

A
SMALL TRIBUTE
TO THE
MEMORY
OF
O S S I A N;
CONTAINING
AN ORIGINAL METHOD
OF
VINDICATING
THE
AUTHENTICITY
OF HIS
POEMS.

*By the Author of the New Picture of Edinburgh, Life of Mahomet,
History of the French Revolution, &c. &c.*

Edinburgh :
PRINTED BY ROBERT MENZIES,
And Sold by Messrs Laing, Hill, Buchanan, and Ogg,
Edinburgh; Messrs Coke and Reid, *Leith*;
and the other Booksellers.

1809.



ADVERTISEMENT.

THE following Small Tribute to the Memory of OSSIAN, the celebrated Celtic Bard, is merely to ascertain the opinion of the Public as to the merits of the controversy; but should it have the good fortune to be well received, it will then only constitute the prelude of a Larger Work, in which the Author pledges himself, to enter more minutely into the Objections of Mr Malcolm Laing, should that Gentleman condescend to give the present a Reply, and endeavour to give them an ample Refutation, one by one, according to the arrangement adopted by that Historian.



A
SMALL TRIBUTE
TO
THE MEMORY
OF
OSSIAN.

THE authenticity of Ossian's Poems, is a subject which has long divided the learned world, and the numerous advocates on both sides of the question, with a very few exceptions, have been fully as liberal of their scurrility and invective, as of their critical acumen, their knowledge of ancient history, or their acquaintance with human nature. Dr BLAIR wrote a very learned and elaborate Dissertation in favour of the Celtic Bard, the substance of which, I am inclined to believe, has never been fairly refuted. Mr MACPHERSON of consequence appears on the same side of the question, and his Discourse is written with considerable ingenuity, as is also a Defence of the same poet by Mr M'DONALD, who has translated some of the smaller pieces of Ossian into English rhyme. The report of the committee appointed by the Highland Society, to investigate the merits of the question respecting the authenticity of Ossian's poems, is well worthy the attention of every man who considers the subject as in any degree interesting. It contains much valuable criticism, many historical facts, which otherwise might never have been examined, and a number

of important papers communicated by private individuals, who seem to have exerted every nerve to ascertain the truth.

Dr SAMUEL JOHNSON may be considered as at the head of the junta who reprobate the idea of Ossian's poems being authentic publications, and regard the whole as a palpable forgery and imposition upon the world. The Doctor was certainly ill qualified to do justice to such an investigation, for he knew as little about the merits of the question, as we do respecting the inhabitants of the moon, if we except the information he received concerning them from an enthusiastic priest. This man, we are told, was a presbyterian clergyman, who successfully imposed a number of dreams, visions, and trances, on the credulity of thousands; and when people of more sagacity and discernment ridiculed or abused him for his pious frauds, he instantly retracted his opinion of Ossian, joined the hue and cry about his poems being forgeries, and enlisted under the banners of Ursa Major.* The Doctor no doubt looked upon him as a valuable acquisition, being acquainted, I suppose, with the original language in which the poems were written, which he might certainly be, without being in any measure qualified to do justice to such a subject.

Mr PINKERTON treats Ossian, and the whole of the Highlanders of Scotland, in such a manner as must render him odious in the eye of candour and discernment, and in such language as is fit only for furious or intoxicated courtizans. This is inconsistent with the character of a gentleman or a scholar, and can never fail to injure the cause which it is meant to support. It is a

* This was the name given to him by the father of the late Mr Boswell, whose sentiments respecting the Doctor were diametrically opposite to those of his son. It must indeed be granted that Johnson was a strange and unaccountable being, looking him all in all, while malice itself must admit, that he was both learned and pious.

wretched substitute for reason and argument, and I believe is never made use of but by those who are persuaded that they have nothing better to offer.

MR MACPHERSON thought, that to have succeeded in ascribing his own works to Ossian, and thus to have placed them in a remote age, he should have been born on the same side of the Tweed with Dr JOHNSON. That is, in order to have been a successful literary cheat; for it is known that Dr JOHNSON ascribed speeches to several members of parliament which they never uttered, but which he composed in his own garret, while he wrote for a livelihood in the periodical prints. This may be denominated a severe retort, but it is not more so than the overbearing temper of JOHNSON certainly provoked, as well as his ignorance respecting the merits of the controversy. Though born in the county of Durham, I cannot help reprobating such mean partiality towards England, as this otherwise great man unquestionably indulged; for it is a notorious fact, that there are greater numbers of men of erudition on this, than on the other side of the Tweed, in proportion to the extent of the two countries. I have known men in England worth several thousands, who could scarcely read their own names in print; but I have met with hundreds in Scotland not worth forty pounds a year, who were excellent scholars.

The poems of Ossian were familiar in the Highlands of Scotland before the time of MACPHERSON, and they were heard recited by many respectable characters for whole centuries before he had any existence, and of consequence, according to Mr LAING's new mode of reasoning, it was by him they were forged! what an amazing discovery! Sir ISAAC NEWTON died in the year 1726, therefore the man who was only born in 1790 must have been the undoubted author of his invaluable principia! If this be not chronology run mad, I am utterly at a loss what name to give it. But perhaps it will be said, that we have no positive proof of the existence of such poems till the publi-

cation of Ossian by MACPHERSON made its appearance. For the truth of such an assertion, there is no evidence whatever, and nothing but the most unaccountable prejudice could ever have framed it. The testimony of one CARSEWELL, whose work was the first scarce book ever printed, and who died in the year 1572, is of the utmost importance on the present occasion. The following is an English quotation from the work now mentioned. "We suffer peculiar loss and inconvenience above any other part of the world, in not having our literature and language printed, as other tribes of men have. We have never had in print, the history or antiquity of our ancestors, although a certain portion of the literature of Scotland and Ireland exists in manuscripts, in the possession of bards and teachers, and their patrons. Great is the sinful darkness, and ignorance, and perverseness of those who teach and write, and compose in Gaelic, in exhibiting much more attention to the heroes of Fingal, than they display to write, and to teach, and to compose the sincere words of God."

The memory of this man is by no means popular, and the bards, to whom he bore no good will, made him the subject of their satirical verses and invectives, and many proverbs expressive of his rapacity, are still current in the country. His apologies for bad spelling, prove that the Gaelic was a written language in his day, containing many popular compositions, besides the exploits of Fingal and his heroes. Carswell, who died about two hundred and thirty-six years ago, is a valuable witness to the antiquity of written language in the Highlands of Scotland; and as this was no doubt common for centuries before his time, it was not necessary to depend so much on oral tradition for transmitting the poems of Ossian to posterity, as some are apt to imagine. The bards, according to him, were learned and elegant, and the druids may be considered as the repositories of much valuable knowledge, both in philosophy and theology. But Mr

LAING scruples not to assert, that there never was a druid in Scotland, which appears to me to be as extravagant as, that there never was a comet in the heavens, or a whale in the ocean. The very word *druid* itself is of Celtic origin, and the knowledge of the order is traditionally universal. The traveller every where meets with the ruins of druidical temples, or circles of large stones placed in a perpendicular direction, as he passes through the Highlands.

Whether Mr HUME knew any thing respecting the great antiquity of Gaelic manuscripts, it is certain he thought it utterly impossible, (and Mr LAING obligingly joins issue with him,) that so many verses could have been preserved by oral tradition during fifty generations, among a rude and uncivilized people. We have seen that this was not necessary, at least for so long a period; but admitting, for the sake of argument, that it had been the case, where was the impossibility of it? We have heard of a woman in Strathspey who, without being taught to read any, could repeat the whole book of Psalms in the Gaelic language, by hearing it frequently read to her by others. It would therefore be astonishing indeed, if bards, the business of whose lives it was to retain poems, and derive assistance from the modulation of numbers, should be outdone in this respect by an old woman. In the history of different countries it is no uncommon thing to meet with numerous well authenticated instances of the most extraordinary and retentive memories. We are assured that JOSEPH SCALIGER got the whole of the Iliad and Odyssey by heart in three weeks, although they contain upwards of 63,000 verses. JUSTUS LIPSIUS had the works of Tacitus by heart, and declared before one of the Princes of Germany, that he would suffer to be stabbed to the heart, or have his throat cut, if he missed a single word in reciting the whole from beginning to end.

Mr LAING, upon the authority of Dion Cassius and

Herodian, tells us that the Caledonians, in the time of the Emperor SEVERUS, were almost naked, having their bodies stained with figures of different animals, armed with swords depending from their naked bodies, and that they had established among them a community of wives. Mr LAING will permit me to ask him, what better were the Britons in the time of JULIUS CÆSAR, and long afterwards, yet even among these *savages* or *barbarians*, a CARACTACUS and a BOADICEA were found, whose magnanimity, fortitude, heroism, and every noble sentiment, were matter of astonishment even to the *civilized* Romans. He must know that they and the Greeks called every other nation *barbarians*, many of whom were greatly superior to themselves, particularly the Jews, whose historian and lawgiver, Moses, wrote an account of the creation of the world, at least a thousand years before any historian appeared among the Greeks. Herodotus the oldest of them, was not born till about 1087 years after Moses. A conceited pedant is more intelligent in his own opinion than every other man, a vanity with which even whole nations have frequently been tinctured; and therefore the words *savages* and *barbarians* are no proof, in the mouths of some people, of the real character of those concerning whom they speak. If a community of wives was established among the Caledonians in the time of Severus, on account of which they deserved the name of *savages*, it should be honestly confessed that there were similar *savages* among the ancient philosophers: and therefore such a practice was far from being peculiar to the people whom Mr LAING seems anxious to depreciate. But I am happy to find that he gives up this point as a groundless calumny, for indeed every authentic circumstance with which we are acquainted, conspires to give it the lie.

Tacitus has given us the speech of GALGACUS, the Caledonian General, which may bear a comparison with those of Hannibal, or Scipio Africanus; and had there not been

good ground for the substance of it at least, we have no reason to conclude that the celebrated historian of an enemy would ever have penned it. Let Mr LAING point out where the instances of savage barbarisms are to be met with in that speech, before he considers the ancient Caledonians as brutes in human shape. Had the speech of Galgacus been delivered by a French, German, or British Commander-in-chief, it is probable that all Europe would have resounded its praise, even in the nineteenth century; but it cuts some men to the very soul to hear such sentiments from the mouth of a native Caledonian.

But let us not wonder at such prejudice, when we reflect that the same historian declares, that there is not now in Scotland, a Highlander of the race which existed at the beginning of the era ascribed to Fingal. He says, that an Irish chieftain of the name of Riada, invaded Scotland in the year 258, who founded a kingdom in the Highlands, from which he concludes, that the present race in that country is descended from the invaders. This he grounds on the authority of an obscure sentence in the ecclesiastical history of Bæda, which appears to be wholly without foundation, from the total silence of cotemporary historians, or those who were nearly so; and it seems impossible to admit, that a people who often contended with the sovereigns of the world, and could bring upwards of 30,000 men into the field of battle, almost two centuries before the supposed invasion of the country by Riada, would have been vanquished by a contemptible horde from the adjoining coast of Ireland. We are assured, on the authority of Tacitus, that an Irish chieftain, with whom he frequently conversed, declared, that a single legion from Rome, with a few auxiliaries would be sufficient to subjugate the whole Island. It is a curious paradox, that six or eight thousand men could have subdued Ireland, and yet that the said country could have vanquished another, which was capable of mustering 30,000 men! He who can believe this, may

believe any thing, however extravagant and absurd. The same author assures us, that in the year 240, the Orkney islands were altogether uninhabited, for which assertion, he gives us the authority of Solinus, while the polished Tacitus declares, that Agricola his father-in-law, first discovered and conquered the Orkneys. What a strange idea to conquer a number of uninhabited islands! How long and bloody must the conflict have been before they were compelled to surrender! What myriads on both sides must unquestionably have fallen

It is astonishing to find Mr Laing assert, that ostentatious addresses to the sun, moon, and evening star, are alone a detection of modern poetry, to which they are peculiar. In ancient Greek and Roman writers, we find numberless addresses to the sun and moon; to Hesperus, or the evening star; to sleep, night, air, and earth. In the *Hyppolitus* of Seneca the tragedian, we find an address to the moon, which may be thus rendered into English. "O queen of the forests, who solitarily inhabitest the mountains, and who alone are worshipped as a goddess on the solitary mountains; O mighty goddess, amidst the woods and groves, bright luminary of heaven, and ornament of night, by whose alternate torch the earth is enlightened." An address to the sun is met with in the *Thyestes* of the same ancient author. "Whether, a parent of earth, and of the powers above, at whose rising every ornament of the dusky night retires, whether dost thou turn thy course?"

It is a curious circumstance; that Sir James Foulis studied the Earse language in his old age, in order to read the epic poems of Fingal and Temora in the original, and he says, (let it be observed that I quote from Mr Laing,) "In spite of all that has been said, or ever may be advanced, in favour of the authenticity of Ossian's poems, the concealing his originals will always be looked on as a convincing proof that he has forged them himself." In a short time I shall demonstrate that it was impossible

for Macpherson to forge them, but I reply in the mean time to the sentiments of the aged baornet, that he did *not* conceal the originals. He left a number of Gaelic manuscripts for a whole year in the shop of one Becket, a bookseller in the Strand, for the purpose of publication, but the subscriptions raised were not adequate to the expence, in consequence of which, they were withdrawn. It ought also to be remembered, that there were many learned Highlanders in London, who could have detected the forgery, had it really been one, and of which circumstance, Mr MACPHERSON must have been well aware. It has been proved, by persons of literary eminence and unimpeachable honour, that Mr MACPHERSON was not very well acquainted with the Gaelic language, and therefore it was physically impossible that he could have been the author, even of the scanty but sublime fragments of Gaelic verse, which he himself has given to the public.

Mr LAING considers the supposed silence of Ossian respecting religion, as a decisive proof, that the poems ascribed to him are not authentic. This mythology, it is true, is very unlike that of Homer and Virgil, in which Gods are represented as so many drunken, debauched rakes and bullies, sometimes conquering the human race, and sometimes conquered by them. The religion of Ossian was of a purer and more rational nature, of which a belief in the Supreme Being was no doubt the basis, since the immortality of the soul, and future happiness and misery, may be easily traced in many parts of his works. His warriors are brave, but they are also honourable and just, while they detest oppression, hatred, and ambition. Fingal had a great and magnanimous soul, and only made war to redress the injured, to repel invaders, or to protect those who had formed alliances with him. But perhaps it could be proved, that religion is not essential to the perfections of epic poetry; and surely Ossian's heroes are superior to any thing we meet with in the writings of Homer, or even the refined Vir-

gil, in so far as generosity and humanity are in any measure concerned.

Many conclusive arguments have been adduced by different authors in favour of the authenticity of Ossian's poems, and many plausible ones against it; but, altogether independent of these, I shall now attempt to demonstrate,

First, That MACPHERSON could never have been the author of them; and,

Second, That if this had been possible, his refusing to confess himself their author, is an instance of self-denial, which has no proper parallel in the history of human nature.

1st, I assert that MACPHERSON could not be the author of the poems which go by the name of Ossian. This I believe to have been utterly impossible, because men can never completely divest themselves of the peculiar customs and manners of the age and country in which they live; and even in the course of a few pages, whether in poetry or prose, they must have frequent allusions to the state of the arts and sciences, of commerce and manufactures, as they are known to their countrymen at the time they write; and all attempts to go three or four centuries back, must put them out of their proper element. Such a man as MACPHERSON, or indeed any other poetical genius, equally cultivated by a liberal education, might have composed a small portion of a something very much resembling the poems of Ossian, without evincing that he lived in more modern times; but let any man attempt to write a poem in the nineteenth or present century, of equal length with Fingal, and setting aside altogether the sublimity and pathos of Ossian, which he could never reach, he would find it impossible to be the man of the third century through a single book of such a poem as that already mentioned. What then would be the consequence before he reached the end of

the whole poem, consisting of eight books? It requires no ingenuity to perceive, that he would shew his cloven foot upon a thousand occasions, if I may be allowed the expression, and demonstrate the absurdity of every effort to write exactly like a man who flourished above one thousand five hundred years before he was born.

Even the great Homer himself, who has been denominated the prince and father of epic poetry, has clearly proved, in numerous places of the Iliad, that he did not live in the time of the Trojan war, admitting we did not know this from the testimony of historians. I mean his frequent allusions to customs and manners long posterior to that event, which, to a person of any discernment, is as convincing a proof of it, as if he had introduced his poem with a solemn declaration that he was not in existence for almost three hundred years after the siege of Troy, according to the Arundelian marble. The above facts cannot be fairly controverted, and they certainly prove beyond a doubt, that neither Mr Macpherson, nor any other man of the present age, could produce such poems as those of Ossian. Before the possibility of success in any such undertaking, it would be absolutely necessary for him to unknow his knowledge, to unlearn all his learning; to divest himself of every vestige of an acquaintance with the customs and manners of his own times, and be at once a man of fifteen hundred years of age.

It appears to me to be an instance of unaccountable stupidity, infatuation, or prejudice, unparalleled in history, to call the poems of Ossian the production of Macpherson, as Mr Laing has done, and thus run the hazard of consigning that reputation to oblivion, which in other respects he most unquestionably deserves. When the intelligent Captain Morrison, eminently skilled in the Gaelic language, returned his answers to the queries put to him by the committee of the Highland Society, he gave it as his opinion, (and no man of common sense could possibly

have done otherwise,) that Macpherson could as well have composed the prophecies of Isaiah, or created the Island of Skye, as composed a poem like one of Ossian's. In the address to the sun in the poem of Carthon, Captain Morrison informs us, that there were two lines wanting in the original, which neither Macpherson, nor any one else could supply, nor any thing even like them.

Mr Laing admits that the Highlander of Macpherson is inferior to the Fingal of Ossian, but denies that this is any evidence even of a presumptive nature, that the latter is authentic. He was young, says he, when he composed the Highlander, (only twenty-one), and had not at that time attended the lectures of Dr Blair, to qualify him for writing such an epic poem. What name this would receive in law, I do not pretend to know, but certain I am, it is an absurdity in logic, and incompatible with reason and common sense. If the attending the lectures of a professor of rhetoric, however eminent his abilities, both natural and acquired, could enable a man to write such a poem as Fingal or Temora, we should have a thousand Homers, and as many Miltons in great Britain, in the course of a few years; but *poeta nascitur, non fit*;—a poet is born, not made. It seems that Dr Blair could make epic poets with as much facility as a basket maker can manufacture wicker work. But to be serious; let Mr Laing, with all his historical knowledge and critical acumen; with all his fancy, and ten courses of lectures, if he pleases, compose such a poem as either of the two now mentioned, and I shall secure for him a far greater sum than would be given to the discoverer of the longitude, or willingly submit to the most ignominious death. Nay, I will go farther still, and declare, without the dread of being refuted by solid argument, that the man does not exist at this day in the British Empire, who could compose such a poem as either of the two, were even his everlasting salvation depending upon it.

But what if Macpherson has granted in so many words, that he really was the author of the poems which are ascribed to Ossian, or said as much as will bear this construction? I answer, every rational being must be sensible of the reverse, for he could as well have extinguished the sun by the breath of his mouth, or reversed the order of nature by a shake of his head. I will not affirm that to write such poems as Fingal and Temora and to extinguish the sun, are alike difficult in an abstracted point of view; but I will venture to assert, as I humbly apprehend I have already proved, that they are equally beyond the reach of a Mr Macpherson, or any other scholar or poet of the present age. If Mr Laing thinks them forgeries, if he is convinced that Macpherson composed them, then let him produce such a poem as Fingal, and the controversy is at an end. I shall then confess that I have never understood the subject; that I am wholly as unacquainted with human nature as the most contemptible insect, and grant that every effect must be infinitely superior to its cause! The truth, however, is, that Macpherson never maintained the poems of Ossian to be his own production, as Mr Laing has roundly affirmed; for he even threatened to horse-whip Dr Johnson for disputing their authenticity; and the late Dr Carlyle of Inveresk, in a letter to William Macdonald Esq; secretary to the Highland Society, declared, that Mr Macpherson always expressed the greatest contempt and disdain for those who thought him the fabricator of Ossian's poems.

I presume Dr Johnson did know, and Mr Laing certainly does know, that this could not possibly be the case, and perhaps the opinion of both may be accounted for on the score of prejudice. That this was the case with Dr Johnson, is too well known to require any illustration from me; and there are not wanting many respectable characters in Scotland who ascribe the sentiments of Mr Laing respecting Ossian's poems to a similar origin. Of this fact, the following extract of a letter from the

report of the committee of the Highland Society, page 39, and signed ANDREW GALLIE, is given as a proof. "As I have not seen Mr Laing's history, I can form no opinion as to the arguments wherewith he has attempted to discredit Ossian's poems: the attempt could not come more naturally than from Orcadians. Perhaps the severe checks given by the ancient Caledonians to their predatory Scandinavian predecessors, raised prejudices not yet extinct. I conceive how an author can write under the influence of prejudice, and not sensible of being acted upon by it." This quotation shall have no comment from me; and while I do not pledge myself for the justice of what it contains, it seems a difficult task to ascribe the sentiments of Mr Laing respecting the poems of Ossian to any other source.

I have proved it impossible that they could be the productions of their translator, which leads me to demonstrate,

2nd, That if this had even been possible, his refusing to confess himself their author, is an instance of self-denial, which has no proper parallel in the history of human nature.

Self-denial may be regarded as embracing two great classes of objects; the appetites and desires which are peculiar to the body, and the intellectual powers or faculties of the mind. With respect to the former, it may very properly be denominated *abstemiousness* or *temperance*, and in reference to the latter, we may call it *humility*. Numerous instances of the most amazing abstemiousness are every where to be met with in the page of history. Thousands have denied themselves, not only the comforts, but the very necessaries of life, and literally starved in the midst of plenty. Such wretches, indeed, are almost unworthy of notice, and the whole of their deportment towards themselves, appears to have been the result of some terrible curse. Others seem to have carried temperance to an unjustifiable extreme, from a mis-

taken idea, that such a mode of living is highly conducive to health, and the friend of longevity, than which nothing can be more preposterous, absurd, and contrary to truth. Its operation, indeed, may be more gradual than that of gluttony, but it is not less certain; and I presume it would be a difficult point to determine, which is the more criminal conduct of the two.

Others again have been uncommonly temperate, from the unworthy motive of being admired by a particular set of men, and multitudes have acted in a similar manner from mistaken ideas of religion, and an absurd belief, that nothing but starvation could enable them to mortify what are called in scripture, *the deeds of the body*. All this is the result of false reasoning, or of blind zeal; for the good things of a present life are given to the sons of men to be used with moderation, but not in such a manner as if poison was one of their constituents, or as if the Supreme Being grudged us as much as is necessary to keep soul and body together.

This, however, is not the self-denial which I have more immediately in view, and therefore although an ample discussion of it might be attended with advantages, I pass it over at present, and proceed to consider that self-denial which has a direct reference to the intellectual powers and faculties of the mind. When a man, by virtue of an enlarged and liberal education, is qualified to exert the powers of his mind, so as to secure the esteem and admiration of the world, it is not easy to conduct himself in such a manner as to stand clear of vanity or self-conceit, and perpetually to exhibit the most amiable, the most engaging humility. This may be partly illustrated by the following anecdote. The system of surgery ascribed to the late Mr Latta of Edinburgh, is said to have been written by another person, who was paid for his trouble; and, although it never acquired any great degree of celebrity, even as a compilation from more eminent writers upon the subject, the

gentleman alluded to could not help hinting, on various occasions, and in defiance, no doubt, of a solemn promise to the contrary, *that the publication was his.*

The love of fame has justly been denominated the *universal passion*, the influence of which every man must have felt at some period of his life, in a greater or less degree. The esteem of the world is the well-earned wages of genuine merit, to be wholly indifferent to which, would bespeak a man to be something less, or something vastly superior to human nature. Nay, it may fairly be asserted, that such a being as would despise the love of fame, would be a monster in nature, and he who never felt its influence, does not exist upon earth.

When I hear it asserted by the biographers of the great and good Dr Samuel Johnson, that he never knew what it was to compose any work but for the sake of subsistence, I am absolutely inclined to declare it is false. The harmonious flow of his periods, and the fascinating eloquence of his whole language, demonstrate the reverse; and perhaps no man ever lived who would have been more sensibly touched by the severity of censure. One of his most elaborate and best performances was given to the world after he was independent, being then in the possession of £.300 a-year, by the influence of the earl of Bute. I mean his admirable work, called *The Lives of the Poets*, which would transmit his name with applause to the latest posterity, although he had never been the author of any thing else.

I had almost said, that a total indifference to fame, reputation, or the esteem of our fellow creatures, would constitute a miracle. It is the love of fame that gives life and energy to a spirit of emulation, which in its turn has ever been the parent of the most splendid and brilliant actions that have done the greatest honour to humanity in every age of the world. Without being actuated by the love of fame, we should be strangers to emulation;

and uninfluenced by a commendable spirit of emulation, properly regulated and directed, the actions of men would speedily dwindle into perfect insignificance, if not something worse, and exhibit nothing more engaging to a disinterested bystander than the life of a brute.

Upon these principles, the philosophical accuracy of which, will not, I trust, be successfully controverted, what an unaccountable being, what a walking miracle, what an inexplicable phenomenon in nature, was Mr James Macpherson! where shall we find a parallel to him in any age or country, or how find it possible to account for his conduct, if the poems of Ossian were his? If they were, then I challenge the whole human race to tell me what could induce him to deny it. It could not be the dread of persecution, for no poems since the days of Homer were ever more universally admired; and in respect of sublimity and pathos, they were proved to be superior even to Homer himself, by the most learned, sagacious, and intelligent judges. They were translated into almost every European language, very soon after their first appearance in an English dress; and the critics of different countries vied with each other in pointing out their inimitable beauties, and resounding their praises in the most energetic language. The immortal pen of Blair delineated their excellence in a masterly manner, and many authors of character and respectability have since given additional importance to the same side of the question.

Shade of Macpherson! couldst thou hear all this without being moved, and by the exercise of an unaccountable something which baffles men or angels to comprehend, persist in denying that the poems were thine? This was an instance of self-denial unknown in the history of the world; and upon the supposition that the poems of Ossian were his own production, it is wholly inexplicable. But I have already proved, that it was physically impossible they could be his; yet, as many learned men were in-

fatuated as to their opinion of these poems being forgeries, Macpherson might have claimed them as his own without much danger; for the sentiments of Dr Johnson, and a few other literary characters, would have borne down the opposition of reason and common sense. The impossibility of the thing might have been gradually forgotten, and he might have enjoyed a degree of fame and reputation which rarely falls to the lot of any human creature. But reason and common sense shall now speak out, and neither prejudice, ignorance, nor self-conceit, shall be able to drown the thunder of their voice. Such unexampled fame and reputation Macpherson rejected, by an exertion of intellectual apathy or indifference, for which, if he was really the author of the poems, no created being will ever be able to account. This is nature completely reversed, and Mr Macpherson is thus represented as possessing powers and faculties of mind, diametrically opposite to those of every other man upon earth.

I believe Mr Macpherson was perfectly aware that he could not possibly compose such poems as those of Ossian, although Transtweedean authors were disposed to pay him such an unaccountable compliment. He was also certain, notwithstanding numbers were inclined to dispute it, that many of the original manuscripts could easily be produced; and therefore had he been infatuated enough to claim the honour of being the author of them, every Gaelic scholar would have been qualified to detect his presumptuous arrogance, and consign his name to everlasting infamy.

I have proved, that he could not be the author of them, and I have no doubt that he felt it equally impossible to impose upon the intelligent part of mankind. This is a better ground of silence upon his part, or even of a solemn declaration that he did not compose them, than any; that all mankind were not fools, although a few literary men might be so, and therefore he rested satisfied with the humble character of a translator, which was sufficient to make his fortune. Had he claimed the honour of being

their author, he knew he could easily have imposed upon Dr Johnson and some others ; but he was also certain, that there were thousands in the nation whom no such pretensions could ever deceive. Macpherson, I am absolutely assured, could not be the author of the poems which go by the name of Ossian, and would still be so, even if a single Gaelic manuscript was not to be found between the Equator and the North Pole ; but for the satisfaction of those who have not metaphysical heads, I am happy to observe, that the indefatigable Sir John Sinclair has given the world an interesting collection of manuscripts of Ossian's poems. This will satisfy those who are not qualified to appreciate the nature and importance of internal evidence, and give to Scotland a poet who may be safely compared with Homer or Virgil ;—a circumstance which appears to give offence to too many on the other side of the Tweed, as if it was impossible that Scotland should have an Ossian, as well as England a Milton.

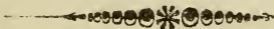
The existence of Gaelic manuscripts of the poems of Ossian has been questioned by many, but the publication of Sir John Sinclair already mentioned, will put the matter beyond any farther dispute. Sir John's Dissertation on the authenticity of the originals, and that of Dr MacArthur on the same subject, are well worthy the attentive perusal of every man, whether he believes at present in their authenticity or not, as they may convince him of the folly and absurdity of ascribing to Macpherson, what it was physically impossible for him to have composed. The learned Dr Graham assures us, that he has seen a beautiful Gaelic manuscript, written by a monk of the 8th century, and another manuscript volume of poems, belonging to the Highland Society of London, written in the reign of James IV. of Scotland. It was, therefore, rash in Mr Laing to affirm, that no manuscript of this kind, which is indisputably a century old, can ever be produced. Numbers much older are now open to the inspection of the Gaelic scholar, which,

I trust, will make Mr Laing return to his original belief respecting the poems of Ossian. Indeed he has promised as much; and if he is acquainted with the Gaelic language, I hope he will find, that the originals before the public, could never have been composed by Macpherson, nor yet by those who are ten times better acquainted with the language than he could pretend to be.

There is one objection not yet mentioned, which has sometimes been made to the authenticity of Ossian's poems, and that is, that they contain many imitations of scripture phraseology, and likewise of different authors belonging to Greece and Rome. Although this has been urged by no less authority than that of Mr Laing, I really cannot help considering it as extremely silly and childish. It has been clearly proved by a certain eminent author, that many of these *supposed* imitations are not even resemblances. But altogether independent of any critical examination of such imaginary imitations, I beg leave to remark, that the grand and magnificent objects of nature must strike all men nearly in the same way. The volume of creation lies open alike to the sage philosopher and the untutored savage, in so far at least as the visible works of creation are concerned. The refulgent lamp of night, in a clear, unclouded sky, or the glories of the meridian sun, must every where produce similar effects upon the mind, and be described in a similar manner, whether in Greece, in Rome, or in the Highlands of Scotland. There was nothing in all Greece,—nothing in the luxuriant country of Italy, so favourable to terrible sublimity, as the scenery of the Highlands. There nature appears in all her horrible grandeur, and powerfully aided the sublime conceptions of such a mind as that of Ossian, which was disposed to cherish gloomy and melancholy ideas, from a series of misfortunes of no ordinary magnitude.

Although I have taken no notice of what appeared to me to be the chief objections of Mr Laing against the

authenticity of Ossian's poems, as he is no doubt one of their most formidable antagonists, yet I have rested the merits of the controversy on a mode of reasoning which to me is altogether original. I have endeavoured to demonstrate, that it was impossible for Macpherson to be the author of Ossian's poems, and that if he even could have composed them, his refusing to confess it, was an instance of self-denial not to be paralleled in the history of human nature. If I have been able to establish the truth of these positions, as I humbly apprehend I have, I may be permitted to hope, that I have justified the modest title given to these pages. They contain a Small Tribute to the memory of Ossian, a bard whose works do as much honour to his native country, as Homer did to Greece, Virgil to Rome, or Milton to England. This truth is galling to some men, who are bound to vindicate the honour of Scotland, and therefore it is difficult to account for such conduct. In Dr Samuel Johnson it was quite consistent, but it is such a disgrace to a Scotsman, as admits of no apology whatever.



APPENDIX.



SINCE the above was written, I have had an opportunity of perusing the account of travels in the Highlands of Scotland, during the summer of 1780, by one Mr T. F. Hill, undertaken for the ostensible purpose of collecting information respecting the poems of Ossian.* In stating the results of his enquiries and investigations, he makes the following very singular remark. "Even allowing," says he, "that an Ossian ever existed and wrote, yet time must have introduced such material changes in his works, if preserved merely by tradition during so long a period, that their own author would barely know them again. I think it however doubtful, whether such a being as Ossian ever appeared in the world." Surely if Ossian could write, he was not wholly singular in this respect, and therefore his works must have been in manuscript at a very early period, which rendered unnecessary the preservation of them by tradition; yet if even this had been requisite, we have already seen what the full exercise of oral tradition can accomplish, and what might have been expected from the labours of the bards, whose constant and daily employment it was to preserve and to recite such poems as those of Ossian. The changes which these must have undergone, in the opinion of Mr Hill, if preserved merely by tradition, would have put it almost out of the power of the author himself to know them again.

If this be admitted, it would be downright Irish to say that they were preserved; for they could not be *his* works, if he was at a loss to recognise them. Preserve them which way you please, either in manuscript, or by tradition, and if they are known again, they must have been preserved; but if it was next to impossible for the father

* Gentleman's Magazine, vol. LIII.

to know his own child again, they have not been preserved, but something else, which perhaps only resembles them in a very few particulars. According to the sagacious Mr Hill, it is even doubtful whether such a being as Ossian ever appeared in the world. This is a discovery of some importance, because it undeniably proves, that men in all ages have been too credulous in their belief of the truth of history; and of consequence, it is *even doubtful* whether such personages as Homer, Virgil, Mohammed, the Arabian impostor, or Jesus Christ himself, ever appeared in the world. It is true, we have the authority of history for these facts; but, as Mr Hill very obligingly informs us, that history is not sufficient to prove the existence of such a man as Ossian, in any age of the world, it is certainly no more efficacious in establishing the existence of the persons just now mentioned. It is even extremely *doubtful*, whether there ever were such men as Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great, Scipio Africanus, an Edward III, an Oliver Cromwell, a Monmouth, or a Marlborough; for, alas! we have nothing but history to convince us of the truth of any such reports, and this, as Mr Hill has been pleased to hint, is no evidence at all.

I have heard that the house of Stuart rose in rebellion against the house of Hanover in the year 1715, and again in 1745; but I never saw either of these events, and consequently it is even *probable*, that there were never any such, because I find nothing in support of them but historical information, and it seems this ought not to convince me, that even such a man as Mr Hill *ever appeared in the world*, or took the trouble to travel through the Highlands of Scotland in the year 1780.

Our author mentions another important question, which he thinks is deserving of serious consideration, and that is, whether was Ossian an Irish or Caledonian Scot? I may possibly be wrong, but to my ear, at least, an Irish Scot sounds very like an Hibernian Frenchman, a Russian

Swiss, or a Siberian Swede; but independent of any criticism respecting the phrase, whether proper or absurd, it is surely ridiculous to make it an important enquiry, whether, Ossian was an Irish or a Caledonian Scot, when it is even *doubtful whether such a being ever appeared in the world.*

I can therefore discover no arguments against the authenticity of Ossian's poems, sufficient to counter-balance the numerous and convincing proofs of their reality, exclusive of the original argument I have already advanced, till something be given to the world vastly superior to any thing that has yet appeared.

Soon after the foregoing pages were composed, a gentleman requested that I would allow him to shew the manuscript to the late reverend Mr M'Intosh, to which I readily consented, because his being both a Highlandman and a scholar, fully qualified him to be a competent judge of the merit or demerit of what it contained. After an attentive perusal of it, my friend repeatedly informed me, that he was pleased to express his approbation of the little work in the most flattering terms; and he even undertook to write notes and annotations on different parts of it, which I was to make any use of that I might think proper. He had advanced so far when he took his last illness, and consequently his death deprived me of the benefit of his remarks. But should those which he lived to finish be found among his loose papers, when his books are sent off to the person or persons to whom they were bequeathed, some of the gentlemen concerned have obligingly promised, that I shall have a present of them. It may indeed be considered as now too late; yet should an indulgent public call for a few hundred copies more, the notes of the late Gaelic secretary to the Highland Society shall then be introduced, and, I doubt not, with very considerable advantage.

FINIS.

