

## **The Poet Robert Fergusson And His Brother in the Muses – Robert Burns**

*'O thou my elder brother in misfortune,  
By far my elder brother in the muses.'*

A finer compliment from one poet to another could scarcely be found, especially when so sincerely expressed by Scotland's National Bard, Robert Burns. But was he being a little too generous? Almost certainly, but it does make clear that Burns held Fergusson's works in very high esteem.

Robert Fergusson is probably second only to Burns in the pecking order of Scotland's most outstanding poets, and had he lived to at least the 37 years that Burns did instead of dying at the very young age of 24, he may have been as well regarded as Scotland's 'other' National Bard. These two iconic poets had much in common. Besides their shared nationality, they were born less than nine years apart, wrote extensively in Scotland's lowland vernacular, struggled for much their lives against poverty, and died far too young. They shared that spark of genius that has bequeathed a wealth of literary and cultural pleasure for generations of Scots the world over, and for those who would like to be Scots. That can be said more of Burns' legacy than Fergusson's, but some of the works of the latter have merited much-deserved acclaim.

The two poets also differed in a number of ways, most obviously in their life experience, Fergusson being a denizen of Edinburgh, Scotland's capital and most populous city at the time, while Burns spent most of his life in a rural setting. This is reflected in the subjects of their muse; Burns was inspired much more by the natural world that surrounded him. Fergusson did compose a few pastoral poems, but most notably focussed on the scenes and curiosities of city life. And, Burns was more of a romantic poet, fuelled by his passion for the 'fair enslavers', and frequently expressing his admiration for them in poem and song. By contrast, Fergusson composed only one romantic poem, a fact that – combined with other indicators - has raised speculation as to his sexual orientation, but that need not concern us here. While each wrote in both the Scots vernacular, or Lallans, and classic English, Fergusson appeared equally comfortable in both. In fact he composed more than half of his poems in English - while Burns wrote mainly in the Scots vernacular. But like Burns, Fergusson's fame rests squarely on his Scottish poems.

Another important difference between the two was Fergusson's great advantage over Burns in having a quite thorough formal education, particularly in literature and the classics through many years of attending high school and university. Burns did enjoy the benefits of a reasonable basic education and accomplished a great deal more through rigorous self-study, but he did not have access to the many additional years of formal scholarship enjoyed by his so-called 'elder brother'.

Robert Fergusson was born on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1750 in Edinburgh's Cap and Feather Close, a vennel off the Royal Mile that was later demolished to make way for the North

Bridge. He remained very much a city boy throughout his life, with an exuberant love of Edinburgh, or Auld Reikie as he preferred to call it. But more of that later.

His parents, William and Elizabeth, came from middle-class stock and hailed originally from Aberdeenshire where William found employment after leaving Edinburgh while Robert was still a baby. However, William's employer died, and the family had to move back to Edinburgh to find work. Despite William being well educated, at first he was only able to secure modest level positions, which condemned the family to a frugal living, particularly as there were five surviving children to support, Robert being the third. In 1762, just five years before his death, he took up a better paid position as clerk and accountant with the British Linen Bank. Robert's mother tutored him at home during his infant years, and with his sharp intelligence he learned to read while still a toddler. When he was six years old his parents sent him to a tutor, and by the age of seven he had progressed so well that he was deemed ready to embark on the study of Latin at the High School of Edinburgh.

Four years later, Robert was selected to receive a bursary covering all costs required to attend the Academy of Dundee. The conditions provided that if he performed satisfactorily there, the bursary would be extended to allow him to attend Dundee University, and at just 14 years of age he was duly admitted as a student to the university. The bursary was increased considerably, even providing a substantial allowance for ale.

He set out to earn a degree in Divinity, not as his own first choice, but acceding to the fervent wishes of his parents. He was a high-spirited young fellow, notorious for often outlandish practical joking, rebellious antics and outspokenness, and a variety of behaviours that got him close to being expelled on two occasions. He was on course to complete his studies that would earn his degree in 4 years, but he decided to leave after 3½. His early departure proved to be something of a relief for some of his long-suffering professors whom he had rankled badly. At that time, not completing one's degree was not looked upon as academic failure by prospective employers.

The time spent in Dundee had been hard on him and his devoted parents. He greatly missed his home and his city of Edinburgh, which he found to be full of interest and intrigue, with its characters of every description and social standing bustling hither and yon in pursuit of life's pleasures, or just trying to scratch out a meagre existence. In his meanderings through the Old Town, the young poet would have admired many of its fine gothic buildings, while being alert to frequent cries of 'Gardiloo' given as warnings to duck or sidestep the cascading contents of chamber pots – or Edina's roses' as the locals referred to it – tossed from the windows of the overcrowded tenement buildings. This and other household detritus added to the filth of the city's cobbled streets, cause of the ever-present pungent odours. The unpleasantness underfoot competed with the frequent pall of smoke – mainly from household fires - that earned the city the affectionate sobriquet of '*Auld Reikie*'. He had to dodge the hawkers and the caddies, or errand boys, the carriages and sedan chairs, whilst keeping an eye out for thieves and

other ne'er-do-wells ready to relieve the unsuspecting of their valuables, or even their lives. Then there was the spectacle of the ever-present ladies anxious to cater to a gentleman's every wish, for a few pennies. Still, to young Robert, Auld Reikie was a city full of life and consuming interest that he never seemed to tire of.

Fergusson took to versifying at a young age, composing his first major poem at 14. He soon realized that he had a flair for it, and was greatly encouraged by the positive feedback some of his early efforts had attracted. The sharpness of his intellect, his energy, his impertinent wit, and his contempt for pretentiousness all contributed to that manifestation of his genius...his poetry! Add to those traits his great command of language, both standard English that in recent years had become popular with most educated Scots, and the rough Lallans still common among the working poor.

Shortly after returning to Edinburgh, he managed to secure a position as legal clerk and copyist at the *Commissary Records Office*, located in what is now Parliament Square in the heart of the Old Town, which was just a short stroll from his home. He was qualified for a much more challenging career, but was grateful for the opportunity to earn the modest wage offered, which he needed to support his recently widowed mother and a sister still living at home. He adored his kindly and caring mother, and she him.

His duties were not so consuming as to exclude the exercise of his muse, and the office stationery cupboard provided him with a good supply of free paper, writing quills and ink. He had scant hopes of earning a living from his poetry, but a writer craves a readership. A new weekly publication, *The Edinburgh Weekly Magazine*, had been launched by Walter Ruddiman. It had a circulation of 3000 copies, and Robert submitted a few pieces that were published, at first unattributed, and were well received by the magazine's readers. For some unknown reason, he held back for the next six-months, but then submitted a few more gems that did have his name attached this time, all of them in English, but again well received. Beginning in 1772, upon realizing that English was too insipid for the grit he wished to work into some of his verses, he decided to write some poems in strong, earthy vernacular Scots. This gave rise to a flood of many of his now much-acclaimed poems. He quickly acquired a fan-base of readers, and was soon being referred to as Edinburgh's *Laureate*. Many of his poems and songs appeared in other newspapers and magazines that earned syndication fees for Ruddiman, the publisher. Even though he had no obligation to do so, he generously shared these with the poet. Fergusson continued to write in English, perhaps to prove that he could, but throughout 1773 more and more of his rhymes were in guid braid Scots. In that same year, Ruddiman extended his generous patronage by offering to publish a small volume containing 36 of Fergusson's poems titled, simply, *Poems, by Robert Fergusson*. 500 copies were printed, and the poet's share of the profit was an impressive £50, probably equivalent to well over a year's salary as a copyist.

Towards the end of 1773, Fergusson began to display signs of despondency that was even reflected in his poems, the output of which declined dramatically. His condition fluctuated over the next several months, but the brief episodes of partial recovery

became fewer and less hopeful. By about mid-1774 it was all downhill, with episodes of chronic depression, delusions, and other disturbing neurological conditions that caused him to give up his job. Then came a fall in mid-August. He was attending a gathering at a flat accessed by a steep flight of narrow stairs. Upon leaving, no doubt pleasantly inebriated, he stumbled at the top of the stairs and tumbled roughly to the bottom. He sustained a serious bloody head wound and was carried back to the home he shared with his aged mother. Even after two weeks of recuperation, he was still in a state of confusion and needed more care and attention than his mother could provide. The decision was made - very much against his will - to take him to Edinburgh's Bedlam Hospital. He remained there for two tortuous months, fluctuating between lamentable confusion and short periods of comparative normalcy, but often suffering from headaches that became more and more severe. He felt lonely and abandoned, and complained of always feeling cold. He died suddenly and unexpectedly on October 16, 1774, less than two months after his 24<sup>th</sup> birthday.

There has been much speculation about the cause of his death. Early opinion tended naïvely to put it down to the effects of insanity, or venereal disease, or alcoholism, but considering all of the known symptoms, modern medical opinion leans to the most likely cause being a subdural haematoma from the head injury he suffered in his fall. He was buried in an unmarked grave in Canongate Kirkyard.

It was a sad end for 'poor Fergusson' as Burns once described him. But what was he really like as a person? Douglas Dunn, a modern-day poet himself and former director of St. Andrew's University *Scottish Studies Centre* described him as:

*'a self-confidant young rogue, daringly witty, with a short fuse for officiousness and heavy-handed morality...there's a wonderful cheekiness to his poetry, and it can be taken for granted that it was temperamental...there's also a performerly poise to it, an assurance.'*

Fergusson became a member of the Cape Club, one of Edinburgh's most prestigious. Club notes imply that he was very well thought of, and admired for his excellent singing voice. It seems that the sometimes insensitive and mercurial behaviour he displayed in his youth improved markedly with maturing age, but his spirited outlook and cheeky, biting wit still shone through in his verse. He dressed shabbily and sported long, dishevelled hair that, like his lanky frame, seemed only infrequently to have benefitted from the sanitary ablution of soap and water. Like most of his peers, he spent much of his time in Edinburgh's taverns where he delighted in exchanges of lively conversation and humour with his friends, lubricated with his favourite tippie, scotch whisky. Early biographers insisted that he was an habitual drunk, but that was almost certainly an exaggeration. When all is said and done, he was a vibrant, unapologetic free spirit.

In making this presentation, I could not omit to say something about Fergusson's poetry, the *raison d'être* for this biographical sketch. Unfortunately, my allotted time precludes a thorough critique. I can only refer to a few of his better-known poems that any of you who are interested may wish to look up. I found his 'English' poems and songs to be of

a high standard, but many critics have dismissed most of them as insipid, or aping the hum-drum style of classical English poets. Other more recent academics - among them the well-respected Rhona Brown - hold to the contrary view, agreeing with my own inexpert impression. And many of his English works (as with his Scots) are defiantly irreverent, such as *Sir John Fielding*; or comically and cleverly satirical, as in *Dr. Samuel Johnson*; or tongue-in-cheek, like another entitled only *Tea*. These and others like them should be judged more liberally than classical poetry. But really, we must move on to Fergusson's Scottish vernacular poetry to discover why he is compared so favourably with Burns. Some of his best known and admired in this category include *The Farmer's Ingle*, *Leith Races* and *On Seeing a Butterfly in the Street*. These are of particular interest in that Burns almost certainly modelled three of his own highly acclaimed works on them, namely - in the same order - *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, *The Holy Fair* and *To a Mouse*; in fact, Fergusson's *Farmer's Ingle* is generally considered to be superior to Burns' *Cotter's Saturday Night*. *The Daft Days* was also one of Fergusson's most admired early Scots poems, but his most acclaimed work is *Auld Reikie*.

*Auld Reikie* was intended by Fergusson to be his defining masterpiece. It was crafted to paint a vivid portrait of the daily life and bustle of his beloved Edinburgh. At 368 lines, it is a long poem, but he intended it to run to perhaps double that length, but his descent into chronic depression and his early death put paid to that. It opens:

Auld Reikie! wale o' ilka town	<i>choice of every</i>
That Scotland kens beneath the moon!	
Whare couthy chieils at e'ning meet	<i>friendly lads</i>
Their bizzing craigs and mous to weet;	<i>dry throats, mouths, wet</i>
And blithely gar auld care gae by	<i>bid</i>
Wi' blinkit and wi' bleering eye;	

Lines from further on read:

Rakin their ein, the servant lasses	<i>rubbing, eyes</i>
Early begin their lies and clashes;	<i>gossiping</i>
Ilk tells her friend o' saddest distress,	
That still she brooks frae scawling mistress,	<i>endures, scowling</i>
And wi' her joe in turnpike stair	<i>boyfriend</i>
She'd rather snuff the stinking air,	
As be subjected to her tongue,	
When justly censur'd i' the wrong.	
On stair wi' tub, or pat in hand,	<i>pot</i>
The barefoot housemaids loe to stand,	<i>love</i>
That antrin fock may ken how snell	<i>passing, bitter</i>
Auld Reikie will at morning smell:	
Then, with an inundation big as	
The burn that 'neath the Nor Loch brig is,	

They kindly shower Edina's roses,  
To quicken and regale our noses.

*contents of chamber pot*

A small sample, but all I can offer in the limited time I have.

Now, what of his poetical legacy? The simple answer would be '*his poetry*'. Certainly, it merits a prominent place in Scotland's store of literary treasures. But we must also recognize his valuable contribution to Scotland's linguistic culture. Together with Allan Ramsay (1686-1758), he helped popularize and preserve the Lallans vernacular for posterity, a baton that both these poets handed on to Robert Burns. The inimitable Robert Burns, does of course fully deserves the crowning laurel of Scotland's National Bard, but not at the expense of dismissing poets such as Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson as also-rans.

Another part of his legacy was the posthumous influence he exerted on Burns' apparently flagging resolve to pursue his muse. It has been said that but for Fergusson there would have been no Robert Burns as we know him. That view is probably overstated, but in his autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore we have it from Burns himself that after giving up all but some religious rhymes, upon reading Fergusson's Scottish Poems, "*I strung anew my wildly sounding lyre with emulating vigour.*" Note his use of 'emulating', perhaps referring to Fergusson's use of lingua Lallans. This falls short of admitting he would never have resumed his poetical ambitions had he not encountered Fergusson's works, but at least it is an indication of the strong impetus they provided.

Earlier I noted that Fergusson was buried in an unmarked grave. Burns was incensed by this callous lack of posthumous recognition of Fergusson by the literati of Edinburgh, and he made it one of his earliest priorities to right that wrong. Not long after arriving in Edinburgh for his first sojourn, in early 1787 he gained permission to erect a memorial headstone on Fergusson's grave, and after a two-year delay by the mason that Burns engaged to carve the stone, it was installed in August 1789. The versified description on the headstone – which is still distinguishable today – reads:

*No sculptur'd marble here, nor pompous lay,  
No story'd urn nor animated bust;  
No simple stone directs pale Scotia's way  
To pour her sorrows o'er her Poet's dust.*

He composed two further verses as part of this eulogy that could have been inscribed on the rear of the stone, but were not. Perhaps the £5-10 price paid for it by Burns was enough of a stretch for his limited resources.

Having given Burns the last word, I will end this account of the life of Robert Fergusson, but there is so much more to know about this remarkable and intriguing genius, Scotland's second Bard.