

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 was an accolade that we can be sure was genuinely intended, and makes it clear that Burns held Fergusson's works in very high esteem.



These two iconic poets had much in common. Besides their shared nationality, they were born less than nine years apart, wrote extensively in the Scottish Lallans vernacular, struggled for much of their lives against poverty, were cursed with bouts of despondency, 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 many of the works of the latter have enjoyed much-deserved acclaim.

They also differed in a number of ways, most obviously in their life experience. As a resident of Edinburgh - Scotland's most populous city - Fergusson was a 'townie', which he relished, while Burns spent most of his life in a rural setting. This is reflected in the subjects of their Muse, Burns being notably more inspired by the natural world that surrounded him, while Fergusson inclined mainly towards urban topics. The latter did compose some pastoral poems, but only a few. Burns was also a romantic poet, inspired by his passion for the 'fair enslavers' who were so often the focus of attention in his poems and songs. By contrast, Fergusson composed only one romantic poem, suggesting that he did not share Burns' near obsession with the lasses, or at least not to the same degree. While each wrote in both the Scottish Lallans and Standard English, Fergusson appeared equally comfortable in both, while Burns clearly favoured the Scots vernacular, at least in his verses. Fergusson composed almost two-thirds of his poems in English - most in the early phase of his poetical career - but like Burns, his fame rests squarely on his Scots rhymes. His later preference for Scots versifying seems to suggest an epiphany of sorts, when he realized that that was his true forte, and what clearly most delighted his audience. Burns, on the other hand, embraced the Lallans early on. Perhaps he was taking a leaf out of Fergusson's playbook, banking on the better choice right from the beginning of his rhyming endeavours.

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 benefit from a solid basic education and accomplished a great deal more through rigorous self-

study, but he did not have access to those additional years of formal scholarship enjoyed by his so-called 'elder brother'.

Robert Fergusson was born on September 5th, 1750, in Edinburgh's Cap and Feather Close, a vennel off the Royal Mile that was later demolished to make way for construction of the North Bridge. He remained very much a city boy throughout his life, with an exuberant love of Edinburgh, or Auld Reikie as he endearingly 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 the couple's first two children were born. William found employment there after leaving Edinburgh shortly following Robert's birth, but his employer died and he felt obliged to move the family back to Edinburgh in order to find work. Despite William being well educated, at first he was only able to secure modest level positions paying little more than £20 per annum, which condemned the family to a frugal life. Eventually, there were five surviving children to support, Robert being the third. In 1762, just five years before his death, he landed a better paid position as clerk and accountant with the British Linen Bank. In the meantime, young Robert's mother tutored him during his infant years, and, thanks to 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 lucky to be selected to receive a bursary covering all costs required to attend Dundee Academy. If he performed satisfactorily there, the conditions were that the bursary would be extended to allow him to attend St Andrews University, and at just 14 years of age he was duly admitted as a student to that 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 strong wishes of his parents who wanted him to follow in the footsteps of two of his great-grandfathers, who had been kirk ministers. He was a high-spirited young fellow, notorious for often outlandish practical joking, rebellious antics and outspokenness, and a variety of behaviours that threatened him with expulsion from St Andrews on two occasions. He was on course to complete the studies that would have earned him his degree in 4 years, but after 3½ he either chose to leave or was expelled - there is some uncertainty as to which. His early departure proved to be something of a relief for several of his long-suffering professors who had lost patience with his brash, indelicate antics that they deemed unacceptable. Fortunately, at that time, not completing one's degree was not looked upon as academic failure by prospective employers.

The time spent in Dundee and St Andrews had been hard on him and his parents, especially his doting mother. 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 frequent meanderings through the Old Town, the

young poet would have admired many of its fine gothic buildings, while being alert to the frequent cries of 'Gardiloo' which were given as warnings, sometimes belatedly, to duck or sidestep the cascading contents of chamber pots, or Edina's 'roses' as the locals referred to those admixtures of urine and 'the other stuff' which were tossed from the windows of the towering, overcrowded tenement buildings...a practice apparently tolerated as normal, or just expedient. This and other household detritus, along with animal excrement, added to the filth of the city's cobbled streets, causing the ever-present pungent odours that assailed the nostrils. The unpleasantness underfoot competed with the frequent pall of smoke - mainly from household fires - that earned the city its affectionate sobriquet of 'Auld Reekie', or '*Reikie*' as Fergusson preferred to spell it. One had to dodge the hawkers and the caddies - or errand boys - the carriages and sedan chairs, while keeping an eye out for thieves and other ne'er-do-wells ready to relieve the unsuspecting of their valuables, or even their lives, especially on the dimly lit streets and alleyways at night. Then there was the spectacle of the ever-present ladies-of-the-night, anxious to cater to a gentleman's every wish for a few pennies. Despite all of this, to young Robert Auld Reekie was a city full of life and consuming interest of which he never seemed to tire.

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 the manifestation of genius reflected in his poetry. Add to those traits his great command of language, both the gentrified English that in recent years had become popular with most educated Scots, and the traditional Lallans still common among the working poor, as well as those, like Robert, who stubbornly supported the culture and traditions of their ancient nation, embodied in part within the Doric cadence of the auld tongue.

After leaving St Andrews, it was thought that young Robert might benefit from an extended stay with his mother's brother, John Forbes, who was a well-to-do owner of several farms in Aberdeenshire. It was hoped that, with his uncle's business acumen and expert guidance, Robert could be steered towards a worthwhile career, but the initiative was a disaster. He spent six months employed around one of the farms, but he and his uncle were worlds apart in their view of the life. Forbes came to abhor his nephew's slovenliness and bohemian attitude, along with his seemingly unproductive preoccupation with literature and poetry. They had a bitter falling-out, immediately followed by Robert packing his bags and storming off. Having no money to pay for transportation, he took ten days to walk the hundred miles back to his home, arriving so exhausted that he had to spend a few days of recovery in bed.

He took some time to find a job, but eventually 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, 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 commission offered (reputedly at a penny for each copy-page completed) which he needed to support his recently widowed mother and his sister Margaret, who was still

living at home. He adored his kindly and caring mother, and she him. No doubt his employer would have been well satisfied with the product of his labours, given that he is said to have been possessed of a fine scriptwriting style, and his industrious output was much above average.

Given that our hero had, by this time, achieved adult status, this might be a good time to paint a picture of what he looked like, both his natural physical form and how he presented himself in dress and grooming. I will begin with a description offered by the mid-eighteenth-century biographer, Robert Chambers:

'His forehead was elevated, and his whole countenance open and pleasing. He wore his own fair brown hair with a long, massive curl along each side of his head, and terminating in a queue, dressed with a black silk riband. His dress was never very good, but often faded, and the white thread stockings which he generally wore in preference to the more common kind of grey worsted, he often permitted to become considerably soiled before changing them.'

He was reputed to be about 5'7" in height and of slim, lanky build, with captivating blue-black eyes. Chambers refers to his lack of sartorial elegance, and indeed he had a tendency to appear in very shabby, well-worn clothing that was usually in need of laundering, or, better still, replacing. His hair tended to be long and unkempt, and his personal hygiene below expected standards. It has been speculated that this lack of attention to his appearance was deliberate, part of the image he wished to convey of an unconventional bohemian free spirit...much as I remember Teddy Boys or Hippies in my own youth. That may have been, but it is more likely that he just did not bother, or thought it unimportant, to exert the necessary effort to conform to societal expectations. Nevertheless, he did display an understanding of the advantages of being well dressed in his poem *Braid Claith*, one verse of which duly attests:

| | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Braid claith lends fouk an unco heeze; | broad cloth, folk, rare advantage |
| Maks mony kail-worms butterflees; | |
| Gies mony a doctor his degrees, | |
| For little skaith; | expense |
| In short, you may be what you please, | |
| Wi' guid braid claith. | |

"Do as I say and not as I do" comes to mind!

His duties as a copyist were not so all-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 writers crave a readership. A new weekly publication, *The Edinburgh Weekly Magazine*, had been launched by Walter Ruddiman. It had a healthy circulation of 3000 copies, and Robert submitted a few pieces that Ruddiman deemed sufficiently worthy to publish. The poems - all in Standard English - were at first unattributed, but were very well received by the magazine's readers. For some unknown reason, he stopped

contributing for a six-month period, but then submitted a few more gems that finally did have his name attached, also all in Standard English. Beginning in 1772, after deciding that Samuel Johnson's much touted South Britain lingua was too insipid for the grit he wished to work into some of his verses, he decided to write a few poems in strong, earthy Scots patois. This gave rise to a flood of many of his now much-acclaimed poems. In the period 1771-1773, he wrote over 100 poems and quickly built up a fan-base of readers that earned him the title of Edinburgh's *Laureate*. Many of his poems and songs appeared in other newspapers and magazines that earned syndication fees for Ruddiman. Even though he had no obligation to do so, Ruddiman generously shared these proceeds with the young, near penniless poet. Fergusson continued to write some pieces in English, perhaps just 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 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, equivalent to perhaps two year's salary as a copyist.

Fergusson had been accepted as a member of the Cape Club not long after taking up employment in Edinburgh. It was one of the city's most prestigious of many such clubs in the town, and he was honoured with the title of Sir Precentor in recognition of his fine singing voice, members being assigned a title after being 'knighted' as part of their initiation. Club notes imply that he was very well regarded. It seems that the sometimes insensitive and mercurial behaviour he displayed in his youth improved markedly with age, but his spirited outlook and cheeky, biting wit still shone through in his verse, as well as in his social interactions. 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. As detailed below, early biographers insisted that he was a habitual drunk, but that was almost certainly an exaggeration. When all is said and done, he was a vibrant, unapologetic free spirit, who did indeed pack away his fair share of aqua vitae, but so too did many of his compeers.

Towards the end of 1773, Fergusson began to display signs of despondency. Although not at first reflected in his poems, his output did decline dramatically. His condition fluctuated over the next several months, but the brief episodes of partial recovery became fewer and less promising. By about mid-1774 it was all downhill, with episodes of chronic depression, wild delusions, and other disturbing neurological signs that forced him to give up his job, but then came a fall in mid-August. He was attending a party 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 still shared with his aging mother. Even after two weeks of recuperation, he was still in a state of confusion, even acting in a threateningly violent manner. It was obvious that he needed more care and attention than his mother could provide. The decision was made - very much against his wishes - to take him to Edinburgh's Bedlam Hospital, reserved for the seriously mentally ill...an insane asylum more than a hospital. Some friends transported him there, pretending they were just taking him out for some more benign

reason. 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 24th birthday.

There has been much speculation about the cause of his death. Early opinion tended naïvely to put it down simply to the effects of acquired 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 hematoma from the head injury he suffered in his fall. He was buried in an unmarked grave in the 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. Andrews University *Scottish Studies Centre* described him as: '*a self-confident 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.*'

Quite aside from his lack of dress sense and a casual approach to personal hygiene, most of the early biographers described Fergusson's character and behaviour in a very disparaging manner, which was not only inaccurate, but also failed to acknowledge his many more appealing qualities. None of these detractors knew the poet personally. Their uninformed critiques, largely based on pseudo-moralistic righteousness, contrast markedly with the account given by another biographer who, unlike most of the others, knew Fergusson well in real life, and in fact was a good friend. In his 1803 *The Life of Robert Fergusson, The Scottish Poet*, Thomas Sommers vigorously assailed these 'foul calumnies'. Regarding the accusations of incessant drunkenness and lack of 'delicacy and propriety', Sommers insisted that: '*...those who were personally acquainted with him will not subscribe to that opinion; for even when in his more devoted hours at the shrine of Bacchus, he preserved a modesty and gentleness of manners, exhibited by few of his age*', also remarking that he lived with '*the best good nature, with much modesty, and the greatest goodness of heart; he was always sprightly, always entertaining.*'

Sommers goes on to say that he spent many happy hours with him in fruitful conversation, in which '*he never failed to please, instruct and charm*' and that far from associating with men of dissolute manners, even his tavern companions were men of social class and literary taste.

A quite recent biographer - Rick Wilson - offers a more itemized summary of Fergusson's persona that I feel deserves to be noted here:

'Annoyingly provocative or cheerfully cheeky joker? Fergusson was obviously both – and more. He was also a sensitive soul, loving son, beautiful singer, convincing actor,

engaging charmer, arty show-off, affectionate observer, intelligent humorist, assiduous verbal recorder, cultural politician, maker and maintainer of true friendships'

These last two more favourable opinions paint a picture of Robert Fergusson that I believe we can accept as much closer to the reality.

With regard to Fergusson's poetical endeavours (the *raison d'être* for this biographical sketch), as noted earlier, unlike Burns he went through two quite distinct phases. In his earlier years his output of 'English' poems and songs greatly exceeded those composed in the last two years of his short life when his focus shifted to the Scots vernacular. There has been much debate over the relative merits of his English verses compared to his Lallans works. Earlier biographers and critics favoured the latter by a wide margin, diminishing most of his English works as insipid, or poorly aping the style of classical English poets. In fact, I found most of them to be pleasing to read and worthy of considerable merit. Other more recent academics - among them the well-respected Rhona Brown - largely side with my own inexperienced impression. In fact, far from being bland or pale imitations of classical English Odes and Elegies, many of his English poems (as with his Scots ones) are cheekily 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 by a different standard than the traditional and more ethereal English compositions of other poets of his time. But even his efforts at more standard pieces are worthy of at least a passing grade in my opinion, as in these few sample lines from an Elegy entitled *CONSCIENCE*:

NO choring warblers flutter in the sky;
Phoebus no longer holds his radiant sway;
While Nature with a melancholy eye,
Bemoans the loss of his departed ray.

O happy he, whose conscience knows no guile!
He to the sable night can bid farewell;
From cheerless objects close with eyes awhile,
Within the silken folds of sleep to dwell.

And, at the cost of missing out on the thread of his theme, his final verse concludes:

**Where is the king that Conscience fears to chide?
Conscience, that candid judge of right and wrong,
Will o'er the secrets of each heart preside,
Nor aw'd by pomp, nor tam'd by soothing song.**

Not a work of outstanding merit, but surely evidence of a talented poet nonetheless?

Another short example entitled, *EPIGRAM, On seeing Scales Used in a Mason Lodge*, illustrates his use of the epigram form also employed (or copied?) by Burns. These were often satirical, jokingly whimsical, and occasionally complimentary:

**Why should the brethren met in Lodge
 Adopt such awkward measures,
 To set their scales and weights to judge
 The value of their treasures?
 The law laid down from age to age,
 How can they well o'ercome it?
 For it forbids them to engage
 With aught but Line and Plummet.**

I will move on now to Fergusson's Scottish vernacular poetry, partly by way of illustrating the comparison of language, style and subject reflected in the output of himself and Robert Burns. Some of the best known and admired of Fergusson's works 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 *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, *The Holy Fair* and *To a Mouse* - in that order. 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, his first vernacular piece to be printed in the *Weekly Magazine* in 1772. 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 life and bustle of his beloved Edinburgh, and as such it reveals to us twenty-first-century Scots so much about the culture and daily goings-on during the era of the poet, even getting across the very 'feel' of it all. At 368 lines, it is a long poem, but he intended it to run to about double that length. Unfortunately, his descent into chronic depression and early death put paid to that. It is worth noting that the opening lines below (especially lines 3-6) bear enough similarity to those of Burns' *Tam o' Shanter* to lead us to think that it was no coincidence.

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

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Lines from further on read: | rubbing, eyes |
|-----------------------------|---------------|

| | |
|--|-------------------|
| Rakin their ein, the servant lasses | |
| Early begin their lies and clashes; | gossiping |
| Ilk tells her friend o' saddest distress, | |
| That still she brooks frae scawling mistress, | endures, scolding |
| And wi' her joe in turnpike stair | boyfriend |
| 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,
The barefoot housemaids loe to stand,
That antrin fock may ken how snell
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.**

pot
love
passing folk, sharp

contents of chamber pots

And so it continues for another 346 lines.

As noted above, Fergusson's *Leith Races*, almost certainly served as inspiration for Burns' *The Holy Fair*. Fergusson's begins:

IN July month, ae bonny morn

And Burns' *The Holy Fair* opens with:

Upon a simmer Sunday morn

Each tells of a meeting between a young man and bonnie lass at an annual outdoor event. In both cases the young jade offers to partner for the day with the unsuspecting fellow so that they might both better enjoy the event. In *The Leith Races* the lass has adopted the moniker of 'Mirth', and in the *The Holy Fair*, 'Fun'. In Burns' poem, two additional hizzies also attend, although with the more sinister labels of 'Superstition' and 'Hypocrisy'. I have selected sample verses from each that I believe display the similarities, at least in their respective themes and verse structure – first *Leith Races*:

**"I dwell among the caller springs
That weet the *Land o' Cakes*
And aften tune my canty strings
At bridals and and late-wakes,
They ca' me *Mirth*; I ne'er was kend
To grumble or look sour,
But blyth wad be a lift to lend,
Gin ye wad sey my pow'r
An' pith this day."**

fresh
wet

helping hand
if, vouch for
Mettle

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| A bargain be't, and, by my fegs | faith |
| Gif ye will be my mate, | |
| Wi' you I'll screw the cherry pegs, | I'll keep you safe |
| Ye shanna find me blate; | shy |
| We'll reel an' ramble thro' the sands, | |
| An' jeer wi' a' we meet; | jest |
| Nor hip the daft an' glesome bands | miss |
| That fill Edina's street | Edinburgh's |
| Sae thrang this day. | busy |

Now, Burns' The Holy Fair:

| | |
|--|----------------|
| My name is Fun – your cronie dear, | |
| The nearest friend ye hae: | |
| And this is Superstition here, | |
| An' that's Hypocrisy. | |
| I'm gaun to Mauchline Holy Fair, | going |
| To spend an hour in daffin: | larking around |
| Gin ye'll go there, yon runkl'd pair, | if, wrinkled |
| We will get famous laughin' | |
| At them this day. | |

Turning now to the question of Fergusson's 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 passed on to Robert Burns. Fergusson was very familiar with the works of Ramsay - a contemporary Edinburgh resident who lived close to the Fergusson family - and was known to have idolized him from the time of his childhood. Not surprisingly, he was strongly influenced by the works of Ramsay. In turn Fergusson (along with Ramsay to a lesser extent) served as inspiration for Burns in general, but specifically with regard to the use of Lowland Scots as his preferred poetical medium in which he excelled so well. Burns' enthusiastic embrace of the Standard Habbie verse form was likely also attributable jointly to Ramsay and Fergusson. In 1784 Burns found reason to compliment "the excellent Ramsay and the still more excellent Fergusson". Still, the inimitable Robert Burns does, of course, fully deserve the crowning laurels of Scotland's National Bard, but not altogether at the expense of dismissing these two predecessors as also-rans.

Another important contribution by Fergusson 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 surely 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'; that most likely referred to Fergusson's use of Lallans, and perhaps the wide-ranging themes he tackled. More generally, Fergusson served as a role model that

Burns could strive to equal, or excel. These influences fall short of making the case that 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.

Returning to Fergusson's own timeframe, Edinburgh's literary establishment seemed largely under-appreciative of the talent and achievements of their city's native son; other than Ruddiman, he seems to have attracted no wealthy or influential patrons as Burns did. Collectively and individually, they neglected to render him much-needed assistance, especially during the torment of his final two months confined to the Bedlam Hospital. They continued to be unmoved at his being buried in an unmarked grave. It is a cruel irony that, just twelve years later, that same community of the learned hailed Robert Burns as the 'Heaven-sent ploughman poet', while earlier virtually ignoring their own Edinburgh-born 'Heaven-taught Fergusson'. Burns was incensed by their indifference, and not long after arriving in Edinburgh for his first sojourn in 1786, he gained permission to erect a substantial memorial headstone on the grave. The mason that Burns engaged to carve the stone unaccountably took two years to complete the assignment, but it was finally installed in August 1789. Burns composed a eulogy that ran to twelve lines, but only the first four - still very readable today - were inscribed. The remainder could have been added on the rear of the stone, but were not. Perhaps the £5-10s price paid for it by Burns was enough of a stretch for his limited resources.

In his poem, *Auld Reikie*, Robert Fergusson expressed a wish never to leave his beloved Edinburgh:

*Reikie, farewell! I ne'er could part
Wi' thee but wi' a dowie heart.* doleful



Of course, he would have meant never in his lifetime. He did leave, and all too soon, but at least his mortal remains are still there...in Auld Reikie.

And those of us who undertake the pilgrimage to visit his grave in Canongate's Kirkyard are greeted by the subject of our veneration, the striding figure of Robert Fergusson in bronze. The sculptor has done a masterful job of capturing his zest and focussed determination. Still walking the streets Edina...almost!

Robert Fergusson is probably second only to Burns in the pecking order of Scotland's most outstanding poets, with Allan Ramsay not far behind. Had he lived to at least the age of 37 like Burns instead of dying at a very young 24, he may have been almost as well regarded as Scotland's now National Bard.

I will conclude with the heartfelt sentiments expressed by Robert Burns for his 'elder brother in misfortune':

*Ill-fated genius! Heaven-taught Fergusson!
What heart that feels, and will not yield a tear
To think Life's sun did ever set e'er well begun
To shed its influence on thy bright career!*

*O, why should truest Worth and Genius pine
Beneath the iron grasp of Want and Woe,
While titled knaves and idiot-greatness shine
In all the splendour Fortune can bestow?*

Researched and written by Jim McLaughlin, on behalf of the Calgary Burns Club 'Carnie Group', August 2021.

Main Sources Referenced:

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