# Oysters and Aqua Vitae: Food and Drink in Robert Fergusson's Poems

## By Amy Wilcockson

In the 3 September 1772 issue of *The Weekly Magazine, or Edinburgh Amusement*, an anonymously authored poem was published. Written by someone referred to only as 'J.S', it was titled 'To Mr Robert Fergusson', who was known for being *The Weekly Magazine*'s house poet at the time. In the poem, 'J.S' praises Fergusson's verses, opening with the oft-repeated line 'Is Allan [Ramsay] risen frae the deid…?'.[1] Alongside this flattering comparison to his Scots forbear, the author notices and reflects on a prominent thread running through many of Fergusson's verses in both Scots and English. 'J.S' addresses Fergusson convivially by describing a potentially raucous trip to visit him in Edinburgh:

> *When I again Auld Reikie see,*
> *And can forgether, lad, with thee,*
> *Then we wi' muckle mirth and glee*
> *Shall tak a gill,*
> *And of your caller oysters we*
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By referring to Fergusson's poem 'Caller Oysters', which was published in the previous issue of *The Weekly Magazine*, 'J.S' not only demonstrates awareness of the most recent of Fergusson's poetical corpus and indicates that Fergusson was building up a dedicated repeat readership at this time, but also shows that readers were noticing the use of his favourite theme: food and drink. With poems variously entitled 'Good Eating', 'A Tavern Elegy', 'Tea A Poem', and 'A Drink Eclogue: Landlady, Brandy, and Whisky', it is obvious that eating, drinking, and merriment are a key subject matter in Fergusson's poetry.

Drawing of Fergusson in *Cassell's Library of English Literature*.

Robert Fergusson (1750–1774) was an educated young man who had attended Edinburgh's High School, Dundee Grammar School and the University of St Andrews on a bursary. Following his father's death, he returned to Edinburgh and worked as legal copyist to support his remaining family members. From 1771 to 1773, Fergusson wrote poetry for almost every issue of *The Weekly Magazine* for the prominent Edinburgh publisher Walter Ruddiman. In 1773, Ruddiman printed Fergusson's *Poems*, a collection of his Scots and English poetry and the only edition of his works to appear in his lifetime. During this incredibly prolific and vibrant period of his life, Fergusson was deeply ensconced in the whirling social scene of Scotland's capital. Notably, he was a member of the Cape Club, a popular society who met in Edinburgh's taverns to 'pass the evening socially with a set of select companions'.[2] These evening meetings soon influenced Fergusson, and he wrote a number of poems about and addressed to fellow members of the organisation. Of the eight manuscript poems that remain in Fergusson's hand, seven are about the Cape Club.

In his series of Cape Club poems, which include 'Cape Song', 'A Mournful Ditty from the Knight of Complaints', 'The Progress of Knighthood' and 'Song (Tune Lumps of Pudding)', Fergusson describes the joys and woes of being a Knight of the Cape (as members were so-called). There are frequent references in these poems to alcohol, including the claim in 'The Progress of Knighthood' that 'Fresh streams of Porter deep imbroun'd / Remove our Care and pain', and the ironic statement 'Of drinking and spewing how great are the joys!' in 'Cape Song'.[3] Rhona Brown compellingly argues that despite the initial 'joyful celebration' of alcohol in his poetry, 'Fergusson's attitude to alcoholic

consumption would gradually alter and darken' in his later poems.[4] This is evident in the descriptions of excess in poems such 'The King's Birthday in Edinburgh', when Fergusson warns that an excess of drink will make 'you ill / And ding your doitet'.[5] The poet's magnum opus *Auld Reikie* echoes these sentiments, describing foppish Macaronis who appear corpselike when 'drunk / In Pools or Gutters aftimes sunk'.[6]

Fergusson also uses drink, excess, and drunkenness satirically in the humorous account of a group boat trip across the Forth, 'A Saturday's Expedition in Mock Heroics'. Fergusson begins by noting the day-trippers' consumption of 'Port, punch, rum, brandy, and Geneva strong', before telling of the consequent horrors of 'wat'ry' seasickness:

> *… the rocking bark,*
> *Truely regardless of their precious food,*
> *Converts their visage to the ghastly pale,*
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Following a feast of 'juicy beef, of mutton in its prime, / Or all the dainties luxury can boast', the friends are badly seasick on their journey. Yet when they reach their destination, the group's 'empty stomachs keenly crave supply' and they begin feasting again 'till every gnawing appetite was quelled'. Following their return journey on the ferry, they march to find further refreshment, 'where roasted lamb, / with cooling lettice' and 'the cheering glass' were consumed by all. The end of the poem sees Fergusson suggest similar expeditions as a cure for the 'racking pains' of gout, which he says prefers lolling 'on a purple sopha' over exploring 'rugged steeps'. As a mock heroic poem, Fergusson's moral is a dubious one, particularly considering the accounts of gluttony within the poem. As W. E. Gillis notes, this moral is 'part and parcel of the whole humorously exaggerated tone of the piece'.[8]

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Frenchman, whilst Whisky characterises a 'paughty Scotsman'.[9] The two argue, with Brandy exuberantly calling Whisky a 'wanwordy gowk' and Whisky retaliating in a measured fashion by declaring himself pleased that Brandy's 'high heart [is] humbled amang common drams'. Although Scotland did not share the excessive animosity towards France which was seen in England during this period, Francophobia was high during the eighteenth century. Food and drink were often used to personify opposing nationalistic claims between the British (often English) and the French, and Fergusson here taps into this trend.[10] The end of the poem sees Brandy get his comeuppance as the character of the Landlady enters and has the last word by declaring Whisky the winner: Brandy is not only too expensive due to '*license* and *excise*' but also can be easily replaced 'By WHISKY tincutr'd w' the SAFFRON's dye'.

Fergusson continues in the vein of nationalist satire, but takes a more pointed tone in his 1773 poem 'To the Principal and Professors of the University of St Andrews, on their superb treat to Dr Samuel Johnson'. Johnson had visited St Andrews on 19 August 1773, and was honoured with a lavish feast. In this poem, Fergusson responds to this real-life event by mocking the excessive hospitality provided for Johnson. In compiling the first modern *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Johnson's entry for 'Oats' read as follows: 'A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people'.[11] Nearly twenty years later, Fergusson attacks Johnson for this perceived jibe by calling him a 'lying loun!'. Instead of delicate English food, Fergusson suggests Johnson should have been offered homely Scottish fare: 'mair hardy, souple, steive an' swank, / Than ever stood on Samy's shank'.[12] Fergusson then goes into specifics, detailing '*Imprimis,* then, a haggis fat, / Weel tott'd in a seything pat' and '*Secundo*, then a gude sheep's head / Whase hide was singit, never flead'. As Ian C. Walker notes, this fare, probably something Johnson would be 'expected to despise, is made almost an instrument of torture'.[13] Rather than roast beef and English cuisine, Fergusson repeats that the food of Fife (including oatcakes!) should have been shared with their distinguished visitor. Fergusson uses satire to defend Scottish food and therefore nationality from a potential English aggressor.

Drinks other than alcohol are also referred to condemningly in Fergusson's works. A satirical account of tea is included in 'An Eclogue', where the humble

farmer Sandie's new wife has a fondness for 'her fav'rite tea' which proves disastrous.[14] Leaving Sandie in despair, his wife sells 'the very trenchers frae [his] bink' to fund her expensive habit. 'Tea. A Poem' takes this satire a step further, with tea now, as Matthew Simpson notes, 'depended upon rather than relished as a luxury'.[15] Tea is here initially praised as 'Celestial', as a 'fountain that can cure / the ills of passion' and 'free the Fair / From frowns and sighs'.[16] During the eighteenth century, tea was often associated with female beauty and classical elegance. In Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), Nymphs sip 'their elemental tea', whilst Edward Young's *The Love of Fame* (1728) similarly focuses on the allure of the female form when combined with tea-drinking:

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Fergusson's poem initially adheres to this view of tea and beauty, claiming the drink has been ordained by Venus herself. Before long however, tea is denounced – due to the 'luring lustre' of gold, overseas trade has brought tea and other delicacies to Britain. In doing so it has caused 'Envy's hissing tongue' and 'deeper poison' to enter the minds of young ladies. Fergusson goes on to attack tea's properties further, and rather than curing all ills, he ends the poem by declaring that tea is in fact:

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For Fergusson, tea and what it represents – namely trade, cosmopolitanism, and exotic tastes – were not as 'refreshing' or as appropriate as 'Britannia's streams' and the 'plants of BRITAIN'. As also exhibited in 'A Drink Eclogue. Landlady, Brandy, and Whisky', and 'To the Principal and Professors of the University of St Andrews, on their superb treat to Dr Samuel Johnson', Fergusson is dismissive of different cuisines and tastes, with food and drink in these poems acting as

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If alcohol equates to dissipation and drunkenness, and tea to 'a poison'd cup' for Fergusson, in his poems water, and specifically Scottish rivers, represent vitality and richness. In 1773's *Poems*, 'The Rivers of Scotland. An Ode' was published for the first time. In this piece, Fergusson expounds a classical vision of Scotland's beautiful rivers – so Arcadian that Pan himself preferred the Tweed. In the same vein but with an injection of realism, 'Caller Oysters' is dedicated to the 'nane sae spacious and sae noble' water of the Firth of Forth.[18] Fergusson describes the abundance of fresh fish in the waters of the Firth: 'skate', 'codlin', 'eil', 'herrin', 'fleuk', 'mackarel', and 'labsters' are all found in the estuary. Unlike the poisonous and decaying properties of tea, the oyster is lauded here as a cure-for-all and an annual celebration – as all Edinburgh's sons 'blyth faces wear' in September once they know 'new oysters fresh' will appear. The poet goes on to praise the oyster in particular as a 'rare cathartic', given by doctors to patients 'to cure his ails; / Whether you hae the head or heart-ake, / It ay prevails'. A similarly named poem 'Caller Water' mirrors this statement, as here Fergusson argues that 'few drogs in doctors shops are better / For me and you', than 'good *Caller Water*'.[19] Rather more humorously, the poem goes on to note that for stiff joints 'Your pith wi' pain be fairly dung, / Be you in *Caller Water* flung'. In short, the water and the oysters found within it are a remedy 'withouten drugs' and a source of sustenance and health for all Scotland.

The correlation between food and life is exacerbated further in Fergusson's poems written from the perspective of animals, or clearly being sympathetic towards them. 'Ode to the Bee', 'The Bugs', 'The Peasant, the Hen and Young Ducks' all are in this vein. A stand-out in Fergusson's corpus is the proto-vegetarian 'The Sow of Feeling'. The poem, a satire on Henry Mackenzie's wildly popular *The Man of Feeling* (1771), as Jerry O'Brien notes, 'reduced the cult of "feeling" to the level of pigs'.[20] The dramatic monologue details the 'bloody stalls of butchers' to which the sow's mate and children were forced, and which left her weeping 'till sorrow shall my eye-lids drain'.[21] Man, in this poem, rather than 'feeling' is instead described as 'monstrous', 'erring from the laws', and as 'base

murd'rers'. It is the sow who is the real animal of feeling, resignedly claiming to be a 'feeling swine' at the end of the piece. According to Carol M. McGuirk, Fergusson's ire here is addressed at the 'new (and in his view decadent) culinary vogue for pork in Edinburgh' at this time.[22] As with Fergusson's other food-based satires, we see the poet opposing the idea of fashionable foods being preferred over Scottish delicacies. This poem also is unique as it is written in English, rather than in Scots as used in the satires already discussed. By writing in the English language of his previous idyllic pastoral poetry, through parodying the ideas of *The Man of Feeling*, and by using visceral and often brutal language ('tear their flesh'), Fergusson injects a real sense of the innocent sow's distress at the horrors of the slaughterhouse. Although a satire, 'The Sow of Feeling' can also be read as an early vegetarian poem, expressing the sentiments found in later nineteenth-century vegetarian poems such as the anonymously published 'Vegetarians Pleading with Flesh-Eaters'. Published in *The Vegetarian Advocate* of 15 October 1848, this poem by 'An Old Vegetarian' expresses distress at the 'struggles' a lamb faces as 'stretch'd beneath the knife /…how meek it begs its life!'[23] Fergusson then, unknowingly, embodies this debate within his poem.

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Returning to more convivial matters, whether the mysterious 'J.S' ever had his oyster dinner with Fergusson, we will never know. Fergusson certainly returned the poetic compliment in kind in his verse response 'Answer to Mr J.S.'s Epistle'. Fergusson's poem was published in the following issue of the *Weekly Magazine* on 10 September 1772. In it he declared:

*At morning air, or late at e'en,*
*Gin ye sud hap to come and see an,*
*Not niggard wife, nor greetin wee ane,*
*Within my cloyster,*
*Can challenge you and me frae pree'in*
*A caller oyster.*
*[…]*

*For this gude sample o' your skill,*
*I'm resting you a pint o' yale,*
*By and attour a Highland gill*

*Of aquavitæ;*

*The which to come and sock at will,*

*I here invite ye.*[24]

Reflecting back 'J.S's' recognition of his use of food and drink, Fergusson refers to two staples in his works: the oyster and whisky (or 'aquavitae') and invites 'J.S.' to join him partaking in both of these. As even this brief exposition shows, descriptions of food and drink are therefore used for various means in Fergusson's works: demonstrating friendship and conviviality, as in this poem, whilst elsewhere warning of the dangers of excess. He uses metaphor to offer satirically nationalistic views and contradict established ideas. A poet of life, who was most at ease when describing the day-to-day of those living in Edinburgh, Fergusson's poetry is full of a sense of vitality, liveliness, humour, and comedy, which is only exacerbated by the descriptions of sustenance and the effects they have on the people of Scotland within his works.

Find out more about the ongoing project to produce a new scholarly edition of Fergusson's works for the twenty-first century reader; and to commemorate the poet's legacies throughout 2024 (the 250th anniversary of his death) and 2025 at 'The Works of Robert Fergusson: Reconstructing Textual and Cultural Legacies'.

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To raise a glass with Fergusson on the 250th anniversary of his death, enjoy making 'The Tavern Rat' cocktail:[25]

**The Tavern Rat**

*Ingredients:*
45ml Scottish aqua vitae (ie. whisky)
1 tsp of tea or 1 teabag
Water (taken specifically from a Scottish river, i.e. Tweed or Forth. If you cannot get this, cleaner water will do)
1 tsp sugar

*To garnish:*

Orange slice (sold by the orange sellers of the Canongate Playhouse)
Gowan

*Method:*
Pour boiling water onto the tea/teabag for five minutes. Remove the teabag and pour the sugar into the mix. Fill a glass with ice and the whisky, before adding the tea. Garnish with the orange slice and a gowan!

Wash down with several oysters for the full tavern rat experience!

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*Gin ye sud hap to come and see an,*
*Not niggard wife, nor greetin wee ane,*
*Within my cloyster,*
*Can challenge you and me frae pree'in*
*A caller oyster.*
*[…]*

*For this gude sample o' your skill,*
*I'm resting you a pint o' yale,*
*By and attour a Highland gill*

*Of aquavitæ;*

*The which to come and sock at will,*

*I here invite ye.*[49]

Reflecting back 'J.S's' recognition of his use of food and drink, Fergusson refers to two staples in his works: the oyster and whisky (or 'aquavitae') and invites 'J.S.' to join him partaking in both of these. As even this brief exposition shows, descriptions of food and drink are therefore used for various means in Fergusson's works: demonstrating friendship and conviviality, as in this poem, whilst elsewhere warning of the dangers of excess. He uses metaphor to offer satirically nationalistic views and contradict established ideas. A poet of life, who was most at ease when describing the day-to-day of those living in Edinburgh, Fergusson's poetry is full of a sense of vitality, liveliness, humour, and comedy, which is only exacerbated by the descriptions of sustenance and the effects they have on the people of Scotland within his works.

Find out more about the ongoing project to produce a new scholarly edition of Fergusson's works for the twenty-first century reader; and to commemorate the poet's legacies throughout 2024 (the 250th anniversary of his death) and 2025 at 'The Works of Robert Fergusson: Reconstructing Textual and Cultural Legacies'.

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To raise a glass with Fergusson on the 250th anniversary of his death, enjoy making 'The Tavern Rat' cocktail:[50]

**The Tavern Rat**

*Ingredients:*
45ml Scottish aqua vitae (ie. whisky)
1 tsp of tea or 1 teabag
Water (taken specifically from a Scottish river, i.e. Tweed or Forth. If you cannot get this, cleaner water will do)
1 tsp sugar

*To garnish:*

Orange slice (sold by the orange sellers of the Canongate Playhouse)
Gowan

*Method:*
Pour boiling water onto the tea/teabag for five minutes. Remove the teabag and pour the sugar into the mix. Fill a glass with ice and the whisky, before adding the tea. Garnish with the orange slice and a gowan!

Wash down with several oysters for the full tavern rat experience!

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*(c) The Bottle Imp*