

Ferguson and *Blackwood's*: the Formative Years

Our awareness of Samuel Ferguson's presence in the history of Anglo-Irish literature has inevitably been filtered through Yeats's several acknowledgements of his contribution – and Yeats's perception of the nineteenth-century poet was coloured both by his own aspirations as a writer and by his emerging vision of how an Anglo-Irish literary tradition might develop.¹ The principal source for biographical information about Ferguson is his wife's *Sir Samuel Ferguson in the Ireland of his Day* (2 vols, Edinburgh, 1896) which, while aiming at comprehensiveness, naturally places the emphasis on the later decades of his life. This was the period best known to Lady Ferguson herself, for the couple first met in 1847 when he was already in his late thirties and with a considerable part of his writing career already behind him. The Ireland of Ferguson's day, as it emerges from the biography, is very much the high Victorian Ireland of the later nineteenth century, in which Ferguson had attained eminence in several spheres of cultural and social activity.

A more continuous, and more immediate, account of Ferguson the writer is to be had from his letters to successive editors of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. This correspondence, which extends from 1832, when he was twenty-one, to his death in 1886, is preserved among the "Blackwood Papers" in the National Library of Scotland. These letters were evidently not available to Lady Ferguson, even though her biography of her husband was published by Blackwood. There are ninety-seven in all, most of them concerned with actual or possible contributions to the magazine but touching also on matters of personal and general interest. They give a particularly detailed picture of Ferguson's earliest and most active period of his association with *Blackwood's*, between 1832 and 1838, when he was still in his mid-twenties and in his formative years as a writer.

I

Before making the breakthrough to *Blackwood's*, Ferguson's first published pieces had appeared in the *Ulster Magazine*, a monthly based in his native Belfast. It was edited by Charles Teeling, and

1. *Davis, Mangan, Ferguson?: Tradition & The Irish Writer*, Writings by W.B. Yeats and Thomas Kinsella (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970), pp. 68-69.

contained a mixture of commentary, fiction and verse in a format which imitated that of the successful *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. It was not to enjoy the longevity of its original, however, lasting only from 1830 to 1832. During 1830 and 1831 Ferguson contributed at least six poems to it, among them an early version of "Willy Gilliland" which was later included in his *Lays of the Western Gael*.² He made his first appearance in *Blackwood's* with considerable *éclat* in February 1832, when his poem "The Forging of the Anchor" was included in the "Noctes Ambrosianae" instalment for that month.³ In a letter written several decades later, Ferguson claimed that the poem, one of the best-known pieces in the nineteenth century, "underwent a rejection before its appearance in 'Blackwood'".⁴ It seems likely that Teeling was the editor who let "The Forging of the Anchor" get away from him.

The earliest letter from Ferguson to William Blackwood was written in the aftermath of the poem's publication, with Ferguson eagerly offering to supply more in a similar maritime vein, and mentioning also that he is engaged on a "metrical romance in six cantos containing about five thousand lines".⁵ His letter further indicates that two other poems included in the same "Noctes" were written by him. These two, which he had submitted anonymously, have not previously been attributed to Ferguson. They are "Roger Goodfellow", which is a translation of Pierre De Beranger's song "Roger Bontemps", and a version of the Seventh Epode of Horace, "*Quo, quo, scelesti ruitis?*".⁶ Whether or not Ferguson so intended, the song is given an explicitly contemporary

2. *Lays of the Western Gael* (London, 1865 [for 1864]). His contributions to the *Ulster Magazine* which I have identified are: (i) "Sir Kenneth Kerr", a narrative ballad in Scottish style, Vol. I (March 1830), pp. 37-38; (ii) "To the Anti-*** Society", a song in praise of drink, Vol. I (March 1830), p. 182; (iii) "Ulster Ballads - No. 1: The Rescue of the Mare", an early version of "Willy Gilliland" which was included in *Lays of the Western Gael*, Vol. II (January 1831), pp. 37-38; (iv) "The Expostulation of the Honourable Lord Augustus Touchmenot with Earl Grey", an ironical anti-Reform piece, Vol. II (March 1831), pp. 160-61; (v) "Ulster Ballads - No. II: Una Phelimy", which Ferguson used again with "Willy Gilliland" and "Young Dobbs" in the January 1836 issue of the *Dublin University Magazine*, Vol. II (March 1831), pp. 174-75; (vi) "Two Songs of Horace - To False Sweethearts", translations entitled "To Barine" and "To Pyrrha", Vol. II (April 1831), pp. 230-31. All the pieces are signed "S.F.", with the exception of (iii) which is unsigned.
3. Vol. XXXI, pp. 281-83.
4. *Sir Samuel Ferguson in the Ireland of his Day*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: 1896) (hereafter *SSFID*), I, p. 275.
5. 2 February 1832, National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS) 4032 f 249.
6. Vol. XXXI, p. 276.

reference in the exchanges surrounding it in the "Noctes". The winter of 1831-32 was a season of political uncertainty as the Reform Bill stumbled along its way to becoming law, and the poem is presented as a rallying-song to the downcast Tory readership of *Blackwood's* who felt menaced by the aims of Grey's government. Contemporary political reference is more pointed in the "Horatian Version", which is headed "On Meeting the Birmingham Mob, Dec. 1831". In adapting Horace's poem on civil unrest, Ferguson engages energetically with the high-running feelings which followed the Bristol riots two months previously, and which had led the Political Union in Birmingham to organise itself as an independent local militia.

Whither away, ye dirty devils?
 Why have ye drawn your fire-shovels,
 Shoulder'd your pokers, and left your hovels?
 Not enough yet of your Bristol revels?⁷

Ferguson had two further contributions in *Blackwood's* during 1832: "The Wet Wooing; A Narrative of '98" in April, and "Light and Darkness" in October.⁸ "The Wet Wooing", a long prose fiction set in Ferguson's native Ulster during the autumn of 1798, tells the story of a young soldier who meets and falls in love with the daughter of a rebel commander. The courtship leads him steadily into the fugitive society of the rebels as they wait to escape to France. The story represents, however clumsily, an attempt to bring two traditions into conjunction. The obvious model is Scott's *Waverley*: the young soldier in the service of the crown embarks on a discovery of the alternative tradition and becomes sentimentally involved with it. With its Irish setting and the scrupulous rendering of Ulster speech, the story gives an early indication of a concern with specifically Irish material which later predominates in Ferguson's writing, antiquarianism, and political attitudes. "Light and Darkness" was an unremarkable poem; its publication prompted an aggrieved comment from Ferguson expressing his surprise and regret that "it should have made it's [*sic*] appearance without any signature".⁹ He was becoming keen to make a name for himself.

His hopes for doing this rested principally on the poetical romance in cantos, which is mentioned several times during the

7. Vol. XXXI, p. 285.

8. Vol. XXXI, p. 624; Vol. XXXII, pp. 681-83.

9. 15 October 1832, NLS 4032 f 269.

year. At the end of June he wrote of it as being nearly complete¹⁰ and soon afterwards he submitted it to Blackwood. It did not meet with approval, however, and in August he was writing: "I purpose altering my long Poem in the arrangement of the Cantos and will probably be obliged to keep it for a few months before I can satisfy myself in the change and submit it again to you".¹¹

This is the last we hear of this early essay in long narrative poetry, at least as far as *Blackwood's* is concerned.

Other pieces were submitted by Ferguson during this, his first year as contributor. Some of them were not published until 1833, while others, like the poem in cantos, did not get into print at all in *Blackwood's*. Among the latter were a verse broadside directed against the newly established radical monthly, *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*,¹² a tale called "The Clouded Honeymoon" which evidently was a follow-up to the success of "The Wet Wooing", and a paper poking fun at the contemporary invention mania and the "March of Machinery" men.¹³ Ferguson was nothing if not eclectic in his range of subject-matter.

The most important event in Ferguson's relationship with the magazine in this first year was the visit he made to Edinburgh in April 1832, *en route* from Belfast to London to keep his terms as a law student at Lincoln's Inn. He spent ten days in the Scottish capital, and Lady Ferguson prints an enthusiastic description by him of his contacts with the Blackwood family and with other writers for "Maga".¹⁴ He was given introductions to several people in London: Thomas Cadell, the publisher, William Johnston, who wrote in *Blackwood's* on Irish affairs, and George Cruikshank. At the time of his first contributions to *Blackwood's*, fifteen years after its commencement, the magazine enjoyed a comfortable superiority over its rivals and imitators. Affairs were prospering, with a monthly circulation of 8,000 having been reached the previous year.¹⁵ It was a vigorous unofficial mouthpiece of Tory political opinion, and it published some of the liveliest periodical fiction. The founder of the magazine, William Blackwood (1776-1834), had in the early years enlisted the distinguished editorial

10. 29 June 1832, NLS 4032 f 261.

11. 6 August 1832, NLS 4032 f 265.

12. 9 March 1832, NLS 4890 ff 84, 85. This piece, entitled "Captain North's Log", is the only manuscript of any of Ferguson's contributions to survive among the *Blackwood's Papers*.

13. 11 June 1832, NLS 4032 f 259; 6 August 1832, NLS 4032 f 265.

14. *SSFID*, I, pp. 25-26.

15. M. Oliphant, *Annals of a Publishing House*, 2 vols (New York, 1897-98), II, p. 102.

assistance of John Wilson, J.G. Lockhart, James Hogg and William Maginn, but by now he and his sons had taken over a greater degree of editorial control themselves. An indication of the magazine's increasing success was its move to imposing new offices at 45 George Street in 1830, and in the same year the Blackwood family moved to Ainslie Place in Edinburgh's New Town; it was at this address that the young Irish recruit was received on several occasions in April 1832.

II

The various introductions from Blackwood served Ferguson well in London, where he remained until returning to Belfast in early July. The Reform Bill was reaching its climax, and it was an exciting summer to be in London, even for one who considered himself "a bad authority on politics".¹⁶ Bad authority or not, his next contribution to *Blackwood's*, in January 1833, was made up of political squibs – verses gathered under the title "An Irish Garland". In these four songs it is evident that Ferguson's political consciousness is governed by constitutional concerns. The levellers whom he depicts as gathering for the lifting of the revolutionary Tricolour trace their lineage back through the Bristol riots to the July Revolution in Paris in 1830:

When last to the banquet we gather'd around her,
 The Seine for three days with our feasting was dyed;
 Blest Paris we left more enslaved than we found her,
 And Bristol in flames to our revels replied.¹⁷

Any faint sympathy with nationalism which may have been discernible in "The Wet Wooing" is here quite absent; the attitude and tone are of a kind with other verse pieces, such as the two anonymous translations in the "Noctes Ambrosianae" and the unpublished broadside against *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*.

"An Irish Garland" inaugurated a very active year in Ferguson's association with *Blackwood's*, and seven of the thirteen numbers for 1833 carried his work. In February there was "The Forrest-Race Romance", another short story set in the latter half of the eighteenth century and again with a lot of marine action, but this time taking place off the south coast of England. Ferguson was a

16. 11 June 1832, NLS 4032 f 259.

17. Vol. XXXIII, pp. 87-88.

keen amateur sailor in his youth,¹⁸ and this experience provided him with useful background detail for several of his writings, from “The Forging of the Anchor” through to the sea-passages in *Congal*. In “The Forrest-Race Romance” there is a fine scene in which the narrator finds himself alone on an unignited fire-ship under full sail in the Channel before ending up in the quiet waters of Forrest-Race where the ship catches fire.¹⁹

The following month’s number contained a poem, “The Fairy Well”,²⁰ which had been sent to *Blackwood’s* together with another, “The Fairy Thorn”. Only the one poem was published in *Blackwood’s*, much to Ferguson’s chagrin: ““The Fairy Well” is doubly unfortunate – it should *follow*, not precede the ‘Thorn’ and the printers have managed to deform it by the greatest blunders.”²¹ “The Fairy Thorn” was eventually published the following year, on its own, in the *Dublin University Magazine*;²² it has become one of Ferguson’s most admired lyrics and has been reprinted on many occasions. Its intended companion-piece, meanwhile, has languished in undeserved obscurity, leaving “The Fairy Thorn” rather less than Ferguson intended it to be. “The Fairy Well” tells of Una Baun, a young girl who is weighed down by great sorrow and wishes she could escape to fairy-land with Anna Grace – the girl whose abduction by the fairies is described in the other poem. Seeking the ease of forgetfulness by drinking at the well of Lagnanay, she fades away and is seen no more. The distant languor of rhythm which characterises “The Fairy Thorn” is less evident here, and the poem relies on narrated incident combined with the returns of a refrain in each stanza for its effect. However, it is so closely related in theme to the better-known poem as to be almost integral to it.²³

Ferguson’s next contribution to *Blackwood’s* was four “Songs After the French of Beranger”, a return to some of the material he had used on his first appearance there.²⁴ Almost forgotten

18. He mentions his sailing activities in letters of 4 August 1832, NLS 4032 f 263, and 15 October 1832, NLS 4032 f 269.

19. Vol. XXXIII (February 1833), pp. 245-260.

20. Vol. XXXIII, p. 667.

21. 29 March 1833, NLS 4035 f 208.

22. Vol. III (March 1834), pp. 331-32.

23. A later Ulster poet seems to have retained a memory of “The Fairy Well”. The distinctive refrain of the first stanza, “Mournfully, sing mournfully”, occurs also as a refrain in another poem about a lost girl, “The Sea-Field” by Joseph Campbell (Seosamh MacCathmhaoil), *Poems* ed. Austin Clarke (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1963), p. 43.

24. Vol. XXXIII (May 1833), pp. 844-45.

nowadays, Pierre de Beranger (1780-1857) enjoyed immense popularity as a writer of songs in early nineteenth-century France, and the extent of his fame in Britain at the time was sufficient to warrant his inclusion in *Fraser's* "Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters" in March 1835.²⁵ Ferguson was one of the earliest to essay translations of his work; later translators included "Father Prout" (Francis Mahony) and Thackeray. Other pieces from Ferguson during 1833 were "The Death-Song of Regner Lodbrog" in June, "Nora Boyle" in September, and "The Return of Claneboy" in December.²⁶ The first of these is a long poem, supposedly a song chanted by the Norse hero as he met his death in a pit of serpents. Ferguson's text is accompanied by footnotes and a long commentary on the recorded details of Regner's life. This scholarly apparatus was the fruit of his spells in the British Museum, which he frequented while in London during the winter of 1833, and it foreshadows the extensive notes which were affixed to *Congal*. "Nora Boyle" is a short and melodramatic tale about an attempt to dispose of an infant heir so as to benefit the evil Sir Richard Morton. He has beguiled the servant-girl Nora into aiding him, but, after a night-time encounter in which she comes to realise the wickedness of Sir Richard, the child is saved, the villain drowned, and Nora dies repentant and forgiven.

When submitting "Nora Boyle", Ferguson had written "It is not one of the projected series I spoke of but a short tale independent of history".²⁷ This series of historical tales, of which "The Return of Claneboy" was to be the first, eventually took the form of the *Hibernian Nights' Entertainments*; most of the tales were published in the *Dublin University Magazine* between December 1834 and May 1836 under that title. The series was originally intended for *Blackwood's*, which published "The Return of Claneboy" and "Shane O'Neill's Last Amour".²⁸ Both of these were included in the three-volume *Hibernian Nights' Entertainments* in 1887, the latter retitled primly "An Adventure in the Life of Shane O'Neill".²⁹ These tales reflected Ferguson's growing interest in

25. Vol. XI (March 1835), p. 300.

26. *Blackwood's*, Vol. XXXIII, pp. 910-23; vol. XXXIV, pp. 344-50 and pp. 929-52.

27. 3 June 1833, NLS 4035 f 211.

28. Vol. XXXV, pp. 249-66.

29. An edition was published in New York in 1857: *The Hibernian Nights' Entertainments* by Samuel Ferguson, Editor of the *Dublin University Magazine*, Author of "The Forging of the Anchor". This edition, apparently pirated, is not listed in bibliographies of Ferguson's work. It is of interest in that it is his first appearance in book form other than in anthologies. This volume contains only those pieces which appeared in the *Dublin University Magazine* (of which Ferguson was never an editor).

history, fed by the material he found in the British Museum and in Lambeth Palace. A letter written in March 1834, after his return to Belfast, tells Blackwood that he has now "accumulated a great quantity of matter on Irish history & antiquities" and offers further pieces of the same kind as "Shane O'Neill", "which took very well here".³⁰ The last phrase indicates Ferguson's growing awareness of a specifically Irish readership for his work, a readership for which he was eventually to find the *Dublin University Magazine* a more effective medium. But his links with *Blackwood's*, and with the access to a more broadly based audience which it provided, were never abandoned and remained a factor in his literary career to the end.

III

The *Dublin University Magazine* had started publication in January 1833, while Ferguson was in London. On his return to Ireland in June of that year he naturally began to cultivate the *University* as an outlet. His first contribution was a poem, "Don Gomez and the Cid", in August 1833,³¹ and from that October until late 1837 the magazine carried one or two pieces from him nearly every month. In spite of his long and often close association with the *Dublin University Magazine*, Ferguson was not one of the founder members,³² and he did not come to live in Dublin until early in 1834 when he registered as a student at Trinity College.³³ Several of his contributions to the *Dublin University Magazine* were offerings that had failed to make the pages of *Blackwood's*. Apart from the series of *Hibernian Nights' Entertainments* which, as we have seen, was actually commenced in "Maga", there were also "The History of Pierce Bodkin" and "The Fairy Thorn".³⁴ It is also likely that "The Stray Canto",³⁵ a verse tale set in England at the time of the crusades, has in fact strayed from "the metrical

30. 11 March 1834, NLS 4038 f 239.

31. Vol. II (August 1833), p. 143.

32. In his monograph *Dublin University Magazine; Its History, Contents and Bibliography* (Dublin: Bibliographical Society of Ireland, 1938), Michael Sadleir mistakenly lists Ferguson among the founders of the magazine (p. 63).

33. *Alumni Dubliniensis: A Register of the Students, Graduates, Professors and Provosts of Trinity College in the University of Dublin (1593-1860)*, edited by the late G.D. Burtchaell and Thomas U. Sadleir, New Edition (Dublin: Alex Thom, 1935).

34. Vol. II (October 1832), pp. 456-64; vol. III (March 1834), p. 331.

35. Vol. IV (July 1834), pp. 72-78.

romance in 6 cantos" which Ferguson had submitted unsuccessfully to *Blackwood's* in 1832. Of the "Three Ballads" published in the *University* in January 1836, both "Una Phelimy" and an earlier version of "Willy Gilliland" had already been printed in the "Ulster Magazine". Ferguson had since incorporated both of these, as well as the third of the trio, "Young Dobbs", into a tale submitted to *Blackwood's* in May 1832;³⁶ this tale was not published, so the poems were recycled for the *University* nearly four years later.

The most notable contribution which Ferguson made to the *University* was his four-part review of Hardiman's *Irish Minstrelsy*, which appeared between April and November 1834.³⁷ This too had originally been intended for *Blackwood's*; indeed, the evidence indicates that these essays and their accompanying translations of Irish poems, which stand at the very fountain-head of modern Anglo-Irish writing, owe their existence to a suggestion made by William Blackwood. Such being the case, some of the often-remarked peculiarities of Ferguson's review immediately become less puzzling.

Just before leaving London in 1833 Ferguson wrote to his editor:

The Museum is closed till the 3rd of June so that I cannot make out the collection you mention. I am but a grammar scholar in Irish as yet, but I hope soon to be able to translate and would be delighted to follow up your suggestion.³⁸

Blackwood had suggested to Ferguson that he work on a collection of translations from the Irish; the phrase "make out" used by Ferguson may mean "compile" or "decipher". This was prompted by Ferguson's having already furnished *Blackwood's* with verse-translations from a variety of sources, especially "The Death-Song of Regner Lodbrog". There were also his Irish prose romances which showed a growing familiarity with the Irish background. That William Blackwood should have been the begetter of Ferguson's work on Irish poetry is not so unlikely as it might at first appear. One of the characteristics of his magazine was its eclecticism regarding literatures other than English, and a decade previously it had published six of J.J. Callanan's versions from the Irish.³⁹

Three months after Blackwood's original suggestion Ferguson,

36. 8 May 1832, NLS 4032 f 255; 14 May 1832, NLS 4032 f 257.

37. *DUM*, vol. VII (January 1836), pp. 66-71.

38. 31 May 1833, NLS 4035 f 211.

39. Vol. XIII, pp. 209-15.

by now on friendly terms with some of the leading Irish scholars of his day, was writing to George Petrie: "Pray make my respects to O'Donovan, and tell him I have begun Irish, and have translated all I want of Hardiman".⁴⁰ This work on Hardiman is evidently what Blackwood had had in mind, and in Ferguson's next letter to him the project has taken on the character of a review.

As you anticipated I find ample materials for a service to the Irish Minstrelsy. I hand you the two first Nos and if you like can have as much more. I tried it first with as grave a treatment as I could give it, but I have found no other style than that I have adopted would answer. . . . If you like the Review I would take it as a great favor if you would send on the proofs to correct.⁴¹

Ten days later he is still concerned about the tone of what he has written: "You will find in N^o 1 of the Minstrelsy that I have said somethings perhaps too broadly; I trust to your better knowledge of what is correct to mark such on the proof that I may if necessary alter them".⁴² The papers were not to appear in *Blackwood's*, however, and by January he was writing "I send you something which I hope you like better than the Minstrelsy".⁴³ It seems clear that the substance of the papers which began appearing in the *University* from April on was familiar to Blackwood, for in March Ferguson remarked to him in an aside "I have been doing a good deal lately for the University Magazine where I begin the Minstrelsy next month".⁴⁴

As printed in the *Dublin University Magazine*, all four papers exhibit that liveliness of style about which Ferguson had been slightly apprehensive, and none of them more than the first, which Malcolm Brown has called "the most interesting, enlightening, and perverse critical essay in the canon of Irish literature".⁴⁵ However, the relationship between the two (of a projected four) essays submitted to *Blackwood's* and the four which subsequently appeared in the *University* is problematical. For instance, are the "translations" first prompted by Blackwood and mentioned in the letter to Petrie those literal prose translations embedded in the

40. *SSFID*, I, p. 42.

41. 5 November 1833, NLS 4035 f 213.

42. 15 November 1833, NLS 4035 f 215.

43. 7 January 1834, NLS 4038 f 235.

44. 11 March 1834, NLS 4038 f 239.

45. *Sir Samuel Ferguson* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1973), p. 51.

text of the papers on Hardiman, or the verse translations appended to the last of the four? Ferguson does mention in the course of the second instalment that he will be supplying these. The opening words of the very first paper ("Oh, ye fair hills of holy Ireland"), anticipate a line from his version of "The Fair Hills of Ireland", the prose translation of which does not appear until the end of the third. This suggests that the four papers were conceived of as a unit before they began appearing in the *University*.

Although at least two instalments of the "Irish Minstrelsy" were offered to *Blackwood's*, it was not simply a matter of transferring those manuscripts from one periodical to another and patching on some further articles. The second, third and fourth papers contain much internal evidence of having been written, or at least revised, with Irish publication specifically in mind. For example, the second paper makes a comparison between the songs of Scotland ("theirs") and the songs of Ireland ("ours"); the third opens with a panegyric to "our" capital city of Dublin; and the second and fourth both begin with extended references to the time of year in which they were written, references which accord strictly with the time of their appearance in the *University* and not at all with what might have been done the previous year for *Blackwood's*. Both the tone and substance of these sections of the review papers are quite consonant with their having been written by an Irishman for the Irish readership of an Irish publication.

Such is not the case with the first of the papers. Professor Brown has, as we have seen, singled it out as being, among other things, "perverse"; Professor Robert O'Driscoll, while upholding Ferguson's analysis of Irish poetry as "one of the most significant and original pieces of literary criticism in nineteenth-century Ireland", feels constrained to concede apologetically that in the opening pages "Ferguson wrote as one of the ascendancy, and in his initial declarations of sympathy for the repressed Catholic Irish there is a touch of arrogant condescension".⁴⁶

The difficulties which arise from the tone of the first paper are greatly diminished if, instead of taking it as an ascendancy Protestant Irishman's address to his countrymen, we read it as an essay by a Tory Protestant observer standing a little apart from Ireland — by a *Blackwood's* contributor in other words. When regarded thus, the questions posed in the long opening paragraph become much more intelligible.

Oh, ye fair hills of holy Ireland, who dares sustain the strangled

46. *An Ascendancy of the Heart: Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Irish Literature in English* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1976), pp. 23-24.

calumny that you are not the land of our love? . . . Who is he who ventures to stand between us and your Catholic sons' goodwill? What though for three centuries they and we have made your valleys resound with clang of axe and broadsword, ringing on chainmail and plate armour, or with the thunder of artillery tearing their way in bloody lanes? . . . What though in times long past they startled your midnight echoes with our groans under the knife that spares neither bedridden age nor cradled infancy? . . . What though in sacred vengeance of that brave villainy we fattened two generations of your kites with heads of traitors?⁴⁷

The personal pronouns in this can be disentangled as follows: "you" and "your" refer to the personified territory of Ireland, whose "fair hills" are rhetorically addressed; "we" and "our" encompass at once the authorial voice of a *Blackwood's* writer and the natives of the larger island of Britain whose love for Ireland is witnessed by their willingness to fight for possession of it, and who make up most of the readership of *Blackwood's*; "they" and "theirs" indicate the indigenous original inhabitants of Ireland. The opening discussion is thus removed from a strictly internal dialogue between Catholic native and Protestant settler. The "heads of traitors" are the heads of those executed by the crown on charges of treason, and when a little further on the text speaks of "the nuptial knot" that is "tied and consecrated between us" the reference is specifically to the Act of Union between Britain and Ireland, not to some fancied reconciliation of Catholic native and Protestant ascendancy. The attitude displayed throughout this first essay is that of a superior, even ironically detached, outsider endeavouring to bring two quarrelling factions to a better understanding of each other:

We will not suffer two of the finest races of men in the world, the Catholic and the Protestant, or the Milesian and Anglo-Saxon, to be duped into mutual hatred by the tale-bearing go-betweens who may struggle in impudent malice against our honest efforts . . .

Some exhortations are addressed in particular to the Protestants, as these constituted the principal Irish readership of the periodical: "But let it first be our task to make the people of Ireland better acquainted with one another. We address in these pages the Protestant wealth and intelligence of the country." More generally,

47. Vol. III (April 1834), p. 456 (incorrectly numbered 465).

Ferguson suggests that Hardiman's recovery of valuable literary remains is an enterprise of value to a larger public outside Ireland – a public that corresponds closely to the bulk of *Blackwood's* subscribers: "Let us contribute our aid to this auspicious undertaking, and introduce the Saxon and the Scottish Protestant to an acquaintance with the poetical genius of a people hitherto unknown to them".⁴⁸ It can only be conjecture, but the irresistible conclusion is that not only are we indebted to *Blackwood's* for the original idea of the papers on Hardiman's *Irish Minstrelsy*, but also that the first of these papers is made up of material originally presented to the Scottish magazine, and that this accounts in large part for its idiosyncrasy of tone.

IV

Between 1834 and 1837 nothing from Ferguson appeared in *Blackwood's*. One obvious reason for this is the availability of the *University* as a more accessible outlet for his work. In February 1834 Ferguson registered as a student at Trinity College, and subsequently he moved to lodgings in Dublin, the city where he was to live for the rest of his life. His most notable undertaking throughout 1835 and into 1836 was the continuing *Hibernian Nights' Entertainments* which, as we have seen, was among the projects diverted from *Blackwood's* to the *Dublin University Magazine*. The death of William Blackwood, the editor who fostered Ferguson's work, in the summer of 1834 may have brought about a change in Ferguson's relationship with the Edinburgh periodical. The direction of the magazine was taken over by William's son, Alexander Blackwood, and he continued the process of consolidating it as a more staid and weightier magazine than it had been in the eighteen-twenties when Wilson, Lockhart and Maginn had let off their fireworks in the "Noctes Ambrosianae". "Maga" could still fire off a cracker or two, however, and Ferguson was responsible for two of them in the eighteen-thirties.

The first of these, published in October 1837, was "The Involuntary Experimentalist".⁴⁹ This story is of some significance in the history of nineteenth-century short fiction generally, in that it stands as the last of a number of remarkable sensation tales which were characteristic of *Blackwood's* during its first two decades of publication. "*Blackwood's* fiction" became a shorthand term for a type of story which concentrated on the state of consciousness of a suffering individual in the death-bed, death-cell, or similarly

48. *Ibid.*, p. 457.

49. Vol. XLII (October 1837), p. 487-92.

in extremis. One of the earliest of these stories had been William Maginn's "The Man in the Bell" in November 1821; through most of the eighteen-thirties the genre was continued by the successful and long-running "Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician" by Samuel Warren.⁵⁰ When that series eventually came to an end in the middle of 1837, Ferguson's story provided an opportune tailpiece, having as it does a medical protagonist also.

Ferguson had already made a tentative approach to the sensation tale in "The Forrest-Race Romance" with its blazing fire-ship, but the romantic element of that story dilutes the more sensational aspects. There is no such dilution in "The Involuntary Experimentalist". A young doctor is returning to the centre of Dublin late one night after a sick-call in Harold's Cross when he passes a burning distillery. He joins in the firefighting efforts, but becomes trapped in one of the huge copper vats of the distillery as the building collapses around him. In the vat he is isolated from direct contact with the flames outside but not, of course, from the rapidly increasing heat. The predicament is awful but, good medical man that he is, he takes the opportunity to note down some first-hand observations on the reactions of the human body when subjected to great heat. These notes are reproduced *verbatim* in the text of the story, diary-fashion.

The central event is grounded in fact, as the story's opening sentence makes clear: "The destruction by fire of the distillery of Mr B----- in Dublin, some time since, will be in the recollection of many of your Irish readers". The distillery was that of Mr J. Bushby in Fumbally Lane in the Liberties area of Dublin.⁵¹ Ferguson's story had a resonance which extended far beyond Dublin, however. As the last of the *Blackwood's* sensation stories it triggered Pole's delicious piece "How To Write a *Blackwood's* Article" and the accompanying tale, "The Scythe of Time". Poe portrays Mr Blackwood offering advice to an earnest young aspirant contributor in his office, and listing the stories which have succeeded in his magazine. The list which Poe puts into his mouth is not wholly accurate (not all of the stories mentioned actually appeared in "*Blackwood's*") but it is an early checklist of the magazine's sensation fiction, including "The Involuntary Experimentalist", all about a gentleman who got baked in an oven, and came out alive and well, although certainly done to a turn.⁵²

50. This ran from August 1830 to August 1837.

51. 28 March 1838, NLS 4045 f 155.

52. *Collected Works*, ed. Thomas O. Mabbott (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978), 3 vols, II, p. 340.

But as well as parodying this type of writing, Poe also learned from it. "The Involuntary Experimentalist" is recognisably one of the models for his own tales,⁵³ so that Ferguson made a significant contribution to a literary tradition far removed from the Celtic renaissance.

The issue of *Blackwood's* for May 1838 carried no less than three pieces from Ferguson: "A Vision of Noses", which poked fun at the phrenology fad, a sonnet on a painting of Niagara Falls by a Mr Wall, and the exuberant "Father Tom and the Pope; or, A Night at the Vatican".⁵⁴ This last has been acclaimed as one of the high spots of nineteenth-century comic writing, although Ferguson himself was initially chary of admitting authorship. Yeats admired the piece before he knew Ferguson to be the author, and in an anthology of Irish writing he ascribed it to William Maginn.⁵⁵ The misattribution was sufficiently widespread at the end of the century for Lady Ferguson to ask Blackwood in 1894 for a statement confirming that her husband was indeed the author.⁵⁶ So ended sixty years of confusion not altogether unforeseen by Ferguson, although it had not been Maginn whom he had had in mind when requesting that "Father Tom and the Pope" be published anonymously:

I am very desirous not to be known as the author. It will be laid at Carleton's door or Maxwell's and they can both bear the misimputation; but, for myself, I am just about to be called to the bar here, and I confess I wouldn't like to lose the patronage of every Papist attorney as I infallibly would if they suspect me of breathing a syllable against their dogma.⁵⁷

The piece survived on the strength of its comic spirit, but it was written with an urgent reference to contemporary affairs in Dublin. The "Father Tom" of the title is a caricature of Father Thomas Maguire (1792-1849), parish priest of Ballinamore in Leitrim and "modern Hercules of dogmatical controversy".⁵⁸ In April 1827 he had established his reputation in a six-day public debate on the subjects of infallibility, purgatory and

53. See Michael Allen, *Poe and the British Magazine Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

54. Vol. XLIII (May, 1838), pp. 607-19; p. 647; pp. 648-60.

55. *Representative Irish Tales*, ed. W.B. Yeats (n.d.).

56. 20 November (1894), NLS f 18, and *SSFID*, I, pp. 274-75.

57. 28 March 1838, NLS 4045 f 155.

58. *Catholic Registry* (Dublin, 1840), p. 158.

transubstantiation; the chairmen for that debate were Admiral Robert Dudley Oliver and Daniel O'Connell, and a transcript of the proceedings was published soon afterwards.⁵⁹ His opponent then was a Protestant clergyman, the Reverend Richard Pope, whose name is punned upon in the title of Ferguson's article. Contrary to Lady Ferguson's account of the background to this article,⁶⁰ however, Pope is of no more than peripheral relevance to the episode by 1838. In the spring of that year Maguire was again active in Dublin, giving a series of sermons in the Church of Adam and Eve on Merchant's Quay which attracted large congregations, including numbers of Protestants. "Father Tom and the Pope" was written as a debunking exercise, to counteract the effects of Maguire's rhetoric. After the piece had been sent to *Blackwood's* a further development took place when Maguire was challenged to another public debate by the Reverend Tresham Gregg, who was minister at Swift's Alley, aggravatingly close to Merchant's Quay along which Maguire's audiences passed. Ferguson was apprehensive about the outcome of this debate, given the reputation of Maguire and the possibility of the upholder of the Protestant cause becoming confused with a much more able namesake, the Reverend John Gregg – at this time Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross, and later one of the most eminent of nineteenth-century churchmen.⁶¹ Ferguson's article was given added urgency by the imminent debate, and it was published most opportunely in the May issue; the nine-day debate began on the twenty-ninth of that month.⁶²

"Father Tom and the Pope" takes the form of a series of letters from one Michael Heffernan, a Leitrim schoolmaster up on a visit to Dublin, who is introduced mainly to allow the story to be told in the dialect of Maguire's own parish and from a viewpoint of blind partisanship. He tells how Maguire, on meeting the Pope for "a night at the Vatican", first beats him in a drinking contest and then outwits him in theology, Latin, metaphysics and algebra. Maguire also shows signs of making off with the Pope's attractive young housekeeper. This last was a piquant thrust, as ten years before Maguire had been in court accused of abducting a young

59. *Authenticated Report of a Discussion which took place between the Rev. Richard T.D. Pope and the Rev. Thomas Maguire in the Lecture Room of the Dublin Institution on the 19th, 20th, 21st, 23rd, 24th, 25th of April 1827.* (Dublin, 1827).

60. *SSFID*, I, p. 105.

61. 9 April 1838, NLS 4945 f 157.

62. *Authenticated Report of the Discussion between the Rev. T.D. Gregg and the Rev. T. Maguire in the Round Room of the Rotunda* (Dublin, 1839).

girl; the oratory of Daniel O'Connell secured his acquittal of what appears to have been a trumped-up charge.⁶³ Throughout, Ferguson's rumbunctiousness is marked by a sense of fun, with an occasional mix of wholesome vulgarity, which render it typical of the eighteen-thirties, a much more robust decade than those which succeeded it. Maguire's "dexterity" is demonstrated in the contrast in bog-Latin, which has the Pope and Maguire trying to sustain a conversation without recourse to any English words. Maguire wins by pretending that the amount of drink he has taken has put him in pressing need of a vessel in which to relieve himself and making as if to use one of the Pope's prized ornaments; the latter's alarm is so great that he breaks into the vernacular to protest. The night's entertainment ends with the Pope being carried off to bed considerably the worse for wear, while an unruffled Maguire lets himself out of the Vatican, taking with him his dog and what little is left of the poteen he brought with him.

V

Ferguson essayed several different forms in his writing during the eighteen-thirties, building on the self-confidence which came with the cachet of being a *Blackwood's* writer. It was by no means all apprentice work. As well as the discovery and exploration of Irish lyric poetry, during this decade Ferguson made his first experiments with long narrative poetry; at the same time he was developing his antiquarian interests. When eventually the two last-named combined to produce his epic poem *Congal*, the metre he employed was that of his early short poem in *Blackwood's*, "The Forging of the Anchor": rhymed couplets of iambic fourteeners. The range of Ferguson's early work suggests that his writing career might have developed in any one of a number of directions. He became an Irish writer on Irish themes only gradually, and it was by no means inevitable that he should do so. For a large section of his readership the change hardly took place at all. In later decades of the century, when his treatment of Irish heroic material had little success in finding an audience in Britain, stories such as "The Involuntary Experimentalist", "The Wet Wooing" and "Father Tom and the Pope" remained current and were republished in the popular *Tales from Blackwood's* series (twelve volumes, 1859-1862). "Father Tom" was still serviceable in 1933 when it appeared in *Humorous Tales from Blackwood's*. While these pieces have their

63. *A Report of the Trial of the Action in which Bartholomew McGahan was Plaintiff and the Rev. Thomas Maguire Defendant, on December 13th and 14th 1827* (Dublin, 1827).

strengths, the fact that it should have been only this side of Ferguson's work which (to his later chagrin) found ready acceptance in Britain indicates that readership's reluctance to treat certain types of Irish material seriously or attentively.

Readers nowadays, eyeing Ferguson's work from this side of the Anglo-Irish renaissance, need to be equally on guard against a similar partiality of response. The tone of "Father Tom and the Pope" is far removed from the later, more public, Sir Samuel Ferguson, Q.C., LL.D., Deputy Keeper of Public Records and President of the Royal Irish Academy. It is, however, of a kind with the enthusiasm for Irish popular poetry which led him to take issue with Hardiman who had claimed that *Róisín Dubh* is a political allegory, and to declare instead that it is "the song of a priest in love, of a priest in love, too, who has broken his vow".⁶⁴

Revisionism has come in several forms. One of the earliest stories in what subsequently became *The Hibernian Nights' Entertainments* was "Shane O'Neill's Last Amour", which appeared in *Blackwood's* in February 1834; in the checklist appended to the biography of her husband Lady Ferguson gives it more delicately as "Shane O'Neill".⁶⁵ Ferguson himself in later life suppressed some of his more nationalist songs.⁶⁶ Most powerfully of all, Yeats has handed on to us the image of him as "like some aged sea-king sitting among the inland wheat and poppies – the savour of the sea about him, and its strength".⁶⁷ Seen thus, he cuts an imposing figure indeed, but it is a figure behind which one can all too easily lose sight of the more versatile Ferguson of the eighteen-thirties, at a time when he was a young man very much in his element.*

*I should like to record my grateful acknowledgement to the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland for permission to quote from the letters of Samuel Ferguson, and to the University of Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities for a Visiting Research Fellowship which enabled me to work on the correspondence.

64. "Hardiman's Irish Minstrelsy – No. II", *Dublin University Magazine* (August 1834), vol. IV, pp. 157-58.

65. *SSFID*, II, p. 370. In the posthumously published three-volume edition of *The Hibernian Nights' Entertainments* (Dublin, 1887), the story appears as "An Adventure of Shane O'Neill".

66. *Davis, Mangan, Ferguson?: Tradition and the Irish Writer*, Writings by W.B. Yeats and Thomas Kinsella, p. 43n.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 47.