregarded calls to report to the local presbytery, forcing it to drop the charges (Train Papers, 44).

## Failure of their Millenarian Hope

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By 1786 the inhabitants of Buchan Ha were preparing for their final translation event, by which they expected the second coming of Christ to reclaim them as his own. They calculated the date as being 1,260 days after the woman of Revelation 12 gave birth to her man-child—that is, the days that had elapsed between the spiritual birth of White as Buchan's man-child. They believed they would not die, but at the second coming of Christ in their translation event they would ascend to meet him in the air as St Paul wrote in his First Letter to the Thessalonians (4:17). They would be instantly changed into immortal beings. As the appointed time approached, their numbers had increased to over sixty and comprised not only

followers from many parts of Scotland but also some Methodists from England. The event was preceded by a 'Great Fast' of some forty days. The group gathered at the local Templand Hill in July to August 1786, and they erected a platform to meet Christ as he descended to them. The failure of Christ to return in this first translation attempt was attributed by Buchan to her disciples' unbelief. However, the failed translation attempt brought disillusionment and many members left, including those who had made their financial resources available to the society (Train 1846, 105-9).

Diminished numbers and the loss of their wealthiest members in 1786 placed the remaining Buchanites at New Cample in a vulnerable position. Patrick Hunter was never to return, although he remained loyal to Buchan and relinquished all claim to the monies he had contributed. On the other hand, John Gibson, a builder, issued a warrant against Buchan and White for the return of his money, placing them in a Dumfries jail until they were released on bail. In September 1786 a further 'libel' was issued from Closeburn parish accusing White and Buchan of adultery. The leaders had shared the same bed while all other male and female members had been separated. It was alleged that they went naked to bed together, but Buchan and White claimed their relationship was a spiritual one. The kirk session was not able to sustain the charges, but the issue of the sect's financial viability was raised, particularly as the society had lived in the district for almost three years, entitling its members to poor relief. In January 1787, the county magistrates in Brownhill ordered them to leave before they could draw on parish funds. They departed New Cample on 10 March 1787 in the early hours of the morning to avoid being molested by the crowds that had gathered to witness their departure (Train 1846, 135-37). The Buchanites relocated in May 1787 to a poor moorland farm known as Auchengibbert in the parish of Urr in Galloway. Their resources were now depleted, and they were forced to accept payment for work (Train Papers, 78).

## Buchan's Death and the Transformation of the Sect

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Buchan, however, could not accept the failures at translation and continued tenaciously to cling to her vision that Christ would return and translate them to glory. So she persisted in taking her followers to a hilltop where they would wait, yet again, for their translation. White, however, became increasingly impatient and placed restrictions on Buchan leaving the farm or speaking to strangers. Disillusioned, he threatened to leave both Buchan and the society, but his tarnished reputation as a minister made it difficult for him to do so. White's disapproval of Buchan was now easily discernible, and he no longer deferred to her spiritual insights. Buchan became increasingly isolated and dejected, and suffered ill-health. On 29 March 1791 she died. White resumed care of his wife and children and encouraged other members to marry. He was not, however, able to gain the support of those minority of members who continued to affirm the veracity of Buchan's teaching. The society was eventually disbanded when, on 11 June 1792, White and some thirty others left for America (Train 1846, 158, 181; Train Papers, 84).

The remnant of the society, some fourteen people, settled at Larghill and later Crocketford in Dumfriesshire, where they came to be regarded as a kindly, quiet, and hardworking people. Retaining their distinctiveness, they sought to establish good relations with their neighbours and adopted a less obtrusive religiosity. They did not attend the local church services, but Innes established a branch of the Bible Society in Crocketford. Their failure to leave the world in 1786 entailed a need to work. The remnant Buchanites applied themselves to transforming Larghill, once a barren sheep farm, into a profitable business. They became famous throughout the south of Scotland for their spinning wheels and their finely

spun yarn, attracting customers from the nobility and gentry. From these profitable ventures and their farming, they were eventually able to purchase five acres of land in Crocketford, where they built houses and gardens. They were respected not only for their industry but also for their charity and their medical expertise, which they offered freely (Train 1846, 190; Chalmers 1912-13, 295).

Buchan claimed on her deathbed that, as the Spirit of God, it was not possible for her to die—she would only appear to do so. After six days, ten, or even fifty years, she would return depending on the purity of their faith. However, her failure to rise after six days presented to the Buchanites, perhaps for the first time, the realization that they too would die. They had already been forced to accept that Christ had not returned for them, and it was ultimately Buchan's death that precipitated a crisis to their continued existence as a millenarian sect (Chalmers 1912-13, 293, 297).

The last surviving Buchanite was Innes, who asserted that he communed with Buchan's spirit every day. In January 1846 he also died, by which time the Buchanites had incorporated a garden cemetery at Newhouse, their Crocketford home. Here they buried their dead, maintaining a physical separateness from wider society until the end. Innes was buried together with Buchan's remains. Her corpse had been buried under the hearthstone at Auchengibbert and then in an open chest at Larghill, and it remained in a room next to Innes at Newhouse while he remained alive. In accordance with Innes's final wishes, Buchan was buried beneath him in the garden of the Newhouse in Crocketford to ensure he would wake should she arise (Cameron 1904, 166).

## Historical Context

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Buchanite millenarianism occurred in Lowland Scotland during a period of significant cultural and religious transformation. Not only had successive religious controversies over patronage resulted in the formation of seceder churches offering diversity in doctrine, but also the dialectic between popular culture and enlightenment rationalism brought about a blending of popular belief with prevailing religious values. The Buchanite story during its initial period covered the years 1783 to 1792 and their experience cut across worldviews present within Scottish Lowland society in this period. During a time of rising urbanization, agrarian change, and heightened emphasis on commercialization, the Buchanites chose to withdraw from paid labour and the pursuit of economic and social progress. Choosing instead to prepare themselves for an imminent return of Christ, they lived communally apart from society, rejected earthly marriage, and failed to conform to established patterns of respectability. Moderate Presbyterianism, an identifiable group within the ministers of the established Church of Scotland influenced by the rationalism of the Scottish Enlightenment, was predominant in that church at this time and had loosened the hold of puritanical Calvinism. However, there was still no place for the kind of 'enthusiasm' and radical departure from orthodox Presbyterian thinking adopted by this end-time sect. Alongside prevalent distrust of religious enthusiasm there was also significant opposition to spiritual influence being wielded by the sect's leader, an uneducated woman living independently of her husband. This female independence and religious leadership, like so many of the Buchanite practices, was understood to threaten social order.

While the Buchanites created local fears about social disorder, a major argument mounted for the lack of widespread social disorder in Scotland in this period has been the distinctive nature and role of religion in Scottish social, economic, and political life. T. C. Smout emphasizes that Calvinism, with its focus upon the

rewards of the afterlife, was counterproductive to the nurture of radicalism in that it stifled the need, at a popular level, actively to seek redress for worldly injustices. The distinctive qualities of Presbyterian theology alongside the workings of church government in education and poor relief promoted social conformity and feudal landowners controlled kirk sessions, dispensed patronage, and exercised benevolence in times of hardship (Smout 1969, 214).

Reservations have been expressed, however, in opposition to this historiography. David Allan (2002, 63) has pointed to an English type of religious culture extolling the virtues of toleration increasingly finding favour among Scotland's parish ministers. In keeping with a paradigm of increasing moderation, the discipline of the kirk sessions increasingly encountered offenders who chose to evade or rebel against church authority, as Buchan and White did when summoned before the Closeburn presbytery. Consequently, the established Church of Scotland was forced to admonish rather than dictate. Landowner patronage also experienced considerable opposition, as evidenced in the number of disputed presentations and organized protests, and the rise of religious dissent (Brown 1997, 18-19).

Notwithstanding this growing enlightenment moderation and dissent within Scottish society in the period, it is clear that popular protest, including religious protest, was an aspect of Scottish society when the Buchanites began in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Yet even among such religious division and protest, Buchan was a disconcerting and unlikely end-time prophet who attracted considerable hostility. So why was it that some of the people of Irvine and Muthill readily accepted her teachings? The fact that many of Buchan's followers stemmed from the Relief Church is not indicative of something inherent within that church which predisposed its members to millenarian teaching. The Relief, while more liberal than some seceding groups, derived its adherence from the rising artisan and mercantile classes, who espoused respectability, making it an unlikely breeding ground for religious radicalism (Brown 1997, 24-25). However, the Relief was also part of a religious climate of unprecedented diversity in an increasingly fractured Presbyterianism in late eighteenth-century Scotland, making it possible for individuals to exercise greater personal choice than ever before when it came to religious affiliation. As Innes explained in a manuscript account of the Buchanites (Train 1846; see below), in his search for 'truth' he had questioned both the established church minister in Thornhill and a Mr Bell of the Relief in Glasgow but had not found satisfaction until he encountered Buchan.

## Sources and Historiography

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The earliest compiled account of the Buchanites was Joseph Train's work *The Buchanites from First to Last*, published in 1846. Train was a middle-class man who had a career in the excise. He had antiquarian and local history interests, coming to the attention of Sir Walter Scott, and wrote his Buchanite book during his retirement. He gathered information from published sources available at that time but also corresponded with contemporary informants and relatives of sect members. His main source of knowledge, however, was Innes, the last surviving member of the sect, who lived in Crocketford, some ten miles from Train's home in Castle Douglas. Innes held fast to Buchanite principles and the messianic attributes of Buchan, but he was not averse to sharing information such as doctrinal treatises with inquirers in the hope that they would understand the Buchanite mission. Train prompted Innes to write a detailed account of the Buchanites (Train 1846, 202-4). Innes had in his possession miscellaneous correspondence and copies of Buchan's letters, which he recorded in a letterbook after her death. However, most of the society's papers, and



Buchan's correspondence, were destroyed by Innes in 1836 when he contracted influenza and did not expect to recover (Train 1846, 23–25). The Innes manuscript was the basis for Train's subsequent publication and therefore has some claim to be treated as a primary, rather than a purely secondary, source.

However, it is apparent that the bulk of the material that makes up Train's seminal 1846 publication has been filtered through various copying processes, first by Innes and subsequently by Train. While Innes played a relatively minor part in the Buchanite story, by virtue of his longevity and continued faithfulness to Buchanite principles he assumed a position of control in portraying the final picture of the Buchanite sect to the world. Only Innes was privy to the knowledge contained in the early letters that White wrote to Buchan, and that conveyed the basis of their early relationship and religious convictions. Was the motive for his destruction of that early correspondence and the society's papers that these did not accord with the vision that Innes had constructed in those latter days? In addition, the Innes manuscript is an autobiographical spiritual narrative and not a 'straightforward' story to be taken at face value, as it was written for a specific purpose—it was Innes's apology for the Buchanites—with the material arranged and selected on that basis. So we must, for example, be mindful that Innes was resentful of White and the role he played within the society. In addition, Train admits his own repugnance of the dogmas put forward by Innes but covers it up in order not to close the door to Innes's confidence. However, this distaste clearly intruded into Train's engagement with Innes, despite his care to hide it, because Innes mutilated Train's early manuscript on the grounds that the selection of the material and the way it had been presented gave too much credence to things written against Buchan. So, as Train's work was published subsequent to Innes's death, it is important to consider Train's bias against Buchan and her followers.

Nevertheless, Train was unusually sparing of authorial remarks and reflections, although he was motivated by his connection to Scott and their common antiquarianism to search for oddities and legends. This focus on the peculiar by Train fed into commonly held views of religious enthusiasm and the emotionally suspect religiosity of women. Consequently, Train and writers following him, coming from a perspective of nineteenth-century rationalism, did not give a critically informed, sympathetic understanding of the Buchanites from the sect's perspective.

This historiography of Buchanite millenarianism as a delusion prompted by a fanatical woman also prevails in the only other monograph about the group, that by John Cameron revealingly titled *History of the Buchanite Delusion 1783–1846* and published in 1904. Cameron is largely dependent upon Train, though claiming to present a more systematic and clear narrative (Cameron 1904, xii).

Another early but secondary source is from the United States. The Boston journal *Little's Living Age* published selections from British and American magazines, and in April, May, and June 1846, just after Innes died and Train's book was published, it reprinted articles about the Buchanites (Anon. 1846). The most extensive of these was taken from the *Dublin University Magazine* on 'Female Fanaticism in Scotland'. All these articles adopted an explanatory position that was almost uniformly followed in later writings about the sect, ascribing its existence to 'impulses, illuminations, visions, gifts of the spirit, and other celestial pretensions, that have misled weak minds, and kept them in thralldom to designing hypocrites'. It went on, 'The only real fanatics that have succeeded have been women', and went on to include among them 'Mrs Buchan' . . . a person of dissolute habits and humble parentage, almost illiterate, but naturally clever, artful and enthusiastic' (Anon. 1846, 123). While these articles largely derive from Train's publication, the Dublin article was the first work to note a resemblance between Buchan and other

contemporary female prophets—Ann Lee, Joanna Southcott, and Jane Leadley—and it also asserted a connection with the French Quietist mystic Antoinette Bourignon. It maintained that ‘the real prototype of Elspeth Simpson was Antoinette Bouvignon [*sic*], whose heresies were flagrant in Banffshire, a few years before Mrs Buchan was born’ (Anon. 1846, 135). This connection is a real possibility given that Buchan was raised by a Banffshire Episcopalian family after her mother died when she was three years old (Cameron 1904, 30). Bourignonism did have an influence in a flowering of mysticism among Episcopalians in its traditional heartland of Banffshire and northeast Scotland in the first half of the eighteenth century (Strong 2019, 268–69).

Archibald Chalmers, a Dumfriesshire antiquarian, first published an account of the Buchanites in the *Dumfries Standard* in July 1908, and then published a further paper for the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society in 1913 (Chalmers 1912–13). He added to his earlier paper a portion on the Crocketford life of the remaining Buchanites, where he had mainly collected material from long-time residents. Chalmers adopted Cameron’s patronizing approach to the sect, using irony to describe their beliefs and circumstances.

The end-time speculations of the Buchanites were not the complete aberration so often characterized by their commentators. While popular millenarianism has not been a significant part of Scottish religious history, apocalyptic expectations were nevertheless part of orthodox eschatological doctrine. However, in eighteenth-century Scotland these hopes were primarily expressed through postmillennial optimism rather than the pre-millennial intervention favoured by the Buchanites. Although Enlightenment religious ideals tended to be dismissive of direct supernatural intervention in worldly affairs, there were those who still held to the traditional belief in God’s providence involved in daily life and thought that credence should also be given to other mystical powers such as fairies, witches, and demons. This existence of Christian beliefs alongside and including folk beliefs continued throughout the eighteenth century. As the Reverend Mitchell wrote in his *Memories of Ayrshire*, published in 1780, a belief in witches and fairies was prevalent in Ayrshire. Chapbooks were readily available and popular with readers from all backgrounds and included graphic illustrations of dreams, prophecies, religious discourses, astrology, and tales of mysterious happenings (Henderson 2001, 171–76).

This connection with a supernatural world of good and evil forces was also present among Buchan’s opponents. It would appear that the violence directed towards the sect was, in the first instance, focused upon Buchan herself and that the charges made against her were in keeping with prevailing attitudes to women who did not conform to religious and secular expectations. A lone woman living out of male control in a patriarchal society and actively seeking to assume enthusiast religious leadership was a ready target for accusations of witchcraft. There was incredulity that a man of learning like White was willing to accept the revelations and teachings of a ‘Jezebel’, a barely literate innkeeper’s daughter (Cameron 1904, 15). Buchan’s opponents believed she had used black arts to induce people such as Patrick Hunter (a merchant and fiscal), James Garven (a successful carpenter), John Gibson (a master builder) and his wife, and Janet Grant (Muir) (a shopkeeper) to leave their businesses and follow her. A belief in witchcraft was alive and well during the eighteenth century, despite the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1735. Buchan’s claims of prophetic insight not only challenged Presbyterian doctrinal purity but also raised fears of diabolic association.

While the story of the Buchanites has been dismissed by most historians, both religious and secular, as a somewhat ridiculous manifestation of fanatical or enthusiastic religion in an early modern world, there is a



need for this story to be retold within the parameters of its own social, religious, and cultural context, as well as within the context of eighteenth-century millenarian expectations in the Atlantic world of Britain and North America. There is also a need to examine and evaluate the activities of the Buchanite sect within the particular social and religious framework that existed in Ayrshire, Dumfriesshire, and Galloway in late eighteenth-century Scotland. A historian of the Scottish evangelical revival, Arthur Fawcett (1971, 156), included the Buchanites in that movement, describing Buchan as a 'female Moses' and the sect as a 'fantastic experiment in communism', but entirely overlooked its essential millennialism. J. F. C. Harrison (1979, 13) points out a real danger that a preoccupation with the so-called eccentric characteristics of popular eighteenth-century millenarianism may detract from their value as a primary source of historical investigation. Clarke Garret's (1987, 173) study of spirit possession and popular religion briefly mentions Buchan as one of a number of female prophetesses in the eighteenth century. The Buchanites were a somewhat unexpected phenomenon in a country where nonconformism only proliferated in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. While small in number they were, as Elspeth King (1993) points out in her history of Glaswegian women, 'comparable to millenarian movements elsewhere' (45) and are worthy of more recognition by historians.

## Further Reading

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There is very little easily accessible, as works on the Buchanites are long out of print and rare. These sources, both academic and popular, along with what contemporary scholarship there is, are listed in the Bibliography.

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## Note

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