

John Buchanan of Zomba: Disgraced missionary or pioneer of ecotheology?

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This article notes that tree-planting and environmental stewardship were prominent during the early years of Blantyre Mission, particularly through the work of artisan missionary John Buchanan. His appreciation of the Malawi environment included both concern for sustainability and ambition to develop successful commercial enterprise. Although implicated in a scandal that led to his dismissal from Blantyre Mission, he continued his work at Zomba, where he developed a successful estate. His coffee plantation offered opportunities for the workers to attend both church and school, which many opted to do. The pioneering plantation was hailed as the fulfilment of the vision that David Livingstone had developed for central Africa. A determined opponent of the East African slave trade, Buchanan advocated increasing British influence and, as Acting Consul, declared the British Protectorate in 1889. He was also instrumental in encouraging European settlers to acquire land and establish plantations in Malawi, seeing this as a strategy to counter the slave trade and oblivious to the negative effects on the Malawian community of alienation of some of the best land in the country. After a decade in Malawi, he calculated that he had preached 1000 sermons and collected 1000 plants – a distinctive combination. His contemporary relevance lies in his role as a champion of Malawi's trees. He understood that sustaining its tree cover was of vital importance to the environment and was active himself as a tree planter. Although lacking training in academic theology, he made the connection between his evangelical Christian faith and his sense of environmental responsibility. In this regard he can be considered a pioneer of ecotheology.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article draws on the disciplines of history, missiology and environmental science. It interrogates the understanding of faith that led to John Buchanan's advocacy of environmental stewardship as an integral element in his understanding of Christian mission.

Keywords: ecotheology; environment; Malawi; trees; missionary.

Introduction

John Buchanan, who, as Acting Consul, made the declaration in 1889 that led to Malawi becoming a British Protectorate, is introduced by historian John McCracken as a 'disgraced missionary' (McCracken 2012:78). It is an accurate description at one level since Buchanan was dismissed by the Church of Scotland in 1881 after his conduct at the Blantyre Mission had become part of a national scandal. However, such is the complexity of the life that Buchanan lived in Malawi that 'disgraced missionary' is a description that hides more than it reveals. This article seeks to revisit his life story, particularly in light of the contemporary environmental crisis. Buchanan was someone who had a keen appreciation of the natural environment in Malawi. Not only that, but his understanding of his 'mission' involved bringing his Christian convictions not only to the people but also to the environment of Malawi (Anderson & Grove 1987; Grove 1989; Mulwafu 2004). Could there even be a case for considering him a pioneer of the ecotheology that is so greatly needed today? Christian ecotheology is defined by Ernst Conradie as, 'a theological movement reflecting on Christian responses to ecological destruction' (Conradie 2023). This is the contemporary movement that prompts a re-examination of Buchanan's life and contribution.

John Buchanan was born in Scotland in 1855 in the rural Perthshire parish of Muthill. As a young man, he found employment as an apprentice gardener at Drummond Castle. At the same time, he had a deep experience of faith through the revival movement that gripped Scotland during the middle years of the 19th century. When he was 18 years old, an event occurred that was to define

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his life: David Livingstone died at Ilala. As with several of his contemporaries, this caught Buchanan's imagination in an extraordinary way. He identified himself with the great explorer's combination of devout Christian faith and practical strategising about how to counter the East African slave trade. Another significant interest that he had in common with Livingstone was endless curiosity about the natural environment. Dana Robert (2011) notes that:

[M]any of the most astute missionary observers of the natural world were products of the Scottish Enlightenment. Perhaps the most famous exemplar of Protestant missionary natural science was explorer David Livingstone, whose *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (1857) provided meticulous observations of nature and African people's relationship to it. (p. 125)

Buchanan was among those inspired by Livingstone's vision. When the Church of Scotland decided in 1874 to establish a mission in the area recommended by Livingstone, the young gardener from Muthill was ready to take up the challenge (Anon 1875).

He was only 21 years of age when he set out with the pioneer party that was tasked to establish Blantyre Mission. His appointment as an 'artisan missionary', designated to work as a gardener, signalled that the vision behind the Mission was not confined to religion in the narrow sense. Proclaiming the Christian message was always central, but this was part of a broader endeavour to supplant the slave trade through the development of legitimate commerce, as Livingstone had proposed. The Mission was therefore both 'evangelical' and 'industrial', with Buchanan fully invested in both dimensions. Andrew Ross, the historian of Blantyre Mission, observes that the initial party sent to establish Blantyre Mission was a mixed bag, including some who turned out to be quite unsuitable for missionary work. However, he identifies Buchanan as a 'dedicated Christian man with a passion to end the slave trade' (Ross 1996:22).

A year later, Buchanan was in his element, recruiting and managing more than a 100 men to build the mission station and construct Malawi's first roads. He had begun to learn the Chiyao language and declared: 'I am getting more in love with this place every day' (Anon 1877b:536). An account of 'A Week at Blantyre', published in mid-1878, gives a glimpse of how a normal day began for Buchanan (Anon 1878):

[A]t 6.50 am the bugle is sounded and the people gather themselves together, and soon after Mr Buchanan appears, book in hand, and immediately proceeds to enrol names of new workers Mr Buchanan proceeds quite calmly, pointing out the men and women he wants, and by the assistance of Tom Bajuito [sic], the interpreter, he gets their names and puts them down. (pp. 100–101)

It is evident that the labours of the large workforce were producing results under Buchanan's direction (Anon 1878):

[W]e have planted out along the water course about 200 plants of a species of wool-tree which grows abundantly on the Shire and Zambesi, and have about 1,000 ready to plant out. We have planted 48 orange and lemon trees, and 30 young mango-trees.

Cape gooseberries and tomatoes are a splendid crop. They are spreading themselves over all the place, and growing without any attendance; already we have got more than 50 lb of berries, and they are just about as plentiful as at the beginning. The water into the station will be an invaluable benefit to the garden and crops. (p. 105)

For our purposes, it is significant that much of the energy of the early Blantyre Mission was devoted to tree-planting. This was not the only dimension. Already there was a small school which had been started by Mapas Nthintili while on secondment from Livingstonia Mission. Duff and Helen Macdonald had arrived and were relishing their engagement with local culture and language. At this stage, however, it was Buchanan's work that was meeting with conspicuous success, indicating that the Mission was serious about the natural environment as much as the human community.

The environmental dimension of Blantyre Mission

The reaction of Europeans to the environment they found in the Shire Highlands needs to be considered against the background that, until the mid-19th century, it was generally assumed that the interior of Africa was a barren desert. This explains why David Livingstone's accounts of his travels were such a revelation and why he became such a celebrity. For him, the Shire Highlands had a particular appeal: 'We were all charmed with the splendid country, and looked with never-failing delight on its fertile plains, its numerous hills, and majestic mountains' (Livingstone & Livingstone 1865:107). On 18 April 1859, when he arrived at Lake Chilwa, he searched for words to describe the splendour of the scene:

[T]he country around is very beautiful, and clothed with rich vegetation. ... Exceedingly lofty mountains, perhaps 8,000 feet above the sea level, stand near the eastern shore. When their lofty steep-sided summits appear, some above, some below the clouds, the scene is grand. (p. 82)

This is the prospectus that brought people like Buchanan to Malawi, and they never ceased to marvel at its rich natural environment.

By 1878, the Committee responsible for Blantyre Mission could report that (Anon 1878):

[T]he many excellencies of Blantyre as the site of our first Mission in Africa are fully borne out by experience. The country is elevated, well-watered, rich in flowers and fruits, and eminently healthy. (p. 129)

It was Buchanan who drew the connection between the rich vegetation and the climate (Buchanan 1885):

[T]he presence of hills, and mountains, and valleys gives the landscape a varied and grand appearance, and influences the climate to a great degree. Those mountain-sides are, many of them, clothed with dense bush to the top, especially in ravines and gorges. (p. 41)

In this respect, he was an exemplar of what Richard Grove describes as 'an emerging belief in the existence of dynamic

links between deforestation and rainfall decline' (Grove 1989:163). He also made it his business to become familiar with the trees that grew so abundantly (Buchanan 1885):

[T]he Shirè Highlands are well-wooded ... Beside streams you meet with handsome specimens of Mbawa [*Khaya senegalensis*], having a clear straight stem 30 feet, with a diameter of 3 feet at the base ... Then there are Nyonwe [*Nuxia congesta*], and other species of the same genus, Mkundi [*Parkia filicordia*], a very handsome tree, having tasselled flowers attached to a peduncle often 18 inches in length. Mwenya is another tall straight-stemmed tree; and Mwayi [*Erythrophleum guineensis*] is a giant, having arms spreading like a monster oak, and hard-wooded. Looking from an elevated position, one can easily tell the number of streams that exist over a distance of twenty miles, through seeing the dark line of big trees along each water-course. (pp. 41–42)

Looking from such an 'elevated position' was something that Buchanan made a point of doing during his early years in Malawi. Just as he was learning the language that would enable him to engage with the human community, so he was making himself familiar with the natural environment of the area.

Besides appreciating the splendour of the environment for its own sake, there was also a commercial dimension to Buchanan's operations. The initial agricultural efforts at Blantyre aimed simply to provide for the small Mission community but Buchanan was ever mindful of Livingstone's conviction that the best way to eradicate the slave trade would be to replace it with 'legitimate commerce'. Therefore, a question that constantly occupied his mind was which products Malawi could hope to sell on the international market? Already by 1878, it was reported that (Anon 1878):

[I]n addition to wheat, roots and vegetables, Mr Buchanan has planted cotton, sugar-cane, bananas, cocoa-nut, date, palm, orange and pine-apple trees, etc. Some time ago Mr Henderson succeeded in obtaining from the Government at Madras several Wardian cases filled with tea and cinchona plants, and some plants have been kindly forwarded from the Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, by Professor Balfour. (p. 129)

Later in 1878, Buchanan wrote to Macrae that, 'The coffee and tea plants which came from Edinburgh are all alive except one, and the others are very healthy' (Anon 1879:270). These few fragile plants represented the beginning of two of Malawi's major industries. Buchanan liked to remind people that it was Blantyre Mission that 'introduced the first coffee-plant in the Shirè highlands, which may be the beginning of an industry whose bounds cannot be well defined' (Buchanan 1885:69–70). Before long, as we shall see, he was running Malawi's first coffee plantation. Conspicuous by its absence was any concern that the introduction of a plantation economy would disturb the natural environment he appreciated so much. As Buchanan surveyed the prospects in 1878, he had a rosy outlook (Anon 1878):

[I] am looking forward to a happy future, when many things failures now will grow successfully, and when those successful will be true emblems of a tropical region. Our livestock is getting on nicely. (p. 105)

Blantyre atrocities: Buchanan disgraced

By this time, the Mission also looked to be well set in terms of its spiritual and evangelical dimensions. Duff and Helen Macdonald had arrived in mid-1878, the first married couple to serve at Blantyre, and both were gifted missionaries who soon made themselves at home. Buchanan found spiritual nourishment from Macdonald's ministry, and the two of them were equally passionate about learning Chiyao. They seemed to be set for happy missionary collaboration (Macdonald, Personal communication, 1879–1880). Just at this time of promise, however, dark clouds gathered over the Mission, with serious consequences for Macdonald and Buchanan in particular. By this time a considerable community had formed around the Blantyre Mission and the question arose as to the administration of justice. The prevailing understanding was that the settlement should function as a small 'colony' – a kind of mini-state. Were crimes to occur, it would be responsible to identify the perpetrators and sanction them. There had been problems with theft and Macdonald's predecessor, James Stewart, had introduced the punishment of flogging for culprits.

Macdonald was uncomfortable with such violence being inflicted by a Christian mission but reluctantly accepted that this was both the policy of the Committee in Edinburgh and the expectation of neighbouring chiefs. Unfortunately, in early 1879, the flogging was taken to extremes with up to 200 lashes being inflicted, which proved fatal in one case (Ross 2025:17–79). There were also cases where the victim of such violence turned out to be innocent. To make matters worse, there was a murder, and the alleged murderer was arrested, sentenced to death and clumsily executed by a firing squad. When reports of these incidents reached Scotland in 1880, it became a national scandal (Chirnside 1880; Englund 2022:43–50; Ross 1996:69–79). The Church of Scotland sent a two-person Commission of Inquiry to investigate. When a Special Committee reported to the 1881 General Assembly, it found fault with the Edinburgh-based Foreign Mission Committee for an element of confusion as regards civil jurisdiction. Its harshest condemnation, however, was reserved for the missionaries on the ground. It recorded (Anon 1881):

[W]ith the deepest regret, that various acts of cruelty, retaliation, and indiscretion have been committed by several of their Mission agents at Blantyre, at intervals between September 1877 and September 1879. (p. 77)

They went on to name names (Anon 1881):

[J]ohn Buchanan being implicated in several of the floggings, and more especially in the one of date March 6, 1879, the Committee consider that he should be recalled, and they resolve accordingly. (p. 78)

Although he had not been directly involved in the infliction of violent punishments, Macdonald, as head of the Mission was also held responsible, and he too was dismissed from his post.

On receiving this devastating news at Blantyre, with a heavy heart Macdonald made the journey to Zomba to confer with Buchanan. Macdonald (1852) reported that:

[I] reached Zomba about three o'clock in the afternoon and found Mr Buchanan looking pale and dispirited on account of the hard sentence which had been passed against him. He had no idea what the grounds could be. (p. 253)

The nature of their conversation can be discerned from Macdonald's (1882) later reflection:

[A]s I spent that hot day at Zomba I felt that a great injustice had been done. I knew the Lay Agents that had been dismissed and I knew the men that had condemned them. For five years the former, while devoting all their time and talents to the service of the heathen, had been obliged to live in hovels, to spend sleepless nights amidst enemies and many dangers, to battle with discomfort and fever and hunger, while the latter lived in comfortable homes amidst friends and relatives. (p. 254)

Macdonald left Blantyre to return to Scotland in July 1881 with a strong sense of injustice. As soon as he arrived, he lodged a petition to the General Assembly to appeal against his dismissal. When this was finally heard by a Special Committee that reported to the 1882 General Assembly, it did not rescind the decision to dismiss the missionaries, but it went out of its way to recognise that any blame attaching to Macdonald was quite limited and that '... no reason exists why his high character and proved zeal should not be made available in any field of Christian usefulness to which he may be called' (Anon 1882). The Assembly also had second thoughts about the degree of blame attributable to John Buchanan (1885):

[H]aving in view that Mr Buchanan was not one of the responsible officers of the Mission, which tends greatly to reduce his connection with the occurrences referred to in the proceedings, are of the opinion that he should be considered relieved from all share in the instances of cruelty and retaliation alluded to in the original deliverance. (p. 149)

Buchanan in Zomba

Meanwhile, Buchanan did not join Macdonald on his sorrowful return to Scotland. He chose to remain in Malawi. Since 1879, he had been busy setting up the first outstation of the Blantyre Mission at Zomba. Now he just carried on the work he had started, sufficiently settled to operate on an independent basis. Within a year of his arrival it had been reported that (Anon 1880):

[T]he Mission-station is about forty miles from Blantyre, is on the southern side of the mountain, is about 3500 in height, and is in a land of many streams, of great fertility, and very populous. Mr Buchanan is in charge, and in a short time has done much and well. Already the school-dwelling and other houses have been built. About twenty acres of land are under cultivation with the usual crops, including sugar cane. (p. 77)

Macdonald noted that 13000 yards of calico had been paid to the 1734 workers who had constructed the buildings and

established the agricultural operations (Macdonald, Personal communication, 1879–1880). Joseph Bismarck, one of the outstanding early African leaders at Blantyre Mission, was assigned to start the first school in Zomba (Bismarck 1932:1). Before long, 'there was a regular attendance of 30–40' (Anon 1880:77). Buchanan conducted a church service every Sunday. When Macdonald visited and took the service on 28 November 1880, he found a congregation of about 300 gathered to hear him (Ross 1996:61). On the same visit, he noted that, 'A high opinion is entertained by Mr Buchanan with respect to the agricultural capabilities of the country' (Macdonald, Personal communication, 1879–80).

After receiving word of his dismissal in 1881, Buchanan simply carried on as before. Technically he was now an independent planter, but he continued to work in very close association with Blantyre Mission. He got on well with David Clement Scott, Macdonald's successor, who made use of Buchanan's building skills to develop the infrastructure of Blantyre Mission (and, later, to assist in the construction of the church that became known as St Michael and All Angels) (Anon 1883:82). By 1884 Buchanan's rehabilitation was complete as his work at Zomba was reintegrated into the Blantyre Mission under a special arrangement by which it was designated the 'Muthill Mission'. It was named after Buchanan's home parish in Perthshire, where James Rankin, the minister, organised support for the mission in Zomba so that it did not require any expenditure from the Foreign Mission Committee. Buchanan reported regularly to Blantyre Mission, which carried out visits of inspection and arranged for the conduct of baptism and Holy Communion (Anon 1884:129). In 1886 the Committee reported that (Anon 1886):

[T]he teaching and meetings at Zomba proceed on the original lines contemplated for Blantyre – viz., a combination of evangelical and industrial, which is specially appropriate here, where all the natives living around are more or less connected with the coffee plantation of the Messrs Buchanan, which now embraces twenty acres under careful cultivation. (p. 129)

When Alexander Hetherwick arrived at Blantyre in 1883 and Clement Scott assigned him to mission work among the Yao, he sent him to Buchanan in Zomba to learn Chiyao (Hetherwick 1889). Buchanan was already a fluent Chiyao speaker, and Hetherwick was a quick learner. After he established himself at the nearby Domasi Mission, the two men collaborated on translating the New Testament into Chiyao. When the British and Foreign Bible Society produced an edition of the Gospels and Acts in Chiyao, most of the work had been done by Hetherwick, but it was Buchanan who had translated the Gospel of Luke (Anon 1889:127). The two men also collaborated in the production of a Chiyao hymnbook (Buchanan 1885:221).

By the mid-1880s Buchanan had been joined by his two brothers, Robert and David, who shared his vision. He also worked in close collaboration with Paton Somanje, who became a Christian through the services held on the estate and was baptised at Blantyre in 1887 (Matecheta 2020:58). He was headteacher of the school and also took the church

services whenever Buchanan was not available (Report of the Foreign Mission Committee 1889:129). A visitor in 1889 was impressed that, 'The teacher, Somanje, takes great interest in his work' (Anon 1890:137). When a Kirk Session was formed at Zomba, Somanje was one of the first to be ordained as an elder, alongside Henry Kapito and William Kalasana, on 19 August 1900 (Zomba Kirk Session Minutes 1900–16). He played a leading role at the Blantyre Mission Native Conference of 1901, held as part of the celebration of the Mission's silver jubilee. Somanje, along with Wilson Mwapeta of Blantyre, led the session on 'The Education of Christian Children' (Anon 2020:124). He was also one of those chosen to speak at the conclusion of the conference (Anon 2020):

[S]omanje, representing Domasi and Zomba, spoke of the good resulting from such a conference as they had had. He had seen the help that they as elders could offer to their fellow-villagers, and he knew that many had turned to Christ because their elders had spoken to them and guided them. (p. 126)

Chilembwe Sing'ando was another of Buchanan's senior staff who was among the first baptised Christians of Blantyre Mission (Matecheta 2020:59). Alexander Kakweni and John Kambona were teachers in the school, working under Somanje (Buchanan 1885:220). The 'Muthill Mission' bore fruit as it produced the first generation of church leaders in Zomba.

It was also bearing fruit more literally as the agricultural enterprise expanded and developed. By 1883, Buchanan could inform Robert Laws at Livingstonia that (Buchanan, Personal communication, 1883):

[I] have got a good quantity of wheat for sale and will be very happy to supply you ... Coffee doing very well and nine months hence there will be lots for sale. I have got one solitary tea plant with two small leaves, a delicate beginning but we are thankful for small mercies.

The 1880s saw a rapid expansion of the estate, which extended to 2000 acres by 1886 (Report of the Foreign Mission Committee, Appendix II Mission at Zomba 1886). In 1890 a visitor observed that:

[T]he Messrs Buchanan have got a flourishing settlement, and have seventy acres under coffee cultivation ... They have also eight to ten acres of sugar-cane ready for crushing, besides cinchons, cocoa, tea, and rubber. (p. 129)

The visitor was no less impressed with the surrounding natural environment (Anon 1890):

[M]ount Zomba, 7000 feet high, is at the door, with, on the slope of the mountain, any quantity of tree ferns, royal ferns, wild date-palms, ground orchids, and everlastings, growing luxuriantly without any care or attention whatever. The scenery is charming, the mountains being clothed with wood, rippling streams, and splendid waterfalls. (pp. 136–137)

The General Assembly of 1887 heard that (Anon 1887):

[T]he Messrs Buchanan Brothers, planters and traders at Zomba, continue to be valued allies of the Mission. By growing coffee etc, and developing legitimate commerce, they are doing much to supplant the slave-trade. (p. 119)

The following year, the report to the General Assembly included a striking quotation from the mission publicist Horace Waller (Anon 1888):

[N]ot only are the natives instructed in the truths of Christianity at Zomba, but large numbers of them are engaged to work for wages on the plantations. In this way freedom and slavery are pitted against each other. It will be an inestimable boon to the whole land if this already flourishing settlement prospers and enlarges its operations; it is the very thing which Livingstone yearned after incessantly, for he knew that it must act as a regenerative influence. To the looker-on it is *the* pioneer plantation of Central Africa, and as such its fortunes will be watched with the greatest interest. (pp. 127–128)

Such an assessment must have been gratifying for Buchanan. His enterprise was frequently lauded as the fulfilment of Livingstone's hopes. The General Assembly of 1890 noted that his 'successful industrial enterprise is precisely such a work as Livingstone greatly desired to see in the country' (Anon 1890:136).

Buchanan as architect of a nation

Livingstone's tireless struggle against the slave trade always had a political edge to it. It was not just about winning the argument at a moral level. It was also about mobilising the forces capable of operating on the ground to eradicate the great evil. Now that Britain had belatedly positioned itself as an opponent of the slave trade, it followed that the extension of British influence was of strategic value in the struggle. Livingstone had also proposed that European farmers with suitable skills should be encouraged to form a small colony, although it should be remembered that, as Timothy Holmes explained, such a colony 'would have more in common with the monasteries of medieval Europe than it would with modern South Africa' (Holmes 1993:146–147). This provided the prospectus for Blantyre Mission, which the responsible Committee explained in 1877, 'is, according to Dr Livingstone's plan, of the nature of a small Christian colony ...' (Anon 1877a:415). Buchanan's life and work at Zomba put Livingstone's idea into practical effect. It also took on a decidedly political dimension as the 'Scramble for Africa' unfolded in the mid-1880s.

When Buchanan published his book on the Shire Highlands in 1885, his primary purpose was to attract more Europeans to consider moving there. He noted the large numbers of European emigrants who were making a new life in Canada and Australia. Using the customary tropes of his time, he put the question: 'Why should not Africa have a share now? Surely she has lain long enough under the curse of darkness and superstition' (Buchanan 1885:71). He couched his appeal in commercial terms: 'I see no reason why an estate of 200 acres under coffee in the Shire highlands should not yield a clear profit of £2,000 yearly' (Buchanan 1885:54). At the same time, it should be noted that the welfare of the indigenous people was always on his mind. Buchanan (1885) struck a cautionary note:

[L]et us hope that such a fine country as the Zambesi and Shire valleys, which have suffered so severely through having many of their sons and daughters exported as slaves to enrich other nations and countries, may not see the annihilation of the remainder through the introduction of drink, that a few European companies may declare a handsome dividend, and that private traders may retire to Europe to spend their competency. (p. 79)

When it came to the alcohol industry, he was well aware that the spread of European influence could be more of a threat than a promise.

More generally, however, he lacked awareness of the harm that could be caused by the imposition of colonial rule. Such was his preoccupation with countering the slave trade that bringing the area under British rule looked to him like a solution rather than any kind of problem. He therefore emerged as one of the architects of the British Protectorate that proved to be the basis of the modern nation of Malawi. The earliest map that defines the territory of today's Malawi was prepared for Buchanan in 1887 when he was seeking to demonstrate that the area was already subject to British influence and therefore this should be formalised as a Protectorate. By now Buchanan's estate in Zomba had become central to this endeavour. He had constructed a Consulate building that was initially occupied by Consul Hawes (Anon 1886:129). When Hawes went on leave in 1888, he nominated Buchanan as Acting Consul (Ross 1996:126). It was in this capacity that he declared the British Protectorate in 1889 at a ceremony held on the banks of the Mudi River in Blantyre (Ross 1996:143).

Besides his directly political role, Buchanan shaped the economy of the Shire Highlands by his encouragement of European-owned estates. During the 1880s, his own estates grew to encompass some 170 000 acres (McCracken 2012:49–50). He also acted as an agent to acquire large areas of land for European investors, such as Horace Waller, George and Henry Pettitt, and Eugene Sharrer (McCracken 2012:49–50). John McCracken notes that the three leading planters of the early colonial period in Malawi were John Buchanan, Eugene Sharrer and Alexander Low Bruce, 'wealthy son-in-law of David Livingstone and a pillar of the Edinburgh establishment' (McCracken 2012:78). Bruce owned a vast estate of 176 000 acres at Magomero (later the centre of the Chilembwe Rising), while Sharrer's landholdings totalled 363 823 acres. Buchanan was instrumental in the transfer of huge tracts of land in the Shire Highlands to European ownership.

From his perspective, it might well have looked as if there was an abundance of land and relatively few people. As he saw it, the introduction of a plantation economy was the key to defeating the slave trade and securing the prosperity of the country. It is not only with hindsight, however, that we can detect a problem with the best land in a country being transferred to the ownership of speculators from elsewhere (Chavinda 2025). At the time, Buchanan's own friends, Scott and Hetherwick, were vigorously highlighting the problem (Anon 1892):

[W]e have always held that the land belongs to the people, and have ever questioned the legal and moral right of the chief to sell any part of his territory over the heads of those dwelling on it without safe-guarding to them the right to have room to plant and build. A very large part of the Shire Highlands is claimed by European purchasers ... Where is the native community soon to find room to hoe and plant its food crop? ... (n.p.)

It is a question yet to be answered. In fact, it has become more acute as the population has increased and the soil has depleted. It is not, however, a question that seems to have troubled Buchanan, despite the contention of Scott and Hetherwick that, 'if the European takes the land they practically enslave the native population' (Anon 1894). Nor is there any indication that Buchanan was concerned about the disruption that large-scale plantation agriculture would bring to the environment that he appreciated so deeply. Nonetheless, Dana Robert's general observation can be applied to Buchanan: 'Despite their mistakes and captivity to modern scientific farming and management techniques, agricultural missionaries filled one of the first formal conservationist roles in the non-Western world' (Robert 2011:125).

Whatever his credentials as a conservationist, however, it is necessary to recognise that his role in Malawi's history has a decidedly equivocal character. The development of agriculture and commerce as a strategy to defeat the slave trade met with considerable success. Yet a lingering question is whether the introduction of large European-owned estates in the Shire Highlands did not lead to another form of slavery for the ordinary people of the area (Krishnamurthy 1972; McCracken 2012:74–99). By 1915, it was clear to John Chilembwe and his followers that the colonial economy placed them in an intolerable situation (Shepperson & Price 1958). One of the key figures in creating the situation that they found so unacceptable was John Buchanan. He also played a leading role in the imposition of colonial rule, including active participation in the violence unleashed on chiefs perceived to be resistant towards the British. These were turbulent times, and Buchanan had been on the receiving end of violence as Acting Consul in 1888 when Chief Makanjila had him stripped, beaten and imprisoned (Buchanan, Personal communication, 1888). Now he became a perpetrator of violence as Harry Johnston used military force to establish British authority. When Hetherwick protested against the infliction of violence on African communities, he named Buchanan as one of the culprits (Hetherwick, Personal communication, 1891). The following year, another Blantyre missionary, Clement Scott's brother Affleck, complained that, 'Buchanan cuts down native crops to force the natives to hoe his coffee' (Scott, Personal communication, 1892). Just as violent conduct had cast a shadow over his early years in Malawi, it appears that it did so again during his final years. It can also be argued that Buchanan's activities helped to constitute a European colonialist approach to agriculture and conservation that proved to be alienating for African communities (Mulwafu 2004). However much we might appreciate his environmentalism, there is also a darker side to Buchanan's story.

A thousand sermons and a thousand plants

When Buchanan reviewed his evangelistic work in 1885, he reflected that, 'I have addressed over a thousand meetings of all sizes, and have had hearers of all ages, and all politely listened to what I had to say' (Buchanan 1885:216). This suggests that he was preaching not only every Sunday but at least once during the week as well. In a probably unintended equivalence, he also recorded that, 'During my stay in the Shire Highlands I have collected nearly one thousand distinct species of plants, including all kinds' (Buchanan 1885:88). A thousand sermons and a thousand plants! These were the tallies by which he took account of his first decade in Malawi. There have since been many preachers in Malawi and not a few naturalists, but not many could match Buchanan's claims in both respects. Aware as we are today of the importance of making the connection between faith and ecology, it is intriguing to enquire as to how, or whether, Buchanan integrated these two aspects of his life in Malawi.

In pursuing this question, it would be unrealistic to expect flights of theological creativity of the kind for which his contemporary and friend David Clement Scott became famous (Englund 2022). Buchanan had no education in academic theology. Instead, his training had been as a gardener. He was a practical man and a convinced evangelical Christian. His answer to our question was given primarily by the day-to-day activity of his Mulunguzi estate from 1879 to 1896. The stewarding of the environment, especially the cultivation of coffee, was combined with weekly church services, the daily operation of a school, and regular evangelistic excursions to neighbouring villages. In his own mind, this combination was the fulfilment of Livingstone's vision, an initiative geared to bring Christianity to the people of Malawi while at the same time freeing them from the misery inflicted by the slave trade and creating the conditions for future prosperity. Stewarding the natural environment and discovering its productive potential were built into the project.

When we enquire about the message he was preaching, it appears that it was orthodox, biblical Christianity. His own account is rather sparse, but he explains that his preaching centred around 'the chief facts connected with the creation of the world, man's fall, the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ ...' (Buchanan 1885:216). As an Evangelical Christian, he was exercised by the question of whether or not those who heard the message were being converted to Christ as a result. In common with most of the early Scottish missionaries, he was prepared to be patient (Buchanan 1886):

[L]et us not judge the work done by the number of converts, but wait ten or twenty years, and by that time there is every hope that we shall see a native church governed and supported by themselves. (p. 218)

Rather than encourage an immediate but perhaps superficial response, he preferred to take the time needed to allow for deeper transformation (Buchanan 1885):

[A] mere professing of religion at native meetings and in public has never been encouraged; and although we should all rejoice at seeing men and women humbly confessing Jesus Christ in public, what we much more desire to see are actions in private or in public which show that their hearts have been touched by God's Spirit. (p. 214)

In this regard, the baptism of Paton Somanje at Blantyre in 1887 must have been a notable day for Buchanan. The two men worked in close partnership, and it was under Somanje's leadership that the spiritual movement initiated by Buchanan in 1879 continued after the latter's death in 1896.

If Buchanan had introspective thoughts about his own spiritual experience, he was not prone to put them on paper. There is, however, a curiously revealing passage in his book on the Shire Highlands. Writing of the journey on the Kwakwa River from Quelimane to the Zambezi, Buchana (1885) observed that:

[T]he whole scene is so inexpressibly solemn, one's heart begins to fail in contemplation of it – a feeling of loneliness creeps over one as if he were alone in the great universe – and the only relief is got by remembering that the Creator and Preserver of all is as near to the lonely traveller on the bank of the muddy Kwakwa, Zambezi, or Shire, as in the heart of Edinburgh or Aberdeen. (p. 14)

He was clearly sensitive to his surroundings, especially the natural world around him, but it is revealing that the measure of the nearness of God is 'the heart of Edinburgh or Aberdeen'. Unlike some of his contemporaries like Macdonald or Clement Scott, whose faith expanded through their exposure to African culture and language, it appears that Buchanan was more conservative, inclined to remain anchored in the faith that he had found through the Evangelical revival during his teenage years in Scotland.

Nevertheless, there was a distinct ecological dimension to his living out of this faith. He has left his mark on the landscape of Zomba through the trees that he planted and the plants that he cultivated. The naturalist John Wilson notes that Wilson, Personal communication, 2024):

[T]he very large trees growing around his house in Zomba are named after him – *Newtonia buchananii*. He also has at least 10 other plant species named after him, including *Aloe buchananii*, an Aloe that grows on Zomba Plateau. (n.p.)

He also had the foresight, even while he was surrounded on all sides by mature trees, to issue a warning (Buchanan 1885):

[D]enude a country of its trees, and you change the climate from a moderately wet one to a very dry one. Streams that should keep running all the year round become dried up by evaporation, and instead of a rich vegetation in the form of trees differing in size and height of stem, foliage beautifully varied in tint and form, you have a partial desert burnt and dry. (pp. 117–118)

Tragically, this turns out to be a description of exactly what has happened to Malawi's landscape, greatly to the detriment of both land and people. Had Buchanan's warning been heeded, conditions in Malawi today might be very different.

Although he did not articulate it with any great degree of sophistication, it does appear that Buchanan's faith informed his concern for the natural environment. He put the rhetorical question: '... what higher reward can one have than the assurance in his own conscience of having conferred on posterity an endowment of fruit-bearing and long-lived trees?' (Buchanan 1885:20). This is an interesting question, and implicit answer, since in the Evangelical lexicon the 'highest reward' would normally be understood in spiritual terms – eternal life etc. For Buchanan, however, his highest reward was found in the indigenous trees and fruit trees that he was planting to provide for the future. The vocabulary of 'reward', 'assurance', and 'conscience' is Evangelical faith language, but Buchanan applies it to the natural environment and particularly to the cultivation of trees. His question turns out to be a vital one for Malawi and its people more than a 100 years after his death. Living in a country denuded of trees, what higher reward could we have than 'an endowment of fruit-bearing and long-lived trees?' The first preacher of the gospel in Zomba was also passionate about caring for the natural environment. Might he be a prophet worth remembering? Although not himself an academic theologian, might he be a pioneer of ecotheology?

Conclusion

Buchanan's life ended abruptly on 09 March 1896 when he succumbed to fever at Chinde in Mozambique while bound for Scotland on home leave (Anon 1896). He was 41 years of age. Three years earlier, in 1893 he had married Cecelia Mackenzie Ferrie at Campsie in Scotland. Their only child was born in June 1896, 3 months after his father's death. Also named John Buchanan, as a young man he captained Scotland's rugby team, was decorated for gallantry in World War 1 (WW1) and went on to have a distinguished international medical career, which culminated in a knighthood in recognition of his work as Chief Medical Officer in the Colonial Office. Meanwhile, his father's mission work at Mulunguzi was reintegrated into the Blantyre Mission after his death (Ross 1996:199). Out of it grew an extensive church movement in Zomba, which today comprises an entire Presbytery of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Blantyre Synod. Many of the trees that he planted around the Mulunguzi River also continue to flourish as the area where he lived has become a botanic garden and national herbarium. Buchanan's legacy in Malawi is a mixed one, with both inspiring and troubling aspects. He lived his entire adult life in Malawi, which he was always ready to commend as 'undoubtedly an excellent country with a bright future before it' (Buchanan 1885:2).

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