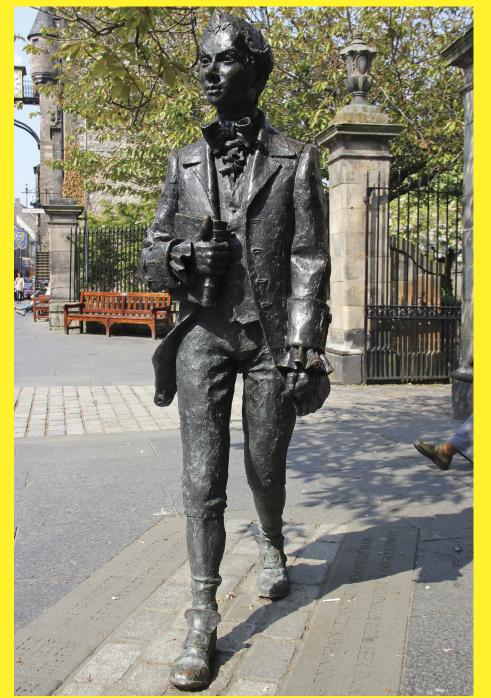




Editor-in-Chief: Professor Gin Malhi



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#### **Cover picture**

#### Robert Fergusson. Sculpture by David Annand. Outside the Canongate Kirk on the Royal Mile, Edinburgh.

Robert Fergusson (1750–1774), whom Burns called 'My elder brother in the muse' and who was admired by Robert Louis Stevenson, Hugh McDiarmid and Edwin Muir, is Edinburgh's greatest poet. His death in the City Bedlam at the age of 24 highlighted the lack of provision for the mentally ill in the Scottish capital and led eventually to the building of the Royal Edinburgh Asylum (now Hospital), which opened in 1813.



Fergusson was born on the 5<sup>th</sup> September 1750 in the Cap-and-Feather Close, a narrow alley off the High street in Edinburgh. A sickly child, he was initially not expected to survive infancy. Subsequently, he attended school in Edinburgh and Dundee, before enrolling at St Andrew's University at the age of 14. He returned to Edinburgh in 1768 and found work as a copying clerk in the Commissary Office. Fergusson had been writing poetry ever since his student days and his poems now began to appear in *The Weekly Magazine* from 1771 onwards. A volume of his poetry, published in 1773, was warmly received and sold well.

Around October 1773, Fergusson began to complain of feeling melancholy and this persisted for several months. In July 1774 he fell down a staircase, sustaining a head injury which rendered him confused and aggressive. He was visited at his home by Dr Andrew Duncan, who was later to become Professor of the Institutions of Medicine in Edinburgh. He arranged for Fergusson to be transferred to the City Bedlam. His condition continued to fluctuate between confusion and lucidity, before he eventually died on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 1774. He is buried in the Canongate Kirk graveyard, his tombstone paid for by Robert Burns. Although it is not possible to say definitively what was wrong with Fergusson, it seems likely that he died from the consequences of his head injury. The grim conditions prevailing at the City Bedlam led Dr Duncan and others to campaign for the creation of a purpose-built asylum in the city.

#### Text by Allan Beveridge

Beveridge A. Edinburgh's Poet Laureate: Robert Fergusson's illness reconsidered. *History of Psychiatry* 1990; 1: 309–329.

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