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Anthologizing Sir Samuel Ferguson: Literature, History, Politics

ABSTRACT

Although Sir Samuel Ferguson is generally recognized as one of the key figures of mid-nineteenth-century Irish literature, there has been no major edition of his poems since 1916, as a result of which his work tends to be known to the general reader through selections published in anthologies. The essay analyzes the selections of Ferguson's work in anthologies of Irish literature published between 1895 and 2010 in an attempt to assess the impact of the cultural dynamics of twentieth-century Ireland on the interpretation of Ferguson's achievement as a poet. The evidence collected demonstrates that the image of Ferguson perpetuated by most twentieth-century anthologists, most of them Hibernocentric in approach, was that of a respectable if rather old-fashioned Romantic nationalist antiquarian, whose work focused primarily on familiarizing the Victorian reader with the ancient myths and traditions of Ireland. This interpretation of Ferguson's achievement, motivated, it is argued, by the predominantly nationalist agenda of modern Ireland's cultural establishment, has largely marginalized the other side of Ferguson—a political thinker committed to the unionist cause and vehemently opposed to the violence perpetrated by the emergent Irish republican movement and culminating in the Phoenix Park murders of 1882, which formed the subject of two of Ferguson's most powerful late poems, "At the Polo-Ground" and "In Carey's Footsteps."

ABSTRACT

It is one of the most bizarre paradoxes of Irish literary history that Sir Samuel Ferguson, famously hailed by W. B. Yeats as “the greatest poet Ireland has produced” (qtd. in Frayne 103), remains to this day a somewhat elusive figure, perhaps more so than any of the other major Irish writers of the nineteenth century. While his work has over the years attracted a considerable degree of academic research, as is demonstrated, in particular, by the monographs produced by Malcolm Brown (1973), Robert O’Driscoll (1976), Peter Denman (1990), and Eve Patten (2004), it is rather surprising that there is to date no major critical biography, and indeed no modern critical edition of his works: it is now nearly a hundred years since the publication of Alfred Perceval Graves’s edition of the poems (1916), and since then the only other collection has been a tiny volume published in 1963 by Padraic Colum. In recent years, Ferguson’s *œuvre* has become more easily available through reprints of nineteenth-century originals and, even more significantly, through the increasing availability of electronic resources; this, however, does not change the fact that for several decades now the majority of readers, academic and non-academic alike, have familiarized themselves with Ferguson’s poetry, in the first instance, through reading selections of his work included in anthologies. It can therefore be argued that the perception, among non-specialist readers in particular, of Ferguson’s art and of his place in Irish literary culture is likely to have been influenced, more so than would have been the case with some of his contemporaries, by the choices made by anthology editors; as a result, the Ferguson known to most late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers is not so much the “real” Ferguson as a cultural construct, a product of the process of selection and exclusion that lies at the heart of any attempt to establish a canon, to define a tradition, or even to select a list of personal favourites. It is the purpose of the present essay to try to investigate how this constructed identity of Sir Samuel Ferguson has developed over the last hundred years or so, and to assess its impact on the popular perception of his contribution to nineteenth-century Irish literary culture and cultural politics.

Nineteenth-century Irish writing, and particularly poetry, has over the years been served by anthologists remarkably well: nearly every decade, since the late nineteenth century, has produced a significant new anthology, some of them one-volume selections bringing together works produced during a particular period, written in a particular genre, or exploring a particular theme, and others multi-volume projects designed to offer a comprehensive survey of writing representative of the Irish literary

culture as it developed over the centuries. The present study focuses on sixteen collections, ranging from W. B. Yeats's 1895 *Book of Irish Verse* to the 2010 *Penguin Book of Irish Poetry*, edited by Patrick Crotty. The focus of all of the anthologies is specifically Irish: the works of Sir Samuel Ferguson tend not to be included in general anthologies of Anglophone literature (there is, for example, no mention of him in Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom's Victorian volume of *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* [1973], or in Christopher Ricks's *New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* [1987], or indeed in Valentine Cunningham's Blackwell anthology *The Victorians* [2000])—which is, in itself, a significant indication of the fact that his work does not achieve the same kind of recognition in the broader pan-British context of Victorian literary culture as it does in its specifically Irish context. Most of the anthologies researched for the purposes of this study offer some form of general introduction, clarifying the approach adopted by the editor(s) in the process of compiling the volume, and sometimes offering brief critical comments on the work of authors included in (and sometimes excluded from) the selection.

Thus, for example, W. B. Yeats notes, in his preface to *A Book of Irish Verse* (1895; revised 1900), that his aim is “to separate what has literary value from what has only a patriotic and political value, no matter how sacred it has become to us” (xv). His introductory essay on “Modern Irish Poetry” sets Ferguson, alongside William Allingham and Aubrey de Vere, all of them “working apart from politics” (xxiii), in contrast to the politically-minded poets associated with the Young Ireland movement, particularly Thomas Davis and James Clarence Mangan. Yeats stresses Ferguson's indebtedness to the traditions of Ireland's bardic culture, and in the broader sense to the tradition of the Homeric epic:

He had not the subtlety of feeling, the variety of cadence of a great lyric poet, but he has touched, here and there, an epic vastness and naïveté, as in description in *Congal* of the mire-stiffened mantle of the giant spectre Mananan macLir, striking against his calves with as loud a noise as the mainsail of a ship makes, “when with the coil of all its ropes it beats the sounding mast.” He is frequently dull, for he often lacked the “minutely appropriate words” necessary to embody those fine changes of feeling which enthrall the attention; but his sense of weight and size, of action and tumult, has set him apart and solitary, an epic figure in a lyric age. (xxiv–xxv)

Yeats's selection of Ferguson's poems does not, however, quite reflect this judgment: he does not include in his anthology any excerpts from *Congal*, and the closest he comes to including a narrative poem is in his choice of the ballad-like “The Vengeance of the Welshmen of Tirawley.” Otherwise,

Yeats's selection brings together poems based on Irish myths ("Aideen's Grave," "Deirdre's Lament for the Sons of Usnach"), Irish folklore ("The Fairy Well of Lagnanay"), popular Irish songs ("The Fair Hills of Ireland"), and the traditional motif of the loss of ancient Irish culture ("Lament over the Ruins of the Abbey of Timoleague"); the only poem carrying a modern, contemporaneous relevance is "Lament for the Death of Thomas Davis."

Yeats's anthology established a pattern followed by many of his successors, with the editors stressing that the approach they adopted was in some way objective, whether on the grounds of aesthetic judgment or the representativeness of the selection, and their choice of Ferguson's poems focusing clearly on works of broadly antiquarian character. Thus, for example, John Cooke, in *The Dublin Book of Irish Verse, 1728–1909* (1909)—"a fully representative volume of Anglo-Irish Verse" (v)—and Alfred Perceval Graves in *The Book of Irish Poetry* (1914)—"a selection of Irish Poetry, old and new, old and modern Gaelic poems in English verse translation and Anglo-Irish poetry of the last two centuries which have most appealed to me as illustrating the leading features of Gaelic, Hiberno-English and Anglo-Irish verse" (xvi)—both select for their volumes a number of poems, the great majority of them from *Lays of the Western Gael* (though Graves includes also two excerpts from *Congal*) and nearly all of them deriving, in one way or another, from Irish mythology, tradition and folklore; the only exception is again "Lament for the Death of Thomas Davis," included in Graves's volume.

A rather different approach is taken by Padraic Colum in his 1922 *Anthology of Irish Verse*. Published in New York at the time when Ireland was emerging as a newly independent nation, the volume seeks to convey, through its selection of poems, what it describes, in words which sound rather unfortunate to the modern ear, as the "racial distinctiveness" (4) of Irish poetry, absent, in the editor's view, from early Anglo-Irish writing, and only infused into poetry written in English through the impact, direct or indirect, of the tradition of writing in Gaelic. This interpretation inevitably puts Ferguson very much in the centre of the development of the tradition of Irish writing in English:

He took the trouble to learn Gaelic, and when he translated the words of Irish folk-songs to the music that they were sung to, he created, in half a dozen instances, poems that have a racial distinctiveness. Ferguson had what Moore had not—the ability to convey the Gaelic spirit. (8)

Colum praises "Dear Dark Head," "one of the most beautiful of Irish love songs[,] . . . a poem that carries into English the Gaelic music and

the Gaelic feeling” (8); he is more critical of Ferguson’s re-telling of the ancient sagas (“he made them conform a good deal to Victorian rectitudes” [8–9]), though he still recognizes that the poet “blazed a trail in the trackless region of Celtic romance” (9) with his use of stirring imagery and “a sense of vast and mysterious action” (9). The actual selection of Ferguson’s poems for the anthology is predictable: five pieces based on antiquarian material and “Lament for the Death of Thomas Davis.”

A rather similar focus on the centrality of Gaelic heritage to the tradition of Irish poetry characterizes another US-published anthology, Kathleen Hoagland’s *1000 Years of Irish Poetry* (1947). In her view, “of the poets in the field of translation Samuel Ferguson in his conception comes nearest to the heroic in the poetry of the Celt—the poetry found in the earliest epics—and nobody has rendered more exquisitely the love songs” (xxviii). Discussing his work in the context of the tradition of the Young Irelanders, she goes on to comment:

Ferguson, endowed with a mighty imagination and poetic narrative power, nourished his talent on the simplicity of Homer. He forged strong, crude poetry to present the persons and events of Ireland’s ancient literary past in epic manner. The finest example of this is *Congal*. . . . In that tour-de-force his talent for achieving architectural structure in narrative poetry appears at his best.

The first work of Ferguson incorporating ancient myth and saga was *The Tain Quest*, a long and plodding poem having within it magnificent passages. . . . Concerning Ferguson’s ballads, Swinburne said of the “Welshmen of Tirawley” that it was one of the greatest ballads of the 19th century. As a contrast to this poet’s sweeping style, his “Fairy Thorn,” and his many Irish-Gaelic translations, show a magical lyric quality that is not suspected by those who know only his more difficult work. (xlviii)

Hoagland’s extensive selection—seventeen poems, the second highest number in the anthologies investigated during the research on this paper—follows the established pattern, with the bulk of the material consisting of a broad range of myth-based and folklore-based poems and songs; as has by then become something of a pattern, “Lament for the Death of Thomas Davis” provides the only example of Ferguson’s engagement with the contemporaneous world.

Geoffrey Taylor’s introductory note on Ferguson in his 1951 collection of *Irish Poets of the Nineteenth Century* opens with the rather refreshing statement that “of all poets, except perhaps Browning, Samuel Ferguson was the most inconspicuously normal” (109). The editor’s scepticism about the value of his poetic *œuvre* as a whole (“his poems . . . have never been collected—nor . . . is there the smallest reason why they should be”

[110]) is juxtaposed with a clear articulation of the way in which Ferguson's poetry occupies a middle ground between the more explicitly Celtic-influenced work of poets like Mangan, and the more conventional English-style poetry of writers such as Allingham:

He almost always chose Irish themes and he was a successful translator from the Irish; but even most of his translations, apart from occasional Gaelic refrains, could take a place in any English anthology without calling attention to themselves. (110)

Among Ferguson's longer poems, Taylor praises "The Welshmen of Tirawley" and suggests that *Congal* is not particularly readable; on the other hand, he expresses his appreciation of the shorter poems, as "they have always an honesty and frequently a felicity which will commend them in any Victorian revival" (111). All in all, his extensive selection (eighteen items, including both complete poems and excerpts from longer works), is—not surprisingly, perhaps, given the way he distances himself from the hitherto prevalent Hibernocentric discourse of his predecessors—distinctively more varied in tone: while it is still dominated by some of Ferguson's best-known antiquarian pieces, it also includes a small number of poems unrelated to Irish themes (such as three sonnets inspired by the paintings of Paolo Veronese), as well as, very importantly, the hitherto neglected by anthologists—though frequently reprinted in the early years of Ferguson's career—"The Forging of the Anchor."

Taylor's mixed feelings about the quality of Ferguson's poetry are reflected by some of the other anthologists of the post-war period. Lennox Robinson states quite openly, in his Preface to *The Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1958), that if poets such as Ferguson are underrepresented in his anthology (the selection includes four antiquarian poems and the Davis "Lament"), "it is to make room for the others, the ones who died only yesterday or the ones whose best work lies in the future" (v). Donagh MacDonagh's introduction to the volume notes Ferguson only very briefly, and then exclusively in the context of the work of his more colourful predecessors; comparing him with Mangan, MacDonagh says:

Samuel Ferguson, his antithesis, translated felicitously and melliflously, though with less respect for the original metre and rhythms. At his best he broke free from the vapid verse-forms of his day and reconstructed, as did Callanan and O'Curry, the country speech of the Irish poet. (xv)

John Montague's *Faber Book of Irish Verse* (1974) reduces the amount of space devoted to Ferguson even further; two of his translations are hidden

(without reference to his authorship of them on the contents page) in a section on “A Wandering Voice: Songs from the Irish,” while the main body of the anthology offers, under Ferguson’s name, only the ubiquitous “Lament.” Montague’s critical comments on Ferguson are rather eccentric and sometimes self-contradictory: having described his adaptations of the Irish sagas as “dated and literary” (32), and having criticized the conventionality of some of his rhymes, he nonetheless goes on to talk about his “solid craftsmanship” (33), and he clearly cannot quite separate Ferguson’s personal life from the role he played on Ireland’s literary and cultural scene when he says that “Ferguson was full of the contradictions of his period: an Ulster Unionist who married a Guinness heiress and was made a knight, he invented the Celtic Twilight” (32). Thomas Kinsella’s introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986) mentions Ferguson only in the context of his review of James Hardiman’s *Irish Minstrelsy*, adding that he “himself produced many versions and verse re-tellings from the Irish during a long and respectable career” (xxvii). The Ferguson selection in Kinsella’s anthology is again quite narrow (five poems), though it is notable for the inclusion of the hitherto unanthologized “At the Polo-Ground.”

Among the anthologies produced over the last forty years, and still widely available to contemporary readers, by far the most generous account of the significance of Ferguson’s contribution to Irish poetry, and the most extensive sample of his poems, can be found in Brendan Kennelly’s *Penguin Book of Irish Verse* (1970). While granting that Ferguson is less inspired and less passionate than Mangan, Kennelly states:

The importance of Ferguson’s contribution to Irish poetry cannot be over-emphasized. It was Ferguson, more than any other single poet, who proved that old mythology was an almost infinite source of inspiration. . . . [His] translations, mainly love poems, show Ferguson’s technical competence and variety, his liking for vigorous rhythms, and his ability to capture the essence of the original. . . . [His] passion [for all things Gaelic and Irish] was the driving-force behind Ferguson’s life as a poet and it made him place all his faith in the mythology of his own land. The bulk of his poetry is heroic, though he also produced some fine lyrics. (35)

Kennelly then goes on to discuss *Congal* and “Conary,” praising the latter for “the restraint with which Ferguson evokes a terrifying supernatural world, in the frightening light of which a great man’s destiny is spun to its tragic end” (36), and describing the poem as “the work of a rich, disciplined imagination” (36). Not surprisingly, the selection of poems in Kennelly’s anthology is relatively extensive, with eleven poems, mostly of

antiquarian character, but including also “The Forging of the Anchor” and “Lament for the Death of Thomas Davis.”

The more recent anthologies tend to treat Ferguson with what could best be described as respectful indifference. Seamus Deane, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), reprints a rather conventional selection of eight poems, and his introductory essay on “Poetry and Song, 1800–1890” notes the historical significance of Ferguson’s central idea—“his pursuit of a cultural renovation that would link together Catholic and Protestant in a single, shared identity” (7); although dismissing Ferguson’s achievement as a poet, Deane grudgingly recognizes the logic, intellectual cohesion, and cultural impact of his grand project:

Nevertheless, he did have an audience and he did have a background out of which he could appeal to that audience. As a result, his work does not suffer from the occasionalism of many others. It is governed by a purpose and, in remarkable fashion, manages to achieve it. For him, translation was not an action that generated crisis in his writing. It liberated him as a poet and helped him to attain his best effects. . . . Ferguson’s theory of cultural politics was predicated on the notion that union between the Irish and English civilizations was possible and desirable. . . . He seeks union between two languages and two cultures; his translations are his proof that the search is justified. (7)

In twenty-first century anthologies—W. J. McCormack’s *Ferocious Humanism* (2000), Stephen Regan’s *Irish Writing* (2004), Peter van de Kamp and A. Norman Jeffares’s *Irish Literature: The Nineteenth Century* (2007), and Patrick Crotty’s *Penguin Book of Irish Poetry* (2010)—Ferguson’s presence is even less prominent: though mentioned in passing in the introductory essays, and awarded enough space for a few poems well familiar to readers of earlier anthologies, he is included and acknowledged but certainly not focused on—an ossified presence from a bygone age, deserving of a token gesture of respect but clearly unlikely to generate any form of genuine enthusiasm or excitement.

Is this vision of Ferguson entirely fair though? If we undertake a simple statistical analysis of the representation of his work in the sixteen anthologies researched for the purposes of this essay, we shall get the impression that in some ways it probably is: the overwhelming majority of Ferguson’s poems made available to readers in anthologies published over the last 115 years are his translations from the Irish and his renderings of tales from Irish mythology: the list of favourites includes “Dear Dark Head” (anthologized 12 times), “Cashel of Munster,” “Deirdre’s Lament for the Sons of Usnach” (9), “The Burial of King Cormac” (8), “The Coolun,” “The Fair Hills of Ireland” (7), “The Fairy Thorn” (6), and “Pastheen Finn” (5).

From the literary-critical point of view, it is difficult not to find this list disappointing: the fact that the most prominent place among Ferguson's antiquarian poems is occupied by the saccharine and self-indulgent "Dear Dark Head," while the dynamic and muscular story of "The Welshmen of Tirawley" does not make it to the top eight, cannot be explained away by suggesting that "Dear Dark Head" is shorter and therefore easier to include in a one-volume collection. The anthologists clearly choose to present to their readers an image of Ferguson as a polite sentimental author of conventional love poems and elegiac celebrations of the lost Gaelic past, a dutiful if rather unimaginative collector of minor curiosities of Ireland's literary heritage, and an heir to the tradition of the drawing-room art of Thomas Moore—with his typically Victorian scholarly earnestness replacing Moore's easy-going charm and musicality.

But there is more to the image of Ferguson emerging from this discussion than that rather bland portrait. Although Ferguson's antiquarian poems constitute over 80 per cent of all the anthology entries analyzed here, the single most frequently anthologized of his poems is in fact his "Lament for the Death of Thomas Davis," included in fourteen of the sixteen collections researched. The prominence given to this poem in the anthologies, all of them dedicated specifically to Irish writing and therefore espousing, to a greater or lesser extent, some form of a Hibernocentric approach to literary and cultural history, seems to indicate that the "Lament" is meant to be read not only in private terms, as an expression of Ferguson's personal homage to Davis, but also in a broader public, and indeed political context: surrounded as it tends to be in most of the anthologies by poems testifying to Ferguson's commitment to the Romantic idea of cultural nationalism, "Lament for the Death of Thomas Davis" begins to sound almost like a declaration of allegiance, linking Ferguson to the ideological, cultural, and indeed political tradition leading from Davis and Mangan to the early Yeats. In a paradoxical reversal of what critics like David Lloyd and Terry Eagleton have described as Ferguson's participation in the process of the appropriation of the ancient Gaelic civilization of Ireland by the colonizing forces of Anglophone Protestant imperialism, the anthologies present the work of Ferguson primarily in the context of Irish nationalist discourse. This approach may not be entirely unjustified perhaps given Ferguson's own complex ideological position in the ambivalent and highly nuanced world of mid- and late-nineteenth-century Irish cultural politics, but it is nonetheless easily misinterpreted in the context of the rather more dichotomous ideological and political discourse of twentieth-, and indeed twenty-first-century Ireland. A modern reader discovering Ferguson through anthologies, and unaware of his background, heritage, and public career, could easily be forgiven for adopting a view of his poetry that, considered in the broader

context of his work, could well be seen as unbalanced and biased, a product of a subtle form of cultural manipulation and indeed appropriation.

The nature of this manipulation becomes clear when we consider the works of Ferguson which are excluded from the anthologies, or which are included in them only occasionally. It is of course important to accept that anthology selections cannot always be fully representative, and have to take into consideration the aesthetic qualities of the works selected as much as their historical, political, or cultural significance—in the context of Ferguson, it would be difficult to blame anthology editors for rejecting the ideologically significant but artistically questionable poems from “An Irish Garland,” or indeed the rather old-fashioned and overly topical “Dublin.” It is much more surprising, however, to realize that only four of the anthologies, none of them, interestingly, published before 1950, reprint “The Forging of the Anchor”—not only one of the most popular of Ferguson’s early poems during his lifetime, but indeed the most direct expression, in his poetry, of the dynamism and energy of the 1830s, its enthusiastic celebration of modernity and progress standing in dramatic contrast to the much more restrained tone of his later writings. It is difficult to resist the impression that the sheer intensity of the poem, with the industrial setting of what can be assumed to be modern Belfast standing in dramatic contrast with the near-timelessness of the world of Gaelic Ireland evoked in his later antiquarian writings, does not fit in with the essentially traditionalist image of Ferguson evoked elsewhere in the anthologies.

It is, however, in relation to another poem, or rather pair of poems, that the bias of nearly all modern anthologists of Irish poetry becomes self-evident. Only two of the sixteen anthologies researched for the purposes of this study (and, significantly, both of them published only over the last twenty-five years) reprint one of the last, and yet one of the most powerful, of Ferguson’s poems, “At the Polo-Ground,” and none of them finds room for its companion piece, “In Carey’s Footsteps.” Rather more ambitious on the formal level than most of Ferguson’s works, in adapting the Browningsque model of the dramatic monologue for the purposes of topical commentary on the Phoenix Park murders of 1882, the two poems offer a powerful analysis of the complex ideological, social, moral, and psychological aspects of the phenomenon of political terrorism, as significant for late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers as they were in the late-nineteenth century, in the British Isles as much as in Continental Europe and beyond. To the contemporary reader, the two poems are perhaps among the most interesting, and indeed the most disturbing, of Ferguson’s works—and yet it is, it seems, this very modern tone of the poems, their explicit engagement with the complex socio-political reality of modern Ireland, and their unambiguous adoption of a particular political

standpoint, that must have proved uncomfortable to the pre-1980s anthology editors, as they fundamentally undermine the received popular perception of Ferguson as a conventional late-Romantic nationalist antiquarian, uncontroversial and respectable but at the same time rather insipid and increasingly outdated, and likely to be of interest to academic critics rather than to the general reader. Ferguson's interpretation of the Phoenix Park conspiracy (and by extension, of the more radical forms of Irish nationalism) as motivated by a combination of greed, envy and moral cowardice, stands in direct contrast to the idealized vision of the Irish revolutionary tradition which shaped much of the Irish cultural and political discourse from the late nineteenth century until relatively recent times; as a result, "At the Polo-Ground" and "In Carey's Footsteps" show the poet to be a far more complex, far more interesting and indeed far more controversial thinker than he is generally credited to be, but also as one who seems to no longer fit into the conventional grand narrative of nineteenth-century Irish nationalism which remains one of the defining myths of modern Irish identity—or rather, as one who would no longer fit into that narrative if the two poems were more easily available, and in consequence more widely known, than on the evidence of the material discussed in this paper they appear to have been. In consequence, then, it is difficult to resist the impression that the near-universal eradication of the Phoenix Park poems from the world of popular imagination that has resulted from the consistent exclusion of them from the great majority of modern anthologies of Irish poetry is in fact a form of ideologically motivated manipulation of the image of Sir Samuel Ferguson, aimed at maintaining a particular image of his contribution to modern Irish culture, an image that is incomplete and consequently unbalanced. If this is indeed the case, then there is perhaps all the more reason for trying to retrieve his work from the relative obscurity into which much of it has now settled; it is, perhaps, time to ensure that the full range of his *œuvre*, in all its diversity and complexity, becomes easily available not only to the academic audience, but also to the general reader.

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