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The Biographical Construction of Robert Fergusson, 1774-1900

Robert Fergusson died in 1774, in Edinburgh's 'Bedlam' Asylum, aged twenty-four. His life was brief, tragic and easily mythologised. Biographical interest in the poet Robert Louis Stevenson characterised as 'the poor, white-faced, drunken, vicious boy, who raved himself to death in the Edinburgh madhouse'¹ has been such that he has become an archetype of tormented literary genius. Having said this, the first biography of the poet which exceeds a few paragraphs is David Irving's 'Life of Robert Fergusson' in his *Lives of the Scottish Poets*, published in 1799, a full twenty-five years after Fergusson's death. This quarter-century delay is relatively unusual; Byron died in 1824 and by 1830, Thomas Moore had published *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron, with Notices of his Life*. Similarly, Robert Burns died in 1796, with James Currie's first edition of the poet's life and works appearing four years later in 1800. In Fergusson's case, the delay is not simply due to his relegation to the status of 'minor' Scottish poet. While Robert Crawford rightly bemoans Fergusson's traditional treatment as 'Burns's John the Baptist',² Burns was also responsible for a reawakening of interest in the Edinburgh poet. After his first visit to the Scottish capital, Burns embarked on a costly and lengthy enterprise to erect 'a stone over [Fergusson's] revered ashes' in the Canongate Kirkyard.³ The indebtedness of Scotland's national poet to his precursor naturally reinvigorated Fergusson's literary reputation.

Although short accounts of Fergusson's life had been published before 1799, the influence of the 'foundational' biography is crucial. Arthur Bradley, discussing accounts of Byron's and Shelley's lives, argues that:

Biography is, after all, a serious business: it is about locating the logic that underpins the minutiae of life, constructing grand narratives from fragments of evidence, and re-discovering the meaning of past, random or even meaningless events. The obvious danger with this approach is that it leads biographers to omit or neutralise the pieces of evidence they cannot find or that do not fit into their logical dialectical jigsaws.⁴

Fergusson is a particular victim of these 'dangers'. In his case, 'fragments' of historical evidence and scant 'fact' are the biographer's materials. Few of the traditional biographical tools are available for the study and construction of the poet's life: all original correspondence has been lost; no poem can be found in manuscript form, save his drinking songs for Edinburgh's Cape Club; his name appears infrequently in historical records, notwithstanding records of his birth and death, a mention in the matriculation roll of St. Andrews University, the Cape Club's Sederunt Book and membership lists, and an appearance in the 'List of Persons who took the usual Oaths to Government' in the years 1751-88, appearing as, in his role as a legal clerk, a 'notary publick'. Indeed, in his 1799 *Life* of Fergusson, Irving asserts that 'the collecting of manuscripts for the following sketch, has been attended with some difficulty',⁵ while William Roughead, writing in 1919, demonstrates the complications inherent in the study of the poet's life in his 'Note on Robert Fergusson':

The foul fate which attended Fergusson in life has since inveterately pursued his memory, and few men have been less fortunate in their biographers.⁶

The earliest biographical note on Fergusson is by his friend and patron, Thomas Ruddiman, in the *Weekly Magazine*'s obituary of 20 October 1774. Here, Ruddiman emphasises Fergusson's convivial and poetic talents, describing him as 'a genius so lively', whose 'talent for versification in the Scots dialect, has been exceeded by none, – equalled by few.'⁷ This piece, written before the arrival of Burns, remembers Fergusson as a pivotal figure in the Scots vernacular tradition. Following Ruddiman's obituary, and contemporaneous to the publication of Burns's Kilmarnock edition, is John Pinkerton's entry in his *Ancient Scottish Poems* (1786). Pinkerton's first paragraph sets the biographical model:

This young man, tho much inferior to the next poet, had talents for Scottish poetry far above those of Allan Ramsay; yet, unhappily, he was not learned in it, for Ramsay's Evergreen seems to have been the utmost bound of his study.⁸

Because of the verve of Fergusson's Scots, critics have traditionally focused on his Scots vernacular work at the expense of his English language poetry, which is, in turn, often dismissed as artificial imitation. As Pinkerton asserts, 'His Scottish poems are spirited; but sometimes sink into the low humour of Ramsay. His English poems deserve no praise' (Pinkerton, cxli). This linguistic bias led to a critical construction of Fergusson as exclusively capable in the Scots language. George Douglas, writing in 1919, describes Fergusson's English work as 'undistinguished' and presenting him at his 'worst'.⁹ Sydney Goodsir Smith writes in 1952 that, 'as in the case of Burns, we can neglect his English works',¹⁰ while Allan MacLaine describes Fergusson's English pieces as 'imitative, trite, and worthless as literature'.¹¹ However, Susan Manning, writing in the most recent collection of essays on the poet's work, makes the assertion that the traditional critical insistence on an absolute separation of 'sterile competence in English and the 'discovery' of a 'natural' Scots medium [...] is a creation of the cultural politics of sentiment which has had the [...] effect of diminishing the ambitiousness of the *oeuvre*',¹² while F.W. Freeman presents Fergusson's work in the context of 'vernacular classicism' and 'classical cultural ideas and values'.¹³ These critical developments allow for an appreciation of Fergusson as a Scottish poet operating in British and European literary traditions.

Following Pinkerton's account is Alexander Campbell's entry on the poet in his *Introduction to the History of Poetry of Scotland*, published in 1798. In his concern with Fergusson's apparent depravity, Campbell states that, 'The delicate frame of our youthful bard, was but ill calculated for the orgies of the midnight revel, or the joys of the overflowing bowl.'¹⁴ Fergusson is portrayed as a childlike, frail victim, unequipped for the anarchic social life of eighteenth-century Edinburgh. For the first time, however subtly, he becomes a tragic poetic hero. Recent criticism has railed against this simplified depiction of the poet. As Manning argues, the tragic projection of Fergusson's life is bolstered by the Romantic movement, down to the period's portraiture:

Visual representations have had an eerie tendency to suggest that Fergusson somehow became increasingly like Keats after his death, with exaggeratedly intense and soulful features capitalising on the premonition of premature extinction. (Manning, 90)

According to Campbell's – and Pinkerton's – portrayals, the poet's tragic flaw is his temptation for the 'midnight revel'; his talent as a 'humorous companion'. This

convivial hubris leads to his nemesis: his guilt-inspired religious mania and eventual dreadful demise. These early biographical notes are primarily concerned with the moral consequences of Fergusson's life; their emphasis is on 'dissipation'. Accordingly, they lay foundations for controversy and condemnation in subsequent memoirs.

David Irving's *Life of Robert Fergusson*, published in 1799, is the first biography of length and investigation. However, despite its depth, it has been dismissed by succeeding biographers as overly moralistic on the poet's convivial habits. Irving's piece is, undoubtedly, austere in its sermon, but, at the same time, it is the first memoir to expose nuances of Fergusson's life and work. Irving's statements on Fergusson's English productions cannot be termed sympathetic, but he is careful to note the 'multifarious' (Irving, 419) nature of the poet's corpus:

His works [...] are of very unequal merit; some of them excellent, some even below mediocrity. It is in the composition of his Scottish poems that we must expect to find his efforts most successful. To such of his pieces as are written in English very little praise is due – they occasionally discover marks of genius, but the greater part appear deficient in every quality which tends to interest and captivate the mind. (Irving, 430-1)

As is common, Irving is biased in favour of the poet's first-rate Scots vernacular work. Having said this, the biographer acknowledges – albeit grudgingly – Fergusson's literary range.

In the infamous portion of the *Life* concerned with Fergusson's debauchery, Irving intensifies his censorious tone. His description of Fergusson's dissoluteness is the basis for irate retorts from later biographers:

His latter years were wasted in perpetual dissipation. The condition to which he had reduced himself, prepared him for grasping at every object which promised a temporary alleviation of his cares; and as his funds were often in an exhausted state, he at length had recourse to mean expedients. [...] When he contemplated the high hopes from which he had fallen, his mind was visited by bitter remorse. But the resolutions of amendment which he formed were always of short duration. He was soon resubdued by the allurements of vice. (Irving, 432-3)

These statements provide the basis for the dismissal of Irving's biographical contribution by subsequent commentators. However, despite his sermonising, Irving makes illuminating asides which represent psychological sensitivity to Fergusson's state of mind shortly before his death. Irving recognises that the poet's indulgence may have been the result of a subconscious need to escape from mental torment; 'a temporary alleviation of his cares'. Such psychological acumen barely features in later biographies except in sentimental guise. Although he criticises Fergusson's hedonism, he also recognises that the poet never let his profession slide: 'Notwithstanding the miserable state of dissipation into which he plunged himself, his poetical studies were never truly neglected' (Irving, 432). John A. Fairley, in his 'Bibliography of Robert Fergusson' (1914), still the standard list of early editions and memoirs, accords with this view, asserting that the poet was equally conscientious in his work as a copyist: 'Mr. Ralph Richardson, the present Commissary Clerk, in a note to the writer says: "Fergusson appears to have entered the Commissary office in Edinburgh in 1769 and

to have left it in the beginning of 1774, a few months before his death.”¹⁵ Ensuing biographers discredited Irving’s commentary. However, despite successors’ fixation with Irving’s charge of profligacy against the poet, his biography portrays Fergusson as a complex human being of considerable poetic range: Irving’s poet is, at least, no simplified stereotype capable only in his own rustic language.

The initial rejoinder to Irving’s memoir is written by the poet’s nephew, James Inverarity, in his ‘Strictures on Irving’s Life of Fergusson’, published in *The Scots Magazine* in 1801. While he applies ‘strictures’ on Irving’s biographical credibility, Inverarity echoes his predecessor’s terms, reiterating Irving’s concern with the supremacy of reason over instinct, and complementing his moral stance. Inverarity recalls Irving’s notion that Fergusson’s foundation *should* have been reflective ratiocination, but that it ‘was unfortunately too weak to check the impulse of the passions’. In his explanation of the poet’s succumbing to temptation, he reasserts an Irving-like moral authority, stating that his uncle *should* have been able to ‘resist’ distracting friendship, or ‘evade’ beguiling ‘pleasure’, had his mind been in its reasonable state.¹⁶ Inverarity, far from providing ‘strictures’ on Irving’s piece, bolsters his predecessor’s authority, finding moral strength from cerebral logic and the rejection of instinct.

Replying directly to Inverarity’s appeal for personal knowledge, Thomas Sommers, in his *Life of Robert Fergusson, Scottish Poet* (1803), makes much of his friendship with the poet. Opening his biography, Sommers supplies his own opinion of Irving’s memoir:

I agree however with that writer, in many of his observations, and that it is proper, nay highly commendable, to hold up to public view, the *vices* and *follies* of mankind, in order to *prevent* some, and *check* others, from following a similar course.¹⁷

Far from distancing himself from moral significance, Sommers actively affirms Irving’s didacticism. Sommers is, however, also concerned with adjusting previous accounts of the poet’s life. Although his statements on Fergusson’s drinking habits are a direct confutation of Irving’s censoriousness, his account appears to benefit from personal acquaintance:

I passed many happy hours with him, not in *dissipation* and *folly*, but in useful conversation, and in listening to the more inviting and rational displays of his *wit*, *sentiment*, and *song*; in the exercise of which, he never failed to *please*, *instruct* and *charm*. (Sommers, 46)

In contrast to Irving’s portrayal of ‘perpetual dissipation’, Sommers provides a sympathetic portrait of Fergusson’s conviviality, intended to protect his friend’s memory from charges of ‘folly’. However, Sommers admits that he finds ‘rational displays’ more ‘inviting’ than those fuelled by alcohol. Echoing Irving’s theme, Sommers presents Fergusson’s life as a moral lesson, one which will discourage others from ‘following a similar course’. As a result, his cheerful but unconvincing description of Fergusson’s conversation reads like a description of his poetry: the poet, like his work, never fails to teach and delight.

Simultaneously, Sommers’s account exemplifies emerging literary Romanticism, a concern particularly visible when he describes Fergusson trying his poetic talents as a student at St. Andrews University:

About this time his poetical talents were beginning to appear, and by yielding to their natural impulse, he became negligent of his academical studies. Every day produced something new, the offspring of his fertile pen. (Sommers, 11)

Fergusson here becomes a model Romantic poet, his work characterised by innate urge: unable to control his 'fertile pen', his creative frenzy leads to 'negligence' of his university work. In his final estimation of his friend's poetic worth, Sommers states that, 'The versification is so easy and natural, that it seems to flow spontaneously, without any kind of effort on the part of the poet' (Sommers, 41). Both descriptions of Fergusson's poetic status demonstrate the influence of the developing Romantic movement: Sommers's remarks appear to have been lifted with embellishment from William Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Sommers's description of Fergusson's muse as a 'natural impulse', as 'easy and natural' and 'flowing spontaneously' is strongly reminiscent of the *Preface*'s statement that 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'.¹⁸ Simultaneously, Romanticism's tenets of rusticity, freedom from convention, spontaneity and use of 'the real language of men' (Wordsworth, 595) fit a simplified estimation of Fergusson's contribution: he died too young, like Keats and Byron; he writes in 'the real language of men', the Scots vernacular; he writes instinctively and without revision; he baulks at convention; he provides a rustic ideal. Accordingly, Manning asserts that, 'well before Wordsworth's Preface' this poetic brand was created, and, consequently:

We have inherited a Burnsian (and subsequently Wordsworthian) model of the Romantic poet – in each case a self-construction designed to obscure the poet's extensive neoclassical reading and rhetorical training. (Manning, 92)

While Sommers attempts to liberate Fergusson's memory from Irving's stern moral lesson, his biography is the first to read the poet's life through a Romantic lens. As precursor to Burns and Wordsworth, Fergusson's life is presented in an alien, but paradoxically all too native, context. For Sommers, Fergusson's is a 'natural impulse'; his writing is instinctive; not cerebral. His portrayal, however attractive it may be, 'obscures' Fergusson's scholarly erudition.

Adding his portrayal is Hugh Miller who, in his *Tales and Sketches* (1869), provides an imaginary account of his protagonist's friendship with 'Fergusson' which draws on previous biographies and his own literary invention. In his first conversation with Miller's fictional protagonist, Mr. Lindsay, 'Fergusson' announces his poetic method:

There is poetry in the remote: the bleak hill seems a darker firmament, and the chill wreath of vapour a river of fire. [...] I seek for poetry among the fields and cottages of my own land.¹⁹

Fergusson, often called the city laureate of Auld Reikie, becomes, for Miller, the poet of the 'remote', while his account of 'the bleak hill' and its poetic inspiration is more reminiscent of Wordsworth than Fergusson. Miller's Fergusson is portrayed as a rustic, Romantic bard, finding inspiration in the sublime aspects of nature. Here too, he becomes a prototype for Burns, seeking for the poetry of 'fields and cottages'. As Wordsworth states in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*:

Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; [...] because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (Wordsworth, 597)

Miller has evidently absorbed his *Lyrical Ballads*, and as a result, Fergusson becomes a model Wordsworthian poet, finding inspiration in the 'beautiful and permanent forms of nature' exemplified by the 'bleak hill'. Moreover, Miller obscures Fergusson's education by describing it as 'twofold'; 'he studied in the schools and among the people, but it was in the latter tract alone that he required the materials for all his better poetry' (Miller, 14). This description reveals a concern with the doctrines of Romanticism and Scottish myth. Just as Wordsworth recommends that poetry be rooted in the natural landscape and the 'real language of men', so too does Scottish myth insist on egalitarianism; the belief in Scotland as a meritocracy was one in which writers of the kailyard school placed pride. Carl MacDougall encapsulates this myth:

The canonisation of Burns, Wallace, David Livingstone and others into the broader 'lad o' pairts' mythology underlined a wider myth, 'that Scottish society was inherently democratic and meritocratic'.²⁰

In Miller's 'tale', Fergusson is portrayed as a 'lad o' pairts'; a poet 'of the [Scottish] people', thus setting the standard that 'English' neoclassicism is cerebral, artificial and dispensable, while the Scots vernacular is natural, instinctive and essential.

Alexander Balloch Grosart's *Robert Fergusson* (1898) is a natural successor to Miller's account. Although Grosart appears to provide research lacking in previous pieces, critics have expressed distrust of his study. Alexander Law, in an essay on the Lives of Fergusson, points out that 'the manuscripts that Grosart consulted have apparently disappeared and we cannot now check the accuracy of his quotations', while he wishes for 'confirmation' of the whereabouts of a collection of manuscripts which provide the basis of Grosart's study.²¹ Furthermore, Stefan Collini offers a worldly explanation for Grosart's literary acquisitions when he discusses the Dictionary of National Biography's founder, Leslie Stephen's, tribulations with contributors:

One enemy [Stephen] certainly made was Alexander Balloch Grosart DD [...]. As early as October 1883, Stephen was complaining that he had 'had my usual letter of abuse from that old fool Grosart', but things took an altogether more serious turn when it was discovered, very late in the day, that Grosart had not only reproduced, without acknowledgement, entries he had already published in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, but had resorted to inventing some of his sources as well.²²

It is with caution, therefore, that one should approach Grosart's biography. In addition to his frequent excursions into 'invention', Routhead describes Grosart's writing style

as highly-wrought and opaque: while his piece is a 'labour of love', its style is, according to Roughead, 'irritating', and its material 'mishandled' (Roughead, 510).

Grosart begins by describing 'our task of love, the re-writing of his pathetic story'.²³ Emotion is to the fore, as is an appreciation of – and at times a revelling in – the pathos of Fergusson's life. Grosart describes Fergusson's family situation thus:

Though William and Elizabeth Fergusson's children were thus of the Poor, the 'tenty' reader [...] will have taken note of an especially Scottish, and especially creditable Scottish, characteristic, viz. that their parents, out of their little income, contrived to provide for the early and thorough education of their children, girls as well as boys. (Grosart, 31)

Fergusson's parents are applauded for their emphasis on education for each of their children. However, Grosart simultaneously constructs Fergusson as the archetypal Scottish 'lad o' pairts': the poet comes from a poor family to a university education, going on to national recognition. In fact, the 'lad o' pairts' myth seems to have been a particular fascination for Grosart. In his Preface to *The Works of Michael Bruce*, another 'delicate' Scottish poet who died at an early age, he describes the myth's importance: 'A godly parentage weighs down mere outward splendour [...]. The men of Scotland who have made their deepest mark on their generation, have worked their way upward from just such levels.'²⁴

His description of Fergusson's education climaxes in a general truth regarding Scotland's apparently meritocratic character:

It has ever been the glory of Scotland that her humblest peasantry and 'common people' – name of honour – equally with the higher, have valued the John Knox-established Parish schools and 'ettled' at something beyond them for their children. (Grosart, 31)

Fergusson is demoted to the level of the 'humblest peasantry' and made to fit the Burnsian template of the Presbyterian cotter. Grosart's association of 'Parish Schools' with Fergusson is misleading: he states that Fergusson was taught in a 'private or adventure school' (Grosart, 38) in 1756, before moving to 'the royal High School of his native city' (Grosart, 39) in 1758. The poet then progresses, by aid of a bursary, to the Grammar School of Dundee around 1762 (Grosart, 44). Fergusson's education is consequently dissimilar to Burns's, which took place in 'a small school at Alloway Miln, about a mile from the house in which he was born', where he made 'rapid progress in reading, spelling and writing; they committed psalms and hymns to memory with extraordinary ease'.²⁵ The biographer's depiction of Fergusson's early education is evidence of his compulsion to 'endorse' Fergusson's experience by allusion to that of 'larger' figures in Scottish literature and myth.

With appropriate rhetoric, Fergusson's history fits the stereotype of the 'lad o' pairts'. As Grosart states, through uncommon abilities, Fergusson is taken from his poverty-stricken home to the University of St. Andrews with the support of a scholarship for boys by the surname of Fergusson, going on to make his name as a poet who revitalises the Scottish vernacular tradition. Grosart's account creates an approving account of Fergusson's life, while constructing a notion of Scotland as inherently meritocratic. To this end, Grosart begins his biography by setting Fergusson beside such figures as Wordsworth, Burns, Carlyle and Stevenson. As Angus Calder asserts:

The strong practical emphasis on [...] great figures [...] has been linked with the relatively democratic character of education in Scotland. The touching notion that the country's universities were crammed with the sons of ploughmen and stonemasons, 'lads o' pairts', released into light and fame by devoted dominies in village schools, does not bear sceptical examination. But it retains imaginative force, if only because a ploughman, Robert Burns, showed what intellectual stuff the Scottish rural proletariat was made of.²⁶

While undoubtedly extolling Fergusson's achievements, Grosart's account, which is part of a series entitled 'Famous Scots', justifies the poet's 'fame' by conflating his experience with that of Scotland's national poet.

Grosart's account of Fergusson's life is also touched by his fascination with the Scottish mother figure, providing numerous miniature portraits of Fergusson's mother, Elizabeth:

Fergusson's mother was so out-and-out a sagacious woman, as well as devout – as was Agnes Brown, mother of the greater Robert – that we may assume that her ebullient and impulsive 'laddie' received many a grave counsel and heard many a fervent prayer in his behalf. After the Scottish reticent manner, the whole family would be quietly proud of their Robert's going to Colledge. (Grosart, 49-50)

Fergusson's mother becomes a stereotypical Kailyard matriarch, poor but devout, worrying but righteous, and reserved but proud; she is, for Grosart, a prototype of Agnes Broun, 'mother of the greater Robert'. This interest is an enduring feature of Grosart's biographical endeavour. Not only is Elizabeth Fergusson compared to Agnes Broun, but also to 'Robert Nicoll's brave-hearted mother'; 'she was of a 'proud spirit' in a good sense, and struggled on without complaining or fretting' (Grosart, 66): Fergusson's mother is a patriotic ideal; she is the suffering but staunch Caledonia. This fixation appears throughout Grosart's corpus, most notably in his account of Michael Bruce's mother in his Preface to Bruce's Works. Anne Bruce is, like Fergusson's, Burns's and Nicoll's mothers, a genuine "mother in Israel", vigilant, loving, frugal, "*eidant*"; [...] she mellowed beautifully as she wore her crown of silver hairs, and exemplified the "hoary head found in the way of righteousness".²⁷

When describing Fergusson's years at St. Andrews University, Grosart directly refutes Irving's censoriousness:

Once more, how wooden, how utterly without least sense or understanding of humour, your 'moralisers' who magnify this ebullience of waggery into 'a grave moral offence'! Fiddlesticks, 'most reverend doctors!' (Grosart, 58)

Irving's moralising is dismissed with an extravagant flourish of sympathy. Grosart's emotional approach is further illustrated in his depiction of an incident in which Fergusson's uncle, John Forbes, dismissed the poet from his house and deprived him of work. A minor aspect of the accounts of Irving and Sommers, the incident becomes, in Grosart's piece, a pivotal event:

This visit, I reiterate, I regard as *the* most fundamental factor in Robert Fergusson's career. [...] As we shall learn sorrowfully, even when tragedy

fell, the poor mother was so abjectly poor that she had no choice but to allow her 'child of genius' to be removed to the pauper-Bedlam! It thus lies on the surface that John Forbes continued to the bitter end unbrotherly, penurious, and callous; and that his sister was of the true old-fashioned Scottish independent spirit and disdained to make further appeal. (Grosart, 69-70)

Grosart's stout sense of Christian decency and Victorian charity are contradicted by the character of Forbes, and this biographical anecdote becomes, in Grosart's depiction, a struggle between the respectable innocence of Fergusson and his mother, and the capitalist-tainted evil of the poet's uncle. In his study of the biographies of Byron and Shelley, Bradley uncovers a similar simplification of opposing forces in the poets' lives. According to Bradley, Byron and Shelley are depicted in biographies as polar opposites for various reasons:

The apparently *biographical* decision to depict the two poets as contradictory is [...] based on more or less *philosophical* assumptions. This leaves many biographical studies in the perilous position of depending on imported philosophical accounts of difference like Hegelian dialectic which have nothing to do with biography and operate quite irrespectively of the lives and works of their subjects. (Bradley, 157)

In Grosart's portrayal, the poet's expulsion from his uncle's house becomes '*the* most fundamental factor in Robert Fergusson's career' while each of the myths lauded by Grosart are offended by Forbes and his uncharitable behaviour. Whereas Fergusson and his family represent the suffering but honest poor of Scotland; the egalitarian, 'lad o' pairs' ideal, Forbes is stained by money because he is a farming factor – indeed, Grosart describes him as a land agent in the mould of Caesar's master in Burns's 'The Twa Dogs. A Tale'. Through this Hegelian dialectic, the characters in Grosart's biography are, arguably, archetypal figures who appeal to a charitable Victorian mindset with its belief in social progress.

Even at the height of his fame, Grosart's Fergusson remains the modest 'lad o' pairs', aware of his humble roots and suspicious of commendations:

Throughout Robert Fergusson kept his head. To this end, as in the beginning, he remained self-respecting, but modest and shy to awkwardness when praised. [...] He was always uneasy and restless when his own productions were being praised, but would listen and join the praises of others cordially. [...] 'Mr. Robert' (it was always Mr. Robert) 'was a dear, gentle, modest creature; his cheeks, naturally pale, would flush with girlish pink at a compliment.' Surely all this is very fine? (Grosart, 99-100)

Remaining wary of praise, he is 'self-respecting'. Just as this depiction of Fergusson successfully presents the poet as a Scottish myth made flesh, Grosart, the practising Church of Scotland minister, is also immersed in theology. As Iain Finlayson considers, concepts of Scottish 'reticence' are based on the teachings of Presbyterianism. Just as Fergusson is given saintly elevation in Grosart's biography, so is he given bolstered chances in the afterlife as reward for his 'tholing' of his worldly circumstances:

Many a man might make a fortune, but to do so might imperil his eternal soul: heaven was the final reckoning in which, if the Magnificat were to be believed, the mighty would be humbled and the deserving poor elevated to their proper rank which the base world had unaccountably failed to recognise. Poverty, well-manneredly and stoically endured, was a passport to good standing in eternity.²⁸

In his careful depiction of Fergusson as a 'stoic', 'well-mannered' member of the 'deserving poor', Grosart arguably endeavours to ensure the poet's 'good standing in eternity'. After Irving's unflinching portrait of Fergusson's debauchery, Grosart perhaps attempts to save the poet's soul from damnation. Finlayson's logic further clarifies Grosart's wrath towards Forbes: just as Grosart is sure of Fergusson's 'elevation', his faith allows him to attack Forbes's 'callousness'; Forbes, as one of the uncharitable 'mighty' is sure to be 'humbled' in the Presbyterian afterlife. Through a consistent portrayal of Fergusson and his family as blessed, honest but poor stereotypes, Grosart saves the poet from the eternal punishment that Irving's accusations of immorality would ensure.

Fergusson has been put to numerous biographical uses since his death in 1774. Before the advent of Burns, Ruddiman portrayed Fergusson as the saviour of a dying Scots vernacular tradition. After the publication of Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* in 1786, Fergusson's contribution was celebrated and compromised; Burns's genuine tributes to his predecessor allowed re-examination, but cemented his place as literary precursor. Biographies of Fergusson in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth illuminate the priorities of their particular contexts, while providing valuable insight into the ways in which Fergusson's literary contribution has been understood and valued in divergent periods. What each biography shares, however, is an appreciation of Fergusson as a literary artist. Ruddiman's obituary describes him as a poetic 'genius', while Grosart encapsulates his contribution thus:

He is to be gratefully remembered for what his vernacular poems did for Robert Burns; for what he did in the nick of time in asserting the worth and dignity and potentiality of his and our mother-tongue; for his naturalness, directness, veracity, simplicity, raciness, humour, sweetness, melody; for his felicitous packing into lines and couplets sound common sense; for his penetrative perception that man and not 'braid claith' or wealth is 'the man for a' that'; for his patriotic love of country and civil and religious freedom; and for the perfectness – with only superficial scratches rather than material flaws – of at least thirteen of his vernacular poems, and for sustaining the proud tradition and continuity of Scottish song. (Grosart, 159)

While compromised by censoriousness and scarce documentary evidence, the biographies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries nevertheless laid the foundation for twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism of Fergusson's work, allowing Matthew P. McDiarmid to publish an authoritative edition of his life and works in 1954-56, and F.W. Freeman to describe Fergusson as 'a highly literate, educated and urbane young Edinburgh poet' in 1984.²⁹ Only one biography of Fergusson was produced in the twentieth century; W.E. Gillis's *Auld Reikie's Laureate: Robert Fergusson, a Critical Biography* sadly remains unpublished.³⁰ The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are a golden age of Fergusson biography. In their engagement with Fergusson's flaws, triumphs and circumstances, these memoirs facilitate a

nanced understanding of ‘Robert Fergusson’ over the last 235 years, but, by extension, a valuable insight into the creation of a Scottish literary canon.

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¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, quoted in Alexander Balloch Grosart, *Robert Fergusson* (Edinburgh, 1898), 15.

² Robert Crawford, ‘Introduction’ to *‘Heaven-Taught Fergusson’: Robert Burns’s Favourite Scottish Poet* (East Linton, 2003), 2.

³ Robert Burns, Letter to the Honourable Bailies of the Canongate, Edinburgh, 6 February 1787, in J. De Lancey Ferguson and G. Ross Roy (eds.), *The Letters of Robert Burns* (Oxford, 1985), Vol. I., 90.

⁴ Arthur Bradley, ‘“Winging itself with laughter”: Byron and Shelley after Deconstruction’ in Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes (eds.), *Romantic Biography* (Aldershot, 2003), 152.

⁵ David Irving, *Lives of the Scottish Poets* (Glasgow, 1799), 6.

⁶ William Roughead, *The Riddle of the Ruthvens and Other Studies* (Edinburgh, 1919), 488.

⁷ See *The Weekly Magazine or Edinburgh Amusement*, 20 October 1774, Vol. XXVI, 128 and Robert Fergusson, *Poems on Various Subjects* (Edinburgh, 1799).

⁸ John Pinkerton, *Pinkerton’s Ancient Scottish Poems* (Edinburgh, 1786), cxi-cxli.

⁹ George Douglas, *Scottish Poetry* (Glasgow, 1911), 160.

¹⁰ Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Robert Fergusson* (Edinburgh, 1952), 13.

¹¹ Allan MacLaine, *Robert Fergusson* (New York, 1965), 22.

¹² Susan Manning, ‘Robert Fergusson and Eighteenth-Century Poetry’ in Robert Crawford (ed.), *‘Heaven-Taught Fergusson’: Robert Burns’s Favourite Scottish Poet* (East Linton, 2002), 88.

¹³ F.W. Freeman, ‘Robert Fergusson: Pastoral and Politics at Mid Century’ in Andrew Hook (ed.), *The History of Scottish Literature*, Vol. II (Aberdeen, 1987), 141.

¹⁴ Alexander Campbell, *An Introduction to the History of Poetry in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1798), 292.

¹⁵ John A. Fairley, ‘A Bibliography of Robert Fergusson’ in *Records of the Glasgow Bibliographic Society*, Vol. III, Session 1913-15 (Glasgow, 1915), 116. Fairley’s piece is still the standard bibliography of Fergusson’s work.

¹⁶ James Inverarity, ‘Strictures on Irving’s Life of Fergusson’ in *The Scots Magazine*, Vol. 63, October 1801, 763.

¹⁷ Thomas Sommers, *The Life of Robert Fergusson, Scottish Poet* (Edinburgh, 1803), 3.

¹⁸ William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to the Lyrical Ballads’ in Stephen Gill (ed.), *The Oxford Authors William Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1984), 598.

¹⁹ Hugh Miller, ‘Recollections of Fergusson’ in *Tales and Sketches* (Edinburgh, 1869), 6-7.

²⁰ Carl MacDougall, *Painting the Forth Bridge: A Search for Scottish Identity* (London, 2001), 8-9.

²¹ Alexander Law, ‘The Bibliography of Robert Fergusson’ in Sydney Goodsir Smith (ed.), *Robert Fergusson*, 168-69.

²² Stefan Collini, ‘Our Island Story’ in *London Review of Books*, 2005, 3.

²³ Alexander B. Grosart, *Robert Fergusson* (Edinburgh, 1898), 8.

²⁴ Alexander B. Grosart (ed.), *The Works of Michael Bruce* (Edinburgh, 1865), 6-7.

²⁵ J.G. Lockhart, *The Life of Robert Burns* (1828; rpt. London, 1947), 4-5.

²⁶ Angus Calder, *Revolving Culture: Notes from the Scottish Republic* (London, 1994), 24.

²⁷ Grosart, *The Works of Michael Bruce*, 6.

²⁸ Iain Finlayson, *The Scots* (London, 1987), 71.

²⁹ F.W. Freeman, *Robert Fergusson and the Scots Humanist Compromise* (Edinburgh, 1984), vii.

³⁰ W.E. Gillis, *Auld Reikie’s Laureate: Robert Fergusson, a Critical Biography* (Edinburgh University PhD thesis, 1955).