

## Robert Fergusson (1750-1774)

"O thou, my elder brother in Misfortune,  
By far my elder Brother in the muse."

Robert Burns

So wrote Robert Burns, in his personal copy of the poems of Robert Fergusson. The subject of this quotation was born on 5 September 1750, at Cap-and-Feather Close, Edinburgh, the fourth child of William Fergusson and his wife Elizabeth Forbes. Their home was situated on the north side of the High Street and, including Robert, the family consisted of William, who held various positions as a clerk, Elizabeth, two sons and a daughter, finally added to by the birth of a second daughter in 1752. The family had probably just moved to Edinburgh a year or two before Robert's birth, from around Tarland in Aberdeenshire. The first three children had been born there, with one son dying in infancy. They seem to have maintained a fairly close connection with Aberdeenshire, where Elizabeth's brother John Forbes was a farmer.

In his younger years, Robert suffered from poor health, but in 1757 began his schooling at a private school in Niddry's Wynd run by Mr Philp. Having spent around six months there, he entered the High School in 1758 in the class of John Gilchrist, who was known as an



Blackfriars Monastery: High School of Edinburgh location  
1578-1777

excellent Latin scholar, and remained in his class until 1761. The school at that time was located on the site of the Blackfriars' Monastery, at the foot of Infirmary Street, and was replaced by a new school building on the same site in 1777. The building is now occupied by the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute of the University of Edinburgh. The school curriculum was very much focussed on Latin, beginning with elementary Latin books and progressing to the works of Virgil, Horace, Sallust and Cicero. There was also a writing master at the School named John Maclure, a rather eccentric character, who had fought in the Government army at the Battle of Falkirk in 1746.

Robert was one of around 27 boys in John Gilchrist's class in 1758, with the total number of pupils in the School numbering up to about 160 in his years there. Since these figures are based on the Library register, which did not necessarily include every single pupil, the numbers may have been slightly larger than this. However, it would seem likely that all the pupils would know one another to some extent. Certainly Robert would have been well acquainted with those in his own class and a brief look at the very varied careers of a few of these perhaps gives some flavour of his classmates.

One of these gained considerable fame. William Fettes (1750-1836), set up his own business as a wine and tea merchant in the High Street, eventually becoming Lord Provost of Edinburgh, and being created a baronet. A bequest left by him eventually led to the foundation of Fettes College. Like Fergusson, although very many years later and in very different circumstances as we will see, he was buried in the Canongate Kirkyard in the imposing Fettes Mausoleum.

A nobleman David Carnegie (1749-1788), Lord Rosehill, son of the 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Northesk, met with a colourful life, firstly beginning with a commission



Portrait by Alexander Runciman, 1772



Sir William Fettes (1750-1836)  
by William Cuming

in the Army. In 1767 he was married in Scotland, but within a year or so he was in America, and in 1768 in Maryland, he bigamously married a well known actress, Margaret Cheer. Details of Lord Rosehill's subsequent life are obscure. He clearly separated from Margaret and eventually died in Rouen.

Two other interesting classmates can be noted here. An intriguing name is that of John Fife. A John Fife was named as a player on the music bells at Edinburgh in the 1720s and 1730s, and Fergusson in his poem *The Election*, tells of the bells of St Giles' celebrating the end of the election –

While Sandy Fife, to mak content,  
On bells play *Clout the caudron*  
To them that day.

It could well be that Robert's classmate was a member of this family. There is also in existence *John Fife's music book*, a collection of Scottish folk music, which originated from Perthshire around 1780. Was this the same John? Perhaps further research would reveal the answer.

Finally, there was Hugh Sparks. Although originally intended for the church, Hugh left college in 1769 and worked as an actor in Dundee, appearing on the stage in Edinburgh from 1777 until 1794, performing regularly, along with his wife. They then moved to London, appearing at the Drury Lane Theatre. Hugh was well liked and held a high reputation as an actor, eventually dying in 1816.

On a visit to Edinburgh in 1750, John Amyat, the King's Chemist, is reported to have said "Here I stand at what is called the Cross of Edinburgh, and can, in a few minutes, take fifty men of genius by the hand". Looking at other individuals who attended the High School during Fergusson's time there, it is possible to see emerging the next generation of "men of genius", men such as the judge and historian, Alexander Fraser Tytler, the surgeon James Russell, Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, agriculturist, politician and author, and the philosopher Dugald Stewart.

When Robert was given the opportunity of benefitting from a bursary, this was welcomed by the family. Its terms were that two years should be spent at the Grammar School of Dundee, followed by some years at St Andrews University. He commenced this programme of study in 1762, entering the University late in 1764, where he remained until 1768. During his time there he was noted for his ability in mathematics, which was studied in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years, and also as the best singer in the University. The professor with whom he had the closest contact was William Wilkie, Professor of Natural Philosophy. Wilkie employed Fergusson to make copies of his lectures over two summers and the Professor's literary interests were probably an influence on the young student, who paid tribute to him in his *Eclogue to the memory of Dr Wilkie*. Wilkie's best known work was *The Epigoniad*, based on *The Iliad*, and he also probably familiarised Robert with earlier literature written in Scots. In his poem *Lines, to the Principal and Professors of the University of St Andrews, on their superb treat to Dr Johnson*, Fergusson refers to William Drummond of Hawthornden, author of the poem *Polemo-middinia*, written in the 1620s in a mixture of Latin, Scots and English. This poem, which has been translated as *The dunghill fight*, describes a farcical dispute between two noblewomen in Fife, and could be seen as a precursor of some of Fergusson's work.

Back in Edinburgh, he obtained a post as a clerk in the Commissary Office in 1769. This proved to be his only place of employment and although the work, largely as a copyist, was undemanding and tedious, it left him the opportunity to focus his thoughts on poetry.

Outwith working hours he threw himself into the social life of Edinburgh, having a particular interest in music and the theatre. During his time at University, major developments had been taking place in Edinburgh, with the adoption in 1767 of the plan for the 'New Town' and in 1769, the Theatre Royal

opened. Fergusson seems to have been a keen theatregoer and as a result of his friendship with the actor William Woods, whom he met in 1771, he received free passes to the theatre.

In 1769, the famous singer Tenducci was contracted by the Edinburgh Musical Society to perform Thomas Arne's opera *Artaxerxes*. Fergusson, who was well known as a singer of Scots songs, was asked to contribute words to three Scots airs which were included in the opera. Written in English and of a poor standard, these were however the first of his poems to be made public.

Robert was to become friendly with many of the professional musicians active in Edinburgh at this time, and the composer John Collet, who arrived in Edinburgh in 1772, set Fergusson's *Ode to the rivers of Scotland* to music.

An important part of the lively social scene in Edinburgh of that time were the many clubs who met in the city's taverns. Fergusson was elected to membership of the Cape Club in 1772, gathering there with members from varied backgrounds, including tradesmen, but particularly from the fields of literature, art, music and the theatre. All members, known as Knights of the Cape, were given distinctive names such as Sir Hayloft, Sir Beefsteaks and Sir Baboon, with Fergusson being designated Sir Precenter, presumably on account of his singing voice.

It was in 1771 that Robert's poetry began to be published in Ruddiman's *Weekly magazine, or Edinburgh amusement*, but it was the following year that saw the publication of his first poem in Scots, *The daft-days*. The quality of his writing in Scots was on a different level to his efforts in English and gained him considerable public notice. This was followed by a succession of Scots poems including *Caller oysters*, *Braid clraith*, *The farmer's ingle* and *Auld Reikie*.

Helen McLean of the Royal High School English department described the four poems in the following way:

**"Caller Oysters"** by Robert Fergusson is a tribute to what was a cheap meal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but is now associated with luxury. The poem celebrates the succulent delicacy, describing its freshness and benefits. Fergusson vividly portrays the joyous atmosphere as patrons eagerly indulge in the oysters, a reward at the end of a hard day's work.

**"Braid Clraith"** by Robert Fergusson is a satire on the tendency of 18<sup>th</sup> century city dwellers to place importance on superficial appearance, as a symbol of wealth or success. He pokes fun at the pretentiousness he witnesses, but there is also a sense that he sympathises with the aspirations of the people his poem depicts.

**"Auld Reikie"** is a lively Scots poem by Robert Fergusson, celebrating the charms and quirks of Edinburgh (Auld Reikie). Through vivid imagery and dialect, Fergusson paints a vibrant portrait of the city's streets, characters, and customs, capturing its essence with humour and affection in his poetic tribute.

**"The Farmer's Ingle"** by Robert Fergusson celebrates the cosy warmth and domestic bliss of a Scottish farmhouse hearth. The poem vividly describes the scene of a family gathered around the fireplace, enjoying each other's company and the comfort it provides. Fergusson captures the simplicity and happiness found in rural life, emphasising the value of shared stories and traditions. This poem by Fergusson has been favourably compared to a similar work by Robert Burns, *The cotter's Saturday night*.

From 1773 onwards there were indications that Fergusson was suffering from mental health issues and towards the end of that year his last poem published in his lifetime appeared. Although his mood fluctuated, his condition was exacerbated due to a fall later the next

year. He accidentally struck his head and became delirious, to such an extent that he could not be cared for at home, so was admitted to the Edinburgh Bedlam, an annexe of the Edinburgh Poorhouse at Bristo. Fergusson died there in miserable conditions on 17 October 1774.

Robert Fergusson has proved to be influential in two important fields, firstly in the development of poetry in Scots and secondly in the provision of mental health facilities in Scotland. The strong effect that his miserable death and the conditions surrounding it had on Dr Andrew Duncan who had visited Fergusson in his last weeks, eventually resulted in the opening of the Edinburgh Lunatic Asylum in 1813.

In particular, however, he played a key role as a poet. Following in the tradition of Allan Ramsay, Fergusson's work crucially revived Robert Burns' enthusiasm as he discovered the possibilities of Scots poetry he found in the works of his "elder Brother in the muse." As Burns wrote "meeting with Fergusson's Scotch Poems, I strung anew my wildly-sounding, rustic lyre with emulating vigour" He certainly had great respect for Fergusson's work and was dismayed at the lack of a memorial over Fergusson's grave in the Canongate Kirkyard. In 1787 Burns gained permission to have a gravestone erected there at his own expense.

Fergusson's influence can also be seen in the work of other subsequent poets, but none more so than Robert Garioch, whose large output of poems in Scots includes *To Robert Fergusson* and *At Robert Fergusson's grave, October 1962*.

In 1958, the RHS celebrated the bicentenary of the poet's enrolment at the High School. This was attended by the poet Norman MacCaig, who delivered an address on Fergusson and poetry, and a short poem by Robert Garioch, entitled *Rab Garioch's apology*, was read. Also in attendance was Alan Jackson, then a student, who later became a noted poet.

This year, marking the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, will see a number of initiatives including a two-year research project based at Glasgow University, entitled *The Collected Works of Robert Fergusson: Reconstructing Textual and Cultural Legacies* - [robert-fergusson.glasgow.ac.uk/](http://robert-fergusson.glasgow.ac.uk/). This project aims to produce a new edition of Fergusson's works in 2026 and to commemorate his legacies through various events.

The Royal High School Club also intends to mark the anniversary in several ways, including a re-unveiling of the memorial plaque to Fergusson at the School at Barnton in October.



Robert Burns' epitaph on Robert Fergusson's grave, Canongate Kirkyard



Robert Fergusson plaque installed Regent Road 1958

**The following poets mentioned above were also educated at the High School/Royal High School.**

## William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649)

William Drummond was educated at the High School and University of Edinburgh and also studied law at Paris and Bourges. He returned to Scotland with a large collection of books, which formed the basis of his personal library. Drummond did not proceed with a career in law, instead living as a country gentleman at Hawthornden, where he had succeeded his father as Laird. Although regarded as a major Scottish poet, he wrote largely in English and was particularly influenced by English and Italian writers.



## William Drummond of Hawthornden

Edinburgh High School around 1596

## Robert Garioch (1909-1981)

Recognised as one of the major Scottish poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Robert Garioch Sutherland was educated at the Royal High School and University of Edinburgh, where he studied English. His poetic output was largely written in Scots, with one of his major influences being Robert Fergusson. He followed a career as a teacher both in the London area and later in Edinburgh and latterly served as a writer-in-residence at the University of Edinburgh from 1971 to 1973.

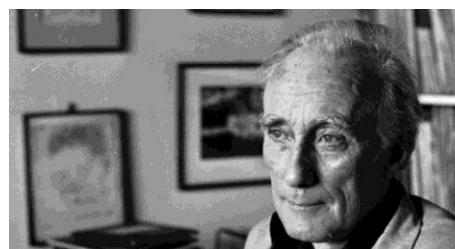


## Robert Garioch Sutherland by Gordon Wright

## Royal High School 1921-1927

## Norman MacCaig (1910-1996)

Another major Scottish poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Norman MacCaig was educated at the Royal High School and University of Edinburgh, where he studied Classics. After spending many years as a primary school teacher, he was eventually appointed to literary positions, first at Edinburgh University and then at Stirling. His first collection of poems was published in 1943 and he continued to produce a large output of poetry (in English) throughout his life, during which he enjoyed friendships with several other Scottish poets, includ-



Norman Maccaig

Royal High School 1915-1928



Scottish poets in Milnes Bar Abbotsford-Cafe Royal by Alexander Moffat 1980

*The Collected Works of Robert Fergusson: Reconstructing Textual and Cultural Legacies.*  
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