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Ferguson, Sir Samuel

(1810–1886)

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Sir Samuel Ferguson (1810–1886)

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Ferguson, Sir Samuel (1810–1886), poet and archivist, was born on 10 March 1810, in High Street, Belfast, the youngest of the six children of John Ferguson (*d.* 1845) and his wife, Agnes, *née* Knox (*d.* 1861), daughter of John Knox, a clockmaker, in whose house the birth took place. His father, whose Scottish forebears had settled in Ulster in the seventeenth century, had inherited property in co. Antrim, but this was improvidently managed and there were no great resources to fund Ferguson's education and youthful years.

Samuel Ferguson went to the Belfast Academical Institution, where he attended some extra-curricular classes in the Irish language; this was an early indication of his lifelong enthusiasm for the history, legends, and poetry preserved in Irish, but there is no evidence that he became a proficient speaker of the language.

Ferguson's earliest verses appeared in 1830 and 1831 in the Belfast monthly *Ulster Magazine*. When his poem 'The Forging of the Anchor' was enthusiastically included in the 'Noctes ambrosianae' section of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in February 1832, it gave him an entrée into what was one of the leading literary and political journals of the day. The poem's success dogged him throughout a poetic career which concentrated on specifically Irish lyric and narrative poetry. In 1833 the *Dublin University Magazine* commenced publication in Dublin and, while not one of its founders, Ferguson was a contributor from the earliest numbers. In 1834 he published in its pages a series of four review articles on James Hardiman's *Irish Minstrelsy* (2 vols., 1831), which gathered Irish songs and poems from earlier centuries with translations into English by various hands. Ferguson took issue with Hardiman's presentation of these songs and poems as representative exclusively of Catholic and nationalist or Jacobite sentiment; he vigorously argued that such material was part of the cultural inheritance of all in Ireland and as such should be recognized and claimed by 'the Protestant wealth and intelligence of the country'. He also deprecated the quality of the English translations, and supplied nineteen versions of his own as an appendix to the final paper. The review was a signal document, appearing as it did in a publication reflecting tory and unionist interests in Ireland. It marked the beginning of a critical engagement with popular Irish writing, and so is one of the founding documents of the Anglo-Irish literary resurgence later in the century. Meanwhile, the translations Ferguson made here and elsewhere initiated the development of a distinctively Irish poetry in English.

Ferguson continued writing for the *University* and *Blackwood's* during the 1830s; they provided an outlet for his literary and scholarly interests, and were also a source of income while he was a student. Among his contributions was a series of tales woven around events and characters drawn from Irish legend and history. For *Blackwood's* he also wrote 'The Involuntary Experimentalist', a sensation tale noticed and parodied by Poe, and 'Fr Tom and the Pope', a burlesque targeting Fr Thomas Maguire, a contemporary preacher and controversialist. It was frequently reprinted in the nineteenth century, because it is richly comic and also as an anti-Catholic squib; in spite of its success, Ferguson was wary of admitting authorship.

Ferguson commenced study of the law, and also enrolled as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin. After keeping a number of terms at Lincoln's Inn in London, in early 1834 he suffered a severe illness, and there were also unspecified family difficulties. These factors evidently interrupted his studies, and he never graduated from Trinity. He resumed his study of the law at the beginning of

1836, enrolling at King's Inns, Dublin, and was called to the Irish bar in Trinity term 1838. Thereafter based in Dublin, he practised on the north-east circuit, which regularly took him back to his native region around Belfast. As a newly qualified barrister in the early 1840s he published less, but his poetry kept his name before the public. His poems featured prominently in the popular anthology *The Ballad Poetry of Ireland* (1845), edited by Charles Gavan Duffy. Ferguson's work was valuable to Duffy as an example of how a protestant unionist might participate in a specifically Irish cultural manifestation.

In 1846, following the death of his father and a breakdown of his health, Ferguson spent the greater part of the year travelling through France and Italy, visiting sites and libraries of antiquarian interest. Yet Ferguson's involvement with nationalism was also reaching its peak in February 1847 when the *University* published his obituary article and poetic lament for the Young Ireland leader Thomas Davis, who had died in September 1845. In 1848 he became active with the Protestant Repeal Movement, of which he was a founder member. The movement sought repeal of the Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland. His brief involvement with nationalist politics ended soon after he became engaged to Mary Catherine Guinness [see Ferguson, Mary Catherine (1823-1905)] of Stillorgan, co. Dublin, in May of that year, as her family disapproved. They were married on 16 August 1848.

Ferguson's two long verse essays on contemporary Ireland, 'Inheritor and Economist' and 'Dublin' were printed in the *University* in May and July 1849 respectively. In 1850 he and his wife acquired 20 North Great George's Street, Dublin, which was to be their home for the rest of their lives. The marriage gave Ferguson an entry to Dublin society, and he gravitated towards the Church of Ireland rather than the Presbyterian tradition of his background. In September 1857, following the meeting of the British Association in Dublin, he was a member of a group which included George Petrie, John O'Donovan, and William Wilde on a visit to the Aran Islands. Ferguson was called to the inner bar in 1859, and received an honorary LL.D from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1865, but his career as a barrister was not particularly distinguished. He maintained a lively interest in antiquarianism, chiefly through his membership of the Royal Irish Academy; nearly every summer he and his wife journeyed in Europe or through Ireland to visit sites of archaeological interest.

Ferguson now focused his attention instead on writing verse narratives on subjects drawn from Irish legend and history. The activities of the Irish Archaeological Society and of scholars such as John O'Donovan in editing, translating, and publishing Gaelic manuscripts were making available material which could serve as the basis of a specifically Irish literature. In 1865, already in his mid-fifties, Ferguson published his first book, *Lays of the Ancient Gael and other Poems*. The 'lays', owing something to Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* and to Tennyson's Arthurian poems, were the core of the book. The 'other poems' were principally translations and shorter poems written thirty years before, a number of which had already

been republished in anthologies, and these attracted the more favourable comment. Ferguson had hoped that the lays would pave the way for a long verse epic, *Congal*, on which he had been working since the 1840s. This drew on an old Irish prose text, *The banquet of Dun na nGedh and the battle of Magh Rath* (1842), edited and translated by John O'Donovan.

In November 1867 Ferguson obtained congenial and prestigious employment when he was appointed first deputy keeper of the records in Ireland. He brought energy and efficiency to the position, which he occupied for the remainder of his life. The post carried a salary of £800 a year, but was not pensionable. *Congal*, with a bulky apparatus of notes and additional material, was published in 1872. In 1878 Ferguson was knighted in a ceremony at Dublin Castle on St Patrick's day, principally in recognition of his archival work. Among his achievements as deputy keeper during the 1870s was the bringing together in the Public Record Office at the Four Courts in Dublin many of the documentary records held in doubtfully secure locations in parishes throughout Ireland. Many of these records were later to be destroyed in the fire at the Four Courts during the civil war in 1922.

Ferguson's *Poems* appeared in 1880. Here, among negligible devotional and occasional pieces, were further narrative poems, notably 'Conary', probably the most successful of all the 'lays'. There was also 'Deirdre', a monodrama in the Tennysonian manner which anticipates the verse plays of Synge and Yeats. This was his last book of poetry. His lifelong contribution to the Royal Irish Academy was recognized in 1881 when he was elected its president. He also published *Shakespearian Breviates* (1882); this set out how twenty-four of Shakespeare's plays might be abridged so as to cut the number of characters and the overall length, and remove any passages considered too indelicate for a nineteenth-century drawing-room, and it supplied linking verses to make good the continuity. It is a book which evidently derived from Shakespearian evenings with friends, where the guests included Ferguson's neighbour Edward Dowden, the Shakespearian scholar. In April 1884, as president of the Royal Irish Academy, he was awarded an honorary LL.D. by the University of Edinburgh.

During the summer of 1886 Ferguson's health was failing, and on 9 August he died of heart failure at Strand Lodge in Howth, a seaside resort north of Dublin where his wife's family had a house. Following a service in St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, on 12 August, he was buried at Donegore in co. Antrim. He had no children.

As an antiquarian Ferguson concentrated principally on ogham stone inscriptions. Towards the end of his life he wrote a dissertation for the Royal Irish Academy on documents associated with Saint Patrick; this, together with his verse translation of the 'Confession' and the 'Epistle to Coroticus', was published in book form in 1888 by his wife. Lady Ferguson also oversaw editions of the *Hibernian Nights' Entertainments* and *Congal* (1887), and *Lays of the Western Gael* (1888), and subsequently prepared *Lays of the Red Branch* (1897) which assembled the narrative lays in sequence. These publications,

and her biography of him published in 1896, helped to keep Ferguson's reputation current in the two or three decades following his death so that, although neglected in the middle years of the nineteenth century, his writing was seen retrospectively as an important tributary of the Irish literary revival as the century turned.

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Archive Edition

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See also

Ferguson [née Guinness], Mary Catherine, Lady
Ferguson (1823–1905), biographer

External resources

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