

# The Pearl Fisher: Robert Buchan 'de Portlethin' in Sweden, 1642-1653

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ROBERT Buchan 'de Portlethin' is a little-known, but intriguing figure in Scottish-Swedish history. In recent years we have been treated to a feast of new scholarship exploring Scotland's relations with her European neighbours.<sup>1</sup> Seldom, however, do we get an opportunity to study the career of someone with such diverse interests as pearl-fishing, salt production, iron-trading, shipbuilding, the jewellery industry, tapestry, gardening and dealing in sheep. Buchan participated in these various enterprises in Sweden after being effectively driven out of Scotland due to his Royalist sympathies during the Bishops' Wars of 1639-40. Indeed we can date the time he left Scotland to around 27 April 1640 at which point William Keith, 6th Earl Marischal of Scotland, ordered ships to be stripped of their sails in order to keep them in Aberdeen:

wnder feir the tounes ante covenanteris wold flie [...] Many tounes men, heiring of Marischallis cuming to the toun, takis the flight. Amonges whome Robert Buchane of Portlethen, with his

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1 See for example T.C. Smout, ed., *Scotland and Europe 1200-1850* (Edinburgh, 1986); T. Riis, *Should Auld Acquaintance be Forgot ... Scottish Danish Relations, 1460-1707* (2 vols., Odense, 1988); Marie-Claude Tucker, *Maîtres et Étudiants Écossais à la Faculté de droit de l'Université de Bourges, 1430-1703* (Paris, 2001); D. Catterall, *Community Without Borders: Scots Migrants and the Changing Face of Power in the Dutch Republic, c.1600-1700* (Leiden, 2002); R. Wills, *The Jacobites and Russia, 1715-1750* (East Linton, 2002); A. Grosjean, *An Unofficial Alliance: Scotland and Sweden, 1569-1654* (Leiden, 2003); D. Worthington, *Scots in Habsburg Service, 1618-1648* (Leiden, 2004); A. Grosjean and S. Murdoch, eds., *Scottish Communities Abroad in the Early Modern Period* (Leiden, 2005); S. Murdoch, *Network North: Scottish Kin, Commercial and Covert Associations in Northern Europe, 1603-1746* (Leiden, 2006).

second sone, efter his houses and ground wes plunerit, takis the sea; so ilk man schiftit for him self, pairt by sea, pairt be land as thay thocht best.<sup>2</sup>

While such sporadic mentions to Buchan are scattered throughout Scottish sources, by far the greatest amount of information we have on him is contained within a corpus of letters deposited in the Swedish National Archives in Stockholm.<sup>3</sup> The letters relate to two explicitly identifiable periods, 1642-44 and 1649-53. Problematically, they are not kept in any specific order. However, the earlier letters are mostly dated, while the later letters can be collated, more or less accurately, by references contained to individuals within their text. From these we get an insight into a part of a life spent abroad, separated from family, and struggling with an alien environment.

One of Buchan's main problems after fleeing Scotland came from his struggle, as he himself called it, as an old man to learn a new language (Swedish), and being encumbered with only the rudest form of Latin.<sup>4</sup> He clearly had some friends who occasionally translated letters into Swedish, though he attempted the Latin for himself (to his cost). His frustratingly poor Latin proved problematic to both himself and his patron, Axel Oxenstierna, the Swedish regent and chancellor. This led him to sometimes address the chancellor in Scots, even when he knew it was disadvantageous to do so.<sup>5</sup> Despite Oxenstierna's renowned loathing of being approached in languages other than Latin, Swedish or German, several Scots had previously written to him in their vernacular with no problem, Sir James

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2 J. Spalding, *Memorialls of the Trubles in Scotland and in England, A.D. 1624-A.D.1645* (2 vols., Aberdeen, 1850), I. p.267.

3 Swedish Riksarkiv [hereafter SRA], Axel Oxenstiernas Skrifter och Brefvexling [hereafter AOSB], vol. E575.

4 I wish to thank Ardis Dreisbach Grosjean, Alexia Grosjean and Peter Maxwell-Stuart for their painstaking work in helping to decipher the very cryptic Swedish and Latin documents written by Robert Buchan. Transcriptions and translations of the Buchan letters can be found on the SSNE database at: <[www.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/ssne](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/ssne)>

5 SRA, AOSB, E575. Robert Buchan to Axel Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 15 January 1643, 18 June 1643, 19 August 1643. In each of these he notes that he has written to the chancellor in Scots and hopes these letters have been translated. He would write a cover note, as per the 19 August document, in Latin to the effect that "I beg most humbly, since I don't know how to express myself in Latin, that whoever has the good nature to read and translate this for your Excellency, and the rest of the most illustrious regents, be called a friend".

Spens even hinting that the chancellor could read the language for himself.<sup>6</sup> However, it was one thing for a long-standing friend of the chancellor, with a quarter of a century in Swedish military and diplomatic service, to use his native tongue, but quite another for a low-born man fresh to Sweden to use vernacular Scots, and quite impudently at that. So what do we know of the man who called Oxenstierna both his patron and master, yet who wrote some audacious letters that flabbergasted even his friends in Sweden (of which more below)?

On several occasions, Buchan claimed to come from a humble background, and described his home as being in Portlethen, 'over seventy miles from Edinburgh'.<sup>7</sup> From unassuming beginnings, and undoubtedly due to his entrepreneurial endeavours, he had climbed at least a little way up the social ladder. Between September 1621 and September 1628, there are records of him trading from Aberdeen with locations as diverse as Ross, Cromarty, Leith, London and Bordeaux. The commodities he dealt in were varied and included salmon, beer, meal, timber and quantities of unspecified goods.<sup>8</sup> After 1628 Buchan appears to have concentrated on his pearl-fishing as no further mention is made of him in Aberdeen port records until he shipped a cargo from Gothenburg to the city in 1642.<sup>9</sup> Whether for his mercantile activities or his fishing, he became both a burghess of Aberdeen in 1625 and, in the same year, held the barony of Portlethen and surrounding lands in the sheriffdom of Kincardine.<sup>10</sup> He would later also sign himself

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6 SRA, AOSB, E724. James Spens to Axel Oxenstierna, 3 August 1614, 13 December 1623, 15 December 1625, 8 January and 1 August 1626. Spens often states that he is writing to Oxenstierna in Scots to save time. Copies of the Spens correspondence can be viewed at: <[http://62.20.57.212/ra/ao/spens\\_index\\_ENG.html](http://62.20.57.212/ra/ao/spens_index_ENG.html)> while some are published in A. Jönsson (ed.), *The Works and Correspondence of Axel Oxenstierna, II: 13. Letters from Sir James Spens and Jan Rutgers* (Stockholm, 2007). See in particular pp.156-157. Spens to Oxenstierna, London, 8 January 1626. For the significance of such letters in Scots to European leaders see D. Horsbroch, 'Nostra Vulgari Lingua: Scots as a European Language, 1500-1700', in *Scottish Language*, no.18 (1999), pp.12-13.

7 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 1 October 1643. Portlethen is a small village to the south of Aberdeen in Northeast Scotland. In older maps of the seventeenth-century the name is rendered Port-Lethin.

8 L.B. Taylor (ed.), *Aberdeen Shore Work Accounts, 1596-1670* (Aberdeen, 1972), pp.109, 113-114, 124, 127-128, 148-149 and 155.

9 Taylor, *Aberdeen Shore Work Accounts*, p.270.

10 *Records of the Great Seal of Scotland, 1306-1668* (11 vols., Edinburgh, 1984), VIII, p.244. Record no. 707, 4 February 1625 and IX, p.261. Record no. 725, 3 July 1637. From these records we learn that his wife was Marjorie Petrie and their sons included William, Adam and Robert.

*Unus Servitoris Regis Magnae Britanniae* – ‘One of the servants of the King of Great Britain’, though interestingly, not until the Cromwellian usurpation of Scotland in the 1650s. He dated his royal service in Britain over several decades, from the reign of James VI & I through that of Charles I:

[After which] will appear my integrity, which I have shown constantly over a period of twenty-seven years by [my] labours for James I, King of Great Britain, of famous memory, and then to Charles, my most serene lord now reigning.<sup>11</sup>

Buchan claimed to hold commissions from both of these kings and was not afraid to remind his social superior, Axel Oxenstierna, of that fact on several occasions. Yet it was a canny game he played. On the one hand, he wanted to let the chancellor know that he was a landholder of some status in Scotland.<sup>12</sup> Yet, on the other hand, he pointed out that Oxenstierna’s failure to intervene on his behalf, coupled with his isolation from Scotland, not only jeopardised Buchan, but also ‘my very dear wife and children and more than three hundred souls [who] are looked on with disfavour by your Excellency, my most illustrious and only patron’.<sup>13</sup> Here, presumably, Buchan meant both the small entourage who travelled with him and those who lived on his lands in Portlethen, though he does not expand on the point.

Buchan’s motivation for repeatedly highlighting his predicament came about for several reasons: he felt aggrieved that he was being insufficiently rewarded for the work he was doing for the Swedish chancellor; that he faced intolerable local opposition to himself, as a foreigner, being allowed to fish for pearls despite having authority from Oxenstierna to do so; that an inheritance case he was involved with was being mishandled and he was losing out as a result. To make matters worse, during the period he was abroad, Scotland again descended into civil war and, as a Royalist, he found himself on the beleaguered side in the political power struggles of his native country, frequently stating his fear of losing his lands. His political fortunes were made worse as, on both occasions in Sweden, he found himself unable to return home to protect his interests due

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11 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 18 November 1643 and one undated letter.

12 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 31 January 1644.

13 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 18 November 1643. In other letters he points out that he has got 10 children. See same to same, 26 September 1643.

to his increasing debts in Sweden. His response was to invoke a variety of friendships, relationships and patronage networks in order to find support – though the manner in which he did so was ill-advised and resulted in some of his allies turning against him. Buchan was persistent, however, and robustly fought his corner for over a decade.

A review of each of Buchan's dilemmas tells us much about the obstacles this man faced, and how he as a foreigner tried to extricate himself from an increasingly dire situation in a country where his contacts were both limited, and sometimes themselves compromised in regard to their own loyalties: should they support their countryman Buchan, or their other kin and patronage networks in Sweden?

### *The Pearl Fisher*

ROBERT Buchan arrived in Sweden for the first time sometime in 1642. He had been brought over with the express purpose of evaluating Swedish rivers for the presence of fresh water shell-fish capable of producing pearls. He had a proven track record in this industry, having discovered thirty-seven pearl-producing rivers for the Scottish Crown, before the Scottish Parliament allocated these fisheries to the local nobility during the meeting of the Estates in 1641.<sup>14</sup> Our sources do not reveal which rivers in Scotland Buchan worked for pearls, although those around the North-east of Scotland would make the most sense. There were good rewards to be had from this profession and Buchan obviously built his fortune upon it. Scottish pearls were a valued commodity in the early modern period, albeit the industry surrounding their collection and distribution has scarcely received serious scholarly attention.<sup>15</sup> Some were noted to be 'the size of peas, or beans or small hazelnuts'.<sup>16</sup>

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14 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Axel Oxenstierna and the *Riksråd*, Gothenburg, 15 January, 9 April 1643. An action was raised by the Convention of Scottish Burghs asking the burgh of Edinburgh to "report thair diligence and proceedings anent the patent grantit to Robert Buchan [to fish for pearl]". See L.B. Taylor, (ed.), *Aberdeen Council Letters, 1552-1681* (6 vols., Oxford, 1942-1961), I, p.348. Missive of the Convention, Montrose, 3 July 1632.

15 The standard text on the subject remains F. Woodward, *The Scottish Pearl in its World Context* (Edinburgh, 1994).

16 Samuel Hartlib Papers, HP16/1/29A-31B. Joachim Polemann to Samuel Hartlib, Amsterdam, 26 September 1659. This is almost identical to a letter of Hartlib to John Evelyn of three days later. See British Library Add. MSS 15948 f. 66A-B. Samuel Hartlib to John Evelyn, 24 September 1659. The two copies are probably taken from the same letter and the authorship simply confused.

I have dealt in Pearle these 40 years and more, and yet to this day I could never sell a Neck-lace of fine Scots Pearle in *Scotland*, nor yet fine Pendants; the Generality seeking for Oriental Pearle, because farther fetcht; Yet for Commendation of our own Pearle, at this very day I can show some of our own *Scots* Pearle as fine, Lucid and more transparent than any Oriental. It is true the Oriental can be easier Matcht, because they are all of yellow Water, yet Forreigners covet Scotch Pearls.

[...] Every Pearl that is one grain or two, that is not worth a Half Penny *Scots* might be worth 4, 5, 6 to 10 Dollars a piece; and if any be of a fine transparent colour, and perfectly round, and of any great bigness, it may be worth 15, 20, 39, 40 to 50 Rex Dollars: yea I have given 100 Rex Dollars for one, but that is rarely to get such.<sup>17</sup>

Scottish pearls were valued both within and outwith Scotland, with some Dutch-based customers explicitly stating that they were not to be sourced in such a way as to 'enrich London merchants', an undoubted hint that no duty was to be paid upon them.<sup>18</sup> Indeed pearls were only one form of wealth which could be easily transported to circumvent fiscal regulations. Among the items destined for Scotland from the estate of Colonel Francis Johnstone in the 1650s were 3 large rubies, 2 large diamonds, a large gold chain and a large gold bracelet with Colonel Johnstone's name inscribed on it – all of which could easily be hidden from the excise man.<sup>19</sup> Buchan can therefore be shown to have been a master in an important profession, with the Swedish authorities keen to tap into his rare skills, but also a key player in the repatriation of illicit wealth back into Scotland.

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17 John Spreull, *An Accompt current betwixt Scotland and England* (Edinburgh, 1705), pp.8, 24. An edited version of this is quoted in Woodward, *The Scottish Pearl*, p.68, though he gives the author as 'Spuel'.

18 Samuel Hartlib Papers, HP16/1/29A-31B. Joachim Polemann to Samuel Hartlib, Amsterdam, 26 September 1659.

19 For reference to this fine example of early-modern 'bling' see Earl of Annandale and Hartfell Private Archive - NRAS, 2171, 'Marquess of Annandale', Bundle 126. 25 October 1656 and 11 June 1657. I thank the present Earl of Annandale for allowing me access to his private archive. For other examples of the repatriation of illicit wealth and capital see Murdoch, *Network North*, pp.237-240.

That Buchan came to the attention of Oxenstierna was probably due to the chancellor's relationship with Buchan's cousin, Colonel Alexander Gordon, who served in the Swedish army.<sup>20</sup> Certainly Oxenstierna already knew of Buchan when, in October 1642, he discussed a 'perlefengiarén' in the Swedish Council of State (*Riksråd*), and noted that the individual sought authority to fish for pearls in Swedish Crown waters.<sup>21</sup> We can be assured that this is Buchan from a subsequent discussion in the *Riksråd* where it was resolved that the *perlefengiarén* should receive the required privileges to send to Scotland for the people he needed to conduct his business, with a pledge to reimburse him for his expenses.<sup>22</sup>

Initially, Buchan was supposed to have had four more pearl-fishers join him from Scotland, but fear of 'pirates' prevented most of them from arriving.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, one of his colleagues had died *en-route* to Edinburgh, after Buchan had outlaid a lot of his own capital on trying to bring him to Sweden. As Buchan pointed out to Oxenstierna:

I say nothing about Robert Seton, Master of Arts with respect to minerals. Frankly, it cost me a hundred and forty thalers in that [business], and in riding to Edinburgh seventy miles from my house. He died in your service ten miles from Edinburgh. I am aware how his wife rails against me.<sup>24</sup>

The circumstances of Seton's death are not recorded and clearly Buchan had made something of an enemy of Seton's widow. Worse for him was that he had no skilled help in Sweden and thus he wrote to the *Riksråd* requesting permission to recruit and train four Swedes to travel with him:

I humbly beg that Your Grace[s] will help me acquire four fellows to travel with me and who will be respectfully selected for all the rivers which are now known to me. Hopefully with God's help I

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20 For Buchan's own identification as being Gordon's cousin and closest heir see SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, undated letters. *RAOSB*, V, p.562 and XV, p.216 and p.324; B. Gafvert, *Meddelanden från Krigsarkivet*, X:II, (Stockholm, 1987), p.616.

21 N.A. Kullberg, et. al., (eds.), *Svenska Riksrådets Protokoll* [hereafter *SRP*] (18 vols., Stockholm: 1878-1959), IX, pp.437. Axel Oxenstierna to the *Riksråd*, 27 October 1642.

22 *SRP*, IX, p.449. *Riksråd* resolution, 8 November 1642.

23 Given Buchan's Royalist credentials and the civil wars in Britain and Ireland, this reference probably has more to do with fear of Covenanter or English Parliamentary vessels rather than pirates as such.

24 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 2x undated letters, c.1643.

shall make them competent pearl-fishers so that they can teach others, and caution them to do nothing unjust in the business as long as I am with them, fearing, with God's help, nothing, but good progress shall be made.<sup>25</sup>

So Buchan was forced to train local 'peasants', as he called them, in his secretive art, noting that he had never done such a thing in Scotland. As early as the summer of 1643, he was proven to be quite successful, claiming to have identified twenty-five new rivers containing pearl-producing shell-fish across western Sweden.<sup>26</sup> His apprentices had also become proficient in the art of pearl-fishing, Buchan himself declaring that 'one of them is now so experienced that he can teach the others. He alone has found four very rich rivers in Småland'.<sup>27</sup> Identifying who these men were is difficult given Buchan's rendering of names into poor Latin. However, we know that Håckan [Hook] Andersson was specifically requested for service by Buchan early in 1643 and paid 100 *rixdaler*.<sup>28</sup> This Andersson had been introduced to Buchan by one of his countrymen, excise-man Captain James Kinnaird, who was a citizen of Gothenburg.<sup>29</sup> He was also aided by Henry (Henrik) Sinclair, another Gothenburg-Scot and customs officer, who accompanied Buchan for a month on his explorations of the rivers (and remained a key contact for him thereafter).<sup>30</sup>

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25 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to the *Riksråd*, Gothenburg, 9 April 1643 and several undated letters.

26 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna and the *Riksråd*, Gothenburg, 9 April, 17 April 1643 and various undated documents, 1643-1644.

27 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 18 November 1643

28 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to the *Riksråd*, Gothenburg, 9 April 1643 and to AO, 17 April 1643.

29 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 17 April 1643. James Kinnaird was born in Scotland circa 1580. He married Elizabeth Wedderburn, a daughter of John Wedderburn of Craigie. They settled in Elsinore by 1616 and paid taxes there in 1617 and 1628. They subsequently moved to Sweden where Kinnaird became a burgher of Gothenburg. In 1639 he became an "*accijs uppsynesman*" - thus excise-man. See T. Riis, *Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot* (Odense, 1988), II, p.228; Långström, *Göteborgs Stads Borgarelängd 1621-1864*, p.18; Göteborg Landsarkiv, W. Berg, 'Genealogiska anteckningar om Göteborgs-slakter', ser.1, vol.2, p.317.

30 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 15 January 1643 (and several undated letters). Sinclair himself writes a postscript to the chancellor on one of Buchan's letters, 29 June 1643. Henry Sinclair became a burgher of Gothenburg as early as 1625. He worked as a customs officer and Inspector of the Tolls around Västergötland after 1638. Sinclair died in 1648 or 1649. See H. Almquist, *Göteborgs Historia* (Gothenburg, 1929), p.109; E. Långström, *Göteborgs Stads Borgarelängd 1621-1864* (Gothenburg, 1926), p.23; C.F. Corin, *Vänersborgs Historia I, Tiden till 1834* (Stockholm, 1944), pp.12, 45 and 172-174; Murdoch, *Network North*, pp.172, 214.



With his newly trained companions, Buchan soon began sending Axel Oxenstierna quantities of mother-of-pearl as well as pearls themselves. On 15 and 16 April 1643 he had particular success declaring to the chancellor that 'I tested a stream not far from here [Gothenburg] and found a very large number of shells of gemstones. The gemstones I have found are enclosed [and] I have never found such as these, and their colour is extraordinary'.<sup>31</sup> The second batch contained 'sixty fragments, the best, just as God created them. I have also taken pains to enclose two extraordinary shells'.<sup>32</sup> Two further consignments followed, not only with raw gemstones, but also some set in pendants for Queen Christina herself.<sup>33</sup> He even managed to ship larger quantities of these gemstones abroad, informing his patron that: he had 'sent a tun of shells from five several rivers to be sent to Alschover to your Majesty's agent, to be sent to Stockholm. I have sent a tun of shells to Holland, a tun to London, the fourth to Scotland'. In order to emphasise the value of these he continued:

For a hundred ages to come, the Crown of Sweden shall have glory by your own pearls; noblemen, ladies, gentlemen, and all sorts – pleurably and commodiously. My humble petition and desire is that all pearls to be taken in time coming may be presented to your sacred Majesty, that your Majesty may be once furnished with your own pearls; and let the finders and fishers thereof be paid for their pains as the custom is in other kingdoms. My humble petition to your sacred Majesty is that what shall come to my hands be sent up to your royal chancellor.<sup>34</sup>

As he also later observed to Oxenstierna, 'At your command, I presented the most serene Queen with three circlets of pearls which are of no small importance'.<sup>35</sup> When Buchan returned to Sweden in the 1650s, at the invitation of Oxenstierna, he once more sent jewels to the queen. In one undated letter he notes that he has sent 'to your Greatness [...] three pendent Swedish pearls which are no less valuable than the eastern kind. I

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31 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 17 April 1643.

32 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 18 June 1643.

33 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 18 November 1643.

34 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Queen Christina, Gothenburg, c.1643.

35 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, c.1643-1644.

have asked most humbly that you be willing to deign to show them to her Majesty with your own hand, so that the beauty and charm of Swedish pearls may become clear to her Majesty'.<sup>36</sup> However, despite his obvious success at pearl-fishing (and gaining Oxenstierna's patronage), Buchan seems to have found himself fighting constant battles during both his visits to Sweden.

### *Entrepreneurial Jealousies*

IN April 1643, Buchan had become irritated by what he perceived as interference in his work. He wrote to the *Riksråd* protesting that:

I am not well satisfied that some of Your Grace's subjects, and some of my own countrymen, have annoyingly despised me and the work I am engaged in, but I will make it to rebound on themselves, for I will apply my industriousness to the good of the Crown. I will prove with my deeds that I serve no other than Her Majesty and Your Grace.<sup>37</sup>

There were several causes for dispute. In an undated letter from the 1643 period, Buchan informed Oxenstierna that:

Please your Majesty and royal Excellency, I am stayed from fishing of pearls in some places, especially by Major Isaacson's house and rivers within 3 miles of Gothenburg. He sent his servant to me, having two of the castle soldiers with him, and inhibited me from further fishing of his rivers within his bounds. The two rivers are very rich. The Queen's Majesty would take no small pleasure to see her own pearls taken etc. The Major's lady causes fish the river and ties all pearl rings to her hands.<sup>38</sup>

No further mention was made of this after the letter to the queen. Because Buchan held a warrant from the *Riksråd* to fish the rivers, it is most likely that Major Isaacson was the one instructed to desist from his activities, particularly as we know Buchan continued to fish the rivers around

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36 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, c.1652.

37 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to the *Riksråd*, Gothenburg, 9 April 1643.

38 SRA, AOSB. E575. Buchan to Queen Christina, n.p., c.1643.

Gothenburg thereafter. Yet, no sooner had he sorted out one problem than he faced another. Countess Coburg had sold Buchan 16 ells of planks and some oak timber with which Buchan hoped to construct a ship. Henry Sinclair had drawn up the contract between them, though he later informed Buchan that the countess, perhaps taking advantage of Buchan's poor linguistic skills, had not wanted Sinclair to write the length of the planks. Buchan had thus been left with timber that was both delivered late and was of insufficient quality compared to that asked for. Not only that, but a Dutch merchant, Rodgier van Oken (aka fan Ickenn) and his creditors stood poised to confiscate the timber as soon as they received confirmation that Buchan had become a debtor. In a complicated arrangement, a quantity of iron belonging to the Scot sat variously in Portuguese ships and at the Stockholm weigh-house and was soon confiscated by Count Fleming, meaning that Buchan could not sell it and thus pay the countess the small instalment still left to pay.<sup>39</sup>

Countess Coburg thereafter deployed her obviously strong patronage network to thwart Buchan's attempts to seek justice. Not only did she hold back some of the timber, but thieves began to pilfer that which had already been delivered, and the Gothenburg customs were demanding commercial taxes for Buchan's goods rather than the non-commercial rates he believed he was entitled too.<sup>40</sup> It was soon made clear to him that the countess had also given her version to Oxenstierna first, persuading him that Buchan was merely involved in pursuing his own business interests rather than the work of the Swedish state. Buchan was horrified to receive a letter from his friend Hugh (Hugo) Mowatt<sup>41</sup> detailing a conversation which involved Axel Oxenstierna and the Lord High Treasurer:

I told my Lord Chancellor that you had a box full of pearls with blemishes on them, but of incredible bigness, and desired that he

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39 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to the *Riksråd*, Gothenburg, 9 April 1643.

40 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 17 April 1643. This was despite his friendship with Henry Sinclair and James Kinnaird.

41 Hugh Mowatt was a long time agent and spy in Swedish service. His career has been studied in some detail, but he most famously worked as the Swedish diplomat in Britain between 1644-1647, tasked with negotiating a union between Sweden, Scotland, England and the Dutch Republic. For more on that mission see J.R. Young, 'The Scottish Parliament and European Diplomacy, 1641-1647: The Palatinate, The Dutch Republic and Sweden' in S. Murdoch, (ed.), *Scotland and the Thirty Years' War, 1618-1648* (Leiden, 2001), pp.93-103; Grosjean, *An Unofficial Alliance*, pp.202-212.

would call for the French doctor and try him if he could cure them;<sup>42</sup> and he answered me that you were both alike promising much and performing nothing; and as for you, he said you were doing your own business and not the Crown's. His words in Latin were these: *similes simili gaudet, nam uterque multa promittit sed nihil perficit, et Buchanus vester rem suam agit, non nostram.*<sup>43</sup> What my Lord Treasurer said of you yesterday, speaking to my Lady Cowbridge [Coburg], you will hear from others.<sup>44</sup>

Mowatt scolded Buchan for the inappropriate language and tone used in his letters to Oxenstierna; for not having Latin, and further pointed out that one of his backers, an Alexander Matheson (aka Matthew), would be jailed if the countess did not get her money.<sup>45</sup> Apart from his obvious indignation at the slurs against his name being voiced by Countess Colburg, Buchan was stunned at the words of the chancellor and went on the attack – a move many would have said was unwise given Oxenstierna's status.

Buchan's response was to write directly to Queen Christina relating his version of events, and to follow this up with numerous letters and petitions to Oxenstierna. He informed Christina of an allegation that he had been arrested in Gothenburg. He told the queen that he knew of no sentence ever being passed against him, and his letters from the period before he heard from Mowatt make no mention of any such occurrence.<sup>46</sup> However, verification of the rumour being sown early comes from *Riksråd* records which mention the pearl-fisher having been arrested in December 1642.<sup>47</sup>

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42 There were many ways of doing this, though kept as a closely guarded secret by those who knew how. In 1659 Joachim Polemann wrote to Samuel Hartlib stating "I saw at a friend's house here that he turned the yellow pearls a beautiful white with a clear water, and I have hopes of getting the secret of this from him, so that I may be more certain hereafter/thereafter ... and I will not neglect to send my Lord further information. I believe, if this process works all the time, and can be used universally with yellow or black pearls, that a large [pearl] could be produced and that much good could be done through this process". See Samuel Hartlib Papers, HP16/1/29A-31B. Joachim Polemann to Samuel Hartlib, Amsterdam, 13 October 1659.

43 "Like takes pleasure in like, for each of those two promises much but accomplishes nothing, and your Buchan pursues his own business, not ours".

44 SRA, AOSB, E575. Hugh Mowatt to Robert Buchan, Stockholm, 28 August 1643.

45 Alexander Matheson (Matthew) awaits proper identification.

46 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Queen Christina, Gothenburg, c.1643.

47 *SRP*, IX, p.478. *Riksråd* discussion, 5 December 1642. In this record he is simply called the pearl-fisher, and not named specifically.

The *Riksråd* Secretary, Anders Gyldenklou, was instructed by the Council to investigate. Buchan perhaps knew nothing of this, but not content with denials, he pointed out to the queen that all his invoices for iron and customs dues had been paid bar a small amount he could not raise due to the impounding of his goods. He finished off his letter to Christina forcefully requesting ‘of your royal clemency, let me receive no more wrong or skaith’.<sup>48</sup> With regard to Oxenstierna’s claim that Buchan promised much but delivered little, the Scot responded by writing to him ‘most illustrious Prince, I received the enclosed letter [from Mowatt]. Woe to me that I should hear such a thing about myself from your Excellency’s sacred mouth!’<sup>49</sup> He also recounted in this, and subsequent letters, his version of events and detailed his progress in Sweden since he had arrived there.

Buchan’s claims included a listing of the twenty-five rivers and streams he had explored in three Swedish provinces in his search for pearls. He also claimed to have catalogued the quantity and quality of the pearls and gemstones he had collected from them, and the samples he had sent to Stockholm, presumably to Oxenstierna himself. Buchan then described quantities of jewellery he had fashioned from his finds before going on to describe how many peasants, fishers and soldiers he had trained in his art of pearl-fishing. As if that were not enough, Buchan reminded Oxenstierna of the goods, including woollen cloth, rams and ewes sent to the chancellor by Buchan’s wife in Scotland. He further claimed that he was the first to bring tapestry-makers ‘of every kind from Antwerp, and weavers of Damask cloaks from Tournai’ to Sweden and pointed out that he was the first person in Britain to make salt from lumps of earth without using charcoal and wood – an art he claimed he could introduce into Sweden also. These were important assertions, but Buchan was not through. In the same list of observations he reminded the chancellor that it was he, Buchan, that brought the Genista-shrub (broom) to Sweden for the first time and that subsequently it could be found in abundance throughout the country. With such a string of accolades Buchan clearly felt no reservations in reminding Oxenstierna that all this had been done at his own expense and that he awaited the *Riksråd* coming good on its promise of compensation for any outlay he had!

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48 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Queen Christina, Gothenburg, c.1643.

49 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 1 October 1643.

He concluded one of these letters with the declaration:

Let my enemies say what they want [...] God is my helper, and God Himself with extraordinary skill, after [my] conscientious tribulations and notoriety, brings [me] to pleasure and honours. If this does not happen to all conscientious people in this life, it happens in the next one. One comes to joys through tribulations, to honours through infamy, to the height through the depth. I do not doubt that God Himself will give me favour in your Excellency's sight etc.<sup>50</sup>

No record appears in the collection to tell us what happened next. However in January 1644, Buchan wrote to Oxenstierna requesting permission to travel to Stockholm. From this letter it is evident that something had happened in his favour since the previous November; there was no mention the iron, or Countess Colburg, and further he stated that he had managed to virtually complete his ship, of which he said:

I have here a ship made for military service and now nearly finished. If it please the most illustrious lords of the Crown, I would sell it. Let the price be however much respectable men think it is worth. Everything is at hand to finish it. But since the workmen have been conscripted to work for the Crown, I have no one here who can finish it. So far I have sent Admiral Simon Stewart<sup>51</sup> its size and length.<sup>52</sup>

Although we hear Buchan also urging Oxenstierna to release him from his detractors and to be allowed to return to Scotland, this first stream of letters dry up at this point. He does not re-appear in the records of the *Riksråd* or in Oxenstierna's correspondence again until the 1650s. We know from the

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50 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, 1 October 1643.

51 Admiral Simon Stewart came from Orkney. A one time pirate, he was taken into Swedish service and ennobled for his services to the Crown of that country. He died after a long career in November 1646. In all probability, Buchan showed this particular admiral the details of his ship due to their shared ethnic origins. For more on ethnic identity as a network linkage see Murdoch, *Network North*, chapter 2. For more detail about Stewart's career read Grosjean, *An Unofficial Alliance*, pp.131-133; *Oxford DNB*.

52 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 31 January 1644.

*Aberdeen Council Records* that he returned to Scotland, because he received instructions from the Council to help compose a report of the damage to lands and properties within his local area in 1648.<sup>53</sup> From a later discussion in the *Riksråd* it also becomes evident that he then spent some time in Danzig in the company of a Scot called Cochran.<sup>54</sup> Thereafter he returned to Sweden, around 1650, but only because the poor man found himself once more involved in a court case!

### *Buchan's Inheritance Claim*

ROBERT Buchan's cousin, Colonel Alexander Gordon, died around 1650. Thereafter, Gordon's widow and executors, Colonel Hugh Hamilton<sup>55</sup> and Captain Robert Hay, became embroiled with the pearl-fisher over the amount of money Buchan should receive from his cousin's estate. Buchan informed Oxenstierna 'Your Excellency shall hear from your servant Mr. Hugh Mowatt's Resident, who wrote his [Gordon's] obligation to me of 4000 *rixdaler*, and is witness thereto'.<sup>56</sup> Part of this debt was due to be paid by Colonel Hugh Hamilton, who owed Gordon's widow 2000 *rdl*. The other 2000 *rdl* formed part of a loan made to Gordon's mother in Scotland.<sup>57</sup> Upon his cousin's death, Buchan was summoned to Sweden by Mrs Gordon in

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53 Taylor, *Aberdeen Council Letters, 1552-1681*, III, pp.114 and 117. Commission, Aberdeen, 15 December 1648.

54 SRP, XV, p.424. *Riksråd* minutes, 20 July 1653. The Cochrane in question is probably the Scottish Royalist diplomat, Colonel John Cochran. He had served as a Stuart diplomat, a representative of the Scottish Parliament, and then reverted to the Royalist cause in the 1640s. By late 1647 he was commissioned to travel to the Baltic states, including Poland-Lithuania and Courland, to raise funds for Charles I. For more on him see H.F. Morland-Simpson, (ed.), 'Civil War Papers 1643-1650' in *Miscellany of the Scottish History Society*, I (Edinburgh, 1893), pp.151-180; S. Murdoch, *Britain, Denmark-Norway and the House of Stuart 1603-1660* (East Linton, 2000/2003), pp.90-160.

55 Colonel Hugh Hamilton was an Irish-born Scot who had arrived in Sweden in 1624 and had an illustrious career thereafter. In 1654 he was naturalised and introduced into the Swedish House of Nobility as Baron de Deserf along with his half-brother Louis/Ludovick, who had joined him in Sweden in 1645. Hamilton was created Lord Hamilton, Baron of Glenawly by Charles II in March 1661, and introduced to the House of Lords in June. He obtained a departure pass from the Swedish king on 1 December 1662 and returned to Ireland. For more on him see S. Murdoch, 'The Scots and Ulster: Some Scandinavian Dimensions' in J.R. Young and W. Kelly (eds.), *Ulster and Scotland 1600-2000: History, Language and Identity* (Dublin, 2004), pp.85-104.

56 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Stockholm, undated.

57 SRP, XV, pp.407-8 & pp.417-419. *Riksråd* minutes, 23 May and 13 June 1653; SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, various correspondence, c.1652-1653

order to settle matters – a fact Buchan informed Oxenstierna of several times but reiterated thus:

May it please your Excellency to read these two documents of the dead Colonel Alexander Gordon, whereby the Colonel or his executors are obliged to pay me 4,000 imperials in return for the money I paid, according to the wishes of the foresaid Gordon and his solemn promises of restitution, partly in Scotland, partly here in Stockholm, in pursuance of the commission entrusted to me by the dead Colonel, as his letters testify. After you have read them and given consideration to the justice of my case, I ask the most illustrious lord to make himself available for me as a kind patron in the court of the most serene Queen, and that Colonel Hamilton and the 'officer of the watch', Robert Hay,<sup>58</sup> executors to the foresaid dead man, be compelled by royal authority to pay me back without delay from Gordon's money which has been deposited with the magistrates of Bremen.<sup>59</sup>

There were, however, other complications; Gordon had made a will which implied that he had no children. In fact he had three illegitimate children, but only married his consort and thereby legitimised his children after his first wife's death, thus throwing the legality of his will into question.<sup>60</sup> A further difficulty arose because Buchan claimed to have approached Hamilton for help in his cause, particularly in selling Gordon's land to raise funds – but after advising him not to sell these, Hamilton had obtained them for himself.<sup>61</sup> During the July session of the *Riksråd*, the queen decided that Buchan had already received 2000 of the money claimed, but that he was

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58 Robert Hay was a Scottish officer in Swedish service. Several individuals of this name were listed separately in the Swedish military archives, but some or all may be the same man. Captain Robert Hay served in George Crawford's regiment in 1632. By 1640 he became a captain in Alexander Gordon's Viborg regiment suggesting that it was this man. Indeed Colonel Gordon left a letter now found in the Swedish Military Archives (Krigsarkiv) 'Krigskollegium Kancelliet; Adressatregistratur till Krigskollegiets Registratur 1631-1654' stating his giving a company to Hay; "att foreställa och inrymma Robert Hay ett komp under sitt reg 7/8/1641".

59 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Stockholm, undated.

60 SRP, XV, pp.418-419, 424-6. *Riksråd* minutes, 13 & 20 July 1653.

61 SRP, XV, pp.417-9, 424-6, 434-5, various *Riksråd* minutes, June-August 1653.



indeed owed another 2000 *rdl* of which Hay was liable for half. Further, she summoned Hamilton to appear before the *Riksråd*.<sup>62</sup> This was quite a showdown, with both Buchan and Hamilton present and at one point – when Buchan entered the room – the scribe taking the minutes could only write *Hammelton tahlte hånom till på schottische* – ‘Hamilton spoke to him in Scots’.<sup>63</sup> We can only speculate how that exchange went. We do know that strong arguments were put forward by Hamilton in refutation of Buchan’s claims, after which the queen sought time to reflect on the evidence with three of her council. The *Riksråd* reconvened to discuss the matter on 8 August 1653. Finally, after several years waiting in Sweden and numerous sessions of the 1653 *Riksråd*, Queen Christina decided that Buchan should receive the outstanding 2000 *rdl*, in full, but without interest accrued.<sup>64</sup>

Interestingly, Axel Oxenstierna attended none of these meetings, perhaps wishing to appear aloof from the proceedings. He had certainly forwarded all the information Buchan had sent him to the *Riksråd* and Queen Christina and thus proved to be of considerable use to Buchan. However, the chancellor was coming to the end of his distinguished career and possibly his age kept him away. Similarly to the 1640s episode, Buchan appears not to have written to him again after the case was resolved – or if he did the letters do not survive. What became of Buchan thereafter is not clear. He had expressed his desire to return to his family in Scotland, so it is very possible that he left Sweden and returned to Portlethen. However, there is one final undated document in the Oxenstierna collection relating to Buchan.

After the abdication of Queen Christina in 1654, her cousin ascended the throne as Karl X. Two *perlehämtare* (pearl-fishers), Sunee Janson and Albrijt Hinderson, wrote to the new king and noted that, despite their royal commission, there was too much competition in Småland and Västergötland and requested that they may be authorised to send any such competition away.<sup>65</sup> This letter is contained in the Buchan corpus, so whether either of them were apprentices of Buchan, or whether they were complaining about some renewed activity by Buchan, will require further research to establish. However, given that Buchan’s activities were supported by Axel

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62 SRP, XV, p.419. *Riksråd* minutes, 13 July 1653.

63 SRP, XV, p.425. *Riksråd* minutes, 20 July 1653.

64 SRP, XV, pp.435-436, *Riksråd* minutes, 8 August 1653.

65 SRA, AOSB, E575. Sunee Janson and Albrijt Hinderson to AO, n.p., undated.

Oxenstierna, and that there was no counter-claim by Buchan in the collection, one would think the former. What we do know for certain is that in January 1659

the lands and barony of Portlethin, the mill-lands and port and harbour, and fish boats, toll, customs, and anchorages of the same; the town and lands of Balquharne and Clashfarquher and croft thereof, manor-place of Portlethin, with the mosses, muirs, meadows &c. of the said lands; the annual-rent and superiority of the town and lands of Anquhorthies and Cluikstone, all in the parish of Banchorie-Devonick and sherrifdom of Kincardine; - which lands, barony, &c. were on 8 March 1639 apprised from the deceased Robert Buchane of Portlethin, at the insistance of the said Mr David Herit, assignee as mentioned in the decret, in payment of £360 English money, with £18 money of sherriff-fee to James Allan, messenger.<sup>66</sup>

Thus it appears that Buchan had died and his lands transferred to another family. The reason is clear in the text: that his lands had been apprised in 1639, right at the outset of the Covenanting period which, coupled with his flight in 1640, reflects his adherence to the Stuart cause, and lack of friends in the Scottish government willing to help him clear his debt. Further, his patent to fish for pearls was revoked the same year.<sup>67</sup> This change in fortune accounts for his removal to Sweden at a time when many other North-east Scots also fled the Covenanting regime, including Bishop Adam Bellenden of Aberdeen, Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromarty and the Rev. Alexander White.<sup>68</sup> Thereafter Buchan would have turned to relatives to help him, like

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66 *Register of the Great Seal of Scotland*, X, pp.292-292. Record no. 680, 27 January 1659.

67 Taylor, *Aberdeen Council Letters*, II, p.146. Remonstrance of the Scottish Burghs, 13 November 1639 to the effect that "the patent grantit to Robert Buchane anent the pearle be recallit".

68 Others in Bishop Bellenden's retinue included his nephew, Mr John Bellenden, John Blackwood, Mr Alexander Innes, Mr Alexander Scrogie 'and sum vtheris'. See Spalding, *Memorialls of the Trubles*, I, 192; R.D.S. Jack and R. J. Lyall, eds., *Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromarty: The Jewel* (Edinburgh: 1983), 5; Alexander White either left separately or is one of the 'vtheris' mentioned by Spalding. For his escape see SRA, AOSB, E748, Alexander White to Axel Oxenstierna, n.d., but post 1650. From its contents, the date of this letter can be placed as having been written somewhere between the Treaty of Breda (1650) and the Battle of Worcester (1651).

Colonel Gordon, in a bid to make money to pay off the debts and protect his lands – the impending loss of which he alluded to throughout his correspondence with Oxenstierna.

### *Conclusion*

SO how can we conclude this brief overview of Robert Buchan's time in Sweden? We can easily summarise several important points. To start with it is evident that Buchan had a high opinion of himself. This revealed itself through the manner in which he concluded letters, using such statements as 'I know there has never been any other Scotsman here of my rank who would serve you more gladly than, most illustrious Sir, your Excellency's most humble and obedient servant and slave'.<sup>69</sup> This really was an audacious claim given the fact that Sweden had been so well served by Scots of all ranks during Oxenstierna's lifetime and that, by the time Buchan wrote the letter, over 30,000 Scots had served in the army and navy, including 2,500 officers; numerous Scots had joined the Swedish nobility and dozens held positions in Swedish government at local and national level.<sup>70</sup> Oxenstierna himself had even been moved to write in 1640 that:

The Scottish nation has now for a long time, about 60 years, had a strong relationship and experience of Sweden, and a good portion of the Scottish nation has shown our previous kings and crown worthy services; for this reason their success and well-being has not been any less desired by us than the Scottish nation itself.<sup>71</sup>

Despite Buchan's obvious inflated self-view, it is difficult to conclude that his high self-esteem was built on any false premise. It took a courageous man to confront his opponents in Sweden the way he did. He was well aware of his failings, particularly in Latin and Swedish, yet not afraid to voice his strengths; he was certainly not afraid to be forthright with a reigning monarch, her chancellor and state council. If we reflect for a moment on the list of claims he made for himself after being slandered by Oxenstierna we are left in no doubt that Buchan was an extraordinary man who had introduced several new skills and plants into Sweden. It is hard to

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69 SRA, AOSB, E575. Buchan to Oxenstierna, Gothenburg, 31 January 1644.

70 For specifics of these see Grosjean, *An Unofficial Alliance*, chapters 3-5, passim.

71 *SRP*, VIII, p.98. Axel Oxenstierna to *Riksråd*, 8 July 1640.

imagine that he would make up any of these claims as if he had been found to be lying he would only have made his situation all the more untenable. Whatever the truth we are left with a host of unanswered questions: how had he made his contacts in Haarlem or Tournai allowing him to bring skilled artisans from those places in Sweden? Where did he learn his entrepreneurial skills? What was his background in gardening, salt-making and animal husbandry, all of which he alludes to in his letters? Undoubtedly these questions will be answered by a more detailed study of the Scottish and Swedish archives, but for now we are left with an interesting glimpse into the life of a fascinating man.

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