Robert Fergusson’s Life, Career and the Scottish poetic Tradition

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Abstract

Fergusson(1750-1774) was the great poet of Scotland. He was the fore-runner of Robert Burns, the national poet of Scotland. It is regrettable that there is only one paragraph on the pages of world’s largest encyclopaedia ‘encyclopaedia Britannica’ with the entry ‘Robert Fergusson’. The chief purpose of this paper is to bring out the contribution of forgotten, but remarkable poet of Scotland ‘Robert Fergusson’. Though Fergusson has never ceased to be read, moiré than forty separate editions of his poems have appeared since his death; he has suffered comparatively neglect at the hands of literary historians and critics who have usually dismissed him with brief uncritical appraisals. The present paper is an attempt to enlighten the life and career of Robert Fergusson. Robert Fergusson’s father died early and left two sons and two daughters. Fergusson was the youngest and only fifteen years old. The account of his life is given by Mr.Thomas Summers of Edingurgh in a book titled ‘the Life of the Poet’ published in 1803.

Key Words: Poetry, Scottish, tradition, career, genre, Eighteenth century, enlighten the life.

Fergusson’s Career

Thanks to generous bursary, whose support brought Fergusson to go to St. Andrews, where he was admitted to St. Salvator College in December, 1764.

Fergusson started his career as a copyist of legal documents for Charles Abercrombie, who was deputy clerk of the Commissary Office, a government legal department. Thus, by September, 1769, Fergusson got his start in one of the most drudging and utterly dispiriting occupations imaginable- the endless copying of endless documents.

Soon after his settlement in Edinburgh, Fergusson resumed his experimental writing of verses and seems quickly to have acquired a local reputation as a poet. By the spring of 1771 he had become a regular contributor to a popular journal. *The Weekly Magazine*, *of Edinburgh Amusement*, published by Walter and Thomas Ruddiman. In that year, eight of his poems in hackneyed neo-classical English appeared in the magazine, most of them worth less limitations of Shenstone. It would be hard to imagine a less promising beginning in poetry. Quite suddenly,

however, in January, 1772, he reverted to the native poetic tradition with 'The Daft-Days", the first of a series of thirty-one brilliant Scots poems which flowed from his pen with ever-increasing and astonishing frequency through the following two years. These poems brought Fergusson almost immediate national fame, but no substantial patronage; he was forced to stick at his dreary job in the Commissary Office. But by the fall of 1772, letters were pouring in from delighted readers all over Scotland, acclaiming his as a new national poet and the legitimate successor to Ramsay ("Is Allan risen frae the died ?"). Two immediate results were Fergusson's election to the distinguished Cape Club of Edinburgh in October, 1772, and the publication of a slim volume of his *Poems* in the next year. Almost overnight the improverished young legal clerk had become an Edinburgh celebrity.

But Fergusson's triumph was short-lived. His health had never been good; toward the end of 1773 it was strained beyond the breaking point by overwork (he was writing at a feverish pace) and by his strenuous social life. In January, 1774, he collapsed with a severe physical and nervous disorder[1]. After several months of fluctuating illness, the final blow came in late July when feeling somewhat better, Fergusson went out to visit a friend and fell down a flight of stone stairs. He suffered a concussion and some brain injury which resulted in violent, intermittent insanity. His distracted mother was forced to commit him to the Edinburgh madhouse for paupers, a grim old building called "the Schelles" or "Cells", where on October 17, 1774,[2] just a few weeks after his twernty-fourth birthday, Robert Fergusson died in the night.

The tragic brevity of Fergusson's career – he did all of his best work in two short years – has tended to obscure the true nature of his achievement. Eclipsed as he was almost immediately by Burns, Fergusson has usually been relegated by historians of literature to the anomalous position of a "forerunner"; seldom has he been treated as a poet in his own right. This approach has encouraged the view of Fergusson as a boy-poet with a lucky gift, who dashed off a few vivid sketches of Edinburgh life and then died and whose only importance is that he happened to have stimulated Burns. But Burns knew better; his poetic instinct recognized the astonishing power and maturity of Fergusson's work which he valued above Ramsay's as, up to his own time, the finest Scots poetry of the century. And Burns was right.

To the Hon[ble] the Bailies of the Canongate, Edinburgh Gentlemen, I am sorry to be told that the remains of Robert Fergusson, 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 ignoble Dead, unnoticed and unknown…

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 –

I have the honor to be, Gentlemen,

your very humble servant

Robert Burns[1]

Eddin 6th Feb,

1787

In this formal but strangely touching letter, Scotland's greatest poet records his protest against the unfeeling neglect of talent and speaks out for the dignity of art. What he says serves to emphasize two facts : the underserved obscurity in which Robert Fergusson's name lingered, and he overwhelming sense of gratitude which Burns felt towards him. just over twelve years before this letter was written, Fergusson had died in an Edin… burgh madhouse at the age of twenty-four, after a few brief but brilliant and prolific years of poetic activity. And Burns never tired of acknowledging his debt to the Edinburgh poet whom he called "my elder brother in misfortune, By far my elder brother in the Muse."[2] This fulsome and often repeated praise of Fergusson has usually been dismissed as grossly exaggerated (Burnsian hyperbole), but Burns knew better than anyone else that his "discovery" of Fergusson had been the turning point in his career, that in Fergusson he had finally found himself. Moreover, recent studies have made it increasingly clear that Fergusson was not only the one really decisive influence upon Burns, but also, in his own right, one of the most significant figures in the history of Scots poetry. A brief glance at the Scots tradition which produced him will help to place Fergusson in this perspective.

When Robert Fergusson burst upon the literary scene of Scotland in the 1770's, the native poetic tradition was in a rather precarious state. In the early part of the century, a group of writers and editors, led by Allan Ramsay, had attempted with partial success to revive interest in the ancient and honorable Scots literary tradition, and to bridge an almost fatal gap in the development of a distinctive national literature, this gap, separating medieval from modern Scots literature, resulted from the long barren period of about 1570 to 1700, during which time the strong and bright current of poetic writing in Scots had been reduced to an intermittent trickle. So long and severe had been the blight upon Scots literature that, by the opening of the eighteenth century, the very names of the great makers of the medieval past-William Dunbar, Robert Henryson, King James I – were half forgotten, while many of their works survived on in obscure and scattered manuscripts. It was as though Scotland had chosen not to remember that she had once had a proud ad distinguished literature.

Scottish Tradition

In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the "golden age" of the old tradition, the situation had been very different indeed. Then the Scottish court had been the center for a brilliant, versatile national literature held in high esteem throughout Europe, and fas surely surpassing in artistic quality the work produced in England during the same period. The Scots poetry of this fruitful age can be divided into three broad categories. First, there was the sophisticated courtly poetry with its "termes aureate", the dream-visions, love lyrics and elaborate moral allegories, this poetry was essentially medieval and international in character, though expressed in a distinctively Scots literary language. In the fifteenth century this "aureate" tradition is represented by such poems as "The Kingis Quair" of James I, "The Testament of Cresseid" of Henryson, and "The Goldyn Targe" of Dundar, and in the sixteenth century by the graceful lyrics of Alexander Scott, "The Cherrie and the Slae" of Alexander Montgomerie, and the courtly poems of Sir David Lindsay and Sir Richard Maitland. Second, at the other end of the scale,

there was the folk poetry, consisting of popular ballads and songs of the common people. Finally, there was a third and very important type of poetry: the artistic treatment of folk themes. Into this broad category fall such poems as the fifteenth-century "Christis Kirk on the Green" and "Peblis to the Play" (attributed to James I); Henryson's "fables", Scott's "Justing and Debait"; much of the best work of Dunbar, Lindsay, and Maitland; and a great bulk of poems by unknown authors.

What happened in Scotland to account for the sudden withering of this vigorous poetic tradition toward the close of the sixteenth century ? Among many possible causes, there may be adduced as certain. One was the triumph of Knoxian Calvinism which proscribed poetry along with other "lewd" entertainments and brought such powerful social and moral pressure to bear that it succeeded in virtually stiffing poetic creation in Scotland except among a handful of the aristocracy. A second severe blow was th removal in 1603 of the court, which had always been the center of poetic patronage, from Edinburgh to London.finally, the overwhelming influence of the great English poetry of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries persuaded the few Scottish gentlemen who (like Drummond of Hawthornded) continued to practice the art to turn their backs upon the old native tradition and to follow the Elizabethan English style. The result was an almost complete break in the development of sophisticated poetry in the Scots tongue, though the folk poetry did continue to thrive obscurely in oral transmission through the long winter of the seventeenth century despite the Kirk's disapproval. From the whole seventeenth century only a handful of new art poems in Scots have come down to us, written by country gentlemen of the type of Drummond or the Sempills of Beltrees. Among these sporadic efforts "The Life and Death of Habbie Simson" (ca. 1640) by Robert Sempill of Beltrees should be mentioned as the prototype of the comic-elegy genre which became immensely popular in the next century. But, generally speaking, the seventeenth century is a dismal and almost fatal hiatus in the history of Scots poetry.

The revival of interest in the native poetic tradition, which tool place in the early decades of the eighteenth century, came in the wake of a renewed sense of Scottish nationalism. The parliamentary Union of 1707, which reduced Scotland politically to the status of a British province, provoked a profound cultural reaction. Many Scots, suffering from a feeling of injured dignity and political betrayal, were stirred to reassert their country's ancient cultural identity and to resist assimilation by England. The result was an extraordinary cultural resurgence, which produced an imposing array of internationally famous philosophers, physicians, architects, lawyers, historians and men of letters; and this renaissance turned Edinburgh into "the Athens of the North", one of he most dynamic intellectual centers in Europe. In literature, some (like Thomson and Boswell) tried to outdo the English in their own literary idiom; others (like Ramsay and his followers) attempted to reinvigorate the native poetic language and tradition.

The Scots poetic revival in the eighteenth century, then, was essentially a nationalistic movement, the effort of some sections of a small and economically poor nation to reaffirm its cultural integrity. It was heralded by the publication of James Watson's epoch-making anthology, *A Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems, both Ancient and Modern*

(Edinburgh 1706, 1709, 1711), and pioneered by the versatile Allan Ramsay. Ramsay's work as an editor and publicist of Scots poetry (*The Ever Greev*, 1724; *The Tea-Table Miscellany*, 1724) met with instantaneous success; moreover, his original poetry in the vernacular-through by no means first-rate-restored to vigorous life several traditional Scots genres. In the latter respect, however, Ramsay's achievement was limited. The Scots tongue had been so long in disuse as a vehicle for serious poetry that Ramsay felt able to use it, for the most part, only for comic verse and songs; in his serious poetry, Ramsay usually reverted to laboured neo-Classical English. Even so, Ramsay's many-faceted and untiring effort as a restorer of literary Scots was of great historical importance and formed an indispensable foundation for the later work of Fergusson and Burns.

The persons influence and example of Allan Ramsay stimulated several younger writers to follow his lead; but, during the long period from about 1730 to 1770 (Ramsay himself virtually stopped writing in 1728), no Scots of comparable stature appeared. As a result, the vernacular revival, so Edinburgh legal clerk, Robert Fergusson.auspiciously launched in the first quarter of the century, seemed to be in serious danger of petering out altogether for lack of adequate leadership. This danger, however, was fortunately averted by the sudden emergence in 1772 of a compelling new voice in Scots poetry – that of an obscure.

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