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### "Blessed among my Kind"

William Roughead, Poet

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# “BLESSED *among my kind*”

Publishers *Faber & Faber* celebrated William Roughead WS as “the Prince of Criminologists” and his works in this guise are still in print today. Less well known, however, were his early published verses. In the final instalment of *Signet Magazine’s* year long celebration, KAREN BASTON remembers William Roughead the poet.

A small volume of poetry is shelved near the Roughead Collection in the Signet Library’s Commissioners’ Room. Alongside studies of criminal acts, executions, and the dark side of human character, written and collected by William Roughead WS, there can be found poems with such gentle titles as *Seaside Regrets*, *The Coming of Christmas*, and *To Celia, Cycling*. The poet is none other than William Roughead.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Roughead published this selection of poetry for the amusement of his friends in 1901. The poems are not works of great seriousness and, given that he published them a year after his marriage to Janey Thomson More, it is likely that the publication was a celebration of love and friendship rather than any attempt to establish a reputation as a poet. Roughead had set up his legal practice in 1893 but had never attracted many clients, nor did he need to thanks to his inheritance. Although he regularly attended trials at the High Court of Justiciary

from 1889, when he attended what he called his “first murder”, the case of the notorious “baby farmer” of Stockbridge, Jessie King, Roughead found time to compose verse. He became famous for his attendance at trials and for his skilled accounts of criminals and their deeds past and present, but *Rhyme without Reason* was his published first book.

Roughead’s foreword mentions that some of the verses had been published in periodicals and that some with “even less merit” were “rhymes of earlier date”. Some of them indeed read like juvenilia, but others show a flair for language and the gift of description that made his reports of criminal deeds and trials so readable and popular.

Roughead’s verses have a variety of styles, settings, and voices. *Lines to a Royal and Ancient Game* celebrates the long history of “gowff” and features the idea of King Jamie “In days o’ yore...” leaving behind his royal role to “blythely tae Leith Links repair Wi’ clanny cleek”. There is a mention of champagne in *The Penny-a-Line Wedding* where press attempts to glamorise society marriages to sell weekly magazines mean that “Although there be but tepid tea and lemonade in siphons, The

notices will hum with Pommery and Mumm”. In *The Complaint Feminine*, the girl narrator laments that her “naughty brother Jack” can get away with rudeness, destruction of toys, sliding down banisters, messing up his clothes, frightening the maid, and pinching their nurse. “I must confess I think it rough, That, in polite society, What for Jacks is right enough, In Jill is impropriety”, she muses.

“Society”, particularly that of Edinburgh, gets another critique from Roughead in *East Wind and West End*. For here “An outsider for years may endeavour, with tears, To break through its etiquette cliquey; If the money he’s made has a savour of trade, It will do him no good in Auld Reekie”. Edinburgh appears throughout the poems: the Usher Hall gets its own poem and the speaker in *A Spring Lament* admits that although he “wadna rin Auld Reekie doun, For weel I luv ma native toun... (No’ that I’m seekin’ tae complain), Gin we had but a wee less rain, Twad be a treat”.

Although most of his verses are light hearted, Roughead’s love of the gruesome is not far away. In *The Disposal of the Inanimate*, the murderous sexton Joe Shovel deals with a threat to his livelihood by killing a crematorium owner and burying him in a traditional

grave. Roughead was a director of Warriston crematorium where he was himself cremated before his ashes were buried at Grange cemetery.

In *The Wooing of Barbara*, a jealous suitor poisons a “bumptious, bald, and blatant” brewer with his own beer. Alas for our narrator Barbara “- to win whose hand I’d made my own so gory – Rejected my proposal, and withdrew to Tobermory”. Roughead was fascinated by poisoners and he wrote about some of the most famous of them, including Mary Blandy and Dr Edward Pritchard, in his later literary offerings.

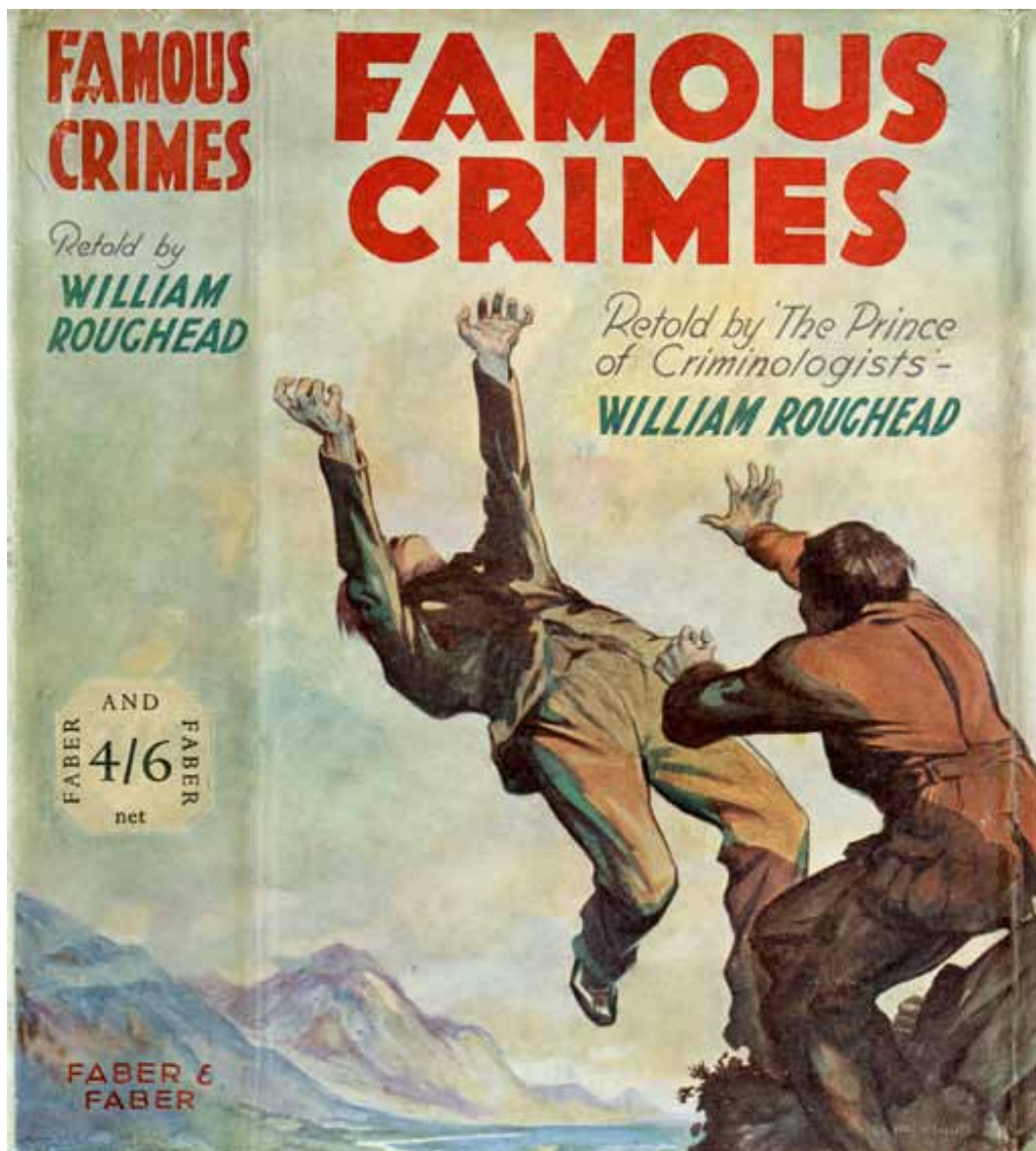
Roughead was part of a long and rich tradition of legal poetry in Scotland. Charles Areskine, Lord Tinwald (1680-1763) composed on his deathbed a Latin verse celebrating the end of

the Seven Years’ War. James Boswell rhymed “assure us” with “Corpus Juris” in the mid-18th century. One Thornton Thistle offered a poetical study of the *Bench in Edinburgh: A Poem* in 1840. Charles Neaves, Lord Neaves (1800 - 1876), was as well known for his satirical poetry as for his judgments on the Bench. Sir Walter Scott was, of course, internationally famous as a poet before he turned to writing novels.

Roughead had collections of legal verse in his library. The Roughead Collection includes *The Court of Session Garland* (Edinburgh, 1839) and *Ballads of the Bench and Bar, or, Idle Lays of the Parliament House* (Edinburgh, 1882). It is difficult to determine Roughead’s real feelings about the merits of his collected poems. His “ArsPoetica” puts

the practice of composition in the context of a family home where “you start at the smash of the crockery’s crash”, “your wife, in a fume, rushes into a room”, and “there’s always a draught where you’re plying your craft” as “you sit yourself down with a resolute frown, On your marble-like, classical forehead”.

One poem in Roughead’s book has particular relevance as we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the arrival of Roughead’s criminology collection at the Signet Library. In *To My Books*, a more serious poem than most in his collection, Roughead describes his books as his closest friends. It seems appropriate to reprint his own tribute to his library - see over on page 28..



Published 1935. Illustration of “The Arran Murder” in which two men on holiday climb up a mountain and only one comes down..

# “To My Books”

By William Roughead WS  
(1870 - 1952)

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If faithful friends be hard to find,  
And harder still to keep when found,  
Then am I blessed among my kind,  
For those I have a safely bound;  
Fast friends, with never failing tact,  
Responsive to my changing mood,  
Yielding what service I exact,  
Regardless of ingratitude;  
Come health or sickness, joy or ill,  
A zest or solace for my need,  
And ever willing to fulfil,  
The mission of a friend indeed.

In seemly show of ordered rows,  
You rise around me as I write,  
While every volume of you knows,  
My care to have you clean and bright;  
Contented that no Vandal hand,  
Shall make your ‘choice condition’ less,  
No desecrating finger brand,  
Your margin’s uncut comeliness;  
That while I live to call you mine,  
You sit secure upon my shelves,  
And confidences we confine,  
As friends, entirely to ourselves.