

Gaelic Poetry in the Highlands.

*The life and letters of James Macpherson,
and a sketch of the origin and influence of the Ossianic poems*

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IN the middle of the eighteenth century a rumour went out from Edinburgh that the songs of an ancient poet, as great as Homer, had been discovered in the Highlands. Fragments of an heroic strain were, it was said, often to be heard in the valleys beyond the Grampians, or on the shores of the Hebrides ; telling, in mournful verse, of the brave deeds of other days, of the battles of Fingal, a glorious king, and the woes of Ossian, his son, who was left, old and blind, to lament the friends of his youth.

There are some who still believe in the legend ; nor is it unwelcome. Could we suppose that the mountains, as we see them in an air of soft mist and broken sunshine, are haunted by the voices of an antique age, it would please our fancy ; even though a great magician has peopled the moors and valleys with the creatures of later romance. Who that has wandered in the deserted glens, or by the rocky coast where the tide swells among islets innumerable, would not willingly dream that a tale of the times of old lingers in the midst of that wild and melancholy grandeur ? that we hear its echo on loch and hill, in the measured chant of the boatmen, or in the song of the Highland lass as she reaps in solitude—

“ Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

“ Will no one tell me what she sings ?
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago.”

If we feel that poetry is at home in the Highlands, it is a feeling inspired by the beauty of nature ; and the old fragments that were found did, it seemed, truly reflect the best features of a landscape now familiar. But in the middle of the eighteenth century there was little admiration for bleak mountains and rugged hills ; and at first the scenery of this wild poetry yielded to its human interest, and its picture of ancient life in a desolate country. It was only in recent years that the Highlands had been explored. Their condition at the period of the rising in '45, the independent rule of the chiefs, and the rough life of the clans, are now matters of general knowledge. But for long after the rising, and in spite of the efforts of the English Government to establish communication with the south, the north of Scotland was still, in the common report of the time, a benighted region, wrapt in fog and storm. Of the inhabitants little was known but that they were men of great size and savage bearing, who in the service of their chiefs had been trained from their youth to the pursuits of war. It was natural that their wild songs should breathe of the joys of battle, the glory of the victors, and the desolation of the conquered. Many gentle and noble traits in the character of the Highlanders were also reported ; and these, too, it was said, were reflected in their poetry ; as well

as strange customs and superstitions else where unknown. For they served their clans with a chivalrous devotion, and in life and death were faithful to old traditions.

To keep alive the martial spirit of their ancestors, the chiefs everywhere maintained bards and senachies, who at great festivals commemorated the deeds of the clan. Sometimes in the long nights of winter they would also recount the feats of ancient days ; singing, as they supposed, the very words of the master himself, the prince of poets.

To this lonely Ossian, the last of his race, the bards looked back with a reverent affection ; and the songs and ballads which immemorial tradition assigned to him were treasured with peculiar care. The office of the bard, like that of his chief, was hereditary ; the poetry which he had learned from his father, he taught in turn to his son ; and thus he came to believe that Ossian was the fount and origin of all bardic inspiration ; and that the best of the poems to be found in the Highlands had been composed by this great poet in an unknown antiquity.

Critics [1] have declared that the Ossianic poems, in the form in which Macpherson produced them, were successful because they gave new expression to a sentimental gloom prevailing at the moment. That they are largely sentimental is not to be denied ; but it is more than doubtful whether their success can be so explained, or whether their sentiment had in it anything peculiarly akin to contemporary fashions. We associate a dreary sentimentalism with Young's *Night Thoughts*, with Robert Blair's *Grave*, and with Hervey's *Meditations* ; and there is sentiment of another character in Richardson's novels, and in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and gloom of a noble and stately cast in Gray's *Elegy*. *Tristram Shandy* appeared about the same time as Macpherson's production ; the *Elegy* was published ten years, and the other works fifteen or twenty years previously ; but their several characteristics are entirely different from the tone and quality of the Ossianic poems. We must remember that literature is rarely free from some kind of sentimentalism, and that, wherever it is found, it is often merely a vicious outcome of that feeling for the pathos of life which gives to all poetry its best and perennial inspiration. Instead of owing their success to the prevalence of a morbid feeling, it is rather the case that the Ossianic poems, by their peculiar melancholy, were themselves a chief agent in the spread of sentimentalism in Europe.

The interest in the poems was at first purely external ; it was bound up with interest in the Highlands ; and the chapter of accidents which led to the success of *Fingal* and *Temora* began in the Jacobite rising. When the insurgent clans marched to Derby in 1745 there was a panic in London : but the alarm of that year quickly yielded to a feeling of curiosity ; and although curiosity was mixed with the kind of bitter contempt which is often born of previous shame, it was not on that account less real. Those who had travelled in the north of Scotland wrote and spoke of it as of a newly discovered country, and descriptions were eagerly read. Burt's famous *Letters*, written at an earlier date, appeared in 1754 ; and they formed a very effective and welcome account of the natural features of the Highlands, and the strange manners, customs, and superstitions of the inhabitants. When it was rumoured that in the same neglected region there was ancient poetry of extraordinary merit, which had already been received with delight in literary circles in Edinburgh, expectation ran high ; and to enhance the interest with which this wonderful product of the mountains was awaited, there was the rumour that it was too wonderful to be authentic. The feeling of curiosity remained for a long time unabated. Many years later, when Johnson went to the Hebrides, he satisfied a popular demand in issuing the journal of his tour ; and not until Scott published his lays and novels did the Highlands become familiar ground, and a new interest in them arise which eclipsed the popularity of Macpherson's production.

The scenery of the poems was a source of delight new to the taste of the time. In some measure the way had been prepared for it by the love of simple nature, which in spite of the dominant influence of Pope had already shown itself in the literature of the earlier part of the

century; nor is it unworthy of notice in this connection that the first long poem devoted to the pleasures and emotions of rural life was the work of a Scotchman. In Thomson's *Seasons* this feeling found ample, if somewhat stilted, expression ; it was continued in the pure verse of John Dyer, who depicted the finer and gentler features of Welsh landscape ; in Shenstone and Akenside it was mingled with curious affectations or the moral doctrines of contemporary philosophers ; and in Collins and Gray, nature, though reflected in some of its quiet moods with great tenderness and beauty, became not so much the inspiration as the graceful ornament of poetry. But in the works of these writers it was the more familiar aspects of country life that were drawn, and the noise and the crime of the city were contrasted with an artless innocence that dwelt in fields and woods. The Ossianic poems were conceived in a grander vein. They opened a wide view of a rugged landscape, of lake and mountain, of streams roaring down narrow valleys, and vacant heaths swept by wind and rain. As in almost all the earlier poetry that came from Scotland, the colours were intense and sharply distinguished ; a few bold strokes sufficed for description ; the imagery was of the rudest and most direct character, and the general effect was heightened by a forced and abrupt style. Later poets have given us purer and gentler tones ; but to readers weary of the arid conventionalities of Pope and his school, Macpherson's work presented a striking and impressive picture. Some of its description appears to us now to be cheap and tawdry, but many passages of enduring beauty remain. Nature in its varying appearance is made to reflect and illustrate human emotion in a way elsewhere unparalleled ; and the heroic figures in the scene are clothed with something of its melancholy grandeur.

Hitherto, a mountainous land was, in the common opinion, a region of terror, where every thing was harsh and repulsive. There were men who could describe the beauties of quiet scenery with rapture, and yet were appalled by a rugged landscape. In no other writer of the time is the contrast between the love of smiling plains and the dislike of wild nature so instructive as in Goldsmith, who was indifferent to the Highlands because, as he said, hills and rocks intercepted every prospect. A like sentiment oppressed him when he travelled in the Alps—

“ Where the bleak Swiss their stormy mansion tread
And force a churlish soil for scanty bread.
No product here the barren hills afford. . . .
No zephyr fondly sues the mountain's breast,
But meteors glare and stormy glooms invest.”

It is the feeling of solitude, with a touch, perhaps, of the old terror still haunting it, that gives a rugged landscape the special character which, by an extension of the original meaning of the word, we now describe as romantic. Solitude and terror, deprived of their dangers and seen from a distance, have become sublime. This fresh spring of poetic emotion was first opened in English literature in the Ossianic poems ; and, whatever may be their origin or their history, if they had no other claim to importance, they would deserve it on that ground. They show the earliest beginnings of that attitude to nature, doubtless full of fallacy, but adding immeasurably to the pathos of human life, which Byron has so finely described.

“ I live not in myself, but I become
Portion of that around me ; and to me
High mountains are a feeling, and the hum
Of human cities torture : I can see
Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be
A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,
Classed among creatures, when the soul can flee,
And with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain
Of ocean, or the stars, mingle and not in vain.”

The antiquity assigned to the work was another element in its charm. A few years previously Gray had shown in *The Bard*, and in the odes which he wrote in imitation of Norse and Welsh ballads, that simple tales from a rude age had an interest of their own ; and this tendency to look to the past for the materials of poetry helped in a high degree to form the character of the romantic spirit.

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THE *Scots Magazine* is likely to have attracted Macpherson long before he wrote anything in it himself ; for the literary aspirant looks with a fond eye on the literary periodical. It would be interesting if we could show that he read it during the winter of 1755-6, which, as it seems, he spent in Edinburgh ; for during that winter there appeared in its pages an English version of a Gaelic poem. It deserved attention as the first that had ever been published.

The poem was accompanied by a remarkable letter calling attention to the great quantity of Gaelic verse to be found in the Highlands. That such compositions existed was, said the writer, a fact well known to any one who had a tolerable acquaintance with Gaelic ; if it were not for the neglect, or rather, the abhorrence which had overtaken that emphatic language, their merit would be at once recognised. Some of them were of a high antiquity, and for sublime sentiment, nervousness of expression and high-spirited metaphor, were hardly to be equalled among the chief productions of modern times ; others, again, were very tender, simple and affecting. Of the simpler sort the writer enclosed a specimen; the burden of it was, he said, not unlike Homer's story of Bellerophon, and it might gratify the curiosity of the learned to see the different treatment of the same theme by a Highland bard.

The writer of this letter was Jerome Stone, a young man who held the humble post of master of the grammar school at Dunkeld. He has a claim to be mentioned here because he was the first translator of Gaelic poetry, and the immediate forerunner of Macpherson. His history is a strange one. The son of a sailor, he was born in 1727, at Scoonie, in Fifeshire, a district in which Gaelic was then almost unknown. As a mere boy he was sent out as a pedlar with a box of braces and buttons, but he seized an early opportunity of exchanging his stock for a parcel of books. He picked up what education he could, worked his way into St. Andrews University, and took a degree there in 1750. In the meantime he had managed to learn Hebrew from a psalter in that language, and such instruction as was freely given him by the ministers whom he visited. On obtaining the post at Dunkeld, on the borders of the Highlands, he exerted himself to learn Gaelic, or, as he called it, Irish, so as to understand the language spoken by most of those amongst whom he was settled ; and he took an interest in collecting its ancient poetry. Stone was undoubtedly capable of great things ; but he died of a fever at the age of twenty-nine, only a short time after his contribution to the *Scots Magazine*.

The poem which he published, *Albin and the daughter of Mey*, was an extremely free rendering of the original. Unfortunately, he did not publish the Gaelic copy ; but, together with other poems, it was afterwards discovered among his papers. [2] As Stone's venture must at some time or other have come in Macpherson's way, it will be interesting to show the kind of rendering for which he won acceptance, if only to give an example of the freedom which was commonly allowed in the process of translation at that period. The fact that Stone's version passed for a fair one has an important bearing on any estimate that may be formed of Macpherson's work. The poem in the Gaelic original is entitled *Fraock's Death* ; and, literally translated, the first three verses run as follow : [3]

“ The sigh of a friend in the grove of Fraoch !
A sigh for the hero in its rounded pale,
A sigh which causes each man to mourn,
And which makes each maiden weep.

“ There to the westward is the cairn
Which covers Fraoch, son of Fiach, of the soft
hair,
He who obeyed the call of Mey,
And from whom that cairn of Fraoch has its
name.

“ The maids from Cruchan weep,
Sad is the cause of their woe,
For their mournful sighs are occasioned
By Fraoch, son of Fiach, of the ancient weapons.”

In Stone's rendering the three verses become one, and the metre is entirely altered :

“ Whence come these dismal sounds that fill our
ears?
Why do the groves such lamentations send ?
Why sit the virgins on the hill of tears,
While heavy sighs their tender bosoms rend ?
They weep for Albin with the flowing hair
Who perish'd by the cruelty of Mey,
A blameless hero, blooming, young, and fair,
Because he scorn'd her passions to obey.
See on yon western hill the heap of stones
Which mourning friends have raised o'er his
bones.”

In speaking of the abhorrence which had overtaken the Gaelic language, Stone used an expression which was none too strong. The English Government had for some time been doing its utmost to suppress the language altogether. It was partly for this purpose that the parochial schools had been established, and that encouragement was given to the Scotch Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, which had obtained letters patent from Anne in 1709. This society planted numerous schools all over the Highlands, and made every effort to introduce and maintain the English tongue ; nor was it very long before, even in the most remote valleys, English was familiar to the children. When Johnson visited the High lands he was especially struck by the great effect of this attack upon the natural language of the people. Some notion of its virulence may be obtained from the fact that a movement existed to prevent the circulation of any Gaelic version of the Bible ; and laws were actually passed which sought to influence private teachers by compelling them to take the oath of allegiance. [4]

Although Stone was the first to translate any of these Gaelic poems, others had previously been at work collecting them. John Farquharson, a Roman Catholic missionary in Strathglass, Inverness-shire, and afterwards Prefect of Studies at Douay, made a large collection some time before the year 1745. In 1751 Alexander Macdonald, master of the school at Ardnamurchan, and a well-known Jacobite bard, brought out a small volume of them at Edinburgh, and in an English preface expressed the hope that the specimens which he offered to the public might awaken interest in a language which contained all the charms of poetry and rhetoric, and be speak favour for a great collection of such pieces, illustrating all the kinds of poetry usual among cultivated nations, with a translation into English verse and critical observations. Whether Macdonald's ambitious scheme was examined and pronounced chimerical, or attracted no attention at all, is a question which cannot now be determined ; but certain it is that it had no result. The very existence of Gaelic poetry continued to be known only to a few persons outside the Highlands. But amongst the Highlanders themselves, while

it is true that only here and there any one cared to collect the specimens which came in his way, a high value was set upon this rude poetry. As to the kind of esteem in which they held it, curious testimony is given by Burt, who visited the north of Scotland about the year 1730. He relates that when he was being entertained at the house of a Highland chief, the bard attached to the family repeated an Erse poem for the pleasure of the guests. The chief, who prided himself upon his classical attainments, was loud in his praises of the poem, and declared that some of the passages in it were superior to anything in Virgil or Homer. It is clear, then, that before Macpherson was born there were educated Highlanders who knew and admired this poetry and believed it to be of an epic cast.

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The enthusiasm in Edinburgh.—Ancient Gaelic poetry.—The Irish and the Scotch Tradition.—“The Dean of Lismore’s Book.”—Carsewell’s “Book of Common Order”.—Scotch Manuscripts.—Oral Recitation and the Bards.—Condition of Scotch-Gaelic Poetry in MacPherson’s time.—His critical efforts.—His attitude to Irish Gaelic Poetry.

THE popular fashion in literature at the end of the nineteenth century has little in common with the fashion which reigned in the middle of the eighteenth ; and the reader who delights in the kind of books at present in vogue, will be at a loss to understand how any popular interest could have been excited in Edinburgh in the year 1760 by an elegant version of a few old Gaelic poems. Nor will the commotion which the translator produced be any the more intelligible to the severe student imbued with modern methods of antiquarian research. Yet the enthusiasm which touched our great-grandfathers at the mere prospect of discovering a lost epic in the remote valleys of the north was perfectly genuine ; and so far was it from being confined to a third or fourth-rate literary clique, that it was the first writers of the time who were most completely carried away by it. Men so different in mental qualities, in literary aims, tastes, and capacities, as Blair, Hume, and Gray, while they varied in their opinion of the merits of this poetry, shared the common astonishment to the full, and, as appears by the evidence, were more eager than Macpherson himself to collect as much of it as could be found. It will help us to realise their enthusiasm if we remember that they formed their opinion solely on the translator’s version. The criticism of the day was a criticism of taste and sentiment ; with a few notable exceptions, it was the elegance and refinement of so-called polite learning rather than any scientific precision, that made the strongest appeal. Of the real nature, origin, and history of the poems, the critics knew nothing ; and in order to arrive at a fair understanding of Macpherson’s work, and of the way in which he dealt with his materials, a slight knowledge of these matters will be necessary.

That some rude poetry existed in many parts of the Highlands is a fact which every one admits now, and even in the last century none but the more violent and ignorant of the controversialists disputed it. Macpherson’s success, by whatever means he attained it, incited others to the work of collection ; but most of those who followed him were inspired by antiquarian rather than by literary ambition. Of these the latest and most important was J. F. Campbell of Islay, whose *Leabhar na Feinne* contains a quantity of Highland poetry indisputably genuine, collected partly from oral tradition and partly from manuscripts of various date, some of them as old as 1512. Campbell’s collection consists of ballads and short poems in the rough condition in which they were actually found ; and it is there that the exact nature of the Gaelic poetry of the Highlands can best be studied, and the most accurate account be obtained of the legends which they embodied. But the general character of the legends was well known in Macpherson’s day ; and even then it was abundantly proved that a rude poetry, recounting the doings of a great chief or hero, named Fion or Fingal, had been handed down among the Highlanders from time immemorial. Common sayings, popular proverbs, and local names in the Highlands and Isles everywhere attested this belief ; so that the

poems and ballads, and the heroism which they celebrated, were regarded as the ancient heritage of the Caledonians.

But when we go further and inquire into the origin of this poetry, we come to matters that are in high dispute. That its substance is not very modern is almost the only thing about it upon which every one will agree. The tradition of Fingal and the *Feinne* dates from a time when there was little or no racial distinction between the inhabitants of the Highlands and Western Isles and those of the North of Ireland ; and as it belonged to both in the past, it has become a bone of contention between them in the present. We know on the unquestioned authority of the *Book of Leinster*, compiled in the earlier half of the twelfth century, and one of the most valuable and ancient Irish manuscripts extant, that Finn MacCumhaill was a personage of much renown in early Irish tradition ; his pedigree is there given at great length ; and in the *Annals of the Four Masters* [5] it is recorded that he was slain in battle A.D. 283 in the reign of Cairbre Lifeachair. We have an account, also in the *Book of Leinster*, of a great slaughter at Gabhra in the following year, when the *Feinne* were overthrown, and Oscar, son of Ossian, son of Finn MacCumhaill, was killed. It is certain that the memory of these deeds was celebrated in song and preserved by tradition ; for the same book gives the incidents of the battle as they were described in an ancient poem attributed to Ossian or Oisín. Now, whoever Finn MacCumhaill was, in tradition he appears to be the same person as Fingal. On these and other grounds the Irish claim Fingal and Ossian for their own.

But the Scotch also claim them. In this same poem in the *Book of Leinster* *Feinne* from all quarters are mentioned : not only *Feinne* of Erin, but *Feinne* of Alban or Scotland, of Breatan, the district of Dumbarton, and of Lochlan, the name given to the North of Germany between the Rhine and the Elbe, and later to Denmark and Norway ; and as it seems clear that Cairbre was King of Ireland at the time, it seems also clear that some at any rate of the *Feinne* were invaders. The Scotch declare that Fingal was King of Morven. Certain it is that names recalling the *Feinne* are still to be found in various parts of the Highlands, in Athole, Lochaber, Glenelg, and elsewhere ; and that these names are ancient is proved by ancient documents. The names of Cuchullin, too, and the sons of Uisneach, who play a large part in Irish tradition of a still earlier date, are also well known in the Western Isles, where we have the Cuchullin Hills, Glen Uisneach and the vitrified forts known as Dun Mhic Uisneachan.

Of the *Feinne* all that we know is that they were heroic warriors fighting against extinction. The burden of all their ballads is that they went forth to the battle, but that they always fell. But to ask who Fingal really was, whether he flourished in Ireland or in Scotland, or whether he was not an entirely mythical personage, akin to, if not identical with, King Arthur ; whether his faithless spouse Graine is not the faithless Guinevere with a new name ; to ask who the *Feinne* were, whence they came, what they did, how they stood to other tribes of whom we have mention, the *Cruithne* and the *Tuatha dé Danann*, and in what direction they disappeared ; where, when, and by whom their deeds were first sung, and how these songs were preserved,—is to ask questions to which, in spite of much writing, no certain answer has yet been given. [6]

In connection with Macpherson's search it will be desirable to show that the tales of Fingal and his heroes, of Cuchullin, Derdriu, and the sons of Uisneach, were the subject of popular song in Scotland from a very early date. For this purpose it is unnecessary to distinguish between the three cycles or classes which scholars have established in Irish mythology and heroic tradition. In the earliest life of St. Columba, the first and greatest of the Irish missionaries to Scotland, written in the seventh century, three places are mentioned in connection with his journey to the palace of the King of the Picts ; namely, Cainle, Arcardan, and the river Nesae. The names of the three sons of Uisneach were Ainle, Ardan, and Naoise ; [7] and two vitrified forts near Lochness are called Dundearthuil. It is also said that mention is

made of Fingal in one of the early lives of St. Columba. Giraldus Cambrensis (d. 1220) referred to a Gaelic poet named Ossian. On the other hand, there are some who assert that the Ossianic legend, describing the invasion of the Lochlanners, is not older than the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and that it was formed by mingling stories of the Northmen's invasion in the ninth century with early heroic traditions. The oldest version of the tale of Derdriu is found in the Glenmasan manuscripts, dated 1238, now in the Advocates' Library at Edinburgh. In John Barbour's poem of *The Bruce*, written about the year 1375, there is a verse on Fingal, and on Gaul, the son of Morn :—

“ He said methink Marchokys son
Right as Gol Mak Morn was won,
To haiff fra Fyngal his menye
Rycht sua all his fra us has he”.

—(Book iii.)

The humanist Arthur Johnston in the same century spoke of great epic poems of the Gaels. Hector Boethius in his *History of Scotland* printed at Paris in 1526, in mentioning Arthur and other ancient British worthies in history and legend, also spoke of Fingal as a remarkable figure in early Scottish tradition : “ Conjiciunt quidam in hæc tempora Fynnanum filium cœli (Fyn Mak Coul vulgari vocabulo) virum, uti ferunt, immani statura, Scotici sanguinis,” etc. Gavin Douglas, on the other hand, in his *Palice of Honour* (before 1522), described Fingal as a deified hero of Ireland :

“ Greit Gow Macmorne, and Fyn Mac Cowl,
and how
They suld be goddis in Ireland as they say”.

But this, again, is contradicted by a passage in *The Interlude of the Droichis* :—

“ My fore grandsyr, hecht Fyn Mac Cowl,
That dang the devil and gart him yowll,
The skyis rained when he wald scowll
And trublitt all the air.

“ He gat my grandschir Gog Magog,
Ay when he dansit the warld wald schog
Five thousand ellis yeid in his frog
Of hieland pladdis of hair.”

Still more valuable evidence of the widespread existence of this poetry is at hand in *The Dean of Lismore's Book*. This is a manuscript of the early part of the sixteenth century, containing over eleven thousand verses of Gaelic poetry ascribed to various bards, and among them twenty-eight poems of an Ossianic character, nine of them ascribed to Ossian himself, and the rest to immediate contemporaries or successors. It belonged to M'Gregor, Dean of Lismore, which was then the Metropolitan Church of the See of Argyle. The dates affixed to it show that it was written at various periods between the years 1512 and 1529. If *The Dean's Book* establishes nothing else, it is conclusive evidence that the names and events which afterwards formed the staple of Macpherson's translations were the subject of popular poetry in the sixteenth century. Later on in that century the *Book of the Common Order of the Kirk of Scotland* by John Knox, printed in English in 1565, was, in 1567, translated into Gaelic by Carsewell, Bishop of Argyle and the Isles. It was the first book printed in that language ; and in his preface the bishop deplored the fact that the Highlanders much preferred their ancient ballads—“ vain, tempting, lying, worldly histories, concerning the Tuatha de Danann and

warriors and champions, and Fingal the son of Cumhall with his heroes”—to such godly works as he was about to publish. And Kirk, in his translation of the *Psalms of David* into Gaelic as late as the year 1684, sends it out into the world with these lines :—

“ Little volume, go boldly forth,
Raise whom ye reach to pure and Godly strains,
Hail the generous land of Fingal’s heroes
The Highland tracts and Isles of Hebrides”.

Even those who, in face of many difficulties, contend for the Highland origin of Fingal and Ossian, are ready to allow that the poems and ballads relating their great deeds on Irish soil are likely to have been known and sung by the Irish bards who in early centuries came over in large numbers to Scotland, in the train, perhaps, of the Irish missionaries. It is, however, no part of the business of the present volume to offer an opinion on this international dispute. For many centuries after St. Columba’s time there was a free interchange of Gaelic learning, just as there was a political union, between the two countries. There is the important fact to be remembered, that, of Gaelic manuscripts extant, by far the larger number come from Ireland ; and if any large number ever existed in Scotland at any period of its history, the fact has yet to be proved. It is asserted on behalf of the Scottish contention, that civil and religious troubles in the High lands were more inimical to the preservation of manuscripts than similar troubles in Ireland.

The Scotch point to the monastery of Iona or Icolmkill, which, if tradition be trustworthy, was an Irish missionary establishment, as the head and centre of Gaelic learning in Scotland. There is, it is true, some slight tradition to show that manuscripts were once collected there. Hector Boethius records that about the year 800, Eugene VII. ordered all books and manuscripts relating to the history of Scotland to be deposited at Iona in a new building specially erected for the purpose ; and that some of the manuscripts there had been taken in the sacking of Rome by Fergus II. when he assisted Alaric the Goth in the year 410. But if there were any manuscripts at Iona at the end of the eighth century, they would hardly have escaped destruction in the hands of the Scandinavian pirates in the ninth. If a further collection was made in the next four centuries, that, too, say the Scotch, was destroyed in the year 1296, by Edward I. [8] And if anything survived these two attacks, it was carried off to Douay and to Rome at the time of the Reformation. If there was anything at Douay it disappeared in the French Revolution, for the monastery was burned to the ground in 1793. This summary fashion of accounting for the paucity of Gaelic manuscripts in Scotland reduces us to look for them amongst the as yet undiscovered treasures of the Vatican. [9]

It was almost entirely in the Highlands that the poems and ballads which existed in Scotland, probably from early times, but to our certain knowledge as early as the twelfth century, were handed down. The state of that region up to the early part of the eighteenth century, the ignorance of every civilised art, the barbarous character of almost every pursuit, and the effort made by the Church, the sole literary influence, to discourage the recitation of all such poems, combined to restrict their spread. The few individuals who devoted themselves to literature took no notice of them ; although, as is evident from *The Dean’s Book*, some attempt must have been made from time to time to collect them. And it is a curious and noteworthy fact that one of the pieces there collected refers to the practice of writing down such poetry. [10] But the great majority of the learned of those days regarded the Highland Gaels much as, later on, Pinkerton and Johnson regarded them, namely as beings little better than savages, and the language they spoke merely as a barbarian dialect. To the remoteness of the Highlands, and the little intercourse which the inhabitants held with the outer world, is undoubtedly due that the language underwent no considerable variation in the course of centuries.

A few of the poems and ballads have been preserved to our time in manuscript, and in Macpherson's time it is not improbable that a larger number were so extant. But most of them were preserved by the oral tradition of the bards. That bards were maintained in all the great Highland families, that attention and respect were everywhere paid to them, that long evenings were spent in listening to their recitations, is known to every reader of Highland romance. That there would be some fidelity of tradition among the bards is probable enough ; for much trouble was taken to preserve the continuity of their order. The bard lived on his laird's land, which he held by inheritance, and as a reward for his services. In some cases it was held on the special condition that the bard should educate his children for the same office, so as to enable the history and poetry connected with the family to be transmitted from one generation to another. But while the bards looked back to Ossian as the head and fountain of their inspiration, and preserved such poems as were traditionally attributed to him, they also composed poems of their own. There can be no manner of doubt that the poems which were spread over the Highlands, although they were of a definite character, and related the exploits of particular heroes, were the out come of many centuries.

Now there is evidence to show that Macpherson endeavoured not only to collect this poetry, but also to determine its precise antiquity, [11] and, more especially, to restore it to its original form. In this he was attempting a task which the best critic of any age would have declined. The matter in question was rude, obscure, and corrupt. It was the production of a great number of individuals who were in no kind of contact with one another, but lived in different ages and in almost complete isolation. If there was any unity and solidarity to be found in their productions, it was only the unity of the tradition common to them all, that Ossian was the first of their race and the deeds he sung the foremost object of their care. If we suppose that a bard of the name of Ossian composed poems in the third or fourth century, that his poems should have come down pure and unchanged, by oral tradition alone, to the eighteenth century, is not indeed impossible ; but it is incredible. Such tradition for three hundred years has, however, been proved ; for many of the poems obtained by the Highland Society from oral recitation at the beginning of the nineteenth century are substantially the same as poems of the sixteenth preserved in *The Dean's Book*. Doubtless some few poems, regarded as particularly sacred, may have been handed down with little change from remote ages ; but with all their care for these, the bards will have had ambitions of their own. For individual treatment of their theme there was everything to offer the fullest scope, and the quality of the verse naturally varied with the power of the bards. It was in the nature of things that only a few of them could reach a high level ; and it may be taken as certain that half the bombast in the Ossianic poems may be set down, not to the man who collected and translated them, but to the commonplace qualities of their ancient authors. In addition to singing the deeds of Fingal and his heroes, the bards often celebrated the doings of their own chief and his clan, which in course of time would inevitably be mixed up with the ancient theme. On what grounds, or by what rules, the ancient treatment of that ancient theme could be distinguished from other treatments of it less ancient, Macpherson had no means of determining ; he had none of the special learning or critical power requisite even for any approach to the question, and no other standard to adopt but the general notion that the better the poetry, and the greater the gap which it filled in a supposed epic, the purer and more authentic it was likely to be.

Macpherson undertook his mission at a critical time in the history of this Highland poetry ; for it was rapidly disappearing under the various changes recently introduced by the English Government. The breakup of the clan system, the abolition of hereditary jurisdictions, and, above all, the ruin or exile of many great families which had participated in the Jacobite risings, brought about the dispersal of the bards. The language fell into contempt. Adam Ferguson, writing at the end of the century, tells us that the late fashion of the times was to be ignorant of anything written or spoken in Gaelic. It was no longer used at any gentleman's table ; but only by cottagers, herdsmen and deer-stealers. Those who took a pride in their knowledge of it were regarded with suspicion as hostile to Government. There were

no books in it but manuals of religion ; and these were written in so awkward and clumsy a style that few could read them. [12] It was only in the remoter districts that the poetry of the language still survived in any quantity. But even there the collector was called upon to make a diligent search ; and what he found was inevitably corrupt.

That Macpherson had undertaken no easy task was fully recognised at the time. Some of the difficulties which he had to encounter were set forth in the very explicit testimony of one of the ministers whom he visited, Dr. John Macpherson, of Knock in Sleat, a man of considerable literary power and strong antiquarian interests, who had excellent opportunities of forming a competent judgment on the whole matter. The versions given by the several persons who rehearsed the same tales in his presence were, he declared, far from being exactly alike. Some of the rehearsers omitted complete incidents which others had repeated ; some inverted the order of whole sentences and stanzas ; others differed greatly from the rest in expression, here and there in the sentiments, in the versification, in the names of the heroes and scenes of action ; and that, too, without doing any considerable hurt to the merit of the poem.

If such differences could exist between contemporary versions of the same tales, it is a fact which deserves to be considered by those who complain that the poems in Macpherson's translation are, in tone and temper, unlike poems of undisputed age and authenticity ; for example, that they are unlike the poems in *The Dean's Book*. But between *The Dean's Book* and Macpherson's translation there was an interval of some two hundred and fifty years ; and while a few fragments were collected from oral recitation in the end of the eighteenth century, which differed very little from poems afterwards discovered in *The Dean's Book*, in many others variety of treatment would in that long interval necessarily establish a considerable change of character. To a still greater extent is this true when we come to contrast the poems in Macpherson's translation with ancient Irish ballads still extant. In both cases it is well to remember that, as we shall see later on, Macpherson treated his materials with a very free hand.

His criticism, too, was of a very rough and summary description. A fair specimen of it is afforded by his attitude towards the Irish tradition. He was well aware that Ossianic poetry existed in Ireland, and he took a very simple course ;— he denounced it as spurious. If he came across any fragments in the Highlands which seemed to savour of Irish tradition, he was careful to reject them. [13] He declared [14] that the bards of Ireland ascribed to Ossian compositions which were evidently their own, and thus occasioned a general belief in that country that Fingal was of Irish extraction ; whereas in the poems which he had collected, Fingal was an ancient Caledonian. The poems which asserted the contrary were, he said, *ipso facto* untrustworthy. He maintained that the nature of the Irish poems and the ignorance of their authors were sufficiently proved when Ossian described himself as a contemporary of St. Patrick, and yet spoke of the Crusades ; and that if a ballad recited in Scotland contained anything of the same kind, it must be rejected as Irish. To account for the fact that Ossian was famous in Ireland as well as in Scotland, he pointed to the old union between the two countries ; and if the Irish were unaware that Ossian was Scotch, it was, he declared, simply because they were ignorant of their own history.

[1] Among others, the late Prof. Henry Morley, in his admirable *First Sketch of English Literature*, p. 862.

[2] Soon after his death they were purchased at a sale in London by Mr. George Chalmers, the antiquary. Prof. Mackinnon, of Edinburgh, has since printed them, with a memoir of Stone, in the *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 1887-8.

[3] They are given in the *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society on the Poems of Ossian* (Edinb., 1805), App., 103.

- [4] After the second Jacobite rising these efforts were re doubled, and in 1747 and 1748 culminated in an attempt to banish the plaid and the kilt. In those years an oath was administered calling down every kind of misfortune on the head of the man who should carry gun, sword, or pistol, or wear a tartan plaid, or any part of the Highland garb.
- [5] The chief of them was Michael O'Clery, a Franciscan friar, who, in 1632, compiled the Annals from then existing Irish manuscripts. They extend from a fabulous antiquity to the year 1616.
- [6] If the reader desires to take an accurate survey of the present state of these questions, let me recommend him to peruse the thirty volumes of the following works : *Transactions of the Dublin Ossianic Society*, 1854-61, six vols. ; O'Curry's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, three vols. ; Hardiman's *Irish Minstrelsy* ; Drummond's *Ancient Irish Minstrelsy* ; M. d'Arbois de Jubainville's *Cours de Litterature Celtique*, i., ii., and v. ; Skene's *Celtic Scotland*, three vols., his Introd. to *The Dean of Lismore's Book*, and his *Essay on the Highlanders* ; Hill Burton's *History of Scotland*, i., ii. ; Beeves' edition of Adarnnan's *Life of St. Columba* ; J. F. Campbell's *Leabhar na Feinne*, and *Tales of the West Highlands*, four vols., and his review of Clerk's *Ossian* in the *Times*, 15th April, 1871 ; Macneill's *Literature of the Highlanders* ; *La Revue Celtique*, passim; Ebrard's *Finghal*, etc.
- [7] See Skene's Introd. to *The Dean's Book*, lxxxii.
- [8] Hume says that " Edward I. gave orders to destroy the records and all the monuments of antiquity which might preserve the memory of the independence of the kingdom, and refute the English claims of superiority". It might be difficult to obtain any precise evidence for this statement.
- [9] We have some strange evidence of the destruction of private collections. Father Farquharson brought his MS. to Douay, where leaves were torn out to kindle fire in a stove. Lachlan Macmhuirich related that some of the old parchments at Clanranald's were cut up by tailors for measuring-tapes (Rep., App., 279).
- [10] *The Dean's Book*, p. 125, and the note thereto.
- [11] On this point see the Report, 44 ; and the notes appended to *Fingal* and *Temora*, passim.
- [12] *Rep.*, App., 65.
- [13] For two instances of such rejection see his letter given on p. 152, with the note thereto.
- [14] In the preface to *Fingal*.

The life and letters of James Macpherson, containing a particular account of his famous quarrel with Dr. Johnson, and a sketch of the origin and influence of the Ossianic poems (1895)

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