The Life and Works of James MacPherson

Prepared by Tony Grace for the Carnie Group of the Calgary Burns Club 2013

The simple facts of the life of James Macpherson are well known, but he himself has revealed very little about the motives and inspirations behind his works – particularly the poetic ones all of which were created in the early years of his life. The works which attracted the attention of the literati as well as a wider audience, namely the Celtic or Ossian poems, have been analyzed by many respected experts over the last two hundred or so years as to their authenticity and over time there is general agreement that they are not genuine ancient poetry, but were based on old Celtic myths and fables. These works were the ones that brought fame and financial security to MacPherson, although he was always extremely reticent about his poetic sources right up to his death.

MacPherson was born on the 27th of October in 1736 at Ruthven in Badenoch, the son of a farmer, Andrew MacPherson and his wife Helen MacPherson, daughter of a respectable tacksman. Andrew was related to the Clan Chief, and so James grew up close to the centre of his Clan and as such could be considered to be in the upper class of Highland Society. At the time of his growing up there were two distinct cultures in Scotland identified by geography, language and tradition. Although the lines along which these two cultures were separated were eroding, there were still strong feelings of mistrust between Highlanders and Lowlanders. A Highlander viewed the rest of the country as being filled with weak, materialistic people who were interested only in advancing their own situations. The corresponding view from outside the Highlands was that it was seen as a wild, remote region, populated by barbarians who should either be tamed or ignored. The Lowlands consisted of land suitable for cultivation and farming, were readily accessible and in fact were already starting to become a market economy. On the other hand the Highland terrain was rocky and mountainous, spotted with bogs and precipices, and a significant lack of roads accentuated by the number of unbridged rivers. Above all the two groups spoke different languages and hence were unable to converse freely with each other.

A feature that particularly stands out was the social organization of the population. In the north the Clan system still prevailed, and it was in such a close-knit community as this that James grew up. With the isolation and lack of communication outside the territory of the Highlanders, they had become very much inwardly-focused groups, even seeking marriage partners from within the Clan. They were largely unaware and uninterested in what went outside their own region and were largely self-sufficient. This Highland emphasis on the Clan or family was completely different to the urban civilization that was developing in the Lowlands and the rest of the United Kingdom.

In these small communities an interest in ancestry was inevitable and in the Highlands many Clans could trace their forefathers back to one of the great Celtic heroes. At this time bardic patronage was dying out but many chiefs were still attended by a bard who was not only responsible for composing poetry, but also for preserving the Clan history. Knowledge of the past and of the deeds of the Clan ancestors was a vital part of the Highland consciousness – one that James was later to use as a theme in his work. The survival of these ancient stories and legends was part of the Highlanders' deep sense of the antiquity of their race. Individuals saw themselves as a pure race with an unconquerable spirit, unsullied by any foreign influences. They compared their own unmixed blood with that of the hybrid English and Lowlanders who they considered to be 'impure'.

Following the Jacobite rebellions, the government ensured that any potential threat of revolt from the Highlands would be stamped out. In an attempt to absorb the Highlanders into the lifestyle and culture of the rest of the United Kingdom, the differences that defined them were to be minimized. Traditional dress was banned and the use of the Gaelic language was eroded by introducing English-only schools. This was further helped by the spread of Protestantism, with an ever-increasing reforming zeal of the ministers in establishing moral and be-

havioral values and standards, reinforced in turn by disciplinary powers. As the authority of the Church grew so the power of the Clan Chiefs was gradually diminished. The government reinforced this by establishing four military barracks at key strategic points in the Highlands, including one in James' back-yard in Ruthven. General communication had already been improved when General Wade built over 250 miles of roads to open up the Highlands, but with the primaryobjective of making it easier to move troops around when required.

In his early years, James witnessed not only the humiliation of his Chief and his Clan, but also scenes of appalling violence carried out by British soldiers in the days and months following Culloden.Both the Highland army of Bonnie Prince Charlie and the pursuing government forces under the Duke of Cumberland passed through Ruthven on the road that ended at Drumossie Moor, in fact the former torched the barracks on his way north.It was against this background and in this atmosphere that James MacPherson spent his formative years.

After growing up and attending school in Ruthven,at the age of sixteen in 1752, some scant six years after the Battle of Culloden he moved to Aberdeen to attend University at King's College for two years before moving to Marischal College, which at that time was a separate institution. What few records survive suggest that James was an able but not particularly diligent student. He started to display a talent for poetry and although he later had a reputation as a good classical scholar, as a student he apparently spent much of his time in the composition of humorous and doggerel rhymes. The startling contrast between his upbringing and his life as a student in Aberdeen would have been difficult to overcome, and probably led to the development of what became his notorious 'Highland Pride', - a talented but impoverished student determined to prove his superiority over his colleagues. At that time Aberdeen was booming and expanding rapidly and must have aroused mixed emotions in the young Highlander after his upbringing in a traditional rural Highland setting.

The year James arrived in Aberdeen, the curriculum at King's College for the traditional Arts course underwent a dramatic revision. Up until then he would have undertaken a philosophical course based on Logic and Reasoning. However this was replaced by a new course based on empirical observation andwas introduced in an attempt to better prepare students for the "useful and important Offices of society". With the new curriculum the first year was a foundation for the rest of the course and continued to be devoted to the classics – both Latin and Greek. The painstaking approach of the empirical philosopher is unlikely to have appealed to James with its prevailing emphasis on fact and utilitarian purpose, which left little room for imagination. His creative talents would be given no formal encouragement and his reading of the poets such as Milton, Pope, Young, Gray and Blair must have been a personal rather than an academic choice.

It should be pointed at this time - in the second half of the eighteenth century, there was a European wide movement away from literary neo-classicism towards a primitivist stance, which looked to the barbarous past of 'uncivilised' nations as the true well-spring of untutored inspiration and poetic truth. Part of this movement included the so-called 'Celtic Revival'.

The pervading influence at Aberdeen at this time was provided by a Thomas Blackwell, the Principal of Marischal College, who had been instrumental in teaching a generation of students, including an Alexander Gerard, and many of whom had obtained academic positions in Aberdeen following their graduation. This cadre of like-minded academics focused on the study of man and a desire to discover an ideal society of superhuman beings. This focus became merged with links to the classical world and the literary legacy emanating from that. In particular the works of Homer were highly regarded and held out as models of classical poetry linking action with

genius. Homer was seen as a genius and able to produce wonderful epic poems because he was a man of action who had actually experienced what he wrote about in times of violence and unrest. Blackwell saw a direct connection between epic poetry and periods of violence and observed that it was in these periods of unrest that the human spirit expanded most fully. From this it is not difficult to understand how the young MacPherson would have been attracted to these notions, particularly as he had witnessed first-hand the events both of and following the ’45 rebellion. He was being given the idea that there was an association between warfare and genius and that violence not only stimulated poetic ability but also furnished the materials for great epics. Blackwell went on to suggest that the epic was the highest and most pure form of poetry and was frequently linked in turn with nationalism. All this fired MacPherson to believe that it was the only genre suitable for the great Scottish poem he was determined to write once his formal education was complete.

One flaw in all this was as society became more stable and peaceful and communities developed, the conditions to produce work of epic quality were diminished. As poetry contributed to the civilization of savage society, it helped to destroy the conditions most supportive of its creation – in fact the art became self-defeating. This erosion was exacerbated by the evolution of languages. As society progressed it became more sophisticated and the need for words to become more refined and specific. The ancient language may not have been suitable for communicating science and philosophy, but as a medium for poetry it was infinitely superior to any sophisticated language. As the use and evolution of English as a language became more widespread, Gaelic was left to its own devices and therefore didn’t evolveand develop to anything like the same extent. English might be the more suitable medium for philosophy and to better express the needs of an evolving society, but Gaelic still retained the energy and imagery of a primitive tongue. Thus MacPherson would have become aware of the importance of Gaelic, despite the fact that he would have been force-fed English at his school in Badenoch.

MacPherson saw the parallels between the stories of the Highlands and the Ancient World and caused him to value more his native society and upbringing. For Blackwell, primitive society was attractive because it was remote, but MacPherson had actually been brought up in such a world. Did he wish to be seen as a savage, and should he compensate for this by a display of education? Part of this mental struggle was Alexander Gerard`s belief that there was no such thing as the Noble Savage and that uncivilized man was a coarse, amoral creature incapable of true sympathy, and further that there was no link between early man and poetry, as in his opinion the latter required careful cultivation. MacPherson`s pride as being an uncorrupted Highlander was thus being undermined and torn by the conflicting views of Blacklock and Gerard. He learned to value the primitive virtues on one hand, but he was also being taught that a refined taste was essential to both art and morality. Thus he was left with conflicting emphases on spontaneity and refinement, on emotional expression and utilitarianism which came to a head when he came to tackle the ancient poetry of the Celts.

In 1756 after three years in Aberdeen followed by a few months in Edinburgh, MacPherson returned home to Ruthven and took up a teaching position at his old school. This move back into his past must have had its problems after his experiences in the outside world, which offered entertainment and intellectual stimulation as well as opportunities for acquiring wealth and status, which by this time had clearly become his objectives. He continued his past practice of writing comic verse to amuse his friends and colleagues,unfortunately none of which appears to have survived. In the mid eighteenth century there was a growing belief that English was the only correct medium for literature and even the leading authors of the day devoted themselves to developing a refined style which was not contaminated by those ‘awful Scotticisms’. MacPherson must have felt these pressures and in Ruthven there were no educational resources to turn to for support and no tutor to guide his fur-

ther development, as he had had in Aberdeen and Edinburgh. He turned to the only source he had access to and that was the contemporary Scottish periodicals which were becoming very popular at that time – for example the *Scots Magazine* and the *Gentlemen's Magazine*. The former had a policy of encouraging new writing in Scotland, anxious that "the Caledonian muse might not be restraine'd by want of a publick Echo to her Song". As such the magazine was the first to publish work by writers who were later to be famous, such as James Beattie, James Boswell as well as James MacPherson himself. It appears that some five poems appeared in the Scots Magazine between 1755 and 1760. These included *To a Friend, mourning the Death ofMiss…* and *On the Death of Marshall Keith.*The other three poems were then republished in *A Collection of OriginalPoems, by the Rev, Mr. Blacklock and Other Scotch Gentlemen*, in 1760. The poem *To a Friend, mourning theDeath of Miss…* was the first published poem by MacPherson, and appeared in the May 1755 issue of *the Scots Magazine.*

What measure can there be to grief?

What joy can give me relief?

Since MIRA is no more

Come, mournful muse of hapless love,

Whose voice and lyre proceed from love,

With me her fate deplore.

The poem was based on Horace, and MacPherson described it as an imitation rather than a translation, whichwas characteristic of that time;in it he also tried to 'improve' upon a classical source. Looking ahead, this approach sheds interesting light on MacPherson's later use of his Gaelic sources in the Ossian 'translations'.

Some three years later, Macpherson published his *Elegy to Marshal Keith,* again in the *Scots Magazine,* and this turned out to be much more successful than his earlier work. Again the poet was exploring a romantic theme – that of the death of a Jacobite hero, who had been forced to leave Scotland after the failure of the earlier 1715 uprising. His death gave MacPherson the opportunity to blend the panegyric for an individual hero with the greater concern for the Highlands and her exiled sons. In Highland society, fame was a matter of great importance, since stories of the forefathers' bold deeds served not only to entertain but also to inspire theirdescendants. By writing the poem, MacPherson was following the Highland bardic tradition of immortalising the memory of the dead and thus inspiring the living.

Subsequent to MacPherson's death in 1796, the Reverend John Anderson who was sorting out his papers, came across a small note book containing the poet's "first Essays in English Verse". It contained two longer but unfinished poems, - entitled *Death* and *The Hunter.* Both these works show MacPherson's preoccupation with death as well as with the Highlands.*The Hunter* also dramatizes a conflict that continued to dog the poet – the attractions of the city urban lifestylecompared to a native attachment to the Highlands.

During the years he spent back in Ruthven immediately following his time at University, MacPherson's interest in the local area developed rapidly and he began to collect old Gaelic poetry, while his interest in the Highlands continued to be reflected in his own compositions. He never completed *The Hunter* for publication but in 1758 he published his first 'epic' which owed much to that earlier piece, and was called *The Highlander*. By this time

the threat of further Jacobite unrest had faded and the old prejudices were slowly changing into the romantic image of the Highlands, and this ensured the acceptance of his poem which would likely have been considered subversive in earlier times. This changing of attitudes was not happening only in England, the Highlanders themselves were starting to recognize the value of their own culture even as its very survival was being threatened. As part of this awakening into the origin of society, ancient languages were earning a new status. Gaelic had a pedigree as distinguished as Greek or Hebrew and was being repressed as it was replaced with English. MacPherson recognized his native tongue as a precious relic from his own ancient civilization and in his preface to *The Highlander* he even proposed that a collection of traditional Gaelic poetry should be made.

In this, MacPherson was not the first. The most important collection of old Gaelic verse, which included a significant number of Ossianic pieces, had been made over two hundred years earlier by James MacGregor, the Dean of Lismore in his *Book of the Dean of Lismore*. A later collection was made by Alexander Pope , the Minister of Rea in Caithness in 1739, which was eventually published by J.F. Campbell in 1872 in a book which also included collections by Donald MacNicol (c.1755), Jerome Stone (c. 1755) and Archibald Fletcher (c. 1750). Such collections as these were put together for the personal satisfaction of the people concerned,there being no attempt at a more formal and holistic assembly of ancient Gaelic verse, and of course this literature was not accessible to non-Gaelic speakers. It was not until the January 1756 issue of the *Scots Magazine* that the first English translation of a Gaelic ballad was published.

At first blush *The Highlander* might well appear to be a reworking of the earlier and unfinished *The Hunter*. Both are based on the theme of a prince raised in obscurity and proving his worth through his deeds. In both, the military might of Scotland comes close to defeat but eventually emerges victorious and this is mingled with a romantic tale of love and marriage. *The Hunter* seems to have come from MacPherson's imagination whereas *TheHighlander* does have a basis in historical and literary sources. One of the main differences between the two poems is the nature of the invading force. In the earlier poem the threat came from "Hateful slavery and th'aspiring Rose"; i.e. Scotland versus England, whereas in the later work it comes from Scandinavia, which suggests that MacPherson was starting to draw on traditional Highland tales to inspire his own poetry, as many of the heroic ballads current at that time dealt with the raids of the Vikings. There are other parallels between The Highlander and Gaelic tradition; an unknown nobleman discovering his true birth; the legendary militia and Alpin's Highland army of the early 720's A.D.; and the idea that Highlanders were always ready for battle whenever Scotland was threatened bears similarities with the role of Fiana, the legendary band of warrior-huntsmen of the second and third centuries A.D., in Ireland. It is interesting to note that most of these Gaelic traditions come more from Irish legends than from Scottish ones.

The Highlander ends with the union between the true heir and the usurper's daughter, a romantic notion that MacPherson was to use repeatedly as he embellished his translations of the heroic Gaelic ballads with tales of amorous maidens and thwarted love. His vision of the Celtic past was not an accurate portrayal of Scotland's history in the Dark Ages, but a more romantic ideal along the lines of the fabled Arthur. Throughout this poem the ancient Caledonians adhere to eighteenth-century ideals of morality, and further there was also a nationalistic theme in this poem. The epic model placed Scottish history on a level with that of classical Greece or Rome and the poem was apparently designed to stir up feelings of national pride. In order to show the moral superiority of the Celts to the heroes of classical literature, MacPherson frequently evoked passages from Virgil and Homer, and in the introduction to the poem he alluded directly to the *Iliad*, the *Aenid* and *Paradise Lost.*

By the autumn of 1759, MacPherson was working as a tutor to Graham of Balgowan in Moffat, when he met the playwright John Home who was making his annual visit to the fashionable spa there. For many years Home – a non-Gaelic speaker – had been developing an interest in the culture of the Highlands, and was thrilled to meet someonewho could give him an idea of what Gaelic verse was really like. The poetry that MacPherson produced excited him and he promptly shared it with George Laurie and Alexander Carlyle who happened to be in Moffat at that time, and they all thought it should be published to the world as soon as possible. Home immediately headed for Edinburgh to further share the poetry with his influential literati friends and the Select Society,a member of which was Hugh Blair, soon to become Professor of Rhetoric and Belle Lettres at Edinburgh University, and who asked not only to see more but urged that they be published. As part of the Scottish Enlightenment a group of gentlemen in Edinburgh founded the Select Society in 1754, and it soon became the pre-eminent intellectual society for the gatherings of Edinburgh's intelligentsia, to discuss and debate all manner of issues and matters, including literary affairs. MacPherson was reluctant and initially refused to translate any more Gaelic poems into English as "no translation of his would do justice to the spirit and fire of the original", although shortly thereafterhe was persuaded to translate more poems. But he also had his native loyalties to consider, as his collection was initiated by his concern for the erosion of Highland culture in the face of the advancing English and Lowland civilizations; so his translating of Gaelic verse into the language that threatened its destruction was something of a breach of trust. The Gaelic tradition was totally different from the English and he was doubtful whether the simple ballads would impress readers used to the elaborate literature of the English and classical authors. It was no use translating the poems if they were only going to be scorned by English readers. Another motive suggested by George Laurie for not producing any more English versions was "that his Highland pride was alarmed at appearing to the world only as a translator".

So MacPherson was being pulled in several different directions, some by his Highland upbringing, some by his University education in Aberdeen, some by uncertainty as to what his own ambitions and aims were as well as by the suggestions of well-wishers (and maybe not so well-wishers) as to what he should do. The first poem MacPherson produced for John Home had been*TheDeath of Oscur,* which ironically bears little resemblance to any surviving Gaelic ballad. It seems that from the beginning, MacPherson adopted the imaginative approach that he was looking through the eyes of an early bard and therefore felt free to create his own stories, even though he used traditional names and used a suitably 'ancient' style. If the existing poems were too corrupt to show off the genius of the Highlands to the outside world, he would use only the parts he considered fit, and he would 'restore' the rest according to his own ideas on ancient literature. It is an interesting comment that in his first collection of fifteen *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, only two are based on recognizable Gaelic ballads; the rest appear to be a blend of Highland tradition and MacPherson's imagination.

Nonetheless *The Death of Oscur* was greeted with much excitement and confirmed that MacPherson had succeeded in producing an 'ancient' poem which satisfied the expectations of contemporary readers. In many ways it was quite different from his earlier poems even though there were some familiar elements. Despite the antique patina, *The Death of Oscur* had as much in common with the poetry of the eighteenth century as with that of any ancient bard, Hebrew, Gaelic or Greek. Even with this poem – one of his earliest attempts – it was becoming plain that MacPherson was adopting a sympathetic bond between himself and the voice of the ancient bard. Just as Ossian laments the passing of the heroic age of Oscur, so MacPherson was becoming aware that the traditional world of the Highlands was starting to disappear. *The Death of Oscur* was by no means an accurate

translation of a Gaelic ballad, but a blend of traditional styles with modern preoccupations. As such, it was to appeal far more strongly to eighteenth century readers than any literal translation could.

Barely a year after MacPherson met with John Home in Moffat, his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, collected in the Highlands and translated from the Gaelic, was published in Edinburgh in June of 1760. It was a small booklet of seventy pages with fifteen pieces of strange prose, most of which were untitled. It should be mentioned that this was the year following the birth of Robert Burns, who later became enamoured with MacPherson's poems. The name of the translator remained a mystery and in the brief preface, also written anonymously,the original poems were attributed to 'the Bards'. It was hinted that this booklet was only a beginning as there could be even more and greater revelations still hidden in the Highlands. Despite its nondescript appearance, the pamphlet was an immediate success and a second edition followed only four months later due to public demand. By this time James MacPherson had become a well-known figure in literary circles in Edinburgh, and inspired by this, he had embarked on a second and far more ambitious project, which turned out to be the appearance in December of 1761 of the great epic poem hinted at in the *Fragments*. Of all the literati in Edinburgh the one to have the most influence on MacPherson was Hugh Blair, who had not only persuaded him to publish the *Fragments,* but who, with the assistance of the translator,had in fact provided the preface to the work. At that time Blair was working on his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*, and his theories complemented MacPherson's poetical work perfectly, and they built on each other. MacPherson's notion that the ballads and stories still current in the Highlands were corrupted versions of Ossian's original poetry accorded very well with Blair's preconceptions about the epic. By this time it had become commonplace to regard the earliest periods of society as providing the ideal conditions for the composition of epic poems. Both MacPherson and Blair felt strongly that the ancient poetry of Scotland ought to have an epic, and further MacPherson believed that Celtic society was very similar to that of ancient Greece, so why shouldn't Caledonia have her Homer?

MacPherson saw the inhabitants of North West Scotland as the direct and pure descendants of the Celts, sharing their language and preserving the last relics of their ancient culture. It seemed possible to him – and to Blair – that an ancient epic poem, or at least part of it, could have survived in those areas furthest from southern influences. Throughout the preface to *Fragments*, the strong desire to retrieve a great epic poem for Scotland is obvious and Blair even includes a summary of the plot of the not-yet discovered or published *Fingal*, to whet the reader's appetite.

The publication of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*met with instant success. Due to publicity provided by MacPherson's patrons in Edinburgh prior to its publication, the vague interest in Gaelic poetry rapidly turned into warm enthusiasm, both by academics and general readers, when the pamphlet appeared in June of 1760. Extracts were published in magazines on both sides of the border, and by July new versions of the *Fragments* appeared, written by poets turning the simple prose of the translations into poems with regular verses and rhyme schemes. With attention being paid throughout Britain, there was a growing demand for more of this ancient poetry. This was particularly true in Edinburgh, as not only did the *Fragments* show that Scotland had a literary heritage far more ancient than anything England could claim, but there was the hint in the preface that somewhere in the remote Highlands, a great national epic lay waiting to be discovered. It should be remembered that the Enlightenment was at its height at this time and the attention of the Edinburgh literati was very much on what was going on, especially in this regard.

Accordingly MacPherson was urged to go back to the Highlands and Islands to look for longer pieces of poetry and in particular the lost epic of Fingal, which by now people were convinced actually existed. But MacPherson had no money, so Hugh Blair came to the rescue, arranging a dinner party for potentially interested and wealthy patrons and the money was raised. In August 1760 a bare two months following the publication of the *Fragments*, Macpherson set out accompanied by his kinsman Lachlan MacPherson of Strathmashie who was able to take down poems from oral recitation as well as to transcribe old Gaelic manuscripts, and also had a good reputation as a Gaelic poet. The exact route taken is uncertain but initially they visited the North West Highlands and the Islands of Skye, Mull and the Outer Hebrides. As a Highlander himself who spoke Gaelic and a member of the MacPherson clan James gained ready acceptance, and people not only recited ancient Gaelic poems for him but even wrote them down at times, and also on many occasions gave him their original manuscripts, most of which they never saw again. Alexander MacPherson, a blacksmith in Portree, had a thick manuscript full of Fingalian poems which he turned over to James, and Thomas Fraser, the Minister of Boleskine gave him a considerable collection of Gaelic poems including the most important manuscript in his collection – *The Book of the Dean of Lismore.* He also obtained the *"Leabhar Dearg"* (the *Red Book*) from Lachlan MacMhuirich of Benbecula which contained both Highland history as well as Ossianic poetry. It is not known how many manuscripts came into the possession of James MacPherson as he was always very secretive about this and never produced them for examination when later asked. However he obtained or used them,his collection of Gaelic material was of great importance and after his death nineteen were delivered to the Highland Society. Not only did he save a large number of manuscripts from destruction, but he also drew attention to the value of ancient poetry. Others paid attention and realised that documents they had in their possession needed to be looked after and even treasured. Once the translation of Ossian was published both Highlanders and Lowlanders began to recognize the importance of old Gaelic poetry and the manuscripts on which it was recorded.

MacPherson was a native speaker but not a Gaelic scholar and appears to have been largely ignorant of Gaelic orthography and much of the manuscript material was completely inaccessible to him being largely presented in the Irish Gaelic. In the end he returned to Badenoch and he, Strathmashie and his friend the Reverend Andrew Gallie jointly translated the manuscripts so that MacPherson could then piece together the various translations with guesses and creative substitutions to make a coherent story. In later letters Gallie seems to have been more impressed with MacPherson's own contributions to the 'ancient' poetry than by the original Gaelic material. He also suggested that MacPherson held the existing remains of the heroic poetry in some contempt, and indicated that in the process of handing the poems down through the generations they had become quite corrupted and needed to be 'corrected'. He blamed the unknown bards who had eventually written down the oral versions for being at fault, and for not preserving the true original compositions. Accordingly he felt quite justified in his attempts at 'restoration' and explained hismethod of piecing together the Gaelic remains in his dissertation on *Temora* – the work that followed Fingal.

MacPherson was not writing his 'translations' for a Gaelic audience, his work being aimed at English-speakers and, in particular, at the literary circles of Edinburgh, so he was anxious to give them what they wanted. The Gaelic names seemed too harsh, so he softened them; the stories were too simple and terse, so he made them more romantic. Above all he 'restored' the entire collection of broken poetry, making it into the epic that his patrons were expecting. Following his sojourn in Badenoch, MacPherson returned to Edinburgh where he rented rooms below Hugh Blair's house and continued his work there. They spoke often and undoubtedly Blair supplied MacPherson with ideas, suggestions and critical opinions as the great epic unfolded. The Highlands and Islands

might have furnished MacPherson with the raw material for his work, but the final product was very much a product of Edinburgh.

Early in 1761 MacPherson set out for London accompanied by Robert Chalmers and carrying letters of introduction from his patrons in Edinburgh to potential publishers in the capital. Once there he had to fend for himself by taking any job he could find while he finished his great epic. One contact he did have was John Home who was working on a new play *The Fatal Discovery* which was based on one of MacPherson's *Fragments.*Through Home, MacPherson became acquainted with the Earl of Bute, one of the most powerful men in the country and later to become Prime Minister, Home at that time being Bute's private secretary. MacPherson tacitly recognized Bute's support in his acknowledgments in *Fingal* and later very directly in *Temora.*In December 1761 (dated 1762), the epic finally saw the light of day under the title *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem. In Six Books: Together with Several Other Poems, composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal.*It was a completely different publication from that of *The Fragments*and unlike the anonymity in *The Fragments*, the name of the translator of Fingal was printed in bold red capitals under the title. These were not fragments but an epic poem, complete with annotations and lengthy dissertations by the learned author. From the first page his intentions were obvious; he was determined to raise the poetry of the Highlands to the highest status, and he alluded constantly to the Bible and classics in his presentations of Scottish material.

A significant feature of *Fingal* when compared to the *Fragments* is the development of Ossian. The earlier collection was attributed to an anonymous body of "Bards", but the author of *Fingal* is clearly stated as Ossian, the son of Fingal. An epic poem required an epic poet, so Ossian, who had appeared in the *Fragments* only as a character, was now definitively placed as the blind bard of the Highlands, in the tradition of Homer and Milton. Despite its epic pretensions *Fingal* is a sprawling work only held together by the presence of the narrator; a baffling series of recollections is made coherent only through the development of the narrator as a focal point.One current commentator has claimed that while the *Fragments* contain some small and delightful prose lyrics of real originality and beauty, *Fingal* and its successor *Temora* are "both turgid and impossible". MacPherson`s Ossian though based on traditional materials and aspiring to antiquity, was very much a product of the mid-eighteenth century. It appealed to the contemporary interest in the antique by conveying not only an idealised Ancient World, but also the sense on modern inferiority to that world.

MacPherson followed the publishing of *Fingal* in 1762 with the 'translation' of a second epic poem called *Temora,* in 1763. So now we have the appearance of three books of 'translations' of Gaelic poetry in the space of three years. This sudden production was clearly driven by demand, initially in Scotland but also from Europe, for more of this type of literature from hungry nationalistic peoples, as well as from the urgings of the literati in the midst of the Enlightenment. The latter two works really form 'one complete poem' consisting of the two separately published epics, with *Temora* being the end of the story started in *Fingal.* Though the content of Ossian's story is not the most relevant issue, it did have certain political implications for contemporary times. The first volume features Fingal, King of Morven whose son Ossian records his feats. Ossian's own son Oscar also becomes a great warrior. In the story, Ireland is invaded by Swedish Vikings, only to be saved by Fingal's armies from Scotland. Temora continues the story as it recounts the last stages of a great civil war in Ireland between two tribes, the Firbolg and the Irish descendants of the Caledonians (Scottish) race. The Caledonian-Irish controlled the throne of Ireland until Caibar, prince of Atha in Connaught, became prince by murdering his father, and killing Cormac, the young king of Ireland. Cormac is a kinsman of Fingal, the King of Morven in Scotland, who has the forces to keep Cormac on the throne. The story begins with the invasion of Fingal's Caledonian army that

comes to de-throne Caibar from his castle at Temora in Ulster, and to punish the Irish rebels, and by the end of the poem, all this has been achieved.

Ossian`s appeal was not limited to Northern Scotland, and found many of its most ardent enthusiasts elsewhere. The discovery of a new 'ancient bard' attracted many readers, who turned to MacPherson`s work as they turned to Homer; eager for the 'fire' of a primitive society. Ossian could be admired as an original genius and provide a hitherto unknown source of inspiration for future poets, as well as for all ordinary Scots. The growing emphasis on originality tended to equate genius with the earliest stages of society, thus increasing the modern sense of inferiority.

With the publication of the three books, MacPherson became famous, literally throughout the world. Despite all of the books supposedly being translations from the original Gaelic into English, over the next few years the English versions were translated again and re-issued in Swedish, German, French, Spanish, Danish, Russian, Dutch, Bohemian, Polish and Hungarian. In 1765 – just three years after the first book *The Fragments* had appeared, all three were re-issued in a combined edition as *The Works of Ossian, Son of Fingal*. A new and final edition by MacPherson was published in 1773 – "carefully corrected and greatly improved". Remarkably MacPherson seemed to have lost interest in poetry once the *Works of Ossian* was published in 1765, although his old friends in Edinburgh did manage to persuade him to revise the Works that one last time in1773. It is interesting to note that in the preface to this edition 'Translator' has become 'Writer', and his 'Fragments' are now 'Poems.'It would appear that his research and work on Gaelic poetry had aroused an interest not only on the literature itself but on the history of those ancient times, and this eventually led to his final contribution to Celtic studies which was *An Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, published in 1771. A key assumption in all these works was that the Scots did not originate from Ireland; in fact the population flow was the reverse. This supported his contention that the origins of the various poems were not Irish but really were Scottish.

Once Fingal was published all MacPherson's financial worries vanished and he remained in London being toasted as a great poet by the literary ladies and sought after as a drinking companion by the gentlemen, somewhat as Robert Burns was feted in Edinburgh a scant twenty years later. He seems to have led a riotous social life but also had a knack of meeting the right people, and was soonmoving out of his poetic career and into public service, being offered a job in America as Surveyor General and Secretary to the new Governor of Florida. So as the Ossianic controversy began to build after the publication of *Temora*, MacPherson conveniently slipped out of the picture for two years. While he was in America, the poems *Fingal* and *Temora* were published in a single volume with a *Critical Dissertation*by Hugh Blair as the preface on the origin and nature of the supposed translations.The *Dissertation* had originally been published in 1763 as a separate book, but was included in the 1765 editionas well as all subsequent editions. This was an attempt by Blair to silence any scepticism over the authenticity of the poems, but only succeeded in both sides of that debate becoming more entrenched in their positions. Blair's arguments were circulatory in nature and didn't really have an end point – in fact they finished by 'proving' the assumptions made at the start of his argument! Regardless his premises were used by others in attempts to confirm the authenticity of the poems and in itself the *Dissertation* became the mainstay of the defence for their genuineness.

This controversy continued much longer than it should have as the issues became confused with contemporary national antagonisms between England and Scotland, and many prominent literary figures weighed in. Samuel Johnson has already been mentioned, with one of his arguments being that the 'Erse' language from which the

work supposedly had been translated had never been a written one, and that the manuscripts on which those translations were based had never been produced.

David Hume, the well-known philosopher of the Enlightenment period, was a friend of Hugh Blair and initially was delighted by the poems. However following a visit to London he became convinced that in fact they were "Inventions of MacPherson". He subsequently wrote an essay *Of the Authenticity of Ossian's Poems* which refuted the conclusions of Blair's *Dissertation.* This essay later became the basis for arguments against the authenticity as opposed to Blair's *Dissertation* for their defence. Even though they were friends it became Hume versus Blair. Others also offered their opinions. William Wordsworth, the English poet, declared that style alone was conclusive evidence against Ossian's authenticity. In 1802 Malcolm Laing, an acquaintance of Walter Scott, published his own *Dissertation* which was "a somewhat merciless exposure of the Ossian delusion, and caused much perturbation with no little indignation in the Highlands." Laing based his refutation partly on the names of the heroes of Ossian, which had been taken from the map of the channel between Skye and the mainland. One of these names was indisputably of eighteenth century origin.

On the other hand there was wide acceptance of the works in Europe, where the Romantic needs of the age needed to have its own ideas legitimized by the past. A passage from the translations appeared in Goethe's *The-Sorrow of Young Werther,* and Schiller wrote that "truer inspiration lay in the misty mountains and wild cataracts of Scotland than in the fairest of meadows and gardens". Even Napoleon "was moved to admiration", and carried the poems with him as his favourite reading during his campaigns. Madame de Stael felt that the word Romantic "is virtually synonymous with Northern, the poetry of Ossian, as opposed to the Southern, the poetry of Homer." When such 'translations' inspired the emotions like this in foreigners, it is scarcely surprising that nationalistic Scots felt a vested interest in upholding their authenticity. Byron and others composed Ossianic imitations and even Walter Scott managed to benefit from them.

Burns ranks as one of the many who declared their love of Ossian. In a letter in 1783to his former schoolmaster John Murdoch, he declares "….my favourite authors are of the sentimental kind, such as Shenstone, particularly his Elegies, Thomson, Man of Feeling, a book I prize next to the Bible, Man of the World, Sterne especially his Sentimental Journey, McPherson's Ossian &c. these are the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct." Note he says 'conduct' and not 'writing.'

MacPherson's work clearly had an influence on Burns, but not as a literary model or as a direct inspiration, but more as a presence and in terms of creating ideas and possibilities. One idea we can draw from these works is the hinted at appearance of what we might call a national voice – a reference to "head of my people" by MacPherson – that occurs throughout the Ossian poems. There is an ongoing suggestion that Ossian is a figure of Scottish glory – even of Scottish Nationalism. It is clear that Burns had no time for the Ossianic style as a literary and expressive mode, but he was attracted to the combination of sentimental singer and national hero, as by this time he was starting to see himself as a national voice. This shows in one of his earlier works featured in the Kilmarnock Edition, called *The Vision*. Here Burns divides his poem into two 'Duans', or cantos or sections. The first time this term was used was by MacPherson, and this use in Burns' poem was the second – hence the link. Analysis of the poem suggests it can be classified as a patronage poem – one that literally advertises the poet, demonstrates his skills, flatters the people he aims at and calls for recognition. As a patronage poem, the link to Ossian becomes more obvious. With these links however the similarities between the two poems ends. Burns was struggling with two objectives – trying to be locally authentic as well as being nationally representa-

tive, something MacPherson was able to accomplish as he was essentially a virtual poet, projecting himself through the long-dead Ossian and not being burdened with any awkward contradictions of reality. Looking at Ossian side-by-side with Burns clearly demonstrates the realities faced by the latter. Burns of course would become the real thing, the Scottish National Voice, by abandoning the artificial conjuring of voice as portrayed by Ossian. Burns achieved his goal by using his natural voice, which was not only authentically Scottish but authentically poetic as well. There should be no surprise that the Ossian veneer can be detected in Burns' *The Vision*, but this is the only one of his works of which it can be said.

All this demonstrates that in the context of early nineteenth century cultural nationalism, why the Ossian controversy remained a live issue in Scotland long after the epic's claim to antiquity had been discredited. The element of national pride remained long after the issues had ceased to be alive for the rest of Europe. As the cultural nationalism of the nineteenth century took hold, Ossian achieved symbolic value as yet another index of Scottishness, a key to the country's cultural independence and unique traditions following the loss of its political independence with the Act of Union in 1707, and this was particularly true in the Highlands.

It was Walter Scott who suggested that the aura of the pieces had given them an influence quite independent of their authenticity. Emulation of "those flowers of sentiment which MacPherson has taught the public to consider as the genuine attribute of Ossianic strain," has given the fraud a status amongst poetasters comparable to that of the Ayrshire Ploughman. It is in this context that Scott laments the narrow nationalism which finds it necessary to place the whole weight of the translations significance on the question of their authenticity, when MacPherson's true importance for Scotland lies quite elsewhere: "while we are compelled to renounce the pleasing idea, 'that Fingal lived, and that Ossian sung,'our national vanity may be equally flattered by the fact that a remote, and almost a barbarous corner of Scotland, produced, in the eighteenth century, a bard, capable not only of making an enthusiastic impression on every mind susceptible of poetic beauty, but of giving a new tone to poetry throughout Europe."

MacPherson returned to Great Britain in 1766 and was allowed to keep his 'American' salary of 200 pounds per annumas a pension for the rest of his life; (compare with Robert Burns' salary in the Excise some twenty years later – 50 pounds per annum). At this time newspapers were proliferating and were becoming very influential politically as they supported or opposed the Government. To aid in this process the craft of political writing was emerging and MacPherson entered this business to help the endeavours of Lord North who became Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1767 and Prime Minister in 1770. Today we would refer to him as a 'spin doctor'. This also left him time to follow other activities and pursue his literary career. He continued to be interested in the remains of Celtic antiquity and set about an inquiry into the Celtic element in the early civilization of Great Britain. Although he took a number of liberties in this work he can be considered to have started an interest in the study of Celtic archaeology and literature that others later picked up. The results of his studies resulted in *An Introductionto the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, published in1771, with a second edition in 1772 and a third edition in 1773.

This was followed in 1773 by a translation of *The Iliad of Homer*where he was encouraged to render Homer into attractive English. Although praised by some of his supporters in Scotland, the reception in general was not good. His flowery language masked the simple vigour of the original, and as in his translations of the old Highland ballads he used vague high-sounding phrases, and he was even accused of parading Homer in a plaid and a kilt.

David Hume, one of the chief figures in the Enlightenment who had earlier published his *History of England*, sometimes referred to as *The History of Great Britain*, between 1754 and 1762 but which finished at the time of the "Glorious Revolution" in 1688. There was ongoing pressure for someone to continue that work up until the then present day. MacPherson took up the task and set about collecting material. Earlier work and much research had been done by Thomas Carte, who when he died left a considerable amount of papers, which included a series of valuable extracts from documents preserved in the Scots' College in Paris. Some of these were purchased by MacPherson who also accessed some ten volumes of papers relating to the House of Brunswick and owned by Matthew Duane. In order to verify the extracts from the Scots' College, MacPherson went to Paris and examined the archives himself. He also visited the Bodleian Library in Oxford and other private sources, although in some cases he was refused permission to inspect collections. He realised the material he now had in his possession would cause an uproar when made public as it would stir the embers of a past struggle, and prove the intrigues of the legendary Duke of Marlborough with the Stuarts. To forestall criticism he decided to publish the papers themselves before bringing out his *History* andto this end he left the documents on view at his publishers, and then in 1775 had them published as*The Original Papers containing the Secret History of Great Britain, from the restoration to the Accession of the House of Hannover.* As anticipated this was attacked by various people and the authenticity of the documents was challenged. Later that year MacPherson published *The History of Great Britain from the Restoration to the Accession of the House of Hanover.* The impact of this work had already been partly discounted by the earlier appearance of *The Original Papers*, but it was successful and soon went into a second edition. MacPherson later received 3000 pounds for the copyright from the publishers.

At about this time MacPherson was employed to 'supervise' the newspapers and to use his influence to prevent attacks on the Government, and for this he was paid 600 pounds a year. He was becoming wealthy and a well-known figure in London society, with a home in Westminster as well as a small villa on Putney Common. On the question of the authenticity of his poems he still maintained his attitude of proud reserve as if he supposedthat the air of mystery in which his work was by now enveloped would excite a considerable interest in the man who had produced it. By this time the poems were becoming increasingly popular not only in England but on the continent. As already indicated, in 1773 MacPherson wrote a new preface to his work, which was then entering its fourth and final edition; and he also took the opportunity of altering and improving it in accordance with various suggestions that had been given him. However his attitude to the public, his contempt of adverse criticism and his high opinion of his own abilities were undimmed. As this edition was going to print, Samuel Johnson was making his tour of Scotland in order to determine for himself whether such ancient manuscripts actually existed, and preparing for another attack on their authenticity. As this played itself out, MacPherson was left with the only option of printing the originals that he had collected. These consisted of disconnected fragments and the effort of arranging and editing them for publication would be considerable, even if there were no vexed questions to be resolved in the matter of Gaelic orthography. However he did commit to print the originals as soon as he had the time to arrange them and provided that the expense of publication could be met. The controversy over the authenticity of the poems spread from the dispute with Johnson into the periodicals of the day, and from there into a series of pamphlets and finally in 1779 into books. However in the absence of the originals and with the general ignorance of Gaelic language and literature, little light was shed upon the debate and no definitive conclusions could be reached.

As a political writer in the 1770's his pen was kept busy with the issues of the day – constitutional struggles, religious entanglements, the Irish question, the enmity of France and Spain, the push for independence by the

American colonies as well as the problems caused by the empire-building in India by the East India Company. James MacPherson's kinsman John had sought his fortune in India and had become associated with the Nabob of Arcot, a man who was beset by many difficulties including an enormous mountain of debt for himself and his country. John returned to London on behalf of the Nabob with papers and letters to appeal to the Ministry under Lord North's Regulation Act. John enlisted James's assistance in preparing a case to put before the Company's directors and the latter produced *Letters from Mohammed Ali Chan, Nabob of Arcot, to the Court of Directors*. To this was annexed *A Statement of Facts relative to Tanjore,* (a territory bordering on the Nabob's land and twice invaded by him). James MacPherson became intrigued by the activities and methods of the East India Company and its employees which had resulted in universal condemnation of how they had achieved their wealth, and especially how they displayed it on their return to England. To reveal some of what had been going on MacPherson published in 1779 *The History and Management of the East India Company, from its Origin in 1600 to the Present Times.*He continued to take a great interest in Indian affairs and subsequently became the London agent for the Nabob. In 1780 he realised a long-held wish to hold a seat in the House of Commons when he was returned for one of the Cornish boroughs, which he subsequently held until his death in 1796. An attempt to nationalise the East India Company through Fox's East India Bill was defeated in the House of Lords in 1783, but in the aftermath MacPherson who had become privy to many of the Company's secrets, put them to his own use by speculating with great success. MacPherson was now at the height of his social career in London, very wealthy and was even considered, with a list of others, for the post of Poet Laureate.

At the zenith of his success, his thoughts turned north – back to Badenoch. He bought three properties on the banks of the Spey, near Loch Inch, formerly the seat of Mackintosh of Borlum, calling it Belleville. He retained the well-known Enlightenment architect, Robert Adam to design a handsome villa in the Italian style. By the late 1780's the house was ready and when he was settled in he lived "with all the state and hospitality of a chieftain". However it was only during a few months in the summer and autumn that he could do this as his business for the Nabob and his parliamentary duties required him to spend the rest of the year in London.

From time to time MacPherson remembered the promise he had given the Highland Society to arrange and print the Gaelic originals of Ossian. It appears that what he meant by this was to 'arrange' the originals to bring them into a greater agreement with the English version – which of course he had produced in the first case. In this he had the support of Henry MacKenzie, the chairman of the Highland Society as well as a Captain Morison who was employed to copy out the poems. MacPherson went so far as to leave money in his will in order that MacKenzie could complete this work. In late 1795 he returned to Belleville and decided, contrary to his usual custom, to spend the winter there. He continued to "dally" with the Gaelic originals, to entertain his friends and assist the poor as was usual, but on February 17th, 1796 he passed away, just a few months before Burns. In his will he left a sum of money for the erection of a monument on his own land and directed his remains should be taken to Westminster Abbey where they were buried in the south transept, near Poets' Corner.

Regardless of the authenticity of the poems, MacPherson's work made a significant impact and left a powerful legacy. His real contribution was the suggestion of a national voice as well as a claim for a deep and legitimate Scottish literary heritage. The poems appeared at a crucial time, when Scottish Culture in general was starting to attract the attention of the world beyond its borders and needed all the support it could get. There was still some irony though with the enthusiasm expressed by the Edinburgh literati as they themselves had previously had no time for the Highlands and the Highlanders before the appearance of Ossian, and they now found themselves obliged to defend these works against English critique, as well as the of Highlands in general. MacPher-

son’s work focused attention on Celtic culture in general and in particular on Celtic literary heritage. People of all stripes started to recognize that there existed in Scotland – as well as in Wales and Ireland, - an ancient historical and literary Celtic legacy that was well worth preserving and could be in danger of being lost. Further, MacPherson was a herald of the Romantic Movement that followed and he clearly influenced the later Romantic British poets such as Coleridge, Wordsworth and Byron. Once available in many European languages with their eloquent portrayal of natural beauty and their treatment of ancient legends, MacPherson’s Ossian poetry has been credited more than any other work with starting the Romantic Movement in European, and particularly German literature, through its influence on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Gottfried von Herder.

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