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James Connor

Elder Brother in the Muse

No sculptur'd marble here, nor pompous lay,
'No story'd urn nor animated bust;'
This simple stone directs pale SCOTIA's way
To pour her sorrows o'er her POET's dust.¹

So reads the quatrain sculptured on the face of the headstone over the grave of Robert Fergusson, the headstone created and paid for by Robert Burns, to the poet, described by him as "my elder Brother in the muse."²

On February 6th, 1787, Robert Burns wrote to the Honorable Bailies of the Canongate in Edinburgh.

Gentlemen,

I am sorry to be told that the remains of Robert Ferguson [*sic*] the so justly celebrated Poet, a man whose talents for ages to come will do honor to our Caledonian name, lie in your church yard among the ignoble Dead unnoticed and unknown.—Some memorial to direct the steps of the Lovers of Scottish Song, when they wish to shed a tear over the "Narrow house of the Bard" who is now no more, is surely a tribute due to Ferguson's memory: a tribute I wish to have the honor of paying.—I petition you then, Gentlemen, for...your permission to lay a simple stone over his revered ashes, to remain an unalienable property to his deathless fame.—

¹"Epitaph. Here lies Robert Fergusson, Poet." *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 322. Henceforth *Poems*.

²[On Fergusson], *Poems*, I, 323.

I have the honor to be, Gentlemen,
your very humble servant
Robert Burns³

Burns had been appalled to discover that Fergusson's grave was unmarked, and after receiving permission to erect a headstone, he commissioned an architect, coincidentally named Robert Burn, to erect the stone. Robert Burns did not settle the account until 1792. Commenting on the delay, he wrote of Mr. Burn:

He was two years in erecting it, after I commissioned him for it; & I have been two years paying him, after he sent me his account; so he & I are quits.—He had the hardiess to ask me interest on the sum; but considering that the money was due by one Poet, for putting a tomb-stone over another, he may, with grateful surprise, thank Heaven that he ever saw a farthing of it (*Letters*, II, 133).

The bill for the headstone, as a matter of interest, was £5/10/-, quite a sum in those days, but as it can still be seen in the Canongate Churchyard along the Royal Mile, near Holyrood Palace, it was a very wise and enduring action of Robert Burns. In his Epistle to William Simpson, Burns allocates the blame for the unmarked grave when he writes:

O *Ferguson!* thy glorious parts,
Ill-suited *law's* dry, musty arts!
My curse upon your whunstone hearts,
Ye Enbrugh Gentry!
The tythe o' what ye waste at *cartes*
Wad stow'd his pantry!⁴

But, who then was this person whom Robert Burns so respected, and so honored? "O thou, my elder brother in Misfortune, / By far my elder Brother in the muse." Robert Fergusson was born in the Cap and Feather Close in Edinburgh on the 5th of September, 1750, although the gravestone states 1751. Burns would be only fifteen years old when Fergusson died. Although he was born in Edinburgh, both Fergusson's parents came from Aberdeenshire, where part of his boyhood and early manhood was spent. He came back to Edinburgh and attended the High School for three years, taking the ordinary course in classics, being destined by his parents for the ministry. Then he moved to the Grammar School of Dundee on a scholarship for three years. After Dundee, he entered the University of St. Andrews at about fifteen years of age, where he

³*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 90. Henceforth *Letters*.

⁴"To W. S*****n, Ochiltree," *Poems*, I, 94.

remained for four years as a student of Divinity. On the death of his father, he had to quit his university studies without a degree. He had been an average student without distinction. In the social life of the university he had an amazing variety of other qualifications, he had a sharp wit, and he "could set a table aroar." Temperamentally, he was vivacious and irresponsible with a flair for practical jokes (students haven't changed).

Due to his domicile being within the Eastern and North Eastern districts of Scotland, Fergusson picked up the language of that area. He acquired the various accents, colloquialisms and vocabulary which change from region to region, almost from village to village. The language on the whole is a richer and fuller Scots dialect than that used by Burns who was restricted to the Southwest of Scotland. Fergusson used far less "Scotticized English"—in fact his tendency was in the opposite direction by "Anglicizing Scots" in spelling, but seldom in pronunciation as the rhyming reveals. Fergusson also had a subtler knowledge of the Scots language, not of the rustic but of the educated classes. After all, he had had a much more extensive formal education.

But to return to a description of Fergusson's career. When he left the University of St. Andrews, in 1769 at age nineteen, he found employment in a lawyer's office which earned him only a pittance, and where he remained until just a few months prior to his death on 16th October, 1774. His poverty, however, never dampened his effervescent spirits. He had a circle of friends mostly of the law and of a bohemian nature. He made his first public appearance as poet in 1769 when he added three songs to Pietro Metastasio's opera *Artaxerxes*, with music and translated libretto by Thomas Augustine Arne, which was performed at the Theatre-Royal, Edinburgh.

Two years later, in 1771, he began to contribute to Walter Ruddiman's *Weekly Magazine* where he was to publish all of his works. He was still writing in English, and not making much progress, when it appears that he realized where his talent did *not* lie—he turned to Scots for his medium, and he burst suddenly onto the Scottish poetic scene. January 1772 opened its New Year with the appearance of his famous poem "The Daft Days" (the days between Yule and Hogmanay), containing the familiar opening lines:

Now mirk December's dowie face
Glours our the rigs wi' sour grimace,
While, thro' his *minimum* of space
 The bleer-ey'd sun,
Wi' blinkin light and stealing pace,
His race doth run.⁵

Here was something entirely different—with this poem, the "Tricky cal-

⁵*Poems by Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson*, ed. Alexander Manson Kinghorn and Alexander Law (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 121.

lant” burst fully fledged into the space left vacant by Allan Ramsay’s death fourteen years before. He seemed in the Scots tongue to have served no apprenticeship in the Muses courts, his style already formed, vigorous, accomplished and self-confident. From this moment onwards, Fergusson poured out a succession of poems of an unusually consistent level of excellence, which met with instant acclamation. He immediately became immensely popular, not only in Edinburgh, but throughout Scotland.

This was, of course, the great age of tavern clubs in Edinburgh. Tavern dissipation prevailed to an incredible extent with no rank, class or profession an exception to this rule. Edinburgh was a center of conviviality—a city of clubs, and talk and good fellowship, a city of harlotry and high jinks, a city of drink. Into this life, Fergusson entered with the hilarity of youth and success, but he was nothing abnormal—his reputation, unlike that of Burns, was unscathed by the slightest hint of concupiscence, or scandalous behavior.

At this time Fergusson joined the Cape Club whose members were mostly composed of literary, artistic and antiquarian characters. He was the “Golden Boy” of Edinburgh, much in demand for his fine singing voice and his repertoire of Scots songs. We get the image of a young, popular, fancy-free man-about-town unattached, and there is nothing reported of any amorous involvement or scandal. For almost two years this young man was feted wherever he went—but the bubble had to burst! During February of 1774, he developed a melancholia and a behavior pattern suggestive of a manic depressive psychosis—he ceased writing and became progressively more depressed.

While attending an “election frolic,” in July 1774, he had the misfortune to fall from a staircase, sustaining a severe concussion, probably resulting in what we would diagnose today as a subdural hemorrhage—a blood clot on the brain—and when he regained consciousness, his reason was visibly affected. Eventually, he was removed to the Edinburgh madhouse, amid the lamentation of his mother and sisters. He was closeted in a barred cell with only straw for his bed, and he died screaming quotations from the Bible on October 16, 1774.

To digress for a medical comment, Fergusson’s physician was Dr. Andrew Duncan who visited him at home and also in the madhouse. Duncan (1744-1828) eventually became physician extraordinary to the Prince Regent, and was one of the Founders of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (of which I have been a member since 1943). Dr. Duncan was shocked at the conditions in the madhouse, and he was instrumental in erecting the Lunatic Asylum of Edinburgh, which received its first patient in 1813. The asylum could possibly be looked upon as a memorial to Robert Fergusson.

Burns wrote:

Ill-fated Genius! Heaven-taught Fergusson,
 What heart that feels and will not yield a tear,
 To think Life’s sun did 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? (*Poems*, I, 323)

It is a great pity that Fergusson did not follow Burns instead of the other way about, for it would probably have been much better for the future development of Scottish literature and poetry, for Fergusson was great enough to have profited from Burns's example, and yet could still have gone his own way, despite the enormous fame of Burns by which he would have been confronted (yet without Fergusson, it is arguable that Burns would never have developed his richest vein). The prodigious shadow of Burns's works was to make succeeding generations think that there was no other way to write in Scots except the "Burnsian" way and no subjects except the "Burnsian" subjects—which were of the village and the small country town. But as a result of Burns's conquest of the Scottish imagination, in a mode and tense that was already old-fashioned in his own day, we find that in the nineteenth century, when industrialization was already transforming the life and ways of Western Europe, Scottish poets and novelists made no attempt to deal imaginatively with the changing world, but continued to write as if Scotland was a country of sentimental gentry, peasants and exiles.

In *Silverado Squatters* Robert Louis Stevenson portrayed the exile as saying: "I do not even know if I desire to live there; but let me hear, in some far land, a kindred voice sing out, 'O why left I my hame...?'"⁶ While authors like Balzac and Dickens were coping with the throbbing life of the new industrial age, Scotland was writing about "The bonnie brier bush" or escaping into the past of high deeds of derring-do with the works of Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson, and a romantic era of Victorian Balmoral, Mendelssohn's "Hebrides Overture," Max Bruch's "Scottish Fantasia." Even up to the present time we are faced with a spate of movies concentrating on Scotland's past such as "Brave Heart," "Rob Roy," and "The Bruce," and we are slowly recovering from an overdose of "Scotland the Brave," "Flower of Scotland" and the ridiculous "Here's tae us wha's like us" attitude.

Although Ramsay was a bit of a "Country Cousin," Fergusson moved from the field and the hedgerow to the town, plainstones and the causey. Alas, Burns was unable to follow this line, and the Scottish tradition, because of Burns's immense prestige, reverted to the bucolic, from which it has scarcely escaped, even today.

It would appear that the influences of the eighteenth and nineteenth century poets and novelists have produced a freezing—a "time warp" of Scottish history for even today, the popular image of Scotland is of mountains, lochs, heather, whiskey, bagpipes, and the kilt, with clans cavorting across the High-

⁶*From Scotland to Silverado*, ed. James D. Hart (Cambridge, MA, 1966), p. 210.

lands, violently disagreeing with each other—the epitome of Caledonian anti-syzygy!! But, after all, what is history?—a combination of fact, legend and folklore. Napoleon described history as “a set of lies agreed upon,” Henry Ford declared “History is bunk,” and Winston Churchill declared “there is no history, only biography.”

But it is significant to note that when Fergusson died at the age of twenty-four he had already published thirty-three major poems—if Burns had died at the same age, he would have published none. The earliest evidence we have of Burns’s composing poems or songs is to be found in *Robert Burns’s Commonplace Book 1783-1785*.⁷ Here we find “A Prayer, in the Prospect of Death,” which is dated August 1784, although it has been suggested that it may have been written as early as December 1781; “Song” (My father was a farmer) dated April 1784, but suggested to have been composed early in 1782; “The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie,” which could have been written in 1783. “Song, composed in August” (Now westlin winds) details an event from the poet’s seventeenth year, and appears in part in the *Commonplace Book*. “I first committed the sin of RHYME [before]...my sixteenth year,” Burns told Dr. John Moore in 1878 (*Letters*, I, 137), and the result was “O once I lov’d” (widely known as “Handsome Nell”). It should be remembered that the *Commonplace Book* contains poems which were transcribed during the period 1783-5, but some were probably composed considerably earlier—“O once I lov’d” is dated August 1783 therein, but was written almost a decade earlier. My point remains, however, that at the age of twenty-three Fergusson had published a substantial corpus of work; Burns’s first appearance in print occurred only when he was twenty-seven.

Fergusson, with his intense production within the last two years of his life, not only stirred Burns’s imagination “to emulating vigour” but suggested to Burns many of his most famous works. In the opinion of many students of Burns, Fergusson’s “Farmer’s Ingle” is more technically brilliant than “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” and there are other famous parallels in which Burns has borrowed the idea, the form and even the phraseology from his forerunner. Compare the opening stanza of Fergusson’s classic with the second stanza of Burns’s:

The Farmer’s Ingle

Whan gloming grey out o’er the welkin keeks,
 Whan Batie ca’s his owsen to the byre,
 Whan Thrasher John, sair dung, his barn-door steeks,
 And lusty lasses at the dighting tire:
 What bangs fu’ leal the e’enings coming cauld,
 And gars snaw-tapit winter freeze in vain;

⁷Ed. J. C. Ewing and Davidson Cook (Glasgow, 1938).

Gars dowie mortals look baith blyth and bauld,
Nor fley'd wi' a' the poortith o' the plain;
Begin my Muse, and chant in hamely strain.⁸

* * *

The Cotter's Saturday Night

November chill blaws loud wi' angry sugh;
The short'ning winter-day is near a close;
The miry beasts retreating frae the pleugh;
The black'ning trains o' craws to their repose:
The toil-worn COTTER frae his labor goes,
This night his weekly moil is at an end,
Collects his *spades*, his *mattocks* and his *hoes*,
Hoping the *morn* in ease and rest to spend,
And weary, o'er the muir, his course does hameward bend. (*Poems*, I, 146)

The final stanza of "The Farmer's Ingle" contains the lines: "May Scotia's simmers ay look gay and green, / Her yellow har'sts frae scowry blasts decreed" (p. 164) and Burns's penultimate stanza voices this hope: "O SCOTIA...Long may thy hardy sons of *rustic toil* / Be blest with health and peace and sweet content!" (I, 51).

The curious may even compare Fergusson's "Caller Water" with Burns's "Scotch Drink"; "Leith Races" to "The Holy Fair" and "Hallow Fair" with "Halloween." Even in Burns's masterpiece, the ghost of Fergusson flits by. Compare the opening lines of Fergusson's masterpiece "Auld Reikie":

Auld Reikie! wale o' ilka town
That Scotland kens beneath the moon;
Whare couthy chiels at e'ening meet
Their bizzing craigs an mous to weet:
And blythly gar aud Care gae bye
Wi' blinkit and wi' bleering eye: (pp. 115-6).

with the opening lines of "Tam o' Shanter":

When chapman billies leave the street,
And drouthy neebors, neebors meet,
As market-days are wearing late,
An' folk begin to tak the gate;
While we sit bousing at the nappy,
An getting fou and unco happy, (*Poems*, II, 557).

⁸*Poems* by Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, p. 161.

Many though the debts of Burns to Fergusson were (debts acknowledged and many times repaid), they did not include an attitude, an idea new in Scots poetry, that some of Fergusson's poems illustrate—the vision of the “townie” or city dweller, to whom nature though still close, is already separate and becoming romantic, to whom, amid the hurly burly of the “causey,” has come a new and innocent sense of wonder—attitudes impossible in a ploughman-poet like Burns, who never left Ayrshire or saw a city until he was twenty-eight years old. But he had other gifts that Fergusson lacked—a greater mastery of the dance of words, a more lashing tongue, greater gusto, and his own passionate, dynamic personality, and an almost neurotic introspection which he called “hypochondria.”

Fergusson and Burns form an ideal pair, for they are complementary, not in opposition. Fergusson is more tied to time and place; he is not like Burns, a world poet, but he is a fine poet, and a unique poet in Scottish letters, too easily labeled parochial and xenophobic and left at that.

In his famous essay “Robert Burns: Life, Genius, Achievement” W. E. Henley mentions Fergusson in an appreciative footnote that is a good summary:

...he was so remarkable a creature that there can be no question but in his death, at four-and-twenty, a great loss was inflicted on Scottish literature. He had intelligence and an eye, a right touch of humour, the gifts of invention and observation and style, together with a true feeling for country and city alike; and his work...with its easy expressiveness, its vivid and unshrinking realism, and a merit in the matter of character and situation...is nothing less than memorable.... Fergusson was...essentially an Edinburgh product—(the old Scots capital: gay, squalid, drunken, dirty, lettered, venerable: lives in his verses...)⁹

Hans Hecht wrote about Fergusson:

...he [Burns] loved and looked upon him as his model, not only in his works, but in his destiny.... No Scot, not even Stevenson, has done so much for Fergusson's memory as Burns, and if the present generation begins to turn again with increasing interest to the literary legacy of that fine, ardent spirit, Burns's warm-hearted championing of the Edinburgh city poet, too early fallen into decay, must never be forgotten.¹⁰

That was well said—and we have not forgotten.

London, Ontario

⁹*The Poetry of Robert Burns*, ed. W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson. 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1896-7). Henley's essay appears in IV, 231-348. The footnote quoted above is on pp. 261-2.

¹⁰Hans Hecht, *Robert Burns: The Man and his Work*, trans. Jane Lyburn (London, 1936), pp. 101-2.