

MACPHERSON'S OSSIAN: A DIACHRONIC SYNTHESIS

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## CHAPTER I

### AN OVERVIEW OF OSSIAN

In 1760, the Scotsman James Macpherson published Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language. He added to these fragments two epics of the same nature, Fingal in 1762, and Temora in 1763, and by the time of the publication of The Poems of Ossian<sup>1</sup> in 1765, he had become one of the most famous yet most maligned of eighteenth-century literary figures, one who influenced almost every major Romantic poet in England and Continental Europe but who faded in both renown and merit in the judgment of later generations. Macpherson's Poems of Ossian was perhaps the most famous work in the world while its fame lasted; it blew the door open for the Romantic Movement, but then its tempest gradually subsided, except for an occasional breeze. Initially, Ossian<sup>2</sup> was created in reaction to the Neoclassical Age and

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<sup>1</sup>For a list of Macpherson's complete poetic works, see appendix A.

<sup>2</sup>Various critics use "Ossian" to refer both to the body of genuine Gaelic literature, to a character in this literature, and to Macpherson's work. In this thesis, Ossian refers to Macpherson's poems, and Ossianic indicates either the person or the genuine Gaelic material. Ossianic deals with either Ossian or the genuine tales of Ossian, depending on the context.

as a wedge for the rebellion of the Romantic Movement, but the questionable authenticity of the poems combined with other forces at work in the eighteenth century, including flaring Scottish patriotism and Macpherson's own personality, to become a political issue in an era when Englishmen and Scotsmen were at peace with each other but remained hostile. Eventually critics reached some general conclusions about Ossian's authenticity, namely that Macpherson had used much of the traditional Gaelic material existing in the Highlands to make his own epics, and so had kept alive some ancient Celtic traditions. By the middle of the nineteenth century the controversy and investigation had tired the world. The labeling of Macpherson as forger, the poems as modern, and the new excitement stirring in the even more "melancholy passion and revolt against the tragedy of life" of Byron dissipated interest in Ossian until the revival of Celtic literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yeats and other poets then brought Ossian again into popularity, and now new methods of investigation could be applied to the Ossianic literature.<sup>1</sup> This new interest in Ossian has persisted in the twentieth century until today, for as

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<sup>1</sup>J. S. Smart, James Macpherson: A Literary Episode (London: David Nutt, 1905), p. 19.

recently as 1974 a scholar wrote:

Ossian became one of the great figures for the rising generation and has retained a place, if a small one, in world literature. I say world literature, not English, for if there are only about five articles published on Macpherson in a given year, they are likely to be in four languages. This is one more of Macpherson's lingering achievements that has paled.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Ossianic controversy has long since cooled, it cannot be pronounced dead because there is still difference of opinion on how much genuine Gaelic material Macpherson used, and final judgment can never be passed on the question of Ossian's literary merit. Thus Ossian made a full circle from an essentially literary work to a highly controversial and political issue which eventually faded from prominence but remained an absorbing piece of literary history that still elicits comments from a respectable number of scholars and critics.

Many aspects of The Poems of Ossian as published by Macpherson are perplexing. Of the few people who have heard of Ossian, even fewer have actually read Macpherson's poems. Yet, in over two hundred years, the interest in the poems Macpherson produced in the 1760s has never completely died, and more true research has been done about Ossian in the twentieth century than ever before. The overriding

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Folkenflik, "Macpherson, Chatterton, Blake and the Great Age of Literary Forgery," The Centennial Review 18 (1974): 387.

question of Ossian is why it should still hold the interest of modern students, teachers, scholars, critics, and even booksellers.

The answer to the question is that The Poems of Ossian and the body of literature that has developed around it hold interest today because, like the Celts Ossian sang about, its tenacity against all odds is both attractive and intriguing. Like the Celtic Arthurian stories which became such an important part of medieval English literature, Ossianic tales describe the improbable promise of resurrection, the central concept of many religions, especially Christianity. The Ossianic cycle has many parallels with the Arthurian cycle of Wales: the band of chivalrous warriors, the question of historic or mythic hero, the withstanding of foreign invaders, the conquering of distant lands, the nephew of the king who elopes with the queen, a stay in fairyland or Otherworld followed by a return to native soil. Ossian, like Bedevere, is left alone to tell the tales of former glories. Ossian combines the attraction of a story about a human being who did not die with the attraction of a controversy that people could not resolve yet refused to withdraw from. We are fascinated by works of such endurance, and this endurance is created by our fascination. The very fact that any stories of the ancient

inhabitants of Scotland and Ireland could exist from the third century until Macpherson, and others, in the eighteenth century collected the mostly oral tales is itself an outstanding example of the tenacity of Celtic literature which overflowed into Macpherson's work and has been a strong current in English literature ever since.

The Ossianic controversy, also quite tenacious, is indivisible from the poems themselves, and herein begins the cyclical character of the Ossianic question. The poems gave rise to the controversy, but the controversy carried Ossian's fame farther eventually than its own literary merit would. The Ossianic question is one of identity, and in such a question numerous points of view can exist.

Beyond doubt Ossian was successful, and success is always a target for either jealousy or suspicion; Ossian's supporters, mainly Scottish, accused its challengers, mainly English, of both. Part of Ossian's widespread fame was the fact that this was the hardest-fought literary battle of the century. But the core of Ossian's fame was its total satisfaction of eighteenth-century desires for fresh literature showing man in his most ideal, most primitive, most natural state, in which he would be closest to God and would feel all the emotions stifled by the confines of classical sophistication. A primitive society was not

what people in the eighteenth century wanted to live in, but it definitely was what they wanted to read about.

The last half of the eighteenth century was a time of transition, in literature and, to a lesser degree, in politics. The neoclassicism represented by Pope was coming to an end, and men were ready for a more free and a more feeling means of expression. The Romantic Movement had just started, and, for many persons, the main interests lay in returning to and worshipping nature in a search for simplicity and solitude and in revolt against such restrictions as the heroic couplet or the structured opinions of classical critics.<sup>1</sup> At the same time that the majority of the eighteenth-century writers and audiences yearned for something new, there was anxiety about what was left to create; what had Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton left for this generation to accomplish in literature? And if an artist did manage to create something, he still had to get it past the critics of the day, Samuel Johnson, Hugh Blair, David Hume, and Adam Smith, to name a few.<sup>2</sup>

Although the eighteenth century did not demand complete originality, it did demand original genius, and

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<sup>1</sup>W[illiam] J[ohn] Courthope, *A History of English Poetry*, 6 vols. (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1919-26), 5: 402.

<sup>2</sup>Folkenflik, pp. 378-79.

in the rebellion against classicism, the more original a work, the better. In returning to the literature of the past, to natural man uncorrupted by society, it was inevitable that writers would imitate past artists such as Shakespeare and Milton and that a chief concern for transitional pre-Romantics would be how to use past greatness without being discovered as imitators.

Literary forgery was one answer. Forgery was inviting because as a mere redactor, the artist himself was not as likely to be attacked, and if he was not praised for his skill as translator or narrator, he was more likely to be ignored than harshly criticized. Macpherson was neither the first nor the last person to claim that a work he had produced was not his own but a "discovery" from hidden sources. Thomas Chatterton is perhaps the best known forger after Macpherson. However, Macpherson is often the first example given of literary forgers in general histories and handbooks of English literature.<sup>1</sup> Thus arises another Ossianic question: Why was Macpherson so denounced, and with such enduring venom, when he did basically what Milton did--took certain materials and developed them into epics which, although he disclaimed

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<sup>1</sup>Strangely, Macpherson appears only in passing in the chapter on Chatterton in J. A. Farrer's Literary Forgeries (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1907).



authorship, are definitely his? Why are other forgers forgiven and called "imitators" and Macpherson not? Were Horace Walpole and his "forged" Castle of Otranto not attacked because he finally admitted his authorship, or because he was English?

Perhaps the key to these questions is the anxiety of eighteenth-century writers about what was left to accomplish in literature. The revolution against classicism left eighteenth-century audiences hungry for something to fill the void, and they decided on primitive man; they wanted nothing modern. Macpherson violated this principle in the very act of satisfying, outwardly and completely, these demands: he presented fake antiquities which thrilled readers in a dozen countries, and in producing his fakes he ignored or damaged genuine ancient material, a crime for which he would never be forgiven, especially by an audience who, starving for fresh bread, found each loaf loaded with alum. English-Scots rivalry is partly to blame for Macpherson's being classed as a forger of the worst kind, although this aspect has been over-stressed by some critics. Englishmen did, in fact, see Macpherson as an outspoken, rough-mannered upstart

at a time when "Highlanders were 'rebels;' and it was petty treason to deny that they were savages."<sup>1</sup>

By no means, then, should Ossian be condemned out of hand, for Macpherson made a real contribution with his poems. He solved the problem, albeit in a disturbing way, of the age's demands for excellence in novel yet primitive literature; he assisted the development of significant new genres by combining classical epic traditions with the beginnings of modern literary tradition; he helped initiate the pre-Romantic characteristics of fragments, as opposed to long poems, and rhythmic prose; and by making Ossian and Scotland famous, Macpherson served the cause of Romanticism.<sup>2</sup> And neither can Macpherson be totally condemned as a mere translator, for there was little for him to actually translate; besides, the ideas of translation in the eighteenth century differed significantly from those which followed in later generations. Although the eighteenth century considered anything that could be successfully translated as a great work of literature because of its universality, the opposite is true now. But the

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<sup>1</sup>John Francis Campbell, Popular Tales of the West Highlands, Orally Collected, with a Translation by the Late J. F. Campbell, 4 vols., new ed. (Paisley and London: Alexander Gardner, 1890 [first printed 1862]; reprint ed., Detroit: Singing Tree Press Book Tower, 1969), 1:xxx.

<sup>2</sup>Folkenflik, pp. 380-87.

eighteenth-century view, and the translations of Ossian into Latin, Greek, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Russian, Polish, Swedish, and Danish, spread Ossian across continental Europe and so opened a way for the Romantics who followed.<sup>1</sup> Macpherson carried on a bardic tradition extant for centuries; he met the Romantic requirements (a return to nature and an elegance of style coupled with simplicity and romantic diction) in creating Ossian. Macpherson's tale of the noble savage, of which fortunately a perfect living example existed in the American Indian, became a true emblem of the transition taking place in the eighteenth century. Ossian, standing between Pope's Homer and Byron's Childe Harold, created an immense amount of energy for both the Romantic Movement and the Celtic Revival. One critic notes: "In fact the whole Ossianic controversy . . . turned out to be one of the most successful pieces of unintentional advertising that the literary world has ever seen."<sup>2</sup>

Primitivism was a major concern of the Romantic Movement, but the readers' total idealization of the simple,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 387-90.

<sup>2</sup>Edward D. Snyder, The Celtic Revival in English Literature 1760-1800 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928; reprint ed., Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1965), pp. 115-16.

the natural, the uncivilized, and the ancient in Homer and Ossian was thwarted by the inescapable greatness of "moderns" such as Shakespeare and Milton. People in the eighteenth century did not want to return to the barbarism of the ancients, for they were excessively proud of their own enlightened culture. Simplicity was a major concern of primitivists, but an author must write elegantly to prevent readers' boredom when relating tales about the simple savages who were so close to nature that they were only a step or two removed from the uncorrupted animals.

As the eighteenth century began to look for sources of primitive literature, the undercurrent of interest in Celtic literature, history, and religion surfaced and became an important part of English literature; men like Lewis Morris, Evan Evans, Thomas Gray, and Macpherson took themes, incidents, and traditions from Celtic Wales, Ireland, and Scotland and wrote of them in English, usually in poetry, or in Macpherson's case, rhythmic or "measured" prose. Englishmen were entranced with these Celtic-English works which suited their new romantic tastes; few Englishmen knew anything about the Welsh or Gaelic languages or about ancient Celtic religion except that there had been druids who worshipped mistletoe and oak and had made human sacrifices until persecuted first by Saxon invaders and then by

Christian missionaries. Fortunately ignorance about druids did not impede readers of Ossian. For this knowledge vacuum the eighteenth century filled with whatever was at hand, specifically the Scandinavian religion with its concept of Valhalla; Macpherson included an Ossianic Valhalla, the hall of Loda, in his poems.<sup>1</sup>

Interest in the ancient Celts extended to their way of preparing food and their battle mannerisms, which were similar to those found in Homer; however, the Celts had practiced certain barbarisms after the Greeks had become further civilized.<sup>2</sup> Thus Macpherson's epic Fingal, telling of the Scottish king's wars in Ireland, and Temora, of Fingal's restoring the royal house of Ireland, gave primitivists the look at antiquity they desired without their realizing that Ossian's heroes were eighteenth-century ideals of sensibility in third-century settings. However, in genuine existing Ossianic cycles, most of which survived in Ireland, the ancient heroes were more believable and primitive than Macpherson's characters; they had faults and adventures which Macpherson either did not know

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<sup>1</sup>Snyder, pp. 8-9.

<sup>2</sup>Jack Lindsay, Our Celtic Heritage (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, Ltd., 1962), p. 29.

or ignored.<sup>1</sup> In a century occupied with the past and the primitive, the doubly retrospective Ossian, the story from antiquity by an aged poet telling old tales, was bound to succeed. In Ossian Macpherson realized both his patriotic and his professional ambitions.

The return to nature, simplicity, and the sublime were important concepts to English and European romantics who were searching for an alternative to the overworked classics; the Celtic Revival, which both affected and was influenced by the Romantic Movement, had far greater significance to Scotland and Ireland than to Wales, where it began with the work of Lewis Morris, the chief Celtic authority of the time, whose unearthing of Welsh literary treasures created an excitement we might now find hard to picture. In an age when men walk on the moon, it is sometimes hard to imagine the excitement that the discovery of Ossian and similar literatures must have caused. The instant appeal of the Fragments of Ancient Poetry was partly due to their supposed authenticity as true remnants of the primitive but noble savages; this "authenticity" gave the Scottish public and the patriots exactly what they wanted.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Smart, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>John J. Dunn, "Introduction" to Fragments of Ancient Poetry, by James Macpherson (Los Angeles: University of California, William Clark Memorial Library, 1966), p. iv.

The Union of Scotland and England in 1707 had legally bound the countries together, but the two Catholic pretenders to the Protestant English throne kept discord alive, as evidenced by the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745.

The largely Protestant Scottish Lowlands, being closer than the Highlands to British soil, had accepted the English rule more easily than had the predominantly Catholic Highlands, where lived many Jacobite supporters who, with the renowned Celtic tenacity, retained their Scottish accent and Highland traditions. (Ireland had great interest in both the Jacobite movement and the Celtic Revival in literature, but partook less in such affairs because, thanks to geography and to Macpherson, the spotlight was on Scotland.) It was after the last Jacobite rebellion in 1745, which took place when Macpherson was nine and no doubt increased his naturally intense Highland loyalties, that Scotsmen began to rise rapidly in importance in English politics, in commerce, and in social and literary circles. As Scotsmen such as Hume, Home, and Blair were "conquering" England, their pride in being Scottish grew with their reputations, and poets other than Macpherson were writing patriotic Highland poetry in reaction to the treatment of Scots by the English. Thus the Celtic Revival

also followed a circular pattern, for patriots published Highland poetry which in turn caused greater interest in the Highlands and inspired a larger number of patriots who then brought forth more Celtic-English poetry. And Macpherson was not the first to publish translations of ancient Gaelic works. In fact, it may have been Jerome Stone's poems, translated from ancient Gaelic and published in 1756 in Scots Magazine, that influenced Macpherson to start his own Ossianic collection, which became Fragments of Ancient Poetry in 1760.<sup>1</sup>

Fragments of Ancient Poetry was published anonymously, but the author was known by the important members of the Edinburgh literary circles, especially since Blair wrote the unsigned but not anonymous preface for the first and least attacked of the Ossianic works. The poems were widely acclaimed, and, with Blair as his chief supporter, in September 1760 Macpherson went far into the Highlands to collect an epic "by a Gaelic poet of the fourth century, in which Homer was rivalled, all modern epics excelled, and Scottish national genius nobly vindicated in the eyes of the English."<sup>2</sup> Macpherson brought back two epics instead

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<sup>1</sup>Snyder, pp. 71-73.

<sup>2</sup>Henry Grey Graham, Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1901), p. 126.



of one, both of which were quickly suspected by non-primitivists such as Samuel Johnson and former supporters such as Hume who were offended when Macpherson had let the fame of Fragments of Ancient Poetry make him haughty and rude. Blair, however, retained unlimited faith in The Poems of Ossian to which, for several decades, his own Critical Dissertation was affixed. Blair lectured on the wonders of Ossian in his classes at Edinburgh, and by example encouraged all patriotic Scotsmen to support both Ossian and Macpherson. Romantics in England, France, and Germany acclaimed Ossian; Napoleon carried Ossian with him on his campaigns, and Goethe mentioned it in Werther. In Italy, Cesarotti's translation of Ossian was the beginning of a new poetic school, and in Sweden the king named his son Oscar, after Ossian's son.<sup>1</sup>

The major personage in England to attack both Macpherson and the poems was Samuel Johnson; given his known anti-Scots sentiments and Macpherson's own arrogant character, their tempers clashed to provide the world with the

controversy that is unique in literary history. For the half-century that followed, the body of poetry eventually collected as The Poems of Ossian provoked the comment of nearly every important man of letters.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 241-42.

<sup>2</sup>Dunn, Fragments, p. i.

Thomas Gray, whose influence on the Celtic Revival was great but is for the most part unheard of today, doubted the authenticity of the poems because of external evidence but was so impressed by the internal evidence that he could not believe Macpherson had constructed the poems from his own imagination alone.<sup>1</sup> Many critics denounced the poems as antiquities but applauded their romantic quality. Dunn observes: "The intensity and duration of the controversy are indicative of how seriously Macpherson's work was taken, for it was to many readers of the day daring, original, and passionate."<sup>2</sup>

However, the group with the most right to criticize the poems is the voice least heard in the two hundred years since Macpherson's Ossian came into being. Irish antiquarians accused Macpherson of stealing their mythic hero Oisín and Irish manuscripts of tales of Finn and his warrior band which were for centuries an important part of the folklore of southern Ireland. One reason the Irish claims have not received more attention is that the Ossianic question developed into a largely English-Scottish, Saxon-Celtic question, and it would have defeated the purpose of the Celtic Revival for the two Celtic nations to quarrel.

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<sup>1</sup>Snyder, pp. 61-63.

<sup>2</sup>Dunn, Fragments, p. i.

The claims of Ireland were not entirely justified; Ireland and Scotland share so much of their history and literature that the most immediately noticeable difference between Irish and Scottish tales is that Macpherson alone called Ossian's father Fingal (Irish Finn or Fionn).

This has been a brief overview of a complex body of literature which surrounds Macpherson's Ossianic poetry. There are essentially three bodies of this literature: studies of historical literature (to which I have limited this thesis) dealing specifically with Macpherson's poems; studies of genuine Gaelic literature, dealing with authentic tales of Finn and Ossian and their relation to Macpherson's work; and studies of world literature, dealing with the specific comparisons of Macpherson to Blake, Scott, Goethe, and countless others. The following chapter deals in greater detail with the critical observations made of Ossian. Chapter III will survey the components and merits of the Ossianic controversy and will survey the imitation of Ossian during the nineteenth century throughout the western world. During this time the Ossianic question evolved from a search for authenticity to the rehashing of known facts and the defense of or attack on individual interpretations of Ossian. By the late nineteenth century, emotional debates by Ossianic scholars had subsided from

personal attacks to more rational, objective levels of study. Although during this time the interest of the general public in Ossian waned, Chapter IV will illustrate that Ossian, genuine or spurious, has not been neglected in the twentieth century, when the fascination with the long ago and far away makes the criticism of Ossian still being produced of interest to students who have never read Macpherson's poems. As a conclusion, Chapter IV will also present a summary of the preceding chapters and will include my personal observations and speculations on the Ossianic question. Thus the literary interest in Macpherson's Ossian which is expressed by this thesis illustrates the completion of the circle begun in 1760 by the catering of one talented man to the desires of rebellious, romantic readers who craved sentimental knowledge of ancient man.

## CHAPTER II

### OSSIANIC LITERATURE

The eighteenth century was a time for many things: the transition from classical to romantic tastes in literature and criticism, changing political relations between England and Scotland, and changing relations between the British Isles and both Continental Europe and America. Instead of the structured heroic couplets of the Augustans, romantic, sentimental prose-poetry became the vogue. The last frontier of this burgeoning change in literary tastes was the Highlands of Scotland, from which only recently had come an invasion by brawny, wild Jacobites whom Englishmen judged the closest surviving relations to primitive man. And for the first time, Britain influenced the literature of Europe,<sup>1</sup> as Macpherson's Ossian spread the romantic fervor as far east as Russia and as far west as the American colonies. (However, Ossian took several years to go through first French and finally Russian translations, and the

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<sup>1</sup>C[harles Edwyn] Vaughan, The Influence of English Poetry upon the Romantic Revival on the Continent, British Academy Warton Lectures on English Poetry IV (London: Humphrey Milford for the British Academy, Oxford University Press, [1913], pp. 1-2.

Revolution in America interrupted there the excitement over the "Scottish Homer" and his melancholy reminiscences.) Although the literary judgments by the eighteenth century of Ossian differ somewhat from those passed by the twentieth century, the major circumstances surrounding Macpherson's poems are generally agreed upon: Ossian's success in a transitional age of poetry, translation, and politics was both a cause and a result of the Celtic Revival and the Romantic Movement; Macpherson built his "translations" on a very sparse skeleton of genuine Gaelic tradition; and regardless of his motives or morals, Macpherson did contribute both to world literature and to a Celtic Renaissance, the effects of which are still evident today.

Even though Macpherson's poems are today known by only a few persons, "even now we cannot read them without something of the vague feeling of poetic mystery and sadness that captivated their first readers stealing over the mind."<sup>1</sup> Before I began in-depth research of The Poems of Ossian, I struggled through the poems so that I could compare my own impressions with the criticism of two centuries. Although Ossian's wild and gloomy descriptions of nature and his sentimental tales of ancient heroes are fallen from popularity now, still I was impressed by the

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<sup>1</sup>Smart, p. 11.

beauty of certain passages, especially what I found later to be one of the most famous, Ossian's Address to the Sun, apparently copied from Satan's similar speech in Milton's Paradise Lost. Macpherson's innovative use of wild scenery, the supernatural, measured prose, sentimentality, the sublime, and the view of ancient man's heightened sensibility many critics throughout the years have judged more important than the authenticity of his poems. Although he corrupted almost every piece of Gaelic literature he touched, Macpherson can be credited for many Gaelic manuscripts' being rescued from a moldy attic or an eighteenth-century fireplace.

Macpherson tampered not only with genuine Gaelic literature but also with the current English language itself, and both of these "sins" he committed in response to the taste of eighteenth-century readers. The sublime was in the eighteenth century one of the most important criteria of any writing; writers strove for language that was exalted above the ordinary human thoughts or feelings, images of fearfully high mountains and frightening ghosts which, however, were no longer dangerous to the enlightened eighteenth-century society. The interest in the sublime "increased the attraction of Macpherson's poems and

received from them in return an astonishing stimulus."<sup>1</sup>  
 Macpherson used wild scenery not only to evoke the landscape but also to emphasize ghosts and battles.

As rushes a stream of foam from the dark shady  
 deep of Cromla, when the thunder is travelling  
 above, and dark-brown night sits on half the hill.  
 Through the breaches of the tempest look forth the  
 dim faces of ghosts. So fierce, so vast, so terrible,  
 rushed on the sons of Erin.<sup>2</sup>

Although the sublime normally originated from the worship of God (Ossian mentioned no deity), Ossian was still sublime, its ghosts being considered sufficient "literary equivalents" described in exalted language.<sup>3</sup>

Like Gray, Macpherson used "the supernatural as an integral part of his narrative structure."<sup>4</sup> Macpherson was the only eighteenth-century writer to use so successfully the type of supernatural machinery which balanced the marvelous with the probable. Macpherson's primitive man, Ossian, was remote enough in both place and time to capture

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>2</sup>Fingal, Book I, in The Poems of Ossian, Translated by James Macpherson, with Notes, and With an Introduction by William Sharp (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1926 [first printed 1896]).

<sup>3</sup>David B. Morris, The Religious Sublime: Christian Poetry and Critical Tradition in 18th-Century England (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), p. 167.

<sup>4</sup>Patricia Meyer Spacks, The Insistence of Horror: Aspects of the Supernatural in Eighteenth-Century Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 100.



the imagination of readers from the Scottish Lowlands to Russia. This framework of the long ago and far away gave credibility to the supernatural which Macpherson used to describe the natural; Macpherson used winds and ghosts in similes to describe the appearances and feelings of the warriors.<sup>1</sup> However, Macpherson used the supernatural in a way different from other redactors. Ossian's Spirit of Loda, which resembles the Norse Spirit of Odin, is not found in any Gaelic literature except Macpherson's. Smart notes that spirits of the dead seldom occur in genuine Gaelic literature, which concentrated on happy, lively men. When ghosts did appear, they were "vivid apparition" rather than the "cloudy and vaguely awful spirits of Macpherson."<sup>2</sup> In addition to the Spirit of Loda, which Macpherson equates with the Norse Spirit of Odin and which resembles the Old Testament God of the burning bush, Ossian contains ghosts of warriors, ancestors, and departed family members. (Fingal's great-grandfather, wife, and son appear in ghostly form.) Although Macpherson's spirits are unique in Celtic literature, he followed the classical rules of epic which required supernatural machinery; one

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 85-87.

<sup>2</sup>Smart, p. 125.

critic compares Macpherson's ghosts to Homer's gods and Milton's archangels.<sup>1</sup>

Ossian, "the Homer of the North," was "declared to be a hundred times more barbarous than Homer, his inspiration more simple, more naïve, closer to Nature itself. His poetry was really the poetry of the heart; for one felt everywhere a heart animated by noble sentiments and tender passions."<sup>2</sup> This sentimentality was an eighteenth-century urge Macpherson satisfied, it is true, but in the circular fashion typical of almost every aspect of Ossian, "Instead of owing their success to the prevalence of a morbid feeling, it is rather the case that the Ossianic poems, by their peculiar melancholy, were themselves a chief agent in the spread of sentimentalism in Europe."<sup>3</sup>

The "peculiar melancholy" of Ossian's poems appears throughout Macpherson's work. This melancholy consisted of the victories in battle being offset by the winner's seldom being happy. Smart captures the feelings concisely:

The young hero is slain in battle, or the maiden herself is slain; the survivor dies of grief, and both are buried together in one grave. Over them the bards lament. Ossian, the narrator, has himself fallen on evil days. He is old; he has become blind; the comrades of his youth are dead and gone. He

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Bailey Saunders, The Life and Letters of James Macpherson, 2d ed. (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., New York: Macmillan & Co., 1895), p. 12.

pours out his laments to the soft notes of a harp. His haunting theme is the transience of human life, the inevitable coming of loss, decay and death.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the sublime and melancholy tales, Ossian had the charm of antiquity, of representing how things stood long ago before man totally lost sight of Eden.

Smart explains that

In these poems were all the virtues that might belong to an earlier race. Fingal and his warriors were valiant and irresistible in battle, but clement to the vanquished, and chivalrous to the weak. Of any harsh action, of any inhumanity there was no trace.<sup>2</sup>

The brief decline of interest in Arthurian romance during the eighteenth century<sup>3</sup> seems to be a result of the immense popularity of Ossian's tales of war and chivalry.

Yet another innovation awaited readers of Ossian. Macpherson's prose-poetry, measured prose, rhythmic prose (it goes by all of these names) "seemed free and expansive to men who had grown weary of sharp epigrams set in trimly compacted couplets."<sup>4</sup> Home is believed to have suggested this alternative to poetry which yet was not totally unpoetic. Much of Ossian's success was due to this

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<sup>1</sup>Smart, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>William Flint Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature, 3d ed. (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, Bobbs-Herrill Co., Inc., 1972), s.v. "Arthurian legend."

<sup>4</sup>Smart, p. 11.

innovation, "And indeed our literature owes to Macpherson perhaps the major part in establishing 'measured prose' as a popular form . . . an eighteenth-century hybrid not very different from our modern free verse."<sup>1</sup> Macpherson's poems were not patterned on any Celtic rhythms but rather on the King James version of the Bible, from the patterns of Hebrew verse which appear in the books of the prophets, especially Isaiah, in Job, in the Song of Deborah, and in David's Lament for Jonathan.<sup>2</sup> "It will be noted that this 'translation' of the Ossianic poems was a translation into rhythmic prose, rhythmic in the sense that it depended upon a rhythm of ideas and feelings rather than of accent."<sup>3</sup> Each sentence of Ossian can be seen as a unit, complete in meaning within itself, but having a lack of connection between sentences that is often disturbing to modern readers. The diction, the poetic license, and the unusual, "barbaric-poetic proper names" which were only a part of Ossian's attraction for the eighteenth century assume a much more important role for twentieth century readers who

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<sup>1</sup>Snyder, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>George Saintsbury, A History of English Prosody, from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day, 3 vols. 2d ed. (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1923), 3:43.

<sup>3</sup>Murray Roston, Prophet and Poet: The Bible and the Growth of Romanticism (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. 143.

study Ossian for linguistic rather than literary reasons.<sup>1</sup> Snyder notes that some passages of Ossian are more poetic than others and that Macpherson's lack of connection between sentences does not pervade the whole work:

His style is not merely highly imaginative, or merely pleasing in occasional rhythmic cadences; it contains numerous sentences, and even paragraphs, that divide themselves inevitably into the recognized feet of English poetry. While we cannot say that all of Ossian was written in unrimed verse printed like prose, we can say that much of it was, and that the average is nearer to poetry than to prose.<sup>2</sup>

This innovation of Macpherson's was so popular that many writers began imitating his style; other poets were seized with the desire to try their hand at versifying Ossian.

Macpherson was not the only eighteenth-century writer to deal with Ossian; his work, however, gained more notoriety than the others combined. Macpherson's work is the only one of these Ossianic works generally considered "spurious." Perhaps the most notable authentic Ossianic work was produced by an Irishman who died the year Fragments of Ancient Poetry was published. Michael Comyn (also Michael Coimin) produced what is perhaps the last piece of authentic Ossianic literature in Laoidh Oisin ar Thir na nóg, or the Lay of Ossian in the Land of Youth, published

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<sup>1</sup>Saintsbury, pp. 44-46.

<sup>2</sup>Snyder, pp. 90-91.

in 1750. Comyn is credited with composition of the poem, which he based on existing Ossianic material.<sup>1</sup> The study of genuine Ossianic material, both in Scotland and in Ireland, would fill volumes; therefore, I will discuss it only as it applies to Macpherson's Ossian and to the changes he made in the traditional material, changes which make Macpherson's name generally recognizable, for good or ill, when Jerome Stone and Michael Comyn are all but unknown.

In his "Chronological Appendix" to Ossian and Ossianic Literature, Nutt presents the earliest Ossianic literature as dating from the second and third centuries A.D., and as the most recent compositions he presents the works of Comyn and Macpherson in the mid-eighteenth century. A few works are of especial importance to the discussion of genuine Ossianic literature in relation to Macpherson for they positively refute Johnson's charge that Macpherson could not have translated Ossian because Scottish Gaelic had never been written. The most important of these early Gaelic works are the Scottish Book of the Dean of Lismore dating from about 1512 and containing about nine poems by Ossian, and the Irish Duanaire Finn or Song Book of Finn

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<sup>1</sup>Alfred Nutt, Ossian and the Ossianic Literature, 2d ed., Popular Studies in Mythology, Romance, and Folklore, no. 3 (London: David Nutt, 1910 [first printed in 1899]), p. 38.

dating from around 1627 with sixty-nine poems in the Fenian cycle. Until the late seventeenth century Scotland and Ireland shared so much tradition and literature it is impossible to separate Irish Ossianic material from that of Scotland.<sup>1</sup> Of course, oral tradition existed along with these manuscripts, and their degrees of interaction is unknown. But it is noteworthy that among the few Gaelic manuscripts found in Macpherson's effects that were not in his own hand was the Book of the Dean of Lismore, and the ballads in this book, along with oral ballads still extant in the Highlands in the eighteenth century, Thomson regards as Macpherson's prime sources.<sup>2</sup> However, there exists in the Book of the Dean no epic; therefore, Macpherson had to put the raw material he found there into this form; and therefore his poems were translations, but they were also something more. Thomson cites the fanatical search by supporters and critics of Ossian as well as by later scholars like John Francis Campbell for an epic manuscript as being the major misunderstanding that lay at the bottom of the

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<sup>1</sup>Gerard Murphy, The Ossianic Lore and Romantic Tales of Medieval Ireland (Dublin: Colm O Lochlainn for the Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland, 1961), p. 55.

<sup>2</sup>Derick S. Thomson, The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's "Ossian" (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd for the University of Aberdeen, 1952), pp. 5, 73.

entire Ossianic controversy.<sup>1</sup> Ossianic literature has endured much, and it is interesting to note how well it seems to have survived; Murphy claims the tradition of singing Ossianic ballads disappeared from Ireland in the nineteenth century, but in the twentieth century still is continued in western Scotland by older dwellers.<sup>2</sup>

The Ossianic cycle has been a dominant part of all Gaelic literature for centuries. One reason is its adaptability throughout history. When the Anglo-Normans began changing the government and literary forms of Ireland and as they began moving north into Scotland, the Ossianic literature continued to develop because it was less historical and political than the similar Cuchulainn cycle of Ireland.<sup>3</sup> Ireland is considered to hold the closer ties to Ossianic literature, and although both Irish and Scottish Ossianic tales developed, the origin seems to lie more to the west. Thomson summarizes the growth of the Ossianic cycle in Ireland:

In earlier tradition these [Fenian and Cú Chulainn] cycles were quite distinct, in the sense that characters from both were not brought together in the one story. From the very early times, on the other hand,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Murphy, p. 59.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 30, 49.



motifs from the Cú Chulainn cycle were incorporated in the Ossianic stories, and to a large extent the Ossianic cycle took the place of the Cú Chulainn cycle in popular tradition. It was, therefore, on the Ossianic cycle that the semi-historical traditions of the Viking times became grafted . . . The Ossianic cycle, indeed, gathered to it a great deal of alien material, mythical, magical and historical.<sup>1</sup>

The Cuchulainn cycle dated roughly from the first century A.D., the Ossianic cycle roughly from the third century. Although the two cycles had common elements, Macpherson blended the two to an extent no one had attempted before. In Fingal, Ossian's heroes come to the aid of Cuchulainn, and Ossian's popularity for many years overshadowed the Cuchulainn cycle. Much more research seems to have been done in the twentieth century about Irish Celtic literature, namely the Cuchulainn stories, than about the Scottish Ossianic cycle. Thomson sees this as a sort of poetic justice for Macpherson's denouncing the Irish for not knowing their own history and for stealing Ossian and Finn from the Scotch. Macpherson, in his efforts to produce a Scottish epic containing material which also existed in Ireland, could not ignore Cuchulainn; so he made him a mere warrior, a regent to a child king, and a dependent upon Fingal's prowess and mercy. But now "Time has 'brought in

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<sup>1</sup>Thomson, pp. 10-11.

its revenges' by making the 'corrupt copies' of the Gaelic [Irish] bards more interesting than Macpherson's imposing edifice."<sup>1</sup>

Macpherson made several other changes in the genuine ballads he knew. Instead of following traditional accounts of ancient Highland Celts, Macpherson pictured life in the time of Fingal the way he thought it should have been and the way eighteenth-century readers would think it should be. I have previously mentioned some of the more general changes: the melancholy (which was erroneously considered the fundamental characteristic unique to the Celts), the Spirit of Loda and vaporish ghosts found in no Ossianic literature other than Macpherson's, the total chivalry of Fingal and his men, and the lack of mention of a deity. In almost all the genuine Ossianic tales, Saint Patrick is mentioned; usually he is the audience for Ossian's lays. In early tales, Patrick and Ossian are friendly; in later tales their relationship changes. Macpherson avoids Patrick all together, and he ignores as well the magic connected with Finn, his magic tooth or magic thumb which upon command gives him whatever knowledge he wishes. Smart objects strenuously to Macpherson's ignoring Patrick:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

The discourses of Ossian and Patrick are among the most characteristic and vital parts of the tradition. Macpherson omitted them altogether, studiously avoiding all mention of the Irish saint and of Christian doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

The later tales of Ossian and Patrick are perhaps the most entertaining. They have less of Macpherson's melancholy and more of the lively Celtic traditions which keep Ossianic and Arthurian legends alive. Smart objects also to Macpherson's distortion of Celtic spirit evident in genuine Ossianic lays:

Sad as these lays are, Ossianic legend is free from that strain of overwrought melancholy which Macpherson sustains in unbroken monotone. Ossian may bewail his weary age, and the ballad-singers may dwell upon the old man's affliction for a moment; but it is only for a moment. Soon they seek for relief in touches of the grotesque. Ossian and Patrick jangle together; the priest prefers his own psalm-singing to heathen tales; Ossian threatens to wring his bald head off; and Patrick is ready to beat the poet with his holy bell.<sup>2</sup>

Like his treatment of Ossianic melancholy, Macpherson overdoes Ossian's chivalry. Fingal and his men never do a rotten deed, yet in the true Ossianic stories Finn's treachery causes the death of his nephew, Dermid, who had eloped with Finn's wife. Then as Dermid lies dying, he asks Finn for a drink of water and is refused. Such dastardly vengeance, even against adultery and incest, had

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<sup>1</sup>Smart, pp. 73-74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 75-76.

no place in Macpherson's stories; so he dropped the love triangle and invented a new death for Dermid.<sup>1</sup>

Thomson points out other similar changes made by Macpherson, some probably caused by his inability to read the Gaelic sources. In Book I of Temora Macpherson has 500 followers in Oscar's band. In the original Gaelic, 500 was the number of enemies killed by that great warrior.<sup>2</sup> Thomson also notes that in the genuine Gaelic ballads, Patrick is mentioned as usually drinking, and Macpherson could not "reconcile the presence of Patrick, drunk or sober, with his notion of Irish and Fingalian history, and so he substitutes for him a 'Culdee', and even gives a new title for his source which he calls 'Duan a Chuldich'."<sup>3</sup> In a typical change toward the sentimental, in The Battle of Lora, Macpherson changes the original plot in which the beautiful maiden is forgotten; Lorma, his maiden, laments his former lover's death and finally dies of grief.<sup>4</sup>

Macpherson ignored the supernatural parentage of Finn and Ossian. Finn was related to an old Celtic god,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>2</sup>Thomson, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 46-47.

and his name meant "Fair One, son of Cumhall" (Finn Mac Cumhaill), and Oisín or Ossian means "little fawn" or "little deer" because Ossian's mother was a woman changed by magic into a doe.<sup>1</sup> Because of the similarity of "Finn" and "Fenian" (which Macpherson changed to Fingal and Fingalian) to "Fians" or "Fianna," one might think that the group of warriors took their name from their leader Finn (or Fionn), but "fiana" was originally a Gaelic common noun for professional warriors and eventually came to refer to only Finn's followers.<sup>2</sup>

For all these corruptions, and for all the controversy which will be discussed later, Macpherson's Poems of Ossian should not be dismissed lightly or condemned because it no longer attracts readers in the measure it once did. Macpherson was innovative and original; no other forger, and there were several forgeries in the eighteenth century, notably those by Walpole, Chatterton, Lauder, and in some opinion, Sir Walter Scott, had such widespread and lasting effects or influenced so much two great movements of the time, the Celtic Revival and the Romantic Movement. Smart notes that "No English author before him, not Shakespeare, Milton, Addison or Pope, had found such hosts of foreign

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<sup>1</sup>Murphy, pp. 6-10.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 6-7.

admirers; no one after him except Byron, hardly even Sir Walter Scott and Dickens, has had a greater fame."<sup>1</sup> And Ossian affected all the arts. Artists contributed their impressions of the melancholy bard; the poems were adapted for opera and set to music; and when Ossianic fever was at its highest around 1800, "Ossianic names became the fashion, and little Oscars and Malvinas were at play in all the nurseries."<sup>2</sup>

Although the Celtic Revival and the Romantic Movement were closely related and Macpherson's Ossian was intricately related to both, I shall deal first with the Celtic Revival, realizing that while these movements cannot in reality be separated from the mainstream of literary history, to do so is the only possible way to study them.

The Celtic Revival actually started in Wales, where some Welsh literature had been published as early as 1707, but it was after the appearance of Macpherson's Ossian that Welsh as well as Scottish and Irish literature became widely read.<sup>3</sup> However, politics of the eighteenth century

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<sup>1</sup>Smart, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Magnus Maclean, Literature of the Celts: Its History and Romance (London: Blackie & Son, Ltd., 1902), pp. 217-18.

focused on Scotland, and Edinburgh was fast becoming the "Athens of the North" when Macpherson brought together ancient Gaelic fragments, his own literary talent, his personal and patriotic ambitions, influential men like Blair and Home, and sentimental readers. Although Ossian was the best-known production of the era, other types of literature, called "Celtic-English" because they were based on Celtic sources but written in English, existed in tales of druids and Celtic mythology, genuine translations of Celtic materials, original poetry about famous Celtic heroes, and later poetry written in English but with the Scottish dialect of Robert Burns.<sup>1</sup>

Snyder has analyzed Ossian's contributions to the Celtic Revival in areas besides "pretended translations." One of the most important appeals of Celtic-English works was a new mythology to supplement the worn-out classics the eighteenth century could not bring itself to totally abandon. "Here Macpherson made only slight use of his opportunity. Although the heroes of his poems are different in type from the conventional Greek heroes, the mythology of the Druids is neglected in Ossian."<sup>2</sup> In the return to the primitive desired by the eighteenth century

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<sup>1</sup>Snyder, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

Macpherson succeeded greatly, but the desire itself did not last. In the yearning of readers for "romantic scenery" Macpherson fared better, with his stormy descriptions of mountains, valleys, skies, and rivers of the Highlands, but his effect was "quantitative rather than qualitative . . . the imagery is seldom definite enough to convey anything more than a vague impression." This vagueness is felt more strongly in the twentieth century than in the eighteenth. Snyder continues:

Finally most of the Celtic-English poetry appealed to the love of liberty. In an age when the agitation against slavery was first assuming importance and the great struggle for freedom was reaching its climax in France and America, it is not strange that people should have glorified the Celts, whose struggles to retain their freedom in spite of the inroads of more powerful nations have been uninterrupted. . . . In this respect, however, Macpherson is lamentably lacking. For the love of liberty he substituted a melancholy tone of regret--regret for anything and everything.<sup>1</sup>

This excessive melancholy many subsequent writers, Matthew Arnold in particular, took for the genuine Celtic spirit and built whole criticisms and studies around an error propagated by Macpherson.

Scotland was not the only country searching her past for a glorious literature to revive; Germany, especially, followed Macpherson's example, and the romantic

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 86-89.



past which Europeans found only made their Romantic Movement more romantic. What they did not find in their own past they copied from Ossian. The remote Highlands remained romantically far away and Macpherson's Ossian was the most exciting look into the Highlands until Scott published his lays and novels "which eclipsed the popularity of Macpherson's production."<sup>1</sup> There arose musical, versified, and dramatic imitations and versions of Ossian all across the Continent too numerous to discuss, but I mention a few to demonstrate the sort of influence Ossian produced. In 1763 David Erskine Baker dramatized Ossian, preserving the English text and adding only stage directions, in The Muse of Ossian: A Dramatic Poem of Three Acts, Selected from the Several Poems of Ossian the Son of Fingal. As It Is Performed at the Theatre in Edinburgh. (The eighteenth century was a great one for long titles.) In 1768 Ossian appeared as opera on the London stage as Oithóna, a Dramatic Poem, Taken from the Prose Translation of the Celebrated Ossian. As performed at the Theatre Royal in Hay Market. Set to Music by Mr. Barthelemon.<sup>2</sup>

Various painters commemorated Ossian's tales. "In 1771 James Barralett led the way with two drawings from

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<sup>1</sup>Saunders, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Snyder, pp. 97-99.

Fingal; Angelica Kauffman followed in 1773 with Trenmor and Imbaca; Alexander Runciman, in 1774, exhibited a scene from Fingal, Book IV." The list goes on, and some of these paintings or drawings were included in editions of The Poems of Ossian. "The number is not large, but it is sufficient to indicate that painting followed the literary fashion."<sup>1</sup>

The irony of Ossian's extensive influence on the Romantic Movement is that Macpherson did not mean to become involved in the movement. He had been educated and had worked in the classical mode, as is evidenced by his changing romantic Ossianic ballads into epics similar to verse forms found in the Bible, ancient Hebrew poetry, and Milton, and "as a critic he was pedantically attached to classical rules and strove to adapt his writings to their requirements."<sup>2</sup> Another irony of the Ossianic case is that there was less direct influence of Ossian in England than in Europe, although residual effects appeared in a host of writers, even those like Wordsworth who denounced Ossian at the instant they were writing in measured prose or using Ossianic names or images.

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel H. Monk, The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1935), p. 200.

<sup>2</sup>Smart, p. 86.

In Germany Ossian's admirers included Goethe, Herder, Klopstock, Lessing, Schiller, Novalis, Burger, and Tieck; Schubert and Brahms set fragments of Ossianic poems to music. French admirers were fewer--Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Madame de Staël, and George Sand.<sup>1</sup> Ossian was of less importance to the Spanish romantic period, but once translations finally began appearing in 1788, interest in Ossian arose, grew, and extended well into the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Italy's Melchior Cesarotti, a little-known Paduan priest in Venice, translated Ossian in the "first extensive translation to be sold separately in book form."<sup>3</sup> Cesarotti was a severe critic of Homer and delighted in placing Ossian above him. His attack was prompted by the stifling literary rules of eighteenth-century Italy, and he and Ossian served each other's purposes. "Cesarotti without Ossian would not have been in a position to mount such an attack on the rules, and the Ossian poems without Cesarotti might well soon have been forgotten in Italy, and definitely would have had little

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>E. Allison Peers, "The Influence of Ossian in Spain," Philological Quarterly 4 (April 1925): 121, 137.

<sup>3</sup>S[tephen] N. Cristea, "Ossian v. Homer: An Eighteenth-Century Controversy; Melchior Cesarotti and the Struggle for Literary Freedom," Italian Studies 24 (1969): 93.

of the significance that they attained through him."<sup>1</sup> In Russia, Ossian influenced the tragedies of Ozerov<sup>2</sup> and the works of Karamzin.<sup>3</sup> Ossianic translations in French were the main source through which Russians learned of Macpherson's poems, though in general these French translations tended to soften and restrain Macpherson's "wild and unconstrained" English.<sup>4</sup> Ossian first appeared in Russia in 1781 in passage translated into Russian from Goethe's Werther; this passage inspired Yermil' Kostrov's paraphrase of Ossian, which he completed in 1792. "Few authors were translated into Russian more frequently, in the last ten years of the eighteenth century and the first five of the nineteenth, than Macpherson . . . ." <sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, far to the west, in America Ossian was popular with Thomas Jefferson, various journalists and poets, and most American readers. Ossian had three phases

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 101, 109, 111.

<sup>2</sup>Vaughan, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>A. G. Cross, "Karamzin and England," Slavonic and East European Review 43 (December 1964): 95.

<sup>4</sup>Glynn R. Barratt, "The Melancholy and the Wild: A Note on Macpherson's Russian Success," in Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture: Racism in the Eighteenth Century, ed. Harold E. Pagliaro (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973), p. 127.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

in America: 1766-1775, the immediate effect of which was dimmed by the Revolution; 1786-1800, when Ossian received newspaper publicity, partly as a result of the raging controversy over the poems' authenticity; and a third period after 1800, when poets like Walt Whitman converted Ossianic elements into a new type of poetry.<sup>1</sup> Carpenter notes:

There seems every probability that, if the Revolution had not intervened, they [the Ossianic poems] would have gained a quick popularity. As it was, they reasserted themselves as soon as the American public could again turn its attention to literary concerns.<sup>2</sup>

Although American literature was less influenced by Ossian than was European literature, America, like Europe, had a minor role in the Ossianic controversy which swamped the men of letters of Scotland, England, and Ireland.

The eighteenth-century European's ideas of authenticity and ethics in "translations" differed markedly from twentieth-century judgments and expectations, and Macpherson was caught in the middle of the transitions taking place in literature and politics during his lifetime. Some

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<sup>1</sup>Frederic I. Carpenter, "The Vogue of Ossian in America: A Study in Taste," American Literature 2 (March 1930-January 1931): 407, 406.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 408.

writers say he placed himself in a position to be attacked when he willfully deceived Blair and tried to deceive others. Some writers, however, maintain that he was not deceitful but that he was careless and that he was unjustly maligned. The truth lies, as usual, between two extremes. The following is a discussion of the famous Ossianic controversy, but I will reserve my own judgments of the evidence, some of which has been put forth in the last ten years, until Chapter IV.

### CHAPTER III

#### MACPHERSON: CLEVER FORGER OR BRILLIANT POET?

One of the reasons disputants could argue the authenticity of Ossian was the lack of specific guidelines regarding where translation ended and original endeavor began. The eighteenth century was a time when writers were reworking the craft of any author that was not contemporary. A striking example of this lack of literary standards was the adaptation by Nahum Tate of Shakespeare's King Lear in which neither Cordelia nor Lear died.

Johnson himself preferred this version to Shakespeare's and believed that public taste had decided in its favour. If Shakespeare was thus maltreated, it would be idle to expect that poems found in a remote part of Great Britain, and never before known to English men of letters, should be scrupulously edited, and published without modern adornment.<sup>1</sup>

This "modern adornment" was the fashion of the day, yet everyone seemed to object to Macpherson's employing it. Of course, Macpherson's claim that his was a translation partially excluded him from using such artistic techniques, but with the loose literary customs of the eighteenth

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<sup>1</sup>Smart, p. 204.

century, when Macpherson said he had made a "translation" he may not have been deliberately deceitful but only mistaken in his terminology.<sup>1</sup> Smart considers Macpherson a purposeful forger, but regarding motivation admits

we must not apply to him the standards of this century: he lived in an age whose methods were different from ours. Severe ideas of authenticity, definite lines dividing ancient from modern and text from interpolation, were unknown.<sup>2</sup>

Some critics claim Macpherson was simply exercising his editorial privileges, albeit freely, in combining Highland fragments; he was so honest about it that he noted passages of Ossian similar to those of "well-known authors . . . whence he obtained some of the niceties of his translation."<sup>3</sup> Where did the eighteenth century draw the line separating imposture from artistic treatment of genuine materials? In Macpherson's case, the line was the Scottish border where it met the Irish Sea. But Macpherson voiced objections to being known as only a translator from the beginning of the work on Fragments of Ancient Poetry, objections so strong that publication of Blair's Critical Dissertation was delayed so that Macpherson could adjust its wording.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Centenary of Ossian," Macmillan's Magazine 74 (1896): 64.

<sup>2</sup>Smart, p. 204.

<sup>3</sup>Saunders, p. 182.



It appears that Macpherson began by riding the tide of eighteenth-century literary leanings but in the heat of controversy straddled the translator-artist fence, much to the delight of Scotsmen and European romantics. "In the face of the evidence, it is impossible to believe that he forged the whole of the translation; and, on the other hand, it is equally impossible to believe that every line of it was taken from a Gaelic original."<sup>1</sup>

The eighteenth century was not only a great age for forgery, it was a great age for controversy: arguments about "taste," "the sublime," politics, and Ossian dominated the thinking of men like Blair and Johnson. Into these arguments were often mixed the morals of the participants. "In his furious letter Johnson had spoken of Macpherson's morals as though their colour affected the arguments in the controversy,"<sup>2</sup> and Johnson's known bias against the Scots made Ossianic disputants even more nationality-conscious.

A view held by many was that if Ossian were a forgery, how could it have affected the literature of Britain, Europe, and America? This, however, equates Macpherson's morality with literary merit and historical

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 296.

authenticity, an unscientific procedure critics today are not totally free of. Throughout the Ossianic controversy many writers have conveniently or ignorantly (and one is as inexcusable as the other) failed to include facts which did not support their stand; the emotional reactions to Ossian have continued to be just as strong into the twentieth century (compare Smart's forger to Saunders' victim). Other "forgers" did just what Macpherson did, and were not condemned for life, and after, as he was, although they were definitely "convicted" by evidence (Chatterton's Rowley poems) or confession (Walpole's Castle of Otranto). Macpherson's guilt was never proven in the course of the controversy (and even now we can only guess at his motives), but because of the emotional reactions Ossian provoked, Macpherson was denied even the "innocent until proven guilty" verdict by English critics. For this reason, because so much bending of facts and so many flaring emotions have been involved in the Ossianic controversy, before I accepted anything said by any one writer, I compared it first with as many other sources as possible, and then with my own observations. My judgments resulting from these comparisons will be presented in Chapter IV.

Somewhere between the emotional extremes present in eighteenth-century discussions of Ossian lies the truth.

Saunders' biography of Macpherson thoroughly covers the historical events of the Ossianic controversy; therefore, here I will give the briefest possible sketch. Macpherson was a school teacher interested in patriotic Scotch poetry. In 1758 his poem The Highlander was published in Edinburgh and was ignored by the critical world. In 1759 Macpherson met Home, and at Home's request Macpherson "translated" a fragmentary Gaelic poem he called "The Death of Oscar," and as a result of Blair's enthusiasm, he proceeded to translate Fragments of Ancient Poetry. So much interest was created by these poems that a subscription dinner held for Macpherson yielded enough money for him to return to the Highlands to gather scattered Gaelic manuscripts and oral tales for an epic poem. In 1760 Macpherson stayed in Edinburgh working on his poems, then took Fingal to London to be published under the patronage of Lord Bute, Charles III's Scotch minister. Fingal appeared in 1762 amid much speculation among English literary circles as to the authenticity of these third-century works, and speculations changed into denunciations with a second epic, Temora, in 1763. Shortly after, the Macpherson-Johnson feud occurred. Macpherson, in the last years of his life, worked toward the publication of the originals of ancient Gaelic manuscripts which he had promised in 1762, but he

died in 1796 with the Gaelic originals still unpublished. In 1797 the Highland Society of Scotland began an inquiry to settle the controversy, but their Report, published in 1805, was fuel for the flames. In 1805, also, Malcolm Laing published his edition of Ossian in which he relegated the poems to simple plagiarism. In 1807 the Highland Society of London published the original Gaelic of Ossian, which had passed from Macpherson's effects to John Mackenzie, secretary of the Highland Society of London, to Dr. Thomas Ross, who made them ready for publication accompanied by Sir John Sinclair's dissertation on the poems. Even now the controversy continued, for Ossian was at the height of popularity, yet Macpherson's critics were as noisy as ever.

One of the questions of this controversy was whether Blair's theories of the sublime and the nature of poetry influenced Macpherson in his rendition of genuine ancient tales and ballads, or if Macpherson's epics, brought out of the Highlands, "was meat for Blair's theories."<sup>1</sup> This question, however, was of less importance than that of the existence of Macpherson's originals which he claimed to have brought out of the Highlands and which in his "Advertisement Prefixed to the First Edition" he promised to

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Morell Schmitz, Hugh Blair (New York: King's Crown Press, 1948), p. 45.

print "as soon as the translator shall have time to transcribe them for the press."<sup>1</sup> As time went by and no originals appeared, attacks on both Macpherson and Ossian grew in vigor and number.

Attacks came from both London and Dublin claiming Macpherson had stolen Irish ballads and corrupted them to produce Ossian. Irish attacks on Macpherson, however, were almost overlooked in the bitter exchange of English-Scots pamphlets which soon began. Ossian's defenders felt the honor of Scotland was at stake, while Englishmen were sure Macpherson was a fraud although they could not prove it.<sup>2</sup> Scottish opposition to the Union of 1707, the two Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745, and the corrupt character of many Scots invading English politics all contributed to English hostility toward the Scots.<sup>3</sup> The English fear

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<sup>1</sup>James Macpherson, The Poems of Ossian, etc., Containing the Poetical Works of James Macpherson, Esq., in Prose and Rhyme: With Notes and Illustrations by Malcolm Laing, Esq., 2 vols., ed. Malcolm Laing (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1805), 1:lvii.

<sup>2</sup>Macpherson claimed to have placed with Thomas Beckett, his publisher, the Gaelic originals to Fingal, leaving them in London during 1762. No one responded to this opportunity, possibly because they overlooked it, or perhaps because Ossian's critics who knew no Gaelic were content never to have seen originals which might prove Ossian authentic.

<sup>3</sup>Saunders, pp. 183-85.

which followed the '45 Jacobite rising was so strong that in 1747 the Parliament under George II banned, under severe penalties, the wearing of any Highland manner of dress and "The oath of a single witness before a Justice of the Peace was enough to effect a conviction."<sup>1</sup>

The English, too, were victims of the limited critical methods of the eighteenth century and "understood nothing but personal authorship, and thought of Homer as a man who had 'written' the Iliad."<sup>2</sup> Johnson's intuitions about Macpherson were right: he thought that Macpherson claimed too much for Ossian. Johnson smelled what he thought was a rat, but it was really just a mouse. Johnson claimed there was no Gaelic writing whatsoever, but the Dean of Lismore's Book, a sixteenth-century manuscript of Scottish Gaelic ballads, including Ossianic ballads, effectively counters that charge. And even though Englishmen derided Ossian, many of them were affected by it, as evidenced by their journeys into the Highlands and Western Islands, the most famous of these journeys, of course, being Johnson's.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"The Centenary of Ossian," p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Green Moulton, "Ossian," in World Literature and Its Place in General Culture (New York: Macmillan Co., 1911), p. 320.

<sup>3</sup>Maclean, p. 316.

It was Johnson's publication of his account of this tour<sup>1</sup> which occasioned the famous quarrel between Macpherson and Johnson, who had met only once. Macpherson learned of the disparaging remarks Johnson was including in his Journey and sent him a note asking that Johnson make more civil his statements on Ossian's authenticity. The Journey was published unchanged, and Macpherson wrote Johnson a second time proposing a correction for future editions discounting Johnson's ungentlemanly remarks about Macpherson. These two letters by Macpherson to Johnson are frequently ignored in telling the story of Macpherson's third letter to Johnson, threatening the Englishman. Johnson's reply to the third letter has gone down in history as the perfect example of the superior Englishman scoffing at the abilities, literary and physical, of the uncouth Scot.<sup>2</sup>

Another peculiarity of this episode is the fact that Saunders is the only source in which I found the connection made between Johnson's attitude toward Macpherson and the embarrassment Johnson was subjected to several years earlier as a result of his support of the Scotsman William

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel Johnson, A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland, ed. Mary Lascelles (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971 [first published in 1775]).

<sup>2</sup>Saunders gives a quite detailed account of this incident, pp. 241-53.

Lauder. The details of Lauder's forgery of Miltonic papers are given in the Dictionary of National Biography and Encyclopaedia Britannica, but nowhere besides in Saunders have I found what appears to be a very well-founded conclusion drawn from Johnson's having suffered indignation once in a similar situation at the hands of a similar Scotsman. Johnson wrote a preface for Lauder's publication; he also dictated Lauder's public confession.<sup>1</sup> Saunders seems unusually perceptive when he says:

And in connection with his [Johnson's] opinion that the [Ossianic] poems were a Scotch forgery there was an earlier experience which could not be overlooked. Some thirteen years previously one Lauder, also a Scotch schoolmaster, had fabricated a mass of Latin poetry, partly taken from Grotius and other modern Latin writers, which he proclaimed as the archetype of Paradise Lost. Among the elect whom he deceived was Johnson himself, who had taken a great interest in the work and supplied Lauder with a preface and postscript. Johnson was not likely to forget the indignation which he had felt when the fraud was detected, or thereafter to look kindly on any other Scotch work of doubtful authenticity.<sup>2</sup>

However, Smart tells us of Johnson's friendliness and courtesy to O'Connor, an Irishman, of Johnson's support of a proposal to have a Gaelic translation of the Bible, and of Johnson's aid to William Shaw's publication of a Gaelic

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<sup>1</sup>Dictionary of National Biography, s.v. "William Lauder," and Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th ed., s.v. "William Lauder."

<sup>2</sup>Saunders, pp. 196-97.



grammar.<sup>1</sup> But these last works were not disputed, unauthenticated works as was Ossian, and although Macpherson was by no means a poor Scottish lamb in a den of English wolves, Johnson's animosity was typical of current English feeling throughout the eighteenth century.

Much of this hostility of the English towards the Scots was a result of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion; the Highlanders were mostly Catholic and their attempts to hold onto traditions banned by an English Protestant Parliament many Englishmen saw as both a political threat and an insult. The Scots saw in Ossian a way to combat this English suppression. Before Macpherson, the Scots accepted the Fenian cycle as Irish, and when Ossian appeared as a more historic and more sublime work than anything in English literature, Scotsmen accepted it totally, ignoring what many of them knew to be true, that Macpherson had suppressed genuine Gaelic literature in favor of his own work in an effort to produce a national epic better than Beowulf, better than Homer.<sup>2</sup> The Highland arrogance that constructed Ossian appeared again in Macpherson's boast that he had produced the Gaelic originals and left them with Beckett for the English critics to study,

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<sup>1</sup>Smart, pp. 142-45.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 41-42, 54-55.

but the inferior Englishmen knew no Gaelic, a truly sublime language, as demonstrated by Ossian, and therefore had no right to criticize the illustrious Macpherson.<sup>1</sup>

There was enough true Ossianic material in Macpherson's poems to prevent his being the sole inventor of Ossian, and the English pamphlet writers tried unsuccessfully time and again to prove Macpherson to be the forger Johnson insisted he was. Malcolm Laing, author of a history of Scotland which rejected Ossian altogether, was Macpherson's "severest and most searching of critics." Of Norse blood, he was accused of taking petty revenge on Fingal, who had defeated his ancestor Swaran, and of being the worst example of a Teuton oppressing the heroic Celt.<sup>2</sup> Laing was determined to solve the controversy forever. By elaborate research he tracked down every plagiarism Macpherson could possibly have committed, and in 1805, the same year the Highland Society of Scotland's Report named Macpherson a forger working with a mere skeleton of Ossianic literature, produced his two-volume edition of The Poems of Ossian.<sup>3</sup> In it Laing, to the extent of his ability to

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<sup>1</sup>Graham, SML, p. 233.

<sup>2</sup>Smart, p. 171.

<sup>3</sup>Already noted on p. 52.

ascertain them, included Macpherson's complete poetic works, although he excluded two critical essays on Ossian which have been attributed to Macpherson.<sup>1</sup> This edition is valuable for making available with Ossian Macpherson's The Highlander, a similar though untitled manuscript which Laing calls The Hunter, and Fragments of Ancient Poetry. A testimony to the value of Laing's work is the fact that in 1977 it was one of the three editions of Ossian still in print. However, most critical opinions agree with those of Sir Walter Scott in his comments on Laing's edition printed in the Edinburgh Review.<sup>2</sup> Scott judged Laing successful in proving that Macpherson was not a mere translator, that he had greatly tampered with his sources, but Scott thought Laing had taken his investigation to such extremes that he had begun to do harm to the evidence by his insistence that almost every other word of Ossian was plagiarized from a Greek, Hebrew, Latin, or Miltonic source.<sup>3</sup> Two years later, when the Highland Society of London finally published Macpherson's Gaelic originals as transcribed by Ross and Sinclair, the Ossianic furor broke out again as new attempts

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<sup>1</sup>"A Dissertation Concerning the Aera of Ossian" and "A Dissertation Concerning the Poems of Ossian" have been prefixed to several editions of Ossian.

<sup>2</sup>Sir Walter Scott, "Report of the Highland Society upon Ossian, etc.," Edinburgh Review 6 (July 1805): 429-62.

<sup>3</sup>Smart, pp. 172, 178.

were made to find Gaelic tales in the Highlands of the early nineteenth century which matched the published Gaelic. This search through the Highlands, which went on throughout the entire nineteenth century, recovered many Gaelic manuscripts and much oral Gaelic tradition that otherwise might have been Anglicized right out of existence, but no Cibola of Ossianic manuscripts similar to Macpherson's epics was found.

While this continuous argument over The Poems of Ossian went on in England, Scotland, and Ireland, in nineteenth-century Europe and America, Ossian was being translated and imitated with the controversy serving as so much free advertising for the wonders of Ossian. More and more editions were printed and reprinted of the work, more and more essays, dissertations, prefaces, and notes appeared discussing now both Ossian and "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s" theories concerning its authenticity. Alongside these discussions appeared works by English and American poets which reflected in varying degrees Ossianic influences.

Although Macpherson's Ossian was of questionable authenticity, it was the only popular version of ancient Gaelic tales circulating until late in the nineteenth century, and its influence appeared in both direct imitation and in less noticeable ways through diction and imagery.

I have already mentioned briefly the European acceptance of Ossian by Klopstock, Goethe, and others; imitations, translations, and versifications of Ossian permeated the Continent. In England Ossian was not praised as loudly as it was in Europe, but its influence was felt, even by critics of Macpherson. Ossianic influences can be seen in Blake's prophetic writing, especially in the undated manuscript of Tiriel in which "the Ossianic influence is strong in its overwrought imagery and violent phase."<sup>1</sup> The exact degree of direct Ossianic influence on Blake is obscured by the work of Chatterton, through which much of the influence of Ossian was transmitted to Blake's work.<sup>2</sup>

Although Robert Burns read Ossian, the work seems to have had little influence on Burns' meter, diction, or imagery. Although both men were Scots, and both used their poetry for patriotic purposes, few critics have pointed out Ossianic features used by Burns. Macpherson drew attention to Scotland in the mid-eighteenth century and broke the English barrier against Scottish work; Burns was popular

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<sup>1</sup>Adolphus W. Ward and Alfred R. Waller, eds., The Cambridge History of English Literature, 14 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907-27), 11:200-206.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret Ruth Lowery, Windows of the Morning: A Critical Study of William Blake's "Poetical Sketches," 1783 (New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 175.

in the late eighteenth century. Macpherson was a Highlander, Burns a Lowlander who wrote about the Highlands. One would expect to find closer ties between the two poets. Ironically, however, the Ossianic controversy which focused the attention of men of letters on the Highlands, may have done Burns a disservice by making the world wary of poetry coming out of the Highlands.

Wordsworth was a harsh critic of Macpherson, but although Wordsworth denounced Ossian

it can be shown that he was familiar with the subject matter, the spirit, and, in places, with the exact phraseology of Ossian; that he borrowed an Ossianic word or two when he needed it; that many of his poems deal with themes relating to the Ossianic poems, or present images or lines to which parallels may be found in Ossian; and that in his passionate love of the mountain wilderness he came very near the spirit of the blind bard of Selma.<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth produced four sonnets to Fingal's Cave, and on at least five other occasions Wordsworth refers poetically to Ossian, the poet and/or Macpherson's book. And it is not only in isolated words and phrases that Ossian's influence is apparent in Wordsworth's work; other writers used descriptions of the mountains and wild scenery, but Macpherson was the first and the most widely read writer to do so.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Robert Moore, "Wordsworth's Unacknowledged Debt to Macpherson's Ossian," PMLA 40 (June 1925): 362.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 366-75.

Perhaps more study has been done on Ossian's influence on Coleridge than other English Romantics. The most outstanding example of Ossian's influence is Coleridge's "Complaint of Ninathoma" in which he mixed parts of several Ossianic poems in a formal imitation of Macpherson's work.<sup>1</sup> "Coleridge knew and respected Macpherson's work; furthermore . . . he incorporated Ossianic imagery into his early poetry, and . . . he continued to do so in passages of his greatest work."<sup>2</sup> In 1796, the year of Macpherson's death, Coleridge planned an opera based on Ossian's Carthon, and he seems to have regarded individual Ossianic poems, many of which were printed with Fingal and Temora, as authentic and Macpherson deceitful only as regards the epics. Dunn notes:

Further indication of Coleridge's admiration of Ossian may be seen in three poems that are permeated with Ossianic diction and imagery: "Anna and Harland" (c. 1790), "Imitated from Ossian" (1793), and "The Complaint of Ninathoma" (1793. . . .

. . . The plight of Anna is identical to that of Colma in The Songs of Selma; her lover and her brother

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<sup>1</sup>John J. Dunn, "Coleridge's Debt to Macpherson's Ossian," Studies in Scottish Literature 7 (July-October 1969): 76-89; Lucyle Werkmeister and P. M. Zall, "Coleridge's The Complaint of Ninathoma," Notes & Queries 16 (November 1969): 412-14; and Henry Augustin Beers, "Ossian," in A History of English Romanticism in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1898; New York: Gordian Press, 1966), pp. 306-38.

<sup>2</sup>Dunn, "Coleridge's Debt," p. 76.

quarrel and in the resulting combat both are killed; she dies from grief almost immediately.<sup>1</sup>

Ossian's direct influence does not appear in any of Coleridge's major poems, although Macpherson's innovative poetic prose must have affected Coleridge's ideas of prosody. However, the "sense of the strangeness and mystery of the world as viewed by a primitive and superstitious narrator," the "narrative technique that is both rapid and abrupt," the use of a "primitive dramatic narrator for the plausible introduction of the supernatural," and the "general simplicity of diction that is appropriate to the dramatic narrators of Macpherson and Coleridge"<sup>2</sup> appear both in Ossian and in several of Coleridge's poems, including "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

Byron also imitated Ossian, combining classicism and romanticism with Ossian in The Death of Calmar and Orla and Oscar of Alva.<sup>3</sup> Sir Walter Scott at first believed Ossian to be authentic, but was soon convinced by evidence to the contrary, although he would have preferred to have Scotland honored by such popular epic poetry. Scott encouraged antiquarians to search out authentic Celtic

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 83, 84-87.

<sup>3</sup>Ward, 12:44.



literature, but this did not occur in any great measure until later in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Scott used, however, many Ossianic elements in his poems and novels; battle and love scenes, landscapes, the supernatural, and sentimentalism were common to both redactors of Scotland's glorious past.<sup>2</sup> An example of Ossian's influence on later poets is the Brownings. The first book Robert Browning purchased "with his own money" was Ossian, and he wrote to Elizabeth Barrett in 1846 that the first poem he ever wrote was an imitation of Ossian.<sup>3</sup>

In the eighteenth century, everyone read Ossian. In nineteenth-century America Ossian had declined in the number of readers, as it had in Britain, but the major writers were still reading Macpherson's work and being influenced by it. Emerson praised Ossian but "qualified his expressions concerning Ossian, with due regard for reality. . . . Thoreau, less shrewd than Emerson, accepted Ossian unreservedly . . . . Eager to believe in their authenticity." However, Longfellow, who admired Ossian's

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<sup>1</sup>Smart, pp. 179-83.

<sup>2</sup>Georg Fridén, James Fenimore Cooper and Ossian, Essays and Studies on American Language and Literature, vol. 8 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Upsala: A. -B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1949), pp. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup>Ward, 11:227, 12:52.

poetry, renounced the poems because they were of such questionable authenticity.<sup>1</sup> The best-known American writer who used Ossian's poems a great deal in his own work was Whitman.

Certainly he came under their influence more completely than did any of the others, . . . he accepted the Ossianic poems as literature, because of their natural appeal to him; and we may be thankful that he did. It is probable that Macpherson's choice of a rhythmic prose for his "translations" had much to do with the genesis of Whitman's new type of free verse.<sup>2</sup>

But more fascinating than these American writers' attitudes towards Ossian is the earlier work of James Fenimore Cooper. When reading The Poems of Ossian I was aware that Ossian and Oscar and the vanished Gaels closely paralleled Cooper's Chingachgook, Uncas, and the vanished Mohicans. Cooper apparently was familiar with Ossian and drew on its romantic decorum and ideas of the epic (Cooper set his Leatherstocking Tales in the primitive past, just as had Macpherson), but a curious irony is that Macpherson may have used reports of the Indian Wars in America which appeared frequently in the 1750s and 1760s in the Gentleman's Magazine for some of his ideas of primitive man.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Carpenter, pp. 410-12.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 413.

<sup>3</sup>Barrie Hayne, "Ossian, Scott, and Cooper's Indians," Journal of American Studies 3 (July 1969): 86-87.

Then later Cooper copied Macpherson, although he was, of course, also influenced by Byron and Scott (who themselves had been influenced by Ossian).<sup>1</sup>

Ossian remained a definite influence on nineteenth-century literature of England, Europe, and America, and the controversy never completely subsided over the authenticity of the poems, although it did fade from the prominence it had in the eighteenth century. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, interest in authentic Celtic literature revived, and the search for a genuine Ossian was renewed.

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<sup>1</sup>Fridén, p. 14.

## CHAPTER IV

### OSSIAN IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

At various times throughout the nineteenth century articles appeared in publications like Royal Irish Academy Transactions and Transactions of the Ossianic Society of Dublin<sup>1</sup> in which the old question of Ossian's origins was studied and disputed by a variety of Irish scholars. In Scotland and England, however, the mid-nineteenth century was devoted to searching out the Highlands and even Ireland for genuine Gaelic or Celtic literature in an effort to preserve a vanishing culture. "A new epoch was made by the labours of John Francis Campbell. . . . He devoted himself to the study of Gaelic poetry and folk-lore with unflagging zeal."<sup>2</sup> Campbell traveled through the Highlands carefully documenting Gaelic ballads and folk-tales that he

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<sup>1</sup>For example, William Hamilton Drummond, "Subject Proposed by the Royal Irish Academy--To Investigate the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian, Both as Given in Macpherson's Translation, and as Published in Gaelic, London 1807, under the Sanction of the Highland Society of London; and on the Supposition of Such Poems not Being of Recent Origin, to Assign the Probable Era and Country of the Original Poet or Poets. A Prize Essay," Royal Irish Academy of Dublin Transactions 16, no. 2 (1830): 3-161.

<sup>2</sup>Smart, p. 45.

collected and in 1862 published Popular Tales of the West Highlands, "one of the most valuable and genuine pieces of peasant literature in the world."<sup>1</sup> In this four-volume work Campbell included with genuine Gaelic tales and ballads, some of them about Ossian, his opinions of Macpherson's Ossian. Overall, Campbell leaned toward believing in Ossian's warped but fundamental authenticity; he acknowledged the validity of the Irish claim to Ossian, but the close historical ties of Scotland and Ireland prevented him from believing Macpherson "stole" from Irish literature for a work which never existed in the Highlands. "MacPherson [sic] has enough to answer for without making him worse than he is; and it seems unjust to accuse him of stealing things which he found at home."<sup>2</sup>

Campbell represents the less emotional Ossianic critic developing in the nineteenth century, one who was willing to examine as objectively as possible all the facts; however, nineteenth-century scholars were still limited by their methods of research. As more and more Gaelic literature accumulated and more and more information was pieced together about how the language of the Celts worked to preserve this literature, the prevalent views

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>Campbell, pp. 10, 13.

about Ossian changed. Campbell was among the first to lean toward an "open mind," which had been very much lacking in the early years of the Ossianic controversy: "I neither believe that MacPherson composed Ossian, nor that Ossian composed all the poems which bear his name. I am quite content to believe Ossian to have been an Irishman, or a Scotsman, or a myth, on sufficient evidence."<sup>1</sup> Campbell devoted an entire section, almost one-third of volume four of Popular Tales, to a discussion of the Ossianic question in which he supports the genuine origins of Ossian. However, following the publication of Popular Tales, Campbell spent ten years preparing as complete as possible a collection of Ossianic Highland ballads, published in 1872 as Leabhar na Feinne, or Book of the Fians. During this ten-year period, Campbell's estimation of Macpherson's poems changed, and he came to regard Ossian as having no real basis in genuine Gaelic literature.

Campbell's judgments were colored, of course, by the already mentioned preoccupation of most critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries--their search for a Gaelic epic, a genre for which Campbell could find no evidence during his years in the Highlands, although he did find several ballads which resemble parts of Macpherson's

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 1:xxxii.

work. Thomson and Fitzgerald have shown that Macpherson really did use ballad material in Ossian, material so changed, however, as not to be easily recognizable.<sup>1</sup> If Campbell did not find the genuine Ossianic epic the world so thirsted for, he did preserve an enormous amount of Gaelic literature which would otherwise have soon disappeared, and he illuminates for us the attitude of the Highland peasants who possessed the genuine and mostly oral Ossianic ballads:

The illiterate seem to have no opinion on the subject. So far as I could ascertain, few had heard of the controversy, but they had all heard scraps of poems and stories about the Finne, all their lives; and they are content to believe that "Ossian, the last of the Finne," composed the poems, wrote them, and burned his book in a pet, when he was old and blind, because St. Patrick, or St. Paul, or some other saint, would not believe his wonderful stories.<sup>2</sup>

George F. Black's bibliography and Dunn's supplement to it<sup>3</sup> present an overview of the amount of literature

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<sup>1</sup>Thomson, already cited, and Robert F. Fitzgerald, "The Style of Ossian," Studies in Romanticism 6 (Autumn 1966): 22-33.

<sup>2</sup>Campbell, 1:xxvii-xxix.

<sup>3</sup>George F. Black, "Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic Controversy: A Contribution Towards a Bibliography," Bulletin of the New York Public Library 30 (June 1926): 424-39, 508-24; John J. Dunn, "Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic Controversy: A Supplementary Bibliography," Bulletin of the New York Public Library 75 (November 1971): 465-73.

in the nineteenth century connected with Ossian. A few of these works are of special interest or importance. Shortly after the publication of Leabhar na Feinne in 1872, Peter Hatelý Waddell published a long and complex work pinpointing the landscapes described in Macpherson's poems in an attempt to prove them genuine.<sup>1</sup> A view almost opposite from Campbell's objective rationalism appeared in The Language and Literature of the Scottish Highlands published in 1876 by John Stuart Blackie. Blackie, a patriotic Scot, began his book by avowing to state "the facts of the case," a statement which grates on the nerves a few pages later:

English ignorance and insolence indignantly bottled up must find vent; and the little Teutonic snake tumid with spite and bigotry must have free scope and large range to hiss and bite and spit venom, before cool reason could have a chance of being listened to in the matter.<sup>2</sup>

Scarcely a year went by between 1875 and 1905, the year of Smart's biography of Macpherson, that at least one article or book did not appear about Ossian. In the 1880s and 1890s Celtic Magazine, Celtic Monthly, and publications of the Gaelic Societies of Inverness and of Glasgow devoted

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<sup>1</sup>P[eter] Hatelý Waddell, Ossian and the Clyde, Fingal in Ireland, Oscar in Iceland; or Ossian Historical and Authentic (Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1875).

<sup>2</sup>John Stuart Blackie, The Language and Literature of the Scottish Highlands (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1876; reprint ed., Louisville: Lost Cause Press, 1957), p. 203.



hundreds of pages to the renewed interest in Ossian which accompanied and/or caused renewed interest in Celtic studies, especially in those of Ireland, where many scholars felt the best possibility lay for studying genuine Ossianic tales. During this period, amidst what was most popularly called the second Celtic Revival or the Irish Renaissance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ossianic materials other than those presented by Macpherson became widely known. Probably the most famous of the writers of the Celtic Renaissance was William Butler Yeats, who

recognized the odd inconsistencies and confusions in Macpherson's Poems of Ossian. . . . But he had reason to be grateful to him as well. Macpherson's indirect influence shone through the material which was a perpetual source of imagery in Yeats' canon of writing. One of Yeats' first poems, "The Wanderings of Oisín," is an expression of that material which variously echoes throughout the phases of his creations until its lines and philosophy are declaimed again in his final works.<sup>1</sup>

Other writers of the Celtic Renaissance included Katherine Tynan, Richard Ellis, John O'Leary, and John Todhunter. These writers also employed material taken from the ancient myths of the Irish Oisín and his Fianna, myths which until the late nineteenth century had been

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<sup>1</sup>Madeleine Pelter Cosman, "Mannered Passion: W. B. Yeats and the Ossianic Myths," Western Humanities Review 14 (Spring 1960): 163.

overshadowed by Macpherson's Ossian. However, Ossian may have done the Irish Oisín more good than harm; the controversy caused by Macpherson led to the founding of the Ossianic Society of Dublin and the exploration of Irish Ossianic ballads by Irish writers such as Joseph Cooper Walker, Charlotte Brooke, Sylvester O'Halloran, Charles Wilson, and several others under the banner of that society.<sup>1</sup> "But the most important influence of Macpherson was that he primed the world for Yeats' set of symbols. . . . When Yeats wrote, much of Ossianic myth could be presented as symbol and not as story."<sup>2</sup>

Interest during the Celtic Renaissance was not confined to the episodes of Ossian and the other Fianna; the Cúchulainn cycle was also becoming popular partly because of its being "untainted" as Oisín had been by Macpherson. Writing in 1898, Eleanor Hull observed that Ossianic tales had been "popularised" and seldom retained their original form and often included episodes incorporated from the Cúchulainn cycle, which were superior in literary merit to the less archaic and less pagan Ossianic cycles. "It has

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<sup>1</sup>Ludwig Christian Stern, "Ossianic Heroic Poetry," trans. J. L. Robertson, Gaelic Society of Inverness Transactions 22 (1900): 287-88.

<sup>2</sup>Cosman, p. 164.

been unfortunate for the literary reputation of the old Gael that the Ossianic tales and not those of the Cuchullin Saga . . . have been kept before the public as typical of the literary genius of ancient Ireland."<sup>1</sup>

Macpherson's Ossian had accomplished remarkable things in the world of literature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but by the early twentieth century Ossian had become a relic of a bygone era, a literary curiosity. Interest in Macpherson's work never totally vanished, but it subsided enough for some critics to feel it "as extinct as the dodo,"<sup>2</sup> and there was no longer the frenzied search for an epic manuscript, although Thomson's Gaelic Sources is proof that interest in Macpherson's original Gaelic manuscripts still exists.

Perhaps the most outstanding authority on Ossianic literature, both genuine and Macphersonish, is Alfred Nutt. Although he devoted himself mostly to Irish and Gaelic Ossianic literature, his comments on Macpherson are objective and perceptive; his contributions to the Popular

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<sup>1</sup>Eleanor Hull, ed., The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature, Being a Collection of Stories Relating to the Hero Cuchullin, Translated from the Irish by Various Scholars: Compiled and Edited with Introduction and Notes, by Eleanor Hull (London: David Nutt, 1898; New York: Grimm Library no. 8, AMS Press, 1972), p. xx.

<sup>2</sup>Maclean, p. 352.

Studies in Mythology, Romance, and Folklore series are both valuable and fascinating.

Another Celtic scholar of the 1890s was William Sharp, a Scots writer, who in 1896 brought out an edition of Ossian and in his "Introductory Note" performed the service of briefly stating the general state of Ossianic literature. This edition was reprinted as late as 1926, and it is an ordinary edition of Macpherson's poems. As an editor of Ossian, however, Sharp is noteworthy because he serves as an example of the peculiar, fascinating way in which Macpherson has often affected writers. Literary forgeries seemingly went out of fashion early in the nineteenth century, and remained so unnewsworthy that it was almost by accident that I discovered history repeating itself in William Sharp, who spent much of his early life in the Highland peasant districts. Writing under the feminine name of "Fiona Macleod," this Scottish journalist wrote novels, poems, essays, and plays which typified the "Celtic twilight" movement popularized by Yeats. In addition to Ossian, under his true name, Sharp edited Lyra Celtica, a Celtic anthology, and published some essays and minor novels. It was only after his death that it was discovered that the entry in Who's Who for Fiona

MacLeod, Sharp's "cousin," was a forgery as were all her works.<sup>1</sup>

Impressive examples of twentieth-century interest in Macpherson's Ossian are Black's bibliography and Dunn's work with Ossian. An appendix to this thesis lists several works written in English which have appeared since Dunn's supplement in 1971. Dunn is probably the foremost Ossianic scholar today, having produced articles on Ossian, a reprint edition of Fragments of Ancient Poetry, and a valuable doctoral dissertation, "The Role of Macpherson's Ossian in the Development of British Romanticism."<sup>2</sup> Particularly interesting is his article on the similarities between Macpherson's The Highlander and his Fingal. Unbelievably, this is the first published discussion of the obvious parallels in these two works, works which are so similar that one would think that anyone who read them could not believe Ossian to be all that Macpherson claimed. Dunn's attitude towards Macpherson is the most modern and the most logical: "What is evident from a reading of The

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<sup>1</sup>David Daiches, ed., The Penguin Companion to English Literature, s.v. "William Sharp," and the Columbia Encyclopaedia, 3d ed., s.v. "William Sharp."

<sup>2</sup>John J. Dunn, "The Role of Macpherson's Ossian in the Development of British Romanticism" Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1966 (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 66-07266, 1966).

Highlander is that Macpherson was not a mere literary opportunist; he had a genuine and serious desire to fashion an epic on a Scottish theme long before the publication of Fingal and Temora.<sup>1</sup> But not all writers, even in the twentieth century, have shown such insight. The very title of Keith Norman Macalister Macdonald's "The Reasons Why I Believe in the Ossianic Poems," published in 1904, coupled with his own Mac-ish name causes smiles in the 1970s; the smiles either broaden or turn into indignation at his discussion of Ossian:

I would like to ask--Are the Scriptures true, or any part of them? If not, where is the truth to be found? Certainly not in profane history. . . . The sacred writings are different from all others, so it is with the Ossianic poems. The

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that produced them has had no equal. They are different from anything else that we know.<sup>2</sup>

Absolute errors appear in this same article; Macdonald declares that in Macpherson's non-Ossianic works, "there is NOTHING COMPARABLE TO OSSIAN in any of them . . ."<sup>3</sup> As late as the 1950s critics were still almost as extreme in their discussions of the events of the controversy:

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<sup>1</sup>Keith Norman Macalister Macdonald, "The Reasons Why I Believe in the Ossianic Poems," Celtic Monthly 12-13 (1904-1905): 7-236 passim; 16-229 passim.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

For the truth is that Macpherson had written a book--published one, anyway, to take the agreed common ground about it--that, while it delighted Continental Europe as few books have ever delighted it, enraged both London and Dublin with a unanimity quite unparalleled in the literary history of these two (often so antagonistic) capitals. Both of them, to a man, hated James.<sup>1</sup>

This enduring extremism surrounding Ossian, which to us is humorous, is perhaps one of its most endearing features. All these people throughout history appear to us comically foolish in their blind support or attacks upon a work which without these arguments might have drawn even less attention than its genuine literary merit deserved. The Ossianic controversy is today, for those who know of it, an object both of study and of entertainment, and it is not always that these attractions can so successfully be combined.

As surprising as it is to find Dunn's article on the similarities between The Highlander and Fingal, it is even more surprising to discover Kenneth F. Gantz's "Charlotte Brooke's Reliques of Irish Poetry and the Ossianic Controversy," which appeared in 1940.<sup>2</sup> Gantz's discussion of Ossian and of Irish ancient poetry is

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<sup>1</sup>Christina Keith, "Second Thoughts on Ossian," Queen's Quarterly 58 (Winter 1951-52): 551.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth F. Gantz, "Charlotte Brooke's Reliques of Irish Poetry and the Ossianic Controversy," University of Texas Studies in English (1940), pp. 137-56.

objective enough, but it is peculiar that he does not seem to realize that everything he says about Charlotte Brooke's poetry parallels facts about Ossian. "In her preface Miss Brooke aligns herself with the defenders of her country . . ." in an effort to prove that Ossian was really Oisín. "She would prefer that someone more talented than herself" would come forth to vindicate Irish antiquities.<sup>1</sup> This is exactly what the Scottish Macpherson did, present a patriotic work with modesty. Gantz notes that, in her volume of modern and ancient poems, Miss Brooke inserted an "original 'tale.'" Like most enthusiasts about old romance, Miss Brooke tried her hand at imitation, with a result of the usual quality."<sup>2</sup> Like Macpherson, her success came not from her original work, but from her "translations." Gantz comments that she was probably influenced by Ossian's methods, but that, unlike Macpherson, she did not attempt a literal translation; rather, she "sought to rectify the impressions Macpherson and his school had given the English public of Irish poetry."<sup>3</sup> But she added to the text of her poems her own comments and notes of historical and critical information, just as

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 141-42.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., note 46, p. 148.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 149.



Macpherson had done in Ossian; she "speculates on authorship," which Macpherson did; she "points out beauties of the Irish tongue," which Macpherson did for the Scottish language. In sentences like the following one, Gantz gives information about Miss Brooke which closely parallels Macpherson's situation, but he fails to mention these parallels, or rather presents them as proper conduct by the lady and deception by the gentleman: "It might be urged, however, that Miss Brooke was not entirely disinterested, in that the revival of interest in Celtic literature afforded her financial opportunity."<sup>1</sup> Macpherson was a scheming opportunist, but Brooke was merely fortunate; Macpherson created his opportunity, but Brooke merely took advantage of hers when it came along. I begin to sound like an eighteenth-century disputant in the case; such is the emotional power of everything connected with Ossian. But the parallels Gantz reveals are too striking to be ignored. Like Macpherson, Brooke slipped her translations from the protection of another profession. Macpherson was a schoolteacher; Brooke was endeavoring to become a housekeeper for the Royal Irish Academy. "In a letter to Bishop Percy, with whom she had corresponded concerning her plan to secure the situation as housekeeper, now definitely

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 148, 149.

abandoned, she mentioned the Reliques as an incipient volume of translations from old Irish poetry upon which she had been at work for some time."<sup>1</sup> This had been suggested to her by two friends whom she considered authorities and who proposed to publish her work by subscription. Change the setting to Moffat, the names to Macpherson, Home, Blair, and Ferguson, and the above material is Ossianic history. Like Macpherson, Brooke had her circle of patriotic supporters: Joseph Cooper Walker, and most importantly, Sylvester O'Halloran, who parallels Hugh Blair's Critical Dissertation with his "Introductory Discourse to the Poem of Conloch," which appeared in Reliques.<sup>2</sup> Gantz notes that Brooke was said to have learned Irish in two years, "became perfect mistress of it,"<sup>3</sup> while Macpherson has been attacked for accomplishing Ossian in a similar length of time, a period which compares unfavorably to the thirty years J. F. Campbell spent in the Highlands making his collections. Like Macpherson, Brooke is known to have had assistance from "learned friends" in preparing her work. Perhaps Brooke did not attain the recognition Macpherson did because eighteenth-century attention focused

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

on Scotland more than on Ireland. Brooke made her originals more available than did Macpherson, but her poems were not accepted at face value by everyone.<sup>1</sup> Finally, like Macpherson, Brooke suppressed an earlier work. Gantz seems to miss the irony of his own statements:

As one reviews the milieu of the Reliques and the resentment Macpherson had aroused in its godfather O'Halloran and the O'Connor so much admired by Miss Brooke, as well as in undoubtedly her whole literary circle, he wonders that she was so restrained in the defense of her country. Perhaps to the eighteenth century female it would not have seemed fitting to be otherwise.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Her reluctance to draw to herself the attention a direct challenge might have aroused may be inferred from her avoidance of publicity in connection with an earlier publication, her translation of a song and monody by Carolan, which appeared anonymously by her express wish in Walker's Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards. Walker explained that he was enjoined to conceal the name of the translator, as she shrank from the public eye.<sup>2</sup>

Is it pure coincidence, in addition to the other parallels already mentioned, that both translators published their first translations anonymously? It is likely that Macpherson served as an example for Brooke in much the same way he did for Chatterton or Walpole; Brooke's work took much the same route as did Macpherson's but achieved far less fame.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 154-55.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 156.

Here ends the broad survey of two centuries of Ossianic influence. Macpherson's Ossian opened to the world a look into the vanishing culture of the Gael, and his corruption of authentic elements seems to be compensated for by the service he did the Romantic revolt and English metrics. The famous Ossianic controversy, the feud between Johnson and Macpherson, the intense emotions which the melancholy Ossian stirred in readers of three continents are not the violent political issues they once were, but they are not forgotten by twentieth-century readers. Editions of Ossian are still in print, and as recently as 1966 a facsimile edition of Fragments of Ancient Poetry appeared. Since 1970 more than a dozen articles have appeared in the English language dealing with Ossianic myth and with Ossian. Because Ossian is still considered a major literary influence by compilers of handbooks of British and American literature, students still learn something about Macpherson and Ossian, although two hundred years of "progress" has not eliminated literary misinformation. "A Biographical Sketch of James Macpherson (Compiled from Answers to an Exam Question in British Literature)" appeared in 1972, and this humorous piece indicates that neither Ossianic literature nor James Macpherson is forgotten. The "biography" begins:

No man has so dominated a nation's literature as James MacPherson did England's. . . . His earliest known activity was as a courier and secretary to John Milton. . . . A few scholars contend, however, that he is a fictional character who appears within the narrative [Gulliver's Travels] itself as: (1) the captain of the ship which rescues Gulliver; and (2) Swift's alter ego.

The biography notes Macpherson's role as Johnson's "closest friend" and concludes "When MacPherson died (by drowning) at the age of one hundred forty-seven, John Milton returned to write his famed Lycidas, which . . . is, of course, dedicated to MacPherson."<sup>1</sup>

It is this emotionalism, which I myself had to guard against, that through the centuries has made Macpherson's Ossian the literary curiosity it is. It began as a literary work of immense influence in the eighteenth century, but because of the changing political situation of Scotland and England, Ossian became a battleground for national issues between Scotland and England and between Scotland and Ireland. Now what was perhaps the hottest debate in all of English literary history is little known, but it still intrigues those who do venture into it.

Those persons who venture into Ossian may wonder how such a work has survived two centuries of criticism,

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<sup>1</sup>George Nølger and Robert Sprich, "A Biographical Sketch of James Macpherson," CEA Critic 34, no. 3 (March 1972): 23.

especially when so many names better-known than Macpherson's have appeared since. I believe the reason for the duration of Macpherson's Ossian is tripartite. First, the romantic literature appeals to us whether it be tales of Arthur, tales of Ossian, or tales of the American Indian; the vanished but noble race attracts us, and Celtic literature has commingled with the literatures of other peoples in other countries taken from the Celts.

Second, the riddle, the mystery of Ossian, which was grounded in authentic Celtic traditions, fascinates us; "A moot point is always fascinating."<sup>1</sup> Macpherson's original Gaelic has been well explored by Thomson, but what of the Gaelic manuscripts Macpherson left with Thomas Beckett in 1762? We will never know exactly what these papers contained. The truth about Macpherson's abilities in Gaelic, his motives, the truth about the testimony of his fellow Highlanders, about the Gaelic in Macpherson's own hand which was reworked by Ross for publication, the degree to which Ross may have changed the work, the number of manuscripts which were lost in Macpherson's travels between 1762 and 1792--all these questions will remain unanswered, riddles which lure researchers on in much the same way the investigations of the Kennedy assassination

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<sup>1</sup>Smart, p. 163.

continue to hold national interest, however unmerited, today.

Last, Macpherson himself is a riddle, first claiming in his preface to present a literal translation of the Gaelic as he found it, then in the 1775 edition confessing "A translator who cannot equal his original, is incapable of expressing its beauties."<sup>1</sup> There is fascination and entertainment in seeing Macpherson straddle the fence between translation and composition, truth and falsehood, Scotland and England, authenticity and forgery, expectations and realities. The combination of eighteenth-century ideas of literary ethics, translation, and methods of research; the politics of the Scottish patriots; the revolt against the classics at the end of a classical age; Macpherson's ability and desire to produce a work such as Ossian; the interest in Celtic antiquities prevalent in the eighteenth century; and the simple fate of one's being in the right place at the right time has given us a unique situation. Ossian must be termed a fraud. But it performed valuable services to the recovery of genuine Gaelic manuscripts. The work contributed to the structure of English poetry and prose, to the Romantic Movement, and to

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<sup>1</sup>First preface--quote exact words; 2d preface, Laing ed., pp.

the Celtic Renaissance of the late nineteenth century. Of course, these services performed by Ossian did not deter the tremendous controversy which sprang up, first as a result of the shared literary history of the Scots and the Irish, second as a result of the Scotch patriotism in the era of the Jacobite rebellions, and third as a result of the tendency of classicists to denounce any work which would rival the beloved Homer. On the contrary, eighteenth-century critics who were not spellbound by Ossian were more than willing to single out Macpherson as they did not Chatterton, Brooke, and Walpole. Pinkerton, for example, was "particularly well qualified to detect literary forgery," as he himself had "successfully passed off some of his own verses as ancient ballads purporting to be discovered in a manuscript of the sixteenth century."<sup>1</sup>

Thomson was the first Ossianic critic to point out the importance of Macpherson's casting his forgery into the epic genre, and the reverence in which men of letters hold the epic no doubt affected the English attitude towards the Scottish Homer. The century-long search for a Gaelic epic resembling Ossian contributed much confusion to the battle over Ossian's authenticity.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Centenary of Ossian," p. 65.



Another problem in ferreting out the truth from the extremes involved in the Ossianic controversy is the tendency of critics to shade meaning to fit their own points of view. Macpherson's two biographers Saunders and Smart (who may be called a biographer, although he is more concerned with the controversy than the life of Macpherson) both make reference to the short time Macpherson spent in the Highlands. For Smart, this brevity, as compared to Kennedy's and Campbell's ten and thirty years respectively, is evidence Macpherson was a forger; Saunders compliments Macpherson on being extraordinarily intelligent and industrious to have performed such a magnificent feat in so short a time. The same sort of paradox arises in a discussion of the Gaelic originals published in 1807. If Macpherson knew scarcely any Gaelic, how could he have made his English into Gaelic in his later years when it is known he had little or no help then such as he had in 1760? And if Macpherson did have the ability in Gaelic to easily and successfully compose his originals from the English, why did it take ten years after his death for his executor Mackenzie, then Ross and Sinclair, who prepared the manuscripts published in 1807, to get the Gaelic in shape for publication, especially when a thousand pounds was made available to Mackenzie by Macpherson's will to

cover the cost. And how is it that Macpherson's handwritten Gaelic manuscripts, the center of such a terrific controversy, were not preserved for future generations? All we have of the Gaelic from Macpherson is what Ross gave to the printer, and more than one critic<sup>1</sup> has noted the influence Ross could have had on the 1807 Gaelic publication which was denounced as being translated from the English Ossian.

Even with these, and possibly other, unanswered questions, Macpherson obviously could not have been vindicated. His claim, which he held to the end of his life, that he had presented a genuine Gaelic work, cannot be supported. Macpherson's "genius lay in producing an epic which people were willing to read, and in making them believe it to be not his work but that of the Celtic heroic age."<sup>2</sup> But a comparison of Macpherson's The Highlander to his Fingal shows that Macpherson's determination to present Scotland with an ancient epic outweighed his regard for genuine ancient Gaelic traditions. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup>Stern and Charles Stanger Jerram, among others.

<sup>2</sup>J. A. MacCulloch, The Religion of the Ancient Celts (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), p. 155.

"the false Ossian reveals the true Macpherson,"<sup>1</sup> and British, American, and even world literature is the richer for it.

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<sup>1</sup>Raymond D. Havens, "Assumed Personality, Insanity, and Poetry," Review of English Studies, new series, 4 (January 1953): 29.

## APPENDIX A

### PRINCIPAL WORKS OF JAMES MACPHERSON

#### Poetic Works

The Highlander, 1758

Fragments of Ancient Poetry collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Galic [sic] or Erse language, 1760

Fingal, 1762

Temora, 1763

The Works of Ossian, translated by James Macpherson,  
1765-77

The Poems of Ossian containing the poetical works of James Macpherson (M. Laing, ed.), 1805

#### Other Works

An Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland,  
1771

The History of Great Britain from the Restoration to the Accession of the House of Hanover, 1775

Original Papers (Secret History of Great Britain), 1775

A Short History of the Opposition during the last session of Parliament, 1779

The History and Management of the East India Company, 1779

The Iliad of Homer translated into prose, 1773

The Rights of Great Britain Asserted against the Claims of America, 1776.

## APPENDIX B

### ADDITIONS TO THE BIBLIOGRAPHIES OF BLACK AND DUNN

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