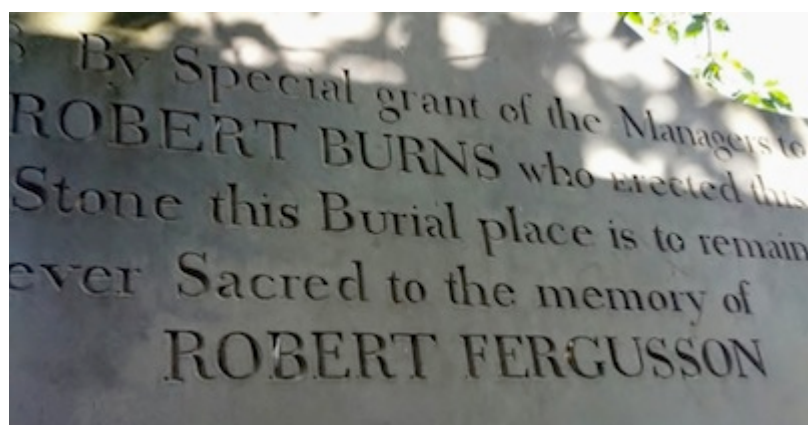


Memorialising the Death and Legacy of Robert Fergusson: Romantic Sympathy and Enlightenment Medical Improvement

By Rhona Brown



The story of Robert Fergusson (1750-74) is a compelling and, in the end, alarming one. Although Tom Leonard recently (and rightly) rejected the traditional view of the poet as 'tragic', instead portraying Fergusson's life as a 'triumph', nineteenth- and twentieth-century biographical accounts have tended to place a magnifying glass over the grim circumstances of his final illness and premature death. This is perhaps unsurprising. Although he died in 1774, well before the culmination of Romanticism, Fergusson's legend is largely a post-Romantic construction. His is an archetypal story of doomed youthful genius and Romantic isolation, bearing parallels with the legends of the poet's English contemporary, Thomas Chatterton and Romantic successor, John Keats. This much is well-documented. Less well-known is the role played by Dr. Andrew Duncan Senior (1744-1828) in Fergusson's story and legacy. Described by his biographer, John Chalmers, as a 'Physician of the Enlightenment', Duncan treated Fergusson during his final illness at home and incarceration in Edinburgh's 'Bedlam' asylum. An analysis of their relationship clearly demonstrates that Fergusson possesses a little-known

but lasting and concrete legacy which stretches far beyond literary influence and is anything but 'tragic'.

The Romantic movement and its forerunner, literary Sensibility, have had a profound effect on the 'story' of Fergusson, particularly when it is told by his fellow poets. It is not difficult to see how Fergusson's biography came to be read through this lens. He was born in Edinburgh's (now demolished) Cap and Feather Close in 1750. Although his childhood was marred by recurring illness, he was educated at a private school in Edinburgh before enrolling in the city's High School. After obtaining a bursary, he continued his studies at Dundee Grammar School and thereafter matriculated at the University of St. Andrews. His father's death compelled his return to Edinburgh without graduating (which was not exceptional in the period) to care for his mother and younger sister. To provide a family income, he took work as a legal copyist or 'writer'. From this point, he was keenly involved in Edinburgh's social life. He was an enthusiastic member of Edinburgh's Cape Club, in which he had close friendships with song-collector David Herd and artist Alexander Runciman, and was a regular visitor to the theatre. He enjoyed patronage from one of Edinburgh's most prominent publishers, Walter Ruddiman, and became the 'house poet' of Ruddiman's *Weekly Magazine or Edinburgh Amusement* in his early twenties, publishing verses there on an almost weekly basis between 1771 and 1773. Ruddiman was also responsible for producing the only volume published during the poet's lifetime, his *Poems* of 1773. Fergusson's achievement, for one so young, is remarkable. Alongside his literary success and social ease, however, he appears to have suffered from frequent periods of depression, and by the end of 1773 was obliged to leave his work as a copyist. After a number of well-documented incidents highlighting his delusional mentality in the ensuing months, Fergusson seems to have experienced a brief respite in mid-1774 during which he had a night out with friends. That evening, he fell on a staircase and suffered a vicious blow to the head which left him furiously insane. His mother's circumstances meant that he could not be cared for at home, so Fergusson was committed (via a 'deception' accomplished by his friends) to Edinburgh's 'Bedlam' or Asylum for Pauper Lunatics. He died in his cell on 17 October 1774, having turned twenty-four in the previous month.

Robert Burns (1759-96), himself often regarded as a key literary influence on the Romantic movement, certainly zoned in on the 'tragedy' of his 'elder brother in

misfortune' and 'in the muses'. In his 'On Fergusson' (1787), Burns's speaker 'pities' the Edinburgh poet's 'unhappy fate' and accusingly asks, 'Why is the bard so unpitied by the world,/Yet has so keen a relish of its pleasures?' According to Burns, Fergusson's death was met by the indifference of 'ungrateful man'. Despite the 'pity' of his life, Fergusson's work is, for Burns, a crucial catalyst. In his autobiographical letter to John Moore from Mauchline, 2 August 1787, Burns attests that, 'Rhyme, except some religious pieces which are in print, I had given up; but meeting with Fergusson's Scotch poems, I strung anew my wildly-sounding, rustic lyre with emulating vigour.' Sentimental some of these words may be, but Burns was willing to back them up with concrete action. On visiting Edinburgh in 1787, Burns was saddened to find that Fergusson's grave in Canongate Kirkyard remained unmarked some thirteen years after his death. In a letter 'To the Honourable Bailies of the Canongate', dated 6 February 1787, Burns declares his surprise at this neglect, as well as his own intentions:

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 to Fergusson's memory: a tribute I wish to have the honor of paying.

Although Burns contributed to the tear-stained legend of Fergusson's 'tragedy' by casting him as the heartbreakingly neglected and isolated literary genius, his memorialisation of Fergusson was both generous and enduring. He ensured that a monument was erected at the Edinburgh poet's grave, etched with Burns's humble and respectful epitaph:

No sculptur'd Marble here nor pompous lay
No storied Urn nor animated Bust
This simple Stone directs Pale Scotia's way
To pour her Sorrows o'er her Poet's dust.

This monument, which remains at the Canongate Kirkyard and was later added to by Robert Louis Stevenson, was clearly a labour of love for Burns. As his letter to Peter Hill from Dumfries, 5 February 1792, attests, it caused considerable financial strain for the Ayrshire poet:

I [inclose (*deleted*)] send you by the bearer, Mr Clarke, a particular friend of mine, six pounds & a shilling, which you will dispose of as follows;- £5-10, per acc^t I owe to Mr Rob^t Burn, Architect, for erecting the stone over poor Fergusson [*sic*]. - 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 hardiesse 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 for it.

Fergusson is, for Burns, a literary deity to whom he was compelled to pay respects. The monument is physical evidence of Burns's esteem for and indebtedness to his 'elder brother'. However, although it is not in doubt that Burns's emotional respect for Fergusson was genuinely felt and well-meant, the Ayrshire poet nevertheless began and cemented the narrative of Fergusson as a doomed, neglected and starving poet who was callously ignored by the Edinburgh establishment.

In this story of Fergusson's neglect, Burns is not altogether correct. During Fergusson's final illness, we know that members of the Cape Club were aware of his circumstances and that they gathered a generous collection of money for his benefit. We know that readers of the *Weekly Magazine* sent anxious letters to Walter Ruddiman, asking for news of their 'house poet'. We know that Ruddiman responded by announcing, in his newspaper *The Caledonian Mercury*, that the poet had been 'seized by a very dangerous illness', and by printing a number of tributes to Fergusson in the *Weekly Magazine* shortly after the poet's death. We also know that, just after losing her son, Mrs. Fergusson received a letter from a Scottish expatriate in India who had heard of his illness, offering the poet a 'handsome settlement' at his estate and enclosing £100 to cover expenses of Fergusson's trip to India. Although this offer came too late, it demonstrates that news of the poet's situation had considerable reach.

These anecdotes from the period of Fergusson's illness and death demonstrate that the poet was not neglected by Edinburgh's great and good. However, more persuasive than the gestures and generous donations of Fergusson's well-meaning friends is the poet's relationship with his physician, Andrew Duncan Senior. Their relationship demonstrates that Fergusson's case had, in fact, not only a profound effect on a key figure in Edinburgh's medical establishment but also a lasting influence on the therapeutic and psychiatric treatment available in

the city.

Although he is somewhat neglected today, Duncan had a long and prominent career. After studying medicine at the Universities of Edinburgh and St. Andrews, he went on to publish key Enlightenment medical texts such as *Elements of Therapeutics* (1770), *Medical and Philosophical Commentaries* (from 1773) and *Edinburgh New Dispensatory* (1789). He was a founder member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and was awarded the gold medal of the Royal Medical Society (1783). In 1790, he was elected President of the Royal College of Physicians, and was re-elected to the office for a second time in 1824. He was appointed First Physician to His Majesty in Scotland and Professor of Materia Medica in 1821; in the same year he was a founder member and first President of the Medico Chirurgical Society. Notwithstanding this glittering medical career, Duncan's encounters with Robert Fergusson held special resonance for the physician, leading to permanent memorialisations of the poet's life and career.

On a basic and coincidental level, Duncan and Fergusson had much in common. As the physician's biographer John Chalmers states in his *Andrew Duncan: Physician of the Enlightenment*, the doctor had long-established links with the University of St. Andrews which he continued during his own medical career. Duncan's mother, Katherine Vilant, came from a family that, according to Chalmers, 'played a prominent part in the University of St Andrews during the 18th century, providing professors of humanity, mathematics, philosophy and civil history, a librarian, and even a tailor to United College.' Duncan's relative, Nicolas Vilant, was Regius Professor of Mathematics at St. Andrews from 1765-1807, and was in post during Fergusson's time as a student. Vilant had, in fact, direct dealings with Fergusson during an infamous incident in which Fergusson was almost expelled. In 1767, Fergusson was involved in a 'scuffle' following the announcement of class prizes and distinctions, and it was recommended that he and others be debarred from their studies. After intervention from, we assume, Fergusson's mentor, Professor William Wilkie, the poet was reinstated to his course. Early nineteenth-century biographers turned to Professor Vilant to give further details of this event. In January 1801, Vilant was happy to confirm that, after staff discussion, Fergusson 'was received back into the College, upon promises of good behaviour for the future.'

Duncan also shared with Fergusson a love of sociability and, in particular, convivial societies. Eighteenth-century Edinburgh was a hotbed of gentlemen's

clubs. These organisations were often formed for convivial reasons, but they were also influential as sites for professional and literary networking. Fergusson's membership of the Cape Club allowed him to forge friendships with key intellectual figures, including poets, actors, artists and antiquarians, thereby enabling him to operate within the capital's core cultural networks. He is also thought to have attended debates held at the city's Robinhood Society. For Duncan, too, these sociable networks were invaluable throughout his career. At the age of twenty-one, Duncan joined the Royal Medicinal Society. In 1771, he was elected a Knight of the notorious Beggar's Benison, a club dedicated to male sexuality, pornography and anatomy. These early memberships were influential on Duncan, as in 1773, he founded the Aesculapian Society, of which he was secretary until shortly before his death in 1828. Soon afterwards he was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society and as a Freemason in the prestigious Canongate Kilwinning Lodge, to which Burns was inaugurated Poet Laureate in 1787. In 1778, he founded the Harveian Society, and was its secretary for over forty years. Five years later, he was a founder member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and, in 1809, co-founded the Caledonian Horticultural Society, of which he was permanent vice president. Finally he was, as we have seen, a founder member of the Medico Chirurgical Society in 1821. This long list of associations demonstrates not only the width of Duncan's interests and his professional commitment, but also the importance of sociable organisations in the age of Enlightenment, from which both Duncan and his poet patient benefited.

The most forceful coincidental link between poet and physician was, however, poetry. Duncan was a prolific author of medical texts, but also seems to have indulged himself by writing verse. According to Chalmers, he 'had a fondness for writing doggerel, and in his old age planned to write a poetic autobiography in seven cantos'. Chalmers also describes Duncan's tradition of climbing Arthur's Seat every year on 1 May, a practice he continued until his eighty-third and penultimate year: 'On reaching the summit he would declaim a poem which he had written for the occasion.' This interest in literature appears to have been one of the mechanisms that propelled Duncan to honour Fergusson's memory through medical improvement.

When visiting Fergusson, both at home and during his incarceration in the 'Schelles' (or 'Cells', as they were known), Duncan was horrified at the conditions under which Fergusson suffered in his insanity. His subsequent Letter to His

Majesty's Sheriffs-Depute in Scotland (1818) describes the situation in which he found the poet:

I was requested to visit the late Mr Robert Ferguson [sic], well known to his countrymen as a Scottish Poet of no mean abilities. I found him in a very deplorable condition, subjected to furious insanity. He lived in the house of his Mother, an old Widow, in very narrow circumstances. Her feeble and aged state, the situation of her dwelling-house, and several other circumstances, rendered it impossible to make any attempts towards his cure, with the slightest prospect of advantage, while he remained at home. After several fruitless attempts to have him placed in a more desirable situation, he was at last removed to Bedlam of the City of Edinburgh. There also I continued my visits to him [...] Without a convalescence from his insanity, death soon put a period to poor Ferguson's existence.

For Duncan the physician, Fergusson's case might have been like any other 'pauper lunatic's' in the late eighteenth century. However, it is clear that Fergusson's role as 'a Scottish Poet of no mean abilities' had special significance for his doctor and had a direct effect on Duncan's future efforts. As he explains in his *Letter*,

[Fergusson's] case [...] afforded me an opportunity of witnessing the deplorable situation of Pauper Lunatics even in the opulent, flourishing, and charitable Metropolis of Scotland. The Loss of Reason is perhaps the most deplorable disease, to which a rational being can be subjected; and, in my opinion, it is impossible to conceive a more interesting object of charity than the Man of Genius when a Pauper Lunatic.

Fergusson's 'Genius', then, makes his situation all the more deplorable. According to Duncan, his death exposed hypocrisy in 'improved', Enlightenment Edinburgh: Fergusson's 'deplorable' decline is in direct opposition to the outer appearance of Edinburgh as 'opulent, flourishing, and charitable'. 'The Man of Genius' is by extension the most compelling 'object of charity' that can be found.

Although it may have been based on an emotional reaction to Fergusson's decline and death, Duncan's fascination with the poet was not sentimental. While Fergusson was a dynamic literary catalyst for Robert Burns, he was also a catalyst for Andrew Duncan:

Since that period I have mentioned, my feeble endeavours have been steadily directed to the erection of a well-constructed Lunatic Asylum at Edinburgh; and it is with some satisfaction I can say, that these endeavours have been attended with at least some benefit to unfortunate Maniacs in Edinburgh.

As is clear, Fergusson's case was instrumental in the development of humane psychiatric treatment and convalescence in Edinburgh. Progress on Duncan's 'Lunatic Asylum' was, however, slow. Duncan launched a fundraising campaign for its construction in 1792. Some years later, in 1806, Parliament endowed £2000 to the cause. These monies were used to buy a large estate in Morningside, and in 1813 the asylum opened its doors for the first time but, significantly, to paying patients only. This caused much controversy; as Chalmers states, commentators led by Dr. Richard Poole complained that in its present state, the asylum failed to fulfil its professed charitable function. This deficiency was remedied after Duncan's death in 1842, with the erection of the West House for poor patients. In 1844, seventy years after Fergusson's death, the hospital took responsibility for the care of all inmates of Edinburgh's Bedlam. The institution is now known as the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, but NHS Lothian has not forgotten the institution's foundations, and a full history of its development is available online. More significantly for our purposes, however, is the fact that the hospital is still home to the Robert Fergusson Unit which, appropriately, treats patients who have sustained brain injuries.

Much has been made of Robert Fergusson's literary legacy. In his position as 'middle child' in the triumvirate of eighteenth-century Scottish vernacular poets, Fergusson is traditionally seen as building on his inheritance from Allan Ramsay and is credited for transmitting traditions, genres and literary spirit to Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns. His role in Scottish literature is undoubtedly pivotal and, to echo Leonard's words, 'triumphant'. Having said this, Fergusson's legacy lived on in other, less obvious ways. While Burns dropped tears on Fergusson's memory and kept it alive through physical memorial and literary emulation, Andrew Duncan was working towards a situation in which he hoped the 'tragedy of Robert Fergusson' would not be allowed to recur. Although progress towards his goal was slow, his relationship with Fergusson was directly influential on the inauguration of the Morningside Asylum and, later, the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, ensuring that psychiatric patients would, from the early nineteenth century onwards, be treated humanely in Scotland's capital. Although these improvements did not directly benefit Robert Fergusson, his 'tragedy' was, thanks to Duncan,

translated into human 'triumph'.

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