

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Fergusson
- poems -

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Robert Fergusson(1750 - 1774)

Robert Fergusson, one of Scotland's great Poets, Born in Edinburgh, September 5, 1750, to an Aberdeenshire family. His Father, William Ferugsson, was through out his life a clerk in trade, marrying Elizabeth Forbes, whom bore him three children prior to Robert's birth and at least one after.

Due to ill health from young age (possibly a venereal disease), Fergusson's education was delayed till his sixth year, despite this he progressed through what schooling he had at an admirable pace. It is said that he attended a private school called Niddry's Wynd, then the high school in Edinburgh prior to obtaining a bursary (allocated to people with the Fergusson name) to Dundee Grammar school (1758-61) and finally at age 14, on to the University of St. Andrews. Where he was denied his degree when he left perhaps due to ill health and/or to support his mother following his fathers death from Asthma.

During his time at St. Andrews, Fergusson was a lively, intelligent young man known for his humour, practical jokes and writing comic verse;

'My compliments to all the folks
With whom I have drunk and cracked my jokes:
Tell them, oh tell, too sadly true,
That lips in wine I scarce embrue.
Nor dare I join the lists with brachus,
Afraid new horrors should attack us,
Till health again with winning face
My brain shall clear, my nerves shall brace;
Then will I with indulgent vein
Be blyth and crack my jokes again.

It was here where he wrote his first prominent known poem "Elegy on the Death of Mr David Gregory", late Professor of Mathematic's at the University, in 1762.

On his return home in 1768, Furgusson held the humble position of clerk to the Commissary Office. Writing poetry in his spare time, with his works now being published in 'The Weekly Magazine' from 1771. His Poem, The Draft Days, published January 1772 with Fergusson now defined as a Scottish poet. He joined the Cape Club, a social group of Edinburgh, which met in various taverns to perform the arts. All this was cut short by the return of his illness (late 1773).

Slipping into what seems to be a manic-depressive state he was compelled to give up his employment. Though recovering briefly from the depression, mid 1774. Late July of the same year, he fell down a staircase sustaining a violent head injury and a great deal of blood loss, which appears he suffered a concussion, and disorientation, that continued for sometime. Concerned for his well being his friends committed him to the Edinburgh Bedlam. He spent two months there and despite the deplorable conditions was in good health and spirits just before his sudden death, (a subdural haematoma may have been the cause) on October 17, 1774, aged 24.

Robert Burns inspired by the young poet was to erect a monument to Fergusson in the form of a simple headstone, inscribed with the heartfelt following;
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. Robert Burns

Braid Claith

Ye wha are fain to hae your name
Wrote in the bonny book of fame,
Let merit nae pretension claim
 To laurel'd wreath,
But hap ye weel, baith back and wame,
 In gude Braid Claith.

He that some ells o' this may fa,
An' slae-black hat on pow like snaw,
Bids bauld to bear the gree awa',
 Wi' a' this graith,
Whan bienly clad wi' shell fu' braw
 O' gude Braid Claith.

Waesuck for him wha has na fek o't!
For he's a gowk they're sure to geck at,
A chiel that ne'er will be respekit
 While he draws breath,
Till his four quarters are bedeckit
 Wi' gude Braid Claith.

On Sabbath-days the barber spark,
When he has done wi' scrapin wark,
Wi' siller broachie in his sark,
 Gangs trigly, faith!
Or to the meadow, or the park,
 In gude Braid Claith.

Weel might ye trow, to see them there,
That they to shave your haffits bare,
Or curl an' sleek a pickly hair,
 Wou'd be right laith,
Whan pacing wi' a gawsy air
 In gude Braid Claith.

If only mett'l'd stirrah green
For favour frae a lady's ein,
He maunna care for being seen
 Before he sheath

His body in a scabbard clean
O' gude Braid Claith.

For, gin he come wi' coat threadbare,
A feg for him she winna care,
But crook her bonny mou' fu' sair,
And scald him baith.
Wooers shou'd ay their travel spare
Without Braid Claith.

Braid Claith lends fock an unco heese,
Makes mony kail-worms butterflies,
Gies mony a doctor his degrees
For little skaith:
In short, you may be what you please
Wi' gude Braid Claith.

For thof ye had as wise a snout on
As Shakespeare or Sir Isaac Newton,
Your judgment fouk wou'd hae a doubt on,
I'll tak my aith,
Till they cou'd see ye wi' a suit on
O' gude Braid Claith.

Robert Fergusson

The Daft-Days

Now mirk December's dowie face
Glours our the rigs wi' sour grimace,
While, thro' his minimum of space,
 The bleer-ey'd sun
Wi' blinkin light and stealing pace,
 His race doth run.

From naked groves nae birdie sings,
To shepherd's pipe nae hillock rings,
The breeze nae od'rous flavour brings
 From Borean cave,
And dwyning nature droops her wings,
 Wi' visage grave.

Mankind but scanty pleasure glean
Frae snawy hill or barren plain,
Whan Winter, 'midst his nipping train,
 Wi' frozen spear,
Sends drift ovr a' his bleak domain,
 And guides the weir.

Auld Reikie! thou'rt the canty hole,
A bield for mony caldrife soul,
Wha snugly at thine ingle loll,
 Baith warm and couth;
While round they gar the bicker roll
 To weet their mouth.

When merry Yule-day comes, I trow
You'll scantlins find a hungry mou;
Sma' are our cares, our stamacks fou
 O' gusty gear,
And kickshaws, strangers to our view,
 Sin Fairn-year.

Ye browster wives, now busk ye bra,
And fling your sorrows far awa';
Then come and gie's the tither blaw
 Of reaming ale,

Mair precious than the well of Spa,
Our hearts to heal.

Then, tho' at odds wi' a' the warl',
Amang oursells we'll never quarrel;
Tho' Discord gie a canker'd snarl
To spoil our glee,
As lang's there's pith into the barrel
We'll drink and 'gree.

Fiddlers, your pins in temper fix,
And roset weel your fiddle-sticks,
But banish vile Italian tricks
From out your quorum,
Nor fortes wi' pianos mix,
Gie's Tulloch Gorum.

For nought can cheer the heart sae weil
As can a canty Highland reel,
It even vivifies the heel
To skip and dance:
Lifeless is he what canna feel
Its influence.

Let mirth abound, let social cheer
Invest the dawning of the year;
Let blithesome innocence appear
To crown our joy,
Nor envy wi' sarcastic sneer
Our bliss destroy.

And thou, great god of Aqua Vitæ!
Wha sways the empire of this city,
When fou we're sometimes capernoity,
Be thou prepar'd
To hedge us frae that black banditti,
The City-Guard.

Robert Fergusson