

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

CHAPTER XIII

SONG-WRITERS - SKINNER - BRUCE - FERGUSSON

THE song-writers of the century hold a distinct place in the literature of Scotland. In our day there are writers who produce lyrics quite as good as some of theirs, which may come with one season, live on to the next, and be forgotten the third, or only sung with the singers' apology that "they have really nothing new." In Scotland in those olden times the lyrics lasted for generations. Young voices sang on to the piano what their mothers had sung to the spinnet, and their grand-mothers had sung to the virginal. This permanency was often due to the charming old melodies to which they were set. As we have seen in the first half of the eighteenth century, it was chiefly gentlemen of land and fortune who wrote the songs on homely Scots subjects. In the latter half we find them coming from pens of all sorts and conditions. [Walker's *Bards of Bon Accord*; Buchan's *Ballads and Songs of North of Scotland*; Chambers's *Scottish Songs*; Cunningham's *Minstrelsy of Scotland*.] Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, Baron of Exchequer, amused himself by writing "O merry may the maid be that married wi' the miller," which, at penny weddings and in fashionable drawing-rooms, was gaily sung. The poor, shiftless parish schoolmaster of Rathven, George Halket - who, till he was dismissed for drinking, lived with his family in a hovel which, divided by a box-bed, served in one part as school and the other as bedroom - wrote "Logie o' Buchan," which became a perennial favourite. Away in a remote district at the foot of the Grampians, another schoolmaster, Alexander Ross of Lochlee, author of "Helenore, or the Fortunate Shepherdess," - a poem with an egregious title and a very dull story, containing graphic pictures of northern rural life, - wrote songs which earned him a long popularity among the people of the North, who sang his "Woo'd and married and a'," and his "Rock and Wee Pickle Tow" with unfailing zest. In the Midland counties, the tall, handsome minister - wit and *bon vivant* and saint - Dr. Alexander Webster - who, having been engaged by a friend to urge his

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suit with Miss Erskine of Alloa, did it so winningly that she offered herself to him instead - composed his lyric, "O how could I venture to love one like thee" to celebrate the triumph; while Dr. Austen, the fashionable physician, who had been jilted by a lady, revenged himself by writing "For lack of gold she slighted me." In the manse of Crathie - then an unknown, unvisited, dreary Highland tract - the Rev. Murdoch M'lennan, touched with the humour of the uneventful fight near Dunblane, in the rising of '15, wrote his clever "Race of Sheriffmuir," with its nimble refrain:

And we ran and they ran,
And they ran and we ran,
And we ran and they ran awa', man.

The humorous Haddingtonshire farmer, Adam Skirving, found in the surprise, defeat, and fight of Sir John Cope a splendid theme for his "Hey! Johnnie Cope, are ye waukin' yet?" and "Tranent Muir," which were the delights of every Jacobite company. A former printer's compositor with the Foulises of Glasgow, John Mayne, composed the "Sillar Gun," a graphic picture of wapinschaws of olden days; his "Hallowe'en," which gave suggestions for Burns's own poem; and his "Logan Braes," which surpasses Burns's "Logan Water." The Aberdeen fish-merchant, John M'Ewen, touched with the pathos of fishing life, wrote his charming "Weel may the boatie row" - showing a consideration for seafaring folk which he did not show to his own kin, whom he left in poverty, to endow a hospital. The Hon. Andrew Erskine - brother of the musical and bibulous Lord Kellie, and the friend of Boswell - wrote songs which Burns calls "divine." He ended his life by suicide, his body being found in the Forth with his pockets weighted with stones.

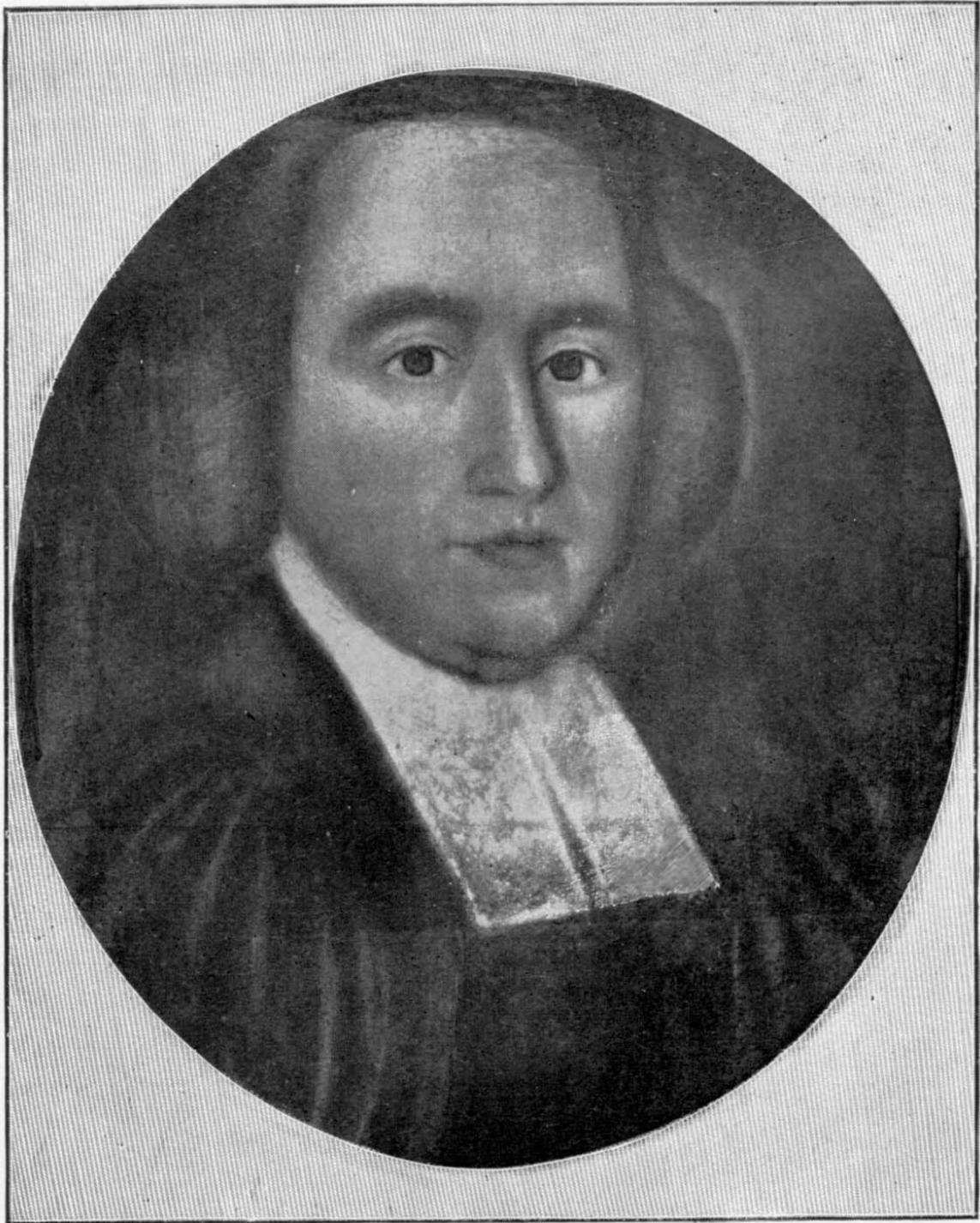
Not to be overlooked on many accounts was the author of the songs of "Erroch's Banks" and "Bonnie Brucket Lassie," set to good old airs, who was to be seen walking the High Street, as Burns describes him, "with leaky shoes and skylighted hat." This was James Tytler - by birth a minister's son, by education a physician, by practice a needy, drunken printer and hack of letters. On a printing-press of his own construction he composed at the same time both type and text of *Essays on Natural and Revealed Religion*, a work which no bookseller would publish. When William Smellie, the learned printer, refused to take part in the second edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, he boldly undertook the task, writing copiously, and extending it from three to ten volumes. Poorly paid, the luckless editor vagrantly lived now with a washerwoman, whose tub reversed

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served as his desk, now in the squalid debtors' shelter at Holyrood, where, working at the articles and devouring a dinner of cold potatoes, Andrew Bell the publisher would find him - that publisher with the vastest bulbous nose that ever adorned a human countenance. Nothing came amiss to the versatile man of letters: the compiling of books on geography or surgery, schemes for bleaching linen, projects for solving the problem of perpetual motion, and experiments to rival Lunardi, the aeronaut, by a balloon with an iron stove. His first ascent was from the garden of the Debtors' Sanctuary, when he rose magnificently to the top of the wall and was deposited gracefully in a dunghill; his second and more ambitious effort was witnessed by crowds of spectators on the Calton Hill, when he rose to 530 feet and descended ignominiously. "Balloon Tytler" ended his career in this country by a seditious pamphlet as a "Friend of the People," when he absconded to America - the only wise action of his threadbare life - and died in 1801. [Chambers's *Eminent Scotsmen*; Kay's *Edinburgh Portraits*; Stenhouse's *Illust. of Lyric Poetry of Scotland*.] This was one of the many clever, learned, penniless hacks who formed an Edinburgh Grub Street. He belonged creditably to that fraternity of song-writers of which Robert Burns, who knew him well, was supreme in genius, and the Duke of Gordon, with his "Cauld Kail O' Aberdeen," was supreme in rank.

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Among the writers of that song-writing age none take a more genial place than the author of "Tullochgorum" and the "Ewe with the crookit horn" - not a very large stock of literary wares with which to trudge to posterity. The poor, hard-working Episcopal minister at Longside is altogether a charming character, in his happy contentment with little, his exhaustless store of good humour and ready wit. In the parish of Longaide, near Peterhead, is the little village of Linshart, where he lived in a mean thatched cottage, such as ploughmen nowadays would refuse to occupy - a "but and a ben," two little dark rooms with grateless fireplaces and earthen floors and open rafters, which were convenient for hanging hams, articles of raiment, and cooking utensils. Linshart was a dreary district of Aberdeenshire - "an ugly place in an ugly country." Patches of corn grew amid heather tracts, but not a tree was to be seen to relieve the weary eyes. Yet good John Skinner and his excellent wife loved the place. Buchan was to them a very paradise; its landscape, which wrought utter depression on the occasional travellers, whose bodies cowered



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From an Oil Painting on Wood.

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beneath the eastern blasts that so often swept the land, was pronounced by the worthy couple “the finest on God’s earth.” [Chambers’s *Life and Works of Burns*. ii. 135.] Such delightful contentments are mercifully acquired by habit if not given by providence. A Scots gentleman of that period, when visiting a friend in Surrey, was taken out one evening to hear the song of the nightingale, which was never heard in his own country. As he listened to its richest notes, given with “full-throated ease,” he patriotically protested “he wadna gie the weepie o’ a whaup (curlew) for a’ the nightingales that ever sang.”

Skinner, born in 1721, was the son of the Presbyterian schoolmaster of Birse, and in his youth was parish teacher at Kenmay, till the Episcopalian community, to the dismay of his father, snatched him as a brand from the burning, and one of its nonjuring bishops carefully rebaptized the lad, who had been only ineffectively “sprinkled in the Schism,” as the Church of Scotland was contemptuously termed by the worthy men. After being a tutor in remote Shetland, he married, when barely of age, a woman who became the mother of a large family and his companion for sixty happy years.

The lot of an Episcopal minister was in those days a very hard one. Up to the Rebellion of ’45 there had been in force a law forbidding a nonjuring minister to officiate in any building to a company containing more than eight persons. In 1746, when the Government regarded the Episcopal community as a nest of Jacobites, an Act prohibited any of its ministers who had not taken the oath of allegiance from preaching in any building to more than four people, and two years later the law still more stringently forbade an unqualified minister to conduct worship except in his own house, and there only before four persons. The penalties for breach of this law were six months’ imprisonment for the first offence and transportation for the second. The poor shed in which Skinner preached since 1742 was ruthlessly burned by soldiers, his cottage sacked, his papers destroyed, and he only escaped under the guise of a miller. Seven years afterwards, though he had taken the oath to Government, he was cast into Aberdeen jail for preaching with orders only derived from a nonjuring bishop. Skinner evaded penalties by an expedient often adopted in those days. On Sundays gathered for worship the country folk - for Aberdeenshire was the stronghold of Episcopacy - who sat or stood outside the cottage, while the “gentles,” or such as had energy to squeeze their way with much bruising of ribs and Christian temper, assembled in the little rooms of the dwelling. [Walker’s *Life of Skinner*, p. 30; Pratt’s *Buchan*, p. 125.] There they could hear Mr. Skinner’s voice at lessons, prayer, and discourse penetrating the thin deal board partitions, and wafted from the

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doorway to the humble congregation outside, who in rain or snow sat on stools or stood deep in the mire - their voices rising in the old Scots psalms to old Scots tunes, which touched the hearts of Whig and Tory, Presbyterian and Episcopalian alike, sung with long melodious drawl in Buchan tones. At times the attention would be distracted by the untimely lowing of a cow in the byre, the crowing of a regardless cock, or, as on one eventful day, by a hen, which, being injudiciously ejected from the crowded apartments, flew terrified along the little passage where the minister was stationed, and scattered wildly the detached pages of Skinner's discourse. "Never mind," remarked he calmly, "a fool [Buchanese for 'fowl'] shall never shut my mouth again." This resolve he kept, paper was discarded, and the admiration of his flock increased. [Walker's *Life of Skinner*, p. 49.]

When in milder days Skinner was allowed to have worship in a chapel - which was as plain as a workshop - there was no ritual in his service; in fact, many old-fashioned Episcopal ministers either did not use the English prayer-book or altered it as they pleased. A staff of twelve *douce* elders helped him in the pastoral work over his people, whom Skinner spoke of as his "family." [Ramsay, i. 527.] He could not, like St. Paul on a memorable occasion, "thank God he had baptized none of them"; rather, when he was old, he thanked God that he had christened almost all of that Episcopalian flock of lairds, farmers, and ploughmen, to whom the parson officiated in his old black gown, besprinkled and yellow with the pinches of strong rappee which he extracted from the leathern pouch in his waistcoat, to punctuate his sermons. At all social meetings in the countryside the minister was both welcome and useful - welcome from his genial humour, and useful to moderate the boisterous humours of others. His sense of fun and hatred of cant were equally irrepressible. When at an agricultural dinner a parish minister had asked a blessing of vast prolixity, while the company waxed hot as their victuals grew cold, Skinner in returning thanks repeated the general thanksgiving of the Common Prayer Book from beginning to end, to the envy of his rival, who, ignorant of the source of inspiration, surprised at such fluency, contemptuously remarked "he didna think the body had it in him."

It happened that Skinner and some of his clerical brethren were spending a day with a lady at Ellon; discussion was warm and tempers were ruffled between the ministers who, like Skinner, had taken the oath to Government, and the non-jurors, who despised these backsliders as renegades. To end the stormy debate the hostess expressed regret at the want of suitable words for old Scots airs, and asked the minister of Linshart to write a song to the old tune of "Tullochgorum." The hint

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was soon taken, and a song, which this episode of ministerial strife suggested, with its keynote, "let Whig and Tory all agree," was the happy result. "The best Scotch song Scotland ever saw," was Robert Burns's unmeasured verdict. Here certainly was a man who could strike the right chord, who had written verses that soon were to be heard through broad Scotland singing social discord to harmony at a thousand tables.

Dr. Beattie had been asked to write a Scots pastoral song to another well-known tune, but, probably owing to his refined distaste at writing in the vulgar Scots dialect, he asked his Episcopal friend to finish the initial lines he had written

The ewie wi' the crookit horn,
Sic a ewe was never born,
Here about and far awa.

The ready pen of the pastor of Linshart soon produced the ballad, which gained immense popularity for a humour which is not exuberant or too obvious. The awkward belief prevailed that, being set to a Highland air called the "Whisky Still," it was not meant to lament a sheep, but to celebrate a shebeen. [Walker's *Life of Skinner*, p. 99.]

There was a charm about the quaint, homely life at Linshart. Easter hospitality was memorable in the year with his people, for after service they were entertained with ale and cakes and stories and fun by their pastor, who was living on the income of a common shepherd. As the wayfarer passed along the dreary road to Longside at night, he was sure to see a light from the cottage window to guide his dark journey, for the parson could never sleep with comfort while there was a chance of a belated Buchan man passing along the "Long gait," who might miss his way "in the mirk." He was happy in his book-closet, "five feet square," with his little stock of beloved volumes and commonplace books filled with copious extracts from works he was too poor to buy with his meagre income (for many a year) of only £15, which his efforts to increase by bad farming served sorely to diminish. Yet in that simple home there was always mirth and harmony! the daughters plaguing their father to write more songs, and singing them to him in their simple voices. In later days letters would come to him from Robert Burns, who unluckily missed seeing his brother poet when visiting in the north, begging for more verses to publish in Johnson's *Musical Museum*, to which the old man responded in admirable rhyming epistles. His lyrics appeared anonymously, and, as Burns told

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him, "one-half of Scotland already gives your songs to other authors," and Beattie got the credit even of "Tullochgorum."

There would often come to his house brother Episcopal parsons, who, like himself, lived in earth-floored cottages, wore threadbare unclerical attire, and managed to rear and educate families and to entertain friends on ploughman's wages, supplemented by eleemosynary supplies of eggs and hams and hens from kindly neighbours. Much were these worthy men (who were not very wise or learned) exercised over Hutchinsonian views. What these were few can tell to-day. Yet in their day they had many disciples. The able Lord President Forbes of Culloden held them as vital truths, and forsook his legal studies to study Hebrew and to give queer exegesis. [See essays in his *Works now first Collected*.] Mr. John Hutchinson, the founder of the system, had been land-agent to the Duke of Somerset and "riding purveyor" to George I. - a man self-taught in science and divinity, ingenious, enormously vain, who wrote worthless treatises enshrined in twelve volumes octavo. He showed to his own satisfaction that there are in Scripture certain words of the Hebrew tongue which Jehovah had revealed to Adam, containing the key to all religion and philosophy. Such radical doctrines were to be discovered in Hebrew roots; and the truths, rightly understood, could confute materialism, atheism, socinianism, and every other erroneous "ism." By manipulation of consonants and ejection of vowels as being of human invention, anything could be proved: the falsity of Newton's law of gravity could be demonstrated from Moses; the Logos could be shown to have stood on Jacob's ladder; and the Trinity could be found in the cherubim. Smitten by this alluring theory, Episcopal ministers in the North adopted the cryptogram, and pored reverently over the ex-riding purveyor's *Dissertation, on, the Trinity of the Gentiles*, and his *Moses Principia*. The parson of Linshart and his brethren bought grammars to study Hebrew, in order to discover mystical sense or nonsense in the divine original. They would meet over their toddy at each other's houses, and discuss in Buchanese the Hebrew tongue, losing their way and their temper in high debate over some wondrous interpretation of a divine conundrum. Worse still, on Sundays they would puzzle their humble congregations with strange exegesis, and fling Hebrew roots at their bewildered heads. To ignore the great key to Holy Writ was considered a mark of hopeless stupidity. "Have you read the works of John Hutchinson, Esquire?" or "Julius Bates?" or "Holloway's *Originals*?" an old Dean would ask a young minister, and when the answer "no" came to each question, he would gaze in pity on the unfortunate man, and say contemptuously, "Ah, ye are na

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far through.” [Walker’s *Life of Skinner*, p. 164.] It never struck these good souls as at all surprising that a providence, however inscrutable, should wrap up soul-saving meanings so carefully that the world could never find them, until they were discovered by the land-agent of the Duke of Somerset, and expounded by Buchan parsons. Even Mr. Skinner had his sense of humour numbed by the convincedness of this system. He studied, preached, yea, printed and published it. The fact that he and his brethren never agreed in their interpretations might spoil their tempers, but it never impaired their faith.

Skinner passed a busy life: if he was merry he wrote songs for his friends; if he was angry he wrote sarcastic verses and caustic epigrams on his enemies; if he was polemical he wrote pamphlets; when he was theological he wrote on Jacob’s thrilling prophecy of the non-departure of the sceptre from Judah till Shiloh came; when he was usefully industrious he wrote his *Ecclesiastical History of Scotland*. Working in his book-closet, or visiting his people among the moorlands, he looked at seventy like a portly man of fifty, with his coal-black hair and alert blue eyes. Years passed by, and as he grew old he saw the once persecuted Episcopal body living in peace, though not in plenty; he saw the Hutchinsonian vagaries pass away from conviction and memory; he saw his big family grow up and marry, and his eldest child - his “chile,” as he called him - elected a prelate, having charge of a few chapel congregations with the sounding title of “Bishop of Aberdeen,” and he was proud to become a dean in his boy’s diocese, with an income of £30 sterling. After a life of contented poverty he died in 1807, leaving behind him a happy memory and some admirable songs.

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The merry songs of Skinner were congenial to the cheerful community he belonged to, but there was one austere religious sect to whom all verse except in devout strains was profane - that was the body of Seceders founded by Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine. The nearest approach made to poetry was the *Gospel Sonnets* by the latter divine - “sonnets” which are verily the *Marrow of Divinity* done into rhyme. Thousands of pious souls loved these lugubrious strains - which appeared in successive editions, to be thumbed out of shape and peat-reeked out of legibility. At last, however, a writer of secular poetry was to arise from the midst of the Seceders in the person of Michael Bruce.

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[Here is a pleasing sample of the “Sonnets”:

Know, then, the divine law most perfect cares
For none of those imperfect legal wares;
Dooms thee to vengeance for thy sinful state,
As well as sinful actions small and great.
If any sin can be accounted small,
To hell it dooms thy soul for one and all;
For sins of nature, practice, heart, and way
Damnation-rent it summons thee to pay.
Yet not for sin alone which is thy shame,
But for thy boasted service too so lame,
The law adjudges thee and hell to meet,
Because thy righteousness is incomplete.]

A little hamlet called Kinneswood, in Kinross-shire, lies at the foot of the “Lomond” hills overlooking Loch Leven - a row of thatched cottages with ash-trees. There was a quaint, old-world air about Kinneswood, - “Kinnaskit,” as the people called it, - the weavers busy with their rattling looms, the wives spinning at their doors, and both men and women in the evening employed in knitting stockings at the firesides. In this village Michael Bruce was born in 1746, and there he went home to die in 1767, when he was but twenty years old. His name to-day is known as the reputed author of the “Ode to the Cuckoo,” which another poet has claimed as his own. His father, who plied a weaver’s loom, was a seceder of the Seceders, being an elder in the congregation of good Mr. Thomas Main of Orwell, who had been expelled from the Antiburgher body for holding that Christ died for all men - which was after all a doctrine only mildly comforting, seeing that the elect alone could be saved. The father, enriched by the bequest of £11 sterling, resolved to send his son to college that he might become a Seceder minister, for the boy’s prayers when he conducted family worship, filled listeners with devout admiration. So in a garret in Edinburgh, nourished on paternal stores of oatmeal, he lived, attending classes, but reading English poetry with avidity from books friends lent him, and buying others with earnings of his teaching. In 1765, when he returned from college, he parted with his treasured books - some he sold from poverty; others - his Shakespeare and Pope - he sent secretly to a friend from fear of discovery; for to a staunch Antiburgher these were heinous works. That in the vacation he should read profane fiction like the *Faërie Queene*, as he herded the sheep on the Lomond hills, was a crime in the eyes of the covenanting folk, who mourned that the devout Rev. Ralph Erskine played on a “wee sinfu’ fiddle.” When college was over he taught in the summer months at a roadside school at Gairney - a hallowed spot with Seceders, for there the first Associate Presbytery was formed

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in a saintly ale-house. The school - which in his youth the famous seceder Mr. John Brown had taught - was but an old disused hut, a few deals on blocks of wood serving as the benches. Twenty children, offspring of strict dissenters, paid, very badly, their two shillings a quarter and their teacher had the doubtful privilege of free board and lodgings with the parents in succession.

In a room at Kinneswood, Buchan, the mason, formed his little class of village lads to practise psalm tunes for the meeting-house. In those days, both in kirk and meeting-house, Christians sang in sanctified drawl - taking their religion sadly - a stock of tunes which were known as the "old eight" - French, Dundee, York, Newton, Martyrs, Abbey, London, and Elgin - consecrated by time-worn use.

[Perhaps Dundee's wild warbling measures rise;
Or plaintive Martyrs, worthy of the name;
Or noble Elgin beats the heavenward flame,
The sweetest far of Scotia's holy lays.

Burns, *Cottar's Saturday Night*.]

It was, however, considered profane by Seceders to practise music on divine psalms, especially by the aid of a human pitch-pipe. They therefore would lift their voices in solemn tunes to such doggerel as this:

Fair London town where lives the King
On his imperial throne,
With all his court attending him,
Still waiting him upon.

Or this:

The Martyrs' tune above the rest
Distinguished is by fame;
On this account I'll sing this
In honour of their name. [M'Kelvie, p. 99.]

Among the band of singers was Michael Bruce, and he was appealed to as a "scholar" to fit these old tunes to more becoming words for practice. Some of these verses, it is said, were afterwards included in the Church of Scotland collection of Paraphrases, as compositions of John Logan, to be sung with pious and monotonous ardour in all churches for generations. [These Paraphrases are those containing the well-known lines:

Few are thy days, and full of woe.
O happy is the man who hears.
The beam that shines from Sion hill.]

The ministry was still his aim, but the Antiburghers, or "Antis," as they were called, would not have him, because his father had quitted them, and he was therefore enrolled as a student with Mr. John Swanston, the Burgher minister at

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Kinross, who was professor in the humble Theological hall of his Synod, which consisted of one small room, where he delivered prolix lectures on Pike's *Cases of Conscience*, the *Marrow of Divinity*, and the *Confession of Faith*, to a poor, threadbare, earnest band, who paid as fees five shillings a session. Well-to-do adherents to the sturdy sect received these divinity students into their houses, would give them food, and occasionally old clothes. Some of these farmers could look back to bygone days, when great lights of their body, like the great Dr. John Brown or the saintly Dr. George Lawson, had got free lodging from them, and would point out proudly the "prophet's chamber," where they had burned the midnight candle. It was a curious, frugal life those old dissenting ministers lived.

Michael Bruce, when his professor concluded his lectures, found employment at Forest Mill near Tillicoultry - then a dreary moorland tract - where, beside a few cottages, stood the school, a low-roofed hut with damp earthen floor. In the hovel the delicate, ill-fed lad taught, standing on a board to keep his feet from the wet ground. [M'Kelvie's *Loch Leven and other Poems of M. Bruce, with Life; Poems of M. Bruce, with Life*, by Grossart.] At this dreary abode, where he had to teach "a dozen blockheads for bread," Michael was busy with his reading, and busy writing "Loch Leven," his longest, but not very inspired, poem. When winter came he was forced to return to his father's house - trudging with weary, feeble steps the twenty miles. His poverty, his labours, his want of comforts and care had ruined a frame naturally fragile. All hope of a long life was gone; and among his family he was content to linger out the few remaining months of his short life. Not long was there to be seen in the weaver village the slender lad, with narrow chest, high shoulders, and white, pallid face and long yellow hair. [Grossart's *Bruce's Poems, with Memoir*, p. 11.]

The dying poet now was back in the cottage, round which his thin hands trained the honeysuckle, gazing out of the window as he thought out new verses, or copied out old ones, which he intended, if he had time and money, to publish before he died. Spring had come, the birds were singing in the hedgerows, the dour ash-trees were bursting into leaf, when the lad wrote his touching "Elegy" as he lay watching the spring which he should never see again: -

Now Spring returns, but not to me returns;
The vernal joy my other years have known.
Dim in my heart life's dying taper burns,
And all the joys of life with health are gone.
Farewell, ye blowing fields, ye cheerful plains;
Enough for me the churchyard's lonely mound,

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Where melancholy with still silence reigns,
And the rank grass waves o'er the cheerless ground.

There let me sleep, forgotten in the clay,
When death shall shut these weary, aching eyes,
Rest in the hope of an eternal day,
Till the long night is gone and the last morn arise.

On the 4th of July 1767 Michael Bruce was found dead in his bed, only twenty-one years old.

Here now begins a literary mystery. The poet had not been many months dead when one day a young man, a former college companion, came to Kinneswood to see the father. This was John Logan, tutor to Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster - a clever, uncouth young man of nineteen. When the Ulbster family were dissatisfied with the manners of the new tutor whom Dr. Blair had recommended, the divine said, "I thought it was a scholar and not a dancing-master they wanted for the young gentleman." [Sir J. Sinclair's *Correspondence*, i. 244.] To his keeping letters and poems in a leathern-covered quarto, in which Michael had transcribed his verses, were entrusted by the father, that they might be published. Time passed and nothing was heard of them; but at last, in 1770, a little volume appeared, *Poems on Several Occasions, by Michael Bruce*. In a brief preface it was mentioned, "To make up a miscellany some poems wrote by different authors are inserted, all of them originals and none destitute of merit. The reader of taste will easily distinguish them from those by Mr. Bruce, without their being particularised by any mark." This was puzzling. How "readers of taste" were to distinguish the poems by Bruce, of whom they had never heard, or discern his style, of which they knew nothing, among the anonymous verses was a perplexing question. Six copies of the meagre volume were sent to the poet's father, by whom it was looked at with dismay. The pious youth had written devotional verses, and hymns in imitation of Ralph Erskine's *Gospel Sonnets*, which had been sung in village class. They were not there. The old man burst into tears, exclaiming "Where are Michael's Gospel Sonnets?" He set forth for Edinburgh, called at Logan's rooms in Leith Wynd, and there the irate weaver was shown a few loose papers, rude draughts of verse, and when he asked for the leathern book, he was told that the servants had singed fowls with it. So matters remained till 1781, when *Poems by Mr. John Logan, one of the Ministers of Leith*, was published. The seceder farmer's son, who had been class-mate of Bruce, had blossomed into a popular preacher of the Church of Scotland. In this volume,

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eleven out of the seventeen pieces in Bruce's Poems were inserted as Logan's own - leaving only six to have been by his friend and the other "different authors" spoken of in the old preface. Folk in the poet's village, it is said, were amazed when they saw the fine "Ode to the Cuckoo" appropriated by the minister; remembering having seen it in the vanished quarto, and having heard it recited from the father's lips. One gentleman had seen a letter from Michael, saying, "You will think me ill-employed, for I am writing a poem about a gowk" [M'Kelvie, p. 114.] (cuckoo). What can be said in Logan's favour is that he claimed it; that some one had seen it in his handwriting - though not before Bruce's death; that local tradition or legend is of doubtful worth; and that village weavers would be apt to magnify a local poet's claims. One is between two straits - alike unwilling to deprive the poet of his one claim to immortality and to deprive his editor of his claim to an ode and to honesty. [On this everlasting controversy see M'Kelvie's *Life of Bruce*; papers by Shairp, Laing, and Small; Grossart's *Memoir of Bruce*, pp. 50-110. Dr. Robertson of Dalmeny said he did not see the Ode among Bruce's MSS.] Certainly, if Logan wrote this poem, he wrote better when he was a lad than ever he did as a man. Astonishment also arose in Kinneswood at finding among the *Poems of John Logan* hymns which people said had been sung in their village as Michael Bruce's compositions. Did Logan play false?

John Logan, who was born in 1748, after preparing for the Burgher ministry, entered the Church of Scotland and soon became notable for literary and pulpit gifts. When minister of South Leith, he gave lectures on the "Philosophy of History" in St. Mary's Chapel, which were attended by the literary *élite* of Edinburgh. Hymns by him became favourite Paraphrases in worship. His play called *Runnymede* was played in Edinburgh, and proved a failure. When being rehearsed in Covent Theatre, it was interdicted, for dangerous political doctrines were scented in the speeches of the Barons. His poems in 1781, containing the "Ode to the Cuckoo," brought more reputation, and Edmund Burke when in Edinburgh called to see the author of the Ode he greatly admired. But soon the eloquent preacher sank into disrepute by his drinking habits, and, resigning his charge with an annuity of £40, passed on to London, warmly recommended by Adam Smith. There he became a literary hack - compiling a *View of Ancient History*, published under the name of Dr. Rutherford, who bought it from him; publishing a pamphlet on the charges against Warren Hastings, which involved the publisher Stockdale in a prosecution. He died in 1788, at the age of fifty-one - "of a broken heart," says Isaac Disraeli. Of the many manuscripts left behind him, consisting of plays, poems, essays, two volumes of his sermons were published by his friends, which

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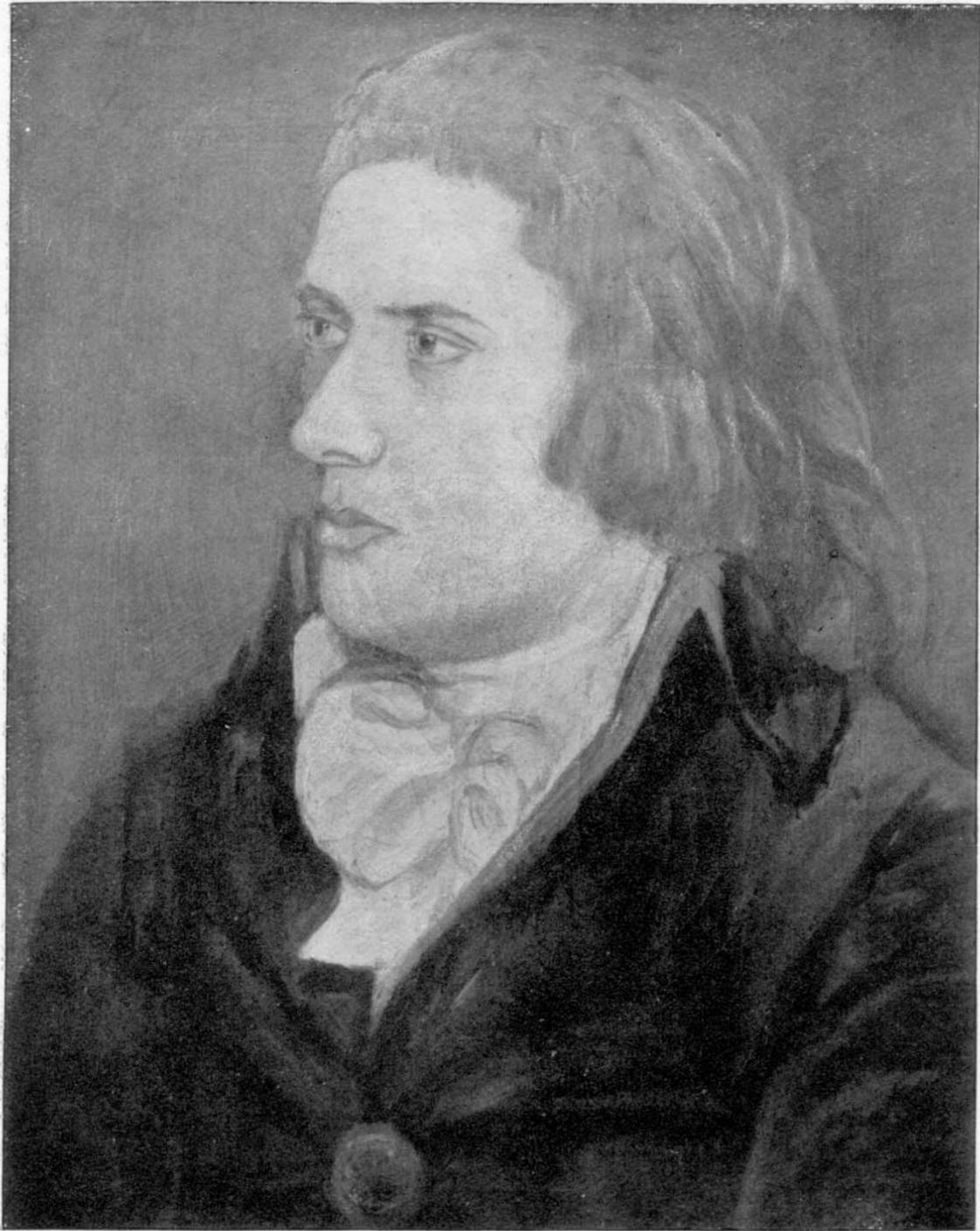
have literary merit. That he had lyric gifts his popular “Braes of Yarrow” remains to prove. Was it the poor schoolmaster lad of Kinross-shire or the brilliant, dissipated clerical failure who wrote the “Ode to the Cuckoo”? -

Sweet bird, thy bower is ever green,
Thy sky is ever clear;
Thou hast no sorrow in thy song,
No winter in thy year.

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At the middle of the century, in a narrow, dirty close called the “Cap and Feathers,” in the Cowgate of Edinburgh, lived William Fergusson, book-keeper to a haberdasher. His shop was then the only one of the kind in the city, situated in a flat reached by a “scale” staircase, where a few silks gave dignity to the stock consisting of “Musselburgh stuffs,” “Holland checks,” and “Dutch ticks.” The book-keeper, on a wage of £20, by the aid of his wife, who employed herself in spinning, was able in his poor lodging, rented for thirty shillings a year, to maintain a large family. Yet Fergusson and his wife each came of a good stock; there flowed in their ill-thriven veins blood - not too generous - which was of good degree; for in those days in Scotland poverty and wealth, rank and trade were brothers; and the barber could often claim kindred with the laird whose face he shaved. In the Cowgate lodging, on the 5th of September 1750, Robert Fergusson first saw the light - not that there was much to see in that dingy dwelling. The father sent his weakly son to the High School, where for three and sixpence a quarter sons of lords and shopkeepers, judges and weavers, got a sound education in Latin. The son of the draper’s clerk had as schoolmates James Boswell, Tytler of Woodhouselee, Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, Lord Rosslyn, Dugald Stewart, and many others of quality. [Grossart’s *Life of Fergusson*, p. 41; Campbell’s *Introd. Scottish Poetry*.] He was only eleven years old when he got a bursary allotted to the maintenance of boys of the name of Fergusson, which had as its condition that they should be educated at Dundee Grammar School and thereafter at St. Andrews University.

It was in October 1764 that Robert Fergusson presented himself at St. Andrews and was admitted as a bursar to St. Salvator College. It was a curious, thrifty life that the students spent in the shabby academic courts. [Rev. C. Rogers’s *Autobiography*, p. 14; Grierson’s *Delineations of St. Andrews*.] St. Salvator common hall was a damp



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vault with earthen floor and cob-webbed roof. There were dinner-tables for the students - with fare consisting of bread, eggs, and fish three times a week; beef and cabbage with ale the other four. Tables were set for students of different grades - for the "primers," sons of lords and landlords, in their fine gowns, who had paid the high fees of six guineas; the "secunders," sons of ministers and smaller lairds, with robes less richly trimmed; and the "terners," robed in poorer stuff, who paid their humble fee of a guinea and a half. At breakfast the boarder at the high table had "one third of a loaf and one mutchkin of milk, to be carried to his chamber by the table-servers"; while the bursar, by a fine distinction, had "one-third of a scone with a mutchkin of milk or ale, for which he shall go to the pantry himself and carry it to his own chamber and eat it there." For dinner "half a scone and a mutchkin of ale"; and for supper half a loaf and one mutchkin and a half of milk or ale were exactly allotted. Adjoining the common hall were chambers in which the students lodged - rooms nine feet square, with a little bed-closet for two bursars - but fire there was none for poorer students, who in the winter would try to keep out the frost by wrapping plaids round their bodies, and by wearing Shetland gloves to protect their hands, red with cold. The Hebdomader - the professor who took his turn for a week to superintend the scholars - visited their rooms at nine at night and five in the morning, to see that order and propriety were observed; and when at six o'clock the bell rang all must be present for prayers, and, thereafter, in time for classes under a fine of twopence for lateness, and sixpence (*sex assibus*) for absence, which the professor pocketed to aid his meagre salary. On college fare and regimen Fergusson throve much better than in his unsavoury, poverty-stricken home. If the colleges were mean and dirty - for the scavenger, dignified by the name of Foricarius, did his duty indifferently - the town itself was worse. Its population of 4000 were mostly idle and poor, its harbour was dilapidated, in its streets side by side were straw-thatched cottages, old houses with traces of stately days, and two-storeyed dwellings with their "forestairs" jutting into the unpaved road, which produced crops of grass, fertilised by the middens placed before the doors. [Grierson's *St. Andrews*, pp. 104, 135, 179; *Travels in Scotland*, i. 118, by Rev. James Hall [William Thomson.] In foul weather the people crossed the street on stepping-stones over streams of rain and mire and gutter. Doubtless it had even considerably improved since the beginning of the century, when it was little more than a village, whose main street, according to contemporary report, was adorned with "dunghills which are exceedingly noisome and ready to infect the air, especially at those seasons when herring-guts are exposed in them."

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Within the College was Dr. Robert Watson, who taught Logic, and was known afar for his *History of Philip II.*, which gained even the praise of Dr. Johnson, whom he entertained in 1773, on his memorable journey. "I take great delight in him," he was pleased to say of the historian, who had then become Principal of the University. [Boswell's *Johnson* (ed. Hill), v. 59.] In the chair of Natural Philosophy and Mathematics was William Wilkie, that uncouth man of genius, who was the delight of his friends and an astonishment to the public. Whenever the classes were over the author of the *Epigoniad* would be off in his ploughman's dress, with his hoe over his shoulder, on his way to his fields, for he was as much interested in turnip as in Greek roots, in potatoes as in fluxions. To this kindest of souls and most eccentric of mortals Fergusson clung. The shabby, frail lad would copy out his master's lectures for him, and the grotesque professor would take him to his farm - the one full of fun and frolic, the other bubbling over with learning and ponderous poetry and humour.

Robert Fergusson early showed his gift for writing verse; he composed two acts of an inevitable tragedy on Sir William Wallace, and perpetrated satires. [He was only fifteen when his Elegy on Professor David Gregory, his late professor of Mathematics, was composed, in the favourite stanza of Scots elegy from Sempill to Burns:

Now mourn ye, college masters a'!
And frae your een a tear let fa',
Fam'd Gregory death has ta'en awa'
Without remeid.
The skaith ye've met wi's nae that sma'
Sin' Gregory's deid.
.
Great 'casion hae we a' to weep,
And cleed our skins in mourning deep;
For Gregory death will fairly keep,
To tak' his nap;
He'll till the Resurrection sleep
As sound's a tap.]

When he was dead, legends were told of boyish pranks, over which his biographers shook their grave, dull heads. One especially. He sometimes acted as precentor in the College chapel, leading the psalmody, and it was his duty in that capacity to read out "the line" or written request for the prayers of the congregation for a person in distress, which were in those more believing days in frequent demand. One day professors were horrified to hear him utter, before the last prayer, the formula in the usual professional drawl: "Remember in prayer a young man [naming one present] of whom from the sudden effects of inebriety there appears small hopes of recovery." [Fergusson's *Poems*, 1801, with *Life of Author*, p. 18.] The students tittered, the regents

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scowled, and the scandalised Senate severely censured the culprit. Other escapades there were which gained solemn rebukes from the grave professors, and showed the irrepressibility of the young scamp, whose exuberant spirits strait-laced biographers deplore with portentous gravity. [Irving's *Life of Fergusson*.]

While at College he was about to study for the Church - of which two of his great-grandfathers had been ministers - but, fortunately for the kirk if not for himself, that intention was ended by the death of his father. The boy went home to his widowed mother, who in dark, malodorous Jamieson's Land eked out a livelihood by keeping lodgers in the spare - very spare - room. An experimental visit which he paid to a prosperous uncle, a farmer and factor in Aberdeenshire, ended in failure. What availed his knack at writing verses? or his pious addresses when he assembled the farm servants who could not get to the kirk on Sunday, and preached to them from a peat-stack till he brought tears to their eyes? He was useless on the farm; he wore out both his clothes and his uncle's patience; and one day when, being called in to see my Lord Deskford, he was not fit to appear, he was dismissed from the house. In high dudgeon he went off to a neighbouring ale-house and wrote a strenuous epistle to his uncle. A sovereign was sent out to him as answer, and with his pride and his money in his pocket he walked foot-sore and indignant to Edinburgh. Thus ended a second intended career.

We next find him - appointed by the aid of his father's friends - a clerk in the Commissary Clerk's office, where he had to copy deeds, wills, decreets, and declarators of marriages for so much - or so little - a page. Of old it had been at "one plack a page"; in his time it was still small, for there are farthings mentioned in his memoranda of earnings, such as a deed at elevenpence farthing. The office was in Parliament Close, consisting of a little room about ten feet square, which was reached by a dark winding stair, at the risk of falling at every step. There the Commissaries - one of them a cousin of Tobias Smollett - sat, deciding on wills, decreets, and declarations. [Topham's *Letters from Edinburgh*, p. 299.] The lad stuck to his work, and so punctual was he, that it was said his coming round the corner on the way to the office was a mark of time surer than the Tron clock. The pay being miserable, the lad tried to earn a little more money by teaching sword-play to a few pupils - he boasts of having eight. [Fergusson's *Poems, with Life*, p. 49.] In his garret, as he sat over Pope and Shenstone or Somerville's *Chase*, he forgot his troubles, poverty, and cold, for reading poetry was his chief pleasure. There were other pleasures, too, in the evening hours, when shops were shut, and men were gathering in the taverns, and over oysters, rizzared haddocks, and ale, merriment was loud and songs were

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jovial. There the threadbare clerk was often seen. He was poor - miserably poor - but the entertainment was cheap; convivial cronies were kind - unkindly kind - to the lad who would amply repay their hospitality by jests, over which they roared, and staves, to which they clattered their tankards in thunderous chorus. [Irving's *Life of Fergusson*; Grossart's *Robert Fergusson*.] At Lucky Middlemist's in the Cowgate, or in the little room of John Dowie's tavern, nicknamed the "Coffin," the drudgery of the day was forgotten in the festivity of the night. The thin, pale-faced lad would stay with his friends, and often outstay them to join other relays of convivialists; and he would sing with his rich voice Mallet's "Birks of Invermay," to charm a toping crew to maudlin sentiment. Up to every prank, having wagered one evening that he would sell a bundle of ballads in two hours, he set forth from Dowie's inn (whose guests made riotous at night Liberton's Close, where the "Man of Feeling" was born), wrapped in an old greatcoat, a scratch wig, down the High Street, singing his ballads, parleying with the crowd that followed him, selling his wares by dozens, and rejoicing his comrades to drink the wager and the proceeds.

All the musicians in St. Cecilia's Hall were his devoted friends, and long years after the famous Tenducci - first favourite in Edinburgh - would burst into tears, in his emotional way, as he spoke of the lovable, luckless genius. Eager for the play and a favourite with the actors, he was to be seen in the "Shakespeare's box," to which he was allowed free access - his face alive with enthusiasm, banging the front of the box in his exuberant delight; especially that evening when, in the Theatre Royal, Arne's *Artaxerxes* was performed, with three songs by himself. Naturally the lad imagined the applause came forth not as a tribute to the music or the singing of the great Tenducci, but to his own poor words. [Grossart's *Robert Fergusson*, p. 87; Harris's *St. Cecilia's Ball*, p. 112.]

In February 1771, in the *Weekly Magazine* - that not very robust rival to the old *Scots Magazine* - published by Walter Ruddiman, the son of the famous old grammarian, a paragraph appeared: "We have been favoured with three pastorals under the titles of 'Morning,' 'Noon,' and 'Night,' written by a young gentleman of this place, the style of which appears as natural and picturesque as that of any modern ones hitherto published." They appeared, but in them there was as little trace of nature as of art. The "young gentleman," in fact, seemed a failure. But in January 1772 appeared verses called "Daft Days," and three months later "Elegy on the Death of Scots Music," which showed that one had arrived possessing the craft and humour of Allan Ramsay. That generation had seen nothing like these - not great, but racy with humour, nimble in rhyme, vivid in speech, Scots at every turn.

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Successive numbers of the stupid old magazine were enlivened by other poems from this unknown hand - "Caller Oysters," "Braid Claith," "The Farmer's Ingle." The numbers sold rapidly, to the surprise of the printers, accustomed to a frigid reception from the public. The verses were discussed in every tavern and club and supper-table, and won a wider fame when a little volume, "*Poems by Robert Fergusson*, price two shillings and sixpence," was published by subscription, with a dedication - without permission - to Sir William Forbes, the banker. That gentleman was the admirer of Dr. Beattie's whiffling *Minstrel*, but he never acknowledged by a word or a guinea this far brighter genius who had craved his patronage. Fifty pounds, however, were gained by the book (more than double what Burns was to get for his Kilmarnock edition), and as the money jingled in his pocket the young author said, "My poor mother shall have her full share of this"; and she had, for her love was first with him. Fools flattered him, and as they pronounced him far superior to Ramsay, he would exclaim, "This is not praise, it is folly!" "Mr. Robert" - old Miss Ruddiman would say long afterwards - "was a dear, gentle, modest creature; his pale cheeks would flush with girlish pink at a compliment."

From 1771 to 1772, from month to month, verses appeared in the Magazine, and the poet got gifts of suits of clothes - one for week-days, another for Sunday wear - which reveals more of the poverty of the poet than the munificence of the publisher. After all, his was but a thriftless, aimless life. There seemed no prospect of rising above his humble post; for he had no steady ambition for anything higher. With fame and flattery and foolish patrons, with a sociable nature, a fragile constitution, and a facile temperament, temptations proved too strong for that weak will of his. By day Edinburgh citizens had their "meridians," and their "whets" at night; they had their tavern meetings in festive gangs, when merchants, clerks, thriftless lawyers, and rakish writers were glad of the company of the good-natured, clever fellow who sang at a word, and could turn a smart verse more easily than they at night could turn a corner. It was delightful for himself, when "deeds" and "decreets," over which his fingers ached, were laid aside for the day, to leave his squalid home and set forth as dusk fell, hearing friendly greetings of "Weel, Rab!" and to meet thirsty admirers in a cosy tavern; to join jovial souls at the Pandemonium Club, in a subterranean oyster cellar, or at the Cape Club, at the Isle of Man Arms, in the narrow Craig's Close, where, with his friend Woods the actor, Alexander Runciman the painter, and other boon companions, the night flew swiftly by; for

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while noisy ten-hours drum
Gars a' your trades gae danderin' hame,
Now mony a club jocose and free
Gie a' to merriment and glee.
Wi' sang and glass they fley the power
O' care, that wad harass the hour . . .
Now some in Pandemonium's shade
Resume the gormandisin' trade. . . .
But chief, O Cape, we crave thy aid
To get our cares and poortith laid. [Fergusson's "Auld Reekie."]

Thither would pass the lad, with narrow shoulders, long nose, eyes blue-black and piercing, and high forehead, his fair brown hair, with a curl at each cheek, tied behind in a queue with silk ribbon. A pretty youth he seemed at that time, with a pleasant countenance and strong, clear, frank voice. After he was dead he was described by one who had often seen him in homely terms as "very small and delicate, a little in-kneed, and waigling in his walk." His dress bore marks of penury in the faded, threadbare coat, the soiled white stockings in his shabby shoes.

A posthumous reputation has been given Fergusson as being utterly dissipated and drunken. [David Irving's *Life of Fergusson*.] If such had been his real character, it is unlikely he would have retained his post in the Commissary's office to the end. If he was foolish, he was young; if he was unsteady, temptations were strong in that convivial city. When counselled by friendly voices to be prudent, he would cover his face with his hand, and sobbing say, "Oh, sir, anything to forget my poor mother and these aching fingers" - a poor enough excuse for forgetting himself, but it tells much. Once he was busy at a county election, exposed to cold and the riotous excesses of electioneering conviviality, and after that there came a reaction of melancholy. Probably it was at this time an incident occurred of which much has been unnecessarily made. One day Mr. John Brown, the old seceder minister, found this unknown lad disconsolate in the churchyard at Haddington. They spoke for a few minutes together, and the minister, surrounded by suggestive tombstones, made a few remarks on mortality - for he had a professional propensity for improving the occasion. He remarked that soon they should be laid in the dust, and that it were well in time to prepare for eternity. If any impression at all was made on Fergusson by the little incident, he returned to town and to the old mirth again. Yet this interview with a most genial old divine, which took place in 1772, has been represented as the cause of the poet's final despair and madness, and the "damnatory creed" of Calvin has been damned as the incitement to his religious

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melancholy two years after - quite a gratuitous indignation. [Fergusson's *Poems, with Life*, 1807.]

It was not till July 1774 that a paragraph appeared in the *Caledonian Mercury*: "Many lovers of poetry will feel regret to know that Mr. Robert Fergusson, the author of some of the most natural and humorous poems that have appeared of late years, has been seized with a dangerous illness." It was too true. Insanity had begun to dim the brilliant brain, and heavy depression fell upon the light heart. In despair he flung his manuscripts into the flames; and he was heard to mutter: "There is one thing I am glad of: I have never written a line against religion." The Bible which his mother had given him on his going to school in Dundee was his companion from morning till night; but it brought no light to his darkness, and the words of his paraphrase of the third chapter of Job, which was quoted in a time of gloom by Robert Burns, expressed his mood:

Say, wherefore has an o'er-bounteous Heaven
Light to the comfortless and wretched given?

Occasionally the old buoyancy would show itself, and he would visit his old haunts and his friends the Ruddimans; but the melancholy quickly returned. Delusions tortured him that he was the perpetrator of a murder which had recently been committed, of which the town was talking; and that he was one of the reprobates who had crucified the Lord. Two months before the end he had spent one lucid evening with a few friends; but as he left the house his feet caught in the carpet and he fell down the steep staircase, and was carried home insensible. Next day his consciousness returned, but not his reason. His mother was occupied with her lodgers, and it was necessary that he should be removed to the madhouse, to which he was conveyed in a sedan-chair - to that building adjoining the old Darien House in Bristo Port, grimly called the "Schelles" (or Cells). In the dismal chamber, with stone floor and straw beds, as he found himself entrapped he uttered one great cry, which was answered by the wretched fellow-inmates of the place. Days passed by - now he was walking gloomily round the cell, plaiting a crown with the straws from his bed, proclaiming himself a king; now he was telling his keeper with glowing eyes that he should be one day a "bright minister of Christ." Sometimes his friends found him stretched on his bed of loose straw, and he would beseech them to set him free. When he was alone the cell would resound with melody, as, with rare pathos, he sang his "Birks of Invermay" and other favourite

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songs. The weary days and nights dragged on. It was October, early winter had set in, and one evening, when his mother was sitting by him, he asked her to heap his clothes together upon him, murmuring that his feet were "cold - cold." He asked his sister, "Might you not often come and sit by me? You cannot imagine how comfortable it would be; you might fetch your seam and sew beside me." And as his mother sobbed silently before him, "What ails you?" the poor youth said; "I am well cared for, I want for nothing; but it is cold - it is very cold." The keeper whispered it was time to leave, and as they were about to go, "Oh! do not go, mother - oh! do not leave me!" he cried, and with this distracted appeal ringing in her ears they parted never to meet again. In the solitude of that night - the 10th of October 1774 - the poor poet died, only twenty-four years old.

Three days later "a large company" gathered. at the West Bow, and followed to the Canongate churchyard the coffin of Robert Fergusson, "writer" - as by courtesy he was called, not in reference to his being an author, but clerk to a lawyer. Shortly before or just after his death his mother had a letter from her sailor son beyond the seas, enclosing some money, which would have enabled her to bring her afflicted boy to her own fireside; and soon after the poet was dead a draft for £100 came from a gentleman for Fergusson, and an urgent invitation that he would join him in India. [Grossart's *Robert Fergusson*, p. 130.] Such is one of life's bitter ironies; one of destiny's many fantastic tricks.

The Scots poems [Fergusson's poems in English are utterly without character or life.] of Robert Fergusson - vivid, humorous pictures of town life and characters and manners, and also of rural ways - gain further interest from the powerful influence they exercised over his great successor, Robert Burns. It was in 1784 they seem to have first stimulated his admirer to the production of his masterpieces - suggesting style and subjects and form of stanza. Robert Fergusson, when he died at the age of twenty-four, had written better than Burns wrote at the same age; but whether Fergusson would ever have risen to any much higher level as a poet had he lived, it is idle to conjecture, it is fruitless to inquire: as a Scots proverb says, "It's ill work chappin' at a deid man's yett." [Which may be Englished: "There is no use knocking at a dead man's door."]