Fame as the Forgotten Philosopher: Meditations on the Headstone of Adam Ferguson
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Fame as the Forgotten Philosopher: Meditations on the Headstone of Adam Ferguson

ROY SORENSEN

Scotland has atmospheric graveyards. The weathered grave markers are large enough to bear instructive inscriptions. I was introduced to my favourite epitaph by a fellow philosopher. We were on a stroll through the Cathedral graveyard adjoining St Andrews University. She drew my attention to the following words:

Here rest the mortal remains of Adam Ferguson LLD, Professor of moral philosophy in the University of Edinburgh. He was born at Logie hunted in the county of Perth on the 20th June 1723 and died in this city of St Andrews on the 22nd day of February 1816. He employed the interval betwixt his childhood and his grave with unostentatious and steady perseverance in acquiring and in diffusing knowledge and in the practice of public and of domestic virtue. To his venered memory this monument is erected by his children, that they may record his piety to God and benevolence to man, and commemorate the eloquence and energy with which he inculcated the precepts of morality and prepared the youthful mind for virtuous actions. But a more imperishable memorial to his genius exists in his philosophical and historical works, where classic elegance, strength of reasoning and clearness of detail secured the applause of the age in which he lived, and will long continue to deserve the gratitude and command the admiration of posterity.

My colleague and I exchanged blank looks. We did not recall Adam Ferguson. Our failure to remember Ferguson seemed to demonstrate how an epitaph can age into a self-refuting statement.

This glacial pragmatic paradox struck my fellow philosopher as poignant. Her embarrassment for Ferguson threatened to generalize how our scholarship be equally ground down by the mass of history? I noted that the inscription only said that Adam Ferguson’s scholarship deserved to be long remembered. Perhaps Ferguson had been spared by this subtle qualification.

On reflection, this was little comfort. Which is worse? To have one’s works forgotten because they were not worth remembering or to have them unfairly neglected?
Roy Sorensen

When I returned to the David Hume Tower at the University of Edinburgh (where I was lecturing for a semester), I passed a neighbouring building called the Adam Ferguson Building. To my professional embarrassment, I learned that he was a prominent figure in the Scottish Enlightenment. Although Professor Ferguson did not have the enormous intellectual legacy of his friends David Hume and Adam Smith, his reputation survives in political philosophy. He is remembered most as the intellectual historian who wrote *Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Although Hume could not shake his low opinion of the book, he was ‘agreeably disappointed’ when it quickly became a literary success. Hume praised Ferguson as ‘a Man of Sense, Knowledge, Taste, Elegance, & Morals’. There is good evidence that Hume resigned the Keepership of the Advocates’ Library so that Adam Ferguson could be his successor in that post.

Right up to his death, Hume kept up a pet debate: If Adam Ferguson, John Pringle, and David Hume were princes of adjacent states, how would they rule their kingdoms? Although Ferguson was a clergyman, he had martial virtues. This emerged while he was chaplain to the Black Watch (The Royal Highland Regiment). Sir Walter Scott tells a story in which Ferguson exceeded his commission at the Battle of Fontenoy. Instead of staying at rear as his commission required, Adam Ferguson led the column brandishing a broadsword. When ordered to the rear, Ferguson retorted ‘D__n my commission’ and tossed it towards the Colonel. John Pringle also had a soldierly aspect. So Hume had grounds for claiming that Prince Adam and Prince John would cultivate the arts of war. Hume said he would cultivate the arts of peace. To protect his kingdom, Prince David would give one of them a subsidy to fall upon the other. After Prince Adam and Prince John were exhausted by a long war, Prince David would end up as master of all three kingdoms.

Posterity has treated Adam Ferguson rather decently. True, he may not be remembered by some philosophers strolling by his grave. True, students at Edinburgh may fail to remember that the Adam Ferguson Building was named after a former professor of unusual wisdom and public spirit. But two hundred years after his death, appreciative scholars write articles about Adam Ferguson and note that his labours extended beyond theory and into practical matters. So I must awkwardly concede that, in truth, few scholars are remembered as well as Adam Ferguson. My apologies.

My pity has collapsed into self-pity. I wonder whether people will read my essays and books two centuries from now. At my age, Ferguson was warm friends with the best philosopher and the best
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economist of his time and was contributing to a cultural transformation. He had just published his most celebrated tome and had already written *A Sermon Preached in the Ersh Language, The Morality of Stage Plays Seriously Considered*, and *Analysis of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy*. I am optimistic about how much sand remains in my hour glass. But I am not likely to have as much as Adam Ferguson. He lived a healthy, active life until a week before his death at age ninety three.

Scholars take solace in the fact that their works are preserved in libraries. But an observation by an English contemporary of Ferguson, Samuel Johnson, demonstrates that mere preservation has the fragrance of formaldehyde and chalk dust:

No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes, than a public library; for who can see the wall crowded on every side by mighty volumes, the works of laborious meditation and accurate enquiry, now scarcelly known but by the catalogue, and preserved only to increase the pomp of learning, without considering how many hours have been wasted in vain endeavours, how often imagination has anticipated the praises of futurity, how many statues have risen to the eye of vanity, how many ideal converts have elevated zeal, how often wit has exulted in the eternal infamy of his antagonists, and ambition delighted in the gradual advances of her authority, the immutability of his decrees, and the perpetuity of her power?—*Rambler* 106

Scholars want to be read and thought about. Most will settle into unread oblivion. Will I join this silent majority?

It is more likely that one belongs to the majority than to the minority. The larger the majority, the higher the probability. Since the population has been growing exponentially and the living’s ability to recall the dead is fairly fixed, the forgotten will be increasingly well-represented in the future. The darkness of the past grows geometrically. Hope of escaping this icy shadow diminishes proportionately.

Nevertheless, I plan to come in from the cold. Mis-placed pity for Adam Ferguson can be turned into a gambit for lasting recognition. The enterprise springs from my epitaph:

**Here lies Roy Sorensen whose paradoxes will make him long remembered**

If I am long remembered for my paradoxes, then the epitaph is true. Well and good. If, as actuarial reasoning predicts, I am not long remembered, then my epitaph seems grimly self-refuting.
Roy Sorensen

You may wonder what is the point of courting the fate that I had mourned for Ferguson in the Cathedral graveyard. The answer lies in the resemblance my epitaph bears to the mythical Phoenix. My epitaph will rise from its ashes. To see how, suppose a philosopher, say the great-great-great grand daughter of my kind friend, discovers the epitaph but does not remember me. She concludes that the epitaph is false. Indeed, it is made false by her very failure to remember me. She is moved by the pathetic self-refuting nature of my epitaph. My kind friend’s great-great-great grand daughter will mention the poignant epitaph to great-great-great grandchildren of others.

These future epigraph readers will draw the lesson that commemorations should be cautiously composed. Better to play it safe like Abraham Lincoln. His famous ‘Gettysburg Address’ has a self-effacing line:

The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

The Gettysburg Address continues to be read by millions. By withstanding the test of time, Lincoln refuted himself in a flattering direction.

So isn’t it best to hedge one’s bet and predict that one will be forgotten? John Keats deepened his fame as a poet by insisting that his Italian tomb be pessimistically engraved with ‘Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water.’

Censorious souls will hold up my optimistic epitaph as a lesson to all who predict posthumous recognition. Perhaps, I will gain notoriety, even celebrity as the forgotten philosopher who received slow, quiet poetic justice.

Eventually someone with a temperament like mine will notice that no one can remember that Roy Sorensen is forgotten. For if someone did remember that Roy Sorensen is forgotten, then Roy Sorensen would be forgotten. After all, memory implies truth. Anyone who is forgotten is not remembered. I cannot be both remembered and not remembered. My words rebound off this contradiction and echo gratifying far into the future by reductio ad absurdum.

The self-defeating appearance of my epitaph is itself self-defeating. My epitaph becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy by a kind of double-negation.

This Phoenix phenomenon is not fool proof. Glory seekers are sometimes confronted by censors. In 355 BC., Herostratos con-
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fessed on the rack that he burned down the temple of Diana at Ephesus to spread his name. The Ephesians decreed that his memory be abolished.

Obviously, this censorship failed. The historian Theopompus frustrated the Ephesian decree by mentioning Herostratos. But I should not take comfort in examples of thwarted censorship. Acts of failed suppression form a biased sample which lead us to underestimate diligent censors.

Happily my epitaph is not an act of arson. Censors do not deign to suppress harmless pedantry. The real threat to my scheme is permanent indifference. If my epitaph is not sufficiently circulated, it is not apt to achieve its psychological effect.

My friends have consoled me with the observation that a paradox can exist without being recognized. Nelson Goodman’s grue paradox was a paradox before he discovered it and will remain a paradox after it is forgotten. The epitaph paradox is an abstract object that will forever hold a rightful place in the Platonic heavens.

Well, that is some consolation. However, it is a bit too reminiscent of Samuel Johnson’s dusty libraries. Writers have generally been moved by a legacy in which their creations really persist in the minds of future people. The Roman poet Horace compared this mental legacy favourably with that offered by mere metal and stone:

More durable than bronze, higher than
Pharaoh’s
Pyramids is the monument I have made,
A shape that angry wind or hungry rain
Cannot demolish, nor the innumerable
Ranks of the years that march in centuries.
I shall not wholly die: some part of me
Will cheat the goddess of death, for while
High Priest
And Vestal shall climb our Capitol in a hush,
My reputation shall keep green and growing.

Well that is a bit over the top Horace. You are wholly dead. And I will join you. What you have actually achieved is a rare relationship with thousands of years of fellow human beings. There is no need to fortify that valuable connection with an allusion to immortality.

And you did take a risk Horace. Had your poetry been less esteemed, you would have been remembered for your vanity rather than your poetry. It is important to be remembered in the right way. Yes, my epitaph may seem to present a similar risk. But its immodesty is integral to its purpose as a paradox. Anyone who thinks
through the epitaph paradox will realize that I died with my boots on.

Of course, there is much to do in the interim. I’ve got to spread the word. More specifically, I must make sure that my epitaph is repeated widely and in a variety of resilient forms. Notice how my epitaph eases the labour of obituarists. They need not labour to find some quaint anecdote to put a human face on my death. Their profession encourages a philosophical bent and so I expect that they will welcome my death. Thus my eager obituarists will help me meet future historians half-way.

My epitaph brings me peace of mind. When on a stroll in 1874, Lewis Carroll thought of a single verse: ‘For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.’ Although Carroll attached no meaning to the line, he was inspired to work forward, or rather, backward, until he had an epic poem that ended with exactly that verse. This is natural for a logician like Lewis Carroll. Conclusions are most easily proved by specifying them in advance and working back toward the premises. Admittedly, Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark* is nonsense. Since I am not a nihilist, I want my last words to function more like a literal conclusion. By specifying my epitaph in advance, I can work out my life backwards from death. I thereby busy myself with the premises and lemmas from which the whole process draws validity.

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