



Riach, A. (2016) Culture: Not just Burns – what about the poet Robert Fergusson? *National*, 2016, 29 Jan.

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Deposited on: 12 October 2017

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Not Burns – Fergusson!

Alan Riach (Friday 29 January 2016)

Burns first read Robert Fergusson's poems in the early 1780s and in the 'Second Epistle to J. Lapraik' he damns the idle, callous rich whose wealth might have eased Fergusson's poverty: 'My curse upon your whunstone hearts, / Ye Enbrugh Gentry! / The tythe o' what ye waste at Cartes / Wad stow'd his pantry!'

Two hundred years later, in 'Proclamation' from the book *Abhorrences*, the American poet Edward Dorn offers a more sweeping condemnation. Imagine the voice, one of those 'Edinburgh Gentry' (still with us) or a Westminster toff, or maybe an American republican candidate:

'Where there is wealth, / let us create excess... / where there is need, / let us create hardship, / where there is poverty / let us create downright misery.'

It's the same old story: rich and poor, the widening gulf, and many of our best poets and artists have not been rich. So how about a redistribution of wealth that would take that into account? Dorn has another poem where he talks about an old disease with a new name: 'HELPS' for 'Heritable Long-range Endemic Poverty Syndrome' and asks: 'Do you think there would be much tea and sympathy for this affliction?' And answers: 'Neither do I.'

Burns recognised Fergusson's worth as a poet immediately and made sure his 'elder brother in misfortune / By far my elder brother in the muse' would be commemorated. At his own expense, Burns had a memorial stone inscribed in Edinburgh's Canongate kirk cemetery, where now, outside the front gate, a life-size statue of Fergusson by David Annand can be seen, striding down the Royal Mile, maybe on his way towards the Scottish Poetry Library in Crichton's Close. Tourists and visitors of all kinds stop and consider, take photographs beside him, wonder who this is, read the inscription. Maybe some of them even go looking for the man's poems.

Burns wasn't alone in affirming Fergusson's neglected genius. Robert Louis Stevenson, writing from Samoa in 1894, said: 'Now the injustice with which the one Robert is rewarded and the other left out in the cold sits heavy on me...'

Fergusson was born in Edinburgh in 1750, his parents from Aberdeenshire; he studied in Dundee and St Andrews. He returned to Edinburgh after the death of his father in 1767, supporting his mother and sister as a clerk, copying documents for the court. The work was dull and Fergusson was a flamboyant young man, had been a wild prankster as a student, enjoyed theatre and the company of actors. He mixed with artists, musicians, performers and bright conversationalists. He was highly strung and full of fun.

All his poems are the work of a young man, filled with energy, quickness and flair. Their range is surprising: fully-charged, vigorous, ironic, deprecating, satiric, enchanted, enraptured, lyrically sustained at perfect pitch, some half-serious, half-comic, some wholly scabrous, some elegiac, dark and grim. His Edinburgh poems are a kaleidoscope of city

pictures: 'Leith Races', 'The Ghaists' and the definitive cityscape, 'Auld Reekie'. Burns recognised the scene in Fergusson's 'The Farmer's Ingle' and used it as his model for 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'. His poems in English are an essential part of his work, especially his address to Dr Samuel Johnson. The world is a much better place for his unfazed, lashing athletic brio. 'Then hie you home,' he advises Johnson at the end: 'And be a malcontent, that naked hinds, / On lentils fed, could make your kingdom quake, / And tremulate Old England libertized.'

Johnson's championship of the English language has had its long-term legacy even unto the twenty-first century, as readers of *The National* following the correspondence about Matthew Fitt's articles will know. For Fergusson, it was nothing but English imperialism at its most foetid. A related poem in Scots, 'Lines, to the Principal and Professors of the University of St Andrews, on their superb treat to Dr Johnson' castigates the officials of his old university for their obsequious prostration before the pompous southron. Both poems connect Fergusson to his Gaelic contemporary James Macintyre (1727-99), whose view of Johnson was equally scornful.

Fergusson can be iconoclastic but there is depth and deliberation to his thinking. He gives us a varied panorama of both his contemporary Edinburgh and rural life. Classical imitations from ancient authors prompt the Odes: to Pity, Horror, Disappointment, the Epigrams and the Pastoral poems. The world of theatres and public bars is evoked in 'To Sir John Fielding, on his attempt to suppress the Beggar's Opera'. 'The Rivers of Scotland' and 'Elegy on the Death of Scots Music' open up the whole country: he is, indeed, a national poet.

'Ode to the Gowdspink' (the goldfinch) begins as a beautiful vision but then is given a darker cast: Liberty is a 'bonny dame' round whose stream the birds rejoice in gratitude, and the goldfinch sings joyously but when freedom is taken away, the goldfinch, confined to 'some daurk chaumer's dowie nook' is cheerless and cursed, and the final point is made with reference to the poet himself, and has its fearful application to his short life: 'For whan fair Freedom smiles nae mair, / Care I for life? Shame fa' the hair; / A field o'ergrown wi' rankest stubble, / The essence o' a paltry bubble.'

He began suffering bouts of depression, the horrors of melancholy, mental affliction, remorse and guilt. After a fall, he was taken to the Edinburgh madhouse in a sedan chair, his bearers pretending they were going to visit a friend. He died aged twenty-four, in a bare stone cell, on straw, surrounded by lunatics, in October, 1774.

In the twentieth century, Robert Garioch recognised in Fergusson a poetic ancestor of his own, writing about Edinburgh in Scots, puncturing hypocrisy and sham. Given his characteristic scepticism, Garioch's reverence, in his sonnet 'At Robert Fergusson's Grave, October 1962', is all the more effective: 'Lichtlie this, gin ye daur: / Here Robert Burns knelt and kissed the mool.' ('Make light of this, if you dare / Here Robert Burns knelt and kissed the earth.')

In the twenty-first century, Douglas Dunn, Kathleen Jamie, Les Murray, Edwin Morgan, W.N. Herbert, Don Paterson and others have also paid poetic tribute to him.

Irvine Welsh once argued that there's a tradition in Scottish literature that goes right back to David Lyndsay and further, a distinctive theme in the whole story of Scotland, described by Marshall Walker in his book *Comrades and Vexations*, as 'the democratic strain'. This tradition includes the socialism of Lewis Grassie Gibbon in a 'world rolling fast to a hell of riches'; 'the dispensation of the poor' in the mind of Sorley MacLean and his redefinition of Calvary in terms of 'a foul-smelling backland in Glasgow' and 'a room in Edinburgh, / a room of poverty and pain'; Bill Bryden's sympathy for a moderate shop-steward in his Red Clydeside play, *Willie Rough*; the 7:84 Theatre Company's attack on capitalist exploitation of Scotland in John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*; the copies of the *Daily Worker* and the dove of peace, and the poster of Paul Robeson, which a pregnant woman thinks she had better hide when a social worker calls to check her suitability for a housing waiting list in Jackie Kay's poem-sequence, *The Adoption Papers*, 'Chapter 3: The Waiting Lists'. A democratic manifesto is implicit in Tom Leonard and James Kelman's use of Glasgow *patois* to cut through to the real lives of ordinary people and in doing so to protest, as Gaelic could never quite do, against the bending of a country's mind by the undemocratic authority of a language whose artificial and ossifying 'correctness' derives from 'the bullying power of a remote parliament and a chimerical throne.' That's what's behind Irvine Welsh's sense that people in Scotland inhabit a very different political culture from people in England.

The key point here is that, as with Burns, Fergusson did not arise as a singular phenomenon. He came from a cultural world we need to know more about. And before him, there was Allan Ramsay. The lives of all three men overlapped: Ramsay (1686-1758), Fergusson (1750-74), Burns (1759-96). And Ramsay was a figure of immense importance in Scottish literary history.

His day job was as a wigmaker for Edinburgh gentlemen, and later as a bookseller, but his deeper commitment was to literature: his own poems and songs, his engagement with the theatre, and his setting-up of Scotland's first circulating public library, are evidence of this, but his role as an anthologist was equally crucial. He edited *The Evergreen* (1724), or to give the full title: *The Evergrene: being ane Collection of Scots Poems, wrote by the Ingenious before 1600*, drawing on the Bannatyne Manuscript from the 1560s, and including poems by fifteenth and sixteenth century poets William Dunbar and Robert Henryson, among others. In 1710, Thomas Ruddiman had published an edition of *The Eneados*, the translation into Scots of Virgil's *Aeneid*, completed in 1513 by Gavin Douglas (c.1474-1522). This is the edition from which Burns took his epigraph to 'Tam o' Shanter': 'Of Brownie and of Bogillie full is this Buke.'

So what does all this amount to?

Put it together and you can see what was happening in the eighteenth century, through the work of Ramsay especially: a retrieval and renewal of the Scots poetic tradition. This was

the world that Fergusson and Burns rose from: a regeneration of an understanding of what the history of Scottish poetry was. After the Union of 1707, after the violent suppression of the Jacobite rising in 1745, an entire historical tradition, which had been utterly obscured, was made available to new generations. It was a resurrection of a kind, a rebirth of possibilities.

It happened again in the 1920s. And it happened again in the 1980s. Sometimes such regeneration is demanded by the dead, of the living responsible to them. Ultimately, it's about how you understand what real value is. Another American poet, William Carlos Williams, put it like this: 'It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.'

[Boxed off:]

Robert Fergusson, from 'To Dr Samuel Johnson: Food for a New Edition of His Dictionary':

Great Pedagogue! whose literarian lore,
With syllable on syllable conjoined,
To transmutate and varify, hast learned
The whole revolving scientific names
That in the alphabetic columns lie,
Far from the knowledge of mortal shapes;
As we, who never can peroculate
The miracles by thee miraculized,
The Muse, silential long, with mouth apert,
Would give vibration to stagnatic tongue,
And loud encomiate thy puissant name,
Eulogiated from the green decline
Of Thames's banks to Scoticanian shores,
Where Lochlomidian liquids undulize.