

Fergusson project will remember 18th century poet

He was one of Scotland's most influential writers, whose poetry inspired Burns, but Robert Fergusson died tragically young in a notorious "madhouse" and his work is now largely forgotten.

Now, £110,000 has been awarded by the prestigious Leverhulme Trust to a new project to celebrate Fergusson 250 years after his death in Edinburgh's Asylum for Pauper Lunatics.

Fergusson was just 24 years old when he died in 1774 but he is credited with being one of Burns' key influences and left behind a substantial body of poetry.

He is honoured on Edinburgh's Scott Monument opposite Burns and is also commemorated in one of the capital's most popular statues, outside the Canongate Kirkyard where he is buried (although the statue has been temporarily removed for repair).



Robert Fergusson outside Canongate Kirk

Funds from the Leverhulme Trust Project Grant will be used to stage events throughout 2024, discussing and celebrating his influence not only on the development of Scottish Literature but on the treatment of mentally ill patients in the Scottish capital.

The two-year project, entitled “The Works of Robert Fergusson: Reconstructing Textual and Cultural Legacies”, is being led by Rhona Brown, Professor of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow’s School of Critical Studies.

Professor Brown said: “Robert Fergusson’s short life has often been seen as tragic, but his poetic output is astonishing in its style, content, and influence.

“Finding inspiration in Allan Ramsay’s (c.1684-1758) Scots language literary, Fergusson writes poems and songs in Scots and English which were so influential on Scotland’s national poet Robert Burns, that he referred to Fergusson as his ‘elder brother in the muse’.

“The project will culminate in the publication of a new textual edition of Fergusson’s complete works, published by Edinburgh University Press, where Fergusson’s entire corpus will be edited to modern scholarly standards for the first time.”

Fergusson, born in Edinburgh in 1750, wrote in both Scottish English and the Scots language.

In 1774, he sustained a head injury from falling down stairs and was submitted into Darien House hospital – known as the “madhouse” and the notorious Edinburgh Bedlam.

The hospital has been described as little more than a prison, where patients were locked up. He was submitted against his will and died there shortly after.

Fergusson was buried in an unmarked grave and it was Burns who privately commissioned and paid for a memorial headstone, in 1787.

Burns at that time referred to Fergusson as “my elder brother in misfortune, by far my elder brother in the muse”.

It has been suggested that Burns, who had suffered from severe

bouts of depression from around 1781, did not understand his condition and feared that he was “going mad” like the poet who inspired him.

It is now thought that Fergusson’s head injury caused a slow bleed on the brain that led to his “madness”.

The bronze statue by David Annand, unveiled in 2004, depicts Fergusson striding past the entrance to the Canongate Kirk.

