*

JAMES MACPHERSON

Works on Ossian and Ossianic Literature published by David Nutt

WAIFS AND STRAYS OF CELTIC TRADITION.

Inedited Scotch-Gaelic Texts, with accompanying English Translations and Explanatory Notes. Argyllshire Series. 8vo. Cloth. *Net prices.*

Vol. II. FOLK AND HERO TALES. Collected, edited (in Gaelic), and translated by the Rev. D. MACINNES; with a Study on the Development of the Ossianic Saga and copious Notes by ALFRED NUTT. 1890. xxiv, 497 pp. Portrait of Campbell of Islay, and two Illustrations by E. GRISET. 12s. 6d. [*Nearly out of print.*

*** The Study forms the first attempt to give a survey of the entire mass of Ossianic literature, and a scientific account of the origin and development of the Ossianic legend.

Vol. III. FOLK AND HERO TALES. Collected, edited, translated, and annotated by the Rev. J. MACDOUGALL; with an Introduction by ALFRED NUTT. 1891. xxx, 311 pp. 7s. 6d.

Vol. IV. THE FIANS; OR, STORIES, POEMS, AND TRADITIONS OF FIONN AND HIS WARRIOR BAND. Collected entirely from oral sources by the Rev. J. G. CAMPBELL; with Introduction and Bibliographical Notes by ALFRED NUTT. 1891. xxxviii, 292 pp. 7s. 6d.

Vol. V. POPULAR TALES AND TRADITIONS. Collected in the Western Highlands by the late Rev. J. G. CAMPBELL of Tiree; with Portrait and Memoir of the Author, and Illustrations by E. GRISET. 8vo. 1895. xx, 150 pp. 5s. [*Nearly out of print.*

*** These volumes form the fullest and most valuable collection of Scotch-Gaelic traditional lore save Campbell of Islay's "Popular Tales."

OSSIAN AND THE OSSIANIC LITERATURE. By ALFRED NUTT. (Popular Studies, No. 3.) 16mo. 6d. net; 7d. post free.

*** The only brief account in print of the genuine Ossianic literature.

JAMES MACPHERSON

AN EPISODE IN LITERATURE

BY

J. S. SMART

LONDON
DAVID NUTT, LONG ACRE
1905

Printed by Ballantyne, Hanson & Co.
At the Ballantyne Press

PREFACE

THIS book is an examination of Macpherson's poems, for so we must call the three volumes which he assigned to another authorship. His life and character, although not the main subject, are studied by the way. Macpherson possessed two things that are rarely joined,—a sensitive and poetic mind, and a shrewd capacity for business. He first appears as an unknown youth, with everything to do for himself, reserved and shy in appearance, but amazingly clever and consumed with ambition. Thirty years later he was successful beyond his dreams, triumphantly aware that his writings were admired by all Europe, rich, prosperous, enjoying and displaying his prosperity. Yet the poems which launched him on his career are as full of laments as the Book of Job, and their melancholy had a genuine cause. A nature so versatile, with so much power over others, and with characteristics so strongly marked, commands our notice.

Macpherson had genius which sometimes broke

into brilliant flame. He was one of the first men of letters who made Scotland famous in other countries. His writings were once as widely known as those of Ibsen and Maeterlinck at the present day. Now he is regarded with contempt as a detected impostor; yet Chatterton, who was also an impostor, has been forgiven; and Macpherson was a greater poet than Chatterton. His moral demerits, which were not small, need not blind us to his one rare excellence.

But if an amnesty be suggested for him, it must be preceded by several admissions. It is too late to maintain, as Mr. Bailey Saunders and Mr. Eyre-Todd have done in recent books and essays, that he was injured and calumniated, the victim of prejudice and unreasoning ill-will. If the world be asked to choose between him and Samuel Johnson, it will declare at once for the latter.

We need not wonder that the controversy about *Ossian* has lasted so long. It hinges upon a question of identity, which gives room for much divergence of view. Macpherson worked over older poems in the composition of new ones. Some have held him to be a fair translator; others that the changes he made gave birth to a different thing. The former point to legendary names and traces of ancient tales; the latter are conscious of a

modern atmosphere. But the work is really Macpherson's. The older poetry vanished as he wrote, and a poetry which was his, the offspring of his own mind, took its place. Shakespeare recast an Italian novel and converted it into a tragedy; but *Othello* is the work of Shakespeare, not of Cinthio. *Paradise Lost* is not the Book of Genesis, although both tell the story of Adam and Eve.

The earlier English critics of Macpherson felt that his pretensions were false; but, in their ignorance of Celtic antiquity, they could not prove it. They fell back on general considerations, which can be met by other generalities. But to traverse their arguments now, is to begin at the wrong end. The vital criticisms, which pierce to the root of the matter, are not the first but the most recent. Modern research has opened up a region of which little was known when *Ossian* appeared. The Gaelic literature of the Middle Ages is now accessible to all, and the key to Macpherson's secret is in our hands. When the riddle has thus been read, we may return to the eighteenth century, and we shall perceive, by a clear and equable light, where justice and veracity lay.

My obligations to those whose labours have made this book possible cannot be too fully

confessed. To some I am specially indebted. Mr. W. A. Craigie and Dr. Magnus Maclean have freely given invaluable assistance; Mr. Alfred Nutt kindly read the whole manuscript and made suggestions by which I have greatly profited; and Dr. MacBain answered several inquiries in the most courteous manner. Thanks are also due to the friends who assisted in revising the proofs.

J. S. S.

April 22, 1905.

CONTENTS

APPENDIX

JAMES MACPHERSON

CHAPTER I

THE AGE AND THE RACE

I

JAMES MACPHERSON is a poet whose fame in his own epoch now astonishes posterity. He appeared at a time of transition; an old school was going out, a new one coming in; and the new school made him one of its heroes and pioneers.

The classical literature of the early eighteenth century had passed its prime, and was dying, like all things, of its own limitations. The reaction against it which led to the romantic movement was beginning. If it were possible to describe the poetry of Pope's age in a single phrase, it might be called one which had its roots in criticism rather than imagination. It aimed at a revival or emulation of Latin and Greek literature by using the works of antiquity as models and its critics as law-givers. The taste of the rising generation now demanded something less studied, more spontaneous and more exciting. The younger

men were seeking also for a wider outlook upon society and history. Classical writers had neglected a large part of experience. They wrote for scholars and courtiers, ignoring whatever fell outside the range of scholarship and the tastes of gentlemen in their own age. Looking backward, they saw between themselves and the Roman Empire only a gulf of semi-barbarism from which the world had just emerged once more into the light of day. Everything medieval was despised as the product of ignorant men among an uninstructed people. From all the authors of Europe before Erasmus, and from the mass of popular poetry that might exist beyond the inner world of cities and colleges, there was nothing to be learned, and in them nothing to enjoy. "Men who think," said Voltaire, "and what is rarer, men who have taste, count but four centuries in the history of the world." These were the centuries in which culture had been perfected,—those of Pericles in Greece, of Caesar and Augustus at Rome, of the Renaissance in Italy, and of Louis XIV. Around them were only dim and obscure spaces, into which those who had been born in more favoured times would care little to penetrate.

New conceptions of life forced the old standards to give ground and opened the way for a new poetry. The revolution was begun by Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose teaching became opera-

tive in many fields and influenced every country in Europe.

Rousseau stoutly laid the axe to the root of the tree. What the men of the classical period had believed in, he reversed and denied. What they admired, he rejected. For Rousseau the magic principle that resolved all difficulties was not authority, imitation or law, but Nature. "Return to Nature," is his constant cry. Mankind had wandered far from Nature, and every step from it had been a declension; back to Nature it must somehow find a path. Those ages of refinement and art, of brilliant city and social life, which Voltaire had thought the only periods worth regarding, were to Rousseau the most pernicious. They were times of corruption and decay. Happiest of all was the natural man who lived before society had been formed, before the invention of property, before the competition for power and possessions had begotten all the vices and had crushed the virtues that spring in the human heart. The primitive, untrained, untutored man was benevolent and good; for Nature made him so. Society depraved him, and in modern civilised life, in such cities as Rome had been and Paris now was, he reached the lowest level of all. His degeneracy increased in proportion as he imagined himself to be refined and elevated. The happiest communities now to be found were not those of Europe, but those outside it which

had preserved some relics of the primeval state, —those which men called savage. If Rousseau were to become king of some tribe in Africa, he would erect at the frontier a gallows on which to hang the first European that should try to enter, and the first native who should seek to go out: better for the native to be hanged than to go to Europe and be corrupted.[1]

Rousseau had expressed, with intense conviction and eloquence, ideas that were dimly forming everywhere. His theory was developed in a thousand ways. It was applied to letters and art by younger critics, many of whom but half realised the resemblance of their position to his. "Back to Nature," was the watchword of the new party,—Nature unfettered and unrestrained. Full flow must be given to its ardours and impulses; the inner wealth of passions and emotions must have free course. Sincerity, unbounded energy and unchecked expression must animate literature and re-create it. Back, therefore, to Nature: from books and formulas to mankind; from artifice to spontaneous feeling; from the town to the country, and from the plains to the mountains and woods. Back also to the earlier and simpler ages of the earth, when Nature had its way, untrammelled by conventions. The northern nations had once possessed a poetry which knew nothing of classical laws, and even among the

[1] *Réponse à M. Bordes;* Morley's *Rousseau*, i. 153.

peasantry verses might yet be found in which native charm would more than compensate for the lack of correctness. Hence began the search for *Volkspoesie* in Germany, and the collection of ancient ballads and songs in England. It became known that a literature many centuries old, marked by energy and simple strength, existed in Scandinavia; other relics of primitive inspiration came to light in Wales. The interest in such discoveries increased, until it became the enthusiasm of the hour. Herder had in his possession poems translated, as he believed, from the language of the Lapps and from that of ancient Peru.

It was at this moment that James Macpherson descended from his native hills and exploded a mine in the midst of Europe. Curious eyes had already been turned towards the Scottish Highlands. Their inhabitants were a remnant of the Celtic race that had been powerful before the modern world arose. They stood outside contemporary civilisation, preserving in their remote wilds the freshness of early life, their own ancient language, their own picturesque costume and simple habits. They even retained, unimpaired by the contagion of luxury, all the valour of the race that had defeated the Romans themselves. Few years had elapsed since a Highland army, a mere handful of men, had risen against the government which the victories of Marlborough

had made great, had scattered disciplined troops, penetrated into the heart of England, and shaken the British throne. In the Highlands, if anywhere, poetry might perhaps be found that breathed the very spirit of Nature, as wild and sweet as the heath of the mountains whence it sprang.

Macpherson more than satisfied these hopes. He published a mass of poems which he averred had been taken down from the lips of peasants in the north and literally translated from Gaelic into English. The hero of this strange literature was Fingal, king of an ancient state called Morven on the western coast of Scotland. Fingal had flourished long, very long before, in the dim recesses of time. He had lived in the third century, and had been contemporary with the Roman Emperors Severus and Caracalla. His achievements had been celebrated by his son Ossian, the poet of ancient Scotland, when sunk himself into extreme old age; and from the third century to the eighteenth—a thing sufficiently striking and wonderful—Ossian's lays had been transmitted by oral tradition. 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. All was grandeur of soul, and everywhere, as Macpherson had said, "disinterested

and generous sentiments" appeared. Morals were pure, manners refined, and women were treated with the most delicate respect.

To the enthusiasts of rising romance nothing in this suggested that the poems might belong to their own age rather than to the youth of the world. They had idealised primitive mankind, and attributed to the simplicity of untutored life just those virtues which *Ossian* revealed. In all barbaric races, with some inevitable qualification, they were prepared to find something of the Ossianic charm. The greatest critic except Lessing that had yet appeared in Germany, Gottfried Herder, gives an interesting glimpse into this attitude of mind :—

"Read through the poems of Ossian. In all their themes they resemble those of another people that yet lives, sings, and does deeds upon the earth, in whose history, without prepossession or illusion, I have more than once recognised that of Ossian and his forefathers. It is the Five Nations of North America. Dirge and war-song, lay of battle and of burial, the praise of their ancestors,—everything is common to the bards of Ossian and the North American savages. I except the songs of torture and revenge peculiar to the latter, in whose stead the mild Caledonians tinged their songs with the tragedy of love . . . Travellers who knew the Scots, and who had long dwelt with the American Indians, acknowledged the manifest likeness in the songs of both nations . . .

"When I still cherished in my mind the thought of a journey to England, you little know how much I then counted on these Scots! One glance, I

thought, at the public life, the stage, the whole lively spectacle of the English people, to make clear, in the main, those notions of the history, philosophy, politics and peculiarities of this wonderful country which present themselves in so confused a fashion to the mind of a foreigner. Then the great change of scene,—to the Scots!—to Macpherson! There I would fain hear the living songs of a living nation, witness all their influence, see the places that the poems tell of, study in their customs the relics of this ancient world, become for a time an ancient Caledonian:—and then back to England again, to examine more closely the monuments of its literature, its collected works of art, and its character. How I rejoiced in my plan!"[1]

But this revelation of early nobility was not the only merit that the men of Herder's time found in *Ossian*. It was also imbued with that spirit of sadness which the new generation had begun to admire. The Return to Nature had many issues; and at first it tended to weaken self-discipline and self-restraint. There must now be no check upon the feelings; for openness to every impression distinguished a noble mind. Artless and naïve spontaneity seemed the truest loyalty to Nature itself. And in a world of hardships to which men had ceased, in works of imagination at least, to oppose a steady stoicism, such yielding to the sensations made wide an entrance for infinite melancholy. Other result was hardly possible when a thin skin was valued more than a thick one. The quality of mind which our ancestors

[1] *Werke*, ed. Suphan, v. 166–67.

called Sensibility set the tone to scores of volumes. Everywhere there was tenderness, and on every page tears were shed. Rousseau, the first of the romanticists, abandoned himself to griefs for which there was in his life more cause than some of his critics have allowed. To turn his pages is to find everywhere the words *attendrissement*, *l'âme sensible*, *mes douleurs*, *mes souffrances*, *mes maux*. The movement culminated when the revolt and despair of Lord Byron had become the theme of all Europe.

Now Macpherson's poems were, as he himself said in his preface, "calculated to please persons of exquisite feelings of heart." Fingal and his soldiers have none of that hardness of temper which constant warfare might bring about. All are men of sensibility in the modern mode. Although Fingal is victorious in every battle, yet he is seldom happy. Love affairs are frequent, but few of them end in marriage. 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 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. And, as a background to this pathetic figure, Macpherson, with a true instinct, has placed the gloomiest

scenery of his native land,—the clouds that hang low over the dark-brown mountains, the rushing torrent, the wind that sighs mournfully through the bending trees.

The burden of his songs can best be shown by a citation. It is the Address to the Sun,—the most famous passage of all :—

"O thou that rollest above, round as the shield of my fathers! Whence are thy beams, O sun! thy everlasting light? Thou comest forth in thy awful beauty; the stars hide themselves in the sky; the moon, cold and pale, sinks in the western wave. But thou thyself movest alone; who can be a companion of thy course! The oaks of the mountains fall; the mountains themselves decay with years; the ocean shrinks and grows again; the moon herself is lost in heaven; but thou art for ever the same; rejoicing in the brightness of thy course. When the world is dark with tempests; when thunder rolls and lightning flies; thou lookest in thy beauty, from the clouds, and laughest at the storm. But to Ossian thou lookest in vain; for he beholds thy beams no more; whether thy yellow hair flows on the eastern clouds, or thou tremblest at the gates of the west. But thou art, perhaps, like me, for a season, thy years will have an end. Thou shalt sleep in thy clouds, careless of the voice of the morning. Exult then, O sun, in the strength of thy youth! Age is dark and unlovely; it is like the glimmering light of the moon, when it shines through broken clouds, and the mist is on the hills; the blast of the north is on the plain; the traveller shrinks in the midst of his journey."

Passages such as these have a beauty of their own. The measured prose in which they are

written advances with a solemn sweep : it seemed free and expansive to men who had grown weary of sharp epigrams set in trimly compacted couplets. And 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.

The poems of Macpherson met with immense and universal popularity. Before many years had passed, they were translated into German, Italian, Spanish, French, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Polish, and Russian ; they have appeared even in Modern Greek. No English author before him, not Shakespeare, Milton, Addison or Pope, had found such hosts of foreign admirers ; no one after him except Byron, hardly even Sir Walter Scott and Dickens, has had a greater fame. To this day the belief that *Ossian* is one of the glories of English literature, a burning planet in our sky, lingers over the Continent. But its influence was greatest in Germany, where the younger school of poets, having thrown off the classical tradition, lacked something to replace the classical models. *Ossian* came to them as dew upon the earth. It was studied and absorbed until an Ossianic colour was diffused over all they wrote. The emergence of the Celtic hero-world prompted them to revive that of Germany itself, a counterpart to Fingal being found in Hermann, the Arminius of Tacitus, who routed the legions of Rome, and thus asserted the supre-

macy of native valour over a decayed but aggressive civilisation. His deeds were celebrated by Klopstock in a drama where Cheruscan bards furnish the chorus, chanting hymns to Wodan and songs of victory.

A theme of discussion sprang up, which was accepted then in utter earnestness: the comparison of Homer with Ossian, the epic poetry of the Greeks with that of the Scots. Ossian 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. The poet Voss exclaimed, "What is the use of beauty in Nature? The Scotsman Ossian is a greater poet than the Ionian Homer." Klopstock was on the same side. Oblivion, he said, had long covered Ossian, but now he had been brought to light, rivalled the Grecian, and defied him. In France, when the romantic movement had invaded it, Lamartine continued the argument, placing the bard above Homer and on a level with Dante.[1] Even Byron fell into the fashion. In his copy of Macpherson, now in the library at Harvard, he wrote down his conclusions. There is no hero in the Iliad or Odyssey who is at once so brave and so amiable as the King of Morven, the splendour

[1] See Texte's *Jean Jacques Rousseau et les Origines du Cosmopolitisme Littéraire*, 1895, p. 401.

of his fame being untarnished by one mean or inhuman act. He is equally the object of our admiration, esteem and love. In sublimity of sentiment and vivacity of description, Byron adds, Ossian may claim a full equality of merit with Homer, although greatly inferior to him in the invention of character and incidents.[1]

Criticism so unreal serves only to show how acute minds may be obscured by a popular illusion. A wiser judge of letters, Goethe himself, was for a time one of Ossian's adherents, and mentioned him along with Shakespeare. From his father's house at Frankfort he wrote to Herder, who had brought both to his notice, that he was now preaching them earnestly among his friends. He had found a flock of admirers for the English poet, and was translating fragments of Ossian, that he might proclaim him also from a full heart.[2] But it was rather for a dramatic purpose that he afterwards introduced the *Poems of Ossian* into *Werther*, and made them the companion of its hero, in whose affection they supplant Homer, his earlier favourite. Werther speaks of them with hardly less enthusiasm than of Charlotte herself.

"You should see the poor figure I make when she is spoken of in company, when people actually ask me how I like her. Like! I hate the word like death. What sort of man must that be who

[1] W. L. Phelps, *Beginnings of the English Romantic Movement*, 1899, p. 154.

[2] *Der Junge Goethe*, i. 299.

likes Lotte, whose whole soul and senses are not filled with the thought of her? Lately some one asked me how I liked Ossian!"

On the last evening that the unfortunate lovers spend together, Charlotte asks Werther to read to her. He obeys, and produces a translation of the *Songs of Selma*. His eyes fill with tears as he begins;—"Star of descending night, fair is thy light in the west!" As the reading continues, both become more and more deeply moved, until it is interrupted by their sobs. Charlotte implores him to resume. Werther, trembling, his heart ready to burst, raises the paper and reads again,—"'Why dost thou awake me, O gale?' it seems to say; 'I am covered with the drops of heaven. The time of my fading is near, the blast that shall scatter my leaves. To-morrow shall the traveller come; he that saw me in my beauty shall come. His eyes will search the field, but they will not find me.'"[1] The crisis of the story has arrived. Already Werther has resolved on suicide, and as he reads, some suspicion of his purpose passes through Charlotte's mind. The lovers part for ever, and next day Werther dies by his own hand.

An exaggerated and unwholesome conclusion, and one opposed to Goethe's own habitual modes of thought. In his later years, when he had come to speak of *Ossian* with contempt, he explained Werther's love of it as the sign of a morbid mind.

[1] From *Berrathon*.

Werther, he said, had praised Homer while he retained his senses, and Ossian when he was going mad.[1]

Nevertheless *The Sorrows of Werther* made an epoch : it was the first revelation of a great genius, and the beginning of a whole literature. In its widening fame it carried everywhere with it the fame of *Ossian*. The greatest admirer of both works was Napoleon Bonaparte. He read *Werther* seven times ; *Ossian* perhaps as often. During the voyage from Egypt he had it in his hands : he read it again on the ship that conveyed him to St. Helena.[2] Napoleon's copy still exists ; it is soiled with thumbs, and covered on the margin with marks of exclamation : from its pages exhales a mingled odour, faint but perceptible, of patchouli, camphor, and snuff.[3] Another notable Frenchman, Bernadotte, gave to his son the name of Oscar, from the heroic son of Ossian who plays so great a part in the poems. His choice had an unexpected consequence. When Bernadotte was created King of Sweden, the people of his new country were attracted by the thought that an Oscar might afterwards be their sovereign. The circumstance produced an astonishing effect ; it seemed a happy augury ; helped, it was reported, to determine the election.[4] Oscar I. succeeded his father on the

[1] H. Crabb Robinson's *Diary*, ii. 432.
[2] Texte, *op. cit.* p. 400.
[3] Arvède Barine, *Journal des Débats*, 27 Nov. 1894.
[4] *Lettres du Comte Joseph de Maistre*, 1851, p. 193.

throne of Sweden and Norway, which passed later to Oscar II., the present King. This superb compliment to the Celtic epics was paid, we may note, by one of the most Teutonic of nations.

It was about a century ago, when so much else was stirring, that Macpherson's vogue was at its height in Europe. Ossianic names became the fashion, and little Oscars and Malvinas were at play in all the nurseries. The roll of admirers in Germany is a large one. Besides Goethe, Herder, and Klopstock, it includes Lessing, Schiller, Novalis, Bürger and Tieck. Fragments of the poems have been set to music by Schubert and Brahms.[1] Among French poets, the most impassioned disciple was Chateaubriand. So devoted was he to the Scottish bard that he would, he tells us, have sustained his existence against all men, lance in hand. "The harp of Morven is the emblem of my soul," wrote Lamartine. Madame de Staël was one of the first enthusiasts, and George Sand may afterwards be seen steeping herself in *Fingal.* Later on and farther away—for *Ossian* appears in the most unlikely places—we find the strenuous Walt Whitman poring over it, as he sits alone in the open air, book in hand, on the seashore of Manhattan.

But all this while opinion in England itself was taking a different bent. At first the Highland poems had attained a certain acceptance.

[1] *Cf.* R. Tombo, *Ossian in Germany*, 1901, p. 67.

Wordsworth relates that in his youth he heard them recited from the pulpit, in company with Isaiah and Shakespeare, by ostentatious preachers.[1] But keen criticism was soon aroused. The antiquity of the poems was strongly impugned, and even their value as pieces of imagination was rated low. They are in truth very unequal. The earliest fragments of Macpherson's poetry have gleams of real inspiration, and their scenic descriptions opened up a new world. But he was too hasty, too facile, and when he launched into epics was not successful in sustained narrative. His tales have little structure, and are full of repetitions. In *Temora*, where his faults culminated, the reader stops midway in bewilderment, scarcely grasping even the outline of the story. This vague flux could only repel men who loved clear statement and concrete ideas. Johnson saw no merit in the book, and assailed it in conversation and print. "In vain shall we look for the *lucidus ordo* where there is neither end nor object, design nor moral." Having been asked whether any modern man could have written such poems, he replied abruptly, "Yes, sir, many men, many women, and many children." And to Sir Joshua Reynolds he exclaimed, "Sir, a man might write such stuff for ever, if he would *abandon* his mind to it."

Yet these utterances are but as sparks struck from flint. Johnson's contempt is too emphatic;

[1] *The Prelude*, Bk. vii.

in denying that there might be found in the poems even a grain of beauty as large as a mustard seed, he falls into extravagance. And we may note that in England, unfriendly to Macpherson as it was, and in the decline of his repute, an astonishing adherent rallied to his side. In the generation after Johnson a critic as positive, William Hazlitt, startles us by the excess of his admiration. Hazlitt mentions "four of the principal works of poetry in the world at different periods of history, —Homer, the Bible, Dante, and, let me add, Ossian." He believes that Ossian is a feeling and a name that can never be destroyed in the minds of his readers. If it were possible even to show that a poet who has conveyed more entirely than all others the sense of privation, the loss of all things, of friends, of good name, of country, of the pith and sap of existence, is himself a mere nothing, then the disillusionment would be only the overthrow of another ideal, another instance of mutability, another blank made, another void left in the heart.

But few of Hazlitt's contemporaries in the great poetic period shared this enthusiasm, although Lord Byron published an imitation of *Ossian* in *Hours of Idleness*, and the sweet voice of Cona is linked with *Paradise Lost* in the preface to Coleridge's poems.[1] Sir Walter Scott, after investigation,

[1] Burns, it should be added, was an ardent student of *Ossian*, and deliberately imitated it. The *Lament for James, Earl of Glencairn*, except the last stanza, is pure Macpherson. So is the elegy *On the Death of Sir James Hunter Blair*. *Cf.* Angellier's *Burns*, i. 59–61.

pronounced decidedly against its genuineness; and Wordsworth denounced it as the work of an impudent Highlander, essentially unnatural, an audacious and worthless forgery. The value of the book and the problem of its authorship may be examined apart, but Wordsworth, like Johnson, is drastic and spares nothing. In particular he condemns its pictures of Scottish scenery. Having been born and reared in a mountainous country, he had from his very childhood observed their falsehood to nature. From what he saw with his own eyes he knew that the imagery was spurious. Yet we may hesitate before accepting this count in the indictment; for Nature after all is varied and ample, and can be seen in as many phases as there are poetic temperaments.

But now the curtain was about to fall. By the middle of the nineteenth century the world had made up its mind that *Ossian* was the work of an impostor: it was modern, and even as such it was rubbish. Its popularity had been due to a vast and almost unaccountable delusion. The glamour of antiquity being gone, every merit seemed to disappear;[1] but it had also been superseded: its vogue had been killed by that of Byron. The melancholy passion and revolt against the tragedy of life, which in the Scottish bard had seemed so touching, now found an infinitely more thrilling

[1] "Ossian semblait l'égal d'Homère quand on le croyait ancien. On le méprise depuis qu'on sait que c'est Macpherson." Anatole France, *Jardin d'Épicure*, p. 224.

utterance; and the uncertain radiance that had shone about the forerunner was extinguished in the splendour of the prophet.

II

The epics of Caledonia were destined, however, to meet with indulgent critics once more, and to enjoy an Indian Summer of repute. Their rehabilitation began where it might least have been looked for,—at Oxford. It was preached there by two Professors of Poetry.

The nineteenth century had found newer and more fruitful methods of criticism than those of the eighteenth, but methods not without their own peril. Works were no longer detached from their writers and estimated by abstract laws of art; the interpreter's aim was to find the author in his book, to reveal in it the influence of his character and surroundings. Then came the conception of nationality in literature. Each race was believed to have its own traits which strongly marked the poetry that sprang up within its bounds, and subtly emerged in the poetry of other races with which it had mingled. This method was applied to the literature of the Celts by Ernest Renan, in one of the most brilliant and unsatisfying works produced by that builder of exquisite but fragile hypothesis. Soon afterwards Matthew Arnold visited Paris, made the acquaintance of Renan, was fascinated by his personality, fascinated by his Celtic deductions,

and returned to England to write his own lectures on *Celtic Literature*. They were delivered at Oxford in 1866.

The weakness of Matthew Arnold's speculations, as of Renan's on which they are founded, lies in their neglect of the comparative method, which alone could offer some security in treading so precarious a soil. Certain qualities are detected in Celtic poetry, qualities of style, of natural magic and of melancholy: they are then declared to be peculiar to the Celtic race and characteristic of the Celtic genius,—if they are found in the literature of England, it must needs be because of a Celtic mixture in English blood. But if such traits are to be claimed as the peculiar property of the Celt, it is not enough that the Celts display them: it must also be shown that the Teutons do not. In Renan there is no serious attempt at comparison. The love of the Celts for Nature is illustrated by their worship of trees and wells in ages of heathendom: but primitive man everywhere has worshipped trees and wells. A beautiful story is told of the death-bed of Columba,—how tender was the spirit of Celtic Christianity! But a similar, almost an identical anecdote has been related of the Venerable Bede. The Celts believed fondly in the return of the lost hero: Arthur was not dead but alive in Avilion, whence he should come to restore his people. "*Celtic Messianism*," exclaims Renan; forgetting that in Germany also

Barbarossa sleeps under Kyffhäuser until the ravens shall cease to fly round its summit. Those poetic elements of style, natural magic and melancholy might, it is conceivable, appear in other races which have passed through the same stage of culture: Renan and Arnold must exclude this possibility if their speculations are to convince. To find the contrasting Teutonic spirit (if there be such a thing) the poems of the Anglo-Saxons, the whole mass of the Sagas, the Minnesingers and *Volkslieder*, the Danish ballads, and even the fairy tales of Andersen, Asbjörnsen and Grimm must be surveyed, as well as the modern literature of six different nations. Without some such breadth of outlook no one can define the attributes which the Teuton may have or be barren of. And our inquiry might be carried further and wider still; for if the qualities of which Arnold speaks should be found in Hebrew poetry, in Greek poetry, in the poetry of the Russians or the Roumanians, one thing at least would be established—that they are not the monopoly of Bretons, Welsh and Gaels. An application of his threefold test would perhaps show that the most Celtic writer of the nineteenth century was Heinrich Heine, the German Jew.

Even comparison itself may lead us astray. The peoples contrasted must be taken in the same age and on the same level, the secular movements of history which have affected all alike being kept

in sight. It is not difficult to show (as Renan has done) that Christian Welshmen were milder than Teutonic heathen; that the Celts of the thirteenth century were more civilised than the Teutons of the ninth or tenth; or even that medieval Welsh poets had a finer sense of beauty than many modern Englishmen. But these may be differences of environment and social conditions rather than of race.

The Celtic strain which Matthew Arnold found in *Ossian*, and which he believed it had revealed to the whole modern world, was its sadness :—

"The Celts, with their vehement reaction against the despotism of fact, with their sensuous nature, their manifold striving, their adverse destiny, their immense calamities, the Celts are the prime authors of this vein of piercing regret and passion—of this Titanism in poetry. A famous book, Macpherson's *Ossian*, carried in the last century this vein like a flood of lava through Europe. I am not going to criticise Macpherson's *Ossian* here. Make the part of what is forged, modern, tawdry, spurious, in the book, as large as you please; strip Scotland, if you like, of every feather of borrowed plumes which on the strength of Macpherson's *Ossian* she may have stolen from that *vetus et major Scotia*, the true home of the Ossianic poetry, Ireland; I make no objection. But there will still be left in the book a residue with the very soul of the Celtic genius in it, and which has the proud distinction of having brought this soul of the Celtic genius into contact with the genius of the nations of modern Europe, and enriched all our poetry by it. Woody Morven, and echoing Sora, and Selma

with its silent halls!—we all owe them a debt of gratitude, and when we are unjust enough to forget it, may the Muse forget us! Choose any one of the better passages in Macpherson's *Ossian* and you can see even at this time of day what an apparition of newness and power such a strain must have been to the eighteenth century."

Was the power of sadness, the charm of grief and regret, indeed so priceless a revelation to Europe? We may doubt its newness; we may even question its worth. But here we have at any rate a fresh criterion applied to the disputed poems that Macpherson produced. The melancholy that pervades them is said to be an ancient characteristic of the Celtic race; from the ancient depths of Celticism, therefore, the poems came forth. The line of thought which Matthew Arnold had expounded at Oxford was developed there by a later Professor of Poetry, John Campbell Shairp, Principal of St. Andrews. He also finds in the sadness of *Ossian* the surest proof of its antiquity, and adds a new argument—the fidelity with which the scenery of the Highlands is described:—

"His poetry is full of natural images taken straight from the wilderness; the brown heath, the thistledown on the autumn air, the dark mountain cairns, the sighing winds, the movements of mist and cloud, silence and solitude—these are for ever recurring in impressive monotone. Even to this day, when one is alone in the loneliest places of the Highlands, in the wilderness where no man is,

on the desolate moor of Rannoch, or among the grey boulders of Badenoch,—when

> 'the loneliness
> Loadeth the heart, the desert tires the eye'—

at such a time, if one wished a language to express the feeling that weighs upon the heart, where would one turn to find it? Not to Scott; not even to Wordsworth—though the power of hills was upon him, if upon any modern. Not in these, but in the voice of Cona alone would the heart find a language that would relieve it. It is this fact, that there is something which is of the very essence of the Highland glens and mountains, something unexpressed by any modern poet, but which the old Ossianic poetry alone expresses; this, if nothing else, would convince me that the poetry which conveys this feeling is no modern fabrication, but is native to the hills, connatural, I had almost said, with the granite mountains, among which it has survived."[1]

The suggestions thus advanced by Matthew Arnold and Principal Shairp have the support of several writers. They are not to be dismissed abruptly; if authority is of value, they have great weight. But others may confess that they are left profoundly unconvinced. The fidelity of the descriptions can prove nothing for the date of the poems. It establishes only that they were composed in the Highlands by some one to whom Highland scenery had long been familiar; and we know that James Macpherson was born and reared

[1] *Aspects of Poetry*, p. 284.

in Badenoch and that he wrote his works in the seclusion of his native valley, with the dark boulder-strewn mountains around him and the grey clouds over his head—at no remote epoch, but in the autumn of 1760. In applying the impressionist or subjective method of Arnold and Principal Shairp the critic starts with a given conception of the Celtic character; it is sad, pensive, weighed down by a sense of failure and decay. With this character *Ossian* accords. But whence did the conception itself arise? From the study of men? Were the Highlanders and Welshmen with whom Arnold and Shairp were acquainted, sad, pensive, haunted by melancholy broodings? Highlanders and Welshmen must then have changed not a little in one generation. From books? The *Mabinogion*, Arnold's other Celtic authority, shows only a bright world of chivalrous adventure, steeped in an atmosphere as lucid as Ossian's is dim, flashing with the gayest colours. Is it not possible, finally, that the notion of Celtic melancholy owes something to Ossian himself; that the argument was a circular one; and that Ossian was justified by a citation before his own tribunal?

"*They went forth to the war, but they always fell.*" This line of *Ossian* stands on Matthew Arnold's first page. What could manifest more aptly the recognition by the Celts themselves of their adverse fortunes, the slipping of the world from their grasp? So Arnold suggests. But it is possible to interpret

otherwise the character of the northern Scots. So far as anything in history can be spoken of with certitude, we may declare that the words "*They went forth to the war, but they always fell,*" were not repeated by dejected bards in the army that followed Donald of the Isles to Harlaw; that they were not muttered in the camp of Montrose; that they were not thought of by the clansmen who hewed the Covenanters to pieces with the broadsword, and charged at Killiecrankie. The impetuous Highland temper is more truly revealed in that poem of Alexander Macdonald's in which the Gaelic bard, contemporary with Macpherson, and himself a soldier, has celebrated the Lion which floated on the banner of his clan:—

"If violence should assail thee
From strangers' bounds and seek thy hurt;
If foemen should draw near thee,
With ill will, and strife, and sturt;
Many an Islay hilt then,
With a strong, smooth blade in it,
Beneath thy silken stream would gleam,
To fight for thee and succour thee.
Thine are men who would not bend
In showers that pierce the body through,
Nor yet be slow to rise and go
Where heads were hack'd and fury grew;
When, over all the tumult spread,
The thundering pipes were heard afar,
That might put spirit in the dead
To rise for gallant deeds of war."[1]

[1] Pattison's *Gaelic Bards*, 1866, p. 44.

This is not the tone of a people whose spirit has been broken by calamity; it is that rather of "an old and haughty nation, proud in arms."

Such things discredit the appropriateness of "*They went forth to the war, but they always fell,*" as an expression of the Celtic spirit. Nor can it be truly said that in Scotland at least the world has slipped from the grasp of the earlier race. Of the modern Scottish nation a large, perhaps the largest part is of Celtic origin; and the share of the Celtic element in its active life has during the last century not diminished but much increased.

There is, nevertheless, one event in history by which *Ossian* was perhaps in some degree inspired, —the suppression of the Forty-five rebellion. In April 1746, an unusual spectacle was seen at the little village of Ruthven, where James Macpherson was born. His own district was Jacobite in sympathy, and his clansmen under their chief, Cluny Macpherson, had joined Prince Charles. The battle of Culloden had been lost, and the fugitives, broken bands amounting to several thousand men, fled up the valley of the Spey, and rallied at Ruthven, gathering around the ruins of its castle which had been burned not long before. It was the last stand of a beaten party. Soon they scattered in all directions to seek safety as they might. The soldiers of Cumberland quickly arrived, crushing every enemy, and endeavouring to seize Cluny

Macpherson, who lurked across the valley among the cliffs of Craig Dhu.

On all this James Macpherson, an eager and observant boy, nine years of age, must have looked with not a little interest. He grew up under the shadow of this disaster to his race and clan; the final conquest of the Highlands, and the obliteration of their ancient modes of life taking place before his eyes. In his poems some reminiscence or echo of these early experiences is discernible. They are full of regret for a great and heroic past, now lost beyond all recall, and of lamentation for the warriors of an earlier time whose day of glory is gone. Ruin is all around. *Untergang der Helden, Jammer und Wehmut*, said Herder, are the prevailing theme. That this note is universally and perennially Celtic is a hard saying; but it may well have been suggested by the defeat of the Highland chiefs in their last struggle, and the passing away of the old Highland system, when reflected in the imagination of a young poet who had witnessed the overthrow.

Matthew Arnold perceived in the English character a shallow optimism and self-satisfaction which turned away from the emotional aspects of life and congratulated itself smugly on material well-being. Against this English optimism he placed the deeper, more sensitive, and therefore sadder nature of the Gael. A lover of paradox might retort by claiming melancholy reflective-

ness as the Englishman's birthright. He might cite the testimony of foreign observers. To Germans and Frenchmen the English seem a dismal nation, incapable of true gaiety, and weighed down in spirit by that spleen which their damp and frowning climate engenders. It was under some such aspect that our literature first became known in the eighteenth century to continental critics. Madame de Staël speaks of English poems which are *remplis de cette noble mélancolie qui est la majesté du philosophe sensible.* She propounds the question, "Why the English, who are happy in their government and their manners, have a much more melancholy imagination than the French?"—and answers it by declaring that serious meditation is the result of liberty.[1] This very problem of English melancholy—the gravity and dejection of the English poets—was also discussed by Goethe, who put forward his own solution.[2] And it is true that about that period our poetry had taken a melancholy bent. Imagination played around the shortness of life, the transitory world, death and its sad accompaniments. Gray's *Elegy* is the typical poem of the time: beside it may be placed Warton's *Pleasures of Melancholy*, Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes*, Robert Blair's *Grave*, and, above all, the *Night Thoughts* of Edward Young, in which the literature of sadness found its most strenuous ex-

[1] *De la Littérature*, ch. xv.
[2] *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, bk. xiii.

pression. It was such works as these that Goethe and Madame de Staël had before them when they spoke of English melancholy. Beside them *Ossian* fell naturally into place. The popularity of *Night Thoughts* on the Continent was enormous : everywhere it was translated, everywhere read. The "note of romantic despair" which Mr. Gosse has found in it, exactly suited the European reader. When *Ossian* came a few years afterwards, the public imagination was all the more ready to welcome it. Thereafter *Ossian* and *Night Thoughts* made the tour of Europe together.

But few will be willing to recognise in Macpherson the despairing revolt of the Celt, and in Young the abiding gloom of the Saxon : the world would be altogether too black. It is better on the threshold of our subject to abandon racial comparison and psychological surmise. More definite tests of authenticity can be applied. Macpherson was not the only man who gathered Ossianic lays in Scotland. Other collections were made there long before ; others in his lifetime ; others in our own day. Many of these poems have now been edited and translated into English by accurate scholars. They can be read along with Macpherson, their tone and substance compared with his. Upon the question which men disputed so stoutly, and with such varied results, a flood of light has thus been cast. The Ossianic controversy exists no longer ; it is now certainly known how far the work of Macpherson

resembled the traditional poems that were repeated by the peasants of the North, how far and how widely it differed from them. But the means of determining this emerged only in the later years of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER II

RIVAL OSSIANS

Of the criticisms which Macpherson encountered, the most authoritative and yet the most neglected have been those of Irish scholars. Ireland had its own Celtic traditions : it had manuscripts of great antiquity : even in the dismal seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were Irishmen who wrote the Gaelic language, and studied its literature with something of patriotic pride. Macpherson's *Ossian* came fairly within their scope. The further we recede in history, the nearer Ireland and Scotland draw to each other. One name, Scotia, has been borne by both. Gaelic was once their common speech, and the early poetry of the two countries is so closely intertwined that distinction is scarcely possible. Many of Macpherson's characters are avowedly Irishmen : the whole action of *Fingal*, from beginning to end, takes place on Irish soil : the contest of two rival houses for the Irish crown supplies the main theme of *Temora*. It would be strange if such events survived only by tradition in the Scottish Highlands, no knowledge of them remaining in the country where they happened. There were, in fact, records

of Ossian and his age in Ireland, but they differed widely from anything presented by Macpherson. He averred that his account alone was authentic; and in a series of notes and prefaces he roundly abused the Irish historians, accusing them of ignorance and incompetence, of basing their works on "puerile and despicable fictions."

By these proceedings the scholars of Ireland were profoundly stirred. They regarded the ancient Gaelic literature and tradition with reverence: they were the treasure of their nation, a treasure peculiarly entrusted to their own keeping. Now came this young man with two Gaelic epics which no one had seen or heard of before. Genuine Gaelic poetry had been used no doubt as his material; but he had transformed it out of all recognition, and swamped it with alien elements. A later writer has happily described the attitude of those indignant sons of Erin. "That pestilent Scotchman had shaken the whole system, to make Caledonian Epics with fragments of the ruin which he made. To smash Stonehenge and build a Parthenon; to hew modern antiques out of the Elgin Marbles; to paint pictures by Zeuxis upon Raphael's Cartoons; or to write Cuneiform Inscriptions on the Book of Kells, could hardly afflict antiquaries more than the publications of Macpherson."[1]

The traditions of which Macpherson had made

[1] J. F. Campbell, *Leabhar na Feinne*, 1872, p. 180.

use were declared to be originally Irish, not Scottish. Ossian, the figure around whom they clustered, was an Irishman, not a Scot; and his heroic father was rightly named Finn, the form "Fingal" being Macpherson's own invention. Finn MacCumhail had been leader of a body of chosen troops that defended Ireland against foreign inroads: his home was at Allen in Leinster, the Scottish kingdom of Morven, and Selma, its palace, being figments of Macpherson's brain. These are salient distinctions between the Ossianic story of Macpherson and that of the Irish. But other differences abound. The Irish stories of Finn MacCumhail are hardly to be accepted as historic, whatever basis in fact they may once have had. They are charming pieces of folk-lore, full of myth and extravagance, fairy tales abounding in enchantment and encounters with superhuman adversaries. Macpherson, sincerely enough, despised these primitive elements of universal literature. He speaks with contempt of "the Irish poems concerning Fion":—

"I have just now in my hands all that remain of those compositions; but, unluckily for the antiquities of Ireland, they appear to be the work of a very modern period. Every stanza, nay almost every line, affords striking proofs that they cannot be three centuries old. Their allusions to the manners and customs of the fifteenth century are so many that it is matter of wonder to me how any one could dream of their antiquity. They are

entirely writ in that romantic taste which prevailed two ages ago. Giants, enchanted castles, dwarfs, palfreys, witches and magicians form the whole circle of the poet's invention. The celebrated Fion could scarcely move from one hillock to another without encountering a giant, or being entangled in the circles of a magician. Witches on broomsticks were continually hovering round him, like crows; and he had freed enchanted virgins in every valley in Ireland. In short, Fion, great as he was, passed a disagreeable life."

Such tales, said Macpherson, were, like all romantic compositions, "disgustful to true taste." But they were late and spurious. They were not the works of the real Ossian, but of Irish poets who had borrowed his name, and had endeavoured also, by wicked arts, to change his nationality. "The bards of Ireland," he wrote, "by ascribing to Ossian compositions which are evidently their own, have occasioned a general belief in that country that Fingal was of Irish extraction, and not of the ancient Caledonians, as is said in the genuine poems of Ossian. The inconsistencies between those spurious pieces prove the ignorance of their authors." "Their stories concerning Fingal, if they mean him by Fion MacComnal, are so inconsistent and notoriously fabulous that they do not deserve to be mentioned; for they evidently bear along with them the marks of late invention."

Thus we have one hero, Fingal or Finn, under two denominations, and it does not yet appear

which is the *alias*. We have a poet of uncertain date for whose nationality Ireland and Macpherson contend, and two dissimilar sets of poems, the heroic epics published by Macpherson and the romantic ballads he spoke of so slightingly, each of which has been put forward, to the exclusion of the other, as Ossian's only genuine works. We have, in short, two rival Ossians, the really ancient and the modern sham: which of these characters shall be assigned to the epics, and which to the ballads of medieval romance, is a question that remains to be determined.

It should be observed that Macpherson did not obtain the "Irish ballads," which he thought so trivial and unworthy, in Ireland itself. He actually got them in the Scottish Highlands. Macpherson was never in Ireland: he had no Irish correspondents: he did not profess to have found the ballads anywhere but in his native country,—in Badenoch, in Perthshire, in Skye, in the Outer Hebrides. The ballads, we are to understand, had made their way across the North Channel, and had come into circulation in Scotland alongside of the genuine Ossianic poems; to some extent they had even displaced those Scottish compositions in popular favour. The seeker for ancient poetry among Highland peasants had thus a remarkable problem to solve. In some cottage in an Atlantic isle poems would be recited to him, which he would write down and searchingly examine. Some would

prove to be relics of the authentic Ossian, the Scottish minstrel of the third century, others to be counterfeit imitations which had come over from Ireland in the fifteenth. He would then separate the true from the false, place the poems of the real Ossian on one side for translation into English, the "Irish pieces" on the other for reprehension and ridicule. All this he would do with no criterion to aid him but his own taste and such internal evidence as the poems themselves might afford. Could any literary task be more perplexing? Macpherson claimed, however, that he had found it surprisingly easy after a little practice, and had been able to sift out accurately the Caledonian remains, and to reject the Irish imitations which his countrymen offered him.

Our wonder at this feat is increased by the speed with which it was performed. The labour of one man, working in the midst of the Highlands and in constant intercourse with their inhabitants during a long lifetime, would hardly suffice for such a colossal piece of editing. But Macpherson's opportunities were slight. It is admitted by all that he was no great Gaelic scholar: even his knowledge of the colloquial tongue was defective and led him in conversation into curious blunders.[1] His whole work as a translator was completed in early youth. He was twenty-four when his first book appeared, and with the publication of *Temora*

[1] *Highland Society's Report*, 1805, App., p. 95.

he finished his labours and abandoned Celtic scholarship for good at the age of twenty-seven. The time which he spent in the Highlands, when he journeyed thither to make his poetic collection, was short,—less than six months. Yet, in his own generation, an obscure schoolmaster called Duncan Kennedy, without the encouraging patronage which Macpherson received, occupied himself for nine or ten years in collecting Gaelic poems. His manuscript remained unprinted until 1872, and is for the most part still untranslated. The greatest Scottish authority on Ossianic literature, John Francis Campbell of Islay, studied it for over thirty years: when he set himself to edit a complete *corpus* of the Ossianic ballads, the work was not completed till after ten or eleven years of earnest toil. Another writer of the same name, the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell, minister of Tiree, published in 1891 a volume of similar ballads obtained in his island parish. "The labour of collecting them," says Mr. Campbell, "has extended over well-nigh thirty years, since the coming of the writer to his present charge." Compared with these investigators, Macpherson, it must be admitted, was little more than a hasty amateur.

How casual were his researches is shown by his preface to *Temora*, an elaborate poem in eight books, from the Gaelic of the ancient Caledonian. Macpherson made the translation in London. He does not claim to have derived the original from

any special source, such as an old and unique manuscript might offer. Nor had he got it himself from oral recitals: it had been sent to him by friends through the medium of the post. When he arrived in London, he tells us, "little more than the opening of the present poem had come in regular connection to my hands," but "by means of my friends I have since collected all the broken fragments of *Temora* that I formerly wanted; and the story of the poem, which was accurately preserved by many, enabled me to reduce it into that order in which it now appears." This he says, like Tennyson's parson, "easy and free." But the weakness of such evidence is apparent. Macpherson has not even named the friends who sent the Gaelic text to London; he has not cited their letters; and for their authority he has assigned nothing but general tradition, which, however, we are to understand was widespread. *Temora* could hardly then have escaped other inquirers; yet in Mr. Campbell's great work, based on collections made in many parts of Scotland during the last three centuries, there is not a vestige of it to be found. The story of the first book corresponds closely to one of the ballads, the remaining seven narrating at tedious length a war carried on in Ireland by Fingal against a prince called Cathmor, who is finally slain. Now, there is no mention of Cathmor in any Irish manuscript or legend; and nothing

has been heard of him in the Highlands except by Macpherson's friends.

Limited, however, as Macpherson's researches had been, he had in his own day one immense advantage in Scotland. He was alone in the field. No one had yet attempted to introduce English-speaking Scots—the bulk of the nation—to the literature of their Celtic countrymen. He was the first translator of Gaelic poetry: he remains incomparably the most famous. And in Scotland his case seemed plausible. It was known that he had spent some time in the Highlands seeking for ancient Gaelic remains. He had collected poems attributed to Ossian: he had published poems attributed to Ossian: and the Scots believed, not unnaturally, that the poems collected and the poems published were the same. That Macpherson might have suppressed what he found and produced his own compositions instead, was a possibility that few people thought of. But, as we now know, he was less concerned to exhibit Highland poetry as it was than as he conceived it ought to be.

The genuineness of Macpherson's epics became almost a test of national orthodoxy. Highlanders were prominent in their defence, and efforts were made to plant them securely in what was thought to be their native soil. Long after Macpherson was dead, patriotic societies endeavoured to foster their study: a copy of *Ossian* was presented to

every parish school in the northern counties, that the young might be acquainted with the monuments of their race.[1] These efforts met with small success. The volumes were forgotten, while the Celtic peasants continued, on the mainland and in the isles, on long summer evenings and round winter hearths, to repeat those very ballads that Macpherson had rejected, in happy ignorance of the judgment once passed upon them by a sprightly young man of letters in London town. To the learned the ballads were a source of great embarrassment. It could not be denied that they existed, for every attempt to plunge into living Gaelic tradition brought up the ballads and nothing else: yet how were they to be reconciled with Macpherson's more imposing compositions? So far as might be, the popular poems were ignored. When they seemed about to emerge, they were frowned upon and driven out of sight. An English traveller, Thomas Ford Hill, set himself in 1780 to investigate the Ossianic question during a journey in Scotland. At Dalmally, in Argyllshire, he found a blacksmith whose mind was stored with Ossianic verses. Hill obtained from him a number of poems, had them translated into English, for he himself knew no Gaelic, and published them on his return to London. To the Celtic defenders of Macpherson this seemed a reprehensible intrusion: *non tali auxilio nec defensoribus istis*, wrote one of

[1] Reid's *Bibliotheca Scoto-Celtica*, 1832, p. 99.

them in wrath. Highlanders who engaged in the same pursuit fared little better. Archibald Fletcher, a native of Glenorchy, made a collection of similar poems, which he had heard in his youth in the glens of Perthshire and Argyll. Fletcher could write no more than his own name, but his neighbours committed the verses to paper : they were stitched into coarse brown covers, and attested by Fletcher's sole piece of penmanship, his signature, which he affixed before a Justice of the Peace.[1] This manuscript was placed at last in the Advocates' Library, and for seventy years it lay there in utter neglect. On the outside some hand wrote the words "Corrupt copies." Why "corrupt"? one cannot but ask. Fletcher had obtained the poems in the Highlands, where Macpherson had professed to find his, and about the same epoch. So far their authority was as good as that of *Fingal.* They were there in manuscript exactly as when taken down, whilst Macpherson's original papers have never been produced. Macpherson's epics, however, had been accepted as ancient; they set the standard; Fletcher's poems were exceedingly unlike them, and therefore were despised, put aside, and forgotten.

Yet, when we get a glimpse behind the scenes, we perceive that it was just such ballads as those produced by Hill and Fletcher that found their way into Macpherson's hands. On visiting the

[1] *Highland Society's Report*, App., p. 270; *Leabhar na Feinne*, p. xvi.

North in 1760 to gather materials, he learned that a collection of Gaelic poems had already been made by Mr. Maclagan, minister of Amulree. He wrote to Maclagan, who sent him copies of several pieces: this fact has often been cited: no other has done more service in defence of Macpherson's good faith. A few years ago the minister of Amulree's manuscripts, which had been preserved by his family, were brought to light, edited and published. Their contents may be found in the first volume of *Reliquiæ Celticæ*.[1] Of the twenty-five ballads there printed, Maclagan sent to Macpherson some thirteen.[2] In a letter to his correspondent, written in January 1761, Macpherson names two of the poems he had just received,—the *Lay of Garbh*, and the *Great Strait of the Fians*, observing that the latter is "valuable for the ancient manners it contains." Both of them are well-known, and literal translations of both into English are now accessible. The tales which they tell are in *Ossian*—much embellished; and they are mentioned, with a change of tone, in Macpherson's discussion of the poems which were forged by the Irish bards. The *Lay of Garbh* is now coarse and vulgar, and the *Great Strait of the Fians* is handled with sarcastic pleasantry. They are, he says, modern, the work of a pretended Ossian.

[1] Inverness, 1892.

[2] Leyden's *Tour in the Highlands and Western Islands*, 1800, pub. 1903, p. 259.

Many years elapsed after Macpherson's appearance before the task of editing the vernacular poems of the Highlands was competently begun. A new epoch was made by the labours of John Francis Campbell. That accomplished writer was known in the west as "Campbell of Islay"; but the family estates had been sold in his youth, and little had been left him to inherit but a barren title which Highland courtesy would not withhold. He devoted himself to the study of Gaelic poetry and folk-lore with unflagging zeal; bringing with him the endowment of a charming temper, a keen sense of humour, much love of the picturesque, and an openness of heart that made him welcome everywhere. His researches were shared by Hector MacLean, an Islay schoolmaster, who worked with Campbell in a fellowship honourable to both for many years.[1] They went directly to the people. Campbell himself wandered on foot up and down the Hebrides. In such islands as Benbecula, South Uist and Barra, he found a people that had changed little for centuries, who spoke almost no language but Gaelic, and remained the most secluded and primitive inhabitants of Britain. Among those simple crofters ideas and customs survived that had long died out on the mainland, and Ossianic legends were told both in verse and

[1] J. F. Campbell was born in 1822, and died in 1885. Hector MacLean died in 1893, after publishing a little book of translations, *Ultonian Hero-Ballads*.

prose. In the Island of Mull an old man was found with a memory so well stored that he recited Gaelic narratives about Finn and the Fenians during a great part of two days. On the first day he told thirty-eight portions of the Fenian history, and sang or referred to fifteen different songs.[1]

On September 10, 1860, a peasant in Barra sang an ancient ballad to Mr. Campbell. It contained about eighty verses. "The poem was attributed to Oisean, and whoever composed it clearly did so in the character of that old half mythical bard, for he speaks like an eye-witness, and dwells on the prowess of *his* son Osgar." The singer and scene are thus described :—

"He is a workman who cannot read, and who speaks no language but Gaelic. He is a fine intelligent man, with a clear grey eye and smooth dark hair, very fond of the old poetry of his native country, and charmed to recite it to an audience able to take an interest in it. The audience was a numerous one on the 10th of September, and we were highly attentive. One woman was industriously weaving in a corner, another was carding wool, and a girl was spinning dexterously with a distaff made of a rough forked birch branch, and a spindle which was little better than a splinter of fir. In the warm nook behind the fire sat a girl with one of those strange foreign faces which are occasionally to be seen in the Western Isles, and which are often supposed by their neighbours to mark the descendants of the Spanish crews of the wrecked Armada—a face which, at the time, reminded me

[1] Campbell's Review of Clerk's *Ossian*, *The Times*, April 15, 1871.

of the Nineveh sculptures, and of faces seen in St. Sebastian. Her hair was as black as night, and her clear dark eyes glittered through the peat smoke. Her complexion was dark, and her features so unlike those who sat about her, that I asked if she were a native of the island, and learned that she was a Highland girl. Old men and young lads, newly returned from the eastern fishing, sat about on benches fixed to the wall, and smoked and listened; and MacDonald sat on a low stool in the midst, and chanted forth his lays amidst suitable remarks and ejaculations of praise and sympathy." [1]

The tales and poems that Campbell gathered among Highland cottages, and which he obtained from gamekeepers, farmers, and fishermen down the western coast, were carefully authenticated—the date, the place, and the name of the reciter being given. *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* was completed in 1862, a century after *Fingal.* The work contains many stories of Ossian and Finn, and six of the ballads, both text and translation. It is one of the most valuable and genuine pieces of peasant literature in the world.

Campbell then projected a new work. He edited a complete collection of the Ossianic ballads, giving every available text. Several thousand lines were got in the isles by direct recitation. He sought out every manuscript that could be found, and obtained more than twenty, most of them compiled in the eighteenth century—some before Macpherson's appearance, others immediately after. The ballads

[1] *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, ed. 1892, iii. 158.

were compared and arranged in sequence ; and the whole book, with introductions and notes, was published in 1872 under the title *Leabhar na Feinne* ("Book of the Fians"). Campbell thus accomplished, with infinitely greater labour and with different canons of accuracy, the task that Macpherson had undertaken a hundred years before. But *Leabhar na Feinne* is still, as a whole, untranslated into English, although there are renderings of separate poems.

The earliest manuscript of which Campbell made use had already been published by another editor. It is called the *Dean of Lismore's Book.* Its compiler, a man otherwise unknown, was James Macgregor, a churchman ; Lismore, a low green island near Oban, was once the Episcopal seat of the Bishops of Argyll, although of its small cathedral little now remains. The book is preserved in the Advocates' Library. Its date is fixed by several entries in prose, one of which belongs to 1512, whilst another makes mention of James the Fifth as then reigning in great felicity. This document is of inestimable value: by revealing the popular poetry of the West Highlands as it was accepted in the early part of the sixteenth century, it carries us to a date before controversy had arisen, and affords the most certain means of testing Macpherson's claims. Copious extracts from it were transcribed by Dr. M'Lauchlan, a clergyman of Edinburgh, and published, together with an English translation, in 1862.

The poems thus brought to light are short and detached ballads, romantic tales of the "Fians of Erin," of Finn, Ossian and Oscar. Above several of them Macgregor has placed the inscription *Auctor hujus Ossin.* It is clear, therefore, that a poet called Ossian had been spoken of in the Highlands long before Macpherson, and that lovers of poetry had collected what they believed to be his works. As we have just seen, a similar ballad attributed to Ossian was recited in the Isle of Barra in 1860. We are thus confronted by a living and continuous tradition: ballads about Finn, ascribed to Ossian, his son, have been known in Scotland and Ireland for at least four hundred years. Poems like those preserved by Dean Macgregor in the reign of James the Fifth were found on the lips of the people under George the Third: the agreement in tone and manner, often in verbal substance, between his lays and those of Maclagan, Hill, Fletcher and Kennedy seems to be perfect. The same poems were afterwards brought to light by Campbell of Islay and Campbell of Tiree. In 1890 Dr. Douglas Hyde heard one of the Dean of Lismore's ballads from a peasant in County Roscommon.

All this proves nothing for Macpherson: it is the strongest evidence against him. Those ballads which he despised, which were "disgustful to true taste," "spurious pieces," "inconsistent and notoriously fabulous,"—are identical with the poems

in the Lismore collection, the Maclagan collection, the Campbell collection. The difference between them and the epics of *Fingal* and *Temora* has never been pointed out more plainly, nor insisted on with more emphasis, than by Macpherson himself. But let us take away the ballads and the evidence for them, and the epics are left hanging in the air. Although the Highlands have been searched from end to end, and popular poetry found in abundance, yet the true Ossian was revealed to Macpherson alone: every one else, from Dean Macgregor downwards, was deceived by the fabrications of the Irish bards. The epics were unknown in the Highlands before 1760, and after 1760 they vanished again into nothingness.

But the truth has now become clear. The ballads were Macpherson's originals—the only originals he ever had. He treated them so freely, deleted and added so much, so altered their spirit and temper, that he produced in substance a new work. But what if others should bring the ballads to notice, and confront him with a purer text? Macpherson forestalled this danger by discrediting the ballads in advance. His own poems were declared to be the genuine Ossian, and the materials he had worked upon to be forged imitations of his own forgery. The audacity of this paradox need not blind us to its cleverness. The trick was completely successful. Macpherson's apologists were prepared to look askance upon the

"Irish poems" from the start. They soon learned to speak of them as harshly as he himself had done. When similarities in name or incident could be detected between them and the publications of Macpherson, they were joyfully pointed to as proof that *Ossian* was authentic: when unlikeness and contradiction emerged, the popular poems were repelled as worthless fruits of a late and degraded tradition. Celtic enthusiasts, eager to defend the literature of their nation, came thus to speak with contempt of tales in which their ancestors had delighted, and which their unlettered countrymen still repeated in island and glen.

In maintaining that the Ossianic legend was of Scottish origin, the earlier followers of Macpherson made a claim which cannot now be upheld. Later research proves that Ireland is entitled to at least an equal share of the honour which a literature so ancient and curious can bestow. Ossianic ballads and tales have been found dispersed through all its four provinces, have been taken from the common people and published; and the great mass of Irish manuscripts in which they appear is only beginning to be adequately known. Miss Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry*, published in 1789, with her own translations into English ballad measure, was the first attempt to rival Macpherson in this field. The *Poems of Oisin*, published by J. H. Simpson in 1857, had been collected in Munster and Con-

naught. But it is rather in prose tales, exquisite and sustained pieces of medieval romance, that the history of Finn has been told in Ireland. Mr. Standish Hayes O'Grady's *Silva Gadelica*, a monumental work which appeared in 1892, contains many such tales, both in Gaelic and a charming English translation. They are derived for the most part from manuscripts of the fifteenth century.

But Ireland has older documents still, which place its claim to the first possession of the Fenian legend on a solid basis. The *Dean of Lismore's Book* is the earliest body of Ossianic poetry preserved in Scotland of which the date can be certainly fixed; but Irish manuscripts carry us to a period much more remote. The *Book of the Dun Cow* is a manuscript transcribed from older originals before 1106, in which year the copyist was murdered in a church. It contains an historical tale which presupposes the main outlines of the later saga, and several poems attributed to the hero himself, or to comrades of his. The *Book of Leinster* was written before the year 1160. It contains three poems ascribed to Ossian, five ascribed to Finn, and numerous allusions to Finn and the Fians.[1]

With perfect justice, Irish scholars have pointed to these manuscripts as proof that the Ossianic

[1] These pre-twelfth-century allusions to the Ossianic Saga were gathered together and commented upon for the first time by Alfred Nutt in his *Development of the Ossianic Saga,—Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, vol. ii., 1890.

story did not, as Macpherson asserted, belong at first to Scotland, and pass over to Ireland only at a late date and by a process of borrowing and appropriation on the part of Irish poets. Macpherson produced no ancient documents. He professed to rely in the main on oral tradition among his contemporaries. But the tradition of the eighteenth century, even if it had supported him, could not have weighed as evidence against manuscript authority of the twelfth.

The Gaelic language is common to Ireland and Scotland. It has been spoken, with slight variations, over the whole tract of island, mountain and valley that lies between Cape Wrath and Cape Clear. With the common language went a common literature. The same legends of Finn have been told for centuries by the peasants of both countries, and in both the same ballads ascribed to Ossian have been found. In this sense the Fenian heroes are equally at home in Caithness and Kerry, in the Hebrides and on the banks of the Shannon. But if Finn were ever an historic figure, he lived either in Ireland or Scotland; the legend originated at some period, however remote, in one country or the other; and all the evidence points to Ireland as its place of birth.[1]

The appropriation of Ossian to Scotland alone was one of the most astute moves made by Mac-

[1] See Windisch's *Irische Texte*, p. 153.

pherson in the game he played so adroitly. It was he who converted Finn, or Fingal, from an Irish chief into a Scottish king; who invented the kingdom of Morven, of which nothing was known before 1760, which is not mentioned in any Highland record or any ancient Highland lay. Before Macpherson the Scots had accepted the Fenian Saga without dispute as Irish, and its heroes were spoken of as Irishmen when mention of them first reached the Lowlands. In the sixteenth century Gavin Douglas, in his *Palace of Honour*, introduced by name

"Greit Gowmakmorne and Fyn Makcoul, and how
Thay suld be goddis in Ireland as they say,"

the legend he cites having come from some Highland Scottish source.[1] The direct evidence of Highland writers is to the same effect. About 1706, thirty years before Macpherson was born, a certain Alexander Campbell was employed by the Duke of Argyll to examine archives and charters at Inveraray. He found Gaelic documents among them, and wrote from such sources an account of the clan's genealogy, which was preserved in manuscript. In this narrative the

[1] To set off this quotation controversialists have relied on a passage in Boece, who speaks of Fyn MakCoul as "virum, uti ferunt, immani statura, *Scotici sanguinis*." But in medieval Latin *Scoticus* means Celtic in general, and Irish rather than Scotch. In Adamnan's *Life of Columba* the saint "enavigavit de Scotia ad Britanniam," when he crossed from Ireland to the Hebrides, and the language spoken in Ireland is called "Scotica lingua."

Fians are said to have been "an Irish militia, raised in the ninth century, under the command of Fion MacCouill, who was appointed by the provincial kings of Ireland General-in-Chief."[1] Of the kingdom of Morven and the halls of Selma not a word. The same tradition remained when J. F. Campbell listened to the tales of the Hebrideans. "Finn, Diarmid and the rest," he says, "are generally represented as Irish worthies."

For other testimony we may consult the *Dean of Lismore's Book*. The hero of its poems is Finn MacCumhail, not Macpherson's Fingal. The scene of one event is laid on a mountain in Tipperary, of another on the Erne near Ballyshannon, and of another at Ventry Harbour, or Dingle Bay. In several places the followers of Finn are definitely called "the Feine of Ireland," "Erin's noble Feinn."[2] And concerning the verses themselves Dr. M'Lauchlan, the translator, has made the important remark that—"Many of these pieces will not read as poetry at all, unless read in accordance with the Irish method of accentuation."[3]

Little of this evidence was actually before Macpherson. He did believe, however, and repeatedly declared, that Ossianic poems which circulated in the Scottish Highlands had been composed by Irish bards. In placing beside them another Ossian,

[1] *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, iv. 235.
[2] *Dean of Lismore's Book*, pp. 17, 18, 19. [3] *Ibid.*, p. 131.

independent, earlier, more to be honoured, and genuinely Scottish, in praising one collection of poems and decrying the other, he constructed a mystification, an elaborate system of make-believe. The Scottish Ossian was none other than himself. But by this skilful strategy he enlisted upon his own side the patriotism and partiality of his countrymen, and made his defence seem a national duty.

CHAPTER III

AUTHENTIC TRADITION

THE date of Finn's life is quite unknown. The annalists of Ireland, whose account varied so much from Macpherson's, agree with him in placing it in the third century, during the reigns of the Irish kings Cormac and Cairbre. Some authorities deny the historic existence of Finn altogether, making him a figure of pure mythology. But the most elaborate hypothesis is that of Professor Zimmer, who has tried with much ingenuity to fix his very place and time.[1] He was a chieftain of Leinster, leader of a band of native Irish mixed with Norwegians, who made head against the Danish invaders that had settled in Dublin: in the year 857 he was slain by them in combat. From Leinster, its first home, the tale of Finn passed into Ulster, where it was known in the eleventh century, as the references in the *Book of the Dun Cow* show. Ulster was then closely related to the Scottish Highlands, and the

[1] *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Alterthum*, Band 35, 1891. An English summary of Professor Zimmer's essay, by Alfred Nutt, is prefixed to vol. iv. of *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, 1891. Professor Zimmer's theory in the form he presented has failed to win the adherence of any scholar of note.

legend, once established there, easily spread northward. The first certain reference to it in any Scottish work is in Barbour's *Bruce*, of which the date is about 1375.

Others seek to assign Finn to an earlier period, and believe that some at least of the tales concerning him had been known before the Viking invasions began. But we are here concerned only with the literature of which he is the hero; and everything in the tales and poems, as we now have them, points to a medieval origin. The age of chivalry and romance has left upon them the strongest imprint. In the story of Finn and his followers we have a Gaelic counterpart to the Welsh tales of Arthur and his knights, influenced perhaps in its development by Welsh models.

In the *Dean of Lismore's Book* the mythic Ossian thus sings the praise of his father :—

"'Twas yesterday week
I last saw Finn;
Ne'er did I see
A braver man, . . .
Both poet and chief,
Lord of all lands,
Foremost always,
Generous, just,
Despised a lie,
Of vigorous deeds,
First in song,
A righteous judge,
Firm his rule,
Polished his mien,
Who knew but victory.

Who is like him
In fight or song? . . .
Marble his skin,
The rose his cheek,
Blue was his eye,
His hair like gold.
All men's trust,
Of noble mind,
Of ready deeds,
To women mild,
A giant he,
The field's delight . . .
Three hundred battles
He bravely fought,
With miser's mind
From none withheld.
Anything false
His lips ne'er spoke.
He never grudged,
No, never Finn;
The sun ne'er saw King
Who him excelled."

Doubtless, as Principal Shairp has said, "an image of noble manhood." But this is no barbaric chief, brought forth by Nature on the hills of Caledonia to contend with degenerate Rome. It is a chivalrous figure, a romantic ideal; the "verray parfit gentil knight"—

"That fro the tyme that he first bigan
To ryden out, he loved chivalrye,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisye"—

of some Celtic poet who may have been contemporary with Chaucer himself. Such also was Goll, who appears sometimes as the rival of

Finn, sometimes as the chief member of his band :—

"A hero brave,
Bold in assault,
His bounty free,
Fierce to destroy,
Beloved of all,
Goll, gentle, brave,
Son of great Morn ;
Hardy in war,
His praise of old,
A comely man,
King, soldierly, free,
Of no soft speech,
No lack of sense,
Cheerful as great ;
In battle's day
He moved a prince." [1]

Finn and Goll were types of heroic virtue to the Highlanders of the fourteenth century. When Bruce, with courage and resolution, extricated his little force after defeat, John of Lorne, his enemy, compared him with involuntary admiration to Goll saving his men from Finn. Better, says Barbour, had he likened him to Gaudifer de Larys, who, in the romantic story of Alexander the Great, rallied his beaten men and bore to earth the son of Philip himself.[2]

The Finn of tradition is represented as a subject of the High King of Erin, to whom he owed allegi-

[1] *Dean's Book*, p. 43. Cf. *Pop. Tales of the West Highlands*, iii. 309.

[2] *The Bruce*, iii. 61–92.

ance. His followers were a band of chosen warriors called Fianna or Fians. Entrance to this body was guarded by severe tests, and those who were admitted came under certain laws. A Fian must offer no violence to any woman; he must put down public enemies and every evil that might afflict the land. We find the Fians vanquishing overwhelming odds, rescuing distressed damsels, performing all the feats of knight-errantry. The mightiest enemies to whom they are opposed are the men of Lochlin, the Danes and Norwegians who plundered the Irish coast.

Here at last we encounter some fragment of fact, and one figure that can be precisely identified emerges. Magnus, King of Norway, was the grandson of that Harald Hardrada who fell at Stamford Bridge in 1066, three weeks before the English Harold, son of Godwin, who vanquished him, perished in his turn at Hastings. Bursting suddenly into the Hebrides with a great army and one hundred and sixty ships of war, Magnus wasted them from end to end, carrying sword and fire through Lewis, Uist, Tiree, Mull and Islay. The people submitted, and even the Isle of Man and Anglesey were reduced. He returned to Norway wearing a kilt, and was thence called Magnus Barefoot or Barelegs. A few years later he attempted the conquest of Ireland, and there in 1103 he was surprised by an Irish force, defeated and slain.

"A king should strive for glory rather than for long life," Magnus had said. He was a splendid and handsome man, tall and stately and royal of aspect, conspicuous with his helmet, red shield, ivory-hilted sword, and red silk cloak embroidered with a yellow lion. The passage of this figure through history seized strongly upon the imagination of the Celts. Magnus stood out in later legend. Traditions concerning him became grafted on the saga of Finn, where he appears as the great King of Lochlin, the chief opponent against whom Finn, in defence of his own country and people, has to match himself. When we discover that a ballad about Magnus was actually the foundation of *Fingal*, we begin to have some understanding of the liberties Macpherson took with his text.

But it is seldom that the Fenian ballads tread so near to the confines of reality. They move in a region of romance and fairy tale. Monsters and supernatural beings encounter the Fians, and share the fate of all their enemies. Sometimes foes most strangely combined appear in alliance against them. At Ventry Harbour in Kerry they defeated a vast confederation, led by Daire Donn, who is spoken of as King of Lochlin and King of the World; with him were the men of India, whose leader's head the Fians cut off, the armed daughter of the King of Greece, and the King of France. The Grecian

princess was slain ; and the French king fled from Oscar, "like a swallow as it grasps the air,"

> "Thirty luckless bands,
> A thousand score in each,"

being left dead beside the waves.

All this in the frankest defiance of history. So in the Welsh *Mabinogion* Arthur becomes an Emperor who has nine crowned kings for his vassals, and to whom the Islands of Greece send a tribute of gold and silver. Finn was no less a conqueror than Arthur. In converse with St. Patrick the aged Ossian magnifies his father's achievements in similar fashion. The kingdoms of the earth on every side belonged to the Fians and paid tribute to them ; in the whole world there was none that dared refuse it.

Other ballads in a different vein, at once more real and more charming, pass from these extravagant feats to depict the life of the heroes in time of peace, their joyous days spent upon the mountains in hunting the stag and the boar :—

> "We had our dress and our armour
> When we went forth to the chase ;
> There was no Fian among us all
> Without his fine soft flaxen shirt,
> Without his undercoat of substance soft,
> Without a coat of mail of brightest steel,
> The covering for his head adorned with gems,
> And in his hand he bore two spears."

So in gallant array they went out.

"On a day that we were on the hunting hill
Seldom were we without dogs,
Listening to the cries of birds,
Calling of deer and of elks.

We did slaughter, doubtless,
With our dogs and death-dealing weapons;
And came to our dwelling at noon,
Joyful, musical, and with right good will."

Ossian in his old age, when Patrick spoke to him of the joys of heaven, could imagine nothing happier than the times he had known beneath the free sky with hunting and minstrelsy.

"When Finn sat upon a knoll we would sing a tune to the Order of the Fiann: it would bring slumber over the host, and oh! it was sweeter than your singing.

"The little dark thrush of Glen Smail, or the noise of the bark against the waves: like these were the tunes we would sing, and right sweet were we and our harps.

"Thirteen hunting dogs had Finn, with which we hunted in Glen Smail: more melodious was the baying of the hounds than your bells, O pious clerk."[1]

The Fians fought and rejoiced in the fray. They roved over the hills of Ireland and Scotland, drinking the high air, following the hounds, and singing blithely to the harp. Thus they fleeted the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world.

[1] Trans. W. A. Craigie, *Scottish Notes and Queries*, Jan. 1891.

At last the inevitable end came. The dissolution of Finn's Round Table began from the same cause as the ruin of Arthur's. Its Guinevere was Grainne, Finn's wife; its Lancelot, Dermid, his nephew. Their story has been told for eight centuries; it is mentioned in the oldest Irish manuscript, and has been heard in our own time among the Western Isles. Dermid the brown-haired had a beauty spot on his brow, which no woman could see without loving him. Grainne beheld it and loved him, and they fled together. The heroes pursued and overtook them. Dermid's life was saved by the help of Oscar, but Finn planned revenge. Dermid was sent to hunt a fierce and venomous boar which roamed upon Ben Gulbin,—a strange beast that had one poisonous bristle in the midst of its back. He slew the monster with his spear, and himself returned in safety.

"Gloom fell upon hospitable Finn, and he sat down upon a knoll: ill was he pleased that the son of O'Duine of fortunate arms had escaped the boar unhurt.

After he had been silent awhile Finn said, and it is ill to tell it, 'O Dermid, measure the boar, how many feet there are from snout to tail.'

He refused not the request of Finn (alas, that he ever left his home). He measured the boar along its back, the son of O'Duine of lightest tread.

'There are sixteen feet of measure true along the back of the wild boar.' 'That is not at all the measure; measure it again, O Dermid.'

'O Dermid, measure the boar again right smoothly against the bristles, and for that you shall have your choice of keen sharp-pointed swords.'

He measured it, no happy journey, the son of O'Duine of lightest tread; the sharp venomous bristle pierced the sole of the hero that was fierce in fight."[1]

A version of the story tells that as he lay on the ground, sore wounded and at the point of death, Dermid besought Finn to bring him a little water from the spring in the palms of his hands. Twice Finn went for the water, and as often, when he thought of his wrongs, he opened his fingers and spilt it. When he brought the water at last, Dermid was dead.[2]

From this hero the clan Campbell trace their descent;—

> "Ye sons of brown Dermid who slew the wild boar,"

sings the heroine of *Waverley*. No theme in Ossianic legend is more famous than this. Yet there is no trace of it in Macpherson, his account of Dermid's death, as we shall see, being his own invention. Probably he shrank from a story in which Finn, whom he has made almost insipidly perfect, plays so unhappy a part.

[1] Trans. W. A. Craigie.

[2] Joyce's *Old Celtic Romances*, p. 346.

Misfortunes now thickened around the Fians, and their greatness crumbled away. Garry, one of the band, in revenge for an insult he had suffered, set fire to their dwelling, and their wives perished with it. Then, seeing the Fians returning, he fled in terror and hid himself in a cave. But Finn could obtain knowledge by enchantment ; in his mouth was a magic tooth, and, when he touched it with his finger, all secrets were revealed to him. Garry was thus tracked to his hiding-place. Summoned to come forth, he begged a boon, and was granted anything short of the saving of his life. Then, secure in the promise given, he demanded that he should be beheaded with Finn's sword—a weapon of incredible keenness —and that the block should be Finn's own thigh. The Fians covered the leg of their chieftain with seven hides and laid over it seven feet of earth, to protect him from the result of his pledge ; but the temper of the sword was such that Finn, in spite of this defence, was desperately wounded.

During his absence, while his hurt was still unhealed, the command devolved upon his grandson, Oscar, bravest and handsomest of men, and the great catastrophe arrived. The battle of Gavra, of which the story is told in many ballads, ended the history of the Fians. They were destined to fall by their own countrymen. Cairbre of red spears, High King of Erin, had resolved to break their power, and now sought an occasion of

quarrel. He invited Oscar and the Fians to a feast. For three days they were joyfully entertained; but on the third day Cairbre demanded with a loud voice that Oscar should exchange spear-shafts with him. The request was refused. Hatred filled all the heroes as they listened; between Oscar and Cairbre fierce words passed. Next day both hosts were drawn up for battle in the narrow glen of Gavra. The Fians were totally defeated, and scare a third of their number left the field alive. Oscar and the High King met hand to hand. Each pierced the other with his spear; Cairbre was slain on the spot; Oscar was mortally wounded, and was carried from the field by the survivors, who laid him on a litter and bore him to the dwelling of Finn, giving him gentle carriage.

Bitter was the lamentation over the hero.

"Wife would not weep for her own husband,
And sister would not weep for brother,
As many of us as were round the dwelling,
We all were weeping for Oscar."

Ossian in one of the ballads tells the tale to Patrick :—

"I rested my spear on the earth,
And stood over him as he lay.
Then I thought, O tonsured priest,
What I could do now, left alone.
Oscar now turned towards me;
It was for me a grievous sight.
He stretched forth his hand to me,
Wishing I should approach him.

Then I seized my dear son's hand
And cried out with a bitter cry.
From that time until now
I've been useless in this world.
Then my own son said to me,
As his life was fast departing,
'Thanks be to the powers above
That thou hast escaped, dear father.'
I tell nothing but the truth :
I could not answer a word."

Then came Finn also, too late returned, and lamented. "Beloved of my beloved, beloved of my beloved ; child of my child, white-skinned and slender."

Oscar spoke to him,—

"In death I have my desire,
Noble Finn of pointed arms."

But Finn turned away and shed many tears, crying,—

"Farewell to battle and fame,
Farewell to the victor's spoils,
Farewell to the many joys
Which I have had in this body."

And from the day of Oscar's death he knew no more happiness.

With the simplicity and directness of these ballads let us compare Macpherson's account of the death of Oscar; remembering that it is founded on the ballads, and that whatever is not in them is Macpherson's own. Fingal thus laments :—

"Art thou fallen, O Oscar, in the midst of thy course? the heart of the aged beats over thee! He sees thy coming wars! The wars which ought to come he sees! They are cut off from thy fame! When shall joy dwell in Selma? When shall grief depart from Morven? My sons fall by degrees: Fingal is the last of his race. My fame begins to pass away. Mine age will be without friends. I shall sit a grey cloud in my hall. I shall not hear the return of a son, in his sounding arms. Weep, ye heroes of Morven! never more shall Oscar rise!"

And Oscar exclaims as he lies dying,—

"Ossian, carry me to my hills! Raise the stones of my renown. Place the horn of a deer; place my sword by my side. The torrent hereafter may raise the earth: the hunter may find the steel, and say, 'This has been Oscar's sword, the pride of other years!'"

Ossian then resumes:—

"Fallest thou, son of my fame! Shall I never see thee, Oscar! When others hear of their sons, shall I not hear of thee? The moss is on thy four grey stones. The mournful wind is there. The battle shall be fought without thee. Thou shall not pursue the dark-brown hinds. When the warrior returns from battles, and tells of other lands; 'I have seen a tomb,' he will say, 'by the roaring stream, the dark dwelling of a chief. He fell by car-borne Oscar, the first of mortal men.' I, perhaps, shall hear his voice. A beam of joy will rise in my soul.

"Night would have descended in sorrow, and morning returned in the shadow of grief. Our chiefs would have stood, like cold dripping rocks

on Moi-lena, and have forgot the war ; did not the king disperse his grief, and raise his mighty voice. The chiefs, as new-waked from dreams, lift up their heads around.

"How long on Moi-lena shall we weep? How long pour in Erin our tears? The mighty will not return. Oscar shall not rise in his strength. The valiant must fall in their day, and be no more known on their hills. Where are our fathers, O warriors! the chiefs of the times of old? They have set like stars that have shone. We only hear the sound of their praise. . . ."

And, to complete the recast, we have the appearance of Oscar's ghost in the clouds after his death :—

"Father of heroes! O Trenmor! High dweller of eddying winds! where the dark red thunder marks the troubled clouds! Open thou thy stormy halls. Let the bards of old be near. Let them draw near, with songs and their half-viewless harps. No dweller of misty valleys comes! No hunter unknown at his streams! It is the car-borne Oscar, from the fields of war. Sudden is thy change, my son, from what thou wert on dark Moi-lena! The blast folds thee in its skirt, and rustles through the sky! Dost thou not behold thy father, at the stream of night! The chiefs of Morven sleep far distant. They have lost no son! But ye have lost a hero, chiefs of resounding Morven! Who could equal his strength, when battle rolled against his side, like the darkness of crowded waters?"

In a note Macpherson speaks of the ballad he thus adapted as a poem "which, though evidently

no very ancient composition, does not want poetical merit." The ballad, we are to understand, was modern ; *Temora,* which has just been quoted, being the ancient and genuine work of Ossian. Macpherson proceeded to develop the story in a manner before unheard of. He made the defeat and death of Oscar no more than a temporary check at the outset of a successful campaign : Fingal thereafter rallies his forces and continues the war against Cairbre's successor, until it ends in victory. But in all authentic tradition the battle of Gavra is never retrieved : it marks the final downfall of Finn and the Fians.

In an obscure fight near the Boyne, Finn is said to have met his end. The Fians dwindled until only two were left alive, Ossian and Caoilte, who survived until the coming of St. Patrick into Ireland, and with him had much discourse. In the prose romances translated in *Silva Gadelica* it is Caoilte who tells Patrick endless tales of Finn, to the delight of the saint. But in the ballads Caoilte also has vanished. Ossian is alone, the last of the Fians ; solitary and sad, he laments the times that are gone. With Patrick he disputes, argues, and sometimes quarrels. The heathen bard will have none of Patrick's psalms and prayers, and Patrick assures him that Finn and his company are all in hell for their sins.

But here we have the strangest lapse in chronology. We have found the Fians fighting in defence

of Ireland against the Vikings, who first appeared on its coast long after it was a Christian country. They have defeated Magnus Barelegs, King of Norway; and Magnus was slain in 1103. Now many years have passed: the Fians are all dead but one; and Ossian, in the evening of his days, has become the companion of St. Patrick, who came to Ireland in 432, and died about 460. In animated dialogue he tells Patrick the story of Finn's encounter with the kilted Scandinavian—an event which happened more than six hundred years after Patrick's decease.

So in a Scottish ballad we find that David Leslie on his way to Philiphaugh in 1645 encounters a venerable warrior who had been at Solway Moss, 1542, and who afterwards had fought at Dunbar, 1650. The composers of ballads relied on tradition, and tradition knows nothing of dates. The ballads belong to a period when Patrick and Magnus had receded together into a past so remote that historic perspective was altogether lost: there was little danger that any hearer would rise and accuse the minstrel of anachronism. Macpherson, perhaps, did not greatly err in assigning them to the fifteenth century. But doubtless they contain legendary elements that are very much more archaic.

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.

Ossian's attitude to the new religion is one of defiance. The old pagan has his own ideals, which he stoutly opposes to the asceticism of the monk. On hearing that the Fians have no part in heaven, he altogether refuses it for himself. Patrick exclaims,—

"Shalt thou not fare well thyself in that city,
Without Caoilte, and Oscar, as well as thy father?"

But Ossian implores him to take compassion upon them.

"For thy love's sake, Patrick, forsake not the heroes,
Unknown to heaven's king, bring thou in the Feinn."

Patrick—

"Though little room you'd take, not one of your race,
Unknown to heaven's king, shall get beneath his roof."

Ossian—

"How different MacCumhail, the Feinn's noble king!
All men, uninvited, might enter his great house."

And if Finn is really in hell, he thinks, may it not after all be a good place? Is it not as good as paradise, if deer and dogs are to be found there? Ossian will hear nothing of the saintly virtues. What man was ever more generous than Finn,

more without blemish? What man was ever his equal in fight? The king of the saints has done no warlike feat, nor reddened his hand in blood.

Ossian after the Fians, the lonely hero in hapless old age, is a familiar figure in Celtic poetry.

> "Feeble this night is the power of my arm,
> My strength is no more as it was;
> No wonder that I should mourn,
> Poor old relic that I am,"

he exclaims. Decrepitude has come upon him. His hands, feet, and head are all feeble. He is without love and without hunting, without feasting and music. His friends are gone, and he pines for the irrevocable past. In this revolt against the hardness of human fate, Matthew Arnold would fain discover "the Titanism of the Celt." He quotes Llywarch Hen, who like Ossian is old and fallen on evil days, bending miserably over his crutch. But when war was every one's occupation and violent deaths were common, honour and safety depending on the vigour of a man's frame, old age was bitter everywhere, and the vicissitude of things was painfully felt. Lamentation over decay and longing for vanished happiness are a common theme in early literature; no other note is so frequently struck by the Anglo-Saxon poets.

Sad as these lays are, Ossianic legend is free from that strain of overwrought melancholy which Macpherson sustains in unbroken mono-

tone. 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.

The heroes of Macpherson are modern sentimentalists, who love "the enchanting tale, the tale of pleasing woe." They call for the minstrel and cry, "Send thou the night away in song; and give the joy of grief. For many heroes and maids of love have moved on Inis-fail: and lovely are the songs of woe that are heard in Albion's rocks; when the noise of the chase is past, and the streams of Cona answer to the voice of Ossian." But not thus the Fians. They may listen to a sad tale in the nights of winter; for who does not know that sad songs are sweet? But this is not their constant nor their common mood. They are not contemplative and wistful; theirs is rather the cheerfulness of open-air life and boundless activity. The chiefs of the Fians are poets, not Ossian only, but Fergus, Caoilte and Finn himself. In the Irish prose tales are many lyric snatches that are put in the mouths of the heroes. Their theme is commonly a glad one,—the coming of spring, the music of dogs in

full cry after the stag; a happy woodland note running through it all. It is thus that Finn himself, in an Irish romance, is made to sing:—

"May-Day, delightful time! how beautiful the colour! The blackbirds sing their full lay; would that Laighaig were here. The cuckoos sing in constant strains; how welcome is ever the noble brilliance of the seasons. On the margin of the branchy woods the summer swallows skim the stream; the swift horses seek the pool; the heath spreads out its long hair, the weak fair bog-down grows."[1]

In *Silva Gadelica* the poet is Caoilte, who utters charming lays in the hearing of Patrick. One day Patrick asked, "What was the best hunting that the Fianna ever had, whether in Ireland or in Scotland?" And Caoilte answered, "The hunting of Arran"—Arran in the Firth of Clyde. Then Caoilte sang:—

"Arran of the many stags, the sea impinges on her very shoulders! An island in which whole companies were fed, and with ridges among which blue spears are reddened.

"Skittish deer are on her pinnacles, soft blaeberries on her waving heather; cool water there is in her rivers, and mast upon her russet oaks.

"Greyhounds there were in her and beagles, blackberries and sloes of the dark blackthorn, dwellings with their backs set close against her woods, and the deer fed scattered by her oaken thickets.

"A crimson crop grew on her rocks, in all her

[1] Douglas Hyde's *Literary History of Ireland*, p. 275.

glades a faultless grass. Over her crags affording friendly refuge, leaping went on and fawns were skipping.

"Smooth were her level spots, fat her wild swine, cheerful her fields . . . her nuts hung on the boughs of her forest hazels, and there was sailing of long galleys past her.

"Right pleasant their condition all when the fair weather sets in. Under her river-brinks trouts lie; the sea-gulls wheeling round her grand cliff answer one the other—at every fitting time delectable is Arran!"

Patrick, as he well might be, was enchanted with his guest. "Victory and blessing wait on thee, Caoilte!" he said; "for the future thy stories and thyself are dear to us."

The Scottish collections also have poems which are filled with the same imaginative colouring.

"Sweet is man's voice in the land of gold,
Sweet the sounds the birds produce,
Sweet is the murmur of the crane,
Sweet sound the waves at Bun Datreor,
Sweet the soft murmuring of the wind,
Sweet sounds the cuckoo at Cas a choin.
How soft and pleasing shines the sun,
Sweet the blackbird sings his song;
Sweet the eagle's voice of Easaroy,
Above the sea of great Mac Morn;
Sweet the cuckoo among the branches,
Sweet the silence of the crane.

Finn MacCumhail is my father,
Who nobly leads the Feinn's seven bands;
When he lets loose his hounds to hunt,
To follow him is truly sweet."

So sings the son of Finn, in the *Dean of Lismore's Book*. How unlike is this to the notes of the harp of Cona!

The poetry of the medieval Celt has a wonderful clearness and quickness of vision, a love of everything in nature that is gracious and winning. In those farthest islands and valleys which the stranger finds so cloudy and bleak, it perceives an infinite charm. It dwells lovingly on Mull with its white towers, Islay with its smooth plains, Lewis with its sandy slopes and pleasant streams. One of the most beautiful of Celtic lyrics is the lament of Deirdre on leaving Scotland. Her story is famous in Irish and Scottish legend. Brought up at the court of Ulster to be the wife of its king, she fled with Naisi, son of Uisnech, across the sea to Alba. There they lived in love and happiness, until the king of Ulster induced them to return, and by treachery both perished. Unwillingly she embarked for Ireland. "And Deirdre looked behind her at the territories of Scotland, and thus she said: 'My love to thee, O land in the east!' saith she; 'and it is sad for me to leave the sides of thy havens, and thy harbours, and thy smooth-flowered, delightful, lovely plains, and thy bright, green-sided hills.'" And she sang the lay:—

"A lovable land is yon land in the east,
Alba with its marvels.
I would not have come hither out of it,
Had I not come with Naisi. . . .

Glen Laid!
I used to sleep under a fair rock.
Fish and venison and badger's fat,
This was my portion in Glen Laid.

Glen Masain!
Tall its garlic, white its branchlets,
We used to have an unsteady sleep
Over the grassy estuary of Masain.

Glen Etive!
There I raised my first house.
Delightful its wood, after rising
A cattlefold of the sun is Glen Etive.

Glen Urchain!
It was the straight, fair-ridged glen.
Not prouder was any man of his age
Than Naisi in Glen Urchain.

Glen da-Ruad!
My love to every man who hath it as an heritage!
Sweet is the cuckoo's voice on bending branch
On the peak over Glen-da-Ruad.

Beloved is Draigen over a strong beach:
Dear its water in pure sand;
I would not have come from it, from the east,
Had I not come with my beloved."[1]

[1] Translated by Dr. Whitley Stokes in *Irische Texte*. The poem is from a manuscript written probably in the fifteenth century, and preserved in the Advocates' Library. The identification of the places is uncertain. Glen Masain, or Glen Massan, is in Cowal, not far from Kilmun; Glen Etive is in Argyllshire; Glen Urchain is said to be Glenorchy, and Draigen to be an island in Loch Awe.

It is needless to quote more, for all the poems have a common character. The glens of the eastern land, and Arran with its glades and woods, are painted with the same minuteness of detail, the same sharp outline and clear illumination, with the same lingering joyous affection. The deepest thought in the poet's mind is this,—"What delightful places are these to dwell in! What a happy life may be led here!" The poetic feeling to which mist, obscurity, loneliness, sad and gloomy landscapes appeal, that loves whatever is pensive and dreary, has not yet been born. It is the offspring of a later age.

Turn now to Macpherson, and we are plunged into a different world. With Arran and the bright glens of Argyll still before us, let us open him at random and read :—

"It is night; I am alone, forlorn on the hill of storms. The wind is heard in the mountain. The torrent pours down the rock. No hut receives me from the rain; forlorn on the hill of winds!

"Rise, moon! from behind thy clouds. Stars of the night, arise! Lead me, some light, to the place where my love rests from the chase alone! his bow near him, unstrung: his dogs panting around him. But here I must sit alone, by the rock of the mossy stream. The stream and the wind roar aloud. I hear not the voice of my love! Why delays my Salgar, why the chief of the hill, his promise? Here is the rock, and here the tree! here is the roaring stream! Thou didst promise with night to be here! Ah! whither is my Salgar gone? With thee I would fly from my father; with thee, from my brother of

pride. Our race have long been foes; we are not foes, O Salgar!

"Cease a little while, O wind! stream, be thou silent awhile! let my voice be heard around. Let my wanderer hear me! Salgar! it is Colma who calls. Here is the tree, and the rock. Salgar, my love! I am here. Why delayest thou thy coming? Lo! the calm moon comes forth. The flood is bright in the vale. The rocks are grey on the steep. I see him not on the brow. His dogs come not before him, with tidings of his near approach. Here I must sit alone!

"Who lie on the heath beside me? Are they my love and my brother? Speak to me, O my friends! To Colma they give no reply. Speak to me: I am alone! My soul is tormented with fears! Ah! they are dead! Their swords are red from the fight. O my brother! my brother! why hast thou slain my Salgar? why, O Salgar! hast thou slain my brother? Dear were ye both to me! what shall I say in your praise? Thou wert fair on the hill among thousands! he was terrible in fight. Speak to me; hear my voice; hear me, sons of my love! They are silent; silent for ever! Cold, cold are their breasts of clay! Oh! from the rock on the hill; from the top of the windy steep, speak, ye ghosts of the dead! speak, I will not be afraid! Whither are ye gone to rest? In what cave of the hill shall I find the departed? No feeble voice is on the gale: no answer half-drowned in the storm!"

The sad tales of Ossian must have a sad environment. This harmony is constantly maintained.

"Autumn is dark on the mountains; grey mist rests on the hills. The whirlwind is heard on the heath. Dark rolls the river through the narrow plain. A tree stands alone on the hill, and marks the slumbering Connal. The leaves whirl round

with the wind, and strew the grave of the dead. At times are seen here the ghosts of the departed, when the musing hunter alone stalks slowly over the heath."

Such is the landscape of Macpherson. Low clouds hang over it; all is desolation and gloom. The wind sighs plaintively through the trees, and the distant torrent adds a deeper note. Ancient moss-grown stones mark the burial-place of an earlier race; flitting ghosts pass by.

"Evening is grey on the hills. The north wind resounds through the woods. White clouds rise on the sky: the thin wavering snow descends. The river howls afar, along its winding course. Sad, by a hollow rock, the grey-haired Carryl sat. Dry fern waves over his head; his seat is in an aged birch. Clear to the roaring winds he lifts his voice of woe."

These descriptions are not without their own beauty. They do depict, faithfully and with power, the varied landscapes of the Scottish North at certain seasons and in some of their aspects. We are here concerned with their unlikeness to poems which we know to have been translated from the Gaelic, and to express the attitude of the Highland bard towards his native land. Yet it is but just to observe that the vernacular poets have portrayed its scenery only in one way. It is not always summer and sunshine: the cuckoo does not always cry among the hills, nor the salmon sparkle in the river. Autumn and winter, bleak moorland and

shattered crags possess also a sombre attraction, which is reflected in Macpherson's writings.[1] Around his birthplace is the very landscape of *Ossian*—the dark brown mountains strewn with grey boulders, which glitter afar in the sunlight after rain, the wild moors, the narrow valleys set deep between enclosing ridges, the streams that dash downward in white foam over echoing rocks. More than any other poet he has observed the changefulness of Highland scenery. He sees tempests come and go, clouds of mist that form on the hillside, only to break and melt in the sun's rays, beams of light passing over the heath, driven hither and thither as the shadows gather and dissolve, stars shining dimly by night through the nebulous edges of clouds, invisible behind the darker mass and visible again. He sees the wind hurrying storm-drifts through the sky or driving before it the down of the withered thistle—another touch of autumnal dreariness. Everything is in motion, yet there is neither fertility nor fruit.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century there was an awakening of interest in the grander aspects of Nature. Switzerland and Savoy were visited with a new enthusiasm, and it began to be

[1] Malcolm Laing, the most persistent of his antagonists, ascribes to him a genius equalled by Gray alone among his contemporaries, and observes that, "In the romantic wilds and recesses of Badenoch, near the source of the Spey, our author seized and delineated the objects around him with the strength and precision of a genuine poet."—Laing's *Ossian*, i. 209, ii. 264.

said that in Scotland and Wales were many wild and noble prospects. The distinction between beauty and sublimity became a common theme: the latter was said to be an attribute of those spectacles whose greatness, ruggedness and might seem at first to overwhelm the mind, but which also have power to elevate, fortify and tranquillise. More than one writer found the poet of natural sublimity in Macpherson. In his essay *On the Sublime*, Schiller spoke of *Ossian*, declaring that a truer inspiration lay in the misty mountains and wild cataracts of Scotland than in the fairest of meadows and gardens. This change in public taste increased the attraction of Macpherson's poems, and received from them in return an astonishing stimulus.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST CAMPAIGN

GREAT as their influence was to be, Macpherson did not realise the tendency of his works. They swelled the romantic movement; but he himself always professed an aversion to romance. He stood at the parting of the ways: as a poet he went, little as he knew it, with the full current of the modern stream; as a critic he was pedantically attached to classical rules and strove to adapt his writings to their requirements. His academic training first cast him into this attitude; but it was fixed and made emphatic by his intercourse with Dr. Blair, whose very voice and accent may be detected in Macpherson's commentaries.

Hugh Blair was a clergyman of Edinburgh whose sermons, when published, had an unbounded popularity. Johnson praised them, and Lord Mansfield read them to King George. But his lectures on criticism, delivered from the chair of Rhetoric, were hardly less successful, and brought him a reputation which has not proved to be lasting. Blair taught in the *a priori* manner of the time. The business of the professor was to indicate the rules and laws according to

which poetry must be written : the laws came first, the poems after : the poems were tested by the laws. The point of view is obsolete, the lectures now unread ; yet they are not without flashes of insight. But Blair's credit has been most damaged by his appearance as the sponsor of *Ossian*. Nothing ever shook his belief that the whole mass of poetry which Macpherson wrote had been composed by a Caledonian in the third century of the Christian era. He observed passages in it which suggested Homer ; he even found in its language a remarkable resemblance to the style of the Old Testament. But not a shadow of suspicion crossed his mind. Concerning *Fingal* he stated that—

"Examined even according to Aristotle's rules, it will be found to have all the essential requisites of a true and regular epic ; and to have several of them in so high a degree, as at first view to raise our astonishment on finding Ossian's composition so agreeable to rules of which he was entirely ignorant."

Yet he did not surmise that the poem had been modified by its translator, who had learned the importance of such rules from his own lips. When he died forty years afterwards, the glamour cast over his mind by the young Highlander was still undispelled.

Blair had been made acquainted with Macpherson by a man of some note, John Home, the dramatist. A few years before, when minister of Athelstane-

ford, Home had written his tragedy of *Douglas*, which was performed at Edinburgh and received with acclamation. It long kept the stage, and furnished Mrs. Siddons with a favourite part. The church, however, had risen against *Douglas*, and its author was forced to resign his charge. The Earl of Bute, King George the Third's minister, came to the rescue, and appointed him to a sinecure office, in which he flourished to a serene old age. Home was a sweet-tempered man with many friends.

During the warm and brilliant autumn of 1759, John Home was at Moffat, drinking the waters by which, in an age of spas, strangers were attracted to the green hills that surround that pleasant town. A cheerful company gathered every afternoon on the bowling-green. Among them was Thomas Graham, son of the laird of Balgowan, who became famous more than half a century later, when he was raised to the peerage as Lord Lynedoch for distinguished services in Spain. He was one of the officers that buried Sir John Moore; he won the battle of Barossa, and at Vittoria commanded the left wing of Wellington's army. But while at Moffat he was still a boy in his eleventh year, and was in charge of a tutor who accompanied him. The tutor was James Macpherson.

It is at this point that Macpherson first steps clearly upon the stage. He had been born in 1736 at Ruthven, in Badenoch, and therefore was now

twenty-three years of age. His father was a small farmer or crofter ; he himself had been a student of Aberdeen, and taught school for some time in his native parish before his connection with Thomas Graham began. The Grahams thought well of him, the father of his pupil declaring him to be a modest young man, who was master of Greek and Latin, of fine taste, and a good scholar.[1] He was conscious of poetic gifts, and had already published *The Highlander*, an elaborate tale in six cantos of heroic verse, where some critics find anticipations of *Ossian*. Macpherson was very tall—some six feet three inches—broad-shouldered, robust and ruddy, with grey eyes and reddish brown hair.[2] Everything yet known of him was to his credit, and no one looked less like a poet of gloom.

Macpherson and Home soon became friends, and to the latter this meeting seemed a golden opportunity. He took an interest, then uncommon, in his Celtic fellow-countrymen. It was a day spent with him at Winchester, ten years before, that had suggested to Collins his *Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland*. Home had already heard from a friend who understood Gaelic that there were vernacular poems in the North, some of them of great beauty. He

[1] Delavoye's *Life of Thomas Graham, Lord Lynedoch*, p. 3.

[2] Carruthers' *Highland Note-Book*, p. 305; Alexander Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 398; portrait by Reynolds.

questioned Macpherson, who replied that he had by him then some of those very poems. Home was much interested, and asked that one of them might be translated for him. The Highlander seemed coy and reluctant, made excuses; but Home persisted and he consented at last. A few days later he brought a short poetic tale in English prose, entitled *The Death of Oscar*, the first of the series which was afterwards to become so famous.

What more natural than to assume that Macpherson acted, thus early at least, in good faith? Who would imagine that, having real Gaelic poems in his hands, he withheld them, and gave to Home a composition of his own, which was no translation at all? Yet such, we now know, is the truth.

Macpherson's *Death of Oscar* is a tragedy of love. Oscar and Dermid were one in affection; the dearest of friends, who fought together in the field, and always with victory. Both fell in love with the same maiden, the daughter of Dargo. They confessed their love to one another; each besought the other to slay him; they fought beside the brook of the mountain, and Oscar killed Dermid. He then went to the daughter of Dargo, and proposed to try her skill in archery. She aimed at a shield fixed on a tree; but Oscar stepped between, and received the arrow in his breast. The maiden pierced her own bosom, and the lovers were buried together. "Often on their

green earthen tombs the branchy sons of the mountain feed, when mid-day is all in flames, and silence is over all the hills."

This tale is so far from being common that no copy of it exists but Macpherson's. In no collection of Gaelic poems is anything told of the fight between Oscar and Dermid for the daughter of Dargo's love. And how shall we reconcile it with the legend, recounted everywhere in Ireland and the Highlands, that tells how Oscar was killed at Gavra by red-speared Cairbre, High King of Erin? Macpherson afterwards perceived this difficulty, and endeavoured to evade it. A more correct copy of the fragment, he said, had reached his hand, which enabled him to amend an error into which he had fallen. There were two Oscars: one, the son of Ossian, was killed at Gavra: the other, the son of Caruth, was the real hero of this incident. It was also possible, he added, that the poem was not by Ossian himself, but by an imitator who had much of his manner and style. He revised it, and inserted a passage to meet this new theory.

This explanation, however, does not save him. There was in Fenian legend another Oscar, son of Garry or Garraidh; but he serves Macpherson's purpose as little as his namesake. At the battle of Gavra this second Oscar took the side of the Irish king: he fought hand to hand with the son of Ossian, and was slain by him; both Oscars

being killed in the same fight on the same day.[1] Neither of them is left for Dargo's daughter and her misdirected shaft. And what of Dermid? In all other tales where Dermid is mentioned, and there are many, he is the lover of Finn's wife, and perishes through his contrivance in the fatal boar-hunt on Ben Gulbin. He will not do for Macpherson's fragment either.[2]

Macpherson, then, produced spurious Highland poetry from the first day of his appearance as a translator. Why did he thus deceive John Home? The answer will depend on our conception of his character; and that in turn must proceed from a review of his whole later life and actions. Yet he is not the only man of mystery. Why did Chatterton, a boy of sixteen, concoct mock-antique English ballads and declare that he had found them in a chest at St. Mary Redcliffe's? Why did William Ireland, nineteen years of age, hoax his own father and half London with a tragedy attributed to Shakespeare and fabricated by himself? A still stranger puzzle is presented by Robert Surtees of Mainsforth, who sent to Sir Walter Scott a series of ballads which he called ancient and had himself composed.[3] In his letters he

[1] *Transactions of the Ossianic Society of Dublin*, i. 77–91; Kennedy's *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*, 1891, p. 189.

[2] The use of the arrow and bow of yew is another mark of spuriousness; see *infra*, p. 126. For the whole subject see *Celtic Magazine*, 1887, pp. 152–154.

[3] Taylor's *Memoir of Robert Surtees*, 1852, *passim*.

quoted authorities. One of these poems had been dictated by an old woman at Alston Moor, another taken down from the imperfect recitation of a withered crone who weeded his garden. The deception was sustained deliberately during a succession of years. Scott was completely taken in: he quoted one of Surtees' ballads in *Marmion*, and inserted others as traditional relics in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. This unfathomable Surtees was a man of landed estate, a scholar, in all his other dealings upright and benevolent. He became one of Sir Walter's personal friends; but the fraud was never acknowledged, and came to light only after Scott and Surtees were both in the grave. It is not easy to explain why Surtees carried on this imposture; or why Macpherson beguiled Home at Moffat in the autumn of 1759. The affair only becomes clearer as it expands.

Home was so delighted with the *Death of Oscar* that he asked for other translations, and others were produced. On his return to Edinburgh he showed them to Dr. Blair, who also was charmed. A ripple of excitement spread among the learned men of Scotland: here, it seemed, was a marvellous unveiling of unsuspected treasure. Macpherson himself came to Edinburgh, accompanied, we may suppose, by Graham, whose tutor he continued to be; and the number of his poems quickly grew. It does not appear that he showed the Gaelic originals, or that he was even asked

to do so, although in the Scottish capital Gaelic scholars might have been found. Everything was taken on his word. His poems were distributed in manuscript: finally they were printed in a little volume, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language*, which appeared in June 1760, and reached a second edition soon afterwards. Dr. Blair wrote the preface, from information which Macpherson supplied. He assured the public that the fragments were genuine. The translation, he said, was extremely literal. Even the arrangement of the words in the original had been imitated. Many more remains of ancient genius, no less valuable than those now given to the world, might be found in the Highlands. In particular there was reason to hope that one work of considerable length, which deserved to be styled a heroic poem, might be recovered and translated, if encouragement were given to such an undertaking.

The *Fragments* in this little volume are sixteen in number. Recent scholars have carefully examined them, and have found two to be based on genuine Ossianic ballads. The remaining fourteen are Macpherson's own.[1] If these things were done in the green tree, what should be done in the dry?

Among those who were taken by the book great names appear. David Hume was then in Edin-

[1] *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, xxii. 274.

burgh. He made the acquaintance of Macpherson, and the first impression was favourable. The poems, he said, were full of noble and tender strokes, and were universally admired. It was certain also that they were in everybody's mouth in the Highlands, had been handed down from father to son, and were of an age beyond all memory and tradition.[1] Adam Smith testified to their genuineness,—his authority the piper of the Argyllshire Militia, who knew them all by heart.[2] Even before they were published, they had made their way to Cambridge and had captivated the first English poet of the age, whose eagerness to taste the fresh wells of early literature engaged his attention at once. Gray had already observed the beginnings of Scandinavian study, and had dipped into the Eddas. Now it appeared that the Celtic world was revealing itself. On receiving copies of the *Fragments*, Gray writes:—

"I was so struck, so *extasié* with their infinite beauty, that I writ into Scotland to make a thousand enquiries. The letters I have in return are ill wrote, ill reasoned, unsatisfactory, calculated (one would imagine) to deceive one, and yet not cunning enough to do it cleverly. In short, the whole external evidence would make one believe these fragments (for so he calls them, though nothing can be more entire) counterfeit: but the internal is so strong on the other side, that I am resolved to believe them genuine, spite of the Devil and the Kirk. It is impossible to convince me

[1] J. Hill Burton's *Life of Hume*, 1846, vol. i., App., p. 463.
[2] *Ibid.*

that they were invented by the same man that writes me these letters. On the other hand it is almost as hard to suppose, if they are original, that he should be able to translate them so admirably. . . . In short this man is the very Dæmon of poetry, or he has lighted on a treasure hid for ages."[1]

But meanwhile at Edinburgh other things were maturing. It had come to be believed that the *Fragments* were no more than a foretaste, that there actually was in the Highlands a long national epic, which might yet be saved before it perished with the Gaelic language; and a suggestion was in the air that Macpherson might be commissioned to seek for it. Some attribute this notion to Blair's fancy; but a careful sifting of the evidence shows rather that we must look to Macpherson for the germ of the idea. When he first visited Blair he spoke of "greater and more considerable poems" that were well known to his countrymen, and added that no translation could do justice to their spirit and force. What was this poetry which was too sublime for translation? Not, we may understand, the popular legends and ballads, which he thought to be poor stuff, beneath the dignity of literature; it was a something else, and a something which he imagined. A letter by David Hume, dated August 16, 1760, has just been quoted. It is full of Macpherson's own conversation. We find him

[1] Letter to Thomas Wharton, July 1760; *Works*, ed. Gosse, iii. 52.

sanguine, brimming with talk about the great work, comparing it already with Homer; while the philosopher, although he accepts the short poems as beautiful wild flowers, now hears of the regular epic with some incredulity.[1] It was also at this period, between the autumn of 1759 and the following summer, that Macpherson began the composition of *Fingal.* The preface to the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* gives a complete outline of its plot,—how Swaran, King of Lochlin, invaded Ireland, and the Irish under Cuchullin were defeated; how Fingal, the Scottish king, arrived with a fleet to assist them, expelled the invaders, and returned home victorious. But this story, as we are now aware, was constructed by Macpherson himself; so that, when he discussed the epic with Hume, he had its whole groundwork prepared already in his mind. Corroborative detail began to spring up. Macpherson spoke of a country doctor in Lochaber who knew the entire poem by heart, but was old and infirm, and must be tapped at once. He could even tell its length, which he fixed at nine thousand lines.[2]

But while thus creating a myth and diffusing

[1] Burton's *Hume, loc. cit.*

[2] The authority for this statement is a letter received by Shenstone and dated "Edinburgh, June 21, 1760." The writer sends a copy of the *Fragments;* speaks with studied praise of their beauty and force of diction, warmth of fancy, chaste and truly noble simplicity; and adds,—"If these specimens are well received by the public, and if suitable encouragement were given to the ingenious translator, he would oblige the world with the translation of the epic poem men-

expectation, he also encouraged the belief that he personally held back. Could a poor tutor, without independence or position, be asked to embark on a project that for him led nowhere? Dr. Blair always fancied that he had been entreated and dragged into it. But means of surmounting the difficulty were found. It was proposed that a collection should be made to enable Macpherson to travel in the Highlands in search of ancient poetic remains; and a dinner was held at which the enterprise was set on foot. Much interest was shown by Blair himself, Robertson the historian, John Home, Lord Elibank and Adam Ferguson; Lord Hailes was friendly, and Hume gave some help. There was a subscription of a guinea or two guineas apiece, a mercurial young man named James Boswell being one of those who contributed. A report even went out that Macpherson had been promised £100 a year while his labours lasted.[1] Whatever the amount it was sufficient. He gave up his pupil and prepared to start.

Towards the end of August he left Edinburgh, journeyed northward to Skye, crossed the sea, and scampered briskly through North Uist, South Uist and Benbecula. He had introductions and

tioned in the preface, which consists of upwards of nine thousand lines; but the dependent situation of a tutor cannot afford him leisure to undertake so great a work." Hull's *Select Letters*, 1778, ii. 170. The editor gives the initials of the writer, which are "J. M-G—." That he was in touch with Macpherson is obvious.

[1] Mrs. Montagu's *Letters*, iv. 320.

was well received. Returning to the mainland, he made his way to Badenoch, from which, on October 27, he writes :—"I have already traversed most of the isles and gathered all worth notice in that quarter."[1] In the same letter he speaks of visiting Mull and the coast of Argyllshire to enlarge his collection. He seems to have spent the early part of the winter in Badenoch, arranging his papers, and assisted in this task by one of his kinsmen, Lachlan Macpherson of Strathmashie, the author of several Gaelic poems. On January 16, 1761, Macpherson was back in Edinburgh, bringing his trophies with him. "I have been lucky enough," he wrote, "to lay my hands on a pretty complete poem, and truly epic, concerning Fingal,"[2]—the same poem of whose plot he had given a sketch before he left Edinburgh six months before.

On his return he proceeded with his translation. Dr. Blair often visited him, and Macpherson would read or recite the result of the day's labour. The fame of the forthcoming epic now spread abroad, and public curiosity was keenly stimulated. A wider field might be sought, and Macpherson departed for London, bearing a letter of introduction from Hume to his countryman, the publisher Strahan. Hume mentioned the *Fragments*, and added that Macpherson had just translated a larger work, a narrative poem of great

[1] *Highland Society's Report*, App., p. 153. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

antiquity, which would probably have been buried in oblivion, if he had not retrieved it.[1] Another and wealthier patron gave encouragement. In *Fingal* Macpherson speaks of "the generosity of a certain noble person," whom he does not name, "as his exalted station, as well as merit, has raised him above the panegyric of one so little known." *Temora*, in a flowing dedication, reveals him as the Earl of Bute, whom the accession of the young King had just raised to power. Thus, in the beginning of the new reign, the poems of Ossian were launched upon the public under the auspices of the Prime Minister.

So far fortune had done well by Macpherson. Buried a few years before in an obscure Highland village, he was now in the eye of the great world, aided by the King's favourite, and regarded with approbation by poets and philosophers. This prosperity was not to continue unbroken. The culmination of his success in the publication of his two epics, whilst it brought him money and fame, awakened suspicions that had hitherto lain asleep and did much to overthrow his credit. In the outburst of accusation and argument that followed, some of his supporters, like Hume, saw the delusion into which they had been led, and forsook him altogether. Others, like Blair and Home, maintained his cause to the end with a tenacity which nothing could move. The acute

[1] Hume's *Letters to Strahan*, ed. Birkbeck Hill, p. 36.

and discerning Gray was tossed in opinion from side to side, loth to give up the poems, unconvinced by the evidence in their favour, inclining at last, it would seem, to the side of acceptance. His case is the stranger because Gray, had he looked into *Ossian* with sufficient detachment, might have found there the influence of his own muse. It cannot be said that had the *Bard* not been published—it appeared in 1757—there would have been no *Ossian;* but *Ossian* would at least have been somewhat different.

"On a rock, whose haughty brow
Frowns o'er old Conway's foaming flood,
Robed in the sable garb of woe,
With haggard eyes the poet stood;
(Loose his beard, and hoary hair
Stream'd, like a meteor, to the troubled air)
And with a master's hand, and prophet's fire,
Struck the deep sorrows of his lyre.
'Hark, how each giant oak, and desert cave,
Sighs to the torrent's awful voice beneath!'"

The bard of Conway and the bard of Cona are exactly the same person. In the days when steel-engravings were prefixed to works of imagination, a single long-bearded rhapsodist, smiting a harp among desert rocks, might have done indifferently for either. Even the background, the oaks and caves, the torrent whose roar mingles with the voice of the minstrel, is the same. But Gray did not observe this quaint affiliation; and it is possible that it was not fully perceived by the author of *Ossian* himself.

CHAPTER V

NEW TALES FOR OLD ONES

WHEN Macpherson met Home at Moffat he had in his possession at least two of the genuine Ossianic ballads. During his journey in the Highlands he collected more; traces of them are scattered all through his works; in one place the outline of a tale, in another a short descriptive touch, in another a fragment of a speech. But not one ballad is given entirely and literally; and his knowledge of some is attested only by tiny scraps embedded in long pages of his own composition. He pulled the ballads to shreds; took from them what suggestions he pleased, and inserted them where he thought fit; and reconstructed the Fenian legend from top to bottom.

It was not easy to pour the bright wine of Celtic fantasy into the bottles of Blair. The young scholar's imagination was filled with Homer and Milton: Blair's young disciple must needs discuss Aristotle, unities, the rules of the epic. Macpherson's academic knowledge gave him another hint. His characters are not Irish, they are not Highlanders of modern Scotland: they are the Caledonians that the Romans knew, and of whom

he had read in the *Agricola* of Tacitus. He hit upon the device of introducing that part of Roman history in which their descendants might take some pride,—the invasion of North Britain by Severus and his failure to subdue the mountaineers. Nothing could be more foreign to the scope of the Fenian ballads; but Macpherson found in them at least a name that might be used. In Celtic legend the "King of the World," against whom Finn MacCumhail fought, is spoken of. A purely romantic personage, he came to Ireland by sea with the warriors of France, Greece and India, and was overthrown at the battle of Ventry Harbour. In the *Dean of Lismore's Book* he is identified with the King of Lochlin, or Norway. Macpherson now seized upon the "King of the World" and made him one with the Roman Emperor. Fingal fights the Romans under Caracalla, son of Severus, who is here called Caracul. Victory is with the men of Morven: Caracul flees; and his enemies exult,—"Confusion pursue thee over thy plains! Ruin overtake thee, thou King of the World."[1] Henceforth the Romans are daunted in presence of the valiant Caledonian. They spread the wings of their pride behind their gathered heap, looking over the stones with fear. Macpherson explains that the "wings of pride" are those of the Roman eagle; and that the

[1] "Ruin seize thee, ruthless King!
Confusion on thy banners wait."—Gray's *Bard*.

"gathered heap" is the Roman wall. How singular that all this of Roman Emperors, Roman eagles, and Roman walls should be picked up from oral tradition in the eighteenth century, in the islands of North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist,—and that by a student fresh from King's College of Aberdeen!

This mock history was seriously taken; it is not yet without defenders. Gibbon himself discussed it in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, with a touch of grave irony, but yet as a matter of weight. After describing the campaign of Severus in North Britain, he continues:—

"This Caledonian war, neither marked by decisive events, nor attended with any important consequences, would ill deserve our attention; but it is supposed, not without a considerable degree of probability, that the invasion of Severus is connected with the most shining period of the British history or fable. Fingal, whose fame, with that of his heroes and bards, has been revived in our language by a recent publication, is said to have commanded the Caledonians in that memorable juncture, to have eluded the power of Severus, and to have obtained a signal victory on the banks of the Carun, in which the son of *the King of the World*, Caracul, fled from his arms along the fields of his pride. Something of a doubtful mist still hangs over these Highland traditions; nor can it be entirely dispelled by the most ingenious researches of modern criticism: but, if we could, with safety, indulge the pleasing supposition that Fingal lived, and that Ossian sung, the striking contrast of the situation and manners of the contending nations might

amuse a philosophic mind. The parallel would be little to the advantage of the more civilised people, if we compared the unrelenting revenge of Severus with the generous clemency of Fingal; the timid and brutal cruelty of Caracalla with the bravery, the tenderness, the elegant genius of Ossian; the mercenary chiefs who, from motives of fear or interest, served under the Imperial standard, with the freeborn warriors who started to arms at the voice of the King of Morven; if, in a word, we contemplated the untutored Caledonians, glowing with the warm virtues of nature, and the degenerate Romans, polluted with the mean vices of wealth and slavery."[1]

The writing of such a passage by Gibbon is almost the measure of Macpherson's astonishing success. In a note a difficulty is stated: the son of Severus was known as Antoninus when in Britain, Caracalla being a nickname invented later and scarcely used by the Romans till after his death. How then did the Highlanders know it? This objection is not easy to surmount. But we may find in Macpherson another anachronism, deeper and wider, by which his historic fabric is rent in twain.

The Roman war is little more than an episode in the life of Fingal. His more constant and familiar adversaries are Vikings from Scandinavia,

[1] Compare Macpherson, who observes that the character of the Caledonians was "happily compounded of what is noble in barbarity and virtuous and generous in a polished people"; and that Fingal "exercised every manly virtue in Caledonia, while Heliogabalus disgraced human nature at Rome."

led by Starno and Swaran, Kings of Norway. But by no indulgence of imagination can we conceive of the same soldier fighting a Roman Emperor and a Norwegian King, now defending his hills against the legions, and now driving the northern pirates back into the sea. The Roman Empire had long since fallen and become a remote fact of history before the black fleets appeared in western waters. In the year 787 there arrived "the first ships belonging to Danish men which visited England." Sailing round the Scottish coast, the Vikings destroyed the monastery of Iona in 802. Their incursions continued for several centuries; and it was not until 1103 that Magnus Barelegs, the original of Macpherson's Swaran, came by his end. When we remember that the same general who overcomes him is also made to defeat Caracalla in 211, we realise that Macpherson's fragile structure is falling about us in hopeless ruin. It is as if Alfred the Great were depicted in a war-chariot resisting the landing of Julius Caesar.

This is not all. In *Fingal* Macpherson has taken liberties, as great if less evident, with the authenticity of romance itself. *Fingal* is undeniable poetry, spirited and full of picturesque touches, although marred by vagueness and rhetorical diffusion. But the characters who appear have been thrown into new parts. Cuchullin, the *fortissimus heros* of the Gaels, is represented as ruler or regent of Ireland during its king's minority.

News is brought to him by a messenger that Swaran, King of Norway, is drawing near with a great fleet. He holds a council of war. Some of his chiefs advise him to delay fighting until the arrival of the Caledonian king, whose help has been asked. But Cuchullin joins battle at once, and is utterly defeated. Soon he hears that the ships of Fingal are in sight, but he is ashamed to appear before his ally after his reverse. He retires and secludes himself in a cave. The Scottish forces arrive, and a great battle with the Norsemen takes place, Fingal and Swaran fighting hand to hand. Swaran is overcome and bound ; his army gives way and is routed with great slaughter. Fingal then celebrates his victory by a feast, at which the bards sing before him. He dismisses his prisoner unharmed, and prepares to depart, but before setting sail he visits Cuchullin, and cheers the Irish prince, whose gladness revives. The ships are launched, and he returns to Caledonia.

We have already seen that Finn, the original Fingal, was an Irishman himself. Need we wonder that Irish scholars were annoyed by this appropriation of their national hero ?[1]

[1] Evidence of Finn's Irish nationality has been given above, pp. 54–55. "The Scotch declare that Fingal was King of Morven," says Mr. Bailey Saunders. But this claim was not made before Macpherson, nor outside his sphere of influence. At an earlier date Martin Martin, a native of Skye, made a journey through the Hebrides, of which he published an interesting account in 1703. Martin has nothing to say of Fingal, but he repeatedly mentions Fin-Mac-Coul. "This gigantic man is reported to have been general of a militia that

The story of *Fingal* was formed by combining two separate ballads, and working in fragments of others. The hero of the first is Cuchullin, of the second, Finn; both are real figures in Celtic legend, but it is Macpherson himself who has brought them together. In the ballads Cuchullin and Finn are never associated. The former is placed in Ulster, the latter in Leinster. Several centuries are supposed to have elapsed between them, Cuchullin belonging to the older legendary period; each is the central hero in a group of tales and romances, and these groups do not overlap. Only at a late date is any confusion of the cycles to be found.

The ballad concerning Cuchullin that Macpherson has made use of begins with a dialogue between Connell, King of Ireland, and his porter. Here is a literal translation of the first verses:—

---

came from Spain to Ireland, and from thence to those isles. All his soldiers are called Fienty from Fiun. He is believed to have arrived in the isles in the reign of King Evan. The natives have many stories of this general and his army, with which I will not trouble the reader." —*Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, reprint, 1884, p. 152.

Another Scotsman, William Shaw, travelled through the Highlands in 1778. He made careful inquiries about Ossian's hero. "When I asked, and particularly those who were possessed of any poetry, songs, or tales, who Fionn was—for he is not known by the name of Fingal by any—I was answered that he was an Irishman, if a man, for they sometimes thought him a giant, and that he lived in Ireland, and sometimes came over to hunt in the Highlands. This is the universal voice of all the Highlanders, excepting those who are possessed of abilities and knowledge to peruse the work of Mr. Macpherson, and are taught by nationality to support an idle controversy." — *Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Ossian*, sec. ed. p. 18.

Porter.

"Arise, O Chief of Tara !—
I see a fleet hard to tell of !—
The bays are brimful and crowded
With the large fleet of the foreigners."

Connell.

"Thou liest, porter, greatly,—
Thou liest to-day and always ;—
It is the great fleet of the plains,—
And coming to us, to aid us."

Porter.

"There is a warrior at the gate of Tara—
At the King's door, much elated ;
Says he can take without trouble,
And force a pledge from the men of Erin."[1]

Turn now to *Fingal* and read the first page :—

"Cuchullin sat by Tura's wall : by the tree of the rustling sound. His spear leaned against a rock. His shield lay on the grass by his side. Amid his thoughts of mighty Carbar, a hero slain by the chief in war ; the scout of ocean comes, Moran, the son of Fithil !

"'Arise,' says the youth, 'Cuchullin, arise. I see the ships of the north ! Many, chief of men, are the foe. Many the heroes of the sea-borne Swaran !' 'Moran !' replied the blue-eyed chief, 'thou ever tremblest, son of Fithil ! Thy fears have increased the foe. It is Fingal, King of deserts, with aid to green Erin of streams.' 'I beheld their chief,' says Moran, 'tall as a glittering rock. *His spear is a blasted pine. His shield*

[1] MacLean's *Ultonian Hero-Ballads*, 1892, p. 91.

the rising moon! He sat on the shore, like a cloud of mist on the silent hill! Many, chief of heroes! I said, many are our hands of war. Well are thou named, the Mighty Man; but many mighty men are seen from Tura's windy walls.'"

The declamatory tone changes everything. The resemblance also of the chief whose spear is a pine, and whose shield is like the moon, to the Satan of *Paradise Lost* strikes us involuntarily. There is nothing to suggest it in the original stanzas.

The lay of which Cuchullin is the subject having supplied an effective opening, Macpherson constructed the rest of his story by using the ballad of Magnus, one of the most famous poems in the Fenian cycle. For Magnus he substituted Swaran, and in the earlier part of the story opposed him to Cuchullin instead of Finn. The King of Lochlin having arrived on the shore with ten thousand barks, Finn, in the ballad, sends his son Fergus, brother of Ossian, to ask the reason of their coming. Magnus replies with a demand that Finn should give up to him his famous dog, Bran, and his wife. The ballad gives the question of Fergus and the reply:—

"'What has brought the fierce band from the kingdom of Lochlin of ancient weapons? Is it to increase the Fiann that your chief has come over the sea?'

"'On thy hand, O hospitable Fergus, though great is thy estimation of the Fiann, we will not

receive tribute unless we get Bran, and take Finn's wife from him.'

"'The Fiann will give hard battle to your people before you get Bran, and Finn will give hard battle to yourself before you get his wife.'

"Fergus, my own brother, returned, and his form was like the sun; calmly did he tell his tale, though loud and great was his voice.

"'It is the King of Lochlin there on the shore, why should I conceal it? Nor will he leave without close conflict, or your wife and your dog in his power.'

"'Never will I give up my wife to any man under the sun, and still less will I ever give up Bran until death comes in his mouth.'"

The passage thus literally translated has been paraphrased by Macpherson in this manner:—

"'Go, Morla, go,' said the King of Lochlin, 'offer peace to these! Offer the terms we give to kings, when nations bow down to our swords. When the valiant are dead in war; when virgins weep on the field!' Tall Morla came, the son of Swarth, and stately strode the youth along! He spoke to Erin's blue-eyed chief, among the lesser heroes. 'Take Swaran's peace,' the warrior spoke, 'the peace he gives to kings, when nations bow to his sword. Leave Erin's streamy plains to us, and give thy spouse and dog. Thy spouse high-bosomed, heaving fair! Thy dog that overtakes the wind! Give these to prove the weakness of thine arm; live then beneath our power!'

"'Tell Swaran, tell that heart of pride, Cuchullin never yields. I give him the dark-rolling sea; I give his people graves in Erin. But never shall a stranger have the pleasing sunbeam of my love.

No deer shall fly on Lochlin's hills, before swift-footed Luath.'"

Defiance thus exchanged, banners were hoisted and pennons raised on high. The Fians prayed, and rushed upon the ranks of the strangers. Finn and Magnus met hand to hand in the thick of the host. Hard was the contest.

"There was a close conflict, like the noise of two hammers, the bloody battle of the two kings. Sore-wounding was the vigour of their weapons.

"When their red shields were broken, and their rage and anger arose, then they threw their weapons on the ground, and the two heroes took to wrestling.

"The bloody battle of the two kings, tedious it was for us to hear it; stones and the heavy earth were turned up by the soles of their feet.

"The unfortunate King of Lochlin was overthrown before the rest upon the heather, and although it was no honour to a king, the bond of the three smalls was put upon him."[1]

This incident also appears in Macpherson, more closely followed, but with characteristic differences in detail:—

"There was the clang of arms! there every blow, like the hundred hammers of the furnace! Terrible is the battle of the kings; dreadful the look of their eyes. Their dark-brown shields are cleft in twain. Their steel flies, broken, from their helms. They fling their weapons down. Each rushes to his hero's grasp. Their sinewy arms bend round each other; they turn from side to side, and strain and

[1] He was tied at the wrists, ankles and neck.

stretch their large spreading limbs below. But when the pride of their strength arose, they shook the hill with their heels. Rocks tumble from their places on high ; the green-shaded bushes are overturned. At length the strength of Swaran fell : the king of the groves is bound. Thus have I seen on Cona ; but Cona I behold no more ! thus have I seen two dark hills, removed from their place, by the strength of the bursting stream. They turn from side to side in their fall ; their tall oaks meet one another on high. Then they tumble together with all their rocks and trees. The streams are turned by their side. The red ruin is seen afar."

After this passage *Fingal* diverges altogether from the ballad. When both poems draw together again the combatants are arranging terms of peace. In the ballad the matter is briefly dismissed. One of Finn's warriors proposes to sever Magnus's head from his body ; but Magnus appeals for grace, and receives it. Thus Finn speaks :—

"Since you are in my grace, I will not do injury to a prince ; I will free you from my Fiann, brave hand for fighting great battles.

"And you shall get your choice again when you come to your own land, either to have friendship and alliance for ever, or again to lay your hand on my Fiann."

And Magnus accepts his clemency :—

"Never will I lay hand on your Fiann so long as strength remains in my body ; and I repent that I ever made one blow against thee." [1]

[1] Trans. W. A. Craigie, *Scottish Notes and Queries*, Dec. 1890.

But we must draw a long breath before plunging into Macpherson's expansion of these simple stanzas. He adds a romantic touch of his own. Agandecca, sister of Swaran, had been an ill-fated love of Fingal's youth, and for her sake the prisoner is spared.

"'King of Lochlin,' said Fingal, 'thy blood flows in the veins of thy foe. Our fathers met in battle, because they loved the strife of spears. But often did they feast in the hall: and send round the joy of the shell. Let thy face brighten with gladness, and thine ear delight in the harp. Dreadful as the storm of thine ocean, thou hast poured thy valour forth; thy voice has been like the voice of thousands when they engage in war. Raise, to-morrow, raise thy white sails to the wind, thou brother of Agandecca! Bright as the beam of noon, she comes on my mourning soul. I have seen thy tears for the fair one. I spared thee in the halls of Starno; when my sword was red with slaughter: when my eye was full of tears for the maid. Or dost thou choose the fight? The combat which thy fathers gave to Trenmor is thine! that thou mayest depart renowned, like the sun setting in the west!'

"'King of the race of Morven,' replied the chief of resounding Lochlin! 'never will Swaran fight with thee, first of a thousand heroes! I have seen thee in the halls of Starno; few were thy years beyond my own. When shall I, I said to my soul, lift the spear like the noble Fingal? We have fought heretofore, O warrior, on the side of the shaggy Malmor; after my waves had carried me to thy halls, and the feast of a thousand shells was spread. Let the bards send his name who overcame to future years, for noble was the strife of Malmor!

But many of the ships of Lochlin have lost their youths on Lena. Take these, thou King of Morven, and be the friend of Swaran! When thy sons shall come to Gormal, the feast of shells shall be spread, and the combat offered on the vale.'"

"Heard ye ever the like o' that? There's a chield can spin a muckle pirn out of a wee tait of tow!" exclaimed one of Scott's characters, lost in admiration at the fecundity of Effie Deans' counsel. "And he's cleckit this great muckle bird out o' this wee egg!" When the authenticity of *Fingal* was disputed, Dr. Blair obtained letters from friends in the Highlands, who testified in general terms to its genuineness. Several were acquainted with a Gaelic poem that mentioned the demand for Finn's wife and dog, the combat with the King of Lochlin, and his release after his capture. But only one pointed out that Finn's opponent was Magnus, not Swaran;[1] and none of them called attention to a more vital fact,—that the poem they knew contained about two hundred lines, whilst there is as much matter in *Fingal* as fills over eighty quarto pages.

Macpherson himself, in his introduction to *Fingal*, states that his rendering is exact,—"All that

[1] "The battle of Lena in book ii. is still preserved by tradition in this country, but with this variation, that the proposal of giving up his wife and dog, as the only condition on which peace would be granted, was made by Magnus, King of Lochlin, to Fingal, and not by Swaran to Cuchullin."—Letter from Donald Macleod, Minister of Glenelg, to Dr. Blair, 26th March 1764; *Highland Society's Report*, App., p. 29.

can be said of the translation is that it is literal, and that simplicity is studied. The arrangement of the words in the original is imitated, and the inversions of the style observed."[1]

Let us take another of the ballads, and compare his version with a translation which actually is literal and simple. The process of adaptation may be followed step by step.

"A day that Patrick was in his dwelling,
Heedless of psalms, but drinking,
He went to the house of Ossian, son of Finn,
Since well he liked his lofty talk.

'Are we welcome, generous old man?
To you on a visit we have come,
Hero, soldier-like, and finest of form,
That never refused anything to any one.

'I would like to hear from you,
Son of Cumhail, of stately and warlike stride,
Of the greatest strait in which the Fians ever were
Since first their track was found.'

'It is I who can tell you that,
Patrick of the sweet-sounding psalms;
The straitest place in which the men were
From the day on which the Fians of Finn were
set on foot.'"

Macpherson ridicules this exordium, and speaks with contempt of a saint who "sometimes threw off the austerity of his profession, drunk freely, and had his soul properly warmed with wine, to receive

[1] *Fingal*, 1762, p. xvi.

with becoming enthusiasm the poems of his father-in-law." So Patrick is cut out, and in his place appears an unnamed missionary, whom Ossian addresses :—

"Son of the distant land, who dwellest in the secret cell! do I hear the sound of thy grove? or is it thy voice of songs? The torrent was loud in my ear; but I heard a tuneful voice. Dost thou praise the chiefs of thy land; or the spirits of the wind? But, lonely dweller of rocks! look thou on that heathy plain. Thou seest green tombs, with their rank, whistling grass; with their stones of mossy heads. Thou seest them, son of the rock; but Ossian's eyes have failed!"

Then follows the story of the *Great Strait of the Fians*—called *The Battle of Lora* by Macpherson. It happened that Finn omitted to invite to a feast two of his heroes, Alvin—Macpherson has "Aldo"—and another. Their wrath and indignation were aroused. They departed from Finn, and made their way to Lochlin, to take service with Erragon, its king.

"They took (fearsome was their journey)
The ships that were long before our time.
From the small summer residence of the Fians
To Lochlin's King of slippery shields.

A year and day's term of service to the King
Was engaged to be made by the two of modest form.
The wife of Lochlin's King of brown shields,
Fell in love heavily and not lightly.

The wife of Lochlin's King of brown shields,
Fell in love heavily and not lightly
With lovable Alvin of sharp-edged weapons,
And they did deceitfully conceal it.

The wife left the King's bed—
That was the act for which blood was spilt;
To the small summer dwellings of the Fians
They took their journey over sea." [1]

Now let us see how Macpherson presents these incidents:—

"They took their swords, their shields of thongs. They rushed to Lumar's resounding bay. They came to Sora's haughty king, the chief of bounding steeds. Erragon had returned from the chase. His spear was red in blood. He bent his dark face to the ground; and whistled as he went. He took the strangers to his feasts: they fought and conquered in his wars.

"Aldo returned with his fame towards Sora's lofty walls. From her tower looked the spouse of Erragon, the humid, rolling eyes of Lorma. Her yellow hair flies on the wind of ocean. Her white breast heaves, like snow on heath; when the gentle winds arise, and slowly move it in the light. She saw young Aldo, like the beam of Sora's setting sun. Her soft heart sighed. Tears filled her eyes. Her white arm supported her head. Three days she sat within the hall, and covered her grief with joy. On the fourth she fled with the hero, along the troubled sea. They came to Cona's mossy towers, to Fingal king of spears."

The King of Lochlin gathered all his host, and pursued. Finn was overawed by his army: he

[1] J. G. Campbell's *Fians*, 1891, p. 114.

sent a princess, bearing gifts, to seek peace, and offer herself in place of the fugitive. Erragon refused her, and battle was joined. Alvin was killed; the Fians were hard pressed, and all but overcome; but at last Erragon was met in single combat by Goll and slain. Macpherson concludes the story by making the queen of Lochlin die of a broken heart.

"She came. She found her hero! Her voice was heard no more. Silent she rolled her eyes. She was pale, and wildly sad! Few were her days on Cona. She sunk into the tomb. Fingal commanded his bards; they sung over the death of Lorma. The daughters of Morven mourned her, for one day in the year, when the dark winds of autumn returned!"

The daughters of Israel mourned four days in the year for the daughter of Jephthah, as Macpherson points out in a note. Such borrowings from the Bible are actually not uncommon in *Ossian*.

One more example of Macpherson's methods, and that the strangest of all. In the days of Ossian's vogue no other incident seemed so striking as Fingal's encounter with the Spirit of Loda,—a dire, supernatural foe. Macpherson identifies this Spirit with the Odin of Norse mythology, and places the scene of the adventure in Orkney, where he was worshipped.

"A blast came from the mountain; on its wings was the spirit of Loda. He came to his place in his terrors, and shook his dusky spear. His eyes

appeared like flames in his dark face; his voice is like distant thunder. Fingal advanced his spear in night, and raised his voice on high.

"'Son of night, retire: call thy winds and fly! Why dost thou come to my presence, with thy shadowy arms? Do I fear thy gloomy form, spirit of dismal Loda? Weak is thy shield of clouds; feeble is that meteor, thy sword. The blast rolls them together; and thou thyself art lost. Fly from my presence, son of night! call thy winds and fly!'

"'Dost thou force me from my place?' replied the hollow voice. 'The people bend before me. I turn the battle in the field of the brave. I look on the nations and they vanish; my nostrils pour the blast of death. I come abroad on the winds: the tempests are before my face. But my dwelling is calm, above the clouds; the fields of my rest are pleasant.'

"'Dwell in thy pleasant fields,' said the king: 'Let Comhal's son be forgot. Do my steps ascend from my hills, into thy peaceful plains? Do I meet thee with a spear, on thy cloud, spirit of dismal Loda? Why then dost thou frown on me? why shake thine airy spear? Thou frownest in vain: I never fled from the mighty in war. And shall the sons of the wind frighten the King of Morven? No: he knows the weakness of their arms!'

"'Fly to thy land,' replied the form: 'receive the wind and fly! The blasts are in the hollow of my hand: the course of the storm is mine. The King of Sora is my son, he bends at the stone of my power. His battle is around Carric-thura; and he will prevail! Fly to thy land, son of Comhal, or feel my flaming wrath!'

"He lifted high his shadowy spear! He bent forward his dreadful height. Fingal, advancing, drew his sword; the blade of dark-brown Luno.

The gleaming path of the steel winds through the gloomy ghost. The form fell shapeless into air, like a column of smoke, which the staff of the boy disturbs, as it rises from the half-extinguished furnace.

"The spirit of Loda shrieked, as, rolled into himself, he rose on the wind. Inistore shook at the sound. The waves heard it on the deep. They stopped in their course with fear."

During the Middle Ages quaint stories of Finn found their way to the Lowlands. The poet Dunbar speaks of him :—

" My fore grantschir hecht Fyn Mac Kowle,
That dang the devill, and gart him yowle,
The skyis ranyd quhen he wald scowle,
He trublit all the air :

He gat my grantschir Gog Magog ;
Ay quhen he dansit, the warld wald schog ;
Five thousand ellis yeid in his frog
Of Hieland pladdis, and mair."

But how was it that Finn "dang the devill, and gart him yowle"? All tradition is silent concerning the Spirit of Loda. Gaelic romances and lays may be searched for him in vain. But tales are told of contest with unnatural beings, of whom a monstrous hag called the Muileartach was the most fantastic. She came to Ireland in the service of the King of Lochlin.

" A day the Fians were on an eastern knoll,
Gazing at Erin all around,
There was seen coming over the waves
A hideous apparition—a heavily-rocking object,

The name of the dauntless spectre
Was the bald-red, white-maned Muileartach.
Her face was dark grey, of the hue of coals,
The teeth of her jaw were slanting red,
There was one flabby eye in her head,
That quicker moved than lure-pursuing mackerel.
Her head bristled dark and grey,
Like scrubwood before hoar frost.
When she saw the Fians of highest prowess,
The wretch coveted being in their midst.
At the outset of fury and slaughter,
She performed an over-keen, thankless deed;
She slew in her frolic a hundred heroes,
While loud laughter was in her rough mouth."[1]

Treasures were offered to the hag to buy her off, but in vain. Rather than all the most precious jewels in Ireland she would have the heads of Finn, Ossian and Oscar. Then Finn took the field himself.

"Mac Coul of good fortune met
The wretch, hand to hand.
Her flank was exposed to the violence of the blows,
And there were drops of his blood on the heath tops.
The Muileartach fell by Finn,
If she did, it was not without strife. . . .
They lifted the Old Woman on the point of their spears,
And tore her asunder in pieces."

Word came to the palace of the King of Lochlin that the Muileartach, who was his foster-mother, according to one account, had been slain by the heroes of Ireland. The king could not at first

[1] J. G. Campbell's *Fians*, p. 142.

believe it ; and, when convinced that the news was true, he vowed to be avenged.

"I will give words again,
If the gentle Muileartach has been killed,
That I will not leave in fair Erin
Hillock, place of shelter, or island,
That I will lift, in the cross-trees of my ships,
Erin fairly-balanced, full weight ;
If it does not take to kicking at sea
When it is being lifted from its sea-walls,
I shall put crooked hooks into the land,
To draw it from its fastenings."

This little piece of extravagance is taken from the ballad by Macpherson, and transferred to the second book of *Fingal*, where we read,—"'Vain ruler of the car,' said Morla, 'wilt thou then fight the king? The king, whose ships of many groves could carry off thine isle? So little is thy green-hilled Erin to him who rules the stormy waves!'" But was it also the wild Muileartach that suggested Finn's duel with the Spirit of Loda? It is perhaps only conjecture ; but the ballad serves at least to reveal the spirit of the popular lays which Macpherson drew upon, and whose fanciful exuberance he thought so undignified.[1]

[1] That Macpherson was acquainted with this ballad is shown by the borrowing in *Fingal* cited above. Compare the simile in one version of the tale, "The blades of the Fians passed as harmlessly through the body of the Muileartach as the knife through flame," with Macpherson's, "The form fell shapeless into air, like a column of smoke, which the staff of the boy disturbs, as it rises from the half-extinguished furnace." The resemblance of this hag of tradition to Macpherson's Scandinavian god was first pointed out by Shaw, in 1781. It is mentioned also by Laing and Sir Walter Scott.

Other supernatural beings introduced into *Ossian* are the ghosts, by whom the imagination of the Caledonians is haunted. Such spectres are constantly described. Their dim faces look forth through the breaches of the tempest. They speak amidst the roaring stream, break the trees by night, contend together in the clouds, and transport themselves on the wind from land to land. Ghosts stand beside moss-grown stones, support columns of mist in mid-air, as it rises slowly from a lake, and stalk dimly in the moonbeams. In short, they are personifications or accompaniments of the more terrible phenomena of nature.

In the classical period "supernatural machinery" was looked for in an epic poem. Had not Homer his gods, and Milton his archangels? The ghosts are Macpherson's "machinery." But in Celtic legend no warrant can be found for them. The literature of the Gael loved "the cheerful, lightsome noon."[1] It dealt with living men, the spirits of the dead being seldom heard of. Even when they appear, they are far from shadowy beings, but are clearly seen and minutely portrayed with the faithful and brightly coloured detail of medieval romance. Once it happened that an ancient poem had been lost, and could be recovered only by raising from the dead its composer, the poet Fergus MacRoy. By the aid of the saints the spirit of Fergus was conjured up. He came "in

[1] *Silva Gadelica*, ii. 178.

a beautiful form, adorned with brown hair, clad in a green cloak, and wearing a collared gold-ribbed shirt, a gold-hilted sword, and sandals of bronze." With such accurate realism even a spectre was imagined.[1] In another tale appears the ghost of Cuchullin, which also is picturesquely described. It had a black head of hair, as smooth as if licked by a cow, a grey gleaming eye, a purple-blue tunic with borders of gold, a brooch of red gold on the breast, a white cloak with a flaming red border, a sword with a golden hilt, a broad grey spear set in a shaft of wild ash, and a purple shield adorned with gold and silver. The eyebrows were blacker than a cooking spit, and the lips redder than rubies.[2] This is a vivid apparition. The cloudy and vaguely awful spirits of Macpherson are beings of another order.

Concerning the dwellings, customs and weapons of Fingal's age, few details are given; but these betray serious errors.

The Caledonian princes are lodged in massive structures of stone. When Balclutha was destroyed, a river was removed from its bed by the fall of the ruins. It had halls in which the fire resounded, towers and courts. In short, it was a feudal castle, removed to an age where it was out of place: the Kings of Ireland lived in houses of wood surrounded by earthen ramparts. Yet

[1] Alex. MacBain's *Celtic Mythology and Religion*, 1885, p. 85.
[2] Miss Hull's *Cuchullin Saga*, 1898, p. 277.

the palace of Fingal is furnished with a plainness which is almost poverty. The precious metals are hardly mentioned, for what should noble barbarians do with lucre? The medieval ballads, however, tend rather to exaggerate the wealth and splendour of Finn. In *Ossian* the king and his chiefs use sea-shells, gathered on the beach, as vessels from which to drink at the feast; but in a poem preserved by the Dean of Lismore, it is said that Finn had bright cups, blue flagons and horns of gold. The use of gold was familiar to the Celts from a very early period, and their goldsmiths worked it with exquisite skill.

Another anachronism is the use of the bow and arrow by armies in battle, which we find everywhere in *Ossian*. Although a primitive weapon, the bow was not often employed by the Celts of the heroic age. They plied each other "with handily missile darts, with small spit-like javelins, with broad and blue-headed spears, and with great stones."[1] The shield which a noble warrior carried, made the bow impossible; the left arm was encumbered by it, and for archery both hands must be free, one to hold the bow, the other to pull the string. Cuchullin and Finn threw javelins with the right hand, and rushed in with spear and sword. According to passages in the most ancient texts, they were unaccustomed even to carry the bow and

[1] *Silva Gadelica*, ii. 146.

arrow in hunting, when the shield would be left at home.[1]

But when Macpherson described the funeral customs of the Caledonians, he introduced a still more curious piece of archæology. Ossian, contemplating his own burial, is made to exclaim, "Remember, my son, to place this sword, this bow, the horn of my deer, within that dark and narrow house, whose mark is one grey stone"; and Oscar elsewhere asks that a deer's horn may be laid beside him in the grave. These allusions attracted the attention of Lord Auchinleck, Boswell's father, who believed them to be a proof of the immense antiquity of the poems. A gentleman whom he knew had opened several barrows in the North of Scotland, and found in them human bones, along with the horn of a red deer. The burials, from the position in which the corpse lay, must have taken place before Christianity was introduced. How old, then, must be the poems in which this remarkable usage is mentioned! And as *Ossian* was published before the barrows had

[1] L'arc et la flèche sont inusitées chez les Irlandais et chez les Celtes de Grande-Bretagne, comme chez le légionnaire romain. Le nom de la flèche, en irlandais *saighed*, en gallois *saeth*, en breton *saez*, est emprunté au latin *sagitta*. Celui de l'arc, *bogha* en irlandais, *bwa* en gallois, est d'origine germanique. Les Irlandais de la plus vieille littérature épique ne se servent pas de l'arc, même à la chasse. Au début d'un des plus anciens morceaux de cette littérature, Cûchulainn veut prendre des oiseaux ; il frappe de son épée ceux qui sont près de lui ; à ceux qui sont plus éloignés, il jette une pierre avec sa fronde, il lance un javelot.—H. d'Arbois de Jubainville, *La Civilisation des Celtes*, 1899, p. 348.

been explored, Macpherson could not have learned of it from them: he had his knowledge from tradition alone: therefore *Ossian* was genuine.

But Lord Auchinleck, shrewd as he was, overlooked another and more likely alternative. The barrows he had himself heard of may not have been laid open until after *Ossian* appeared; but similar barrows were perhaps known already, and from them Macpherson might have derived the hint which he used. There is confirmation of this conjecture; for in Banffshire a tumulus was removed in 1755, and a deer's horn was found in it beside a human skeleton.[1] Macpherson was then a student at Aberdeen, and *Fingal* was not written until six years afterwards. Such considerations alone would justify us in distrusting this piece of ancient local colour.

Blunders like these are of little moment, if the poetic interest outweighs them. But they confirm the belief that the hero-world of Morven is an unreal place of unreal men and manners, at variance even with the fictions of Celtic imagination.

[1] Pennant's *Tour in Scotland*, 1769, ed. 1790, i. 155.

CHAPTER VI

THE CONTROVERSY

In the controversy, perhaps the most famous in literature, that sprang up around the Ossianic poems, the massive figure of Dr. Johnson, wielding a cudgel of English oak, is conspicuous. For the part which he played in the business he has been diversely judged, much applause coming from one side, much reproach from the other. George Henry Lewes, representing a familiar view, has praised the stern, clear sense with which the old man saw into the very heart of the subject, and perceived that *Ossian* was rhetorical trash. But in the opinion of the opposite party something more than common sense was needed to appreciate *Fingal*. It was Johnson's lack of romantic imagination, aided by national antipathy, that determined his attitude. He was as fit, declared Robert Buchanan, to listen to the Gaelic bard as to paint poetically the mountains of Skye. And the hostility of Johnson is supposed to have settled the fate of *Ossian* in England. He was a literary dictator whose opinions had the force of decrees, accepted blindly by those who heard them, and transmitted unimpaired to later generations. Eng-

lishmen thus rejected the Highland poet, not on his merits, but at the bidding of an autocrat. Johnson's methods were harsh. He roared; he was truculent and not to be reasoned with. He imposed his prejudices by dogmatism upon the mind of his country.

But in all this there is exaggeration. Our conception of Johnson as a giver of law owes not a little to Boswell: we think of him as dictating to England when, if he dictated at all, it was to a dinner party. His authority over his contemporaries was not vast and decisive. Some of them, Horace Walpole and Gray, Adam Smith and Hume, were in hostile camps, disliking him or disliked. Cowper once longed to thresh his jacket till his pension jingled in his pocket. Burke and Gibbon, although in his circle, were there as equals; and even such lesser associates as Percy and Warton had minds of their own. Neither can it be justly said that he formed the opinions of posterity. We know that he spoke grudgingly of Milton, disliked Fielding, had a prejudice against Swift, and undervalued the author of the *Seasons;* but these censures are forgotten, and their victims not a penny the worse. "No man was ever written out of reputation but by himself," was the maxim in which the illustrious Bentley, when controversial enemies triumphed over him, found support.

Nor is it true that the first assaults upon *Ossian* were made by Johnson: the reaction had set in

long before he intervened. Many rejected even the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* as soon as they came out.[1] Disbelief increased with *Fingal*, received a strong impetus from *Temora*, and was accelerated by the hostile criticism of Celtic scholars.

The earliest public attack may be found in a pamphlet which appeared in the beginning of 1762, less than three months after *Fingal*. Its author was Dr. Warner, an English clergyman, who had a short time before been made Rector of Barnes. He was interested in Irish history, and wrote several works upon it which still are of value. In 1761, when *Ossian* was passing through the press, Dr. Warner was in Dublin studying manuscripts. He returned to London to find the Northern epic in every one's hands, and was able to estimate its authenticity.

He endeavoured in his pamphlet (he tells us) to discuss the subject in the manner that befitted a gentleman and a scholar. Being a native of England, and having no personal connections with Ireland, he believed that his impartiality would be confessed; as he had for a considerable period made the antiquities of Ireland his particular study, he was in some measure qualified to decide the dispute that was already rising. Dr. Warner then proceeded, with calmness and in the most temperate tone, to indicate a series of errors into which

[1] Gray wrote, October 21, 1760: "Very few admire them, and almost all take them for fictions."—*Works*, iii. 65.

Macpherson had fallen. He showed that the chief who was celebrated in the poems under the name of Fingal was really Finn, an Irish hero; that there was no record of an invasion of Ireland from Scandinavia until the coming of the Danes, which took place centuries after the era of the poems; and that the Irish histories, which gave a precise account of the birth and death of Cuchullin, placed him at a different epoch from Finn. Macpherson's narrative had thrown the whole of Irish history into confusion. For his historical notes he had produced no authorities: until he could do so, Cuchullin, Finn, and Ossian must continue to rank as Irish heroes, and the poems which celebrated them as, in their original shape, the work of Irish bards. Dr. Warner protested against the quarrelsome tone Macpherson had fallen into; but then Macpherson was "blinded by his prejudices against the innocent antiquities of the poor Irish."

After this courteous knight had broken a lance in their behalf, the scholars of Ireland themselves took the field. On the first publication of Macpherson's works they had attracted attention at Paris, and in the *Journal des Sçavans* their appearance was announced as an event of mark. The first references were sympathetic and betrayed no suspicion; but soon doubt arose. It was pointed out, before the end of 1762, that the famous description of the fallen Balclutha suggested certain passages in Isaiah and that the Address to the

Sun in *Carthon* was surprisingly like the speech of Satan to the Sun in *Paradise Lost*, the laments of Ossian over his blindness being also similar to the utterances of Milton on the same subject.[1] Discussion continued. In 1764 there appeared a series of articles by *un sçavant Irlandois*, who is known only as "M. de C." ; almost certainly he was an ecclesiastic. "M. de C." took Macpherson severely to task. He allowed that he had written a brilliant work. Macpherson had poetic genius, cultivated by the assiduous study of the Prophets and the other books of the Old Testament, which had become the favourite reading of the Scots since the religious revolution of Knox. But he had invented a new system of history for the events he described. It was necessary to show the true sources from which he had borrowed his subject and plan,—sources which he had confused and mixed together so that they might escape recognition, changing at the same time the names and titles of the characters to disguise them. But, "M. de C." remarks: "I should never have done, if I wished to mention all the fictions, all the errors, all the thefts of Irish heroes, which fill the history and the poems of Mr. Macpherson."[2]

The next public attack by an Irish scholar was that of Charles O'Conor of Belanagare, in an ap-

[1] *Journal des Sçavans*, Novembre 1762.

[2] The articles in the *Journal des Sçavans* made some stir. They were reprinted at Amsterdam, and, in 1765, at Cologne. See Tombo's *Ossian in Germany*, p. 5.

pendix to his *Dissertations on the History of Ireland.* The date of this work is 1766. The dispute was now becoming warmer: Macpherson was assailed with bitter invective. O'Conor's indignation was not without cause. Macpherson had laid the scene of his principal poems in Ireland: he had talked freely of Irish kings, and had set forth their genealogies. Even in his first editions he had surrounded the text with prefaces and notes, in which he reprimanded Irish historians for their inaccuracy with an air of authority which they cannot be blamed for resenting. O'Conor retorted warmly that the ignorance was on Macpherson's side. He pointed out the blunders into which he had fallen in making Cuchullin and Finn contemporaries, and in bringing the Scandinavians to Ireland long before their actual arrival. Macpherson's geography was equally at fault: he had placed Moylena in Ulster, instead of in King's County, and Temora, *i.e.* Tara, in Ulster, whilst it actually is in Meath.

In the midst of his philippic, O'Conor aimed an adroit blow at the enemy, in a passage which may be quoted :—

"He doth not scruple to advance that the ancient Gaelic or Scotic was preserved from age to age among an illiterate people, who were sunk in extreme ignorance and barbarism ever since the Saxons took possession of the Lowlands.[1] Thus

[1] Macpherson's own words are: "The Saxon manners and language had at that time made great progress in the south of

it is that he divides his contempt for his readers between barefaced imposition on the one hand and national slander on the other. But the readers of South Britain will hardly take his bare word for it, that any language can be preserved in its classical integrity through many ages among an unlettered people; and the gentry of the Highlands know best what is due to him for representing their ancestors as *the most ignorant barbarians*,—in contradistinction to Adamnan and Bede, writers of the seventh and eighth centuries, who represent them as a civilised, lettered nation."

While these reproaches from Dublin were hurtling in the air, Macpherson's credit in England was waning rapidly. Readers in London paid less heed to his historical errors. But there were objections which lay on the surface. How came it that such a copious mass of poetry had been transmitted for so many ages by tradition? How strange it was that the ancient Caledonians, surely a rude people, displayed all the refinements of chivalry! And why had not the authenticity of the poems been confirmed by a more definite account of the manner and state in which they were discovered?

In the minds of several men of letters we can see clearly these fluctuations of opinion. Horace Walpole received copies of Macpherson's first frag-

Scotland. The ancient language and the traditional history of the nation became confined entirely to the inhabitants of the Highlands, then fallen, from several concurring circumstances, into the last degree of ignorance and barbarism."—Dissertation prefixed to *Temora*.

ments from a friend in Scotland. He admired them and thought they contained natural images and natural sentiment, composed before rules were invented to make poetry difficult and dull. Yet suspicion soon began to start up. Macpherson came once to see him, bringing the first book of *Fingal* in manuscript, and after their conversation Walpole declared that his doubts of the genuineness had all vanished. But before the year ended, doubt had returned and prevailed. In December 1761 he wrote to George Montagu,—"*Fingal* is come out; I have not yet got through it; not but it is very fine—yet I cannot at once compass an epic poem now. It tires me to death to read how many ways a warrior is like the moon, or the sun, or a rock, or a lion, or the ocean. *Fingal* is a brave collection of similes, and will serve all the boys at Eton and Westminster for these twenty years. I will trust you with a secret, but you must not disclose it; I should be ruined with my Scotch friends; in short, I cannot believe it genuine."

But other unbelievers were more outspoken, and soon the storm broke. Macpherson's success might have lasted longer had he refrained from pushing it so hard; but two epics in two years caused a public explosion. When David Hume visited London in 1763, he found that disbelief in their authenticity was wide-spread, and even heard them totally rejected, with disdain and indignation, as a palpable and impudent forgery. The uneasi-

ness which Hume had already felt now deepened almost into consternation. His Scottish patriotism was touched, his friends were compromised in the business, and his own credit had been used to promote the undertaking which was turning out so ill. If the situation were to be saved at all, a strong effort must be made. He wrote, therefore, an urgent letter to Dr. Blair, suggesting that evidence should be collected, manuscripts sought out, and positive testimony obtained that such poems had long been recited in the Highlands. Hume spoke of this project to Macpherson, who flew into a passion. But, he assures Blair, "you must not mind so strange and heteroclite a mortal, than whom I have scarce ever known a man more perverse and unamiable. He will probably depart for Florida with Governor Johnstone, and I would advise him to travel among the Chickisaws or Cherokees, in order to tame him and civilise him." [1]

Macpherson did actually go to Florida as Governor Johnstone's secretary; but he quarrelled with him and came home on a pension two years afterwards. Meanwhile Dr. Blair set about his inquiry. He wrote, as Hume had suggested, to Highland ministers and lairds, and received in reply many letters which were preserved and have been printed. His correspondents assured him,

[1] Letter to Dr. Blair, 6th October 1763; Burton's *Life of Hume*, App., p. 470.

with perfect truth, that the Highlands were full of stories about Cuchullin, Finn, Ossian, and Oscar; and some identified, in general terms, passages in Macpherson with poems they had heard recited. A young baronet, Sir John Macpherson of Lauriston, sent him a copy in Gaelic of the Address to the Evening Star, which appears at the beginning of the *Songs of Selma*. It came, he said, from an ancient manuscript. But Sir John Macpherson had not himself seen the manuscript: he had been told of it by a gentleman who had copied the fragment, and who assured him that James Macpherson had no access to it before his books were published, and thus got the Address to the Evening Star from a different but collateral source—one source confirming the other.

Had Dr. Blair really possessed an appreciation of what is sound in evidence, he would now have asked the name of Sir John Macpherson's friend; he would have communicated with him in turn, inquiring where the manuscript was deposited and who was its owner; he would then have had it examined and publicly attested. This was indeed the course that Hume, a man of much keener mind, had urged upon him. Unfortunately Blair did not follow it. He did no more than print Sir John Macpherson's letter; and thus left the authenticity of the fragment to depend upon the word of an unknown man, who had copied it from

an unknown document in an unknown place.[1] No such manuscript, it must be added, is now to be found in the Highlands, and no version of the *Songs of Selma* in Gaelic has been published at any time.

The letters which Blair received, when cited in defence of Macpherson, produced little effect. The critics called for more definite evidence. In the *Journal des Sçavans*, "M. de C." wrote,—"But why does Mr. Macpherson exhaust himself in arguments to prove the existence of his originals and the possibility of that existence, whilst he can end the dispute by showing them? Let him place them in a public library; let him expose them to the eyes and to the enlightened criticism of scholars." Dr. Johnson, in conversation with Boswell, made the same suggestion as the Parisian Irishman,—"If the poems were really translated, they were certainly first written down. Let Mr. Macpherson deposit the manuscript in one of the colleges at Aberdeen, where there are people who can judge; and, if the professors certify the authenticity, then there will be an end of the controversy." It was not Macpherson, however, but his backers who were exhausting themselves in argument to prove that the elusive originals existed. The hero of the incident had himself

[1] The name of Sir John Macpherson's friend was not made known, but a guess may be hazarded. He probably was Lachlan Macpherson. The laird of Strathmashie was a poet, and seems to have versified other portions of his kinsman's work.

fallen, from the first moment of suspicion, into a silence which nothing could induce him to break. He would respond neither to the defiance of his critics nor to the entreaties of his bewildered friends. The world must believe on his authority that the poems were genuine: to deny it was to question his honour; and to those who doubted his honour he refused to make a reply. The most incredible of all facts, Hume afterwards wrote bitterly, was to be taken on the word of one whom nobody knew.

This attitude disconcerted Dr. Blair, and one of his correspondents, Sir James Macdonald, writing from the Isle of Skye, speaks of it sharply enough:—

"I must, however, join with you first in expressing my wonder at Macpherson's obstinacy, and I must add his ignorance. Who should imagine that his own consciousness of the authenticity of the work was any reason for other people's conviction, or that a man who was weak enough to doubt of this point is not worthy of satisfaction? I have said so much to him upon this subject already to no purpose, that I believe he has abandoned me along with the sceptics long ago."[1]

When forced, many years afterwards, to make some answer, Macpherson did not at last produce his originals, but offered proof that they had been shown already. In 1775 his publisher issued a statement that the Gaelic text of *Fingal* and other

[1] *Highland Society's Report*, App., p. 3.

poems of Ossian had been placed in his shop in the year 1762 for many months, for the inspection of the curious, and that public notice of this had been given in the newspapers. No one, it appeared, had made use of this opportunity; and the papers had at last been withdrawn and restored to their owner.

This statement is supported by other evidence;[1] and there seems no reason to doubt that in 1762 a Gaelic manuscript of some sort was actually exhibited. What its contents may have been we can only conjecture. We know that Macpherson had then in his hands an ancient Gaelic book lent him by a Highland chieftain, of which we shall afterwards hear more: he had also, in the original Gaelic, the ballads that Maclagan of Amulree and others had given to him in Scotland, and which he himself affected to despise as valueless fables. If such documents were placed on view, they might well pass for the original of *Fingal*, when not too closely examined. But little weight can be attached to this incident. Macpherson did not really meet the challenge of his opponents by his publisher's declaration. Their demand that the Gaelic text should be placed permanently where scholars might have access to it, was not unreasonable in itself; and it asked no more than the fulfilment of

[1] "Les manuscrits d'après lesquels M. Pherson (*sic*) a fait sa traduction, sont déposés chez les Libraires qui l'impriment, et tout le monde peut les y voir."—*Journal des Sçavans*, Février 1762.

a pledge which Macpherson had given. In the preface to the first edition of *Fingal* he had said,—"There is a design on foot to print the originals, as soon as the translator shall have time to transcribe them for the press; and if this publication shall not take place, copies will then be deposited in one of the public libraries, to prevent so ancient a monument of genius from being lost." This undertaking he had not carried out; and the exhibition of his papers for a short time in a publisher's office was a substitute which his critics might fairly refuse to accept.

In 1773 Dr. Johnson made his journey through the Hebrides, accompanied by Boswell. He had long desired to visit that remote region, so long that he could scarcely remember how the wish was originally excited. Martin Martin's book, which he read when a boy at Lichfield, is said to have first attracted him to the Scottish Isles. The occasion came late; it might never have arisen had not his interest been kept alive by Boswell, who managed his friend with admirable tact, and was eager to introduce him to his native land.

Boswell has been addressed by Wolcot as—

"Thou jackal, leading lion Johnson forth
To eat Macpherson 'midst his native North;
To frighten grave professors with his roar,
And shake the Hebrides from shore to shore."

But Johnson did not go to Scotland to find fault, nor to gather evidence against Macpherson. Nor

was he, as has been too often said, a narrow-minded bigot, a hater of everything beyond the English pale. He was a man of decided speech, and his prejudices were not a few; but we lose the essence of his character if we permit them to obscure from us his real breadth of sympathy, and the humane spirit which they only half concealed.

Johnson was not himself a philologist; but in compiling his *Dictionary* he had come to appreciate the value of all philological research. He had a zeal for languages, which he extended to the Celtic tongues. Several years before *Ossian* was heard of, he read the first edition of Charles O'Conor's work on the early history of Ireland, and sent to the author a letter of thanks and exhortation.

"I have long wished that the Irish literature were cultivated. Ireland is known by tradition to have been once the seat of piety and learning; and surely it would be very acceptable to all those who are curious either in the original of nations, or the affinities of languages, to be further informed of the revolution of a people so ancient, and once so illustrious.

"What relation there is between the Welsh and Irish language, or between the language of Ireland and that of Biscay, deserves inquiry. Of these provincial and unextended tongues, it seldom happens that more than one are understood by any one man; and, therefore, it seldom happens that a fair comparison can be made. I hope you will continue to cultivate this kind of learning, which has too long lain neglected, and which, if it be suffered to remain in oblivion for another century, may, perhaps,

never be retrieved. As I wish well to all useful undertakings, I would not forbear to let you know how much you deserve, in my opinion, from all lovers of study, and how much pleasure your work has given to, Sir, your most obliged and most humble servant."

O'Conor was impressed by the friendliness which Johnson had shown, and speaks of him with great cordiality,—"Far from joining in the current prejudice against the present subject, or oppressing the writer who undertook it with censure, even where censure was justly due, he approved of an endeavour to revive (as far as they can be usefully revived) the ancient language and literature of a sister isle which was once the prime seat of learning in all Christendom."[1] Johnson's interest did not flag. Twenty years after his first letter he wrote to O'Conor again, urging him to persevere. He had expected great discoveries in Irish antiquity, and large publications in the Irish language, but the world still remained as it was, doubtful and ignorant. If O'Conor could give a history of the early Irish nation, he would amplify knowledge with new views and new objects. Let him set about it, lay the foundation, and leave the superstructure to posterity.[2]

When Johnson once, in a fanciful mood, described an imaginary University at St. Andrews and filled its chairs, he provided a Professor of

[1] *Dissertations on the History of Ireland*, 1766, p. iv.

[2] The letters to O'Conor are in Boswell's *Life*.

Celtic learning. He supported, almost with vehemence, a proposal to translate the Bible into Gaelic; hoped the translator would go diligently forward, and was glad the old language was not neglected. Another incident is worthy of notice. William Shaw, a young clergyman from the island of Arran, had written a Gaelic Grammar, of which the manuscript came into Boswell's hands, and was shown by him to his friend. It was published at the instance of Johnson, who tried to interest others in the book, declaring that such a work deserved patronage. Shaw himself, in his preface, attributes its appearance to the advice and encouragement of Dr. Johnson, the friend of letters and humanity. Thereafter he attempted a Gaelic Dictionary, and left for Scotland to gather materials, Johnson sending him with good wishes on his way. "If you give the world a vocabulary of that language," he is reported to have said, "while the island of Great Britain stands in the Atlantic Ocean, your name will be mentioned."[1] It was then commonly believed that Gaelic was dying and would speedily be extinct; whoever saved some remnant of it for future philologists would earn a portion of immortality.

Johnson's tour in the Hebrides, undertaken at an age when men less stalwart would have shrunk from rough travelling and open boats on stormy waters, was a perfect success. It gave much

[1] *Memoirs of Dr. Johnson*, attributed to Shaw, p. 152.

pleasure to himself, much pleasure to his entertainers, and to Boswell, its projector, unqualified gratification. Two interesting books were the fruits of it, Boswell's and his own. By the people he was much attracted. "Civility," he says, "seems part of the national character of Highlanders. Every chieftain is a monarch, and politeness, the natural product of royal government, is diffused from the laird through the whole clan."[1] The repression that had followed the last rebellion, and the changed conditions of life by which the islanders were being driven to emigrate, filled him with a noble indignation.

"To hinder insurrection by driving away the people, and to govern peaceably by having no subjects, is an expedient that argues no great profundity of politics. To soften the obdurate, to convince the mistaken, to mollify the resentful, are worthy of a statesman; but it affords a legislator little self-applause to consider that, where there was formerly an insurrection, there is now a wilderness."

He was entertained by Flora Macdonald, "a name that will be mentioned in history, and if courage and fidelity be virtues, mentioned with honour." The hospitality and kindness he had met with are

[1] "There are more gentlemen in Scotland than there are shoes," he once said to Cumberland, the dramatist. Dr. Norman Macleod, who knew the Western Highlands well, declares that Johnson has written "the truest yet most complimentary delineation of the character and manners of the people."—*Reminiscences of a Highland Parish*, 1867, p. 104.

acknowledged again and again. He was interested in whatever might improve the common lot in islands that still are lamentably poverty-stricken. Schools are spoken of, and Johnson regrets that only English, not Gaelic, is taught in them, so that the natives read a language which they may never use or understand.

Nevertheless Johnson would have no mercy upon *Ossian* and attacked it with almost savage vigour. The cause of this attitude was not personal enmity. We are told by Mrs. Thrale that he never bore Macpherson the slightest ill-will, after their public and violent quarrel, and had even been heard to speak of him with respect. They had at least this in common, that both were Tories, both pensioners, and both supporters of Lord North. But he had always rejected Macpherson's pretensions, and felt a sincere distaste for his book. All the canons of excellence, as Johnson understood it, were broken in the Caledonian Epics. Clearness, definiteness, distinctness of idea and perfection of form were his first and final tests : to apply them to *Ossian* was to condemn it at once. He accused even Gray of writing poetry in which no one could find a meaning, and declared that the obscurity in which he had involved himself did not make him sublime. Nor was he reconciled to *Ossian* by the sentimental sadness which pervades it, and which so many have found to be its greatest charm. In spite of his own constitutional melan-

choly, perhaps in some measure because of it, he protested against every expression of affected or groundless complaint. There was no place for idle gloom and useless lamentation in a world so full of sin and sorrow. When Lady Tavistock died of grief for the loss of her husband, Johnson roughly refused to sympathise. She cried till she lost all power of restraining her tears, because she was rich and wanted employment; but had Lady Tavistock been forced to keep a shop, with a nurse-child to tend, her life would have been saved. A moralist so practical would find no beauty (and indeed there is little) in Macpherson's countless tales of broken hearts.

As he travelled through the Hebrides, Johnson had much discussion with lairds and ministers. He formed an acquaintance with Mr. M'Queen, a parish clergyman, who had before been one of Dr. Blair's correspondents. M'Queen assured him that Macpherson's poems fell far short in beauty of those he himself knew in Gaelic which were said to be Ossian's. Johnson replied: "I hope they do. I am not disputing that you may have poetry of great merit; but that Macpherson's is not a translation from ancient poetry. You do not believe it. I say before you, you do not believe it, though you are very willing that the world should believe it." If *Fingal*, he said, had been really ancient, it would have been a curiosity of the highest value: as it was, it was nothing. The next day a Gaelic poem

on Ossian's courtship was repeated to Boswell, and he was told that it resembled a passage in Macpherson. He hastened to inform his companion, who made answer;—"Well, sir, this is just what I always maintained. He has found names, and stories, and phrases, nay, passages in old songs, and with them has blended his own compositions, and so made what he gives to the world as the translation of an ancient poem."[1]

These debates, it is pleasant to observe, did not prevent Johnson's intercourse with M'Queen from ripening into friendship. He took leave of him at last, says Boswell, very affectionately.

In the *Journey to the Western Islands* he set forth his conclusions, prefacing them with some remarks on the "Erse" language, as Scottish Gaelic was then called, founded on such information as his Highland friends could supply. Johnson was aware that an ancient literature, possessing many early documents, existed both in Ireland and Wales. But he denied that the Highlands had such a literature. In Scottish Gaelic there was not a single manuscript a hundred years old—in this he was wrong; it had never teemed with books; it was even without that essential mark of every literary speech, a settled orthography, although the Welsh, two hundred years before, had boasted the superiority of their own system of spelling to

[1] "Johnson's verdict is undeniably the correct one,"—says Dr. Stern. —*Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, xxii. 275.

that of the English. How could a language so unformed and uncultivated claim to have important literary monuments? But Johnson knew well that Irish works had found their way long before into the Hebrides; he quoted Martin to that effect.

As for the *Poems of Ossian*, he spoke of them with contempt and intolerance.

"I believe they never existed in any other form than that which we have seen. The editor or author never could show the original, nor can it be shown by any other. To revenge reasonable incredulity by refusing evidence, is a degree of insolence with which the world is not yet acquainted; and stubborn audacity is the last refuge of guilt. It would be easy to show it if he had it; but whence could it be had? It is too long to be remembered, and the language formerly had nothing written. He has doubtless inserted names that circulate in popular stories, and may have translated some wandering ballads, if any can be found; and the names and some of the images being recollected, make an inaccurate auditor imagine, by the help of Caledonian bigotry, that he has formerly heard the whole."

Meanwhile Macpherson had returned from America; had published a translation of the *Iliad* which met with little success; and was now settled in London as a man of letters. Disquieting rumours preceded the publication of the *Journey to the Western Islands*. It became known that it would contain strictures on *Ossian* and on himself; the words "insolence," "audacity" and "guilt,"

were already quoted. Macpherson took alarm, and endeavoured to avert the blow before it fell. Such expressions, he wrote, ought not to be used by one gentleman of another, and could not be passed over with impunity. He therefore requested his publisher to wait upon Johnson and demand that they should be cancelled before the book appeared; this must be done to prevent consequences that might be disagreeable both to Dr. Johnson and to himself. In private letters he spoke of Johnson as an impertinent fellow, whom, but for other occupations, he would already have dealt with in a very effectual manner.[1]

Johnson's language was too harsh, and placed Macpherson in a painful situation; but his way of meeting it was neither tactful nor dignified. When told that the volume was printed off and could not be changed, he suggested that a withdrawal might be inserted on a slip. He even composed what he thought a suitable announcement, and sent it for Johnson's use. It contained an assurance that no personal reflection had been intended, and an undertaking that all words which might seem to convey an affront should be expunged in the next issue. It was an unlucky step; nothing could come of it but fresh mortification. When the book came out, unaltered and without apology, he challenged Johnson to a duel. Johnson declined; and then in a burst of rage he sent a message

[1] Bailey Saunders, *Life and Letters of James Macpherson*, pp. 245–247.

hinting at physical chastisement. The text of his letter is lost, but one of his supporters, in a pamphlet published soon afterwards, gives its substance. Johnson was told that "as he had declined to withdraw from his book the injurious expressions reflecting on Mr. Macpherson's private character, his age and infirmities alone protected him from the treatment due to an infamous liar and traducer."[1]

Johnson's reply is well known.

"MR. JAMES MACPHERSON, — I received your foolish and impudent note. Whatever insult is offered me, I will do my best to repel, and what I cannot do for myself the law shall do for me. I will not desist from detecting what I think a cheat, from any fear of the menaces of a ruffian.

"What would you have me retract? I thought your book an imposture; I think it an imposture still. For this opinion I have given my reasons to the public, which I here dare you to refute. Your rage I defy. Your abilities, since your Homer, are not so formidable; and what I hear of your morals inclines me to pay regard, not to what you shall say, but to what you shall prove. You may print this if you will. "SAM. JOHNSON.[2]

"*January* 20, 1775."

The robust doctor used to say that in controversy a man should try to lessen his antagonist: to treat him with respect would be striking soft in a battle. But such methods give pain. Macpherson was

[1] Clark's *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry into the Authenticity of Ossian*, 1781, p. 48.

[2] In Boswell's *Life*. But see *Letters*, ed. Birkbeck Hill, i. 307.

proud and sensitive. He had flown into a passion when David Hume, one of his best friends, suggested that evidence should be obtained to attest the authenticity of his translations. Now the unfortunate man was cut to the quick. But he made no reply; the incident ended; and though he afterwards wrote satires upon his antagonist, he never published them.[1] If more aggressive measures had really been thought of, they were abandoned. Johnson was skilled in the art of boxing, and in his younger days he had knocked down a publisher with a folio Septuagint. Now he brought out the great stick with which he had vowed to break the bones of Foote, the comedian, when that versatile impersonator proposed to take him off on the stage, and threatened to wield it vigorously in his own defence. It was an oak plant of tremendous size, with a head as big as a large orange; upwards of six feet long, an inch thick at one end, and nearly three inches thick at the other.[2]

A few years afterwards another traveller was on his way to the North. William Shaw, whose Celtic studies Johnson had encouraged, set out for a tour in the Highlands. His immediate purpose was to prepare his Gaelic Dictionary; but he cherished also another object. Shaw then believed in *Ossian:* some Gaelic fragments, which Macpherson had produced as specimens of his

[1] Carruthers' *Highland Note-Book*, p. 308.
[2] Hawkins' *Life of Johnson*, p. 491.

original, were cited in his first book as verses of real antiquity: he even based upon them a discussion of Celtic metre. During his researches he hoped to find considerable portions of *Ossian* recited in Gaelic; he might light upon manuscripts. His intention was to have everything that he found committed to writing, and attested in due form before ministers and Justices of the Peace. Armed with these documents he would return to London: he hoped even to convert Dr. Johnson himself.

Beginning in the spring of 1778, Shaw spent nearly six months in the Highlands and Isles. He traversed mountains, explored valleys, and crept into cottages to interrogate their inhabitants. He wandered, wet and weary, from island to island. He frequently engaged in long discourses with the blind, the lame, and the aged; giving snuff, whisky, and sometimes money, to cheer their spirits and raise their enthusiasm for recitation. All the difficulties with which the modern collector of folk-lore is familiar, were encountered. A report went before him that he had been sent on a special mission by His Majesty the King, and was able to draw on the boundless wealth of the British Treasury: thereafter he must needs distribute snuff and alcohol more lavishly than ever. But all was in vain. Shaw found many "fabulous and marvellous verses" about Finn Mac Cumhail, and many stories of enchantment, fairies,

and second sight. In short, he lit upon the same poems and legends which Macpherson had obtained eighteen years before, and had thrown into the crucible of his own genius; which John Francis Campbell, nearly a century later, published in their unadorned simplicity and charm. But they were useless to Shaw. He believed, on Macpherson's authority, that these things were recent and spurious inventions. He was in search of ancient Caledonian Epics; and Caledonian Epics were not to be found. Shaw persevered:—"Beyond the next mountain, in the next valley, or the neighbouring island, something of the genuine Ossian's poetry might have remained." He asked for manuscripts, and was told that Mr. Macpherson had taken them all to London. Going over to Ireland he continued his explorations. He found ancient Irish learning in manuscripts of great antiquity, but no *Fingal* or *Temora*.

Shaw now saw plainly that the bubble had burst. He wrote a little book and set forth his conclusions—a proceeding fraught with unsuspected risk. Antagonists sprang up, who fell upon him in a frenzy of wrath which is almost unaccountable. His personal character was bitterly assailed—*impudens, impurus, inverecundissimus,* is the motto prefixed to a hostile pamphlet. He was depicted as an adventurer, a renegade Scot who was courting the favour of Dr. Johnson for selfish ends. But such execration was grotesque. Shaw's

honesty is almost transparent, the ingenuousness which his writings betray at every turn being his best apology.

Macpherson took no part in this passage at arms. From the quarrels that had sprung up around his work he stood conspicuously aloof, leaving its defence to more eager champions. That he would even, had that been possible, have admitted the authorship and claimed the success of *Ossian* for himself, has been conjectured with some show of reason. But he found himself in a dilemma. The poems which had been so extravagantly praised, which had been translated into all the languages of Europe, owed their triumph to his own genius: of that he was well aware. The glory was his, yet he dared not put forth his hand to take it. To avow the truth would have been to justify his opponents, disconcert his advocates, and throw discredit on his own past. But he dropped studied hints: he began to treat the question of his share in the poems as an open one. "Without vanity I say it, I think I could write tolerable poetry; and I assure my antagonists that I should not translate what I could not imitate." "A translator who cannot equal his original is incapable of expressing its beauties." These suggestions are not in harmony with his first claim that the English version was a literal rendering of the Gaelic. He now calls himself sometimes the "author," some-

times the "translator," using the terms as equivalent. His last preface, published in 1773, begins thus—

"Without increasing his genius, the author may have improved his language in the eleven years that the following poems have been in the hands of the public. Errors in diction might have been committed at twenty-four, which the experience of a riper age may remove: and some exuberances in imagery may be restrained with advantage by a degree of judgment acquired in the progress of time. Impressed with this opinion, he ran over the whole with attention and accuracy; and, he hopes, he has brought the work to a state of correctness which will preclude all future improvements."

Who in reading these words could imagine that there had been any question of translation from another language? Macpherson speaks of his genius and his work. He now finds in it certain traces of youthfulness, in particular some "exuberances in imagery" natural to a young poet, but to be restrained by one of riper age. Was this the imagery of James Macpherson or of Ossian, the grey-haired and venerable bard, for whose exuberances immaturity of mind was the last excuse that could be offered?

There is another document of the same period which is too important to be passed over. It is a short biography of Macpherson, published in 1776 in *Ruddiman's Weekly Magazine*, an obscure journal of the time. The article was anonymous, but it

must have proceeded from Macpherson's own circle; for it contains details that he only could have supplied, and its fervent eulogy would seem to show the intimacy of the writer's friendship. In this article the appearance of *Ossian* is thus described :—

"During the time Mr. Macpherson remained at the university, it is presumed, he sacrificed in secret to the muses. But the first pieces of his composition that were presented from the press, made not their appearance till early in the year 1760. These were 'Fragments of Ancient Poetry,' whose simplicity of language, harmony of diction, natural sentiments, beauty and sublimity of thought, recommended them to general estimation.

"The favourable reception given to these specimens of Celtic poetry, encouraged Mr. Macpherson to give a larger work, 'The Poem of Fingal and other pieces,' to the public, in the end of the year 1761; and the next year he finished his collection by the publication of 'Temora and the remaining poems of Ossian.'

"The very favourable reception given by the world to these works, is recent in the memory of every reader. The most rigid critics allowed them to possess every mark of an exalted genius in the author or translator; whilst many did not hesitate to prefer them to all other poetical compositions, whether ancient or modern."

It is not hard to estimate how much of the glory is here assigned to Macpherson, and how little remains for his remote original.[1]

[1] Malcolm Laing conjectures that this curious panegyric was written by Macpherson himself! This view is perhaps justified. We know

These half-confessions brought him into deep disgrace in the North, where the Ossianists were ready to do battle for *Fingal* against its own author. Claymores were shaken in the face of the apostate. A new edition of *Ossian*, published at Edinburgh in 1792, and afterwards reprinted at Glasgow, contains a vigorous preface. The writer deplores that Macpherson wished to keep the question of authenticity in a state of oracular suspense, and even seemed disposed to claim the whole, or at least a great part, of the poetry as his own composition. His attitude had been discussed by many Highlanders. "Their sentiments with respect to his conduct were uniform; and upon every occasion they made no scruple of expressing their indignation at such an instance of ungenerous and ungrateful ambiguity." Even Macpherson himself was thus treated at last as no better than one of the sceptics.

Meanwhile he was absorbed in other pursuits. He produced several historical works, and became an active politician and an indefatigable journalist. When Junius appeared, an adversary called Scae-

that Macpherson was not incapable of sounding a blast on his own trumpet. He wrote a high-flown letter in praise of his *Secret History of Great Britain*, which he sent to his publisher with instructions that it should be inserted in a newspaper above the signature "Impartial." —Bailey Saunders, pp. 230–31. This should be compared with the remarks on the same subject in *Ruddiman's Magazine* (Laing i. li.): the resemblance is so striking as to suggest the same hand. Compare also *Ruddiman*, "It is presumed he sacrificed in secret to the muses," with the words "He had served his apprenticeship, though in secret, to the muses," in Macpherson's preface to his last edition of *Ossian*.

vola wrote letters against his letters: Scaevola was Macpherson. During the American War we find him in the service of Lord North, directing the ministerial press. He wrote articles and inspired reports, endeavouring (we are told) to persuade the people of England that all was going well at the front, that Cornwallis would yet do better than Burgoyne. Horace Walpole, a hostile critic, speaks of "Macpherson's daily column of lies." From Lord North's government he received a pension, which Walpole in one place calls £600, in another £800. About the same time the Nabob of Arcot, who had quarrelled with the East India Company, made him his confidential agent in England. The service of this potentate was lucrative, and he quickly became a man of wealth. He entered Parliament, by the usual method of presentation, for a small borough in Cornwall, and retained his seat till the end.

The last years in Macpherson's life were the best. Grown rich and growing old, he turned his thoughts to the hills of his native Badenoch; and thither at last he returned, in another character than that of the poor schoolmaster who had left it so long before. Land was bought and a mansion built, which stood on a hillside among pine trees, looking forth far and wide upon the Spey. Macpherson was a hospitable and generous laird: tradition, in a region where it is tenacious, has preserved anecdotes that do him credit. Con-

temporary accounts of his life at Kingussie are given by Mrs. Grant of Laggan, author of *Letters from the Mountains*, who, when he died in 1796, wrote of her friend in terms that show genuine grief :—

"He was a very good-natured man; and now that he had got all his schemes of interest and ambition fulfilled, he seemed to reflect and grow domestic, and showed, of late, a great inclination to be an indulgent landlord, and very liberal to the poor; of which I could relate various instances, more tender and interesting than flashy or ostentatious. His heart and temper were originally good; his religious principles were, I fear, unfixed and fluctuating. But the primary cause that so much genius, taste, benevolence, and prosperity, did not produce or diffuse more happiness, was his living a stranger to the comforts of domestic life, from which unhappy connections excluded him. . .

"Such was poor James Macpherson, who certainly was worthy of a better fate. His death and the circumstances of it have impressed my mind in a manner I could not have believed. I think we are somehow shrunk, and our consequence diminished, by losing the only person of eminence among us. It is like extinguishing a light. His will, which was made some time before this period of anguish, was, alas, too strongly marked with that vanity and ostentation which threw a deep shade over many good qualities he really possessed. The parade of going to Westminster Abbey marks him out as the first man in the annals of time that, dying in the very spot where he was born, and where all his ancestors were buried, desired to have his bones carried out of his native country. There is a sum of £500 appointed to be laid out on a monument at Belleville . . ."

This monument, a shaft of grey and white marble, stands near Kingussie on a knoll close to the highway. It was by his own request that Macpherson was buried at Westminster. He lies in the south transept, almost by the side of Samuel Johnson, the only adversary who had worsted him during all his career of success.

CHAPTER VII

CONTINUED DEBATE

THE author of *Ossian* being gone, the dispute did not vanish with him; it has continued, fiercely or fitfully, to our own time. A moot point is always fascinating. Although the general verdict is against Macpherson, it has been challenged by many Germans, among them Jacob Grimm, by several Englishmen, and by a host of his own people. Underlying the controversy is a misunderstanding,—a failure to distinguish, as Macpherson himself has clearly done, between his elaborate works and the homely songs they were based on. In spite of all resemblances, *Fingal* is essentially different from the tales of Ossian and St. Patrick and the wild legend of the Muileartach. Even when this difference has been realised, the conclusion it suggests has been eluded; the more dignified poems, because of their dignity, being accepted as the more authentic.

The death of Macpherson having quickened interest in the problem, the Highland Society of Scotland[1] resolved in 1797 to sift the whole

[1] Now the Highland and Agricultural Society.

matter by appointing a Committee of inquiry. Its moving spirit was Henry Mackenzie, the cheerful author of a sentimental book, *The Man of Feeling*. The Committee set to work with vigour. Circulars were sent throughout the Highlands and Islands to all persons from whom information might be expected. The recipients were asked to state whether they had heard any of the poems of Ossian repeated or sung in Gaelic, or any ancient poems of the same kind; to obtain copies of these poems whenever possible, and transmit them for inspection. Should they know any persons from whom Macpherson in his travels, forty years before, had received his poetic material, they were to show his translation and ask whether it was literal and exact. All proofs were to be investigated with a legal strictness. A mass of information was gathered, and in 1805 Mackenzie presented a voluminous report. His Committee found that Ossianic poetry existed in the Highlands, that it was common, general, and in great abundance. But they believed that Macpherson had taken liberties with the materials he found, both by adding and suppressing passages and by changing the general tone. And the Committee had "not been able to obtain any one poem the same in title and tenor with the poems published by him."

This report was far from settling the debate. It gave it rather a fresh impetus which carried it on for many years, both parties digging for proofs in

the documents which the Committee had collected. But the only evidence of real value would have been the production of Gaelic texts, obtained by recitation in the Highlands or from ancient manuscripts, which corresponded with some exactness to Macpherson's English poems. During the researches of the Committee a few such fragments appeared. Gaelic versions of the Address to the Sun in *Carthon*, and of another Address to the Sun in *Carric-thura*, were placed in their hands. Here were some proof indeed, if it were trustworthy, that portions of Macpherson's *Ossian* were actually known in the Highlands. But, by a coincidence too remarkable to be fortuitous, Gaelic versions of those very Addresses had been brought from his study in London many years before and put into circulation in Scotland, in manuscript copies, by one of his friends. The copies which the Committee obtained, and those which could be traced back to Macpherson himself, were compared and found to agree almost word for word. There could be little doubt that all of them came from a common source.[1]

A Highland clergyman, Mr. Gallie, then eighty years of age, stated that Macpherson had visited his house during his Highland travels, and had shown him the papers he had just collected. Mr. Gallie even produced a piece of Gaelic verse which had been copied from one of his manuscripts,—

[1] See Appendix.

a vellum of the fourteenth century, beautifully illuminated. He had not himself made the extract: the passage had been taken direct from the vellum by another of James Macpherson's friends, Lachlan Macpherson of Strathmashie, from whom Mr. Gallie had received it.[1]

But recent investigators dispute the authenticity of this fragment, and regard Strathmashie with doubt. It differs widely from Macpherson's rendering of the same passage, to be found in the fourth book of the Gaelic *Fingal* published after his death, of which more will hereafter be said. If he had indeed transcribed *Fingal* from the Hebridean parchment, as his friends asserted; if Strathmashie had obtained his extract from the same parchment, as was reported by Mr. Gallie; then the verses would be identical. But they are totally unlike; they are the same in substance, but in language they have so little in common that they do not agree in a single line.[2] In short, they are translations made by different hands from a common original, which we must look for in the English *Fingal* of 1762. When Macpherson was preparing his Gaelic, Strathmashie had long been dead, and, in ignorance of the lines which the remote Highland clergyman still preserved, he did not adopt them as his text, but composed a new one.

[1] *Highland Society's Report*, pp. 33, 43.

[2] *Cf.* Archibald Brown's *Memorials of Argyleshire*, 1889, pp. 242, 243.

Macpherson was thus supported by friends whose desire to aid him has made their statements as untrustworthy as his own. When Dr. Blair's inquiry was on foot, Strathmashie declared that he had himself assisted the translator of *Ossian* in collecting and transcribing by far the greater part of the poems. "Since the publication, I have carefully compared the translation with the copies of the originals in my hands, and find it amazingly literal, even in such a degree as to preserve, in some measure, the cadence of the Gaelic versification."

As for the ancient manuscripts of *Ossian*, no such documents, on vellum or on paper, are now known. The only matter in dispute is whether they ever existed. The apologists of the last generation believed that they did, and that Macpherson himself, with incredible carelessness, had suffered them to be destroyed. Having thus brought the Gaelic *Ossian* to light, he transcribed it and preserved the copy he had made. After his death it was found in his house, written on modern paper in a modern hand. But the priceless originals were sought for in vain. They had been lost in his American travels, allowed to perish in some undefined way. They were gone beyond recall.

This theory is found on closer inspection to centre around one name, that of Clanranald, chief of a branch of the Macdonalds in South

Uist. In 1763 David Hume wrote to Blair,—"Macpherson pretends that there is an ancient manuscript of part of *Fingal* in the family, I think, of Clanranald;" and soon afterwards Sir James Macdonald, writing from Skye, said that the islands never were possessed of any curious manuscripts, so far as he could learn, except a few which Clanranald had, and which were then in Macpherson's hands. At a later time, Boswell was told that Macpherson had obtained an old book from Clanranald, which he bound himself by a formal obligation to restore. And in 1779 the Rev. Donald M'Nicol, in a book against Johnson, spoke of Gaelic manuscripts that might be seen in London in the hands of John Mackenzie, a friend of Macpherson's, with whom it would seem that he had deposited them. The most important was called the Red Book, and had been given to Macpherson by Clanranald's hereditary bard.

When the Highland Society's Committee began its researches, evidence was given to the same effect. Witnesses reported that during Macpherson's visit to the Hebrides he had spent several days in Clanranald's house, and there had met the chieftain's bard, MacVuirich, who gave him some ancient Gaelic documents. MacVuirich was dead, but his son was appealed to, and made a statement before a Justice of the Peace. His father, he said, had once owned a volume called

the Red Book, which he inherited from his predecessors, and in which were records of the Clan Macdonald and poems of Ossian. Clanranald made his father give up the Red Book to James Macpherson from Badenoch.[1]

The manuscripts that came into the translator's hands are thus clearly defined. It does not appear that he had many; those upon which the question turns were Clanranald's; and among them the Red Book was the chief. Their importance was exaggerated, and a legend grew up; it came to be believed that Macpherson had taken the whole substance of *Fingal*, and even the more bulky *Temora* (which he himself assigned to oral tradition), from Clanranald's volumes.[2] They have been mentioned in almost every defence of *Ossian*. But this testimony at last received a fatal shock when the Red Book itself was translated and published. After some obscure vicissitudes, it was restored to its owner; it is preserved by the present Clanranald; and its contents, in Gaelic and English, may be found in *Reliquiæ Celticæ*.[3] The Red Book actually contains a narrative of Montrose's wars, in which the Macdonalds took part, and various Gaelic poems; but we seek there in vain for so much as a line of *Fingal*. Another of Clanranald's manuscripts, called the

[1] *Highland Society's Report*, App., p. 279.
[2] Leyden's *Tour in the Highlands*, p. 107.
[3] Vol. ii., 1894.

Black Book, has also been recovered and translated. It shows no vestige of Macpherson's text.

Those antique vellums from which the Gaelic *Ossian* came, must therefore be dismissed to the limbo of things fantastical. And even if imagination could conceive them emerging at the young magician's touch from the Outer Isles, a still greater feat would remain for it to perform. Something is now known of the difficulties with which such documents are beset; how slowly they are deciphered, what pains must be lavished upon them before text and translation are set before the reader in type.[1] The youthful Macpherson, running lightly through parchments of the fourteenth century, amending the errors of scribes, and unveiling the original which faithless hands had corrupted, translating an amended and purified Gaelic into fluent English, and accomplishing all this task in the space of a few months, presents a spectacle which is harder to credit than the existence of the visionary documents themselves. It is said that, when he visited the Bodleian Library years afterwards, an ancient Gaelic manuscript containing a dialogue between St. Patrick and Ossian was placed before him,

[1] "It took the late Dr. Maclauchlan of Edinburgh five years to decipher and copy a single MS. . . . and he tells us pathetically that it was the hardest piece of work he was ever engaged in."—Magnus Maclean's *Literature of the Celts*, 1902, p. 116.

and that he confessed himself quite unable to read it.[1]

Now appears another person in the story, Malcolm Laing, the severest and most searching of critics. Laing was a native of Orkney, and therefore of Norse descent—a circumstance with which he has been much reproached. Old Mr. Gallie suggested that he wished to avenge the defeats which Fingal had inflicted on his Viking ancestors, by discrediting the poems in which they are celebrated; and Professor Blackie found in him,—"the little Teutonic snake tumid with spite and bigotry," hissing and biting and spitting venom, —"the chosen instrument for the expression of Teutonic bile."[2] But Malcolm Laing was far from deserving all these hard words. He was a lawyer, acute and industrious. He had written a History of Scotland, and in investigating early records could not but take account of *Fingal*. Dr. Henry, in his *History of Great Britain*, had accepted *Ossian* as a priceless historic document; citations from it are scattered through his pages with a lavish hand. Coming after Henry, Laing must adopt his materials and conclusions, or give reasons of dissent. He rejected *Ossian* altogether. His views were first published in 1800 in an Appendix to his History; but the subject had now fascinated

[1] This story was told by Price, the librarian. See *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, 1831, p. 245.

[2] *Language and Literature of the Scottish Highlands*, p. 203.

his active mind. He pursued it further, resolved to search the mystery to the bottom and expose the fabrication for good.

In 1805 a new edition of the *Poems of Ossian* came out in two substantial volumes, with annotations by Laing. It is from beginning to end an indictment on the score of plagiarism. If *Ossian* could be shown to abound in passages borrowed from the classics and from modern English poetry, it must be the work of Macpherson, and the blind bard of Cona would be fairly disposed of.[1] Laing pursued this method with such persistence that he found imitations lurking in every corner, and claimed to have traced to its source every simile and nearly every poetical image which the poems contained.

In this he followed to its last conclusions a precedent already set by Macpherson himself. If we turn to the first edition of *Fingal*, that of 1762, we shall find, on one page after another, notes like those which have been attributed to the angry Orcadian's Teutonic malice. Resemblances to passages in Homer, Milton, and the Bible are indicated everywhere. It was the fashion of the eighteenth century to imitate, and poets freely

[1] A conclusion similar to Laing's had been arrived at by the German poet Gerstenberg, himself one of the bardic school. In 1766 he declared that he had always doubted the genuineness of the poems, because of the many traces of modern authors they displayed, and the hints which the writer seemed to have borrowed from Homer. See Tombo, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

confessed their own borrowings. Pope's *Pastorals* abound in transcriptions from Virgil. Many are pointed out by himself, and editors have detected others. His *Messiah* is based on parts of the Book of Isaiah, and Pope, on the margin, mentions chapter and verse. In the *Seasons*, Thomson shows plainly the influence of the *Georgics*. Gray's *Bard* has reminiscences of Shakespeare, to which he himself calls attention.

> "Dear lost companions of my tuneful art,
> Dear, as the light that visits these sad eyes,
> Dear, as the ruddy drops that warm my heart,
> Ye died amidst your dying country's cries."

Thus the Bard laments; and beneath are set the lines of *Julius Caesar*,—

> "As dear to me as are the ruddy drops
> That visit my sad heart."

The poems of Thomas Warton are little more than a cento of passages adapted from Milton and Spenser, as his editor has exhibited in detail.

Macpherson at first fell almost unconsciously into this accepted custom. He augmented his work with beauties from great authors, and directed notice to these proofs of scholarship. Only as time went on and suspicion was aroused, did he perceive the significance of his action and take warning. *Fingal* in 1762 had bristled with notes of comparison and reference; but in the *Temora* of 1763 there are none. He stated in the preface that the

similarities already pointed out could only have proceeded from Nature, the great original, and therefore no parallel passages need now be presented.

Examples of these borrowings may be given. In the *Death of Cuchullin* we read,—"His spear never returned unstained with blood: nor his bow from the strife of the mighty. . . . Thy strength was like the strength of a stream: thy speed like the eagle's wing." Is it necessary to mention the original? Macpherson has done so, and has quoted it,—"From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, and the sword of Saul returned not empty. . . . They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions." In the same context he has the temerity to write,—"The mighty have fallen in battle, and thou wast not there. Let none tell it in Selma, nor in Morven's woody land."

In *Berrathon* it is said—"The sons of future years shall pass away. Another race shall arise. The people are like the waves of ocean: like the leaves of woody Morven, they pass away in the rustling blast, and other leaves lift their green heads on high." On the margin Macpherson writes,—"The same thought may be found, almost in the same words, in Homer, vi. 146." The simile there is:—"Even as the generation of leaves, such is that of men. The wind scatters the leaves on the earth, and the luxuriant forest puts

forth others, and they come after in the season of spring: so one generation of men flourishes and another passes away."

Macpherson has written in *Oithona*—"On the third day arose Tromathon, like a blue shield in the midst of the sea"; and in a note he mentions the lines of the *Odyssey*,—"On the eighteenth day appeared the shadowy mountains of the land of the Phaeacians, where it was nearest to him; and it looked like a shield in the cloudy sea."

But it is *Paradise Lost* on which he has drawn most lavishly. Still following the *Fingal* of 1762, let us place extracts from *Ossian* and from Milton side by side.

Ossian.	Milton.
1. Who are these on Lena's heath that are so gloomy and dark? Who are these like two clouds and their swords like lightning above them?	And such a frown Each cast at the other, as when two black clouds, With heaven's artillery fraught, come rattling on Over the Caspian.
2. Thus the sun appears in the west, after the steps of his brightness have moved behind a storm; the green hills lift their dewy heads: the blue streams rejoice in the vale.	If chance the radiant sun with farewell sweet Extend his evening beam, the fields revive, The birds their notes renew, and bleating herds Attest their joy, that hill and valley rings.

Ossian.	Milton.
3. Let each assume his heavy spear, and gird on his father's sword. Let the dark helmet rise on every head; and the mail pour its lightning from every side. The battle gathers like a tempest, and soon shall ye hear the roar of death.	Let each His adamantine coat gird well, and each Fit well his helm, gripe fast his orbed shield, Borne even or high; for this day will pour down, If I conjecture aught, no drizzling shower, But rattling storm of arrows barbed with fire.
4. Fingal struck his bossy shield; and gave the dismal sign of war; a thousand swords, at once unsheathed, gleam on the waving heath.	He spake; and, to confirm his words, out-flew Millions of flaming swords, drawn from the thighs Of mighty Cherubim; the sudden blaze Far round illumined Hell.
5. Raise my standards on high,—spread them on Lena's wind, like the flames of an hundred hills.	The imperial ensign, which, full high advanced, Shone like a meteor streaming to the wind.

Malcolm Laing found other parallels between *Fingal* and Milton. When Ossian speaks of the darkened moon, "when she moves, a dun circle, through heaven; and dreadful change is expected by men"; he recalls how in *Paradise Lost* the sun

"from behind the moon,
In dim eclipse, disastrous twilight sheds
On half the nations, and with fear of change
Perplexes monarchs."

And finding on the next page a defeated army;—"like a grove through which the flame had rushed, hurried on by the winds of the stormy night; distant, withered, dark they stand, with not a leaf to shake in the gale,"—he remembers the defeated angels,—

"yet faithful how they stood,
Their glory withered; as when heaven's fire
Hath scathed the forest oaks or mountain pines,
With singed top their stately growth, though bare,
Stands on the blasted heath."

The force of evidence like this lies in its cumulative effect. Two different works cannot coincide so often by chance; especially when the writer of the second avows his familiarity with the first, and lets us know that he wrote with it open before him. Moreover, many proofs of plagiarism were not needed to establish Laing's case. One appropriation from a book that was unknown in Scotland in the third century, would suffice to show that *Ossian* was not composed by a pagan Caledonian. The borrowing from David's lament over Saul and Jonathan is decisive. But Laing was carried away by the ardour of the controversialist. He traced out the smallest resemblances: Macpherson could not utter a commonplace but he put another

commonplace beside it. In the end he weakened the effect he desired to produce. It was easy to quote his slightest and most uncertain parallels as typical of all, and demolish both them and him. Instead of closing the controversy, as he had hoped, Laing prolonged it, by supplying the other side with an excellent dialectical weapon.

The best judgment upon Malcolm Laing's methods is that of Sir Walter Scott. He brought forward analogies that were remote and even fanciful, he was misled by his own ingenuity, and laid equal weight upon very unequal arguments. Nevertheless he had succeeded in the main. The impression he made was irresistible, and he had, as it were, carried his point by storm. Scott had before been willing to believe that perhaps more than the half of Macpherson's work was genuine. Now he could not but conclude that it bore the same relation to the original legends that the play of *Douglas* does to the ballad from which came the outline of its plot.

The article just quoted, which appeared in the year 1805 in the *Edinburgh Review*, remains one of the most satisfying contributions to the debate. The whole substance of the matter had never before been written so plainly, nor with such perfection of tone and temper. A long letter to Miss Seward of Lichfield, published by Lockhart, supplements it, and puts us in complete possession of Scott's conclusions.

When Scott was a schoolboy, old Dr. Blacklock put into his hands two authors by whom he was enchanted,—Ossian and Spenser. He devoured rather than perused them. Their tales were for a long time so much his delight that he could repeat without remorse whole cantos of the one and books of the other. But this was youthful exuberance: its disappearance, he said, was the natural result of his improvement in taste: Ossian's poems, in particular, had lost their charm for him in later life. As for the great controversy, he would be no patriotic Scotsman if he had not attentively considered it. From his Highland friends he had procured translations of some twenty or thirty of the Ossianic ballads which were admitted by all to be of genuine antiquity. He had examined them with great care, and found between them and the works of Macpherson a prodigious and irreconcilable difference. The ballads were the compositions of a rude people, and reflected their roughness of manners; whilst in Macpherson all was elegance, refinement and sensibility, Fingal himself uniting the bravery of Achilles with the courtesy, sentiment and high-breeding of Sir Charles Grandison. But Macpherson had made all the use of the ballads that he could, in order to give his poems an air of authenticity, and it was not surprising that he should have exerted himself to collect them. His obvious interest was to do so, if he hoped to carry on his

imposture with success. It was because the Highlanders recognised the leading features of their own legendary tales that they readily gave testimony in his behalf. If the ballad of *Chevy Chase* were expanded into a long epic, bearing no resemblance to it except in a few stanzas or incidents, it would not be difficult to procure in England abundance of witnesses in favour of the new poem, who would declare that they had been familiar with it from childhood. "Of the thousands who hear poetry recited, we ought always to consider upon how few anything is impressed, excepting the general turn of the story, and perhaps here and there a peculiarly striking expression; and where these are ingeniously wrought into a new composition, the memory of such persons affords them no accurate means of distinguishing it from the original." But the use of such ancient materials did not prevent Macpherson's poetry from being in substance modern. "Incalculably the greater part of the English *Ossian* must be ascribed to Macpherson himself, and his whole introductions, notes, &c., are an absolute tissue of forgeries."

Some eleven years after this letter and article, Scott wrote one of the most charming of his novels, the *Antiquary*, in which the Ossianic question emerges, and a similar train of thought appears. Mr. Jonathan Oldbuck is walking on the beach with his nephew, Captain Hector M'Intyre, when between scholar and soldier controversial

discord is awakened. Captain M'Intyre has just declared that he is not indifferent to the ancient legends of his race. "I used often of an evening to get old Rory M'Alpin to sing us songs out of Ossian about the battles of Fingal and Lamon Mor, and Magnus and the spirit of Muirartach."

"'And did you believe,' asked the aroused Antiquary, 'did you absolutely believe that stuff of Macpherson's to be really ancient, you simple boy?'

"'Believe it, sir?—how could I but believe it, when I have heard the songs sung from my infancy?'

"'But not the same as Macpherson's English Ossian—you're not absurd enough to say that, I hope?' said the Antiquary, his brow darkening with wrath.

"But Hector stoutly abode the storm; like many a sturdy Celt, he imagined the honour of his country and native language connected with the authenticity of these popular poems, and would have fought knee-deep, or forfeited life and land, rather than have given up a line of them. He therefore undauntedly maintained that Rory M'Alpin could repeat the whole book from one end to another; and it was only upon cross-examination that he explained an assertion so general, by adding, 'At least, if he was allowed whisky enough, he could repeat as long as anybody would hearken to him.'

"'Ay, ay,' said the Antiquary; 'and that, I suppose, was not very long.'"

The two kinsmen continue the debate, both becoming animated. Mr. Oldbuck demands that

his nephew should translate to him one of Rory M'Alpin's ditties.

"'I shall prove a wretched interpreter,' said M'Intyre, running over the original, well garnished with *aghes*, *aughs*, and *oughs*, and similar gutturals, and then coughing and hawking as if the translation stuck in his throat. At length, having premised that the poem was a dialogue between the poet Oisin, or Ossian, and Patrick, the tutelar Saint of Ireland, and that it was difficult, if not impossible, to render the exquisite felicity of the first two or three lines, he said the sense was to this purpose:

"Patrick the psalm-singer,
Since you will not listen to one of my stories,
Though you never heard it before,
I am sorry to tell you
You are little better than an ass——"

"'Good! good!' exclaimed the Antiquary; 'but go on. Why, this is, after all, the most admirable fooling—I daresay the poet was very right. What says the Saint?'

"'He replies in character,' said M'Intyre; 'but you should hear M'Alpin sing the original. The speeches of Ossian come in upon a strong deep bass—those of Patrick are upon a tenor key.'[1]

"'Like M'Alpin's drone and small pipes, I suppose,' said Oldbuck. 'Well? Pray, go on.'

[1] "The dialogue between St. Patrick and Ossian—of which there is, in most of the poems, either more or less—is quite dramatic in its form. Even the reciters of the present day appear to feel this, and I have heard the censorious self-satisfied tone of Patrick, and the querulous vindictive whine of the half-starved old man, reproduced with considerable humour by a reciter."—Douglas Hyde's *Literary History of Ireland*, p. 511.

"'Well, then, Patrick replies to Ossian:

"Upon my word, son of Fingal,
While I am warbling the psalms,
The clamour of your old women's tales
Disturbs my devotional exercises."[1]

"'Excellent!—why, this is better and better. I hope Saint Patrick sung better than Blattergowl's precentor, or it would be hang-choice between the poet and psalmist. But what I admire is the courtesy of these two eminent persons towards each other. It is a pity there should not be a word of this in Macpherson's translation.'

"'If you are sure of that,' said M'Intyre gravely, 'he must have taken very unwarrantable liberties with his original.'"

If Macpherson had indeed taken such liberties, one course remained to Celtic scholars,—to drop him altogether, return to the original sources in Highland tradition, and edit the Ossianic poems afresh on a new basis. Celtic poetry, Scott wrote in his letter to Miss Seward, contained much which was worthy of preservation. In searching out the genuine records of the Celtic Muse, and preserving them from oblivion, with all the curious information which they must doubtless contain, Highland antiquaries would merit better of their country than by confining their researches to the fantastic pursuit of a chimera.

But even while Scott was thus writing, another

[1] Captain M'Intyre's quotations are from the exordium to the ballad of *Magnus*. *Cf.* J. G. Campbell's *Fians*, p. 106.

attempt to vindicate Macpherson was in active progress. The Gaelic version of *Ossian*, which had been kept so long in obscurity, was about to be published; and its appearance would afford a crucial test which both sides might welcome. The Highland Society of London, led by Sir John Sinclair, an energetic baronet of the North, had obtained the papers and controlled the enterprise. In 1807 the Gaelic *Ossian* appeared in three volumes, whose creamy paper, exquisite type and stout leather binding seemed worthy of such a monument. A translation into Latin confronted the Gaelic on each page.

What was this mysterious original, and what was its value? To answer these questions we must return for a brief period to the time when James Macpherson was still active in sublunary affairs.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GAELIC TEXT

WHEN Macpherson declared that he had translated the Gaelic *Ossian* as he found it, and had placed the poems before the reader as they came into his hands, the arrangement of words in the original language having been imitated, and the peculiarities of the Gaelic style preserved, he evidently claimed to have in his possession a Gaelic text as complete and full as the English, parallel to it poem by poem and line by line. As we have seen, he wrote in 1762 that there was a design on foot to publish this original as soon as he should have leisure to transcribe it for the press, and that, if this publication should not take place, copies would then be deposited in one of the public libraries, "to prevent so ancient a monument of genius from being lost."

To descant on the completeness of his Gaelic and the literal exactness of his translation was easy, and at first threw a certain colour of reality about his works. But when opposition had begun, these assurances placed him in some embarrassment. For it is now known that he had no such Gaelic text, and did not confute his critics by its production because he could not.

From this situation there was but one way of escape,—the construction of a new body of Gaelic poetry by translating from the printed English, and its ultimate exhibition as the missing Celtic original. At what time Macpherson set about this work, and what collaborators lent him assistance, it is impossible to tell with precision. The undertaking had been begun as early as 1763, when a Gaelic version of the Seventh Book of *Temora* was published, "for the satisfaction of those who doubt the authenticity of Ossian's poems." During the years that followed, other portions fitfully appeared. Shaw obtained a number of lines which had been given to one of the Lords of Session, and published them in his first book. Other extracts found their way about in manuscript. But whatever progress Macpherson may have made, the Gaelic *Ossian* still remained incomplete. Probably he himself had become weary of it. He was now living in London where opportunities for Gaelic study were scarce, and his mind was occupied with political affairs and money-making. The enterprise seems to have been abandoned for a time, and the parts of the Gaelic version which he had done lay in an old box in a lumber room. And while Macpherson had become absorbed in other business, public interest in the dispute had declined; there seemed a likelihood that it would lapse altogether; and Macpherson's laborious and irksome task might be permitted to lapse too.

Things had fallen into this not unsatisfactory state, when he was suddenly recalled to his labours in a manner that was disconcerting enough.

A Highland gentleman in India, Sir John Macgregor Murray, had been prompted by Johnson's attack on the authenticity of *Ossian* to do something for its defence, and therefore drew up a manifesto in which he proposed a subscription to defray the cost of issuing the Gaelic text. The paper might almost have been written by the fiery nephew of Monkbarns. Attempts, said Sir John Murray, had been made to rob ancient Caledonia of the honour which Ossian's poems, those sublime productions of human imagination, reflected upon her, by proving that the noble and heroic sentiments they contained were incompatible with the contemporary circumstances of that country; that the nation was then too barbarous to inspire, and its language too imperfect to express them. These misrepresentations, which had naturally excited a mixture of sorrow and indignation in those who found the source of their noblest ideas thus vilified, could best be answered by enabling Mr. Macpherson to publish the works of Ossian in the sublime original and the ancient character. None but Highlanders were to take part in the movement.[1]

The project was taken up with enthusiasm. A sum of £1000 was collected, which Sir John

[1] Sir John Sinclair's *Dissertation*, 1807, p. ccxvii.

Murray transmitted to John Mackenzie, Secretary to the Highland Society of London, who, as it happened, was one of Macpherson's friends. He sent with it a letter in which a hope was expressed that Mr. Macpherson would manifest a cheerful promptitude in yielding to the calls of his country. The members of the Highland Society then proceeded actively in the matter. After thanking the East Indian subscribers for their exertions, they appointed a committee to wait upon Macpherson, to express their own ardent wishes for the publication, and to ask when it might be looked for.

To Macpherson himself, this sudden and earnest appeal was not altogether welcome. On being asked to receive the deputation, he sent a reply which it is best to quote in full.

"NORFOLK STREET, *July 4th*, 1784.

"MY DEAR SIR,—I received the favour of your letter, dated yesterday; and I am sorry the gentlemen should think of giving themselves the trouble of waiting upon me, as a ceremony of that kind is altogether superfluous and unnecessary. I shall adhere to the promise I made several years ago to a deputation of the same kind; that is, to employ my first leisure time, and a considerable portion of time it *must* be to do it accurately, in arranging and printing the originals of the Poems of Ossian, as they have come to my hands. Funds having been established for the expense, there can be no excuse but want of leisure for not commencing the work in a very few months.

"I am, with my best respects to the gentlemen of the Committee.—My dear Sir,—Your faithful humble servant, JAMES MACPHERSON.

"JOHN MACKENZIE, Esq., &c."[1]

It was not a cordial response; but the deputation was not to be denied. It called upon Macpherson, and Mackenzie was able to report to the East Indian subscribers that he had at last promised to comply with the wishes of his countrymen in all quarters of the world.

This incident did in fact stimulate him to seek out the portions of his "original" which had formerly been written, and to furbish up his neglected Gaelic in hopes of completing it. Mackenzie kept a diary from which one entry has by some chance survived. Here is the portion of it that concerns us:—

"July 22,—Went at one o'clock to Putney Common to Mr. Macpherson. He said he had been searching in an old trunk upstairs, which he had with him in East Florida, for the original of *Berrathon;* that he feared it was in an imperfect condition, and that part of it was wanting, as of *Carthon;* that he had only put together a few lines of it, and those not to his own liking; that he had tired of it after a short sitting."[2]

It would seem then that parts of the Gaelic *Ossian* had been prepared long before, and that portions of those parts had been lost. It appears also that

[1] Sinclair, p. ccxx. [2] Sinclair, p. xc.

Macpherson was endeavouring to fill the gaps; for the last expressions apply more naturally to actual composition than to a search for old papers in old trunks.

The task of writing verses in a language so long disused must have been uncongenial. Nevertheless Macpherson persevered, and a few years later we find that he had come to take a hopeful view of the enterprise. Not only was Ossian going on, he wrote to a friend in the summer of 1789, but much more was being done. The Gaelic language itself was now being established on primitive, clear and unerring principles. It would be shown to be the most regular, the most simple, and the most pleasing of all languages, ancient or modern.[1]

By 1793 the Gaelic version was so far advanced that the manner of its publication began to be discussed. Macpherson was seized by a curious crotchet: he would fain have his Gaelic set up in Greek letters. In the eighteenth century there was no accepted spelling of Scottish Gaelic, and the way seemed open for any whimsical innovation. His friends in Scotland endeavoured to dissuade him, and an active correspondence began, the chief part being taken by the venerable Adam Ferguson, Professor of Moral Philosophy. A letter exists which Macpherson wrote to Adam Ferguson at this period. It contains a passage

[1] Letter to Captain Morrison, Graham's *Essay on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian*, 1807, p. 445.

that cannot be read for the first time, after a study of Ossianic apologetics, without a considerable shock of surprise.

Dr. Blair and several others had recorded their opposition to the plan of using Greek characters for a Gaelic book, and Macpherson, in a tone a little peremptory, was rebutting their objections. One Mr. Davidson, a friend of Ferguson's,[1] had taken part in the debate, producing a suggestion of his own. To Davidson the solution of the matter seemed easy. It was only necessary, he argued, to follow the ancient manuscripts: they, doubtless, contained a system of spelling from which it would be unwise to depart; and their authority should be final. To this Macpherson retorted, abruptly and decisively, that Davidson's plan was impossible, because there were hardly any ancient manuscripts to be followed.

On reading this response, a modern critic rubs his eyes and wonders if he dreams. We have seen Dr. Johnson beaten with the bludgeon of reproof for doubting the existence of Gaelic manuscripts. We have found the laird of Strathmashie asseverating that he saw one in Macpherson's hands, written as far back as the year 1410.[2] Captain Alexander Morrison related that he once had access to

[1] Probably John Davidson, the antiquary, died 1797. A portrait of this gentleman is in Kay's *Caricatures*.

[2] Letter to Dr. Blair, 22nd Oct. 1763, *Highland Society's Report*, App., p. 9.

Macpherson's papers in London, and saw many manuscripts in the old Gaelic character among them. More detailed evidence was given by the Rev. Andrew Gallie. In a letter dated March 12, 1799, he states that Macpherson came to his house in Badenoch, on his return from his explorations in the Western Highlands, bringing the Gaelic books he had discovered. "I remember perfectly," says Mr. Gallie, "that many of those volumes were at the close said to have been collected by Paul MacMhuirich, Bard Clanraonuil,[1] and about the beginning of the fourteenth century" —the time of the battle of Bannockburn. "Mr. Macpherson and I were of opinion that, though the bard collected them, yet they must have been writ by an ecclesiastic, for the character and spelling were most beautiful and correct. Every poem had its first letter of its first word most elegantly flourished and gilded; some red, some yellow, some blue, and some green. The material writ on seemed to be a limber, yet coarse and dark vellum: the volumes were bound in strong parchment: Mr. Macpherson had them from Clanranald.

"At that time I could read the Gaelic characters, though with difficulty, and did often amuse myself with reading here and there in those poems, while Mr. Macpherson was employed on his translation.

[1] The contemporary MacVuirich, Clanranald's bard, on being interrogated, denied that he had an ancestor called Paul.—*Report*, App., p. 279.

At times we differed as to the meaning of certain words in the original."[1]

All this, which Mr. Gallie recalled so distinctly in 1799, Macpherson himself had quite forgotten in 1793. His words are,—"Mr. Davidson writes rationally, but he seems not to know that there is scarce any manuscript to be followed, except, indeed, a very few mutilated ones in a kind of Saxon character, which is as utterly unknown to the Highlanders as either the Greek or Hebrew letters."[2] Macpherson's friends declared that manuscripts were abundant; Macpherson that there were almost none. Gallie binds his books in strong parchment; Macpherson's are mutilated. And while Gallie speaks of Gaelic writing which he and his friend had studied together, Macpherson affirms that the very few manuscripts he had seen were written in Saxon characters, which to Highlanders were quite unintelligible.

The discussion with Adam Ferguson dragged on, but came to little result. Macpherson dallied with his project of using Greek letters, and decided nothing. When he died in 1796, some twelve years had passed since the receipt of the East Indian

[1] *Report*, p. 31.

[2] *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, xxiii., p. 652; Bailey Saunders, p. 294. Macpherson concludes this remarkable letter by exhorting his correspondent not to communicate it to Davidson and Dr. Blair,—"You will easily perceive that this letter is meant only for your own eye; for few men wish to know that they have been so long deceived, on a point which the smallest attention might at once ascertain."

subscription, and the Gaelic *Ossian* was still unpublished. The Indian enthusiasts, now less enthusiastic, there is reason to surmise, threatened to recover the money from his heirs by process of law.[1] Macpherson, however, by his will, had transferred the sum to John Mackenzie, with injunctions that the publication should still be proceeded with. But in a short time Mackenzie also died. His executors had no wish to be burdened with the toils of editorship, and the enterprise appeared to be hopelessly derelict.

It was at this juncture that the Highland Society of London intervened to save the Gaelic epics from the fate that now seemed imminent. All the papers that could be found in the desks of Macpherson and Mackenzie were transferred to them, along, it may be supposed, with the much travelled thousand pounds. The documents were transcribed and, with infinite delay, revised and corrected by several Highland clergymen. Thereafter, when the publication had been completed, they were lost or destroyed; and nothing remained to represent them but the printed pages that were given to the world in 1807. Thus at length the Gaelic version of Macpherson's works—so often discussed and demanded in vain—was made accessible, forty-five years after the first appearance of *Fingal* in English.

The documents by which the problem might be

[1] Sinclair, p. lxxxviii.

finally solved now lay visible and open, but for the greater part of a century the solution was delayed. Not until several generations had passed were they searchingly examined by philologists. There arose, besides, a new mystification by which the old obscurity was made darker than before. Earlier critics, who were acquainted with Gaelic poetry, had declared Macpherson's rendering of the originals to be inaccurate, a wide divergence appearing between them and his English publications. They had the ballads before them, and their criticism is easily understood. But it was now assumed, altogether without reason, that the originals thus spoken of were the Gaelic poems of 1807, derived from Macpherson's receptacles and not to be traced beyond them. All things, it was thought, might be amended by writing a fresh English translation, not of the ballads, but of Macpherson's own Gaelic. Thus pure tradition would be restored, and English readers enabled to taste "the wild-honey flavour of the original," as it has been strangely called. New *Ossians* appeared, translated from the Gaelic of 1807, but endowed with as little authority. Dr. Clerk of Kilmallie published in 1870 an elaborate reprint of the Gaelic version, with his own English on opposite pages. His introduction is clear and temperate, but is not now helpful.

So late as 1881 Principal Shairp deplored that the question was still unsettled. Was it too much

to hope, he asked, that some Gaelic Porson or Bentley might yet arise, who should apply to the documents his best critical acumen, and pronounce a verdict which should be final, as to which of the two—the English or the Gaelic—was the original, which the translation? "If some one were to assert that he had discovered a lost book of Homer, and were to publish it with an English translation, the resources of Greek scholarship are quite competent to settle whether the Greek were authentic or a forgery. Why should not Gaelic scholarship achieve as much?" [1]

Since these words were written, much has changed. Gaelic scholarship has made definite and brilliant advance; and in the last years of the nineteenth century decisions have been arrived at which no one now directly contests. Some of these conclusions, so far as they are open to the English reader, may be stated.

Macpherson's original is incomplete and fragmentary,—a fact of which the significance was long overlooked. There is Gaelic in Sir John Sinclair's volumes to represent only two-thirds of the English *Ossian*. The number of poems, large and small, amounts to twenty-two; of these we have Gaelic for only eleven.[2] What shall be said of the residue? The other eleven poems are found in English alone: it has never been shown that they existed in Gaelic

[1] *Aspects of Poetry*, p. 268.

[2] See Brown's *Memorials of Argyleshire*, p. 238.

of any kind at any time. Among them are the *Songs of Selma*, which Goethe made use of in *Werther*, the *Battle of Lora*, *Oithona*, *Darthula*, in which are some of the most striking passages. They differ in no respect from the others which possess a Gaelic counterpart: all are plainly the works of one hand and one imagination.

A more remarkable circumstance is the complete isolation of the Gaelic of 1807 from the whole body of traditional Gaelic poetry. During his minute researches in the Highlands, J. F. Campbell failed to find a trace of it in popular recitation: it was unheard of and unknown.[1] Two long epics familiar to thousands over the North and West of Scotland, could not have vanished utterly in a hundred years. If they had been handed down by tradition unimpaired—six books of one and eight of the other—from the third century to the eighteenth, they might well have lasted one century more. However much might have been lost, at least parts, fragments, lines, would still have survived. Campbell found nothing. There was, however, abundance of traditional poetry still extant, much of it of high antiquity. After collating all the Ossianic poems that could be got,—those derived from the *Dean of Lismore's Book*, about twenty collections made during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and those

[1] A countryman to whom Campbell read parts of it shook his head and said, "This is not the old stuff."

obtained orally by his own personal search—Campbell estimated that he had in his hands about 54,000 lines of Gaelic verse. Turning to Macpherson, he found there Gaelic verse to the amount of 10,232 lines. He compared them with the mass of poetry from other sources that was certainly genuine, and saw that the two works were entirely different. Campbell could not discover so much as a line that was common to both : one such line seems the utmost that later inspection has brought to view.

But the final and most fatal test applied to Macpherson has been the examination of his vocabulary and syntax. It could not be expected that the language should be ancient. Even had the poems been first composed in a remote age, they could hardly have come down to us in an archaic form, if their transmission depended on oral tradition alone. Each generation would have altered the language to suit itself, and the poems would have been recited at last by eighteenth-century Highlanders in a diction which was comparatively modern. It would, however, have been good Gaelic, following the usages of the language, and free from marked English influence. The charge brought against Macpherson's is simply that it is bad,—such a dialect as might have been written at Putney by a Highlander who had long lost touch of his native idiom.

Campbell declared some parts of the Gaelic

Ossian to be so full of borrowed English constructions that, if Anglicisms were to be marked, it would be necessary to mark the whole text. Even the earliest fragments of Macpherson's "original," produced when he had just left Scotland, were far from faultless. The version of the Seventh Book of *Temora*, which he printed as a specimen of the documents he had in reserve, is condemned outright :—

"We can compare Macpherson's own printed unrevised sample of 1763 with collections written in 1756 and 1774, with current oral tradition, with manuscripts of 1530, with other manuscripts, with the earliest printed Gaelic book, and with the oldest Celtic manuscripts and glosses discovered by modern students. Having gone as far as he can with the best intentions, we hold that an unprejudiced Celtic scholar must admit that Macpherson's specimen is unique. It is neither ancient nor modern, Scotch nor Irish, as language. . . . The sample stands quite alone, and it looks fearfully like something unreal, — say an English tourist in his first kilt."[1]

Hector MacLean is equally decided. He finds that Gaelic idiom is violated, inversions such as occur in English poetry abound, and words are so wrenched out of their usual meaning as to be unintelligible to Highlanders.

"The difficulty of understanding the epic poems does not lie in ancient forms of speech, or in old obsolete words, but in the strange liberty that is

[1] Review of Clerk's *Ossian*, *The Times*, April 15, 1871.

taken with words by using them in quite a new way, and in arranging them in a manner that is incomprehensible to those whose native language the Gaelic is, unless they happen to know English, or some classical tongue. In many lines the words only are Gaelic; the structure has nothing to do with that language. The sentences may be English, or Latin, or Greek, may, in fact, be specimens of a new universal language, but they are not Gaelic. . . . Some lines prove to be nonsense when closely examined. Bad grammar and violated idiom abound everywhere. Adjectives of more than one syllable are placed before substantives, which is much the same as if we were to say in English, 'There is a horse beautiful;' 'O what a house elegant!'"[1]

An Irish scholar, William Maunsell Hennessy, wrote in 1871,—"As regards the Gaelic text itself, it would be difficult to conceive anything more deplorably corrupt."[2]

In more recent years the centre of discussion has been established at Inverness, the chief town of the Highlands. It is in publications issued there that the latest and most destructive criticisms of Macpherson have appeared. Dr. MacBain, in the *Celtic Magazine*,[3] tersely reviews the whole matter. His verdict on Macpherson's Gaelic is as unfavourable as Campbell's, MacLean's, and Hennessy's. He finds that the boldest liberties have been taken with the grammar and rhetoric of the language.

[1] *Pop. Tales of the West Highlands*, iv. 159.
[2] *Academy*, August 15, 1871.
[3] February, March, April, 1887.

Nouns are used as adjectives, and adjectives as nouns; certain words are employed in different passages in entirely opposite meanings, only one of which is known in genuine Gaelic; well-known words appear with a meaning peculiar to Macpherson himself. Inversions, especially the placing of the adjective before the noun instead of after it, are common: they are caused by thinking in the English language and translating from it. There are also great numbers of borrowed words, and an utter disregard of inflection. "We may accept it as fairly true," concludes Dr. MacBain, "that Macpherson has some error of grammar, idiom or composition on the average in every twenty or twenty-five lines." Many of his sentences are absolutely meaningless, and there are whole passages full of error and obscurity.

An even more penetrating and exhaustive discussion appeared at Inverness only five years ago. Its author, Dr. Ludwig Christian Stern, is a Celticist of Berlin; but his study, *Die Ossianischen Heldenlieder*,[1] was translated for the Gaelic Society of Inverness, read before it in 1898, and included in a volume of *Transactions*, published in 1900, with the Society's authority. "Never before has the Ossianic question been handled so concisely, so completely, and in so scholarly a way as by Dr. Stern," writes the editor of the book. It is the last

[1] First published, 1895, in the *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteraturgeschichte.*

word of Celtic research, and unites two sources of authority,—the thoroughness of the German philologist and the approval of those most competent to speak for Gaelic scholarship in Scotland.

Dr. Stern finds that the language alone gives ample proof that Macpherson's epics are spurious. It is a jargon deviating strangely from all real Gaelic, conspicuously wanting in the idioms of the latter, and bristling with Anglicisms which a Highlander can fall into only when he has half forgotten his native tongue. All the rules of syntax are violated, and inversions are as common as if the language recognised no rules for the order of words in a sentence. Words are used with a significance which is altogether unwarranted, and which can be divined only from the English version. The Gaelic, indeed, has been rendered from the English quite recklessly, and with a slavish literalness.

"So foreign is this Gaelic *Ossian* to the native popular ballads that all the efforts made to circulate and popularise it among the Scottish Highlands were quite unsuccessful, though a large edition was gratuitously distributed in 1818, and a cheap pocket edition appeared in 1857. From this we must conclude that in the Highlands and Islands the *Ossian* of Macpherson was quite unknown; yet all the while the common people of these districts preserved with touching fervour the cherished old material of the genuine 'Ossianic' folk-poetry. A more minute study of the text of the Gaelic *Ossian* leaves not the least room for

doubt that it was translated from the English original, and that the Gaelic of 1807, like the earlier attempts in the same line, was merely designed to blind the world to the actual truth that the *Poems of Ossian* were fabricated by Macpherson's own hand. With this forgery of the 'originals' the monstrous imposture was complete, and no palliation of the contemptible deed, or extenuation of the mendacious verbosity with which it was perpetrated, is now any longer permissible."

If Johnson and Laing chastised Macpherson with whips, he has now been chastised with scorpions. It is against Dr. MacBain and Dr. Stern, not against the critics of the eighteenth century, that he should be defended, if apologists continue to be found.

With this concurrence of views, reinforced as it has been by Professor MacKinnon of Edinburgh University, and Dr. Magnus Maclean of Glasgow, the controversy concerning the authenticity of *Ossian* is now virtually decided. Only one subject remains to be dealt with before we part from it. What are the moral aspects of the transaction we have reviewed, and what judgment do they enable us to pass on the character of the principal actor? Dr. Stern has handled him with severity enough. Is there, after all, anything that may be fairly pleaded on the other side?

It is not hard to understand the indignation of the Celtic specialists. Macpherson has sown tares in their corn and weeds in their garden. He has

put sham antiquities in the place of true ones, encumbered and embarrassed the work of research. Yet 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. Literary material which was not the work of contemporaries, was common property: any one might remould it at will. When Percy published his old English ballads, he trimmed and embellished with a lavish hand. Even Shakespeare did not escape. His finest plays were put upon the stage in garbled versions and preposterous recasts. In place of *King Lear* there was presented an amended drama with alterations by Nahum Tate; Shakespeare's conclusion being set aside for an ending in which virtue was rewarded by the triumph of Cordelia, the restoration of the old king to his throne, and her own happy marriage with Edgar. 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.

In using the ballads as a basis for his own compositions, Macpherson was within his rights as an

eighteenth-century poet. But the exhibition of his works as genuine antiques, fifteen centuries old, and the unreal pretensions which he wrapped about them, are a different matter. Perhaps nothing else is so likely to harden one's heart against him as a careful study of his own prefaces and notes. The poor Ossianic ballads, and indeed all Highland poetry but his own, are rarely mentioned without a sneer. They are "those trivial compositions which the Irish bards forged under the name of Ossian,"—"puerile and despicable fictions" —"trivial and dull to the last degree." Such as they are, they were his own original materials. Yet this intrepid man seizes every occasion to laud the works of the real Ossian,—himself. *Fingal* is truly epic. "The characters are strongly marked, and the sentiments breathe heroism." *Temora* has all the grand essentials of epic poetry. "Unity of time, place and action is preserved throughout. The poem opens in the midst of things; what is necessary of preceding transactions to be known, is introduced by episodes afterwards; not formally brought in, but seemingly rising immediately from the situation of affairs. The circumstances are grand, and the diction animated; neither descending into a cold meanness, nor swelling into ridiculous bombast."

Macpherson, it has been said, admitted that he was himself the editor of *Ossian;* he found the poems in detached fragments, and pieced them

together according to his fancy. But here he assigns *Temora* as a structural whole to Ossian alone: it was Ossian, not Macpherson, that observed the unities and introduced the episodes aright. Macpherson was haunted by these epic notions, and compared his own works with the most famous heroic poems in literature. An epic poem, as the best critics allowed, ought to end happily; but Homer, Virgil and Milton all at the conclusion throw a melancholy damp on the mind. *Fingal*, however, ends on a cheerful note. Its last words are,—"We rose on the wave with songs, and rushed with joy through the foam of the sea." The counsel of Gaul never to attack a sleeping foe is "much more noble, and more agreeable to true heroism, than the behaviour of Ulysses and Diomed in the *Iliad*, or that of Nisus and Euryalus in the *Æneid*." The Caledonian warriors display a loftiness of spirit which is constantly dwelt on: their bravery is "mixed with incomparably generous actions and sentiments." "To mourn over the fall of their enemies was a practice universal among Ossian's heroes. This is more agreeable to humanity than the shameful insulting of the dead so common in Homer, and after him servilely copied by all his imitators, the humane Virgil not excepted." Cathmor was hospitable but averse to praise, and dwelt in a wood to escape it,—"which is still a higher degree of generosity than that of Axylus in Homer,"—a

somewhat quaint commendation. These eulogies were carried so far that Macpherson began to find them dangerous, and disclaimed the intention of bringing Ossian into rivalry with the great names of Greece and Rome. "The extensive field of renown affords ample room to all the poetical merit which has yet appeared in the world, without overturning the character of one poet to raise that of another on its ruins. Had Ossian even superior merit to Homer and Virgil, a certain partiality, arising from the fame deservedly bestowed upon them by the sanction of so many ages, would make us overlook it and give them the preference."

All this makes an impression which is almost painful. Its crudeness and clumsiness remind us vividly that the writer was still young, and had come but lately into the great world of men and things. But when we remember that the poems Macpherson thus annotated were in truth and reality his own, what shall be said of the strategy he betrays? It was while inditing these notes that he sent the letters which Gray, with the best will to believe him, found to be "ill wrote, ill reasoned, unsatisfactory, calculated (one would imagine) to deceive one, and yet not cunning enough to do it cleverly."

Could we believe that Macpherson was honest at first, we might regret and extenuate his later falling away. Criticism has depicted the poor

young Highlander exhibiting to the learned men of Edinburgh, unaltered and undistorted, the fragments of Celtic poetry which he had brought from his native village, almost startled by their demand for the ampler monuments their fancy had conjured up, driven with reluctance and half unconsciously into fabrication by the eagerness of Home and Blair. Unhappily for this plea, it is now established that Macpherson invented and romanced from the beginning: the fragments were as much his own as the epics: the first poem which he gave to Home at Moffat is the most certainly spurious of all. In his dealings with his Edinburgh patrons he was never otherwise than disingenuous. To understand these youthful transactions, we must use our knowledge of his nature when it had reached maturity and was more plainly manifested. We may then find in his intercourse with Blair and Home some trace of that insight into character and occasion, quick adaptability, and shrewd self-confidence, by which in later life he amassed a fortune and, having been born in poverty, died the possessor of wealth and lands.

APPENDIX

THE ADDRESS TO THE SUN

In almost every defence of *Ossian* during the last century something is said of the famous Address to the Sun in *Carthon*, "O thou that rollest above, round as the shield of my fathers!"[1] A version of this Address in Gaelic rhyme—ostensibly the original—was placed in the hands of the Highland Society's Committee. The evidence in its favour would seem to prove it an ancient vernacular fragment, genuine beyond dispute, and as such it was accepted; but some doubt has always been felt.

The earliest date to which the Gaelic text can be certainly traced is 1780–81. We find it then in London, of all places in the world, where it lies in the desk of James Macpherson.

Among Macpherson's friends was a certain Alexander Morrison, who served during the American War as captain in a body of loyalist troops. Captain Morrison, when in England, assisted Macpherson in arranging his papers; and among them he found the Gaelic version of the Address to the Sun.[2] He transcribed the lines, and afterwards gave away copies to his friends in Scotland: one such copy, we know, was sent to Sir James Foulis of Colinton, a Lowland baronet who had devoted himself

[1] *Cf. supra*, p. 10. [2] *Highland Society's Report*, App., p. 175.

to Gaelic studies; another to the Rev. John Mackinnon, minister of Glendaruel in Argyllshire. In a letter written long afterwards Captain Morrison says:—

"When writing Ossian's poems with James Macpherson at London, Sir James Foulis wrote me to send him the Address to the Sun, which I did: and that was not the one he wanted. He wrote the poem it was in, and then I sent it to him. He knew more of the Gaelic than James Macpherson, or any man I ever saw. . . . I wrote most part of Ossian's works with Mr. Macpherson before I went for my family to America in 1781."[1]

There are in fact two Addresses to the Sun in *Ossian*, —that in *Carthon*, and another in *Carric-thura*, which begins,—"Hast thou left thy blue course in heaven, golden-haired son of the sky!" These appear to be the passages given in Gaelic to Sir James Foulis. Mackinnon of Glendaruel received his copy of the Address in *Carthon* about the same date. He afterwards communicated it to Lord Bannatyne.[2] Thus we have in 1781 two Scottish gentlemen possessed of copies of the Gaelic Address, one of whom at least is ready to impart it to others. Morrison may have given away other copies, so may Mackinnon, so may Sir James Foulis of Colinton. A considerable circulation in manuscript is not unlikely.

Twenty years now pass by. The Highland Society begins its investigation, and a new character comes on the stage: the Rev. James M'Diarmid, minister of Weem. The son of this gentleman, John M'Diarmid, a journalist,[3] sent to the Society the two Sun poems in Gaelic, along with a letter he had received from his father:—

---

[1] Brewster's *Edinburgh Encyclopædia*, 1830, xvi. 181.

[2] *Highland Society's Report*, App., p. 176.

[3] *Cf. Dictionary of National Biography*, xxxv. 23.

"WEEM, *April 9th*, 1801.

"Inclosed you have a translation of the Gaelic pieces which I sent you last week. It is as literal as possible. . . .

"I got the copy of these poems, about thirty years ago, from an old man in Glenlyon. I took it, and several other fragments, now I fear irrecoverably lost, from the man's mouth. He had learnt them in his youth from people in the same glen, which must have been long before Macpherson was born."

A precise and definite statement, not to be rejected without good cause. On another occasion in 1801 M'Diarmid gave the name of the old man of Glenlyon as Duncan Robertson. But this time the poems had been obtained, not thirty, but "upwards of forty" years earlier.[1] The date given elsewhere by the younger M'Diarmid is 1765.

A neighbour of M'Diarmid's, the Rev. Alexander Irvine of Kinloch-Rannoch, a young and able minister, assisted the Highland Society in its inquiries. Hearing that Captain Morrison was still alive at Greenock, he journeyed thither, made his acquaintance, and received from him Gaelic copies of the Address in *Carthon* and the Address in *Carric-thura*. On his return to Perthshire, Irvine visited the minister of Weem, who imparted to him *his* copies of the same poems, derived from the old man of Glenlyon. Irvine compared them with Morrison's, and found that the two texts "agreed almost verbatim." The similarity is so striking and perfect that it can only be accounted for by a common written source.

If in these perplexities we resort to internal evidence and examine the poems themselves, we shall find the

[1] *Leabhar na Feinne*, p. 216.

gravest reasons for doubting their genuineness. They bear about them every mark of the eighteenth century. It was an age of personification, of declamation, of apostrophe. The poetry it produced abounds in Addresses,—to the Muse, to the Stars, to Freedom, to Adversity, and bristles with "O thou!" and "O ye!" Nothing is spoken *about* if it can be spoken *to*: a mannerism which *Ossian* illustrates, and which is abundantly evident in Pope, Thomson, Collins, Gray. In the *Night Thoughts* we shall find parallels to the Ossianic addresses, passages of no little beauty:—

"O majestic Night!
Nature's great ancestor! Day's elder-born!
And fated to survive the transient sun!
By mortals and immortals seen with awe!
A starry crown thy raven brow adorns,
An azure zone thy waist; clouds, in heaven's loom
Wrought through varieties of shape and shade,
In ample folds of drapery divine,
Thy flowing mantle form; and, heaven throughout,
Voluminously pour thy pompous train."

It is the rhetoric of poetry, not written at every time, but in its period admirable. We are still in the same school and age when we turn to the addresses in Byron,—that to Ocean in *Childe Harold*, or to the Sun in *Manfred*.

"Most glorious Orb! that wert a worship, ere
The mystery of thy making was reveal'd!
Thou earliest minister of the Almighty,
Which gladden'd, on their mountain tops, the hearts
Of the Chaldean shepherds, till they pour'd
Themselves in orisons! Thou material God!
And representative of the Unknown—
Who chose thee for his shadow! Thou chief star!
Centre of many stars!"

The example of Milton did much to plant this love of invocation in English poetry, and to maintain it there for a century and a half. Satan's address to the Sun in *Paradise Lost*—

"O thou that with surpassing glory crowned"—

may have suggested Macpherson's "O thou that rollest above." The resemblance has often been observed. It was first pointed out, in a note to the *Fingal* of 1762, by Macpherson himself.

But such measured eloquence is not to be looked for in popular ballads and peasant tales. Ossian's Addresses to the Sun, the Moon, and the Evening Star (placed at the opening of certain poems, as Milton's books begin with addresses to the Heavenly Muse, to Light, to Urania) are more justly open to doubt, when antiquity is in question, than any other parts of the volume. Only the most convincing evidence could make us believe that they were ever declaimed in a Highland cottage.

In the Gaelic version the acuteness of J. F. Campbell[1] detected another difficulty, which has been considered decisive. *Grian*, the Gaelic for *sun*, is a feminine noun, like the German *Sonne*, but in these dubious passages, and everywhere in Macpherson, *Grian* is made masculine. In the *Carric-thura* Address the sun even becomes "Golden-haired *son* of the sky." Such a personification seems natural in English, but in Gaelic almost impossible. The instinct of the poet would rather have led him, had the Gaelic been the original, to personify a feminine noun as a female. It is so in German. Goethe in *Faust* has the line, in the description of a sunset—

"Doch scheint die Göttin endlich wegzusinken."

[1] *Ibid.*

And Gerhart Hauptmann in *Die Versunkene Glocke* makes the sun a primal mother, on the milk of whose breasts all are fostered,—

> "Urmutter Sonne! dein und meine Kinder,
> Durch deiner Brüste Milch emporgesäugt—"

The incongruity of a masculine sun struck the first German translator of *Ossian*, Denis, who brought his text into harmony with German idiom by converting "Son of the sky" into "Tochter des Himmels." We should have looked to find "Daughter of the sky," if the Gaelic had first been written; for it is hard to imagine that a Gaelic poet who was ignorant of English thus confused the genders of his mother-tongue.

When testimony conflicts, internal evidence must outweigh external, however well attested the latter may appear. We cannot but conclude therefore that M'Diarmid's statement is unworthy of trust. His copy of the poems seems to have been derived, through some channel which we cannot now identify, from the distribution which was begun by the operations of Captain Morrison. The younger M'Diarmid, in the recklessness of dispute, called Morrison himself as a witness to their antiquity; stating that he had obtained the Address to the Sun in 1763 from an aged reciter—a duplicate of the old man of Glenlyon, located this time in the Isle of Skye—and had given the copy thus procured to Mr. Irvine of Kinloch-Rannoch.[1] But Irvine denied all knowledge of this story;[2] and it is contradicted by Morrison's declaration that he got the Address among James Macpherson's original papers. The obliteration of this old man of Skye must increase our distrust of the Glenlyon patriarch.

[1] *Literary Journal*, August 1804, p. 126. [2] Laing, i. xxxix.

Another circumstance throws further doubt on the evidence of the M'Diarmids. They sent to the Highland Society a third Gaelic poem, called the *Bed of Gaul*, assigned also to oral tradition: it had been transmitted by "a person in Argyllshire who had heard it in his youth." But the *Bed of Gaul* had already been in print for more than twenty years. It is found in a collection of poems published by Dr. John Smith in 1780, and now believed by every one to have been the work of that divine. M'Diarmid averred that in his younger days he had gathered Highland poetry, but that in course of time, as his interest slackened, all his pieces had been lost, with a few exceptions. The exceptions are Dr. Smith's printed poem and the two fragments of *Ossian* which Macpherson's friend had put into currency long before among lovers of Gaelic verse.

INDEX

THE END

Printed by BALLANTYNE, HANSON & Co.
Edinburgh & London

Mr. DAVID NUTT'S

PUBLICATIONS

BELLES LETTRES, FICTION, POETRY, ILLUSTRATED GIFT BOOKS, &c.

Contents

The Phœnix Library

A Collection of Standard Novels by the Best Writers of France, Italy, Germany, &c.

Handsomely printed on featherweight paper in clear, attractive type. Bound in art linen. Each 6s.

The Colonel

A Military Romance. Translated from the Italian of Captain OLIVERI SANGIACOMO by E. SPENDER. (Phœnix Library, Vol. I.) Crown 8vo, 368 pages. In effectively designed cloth cover.

*** A tragic story of youthful sin and retribution, written by a distinguished Italian Officer. It gives a vivid description of the unrest of which recent scandals have revealed the existence in all European armies.

To-Day.—"If all the novels in the 'Phœnix Library' come up to the level of the first book in the series, Mr. David Nutt, the publisher, will have conferred a great boon on the reading public. . . . No more captivating initial volume could have been chosen than 'The Colonel.'"

Outlook.—"An intensely tragic military romance."

Daily Chronicle.—"Written by a man who thoroughly knows his subject."

Echo.—"A wonderful novel."

The Times.—"To those who wish to learn something about the Italian Tommy Atkins and his officers it is to be strongly recommended. . . . The translation is excellent."

Vol. II. The House on the Hill

Being a translation of *L'enfant à la Balustrade*, by RÉNÉ BOYLESVE. Translated by JANE HUTCHISON.

*** A charming study, full of delicate and sympathetic humour, of life in a small French country town almost as conservative in its ideas as CRANFORD itself.

Great Thoughts.—"A book Ruskin would have loved."

Scotsman.—"For sheer grace there are no story-writers that can compare with the French; and when, as in the case of M. Boylesve's story of French country life, there is also a transparent innocence and a profound worldly-wisdom, the result is charming indeed."

Manchester Guardian.—"Of the many French novels which deal with provincial life, 'The House on the Hill' is one of the most delicate and charming. . . . It is not often that a French novel is chosen for translation because of its complete suitability to English readers, and therefore this one is all the more to be welcomed."

St. James's Gazette.—"Should be very welcome to English readers. . . . The translation is capitally done."

Vol. III. Divorce

Being a translation of *Un Divorce*, by PAUL BOURGET, Member of the French Academy. Translated by E. L. CHARLWORD.

*** A study of divorce conceived in a thoroughly orthodox spirit, whilst at the same time doing full justice to the representatives of modern ideas.

Scotsman.—"A story of fascinating and powerful interest. The characters are drawn with strong and subtle realism; the action of the drama is rapid, and never allows the attention to lag. . . . The moral tragedy is evolved with consummate art, and the brilliant delineation of the characters and the eternal human interest of the general problems that underlie the actual story justify the opinion that it is one of the most powerful works of fiction that France has of late produced."

To-Day.—"Though M. Bourget takes his place very definitely with the Catholic Church, and is very severe on recent French Governments, he is still a good enough artist to present the emotions and ideals of his characters with an impartial justice. . . . This powerful novel of his will, I am sure, attract a wide public among the more intelligent of English readers."

Bloomsbury

A Story of Modern London. By C. F. KEARY, Author of *The Two Lancrofts*, *Herbert Vanlennert*, *Un Mariage de Convenance*, &c. Crown 8vo. Cloth. 6s.

Athenæum.—"The scene is laid almost exclusively in the quarter of London indicated by the title. But for contrast this microcosm is peopled with a great variety of intellectual types, suggestive of the sects and 'isms' among which almost all societies are nowadays partitioned."

To Windward

The Story of a Stormy Course. A Novel of Modern New York. By H. C. ROWLAND, Author of *Sea Scamps*. Frontispiece in Colour by CHARLOTTE WEBER. Crown 8vo, 359 pp. Cloth. 6s.

The Three-Cornered Hat

(El Sombrero de los Picos), by PEDRO ALARCON. Translated from the Spanish by LADY GOODENOUGH. Fcap. 8vo. Cloth. **2s. 6d.**

*** One of the most vivacious and characteristic examples of the art of Alarcon, the gayest and liveliest Spanish story-teller of the last half-century.

Works of Miss FIONA MACLEOD

The Sin Eater, and other Tales

Crown 8vo. 294 pp. Cloth. Net, 3s. 6d.

The Washer of the Ford, and other Legendary Moralities

Crown 8vo. 320 pp. Cloth. Net, 3s. 6d.

Shorter Stories:

Cheap re-issue in 3 vols. Crown 8vo. Sewed. Each net, 1s. 6d., or together, net, 3s.

I. Spiritual Tales. II. Barbaric Tales. III. Tragic Romances

*** Miss Fiona Macleod has been universally recognised as the writer of most individual and characteristic genius, with the exception of Mr. Yeats, which the Neo-Celtic literary movement has produced. She interprets with unrivalled charm and intensity one side of the melancholy, mystic, passionately spiritual genius of the Gael.

Works of
WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY

Mr. Henley's poems were originally issued in two collections: "A Book of Verses," 1888; "The Song of the Sword," 1892. These are still on sale: In attractively printed and bound Pocket Volumes at 2s. 6d. net each.

A Book of Verses

Fifth Edition. 16mo. 1897. xvi–175 pp.

London Voluntaries and other Verses

Second Edition. 16mo. 1893. xii–130 pp.

In 1896 the matter of these two Volumes, with additions, omissions, and changes, was collected into one demy 8vo volume:

Poems

(Comprising "A Book of Verses" and "London Voluntaries," in one volume). Small demy 8vo. 1904. Seventh Edition. With Photogravure of the author's bust, by RODIN. Cloth, **6s.**

In 1900 appeared

For England's Sake

Verses and Songs in Time of War. Small 4to. 1900. Sewed. **1s.**

A portion of which is reprinted in

Hawthorn and Lavender, a Lyric Sequence; and other Poems

Second Edition. Demy 8vo. 1901. 128 pp. Cloth, top gilt. **6s.**

This Volume is printed in the same type and on the same paper as "Poems," and is bound uniformly, so that these two volumes contain the pick of Mr. Henley's poetical output, in the form finally decided upon by him, with the exception of his latest work issued just before his death:

A Song of Speed

Small 4to. 1903. Sewed. **1s.**

Mr. Henley's critical work is contained in the following volumes:

Views and Reviews

Essays in Appreciation. 16mo. Cloth, top gilt.

Vol. I. Literature: Second Edition. 1892. 16mo. xii–228 pp. Net **5s.**

Vol. II. Art: 1902. 16mo. xvi–175 pp. Net **5s.**

Poet-Lore—"To conquer a new province for the poetry of all the world, and to free English verse from the trammels —if such they be—of rhyme, these were the achievements of William Ernest Henley by which he will be principally known when the history of English literature of the last decade is written. . . . So we leave him, this singer of the personal note, this innovator who must henceforth have a place in England's pantheon as an author of genuine poetry and beautiful prose."

Town and Country Poems

By A. E. J. LEGGE. Crown 8vo. 1901. 101 pp. Cloth, top gilt, uncut. Net **3s. 6d.**

A Masque of Shadows

By A. E. J. LEGGE. 12mo. 1902. 123 pp. Cloth. Net **3s. 6d.**

Secret Nights

Poems. By J. A. NICKLIN. 16mo. Printed at the Constable Press on hand-made paper, and bound in parchment gilt, with gilt top, **2s. 6d.** net.

Scotsman.—"A genuine poet."

Pall Mall Gazette.—"Wins praise for its cultivation, its thoughtfulness, its austerity, its artistic exclusiveness and inclusiveness. And there is passion at the heart of it."

Mister Dormouse and other Poems for Children

By GERALDINE M. SEYMOUR. Square demy 8vo. 1905. Art boards. **2s. 6d.**

The Burden of Demos and other Verses

By MARY ALICE VIALLS. Crown 8vo. 1905. Wrapper. **1s.**

"The Ideal Gift Books of the Season."

Fairy Tales of the British Empire

Collected and Edited by JOSEPH JACOBS.
Illustrated by J. D. BATTEN.

Mr. JACOBS' Fairy Tales, which have been appearing since 1890, have won immediate and widespread acceptance. The choice of matter, the simplicity and suitable character of the language of the text, the beauty, humour, and charm of Mr. Batten's Illustrations, and the large and legible type, have commended the series alike to children and to lovers of art; whilst the prefaces and elaborate notes, parallels, and references added by the Editor, have made them indispensable to the increasingly large portion of the public interested in the history and archæology of popular fiction.

"Fairy Tales of the British Empire" are to be had in two forms, at 3s. 6d. and at 6s. a volume.

In so far as Tales and Illustrations are concerned, the 3s. 6d. Edition is the same as the original 6s. one, but the Editor's Prefaces, Notes, Parallels, and References are omitted.

English Fairy Tales

Complete Edition, xvi–255 pages, 9 full-page Plates, and numerous Illustrations in the text. Designed Cloth Cover, Uncut or Gilt Edges. **6s.**

The same. *Children's* Edition, viii–227 pages, 7 full-page Plates, and numerous Illustrations in text. Cloth. Cut. **3s. 6d.**

More English Fairy Tales

Complete Edition, xvi–243 pages, 8 full-page Plates, and numerous Illustrations in text. Designed Cloth Cover, Uncut or Gilt Edges. **6s.**

The same. *Children's* Edition, viii–214 pages, 7 full-page Plates, and numerous Illustrations in text. Cloth, Cut. **3s. 6d.**

Celtic Fairy Tales

Complete Edition, xvi–274 pages, 8 full-page Plates, numerous Illustrations in text. Designed Cloth Cover, Uncut or Gilt Edges. **6s.**

The same. *Children's* Edition, viii–236 pages, 7 full-page Plates and numerous Illustrations in text. Cloth, Cut. **3s. 6d.**

More Celtic Fairy Tales

Complete Edition, xvi–234 pages, 8 full-page Plates, numerous Illustrations in text. Designed Cloth Cover, Uncut or Gilt Edges. **6s.**

The Same. *Children's* Edition, viii–217 pages, 7 full-page Plates, and numerous Illustrations in text. Cloth, Cut. **3s. 6d.**

Indian Fairy Tales

Complete Edition, xvi–255 pages, 9 full-page Plates, and numerous Illustrations in text. Designed Cloth Cover, Uncut or Gilt Edges. **6s.**

No Children's Edition of the "Indian Fairy Tales" issued.

Mr. ERNEST THOMPSON-SETON'S Famous Animal Stories

The Lives of the Hunted

With 30 full-page Plates, and upwards of 200 Drawings. Square crown 8vo, fancy cloth. Net 6s.

CONTENTS

Krag, the Kootenay Ram—A Street Troubadour, being the Adventures of a Cock Sparrow—Johnny Bear—The Mother Teal and the Overland Route — Chink : the Development of a Pup — The Kangaroo Rat—Tito, the Story of a Coyote that learned How — Why the Chickadee goes crazy once a year.

Wild Animals I have Known

With 37 full-page Plates, and upwards of 200 Text and Marginal Illustrations by the Author. Square demy 8vo, cloth, top gilt. Net 6s.

CONTENTS

Lobo, the King Wolf of Currumpaw—Silverspot, the Story of a Crow—Raggylug, the Story of a Cottontail Rabbit—Bingo, the Story of my Dog—The Springfield Fox — The Pacing Mustang — Wully, the Story of a Yaller Dog—and Redruth, the Story of the Don Valley Partridge.

The Trail of the Sand Hill Stag

Square crown 8vo, with Coloured Frontispiece and 60 Illustrations (many full-page) from Sketches and Photographs by the Author. Printed at the "De Vinne Press," in black and sage-green, and bound in sage-green sailcloth, top gilt. Net **3s. 6d.**

The Hidden Servants, and other Very Old Stories

Told over again by FRANCESCA ALEXANDER, Author of *The Story of Ida*, *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*, &c. Crown 8vo, 231 pages, printed on hand-made paper. Title in red and black, etched frontispiece. Cloth gilt, gilt top, edges trimmed. Net **6s.**

*** Miss Alexander's name is familiar to, and beloved by, all lovers of Italy, and all lovers of Ruskin. These exquisite retellings of Italian religious "leggende" are redolent, as Miss Anna Fuller justly says in her charming preface, "of the grace of the author's adopted people —their sunny charity, their native sense of the beautiful, their childlike faith."

The Mabinogion: Mediæval Welsh Romances

Translated by Lady CHARLOTTE GUEST. With Historical and Literary Notes by ALFRED NUTT. 16mo (*Temple Classics format*), 364 pages, cloth, top gilt, marker, net **2s. 6d.**

*** The Mabinogion is the finest collection extant of mediæval romance, and one of the half-a-dozen finest story-books in all literature.

The Happy Prince and other Tales

By Oscar Wilde. With Illustrations by Walter Crane and Jacomb Hood. Third Edition. Small 4to. 1902. 116 pp. **3s. 6d.**

*** These exquisitely written stories may challenge comparison with the best of Hans Christian Andersen. Like them they appeal to all ages, to children by their charm and pathos, to their elders by the perfection of their art.

Aucassin and Nicolete

Translated by Andrew Lang. 16mo. Printed on hand-made paper. Title-page in red and black. In full morocco, top gilt, marker. **3s. 6d.**

*** A reprint in elegant and attractive form of Mr. Lang's exquisite rendering of the masterpiece of mediæval story-telling.

The Sweet Miracle

By Eça de Queiroz. Translated from the Portuguese by Edgar Prestage, translator of *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun.* With Frontispiece reproducing a design by the King of Portugal. Square 16mo. Printed on hand-made paper at the Ballantyne Press. In apple green boards with label. Net **1s.**

*** A delightful legend, with the true flavour of Mediæval Catholicism, by Portugal's greatest modern story-teller.