

IN SEARCH OF THE BUCHANAN FERN

J. Mitchell and J. B. Mason

It was an article in *The British Pteridological Society Bulletin* that stirred our interest. After all, it is not every day of the week a fern totally unique in the world is discovered right beside your own doorstep. The botanists and gardeners caught-up in the wave of 'Pteridomania' or 'Fern Fever' that swept through Britain during the mid-19th century were not content with collecting and growing normal specimens, aberrations, some of which would be considered little more than monstrosities today, being much in demand. In just a few short years literally hundreds of varieties or 'sports' were described and named, although many of these have long since been forgotten. One notable exception is *Athyrium filix-femina* 'Victoriae' or Buchanan Fern, a particularly fine variety of Lady Fern, of which it was observed that 'no fern lover but desires to possess'.

What makes this variety so aesthetically appealing to the fern enthusiast is its elaborate, yet perfectly symmetrical, design. Each one of the long, slender pinnae (side branches) is divided into two and the pair set almost at right angles, which, together with their opposite partners on the other side of the rachis (stem), form a diagonal cross. On the original specimen the pinnules (branchlets) of each pinna repeated the process, but this additional character seems to be absent in most of its descendants. Apart from the delicate lattice-work pattern formed by the overlapping pinnae, each one of the divided branches is completed by a pendulous tassel at its tip. It should be added that the illustration of the two pressed fronds (Plate) does not do justice to the three-dimensional effect produced by each pair of divided pinnae being joined to the stem at a twisted angle. Since the fern was first taken into cultivation, a small number of different forms have been developed.

The story begins on Loch Lomondside in the summer of 1861, when an Edinburgh student by the name of James Cosh chanced upon a tall and striking variety of Lady Fern while enjoying a botanical ramble in the neighbourhood of Drymen. The precise spot where Master Cosh found the fern has never been disclosed, but a combination of clues would seem to pin down the locality to beside the former east gate to Angle Plantation near Coldrach Farm, Stirlingshire. According to E. J. Lowe, author of a classic two volume treatise on native ferns published a few years later, Cosh left the plant undisturbed until 1863 when it was dug-up and transferred to the gardens of Buchanan Castle nearby. This uncharacteristic act of



- 98 leaving an exceptionally good 'find' *in situ* for two years, at a time when fern-hunters were rapaciously scouring the countryside in force, seems not to have been questioned until 1895 when C. T. Druery was gathering material on fern varieties for one of his many publications. Being a relative of the estate factor, Druery experienced no problems in tracing and being introduced to the tenant of Coldrach Farm, who had actually been present when Cosh discovered the plant 34 years earlier. Just as Druery had suspected, Cosh, along with a Mr Connon — the head gardener at Buchanan Castle, had returned with spades *the very next day*. The fern was divided, part going to the castle gardens as stated by Lowe, the rest being taken to Edinburgh where it was apparently distributed amongst Cosh's friends.

Two and a half years after the fern had been collected, a few fronds were sent by head gardener Connon to *The West of Scotland Horticultural Magazine*, the editor of which suggested the variety be named 'devaricata' or 'deflexa'. However, fronds from Cosh's share of the plant had already fallen into the hands of John Sadler at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, who in turn passed on a specimen to the leading authority on fern varieties, Thomas Moore. Moore pronounced it to be 'a queen amongst Lady Ferns' and patriotically dubbed it 'Victoriae'. It first appeared under this name in a list of 240 described forms of Lady Fern compiled by Patrick Neill Fraser for his *British Ferns and their Varieties* printed privately at Edinburgh in 1865.

As to what eventually happened to the portion of fern dispatched to Edinburgh is uncertain, but something of the early history of the rest of the plant has been passed down. From Druery's and other naturalists' accounts of visits to the grounds of Buchanan Castle in the 1890s it is known that Connon's share of the fern was split in two, one half planted in the walled garden and the other with native and exotic species in a rockery built around a rustic well. Also that it was being propagated by means of spores and small plants made available for sale under the name 'Buchanan Fern'. Thereafter the trail grows cold until sometime in the 1920s, when John Mason (grandfather of one of the present authors) established a small nursery just off Drymen Square. Amongst the range of plants listed in the nursery catalogue were offsets of the Buchanan Fern. About 1950, Mr. Mason's stock of Buchanan Fern was disposed of to a nurseryman in Fife, but not before one good root had been transferred to a son's garden in the neighbouring village of Gartocharn, where the clump still flourishes to this day. The fate of the two large specimens at Buchanan Castle is a mystery, but they may have found their way into local gardens together with other choice items from the fernery when the castle and grounds were

converted into a military hospital for the duration of the Second World War.

Although *Athyrium filix-femina* var. 'Victoriae' can apparently still be purchased through some nurserymen's catalogues, we were keen to find out how many gardens in the district still contained the fern originating from Buchanan Castle. Response to a poster displayed in local post offices and branch libraries was encouraging, but almost all of the cultivated Lady Ferns brought to our attention proved to be varieties other than 'Victoriae'. Two more Buchanan Ferns did come to light however, both in Drymen and ironically right under our noses all of the time. The first to show up was in a garden on the Gartmore Road. Due to changes in occupancy of the house the source of the plant could not be ascertained, but it is suspected that it came from Mason's nursery.. The second clump is known to have been obtained from Buchanan Castle about 1910, although it had moved addresses on two occasions before finally being transferred to a garden in Charles Crescent.

We feel certain that there are further specimens of Buchanan Fern awaiting rediscovery in some of the older gardens in the Drymen area — it is even possible that the original plants from the castle still survive. In addition to the three well established clumps turned up by our enquiry, as from now *Athyrium filix-femina* var. 'Victoriae' can be found in two other local gardens. No prizes offered for guessing the identity of the new proud owners of this 'Queen amongst Lady Ferns'.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

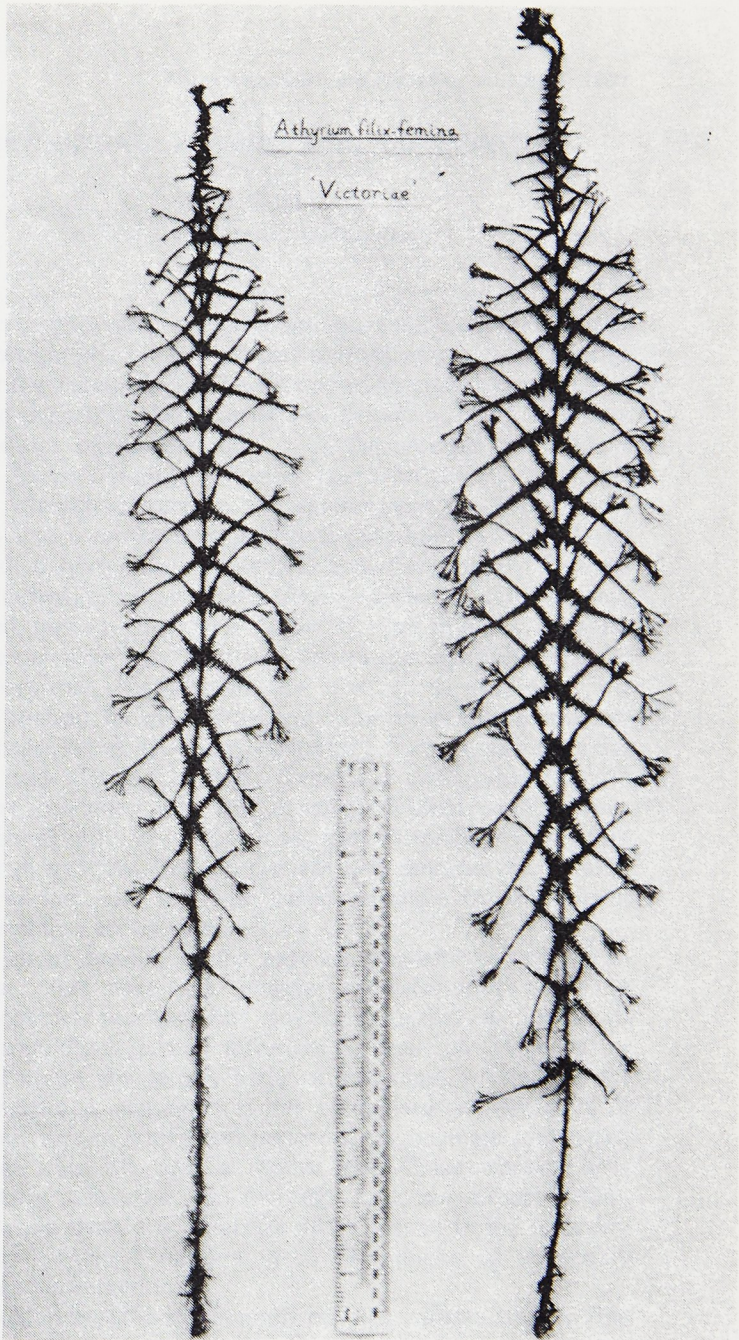
We are very grateful to the residents of Drymen and district who patiently permitted us to wander through their well kept gardens in search of the Buchanan Fern. Especial thanks are due to J. W. Dyce of the British Pteridological Society for his invaluable help in piecing together the historical background to our quest.

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Buchanan Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina* var. 'Victoriae') Photo: J. Mitchell



As got