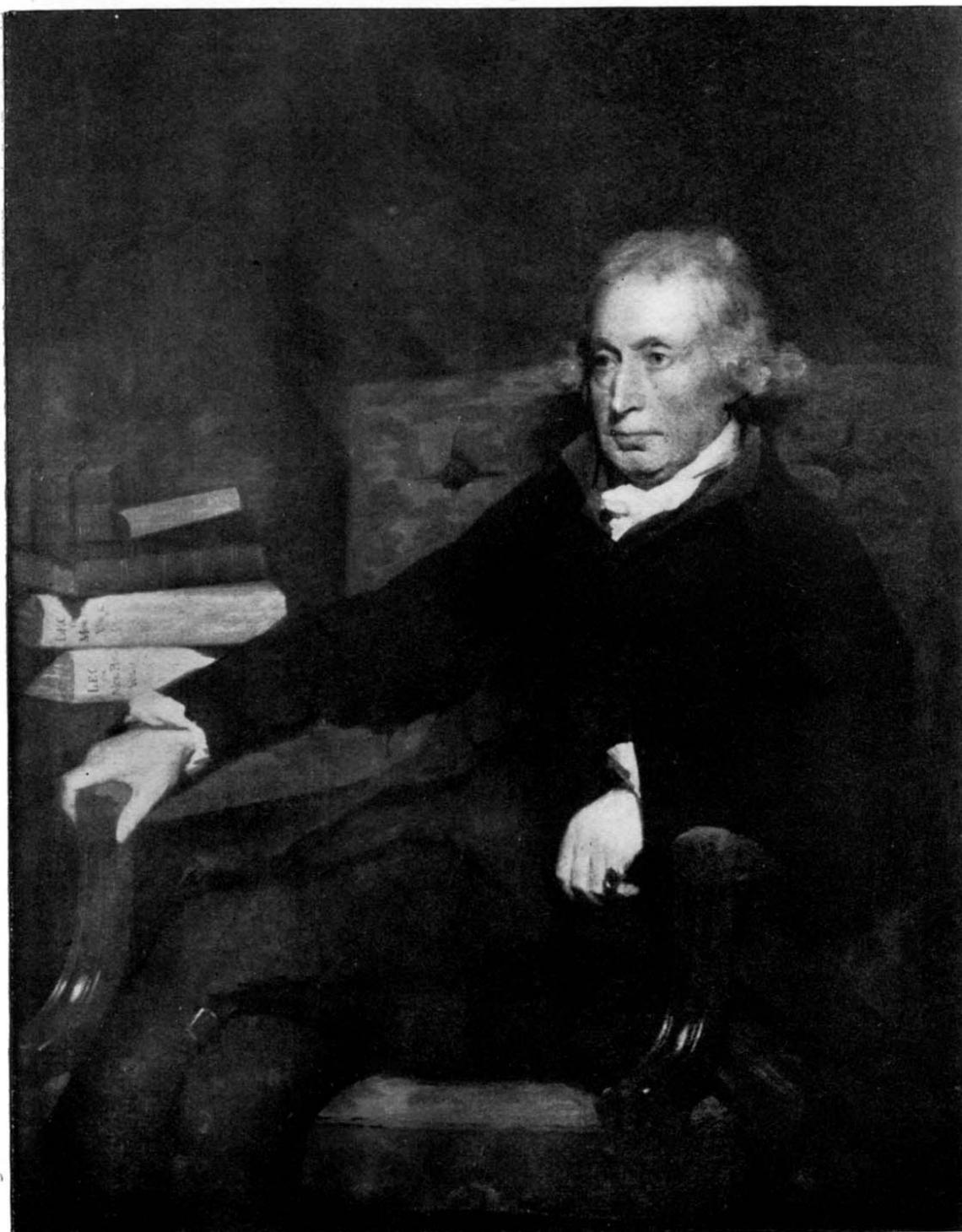


# SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

## CHAPTER V

### ADAM FERGUSON - DR. HUGH BLAIR - DR. WILLIAM WILKIE - DR. BLACKLOCK

The remarkable feature of literary society in Scotland in the second half of the century was the familiar fraternity in which these men lived. They all knew one another - most of them since boyhood, for they were all about the same age. They met one another almost every day of their lives; they belonged to the same set of society, sat at the same tables in the dingy old flats, copiously partaking of claret and punch without a headache, and of indigestible national dishes without a nightmare, with all the zest of epicures over the most delicious novelties. They could not go out of their wynds without being sure to see friends they had met last night at Mrs. Cockburn's merry parties, over a light tea and cakes; or at the Lord President's, over a heavy supper and drink. David Hume, when he left his house in James' Court, before he had gone for two minutes up the High Street, might meet the dapper and prim Dr. Hugh Blair, or rub shoulders with Lord Elibank, to whom he would give a stiff bow, as he was not on good terms with his lordship. Principal Robertson, proceeding in his stately gait, would meet Dr. Carlyle arrived from Inveresk, who had just put up his horse in the stabling in the Grassmarket, equipped in jack-boots and spurs and whip, accoutrements which were slightly discordant with his clerical coat and bands. Probably there had ridden into town from Kilduff Mr. John Home - radiant in smiles and a scarlet coat - on his now aged steed. Lord Kames would pass by in wig and gown from his house in the Canongate on his way to court, and as his tall, gaunt figure disappeared round the corner, who should come but Lord Monboddo, who always kept his distance from a man who had the bad taste to ridicule his profound speculations. At his door at the Luckenbooths, standing on the steps leading to his book-shop, Mr. William Creech would be seen, attired in silk breeches and black coat, with carefully-powdered hair, for it was twelve o'clock, the hour that the bibliophile had his levées of literary friends, and he would intimate to Lord Hailes and rubicund James Boswell that in the back room were little Mr. William Tytler of Woodhouselee, turning over some antiquarian books, and Mr. Adam Ferguson, with his young friend Dugald Stewart, who was then professor of Mathematics. Then there might come in to make arrangements for



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From the Painting by Raeburn in Edinburgh University.

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the press, Mr. William Smellie, the printer, also naturalist and natural philosopher, who was the correspondent and translator of Buffon, the editor and compiler of all the principal articles in the first edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, which began to appear in 1771, in three modest volumes, edited for a modest £200. This lumbering, slouching figure, with uncombed hair, unshaven face, clad in a grey coat far too big, all sprinkled with snuff, and a rusty cocked hat, was he of caustic tongue and rude humour, who talked philosophy at Lord Monboddo's suppers, and headed the revelries of the Crochallan Club, in Douglas's tavern, with jocose and roystering comrades. It was there Robert Burns met him on too festive evenings in 1787 -

His bristling beard just rising in its might -  
'Twas four long nights and days to shaving night;  
His uncombed, grizzly locks, wild staring, thatched  
A head for thought profound and clear unmatched.

Such were the men, notable for learning and letters, who met every day; while there were lawyers like Henry Erskine, the most delightful of jesters, most able of pleaders; the mighty Robert MacQueen, famous as Lord Braxfield; Andrew Crosbie; Lord Cullen, the incomparable mimic; and men of science like Drs. Cullen and Black, Gregory and Robison. Smollett enthusiastically said Edinburgh was a "hotbed of genius." [*Humphrey Clinker*.]

When Amyat, the king's chemist, was in town, he said to Smellie: "Here I stand at what is called the Cross of Edinburgh, and can in a few minutes take fifty men of genius by the hand." [Kerr's *Life of Smellie*, ii. 252.] Allowing for some courteous exaggeration, it certainly was a remarkable time. It was in 1773 - the year in which Dr. Johnson arrived in Edinburgh to overawe the Scottish capital with his literary magnitude - that David Hume wrote to his friend Strahan, the printer, alleging that "England is so sunk in stupidity and barbarism and faction that you may as well think of Lapland for an author." [*Letters to Strahan* (ed. by Hill).] This is, of course, in his whimsical way of girding at the Southrons; but it must be owned that there were very few English men of letters when he wrote - singularly few in London. Who were they? Johnson, and Sir William Blackstone, the jurist. Add to these Colman, Murphy, and Richard Cumberland, the playwrights; but who else besides? Gray, Churchill, and Sterne were gone. Burke and Goldsmith were Irishmen. The great writers were dead; their successors had not yet come to literary life. It was much, then, to boast that while London, with about 700,000 inhabitants (and Hume

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conjectured “there is a kind of impossibility that any city could ever rise much beyond this proportion”), had not half a dozen authors of mark, Edinburgh, with only 70,000, possessed so many. [“Essay on the Populousness of Ancient Nations.” “I believe this is an historical age - this is an historical nation; and I know of no less than eight histories upon the stocks in this country,” (*i.e.* Scotland) wrote Hume to Strahan in 1773 (*Letters of D. Hume* (ed. Hill), p. 155). Even Dr. Carlyle had intended to join the band of historians, for his friend Dr. Dickson writes to him in 1765 from London: “I most ardently wish you to set about your History, and you must procrastinate no longer” (Carlyle MSS.).] Within a few years, the English, who sneered at the Scots, were obliged to buy and to read their books. They read Ferguson for Roman history; Hume, Smollett, Henry for English history; Robertson and Watson for foreign history. In philosophy little had been produced in England since Bishop Berkeley wrote, and they therefore resorted to Hume and Reid, even to Beattie and Monboddo. They got criticism from Blair and Lord Kames; learned political economy from Smith; and docilely accepted poetry from the piping of the *Minstrel*. All this shows a remarkable contrast in literary activity between north and south of the Tweed.

Few men added more vivacity and freshness to the literary band than Adam Ferguson. He was the only one who was not a Lowlander; and coming from Perthshire, with Gaelic accents on his lips, with Highland blood in his veins, and extremely Celtic temper in his spirit, he brought a refreshingly new, but by no means disturbing, element into the society of Edinburgh.

He was born in the little Manse of Logierait in 1723. His father was an estimable clergyman, who had been brought up in the strictest sect of the evangelicals. This we gather from the simple reminiscences in which the old minister relates how, on one occasion, the regent at the university of St. Andrews, where he boarded, ordered him on the Sabbath to go to the kitchen to dry some tobacco and grind it into snuff; at which the pious student had been grievously offended, for he had seen his father frequently refuse to take a “sneeze” from a person who, he suspected, had prepared it on the Lord’s Day. [*Edin. Review*, 1867. It was the custom in pious households to have children baptized as soon as possible. Adam Ferguson and two of his brothers were baptized the day after their birth - the rest of the family a few days after (*Records of Clan Ferguson*, p. 123; see also *Memoirs of Thomas Boston*).] To the same college his son Adam was sent at the age of sixteen, and thence passed to Edinburgh to complete his studies for the church. When he had completed two out of six portentous years of divinity lectures, required then from all preparing for the ministry, he was, by favour of the General Assembly, licensed, in order to accept the post of Deputy Chaplain of the Black Watch. There were special reasons why he should seek such an appointment. The Duke of Atholl was his father’s patron, and his Grace’s son, Lord John Murray, was colonel of the regiment - a youth of twenty-three - over whose conduct it was

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thought an advantage that a watchful, though youthful, ministerial eye should be kept. No one was better fitted for the delicate task than the young Highland chaplain, whose knowledge of Gaelic also enabled him to preach and minister to the Highland soldiers. The story is told, to show his impetuous nature, that on the luckless field of Fontenoy he was seen in the front of his regiment, broadsword in hand, and when the commanding officer bade him remember that his commission did not warrant his taking such a position, "Damn my commission!" was his reply, and he flung that document at his head. [Scott's *Works*, xix. 313.] A good story; but was it usual for chaplains to carry their commissions about their persons, ready to fling as missiles at their superior officers, with appropriate but unclerical expletives? More credible and more creditable is the account that, in answer to a remonstrance at his being in the front of his regiment, he replied that he was there not to fight, but to tend the wounded and the dying. [Stewart's *Sketches of Highlands*, ii, Appen. iii.] In truth, he was the idol of his men, from his courage and his tenderness; while the dignity of his bearing rendered him able to restrain the conduct and the speech of both officers and men by a word or a look. His military career lasted for ten years, during which he was through the campaign in Flanders, and we have Uncle Toby's authority for saying that, formerly at any rate, "they swore terribly in Flanders." Disgusted at the Duke of Atholl refusing to give him a living - which the chaplain had confidently expected - he, with his pride on edge, gave up his clerical calling. From Groningen, in 1754, he wrote to his friend Adam Smith, bidding him no longer address him by any reverend title, for "I am a downright layman." At this time and place he was governor to a Mr. Gordon, who was studying law, and accompanied him to Leipzig University, where he passed the time conversing in "bad Latin and bad French," the only languages he could muster. From Leipzig he wrote pleasant gossip to his friend Adam Smith, with stories of foreign celebrities. How the nonogenarian Fontenelle, travelling with a lady who happened to drop her fan, put himself in motion to pick it up; but as she prevented him (for he is nearly a hundred years old), he said, "*Plût à Dieu que je n'avais que quatre-vingt ans.*" Another lady, coming into his neighbourhood, paid him a visit, and told him she expected to see him often for that reason. He replied, "That won't be my reason, it will be only my pretext." He then relates that "A lady tells me she saw Voltaire on his way from Berlin, and that he caressed one of her children, and said he would be fond of him even if he had been begotten by Maupertuis" - his special antipathy. [From unpublished letter to Adam Smith.]

In 1757 Ferguson settled in Edinburgh. His tall, handsome person, his air of high-breeding and easy grace, his vivacious talk, were a charm to his friends. They

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knew he was choleric and would fire up on the smallest provocation in an instant, for he was explosive at a very low flash-point. But then his heart was as warm as his temper. Having renounced his clerical profession, sometimes he would lend an old sermon to a friend, who astonished his hearers by a profound discourse on the “Superiority of personal over physical circumstances” or on “Moral perfections” to which they were quite unused. Merrily he entered into Edinburgh life - its clubs, its dinners, its talk, and its friendships. Most of that literary society consisted of clergymen, all about the same age, all liberal-minded, all good-humoured. They were not witty - no *bon mot* survives from their lips - but they were vivacious. They formed a fine brotherhood, and though they had their tiffs, and might fall out of friendship, they soon fell in again, and when one died they mourned as over a brother’s death. To use the words of Dr. Carlyle, one of the ablest of that company: “The whole circle of learned and ingenious men who had sprung up together at this time was remarkable for the unbroken union which prevailed in it. There were circumstances relating to the capital at this time which contributed much to this fraternal concord; such as the small size of the city, though containing a great population, and the social and hospitable manners which then prevailed. It was peculiar to the city and to the period that there could arrive from the country in the afternoon and be almost certain of assembling such men as David Hume, and Adam Smith, and Robertson, and John Home, and Adam Ferguson, and others, in a tavern at nine, which was the hour of supper in those days, and the chief time of convivial entertainment till about the year 1760. These circumstances conduced not a little to that harmony which then reigned among an order of men said proverbially to be irritable minds.” [From Dr. Carlyle’s MSS.] To this fraternity Ferguson brought humour, dignity, a graceful presence, and the manners of a man of the world. He was full of interest, like all the town, in Home’s *Douglas*, and, with Carlyle and Elibank, present at the meetings with Digges and Mrs. Sarah Ward at Thomson’s Tavern, partaking of historic “pork griskins” and punch in dubious company. While scandalised ministers were denouncing the iniquitous performance, he freshened the air with a breath of common-sense by a pamphlet, “The Morality of Stage Plays seriously considered.” He at least could speak with perfect freedom: the Church could not cast him out, as he had already cast it off. While Ferguson made some money by acting as tutor to the sons of Lord Bute, and from the post of librarian at the Advocates’ Library, in which he succeeded Hume, he aimed at a professor’s chair. There was a talk of his buying out the professor of Civil Law; for as no professor could then afford to retire, he usually bargained that a round sum of some

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£800 should be paid down by any one who wanted his place, who was obliged to borrow the money and hamper himself with debt, or to give up the salary and live only on the meagre fees. [Burton's *Hume*, ii. 47.] In those days the point which was considered was not how to get a chair which a man was qualified to teach, but how to secure any chair - Greek or natural philosophy or logic - whose subject he might afterwards learn. It so happened that the chair of Natural Philosophy now fell vacant, and to this post the ex-chaplain was appointed by the town council, "after consultation with the ministers of the city." What did it matter to Mr. Ferguson that he knew nothing about science, and had never opened a book upon it since he had worked at Euclid and hydrostatics in St. Salvator's College when a boy? The appointment was made in July, and the classes began in October, so at once he began working up mechanics, optics, astronomy, and Newton's *Principia* learning in haste what he had to teach at leisure. The result was admirable. Students never had had so lucid a teacher, so patient a master. He never was too profound for them; in truth, he managed always to be a few days ahead of them in knowledge. "You are a greater genius than any of us," [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 283.] bantered David Hume, "seeing that you have learned such a science in three months." At which Adam gave a pleasant smile. It must be owned that what he gave was quite worth what he got.

The active minds in the town were keen over the Select Society which was being formed in 1754, for philosophical inquiry and improvement in the art of speaking. The moving spirit was Mr. Allan Ramsay, the poet's son. Besides being an admirable and popular portrait-painter, he was a man of fashion, living in the best society, which did not think less of him for coming from a wig-maker's family. He was also an admirable classical scholar, and the professor of Humanity would have hesitated to contend in learning with the lively, petulant artist with the pugnacious nose and erudite tongue. The Society, which met in the Advocates' Library, consisted at first of only fifteen members, but it became so fashionable that in a few years it numbered 300, including all the literati, many nobility, gentry, lawyers, clergy, and physicians, who met every Friday evening. Trade, politics, social economy, historic questions were debated; such as "Should Bounties on Corn be allowed?" "Should the Repentance Stool be removed?" "Was Paper Credit a Benefit to the Country?" "Was Brutus right in killing Cæsar?" Robertson, Kames, Lord Alesbury, Sir Gilbert Elliot, and Wedderburn were frequent speakers. Lord Elibank, William Wilkie, and Lord Monboddo added liveliness by their whims, their cleverness, and their humour. David Hume and Adam Smith gave only their silent presence. [D. Stewart's *Works*, x. 204; Tytler's *Life of Kames*, vol. ii. Appen.] In course of time

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the Society took up the encouragement of trade and agriculture and art in Scotland with excellent results; but as years wore on the ardour fell off, and it was transformed finally into a society for improvement in the English tongue, and died away.

A more convivial Society was formed, in which Ferguson took a leading part. Scotsmen were indignant at the neglect of their interests by the English Government, and were irate at the Militia Act, which excluded Scotland from the power of raising a military force, because it was deemed unfit to be trusted with arms after the '45. Accordingly, a society of aggrieved Scotsmen was formed in 1762 - Hume, Elibank, Carlyle, Home, Kames, Sir William Pulteney were of the number. What should the name of the club be? it was asked. "Why not call it the 'Poker Club'?" said Ferguson, who is said to have been standing at the fire with the poker in his hand; for it was to stir up an inert country to a sense of its atrocious wrongs, and "to poke" the fire of patriotic zeal in demand for its defrauded rights. What they did after all we cannot tell, what impression they made on a callous ministry we cannot see; but they spent many happy nights, talked a great deal of brilliant nonsense, consumed a great deal of very cheap claret. They met at the Carrier's Inn, which was known as the Diversorium, near the Cross, where they had dinner at two o'clock, at one shilling a head, wine to be confined to sherry and claret, and the reckoning to be called at six o'clock. With gentle humour Alexander Crosbie was chosen *Assassin*, and to neutralise his severity placid David Hume was added as assessor. [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 420; Mackenzie's *Life of Home*, p. 27.] They were immensely delighted with a pamphlet squib by Ferguson in 1761, entitled "The Proceedings in the Case of Margaret, called Peg, Only Sister of John Bull." Of course they equalled it to the best work of Swift and Arbuthnot; yet it is not so brilliant that we require to read it with blue spectacles, which Gautier said were necessary when reading the dazzling pages of one of his friends.

Societies like the "Select" and the "Poker" brought men of intelligence together of all classes - nobles and gentry, ministers and lawyers - and fostered a friendliness of intercourse which was peculiar to those days. ["The club they instituted in 1762, called the Militia or the Poker Club, not only included the literati, but many noblemen and gentlemen of fortune, and the liberal professions, who mixed together with all the freedom of convivial meetings once a week during six months in the year, which contributed much to strengthen the bond of union among them. Although the great object of these meetings was national, of which they never lost sight, they had also happy effects on private character by forming and polishing the manners which are suitable to civilised society, for they banished pedantry from the conversation of scholars, and exalted the ideas and enlarged the views of the gentry, and created in the several orders a new interest in each other which had not taken place before in the country" (from Dr. Carlyle's MSS.)] The Poker, after continuing many years, died at last. It is told how, after the

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famous Club had expired, some of the members, when stricken in years, tried to revive it. They met in the familiar tavern, in the same dingy old room; they sat looking at each other with sunken eyes, and wrinkled faces, as they munched the old-fashioned dishes, with reminiscent talk of departed days and dead friends. These aged gentlemen, who had lost their teeth and kept their friendships, never met again as a Poker Club. [Scott's *Works* - "Periodical Criticism," xix.] It was a melancholy resurrection for a night.

Ferguson remained at his task of teaching a science of which he knew little to pupils who fortunately knew less, till seven years later a vacancy occurred in the chair of Moral Philosophy. He secured this post, for which he was excellently fitted, and began a brilliant course in 1764. Students were attracted to Edinburgh to attend his lectures, always stimulating, often eloquent if not very original. Men of fashion and culture in the city sat down beside raw lads to hear him day by day. Now he could boast of an income from fees and salary of no less than three hundred a year, which was wealth beyond the dreams of the most avaricious professor. Still wider spread his reputation when his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* appeared in 1766 - a treatise on the laws affecting the origin and growth of society and government; on the effects of climate and physical conditions on commerce, polity, and thought; the evolution of the race from savagism to civilisation; the influence of political institutions on countries. It is a study in sociology following very closely on the lines of Montesquieu. From London, Hume, though he did not think much of it, sent news about its warm reception: how highly Shelburne and Townshend thought of it; how Lord Bute had read it eight times over; how Lord Mansfield had said "it was extremely well wrote" - we are sure his lordship said "written"; while the Archbishop of York asserted "it surpassed Montesquieu, and had not a Scots idiom in the whole book. [Burton's *Hume*, ii. 386.] All this was very pleasant, though very extravagant praise of a superficial book, and the news was heard at every supper-table, where friends rejoiced at their friend's success, and gloried at fresh lustre being thrown on their country.

A greater triumph came when in 1772 Ferguson's now quite forgotten *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* appeared, and made his name known far and wide, being translated into several European languages, and used as a text-book in the Empress Catherine's Universities in Russia.

It was, as we have seen, usual for professors to enlarge their income by taking boarders into their families: Blair had the sons of the Duke of Northumberland and other noble youths packed in his abode in Riddell's Court;

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Robertson had a son of Lord Warwick's in his salubrious house in the Cowgate; and Ferguson had two younger members of the same family. [*Caldwell Papers*, ii.] As tutor he had a huge divinity student standing six feet three on his stocking soles - the warm-hearted, genial son of the minister of Sleat, who was to prove by acts of generosity the loved and lovable friend of his master, when he rose to rank and power as Sir John Macpherson, Governor-General of Bengal. One day there was a curious scene. Dr. Percy, afterwards Bishop of Dromore, of *Reliques* fame, was in Edinburgh in 1765, and after having one Sunday evening visited Dr. Blair, from whom he had in the forenoon heard a most eloquent sermon, he set forth with his young charge Lord Algernon Percy to take tea with Mr. Ferguson. They discussed the merits of Ossian, in which Ferguson had taken much interest and given some faith. Dr. Percy afterwards stated, and with much irritation at being hoaxed, that the professor called on the student to recite ballads from the so-called epic in Gaelic in proof of its genuineness. "Being Sunday," the Bishop relates, "Mr. Ferguson could not decently sing the tune, which I had a great curiosity to hear, and as I was obliged to leave him again, he, as we were going away, took me aside, and in a low voice hummed a few notes to me as a specimen of the old Highland tune." [*Small's Life of Ferguson*, p. 37; *Nichol's Illust. of Lit. Hist.* vi. 567.] Now it is curious to learn that this story Ferguson denied point-blank; yet we would rather trust the veracity of the Bishop than the memory of the Professor. The amusing thing in the scene is the felt impropriety of a secular tune coming from the lips on the Lord's Day, and the furtive "humming" of it "in a low voice" by the Scotsman in an aside as he shows his visitor out. Evidently a sin that was "hummed" was less heinous than a sin that was sung.

A break occurred in the professorial life by a new occupation. The free-and-easy way in which Scots professors deserted their chairs without leave of absence when they liked, and for as long as they liked, is a peculiar characteristic of those old days. When Sir John Pringle was appointed to act as army surgeon in Flanders, he calmly left his chair of Moral Philosophy for years, and put a cheap young man to teach in his place. The smallness of their incomes made professors ready to snatch at temporary and more lucrative employment, and become tutors to young gentlemen. There now came a tempting proposal to Ferguson that he should travel as companion to young Lord Chesterfield, and he bargained shrewdly that he should have a salary of £400 a year, and a pension afterwards of £200. Now his lordship was not a man after Ferguson's own heart; unlike his polite godfather, "he had as little good breeding as any man I ever met with," records Madame D'Arblay. Some

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years before he had had as tutor the famous Dr. Dodd; and when that unctuous divine, after his audacious attempt to bribe the Lord Chancellor Apsley's wife to gain a living (for which Foote gibbeted her on the stage as "Mrs. Simony"), prudently sought seclusion abroad, Lord Chesterfield received him with open arms and presented his tutor and bottle companion to a comfortable living. A few years later, however (in 1777), Dr. Dodd forged his patron's bond for over £4000, and though he might probably have saved from death his old friend (who had paid back the money), he left him to swing on Tyburn tree. His lordship was long known afterwards as the "man who hung a parson." [Fitzgerald's *A Famous Forgery*; D'Arblay's *Diary*, v. 92.]

With this not too distinguished nobleman Ferguson set forth in 1778; saw the world, its gay towns, its brilliant society, its great men - not, of course, excepting Voltaire - and found his fame had gone before him to Paris, at whose salons he was welcome. When he came back he found that the town council, in their wrath; had passed a strong resolution against "professors strolling through the country as governors," and were unwilling to let him resume his post. However, he did return to his class, and even quitted it again a few years later, when in 1778 he was appointed secretary to the commission sent to Philadelphia to negotiate peace with the rebel States - an errand which proved utterly futile, and rather ignominious. Dugald Stewart undertook during his absence to lecture for him on ethics at three days' notice, as well as to carry on his own class of mathematics. It is not surprising that at the end of the session the exhausted young man required to be lifted into a carriage. [Stewart's *Works*, x. (Life by Veitch).]

It was after his return, when busy with his Roman History, that Ferguson was struck with paralysis, said to have been occasioned by free living. By the grace of a good constitution and the aid of his friend, Dr. Joseph Black, he recovered, and for thirty-six years enjoyed unbroken health, But no more "free living"; no more alluring dishes, such as "crabbie claw" and "friar's chicken"; no longer enlivening magnums of claret and bowls of punch. Henceforth he was condemned to feed on such messes as milk and vegetables. Often on such painfully wholesome fare would he sup with his abstemious crony Dr. Black, whose niece he had married; and his son, Sir Adam, used to say it was delightful to see the two philosophers "rioting over a boiled turnip." [Cockburn's *Memorials*, p. 50.]

In 1783 the *History of the Roman Republic* appeared, and earned for the author well-merited fame. To say that this History was the best which had yet appeared in England on the subject is to say very little, for who except Nathaniel

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Hooke had written respectably upon it, yet this work, too, had in time to join the long, pathetic procession of Roman Histories on their way of oblivion - histories great in their day, which successors always fatally supersede. "It was Ferguson's former experiences," says Dr. Carlyle, "which turned his mind to the study of War in his History, where many of the battles are better described than by any historian but Polybius, who was an eye-witness of so many." [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 283. Ferguson, whose admiration for the Roman people was great, as a disciple of Montesquieu marks the effects of political institutions on the national character, and the steps by which a republican government gave way to a despotism.] Carlyle was always under the belief that his friend's works were not sufficiently appreciated.

Two years later Ferguson retired from the chair of Moral Philosophy, for he found "its duties pressed upon his health and spirits"; and now Dugald Stewart, giving up his uncongenial mathematics, took the chair which his friend resigned, and soon became the most distinguished expositor of Scottish philosophy. Strange academic manœuvres were common in those days, and indeed necessary in times when, there being no retiring pensions, old men must either retire and starve or linger on in senile incapacity till their death. By an ingenious device, Ferguson was transferred to the vacant chair of Mathematics, of which he got the salary, while young John Playfair, as his colleague, did all the work and only drew the students' fees. It must have required all the geniality of that amiable natural philosopher to see this literary patriarch with irritating vitality retaining the salary of a chair which he did not teach for thirty long years.

Dr. Ferguson, at least, had no reason to complain. He had abundant leisure to enjoy society, and to pursue his favourite studies. It is true, his temper was keen, his spirit was peppery, and his blood was hot; and in one of these moods there arose a quarrel with his old friend Adam Smith - the only serious estrangement that severed any of those brothers of the pen. Years after, however, when tidings reached him that his former friend was dying, forgetting all old sores, he took his sedan-chair and went to visit the companion of bright days, and sat by the sick-bed - the two as peaceful, as companionable as if they had never passed each other by in the High Street. [Rae's *Life of A. Smith*, p. 433.] Now Ferguson lived without a burden to bear or an old lecture to repeat. In the social life of the town he had only one cause for chagrin: his diet could no more be the succulent dishes that loaded the boards and highly flavoured the dining-rooms. For him there was now only Spartan fare of "mashed turnips" and cauliflower, while he watched his friends, with appetites provokingly vigorous, enjoying the fragrant fare of his youth, and quaffing

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gloriously the genial claret and emptying the “tappit hen,” while he sipped his cold milk. The choleric professor taught a fine stoicism in his books, but he found it terribly hard to practise in his daily life. Woe to that member of the household who ventured into his study, which he usually kept locked, and who dared to remove the dust and rubbish which had for months accumulated on the books and papers. His temper was in a state of incandescence for days.

He was a septuagenarian when he set about the retrospect of his past teaching on moral philosophy, which appeared in 1792 under the title of *Principles of Moral and Political Science*. The philosopher contributes one more infallible theory on moral judgment to the many that the age was propounding. Man is said to acquire his notions of duty from his conception of perfection - the ideal which he forms in his mind of what is highest and best. A buoyant optimism pervades Ferguson’s teaching: in the keen love of political as well as religious and social liberty, which made him expect much from the French Revolution, till its excesses blighted the hopes of enthusiasts. His philosophical works - able in argument and elegant in style - are now completely forgotten, and as Johnson has said, “There is no need to criticise what nobody reads.”

At the age of seventy-two [Small’s *Life of Ferguson*; Carlyle’s *Autobiography*, p. 57.] he set out for Germany and Italy, attended by his servant-man, James, to inspect the famous historic scenes; for he was preparing a new edition of his History. The old man rode along the banks of the Adige, visited Verona, viewed old battlefields with the eye of an amateur master of strategy. He was glad, however, to get back once more to his house at Sciennes (called “Sheens”), within a mile of Edinburgh Town - which was known by friends, from its remoteness and the chilly, fur-clad frame of its fiery occupant, by the name of “Kamtschatka.” There he could regulate his temperature by Fahrenheit, putting the family into commotion if he found he was a degree too hot or too cold. His house was the resort of the brightest and the merriest companies at tea or supper.

It was at one of these brilliant gatherings that the boy Walter Scott saw Robert Burns. He was proud to be the only one able to tell the poet who was the author of the lines written below the picture of a soldier dead in the snow which moved him to tears. [Lockhart’s *Life of Scott*, i. 185.] Who in that company could have imagined that the fragile, shivering host would last for nearly thirty years longer, when most of that bright gathering were in their graves! What a vitality there was in that good old philosopher, in spite of the old shock of paralysis; in spite of milk and turnip diet; in spite of his fragile frame and his bloodless body, which shivered at every whiff

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of air beneath his furs! A man he was of “cheerful yesterdays and confident tomorrows.”

It is as a veteran of over seventy years, possessed of benignant face and choleric temper, that he is pictured in Cockburn’s vivid pen-portrait - with his hair silky and white, his animated light-blue eyes, his cheeks mottled with broken red, like autumnal apples, fresh and healthy; his thin lips - the under one with a touch of acidity in the curl; his face of sweet dignity. His frail frame was clad in garments, even to his hat, of Quaker grey. With single-breasted coat, long waistcoat with capacious pockets, fur greatcoat, worn out of doors and within his house, and half-boots lined with fur, he presented a curious, venerable appearance as he walked along the streets, with a tall staff held at arm’s length, his two coats, each held only by the upper button, displaying the whole of his handsome old form. “His gait and air were noble, his gestures slow, his look full of dignity and composed fire. He looked like a philosopher from Lapland.” “Truly,” as Lord Cockburn says, “a spectacle worth beholding”; and as he sits with folded hands and benign, thoughtful gaze, as if no earthly trouble could ever ruffle his irritable soul, he is worth looking at in Raeburn’s noble portrait.

We see the old gentleman leaving his Edinburgh home when over eighty years of age, settling for a while in the gaunt, grim, half-ruined fortalice house of Neidpath Castle at Peebles [Small’s *Life of Ferguson*, pp. 61, 62.] - a fitter haunt for owls and bats than for a frail philosopher. Charming it was, no doubt, when the bright sunshine glittered on the silvery Tweed, that runs beneath; but dreary in winter, when the light came feebly through the little iron-barred windows that pierced the walls six feet thick. After a hot quarrel between the fiery tenant and his cynical landlord, the disreputable “Old Q,” the old man removed to the more genial mansion of Hallyards in the Vale of Manor, which he described to one of his friends as having in view a most delightful kirkyard, retired and green, on the bank of a running water. “To me it gives the idea of silence and solitude away from the noise of folly.” And the old man pictures himself laid in Manor Kirkyard, with a tombstone bearing this inscription in Greek: “I have seen the works of God; it is now your turn. Do you behold and rejoice.” It was not there, however, that his thin body was to lie, or a Greek epitaph was to puzzle wayfaring posterity; for the old gentleman was full of vitality, looking after his turnip-fields with all the energy of a young farmer. It was when staying in 1797 with the philosopher and his son that Walter Scott first saw the Black Dwarf, whose name he was to make immortal. After the visitor entered, the creature locked the door of the hut, smiled with horrid

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grin, and seizing him by the wrist, weirdly asked: "Man, hae ye ony poo'er?" All magical power was earnestly disclaimed by the young advocate, who, pale and trembling, quitted the hut of Davie Ritchie. [Chambers's *Life of Sir W. Scott*, p. 35.]

Age made its presence felt at last in the old man, who feeling need of more companionship, for his soul was gregarious, and finding need of more comforts, for his body was frail - took up his residence in the then slumbrous city of St. Andrews. There he found cultivated company among the professors; peace in the grass-grown South Street; and quiet morning walks on the links, which were not the crowded turf of to-day, crawling with golfers and hurtling with balls. There in the city, where so often, as round the Cave of Spleen, "the dreaded east is all the wind that blows," his furs and wraps kept the acrid air at bay. At ninety-three there was still wondrous freshness in the venerable face, with the ribstone-pippin complexion, the mild blue eyes, the soft, humorous mouth, the silvery hair. There was the old mental alertness about everything that was new, and the aged philosopher listened eagerly when the divinity student who attended him read out to him the newspapers. He who was a young man when the Rebellion of '45 broke out, lived to read the bulletins of the battle of Waterloo. At last, in 1816, he died, his final words as he turned to his daughters by the bedside being the exclamation of bright assurance: "There *is* another world," [Edin. Review, Feb. 1868.] and in a few minutes he was gone to see it. One of the best of a brilliant company of literary comrades, he was the last to die. He had seen his old friends pass away one by one, in fame, honour, and old age. After having lived in the bright old days of Scottish literature, he survived to see with unjealous eyes another brilliant day dawn which should rival the past.

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It is not easy to understand at times the reputation borne by many men of the past, and the deference they met with, the flattery they incited, the ceaseless applause that attended their course. We read their books and we are not impressed; we turn to their finest passages and we see no beauty; we extract their best thoughts and they seem woefully commonplace. There are fashions in literature, as there are in art, costume, and furniture, but a bygone literary fashion rarely returns. "Queen Anne patterns" may again come into vogue, Chippendale chairs may be recovered from the dusty garrets to adorn rooms and to torture backs, but a Johnson's *Rambler*, a Beattie's *Minstrel*, and Blair's *Sermons* come back to our book-shelves

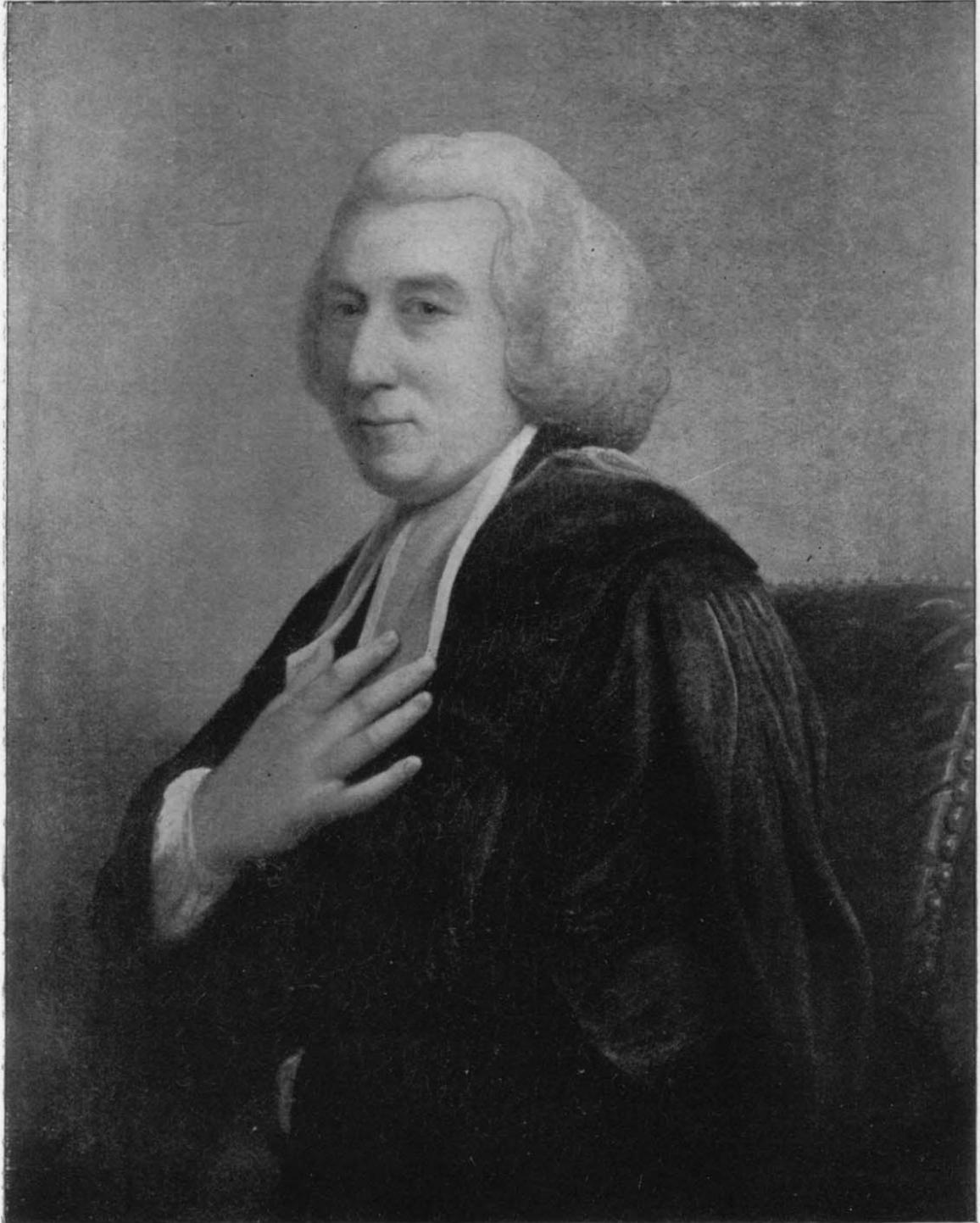
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no more. The authors themselves, however, have an interest for us. We are curious as to what manner of men these were who were so celebrated in their day, when their names were on every lip, and their books were in every hand.

In Edinburgh none was more famous in the latter half of the eighteenth century than Dr. Hugh Blair. His dingy church was attended by the most fashionable when he preached; his little, dark class-room at college was full of the most cultured when he lectured; every tea-table was silent when he spoke; every supper-party was deferential as he conversed. An uneventful life of unbroken health and prosperity was the fortune of the preacher-critic of Scotland. Born in 1718, the son of a merchant of good position and connected with clerical families of great note, Blair passed through the usual classes at the University with unusual distinction, and when he was in the Divinity Hall, with a cousin he wrote a poem on the "Resurrection," which, after being handed round in manuscript to admiring readers, at last, to the author's amazement, made its appearance in a handsome folio, dedicated to the Prince of Wales - a Dr. Douglas having claimed it as his own and bartered his conscience for a living, though when he was about it he might have done it for a better production. After being tutor to Simon Fraser, the son of Lord Lovat, Blair was licensed to preach, and soon won the good opinion of all moderates and the respect of all unemotional patrons by sermons distinguished for the qualities "correctness of design and chastity of composition," which were then immensely admired. Men of the world and of taste felt that the common duties of life preached by moderate clergy were quite enough for them, and that what evangelicals or "High-fliers" denounced as "filthy rags of self-righteousness" formed a very good costume for a Christian's daily wear. After a few months in the parish of Collessie in Fife, the popular minister was appointed to the Canongate parish, then the centre of all that was notable for rank and wealth and fashion, as it is now the centre of dirt and poverty and squalor. The hideous kirk, with its deep gallery and box pews, was thronged with ladies in their brocades and hoops and powdered hair, and with gentlemen in their satin coats and powdered wigs. Patrons wooed and congregations yearned for this preacher, so he passed on to Lady Yester's Church, endowed by a pious lady of evangelical propensity (which, it is to be feared, Mr. Blair would not have satisfied), and thence to the High Kirk in St. Giles', the summit of clerical ambition.

At that period St. Giles' Cathedral was deformed to its utmost capacity.

[Chambers's *Traditions of Edinburgh*, ii. 212; Peter's *Letters to his Kinsfolk*, ii. 9; Arnot's *History of Edinburgh*.] Attached to its walls outside were little wooden-fronted shops in niches of the



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From the Painting by David Martin in Edinburgh University.

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building, fixed like barnacles to a ship, occupied by jewellers, booksellers, glovers. Only one of these was two storeys high, and in that a goldsmith had his shop and dwelling, his large family living in the flat above, while a cellar beneath, lighted by an iron grating in the pavement of Parliament Square, served as nursery. This merchant was Mr. Ker, member for the city, who had married the daughter of the Marquis of Lothian. It was thus people dwelt in those simple, frugal days. The interior of the building was divided into four places of worship, each of which had its minister of different type and doctrine, and its congregation of different type and class. At the door of a Sabbath day rival throngs of worshippers would meet on their way to "sit under" their favourite pastor - evangelical or moderate. If they were "high-flying," they entered the door which led to the Tolbooth Kirk, where Dr. Alexander Webster entranced the "Tolbooth saints," as they were called, thrilling them by his fervid appeals, gratifying them by his Calvinistic doctrines, and edifying them by those unctuous prayers which he uttered as he stood with black-mitted hands fervently clasped. If they enjoyed a solid, sound, yet intellectual discourse, they went into the Little Kirk, otherwise called lugubriously "Haddo's Hole," where Dr. Wallace, the most accomplished of all the clergy, might be heard discoursing elegant morality with a wholesome blend of doctrine, quoting Gray's Elogy, just published, and comparing it with the finest specimens of classic poetry. But most of those pertaining to the fashionable world went in by the left door opening into the High Kirk, where Mr. Hugh Blair preached in the forenoon. They took care not to go at the "diet" when his colleague, Mr. Robert Walker, did duty; for that estimable man was as evangelical as his partner was moderate, one who preached Calvinism and denounced worldly dissipation, and indeed had boldly preached powerful discourses before the Magistrates and Lords of Session on the iniquity of patronising the stage, to which Mr. Blair was addicted. To his ministrations the poorer classes came, and the Church plate was then conspicuous for the number of halfpence; an observant elder remarking that it took twenty-four of Mr. Walker's hearers to equal in contribution one of Mr. Blair's. So it happened that on one part of the day there went the *élite* to worship, on the other there went the elect. When Mr. Blair was to conduct the service the church was full of all the great folks of Edinburgh flats, in their most brilliant attire. Lords of Session were there, who may have been drunk as lords the night before, but were as sober as judges when the ten o'clock bells were sounding; magistrates came gorgeous in their scarlet robes from the Exchange, preceded by the city guards bearing their halberds, eagerly watched by the crowd, on whom the display of civic splendour

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never palls. To please the taste of a throng so fashionable, [Kay's *Edinburgh Portraits*, i. 348.] a precentor had been brought from York Cathedral, and the psalmody lost its weary drawl, while varied tunes charmed the most fastidious Presbyterian ears. All listened with rapt attention as the great preacher read closely from the pulpit cushion his well-rounded, sonorous sentences, his indisputable truths of morality, expressed with elegance and taste. They soon forgot the pompous, inanimate manner, the irritating burr of the orator's voice. Judges and bailies, lords and writers would remark with great satisfaction as they walked home, "That was a truly admirable discourse we have had to-day." In their wynds and turnpike stairs, to which they returned, they never were accustomed to cleanliness; they did not, therefore, observe that St. Giles' was deplorably grimy, that there were cobwebs on the pillars, dust thick on unswept pews and passages, that the dingy windows had not been cleaned for ages. When Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1773 looked in - not on Sunday, for he would not attend a worship fit for Presbyterian dogs - St. Giles', as Boswell confesses, was "shamefully dirty." At the time the distinguished traveller said nothing; but when he came to the Royal Infirmary, and saw a board with the inscription, "Clean your feet," he turned slyly to his friend and said, "There is no occasion for putting this on the door of your churches." [Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (edit. Hill), v. 42.]

Year by year the reputation of the preacher was increased by his sermons, to each of which he devoted a whole week's labour. He had an art in composition which pleased men of taste, a common-sense which satisfied men of the world, a vein of mild sentiment which touched women of emotion. But he was also a man of literary judgment, a man well read in literature, which more and more was being considered in Scotland. The *Edinburgh Review*, even if it had not died six months after it was born, would have given little scope for his skill; but a chance occurred for his establishing a new reputation. Adam Smith, in the winter months of 1750-51, had given a course of lectures on Literature in a class-room at the College before his departure for Glasgow. These were successful, as were also those of his successor, Dr. Watson, who soon after left for a chair in St. Andrews, where he earned a reputation by a *History of Philip II.*, which had the distinction of being praised both by Dr. Johnson and Voltaire, and of being quoted by Charles Fox in the House of Commons. Dr. Blair now took their place and continued their work with enormous favour. Persons possessed of good memories and ill natures said that the minister, who had studied Adam Smith's manuscript lectures, had got all his best matter from his friend; but people will say anything, and this time they were wrong.

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[Rae's *Life of Adam Smith*, p. 32.] The small dingy room in the old buildings of the College was filled by the best society; the lawyers, the *literati* - to use the favourite term - and the ministers attended, and all the pronouncements of the critic were received with profound respect. So great was the success that the town council was moved to found in 1761 a chair of "Rhetoric and Belles Lettres," and Dr. Blair was appointed to the post, with a modest salary of £70. All this was a sign of the interest in "polite letters" in Scotland which had been increasing year by year. Of old it had shown itself in discussions in tavern clubs, and later in the effort of people of rank and fashion to discard Scots provincialism and acquire an English polish; in the cultivation of literary taste, which had sprung up all around, and was now bearing excellent fruit in the works of Hume and Robertson and Ferguson. So keen was the interest excited by the lectures on literature and rhetoric, that impecunious students wrote out their notes to sell them to booksellers, who exposed the manuscript reports for sale in their windows in Parliament Close. [Chambers's *Lives of Eminent Scotsmen*.]

Great was the excitement in Edinburgh when, in 1760, the little volume *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* appeared, with a preface by Dr. Blair, in which remains of a great poem of Ossian, "discovered and translated from the Erse" by the big Highland tutor James Macpherson, were brought before the world. It was believed to reveal a work by a Gaelic poet of the fourth century, in which Homer was rivalled, all modern epics excelled, and Scottish national genius nobly vindicated in the eyes of the English. The poetry was regarded by Blair - the pre-eminent judge - as undoubtedly genuine, as undoubtedly ancient work of rarest beauty, and to large audiences he delivered a course of lectures on the antiquity, the value, and the sublimity of the songs of the son of Fingal. The professor's name was spread far and wide by his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian*, in 1763, which were ingenious and acute, and as good as could possibly be written by a gentleman lecturing on a language he did not know, of a past he had not studied, of a poem on whose origin he was utterly mistaken. But in all his mistakes he erred with Hume, Ferguson, and Home, Kames and Monboddo; and the very fact that he maintained the authenticity and vast genius of a Caledonian Ossian only made him the more admired by a patriotic country.

He was accepted as the arbiter of taste. Poems and treatises were submitted for his judgment, and his opinion was considered infallible. Home brought to him his *Douglas*, Blacklock his poems, Hume his essays, and we know how in later years his verdict on Burns' poems was awaited with anxiety. He was the literary

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accoucheur of Scotland. At the same time patrons conferred with him on suitable moderate “presentees” for parishes, and town councils consulted him on candidates for professorial chairs. Is it surprising that the popular preacher, the respected critic, the deferred-to guide, had his constitutional vanity strengthened, and that all this homage made him more pompous and certain of his infallibility, especially as he was utterly devoid of any sense of humour?

It was pleasant to see the good Doctor in his unbending moods mingling with heartiness but dignified propriety with his friends, Carlyle and Home and Ferguson, in their genial suppers. He could make himself agreeable to Mrs. Sarah Ward, the handsome actress, over whose beauty all the Edinburgh bucks were raving, and be the intimate friend of David Hume, over whose infidelity all the religious world was moaning. We find him at the many gatherings of people of society and letters, with suave manners and imperturbable courtesy, yet without one touch of wit or one grain of humour. Quite impervious to the keen jests that passed, and the jokes that flew about, making the table roar, he would sit blandly, vaguely smiling at their mysterious hilarity. [Carlyle’s *Autobiography*, p. 114; Mackenzie’s *Life of Home*.] But all respectfully listened as he passed his opinions with shrewdness and weight on less frivolous matters. Many of the moderate ministers had come out of rigid or evangelical homes, to which the austerity of gloomier days still clung. They had learned no pastime, indulged in no worldly entertainment. To play at golf or bowls was a doubtful practice; to play at cards or to dance was a forbidden act. Even the most liberal clergy could not easily throw off traditional shackles, and would only play hazard with doors carefully locked - whereat the laity did not fail to taunt them. Carlyle of Inveresk had cast off these restraints and excelled in dancing, a performance which his worthy father shrank from; and he pressed his friends, Blair and Robertson, the most sedate of that set of men, to learn whist to while dull weather and long nights away. They at last yielded, and began laboriously to learn whist with twinges of conscience and with very poor results, [Carlyle’s *Autobiography*, p. 298.] Robertson succeeding in playing decently, and Blair miserably. Still it was a significant symptom of transition from the past, that these middle-aged divines should play, even with incessant revokes, the cards which their fathers had denounced as Devil’s devices. [In “A Comparison between Robertson and Blair,” Carlyle remarks: “Robertson was bred in the strictness of an ecclesiastical family at that period, - the members of which were not only denied the amusements of the theatre, but likewise of the dancing-school, and prohibited to play at cards or almost any domestic pastime, which favoured his recluse and studious bent when at college. But this induced a personal awkwardness that could never be shaken off. Blair was bred with less austerity, but not being of an opulent house more than the other, he was equally unacquainted with those country sports and amusements which not only strengthen the body but give grace and ease to its motions.” : from the Carlyle MSS.)]

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One of Dr. Blair's hearers in the High Kirk was Lord Kames [Tytler's *Life of Lord Kames*, i. 198.]; and he was so struck by the literary merit of his friend's sermons that he urged him to publish them, feeling sure that they would bring him fame. The judge was not the man one would fix upon as most likely to admire pulpit oratory in any form, but with all his coarseness he was a man of letters, and his opinion was worth much. The result was that the manuscripts were despatched by mail-coach to Mr. William Strahan, the eminent printer, a shrewd critic and a Scotsman, who would naturally be disposed to think well of his countryman's productions. Yet he gave no encouragement, and Blair's hopes seemed shattered. Fortunately, however, the cautious printer, who evidently thought well of the sermons, though sermons were a "drug in the market," showed the manuscripts to his friend Dr. Johnson, and on Christmas Eve a note reached him by the hands of Francis Barber, the black servant, saying: "I have read Dr. Blair's first sermon with more than approbation, to say it is good is to say too little." Such authority dispelled all doubts. The preacher was offered, to his modest surprise, 100 guineas for a volume of the sermons, and Cadell published it in 1777. [On the success of the first volume Strahan gave another £100, paid £300 for the second volume, and for the third and fourth volumes £600 each. In those days there was a partnership between printers and booksellers who acted as publishers.] All the world knows of its success - how the sermons made the Presbyterian minister famous; how Episcopal dignitaries admired them and Episcopal clergy preached them; how ladies in their boudoirs settled down to them; how men not addicted to church-going perused with satisfaction these elegant discourses on "ensoriousness," "gentleness," and "dissipation." Lord Mansfield, the "silver-tongued Murray," read them with his fine elocution to King George and his consort in the Royal closet, and His Majesty expressed his wish that every youth in the kingdom might possess a copy of the Bible and of Blair. They were the favourite discourses to read aloud in family circles on Sunday night in mansions and castles; they were translated into most languages in Europe; and, finally, they procured a pension of £300 a year for the author. Success attended each volume as it came from the press. There was a pomp and sententiousness in them kindred to Johnson's own *Rambler* and the great literary autocrat never lost his admiration for the sermons whose merits he was first in England to recognise. "I love Blair's sermons, though the dog is a Scotsman and a Presbyterian and everything he should not be. I was the first to praise them," he would say. When Dr. Blair made occasional visits to London, he was received with honour in literary circles, and would sit blandly listening to Dr. Johnson's boisterous assertions, careful not to provoke an assault. He saw the best of society,

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too, in the houses of Scots peers and members of Parliament, and in the company of Anglican dignitaries, who greeted respectfully the well-dressed, dapper, carefully-wigged Presbyterian divine. He condescended even to go to the theatre with that fascinating feather-head, James Boswell; but it must have been an agony to his dignified soul to hear that irrepressible young man beguiling the time between the acts by imitating the lowing of a cow, and, as Bozzy boasted, “entertaining the audience prodigiously, “amid unbounded applause of the groundlings in the pit and the footmen in the gallery. Cries of “Encore the cow,” “Encore the cow,” stimulated the youth next to imitate the cackling of hens, the crowing of cocks, the braying of asses - efforts which met with imperfect success. Whereupon “my reverend friend, anxious for my fame,” relates the unabashed Boswell, “with an air of the utmost gravity and earnestness addressed me thus: ‘My dear sir, I would confine myself to the cow.’” [*Life of Johnson* (ed. Hill), v. 296. The words “Stick to the coo,” which are ascribed to the divine by Scott, are not at all in Dr. Blair’s manner.]

The world went well with Dr. Hugh Blair, and his position as a critic was improved by the publication in 1783 of his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, which made him the literary pope of Scotland. We can well imagine how he received Robert Burns on his visit in 1787 - the dignity, the courteous condescension of his manner toward the remarkable ploughman; how at his table he would give the soundest advice to the “estimable young man,” how paternally he would show him how to devote his “really excellent talents,” and recommend improvement in his style. Burns had approached the great man with modesty and trepidation - for his reputation had made him a being to bow before - but in his presence the poet took the measure - and it was not a large one - of the critic. Sitting in his dingy garret in Baxter’s Wynd at night, he wrote down his impressions of the professor. “Truly,” recorded the poet, “a worthy and most respectable character. Natural parts like his are frequently to be met with; his vanity is proverbially known among his acquaintances; but he is justly at the head of what might be called fine writing, and might be called in the first rank in prose, even in poetry a bard of Nature’s making can only take the *pas* of him.” This is all very well, but he goes on to show that he himself had vanity as well as his patron. “My heart overflows with liking when the good man descends from his pinnacle and meets me on equal ground in conversation. When he neglects me for the mere carcase of greatness, and when his eye measures the difference of elevation, I say to myself, with scarcely any emotion, ‘What care I for him or his pomp either?’” One sees it all - the farmer ignored when his host converses with my lord; the poet wincing while the Doctor

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ceases to address him, and turns away to talk with frisky grace or deference to a more important guest across the table. [Chambers's *Life and Works of Burns*, 1851, ii. 61, 68.]

Vain the worthy man undoubtedly was. Friends would tell how an omitted deference would make him wince, and an imagined slight would cost him sleep. It was at his table Robert Burns blunderingly mentioned that one of the places at which he had found most gratification was the High Church, and in listening to the preaching of - Dr. Greenfield. An awkward stillness fell over the company at the gauche remark of the rustic poet, for well they knew their host's weak point, though the Doctor tried to pass it off by courteously agreeing with his malaprop guest. Long afterwards Burns thought of that awkward moment, and the pained look that came over the face of his reverend friend, who was proud above all things of being the preacher of the age. One day at dinner at Dr. Blair's an English clergyman was asked by one of the company what was thought of their host's sermons by his professional brethren in the south. "Why," he replied, "they are not partial to them at all." A cloud passed over the divine's face, and dismay over the disconcerted inquirer, who faltered out, "Why?" "Why," answered the clergyman, "because they are so much read, so generally known, that none dare borrow from them." Thereupon the company breathed once more, and Blair's countenance beamed with pleasure. He dearly enjoyed all praise of his sermons, was so delighted to hear that Lady This or Lady That had read them three times over. "He bore the trowel with fortitude and resignation," said Sir Gilbert Elliot, who often witnessed the operation.

Friends laughed over his foibles: his relish for flattery, his angling for compliments, his purring over homage, his puerile curiosity over small things, his equal excitement over a new wig and an epic. [Kay's *Edinburgh Portraits*, i. 83; Carlyle's *Autobiography*, 295; *Life of Sir Gilbert Elliot*, i. 84.] Gossip would tell of his anxiety about the perfection of his garments: how the old gentleman would make the tailor place a mirror on the floor, and, standing on tiptoe, would peer over his shoulder to see how his skirts were hanging. But while they laughed at him, with his "infantine disposition," his friends liked him not the less, as a generous, unobtrusive, amiable man without a touch of malignity; an author without jealousy, a critic without an enemy. Where else could such be found? Characteristically he asked the painter to make his portrait have a "pleasing smile."

Dr. Carlyle speaks of him when seventy-eight as "frisking more about the world than ever he did in his younger days, no symptoms of frailty about him, preaching every Sunday with increasing applause, and though he is huffed at not

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being offered the Principality (on Robertson's retirement), he is happy at being resorted to as head of the University." In fact, he was "irritated far beyond the usual pitch of his temper" at being passed over. Owing to his diffidence, which hindered him in public speaking, he declined to be Moderator of the General Assembly.

With precise and formal air the divine would sally forth, as St. Giles' bells began to chime, each Sunday morning on his way to church from Argyll Square; [Chambers's *Traditions of Edinburgh*, ii. 96; Kay's *Edinburgh Portraits*, i. 122.] his neat cocked hat poised with fine exactitude, his frizzled, powdered wig curled to a nicety, his pulpit gown flowing gracefully behind, his bands fluttering neatly in front - the whole presence ceremonious, blandly self-conscious, as he wafted in his well-known burr "good mornings" right and left to acquaintances in the street. At the age of eighty he preached vigorously a sermon on "A Life of Pleasure and Dissipation," which appeared in a posthumous volume of discourses. Thus the old man lived on, diverting himself with reading *Don Quixote* and the blood-curdling romances of Mrs. Radcliffe. One by one his old friends dropped off, and he would say with a sigh that "he was left the last of all his contemporaries." Yet when he died in December 1800 there still survived John Home, with a mind that had lost its vigour, but with the old kindly smile and unruffled good-nature; Adam Ferguson, with the warm heart and choleric temper of olden days; and Dr. Carlyle, busy corresponding with great dames and politicians, composing verses (though "no more a poet than his precentor," said Scott), and writing his delightful memoirs of his times. [Among Dr. Carlyle of Inveresk's papers there is an interesting "Comparison of Principal Robertson and Dr. Blair." "It is observable that neither of them had wit, and Robertson only a relish for humour, of which he had a small portion, while his rival Blair had none, nor even a taste for it. In colloquial intercourse there is no doubt Robertson far surpassed Blair, with this difference, however, that the conversation of the last was in general most acceptable to his friends and that of the first to strangers. Blair had no desire to shine in company, and his conversation was simple and plain even to puerility. But when the subject called his knowledge and judgment into exertion nothing could excel his clearness and decision. Robertson's constant desire to shine seemed his ruling passion, insomuch that even when he had strangers of eminence to show off to his friends convened for the purpose, he could hardly bear them with patience. Blair, on the contrary, when he had distinguished persons to exhibit to his guests, gave himself up entirely to that duty, and was never happier than when in so doing he gratified his friends. Blair's vanity was satisfied with the admiration of the ladies and other persons of taste of his appearances in the pulpit. But Robertson's appetite for praise was truly insatiable, for in the pulpit or the General Assembly, at table or in the drawing-room, he swallowed large draughts of it from high or low, learned or unlearned, from wise or foolish."]

## PROFESSOR WILLIAM WILKIE

The world has long forgotten William Wilkie, "The Scottish Homer," who in his day was regarded, as almost the greatest of that brilliant band of Scotsmen - a

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startling contrast in appearance and character to the punctilious and precise Dr. Blair. It is strange to notice about the middle of the century the unanimous chorus of admiration of this now unknown man. Hume, Carlyle, Mackenzie, Sir Robert Liston, who became ambassador at Vienna, all speak of his marvellous ability. In the intercourse of young men who afterwards became famous he was all-powerful. Yet a figure so uncouth - in dress deplorably shabby and dirty, with hair unkempt, manners preposterous, and gestures grotesque - never before was seen in society. Born in 1721, Wilkie was the son of a poor farmer in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh, the descendant of an ancient Midlothian family. [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 394; Burton's *Life of Hume*, ii. 40; Southey's *Life of Dr. Bell*, i. 29. "Of Wilkie all the party spoke as superior in original genius to any man of his time" (Mackenzie's *Life of Home*, p. 15).] The death of his father, almost in destitution, obliged him to support his mother and sister when he was but a boy. By break of day his dirty, ragged little person was seen following the plough with its team of oxen, or sowing the seed on the furrows from the canvas-bag; and then, after a hasty dish of porridge, he would trudge for miles along the road from Farmers' Tryste to the eight o'clock class at college. At nights, by the glimmering light of a hardly-bought candle, the lad would pore over his classics, philosophy, and mathematics. At the University none was more loved for goodness of heart, none more admired for ability, none more laughed at for eccentricity.

When licensed to preach, to this strange clownish creature preferment did not readily come, and for ten years he had to continue his rustic life - wretchedly poor, ill-fed, and ill-clad. Sometimes he preached for neighbouring ministers and got a trifling fee; but it was by his little farm he lived, and on it he worked, changing energetically the nettle-covered rigs and marshy ground to fertile soil with fruitful harvests. One day Dr. Roebuck, the founder of the Carron iron-works, then travelling in Scotland, passed along the road, near the field where the scholar was sowing corn with a sheet before him, all covered with dirt, clad in ragged coat and breeches, and a dilapidated bonnet. To trick the Englishman, the friend with whom he was riding, who knew Wilkie, cried out, "Here is a peasant; let us call him." They conversed; the talk passed on from manure and turnips to Greek literature. To an observation about husbandry the seeming peasant, in broadest Scots, remarked: "Yes, sir, but in Sicily there is a different method," and he quoted Theocritus to confirm his statement. As he rode off with his friend, Roebuck asked with amazement, "Is it usual for your peasants to read the Greek poets?" "Oh yes," his companion replied; "we have long winter evenings, and how can they better employ themselves than in reading Greek poets?" The doctor went on his way, astonished that the

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poorest herds in Scotland devoted their nights to Euripides and Homer.

In those days the dove-cots of the lairds were nurseries for thousands of marauders that fed on the sparse crops of the farmers; and poor Wilkie wasted his time in chasing off the crowds of pigeons that devastated his fields. As he set off to his rigs in the morning he had an old gun over his shoulder to frighten the “doos,” and paper bulging his pocket whereon to indite his verses, for he was busy composing no less than an epic. As he sat down to pen lines on Agamemnon, the fowls of the air would settle at his expense to their morning meal, which he himself had not had, and incessantly he would be forced to rise from his mood of Homeric inspiration and fire his futile musket - shots and rhymes alternating in disconcerting succession. [Burton's *Hume*, ii. 25.] Poetical though he was, with minute economy he would pick up dead cats and dogs, which were to be found near Edinburgh, and carefully inter them in his ground to enrich his soil. [Southey's *Life of Dr. A. Bell*, i. 11.]

At length Lord Lauderdale, admiring his abilities and overlooking his oddities, appointed him assistant and successor to the minister of Ratho, where he felt himself in opulence on £30 a year, especially as he remained still on his farm four miles off. Even when he became sole minister of the parish he farmed land with a success which astonished his neighbours, who found that the new enclosing, and draining, and manuring adopted by the minister gave good crops while their antiquated methods kept them in poverty. “Potato Wilkie,” as he was called from his culture of the then little known vegetable, interested his people perhaps more by his peculiarities than by his pulpit powers, for sometimes he would preach obliviously with his hat on, or omit to pronounce the blessing at the close of the service, and in dispensing the communion perhaps forget himself to communicate. Often he would set off for Edinburgh to meet his friends, Carlyle, Home, or Blair, at a tavern supper, or to debate at the Select Club. Overwhelming in argument, copious in learning, he feared not the best of them. “Shall I, who have kept company with Agamemnon, the king of men - shall I shrink from contest with a puny race?” [Clayden's *Early Life of Sam. Rogers*, p. 166.] he would say when praised for his courage in combating Dr. Robertson and Lord Elibank. When at table the company were talking, he kept silence; when all were silent something would tickle his humour, and he would burst into a wild torrent of wit and argument, “in which,” said Dr. Wallace, “none could cope with him.” Ungainly, erratic, and brilliant, when Charles Townshend met him at Inveresk Manse, he pronounced him a man who approached nearer the extremes of a god and a brute than any one he had ever met.

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From combats of wit Wilkie would return to classics, and his turnips, to mathematics and his fiddle, which he would play far into the night. ["I fancy there has seldom been so much wit, poetry, and philosophy blended together in the conversation of any individual." - *Travels* by Rev. James Hall {William Thomson}, 1801, i. 129.] His poems he read to an old woman, whose criticism he meekly accepted.

In 1757 there appeared the *Epigoniad, an Epic Poem in Nine Books*. "This poem," says the author, "is called the Epigoniad, because the heroes it celebrates have got the name of the Epigoni (or Descendants), being the sons of those who attempted the conquest of Thebes in a former expedition." Here, with simple-hearted audacity, he tries to imitate and to continue Homer in an account of the second siege of Thebes. Great expectations had been entertained of his work by his admiring friends, who believed that in him a new Homer would arise, one who would shed fresh lustre on Scotland. David Hume, of course, was the first to applaud. [Burton's *Hume*, ii. 29.] "I suppose," he wrote to his friends, "you have read and admired the wonderful production of the *Epigoniad*, and that you have so much love for art and for your native country as to be very industrious in propagating the fame of it." "It is a most singular production, full of sublimity and genius." [Burton's *Hume*, ii. 40.] And from the Lord Advocate Dundas and a hundred important lips similar praise came forth. London critics were severely just; though it was all "sheer jealousy" Edinburgh admirers protested. The *Critical Review* [*Critical Review*, June 1757.] was contemptuous, but Smollett, its editor, patriotically regretted that such a notice of his countryman's work had appeared by an oversight. The other leading magazine, the *Monthly Review*, [*Monthly Review*, July 1757; Gray's *Ode* was reviewed in same number.] was equally caustic in an article written by Oliver Goldsmith, who at that time was the drudge and slave of Ralph Griffiths, who kept his poor hack at work from morning till night in his back shop in return for bed and board, while Mrs. Griffiths, the learned harridan, tampered with the proofs and interpolated the manuscripts. By his laborious review Oliver had well earned his dinner that day. The anachronisms in this second Siege of Thebes, the wearily reiterated phrases, the bad rhymes, the dulness of the story were all brought against the author, whose nationality seemed flagrantly declared by his using the word "hing" for "hang." Any page affords a fair sample of the forgotten epic:

Now tow'ring in the midst Atrides stood  
And called his warriors to the fight aloud.  
As mariners with joy the sun descry  
Ascending in his course the eastern sky,

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Who all night long by angry tempests tossed,  
Shunned with incessant toil the faithless coast;  
So to his wishing friends Atrides came,  
Their danger such before, their joy the same.  
Again the rigour of the shock returns,  
The slaughter rages and the combat burns.

And so on - with a succession of Homeric speeches, fights, prophecies, and similes, which form a respectable, though dull, parody of the great original. Ignored in England, Scotland had a monopoly of enthusiasm for the Caledonian epic. His country and his friends exhausted Wilkie's first edition; eternity could not exhaust the second.

Promotion came to reward this most learned prodigy. In 1759 he was appointed Professor of Natural Philosophy in St. Andrews. The salary and fees, amounting to about £80, seemed to this poor man, who had starved during so much of his life, as opulence beyond the dreams of avarice; for "what," said he simply, "could a man want in life which was not to be bought with such a fortune?" In his class-room he was in his element. His ability was immense, his scientific attainments were great, his style of lecturing was attractive, in spite of strange fits of absence of mind, and the affection between him and his students was singularly deep. In his class he had as pupils Playfair and Leslie, who were in after years to add scientific reputation to their country. When the class hours were over, he would be seen slouching along the streets in shapeless clothing, bearing a hoe over his shoulder to weed his turnips and potatoes in fields which he had hired near the town. [Hall's *Travels*, i. 127-40.] Sometimes a thin, poverty-stricken lad attended him to his farm, with face of docile, admiring affection. This was his pupil, Robert Fergusson - the luckless poet of later years, who copied out his master's lectures for the class and his *Fables* for the press. [Grossart's *Robert Fergusson*, 1899, p. 56.]

Wilkie, undaunted by the failure of his first literary venture, published *Moral Fables in Verse* in 1769, with engravings by Samuel Wale. His fame was not enhanced. There is some ingenuity in the fables; but the airy gaiety and deftness of La Fontaine and Gay were far beyond this son of the soil.

What stories his pupils were wont to tell of their professor, to whom they were devoted - of his amazing disregard of decorum and the dignity of society! One sees him, when visiting dormitories of St. Leonard's College in his capacity of "hebdomader" (as the professor who inspected students' rooms for the week was termed), entering the chamber where young Lord Buchan and his volatile brother

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Henry Erskine lodged. There he tried to amuse Harry, who was ill, by giving a lesson in astronomy, and the earth's revolution on its axis he described by thrusting his leg between the bars of the chair and making gyrations which resulted in his illustrating the law of gravity instead, as his big form was projected under the bed, to the unspeakable delight of his appreciative audience. [Fergusson's *Henry Erskine*, p. 64.]

His early life of poverty and exposure to wind and wet and marshy soil had brought on ague fits, from which he was rarely free, and to relieve his trouble he would wear a mass of old garments, piled on till his original form was untraceable, and in his bed he was undiscoverable beneath twenty-four pairs of Scotch blankets. It is difficult to credit that this strange, slovenly, absent-minded mortal, simple as Parson Adams, who passed along in wig awry, old cocked hat, dirty flannel dress, surmounted by an aged greatcoat - one pocket protruding with turnip seed, and the other with a copy of Homer or Sophocles, - on his shoulder a rusty gun to frighten crows from his grain, could really be the man whom Hume, Carlyle, Wallace, Robertson, and Henry Mackenzie, and indeed all the illustrious company, proclaimed a great genius. It is true he was the first poet who ever knew the fluxionary calculus. He lived meagrely not because he was mean, but because he dreaded a return to the old penury whose bitter memories never ceased to haunt him. "I have shaken hands with poverty up to the elbow, and I wish to see him no more," he would say.

In 1772 he died, leaving memories behind him of perfect simplicity and goodness of heart, of clumsy genius, of dirty slovenliness, and amusing eccentricity. Up to the end of the century there were Scotsmen who still spoke with undiminished admiration of the *Epigoniad* [Mackenzie's *Life of Home*, p. 16; *Stat. Acct. Scot.* i. 339.]; lauding "the splendour of its descriptions," "its mastery of the times of which he writes," as possessing "the very soul of Homer," and containing passages "sufficient to entitle the poet to undying fame." Speaking from the painful experience of reading it, we refuse to echo one of these wild encomiums. In a loving Eclogue his favourite pupil Robert Fergusson lamented his dead master:

Whase sangs will ay in Scotland be revered,  
While slow gaun ousen turn the flowery swaird,  
While bonnie lambies lick the dew's o' spring,  
While gaidsmen whistle and while birdies sing.  
[Hall's *Travels*, 1801, i. 128; Fergusson's *Poems*, 1807, p. 228.]

In part this prophecy was fulfilled, for in a few years the "slow-going oxen" ceased

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to drag the lumbering plough, in a few years gadsmen were required no more by their whistle to entice the weary team, and in a few years Wilkie's works passed into oblivion.

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It was in 1773 that Dr. Johnson made his ever memorable raid into Scotland, and in August he was visiting all the sights and objurgating all the smells of Edinburgh. He looked into the churches and pronounced them dirty; he visited the buildings of the University, and found them contemptible; he inspected the wynds and panted up the dark turnpike stairs, and called them squalid; he met the literati, and, hectoring them into silence, declared they had nothing to say. He had, however, a good word to speak of Dr. Blacklock, and it was noted by Boswell as an act of remarkable grace, that when the blind poet was introduced to the great lexicographer in James' Court, he was received with "humane complacency," and greeted with the words, "Dear Dr. Blacklock, I am glad to see you," as the oracle raised his huge frame from the easy-chair and grasped him by the hand. A few days later Dr. Johnson, with his friend, went to visit the blind man, for, we are told, he had "beheld him with reverence." He made himself vastly agreeable, and during the conversation absorbed, to good Mrs. Blacklock's consternation, nineteen dishes of tea. [Boswell's *Johnson* (Hill's edit.), v. 47; Mackenzie's *Life of Blacklock*.]

Through the genial society of Edinburgh, with its vigorous speaking and drinking, its stalwart race of men of letters, law, and fashion, flits the somewhat pathetic figure of the gentle and helpless Dr. Blacklock. He was to be seen led along the crowded High Street, every one making way respectfully for the blind man, and led carefully up the slippery staircases, whose dirt and darkness could not vex his sight, though the odours might afflict his acuter sense of smell. In the best company he was welcomed, and all forgot the plainness of that pock-pitted face in the amiable expression that gave it charm. In the Meadows friends would find him in the forenoon, leaning on the arm of Robert Heron, the discarded assistant to Dr. Blair - a versatile literary hack, a thread-bare toper, who, after an evening's debauch on a meagre supply of potatoes and green peas, with large potations of whiskey, had risen from his garret bed to take his venerated friend out for a stroll. [MS. "Journal of my Conduct," by Robert Heron, in Edinburgh University. After a career of drinking and of writing, during which he produced plays, pamphlets, travels, biographies, and translations, he died in 1801, a debtor in Newgate, where he wrote a volume entitled, with unconscious irony, *The Comforts of Life* (Disraeli's *Calamities of Authors*, p. 83).] Blacklock's reputation was considerable for genius and for fine literary

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judgment. To-day we must deny him genius, but may allow him taste.

His story is one of misfortune in youth, strangely guided by kindly fortune in later years. He was born in 1721 in Annan, where his father was a bricklayer. When six months old he lost his eyesight owing to smallpox, which in those pre-inoculating days worked devastation in every class. His calamity was softened by the tenderness and teaching of parents who must for their time and station have been singularly refined; and schoolmates read to him as he grew older the works of English poets. Soon he became familiar with the works of Addison and Pope, of Shenstone and Thomson. His mind became full of the rhymes and images of the authors he loved best, and, strange to say, these were descriptive poets like Thomson, who delighted him with their pictures of Nature which he was never to see with the bodily eye. When he was nineteen his father was killed by falling into a malt-kiln, and he was left to the charge of relations who were too poor to support him. Poems he wrote, and these were handed round to patrons and friends, who gave their admiration and their wonderment at his genius, but extremely little money to prevent it from starving. In his despair he even thought of earning a living as an itinerant musician, for he had fine skill in playing the flute. His austere conscience, however, withheld him, and he “drew back in horror at the notion of prostituting his talents to the forwarding of loose mirth and riot” at rustic gatherings and penny weddings. [Mackenzie's *Life of Blacklock*; Chambers's *Eminent Scotsmen*.]

By good fortune Dr. Stevenson, an eminent Edinburgh physician, saw one of his productions while visiting Dumfries, and through him the blind lad got means to gain a classical education, first at school and afterwards at college in Edinburgh. Class-fellows were glad of his company, and he was helpful in teaching them in exchange for their kindness in leading him through the crowded streets and tortuous wynds. It was thought that the ministry, to which his taste led him, would afford him a career, so in 1741 he became student of Divinity, and began that long, dreary course of six years' training in theology which was then exacted from prospective ministers. In 1745 a tiny volume of his poems was published in Glasgow, by the aid of his never-failing patron, that good, staunch whig Dr. Stevenson, who, when the town was threatened by the Highlanders, sat day by day as guard at the Nether Bow, with a musket over his shoulder, all swathed in flannel, because of the gout which was torturing his limbs. [*Land of Burns*, ii. 61.] This volume came in obscurity and in obscurity it remained. But eight years after a mature collection was issued. Being printed for himself, the only way in which it could be disposed of was by friends taking copies or persuading their acquaintances to buy



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From the Painting by W. Bonnar, R.S.A., in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery,  
Edinburgh.

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them. He was a student of twenty-three when David Hume first saw him at a friend's house, and was struck by his literary taste, his utter simplicity of nature, and the strangely acute emotion which agitated his whole frame on hearing fine poetry. None was more active now than David Hume in helping the blind poet, for that fat philosopher and most indolent of beings was always energetic when there was a kind action to be done. "Take a cargo of these poems," he wrote to friends, "which, if I have the minutest judgment, are many of them extremely beautiful, and all of them remarkable for correctness and propriety." The poor man's whole fortune consisted of 100 guineas gained by this volume, and his whole income was a bursary of £6 to prosecute his studies at college. However, Hume got friends to guarantee another £12 for the remaining five years at classes, and when he was in high dudgeon at the curators' objecting to his putting La Fontaine and Crébillon on the innocent shelves of the Advocates' Library, he presented the £40 salary of his librarianship to the impecunious poet. [Burton's *Life of Hume*, i. 390.] In 1756 appeared a new edition of the poems, and an essay on Immortality, with "An Account of the Life, Character, and Writings of Mr. Thomas Blacklock," from the pen of the "ingenious" Mr. Joseph Spence, Professor of Poetry in Oxford. [Spence's *Anecdotes* (Singer's edit.), p. 24.] The editor had prudently prevailed on the author to omit an ode to his heretical friend, lest it should damage his name. Mr. Spence's word carried vast weight in England, where he was the friend of all men of letters, and the story of the "Student of Philosophy" was soon known everywhere - though it was rather his blindness that awakened interest than his poems, which contained such effusions as odes "On a Young Gentleman bound for Guinea"; "On the death of a promising infant"; a "Soliloquy on the author's escape from falling into a deep well by the sound of a favourite lap-dog's feet." In Scotland he was regarded as a "fine poet" - which is the less surprising when we remember that at the time there was not another poet living north of Tweed.

Blacklock at last was licensed to preach; interest was stirred in the poet's career, blind and poor and helpless; and in 1762 he was presented to the parish of Kirkcudbright - a gift to bring bitter vexation. The dour south-country people, with keen covenanting instincts and bitter hatred of patronage which ignored their Christian rights, abhorred the idea of a blind man becoming their minister, even though they might have gained some satisfaction in the certainty that he could never read his sermons. Two years of weary disputation ensued; and the luckless presentee - the most sensitive of mortals - was half mad with anguish. He had married in prospect of a comfortable manse, and now there lay the painful

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alternatives before him - misery if he remained, and poverty if he left. No wonder his letters were wild against the “vindictive people”; but in prudence and despair he resigned the charge, receiving a small part of the stipend, which, if it did not give him luxury, at least brought him peace. [Burton’s *Hume*, ii. 164; Mackenzie’s *Life of Blacklock*.]

His future life was to be spent in Edinburgh, in a small house in the outskirts of the town, and he gained a livelihood by keeping boarders and taking pupils. He might have been professor of Greek in Aberdeen had it not been evident that, with his blindness and simple nature, he could never have kept unruly lads in order. But now, with a devoted wife to tend and lead him about, with occupation in teaching and writing, and with troops of friends in the liveliest circles in the town, he had a pleasant life. He published sermons which he never preached, and wrote some treatises which it is to be feared the public never read; though to his literary judgment all deferred with devoted homage.

In producing verses he had a most painful facility. “I have known him,” says Henry Mackenzie, who was one of his pupils, “dictate thirty or forty verses, and by no means bad ones, as fast as I could write them; but the moment he would be at a loss for a rhyme or a verse to his liking, he stopped altogether.” [Mackenzie’s *Life of Blacklock*.] This interruption was merciful. It was a curious, pathetic thing to see the poet in those moods of fluency which he mistook for inspiration - the face all rapt with enthusiasm, the sightless eyes vaguely rolling, the whole body swaying to and fro as he stood upright, dictating to his devoted boarder, whose pen galloped and panted over the paper to keep pace with the utterance. “A strange creature to look at” - John Home [Mackenzie’s *Life of John Home*, p. 131.] described him - “a small, weakly thing, a chill, bloodless animal that shivers at every breeze. But if Nature has cheated him in one respect by assigning to his share forceless sinews and a rugged form, she has made ample compensation on the other hand by giving him a mind endowed with the most exquisite feelings and the most ardent, kindled-up affection, a soul - to use a poet’s phrase - that is tremblingly alive all over; in short, he is the most flagrant enthusiast I ever saw. When he repeats his verses he is not able to keep his seat, but springs to his feet and shows his rage by the most animated motions.” The bard was ever ready to respond to the wish that he should recite, and many would go to his house less, it is to be suspected, from reverence than from idle curiosity to see the little, excited man declaim his lines with Sibylline contortions, his body oscillating from side to side, and hand outstretched in the ardour of his feelings - gestures of whose oddness he was serenely unconscious. Morbidly sensitive, he was subject to fits of dire depression. An affront, a trouble, or some

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untraceable cause would throw the worthy man into abject melancholy. It was then he found comfort in playing on his flageolet tunes sweet and pathetic, whose melody floated through the house and greeted the ears of visitors as the front door was opened. On taking out the little flute, which he always carried in his pocket, the evil spirits departed from him when the old Scots tunes came forth, as they departed from Saul at the sound of David's harp.

His fame as a poet had spread to England, and the circumstances of his life gave an interest to his poems which they certainly did not deserve from their intrinsic merits. At the instigation of his friend, Professor Spence, he even wrote, though with trepidation of conscience, a tragedy, which he committed to the hands of Andrew Crosbie. The carelessness of that bibulous lawyer in losing it the world will cheerfully pardon. After he ceased to publish poetry, he remained a recognised authority in literary taste. Macpherson's *Ossian* was submitted for his opinion; Beattie laid before him the manuscripts of his once immortal *Essay on the Immutability of Truth*, levelled at the heresies of his good friend Hume, from whom he now kept aloof for some unknown reason. [Forbes's *Life of Beattie*.] The most important production of his pen was certainly his enthusiastic letter to Dr. George Laurie of Loudon, who had sent him a copy of Burns's poems for his judgment. This was at a crisis of the greater, though almost unknown, poet's life in 1786. He had resolved to sail for the West Indies, and his chest was on its way to Greenock harbour, "when," as he tells, "a letter from Dr. Blacklock to a friend of mine [Dr. Laurie] overset all my schemes by opening new prospects to my poetic ambition. His opinion that I should meet with encouragement in Edinburgh for a second edition fired me so much that I posted for that city." [Chambers's *Life and Works of Burns*, i. 303.] Burns considered the opinion of so eminent a critic as the blind minister as of vast importance. To everybody Blacklock endeared himself; for he was a very good man, though a very poor poet. Young men he drew from obscurity, educated, and started in life, who never forgot the unhumorous, guileless man, who knew nothing of the world except its goodness. With a temper which nothing could ruffle, he worked with his boarders over Greek and Latin, and entered into all their entertainments with childlike pleasure, while the keenest pleasure of his boarders was to do kindly services for him. [Mackenzie's *Life of Blacklock*.] In his placid home there would meet at breakfast or in the evening all who had any pretence to wit and culture. There were heard the chatter of Mrs. Cockburn, the lively tongue of the Duchess of Gordon, with the voices of Adam Ferguson, Lord Monboddo, and Dr. Robertson, as they sat at tea; while the boarders handed scones and cookies to the

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company, and listened eagerly as great men and bright women discussed and jested, making the little room noisy with their talk and merry with their laughter.

When in 1791 the old verse-writer died, an interesting figure passed away from Scottish society. That a good poet had gone no one could say, but certainly a good man who had surmounted physical disadvantages with rare patience and ability. To use Mr. Spence's words, "There is great perspicuity, neatness, and elegance of style" in his pieces - mild elegiacs, and amiable odes and songs. Their only interest lies in the blind man's art in painting external objects with appropriateness of colour and form. Sometimes the art is apparent enough. It consists simply in putting correct names and epithets together from memory of what he had read and heard:

Yet long-lived pansies here their scents bestow,  
The violets languish and the roses blow.  
In purple glory let the crocus shine,  
Narcissus here his love-sick head recline.  
Here hyacinths in purple sweetness rise,  
And tulips tinged with beauty's fairest dyes.

Here all is accurate and detailed as in a seedsman's catalogue.

He explained the humble secret of his art. Locke tells of a blind man who said that he knew what scarlet was like: "it was like the sound of a trumpet." When Johnson asked Blacklock if he had formed any associations of that kind, and associated colour and sound together, he answered that he so often met in books and conversation with the terms expressing colours, that he formed certain associations which supported him when he wrote or talked about them. These associations, however, were intellectual: the light of the sun, for example, he supposed to represent the presence of a friend; the cheerful colour of green to be like amiable sympathy. [Burton's *Life of Hume*, i. 389; Boswell's *Johnson* (Hill's edit.), i. 446.] In an interesting article on the Blind in the second edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, he says, "that it is possible for the blind, by a retentive memory, to tell you that the sky is azure, that the sun, moon, and stars are bright, that the rose is red, the lily white or yellow, and the tulip variegated. By continually hearing these substantives and adjectives joined together, he may mechanically join them in the same manner; but as he never had a sensation of colour, however accurately he may speak of coloured objects, his language must be that of a parrot - without meaning, without ideas." This is a modest explanation of his art - or rather artifice - which it is too absurd to

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foist on the world as poetry. But why did he persist so often in trying to be a descriptive poet? “That foolish fellow Spence,” growled Dr. Johnson, “has laboured to explain philosophically how Blacklock may have done by means of his own faculties what it is impossible he should do. The solution, as I have given it, is plain. Suppose I know a man to be so lame that he is absolutely incapable to move himself, and I find him in a different room from that in which I left him, shall I puzzle myself with idle conjectures that perhaps his nerves have by some unknown change all at once become effective? No, sir; it is clear how he got into a different room - he was carried.” [Boswell’s *Johnson* (Hill’s edit.), i. 466.] Very properly the sage of Bolt Court felt that he had clenched the matter.