

The following chapter from my book *The Highland Pipe and Scottish Society* (East Linton, 2000; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Edinr., 2008; reprinted 2013) tells the story of James Macpherson's epoch-making mid-eighteenth-century edition of the traditional poems associated with the legendary bard Ossian. The text was swiftly translated into most of the major European languages and enjoyed an immense influence. Macpherson's extensive editorial apparatus contains the earliest and most influential reasoned defence of oral tradition as a mechanism capable of carrying material coherently over lengthy periods of time. The earlier parts of the chapter provide the context; towards the end we consider Macpherson's detailed defence of the coherence of tradition.

## CHAPTER ONE

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### 'Their songs are of other worlds': Ossian and the Macpherson Paradigm

As the 1750s drew to a close two young Highlanders were working to present major Celtic art forms to a wider British, and ultimately world, audience. James Macpherson's Works of Ossian and Joseph MacDonal's Compleat Theory of the Scots Highland Bagpipe were the two great projects of the post-Culloden generation. The first took Europe by storm, was translated into many different languages and brought its author wealth and fame. The second was brought to an abrupt halt by the death in Calcutta at the age of twenty three of its brilliant young creator. It was not published until 1803, and then in an edition so limited and corrupt that it was effectively lost for nearly a century thereafter. A reliable text only became available in 1994, nearly two hundred and fifty years after its first composition. Since all Highland art was subsequently, and wrongly, assumed by those outside the Gaidhealtachd to have sprung from the same cultural matrix as the poems of Ossian, the work of James Macpherson is fundamental to an understanding of how the pipe and its music were to be received outside the performer community from the 1760s onwards.

Towards the end of September 1759 on the bowling green of Moffat, a small spa town in the Scottish Borders, a young man presented himself with a letter of introduction to John Home, a distinguished Scottish man of letters whose tragedy, 'Douglas', had lately been the toast of Edinburgh. Home was affable and well-connected, secretary and confidant to the great Earl of Bute and a channel, therefore, to impressive quantities of patronage. He had served as a volunteer with the government forces during the '45 and made a daring escape from the castle of Doune after his capture at the battle of Falkirk. He was fascinated by the differences between Highland and Lowland culture and was working, rather fitfully, on an ambitious long-term project--a history of the Rising which would relate politics to deeper social and

cultural forces.<sup>1</sup> On his research forays into the Highlands he had listened enthralled to translations of epic oral verses recited by the common people, so that the tall, red-headed, highly-educated Highlandman who stood before him was a real discovery. His name was James Macpherson, and he was 22 years old.

Home's questions met with a swift response. Yes indeed, Macpherson knew of

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<sup>1</sup> After many delays this was eventually published as The History of the Rebellion in the year 1745 (Lond., 1802); see especially pp. v-vi, 1-3. For its contemporary reception, see [James Browne], A Critical Examination of Dr. Macculloch's Work on the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland (Edinr., 1825), pp. 11-14.

#6 such poetry. Better still, he could read Gaelic (by no means a common accomplishment in the English-dominated educational milieu of the time) and had transcripts of Ossianic material actually in his possession.

When Mr Home desired to see them, Mr Macpherson asked if he understood the Gaelic? ‘Not one word’. ‘Then, how can I show you them?’ ‘Very easily’, said Mr Home; ‘translate one of the poems which you think a good one, and I imagine that I shall be able to form some opinion of the genius and character of the Gaelic poetry’. Mr Macpherson declined the task, saying, that his translation would give a very imperfect idea of the original. Mr Home, with some difficulty, persuaded him to try, and in a day or two he brought him the poem on the death of Oscar...<sup>2</sup>

Macpherson’s caution was intelligible. He was probably aware of what had happened to the last volume of Gaelic poems to be published in Scotland, Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair’s Ais-eiridh na Sean Chánoin Albannaich (The Resurrection of the Ancient Scottish Tongue), burned by the common hangman at the cross of Edinburgh in 1752 on account of its fiercely Jacobite sentiments.<sup>3</sup> His own were more carefully guarded. Although too young to have taken part in the Rising, he had been well placed to witness its consequences.

He was a gentleman of the clan Macpherson, a first cousin of the chief, born into the ‘tacksman’ or middle class of Highland society at Invertromie near Kingussie on 27 October 1736. Brought up within sight of Ruthven barracks, under a punitive military regime, he had gained first hand experience of those parts of the British constitution which were not consecrated to liberty and human rights. For years after the ’45, parties of soldiers scoured the country hunting for the chief, Cluny Macpherson, who had rendered himself particularly odious by defecting to the Jacobite side after promising to support the government. As late as 1755 the former local commander, James Wolfe (later to become a major general, and victor of Quebec) was advising that there should be ‘a couple of hundred men in the neighbourhood with orders to massacre the whole clan if they show the least symptom of rebellion.’<sup>4</sup>

For those living beyond the Highland Line the ’45 was the most momentous event of a momentous century, a desperate affair, described by Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair, who had forsaken his little school in Ardnamurchan to fight as a captain in the Jacobite Clanranald regiment, as ‘ane enterprise the

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Mackenzie, Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland, appointed to inquire into the nature and authenticity of the poems of Ossian (Edinr., 1805), Appendix IV, pp.68-9.

<sup>3</sup> For an outline of Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair’s life and work see John Lorne Campbell, ed., Highland Songs of the Forty-Five (Edinr., 1984, first published 1933), pp.33-41.

<sup>4</sup> Fiona J. Stafford, The Sublime Savage: A Study of James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian (Edinr., 1988), pp.19, 23 u 54.

#7 most hazardous and resolute that the history of any person or country can afford.<sup>5</sup> It had seen Charles Edward Stuart land in Scotland with a handful of companions, seize Edinburgh at the head of a largely Highland army, rout Government forces at Prestonpans and Falkirk, and encounter shattering defeat in turn at the battle of Culloden. It is one of the best known episodes in Scottish history, the subject of countless books and paintings, and of the epic Jacobite song-cycle which celebrated the triumphs and disasters of the campaign and the ‘flight through the heather’ when the Prince, with a price of £30,000 on his head, was pursued through the western Highlands and the Isles in the summer of 1746.<sup>6</sup>

It was one of the most remarkable events in recent European history, and there were various attempts during the following two centuries to establish a perspective from which it might properly be viewed. Some saw it in dynastic, some in ethnic terms; some as a clash between opposing constitutional theories, some as a struggle between rival systems of social organisation--the triumph of a ‘modern’ over a ‘traditional’ type of society.

But Highland historians spoke with a single voice: to them the ’45 was an unparalleled calamity, not just for the Jacobite clans who had supported the Prince in ‘Bliadhna Theàrlaich’ (the Year of Chairlie)--for the ’45 was a civil war, with people from the same district, island, family even, involved on opposite sides--but for the whole of the Gaidhealtachd. ‘All this country,’ wrote the victorious Government commander, William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland, ‘are almost to a man Jacobites; and mild measures will not do’, and he launched a vigorous campaign of reprisals to determine what a smack of officially-sanctioned terrorism might do to adjust the political inclinations of the natives. The distinctive legal framework which underpinned the social organisation of the Highlands, linking commons, tacksmen and lairds in bonds of mutual obligation through a land-tenure system involving liability for military service, was systematically dismantled.<sup>7</sup> Execution and exile weakened the leadership élite preparing the way for a new generation of Highland lairds more ready to accommodate itself to ‘British’ norms. Disarming Acts of unprecedented severity were passed.<sup>8</sup> These were aimed at reducing the military potential of the Gaidhealtachd not only by disarming certain sections of the population, but also by prohibiting a

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Journall and Memoirs of P..... C..... Expedition into Scotland Etc. 1745-6. By a Highland Officer in his Army’, in George Lockhart of Carnwath, The Lockhart Papers: containing Memoirs and Commentaries upon the Affairs of Scotland from 1702 to 1715 (2 vols., Lond., 1817), ii, 479-510, (479).

<sup>6</sup> See William Donaldson, The Jacobite Song: Political Myth and National Identity (Aberd., 1988), passim.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Lenman, The Jacobite Risings in Britain 1689-1746 (Lond., 1980), pp. 277-280; for an account from a less unionist perspective see Frank McLynn, The Jacobites (Lond., 1985); see also A. J. Youngson, After the Forty-Five The Economic Impact on the Scottish Highlands (Edinr, 1973), pp.12-13.

<sup>8</sup> 19. Geo 2. c.39; 20. Geo.2.c.51 and 21 Geo.2.c.34.

#8 distinctive article of clothing, the plaid, which was understood to permit that mobility and endurance which made Highland armies so formidable. Any member of the common people, man or boy, found wearing plaid, philibeg, trews, shoulder-belts, or any item of clothing whatsoever composed of tartan, could expect in theory to face six months imprisonment for a first offence, and transportation for a second. But the first Act was so badly drawn that Government had to have two further attempts at it, pushing back the date of eventual implementation to 25 December 1748. There seem to have been relatively few prosecutions under its terms.<sup>9</sup>

It is frequently claimed that the pipes, too, were proscribed, but there is no mention of bagpipes in the Disarming Acts, nor contemporary evidence that they were forbidden or discouraged.<sup>10</sup>

The dismantling of the traditional hierarchy of social control within the Highlands was completed by the forfeiture of 41 estates. Most were sold to pay creditors, but 13 were annexed to the Crown, and their rents administered by commissioners ‘for the Purposes of civilizing the Inhabitants upon the said Estates, and other Parts of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and promoting amongst them the Protestant Religion, good Government, Industry and Manufactures, and the Principles of Duty and Loyalty to his Majesty, his Heirs and Successors...’<sup>11</sup> The Gaelic language came under sustained attack. It was viewed as a prime source of disaffection, because it encouraged the people to regard themselves as a race apart and restricted interaction with their neighbours. Steps were taken, therefore, to increase provision of schools in which English alone would be the medium of instruction.

All the misfortunes which overtook the Gaidhealtachd during the following two centuries: the great diaspora known as ‘The Clearances’; the inexorable shrinking of the language-base; the alienation of the leadership élite; land agitation and social strife; the threatened extinction of a distinctively Celtic culture beyond the Highland line even, were ultimately traced to the ’45<sup>12</sup>.

But the ’45 did not just change the Highlands; it transformed the popular culture of Lowland Scotland as well. The adoption as national icons of various elements of Highland costume, music and poetry led to a progressive Celticisa

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<sup>9</sup> John Telfer Dunbar, The Costume of Scotland (Lond., 1981), pp.50-54. The writer Mrs. Ann Grant attended a service in the Rev. Patrick MacDonald’s church at Kilmore near Oban in 1773. It is clear from her description that the kirk was ablaze with tartan: Letters from the Mountains; being the real Correspondence of a Lady, between the years 1773 and 1803 (3 vols., Lond., 1806), i, 56-58. For a detailed recent discussion of these points see John G. Gibson, Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping 1745-1945 (Edinr., 1998), pp.25-8, 36-63.

<sup>10</sup> See Gibson, pp.28-35, 51-6.

<sup>11</sup> Youngson, p.27.

<sup>12</sup> By the same token a **Stuart restoration was explicitly linked with a revival in Gaelic culture**: see William Matheson, ed., The Songs of John MacCodrum (Edinr., 1938), ‘Introduction’ p.xxix.

#9 tion of the public symbolism of Scotland which transformed the national identity in the generation following the Rising. Robert Burns remarked, ‘When political combustion ceases to be the object of Princes & Patriots, it then...becomes the lawful prey of Historians & Poets’,<sup>13</sup> and the latter were given exciting scope by the extraordinary nature of what had just taken place. John Home captured something of this in his History of the Rebellion:

In the year one thousand seven hundred and forty-five, Charles Edward Stuart, the Pretender’s eldest son, calling himself the Prince of Wales, landed with seven persons in a remote part of the Highlands of Scotland. A few days after his arrival, some Highlanders (not a very considerable number) joined him, and descending from their mountains, undisciplined, and ill-armed, without cavalry, without artillery, without one place of strength in their possession, attempted to dethrone the king, and subvert the government of Britain. The conclusion of this enterprise was such as most people both at home and abroad expected; but the progress of the rebels was what nobody expected; for they defeated more than once the king’s troops; they over-ran one of the united kingdoms, and marched so far into the other, that the capital trembled at their approach, and during the tide of fortune, which had its ebbs and flows, there were moments when nothing seemed impossible; and, to say the truth, it was not easy to forecast, or imagine, anything more unlikely than what had already happened.<sup>14</sup>

The fame of Charles Edward and his Highland clans, made them at once ‘l’admiration et la curiosité de l’Europe’.<sup>15</sup> He had emerged from the mists accompanied by a living museum of ancient manners, dress and arts, the last remnants (or so it was thought) of the once mighty Celtic civilisation which had dominated Europe, and given instruction through its Bardic and Druidical schools to Gaul and all the West. This was no footnote in a dusty classical text by Livy or Tacitus, but an actual survival from high antiquity, and as such immediately assimilable to the fashionable theories of primitive culture which shaped contemporary thinking about man and society. The European intelligentsia was fascinated. How could such people, such a society, be? There was a clever young Highlander called James Macpherson very ready to tell them.

Macpherson had studied at both of Aberdeen’s university colleges, King’s and Marischal, which attracted many students from the Highlands, because of the shortness of the academic year and the city’s easy accessibility by sea. In the 1750s the Aberdeen colleges were at the height of their fame, with a teaching staff of international reputation in philosophy, aesthetics, classical studies and rhetoric:

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<sup>13</sup> J. De Lancey Ferguson and G. Ross Roy, eds., The Letters of Robert Burns (2 vols., Oxford, 1985), ii, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Home, pp.1-2.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Lang, Pickle the Spy: or The Incognito of Prince Charles (Lond., 1897), p.7.

#10 figures like Thomas Reid, founder of the Scottish 'Common Sense' school of philosophy, who was Macpherson's tutor; George Campbell, whose Philosophy of Rhetoric dominated its field for upwards of a century; the writer James Beattie (although he came a little after Macpherson's time) whose poem 'The Minstrel' was to become one of the founding documents of the Romantic revival in Britain; above all, perhaps, Thomas Blackwell, the most distinguished Scottish classicist of his period, principal of Marischal College, teacher of Macpherson's teachers, and a man of immense influence.

Blackwell was not a classicist in the narrow linguistic sense, or a writer in the dusty academic mode. His major works, An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer (Lond. 1735) and Letters on Mythology (Lond. 1748) show him to have been at once a folklorist, a student of myth and a pioneering cultural anthropologist.<sup>16</sup> He offered deep explanations of the nature of mythology, revealing the theories about the world that lay behind the screen of metaphor, and he was author of the definitive Scottish statement on the links between epic poetry and the social organisation of early societies.

His approach was marked by a sophisticated cultural determinism, which suggested that a combination of the right kind of society, geography and climate would produce epic poetry. An additional spark of genius would bring forth a Homer. Blackwell pictured early classical Greece as a turbulent military society marked by a heroic simplicity of manners, and a proliferation of small aristocratic courts. It was uneven in its cultural development because centres of high civilisation were mixed with surrounding pools of relative barbarism. It was mountainous in its geography and divided up by rivers and straths, fostering a variety of local cultures, each with its own identity, and it sustained a powerful bardic class drawing inspiration from the traditions of the common people.<sup>17</sup> The whole bore an uncanny resemblance to the Scottish Highlands of James Macpherson's youth.

One idea would have struck Macpherson with particular force: the insistence on a kind of noble barbarism as the essential precondition of great epic poetry. Blackwell wrote:

I am in the case of a noble Historian, [Herodotus] who having related the constant Superiority his Greeks had over the Inhabitants of the Assyrian Vales, concludes 'That it has not been given by the Gods, to one and the same Country, to produce rich Crops and warlike Men:' Neither indeed does it seem to be given to one and the same Kingdom, to be thoroughly civilized, and afford proper Subjects for Poetry...It is thus that a People's Felicity clips the Wings of their Verse...<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The latter text was begun by another hand; Blackwell completed letters 7 and 8, and wrote the remainder of the sequence through to no.19.

<sup>17</sup> Blackwell, Enquiry, pp. 5, 11-12, 15-25, 104-5, 119-28.

<sup>18</sup> Blackwell, pp.26, 28.

Blackwell's insistence upon the creative importance of the audience for the Homeric poems, 'He had not the Inhabitants of a great luxurious City to entertain...but the martial Race of a wide and free Country, who listen willingly to the Prowess of their Ancestors, and Achievements of their Kings' would have increased Macpherson's growing realisation that he was a privileged witness to a living heroic culture.<sup>19</sup> Macpherson went back to Ruthven as a schoolmaster and began to collect traditional Gaelic poetry. But he was restless and hungry for recognition, and soon his own original verse, in English, was finding outlet in the magazines of the day. His first extended work, a poem in six cantos entitled The Highlander published in 1758, showed epic Celtic warriors repelling a Scandinavian invasion, a foretaste, perhaps of what was to come.

The young man who stood before John Home that autumn day in Moffat represented several strands of cultural possibility: he had personal contact with a heroic 'primitive' culture, potential access to an international literary market hungry for information about the Jacobite clans and the society from which they had sprung; and a powerful theory of culture capable of linking ancient and modern, the oral and the literate, and Celtic with Classical antiquity in a common epic mould.

A few days later Macpherson produced examples, in a startlingly unconventional English prose, of what he claimed was the work of a mighty Caledonian bard called Ossian who had flourished in the third century A.D. Home was stunned. Of Ossian himself he had probably heard, but nothing in his experience could have prepared him for the fresh, original and delicate fragments of prose poetry he held in his hand. This was a discovery of major proportions, a line of noble ancient poetry preserved for centuries within the fastnesses of the Scottish Highlands unknown to the larger world, which, if it were genuine, might have incalculable implications for the balance of cultural power within the United Kingdom. Anxiously he consulted his friend Adam Ferguson, professor of Natural Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh and a Gaelic-speaking Highlander from Perthshire, to whom Home owed most of his knowledge about the language and culture of the Gael. Ferguson confirmed. Yes, he remembered hearing such verses as a child, and there was, he thought, a lot of material like this probably still in existence. Copies of Macpherson's fragments circulated amongst Home's friends in Edinburgh's prestigious Select Society and 'were...received with the utmost enthusiasm and delight. Every one read them, and every one admired them; and, altogether, a sensation was created in the world of letters, which it had known but on few occasions before.'<sup>20</sup> In an atmosphere of feverish excitement and expectancy Macpherson was summoned to the capital to meet

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<sup>19</sup> Blackwell, p.119. See also James Macpherson, An Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland (Lond., 1771), pp. 188-192.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Chambers, ed., Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen (9 vols., Glasg., 1853-55), vi, 542.

#12 the great arbiter of contemporary taste, Dr. Hugh Blair, minister of the High Kirk of St. Giles and ‘literary accoucheur of Scotland.’<sup>21</sup>

Blair was in his early forties and at the height of an outstandingly successful ecclesiastical career. He was as close as one could get in Presbyterian Scotland to being a ‘society’ preacher, numbering amongst his hearers the Lords of Session, and the other great officers of law and state, the magistrates of Edinburgh, and most of the rank and fashion of the city. It was the most elegant congregation in Scotland, and he regaled it with sermons of unimpeachably chaste composition, containing, as one rather hostile later commentator remarked, ‘one grain of the gospel dissolved into a large cooling-draught of moral disquisition.’<sup>22</sup>

Blair was dignified and sedate, a fastidious, dressy, decent man, whose brains were powerful enough to be respectable but not enough to cause alarm. His fashionable lectures on literature and criticism were gratifyingly well attended, and he was soon to be appointed to the chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University, the first of its kind in Britain. He was the touchstone of good taste in everything from tragedies to teapots and his instinct was held to be infallible; a classically safe pair of hands, guaranteed to ruffle no feathers and leave no hostages to fortune.

Indeed Blair was later assumed to have been the controlling intelligence behind the whole venture, but the reality was rather different. Since he had no Gaelic and little personal knowledge of Highland culture he was almost entirely dependent on Macpherson for access to the text, and he was to prove little match for Macpherson’s powerful and devious intellect.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless he unhesitatingly assumed the role of literary co-ordinator-in-chief, and wrote a preface for Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Galic or Erse Language which was published in June 1760 and was greeted with high excitement in the capital.<sup>24</sup> As well it might be, for it was

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<sup>21</sup> Henry Grey Graham, Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth. Century (Lond., 1901), p.126.

<sup>22</sup> Eminent Scotsmen, i, 255.

<sup>23</sup> Mackenzie, Report, pp.60-61. That Macpherson was responsible for the intellectual approach is evident from his later prefaces and essays; Blair was forced to rely upon a network of Highland correspondents, chiefly ministers and lairds, such as **John Macpherson of Sleat** and **Donald Macqueen of Kilmuir**, who simply tended to confirm in a general kind of way what James Macpherson was saying: see Hugh Blair, A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal (2nd edn., Lond., 1765), pp.140-8. Blair’s Whiggish and unionist circle must also have been uncomfortable with the explicitly nationalist thrust of Macpherson’s work. For example, see **Adam Ferguson’s** letter to **Sir John Sinclair** of Ulbster when the latter was compiling the Statistical Account of Scotland, urging him to avoid using the word ‘Scotland’ and substitute instead ‘certain northern counties or parishes of Great Britain’, quoted in Rev. John Sinclair, Memoirs of the Life and Works of the Late Right Honourable Sir John Sinclair, Bart (2 vols., Edinr., 1837), ii, 34-5.

<sup>24</sup> Fiona Stafford, ‘Introduction: The Ossianic Poems of James Macpherson’, in Howard Gaskill, ed., The Poems of Ossian and Related Works (Edinr., 1996), pp.v-xxi, (xii).

#13 revealed that the Fragments were merely part of a much larger work. A lost epic poem, nearly two thousand years old existed somewhere in the Highlands, and it might be possible to recover it.<sup>25</sup>

Macpherson was furnished with money and letters of introduction and in August 1760 despatched to the Highlands on the greatest literary big-game hunt of modern times. Several months later he returned laden with transcripts and proceeded to assemble the text of Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem. In Six Books: together with Several Other Poems composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal. This was published in London in December 1761, to be followed in March 1763 by Temora, an Ancient Epic Poem in Eight Books: together with Several Other Poems composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal. Both were issued together in 1765 as The Works of Ossian.<sup>26</sup>

These presented heroic episodes from the wars of the ancient Caledonians, a legendary race of giant warriors led by Fingal, King of Morven, whose deeds were commemorated by his son the blind minstrel Ossian, last of his race. Contemporaries were excited by the boldness and novelty of the diction, which deliberately avoided conventional verse forms in favour of an elevated, loosely-structured poetic prose which emphasised the utter remoteness of the subject matter from a present widely perceived as decadent, whilst at the same time subtly reinforcing a characteristic ambience of cloudy melancholy and loss:

Whence is the stream of years? Whither do they roll along? Where have they hid, in mist, their many-coloured sides? I look into the times of old, but they seem dim to Ossian's eyes, like reflected moon-beams on a distant lake...As flies the unconstant sun, over Larmon's grassy hill; so pass the tales of old, along my soul, by night. When bards are removed to their place; when harps are hung in Selma's hall; then comes a voice to Ossian, and awakes his soul. It is the voice of years that are gone: they roll before me, with all their deeds. I seize the tales, as they pass, and pour them forth in song. Nor a troubled stream is the song of the king, it is like the rising of music from Lutha of the strings.--Lutha of many strings, not silent are thy streamy rocks, when the white hands of Malvina move upon the harp.--Light of the shadowy thoughts, that fly across my soul, daughter of Toscar of helmets, wilt thou not hear the song! We call back, maid of Lutha, the years that have rolled away.<sup>27</sup>

The publication of Ossian was a major event. It was translated into most of the European languages and hailed with delight by figures such as Herder (who

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<sup>25</sup> The introduction to Fragments, is reproduced in Gaskill, Poems of Ossian, pp. 5-6.

<sup>26</sup> Gaskill, Poems of Ossian, p. xxiii.

<sup>27</sup> Ossian represented an extraordinary stylistic coup: looked at merely in terms of English language sources, there are obvious traces of the Authorised Version and Milton, and James Thomson's great nature poem, 'The Seasons', with perhaps a little smack of gentle parody directed against John Home himself, whose epic blank verse had been extravagantly admired. The passages quoted are from Temora, pp.203, 211.

#14 calmly read ‘Fingal’ in the middle of a shipwreck)<sup>28</sup>, Goethe, Schubert, Hölderlin, Schiller, Madame de Staël, Chateaubriand, and Lamartine; Napoleon carried it with him on his campaigns in an Italian translation, and it became the inspiration for countless other poems and novels, operas, paintings and plays.<sup>29</sup>

But in Britain, the response was sharply divided. There was bitter controversy about the poems’ authenticity. Scottish critics, led by Hugh Blair, asserted that they were genuine, while English critics, led by Dr. Samuel Johnson, denounced them as forgeries. Johnson denied that non-literate communities could transmit cultural products coherently over anything like the time-span required and rejected with scorn the notion that a people such as the Scotch Highlanders could at any period have created works of such refinement and moral cultivation. Macpherson’s apparent reluctance to produce the ‘originals’ for inspection, led the hostile critics--though few of them were acquainted with the Gaelic language or the habits of oral communities--to conclude that he had made it all up himself.<sup>30</sup>

But the fury of the English intelligentsia was largely directed against a position that was not, in fact, being defended. It appears that Macpherson’s work really was based on manuscript and traditional oral sources, however distantly.<sup>31</sup> He had altered names and locations, interpolated huge passages of his own, expressed himself in an English whose sumptuous literary patina, and unflaggingly elegiac tone departed significantly from the texts he was ostensibly translating; but such practices were not enormously at variance with the casual editorial standards of the time. He indicated explicitly that he was responsible for weaving together into a coherent whole the fragmentary evidence he had found, justifying his publication of a second version of ‘Temora’ with reference to fresh materials which had recently come into his possession, adding ‘The story of the poem, with which I had been long acquainted, enabled me to reduce the broken members of the piece into the order in which they now appear.’<sup>32</sup>

His approach was entirely in keeping with contemporary Scottish theories of

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<sup>28</sup> Uwe Böker, ‘The Marketing of Macpherson: The International Book Trade and the first Phase of German Ossian Reception’, in Howard Gaskill, ed., Ossian Revisited (Edinr., 1991), pp.73-93, (85).

<sup>29</sup> See Andrew Hook, ‘Scotland and Romanticism: The International Scene’ in Andrew Hook, ed., The History of Scottish Literature Volume 2 1660-1800 (Aberd., 1987), pp. 307-322, (313-6). See also Kirsti Simonsuuri, Homer’s Original Genius: Eighteenth-century Notions of the Early Greek Epic (1688-1798) (Cambridge, 1979), p.111. See also Roger Fiske, Scotland in Music A European Enthusiasm (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 31-54. There is a town called Ossian, in Indiana, USA.

<sup>30</sup> See R. W. Chapman, ed., Johnson’s Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D. (Oxford, 1930), pp.104-108.

<sup>31</sup> Derek S. Thomson, The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson’s ‘Ossian’ (Edinr., 1951), *passim*, but esp. pp. 1-12, 79-84; see also Ossian Revisited, *op.cit.*, pp.5-6, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Temora, p.xviii; see also p.3, n, 4,n; Fingal, *op.cit.*, p.104, n. See also Stafford, *op.cit.*, pp.82-85, 124-126.

#15 epic poetry, which envisaged the evolution of unitary, written Homeric texts as a late development resulting from deliberate editorial intervention in a previously oral process. Blackwell insisted that Homer had been a strolling oral poet, whose ballads had been committed to writing as coherent developed epics centuries after his death. Macpherson could easily claim that what the Greek redactors had done, might very properly be done again by a modern collector/editor working with the essentially non-literate oral products of the Scottish Highlands.<sup>33</sup>

Had the point of the controversy been merely literary, his position might have been accepted as a reasonable one. But in the domain of cultural politics, the implications of Ossian were explosive: if it were 'genuine', then the Scots, like the ancient Greeks and Romans (whom Macpherson also included in the roll of Celtic nations), but pointedly unlike the contemporary English, possessed the ultimate national status-marker: a great foundation epic.<sup>34</sup> Hence the frequent references to Homer and Virgil. Ossian was a calculated stroke in the struggle for cultural supremacy within the United Kingdom which had been rumbling on for centuries. Macpherson's demonstration of the seniority of Scottish poetry, and his insouciant tracing of 'British Liberties' to Celtic rather than to Anglo-Saxon roots, were utterly galling to the English intelligentsia and intended to be so.<sup>35</sup> This is why the counter-attack was so ferocious.

But Macpherson's political instincts were highly developed, and his text was furnished with an elaborate apparatus of dissertations and notes intended to meet the arguments likely to be brought against it. It was important to establish very clearly the cultural community to which these poems referred, and this entailed an important sequence of arguments about the origin and identity of the Scottish nation. Some writers had described the Scots as an ethnically loose confederation of peoples--Germanic Picts and northern Angles, and Celtic Scots out of Ireland--brought together by the vagaries of dynastic circumstance. Not so, said Macpherson, appealing to an impressive array of antiquarian lore. With the exception of a later, debilitating, admixture of Saxon stock following the acquisition of the Lothians, the ancient Caledonians were a wholly Celtic

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<sup>33</sup> Blackwell, Enquiry, 104-5, 119ff; see also Temora, op.cit., 4, n. The poems' reception in the Highlands seems upon the whole to have been balanced and realistic. **Duncan Robertson of Struan** wrote in 1767: 'I have read **Fingal**, but not with the pleasure that I have heard many of his Exploits repeated in the original Language. It is more than 40 years since I knew the characters of Fingal and his principal Heroes. The Translation seems really surprisingly good, but let any body that understands the Language compare the 7th Book of Temara in the Original (which M'Pherson has given as a specimen), with the Translation, and he'll find a great deal of strength & beauty of expression lost; which is perhaps not so much the fault of the Translator as the deficiency of our modern Language'. quoted in T. L. Kington Oliphant, The Jacobite Lairds of Gask (Lond. 1870), p.354.

<sup>34</sup> See Macpherson, History of Great Britain and Ireland, pp.6-9.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp.223-4; see also L. P. Curtis, jr., Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England (Bridgeport: Conn., 1968), pp.8-9.

#16 people, having originated in Gaul and subsequently migrated into the north.<sup>36</sup> Popular mythology might link them with marauding Irish war-bands during the Dark Ages, but Macpherson insisted that the colonisation had taken place in exactly the opposite direction, Ireland being settled subsequently to Britain, the southern parts by Belgic Celts, and the north by Celts from Scotland and the Isles.<sup>37</sup>

Although climate, geography, and political history had subsequently divided the Highland from the Lowland Caledonians in language and social mores, they were essentially a single people.<sup>38</sup> So that the discovery of Gaelic epic poems possessed significance not merely for Highland, but for Scottish culture as a whole. And Macpherson insisted that Ossian was not an isolated phenomenon. He was by far the best and oldest of the bards, it was true, but only one of a succession of brilliant poetic talents preserved in the treasure-house of the Gaelic language, whose recovery bade fair to transform Scotland's standing in the world of learning and culture.<sup>39</sup>

Macpherson was at pains to stress the unique richness of the Scottish Highlands as a receptacle of tradition. He pointed to the deep conservatism of the people, and their social isolation which had restricted external influences whilst strongly fostering indigenous forms. Their military organisation and the spartan austerity of their way of life provided the ideal ambience for a cult of epic nobility to flourish.

If tradition could be depended upon, it is only among a people, from all time, free of intermixture with foreigners. We are to look for these among the mountains and inaccessible parts of a country: places, on account of their barrenness, uninviting to an enemy, or whose natural strength enabled the natives to repel invasions. Such are the inhabitants of the mountains of Scotland. We, accordingly, find, that they differ materially from those who possess the low and more fertile part of the kingdom. Their language is pure

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<sup>36</sup> Fingal, pp. ii-iii; Temora, pp.ii-iv, xiii-xiv.

<sup>37</sup> Temora, p.vii. For the historical background to Macpherson's thinking see William Ferguson, The Identity of the Scottish Nation, esp. Chs. 10-11.

<sup>38</sup> Temora, pp.v-vi.

<sup>39</sup> Macpherson was powerful on the links between language and identity: 'Nations are not so tenacious of their customs and manners as they are of their aboriginal tongues. The first may gradually vanish in the growing improvements of civil life; the latter can only be buried in the same grave with the people themselves. Conquest may confine the bounds of a language; commerce may corrupt it; new inventions, by introducing new words, may throw the old into disuse; a change in the mode of thinking may alter the idiom: but the extirpation of those who speak any original tongue is the only means, by which it can be entirely destroyed, even where letters have been altogether unknown. It retires from successful invasion into rocks and deserts; it subsists with the remains of a people; even mountains and rivers in part retain it when the people are no more.' History of Great Britain and Ireland, p.241.

#17 and original, and their manners are those of an antient and unmixed race of men. Conscious of their own antiquity, they long despised others, as a new and mixed people. As they lived in a country only fit for pasture, they were free of that toil and business, which engross the attention of a commercial people. Their amusement consisted in hearing or repeating their songs and traditions, and these intirely turned on the antiquity of their nation, and the exploits of their forefathers. It is no wonder, therefore, that there are more remains of antiquity among them, than among any other people in Europe.<sup>40</sup>

The antiquity of Ossian was essential to Macpherson's argument and the point was expounded at length in the 'Dissertations' which accompanied the poems. He pointed to the deep conviction amongst the communities which had preserved them that the pieces were antique. The ideas, manners and linguistic idiom also seemed to indicate great age. In structure they were nobly wild and irregular, which was thought to be the hallmark of 'primitive' poetry. There was no reference to long-established social forms like clanship, and such allusions to Christianity as the poems contained treated it as an intrusive and novel creed.<sup>41</sup>

Macpherson appealed to the fashionable theories of 'conjectural history' currently being developed by Enlightenment thinkers in Scotland and elsewhere. Human societies were thought to pass through a series of clearly-defined stages arranged in a fixed sequence: an age of hunter-gatherers followed by a pastoral age of flocks and herds, then an era of more settled agriculture with tending of crops, and finally the modern mercantile era with its cash nexus and contractual relations.<sup>42</sup> In terms of material prosperity, each stage represented an advance on the previous one, but contemporaries did not regard the process wholly in terms of gain. Blackwell had already noted that it did not 'seem to be given to one and the same Kingdom, to be thoroughly civilized, and afford proper Subjects for Poetry,' and the idea of a lost golden age distinguished by high artistic achievement could be traced back to classical antiquity and beyond.<sup>43</sup> The heroic past possessed a potentially strong appeal if it could be shown not to be barbaric in a squalid savage sense, but nobly *primaeval*; and this Macpherson set himself to do. He radically rearranged the graph of culture, replacing the smooth upward curve with a high initial peak followed by a downward subsequent trajectory, implying that the creative impulse had become so compromised by

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.ii-iii; see also *Fingal*, 'Preface'.

<sup>41</sup> *Fingal*, pp. iv, vii; 'Preface' to *Fragments*, in Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, p.5.

<sup>42</sup> Macpherson's thinking here seems to have influenced both Adam Ferguson and Lord Kames: see William C. Lehmann, *Henry Home, Lord Kames, and the Scottish Enlightenment: a Study in National Character and in the History of Ideas* (The Hague, 1971), p.190; and George W. Stocking, Jr., 'Scotland as the Model of Mankind: Lord Kames' Philosophical View of Civilisation', in Timothy H. Thoresen, ed., *Towards a Science of Man: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (The Hague, 1975), pp.65-89.

<sup>43</sup> Blackwell, *Enquiry*, p.26.

#18 commercial values that the present could not hope to equal the past in the production of an enduring poetry.

The lofty, chivalric code of the Ossianic heroes had been framed by the bards and conveyed in language of such power and eloquence as to give it the force of a moral imperative. Art, which had begun by reflecting life, ensured that life in turn attempted to emulate art. In this way heroic values were diffused through Highland society. Every chief believed himself to be descended from a Fingalian hero, and every chief had a bard who could recite the old epics, and in time the office became hereditary. And so bardic succession ensured that the poems were handed down intact from generation to generation.<sup>44</sup>

Macpherson was committed to defending oral tradition as a medium capable of transmitting large-scale cultural forms accurately over considerable periods of time, and he appealed to a spread of similar practices amongst other ancient peoples in support of his ideas.<sup>45</sup> He was prepared to specify the mechanisms of transmission in considerable detail. These involved techniques of disciplined memorisation instilled in the bardic class; their practice of frequent allusion to the established classics which kept knowledge of them current; the public nature of poetry which provided a social brake upon innovation; and the prosodic structures of Gaelic poetry itself which, he thought, inhibited casual mutation.<sup>46</sup>

The oral element was of crucial importance because it was the sole means of access to the 'lost' original fixed authoritative text. Various references in the Dissertations and Prefaces suggest that Macpherson actually believed that such a thing had once existed, and that he was acting as a 'restorer' rather than as an independent creator in his own right.<sup>47</sup> Although he was willing, indeed compelled, to acknowledge the ultimate coherence of 'tradition', he was never entirely comfortable in its presence, regarding variation between the oral versions as probable signs of corruption and loss.<sup>48</sup> Blackwell had been happy to contemplate the 'original' Homeric text as episodic and oral and as having undergone significant change over time, but Macpherson hankered after something a good deal more stable and unitary. He regarded invariance and fixity as the hallmarks of tradition and considered that it was the role of educated mediators such as himself to rescue the products of these forces from disintegrating contemporary oral cultures. This was a task of some urgency. Highland society, he thought, had experienced more rapid change during the last thirty years than in the last thousand. As a result of this its traditional culture stood in serious jeopardy:

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<sup>44</sup> *Fingal*, pp.x-xi.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiii.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.xi-xiii.

<sup>47</sup> Stafford, pp.82-3.

<sup>48</sup> Indeed he remarked in *Temora* that 'Probability is all that can be established on the authority of tradition, ever dubious and uncertain.', p.xi.

The genius of the highlanders has suffered a great change within these few years. The communication with the rest of the island is open, and the introduction of trade and manufactures has destroyed that leisure which was formerly dedicated to hearing and repeating the poems of ancient times...Bards have been long disused, and the spirit of genealogy has greatly subsided. Men begin to be less devoted to their chiefs, and consanguinity is not so much regarded. When property is established, the human mind confines its views to the pleasure it procures. It does not go back to antiquity, or look forward to succeeding ages. The cares of life increase, and the actions of other times no longer amuse. Hence it is, that the taste for their ancient poetry is at a low ebb among the highlanders.<sup>49</sup>

Many generations of readers were to return to Fingal, and Temora and find themselves touched by unearthly beauty and power. Many generations of historians and critics were to acknowledge their outstanding importance in the history of European thought. For this study, however, the significance of Macpherson's work lies in the series of theoretical statements to which it gave rise about the nature of Celtic art. These were caught up and amplified by later writers and established the conventions to which all Highland art forms—and especially the music of the pipe--were subsequently expected to conform outside the Gaidhealtachd. They were as follows:

- (1) **That as Ossian was shrouded in controversy, then all Celtic cultural products might be considered potentially bogus.**
- (2) **That antiquity was the distinguishing feature of Highland art and the great period of achievement lay in the past.**
- (3) **That its true expression was linked with noble barbarism and rugged natural settings.**
- (4) **That wildness and irregularity were its leading formal characteristics.**
- (5) **That cloudy melancholy was its most typical emotion.**
- (6) **That 'tradition' ought to be, like the societies which sustained it, essentially unchanging.**
- (7) **That the fluidity inherent to oral 'variants' must therefore represent corruption and loss.**
- (8) **That since the mechanisms of transmission were failing, modern 'tradition'**

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<sup>49</sup> Fingal, p.xv.

**must be inherently degenerative and unable to sustain itself without the intervention of external mediators.**

This, then, was the Macpherson paradigm which was to dominate the interpretation of Highland culture outside the Gaidhealtachd during the following two centuries.

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