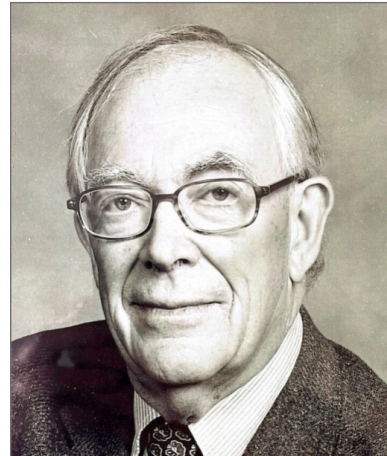


Professor Ronald Hull Buchanan (1931–2025) – An appreciation

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Abstract: Ronnie Buchanan was Professor of Geography at Queen's University of Belfast (QUB) and formerly Director of its Institute of Irish Studies between 1982 and 1993. He spent most of his academic career at QUB where he gained a PhD in 1958. Following a year teaching in the USA, he joined the Department of Geography QUB as a lecturer in 1959, becoming full professor in 1982. Three distinct sets of contributions can be identified in terms of his legacy. First, in pedagogical terms, he encouraged students to analyse their subject matter and adopt a more holistic approach to the study of geography. He was committed to interdisciplinary research and teaching. Second, he contributed to the work and education of future planners as reflected in his publications and lectures which went beyond his own specialism of Irish historical geography. He had the ability to go outside the 'ivory tower' of academia to the real world of policy and practice. Third, he actively engaged with students to gain a better understanding of their backgrounds and motivations. He was forever conscious of the contribution the academic can make through deepening knowledge of our past and generating greater awareness of our environment. Future generations of geographers and planners will be rewarded by recognising the contribution he made to our understanding of the changes impacting on our urban and rural spaces.

Key Words: *Irish historical geography, environmental conservation, heritage, landscape, interdisciplinary research.*

Many geographers and planners across Ireland, currently active or retired, will be saddened by the news of the death of Professor Ronnie Buchanan on 18 March 2025. He spent most of his academic career at Queen's University of Belfast. Awarded a PhD in

1958, he had studied under the late Professor Estyn Evans. Following a year's teaching in the USA, he joined the Department of Geography QUB in 1959, becoming a full professor in 1982. Under Estyn Evans' leadership, the QUB Department of Geography had become 'one of the most respected geography departments in the world' (Cashman, 1996). Buchanan succeeded E.R Green as the third Director of the Institute of Irish Studies, retiring in 1994. For many planners the route into the planning profession was more often than not through the study of geography at Queen's University followed by further studies to obtain a recognised planning qualification. For those who pursued such a path, they most likely would have encountered the work of Ronnie Buchanan. He made an enormous contribution to the study of geography at QUB as reflected both in his research and publications, much of which had considerable relevance for town and country planning in Ireland, both north and south.

It is beyond the space of this short appreciation to present a full analysis of the many contributions he made to life and society across this island and beyond. However in relation to human geography and the discipline and practice of town and regional planning, as one of his former students, I would venture to identify three distinct sets of contributions which define his legacy. **First**, in pedagogical terms, he encouraged students to analyse their subject matter and adopt a more holistic approach to academic study. He did not limit himself to his original area of specialism, namely Irish historical geography but was equally at ease delivering a course on social geography, thereby equipping students with a broad knowledge base relevant to future planning studies. He was committed to an interdisciplinary approach to his research and teaching activities. During his tenure as Director of the Institute of Irish Studies, he established a new degree in Irish Studies where students were given a broad introduction to Ireland's environment, history, language and literature including its social, political and economic challenges. In his obituary of Estyn Evans, Buchanan refers to Evans' breadth of vision, reflecting in part, on how Evans 'refused to recognize the narrow subject boundaries of conventional academic disciplines' (Buchanan, 1990a, 1-2). This same approach was fully embraced by Buchanan's own approach to the worlds of both academia and the policymaker.

Second, in relation to the work of the planner, he often had a better grasp of planning issues than those who would put themselves forward as 'planning experts'. One only has to look at the subject matter of his written works. The publication, *Province, City and People Belfast and its Region* (1987) which he co-edited with Dr Brian Walker (who succeeded him as Director of the Institute of Irish Studies) marked the beginning of a new era of academic work in Northern Ireland giving a broad perspective on its economy, society and environment in an easily readable fashion.

For anyone working on rural development or landscape conservation matters, Buchanan's chapter entitled '*Landscape: The recreational use of the countryside*' (Buchanan, 1982) contained in *Northern Ireland Environment and Natural Resources* (edited by J.G. Cruickshank and D.N. Wilcox (1982) still makes for compulsory reading forty years on and the reader will not be disappointed.

Similarly, if one picks up a copy of *Irish Geographical Studies* (written to honour the late E. Estyn Evans after his forty years at QUB) edited by Nicholas Stephens and Robin Glasscock published by the Department of Geography, QUB in 1970, there are at least two chapters of relevance to the work of the planner. One entitled '*Rural settlement in Ireland*' was written by Buchanan, the other entitled '*Towns and planning in Ireland*' was compiled by one of his contemporaries at the time, Jean Forbes (Forbes, 1970), who was then lecturer in planning in the University of Glasgow (GU) and who was one of the first female town planners in Northern Ireland. She went on to have a distinguished career at GU and subsequently the University of Strathclyde. In his chapter on rural settlement, Buchanan vividly describes the then state of Irish country towns and the necessity for renewal. In an earlier article published in 1960, Buchanan records how rural depopulation had left its mark on many parts of the Irish countryside, noting the effects of declining opportunities in the traditional occupations (Buchanan, 1960).

In 1997, the Royal Irish Academy published as part of its digital Irish Historic Towns Atlas series, its coverage on *Downpatrick* written by Buchanan and Anthony Wilson (1997). For any planner, conservationist or local government official working on heritage and conservation matters or coping with how to deal with modern urban expansion, this would still be highly relevant. There was probably no one better qualified to write such an edition given that his doctoral thesis awarded in 1958 focused on the *Barony of Lecale – A Study in regional Personality*, which covered the peninsula of that name in eastern Down (Buchanan, 1958). Flaherty in his extensive review of the rundale system in Irish historical geography acknowledges Buchanan's typology of Ireland field systems. (Flaherty, 2015). He also recognises the work of the 'Queen's school' of historical geography 'exemplified by the works of Estyn Evans, Ronald H. Buchanan and Desmond McCourt', noting how its most prolific period of research extended from the 1940s to the 1970s. Whilst there has been criticism of that approach and the assertions made by the Evans' school, nonetheless, their findings have contributed to our understanding of the historical geography of Ireland and its complexities.

In a further published tribute to the late Professor Estyn Evans published in 2000 by the Ulster Folklife Society entitled *Mourne Country Revisited: A tribute to Estyn Evans*, Buchanan (2000) makes reference to his mentor's 'easy and lucid style which he describes as 'making his prose a delight to read, for layman and academic alike'. This description could easily be applied to his own style of writing!

In terms of his influence on the policymaking process, Buchanan was an academic who was always willing to go outside the 'ivory tower' of academia to enter the real world of practice as evidenced by his active engagement in environmental conservation serving on several advisory committees and voluntary bodies from 1967. This included: the National Trust serving as Regional Chairman for ten years; chairmanship of the Ulster Society for the Preservation of the Countryside, the Northern Ireland Museums Council and serving as a Trustee of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (the latter he described as 'the foremost museum of rural life in these islands' (Buchanan 1989, p56). In 1992, he was appointed OBE for work in conservation and historic monuments and buildings.

Significantly, he was elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy, the highest academic honour in Ireland. He served as a vice-president from 1992-96.

Ronnie Buchanan could be vocal in public seminars on several challenges facing planners in respect of urban and rural development policy matters. One example was his chairmanship of a major conference entitled *'The Ulster countryside in the 1980s'* (Forsyth J and R.H. Buchanan, 1983). In the presence of David Mitchell, UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Northern Ireland Office (as the region was still under direct rule from Westminster), the conference gave Buchanan a powerful platform to express his concerns to planning officials over how Government policies could have an adverse effects on the measures for protecting the region's most scenic areas and heritage. The latter he described as being common to all the people who lived and worked there whatever their background or political allegiance. He felt this was an important bond transcending the divisions in Northern Ireland society, a theme he would further develop in a public lecture in 1989 *'Ulster: Exploring a common ground'*. He heavily criticised the *Cockcroft Report* published in 1978 which had recommended a relaxation of rural planning controls enabling more houses to be built in the open countryside. He accused the report of being hostile to most forms of development control and being indifferent to the aims of planning. He continued to give evidence to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the reform of conservation practices in the north in response to the publication of the Balfour Report in 1984 entitled *'A new look at the Northern Ireland Countryside'* (Northern Ireland Assembly, 1985).

It can be very challenging when it comes to measuring the precise impact one academic has had on influencing policy especially given the wide range of factors that influence policy decisions at any one time. We can say that Buchanan generated debate and discussions through conferences and events and through his research publications on rural planning and development at a time when even the concept of 'integrated rural development' had not yet been properly or adequately recognised by the relevant Government departments in Northern Ireland. In the context of the region's divided society, he was supportive of the development of collective actions to address environmental issues including the creation of civic trusts and the work of voluntary bodies. Such efforts were directed in support of what he termed the 'common ground' i.e. the rich inheritance we share irrespective of creed, political allegiance or ethnic origin.

In making any assessment of his contributions to the work of the planner, we can draw on his 1989 public lecture referred to earlier entitled *'Ulster: Exploring the Common Ground'*. This provides valuable insights into his views on geography and the role of academics in helping to uncover the facts providing explanations as to how the past has influenced the present, including the way we are and way we think. He viewed geography as a discipline which gave him '...a world view, an explanation of regional differences and on the way people use the environment to make a living now and in the past'. He was an academic who could at one scale examine the dynamics of a single townland including its heritage and folk culture and equally at another scale would be at ease discussing Ireland's cultural relationships with the wider world of Britain and Europe. To him, the

study of geography was as he stated, 'a constant voyage of discovery'. Nor was he limited to the world of rurality. He could equally hold his own in the field of urban geography, noting for example how QUB geographers had been influenced the planning of Belfast and its region (Buchanan, 1990b). He described geographers as having a huge advantage as traditionally their training 'enables them to see the working of the natural and the man-made world as a series of interrelationships, of different components which fit together and interact as functioning entities' (Buchanan op.cit). In that same 1989 public lecture, he confessed to his audience that the scientific analysis covered in geography suited his temperament. We can also conclude that the apprenticeship which he had served under Estyn Evans in his formative years as an academic stood him in good stead as he was not restricted to one discipline. Like Evans, he was willing and able to look beyond to other disciplines covering folklife studies and archaeology, adopting a multi-disciplinary approach. This approach manifested itself in the way he subsequently developed the Institute of Irish Studies at QUB when he became its third Director.

In terms of his publications and lectures, he was conscious of the role which academics have in disseminating the findings of their research taking account of the range of target groups such as school children of different ages, university students, adults in further education as well as the general reader. In the case of the latter, he had the following advice: 'Ultimately it is the general public, the man in the street, whose attitudes we want to influence, whose myths we need to confound.' (Buchanan, 1989).

Third, on a personal level, he actively engaged with his students to gain a better understanding of their backgrounds, motivations and concerns. Today, it would probably be impossible for a university tutor to adopt such a dedicated approach to his or her students, given the massive changes in third level education over the years. However, for those fortunate enough to have had Ronnie Buchanan as their tutor, it paid huge dividends, as I can confirm. I consulted him when I was undertaking my undergraduate dissertation and often discussed the pros and cons of the approaches that could be adopted. Even after finishing at Queen's, as a postgraduate at Glasgow University (GU) I chatted to him again about topics for my MPhil dissertation. Often one idea or one suggestion from him was all that a student needed to set them off in the right research trajectory. I will be forever grateful for the support he consistently granted me in my application for a place and a studentship at GU.

Future generations of planners will be rewarded by recognising the contribution made by Ronnie Buchanan to our understanding of the changes impacting on urban and rural space and their associated communities. In this regard, he must surely stand alongside his mentor, the late Professor Estyn Evans (himself an honorary member of the RTPI in recognition of his work on urban geography of Belfast) as one of the foremost scholars of their respective generations. It is fair to say that there will be many people like me in the planning profession who will be indebted to Ronnie Buchanan for the support he gave them when setting out on their planning career. We owe it to him to ensure that his legacy is not lost in the education and training for the next generation of geographers and planners.

Acknowledgements:

Photo: courtesy of Queen's University of Belfast

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