Scottish Verse in The Weekly Magazine

Ian C. Walker
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The chief glory of the Edinburgh Weekly Magazine,1 preserving it from oblivion is, of course, the poetry of Robert Fergusson. However, it is outside the bounds of the present study to attempt a full-scale appreciation of his work. The task has already been in some measure undertaken by M. P. McDiarmid in Volume I of the Scottish Text Society's edition of the poems;2 although he is more concerned with Fergusson's position in literary history than with detailed evaluation of individual poems. Even the relationship between Fergusson's poetry and its magazine setting, more germane to the present investigation, has already been touched upon, albeit somewhat informally, by J. W. Oliver, who shows that certain of the poems may have been prompted by passages Fergusson had read in the journal of his friend and patron.3 Instead, it is proposed to seek an answer here to the following question: Why is the Scottish poetry of Fergusson and others in the Weekly Magazine so much better than the English poetry, including the English poetry of Fergusson himself? A possible advantage of pursuing this enquiry may be to rescue the Scottish poetry written by other contributors from neglect, if it so deserves. Undoubtedly it has suffered neglect, completely obscured by the achievement of Fergusson himself.

First of all, it may be profitable to describe some of those characteristics of Fergusson which are shared by his fellow-contributors in Scots. To write a poem in Scots involves far more than the use of "provincial" words and phrases. A Scots poet sees things in an entirely different light from an English one. For example, in Fergusson's first Weekly Magazine Scots poem (2nd January 1772, XV, 17), his attitude to the hostile elements of nature is not one of respectful awe: the Scottish mortal gets his own revenge against the weather by being

1The Weekly Magazine or Edinburgh Amusement, published by Walter Ruddiman (nephew of Ruddiman the grammarian) and his son Thomas, 60 vols. (Edinburgh, 1768-1784).


disrespectful; his native vocabulary becomes an effective instrument to let him be so:

Now mirk December's dowie face
Glowrs ow'r the rigs wi' sour grimace,
While, thro' his minimum o' space,
   The bleer-ey'd sun,
Wi' blinkin' light, and stealing pace,
   His race doth run. (**The Daft-Days,** ll. 1-6).

The eighteenth-century Scots poet's attitude tends to be more relaxed and spontaneous than that of his English counterpart. His language is closer to that of the common people and makes use of proverbial or semi-proverbial expressions. Instead of adopting a condescending air he almost becomes a participant in the scene described.

"The Sow of Feeling," Ferguson's attack on Henry Mackenzie, although written in English, seems to symbolize the confrontation between the Scots nationalistic intellect and the contemporary movements of pre-romanticism and sentimentalism in English writing. In Ferguson's best work one is aware of the sense of community, the sense of belonging. The figure of the sentimental wanderer is absent. He is a town poet, and in some respects might almost be called an Augustan. But yet his work and that of his fellow *Weekly Magazine* writers in Scots should not be regarded as a throw-back from the pre-romantics and sentimentals to something more antiquated. M. P. McDiarmid has described as a limitation the fact that in Ferguson's time Scots was considered suitable only for poetic subjects of a humorous or lowly nature. But this apparent limitation has been the saving grace of Scottish poetry. Endowed with too much earthy humour to take himself over-seriously, the Scots poet is in no danger of falling into postures of sentimental affectation or stilted artificiality.

The importance of Ferguson in this context is that he provided the stimulus for the continued use of Scots as a literary language, respectable enough to appear in print amid the current Anglicising trend. He reminded his countrymen of their native verse tradition and freed them from the necessity of adopting a vein that was unrealistically pretentious and solemn. His Scots poems are constructive, they present an objective view of life, even if the viewpoint is predominantly humorous. And in discussing his work it is easy to over-stress the humorous element, so as to give the impression there is nothing else. One should remember that serious love song, "The Lee Rig," which Burns

*Poems, II, 118 ff.*
admitted he could not excel, the memory of halcyon student days ("Say ye, red gowns . . .") in the "Elegy on John Hogg," the opening lament in the "Eclogue, to the Memory of Dr. William Wilkie," ("Blaw saft, my reed, and kindly to my maen,"") with its long muted sounds exploiting to the full the qualities of the language.

The first blow for the continued existence of Scottish poetry was struck, however, not by "The Daft-Days," but, rather strangely, by a verse epistle of Beattie to Alexander Ross (I, 275). Although this was a reprint from the Aberdeen Journal, in its Weekly Magazine context of artificial English verse it looks quite sensational. The Scottish poet's attitude, even more than his language, comes as a relief after what had gone before in this section of the magazine, so much more homely, sincere, down-to-earth and hard-hitting. Although not disdaining to call a spade a spade, Beattie shows in his ninth stanza, just admired by a reader (I, 404) that the Scottish scene and the Scottish language could provide real poetry, without the affectations of a fictitious Arcadia:

O bonny are our greensward hows,  
Where through the birks the burny rows,  
And the bee bums, and the ox lows,  
And saft winds ruse,  
And shepherd-lads on sunny knows,  
Blaw the blythe fustle.

The whole piece is more than just a familiar and ephemeral verse epistle. It makes a stated case for the continued use of the national language as a literary medium, presenting in the third and fourth verses from the end a roll-call of those poets, such as Dunbar and Douglas, who had achieved greatness through their use of the old tongue.

Examination of the Weekly Magazine's files shows that all the other Scots poems by little-known writers were published after Ferguson had started to contribute. A fairly well-founded guess might therefore be made that he provided the example, if not always the model for imitation. There would be little point in discussing pieces like Charles Keith's "The Farmer's Hi," John Mayne's "Hallow-Een" and "The Siller Gun" that are patently imitations of specific poems by Ferguson: they suffer from the defects of all imitations made seriously by someone who is not a master. Instead, it may be worth-while to isolate from Ferguson's influence some of the elements, possibly of independent origin and certainly of literary value, present in the work of other contributors writing poetry in Scots.

The most accomplished Scots poem in the magazine showing little trace of Ferguson's influence is probably the imitation of Horace, Book
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I, Ode IX by the unidentified "Vanlu" of Aberdeen (28th January 1773, XIX, 146), written in *rima coule*, a rather unusual metre for an eighteenth-century poet. The complete text is not reproduced here as it is reprinted in an appendix to the Scottish Text Society's edition of Fergusson's poems (II, 246). This piece should not be compared with Fergusson's version of Horace, Book I, Ode XI (not published in the *Weekly Magazine*), a *tour de force* of fairly strict translation, rendering the Latin into "language such as men do use" instead of the no-man's language of too many translations. "Vanlu's" poem is something different: he rightly calls it an imitation. It may, therefore, profitably be compared with Ramsay's "Look up to Pensland's towring Tap," also an imitation, and an imitation based, of course, on the same Horatian ode. Both could be described as being in the same relation to *Vides ut alta stet* . . . as a painting is to a pencil drawing. Both Ramsay and "Vanlu" choose a certain aspect of the original and work it out in picturesque detail far beyond Horace's limits. Each of them is typically Scottish in his awareness of the physical presence of what is being described in detail. Ramsay chooses to develop the amatory aspect, and makes it the most important feature of his poem. "Vanlu" plays down that particular aspect, giving it even less attention than Horace did, and instead develops the grimmer aspects of winter and old age.

Look up, my friend, look up and see,
The hills of North and Bannochie,
What heaps of snow lie o' them!
Lord help the bodies of the hills,
For neither plows, nor kills, nor mills,
Can gang this day amo' them.
The hills are white, the woods are blew,
There's neither drink for horse nor cow
(‘The wells are smor’d wi’ drift),
But when the silly servant lad
Flings aft the snow wi’ shool and spade,
And makes a sorry shift.

The development of the old-age aspect is worthy of the medieval "makars," almost terrifying in its stark intensity:—

'Ere age come creeping like a snail,
And make you twa-fald like a flail,
And nail you to the blankets;
Flyp baith your cheeks, and fur your brow,
Twin you of teeth and mark o' you',
And sharp your whittle nose,
And with your fabric act a farce
Will gar your breeks hing o'er your a-e
And legs haf fill your hose.

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The line "And make you twa-fald like a flail" might seem to be derived from Ramsay's "And lay ye twa-fald o'er a rung" and, even with the addition of a picturesque simile, is not necessarily an improvement. Ramsay's line is equally vivid, perhaps even better because it is simpler.

The number of vernacular poems couched in the form of the eclogue or pastoral dialogue cannot escape attention, e.g., "a pastoral in the Scots dialect, in imitation of Virgil's First Eclogue" (28th October 1773, XXII, 146-147) where the classical dialogue is transported with some care to a Scottish landscape, possibly gaining topical interest from the current problem of Highland emigration:

ROBIN

So Symon, lie you here? it's weel wi' you,
To sing an' sleep's the maist ye ha' to do:\nGod help us! we our lang-held houff maun flee,
And seek anither hame beyond the sea;
While laid fu' keidgily aneath the shade,
Wi' leaves and lilies reeling round your head;
Of dautit Peggy's gowden locks you sing,
Till hill an' dale wi' Peggy's praises ring . . .

This recourse to a classical poem might represent a desire to rid the pastoral of its accumulated artificiality by going back to a purer form. The use of such a model would permit a Scottish poem to be acceptable even if it did not aspire above the level of homely and relaxed conversation. But the popularity of the eclogue could also be seen as evidence that the Weekly Magazine's minor Scots poets were looking to Ramsay as well as to Fergusson for inspiration: the situation described in "a pastoral eclogue in the Caledonian dialect" (20th February 1777, XXXV, 273-274) is very similar to that in Ramsay's "Patie and Roger." Unfortunately all these pastorals lack the supreme ease and naturalism of Fergusson's elegiac eclogue on Professor Wilkie, where the accepted convention is so successfully submerged in the view of the Scottish scene as to be completely unobtrusive. In all these other examples, as indeed in "The Twa Dogs" of Burns, one is perhaps a little too conscious of the stereotyped beginning and ending, whereby it is explained how the interlocutors found occasion to talk, and how the weather or the time of day at length terminated their conversation.

Descriptions of winter figure frequently in the magazine's dialect poems. The authors were only too familiar with the season's severity, which could be quite well portrayed through the expressive sounds of their native speech:

Bleak winter reigns, ilk hill's o'erlaid wi' snow,
Cauld frete the north wi' bir the tempests blaw;

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The rowan spait ilk neib'ring tenant drees,
While brattling hailstanes sough amang the trees:
Syne the herd lads, saebiens they canna' tent
Their cauldrife hirlses on the elricht bent,
To shun the storm their doors they carefu' steek ...

("Marion. A Pastoral.")
16th October 1777, XXXVIII, 63-64)

Not unnaturally the Scots were also familiar with remedies against
the inclemency of winter, and conviviality is equally prominent among
the themes of their verse. Outside the work of Fergusson, the finest
expression of conviviality in the magazine is undoubtedly Skinner’s
"Tullochgorum" (2nd May 1776, XXXII, 177-178; an alternative version
appears under 30th January 1777, XXXV, 178). M. P. McDiarmid
writes, "The earliest appearance of Skinner's excellent song, to my
knowledge, is in The Weekly Magazine, 2 May, 1776,"* but there seems
no reason to doubt the veracity of the editor, in his introduction to the
song: "An incorrect copy of the following very agreeable Scots Song
having lately appeared in another Publication, falsely ascribed to a
celebrated writer, we are desired by the connections of the real author
to present our readers with a genuine copy." With its echoing repetitions
producing somehow a tremendous sense of warmth and social merriment,
it has all the appearance of a drinking song, and yet, surprisingly,
the element of drink is quite absent from it.

Skinner's song would probably not be nearly so good as it is but
for the fact it was written to fit an existing tune. This brings us to
mention the last feature of literary value, independent of Fergusson, in
the Weekly Magazine's vernacular poems, the folk-song element, which
has been the saving grace of more than one minor Scots poet. When
composing his verses to fit the metre of a traditional tune, the poet is
able to forget the restrictive requirements of more elaborate literary
forms, and is encouraged to express his feelings with greater simplicity
and unrestrained spontaneity than would otherwise be possible. To
illustrate this point, an example from the number for 23rd October
1777 (XXXVIII, 88) is given entire:

For the WEEKLY MAGAZINE
The SOGER'S RETURN. A NEW SONG.
Tune, Push about the forum.

THE tither morn,
When I, forlorn,
Aneath an aik sat moaning,
I did na trow

*Poems, II, 255.

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I'd see my jo,
Beside me 'gain the glowming.
    But he fu' trig,
Lap o'er the rig,
And dawingly did cheer me,
    When I, what reck!
Did least expect
To see my laddie near me.

His bonnet he,
    A thought a-see,
Cock'd sprush when first he clasp'd me
    And I, I war,
Wi' fainness gra,
While in his grips he press'd me!
    Deil tak the war!
I late and air
Have wish'd since Jock departed;
    But now as glad
I'm wi' my lad
As shortsyne broken-hearted!

Fu' aft at e'en,
    Wi' dancing keen,
When a' were blythe and merry,
    I car'd na by,
Sae sad was I
In absence of my deary.
    But praise be blest!
My mind's at rest,
I'm happy wi' my Johny!
    At kirk and fair,
I'se ay be there,
And be as canty's ony.

AENIGMA.

As the Weekly Magazine bears witness, Scots songs were very popular at that time in London. Some of them were reproduced "as sung by Mrs. Wrighten" at Vauxhall Gardens—"The Favourite Kissing Song," "Willy's Rare and Willy's Fair," "Where new mown hay, on winding Tay" (XXXVII, 232, 256; XLI, 17). The two last-mentioned examples, like the original "The Lass of Howgate" (Tune "The Bonniest Lass in a' the Warld," XLVI, 89) are really Anglo-Scots, since the Scots language element is small. Yet in them, especially at the refrain, we find the same simple and artless emotion expressed without self-

* Cf. Ruddiman's note to the alternative version of "Tullochgorum": "We hear Miss Catley is figuring away with it at Covent-Garden theatre." (XXXV, 178.)
conscious restraint, as in "The Soger's Return." It is freely admitted that these pieces do not depend for their success on use of the vernacular, since this is present only in small quantities. What we have here is something approaching pure folk-song, for which dialect is not really necessary. Nevertheless folk-song and vernacular combined may have a powerful effect. A more accomplished song in Scots occurs in the number for 1st January 1784 (LIX, 14), reproduced in full here, as it deserves. Unfortunately it lacks the superscription "For the Weekly Magazine" and may, therefore, be a reprint.

_A LUVE SANG_ to Bonny KATE, _our neist door Neighbour._

Tho' Winter comes wi' breath sae snell,
And nips wi' frost the gyzan'd gowan,
Yet frosty winter (strange to tell)
Has set my thrawart heart a-lowin.

Whan a' the chielis, wi' noset blase,
Creep chittering to the canty ingle,
Thro' sleet and snaw to Kate I gae,
Drawn wi' a whang o' Cupid's linigel.

If in a dub I chance to plash,
Up to the lugs, like mad Leander;
The dub plays phizz, whan down I clash,
Just like a herring on a brander.

O gin the Muse wad grant my boon,
And steal the pipe of Jamie Beattie;
Wi' pith I'd blaw the poet's drone,
And sing the charms of bonny Katy.

For Katy's sonny, Katy's fair,
She's sweet, and buxom, blyth, and gawsy;
There's nae laas can wi' Kate compare
O' a' that walks Edina's causey.

When first I met her glances keen,
I fan' my heart wi' luve sae ruggit,
That troth I curst her pauly een,
And wish'd that they had baith been pluggit.

Gin there be ony lumpish ass
Wha disna fin' his heart-strings kittle,
As soon's he sees my Katy's face—
I doubt he's made o' saffish mettle.

Whan our back-dore I gang to steek,
And bonny Kate frae her back winnock,
Gies a bit sleet and smiling keek,
It warnis me like a toasted bannock.
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To sleep I try — but de'il a wink —
(Fae hopless luve may Fate ay screen us)! I sprawl and sprattle when I think There's nought but a bit loan a'ween us.

Lang syne Leander, ilka night, Swam ower the sea at Hero's bidding; But gin my Kate wad me invite, I've nought ado but jump the midding.

One may observe here the use of similes, "like a toasted bannock," "like a herring on a brander," so homely and appropriate to the native scene that they might well have their origin in common speech rather than in literary invention. The phrase "sprawl and sprattle," more familiar from Burns's "To a Louse" may also be a colloquial expression. The tone of frank, easy conversation is also fostered by the metre, with a hypermetrical syllable at the end of the second and fourth lines in each stanza. It is gratifying to notice how completely classical mythology has been assimilated into the vernacular context with humorous effect, avoiding all taint of artificiality, e.g., "wi' a whang o' Cupid's lingel," "up to the lugs, like mad Leander," with which compare "Styx, that filthy burn" in L.G.'s "Verses from the Living to the Dead" addressed to Ferguson (XXXIII, 82), or the comic involvement of the goddess in the situation described in Ferguson's own "Leith Races." But more important still in the "Luve Sang" is the relentless impetus and verve carrying the sense forward, something not always present even in Ferguson at his best. This quality is obviously derived from the musical foundation, or at least musical association, and as in so many Scottish songs, the rhythm is almost that of a lively dance.

If we look for literary connections, then it might be said that this category of native verse in the Weekly Magazine looks back to Ramsay, forward to Burns. The element of Scots song is scarcely evident in Ferguson, but it would not be true to say it is entirely absent; it only disappears to run underground. One thinks of his personal exploits in singing, of "The Lee Rig," his solitary written specimen of this art, but also of the ballad style in "Leith Races"? and the marvellous atmosphere of gay abandon at the beginning of "The Election," in its rhythm strongly reminiscent of "There's nae Luck about the House."

Briefly, the Scots verse in the Weekly Magazine is preferable to the English because it is closer to life, to the real life that these poets knew. Perhaps their experience of life was restricted, but their reaction to it in the native tongue is sincere and perfectly valid, even if it is a

? Noticed by McDiarmid, Poems, II, 293.
humorous view, or a worm's-eye view. McDiarmid's assertion, mentioned earlier, that in the eighteenth century Scottish dialect verse was limited in its scope, considered appropriate only for humble or humorous subjects, should not be misunderstood to mean that the vernacular cannot be an effective medium for more serious subjects, or that the comic vision of life is one that is distorted and untrue.

It should be remembered that not only Fergusson, but also most of the minor vernacular poets in the Weekly Magazine contributed pieces in English as well as Scots. It almost seems as if they did not realise one medium was preferable to the other. As McDiarmid writes of Fergusson, "There was no question, of course, of a decision between the two mediums of expression, of a choice having to be made between two paths to fame. Fergusson obviously intended to follow both the English and the Scottish ways."

Perhaps Ruddiman himself was a little more perceptive. Whereas he scarcely ever praised any of the English verse contributions, he wrote thus when introducing some Scottish verses addressed to himself:

> The following Scots stanzas were addressed to the Publisher by an anonymous correspondent. We now insert them for the sake of the humour and the language, and not from any motive of vanity or ostentation. They are not a despicable imitation of Fergusson, whose genius we wish to see revived — Sed quando alium inveniemus parem?

(14th April 1779, XLIV, 66).

Viewed against the context of other literary movements represented in the magazine, Scottish poetry stands apart, almost timeless. An affinity between Fergusson and the Augustans was suggested earlier, but the differences are stronger than the similarities. Closer all the time to real life and to nature, the native verse had no need to react violently as the main current of English literature did, from the extreme of neo-classicism to the extreme of naturalism. The cult of sensibility could be just as artificial as anything it was meant to replace.

If one searches in the Weekly Magazine for any signs of a flowering of Scots prose comparable to that of Scots poetry, the result is extremely disappointing. The few passages of continuous Scottish prose that are encountered show clearly that the medium could not flourish even in such a fertile soil as Ruddiman's journal. Semi-humorous or trivial, they merely reproduce the tone of commonplace conversation.

*Poems, I, 33.

*IV, 241-243 — a reprint; XXVI, 79-80; XXXI, 144; XLII, 158-159, 204-205.
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There is no attempt to transmute life into literature. An impression is conveyed merely of something primitive, which is not true of the magazine's vernacular poetry.

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