

Buchanan

INTRODUCTION

The Buchanan tartan has been produced in a plethora of versions over the years, many of which were the result of incorrect copying of earlier specimens. As discussed later, these errors were often the result of a failure to understand and/or correctly record the original asymmetric setting. It is one of the few old asymmetric patterns to have been adopted as a clan tartan before the 20th century and it remains one of relatively a small group even today.

ORIGINS OF THE SETT

The oldest record of the Buchanan tartan is a Highland Revival era cloak c1800-10 (Fig 1). Examination of the cloth confirms that it is hard tartan of the type produced by Wm. Wilson & Son, Bannockburn during the late 18th and early 19th centuries and importantly, that the pattern was asymmetric at that time (Fig 2).



Fig 1. Buchanan Cloak c1800-10.
Photo credit: [SCRAN](#)



Fig 2. Asymmetric Buchanan tartan c1800-10.
Photo credit: [SCRAN](#)

In this early version of the cloth the red, green and yellow blocks are almost identical in size and the blue is Wilsons' *Light or Section Blue* as opposed to a mid-dark shade more commonly seen today. Such small asymmetric check patterns are typical of some of Wilsons' *fancy patterns*. They were often simply identified by a number although some were later named, often after a place, famous person or event. We don't know what this pattern was called c1800, nor when the name became associated with it but it was certainly know as Buchanan by 1831 as it is amongst the tartans given by Logan¹. It may have been designed for or named after a particular Buchanan individual or family but we will probably never know.

THE SETTING

Asymmetric designs often cause confusion and the Buchanan tartan is no exception. In this case the confusion goes back to the first known recording, that by Logan. His scales were based on samples provided by Wilsons and his method of recording was to measure each colour in $\frac{1}{8}$ th inch. However, the recording method was not applied uniformly even with symmetrical patterns. In the case of the Buchanan his count was written in exactly the same

$\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch.	Colours.	$\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch.	Colours.	$\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch.	Colours.	$\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch.	Colours.
ABERCROMBIE.		8	blue	8	green	1	black
$3\frac{1}{2}$	green	$\frac{1}{2}$	red	8	black	1	blue
$\frac{1}{2}$	white	8	black	8	blue	7	black
$3\frac{1}{2}$	green	8	green	1	black	$\frac{1}{2}$	yellow
$3\frac{1}{2}$	black	$1\frac{1}{2}$	red	1	blue	11	green
1	blue	$\frac{1}{2}$	green	1	black	$\frac{1}{2}$	yellow
1	black	$\frac{1}{2}$	red	8	blue	7	black
1	blue	4	green	8	black	6	blue
1	black	$\frac{1}{2}$	red	8	green	1	black
$3\frac{1}{2}$	blue	$\frac{1}{2}$	green	1	black	1	blue
BUCHANAN.		$1\frac{1}{2}$	red	2	yellow	CHISHOLM.	
$\frac{1}{2}$	azure	8	green	1	black	$2\frac{1}{2}$	red
8	green	$\frac{1}{2}$	red	8	black	8	green
$\frac{1}{2}$	black	8	blue	1	blue	$2\frac{1}{2}$	red
1	azure	$1\frac{1}{2}$	red	1	black	2	blue
$\frac{1}{2}$	black	4	blue	1	blue	1	white
2	yellow	1	yellow	1	black	2	blue
$\frac{1}{2}$	black	CAMPBELL.		4	blue	11	red
2	yellow	This is worn by the Duke of Argyll and the Campbells of Lochaw. The Earl of Braidalban & his clan, wear the following pattern.		1	black	2	blue
$\frac{1}{2}$	black	4	blue	2	blue	1	white
1	azure	1	black	1	black	2	blue
$\frac{1}{2}$	black	1	blue	1	blue	$2\frac{1}{2}$	red
8	red	1	black	1	black	8	green
1	white	1	blue	8	black	$2\frac{1}{2}$	red
CAMERON.		8	green	8	green	1	blue
$\frac{1}{2}$	yellow	1	black	2	blue	COLQUHOUN.	
4	blue	1	black	1	black	$\frac{1}{2}$	blue
$1\frac{1}{2}$	red	2	white	1	blue	1	black
		1	black	1	blue		

way as all the other counts, all of which are symmetrical (Fig 3). The count starts in the middle of the light blue stripe centred on the green and finishes with the whole of the white stripe centred on the red. We are fortunate that Wilsons' comments on Logan's scales survive. Of the Buchanan they said '*The scale given of this Tartan is very defective – a correct one is given – note this pattern is*'. The sentence is incomplete but it must surely have been a reference to the fact that the sett was asymmetric, a point supported by specimens of the time.

Logan's confusion with the Buchanan was the result of his recording method.¹ Two surviving specimens of the time confirm that one selvedge was the middle of the blue stripe centred on the green (Fig 4).

Fig 3. Logan's scale for the Buchanan and others.

Support for the pattern being asymmetric, and therefore that Logan's count was *very defective*, can be inferred from Mclan's plate showing the Buchanan, for which work Logan provided the text and the tartansⁱⁱ. The plate's detail is not exact but is sufficient to show that the pattern was asymmetric (Fig 5).

The authors wrote of it that: "*The tartan of the Buchanans, as shown here, contains that peculiarity of colour which has, about the Pass of Balmaha and Loch Lomond side, generally procured it the name of the breacan bhui*". The correct spelling, Breacan Bhuidhe means the *yellow tartan*. We have no idea how widespread the use of this tartan was amongst Buchanans around south Loch Lomond some 50 years after its apparent design by Wilsons and the Mclan-Logan claim may have been nothing more than artistic licence.



Fig 4. A Wilsons' sample c1830-40 with selvedge (right) on the blue. © The Author.

¹ "Commencing at the edge of the cloth, the depth of the colours is stated throughout a square, on which the scale must be reversed or gone through again to the commencement."



Fig 6. Detail of the tartan from Mclan's original Buchanan plate.

Photo credit: David Pope.

Mclan also used the Buchanan tartan for his MacMillan plate saying that '*The tartan is that of Buchanan, a pattern of a rather singular but effective design*'. The rationale seems to have been the lack of a MacMillan tartan at the time and the similarity of the Chief's Armorial Bearings with those of the Buchanan's.

Whether taken as a symmetric or asymmetric pattern, one element of Logan's count differs from most samples of the time, the yellow field is 75% smaller compared with that in early specimens. This reduced yellow is apparent in the colour strips below where the original setting is followed by that given in Logan's scales but 'corrected' by the author to show the proper asymmetric pattern.



A possible explanation for the proportional difference in Logan's count is discussed below.

AN EARLY VARIATION

At some time between the publication of the Logan and Mclan books Wilsons produced a variation of the original setting but with a reduced amount of yellow, as described by Logan, and dark blue for the usual green. In a letter date Nov 1838 a merchant, Thomas Paterson, wrote to the firm enclosing a piece of '*silk pattern of the Buchanan*' and ordering some Super Fine cloth (a fine worsted wool) to match '*as near as to the silk pattern possible*'. (Fig 7).

This blue version had previously been thought by tartan researchers to be a 20th century trade error or fancy variation but the Wilsons' letter proves it to be much older. How much earlier than 1838 Wilsons were weaving this setting is unclear and there are no known earlier wool specimens with blue, nor any with reduced yellow. However, Logan may have had access to a sample with less yellow which would account for his scale. Such a sample would presumably have included green as he names that colour and not blue. Alternately, he may have just made another error in his count for the sett which obviously caused him a problem. This reduced yellow version may have been originally intended as a setting for silk although that would not account for the dark blue replacing the green.

THE SYMMETRIC SETTING

Mention has already been made of Logan's scale where the pattern is apparently given as a balanced count. This error appears to have been the source of Smibert's plateⁱⁱⁱ which is the earliest known occurrence of a symmetrical setting of the Buchanan (Fig 8).

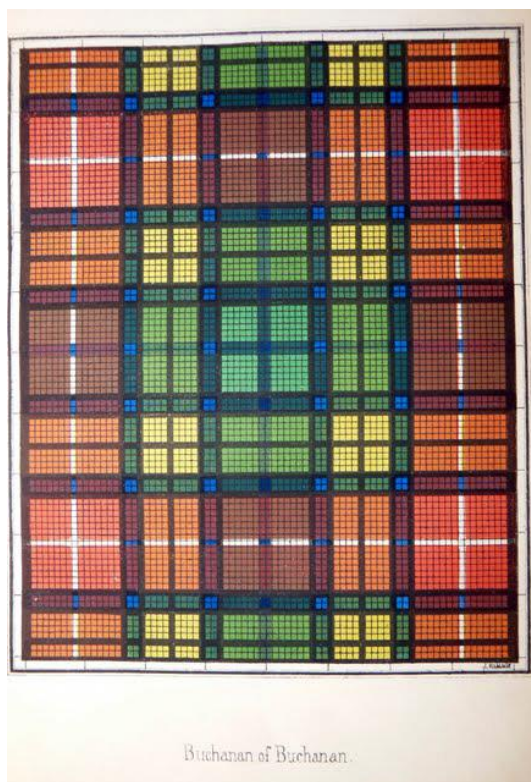


Fig 8. Smibert's symmetrical setting of Buchanan.

specimens discovered subsequently. His contention that the symmetrical sett should replace the standard asymmetric tartan should therefore be viewed as an historical anachronism.



Fig 7. Letter dated 10 Nov 1838 ordering Buchanan with blue and less yellow. Photo credit: [SCRAN](#)

Smibert's error was reinforced by Stewart in his *Setts*^{iv} where he assumed Logan's setting was correct. He said of that count that it was '*perfectly regular, and of markedly superior quality*' (to the settings given by Mclan and the Smiths^v). Speaking about Smibert's plate Stewart says of the version that '*while coarser in its proportions, is substantially the same as the specimens from which Logan made his count*'. He also stated that Smibert's plates were based on samples obtained from Wilsons whereas in his introduction Smibert states that '*With respect to the Sets of the Clan-Tartans here given, the work of Mr Logan has been held, after due consideration, to be preferable as a general guide*'. This confirms that he used Logan's scales rather than Wilsons' samples of which he makes no mention.

The fact that Stewart was convinced of the symmetrical setting's authenticity and thought that the non-reversing version a later error by the Smiths is demonstrably wrong. He mistakenly took Logan's count and Smibert's plate as proofs of its early use, a view he would not have formed had he had access to the various Wilsons'

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

In a bound collection of samples dated 1880 and entitled the *Clans Originaux*² the Buchanan sample is evidence of a further departure from the original setting (Fig 9).



Whilst the original balance of red, green and yellow is retained in the sample, the Light Blue/Blue is entirely absent and replaced by black. The identity of the weaver of the samples is unknown, it may have been a Scottish firm but by that date could equally have been one in England. It is impossible to know whether the simplification of the design from six to five colours was the result of a transcription error or by design³ but this simpler setting was taken up by some subsequent manufacturers and was still being woven in the 1970s, possibly later.

Variations over the years lead to a plethora of incorrect versions of the Buchanan tartan appearing and this continues to be the case.

Fig 9. Clans Originaux Buchanan sample c1880.

CONCLUSION

Examination of early surviving specimens and a number of early publications confirm that the original setting of the Buchanan tartan was asymmetric or non-reversing and that the symmetrical version owes its origins to Logan's mis-recording of a Wilsons' sample. Later, Logan's mistake was erroneously taken by Smibert and Stewart as evidence of the proper setting. Today both versions are produced but unfortunately the commercial dyes used are a poor reflection of the original natural dyes of Wilsons' time and result in a tartan far less pleasing on the eye.

© Peter Eslea MacDonald Nov 2014

ⁱ LOGAN J. 1831 *The Scottish Gael*. Smith, Eldar & Co., London

ⁱⁱ LOGAN J and MCIAN R.R. 1845 *The Clans of the Scottish Highlands*. Ackermann & Co., London

ⁱⁱⁱ SMIBERT T. 1850 *The Clans of the Highlands of Scotland*. James Hogg, London

^{iv} STEWART D.C. 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh. Revised Edition Shephard Walwyn., London 1977

^v SMITH W & SMITH A. 1850 *Authenticated Tartans of the Clans and Families of Scotland*. W & A Smith.,Mauchline

² Clans Originaux was produced by the Parisian firm, J. Claude Fres. & Cie., as a sample book of patterns for sale.

³ Some manufacturers' looms are only capable of weaving with a maximum of five colours automatically and this may have been a consideration in reducing the number in the tartan.