

# The Legend of the Fiann

In The

Highland Bards.

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Gaelic literature is not a thing of last century, nor of the one before that. Go back into the middle ages, and you will still find that the Gael has a literature, copious in extent and of surpassing interest, — a literature that in its written forms goes back to the 10th century, and which, traditionally must be much older.

This literature, however, is of a different cast from that of our early Highland bards. It is the glory of these that they made Scottish Gaelic a literary tongue. But the literature on which they were reared was that of their kinsmen in Ireland. It was in this that many of them learned their art, it was this that they wrote in their books, and in this they corresponded with their poet friends in Ireland. Now in the latter half of last century there arose in Scotland, along with Macpherson's Ossian and other complications, an unreasoning prejudice against everything that was Irish. Any word that could be branded with that stigma was promptly hustled out of Gaelic books, even out of the scriptures which first came to Highlanders in the Irish tongue, and sent across the channel at the first opportunity. Along with this, perhaps to some extent causing it, came the inability to read the manuscripts which their fathers had written in the Irish tongue and in the Irish letter. They were neglected, destroyed, cut into tailors' shapes, and perished unlamented. A more gigantic blunder was never committed in the literary world. For a people, who were proud of their race and their language, to deprive themselves wantonly of their true literary heritage, was an act of which it would be hard to find the like. What although it was Irish? It was the literature that the Scottish Gael had enjoyed in common with their Irish kith and kin, to which they may have contributed more than we know of, and to turn round in this way and throw it to the winds, was an act of literary suicide. It is for us now, recognizing the error, to try to restore the broken link that connects the poetry of the Scottish Highlands with the poetry of the older day's, and it is in the hope of showing how close the two run to each other, that I have endeavoured in this paper to bring our Highland bards into close connection with the older literature of the Gael.

Among the many striking legends of the Gaelic race, which for centuries have been a source of delight in Ireland and Scotland, which in some ways have been more real to the Gael than history itself, the only one that has made itself known over the length and breadth of Europe, and has thus entered into the literature of the world, is that connected with the names of Ossian and the Fiann. This great service to Gaelic literature was rendered by James Macpherson, and, however much we may object to the form in which he presented the legend, however perverse we may consider his methods to have been, we must at least admit that, but for him, the tale of the Fiann would still have little interest for any but the Gael themselves. It is true that some stray hints of the story are found in earlier times. Giraldus Cambrensis, in his enquiry into Irish affairs, had heard something of the leading persons in it, of Finn Mac Cumhail, of Ossian and Oscar. The poets of the Scottish Lowlands in the 16th century also knew of

“ Finn mak Coul and Gow Mac Morn, and how  
Thai suld be goddis in Irland, as thai say.”

The knowledge, however, covered little more than the mere names of these chief personages; of the details of the legend itself, and of its value as literature or as poetry, these writers seem to have known nothing. It was James Macpherson who, in some moment of bright inspiration, seized upon the poetic motives of the tradition, and upon the basis of these, with the familiar names and a few of the well-

known incidents, all steeped in mist and tinged with new sentiment, produced those “ Poems of Ossian,” which were a marvel and a delight to the one generation, and a weariness of flesh to the next.

It is of course notorious that Macpherson could never give any clear account of his authorities for these poems of Ossian. His own “ dissertations” are very vague when treating on this point. On the one hand he seems to claim that they were handed down from one generation to another as models of poetry and of sentiment ; on the other he seems to assert that the later bards were a degenerate race, incapable of appreciating the noble themes of Ossian, and given only to praising their chief and the good cheer he provided. It seems strange, indeed, that bards, whom he describes as successful in every other branch of poetry, should have been so hopelessly inferior in this : the whole argument, in fact, has a strong suspicion of being invented to make out a case. The case, of course, that Macpherson wanted to make out, was that the heroic ballads, which are in reality the only genuine “ Ossianic” poems, were the composition of these degenerate bards, and therefore not to be placed on the same page, or even named in the same breath, with his heroic, cloudy, high-souled, sentimental Ossian.

It is remarkable how little the conclusions established even by Macpherson’s contemporaries were regarded in the discussions on the genuineness of Ossian that raged for so many years. All their evidence goes clearly to prove that no one in the Highlands could produce any “ Ossianic” poetry like Macpherson’s, or indeed anything except those compositions which he rejected as bardic and Irish. This was the living Fenian tradition of Macpherson’s time ; it is the only living one yet. No man was more entitled to speak with authority on this subject than Campbell of Islay, and this is *his* verdict, deliberately given after an examination of the evidence on both sides. “ Macpherson’s Ossian, Smith’s Sean Dana, Clark’s Morduth, and MacCallum’s Collath are the four samples of that class which claims to be authentic, and calls the other class corrupt . . . No uneducated Highlander ever has recited this kind of Gaelic to me, and I cannot find a trace of it in any old writing.”

To Macpherson then, pledged in favour of an Ossian who should be all sentiment and high-souled feeling, the common Ossian was but the late and unrefined dross of the ignorant bards. We may so far accept his decision on this point, for we shall find that the Ossian of the bards is indeed this despised anachronism, against whom Macpherson vents his scorn in his Dissertation. That the professional bards were responsible for the poems may however be doubted. A ballad literature is a growth of which the origins are obscure, and the authorship always uncertain. Both in Ireland and in Scotland the bard’s name is seldom forgotten, and goes down to posterity in close connection with the poems themselves, whereas all real ballads are anonymous, and seem to have grown rather than to have been made. So it is with these ballads of the Fiann ; they represent a literary movement, which is popular rather than professional, spontaneous and not artificial. But however they arose, it was natural that the bard, as the literary representative of his clan, should be acquainted with them. It was his business not merely to praise the chief and his clansmen, but to entertain them, and a knowledge of these tales and ballads would be expected of him as a matter of course. Being thus familiar with the legend of the Fiann, it might well be expected that the bard’s own compositions would at times reflect this knowledge. The early legends of every race, so long as interest in them remains, are sure to appear in its later literature. They are part of the mental inheritance of the people ; references to them come out almost instinctively even in every-day language. They serve both the poet and the prose-writer as a ready means with which to point his moral and adorn his tale, and the allusion is one which the hearer or reader will at once understand and appreciate. So it is, for instance, in the literature of Greece. The tales of Troy and Thebes continue to be referred to by later authors, whether in prose or verse, and even were the Homeric poems lost, we should still be able to learn much of the legend from these later allusions. It is something like this which I propose to do in this paper, — to show from the compositions of the Scottish Gaelic bards what kind of Ossian *they* believed in, how far their testimony bears out Macpherson’s assertion that the Ossian of the bards was this late Irish absurdity which he condemns. If this turns out to be the case, it becomes more imperative than ever that Macpherson should have given some clear proof that *his* Ossian was something independent of such a tradition, and old enough to be free from its pernicious influence. Such evidence he never did produce.

Here, however, it may be well to say a word or two on the state of this tradition in Scotland. That the legend of the Fiann is a living tradition no one could deny after the evidence afforded by J. F.

Campbell's "Popular Tales of the West Highlands," and his "Leabhar na Féinne;" or the Rev. J. G. Campbell's volume in "Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition." At the same time, there is, I think, some danger of misunderstanding this tradition. It is sometimes pointed out as a marvellous thing that ballads, which are found in the Dean of Lismore's book about 1520, are repeated at the present day in forms not marked by any wide divergences. We must not forget, however, that a whole mass of written literature intervenes between these periods. From the seventeenth century these ballads are found in manuscripts which were in use in the Western High-lands until at least the early part of last century. The professional bards were able to read these manuscripts, and were thus not dependent on memory alone for their accurate transmission, and even the unprofessional reciter could thus be reminded of what he had forgotten. In fact, so far as we are dealing with anything that was in the habit of being written down, our only safe starting-point for an oral tradition is the fall of clanship and the decay of a purely Gaelic education. This applies not only to the ballads but to the prose tales. In an article in the "Scottish Review" of October, 1894, I gave evidence of this in connection with two pieces that occur in Campbell's "Tales of the West Highlands," showing that these were at one time derived from a literary original. To these I might have added his interminable tale of "Conall Gulban's Sword," a version of which, though unfortunately imperfect at the beginning, is contained in one of the manuscripts in the Advocates' Library. Campbell says he had heard of MSS. of the tales.

Remembering, then, that our tradition may not be always oral tradition, we shall see how far the Highland bards in their own compositions indicate a knowledge of its substance and an appreciation of its general tone. The legend itself, being so popular, must have some features in it that can hardly be lacking in the newer literature, however the two may differ in their themes. It will, however, serve to make our treatment of the subject more complete, if we go back even a little further than the mere Fenian tradition, and take a glance at its historic position in the literature of the Gael.

The great mass of Irish hero-legends, which have only in recent years come to be properly understood even among Celtic scholars, falls into three well-defined groups, which, so far as one can judge, succeed each other in the date of their origin, as well as in the supposed time of their action. The first of these, connected with the names of the Fomhóraigh and the Tuatha Dé Danann, relates to a far back time in the history of Ireland, a period which is set down by later historians, aiming at an exact chronology, as contemporary with the Trojan War, or somewhere about 1100 years before our era. It has been pretty clearly proved that the leading characters in this cycle are in reality the old Celtic deities, retaining much of their marvellous powers and qualities, but vulgarized and made ridiculous by the irrepressible humour of the Irish storyteller.

The second group, connected with the names of Cuchulainn and Conchobhar, has rather a historic than a mythical basis, and the date of it was fixed by Irish antiquaries as the very beginning of the Christian era. To this, amid much that is fantastic and grotesque, belong such beautiful and touching tales as "The Death of Conlaoch," "Cuchulainn's Visit to the Land of Faery," and "The Fate of the Sons of Uisneach," the latter being one of the "Three Sorrows of Tale-telling." [1] This cycle was an Ulster one, and remained in full force down to about the 13th century. About that time a new one began to rise in importance, the chief interest of which centred in Leinster. Cuchulainn had championed the cause of Ulster against the men of Connaught and Munster, but the Irish mind was now occupied by a more recent and far more important struggle, that of Ireland against the Danes and Norsemen. This third cycle, therefore, deals with the defence of Ireland against the Scandinavian invader, and Fionn, with his following of the Fiann, is the chosen champion of his native land. If they are not fighting against magic and all the arts of sorcery, they are doing their best, and that is not small, against the men of Lochlann.

The same ingenious historians of Ireland fixed the date of the Fiann in the 3rd century A.D., in the reign of Cormac mac Airt, so that just as Cuchulainn is to Conchobhar, so is Fionn to Cormac. But at an early period there grew up the story of how the old Ossian survived all his fellows for more than a century, and told their story to St. Patrick. This is a constant feature of the legend, and Macpherson's rejection of it only shows how much he misunderstood the real nature of the tradition.

As will be seen later on, the legend of the Fiann took a far greater hold on the mind of the Scottish Gael than either of the two earlier Cycles. For this several reasons might be found. It was the latest

and freshest of them all ; it was perhaps less connected with purely Irish topography ; but above all, it dealt with something that had been as familiar in Scotland as in Ireland — the Norse invasions. This no doubt was the main reason for its popularity in Scotland, and perhaps also the fact that so much of it was thrown into simple ballad form, while the earlier cycles were only told in prose, or in very obscure and difficult verse, although with some notable exceptions. Thus, although the tales of the Children of Lir and the Children of Tuireann, both connected with the oldest cycle of legend, are found in manuscripts which were in use in Scotland, there is little trace of a living interest in it. When Iain mac Ailein, in the early part of the 18th century, explains the introduction of whisky into Scotland by a humorous tale and poem entitled “ The Expulsion of the Tuatha Dé Danann,” one is inclined to suspect a literary acquaintance with the legend, rather than a traditional one.

With regard to the second Cycle things are different ; Cuchulainn at least is a person whom the Gaelic reciter has not forgotten. Besides the prose tales there are ballads belonging to this group of legends, chief among which are those of “ Garbh mac Stairn,” “ The Death of Conlaoch,” “ The Lay of the Heads,” “ The Lay of Fraoch,” and “ The Fate of Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneach.” In Macpherson’s first publication of 1760 a translation is given of the first of these, the ballad of “ Garbh mac Stairn,” and it next makes its appearance in the first book of his Fingal, thereby committing Macpherson to the huge blunder of mixing two perfectly distinct cycles of legend. It is interesting, however, to find that Archibald Grant of Glenmoriston, though born so late as 1785, has reminiscences of the story in one of his poems, in a form which is plainly traditional, as he has mixed up “ Garbh mac Stairn,” who in the ballad comes from over the sea, with the herdsmen of Queen Meyve of Connaught in the tale of “ The Cattle Spoil of Cuailgne.”

The passage in question occurs in a song addressed to one John Richmond (Grant's poems, p. 147) : —

’S e do stòraidh nach biodh cearbach,  
 ’S cha bu shearbh leam bhi ’g an eisdeachd,  
 ’N uair chaidh Cuchulainn ’n a charbad,  
 Ris an Garbh ’bha ann an Eirinn.

Gur è ’n Garbh mac Stairn bha dana,  
 ’M buachaille laidir bh’ aig Ebh è,  
 Mhill e buachaillean Chuchulainn,  
 ’S ghabh e uile gu leir orr’.

’S thug e ’n tarbh leis o na gillean,  
 ’S cha bu chridheach dha mar dh’eirich,  
 Gu ’n theab Cuchulainn a mharbhadh  
 Ged bu stairneach garbh a’ bheist è.

Another old scrap which Macpherson utilized is the “ run” describing the chariot and horses of Cuchulainn, which must have come from some prose tale. In the Dean of Lismore’s book these horses are referred to by name, in a poem attributed to “ Finlay the Red Bard ;” the Dean spells them *Dow seywlin* and *Lay macha*, which is fairly close to the original forms *Dubh Sainglend* and *Liath Macha* (the “ Black of Saingliu” and “ Grey of Macha”). The later reciters, not understanding the original names, alter them so as to make something more intelligible to themselves out of them. Thus in the versions of the MacCallums and Grant they become an *Liathmhor mhaiseach* and *Dubh seimhlinn* ; in the Report on Ossian (p. 206) they are an *Liath-mhaiseach* and *Du-shronmhor*, while Macpherson’s English makes them into *Sulin-sifadda* and *Dusronnal*, his Gaelic into *Sithfada* and *Dubh-srongheal*. It is curious that even in this minor matter Macpherson should be further removed from the originals than any one else. Archibald Grant has also a reference to Cuchulainn’s horses (p. 8) : —

“ Mar na h-eich bha air thoiseach  
 Aig Cuchulainn ’gan nochdadh,  
 Anns a’ charbad bha socrach  
 ’S fada dh’ aithnichte le ’n dos air an t-sràid iad.”

Beyond these references, Cuchulainn is merely alluded to once or twice by the bards of last century as one of the ancient heroes, as by Duncan Bàn in his poem of “ Beinn Dorain,” where he says

Ged thig Caoilte 's Cuchulainn,  
'S gach duine de 'n t-seors' ud, &c.

And the other heroes of the cycle are, to use that much abused phrase, “ conspicuous by their absence.”

Coming now to the question of how far the legend of the Fiann makes itself prominent in the works of the Highland Bards, it may be confessed at the outset that the result is more meagre than might have been expected. From Macpherson's dissertations one would have expected Ossian and Fionn to be constantly in their mouths, but, as a matter of fact, the native Highland productions from the middle of the 17th to the end of the 18th century, being the best period of Scottish Gaelic verse, make only scanty and vague references to the legend. Poets like Alexander Macdonald, John Roy Stuart, or William Ross have no illustrations to draw from them, although the first of these might have found a prototype for the heroes of the '45 in those of the Fiann, had he not been more enamoured of classical divinities and heroes. John Mac Codrum again has only the barest of references to the legends he knew so well, although his versions would not have suited Macpherson, even if the famous retort [2] of the bard had not wounded that gentleman's feelings. Even Lachlan Macpherson of Strathmashie, the friend and assistant of the more famous James, does not allude to them in such poems of his as are preserved. This, of course, has nothing to do with the merits of the poets in question : one might search through a good number of Greek poets without finding much reference to the tale of Troy, but the fact remains that the legend of the Fiann was not so absorbing to these poets as to find a place in their verse. The field is thus not a very extensive one, but it contains much that is of interest. The poet whose works display most acquaintance with our subject is Archibald Grant of Glenmoriston, whose allusions to the Fiann are more copious and precise than those of any other poet, and yet show no trace of Macpherson's Ossian, although he was born more than twenty years after it appeared. In this respect at least, it can hardly be said of his poems that they “ do not deserve serious examination,” which is the remark with which a recent writer on Gaelic literature dismisses him.

That the legend of the Fiann was a common subject for entertainment is of course well known. It is referred to in the splendid song by Màiri nighean Alasdair ruaidh on the hall of Macleod, where talk about the Fiann is coupled with discussing the deer :

Gur h-é b' eachdraidh 'na dhéigh sin,  
Greis air uirsgeul na Féinne  
'S air chuideachda céir-gheal nan croc.

A hundred and fifty years later Archibald Grant speaks of the same practice, only he, strikingly enough, makes it the common habit to tell stories of the Fiann after the reading of the Bible was over, and speaks as if it were mainly a women's amusement.

'S gheibhteadh naigheachd a' Bhiobaill  
Aig luchd-teagaisg 'g a h-innseadh,  
'S greis air uirsgeul na Féinne

Aig na mnathaibh air chéilidh,  
'S iad ag innseadh dha chéile  
Mar bha Oisean, naomh cléireach is Pàdruig (p. 7).

And again —

Agus sgeula Bhiobaill  
'G a h-inns' ann air gach tràth,  
Is treis air eachdaireachd 'n a dhéigh,  
Mar bha an Fhéinn 's na blàir (p. 11).

What was a delight to the poet was, however, a scandal to the “unco guid,” and Peter Grant of Strathspey tells how the Sabbath was profaned with vain talk about the Fianna. The combination of this with the Bible seems to have been unknown to him, for he says : — “ On knolls and hills and in the houses of meeting we would gather together, but it was not the Bible that would be read, but some foolish tale without an end.”

“ Air cnuic ’s air sléibhtean, ’s na tighean céilidh,  
Bhiodhmaid le chéile a’ tional ann,  
Ach cha b’e ’m Bioball a bhiodh ’ga leughadh,  
Ach faoin sgeul air nach tigeadh ceann.”

What then was this legend of the Fiann in which the Gael so much delighted ? We have already seen how it grew up in Ireland, and it will serve best to connect the scattered allusions of the Highland bards if we go briefly through the main outlines of the story. It can hardly be said, however, that this forms a definite narrative ; the whole history of the Fiann from beginning to end never received its final shape, although attempts were made to reduce it to a system.

The most notable of these is the “ Dialogue of the Elders,” a long Irish composition, in which the tale is told to Patrick with some kind of connection. At the same time, it was never so definitely shaped as that of Arthur was in England, and the separate incidents hang together much more loosely.

The Fiann, then, were a band of chosen warriors gathered round Fionn mac Cumhail for the practice of chivalry and the defence of Ireland. The highest ideas were entertained of their prowess and dexterity : witness the following passage from O’Grady’s “ Silva Gadelica ” (p.100). “ No man was taken until he were a prime poet, versed in the twelve books of poetry. No one was taken unless he could ward off nine spears thrown at him all at once, with only his shield and a piece of stick. Not a man of them was taken till his hair had been put into plaits, and he had run through the woods followed by the other Fianna, his start being only the width of one branch. If he was overtaken, he was wounded, and not received in the Fianna. If a branch had disarranged his hair, he was not taken. If he had cracked a dry stick under his foot as he ran, he was not accepted. Unless he could, at full speed, jump a stick level with his brow, and pass under one level with his knee, and unless he could, without slackening his pace, extract a thorn from his foot, he was not taken into Fianship.”

In accordance with this view of the Fiann, we find our Highland bards referring to their era as something far distant, but at the same time as the golden age of the Gael. Thus Iain dubh mac Iain mhic Ailein, in his dream on the state of the kingdom in 1715, says : “ When they gathered together — the host of sea and land — there was plenty of ammunition and provision in their midst. . . . From the time of Fionn so many thousands were not gathered together.” So, too, Iain Lom, in one of his songs, addressed to Donald Gorm Og of Sleat— “ Since the departure of the Fiann ye are undoubtedly the chiefs over the kilted clans.” Duncan Bàn also, in his second poem on the battle of Falkirk, — not the one where he satirizes Fletcher’s sword, but a more serious composition — says : “ The Camerons from Lochy would rise with you, the MacDonalds and the Macintyres ; there has not been their like in these bounds since the Clanna Baoisge came to an end.” The Clanna Baoisge was the tribe to which Fionn belonged ; his father Cumhal being slain by the Clanna Morna led to a feud between these two tribes, which was afterwards made up, so that “ Finn mak Cowl” and “ Gow mak Morne” are naturally mentioned together by the Lowland poets, as we have seen. Duncan Bàn also uses “ sliochd nan Fiantan” as a general name for the Gael, but perhaps the very finest and most poetic use of this antiquity of the Fiann comes out in a poem by William MacKenzie (an ceistear crúbach), where he complains that the world is going to wreck since all the heroes have departed, and that nothing but sorrow and trouble is now in store. Then he adds — “ And if I wait to see it as long as my grandfather, every man will be asking at me whether I have seen the Fiann.”

’S na’m fanainn ri ’fhaicinn  
Cho fad ri mo sheanair,  
Gum farr’deadh gach fear dhiom  
Am faca mi ’n Fhéinn.

In the Irish tradition the Fianna are divided into seven battalions, called “ seachd ruadh-chathan na Féinne,” and this division is referred to by Iain MacCodrum in his satire on Donald Bàn’s bagpipe, which, he says, “ withered up with its barking the seven battalions of the Fiann, and weakened at once the strength of Dermid and Goll.”

Shearg i le ’tabhann  
Seachd cathan nam Fianntaidh,  
’S i lagaich an ciad uair  
Neart Dhiarmaid is Ghuill.

The chief delight of the Fiann was in the chase, a feature which appears constantly in the ballads and the prose tales, and brings out many beautiful pictures from the poet and story-teller. Mighty hunters, too, were the Highland chiefs, and how natural would it have been for the bards to compare him and his followers in pursuit of the deer to Fionn and his warrior huntsmen ! Yet somehow the bards never thought of this ; it is left for Archibald Grant to do it in his song to Mac mhic Phàdrraig (p. 72), where it comes into a strangely modern setting. “ In London of the cloaks you would not get the sport that you have between the Strone and Cruachan, with your dogs on the hills driving the slender deer, — that is how the Fiann once were. ”

“ Cha ’n fhaigheadh tu spors an Lunnainn nan cleoc,  
A tha eadar an t-Sroin ’s an Cruachan leat,  
Le d’ chuilean ’s a’ bheinn a’ ruith nan damh seang, —  
Sud mar bha ’n Fhéinn uair eiginn.”

Among all the chivalrous qualities of the Fiann one of the most noticeable was their love of fairplay which comes out often in the tales, even where it is exercised to their own loss. Thus in the tale of the “ Palace of Little Red Eochaidh,” Conan, when beaten by a monstrous hag, implores Dermid to assist him. Dermid rises to do so, but Fionn stops him. “ It is forbidden to me,” he said, “ to take away the advantage gained by any one in single combat, and I will not take it away from her.” This “ fairplay of the Fiann” has become proverbial in the phrase “ cothrom na Féinne,” which is used in the poem on the “ Massacre of Glencoe” by the Bard Mucanach : — “ Had there been the fairplay of the Fiann between yourselves and the Lowlanders, the shaggy birds of the hill would be croaking foully over the bodies of the others.”

Na’m b’e cothrom na Féinne  
A bhiodh eadar sibh féin ’s clanna Gall ;  
Bhiodh eoin mholaich an t-sléibhe  
’Gairsinn salach air chreubhagan chàich.

The hospitality of the Fiann is another point in which the bards might have claimed kinship with them for their chief, but I have only noticed one reference to it, in a song by Ailean Buidhe.

Bha ainm faoileachd na Féinne  
Do Dhonnachadh na féile ’s taobh tuath.

The same bard also, in his praise of Conach Narachain, has an interesting verse describing the house that the Fiann kept, for which I have found no authority elsewhere, but which may well be a traditional feature. “ There were a dozen rooms in that hall,” he says, “ in every room twelve fireplaces, and the number around every fire when they were warming themselves was a hundred men and one, ”— which would make the total number of the Fiann over 14,000.

’S i sud a’ chruach ’bha ainmeil,  
’N taigh foirmeil bh’aig an Fhéinn,  
Le ’n teaghlach mor ’bha aincheardach,  
’S le ’n gillean meanmnach treun ;  
Bha dusan tigh ’s an talla ud,  
Anns gach rum da aingeal deug,  
’S b’ è ’n cunntas ’n am an garadh  
Mu gach aingeal, fear is ceud.

Archibald Grant, too, gives his views of the dwelling of the Fiann in a song to MacUisdean (p. 8), who, he says, being fond of having things in the old fashion, got the very plans of the castles that Fionn and Dermid built, and the written description of the tower of the Fiann, with seven pillars on each side of it, and greyhounds for hunting lying beneath every bed.

Ghabh thu 'm plana, 's gu 'm b' f hiach e,  
Bha aig Fionn agus Diarmad,  
Gaidheil duineil bha riamh,  
Ris na caisteil d' an deanamh  
Anns na bràighean 'bha fiadhaich :  
'S e sean-fhasan bu mhiann le fear t' àite.

'S fhuair thu 'n eachdraidheachd sgriobhta,  
Mar bha 'n tùr bh' aig na Fianntan ;  
Bha seachd [3] slios an gun fhiaradh  
Air gach taobh dheth 'g a dhianamh ;  
Fuidh gach leabaidh bhiodh miolchoin  
'S iad a' feitheamh an fhiadhaich.'

Having thus in the poet's words, " set the Fiann on foot," and given them a home to live in and something to do, we may now take a look at their leading men, and at some of the legends connected with them, to which reference is made by our bards.

Besides Fionn himself, the great heroes are his son, Ossian, and his grandson, Oscar, Goll Mac-Morna, Dermid, and Caoilte, and all of these are referred to occasionally. Strangely enough, the humorous man of the company, " Conan maol mallachdach," who supplies the comedy of the Fenian tragedy, does not seem to be mentioned more than once. As early as the poetry in the Dean of Lismore's book, we find Scottish bards comparing their chiefs to the great men of the Fiann. Thus, in a poem on MacGregor of Glenlyon, by Dughall Mac-ghille-ghlais (p. 99), the chief is compared to Oscar : — " His hand like Oscar's in every place ; it is he that the chief himself resembles ; . . . there is no one to be compared to his white breast, except the man who commanded the Fiann." So in a later elegy on MacDougall of Dunolly, " You were valiant with good semblance as was Oscar among the Fiann." Or again, when Màiri nighean Alasdair ruaidh addresses Ruairi MacLeoid with the words : " Where is there one that is like to you, since Fionn and Ossian are no more, brown-haired Dermid, or Goll or Oscar?" [4] In a very interesting composition, entitled, " Domhnall Gorm," printed in the Gael (vol. 5, p. 69), which is also curious as retaining the old expression *mor-sheisear*, or " big six" for *seven*, there occurs a list of Fenian heroes : — " The strength of Cuchulainn in his full armour to be between Donald Gorm and his shirt ; the strength of the seven battalions and the host of the Fiann, etc. ; the strength of melodious Ossian and of valiant Oscar, etc. ; the strength of Goll of the heavy wounds, etc. ; the strength of Fionn of the many blows, etc." Here the fact that Cuchulainn is placed first, and not mixed with the Fiann, no doubt indicates that the poet knew he did not belong to them.

Caoilte was the swift man of the Fiann, of whom Kennedy writes that " they used to bind his knees, because he was so swift in running, that none of them could not be up with him." Duncan Bàn's reference to him has already been quoted. A still better one is found in a song on a weaver, by John MacGregor : " When his foot struck the beach, he that would catch him would not be slow ; he would foot it quicker than the wind, and Caoilte would not keep pace with him."

It is worth mentioning that Caoilte, as well as Ossian, appears as one of the poets of the Fiann. In the " Dialogue of the Elders" it is Ossian who narrates in prose, and Caoilte who sums up the stories in verse. His description of the Island of Arran is so beautiful that it would be a pity not to give it here ; there is so much in it to remind one of Alexander MacDonald and of Duncan Ban.

" Arran of many stags, the sea impinges on her very shoulders ! an island in which whole companies were fed, and with ridges among which blue spears were reddened. Bounding deer are on her pinnacles, soft blackberries on her waving heather ; cool water in her rivers, and mast upon her russet oaks. Greyhounds there were in her and beagles ; blaeberrys and sloes of the dark black

thorn ; dwellings set close against her woods, and the deer fed scattered by her oaken thickets ; . . . her nuts hung on her forest-hazel boughs, and there was sailing of long galleys past her. Right pleasant their condition all, when the fair weather sets in : the sea-gulls wheeling round her cliffs answer one another. — At every time beautiful is Arran.” [5]

“ As Fingal and his chiefs,” says Macpherson, “ were the most renowned names in tradition, the bards took care to place them in the genealogy of every family.” The only case of this that I have been able to find, among their poetry at least, is the descent of the Campbells from Diarmad Ua Duibhne, on account of which they are referred to as “ Sliochd Dhiarmaid” and “ Duibhnich,” sometimes corrupted into “ Guimhnich” or “ Guinich.” Thus Duncan Bàn, in his song on the Andrea Ferrara, which he got at Taymouth Castle, says, “ The Fiann had it for a while, men that were fierce in battle ; it was made originally for Dermid, and to the race of Dermid it still belongs.” So also Archibald Grant, speaking of the Earl of Argyle, says, “ I trace his descent, it is no falsehood, from Dermid that was among the Fiann.”

More passages might have been quoted where the bards run over the names of Fenian heroes, [6] but it will be more interesting to continue with Dermid and recall one of the finest tales of the Fiann, connected with Dermid’s elopement with Fionn’s wife, Grainne. The whole story of this affair is excellently told in the Irish prose tale of “ The Pursuit of Diarmad and Grainne,” originally published by the Ossianic Society, and afterwards issued as a school-book. Dermid, according to the legend, had a love-mark on his brow, which made Grainne fall in love with him and desert Fionn. After hiding in the deserts and wilds for some time, pursued by Fionn, Dermid is enticed to take part in a boar-hunt, and kills the boar, which is venomous. Fionn asks him to measure its length with his bare feet ; in doing so a poisonous bristle pierces his foot, and Dermid falls to the ground. Fionn could cure him by giving him a drink out of his charmed cup, but refuses to do so, and Dermid dies. The story is also told in ballads, some of which are common to Ireland, others seem to be only known in Scotland.

All of these features are well known to the Highland bards. The love-spot on Dermid’s brow is referred to by Lachlan Mackinnon —

‘ Fhuair thu ’n iasaid buaidh bho Dhiarmad,  
’Tha ’cur chiad an geall ort ; ’

and still more explicitly by Archibald Grant : —

“ Your beauty is like Grainne’s, and you have a love-spot like Dermid’s” —

’S i bh’ aig Conan ’s aig Diarmad,  
Aig Du’ chomar ’s aig Diaran  
Bha i uile aig na Fiannaibh. — JOHN MAC GREGOR

These passages may contain a touch of Macpherson’s Ossian, but on the whole they give genuine traditional features, such as the speed of Caoilte in the second one.

‘ Mar bha Gràinne tha do bhreaghad,  
Tha ’m ball-seirc ort mar bh’ air Diarmad,’

and again —

‘ Gu ’n choisinn i air àilleachd iad,  
Mar Ghrainne a bha ’s an Fhéinn,  
Am ball-seirce a bha air Diarmad,  
’Cuir ciadan as a déigh.’

Grainne is quoted either as a type of beauty or of faithlessness. Grant, in an “ Oran Gaoil,” says— “ I believe she surpassed Grainne that was among the Fiann.” In that excellent collection by Donald Macpherson, “ An Duanaire,” there is a description of Fionn’s wife, being the bard’s ideal of a woman, which ends with, “ The wife that Fionn chose for himself, when Diarmad brought Grainne under his spells.” Fionn’s loss of his wife is also referred to by John Mackay (am Piobaire Dall) in

consoling Sir Alexander MacDonald of Sleat : after giving various instances of such mishaps, he ends with, “ and Fionn’s own wife left him.” Similar consolation is offered in an old poem in the Turner collection (printed in *Reliquiæ Celticæ*, II. p. 314), which shows an extensive knowledge of the old legends. “ O Knight,” says the bard, “ be not ashamed, for Grainne went away from MacCumhail ; Grainne went away with Diarmad, that is the tale that many have heard, and she left Fioim, the hospitable prince, the chief whom the hosts obeyed.” It is to be hoped that the knight in question was comforted by so illustrious a precedent.

The part of the story which deals with Dermid’s killing of the boar seems only to be alluded to by Grant, who, in a poem addressed to Gordon Cumming, says, (p. 61) — “ The poisonous boar was rough in his ways, and the dogs pursuing him swiftly. If Dermid had not gone against him, he would have brought disgrace on the Company of the Fiann. Oscar and Goll were strong, and there has not often been their like, but the boar completely over-threw them, etc.” Again, in a song to Patrick Grant (p. 113), he refers to Dermid’s measuring the boar with his feet, and Fionn’s refusal to give him a drink from his cup. “ Now I will be closing,” he says, “ since the case cannot be made any better, and since I have not got the wine cup that the Fiann had, or I would make you well : as in the case of Dermid and the boar, when he wounded his heel measuring it, and Fionn unkindly poured it out — and that is what I would not have done to him.” A very similar reference to the same cup is made in a poem on the tragedy of Gaick (*Call Ghàbhaig*), so famous in Highland tradition of this century, by Calum dubh Mac-an-t-saoir (printed in “*An Duanaire*”), who says: — “ If I could, I would cure you. I would keep for you the balsam-cup (*cuach iocshlaint*) of the Fiann, that Fionn mac Cumhail brought from Erin.” In another curious production, given in “*An Duanaire*,” and entitled “*An Glaistig Lianachain*” the cup is called “ the cup of price ;” “ she gave forth a sorrowful scream that might have been heard over seven hills ; one would have thought it was ‘ the cup of price’ that Fionn had, that gave a whistle.” Perhaps the author of this pictured it as one of those old drinking cups, which were fitted with a whistle to be blown when the contents were drunk off. [Compare Burns’s poem of “*The Whistle*.”].

References to other tales of the Fenian cycle are not very numerous among our bards. Lachlan Mackinnon, however, in his satirical poem of the “*Biodag thubaisteach*” has an allusion to the very amusing tale of the Rowan-tree Booth, which was such a wonderful place that some account of it will not be amiss. Fionn and some of his heroes went by invitation to a palace, which they found to be a magnificent place, built of boards of different colours, and where they sat down on silken coverings, “ and they would not even have their own clothing between them and the trappings of the *bruighean*.” After sitting there for a little Fionn spoke up and said : —

“ I marvel that we are so long in getting anything to eat here.”

“ There is something that I marvel at more than that,” said Goll, “ which is, that the place that had such a sweet odour when we came into it now smells fouler than all the closets of the world.”

“ There is something that I marvel at more than that,” said another, “ and that is, that the palace that had every colour on it has now not a single tree, beaten together with the backs of axes and mallets.”

“ There is something I marvel at still more,” said Faolan, “ the palace which had seven doors when we entered it has now only one.”

“ And I marvel still more,” said Conan, “ that of all the coverings and carpets that were under us, when we sat down, there is not one thread under us now, and methinks it is the clay of the earth that we are on, and it is colder than the cold snow of one night. ”

According to Mackinnon’s lines, the unlucky dirk played a part here in the hands of Fionn ; “ it swore an oath that it never left a man alive, and that there never was one that it touched but what it would cleave him to his shoe.”

’ Bu mhath ’s a’ Bhrùighean Chaorthainn i,  
 ’S an connaig nam fear mor,  
 ’S e Fionn ’thug dhi an latha sin  
 An t-ath-bhualadh ’n a dhorn :  
 Thug i na brath-miannan sin,  
 Nach d’ fhag i duine beo,

'S nach robh neach 'g am beanadh i  
Nach gearradh i g' a bhroig.'

In this Mackinnon was either indulging in invention, or his memory was at fault, as in the story itself Fionn has no need for a dirk, and was incapable of using one, as his hands were stuck to the floor. [7]

The wars with Lochlann or Scandinavia, which bulk so largely in Fenian legend, are apparently referred to in a general way only in a very late poem on the "Battle of Egypt." "Your enemies," says the bard, addressing the Highland soldiers, "thought that you had all been cowed by the destruction of the Fiannachd. The Lochlannaich made attempts to subdue us completely with sorcery (foghmhoireachd) and evil arts both on sea and shore." One would certainly have expected the Norse Wars to be more frequently alluded to, considering the popularity of ballads like "Manus," "The Muileartach," "Teanntachd mhór na Feinne," and "Duan na Ceardaich." As a matter of fact these are actually referred to at considerable length by Archibald Grant, and are the plainest proofs that he was familiar only with the Ossian of the ballads, and not of Macpherson. In one of his songs he speaks of a Fraser who killed a hag that was akin to the goblins, "just like the Fiann and the Muirealtach, who is famous in song." [8]

The same author's "Blessing of the new ship that was built at Invermoriston" is filled with allusions to these ballads ; there he speaks of Caoilte and the wonderful smith, Mac an Luin, who could beat all in running, of the lad with the skin cloak who could hear the grass growing, of another who could steal her eggs from the heron while she was looking at him, and of Garbh mac Stairn, who would pull up their anchor for them and save them cutting the cable in a storm. The passage is perhaps worth quoting entire (pp. 57, 58).

' Beannachadh Bàird do 'n luing,  
'S boidhch' tha coimhead fo 'cuid siùil ;  
Sud na làmhnan thaghainn duibh, —  
'S rogha pàigheadh thoir g' a chionn, —  
'N luchd sgairte feadha bha aig Fionn ;  
Rasg mac Radhairc o 'n Fhéinn,  
Chitheadh roimhe 's as a dhéidh ;  
Streap mac Strígum thon a' chroinn ;  
Bhiodh an Gramaich 's na ruip,  
'N curaidh cama-chasach air stiùir,  
'S Mac an Lorgair thon na gaoith',  
Dheanadh lorg air muir 's air tràigh ;  
Na'm biodh preasaigeadh air muir,  
Bu mhath Caoilte 's Mac an Luin,  
Cha do chuir air sliabh a chois  
Air nach beireadh e luath's ruith.  
Bha fear eile falbh ri 'n cois,  
'S mor na chealgaireachd bha leis,  
Ghoideadh o 'n a chorr an t-ubh  
'S a da shùil a' coimhead ris.  
Gille nan cochullan craicinn,  
Cha b' esa gaisgeach bu mheasa,  
Dh' aon éiginn d' am biodh orra ;  
Cha deanadh stugh dolaidh air-sa,  
'S an uair a dh' eireas soirbheas àrd,  
'S mur a cluinn iad guth le gàir,  
Cluais ri caismeachd a measg chàich,  
Chluinneadh esa fear a' fas :  
'S na'm bu chunnart air bhiodh aca,  
Bhiodh an Garbh mac Stàirn 'nan taice :  
Eagal an capull a ghearradh,  
Thàirneadh es' an t-sas an acair.

Further on in the same poem he borrows straight from the ballads of Manus and the Muileartach. [9] In fact Grant seems to have known so many of these ballads, that it is perhaps to be regretted that he did not publish them rather than his own poems, which otherwise cannot be said to be of much account. Another very common and favourite ballad, that of “Eas Ruadh,” is alluded to in the poem of consolation by the Piobaire Dall already mentioned. “The son of the King of Sorcha,” says he, “whose name was Maighre Borb, lost his wife, bright as the sun, and yet he remained alive after her.” According to the ballad it is the daughter of the King of the Land beneath the Waves who flees from the addresses of Maighre Borb and is protected by Fionn. Kennedy, in one of his amusing introductions to his ballads, sums up with — “He pursued her in hopes that he would take her from Fingal, for he was of extraordinary height and bigness, and of strength accordingly, besides being a great enchanter or conjurer, but nevertheless he was kilt by Goll at last. Observe the poem !” John Mackay had certainly observed the poem, for he takes two lines straight out of it.

‘ Mac Rìgh Sorcha, sgiath nan airm,  
Gur e b' ainm dha Maighre Borb,  
Chaill e 'gheala-bhean mar ghrian,  
'S dh' fhuirich e féin 'n a deigh beo.’

It has been said more than once that the old tale of the Fate of the Sons of Uisneach contains the materials for a perfect tragedy, and had there ever been any Gaelic Shakespeare it would no doubt have taken that shape. It may be said with equal truth that there are materials for a great tragedy, though more perhaps in the vein of Æschylus than of Shakespeare, in the story of the last fight of the Fiann. Here all that is grotesque and incongruous in the legend disappears, and the fall of Oscar in the battle of Gabhra is cast in a purely heroic and Homeric mould. Macpherson saw its value when he appropriated it for his first book of *Temora*, but in his hands it assumes another tone, another turn of thought and feeling. In the legend Fionn is wounded in the thigh, and goes to Rome to be cured. While he is absent, Cairbre, son of Cormac, is persuaded to make an attempt to destroy the power of the Fiann. He invites Oscar from the hill of Allen, the seat of Fionn, to Tara, and demands an exchange of spears. Oscar refuses, and hostilities are declared. The next day the great battle is fought, where both Oscar and Cairbre fall. Fionn arrives before Oscar's death, and thinks to heal him, but Oscar knows that no art can avail him, and before long he is dead.

Fionn, too, was slain shortly after the battle of Gabhra, and his death was avenged by Caoilte. In the “Dialogue of the Elders” it is he and Ossian who survive to tell the story to Patrick, but in the ballads it is the aged Ossian alone who appears as a sublime anachronism, confronted by this new faith that he will have none of, that is in his eyes weak and womanish beside the glorious deeds of the Fiann. “It is certain,” says Kennedy, “that Ossian survived all the Fingalians, and lived till that era Christianity was introduced into Ireland by St. Partick, who is no other than this son of Alpin he addressed his poems so frequently to. It is applied till this day to an aged man, who lives after all his friends, relations and children, that he is left alone as Ossian after the Fingalians. (“Tha e mar Oisean an déigh na Féinne.”) This is an idea which, more than any other, might be expected to occur in the poetry of the bards, and the allusions to it are not few. Iain mac Codrum, in lamenting the death of a chief, uses the words : — “We are tearful, poor, melancholy, without merry shouting or any hope of it, like the Fiann when left by Fionn. We are without Osgar and Dermid, without Goll the valiant and hospitable, every chief tree going from us to Paradise.” It would hardly be worth while to give all the instances where the bards make use of the idea of “Oisean an deigh na Feinne,” and one or two will suffice. The Piobaire Dall, in his song to Sir Alexander MacDonald of Sleat, on the death of his wife, says : — “I remain Upon the field, fighting the battle as of old, with my heart sighing after them, like Ossian after the Fiann.” So in a song by Alasdair MacCallum : — “Age is ever persecuting me ; it has left me weak, poor and wretched ; as you see, I am like Ossian, sighing and lamenting for those that have gone from me,” Two late instances may be quoted from “An Duanaire,” one in the poem on the “Call Ghàbhaig” already referred to : — “That left your brothers without comfort, like Ossian who was ever lamenting after the Fiann — blind on a hillock.” The other is in an elegy on William Macintosh of Bail-an-easpuig in Badenoch : — “I am like Ossian, who would be telling how it befell the Fiann, who would be speaking about Oscar, and sighing over the deeds of the brave men.”

In other cases the bards show their knowledge of St. Patrick's connection with the legend. Thus Iain mac Codrum in his elegy on Sir James MacDonald of Sleat : — " Now since I am a poor orphan, direct heir to Ossian, who used to relate his hard fortune to Patrick." Iain Lom, too, in his lament for Aonghas mac Raonuill oig, has : — " I am like a goose that has been plucked, without feathers or plumage ; I am like Ossian under judgment in the house of Patrick." In an elegy by Iain mac Ailein, on a child who died in 1706, there is a more general reference to the clerics whom Ossian encountered : — " The others left him lonely, as was Ossian and the clerics after the Fiann in the land of Innis Fàil. " There can be no doubt as to this poet's view of the proper country of Ossian.

Perhaps the finest application of the idea in a new setting is in the song on the " Battle of Egypt" : —

' Is aoibhinn learn deagh sgial oirbh,  
Ged tha mi crionaidh, bredit',  
Ach mis' ma 's Oisean liath mi,  
Mo dhoigh, bidh m' Fhéinn sior-bheo.'

Such then are the points in which the Highland poets of the last two centuries found the legend of the Fiann of service to them to express the ideas they wished to convey. That they are not more numerous is probably due to the fact that the school of poetry was a new one, coming not so much from the professional and educated bards as from among the people, who, while familiar with these tales, were not primarily charged with keeping the knowledge of them alive. Still they have used them to such an extent that we can clearly see the form in which the legend was familiar to them, and so discover that it was the form common to both Irish and Scottish tradition, reaching back through the centuries to the earliest germ contained in the " Book of the Dun Cow," and gradually growing with the years until it attains its full proportions somewhere about the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Even then it did not quite stop growing ; the beautiful poem of " Ossian in the Land of Youth," is a last century production, written by Michael Comyn about 1750. Surely such a mass of legend, containing many noble features, and many incidents worthy of the poet's fancy, ought not to be lightly let go. If our Highland bards of the past have woven some of its incidents and thoughts into verse that deals with other things, let us hope that some Gael will yet do justice to the legend for its own sake, and once more awaken his countrymen to the wealth of poetry that lies yet unexpressed in the Legend of the Fiann.

[1] The other two, " The Fates of the Children of Lir," and " The Children of Tuireann," belong to the preceding group.

[2] Mac Codrum's reply to Macpherson's question, " Bheil dad agad air an Fhéinn ?" does not in the least prove, as some have argued, that Macpherson was too ignorant of Gaelic to compose his " Ossian's poems," but merely that John saw a good chance for a joke.

[3] This number is very possibly derived from the seven doors and seven hearths which were the correct number in a *bruighean*.

[4] Similar lines occur in the waulking song ' Heman dubh.'

' Cha robh e ann fear do choltais,  
O nach maireann Fionn no Oisean  
No Diarmad donn mac rìgh Lochlainn.'

' S nuair a bhuaill a throigh an tràigh,  
Cha bhiodh e mall a ghlacadh e ;  
Bu luaithe 'steudadh e na 'ghaoth,  
'S cha chumadh Caoilte spaca ris. '

[5] O'Grady's ' *Silva Gadelica* ' p. 109.

[6] e.g., when speaking in praise of Gaelic : —

Gur i' Ghàidhlig ghlan chiatach,  
Bha aig fir na Féinne 'n Albainn,

'Sibh' aig Treunmor 's aig Oisean,  
 Sibh' aig Osgar 's aig Diarmad,  
 Aig Goll 's aig Deo gréine (!)  
 'Sibh' aig Fionn 's aig Cocullan,  
 'S bha i h-uile aig na Féinnean. — *Anonymous*.  
 'S i bh' aig Treunmor an toiseach,  
 A thog cis o Rìgh Lochlainn,  
 Aig Fionn is aig Toscar  
 Aig Cuchullainn 's aig Oscar,  
 'S aig Caoilte nan cos luath  
 A' siubhal aonach is shloc is mhór-bheann.  
 'S i bh' aig Conan 's aig Diarmad,  
 Aig Du' chomar 's aig Diaran  
 Bha i uile aig na Fiannaibh. — JOHN MAC GREGOR

These passages may contain a touch of Macpherson's Ossian, but on the whole they give genuine traditional features, such as the speed of Caoilte in the second one.

[7] For an account of this, and other Bruighean tales, see the *Scottish Review* for October, 1894.

[8] Grant's lines are ('Oran do dh' fhear Fothir,' p. 31) : —

' Uisdean mac mhic Shimidh,  
 Gu 'n ghineadh e bho 'n oigear ud,  
 Nach robh 's an Fhraing 'n a chladhaire,  
 'S na dhéidh a bha càmhach air :  
 Gu 'm rnarbh è a' chailleach,  
 Ged bha car aice ri bocanan,  
 Mar bha 'n Fheinn 's a' Mhuirealtach,  
 Gu 'm b' iomraiteach air oran i.'

[9] 'S fhearr i na soitheach bh' aig Mànus,  
 Mac rìgh Lochlann nan gnìomh gàbhaidh,  
 'N uair a chuir e fios gu Fionn,  
 Gu 'n robh soitheach aig' air burn,  
 “ 'S mur a dean thu géilleadh dhuinn,  
 Bheir sinn Eirinn as a grunn.”  
 Labhair Feargus nan arm grinn,  
 “ 'S tapaidh an rud a thubhairt thu ruinn ;  
 'S e cuig cuigibh tlia innte,  
 'S math an luchd dhuibh cuigibh dhi.”

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