

8-2012

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Recommended Citation

McGuirk, Carol M. (2012) "Burns's Two Memorials to Fergusson," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 37: Iss. 1, 5–23.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol37/iss1/3>

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Cover Page Footnote

This article was first published in the volume *Robert Burns & Friends, Essays by W. Ormiston Roy Fellows* (2012), a festschrift presented to G. Ross Roy on his 88th birthday.

Burns's Two Memorials to Fergusson

Carol McGuirk

The more gifted the writer the more alert he is to the gifts, the things given or given up, the *données*, of language itself.... A seemingly infinite obligingness of language may indicate an onerous burden of obligation, though the obligation may be only that of accommodating oneself to expectation.

—Geoffrey Hill, “Unhappy Circumstances”

Early in February 1787, Robert Burns requested permission from the governors of Edinburgh's Canongate church to place a headstone on the neglected grave of Robert Fergusson (1750-1774), whose poems had once enjoyed a lively local popularity but were slipping into obscurity. In the petition, Burns ignores Fergusson's partial eclipse of reputation, calling him “justly celebrated” for works of “deathless fame,” and in this way softening his implicit rebuke to an ungrateful public: “I am sorry to be told that [... his] remains ... lie in your church yard among the ignoble Dead unnoticed and unknown —Some memorial to direct the steps of Lovers of Scottish Song ... is surely a ... tribute due to [his] memory, a ... tribute I wish to have the honor of paying” (Roy I: 90). Burns, “alert to the gifts” of stanza-form and vigorous Scots diction that he had received from Fergusson, is speaking here to private obligations, though his explicit reference is to a more nebulous entity, the “Lovers of Scottish Song.”

Six months earlier, he had settled accounts with John Wilson, printer of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*

(Kilmarnock 1786), receiving some £56 after reimbursing Wilson for the costs of paper and printing.¹ In late November he had traveled to Edinburgh to arrange for an expanded second edition, making an early visit to Fergusson's grave. When he wrote his letter to the Canongate bailies on 6 February, the new edition was underway and he had the prospect of further income. Nonetheless, his commissioning even of a modest monument was an extravagant gesture. At this time, and for the nine years remaining before his own death, Burns had numerous family claims on a scanty income. His own youngest brother, John (d. 1785), lay in an unmarked grave in Mauchline; yet some compelling sense of duty led Burns, within weeks of arriving in Edinburgh, to pledge this memorial in tribute to his "elder brother in the Muse" (Kinsley I: 323). The Kilmarnock edition had been received with a wild enthusiasm that Fergusson's own poetry had never enjoyed, and some emotion more complex than appreciation—something conscience-stricken—underlies this episode.

¹ Burns reported his profit for the 1786 *Poems* not as £56 but as "near twenty pounds" (Roy I: 145) in the personal history he sent to John Moore on 2 August 1787. Among the biographers, Robert Fitzhugh offers the most succinct breakdown of credits and debits: "The 612 copies brought in £90, of which the printer's bill took £34/3/-; but Burns says that he cleared only £20. Perhaps the difference is accounted for by the £9 passage money for Jamaica which he paid down, and which he may have lost" (108). (The cost of the passage was in fact slightly higher, being 9 guineas, not 9 pounds). Fitzhugh mentions a further payment made to Elizabeth Paton, mother of Burns's first child, on 1 December 1786, but mentions no amount: this was for £20. In reckoning profits Burns evidently subtracted some £30 (the payment for Jamaica passage given to Irvine shipping agent James Allen and the payment to Elizabeth Paton), which would reduce his profit to £26. He may then have rounded off downward in reporting to Moore; but the remaining £6 discrepancy might represent a further debit: a 50% down payment to "Robert Burn, Architect" for Fergusson's headstone.

In the event, it was difficult to pay for the headstone. Burns sent a messenger in 1792 to his friend Peter Hill, an Edinburgh bookseller, with instructions:

£5-10 per acct I owe to Mr Robt Burn, Architect, for erecting the stone over poor Ferguson [sic].—He was two years in erecting it ... & I have been two years paying him ...; so he and I are quits.—He had the hardiesse to ask me interest on the sum; but considering the money was due by one Poet, for putting a tomb-stone over another, he may, with grateful surprise, thank Heaven that ever he saw a farthing of it.
(Roy II: 133)

“Mr. Robert Burn, Architect,” selected to engrave and set the stone, is curiously the poet’s near-twin in name; a surrogate performs the practical work of discharging this debt to Fergusson’s memory.²

Burns’s reverence for Fergusson’s burial place is remembered in a poem of 1962 that calls up Robert Garioch’s own wandering thoughts while standing at Fergusson’s grave:

Canongait kirkyard in the failing year
is auld and grey, the wee roseirs are bare,
five gulls leam white agen the dirty air:
why are they here? There’s naething for them here.
... Strang, present dool
ruggs at my hairt. Lichtlie this gin ye daur:
here Robert Burns knelt and kissed the mool.
(Garioch, “At Robert Fergusson’s Grave” 16)

Garioch expresses that same recognition of kinship, poet to poet, that animates Burns’s references to Fergusson. His poem’s speaker “canna hear” the public address being given

² On Burns’s calling the stone-mason an architect: the poet typically used that word as a synonym for “builder” or “contractor,” as in a letter of February 1789 that tells his cousin James that his father-in-law James Armour has agreed to take their cousin William as apprentice: “to bind himself to be a Mason.” The letter then refers to James Armour as “a pretty considerable Architect in Ayrshire,” which has been read as a snobbish inflation of Armour’s status, although Burns has already made it clear that Armour is simply a busy master-mason (Roy I: 377).

at a ceremony honoring Fergusson. Around him in the silent crowd are “Fergussons mainly, quite a fair/ turn-out, respectfu, ill at ease”; but Garioch’s strong emotion has little to do with the name-recognition that leads the general public to honor literary merit. He celebrates not a surname but a shared calling to write in Scots. For him as for Burns, Fergusson’s grave site was ground sacred to poetry.

The headstone in the Canongate churchyard was not Burns’s first memorial to Fergusson, however. That would be *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock, July, 1786), a showcase for many “things given” by the elder to the younger poet, especially Fergusson’s revitalized “Standard Habbie” stanza, with its exuberant, repetitive rhyming.³ Just as striking, and less often studied, are the elements in Fergusson’s poetic practice “given up” or re-purposed by Burns, who shifted the subject-matter of Scots poetry in important ways, reshaping the Scots vernacular as a vehicle

³ Allan Ramsay rediscovered the Standard Habbie stanza (8A,8A,8A,4B,8A,4B) for the eighteenth-century vernacular revivalists, perhaps first encountering it in James Watson’s *Choice Collection* (1706) in a comic elegy for Habbie Simpson, Piper of Kilbarchan, by Robert Sempill of Beltrees (c. 1595-c. 1668). George Saintsbury’s *History of English Prosody* gives the best general account of what he calls the Burns meter:

The famous “Burns metre” has been traced by the ingenious to those other ingenious who wrote it in foreign lands and early mediaeval times; and we have seen how it is as common as anything (and commoner than “common measure” itself) in English poetry, certainly of the fifteenth, perhaps of the late fourteenth century Almost the whole beauty of this “Burns-metre” (which was at least five hundred years old, perhaps much more, when Burns was born) consists of the sharp “pull up” of the fourth and sixth lines as compared with the other four, and the break of fresh rhyme after the opening triplet. The eighteenth century had despised refrains; Burns brought them in on every possible occasion, both in the regular form of exact, or nearly exact, repetition, and in the other of partly altered “bobs” at the end of verses (3, 5-6).

Tom Scott describes Fergusson’s bold reshaping of the stanza: “It had ... elegiac, heroic, realist, pathetic, and satiric possibilities: it was ... formal and classical yet lively and graceful as a highland dance. Fergusson found it only used for comic elegy and left it fit for many further purposes” (23-24).

for introspection: “to transcribe the various feelings, the loves, the griefs, the hopes, the fears in [...my] own breast,” as he puts it in his 1786 preface (Kinsley III: 971). William Shenstone’s elegiac English poems are praised in a prominent paragraph near the opening of the preface, but Burns offers a tribute to Scots predecessors near its close, asserting the “genius” of Allan Ramsay (1686-1757) and—in wording warmer but more complicated—the “glorious dawns of the poor, unfortunate Ferguson” (Kinsley III: 971). Although his own writings have been “kindled at their flame,” the poet has refused “servile imitation”—equivocal language that declares a link while insisting on a fundamental difference. The commissioning of the grave-marker shares a similar tinge of ambiguity, for to set up a memorial is among other things to mark a closure. Burns’s 1786 volume, like the headstone he ordered in 1787, remembers Fergusson yet addresses him historically, especially by grouping him with Ramsay, whose best Scots poetry was published during the 1720s, at the other end of the century. Burns honors his predecessors as capstones of a bygone era, paying his respects but also declaring the beginning of a new age.

Fergusson’s own poetic calling was effectual but brief: he stopped writing at around age twenty-three. Locally celebrated, he was never accepted, let alone taken up, by the Anglophilic literati of Edinburgh. While all classes had mingled at the Cape Club, a singing and drinking fraternity celebrated in Fergusson’s poetry, the elite of the city, who knew him well, allowed his reputation to slide into obscurity. As has been seen, it was no brother of the Cape who ordered a headstone for Fergusson thirteen years after he had died at age twenty-four in the Edinburgh madhouse. No review of his volume of poems, published in January 1773, was printed in Scotland, although a 50-word notice appeared in London’s *Monthly Review* (Manning 87). The literati, with their ongoing promotion of Edinburgh as a world capital of Enlightenment, may have been offended by Fergusson’s vivid celebrations of their city’s voluptuous banquet of stanches, as in these octosyllabic lines:

Gillespie’s Snuff should prime the Nose

Of her that to the Market goes,
 If they wad like to shun the Smells
 That buoy up frae markest cells;
 Whare Wames o' Paunches sav'ry scent
 To Nostrils gi'e great Discontent.
 ("Auld Reikie," McDiarmid II: 115-16;
 subsequent quotations from this edition)

Burns's 1786 volume also luxuriates in local color yet suppresses Fergusson's focus on the grotesque and the bizarre: the rural and small-town settings in his 1786 *Poems* are handled very differently from Fergusson's fascinated close-ups of a teeming and clarty capital. Burns never printed his own most corrosive satires, including "Holy Willie's Prayer," during his lifetime. He published such edgy texts as "Address to the Deil" and "The Holy Fair" in 1786, but in those cases satiric attack is tempered by not wholly unsympathetic character analysis, such as the half-admiring sketches of the ranting preachers in "The Holy Fair." Burns called this element in his work, which mitigates harsh satire, "manners-painting" ("The Vision," Kinsley I: 112). He highlights idiosyncrasies of culture and also—like Alexander Pope in the "Moral Epistles"—offers shrewd psychological assessments of his characters. The satires that Burns published target superstition and fanaticism, topics few Enlightenment readers would take personally.

Henry Mackenzie's influential review of *Poems* (1786) in *The Lounger* mentions that the satires have been found objectionable by some, but he defends Burns, urging readers to "look upon his lighter Muse, not as the enemy of religion, (of which in several places he expresses the justest sentiments), but as the champion of morality, and the friend of virtue" (Low 70). There was no such defense by Mackenzie of Fergusson's poems. Probably Mackenzie was annoyed by "The Sow of Feeling" (1773), a dramatic monologue that sends up Mackenzie's bombastic play *The Prince of Tunis* (1773) and best-selling novel *The Man of Feeling* (1771):

I'll weep till sorrow shall my eye-lids drain,
 A tender husband, and a brother slain!
 Alas! the lovely langour of his eye,
 When the base murd'ers bore him captive by!

His mournful voice! the music of his groans,
 Had melted any hearts—but hearts of stones!
 (McDiarmid II: 131)

The Sow's soliloquy laments the butchering of her mate for food. Fergusson's ridicule is mainly directed at the new (and in his view decadent) culinary vogue for pork in Edinburgh; but it is not surprising that Mackenzie took offense.

Burns first encountered Fergusson in a borrowed volume during his early twenties.⁴ He later wrote that the experience changed his life, inspiring him to rededicate himself to poetry (Roy I: 143). A closer acquaintance began in February 1786, when Burns wrote to John Richmond in Edinburgh requesting that he send him by return messenger a copy of Fergusson's poems (Roy I: 28), the first mention of Fergusson in Burns's letters. In the same letter Burns says he has been busy with work on "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "The Twa Dogs," "Scotch Drink," "The Ordination," and "Address to the Deil" (see Roy I: 27-28). Probably Richmond sent Burns the 1782 (third) edition of Fergusson's poems, a volume that Burns consulted as he put the Kilmarnock Poems into final form. He then passed it along during spring of 1787 to the aspiring poet Rebekah Carmichael, further extending the circle of Scottish poets obliged to Fergusson.⁵

Close study of Fergusson had by then served its purpose. *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786) emulates Fergusson's spirit of fraternal camaraderie, taking up his topics and verse-forms almost as if imagining rejoinders to an "elder brother" in an epistolary exchange. Some of the more closely linked texts are Fergusson's "Caller Water" and

⁴ Matthew MacDiarmid speculates that the outpouring of dialect poetry by Burns in 1784 means that he first encountered Fergusson in that year (I: 180). Yet in Burns's own account in his autobiographical letter to John Moore (Roy I: 133-146), he remembers having first read Fergusson "in his twenty-third year," or around 1782 (see also McGuirk, "The Rhyming Trade" 153-54).

⁵ Burns then acquired a third and more recent copy of Fergusson's works: the Edinburgh Central Library retains an edition of 1785 that bears Burns's signature. The intense phase of his study of Fergusson passed, however, with the publication of his first volume of poems (Lindsay 131).

Burns's "Scotch Drink," Fergusson's "Hame Content" and the late lines on the Grand Tour in Burns's "The Twa Dogs," Fergusson's "The King's Birth-day in Edinburgh" and Burns's "A Dream," Fergusson's "Answer to Mr. J. S.'s Epistle" and Burns's "To J. S****," Fergusson's "The Rivers of Scotland: An Ode" and Burns's "The Vision," and Fergusson's "Leith Races" and Burns's "The Holy Fair."⁶ Burns's satires aimed at Auld Licht partisans are departures: Fergusson, afflicted with a religious melancholy, never assaults a clergyman in Scots. Yet even Burns's kirk satires draw freely on Fergusson's reshaping of the Standard Habbie stanza (Scott 24).

What Burns utterly rejected was his predecessor's off-hand packaging of his poems. Even Burns's title, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, which now sounds so inevitable, departs from custom. Eighteenth-century precursors had never advertised dialect in their titles. Fergusson's 1773 title, like Ramsay's in 1721, was simply *Poems*, though this was changed by an editor in 1779 to *Poems in Two [i.e., English and Scottish] Parts*. Ramsay's *Tea Table Miscellany* (1724-37) and *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725) had been given pointedly English titles despite including vernacular Scottish lyrics. Ramsay's preference for English titles extends even to his antiquarian anthology *Ever Green: A Collection of Scots Poems wrote by the Ingenious before 1600* (1724), where "Scots" is deferred to a subtitle. Fergusson had hoped to publish "Auld Reikie," his mock-epic celebration of Edinburgh, in book form, but had taken ill soon after the lukewarm Edinburgh reception of the first canto; he died in 1774 without working on it further. If the poem had been completed and separately published under that title, "Auld Reikie" would have been the first volume of Scottish poetry bearing a title in Scots—that I have been able to trace, at any rate—since the Union of Parliaments in 1707.

⁶ For a summary of parallels between Fergusson and Burns see McGuirk, "Rhyming Trade" 155-156, n7 and n8. Thomas Crawford identifies numerous parallels in his notes (see his Index, p. 394, under sources and parallels); *The Scots Magazine* in 1925 also printed a list of parallels between the two poets.

It may have been the negative example of Fergusson's limited reception that led Burns to negotiate so carefully his use of Scots language. By titling his book *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, he announces dialect without actually using it, preparing readers for what is to come. All his prefatory matter is in standard English. Dialect-use is reserved for the poems, yet is firmly emphasized in those: there is none of the faintly apologetic light dusting of dialect typical of Ramsay in successful mid-career. From the first title of the opening poem ("The Twa Dogs," not "The Two Dogs"), these are poems "chiefly" in "Scottish"; indeed, "The Twa Dogs," at 238 lines, is the second-longest poem Burns ever wrote: a sustained dialect performance—in the octosyllabics so often chosen by Fergusson—opens Burns's debut volume.⁷ Burns suppressed the majority of English poems and songs completed before 1786 in order to keep this first book mainly vernacular in diction as well as "chiefly" descriptive/epistolary (as opposed to lyric) in focus. Only three texts identified as songs are printed in 1786. Yet although Burns insists on dialect, he is careful to teach his meaning—never assuming, as Fergusson had, that readers were chums, members of an in-group already in the know. The glossary of Fergusson's *Poems* (1773), for instance, was not designed to assist non-Scottish readers, explaining numerous words that any reader would already have known— "Bridal" ("Wedding"), "Colley" ("Sheepdog"), "E'ening," ("Evening"), "Gabbling" ("Speaking"), "Rue" ("Repent"), "Sleek" ("Smooth"), "Strappin" ("Lusty"), "Tail of May" ("End of May"), "Weet" ("Moisture"), and "Yelp" ("To Make a Noise")—while omitting any number of puzzling Scots words. To take dialect words used in just one of Fergusson's poems, "The King's Birth-day in Edinburgh," as an example, the glossary provides no entry for "limmer,"

⁷ "The Holy Fair," also printed in the Kilmarnock *Poems*, is five lines longer than "The Twa Dogs" but as a kirk satire may have been considered a risky choice to open the volume. "The Vision" appeared in the 1787 *Poems* at 276 lines, but the version printed in 1786 was shorter—228 lines.

“ding,” “steek,” “gowany,” “tither,” “wyte,” “muckle,” “baith,” “clarty,” “bairns,” and “blude.”

Burns’s glossary of 1786 defines 233 words. Although shorter than Fergusson’s by some twenty-three words, it is much more helpful. Surprisingly few words are explained by both poets, but “cogs” occurs in each. Fergusson gives “wooden dishes”; Burns, almost as brief, adds a sense of relative size and design: “Cog, or coggie, a small wooden dish without handles” (Kilmarnock 237). Fergusson, for “blinkit,” gives “Look’d hastily” (1773 *Poems* 124), while Burns provides contexts for use: “a glance, an amorous leer, a short space of time” (Kilmarnock 236); he expands these in his glossary of 1787: “a little while, a smiling look; to look kindly, to shine by fits” (Edinburgh 351). Finally, almost as if addressing Fergusson’s superfluous glossing of self-explanatory terms, Burns opens his 1786 glossary with a headnote explaining classes of words that will not be defined, including poetic elisions and changes of the English participial “ing” (e.g. “strapping”) to Scottish “-in” or “-an”:

Words that are universally known, and those that differ from the English only by the elision of letters by apostrophes, or by varying the terminations of the verbs, are not inserted. The terminations may be thus known; the participle present, instead of *ing*, ends, in the Scotch Dialect, in *an* or *in*, particularly when the verb is composed of the participle present, and any of the tenses of the auxiliary, *to be*. The past time and participle past are usually made by shortening the *ed* into *'t*. (Kilmarnock 236)

Burns’s glossary excludes cognates and minor variations in spelling, saving room for clarification of some private coinages—i.e., “Burnewin” (“burn-the-wind, a Blacksmith,” Kilmarnock 237). He also uses the glossary for what are in effect short footnotes, though this is more true of his expanded 1787 glossary. Fergusson’s “The King’s Birth-day in Edinburgh” mentions “blue-gown bodies,” for instance, but offers no gloss. Burns likewise uses the phrase in his verse-epistle to John Rankine, only italicizing it in the Kilmarnock *Poems* but glossing it in 1787: “one of those beggars, who get annually, on the King’s birth-day, a blue cloke or gown with a badge” (351).

The 1773 edition of Fergusson not only glosses halfheartedly but more or less hides the dialect poems (eight were printed) in the back of the book. The second and third Fergusson editions are built on *Poems* (1773), with many more Scots poems appended and, as mentioned above, with the title changed to *Poems on Various Subjects ... In Two Parts*. The poems in Part 1 are in standard English. Some of these, contrary to long-held consensus, are highly successful. Tom Scott rightly praises “The Canongate Playhouse in Ruins” (23), and more recently Susan Manning has called for a moratorium on the “crude binary reading” that assumes that Fergusson’s English writing must be inferior to his Scots (94). Nonetheless, Part 1 does not prepare a reader for the explosion of hallucinatory Scots poems in Part 2 (of the 1782 edition that Burns owned), poems such as “To my Auld Breeks” or the midnight dialogue-poem “The Ghaists,” whose dreamlike intensity is unlike anything in Burns—unlike anything in Scottish poetry until the phantasmagoric Scots of Hugh MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). Yet Fergusson’s genius would have been apparent only to a persistent reader, someone who, like Burns, kept reading all the way through the love trials of Damon and Alexis in Part 1. The poems in dialect are placed almost as if an afterthought: Fergusson’s masterwork is left unframed.

Burns’s Kilmarnock edition offers by contrast a series of framing devices; it proclaims “the Scottish Dialect” even in its title yet never separates the English from the Scots. Not only in his glossary but within the poems themselves, Burns makes Scots words much more accessible by linking dialect words in compound phrases with their English equivalent. Burns’s mock-elegy for his sheep Mailie, for instance, passes along her dying words to her “toop-lamb, my son an’ heir” (Kinsley I: 33), a phrase that first italicizes the Scots “toop” (a male sheep, a ram) and then explains it twice: “my son an’ heir.” In “The Holy Tulzie” he addresses “a’ ye flocks o’er a’ the hills,/By mosses, meadows, moor, and fells” (Kinsley I: 73), where the English “hills,” “meadows,” and “moor” assist non-Scottish readers toward guessing more or less correctly at “mosses” (peat-bogs) and “fells” (stretches of hill-moor).

Another example appears in “The Author’s Earnest Cry and Prayer,” a burlesque address to Parliament in which the rustic speaker commiserates with the Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, over “Yon mixtie-maxtie, queer hotchpotch,/The Coalition” (Kinsley I: 189). A loose translation would be “that mixed, odd, heterogeneous mixture, the mixing of rival parties.” “Mixtie-maxtie” is Burns’s coinage—at any rate, this is the earliest cited use in the Oxford English Dictionary. “Hotchpotch,” a word from Scotland common in England as “hodge-podge,” at once follows and clarifies it. Burns then links both terms to a political “mixture,” the Coalition. Here it is the English word that receives italic emphasis. Burns often uses italics or small caps to mark a word at the same time that he keeps English and Scots in close proximity: the two worlds of language remain linked in Burns’s poems. He may have devised this juxtapositioning of dialect with standard English after studying and discarding the strict division of English and Scots into separate sections by Fergusson (or his editors).

Two languages are juxtaposed even on Burns’s title page, where the provocative “Scottish Dialect” is buffered by an English epigraph just below that aligns the use of Scots not with local or national pride but instead with “Nature’s pow’rs”:

The Simple Bard, unbroke by rules of Art,
 He pours the wild effusions of the heart:
 And if inspir’d, ‘tis Nature’s pow’rs inspire;
 Her’s all the melting thrill, and her’s the kindling fire.
 Anonymous (Kinsley III: 970)

This promise of natural poetry from a “Simple Bard” puts the matter of vernacular Scots usage in a light intended to be appealing to contemporary readers across Britain. Burns’s epigraph, like his self-manufactured glossary, extends a welcome to every feeling heart, reassuring prospective readers. At the same time, the purely English epigraph, in being attributed to “Anonymous,” is decisively severed from the main volume and specifically excluded from the writings of “chiefly Scottish” Robert Burns.

In 1721, Allan Ramsay's standard-English Preface to his first volume of Poems (printed by Thomas Ruddiman, uncle of the Walter Ruddiman who some fifty years later showcased Fergusson's poems in *The Weekly Magazine*) had been charming but self-deprecating. As David Daiches observes, "he was on the defensive about his 'Scotticisms.' They may, he said, 'offend some over-nice Ear,' but ... 'become their place as well as the Doric dialect of Theocritus, so much admired by the best judges.' One cannot imagine Dunbar defending his Scots language in this way" (in Woodring 100-101). In 1773, Fergusson had not provided any preface.

Burns's preface of 1786 has been much studied: it is defensive, distanced, as if to offset the genial intimacy of address in the poems to follow. Its formal English refers to the poet in the third person, as if "not by Burns himself but by someone closely interested, a press agent perhaps, a noted literatus, a Reverend Hugh Blair or Doctor Moore," as Jeffrey Skoblow writes (118). It opens with no mention of Scotland or the use of Scots, the title having already identified the language and culture mainly celebrated. The poet begins instead with the social and educational gulf that separates the working and leisure classes: "The following trifles are not the production of a Poet, who, with all the advantages of learned art, and perhaps amid the elegancies and idlenesses of upper life, looks down for a rural theme" (Kinsley III: 971). With a dash of resentment, Burns places front and center the difference between what is expected of poets and what he is prepared to offer. Burns's wording is always chosen with care and is especially significant here: a struggling tenant farmer cannot look "down" but must look across the social landscape for "rural themes." Burns opens his preface with an announcement—I intend to speak in these poems of my life as a poor man—that electrified readers in and, eventually, out of Scotland. Allan Cunningham, who was a child in 1786, in 1834 looked back and marveled at the impact of the Kilmarnock edition: "had a July sun risen on a December morning, the unwonted light could not have given greater surprise" (I: 37).

The 1786 poems surprised Scotland by steering literary Scots in a different direction. No longer chiefly the argot of

urban riot or rustic pastoral, it had become again, for the first time since the Makars, a means of searching a poet's own soul. Despite the stylized English, there is nothing of imposture—more like a guarded truth-telling—in the preface's last paragraph:

To amuse himself with the little creations of his own fancy, amid the toil and fatigues of a laborious life; to transcribe the various feelings ... in his own breast; to find some kind of counterpoise to the struggles of a world, always an alien scene.... these were his motives for courting the Muses, and in these he found Poetry to be it's <sic> own reward.

(Kinsley III: 971)

Never defending dialect per se, the preface mainly asserts the authority of a dialect-user to speak as a poet, to speak for himself, and to speak also to (and for) people like himself—a potential audience far larger than the Cape Club. Despite Burns's "seemingly infinite obligingness," to return to Geoffrey Hill's musings on poetic language, all is not accommodation in his preface: beneath its "surface humility," as Fiona Stafford has observed, is "an ... assertion of superiority" (54).

Edwin Morgan rightly sees Fergusson as "a poet who really had his gaze on Edinburgh" (83). Fergusson's poems about life in the capital celebrate the "daft days" around the New Year, the races at Leith, the opening and closing down of the legal Courts of Session. His treatment of country people, while respectful, is much more conventional. In the rare instances when he turns to peasant subjects in his dialect poems, he stands far back. "The Farmer's Ingle" (1772) is among his best poems. Nonetheless, it is not addressed to the farming family it describes, who serve as the mute centerpiece in a poetic lesson actually aimed at "gentler" readers:

Frae this lat gentler gabs a lesson lear;
 Wad they to labouring lend an eidant hand,
 They'd rax fell strang upo' the simplest fare,
 Nor find their stamacks ever at a stand.
 Fu' hale and healthy wad they pass the day,
 At night in calmest slumbers dose fu' sound,
 Nor doctor need their weary life to spae,
 Nor drogs their noddle and their sense confound,

Till Death slip sleely on, and gi'e the hindmost wound.
("The Farmer's Ingle": MacDiarmid II: 137)

The poem, which describes the supper and evening pastimes of a rural family, was one inspiration for Burns's "The Cotter's Saturday Night." Yet Fergusson's "ingle" or household fire, which expels the cold, warms the food, and draws the family close, is characteristically amplified by Burns. His cotters likewise gather around a hearth-fire, but later in the poem they themselves become a "wall of fire," an elemental force encircling and protecting Scotland. "The Farmer's Ingle" was of interest beyond Edinburgh: appearing in *The Weekly Magazine* (13 May 1773), it was soon reprinted in *The Perth Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* (21 May 1773; see McDiarmid II: 285). Yet the appeal of "The Cotter's Saturday Night" was broader still. For over a century, this was among the most admired of Burns's poems, no doubt in large part because of its vision of working families as strong and indomitable, not politically quiescent and meek.

Linking Scots dialect to an articulate and self-respecting peasantry, Burns was able to surmount the difficulties in reception that a use of Scots vernacular created. If the Scots words were puzzling, he would explain them; and if the peasantry in Scottish poetry had long been silent, they would now speak up. Still, as he settled the contents of the 1786 *Poems*, two questions must have constantly recurred. How could the Scottish dialect become a medium for enduring poetry, not just locally circulated like Fergusson's in Edinburgh, Dumfries, and Perth, but read and reviewed throughout Britain? Could any dialect poet expect a fate different from Fergusson's, an extraordinary poet whose work had been read, enjoyed, and then forgotten?

Allan Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* and songbook series *The Tea-Table Miscellany* (1724-37) had achieved, Burns knew, just such a currency outside Scotland. Yet these were, as their titles suggest, Anglicized projects; furthermore, Ramsay's portrayal of peasants was even more equivocal than Fergusson's. Contradicting the admiring sketch of dialect-speaking "Mause" in the back-story of *The Gentle Shepherd*, for instance, is Ramsay's main plot, wherein the

hero is revealed, as the title hints, to be no peasant by birth but instead the long-lost son of a baronet, Sir William Worthy. Peggy, Patie's bride-to-be, is then discovered to be Patie's cousin—exactly his equal in birth. Mause herself is something other than the rustic that she appears to be. Once Peggy's nurse and still loyal to the Worthy family, she says that ignorant peasants call her a witch because she speaks like an educated person. Even Ramsay's forenames assign a superior grace to the well-born: there is a world of social difference between "Patie" and "Peggy," the names of the hero and heroine, and "Bauldy" and "Neps," names of the herdsman and his wife-to-be.

The Gentle Shepherd is a much more interesting play than most critics have acknowledged, though Steve Newman has done it justice.⁸ But the plot, in which all the attractive "peasants" turn out to be of gentle birth, shatters no paradigms. Furthermore, although Ramsay's song collections were very popular, his poems had received almost as little critical attention as Fergusson's. His reputation in Burns's day was that of a purveyor of ultra-light diversions. This was not fair, given the razor-wit of Ramsay's occasional experiments with a gritty street-Scots ("Lucky Spence's Last Advice"). Still, he seldom risked offending polite readers after the earliest phase—circa 1720—of his long poetic career.

Burns never dreamed of Ramsay's "minor" status, any more than he could endure the thought of Fergusson lying, "unnoticed and unknown," in a pauper's unmarked grave. He sought for Scottish vernacular poetry the same high cultural profile that he sought for himself; and he wanted nothing less than "to be distinguished," as he put it in the final paragraph of his 1786 preface (Kinsley III: 972). Remembering and honoring his precursors, he nonetheless became the first of the eighteenth-century Scots poets to break away from caricature in the portrayal of dialect-speakers. This is not to say that Burns is never comic, but his jokes at the expense of rustics are rooted, as in "Holy Willie's Prayer," in idiosyncrasies of speech, belief, and behavior. His

⁸ See Newman, "Scots Songs in the Scottish Enlightenment: Pastoral, Progress, and the Lyric Split in Allan Ramsay, John Home, and Robert Burns" (44-96); also, McGuirk, "Augustan."

Scots-speakers are “characters,” not stereotypes like Fergusson’s Sandie and Willie or archetypes like Ramsay’s Bauldy in *The Gentle Shepherd*, who might have walked slowly north out of fifteenth-century Wakefield’s *Second Shepherd’s Play*.⁹

Burns’s second monument to Fergusson, the headstone he commissioned in 1787, paid public tribute to a poet whose reputation had been local and fleeting. His first memorial to his “elder brother in the Muses,” the *Poems* of 1786, surmounted the difficulties Fergusson had encountered by retaining a similar intensity of dialect while moving vernacular poetry out of the capital city to the margins of Scottish culture. Burns employs cotters, old farmers, haranguing preachers, sentimental ploughmen, even a pet sheep, as powerful speakers. As mentioned, Burns gave his copy of Fergusson away in 1787 to would-be Scottish poet Rebekah Carmichael, having learned what he could. He passed along something of Fergusson to an aspiring English writer as well. Although never mentioning Burns, William Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) carries on the Scots vernacular poets’ shared project of distilling a newly representative kind of poetry from the “language of conversation in the middle and lower classes”:

⁹ In “Eclogue,” first poem in the Scots portion of his 1773 volume (twenty-eight poems in English and nine in vernacular Scots, though many more Scots poems had appeared in *The Weekly Magazine*), Fergusson makes a rare use of dialect-speakers, Sandie and Willie, in a country setting. He may have placed this poem first as an homage to Ramsay, for it resembles the interchange between young shepherds that opens *The Gentle Shepherd*. Fergusson’s Sandie, a plowman, is—like Ramsay’s character Roger—comically unlucky in love, complaining to his sympathetic friend Willie that his scold of a young wife has yet to spin any cloth for him though she has had the lint a year; instead, she has been stealing away into Edinburgh to shop for tea. Fergusson’s midnight town-poems are another matter, but to Fergusson a country setting suggests sunshine, cheerful work, and uncomplicated young men who speak, like Sandie in “Eclogue,” of small domestic comforts and distresses.

The majority of the following poems ... were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure.... [W]hile they are perusing this book, [... readers] should ask themselves if it contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents. ("Advertisement" 443)

Wordsworth encountered Burns at age 17, borrowing the 1786 *Poems* from a school-friend. He and his sister Dorothy so highly regarded the book that they purchased and annotated the expanded 1787 edition. Fergusson's expressive Scots dialect became in Burns's own hands a means to re-center poetry around the no-longer-silent voices of "poor bodies," a lesson not lost on Wordsworth as he worked on his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*. It is pleasant to consider that Wordsworth's partial emulation of Burns, who partly emulated Fergusson, was a means by which the forgotten Robert Fergusson's rich gift of Scots was paid forward for future generations in places far from Edinburgh's moonlit streets. Through Wordsworth's own adaptations of Burns's poetic diction, Fergusson, in company with the "younger brother" that he never met, passed—unremarked yet instrumental—into the traditions of British Romanticism.

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