

Rhona Brown, *Robert Fergusson and the Scottish Periodical Press*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012. Pp. 280. £65. ISBN 9781409420231 (hb); ISBN 9781409420248 (ebk).

Sebastian Mitchell, *Visions of Britain, 1730–1830: Anglo-Scottish Writing and Representation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 304, 32 b/w illus. \$90. ISBN 9781137290106.

Rhona Brown's *Robert Fergusson and the Scottish Periodical Press* and Sebastian Mitchell's *Visions of Britain* are two new monographs that consider national identity through language (Brown) and the relationship between text and image (Mitchell). They are considerably different publications: Brown's book is a single-author study while Mitchell considers a range of Anglo-Scottish writers and artists, but both offer intriguing new insights into their subjects.

Rhona Brown's exploration of Robert Fergusson's literary output and his role as 'house poet' of Walter Ruddiman Jr's *Weekly Magazine; or Edinburgh Amusement* in the years 1771 to 1774 is a nuanced, thoughtful and convincing re-examination of a poet often seen merely as a precursor to Burns. It encourages us to re-evaluate Fergusson's work through its magazine contexts, and retrieves him from the vernacular shadow of his popular Scots poems.

The introduction carefully sets out the argument of the book: that reading Fergusson as Burns's predecessor is far too limiting an approach, and that Fergusson's works should be seen in the context of the Scottish periodical press of the 1770s, where he quickly established himself as public poet and a cultural spokesperson on political, literary and aesthetic matters. Approaching Fergusson in the context of the *Weekly Magazine*, Brown argues, 'sharpens the focus of his poetic career and [...] ambitions' (8), and allows us to see the other side of Fergusson: as 'contemporary literary spokesman' (8).

Chapter 1 focuses on 1771, and offers a diligent close reading of the poems published that year. Fergusson first appeared in the Scottish periodical press in February 1771, and over the course of the year published poems in a variety of styles and genres: pastoral, seasonal, elegy, mock-heroic, in polished neo-classic English verse. Together these form his apprentice pieces, showing him as 'trying his talents' (39), exploring different literary forms and themes, and, through the poems' political content, setting him up as a very contemporary, modern writer. In this chapter Fergusson's politics are contrasted sharply with John Wilkes and his *North Briton*: many of his poems from that year show him upset with the inequality of Anglo-Scots relations, and his depiction of city life sets him up as a poet of the present, concerned with all aspects of human life and as an adjustor of traditions.

In Chapter 2 Brown traces Fergusson's rise in 1772. This year saw the publication of 'The Daft Days' in January, and thus is usually heralded as the 'proper' beginning of his literary career. However, as Brown argues, this is not quite true: although 1772 marks a change in the *Weekly Magazine*'s poetry section with its inclusion of vernacular poetry, only eight of the twenty-five poems Fergusson published in the *Magazine* that year were in Scots. Furthermore, 'The Daft Days' 'continues many of the concerns and preoccupations already outlined in Fergusson's English language productions of 1771' (41). Throughout this chapter Brown convincingly continues her discussion of Fergusson as spokesman of Edinburgh's public sphere.

Chapter 3 explores January to July 1773, with particular emphasis on 'The Farmer's Ingle', 'The Ghaists' and 'Leith Races'. Brown's thoughtful readings on these poems in the context of other contributions to the *Weekly Magazine* establishes Fergusson firmly as a

popular poet interested in the relationship between the past and present, who, far from being anti-Enlightenment, was keen to satirise current literary fashions, often in a ‘characteristic concoction of the comic and serious’ (119). This chapter also highlights Fergusson’s interest in the law and contemporary politics.

Chapter 4 focuses on Fergusson’s best-known poem, ‘Auld Reekie’. This period sees the beginning of the construction of Fergusson as a ‘vernacular poetic humorist’, (166) – a comic poet. Here, Brown again shows that correspondents to the *Weekly Magazine* confirmed Fergusson’s popularity. ‘Auld Reekie’ is shown to be a ‘characteristically contemporary poem’ (188); its portrayal of Edinburgh striking a balance between pastoral and urban, appearance and reality, and past and present.

In Chapter 5 Brown explores the latter half of 1773 – the period of Fergusson’s ‘Literary Zenith’ (189). The close readings of both vernacular and English poems in this chapter continue the argument set up earlier, of Fergusson as a contemporary poet, keenly aware of both rural and urban issues, and engaged with classical and sentimental themes. In this chapter we see Fergusson largely away from Edinburgh (commenting, for example, on Samuel Johnson’s tour of Scotland).

The final chapter traces responses to Fergusson’s death in October 1774, particularly through letters and poems published in the periodical press. Brown pulls together a number of ‘hitherto unnoticed’ responses to convincingly conclude her argument that Fergusson was not, as so often argued, a literary outcast, but instead valued as a poet and astute commentator in his lifetime.

Sebastian Mitchell’s *Visions of Britain* takes a chronological case study approach and explores six ‘set pieces’ in an interdisciplinary fusion of literature and art. The close reading and detailed analysis of individual works sits happily alongside ongoing critical reviews and engages the reader throughout in its meticulous examination of the relationship between art, literature and Britishness.

The first chapter focuses on James Thomson’s three major poems, *The Seasons*, *Liberty* and *The Castle of Indolence*. Mitchell argues that each poem corresponds to a different phase of ‘Thomson’s poetical national representation’ (13): Britishness and international outlooks in *The Seasons*, a concern with cyclical history in *Liberty* and the personal, confessional aspects of *The Castle of Indolence*.

In Chapter 2 Mitchell explores a number of Tobias Smollett’s works, from *The Regicide* and *The Tears of Scotland* to his well-known novels. Here, Mitchell’s argument lies in the relationship between subjective and objective, and Smollett’s representation of Britain, he argues, ‘is repeatedly structured in terms of the relationship of self to object’ (48). In this ‘dialectical nationalism’ the self ‘merges with the national material’ (48) interchangeably, presenting — like Mitchell’s book itself — a series of incidents that together, in their various domestic and international settings, allow us to piece together a subtle view of Britain.

Chapter 3 moves from literature to art: here, Allan Ramsay’s work is explored through the lens of David Hume’s sceptical empiricism. Mitchell’s central thesis here is that Ramsay’s portraits illustrate Hume’s hierarchical view of contemporary Britain, and he convincingly places Ramsay’s political writings in the context of his painting and the sort of social vision explored by Hume.

The fourth chapter is devoted to Ossian. Mitchell persuasively shows that Ossian is not just a means of national representation in the poetry and ongoing critical responses to it, but is indeed as strong in the visual arts. In British culture Ossian ‘often operates on the basis of a visual analogy’ (125), paradigmatically and aesthetically altering our notions of romanticism and heroism, and its odd (but highly successful) combination of the martial and the pacific.

In the fifth chapter Mitchell returns to earlier considerations of the self and the nation in his discussion of James Boswell. Mitchell debates Boswell's responses to a number of national perspectives in relation with the self in an astute argument that situates Boswell's (auto)biographical writings in a framework of writing as self-reflection and self-realisation.

The final chapter considers J.M.W. Turner's illustrations for the 12-volume edition of Sir Walter Scott's poetical works published by Robert Cadell in the 1830s. In particular, Mitchell examines these as an example of Anglo-Scottish collaboration, arguing that this functions as 'contributing to a more dynamic envisioning of British experience' (196) – a fitting 'closing national vision' (196) for a study that begins and ends with Scotland.

All in all, Brown and Mitchell offer a re-evaluation of authors, texts and works that have, perhaps, been read too narrowly in the past. Their arguments are convincing and sustained, and their meticulous research and engagement with scholars both contemporary and historic makes for two interesting and well-written companionable books.

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