

Painting discovered at Dalmeny Estate may be Robert Fergusson

It is believed that a painting discovered among the art collection at Barnbogle Castle on Dalmeny Estate may be a new image of the poet, Robert Fergusson.

Fergusson, a talented writer in Scots, left an indelible mark on Scottish literature despite his very short life. He died at the age of 24. His work and untimely death profoundly inspired Robert Burns, who referred to Fergusson as his “elder brother in misfortune ... [&] in the muse”. This is the 250th anniversary of his death and the University of Glasgow is leading on the celebrations.

Until now only three known likenesses of Fergusson have been known. One is a crude sketch from the Cape Club minute book for 1773, a portrait by Alexander Runciman and a painting by an unknown artist which may have once been owned by artist Henry Raeburn.

The portrait has an inscription on the reverse reading “Portrait of Robert Ferugson”. Professor Carruthers is sure that the evidence points to portrait painter, James Cummyng, a fellow member of Fergusson’s Cape Club and a Herald Painter and Lyon Clerk Depute.

The painting is part of the collection of the 5th Earl of Rosebery who was a Prime Minister and a noted Scottish

antiquarian.

The painting has been investigated meticulously by Professor Gerard Carruthers who is a leading Scottish Literature scholar.

Professor Carruthers said: "While examining a copy of Fergusson's works that belonged to Robert Burns, a portrait was also kindly presented for examination by Lady Jane Kaplan at Barnbogle Castle. I realised when I saw it, we might be looking at a lost artwork of immense significance. This may well match a fabled 'lost portrait' of Fergusson or be one hitherto entirely unknown.

"Whatever the case, we have here a late 18th century oil portrait of Fergusson, very possibly painted during his lifetime, and for which he may well have sat. The heraldic illustrations in the frame and surrounding the painting align perfectly with Cummyng's official role in regulating Scottish coats of arms.

"This discovery could be one of the most significant Fergusson finds in decades. The portrait's provenance and artistic features suggest it may be the very artwork mentioned in Fergusson's own poem 'Codicile to Rob. Fergusson's Last Will,' where he references a portrait intended for his publisher Walter Ruddiman."

Other theories include the portrait being the work of Andrew Fyfe, a skilled draughtsman and prize-winning painter who had connections to Fergusson's artistic circles, or potentially a likeness of Fergusson's sister who was known to bear a strong resemblance to the poet by an unknown painter.

The portrait has also sparked interest among art historians. James Holloway, the former Director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, has confirmed the painting's late 18th-century origins, though he was unable to attribute it to a known artist.

Mr Holloway added: "It is a wonderful discovery and a great rarity. I congratulate Professor Carruthers."

The Primrose family have given access to University of Glasgow scholars from the Centre for Robert Burns Studies to increase their knowledge and understanding of great Scottish literary figures like Burns and now Fergusson. This relationship has already led to two discoveries – the first was detailed lists of materials for the construction of Burns' Ellisland Farm, outside Dumfries in 2023 and then in January 2024, the discovery of a cancelled Burns manuscript of his *Ye Jacobites by Name* poem.

Lady Jane Kaplan along with her brother Harry, the 8th Earl of Rosebery, the great-grandchildren of the 5th Earl, have been instrumental in supporting the Centre for Robert Burns Studies research into their family's collection.

Lord Rosebery said: "It's deeply moving to see our family's stewardship of these literary treasures bearing such remarkable fruit. Following the discoveries of the Ellisland Farm drawings and Burns' *Ye Jacobites by Name* manuscript, this latest Fergusson find further demonstrates the extraordinary depth of our great-grandfather's collecting vision. Now this Fergusson portrait and working with the University of Glasgow's Centre for Robert Burns Studies show that after more than 200 years, Scotland's poetic heritage can still surprise and delight us with new insights."

The portrait discovered at Barnbogle will be unveiled to an audience at Irvine Burns Club on 29 November 2024. Robert Burns moved to Irvine in 1781 and while staying there he found a book of poetry by Fergusson in a local bookshop, which fired his creativity particularly in Scots.

Bill Nolan, Hon Secretary, The Irvine Burns Club, which celebrates its 200th anniversary in 2026, said: "Willie Templeton, a local Irvine bookseller, introduced Robert Burns

to the verses in Scots of Robert Fergusson, as a possible medium for his own poems. By his own admission, Burns chose Fergusson as his muse and while there is no doubt that Burns could – and did – write in English, it was his ability to write and publish in Scots that has set Burns apart from other 18th Century Scottish versifiers. Thanks to Irvine's influence, and especially that of Willie Templeton in introducing him to Fergusson's poetry, Robert Burns's works remains as alive and relevant today as they did more than 200 years ago."

The Leverhulme Trust-funded project "The Works of Robert Fergusson: Reconstructing Textual and Cultural Legacies" aims to publish a new edition of Fergusson's complete works and explore his enduring influence on Scottish literature.



Professor Gerard Carruthers from The University of Glasgow at Barnbogle Castle, South Queensferry
Photograph by Martin Shields



Photograph by Martin Shields



Photograph by Martin Shields