

**BIOGRAPHICAL
SKETCH OF
ADAM FERGUSON**

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Biographical sketch of Adam Ferguson by John Small

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JOHN SMALL

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OF

ADAM FERGUSON, LL.D., F.R.S.E.,

PROFESSOR OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH.

BY

JOHN SMALL, M.A.,

LIBRARIAN TO THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH.



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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF ADAM FERGUSON.

The Memoir now submitted to the Society, while it details the chief events in the life of a man who occupied a distinguished place in the literature of Scotland, at a period when it had attained a high reputation, cannot claim to be so complete as might be desired. His life was prolonged for several years after nearly all of his early friends had passed away; and since his death many papers have been destroyed or have fallen aside, which would now be of the greatest interest.

Whilst in this way much has been lost that might have given greater completeness to these pages, still, the recent publication of the Diary of his friend Dr CARLYLE of Inveresk, has furnished many additional details, and afforded further evidence of the estimation in which he was held by his literary associates.

Several letters selected from the lives of his distinguished friends, and from the Manuscript Collection of the University, in addition to information derived from the short notices of his life already printed, have afforded the materials for preparing this sketch of one, whose career was more varied, while his public labours and literary connections were not less important and extensive, than those of any of his contemporaries.

Dr ADAM FERGUSON, son of the Rev. ADAM FERGUSON, minister of the parish of Logierait, Perthshire, was born in the manse of that parish on the 20th of June 1723. His father was descended from an old and respectable family in Athole, to whom the estate of Dunfallandy yet pertains; and his mother was the daughter of Mr GORDON of Hallhead, in the county of Aberdeen. In the female line FERGUSON traced a connection with the noble family of ARGYLL, thus referred to in a letter addressed to him by Dr CARLYLE of Inveresk: "I am descended from the Queensberry family by two great-grandmothers—much at the same distance as you are from that of ARGYLL."*

ADAM was the youngest son of a numerous family. His father had been minister of Crathie and Braemar from 1700 to 1714, and was long remembered with gratitude for having sheltered in his manse of Crathie some of the unfortunate Macdonalds on their flight from the treacherous massacre of Glencoe. Just before the Rebellion of 1715 he was translated to Logierait, where he passed the

* MSS., University of Edinburgh.

remainder of a long life, discharging his ministerial duties with exemplary piety and firmness. Although the parishioners were at the period of his induction almost universally hostile to Presbyterian principles, he speedily secured general respect, which he retained till his death in 1754.

FERGUSON received his earlier education partly at home under the tuition of his father, who had soon discovered his son's superior abilities, partly at the parish school of Logierait. He was afterwards sent to Perth, where he attended the classes of Mr JAMES MARTIN, rector of the grammar school, a distinguished teacher, who had numbered amongst his pupils the great Lord MANSFIELD. There he was committed to the charge of his relation, WILLIAM FERGUSON, a merchant, and at one time chief magistrate of that city. At the Grammar School of Perth FERGUSON excelled in classical literature, and especially in the composition of essays; and we learn that his themes were not only praised at the time, but were long preserved, and shown with pride by Mr MARTIN, who declared that none of his pupils had ever surpassed the writer.

In 1738, when he had just entered on his sixteenth year, FERGUSON was enrolled at the University of St Andrews, where he studied Latin under Professor YOUNG, and Greek under Professor PRINGLE. The classes were then ably superintended by Principal TULLDELPH, to whom FERGUSON had the advantage of being recommended by his father's friend and namesake, the minister of Moulin.

At the commencement of the session, FERGUSON gained by competition one of the foundation bursaries, which are tenable during the curriculum in the Faculty of Arts, and which entitled him to maintenance at the College table. This he owed to his previous excellent training in Latin. His attention was now given to the study of Greek, of which, hitherto, he seems to have had little knowledge; and that so successfully, that at the end of his first session he read Homer with considerable ease. During the summer recess he resolved to read one hundred lines of the Iliad daily, and in this way perused the whole poem. He obtained his degree of M.A. on the 4th May 1742, when he had nearly completed his nineteenth year; and thus finished his curriculum in arts with the reputation of being one of the best classical scholars, and perhaps the ablest mathematician and metaphysician of his time at the University.

Having been intended by his father for the church, FERGUSON entered the Divinity Hall at St Andrews in 1742, under Principal MURISON and Professors SHAW and CAMPBELL; but shortly afterwards he removed to Edinburgh, and continued his course under Professors GOWDIE and CUMMING. There he joined a number of young men who afterwards attained to eminence—amongst whom were JOHN HOME, author of 'Douglas;' WILLIAM ROBERTSON, afterwards Principal of the University; HUGH BLAIR; Mr WEDDERBURN, afterwards Lord LOUGHBOROUGH; and Dr CARLYLE—in forming a debating society. This club after-

wards became merged in the Speculative Society, which still exists in unimpaired efficiency.

FERGUSON, while not neglecting the study of divinity, applied himself less to it than to those subjects of philosophy for which he showed special aptitude, and in which he was afterwards to become so celebrated. In 1745, when he had attended divinity classes for two only, out of the full period of six, years—the time then required before obtaining license to preach—he was offered the appointment of deputy chaplain to the 42d regiment, or “Black Watch,” by Mr MURRAY (brother of Lord ELIBANK), who was principal chaplain. For this appointment his knowledge of the Gaelic language was an important qualification. The rules of the Church allowed Gaelic students to be taken on trials after four years’ attendance at the Divinity Hall; but it was necessary, in FERGUSON’S case, to obtain from the General Assembly a still farther dispensation. The Assembly, in consideration of his good character and high testimonials, granted special authority for his ordination, and he was ordained by the Presbytery of Dunkeld on the 2d of July 1745. A few days after this he joined his regiment, then serving in Flanders; and in a short time he obtained, on the retirement of Mr MURRAY, the rank of principal chaplain.

We are informed by Dr CARLYLE, that it was through the influence of the Duchess Dowager of ATHOLE that FERGUSON obtained his appointment as chaplain to the 42d Regiment. “Her son, Lord JOHN MURRAY,* had obtained the colonelcy of that regiment when he was not more than twenty-two years of age; and the Duchess had imposed the very difficult task upon FERGUSON, to be a kind of tutor or guardian to Lord JOHN,—that is to say, to gain his confidence, and keep him in peace with his officers, which it was difficult to do. This, however, he actually accomplished, by adding all the decorum belonging to the clerical character to the manners of a gentleman; the effect of which was, that he was highly respected by all the officers, and adored by his countrymen, the common soldiers.”

Shortly after FERGUSON joined his regiment, the battle of Fontenoy took place, in which he behaved with the greatest bravery. In that battle, according to the account of the French themselves, “the Highland furies rushed in upon them with more violence than ever did a sea driven by a tempest.” FERGUSON went into action at the head of the attacking column, with a drawn broad-sword in his hand, and could with difficulty be persuaded to retire to the rear.† Colonel DAVID STEWART, author of the “History of the Highlanders,” remarks, that he continued with his regiment during the whole of the action, in the hottest of the

* Lord JOHN MURRAY—son of JOHN Duke of ATHOLE by his second marriage—was appointed colonel of the Royal Highlanders on April 25, 1745; major-general in 1753; lieutenant-general in 1754; and general in 1770.

† Sir W. SCOTT’S Miscellaneous Prose Works, vol. xix. p. 331.

fire, praying with the dying, attending to the wounded, and directing them to be carried to a place of safety. The Colonel further remarks, that FERGUSON, "by his fearless zeal, his intrepidity, and his friendship towards the soldiers (several of whom had been his schoolfellows at Dunkeld); his amiable and cheerful manners, checking with severity when necessary, mixing among them with ease and familiarity, and being as ready as any of them with a poem or a heroic tale, acquired an unbounded ascendancy over them; and while he was chaplain of the corps he held an equal, if not in some respects a greater, influence over the minds of the men than the commanding officer."*

While he was connected with this regiment, he published a sermon, which was his first contribution to literature. It is entitled—*A Sermon preached, in the Ersh Language, to His Majesty's First Highland Regiment of Foot commanded by Lord JOHN MURRAY, at their Cantonment at Camberwell, on the 18th day of December 1745, being appointed as a solemn Fast. Translated into English for the Use of a Lady of Quality in Scotland, at whose desire it is now published.*†

This sermon, printed at the request of the Duchess Dowager of ATHOLE, with whom FERGUSON was a particular favourite, is more remarkable for the vigour of its patriotic exhortations than for the elegance of its language, and contains strong denunciations of the attempt made in the year 1745 to seat Prince CHARLES on the throne of Britain.

With this gallant regiment FERGUSON served during the whole of the campaign in Flanders; and on the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, he obtained leave of absence, and visited the scenes of his youth, where he spent much of his time in wandering amongst the Perthshire mountains. Writing to an intimate friend at a subsequent period, he says, "If I had not been in the Highlands of Scotland, I might be of their mind who think the inhabitants of Paris and Versailles the only polite people in the world. It is truly wonderful to see persons of every sex and age, who never travelled beyond the nearest mountain, possess themselves perfectly, perform acts of kindness with an aspect of dignity, and a perfect discernment of what is proper to oblige. This is seldom to be seen in our cities, or in our capital; but a person among the mountains, who thinks himself nobly born, considers courtesy as the test of his rank. He never saw a superior, and does not know what it is to be embarrassed. He has an ingenuous deference for those who have seen more of the world than himself; but never saw the neglect of others assumed as a mark of superiority."‡

With a desire to obtain a more permanent and more congenial sphere of usefulness, FERGUSON applied for the living of Caputh, a beautiful parish near Dunkeld, in the patronage of the Duke of ATHOLE. He was not, however, in all

* Hist. of the Highlanders, vol. i. p. 292. † Lond., 1746. 8vo. ‡ MSS. Univ. of Edin.

respects qualified for discharging the duties of a Scottish clergyman. Although, by his polished manners and his great abilities, he took a prominent part in private society, he was deficient in the gifts necessary for the popular preacher. His sermons were elaborate disquisitions, showing more acquaintance with systems of philosophy than with the wants of common hearers.* He was unsuccessful in his application for this living; and when the death of his father (whom he had hoped to succeed) took place shortly after this disappointment, he abandoned all intention of undertaking the duties of a parochial charge. He continued to remain attached to his regiment, during its service in Ireland, till about the year 1754, when he resigned his commission.

The knowledge of military affairs thus acquired by his service in the army enabled him to give so much distinctness and liveliness to his descriptions of war in his 'History of the Roman Republic,' that it is remarked by CARLYLE, that he was excelled, in this respect, by no historian but POLYBIUS, who was an eyewitness of so many battles. His military service also proved beneficial to him by opening up a wide field for the observation of human character, and gave him enlarged opportunities of studying the political phenomena of the period.

After resigning the chaplaincy of the 42d Regiment, FERGUSON spent some time in Holland with his friend Mr GORDON, and resolved to give up all thoughts of further exercising the clerical profession. Writing to ADAM SMITH from Groningen, in October 1754, he concludes by requesting a reply to be addressed to him at Rotterdam, "without any clerical titles, for I am a downright layman."†

Shortly after this, FERGUSON returned to Edinburgh, where he renewed his acquaintance with the friends of his youth. As DAVID HUME had at this time given up his appointment of Keeper of the Advocates' Library, he became a candidate for the office, and was appointed HUME's successor as Librarian and Clerk to the Faculty on the 8th of January 1757.

While he was connected with that Library, FERGUSON became a member of the Select Society, which had been instituted in 1754 by Mr ALLAN RAMSAY, the eminent artist. The meetings of the Society were held weekly in one of the inner apartments of the Library, and were for the purpose of literary discussion,

* The following anecdote illustrates their character:—"Sometimes he lent or presented a sermon to his friends. One of them one day preached a very profound discourse on the superiority of personal qualities to external circumstances, that showed a very thorough acquaintance with the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle. Mr BISSER (his father's successor), in whose church the gentleman delivered this sermon, was at first greatly surprised at hearing such observations and arguments from a worthy neighbour, whom he well knew to be totally unacquainted with the philosophy of Plato, or any other, ancient or modern. When service was over, he paid the young man very high encomiums on his discourse—that it very much exceeded the highest expectations he had ever entertained of the talents of the preacher; who told him very honestly that he knew very little about these things himself, but that he had borrowed the discourse from his friend ADAM FERGUSON."—*Histor. Mag.* (1799) vol. i. p. 44.

† This interesting letter is in the possession of the Rev. Mr CUNNINGHAM, Prestonpans.