

4-1-1964

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Recommended Citation

Gillis, William (2013) "An Authentic Fergusson Portrait," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 1: Iss. 4, 215–222.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol1/iss4/2>

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WILLIAM GILLIS

An Authentic Fergusson Portrait

A new portrait of the 18th century Scots poet Robert Fergusson, recently acquired by the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, is undoubtedly an authentic likeness painted from life. Its discovery dispels almost a century and a half of uncertainty. Mr. H. Cooke of Hitchen, Hertfordshire, brought the portrait to light. Late in the 19th century it had been purchased by his father, and in 1935, after his father's death, it went to Mr. Cooke's home. Not until 1960 did he see an inscription on the reverse in an early 19th century hand identifying the subject as Fergusson and the painter as Alexander Runciman.

Authentication of the portrait rests upon three factors: (1) internal evidence; (2) biographical evidence; and (3) its relationship to other hitherto questionable portraits of the poet.

I. Internal Evidence

Since we know that Fergusson was painted by Runciman, the attribution of this portrait to him is of first importance. In a letter to me the Director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Mr. R. Hutchison, offers as much confirmation that Runciman painted it as is possible: "We are reasonably convinced that this is a Runciman. The painting is very like his work, but without additional evidence it is difficult to be *absolutely* certain." He has further pointed out that the brush stroke appears to be Runciman's.

As I shall show later, the portrait is perhaps a study for a series of religious paintings undertaken by Runciman. The artist may have taken some artistic liberty with his subject, romanticizing Fergusson's appearance for his own purposes. Contemporary descriptions allow only a vague comparison of Fergusson's actual appearance with the portrait.

His forehead was elevated, and his whole countenance open and pleasing. He wore his own fair brown hair, with a massive curl along each side of the head, and terminating in a queue, dressed with a black silk riband. (Robert Chambers, *Lives of Illustrious and Distinguished Scotsmen*. (Glasgow, 1832-1835), II, p. 304.)

* * *



Courtesy of the National Galleries of Scotland

ROBERT FERGUSSON, 1750 - 1774

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Fergusson was in his person, rather slender; his countenance expressed the vivacity of penetrative genius, yet modesty was mingled in his glance. (Alexander Campbell, *An Introduction to the History of Poetry in Scotland*. (Edinburgh, 1798), p. 300.)

* * *

The personal appearance of Fergusson is described as interesting and genteel, although not peculiarly handsome... ([Alexander Peterkin], *The Works of Robert Fergusson*. (London, 1807), p. 73.)

* * *

As to his person, he was about the middle stature, and of a slender make. His countenance, which in other respects had a tendency toward effeminacy, was rendered highly animated by the expression of his large black eyes. (David Irving, *The Poetical Works of Robert Fergusson*. (Glasgow, 1800), p. 18.)

* * *

He was in person about five feet, six inches high, and well shaped. His complexion fair, but rather pale. His eyes full, black, and piercing. His nose long, his lips thin, his teeth well set and white. His neck long, and well proportioned. His shoulders narrow, and his limbs long, but more sinewy than fleshy. (Thomas Sommers, *The Life of Robert Fergusson*. (Edinburgh, 1803), p. 45.)

Only some of this material is pertinent to the authentication of the newly discovered portrait, though its relevance will be evident in further discussion.

II. Biographical Evidence

Our first source of biographical evidence is Thomas Sommers' *The Life of Robert Fergusson*, in which he recounts the poet's first meeting with Runciman:

...That artist was...painting in his own house in the Pleasance, a picture on a half length cloth, of the *Prodigal Son*, in which his fancy and pencil had introduced every necessary object and circumstance suggested by the sacred passage. At his own desire, I called to see it; — I was much pleased with the *composition*, — *colouring*, and admirable *effect* of the piece, at least what was done of it; but expressed my surprise, at observing a large space in the centre, exhibiting nothing but chalk outlines of a human figure. He informed me that he had reserved that space for the *Prodigal*, but could not find a young man whose personal form, and expressive features, were such as he could approve of, and commit to the canvas. *Robert Fergusson's* face and figure, instantly occurred to me: Not from an idea, that Fergusson's real character was that of the *Prodigal*; by no means; but, on account of his sprightly humour, personal appearance, and striking features. I asked Mr. Runciman, if he knew the poet? — He answered in the negative, but that he had often read and admired his Poems. That evening at five, I appointed to meet with him and the Poet, in a tavern, Parliament close; — we did so; and I introduced him. The painter was much pleased, both with his figure and conversation. I intimated to Fergusson the nature of the business on which we met; — he agreed to sit next forenoon — I accompanied him for that purpose, and in a few days, the picture strikingly exhibited the Bard in the character of a

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prodigal, sitting on a grassy bank, surrounded by *swine*, some of which were sleeping, and others feeding; his right leg over his left knee; eyes uplifted, hands clasped, tattered clothes, and with expressive countenance bemoaning his forlorn, and miserable condition! This picture when finished, reflected high honour on the painter, being much admired. It was sent to the Royal Exhibition in London, where it was also highly esteemed, and there purchased by a gentleman of taste and fortune at a considerable price. I have often expressed a wish to see a print from it, but never had that pleasure; as it exhibited a *portrait* of my favourite Bard, which for *likeness, colouring, and expression*, might have done honour to the taste, and pencil of a *Sir Joshua Reynolds*.¹

The meeting took place in mid-1772. Sommers errs a little in this account, for the painting sent to the Royal Exhibition was not the one he describes: it is catalogued as "Luke XV, 20-21" and therefore must have been a painting of the Prodigal's Return. There are two extant copies of the Return, one in the possession of the Honorable Steven Runciman and the other in an altarpiece in St. Patrick's Church in Edinburgh. Though these pictures differ considerably, the figure of the Prodigal is the same in both, and therefore we can assume that Runciman used the same model for the whole Prodigal series he is said to have painted.

The person depicted as the Prodigal is a robust young man, chiefly distinguished for his muscular, unstarved appearance. Although no portrait of the poet resembles the Prodigal, Sommers maintained it was the best likeness he had seen. On his testimony a portrait based on one of the Prodigal series (Lord Runciman's) was engraved for the 1821 edition of the poet's works (edited by James Gray); another impression from the same plate was sold separately.²

But one authoritative dissent to Sommers' opinion of the portrait is in John Kay's *Portraits*: "The engraving was shown to the late Robert Pitcairn, Esq. Keeper of the Register of Probative Writs, who was well acquainted with Fergusson, but he could trace no resemblance to the poet."³

I can suggest an explanation for this uncertainty. Sommers did not know Fergusson as well as he claimed to, for major errors and inconsistencies appear in his biography of the poet. Thus his accuracy must always be questioned. Sommers was also recalling the painting 29 years after the poet's death. While we do not doubt that Runciman painted Fergusson and that he at least considered him in 1772 as a possible model

¹ Thomas Sommers, *The Life of Robert Fergusson* (Edinburgh, 1803), pp. 23-26.

² Also reprinted in *The Poetical Works of Robert Fergusson*, ed. Robert Ford (Paisley, 1905), p. xliii.

³ John Kay, *A Series of Original Portraits and Caricature Etchings* (Edinburgh, 1838), II, p. 239.

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for his Prodigal series — and may have used him, for the artist can be quite free in his conceptions — we have too little evidence to take the Prodigal as a good likeness. Can it be that Sommers saw an artist's sketch, that is, our newly discovered portrait, and then saw a free use of it in the series? Can it be that he confused the two?

My conclusion is that Runciman painted Fergusson's head hastily, trying to see in the poet his concept of the Prodigal (hence the thick neck and the emphasized sensitivity in the eyes as in the Prodigal series). Having painted his series and having no further use for the portrait, he presented it to Fergusson. Mr. Hutchison's comments tend to substantiate this conclusion:

Our portrait is probably a study rather than a finished picture. Those portraits of Runciman's that do survive are carefully composed and with more space used round the head.

Our painting is on paper mounted on a board, which adds weight to the idea that it is a sketch. The head, which is not complete, gives the impression that it was done in one sitting.

III. Relations To Other Portraits⁴

While other portraits of Fergusson all differ considerably one from the other, the new portrait, which I shall hereafter refer to as the Runciman portrait, bears a strong relationship to most of them. I shall designate them as Portraits A, B, C, D, and E.

A. The Runciman portrait must have been the model for the engraving which appeared in the first issue of the 1782 edition of Fergusson's poems (published August 1781).⁵ The "Codicile" to Fergusson's poetical will could explain how it came to the publisher, Thomas Ruddiman, son of Walter Ruddiman, who first printed Fergusson's poems in his *Weekly Magazine*:

TO WALTER RUDDIMAN, whose pen
Still screen'd me from the *Dunce's Den*,
I leave of PHIZ a picture, saving
To him the freedom of engraving
Therefrom a copy, to embellish,
And give his work a smarter relish . . .

Obviously Runciman had given the portrait to Fergusson and, while the poem is nothing more than fun in the Villon tradition, it reminded

⁴ Portraits A, D, and E in this discussion appear in Ford's edition of the poems and in *Robert Fergusson 1750-1774, Essays by Various Hands to Commemorate the Bicentenary of his birth*, ed. Sydney Goodsir Smith (Edinburgh, 1952).

⁵ And if not, the following argument does not suffer, for the subject of the Runciman portrait is obviously the same as that of the 1782 portrait, and here I wish only to assert the fact that it is Fergusson depicted in both and to recreate the history surrounding the portraits.

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Thomas Ruddiman that there was a portrait to be borrowed from the Fergusson family. He must have had an engraving made from it for his edition of the poems.

But Ruddiman cancelled the engraving in the second issue of the poems. John A. Fairley⁶ has suggested that the cancellation was made because the portrait was a caricature and Fergusson's family objected to it. I think Fairley was partly right. The family may well have objected to this rather horrid pig-like production; and Fergusson's mother had obviously consulted with Ruddiman about other materials in the 1782 volume. The engraving, however, is no caricature; it is simply a bad job of engraving from the Runciman portrait or another sketch. Basic features are the same. The poet is depicted as having a long nose and strikingly large eyes, a peculiar ear lobe and upper lip, a massive curl at the side of his face, and a heavy jaw. Besides these telling features, he has white, or greying, hair. This feature is explained in the 1805 edition (Edinburgh) of his works: "His hair was almost pure white," a characteristic perhaps true of him just before his death. The engraver may have known Fergusson in those last days.

Because the engraving from the Runciman portrait had been botched, Ruddiman sought another portrait (or, a bare possibility, the same one for re-engraving) for the second issue of the 1782 edition. He wrote James Cummyng, heraldic painter and friend of Fergusson:

Tho. Ruddiman's Compliments to Mr Cummyng. Begs he would look among his Papers for a Quarto Book of Drawings which T. R. left with Mr. C. some months ago. — It contains a sketch of the likeness of R. Fergusson, whose works T. R. has nearly ready for Publication and wishes to have his head engraved with all speed — If Mr. C. will leave the Book with his Son, T. R. will send for it this afternoon.

Tuesday—

7 May 1782 [this last in Cummyng's hand]⁷

In another letter, dated a week later, Thomas Ruddiman again urged Cummyng with the words, "The want of Fergusson's Head is an infinite Loss to us at present.—"⁸ Obviously Cummyng was not sufficiently stirred to send it along in time for inclusion in the second issue of the 1782 edition and that portrait is perhaps lost; it can hardly have been the Runciman portrait.

Despite the cancellation of the 1782 engraving, new engravings were made from it for a number of editions of Fergusson's works. The

⁶ John A. Fairley, *Robert Fergusson, The Published Portraits* (Aberdeen, 1932), pp. 4, 5.

⁷ Edinburgh University MS. La. II 334/3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

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more ridiculous elements were refined, but it was not much improved. One of Fergusson's editors, David Irving, who knew the poet's family, declared that these later engravings were "suppositious." Re-engravings appeared in the editions of 1788 and 1800. Later A. B. Grosart, Fergusson's most dedicated biographer and editor before Matthew P. McDiarmid, found a "private copper-plate" of it⁹ in the hands of the Ruddiman family, had that re-engraved and improved, and placed it in each of his four editions. Grosart's "private copper-plate" must have been the one used for the first issue of the 1782 edition, though he could not recognize this because he had not seen a copy of that volume. Grosart wrote to David Laing, Director of the Signet Library, on the matter of portraits and Laing was able to find substantiation for the copperplate.

Robert Fergusson the Poet [Laing's hand]

Mem. Mr. Spence thought the portrait with the pen in hand the best likeness, but allowed every one of the rest, except the miserable copy of the above, to be more or less like also.

With Mr Chambers' compts.¹⁰

The "miserable copy" may have been any one of the imitations of the original engraving, but it was probably that of the 1788 Morison edition of the works. Further attestations to the likeness were made, says Grosart, by Miss Ruddiman, Professor Vilant of St. Andrews, and Mr. Howden, a jeweller. These attestations, however, probably related to any of the portraits of the 1782 "series" (i.e., the original engraving and any of its copies), since Professor Vilant, we know, had approved the portrait in the St. Andrews edition of 1800. It should be remembered that all of these people were very old at the time they gave testimony and may not have remembered Fergusson particularly well — just as Sommers seems to have forgotten him. But all in all, this series, most likely started from the Runciman portrait, which the series resembles, has a good basis for authentication as a likeness of Fergusson.

B. In the 1800 Glasgow edition of the works, edited by David Irving, is a stippled engraving of the poet. It bears little resemblance to the 1782 engraving or any of its successors, but yet it reminds us strongly of the Runciman portrait. Drawn by I. Denholm and engraved by K. MacKenzie, it is connected with the next portrait to be discussed.

C. We know that the lack of an available portrait led Alexander Peterkin, editor of the 1807 edition (Edinburgh and London) of the works, to use a portrait for which the poet's sister, Margaret Duvall,

⁹ *The Works of Robert Fergusson with Life of the Author and an Essay on his Genius and Writings*, ed. A. B. Grosart (Edinburgh, 1851), p. xi.

¹⁰ Edinburgh University MS. La. II 334/5.

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had posed. She is said to have resembled her brother closely. Upon seeing the engraving, we note the resemblance to the Runciman portrait, and this leads immediately to the question: is the newly discovered portrait actually an artist's study of Margaret Duvall painted expressly for engraving? It is unlikely. Closer observation reveals rather the effeminate features of a handsome Scotswoman than those of a man, however delicate and sensitive appearing he may have been. Then, turning back to the Irving portrait, we become fairly certain that the Irving engraving and the 1807 engraving came from the same original. Irving must have arranged for Denholm to paint the sister: he knew the family. He had been unable to find an authentic portrait. But for our purposes the authenticity of these engravings is not the question. The sister resembled the brother. Engravings of her resemble the subject of the Runciman portrait. This tends to substantiate the identification of the subject as Fergusson.

D. Fergusson was a member of the Cape Club and it was the practice of the club to dub each member with a facetious title of knighthood: Sir Toe, Sir Cape, etc. On the back of each Cape Club membership petition a club artist, or artists, sketched something illustrative of the knight's title. Usually Runciman is credited with the sketches, although another artist, James Cummyng, was also a member of the club. The masterful work of Runciman seems most prevalent. In the club Fergusson was Sir Precenter and on the back of his petition is a line drawing of a long, thin, woebegone person seated and holding a book, obviously a song book. The nose is long and the chin heavy. This sketch is far below the quality of Runciman's petition drawings and reminds us more of the sketches of James Cummyng. This "portrait" has been reproduced a number of times, the first time in 1823. Since it is a cartoon, it is too slight to compare with the Runciman portrait for purposes of authentication.

E. While Grosart had very assuredly stated that his copperplate "faithfully — *literally* represents the poet,"¹¹ in 1897 he changed his mind and vouched for a painting of Fergusson he had found in the possession of the Raeburn family. The tradition of this painting was that Runciman had painted it and had given it to Sir Henry Raeburn. (It is now in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.) The story is enticing, for Raeburn was 19 when Fergusson died and must have seen him. But the portrait was not painted by Runciman. It is not his style; it does not show his considerable skill. Nevertheless Grosart published the portrait.

¹¹ Grosart, *Works*, p. xii.

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But what can be said in its defense as a portrait of Fergusson? The Raeburn tradition, if partially mistaken, must be regarded as strong evidence. It may have been given to Raeburn by Runciman; it could have been the work of one of his students. It was painted c. 1770 and it depicts a person with the physical characteristics of Fergusson: long nose, heavy chin, brownish grey hair. The hair is the color of a lock of Fergusson's hair preserved in the National Library of Scotland. The eyes are large, the lips full; the general impression is of a young, though haggard, sensitive person.

If the authenticity of the portrait must rest upon its origin, I can make a conjecture. The 1821 Deas edition of the poems presents a plausible explanation: "There were two portraits of Fergusson finished, one by the celebrated Runciman, the other by Mr. Fyfe, North Bridge, Edinburgh; but it is feared both of these are now lost."¹² Perhaps the Raeburn portrait then can be attributed to "Mr Fyfe." Who was he? One Fyfe was a Cape Club member, but there is no evidence he was an artist. Whoever he was, the portrait is a bad minor work which we cannot assign to Runciman.

As with the Cape Club petition cartoon, a comparison of the Runciman portrait with the Raeburn portrait does not serve for authentication. The only connection between the two is the common depiction of some basic features.

* * *

That the Runciman portrait was, in fact, painted by Runciman rests upon uncertain evidence of technique in the painting itself and upon the sometimes unreliable memories of Thomas Sommers. That it is a likeness is more certain. Portraits A, B, and C bear a resemblance to it. Portrait A has a strong testimony in its favor as a likeness and it was perhaps engraved from the Runciman portrait, which it resembles strongly. Portrait C (of Margaret Duvall) has a certain contemporary validity as a likeness and this, in turn, appears closest to portrait B, perhaps also taken from a painting of Mrs. Duvall. The subject in B and C resembles the subject in the Runciman portrait. Portraits D and E are of no use in authenticating the Runciman portrait, but we know the first to be a portrait of Fergusson, and the features depicted in the second lead us to the conclusion that it is a portrait of Fergusson. Little doubt can exist that the Scottish National Portrait Gallery now has an authentic likeness of Robert Fergusson by the hand of a competent artist.

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¹² *The Poems of Robert Fergusson with a Life of the Author, and Remarks on his genius and writings*, ed. James Gray (London, 1821), p. xi.