

ROBERT FERGUSSON (1751-74): A DIAGNOSTIC ENIGMA

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Canogait kirkyaird in the failing year
is auld and grey, the wee roseirs¹ are bare,
five gulls leam² white agin the dirty air:
why are they here? There's naething for them here.

¹rose bushes
²gleam

Why are we here oursels? We gaiter near
the grave. Fergussons mainly, quite a fair
turn-out, respectfu, ill at ease, we stare
at daith - there's an address - I canna hear.

Aweill, we staund bareheidit in the haar,
murnin a man that gaed back til the pool
twa-hunner year afore our time. The glaur³

³mud

that haps⁴ his banes glowres back. Strang, present dool⁵
ruggs⁶ at my hairt. Lichtlie⁷ this gin⁸ ye daur;
here Robert Burns knelt and kissed the mool.⁹

⁴covers ⁵grief
⁶tugs ⁷make light of ⁸if
⁹earth

Robert Garioch (1909-1981). At Robert Fergusson's Grave, October 1962.

FERGUSSON'S LIFE

Robert Fergusson was born in Edinburgh on 5th September 1751 of Aberdeen parents, his older brother and sistes having been born in Aberdeen. As a child he was 'exceedingly delicate' and was unable to attend school till the age of six when he was sent to the High School in Edinburgh to learn Latin. Clearly his intelligence was well above average. Davison¹ wrote, 'During the years of his early infancy, his constitution was so extremely delicate, that his life was frequently despaired of ...' During his period at the High School in spite of continuing infirmity it appears that young Robert acquired a loving for books, and his chief delight was in reading the Bible. It appears that the Proverbs of Solomon affected him deeply and Davison recorded 'One day he entered his mother's chambers in tears, calling her to whip him. Upon inquiring into the cause of this extraordinary behaviour, he exclaimed, "O mother! he that spareth the rod, hateth the child".'

After four years at the High School Robert obtained a bursary to study at Dundee High School for a period of two years. His parents were anxious that he should take up divinity and at the age of 13 he entered St Andrews University. Fergusson spent four years at the University where it appears he was somewhat negligent of his studies, his qualifications, as recorded by Chambers,² 'were other than those of the graver and more solid cast ... namely, those of a "sprightly fancy and flow of sarcastic humour".' Certainly his elegy on the death of the Professor of Mathematics and his subject suggests this.

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He could, by Euclid, prove, lang sine,¹
A ganging² point compos'd a line,
By numbers too he cou'd divine,
Whan³ he did read,
That three times three just made up nine,
But now he's dead.

¹long ago
²moving
³when

This reductive humour is typical of Scottish poetry, and is seen also in Robert Burns, e.g. *Tam Samsan's Elegy*. Nevertheless, Thomson³ records that the professor of natural philosophy, Dr William Wilkie, chose Fergusson to read his lectures to his class when sickness or other causes prevented his own performance of the duty. Dr Irving⁴ ridiculed the idea of a youth of 16 'mounting the professorial rostrum' to deliver lectures.

In 1767 Fergusson's father died and because of the loss of family income Fergusson had to leave the University without obtaining a degree. He spent 6 months with a rich uncle in Old Meldrum but left after a quarrel; on return to his mother's home in Edinburgh Fergusson took the only job he could find and became a writer or copyist in the office of the Commissary Clerk, a poorly paid post he held until a few months before his death.

LIFESTYLE

A recent review of Robert Fergusson's life and poetry suggests that this post suited his temperament and offered him the opportunity to write poetry while allowing him ample relaxation time to indulge in the convivial life of the Edinburgh taverns in which he spent much of his free time.⁵ These taverns were small crowded places, which opened in the evening around 8.00 p.m. for eating and drinking. The more sober citizens would leave at the 'ten hour's drum', but the less responsible would remain often till the next morning. The best taverns were also the homes of the Edinburgh clubs, which are described in Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering*. Fergusson was a member of a typical club of that period, the Cape Club, in which everyone had a pseudonym. Because of his skill as a singer Fergusson was known as 'Sir Precentor'. It appears that his favourite song for which he was often called upon was 'The Birks of Invermay'.

Fergusson himself gives a good description of the contrast between the warm cosy clubs and a wet cold Edinburgh's winter's night in his poem 'Caller Oysters'.

Whan¹ big as burns² the gutters rin³,
Gin⁴ he hae⁵ catcht⁶ a droukit⁷ skin,
To luckie Middlemest's loup⁸ in,
And sit fu' snug⁹
O'er oysters and a dram o' gin
Or haddock lug¹⁰.

¹when ²rivers ³run
⁴if ⁵had ⁶caught ⁷drenched
⁸jump
⁹fully comfortable
¹⁰ear

It is difficult to know how dissipated a life Fergusson led. Although Irving⁴ and Peterkin⁶ stressed his dissolute ways Chambers² maintained 'the convivialities of Fergusson have been generally described as bordering on excess, and as characterising himself in particular, amidst a population generally sober. The sober truth is that the poor poet indulged exactly in the same way, and in general to the same extent, as other young men of that day'.

Whether Fergusson was sexually promiscuous cannot be ascertained from

either his own writing or from biographies of his life.¹⁻¹² However, Grahame⁷ records that the name and address of a prostitute was known to Fergusson since, in an effort to cure his landlord of drunkenness and religious hypocrisy, Fergusson stole a parcel from him and later returned it with a letter purporting to come from a well known Edinburgh prostitute. His own love life is enigmatic, although it is known he had his Stella, a married woman and poetess, as Burns had his Clarinda, but he does not mention her in any of his poems. Fergusson only wrote one love poem 'The Lee Rigg' and his comments on the marital state in 'An Eclogue', while amusing, suggest a healthy male chauvinism.

Ah! Willie, Willie, I may date may wae ¹ ,	¹ woe
Frae what beted ² me on my bridal day;	² befell
Sair ³ may I rue the hour in which our hands	³ sore
Were knit thegither in the haly ⁴ bands:	⁴ holy
Sin ⁵ that I thrive ⁶ sae ⁷ ill, in troth I fancy,	⁵ since ⁶ strove ⁷ so
Some fiend or fairy, nae sae ⁸ very chancy ⁹	⁸ not so ⁹ safe
Has driven me by pauky wiles ¹⁰ uncommon,	¹⁰ sly deceptions
To wed this flytin ¹¹ fury of a woman.	¹¹ scolding

From his biographers one get the impression of Fergusson as a gay, vivacious, irresponsible young man who was fond of playing practical jokes. Chambers² describes him having a 'sprightly fancy and flow of sarcastic humour' and when asked if he remembered him, James Inverarity, the poet's nephew, replied 'Bob Fergusson! That I do! Many's a time I've put him to the door—Ah, he was a tricky gallant (i.e. likeable lad) but a fine laddie for a' that!'. His penchant for playing practical jokes is recorded by Sommers⁸ 'Such were his vocal powers and attachments to Scots songs, that in the course of his convivial frolics, he laid a wager with some of his associates that if they would furnish him with a certain number of printed ballads (no matter what kind), he would undertake to dispose of them as a street singer in the course of two hours. The bet was laid: and the next evening, being in the month November, a large bundle of ballads were procured for him. He wrapped himself in a shabby greatcoat, put on an old scratch wig, and in this disguised form commenced his adventure at the weigh house, head of the West Bow. In his going down the Lawnmarket and High Street, he had the address to collect great multitudes around him, while he amused them with a variety of favourite Scots songs, by no means such as he had ballads for, and gained the wager by disposing of the whole collection. He waited on his companions, by eight o'clock that evening, and spent with them, in mirthful glee, the proceeds of his street adventure'.

His character is well reflected in his poetry, the fundamental quality of which is gaiety.² This comes through both as satire but without malice as in his poem 'To the Principal and Professors of the University of St Andrews, on their Superb Treat to Dr Samuel Johnson'.

For ne'er sic ¹ surly wight ² as he	¹ such ² fellow
Had met wi' sic respect frae ³ me	³ from
Mind ⁴ ye what Sam, the lying loun ⁵ !	⁴ remember ⁵ rascal
Has in his Dictionar laid down?	
That aits ⁶ , in England, are a feast	⁶ oats
To cow an' horse, an' sican ⁷ beast,	⁷ such-like
While, in Scots ground, this growth was common	
To gust the gab ⁸ o' man and woman.	⁸ give appetite to the mouth

There are several descriptions of Fergusson's personal appearance. Chambers² describes him as 'being in height about five feet nine, slender and handsome. His face never exhibited the least trace of red, but was perfectly and uniformly pale, or rather yellow. He had all the appearance of a person in delicate health. His forehead was elevated, and his whole countenance open and pleasing. He wore his own fair brown hair, with a long massive curl each side of the head, and terminating in a queue, dressed with a black silk riband. His dress was never very good, but often much faded, and the white thread stockings which he generally wore in preference to the more common kind of grey worsted, he often permitted to become considerably soiled before changing them'.

Sommers⁸ states that 'his complexion was fair, but rather pale. His eyes full, black and piercing. His nose long, his lips thin, his teeth well set and white. His neck long, and well proportioned. His shoulders narrow and his limbs long and well proportioned, but more sinen (i.e. sinew) than fleshy'.

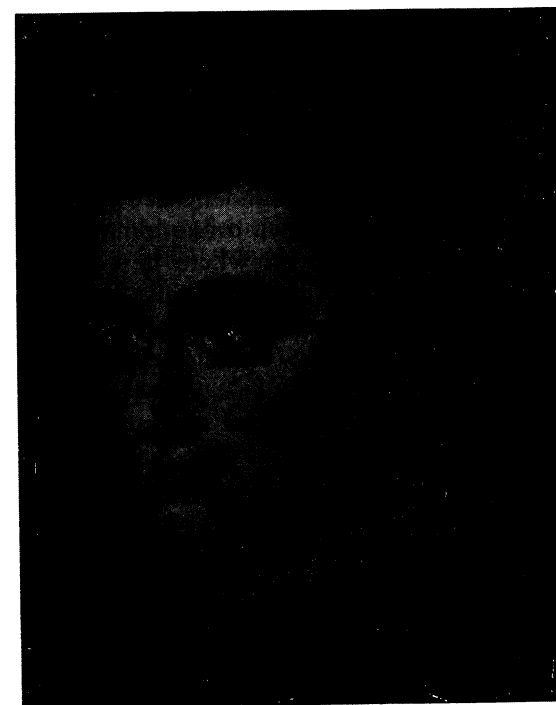


FIGURE 1

Robert Fergusson (1751-1774) painted by Alexander Runciman.
(Reproduced by permission of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh).

The portrait (Fig. 1) by Alexander Runciman in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh emphasises his large prominent eyes, and suggests a degree of bilateral exophthalmos. The prominence of the eyes, however, may be exaggerated by the art fashion of the day. Two commemorative stamps were issued in 1974 (Fig. 2).

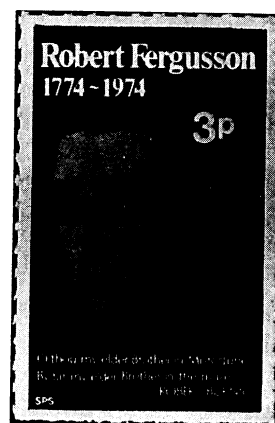


FIGURE 2

Bi-centennial stamps of Robert Fergusson issued in 1974.

ILLNESSES

Fergusson died at the age of 24. In view of this the output of his poetry is remarkable: 53 poems in English and 31 in Scots. At the same age Burns would have left behind only four poems. The illness which finally proved fatal appeared to begin in the autumn of 1773 when Inverarity⁹ noted that the poet 'retired to the country in pursuit of that peace of mind he had in vain sought for in the town', but 'the same disease of mind which drove him into the country in three days drove him back again to the town, where he continued to prey to the horrors of melancholy'. Inverarity also quotes Fergusson writing in October 1773 to a friend 'the town is dull at present. I am thoroughly idle, and that fancy which had often afforded me pleasure, almost denies to operate but on the gloomiest of subjects'.

Although in general Fergusson's poems are not intimate, in two published in the last months of 1773 there is a suggestion that he may have been despondent and have had forebodings of death. For instance in 'My Last Will' he writes prophetically, '... fearing death my blood will fast chill, I hereby constitute my last will'. In his poem 'To my Auld Breeks' he gives a glimpse of himself.

You've seen me round the bickers ¹ reel	¹ drinking cups
Wi' heart as hale ² as temper'd steel,	² healthy
And face sae open, free, and blyth,	
Nor thought that sorrow there cou'd kyth ³ ;	³ show
But the niest ⁴ moment this was lost,	⁴ next
Like gowan ⁵ in December's frost.	⁵ daisy

There is some evidence that even before 1773 Fergusson may have been psychologically distressed. Campbell cited by Sommers⁸ relates

It happened in the autumn of 1774, while on a visit to a friend in the neighbourhood of Haddington, that one day as young Fergusson was sauntering near the churchyard of that town, that a person of a sudden joined him, who accosted him in a polite and familiar manner. The solemnity of the scene naturally suggested a conversation, rather of a moral cast, which by degrees became abstract and gloomy. This stranger turned out to be a pious Divine, of the sect called Seceders from the Church of Scotland; this name was Brown, author of several works in Divinity, well known among the true believers of that sect.

Mortality and a judgement to come were the topics our Divine chose to expatiate on, and bring home to Fergusson. These topics seemed to sink deep in the mind of our poet, and they parted; the one convinced that he had found a lost sheep, the other that he had been led too far astray, to find favour in the sight of the Chief Shepherd of Israel. He returned to his mother's house in all the agonies of religious horror; and soon sunk into a state of complete despondency.

According to Campbell this incident occurred in the autumn of 1774, but Irving maintains this occurred two years earlier.

The first marks of insanity, according to Inverarity, betrayed themselves one day when he accosted his friend Woods, the actor, and in a very excited condition announced that he had just discovered one of the miscreants who had crucified our Saviour, and was on his way to lodge an information against him with Lord Kames.⁴

This incident, if indeed true, does not suggest a frivolous practical joke. Davidson¹³ also records that in December 1773 Fergusson was observed

to be more serious and thoughtful than formerly: and in the month of March succeeding, I also met with him. He was then very poorly, and, in the course of a long walk, he freely communicated the state of his mind, and also the situation he had been in for some time.

Another incident is recorded¹⁰ in which Fergusson was startled by a starling which had fallen down his chimney

In the room adjoining to that in which he slept, was a starling, which being seized one night by a cat that had found its way down the chimney, awakened Mr. Fergusson by the most alarming screams. Having learned the cause of the alarm, he began seriously to reflect how often he, an accountable and immortal being, had in the hour of intemperance set death at defiance, though it was thus terrible, in reality to an unaccountable and sinless creature. This brought to his recollection the conversation of the clergyman which, aided by the solemnity of the midnight, wrought his mind up to a pitch of remorse that almost bordered on frantic despair. Sleep now forsook his eyelids: and he rose in the morning, not as he had formerly done, to mix again with the social and the gay, but to be a recluse from society, and to allow the remembrance of his past follies to prey upon his vitals. All his vivacity now forsook him: those lips which were formed to give delight, were closed as countenance sat horror plumed.

According to Irving, Fergusson

sunk into a state of religious despondency; but previous to that event his body was emaciated by disease, and his mind totally unhinged. His relations began to observe in his behaviour something of an infantine cast; he talked in an incoherent manner and often manifested an entire vacillation of thought. Persons in his condition must generally have some leading object to engross their attention, and religion happened to present itself to him. His favourite studies were now neglected; he laid every other book aside, and made the Bible his constant companion. Such of his manuscripts as were in his own possession, he committed indiscriminately to the flames, and was heard to declare, that he felt some consolation in never having written any thing against religion.⁴

Early in 1774 it appears that the bard had sufficiently recovered to attend an election in 'one of the eastern counties'. It appears that there was a great deal of drink consumed and Chambers² censored him for 'being involved in riotous scenes'. It appears that on his return from the election to Edinburgh he caught 'that baneful distemper'. Peterkin⁶ alleges that Fergusson on his return to Edinburgh was 'under the influence of medicine for his recovery from the consequence of ebriety and folly' without naming specifically the complaint with which Fergusson was afflicted.

Throughout the remaining months that he lived in 1774 Fergusson was in poor mental and physical health. His name appeared no more in the attendance

book of the Cape Club and at a sederunt of this Club on 2nd July 1774 the resolution was passed to

the remainder of the fines of the absentees from this meeting ... for the benefit and assistance of a young gentleman, a member of the Cape, who has been a considerable time past in distress, and the gentlemen present in the Grand Cape made a contribution themselves for the same purpose.

In the *Caledonian Mercury* of 9th July 1774 an anonymous poem signed W suggests he might have been improving.

An may thy friends the News believe!
Dost thou to perfect sense and feeling live?
Has Pain, Despair, and Melancholy fled,
that shook their gloomy Horrors round thy Bed?
Has reason chok'd the troubles of the Brain,
and fix'd her native empire there again.

But in the same paper on 28th July it is reported that the poet 'has been seized with a very dangerous sickness', and this is confirmed in the minutes of the Cape Club of 3rd September 1774: 'he had been very ill'.¹¹

Nevertheless, it appears that he did improve sufficiently at times to go out drinking with his friends and on one of these occasions he was 'taking a glass with a few friends and had the misfortune to fall from a staircase, by which he received a violent contusion on the head'. Ford describes the fall:

his feet caught in a stair carpet, and he was thrown to the bottom of the steps, receiving such injury about the head that he bled profusely. When borne home to his mother's house he could give no account of what had happened, being in a state of total insensibility. His reason was now to an almost hopeless degree destroyed. He passed days and nights in total abstinence from food, sometimes muttering dolefully to himself, and at other times becoming so outrageous that it required the strength of several men to keep him in his bed. Occasionally he sang his favourite melodies. In particular, he chanted 'The Birks of Invermay', but now in such a style of pathos and tenderness that those who heard the notes could never forget the sound. From the distress into which his poor mother was plunged, and her inability to render him the attendance his condition demanded, she was obliged to take steps for his removal to the public asylum. His conveyance thither was effected by a kindly stragem. On pretence of taking him on an evening to visit a friend, some of his more intimate acquaintances placed him in a sedan chair, and conveyed him to the place which he had long feared would be his final abode.¹⁰

Sommers records that

During the first night of his confinement he slept none: and when the keeper visited him in the morning, he found him walking along the stone floor of his cell with his arms folded, and in sullen sadness, uttering not a word. After some minute's silence, he clapped his right hand on his forehead and complained much of pain. He asked the keeper who brought him there; He answered—'Friends,' 'Yes, friends indeed,' replied Robert; 'they think I am too wretched to live, but you will soon see me a burning and a shining light.' 'You have been so already,' observed the keeper, alluding to his poems. 'You mistake me,' said the poet; I mean, you shall see and hear of me as a bright minister of the Gospel.⁸

When the keeper in the asylum brought the poet a plate of porridge Fergusson set it aside and said 'but I will thank you if you will give me a glass of whisky for I am very cold.' The keeper, however, could not grant this request.¹⁴

Two incidents are recorded of his 'madness' during his captivity. In one he was sitting reading when a cloud overshadowed the moon, and Fergusson exclaimed loudly 'Jupiter, snuff the moon! Thou stupid god, thou hast snuffed it out'.¹² However, this hardly indicates gross insanity. In the other he plaited a

crown from the straw of his cell, and put it on his head strutting around proclaiming himself 'A King! A King!'. In view of his penchant for practical jokes this does not, as his biographers have suggested, necessarily indicate insanity.

Records of two visits shortly before his death are available. The first was from his mother and sister

A few days before his dissolution his mother and sister found him lying on his straw bed, calm and collected. The evening was chill and damp; he requested his mother to gather the bed-clothes about him, and sit on his feet, for he said they were so very cold as to be almost insensible to the touch. She did so, and his sister took her seat by the bedside. He then looked wistfully in the face of his affectionate parent, and said, 'Oh mother, this is kind indeed'. Then addressing his sister he said 'Might you not come frequently, and sit beside me; you cannot imagine how comfortable it would be; you might fetch your seam and sew beside me'. To this no answer was returned; an interval of silence was filled up by sobs and tears. 'What ails ye?' inquired the dying poet: 'wherefor sorrow for me, sirs? I am very well cared for here—I do assure you. I want for nothing—but it is cold—it is very cold. You know, I told you, it would come to this at last—yes, I told you so. Oh, do not go yet—do not leave me!' The keeper, however, whispered that it was time to depart, and this was the last time Fergusson saw those beloved relatives.²

The second was from Sommers and Dr John Aitken

We got immediate access to the cell, and found Robert lying with his clothes on, stretched upon a bed of loose uncovered straw. The moment he heard my voice he arose, got me in his arms and wept. The doctor felt his pulse and declared it to be favourable. I asked the keeper (whom I formerly knew as a gardener) to allow him to accompany us into an adjoining back court, by way of taking the air. He consented. Robert took hold of me by the arm, placing me on his right, and the doctor on his left, and in this form we walked backward and forward along the court, conversing for nearly an hour; and in the course of which many questions were asked both by the doctor and myself, to which he returned most satisfactory answers; but he seemed very anxious to obtain his liberty. The sky was lowering, the sun being much obscured. Led by curiosity, and knowing his natural quickness, I asked him what hour of the day it might be. He stopped, and looking up with his face towards the south, while his hands were clasped, paused a little and said it was within five minutes of twelve. The doctor looked at his watch and exclaimed, 'It is just six minutes from twelve'.⁸

Before Sommers and Dr Aitken left they asked the keeper 'if he would allow us to give the poet a glass of ale or spirits. The *former* he said we might give him, but the *latter* was prohibited'. They got a glass of ale and some rolls and cheese, which 'Robert partook of heartily, and declared himself wonderfully refreshed'. Having promised to visit him again in a day or two Sommers records 'He calmly and without a murmur, walked with us to the cell, and upon parting, reminded the doctor to get him soon at liberty, and of mine to see him next day'.

However, neither of these wishes were to be granted for a few days later Sommers received 'an intimation from the keeper, that Robert Fergusson had breathed his last, without the smallest symptom of pain'. In the Minute Book of the Charity Workhouse Fergusson's death is recorded somewhat laconically and chillily on 16th October 1774, 'Mr Fergusson, in the cels.' It is noteworthy that only he had Mr before his name.

CAUSE OF ILLNESS AND DEATH

In retrospect it is extremely difficult to know what was wrong with Robert Fergusson. Not only does the total output and quality of his poetry indicate high intellectual capacity, but the fact that he completed 84 poems in a period of three years strongly suggests hypomanic energy. The content of these poems at this

time is witty and humorous, indicating a constant elation of mood. This period was followed by a fall in output accompanied by black depressive episodes, as witnessed by all his biographers. The poetry he did produce in this period does to some extent reflect this change in mood, although in general his poetry unlike that of Burns shows little evidence of despondency. The one feature of Fergusson's poetry which above all characterises it is its humour and mirth. During the months of his depressive illness he did not compose, and he consequently provides no insight into his mental anguish.

There is evidence that Fergusson's depression at times bordered on the psychotic. The episodes, if true, of his reaction to his conversation with a minister in the graveyard, his belief in knowing someone who had crucified Christ, and the distress when a starling was caught in the chimney of his house, certainly indicate disturbance of rational thought.

The incident in the asylum when the light of the moon was over-shadowed by a cloud has been cited to indicate disorder of thought, but could simply reflect his obviously extensive literary background. The other incident when he put a crown of straw on his head, crying out that he was a king, could well have been a practical joke.

While there is no doubt that he was depressed it is difficult to know whether this was endogenous or organic. In view of his life history his symptoms may well have simply reflected a manic-depressive psychosis. In this condition psychotic thoughts are not uncommon in childhood, but the adjustments of puberty and adolescence may be accompanied by outbursts of excitement or by agitation and depression.¹⁴ The poet's preoccupation with religious matters and his feelings of unworthiness are consistent with a manic-depressive state, but his unexpected death cannot be attributed to this disorder. Although suicide is common in manic-depressive psychosis particularly during recovery from depression, there is no indication from any of the biographers that Fergusson took his own life. It is possible, however, that he may have contracted lobar pneumonia, which could explain his sudden death, and certainly on the occasion of his mother's visit he complained bitterly of the cold. Schizophrenia is unlikely as a cause of his depressive illness, in view of his clarity of thought, humour and sociability.

Some of the Fergusson's biographers have suggested that he had contracted syphilis.⁶ However, as general paralysis of the insane requires upwards of 10 years after the primary infection to make its appearance, it is unlikely that Fergusson died as a result of syphilis. In addition, his judgement and memory and social habitus remained unimpaired right up to the day he died. It is possible that he might have had congenital syphilis, but his portrait shows none of the stigmata of this disease. However, either gonorrhoea or syphilis might have contributed to his depressive illness.

Any differential diagnosis of Fergusson's illness should take account of the fall which he suffered two months before his death. He had been out drinking and may have fallen as a result of inebriation. However, it is possible that he may have had a subarachnoid haemorrhage which caused his fall; his subsequent violent and confused illness when he required physical restraint is consistent with this diagnosis. Certainly Fergusson complained of very severe pain in his head on admission to the asylum, and such headache is a characteristic feature of this illness. His sudden death could also be explained on the basis of a massive subarachnoid haemorrhage, since fatal recurrence of subarachnoid haemorrhage

may occur up to 20 years after the initial bleed. Psychotic episodes do occur after subarachnoid haemorrhage, but Fergusson's affective disorder antedated this episode by many months.

It is unlikely that head injury *per se* could explain Fergusson's subsequent illness and sudden death. A post-concussional syndrome may explain his early course, but there is no reason to attribute his death to this and there is no record of his having post-traumatic amnesia. Although late death from head injury is possible due to a chronic subdural haematoma, the recovery of his thought and physical functions prior to his death argue strongly against this diagnosis. A similar argument can be put forward against any space occupying lesion of the brain.

None of the above conditions take account of Fergusson's drinking habits. The amount of alcohol he consumed is not known with any accuracy, but in his poetry he makes evident his intimate awareness of the effects and evils of drink. It seems likely that with his gay and social personality and enjoyment of tavern life, which contrasted so strongly with the dull boredom of his daily work, his drinking habits would not have been moderate. Davison comes to this conclusion:

Wisdom, however, is manifested in the discreet use of intoxicating beverage. Under its influence, the most delicate sensibility, the most rigid virtue, and inflexible firmness, cannot preserve a man from folly and from crime. In the gay season of youth, its power is doubly blafeful. Fergusson is a striking example. His understanding powerful; his heart generous even to weakness; his feelings delicate, elevated, honourable; his mind ardently glowed with the sublime emotions of religion: yet in the midst of the scenes of dissipation to which he was exposed, and in which he was admirably calculated to shine, his best qualities were humbled in the dust. Urged by the maddening draught, prudence, reason, principle, all fell prostrate before the potent poison: he indulged in the gratification of animal passion, until his hapless career was closed in madness.¹

If indeed, his alcohol consumption was excessive when he was in his hypomanic period then during his depression it is likely that his consumption would have been even more excessive. His emaciation would be consistent with the malnutrition of a chronic alcoholic. Although tuberculosis was rife in the eighteenth century there is no history to suggest chronic respiratory tuberculosis. The agitation which followed some time after his fall might be explained by delirium tremens, precipitated by his enforced abstinence. His recovery is entirely consistent with continued abstinence from alcohol both at home and in the asylum. Sudden death in chronic alcoholism is also common from gastro-intestinal haemorrhage, alcoholic cardiomyopathy and from lobar pneumonia.

In conclusion, we suggest that the likeliest causes of the poet's illness and death are a combination of manic-depressive psychosis and chronic alcoholism, combined with either a subarachnoid haemorrhage or lobar pneumonia. Nearly two centuries after Fergusson's death, another fine Scots poet, who also died young, Sydney Goodsir Smith, wrote 'it is ill wark chappin at a deid man's yett' (little point on knocking at a dead man's coffin). At least we have the consolation of knowing that the tragic circumstances of Robert Fergusson's death in the city asylum were to lead to improvements in facilities for the treatment of mental illness in Scotland. In 1813 the Royal Edinburgh Asylum for the Insane was opened at the instigation of Dr Andrew Duncan when he was Professor of the Institutes of Medicine at the University of Edinburgh. Perhaps also the words of Robert Burns lamentating the untimely death of Robert Fergusson in his *Epistle*

