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## **J.D. Fergusson – Art and Nationality**

**Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat (Friday 18 March 2016)**

### **[Boxed off:]**

While Scottish poets and writers gathered in Montrose in the 1920s, then in St Andrews and Shetland in the 1930s, an artist of an older generation, born in Leith in 1874, was to travel alongside and sometimes intersect with their work. He was one of the group known familiarly as the Scottish Colourists but his vision and purpose is seen not only in his style and subjects but also, emphatically, in his book, *Modern Scottish Painting*. This was and remains a manifesto for the distinctiveness of Scottish art, and of Scotland, internationally and independently. He is one of the major artists of the twentieth century, fully in touch with international Modernism in Paris before the First World War, and committed to cultural and political regeneration in Scotland after the Second World War. His name was John Duncan Fergusson.

### **[Article begins:]**

J.D. Fergusson's book, *Modern Scottish Painting* appeared in 1943, the same year as Hugh MacDiarmid's autobiography *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* and the major breakthrough volume of modern Gaelic poetry, Sorley Maclean's *Dàin do Eimhir*. Taken together, these three key books signal the co-ordinate points by which a new Scotland was to be created, and Fergusson, MacDiarmid and MacLean might be seen together as artists whose shared vision of what Scotland could be has nourished and inspired the nation's cultural and political regeneration, from the 1920s, through dark times in the middle of the Second World War, to the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Unlike any of his Scottish artist contemporaries, Fergusson gathered and wrote down his thoughts, beliefs and commitments about art and politics. *Modern Scottish Painting* is a declaration of the practice of painting as national intent.

Each chapter prompts variations on the central theme of painting and freedom – freedom from the tyranny of academic authority in taste, artistic conventions and social priorities, and increasingly, freedom from the coercive pressures to conform politically in British imperialism, as opposed to distinctively anti-imperialist Scottish national art.

Fergusson's political nationalism and repeated call for Scotland's independence is unmistakable, loud and clear, on almost every page of the book. Maybe this is one reason why it has frequently been passed over in silence or given only muted acknowledgement by most

of his commentators.

Fergusson grew up in the port of Leith, near, but not part of, Edinburgh. In Fergusson's youth it was a town quite distinct from the polite establishment ethos of the New Town. As a young man, Fergusson had one eye on a world that opened out internationally, and the other looking at what was no longer the capital city of an independent nation.

He must have been impressed from an early age by the contrast between the austerities of Calvinism, Kirk elders dressed in black, and the colour and linguistic energy of the port. Language is the key. His parents were Gaelic speakers from Perthshire. He would have heard rich Edinburgh Scots spoken in the streets around him as a boy, and a range of other languages spoken by the seamen, and he would have been familiar with the polite, genteel English of the Edinburgh bourgeoisie. After attending the Royal High School in Edinburgh, he enrolled at Edinburgh University as a medical student, becoming familiar with the shapes and structures of bodily form. But he walked away from any formal academic programmes as quickly as he could.

He positioned himself as an independent artist from the beginning, acquiring a studio in Picardy Place at the top of Leith Walk in 1894. He began visiting Paris on a regular basis from 1897 onwards, and moved there in 1907, after a series of summer trips to France with his fellow Scottish Colourist, Samuel Peploe. He loved the place for a reason:

“Paris is simply a place of freedom. Geographically central, it has *always* been a centre of light and learning and research. It is a place that has always been difficult to dominate by mere deadweight of stupidity. It will be very difficult for anyone to show that it is not still the home of freedom for ideas; a place where people like to hear ideas presented and discussed; where an artist of any sort is just a human being like a doctor or a plumber, and not a freak or madman, and where he doesn't need to look fantastic. After going there over thirty years ago I have some right to speak – *Salut!* to Paris. It allowed me to be Scots as I understand it, and has *made* me so Scots that I am leaving it and coming home.”

In Paris, Fergusson eagerly embraced all the new discoveries being made in painting by Cézanne, the Fauves and the Cubists. He was in the company of Picasso, Léger, Matisse, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Apollinaire, Stravinsky, Ravel, Fauré, Lenin, Trotsky, and others at the forefront of revolution in the arts, literature, music and politics. The Fergusson archive in Perth contains letters from Picasso that clearly reveal the depth of affinity, affection and professional respect they had for one other.

We do Fergusson a grave disservice not to contextualise him fully among his great modernist contemporaries. It was in Paris around 1913 that Fergusson met his life-long partner

Margaret Morris, the pioneering dancer and choreographer. It was here that he painted his masterpiece, “Les Eus”, a radical vision of a group of women and men dancing in a revolutionary self-expression of good health and freedom, a Scottish “Rite of Spring”.

In 1922, when Eliot published *The Waste Land* and Joyce published *Ulysses* and MacDiarmid first appeared in print, Fergusson travelled around the Highlands seeking to address the landscape of Scotland in this modernist context. He was the first major artist in Scotland to do so.

Two key paintings from this trip are “A Puff of Smoke Near Milngavie” and “Storm around Ben Ledi”. They are contrasting scenes: one is of cultivated fields, farmland, a small town or village in the foreground. The hills are in sunshine, three big white clouds are passing in the blue sky, the puff of smoke looks benign, also white, perhaps from a passing train? Leaves on branches hang down from the upper edge of the frame, almost visibly swaying in the breeze. The address of the landscape – how people who live there might experience it, how it might affect the experience of people who live there – is in the painting itself. It invites the viewers’ consideration of this. It is not merely a pretty picture.

This involvement with the vision of the inhabitants of a place takes the work into alignment with the great literary works of Modernism, especially in Scotland.

One of the key characteristics of Modernism was the repudiation of the security of the master narrative, the secure sense of where we are standing when we look at what is visualised before us. In classic realist fiction of the nineteenth century, there is a fixed hierarchy of author and characters. In Scottish literature for more than a century the authorial language had been English. In fiction, characters would speak Scots, but the master narrative was in English. In the 1920s and 1930s, pre-eminently Hugh MacDiarmid in poetry and Lewis Grassie Gibbon in novels and stories, use the Scots language. Gibbon creates a linguistic idiom that is tuned into the language of his characters. The hierarchy is abolished. The authority of judgement must be created out of the experience of life which the work of art brings into form. This is as true of F.G. Scott (1880-1958) in music, MacDiarmid and Gibbon in literature, and in painting with William Crozier (1893-1930), William McCance (1894-1970), William Johnstone (1897-1981) and William Gillies (1898-1973). They all build on the example of J.D. Fergusson.

Even less of a “merely” pretty picture, and even more impressive, perhaps, is “Storm around Ben Ledi”. The dark greens of the forests and the disrupting shapes of the mountains; the storm clouds, the greys and blues of rain and wind, the dark blue loch in the foreground; the trees standing resistant against the weather’s onslaught, all create a wilderness that is more attentive to geological and topographical reality than romantic encounter. The perspective is

disconcerting, taking your gaze vertiginously down into the glens, through and over the woods, and up to the summits.

Looking at these paintings, the answer you might give to the question, “What sort of place is this, Scotland?” would be very different from what could be imagined were you looking at a painting by any more conventional 19th-century landscape artist. These works are less about property than they are about experience.

As the Second World War was approaching, Fergusson chose to return to Glasgow from France because, he said, it was the most Highland city in Scotland. As soon as he arrived he set about invigorating Glasgow’s art scene. Dissatisfied with the existing Glasgow Art Club because it would not admit women, he established the New Art Club in 1940. He was the founder-member of the New Scottish Group, holding annual exhibitions from 1943-48, and again in the 1950s. There was no jury selection. He based this procedure on his experience of the Salon des Indépendents in Paris. This openness encouraged influential European refugees such as Josef Herman and Jankel Adler as well as non-conformists like Ian Hamilton Finlay and William Crosbie to exhibit and participate actively. Alongside Fergusson’s activities, Margaret Morris formed the Celtic Ballet in 1947, and in 1960, the Scottish National Ballet. She was, in a sense, the model for the female figures in the designs Fergusson contributed to the first editions of MacDiarmid’s epic poem, *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955), where visualisation, musical annotations, the ancient Celtic script known as Ogham and the endless variations of language and creative expressivity are the constantly exfoliating principles of human rejuvenation to which both Fergusson and MacDiarmid were comprehensively committed.

Fergusson consistently supported the work of contemporary women artists such as Louise Annand, Pat Douthwaite and Isobel Brodie. Their work forms part of the Scottish Women Artists exhibition running till the end of June at the National Galleries of Scotland.

Like McTaggart and Patrick Geddes before him, and along with his close friends S.J. Peploe and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Fergusson had a vision for Scotland. “It is quite possible to turn Scotland into one of the most wonderful and vital countries in the world, but it has to be done by Scots.”

His vision was far-reaching and continues to inspire and instruct. That’s his real legacy. In her biography, *The Art of J.D. Fergusson*, Margaret Morris remembers Antibes in the summer of 1924: “One day we met Picasso at Eden Roc and we walked back to the hotel together. He said, ‘You do not fit into this place,’ and picked a sprig of bog-myrtle from a bush and handed it to Fergus, saying, ‘This is you’.”

Picasso was only one of his friends and fellow artists to recognise and endorse Fergusson's love of his country and his desire for its independence.

**Fergusson's greatest paintings can be seen at The J.D. Fergusson Gallery in Perth, the Hunterian Gallery at Glasgow University, the University of Stirling, and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh. Admittance to all galleries is free of charge.**

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