

The Mystery of “Peter Whannell alias Buchanan”

By Dr.D.C.McWhannell (25/02/12)

Part 1

Peter Whannell alias Buchanan registered his arms with Lyon Court on 8th August 1778 (see Lyon Register Vol.1) He is stated to be “of the County of Air” and to be “descended in the male line from the antient family of Buchanan of Buchanan”. Presently no other facts about this man appear to be easily recoverable from official records. No proven date of birth, marriage or death has so far been found either in the National Archives of Scotland or in the local archives for Ayrshire or indeed in the National Archives in London. No lands or other property relating to this person have yet been discovered.

It is a curious coincidence and probably no more than that, that a Patrick McIlhonell was a student at St. Andrews University in sessions 1775/6 1776/7 and 1777/8 but then disappears from the record (see “Biographical Register of the University of St.Andrews” by Smart, R.N.,pub., 2004 St.Andrews). While at university Patrick changed his forename to Peter but retained his surname unchanged. This Patrick/Peter may well have been the eldest legitimate son of Alexander McIlchonnell of the Littleport family. Patrick paid the tuition fees that matched his father being either a tradesman or tenant farmer. The Gaelic name Pdraig Mac Gille Chonaill might conceivably have “morphed” into Peter Whannell amongst an Anglophone community. This particular Scottish surname is known to have changed over time from the original Gaelic form to McIlchonnell, McIlquhonnell, McIlwhannell, McWhannell and Whannell. It is the case that from at least 1482 onwards the Perthshire and Argyllshire MacGilleChonaills provided a baillie, servitors, a chaplain, a ground officer and boatbuilders to various significant Campbell families. The surname also existed in Dumfries, Galloway, Ayrshire and the Isle of Man. Although some members of the Clann Mhic Gille Chonaill were at one time small landowners in Argyll and Perthshire and historically at least three persons were known locally as “Barons” there is currently no evidence of their being armigerous and equally there is no demonstrable historical link with the surname Buchanan.

Might this “Peter Whannell alias Buchanan” have adopted the surname Whannell from his mother or some other female ancestress or relative due to particular family difficulties after the 1745 rebellion (or alternatively to obtain an inheritance?) ? It should be noted that the Arnpryor Buchanan family estates were forfeited and managed by a Government agent for some years after “The ’45”. It is also the case that there is a rather distant Buchanan of Arnpryor link, through marriages, to the 6 merkland of Skimieland and the 5 shilling land of Templelands of Dreghorn in the Bailiary of Cunninghame, Sherrifdom of Ayr (N.A.S. docs.).

Conversely might this “Peter Whannell alias Buchanan” be a Whannell who had for political, social or other reasons such as inheritance chosen the alias “Buchanan”?

Accepting initially the proposition that this man is truly a male line Buchanan of Buchanan what can be made of him either from his unique armorial achievement or from published records of the various Buchanan families?

His arms certainly display the sable lion rampant and the double black treasure associated with the Buchanan of Buchanan arms. The particular features unique to this individual being the crest (a dove holding an olive branch in its beak) the motto “Nuntius Pacis” and the three crescents gules placed symmetrically on the shield (see www.esd.co.nz/buchanan/body/peter.html) It has been suggested that these crescents may be cadency marks for “the second son of a second son of a second son”. This possibility is not however likely to be valid in a Scottish context. It has also been suggested, perhaps more credibly, that these marks may represent an armigerous female ancestress possibly a Seton but much more probably an Edmonstone (see below). It has also been suggested that the motto and crest may allude to “Peter Whannell alias Buchanan” having been a clergyman although in a Scottish context this is not particularly likely (private communications with Alistair Campbell of Airds, Unicorn Pursuivant , David Sellar, Bute Pursuivant , now Lord Lyon King of Arms and Dr. Steven Boardman , Dept of Scottish History , Edinburgh University). Presently it seems most probable that these three crescents gules are purely “decorative” and serve only to distinguish this particular coat or shield. Is there a possible comparison with the three mullets azure accompanying the black lion rampant on the

MacMillan of MacMillan and Knap shield and if so might this indeed be a “Whannell” armorial achievement rather than that of a Buchanan?

Following up leads on the various Buchanan families is facilitated by information listed on www.stirnet.com/html/genie/british/bb-fz/buchanan. (The information given on this web site is claimed to be derived from published sources listed as “Strathendrick and its Inhabitants from Early Times” and “The Parish of Strathblane” both by Smith J. G., pub. Glasgow 1896 plus “Burkes Landed Gentry” 1952).

Summarising what has been established to date gives the following picture.

- (a) The “sable lion” form derived from the Royal Arms of Scotland seemingly came into use by the main line of Buchanan due to the second wife of Walter 12th of Buchanan having been Isobel daughter of Murdoch Stewart 2nd. Duke of Albany.
- (b) George 15th of Buchanan (d1561) was married to Margaret daughter of Sir Archibald Edmonstone 3rd of Duntreath (a possible source for the three crescent motif but why then were the arms not quartered in the usual manner?)
- (c) The main line of Buchanan of Buchanan ended with John 19th of Buchanan whose daughter Elizabeth married James Stewart of Ardvorlich sometime before 1680.
- (d) The senior line of the Buchanans then became that of Arnpryor through John 1st of Arnpryor (d. 1547), the second son of Walter 14th of Buchanan.
- (e) The possibility that the three crescents do indeed indicate “the second son of second son of a second son” might lead via John 1st of Arnpryor to Walter Buchanan of Bochlyvie, the second son of Andrew 2nd of Arnpryor. Unfortunately there are no male descendants of this Walter presently known to the author.
- (f) A further area of confusion arises in the published sources since the believed younger brother of John 1st of Arnpryor, Walter Buchanan 1st of Spittal may have been the son of Patrick the eldest son of Walter 14th of Buchanan rather than a younger brother of John 1st of Arnpryor. If true this would make Walter a brother of George 15th of Buchanan and perhaps give him “2nd son” status.
- (g) Looking at the male descendants of Walter 1st of Spittal we find Edward 5th of Spittal married to Helen daughter of Edmonstone of Balleum (a second Edmonstone link). It is also noticeable that Peter is used as a forename by the descendants of Walter 1st of Spittal but is generally not used by the other armigerous Buchanan families. Unfortunately once more the various Peters who might be considered as candidates for being “Peter Whannell alias Buchanan” do not appear to match up convincingly with the date for registration of his arms.

The questions then remain “Why should an armigerous Buchanan use the surname Whannell ?” or conversely “Why should an armigerous Whannell use the alias Buchanan?” and “What is the true significance of the three crescents on this man’s arms ?”.

Part 2

Moving now to another line of enquiry there are various mentions of a Peter Whannell (b. “abroad” July 1778 d.1854 Madras) and a Peter Brunton Whannell (b.1816 Madras) to be found at www.nas.gov.uk see GD112/52/612 and GD112/74/43 etc (plus a separate legal action “Ensign Peter Buchanan v James Aird jr. & another” see CS271/29993 dated 1788 however this Peter, who never uses the surname “Whannell” appears to be a member of the Buchanan of Silverbanks family) while some sixteen entries for that Peter Whannell (d.1854) who rose from Ensign (1803/4) to become a Colonel and later Auditor General in the British East India Company, Madras Army, are to be found via www.a2a.org.uk/search . This Peter Whannell, who when sailing to India on the “Henry Dundas” (L/Mil/9/36) has his occupation listed as “a labourer”, had enlisted in the East India Company’s European Infantry. On 17th Aug. 1803 approval was given by the Court of Directors of the E.I.C. for his appointment as deputy accountant He appears to have become “Deputy Accountant in the Office of the Military Auditor General” in Madras in 1805. He subsequently rose steadily in his chosen career to become ultimately Auditor General at Madras with the rank of Colonel. Was this rise in fortune a tribute to the Scottish parish school system as well as an indication of Peter’s innate ability? Peter served throughout his career in Madras and apparently without any opportunity to return to Great Britain. To the present day Colonel Peter is remembered through the existence of Whannell’s Road in Chennai (formerly Madras).

Col. Peter Whannell married a Mrs. Eliza Bulow (b.1786 d.1848) in 1814 and had three children, all born in Madras, Peter (b.1816), Eliza (b. 1820 d. 1836) and Mary (b.1826 d.1845). Whannell family papers, including wills and testaments are included within a bundle of some 700 individual items held as Mss EUR G107 in the British Library but have not provided any clues as to this Peter Whannell's ancestry. It does appear to be the case, based on a letter held in GD112, that Peter Whannell's father may have been resident in Scotland. Unfortunately his name and place of residence are not given. It appears that at some point in time he, the father, may have lived in London.

It seems also to be the case that Peter had a brother a Lt.Col. George Whannell of Her Majesty's 33rd. Foot (Duke of Wellington's Regiment, see Army List of 1847, full career details available from Halifax Museum's regimental archives) born London 5th. June 1798 and who died in 1861 (see the entry in The London Illustrated News of 8th. June 1861). George Whannell purchased his Ensign's Commission in the 33rd. Foot on 1st. March 1811. He was promoted to Lieutenant on 16th. March 1814, to Captain on 3rd. November 1825, Major on 22nd. July 1841 and finally to Lieutenant Colonel of the 33rd. Foot on 14th. April 1843. He had served during the Waterloo Campaign and was awarded the Waterloo Medal. He was promoted to the Lieutenant Colonelcy of the 33rd. during the Regiment's posting to the West Indies having previously served in Jamaica from 1822 to 1832. Lt. Col. George Whannell and his Regiment were then posted to Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1843. He retired from the Army in 1848.

Peter appears to have had a second and elder brother Lt. John Buchanan Whannell who was commissioned in the 71st. Foot on 19th. June 1806, transferring to the 12th. Foot in 1807, and who was stationed in India at a time when Col. Peter was in Madras (see correspondence in GD112 in N.A.S.). It is not known when or where Lt. John Buchanan Whannell died.

John Buchanan Whannell's father was it seems a Peter Whannell Snr. who in 1801 was a Lieutenant in the 9th. Veteran Battalion (W.O. 31/207). This Peter Whannell Snr. was first commissioned on 3rd. Sept. 1794 into a New Independent Company of Foot, commanded by a Henry Short. This company was disbanded in 1796. On 3rd. Sept. 1801 Peter senior was in the 3rd. Independent Company of Invalids at Plymouth. On 18th. April 1895 he was promoted Lieutenant in the 9th. Veteran Battalion. He retired on full pay of the 12th. Royal Veteran Battalion and his death must have occurred during 1825 as his death was announced in the 1826 Army List.

It appears that Col. Peter Whannell's son also Peter, born in 1816, is indeed that Peter Brunton Whannell who married a Miss Maria Jane Blake, apparently the daughter of an Irish gentry family. The Gentleman's Magazine of 1840 refers to the marriage, in London on 21st. April 1840 and states that Maria Jane was the youngest daughter of the late Thomas Blake Esq., a grand niece of Sir Edmund Stanley formerly Lord Chief Justice of Madras and cousin to Sir Valentine Blake, Bart.. In the year of Peter B. Whannell's marriage he petitions the Earl of Breadalbane, from an address in London, for a Commission in the Argyll and Bute Militia citing the alleged support of Argyll himself. He appears to be successful with his request as he writes thanking Breadalbane from a hotel in Campbelltown. Peter Brunton Whannell does not however appear to have been enthused by his commission in the Argyll and Bute Militia as he reappears in 1845 as Postmaster at Trichinopoly in India. Amazingly in a document written in San Bernardino California dated 24th. July 1864 Peter Brunton Whannell states that he sailed from Melbourne Australia in November 1856, arriving in San Francisco sometime later after crossing the Pacific. Peter B. then emerges as an official Justice of the Peace/Magistrate (and claiming the rank of Captain, a rank which he briefly had held in relation to a troop of American soldiers in San Francisco, California) in the gold mining town of Yale in Canada and a colourful description of him emerges through his activities in relation to an incident known as "McGowan's War" of 1858 (see various web sites). The last North American notice presently available for Peter B., in 1867, is in a voters roll for California (see web sites on "Foreign born Voters of California"). His final appearance in the records appears to be in 1872 where he is given as the father of a child born to a totally new wife (his wife's Christian names are given, but her surname is unknown) in a baptismal record in Agra, India.

It is the case that Peter Brunton Whannell in 1864 when he needed to prove his claim to his father's estate, and was resident in California, used a seal imprinted in the wax on legal correspondence, with the same heraldic details as those of the arms of "Peter Whannell alias Buchanan" of 1778 including a "shield with lion rampant and three crescents and a crest with the dove with olive branch motif" but with the motto rendered as "Nuncius Pacis" below the shield. Full details of this seal have been confirmed from a document held in the National Library at St. Pancras, London. An enlarged image of this seal has been supplied to the author (in TIFF format on a CD) by the British Library and is also capable of being made available as a JPEG image file for study purposes if required. This seal appears to imply that Peter Brunton Whannell, Col. Peter Whannell (Peter B's father) and his brothers George and John Buchanan Whannell and their father Lt. Peter Whannell Snr. were indeed descendants of that Peter Whannell who registered arms in 1778. Descendants of Peter Brunton Whannell are known to have lived in Australia but it is not yet established if any heirs male presently exist. The Mss Eur G107 papers cover a period from 1864 to 1875 and relate to trust money applied for in 1865 by Peter George Alexander Samuel Whannell, butcher, of Broadmeads, Melbourne, Australia who states that he is the son of Peter Brunton Whannell deceased

and Mary Jane Whannell (maiden name Blake). This was indeed the case as he was the third child of Peter Brunton Whannell. Peter G.A.S. Whannell's death certificate dated 20th January 1891 (New South Wales 1891/009894) indicates that he was aged forty six years and four months, was born in Madras, India, had lived for twenty one years in New South Wales, Australia and had a surviving brother George Arthur Whannell. Peter G.A.S. Whannell had married, at thirty-five years of age, a Sarah Delaney with issue Arthur Henry Whannell who was alive aged twenty-one at the time of his father's accidental death. The death certificate also states that Peter G.A.S. Whannell's father was a "Colonel in the U.S. Army"!

Curiously it is also the case that a McWhannell, descended from the Littleport family, who had immigrated to Australia and had become a successful stock farmer and member of the Queensland Assembly, used a seal incorporating the same "dove with olive branch" crest as found on the 1778 Peter Whannell arms but with the motto rendered as "Nuncia Pacis". An image of this seal is also available for study if required.

It should however be noted that jewellers in the mid 1800's had available to them a book of family crests including the "Whannell alias Buchanan" crest but giving the motto as "Nuncius Pacis" rather than the "Nuntius Pacis" of the 1778 arms. These books of crests however did not show the full armorial achievements but only the crests and mottoes hence the particular interest in the seal with shield, crest and motto used by Peter Brunton Whannell in 1864. It would appear to be unlikely, although not impossible, that Peter Brunton Whannell would have had access to details of the "Peter Whannell alias Buchanan arms" as registered with Lyon Court such that he might claim to be armigerous and the senior legitimate male descendant of Peter Whannell of circa 1778 through the medium of having a seal engraved specially for the purpose of proving he was the heir male of Col. Peter Whannell (d 1854).

Although seemingly much has been discovered about the descendants of "Peter Whannell alias Buchanan" and their quite colourful lives it is to be regretted that it has not so far been possible to identify the provenance of Peter Whannell of circa 1778 or of his ancestors. Was he really a Buchanan or is this an alias in the sense only of "also known as Buchanan"? It is certainly the case that his proposed descendants all used the surname Whannell rather than Buchanan and as indicated by extensive previously published research there is no reason yet apparent for considering "Whannells", who in general can be shown to have been descendants of a Mac Gille Chonail, to be in any sense "Buchanans".

What then is to be made of 1778 Peter Whannell's apparently "Buchanan" arms? Who was Peter? Who were his male ancestors and was he indeed truly "of the County of Air"?

Note; **Part 1** of this article was originally published in West Highland Notes & Queries, Series 3, No. 9, August 2007