

Fergusson
family

BEHIND THE GRAVESTONE

Robert Fergusson (1750-1774)

by David G C Burns

A statue of Robert Fergusson, the Poet, stands on the pavement outside Canongate Kirk: erected to his memory by "The Friends of Robert Fergusson". Sometime later I found myself by his graveside, and was touched at finding a fresh bunch of flowers on the grave. After all these years, someone still remembered him.

Robert Fergusson was born in Edinburgh on 5 September 1750, the son of William Fergusson, clerk, and Elizabeth Forbes. He began his education at the Royal High School, obtained a bursary to study at Dundee High School, before moving on to St Andrew's University, where he started to write poetry. After the death of his father, he returned to Edinburgh to look after his mother and sister. He found work as a clerk in the Commissary Office but continued to write poetry in his spare time.

In his short life, he composed over 80 poems; 33 in the vernacular. His writing, highly acclaimed and published, included "Auld Reekie" and "Leith Races". Greatly admired by his contemporary, Robert Burns and, in the following century, the writer, Robert Louis Stevenson; when Burns visited the grave in 1789, he paid for a headstone with the following epitaph:

"No sculptured marble here, nor pompous lay;
no storied Urn, nor animated Bust;
this simple stone directs pale Scotia's way
to pour her Sorrows o'er her Poet's Dust

Fergusson suffered terribly, physically and mentally, after he fell down a Staircase, with serious injuries. Incarcerated in the local Bedlam, he languished there until his death on 17 October 1774.

The Physician, Andrew Duncan, another contemporary of Fergusson, disgusted at the horrors he found in Bedlam, campaigned vigorously for a more enlightened attitude to the psychiatrically ill. He opened up a clinic in 1813 in Morningside. It is still there; under another name.

[NB I am indebted to Collins' *Encyclopaedia of Scotland and Ruins and Remains: Edinburgh's Neglected Heritage* for some background material.]

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