

## **David Osborne's September 2001 Introduction to '*The Ghaists – a Kirk Yard Eclogue*' by Robert Fergusson**

At last month's meeting you may recollect our worthy secretary highlighted the fact that he had received a flyer from Scotsoun Publications that their second annual lecture would be in St Andrews in the Square on 2<sup>nd</sup> December. To avoid filing the subject communication he deposited it with the Treasurer obviously feeling that consigning it in crumpled form to the not insubstantial flames to his right was somewhat inappropriate.

A number of such worthy offerings have been available over the years, a significant number at Strathclyde University in the early weeks of January focussing on him who brings us here tonight and which have been profitably attended by many members over the years but not for one reason or another by me. However on this occasion I did. Why ? It'll come as no great surprise to many, even those whose experience of sermon tasting is not of recent vintage, that over a half century of exposure to the Presbyterian form ensures that the answer is tripartite in composition.

Firstly, a reason without literary substance. I have been aware of the building off the Saltmarket for a long time, been conscious of restoration work undertaken but despite attendance on a number of Glasgow's Open Days, where nothing quite matches a stint at 11 Queen Street on the previous weekend, I had never been in the building, modelled on St Martin's in the Fields. The restored building in its ultimately realised setting of a residential square is well worth visiting. The marble backdrop to the communion table and the ornate woodwork of the pulpit offset incongruously by the Budweiser dispenser in the corner.

Secondly the lecture was to be given by William McIlvanney on whose prose I have commented on a previous visit to this chair. It was you will remember to be entitled 'English in its Underwear : a celebration of Scots Language', the central thesis being that Scots likes to dismantle pretensions, You know you can't fake it, you can't be as hypocritical, I think it is very difficult to be pompous in Scots. He speaks well but writes much better. Sponsorship by Scotsoun had not ensured the sound system was working well and despite sitting near the front, in deference more to my mother's aural limitations than a desire for proximity I had periodic difficulty in hearing. A new phrase which appealed to the chairman was that language was the 'survival kit' of a nation. He appeared to exude optimism but how justified his grounds, will have to await publication for a fuller analysis.

Thirdly any proceeds from the evening were to be devoted to the Robert Fergusson Statue Fund and in such commemorations in stone, as in much else, the example of Burns has left its impact. Only this June we acknowledged the last resting place of 'By far my elder brother in the muse' which had been unmarked for fifteen years after his death in 1774, was now marked by a stone which interestingly wrongly records the year of birth as 1751.

Who was this man to whom Burns felt he owed so much. Not just in form, not just thematically but as he recounts of his time in Irvine in his letter to Dr Moore '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. Obviously a vital factor in Burns recovery from the depressions of that period.

Robert Fergusson was born in Edinburgh on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1750 in Cap- and – Feather Close which ran up to the High Street from the north side , opposite but slightly above Niddry's Wynd (now Niddry Street) a mere stone's throw from where Drew Moncrieff partook of his midday repast at this year's summer outing.

His parents who had come from Aberdeen two years previously were not well off, his father being employed as a clerk but from an annual income of £20 ensuring that £1 15s was spent on school fees for Robert and his brother Hary, the elder by some eight years. Not a robust child he initially attended a school in the said Niddry's Wynd down which this year the said Drew Moncrieff made an apparently steady return to the coach parked outside St Cecilia's Hall. Incidentally for me the memory of the summer outing was seeing in the Russell collection in the Hall an instrument owned by Sir William Hamilton in Naples on which his wife, Lady Hamilton and Mozart had played a duet. Consulting a biography of Mozart on my return to Paisley, sure enough there was reference to a visit paid by Mozart to Naples and his playing with Sir William's wife, to whom the footnote refers as 'the famous Lady Hamilton.' Unfortunately this visit took place in 1770 when Mozart was 14 and the nautical inspiration Emma was but 5 and not destined to marry Sir William until 1791 the year of Mozart's death – my enquiries into the fame of presumably the first Lady Hamilton continue.

After one year in Niddry Wynd, Robert attended the High School for four years before being awarded a mortification or bursary instituted in 1695 for two poor children called Fergusson to be educated at the Grammar School of Dundee and in due course at the University of St Andrews where he went in 1764.

The town, with a population of around 2000, had seen better days. It was described as sleepy, sordid the sort of place in which only ale houses abounded. Thomas Pennant, the Welsh writer, in 1772 deplored the fact 'that the manufactures this city might in former times possess, are reduced to one, that of golf balls, which trifling as it may seem, maintains several people. The trade is commonly fatal to the artists, for the balls are made by stuffing great quantity of feathers into a leather case, by help of an iron rod, with a wooden handle , pressed against the breast, which seldom fails to bring on consumption. It had long since ceased to be the centre of ecclesiastical life and its university had no great reputation. After a visit in 1773 Dr Johnson lamented 'Had the university been destroyed two centuries ago, we would not have regretted it ; but to see it pining in decay and struggling for life, fills the mind with mournful images and ineffectual wishes. Greek , Latin, Mathematics, Logic, Moral Philosophy and Natural Philosophy formed the curriculum. Fergusson's forte surprisingly appears to have been mathematics but what really flourished was his capacity for rhyme commenting often satirically on university life. The only surviving example is 'Elegy, on the death of Mr David Gregory, late Professor of Mathematics at the University of St Andrews.

Now mourn, ye college masters a'!  
And frae your een a tear lat fa,  
Fam'd Gregory death has taen awa  
Without remeid;  
The skaith (trouble) ye've met wi's nae that sma,  
Sin Gregory's deid

Remarkable poetry? No. But composed at the age of fourteen and probably the initial example of 'Standard Habbie' being applied to a 'respectable' subject. Apparently pipers, greyhounds, horses or innkeepers had been the previous subject matter.

His rhyming skills, his superb singing voice ( best in the university) and a capacity for conviviality (note euphemism) made him popular but not universally. A note in the margin of a university library book of the period apparently describes Fergusson as a 'stinking fairy' and 'snake in human form' – my point of reference does not go on to explain the meanings in eighteenth century terms.

After various threatened expulsions, in May 1768 Fergusson finished his studies. He did not graduate but this apparently carried no implications of failure. Completion of a degree in divinity, law, or medicine would have required four more years study and his mother had been recently widowed.

He eventually returned to Edinburgh, and took up a post as clerk and copyist in the Commissary Records Office. He was but nineteen, but it turned out to be his final occupation. Poorly paid and to one of imagination boring it may have been but situated in Parliament Close, Edinburgh's legal, commercial and social heart providing much raw material for one whose reputation rests to a marked degree on his capacity to observe the men and mores of the capital, Edinburgh whose population in 1755 was at 53000 almost double that of Glasgow, a position of equality at 80000 had been reached by the end of the century.

Fergusson's job may not have paid well but it enabled him to enjoy a full social life as 'Sir Precentor' of the Cape Club. While apparently non exclusive and unpretentious, the club had 650 members between 1764 and 1800 of which Fergusson was 159. – fellow members including Alexander Nasmyth, Henry Raeburn and one Deacon William Brodie.

He wrote in both English and in Scots, particularly in the latter of Edinburgh life much of which was printed in 'The Weekly Magazine' by Walter Ruddiman who also published a collection of Fergusson's poems in January 1773. It sold a disappointing 500 copies and realised the poet around £50. A second edition was printed in 1779, including his masterpiece 'Auld Reekie'. It is a copy of this which is thought to have been Burns' inspiration.

Publication throughout 1773 continued but depression set in and by early 1774 his absence from 'The Weekly Magazine' was a matter of concerned enquiry from subscribers. In July his friends in the Cape Club contributed funds for his well-being but after a fall from a stairhead after an evening of conviviality his behaviour was such that his poor mother could no longer cope. Under the pretext of taking him to visit an acquaintance, some of his friends put him in a sedan chair and removed him to the public asylum. He was not totally deserted, he was regularly visited but died after two months on October 17th 1774.

What size of debt is owed by Burns to Fergusson.? There are many parallels in form and theme. The various references not least that inscribed in the copy of Fergusson's poems presented to Rebekah Carmichael in March 1787 O thou my elder brother in misfortune, By far my elder brother in the muse, show a high regard. This is thought by some to be overstated but presumably Burns command of language would have found another form of expression if he had thought it appropriate. Most critics, or at least those I've consulted, rate Burns the better poet but he did not die at 24 and in fact had written less in the vernacular than had Fergusson at that age.

In Thomas Crawford's commentary on Burns poems and songs, his source analysis highlights Ramsay as the main inspiration but Fergusson's in second place.

While Burns is the rural poet and Fergusson the urban, some critics are bold enough to suggest that if there is one poem of Fergusson's which is superior, it is the Farmer's Ingle. When one considers the contribution to Burns' fame made by the Cottar's Saturday Night, it is a brave claim.

It was observed by one that every Scots word used by Burns which was not Ayrshire in origin, could be found in the works of Fergusson; is that all so surprising when their fathers were born in places less than fifty miles apart.

I have chosen to read 'The Ghaists : A Kirk-yard Eclogue'. First published in The Weekly Magazine in

May 1773 it takes the form of a conversation between the two Georges, Heriot and Watson, the former having been dead around a hundred and fifty years, the latter around fifty.

The initial section in Watson's name acknowledges their existence as creatures of the night and that their meeting will have to end at dawn and the cock crowing. Herriot, while acknowledging this nocturnal reality, responds that there is change afoot and night may last longer than Watson thinks. Birds are not flying during the day, owls are seen at noon and hawks are no longer birds of prey.

In his opinion Scotland and its capital are in decline and his benefaction has been in vain.

Watson attempts to alter his perspective; claiming that some warlock's distorted his vision. The Major Weir referred to was an apparently devout Presbyterian, where have we heard that before, who was in fact much given to incest with sister Jean coupled with bestiality.

He points out that unless his eyes deceive him, George Heriot's Hospital still seems to be standing. Herriott responds that the cause of his distress and implying that it should give Watson the same cause was a bill before, to Herriott's disgust, the British Parliament called the Mortmain Bill, named presumably because it sought to encourage trustees to invest in a government fund at three percent. The thought of his trustees realising investments for a low rate of interest and effectively relinquishing responsibility was obviously upsetting his spirit. The bill was widely opposed in Scotland, being seen as a device to service the national debt at the expense of North Britain and was not in fact passed.

Watson, wakening to the danger, worries about the continuing good work for which they have been responsible but feels even if the bill is passed, some body of public spirited folk, even the council, will find some way to ensure youngsters do not suffer. Herriott responds that there are few as altruistic as Watson would like to think and as long as they are well provided for the fate of others matters little.

Watson offers to discuss with an intimate of the devil that in the event of the worst happening, he will see if Auld Nick can reek the necessary havoc and separate once again north Britain from its southern neighbour. Herriot concludes by suggesting that the ghost of 'bluidy Mackenzie' the scourge of the Covenanters be encouraged to sort out the bill's proponents.

There is indeed a proposal afoot to erect in the Royal Mile a statue to Fergusson and I suggest that in due course this Club would want to follow its inspiration and contribute but possibly settle more quickly.