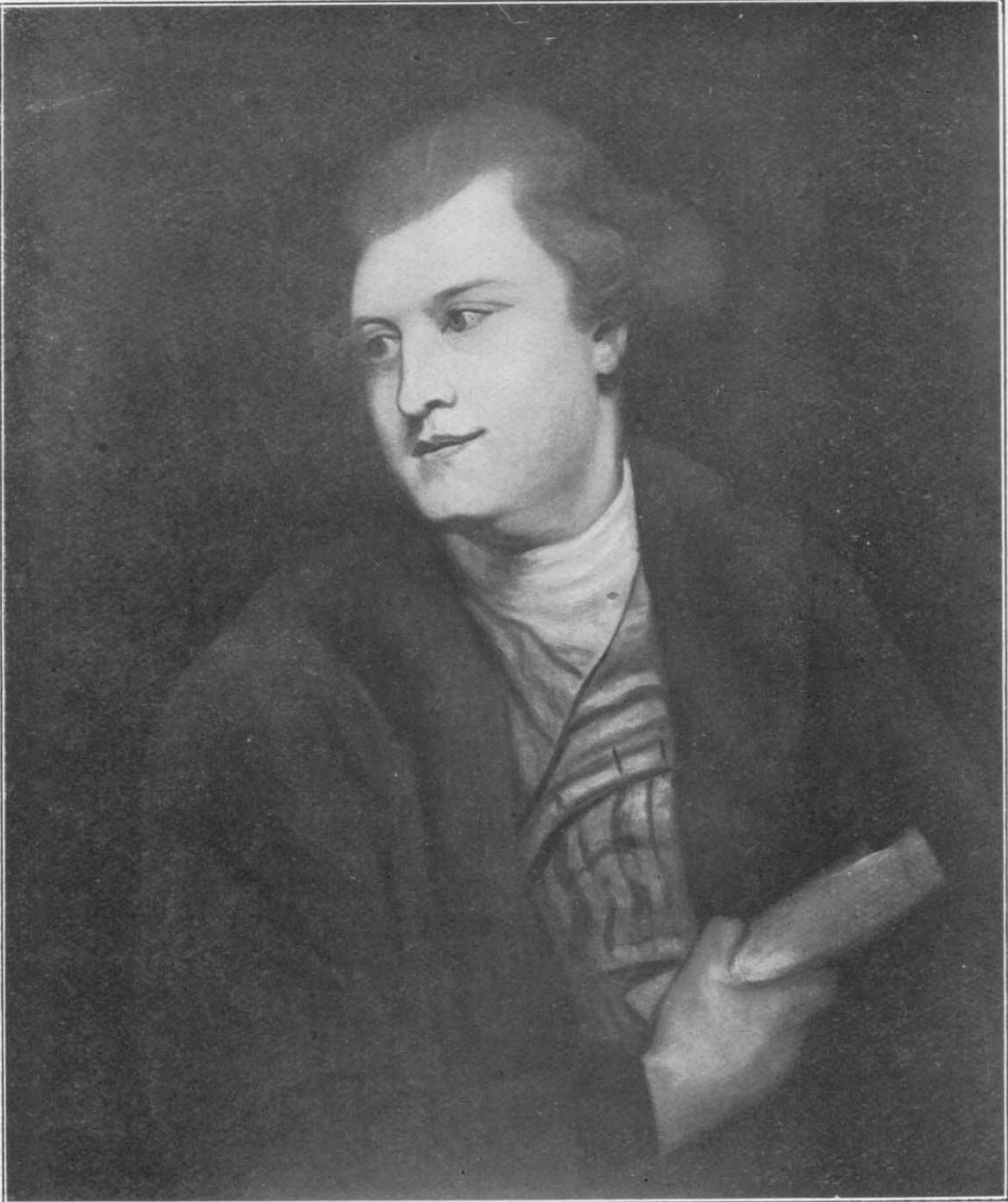


SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

CHAPTER IX

JAMES MACPHERSON

THE bowling-green at Moffat about the middle of the century was a gay scene. There were present visitors from all parts of Scotland who were glad to while away the time between the intervals of drinking the sulphur waters which had gained fame for the village. Lairds and their wives from remote districts came to the wells, anxious to join the rank and fashion which every season gathered there - "nabobs" who returned from the Indies, possessed of lacs of rupees and bilious constitutions; "Tobacco lords" from Glasgow with airs of consequence as pronounced as their accents; ministers in blue, professors in black, and lawyers in scarlet coats, with ladies in their hoops and sacques of brilliant hues. On an October day in 1759, there met on the green Mr. Alexander Carlyle, the minister of Inveresk, and Mr. John Home, and Mr. George Laurie of Loudon - a young minister, who afterwards was helpful to Robert Burns. There, too, was a big stalwart youth of six feet three, standing substantially on thick-set legs, encased in old-fashioned jack-boots. [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 398.] This was James Macpherson, tutor to young Graham of Balgowan, known afterwards to history as Lord Lynedoch, who was staying at the wells. A letter of introduction from Adam Ferguson had made the tutor known to John Home, who was always glad to make himself pleasant and useful to any one. They discussed that day many things, among them Gaelic poetry, customs, and superstitions, and the young Highlander mentioned that he had some pieces of Celtic poetry in his possession. When the author of *Douglas* begged to see some specimens, but owned he did not know Gaelic, "How then can I show them to you?" he was asked. "Very easily," said Home, "translate some of the poems which you think are good, and I imagine I shall be able to form an opinion of the genius and character of Gaelic poetry." [*High. Soc. Report*, 398, App. 68.] With reluctance he agreed, and in a few days produced a fragment called "The Death of Oscar." Some translations were also shown to Laurie. Both he and Home felt that an invaluable discovery had been made, and when they went to Edinburgh, each of them called on Dr. Hugh Blair in Riddell's Close, to show to the literary dictator these remarkable



JAMES MACPHERSON

From the Painting by Reynolds in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

translations from an unknown Erse poet. The three friends agreed that here was indeed a literary revelation of transcendent importance, poetry of vast antiquity and rare genius. Dr. Blair became eager to see James Macpherson in Edinburgh, and, when he met him, urged him to translate still more for publication. The young man of twenty-two years was, however, a difficult youth to deal with, silent, reserved, and proud. He deprecated [Laing's *Dissertation on Ossian*, 1805, ii. 46, 393.] his power to find more originals, and after he had consented he tried to avoid the task, and several times wrote begging Mr. Laurie to get him released from his engagement, urging that his Highland pride was offended at appearing to the world only as a translator. His friend, however, was insistent, and Macpherson gave way; testily swearing that the blood of Ossian would be on the young minister's head. [Laing's *Dissertation on Ossian*, 1805, I. xv. Many years after, in 1788, Dr. Laurie wrote to Macpherson asking his influence with government in favour of his brother, the governor of the Mosquito Coast. Macpherson answered that he did not remember ever having met Dr. Laurie. A memorial was thereupon sent recalling their former intimacy: "The first time Mr. G. Laurie saw or conversed with Jas. Macpherson, Esq., was at Moffat. Mr. Laurie was favoured with three or four translations of ancient Irish poetry, which upon his arrival in Edinburgh he showed to Dr. Blair. He desired to see Mr. Macpherson, and that was complied with; and he took Mr. Macpherson's promise to send as many fragments as would be contained in a shilling pamphlet - about a dozen in number. Mr. Macpherson, upon his return to the north, repented his promise, and wrote several times to Mr. Laurie begging to be released from it and to use his influence with Dr. Blair. Mr. Laurie was too great an admirer of these works to undertake such a task, but rather pressed Mr. Macpherson to adhere, which he did. And Mr. Macpherson concludes his last letter with an imprecation that their blood might be on Mr. Laurie's head," etc. (from MS. of Macpherson's letter and the memorial).]

This unknown youth had been born in 1738, in a little thatched cottage in Ruthven, near Kingussie, where his father had a small farm. He had become a student at King's College, Aberdeen, with the intention of entering the Church, and had then gone to finish his studies at Edinburgh College. He returned to his native parish, and when barely twenty years old became the master of a charity school. An income of about £6 or £8 gave him money enough to live upon, and his scanty flock of scholars gave him leisure enough to study, for reading poetry, and writing verses beside his peat fire when the children had left for the day. Already, from the age of seventeen to twenty, he had written the portentous number of 4000 verses; and an ambitious poem called the "Highlander," in six cantos, crept into light in 1758, and at once crept back into obscurity.

While teaching at Ruthven, he amused himself by listening to the snatches of Gaelic ballads, which were recited by the people, from whose lips came verses transmitted from generation to generation. [Dissertation prefixed to *Fingal*; Ramsay's *Scot. and Scots.*, i. 546.] A few such relics of the past had already been collected; and in 1756, in the *Scots Magazine*, a poem "Alvin, or the Daughter of Mey," with some others, had appeared, introducing English readers to unknown poetry from an unknown tongue.

JAMES MACPHERSON

These translations from the Erse were by Jeremiah Stone, who had begun life when a boy as a pedlar, and ended it at the age of twenty-nine, as a learned schoolmaster at Dunkeld. Save from a few fragments, the world knew nothing of Celtic poetry till Macpherson gave his specimens.

It was when he had relinquished his school for a tutorship that literary friends discovered him, and brought him out of obscurity into the full glare of notoriety. Blair, Ferguson, and Lord Hailes, when they saw his manuscripts, were eager for their publication, and copies were sent to Horace Walpole and Shenstone, who expressed their admiration of them. Coy publishing, while his friends were urgent, he at last, swearing he would never consent, consented. Full well he knew that he was involving himself in an enterprise which was difficult if it was honest; and perilous if it was fraudulent.

The year 1760 became eventful by the appearance in Edinburgh of an attenuated volume entitled *Fragments of Ancient Poetry collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language*, with a preface by Dr. Blair explaining that the work contained Gaelic verse of great antiquity, anterior to the clan system, and bearing no trace of Christian influence. The peculiar rhythmical prose adopted for the translation had been suggested by Home - it being that form in which Bishop Lowth had recently rendered the Psalms, which had earned the praises of Dr. Hugh Blair.

The success of these "Fragments" was immediate. All Scotsmen were delighted at being able to boast that even the most barbarous parts of their despised country had been possessed of genius before England had risen out of savagedom. Hume and Home, Ferguson and Blair, Lord Elibank, Lord Kames, Lord Hailes - in fact every one - joined in the chorus of acclaim, and were fierce at any who dared to impugn their genuineness, or to alight their beauty. Had not these verses been handed down from remote ages? Did not chiefs keep their own hereditary family bards whose themes were the feats of their clan and the wars of Fingal? Had not Adam Smith heard a piper of Argyleshire repeat some of these very poems? Did not distinguished chieftains - Mackays, Macleods, Macfarlanes - assert that they knew them well? Furthermore, were not the very names of the heroes, Fingal, Ossian, Oscar, Diarmid, still given in the Highlands to large mastiffs, as the English gave the name of Pompey and Hector, and the French gave the name of Marlborough to their dogs? So wrote, so argued David Hume, full of his usual extravagant patriotism and wild defiance of Southron suspicion. [Burton's *Life of Hume*, i. 464.] Meanwhile, even in England, there was little suspicion. Shenstone and Gray were

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

charmed, and Walpole was pleased.

This first success whetted literary appetite for more, especially as Macpherson stated that he had only given fragments of a great epic existing orally in the Highlands. We next find his admirers urging him to rescue the great poem from oblivion. They offered him funds to travel in search of the nebulous epic. An enthusiastic dinner - party met in Edinburgh, over which Lord Elibank presided, and at which Robertson, Ferguson, Blair, and others gathered, their object being to gain the lad's consent to proceed in search of the missing works of Ossian. [*Highland Society Report*, App.] He refused, he hesitated, but at last consented under such high persuasion. Before many months were over, in September 1760, he mounted his horse, fixed his saddle-bags and wallet, and set forth on his journey of discovery. How he had learned that such an epic existed he alone could, but did not, tell: the difficulty of proving his assertion may explain his reluctance to undertake the expedition. However he departed, a young man of twenty-three, with an imperfect knowledge of Gaelic and a perfect confidence in himself. Letters of introduction insured him help and hospitality in distant glens and islands with lairds and ministers from Perthshire to far-off Benbecula, where unadulterated tradition and undefiled Gaelic were likeliest to be found. Chiefs in their houses showed him dusty manuscripts hard to decipher; ministers helped him to translate Gaelic, in which he was very deficient; venerable blacksmiths, sons of bards, recited long screeds of Fingalian verse in high nasal accents, with the prospective reward of a gill of whisky or a roll of tobacco. Onwards he travelled with Macpherson, the Laird of Strathmashie, his faithful friend and kinsman, over island and mainland. Schoolhouse, croft, and manse welcomed him, and chieftains gave him the loan of treasured manuscripts containing household receipts, genealogical notes and old verse in chaotic confusion and distressful cacography - some were lent and never seen again. [*Highland Society Report*, p, 81.]

After four months spent on tours of discovery, the literary explorer got back to Edinburgh in 1761. His patrons were naturally anxious as to the results. Soon the precise steps of Dr. Hugh Blair with Mr. Adam Ferguson ascended the dirty turnpike stairs of his lodgings in Blackfriars Wynd, and entered the dingy flat. There was James Macpherson, "a plain-looking lad dressed like a preacher," with a manner starched and reserved. His little garret room was crowded with books, copies of verses, manuscript books in Gaelic, some of them "stained with smoke and daubed with Scots snuff." [*Highland Society Report*, App, p. 63; Ramsay's *Scotland and Scotsmen*, i. 549.] The visitors, after their interview, quitted the room highly satisfied with the

JAMES MACPHERSON

assurances of Mr. James Macpherson that the great promised Ossianic epic had been found. Quickly the news ran along, and society hummed with excitement. Celtic Homer had been brought to light after he had been dead thirteen hundred years.

In a few months Macpherson took horse with his manuscripts in his valise to seek subscribers and publishers and a patron in London. David Hume meanwhile had written to his friend William Strahan, the printer, recommending him as “a sensible, modest, young fellow, a very good scholar, and of unexceptionable morals.” Lord Bute was then the Court favourite, and his favour was secured, and with a humble dedication to his lordship, who was the most patronising of patrons, there appeared in December 1761, *Fingal, an ancient Epic Poem, in six books, together with several other poems composed by Ossian, the son, of Fingal, translated from the Gaelic language by James Macpherson.*

Now there was a stir in every literary circle; the poetry met, as Dr. Beattie, who was no believer, expresses it, with “a universal deluge of approbation,” and it rivalled the Cock Lane ghost in the interest it excited in London. True, there were some notes of discord, the truculent Churchill had his sarcastic flings, and Wilkes had his jeers; for Scotsmen, and all who clung to Lord Bute, were the butts of every wit and witling. In Scotland, however, hardly one dissentient voice was heard. Here was an epic that cast Homer into the shade; here was a poem that shed a lustre on Scotland which England well might envy. At every Edinburgh breakfast-table it was discussed and lauded, the dinner-table resumed the talk, and every supper-party got more enthusiastic as the wine passed round. The class-room at College was crowded by the rank and fashion of the town, as Dr. Hugh Blair, with the pride of a discoverer and the pomposity of a critic, descanted in his familiar burr on the age, the style, and marvellous beauties of the blind son of Fingal. When the lectures were published in 1763 his *Critical Dissertation* was hailed as a masterly and convincing performance. It was, indeed, as learned a disquisition as could be written by a man who knew nothing of his subject.

More debate, more talk arose when, shortly after these laudatory lectures appeared, the final part of the immortal work was issued - *Temora, an ancient Epic in eight books, composed by Ossian, the son of Fingal.* Here was, indeed, a surprising result of the Celt's travels for four months in the Highlands - not one, but two great epics which had survived the lapse of ages which lingered in the tenacious memories and flowed from the fluent lips of Highland crofters. By this time the translator had lost all his diffidence. He went about London with a swagger; he was

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

vain-glorious and aggressive. Fame had spoiled his character - not that there was much to spoil - and even his old supporters winced under his manner. Good David Hume retracted alike his faith in Ossian and the good things he had said so guilelessly of the "sensible, modest fellow," and now wrote to Strahan of his "absurd pride and caprice - a mortal than whom I have never known more perverse and unamiable." [*Letters of D. Hume*, p. 36.] Three years before, he had been pleasingly diffident, and deferential to his superiors, being conscious of his poverty, his humble birth, his ignorance of the world. Now, however, that he was celebrated, patrons he owned no longer [*Boswelliana*, p. 213; *Report*, App. 61.]; he was impatient of the advice of friends, contemptuous of the cavils of opponents. See him with his big, brawny person, dressed in ill-fitting clothes, jostling his way along the Strand; his voice strident and blustering in the coffee-houses, looking down from his height of six feet three at his acquaintances, talking English phrases in Highland tones, and assuming the grand airs of a man of the world. He was aware that society was not so loud in its praises of the great Ossian as before; that it was more sceptical of its genuineness; and this made him all the more defiant in tone. In truth, the world was weary of the melancholy monotony of the verse, of the moaning winds and "sounding shores," misty hills and "halls of shells." It found certainly more bombast in this last doubtful relic of antiquity. "Why, sir," said Dr. Johnson, "a man might write such stuff for ever if he would abandon his mind to it," and in spite of Boswell's patriotic protests the Literary Club would treat Ossian contemptuously.

To silence sceptics Macpherson placed in the hands of Beckett, his bookseller, certain Gaelic manuscripts; and the newspapers advertised that the "Originals of Fingal and other poems were to be seen at the shop by all who desired to examine them." "Ossian" Macpherson was not highly gifted with a sense of humour; but surely there was excellent humour of a sardonic sort in this proposal that Englishmen should satisfy themselves of the genuineness of a translation of a Gaelic epic by looking at documents without a history, manuscripts without a date, in a language of which they knew as little as a Hottentot. Is it surprising that no Englishman went to see them? For months the manuscripts lay uninspected in Beckett's back room, and then they were withdrawn in sulky triumph. Most of these documents were copies of recitals from Highland lips, with a few old papers, which sceptics like George Dempster declared were Gaelic leases from Macleod of Skye's charter chest. [C. Rogers, *Century of Scottish Life*, p. 60.] It was possible for experts to examine Chatterton's pretended poems of Rowley and Ireland's impudent Shakespearian fraud of *Vortigern* - which Boswell knelt before and kissed with

JAMES MACPHERSON

maudlin tears. But who in London could decide on those manuscripts? The translator could, however, taunt his critics by asserting that he had offered them proof which they were afraid to look at. Even in Scotland, where a year or two ago Dr. Carlyle said there were only two unbelievers, a feeling of uneasiness began to be shown, and Hume sensibly urged Dr. Blair to set on foot investigations in the Highlands among ministers and others who knew the language to make the evidence indisputable. This was not proposed from any anxiety for the translator's character, but only from jealousy for his country's honour.

A few years went by and Macpherson won his way into importance. He became an active man of affairs as well as a man of letters, a useful hack of Government, which rewarded his services with the post of surveyor-general and secretary to Commodore Johnstone, with whom he went to Florida. [Saunders's *Life of James Macpherson*, p. 212.] These two Scotsmen had tempers admirably matched - passionate, hectoring, and blustering, and they quarrelled furiously. But though the appointment was lost, Macpherson retained a pension of £200 on condition of serving the Ministry. In those days janissaries of the press abounded. For pay or posts they would malign any mortal, public or private; defend a Government in any blunder, support any job, fawn on any patron. Their stock-in-trade was an aptitude for white-washing a Ministry and blackening an Opposition, a fine art of mendacity and misrepresentation with a copiously vituperative vocabulary. Macpherson did not descend to all this, but he descended to much, for his scruples were not of the keenest. He had time to write *An Introduction to the History of Great Britain*, in which the genius and influence of the Celtic race on the civilisation of the country are patriotically shown. In an evil hour he began to perpetrate a translation of the *Iliad* written in the familiar Ossianic prose. This work, it was said, he took only three months to write, and it was a disastrous failure. Principal Robertson loyally proclaimed it "the only translation in which Homer appears like an ancient poet and in his own simple magnificence"; but Hume more sensibly declared "he did not know whether the attempt or the execution was worse." [Hume's *Letters to Strahan*.]

The great questions regarding Ossian were for a while silent if not settled, but they suddenly started once more into life. Dr. Johnson made his famous journey to the Highlands in 1773, and he took with him his contemptuous incredulity to the land of the Gael. There he bullied chiefs and hectoring ministers, snorted forth his contradictions and his flouts, till he reduced them to silence, and he mistook the courtesy of his hosts for the abjectness of the convicted. When the famous *Journey*

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

to the Hebrides was about to appear, Strahan, the publisher, Macpherson's good friend and countryman; let out that some unpleasant passages and offensive charges were to appear in its pages. A civil note was written begging that any injurious statements might be omitted. No notice was taken of this appeal, and the temper of the Celt boiled over when the *Journey* was published, and a letter was despatched by him to Johnson's Court, informing his assailant that "his age and his infirmities alone protected him from the treatment due to an infamous liar and traducer." This time an answer did come, in its writer's ripest and most trenchant style. Thus it ran: "Mr. James Macpherson, I have received your foolish and impudent note. I will do my best to reply to it, and what I cannot do for myself, the law will do for me. I will not desist from detecting what I think a cheat from any fear of the menaces of a Ruffian. I thought your book an imposture. I think it an imposture still. For this opinion I have given my reasons to the public, which I dare you to confute. Your rage I defy, your abilities since your Homer, are not so formidable, and what I hear of your morals inclines me to pay regard not to what you say, but to what you shall prove. You may print this if you will. - Samuel Johnson, 20th January 1775."

[Boswell's *Johnson* (Hill's edit.), ii. 279.] Dr. Johnson was a very complete letter writer. As soon as this trouncing epistle was in the hands of his brawny foe, the writer bethought himself that it was prudent to buy a formidable cudgel, six feet long, headed with a knob three inches in diameter, with which to protect his aged but still sturdy person. No personal assault, however, was made. Macpherson in his tavern only spluttered forth curses, while Johnson at his club ejaculated sneers.

Busy and versatile Macpherson published *Original Papers, containing the Secret History of England*, which gave private papers revealing old political intrigues which filled Tories with rapture and Whigs with rage, and made them cry out "Impostor!" Calmly he went on writing a *History of Great Britain*, from the Restoration to the Accession of the House of Hanover, which David Hume told Strahan was "the most wretched production that ever came from his press." [Hume's *Letters to Strahan*, p. 306.] It must be remembered that the Philosopher-historian never could bear philosophically any one who poached on his historical preserves. It produced to the author £3000 before it passed out of a second edition into oblivion.

The future career of this indomitable Scot was one of active success. He was ready with his pen to back up any ministerial policy. Did the Ministry want a writer to attack the mysterious Junius? He could write letters signed "Scævola," which supplied in venom what was lacking in strength. Did a badgered Prime Minister require a pamphlet to defend his American policy? He was ready with a pamphlet

JAMES MACPHERSON

which outdid his enemy Johnson's "Taxation no Tyranny" in popularity. Did the ill-used Nabob of Arcot need an advocate to plead his claims against the East India Company? He became that potentate's advocate at a good price; and through his friend and brother Celt, Sir John Macpherson, he also became the Nabob's well-paid, highly-pensioned agent. [Wraxall's *Posthumous Memoirs*, i. 254.] For a salary of £600 [Walpole's *Journal of the Reign of George III.* ii. 57.] the Government found in him a useful mercenary who could tune newspapers to dance to party measures, and with truculent advocacy fill columns, which Walpole called "columns of lies." Besides that he could put up friends and ministers to good things in India Stock. When in 1780 he became M.P. for Camelford, his vote was worth something, though he never made a speech. If not a great man, he now was the friend of men great in letters, art, and politics; he was rich, had his house at Putney and another in town, and drove to the City in a splendid carriage. As he was flouting one day at the English after the fashion of his countrymen, Dr. Blair expressed surprise that since he did not like John Bull he should stay in England. "Sir," he answered the precise divine, "I do not like John Bull, but I love his daughters." [Boswelliana, p. 208.] That was perfectly true. He was not married, but he was not without children, for whom he provided well. Alas! where now was David Hume's young friend "with unexceptionable morals"? His countrymen found him arrogant, disdainful, obstinate, masterful. What had become of Hume's "modest, sensible young lad"? No longer was he deferential to Dr. Blair and others who were reigning as magnates in Scotland when they saw him in London. The quondam patrons found themselves patronised in their turn by their former protégé. It seemed even to have become irksome to his vanity that he should be known only as a translator, and he grudged the blind son of Fingal reaping all the glory. Though "Jupiter" Carlyle says he was always indignant at its being suggested that he was the fabricator, yet under the unbosoming influence of wine, he seems to have more than once hinted that he was more than translator. [Laing's *Ossian*, I. xx. xxi.; Pinkerton's *Correspondence*, ii, 93; *High. Soc. Report*, App. 65.] Of course in public he dared not assert this, and thereby write himself down the impostor and liar that Johnson alleged him to be. He was also shrewd enough to know that poems which gain fame and honour from their antiquity will be flung aside the moment they are discovered to be modern. The mock antique may be as exquisite as the genuine article found in Etruscan tombs or the Roman Campagna; but the instant it is known to have come from Birmingham it turns to trash. The mock pearl may seem finer than the real - but it is paste and nothing more. In an arrogant preface to the 1775 edition of *Ossian* he vaunted his merits: "The

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

translator who cannot equal his original is incapable of expressing its beauties.” Thus he boldly equalled Macpherson to Ossian, but he dared not say that they were anonymous.

It was in 1785 that some enthusiastic Highland gentleman subscribed £1000 to have the original Gaelic manuscripts of Ossian published, and they provokingly, but respectfully, begged the great man to undertake the task. More than twenty years had elapsed since the epic translation had appeared, and he said there were trunks in the attics, which he had not opened for years, full of manuscripts, both old and new, antique books to read, and fragments to arrange - he did not add that he had all the verse he had composed in English to turn into the supposed original Gaelic. No wonder he demurred; it was pleasanter to coax votes for my Lord North, to manipulate newspapers, to collect salaries and pensions paid quarterly, to have jovial bachelor dinners. The chests were never ransacked, the version was never issued. He proposed, however, an absurd plan of publishing the Gaelic in Greek characters, as conveying Erse sounds better than Roman letters.

So the big burly politician lived in society, and in spite of his abominable temper with many friends, the best of them being Sir John Macpherson, son of the minister of Sleat (whose manse he had visited on his famous expedition in search of Ossian), who had made his way by his ability, his tact, his exquisite temper, to the highest office in India, succeeding Warren Hastings as Governor-General of Bengal. In the Mall were often seen these two brother Celts, who were striking, massive figures in the crowd, both men of six feet three or four - Sir John, with an expression frank and genial, [Wraxall's *Posthumous Memoirs*, ii. 6.] and his friend with aggressive expression in his keen eyes, which looked from his florid face, his handsome person dressed in a fur-edged coat.

As he grew elderly, rich, and prosperous, Macpherson's heart yearned for his old Highland district, and he turned his eyes to Badenoch; there he resolved to buy land and build a home within sight of his native mountains. Two or three small farms were bought on the banks of the Spey, and soon a villa, bearing the cockney title of "Belleville," which had been designed by his friend Adam, the architect, rose in the wilds, two miles from Kingussie. People long remembered the great man from London, who came every year, bedizened with rings and gold seals, and clad in fur-edged coat. They told stories of the grand state he kept up as a Highland chief, his splendid table, his home filled with guests; of his sallying forth in the morning and bringing bibulous lairds from houses far and near, who in the dining-room, from whose walls portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds looked down, kept high revelry

JAMES MACPHERSON

till they and the nights were far spent. [Carruthers's *Highland Note-book*; p. 360.] But good things, too, were told of Macpherson, pleasant to remember; of his refusing from a grateful Government the forfeited estate of Cluny Macpherson, which was thereupon restored to its rightful owner; his generosity to the poor, whom he employed at high wages, which no Badenoch man had ever dreamed of; his kindly remembrance of all about his native Ruthven. Now that his ambition was satisfied, now that his struggle with poverty and obscurity was over he could be the pleasant, affable man, the kindly landlord, and the genial host.

It was on 17th February 1796 that Macpherson died at his Highland home, and Mrs. Grant of Laggan, who had been saddened by the quality of his morals, but was now satisfied with his penitence, describes in her old-fashioned, pious way his edifying end: "It pleased the Almighty to render his last scene most affecting and exemplary. He died last Tuesday evening, and from the minute he was confined to bed, a very little before he expired, he never ceased imploring Divine mercy in the most earnest and exemplary manner." [Mrs. Grant's *Letters from the Mountains* (6th edit.), i. 235, ii. 203.] An obscure burial in a Highland kirkyard not satisfying his ambition, he left £500 to erect a monument on his land, and ordered that his important remains should be interred in Westminster Abbey. After travelling for eighteen days, the hearse arrived in London, was met at Highgate by many acquaintances, and a long range of carriages followed it to the Abbey, where the body was laid within a few feet of that of his enemy, Johnson, in the sanctuary where foes can war no more. Thus in pomp and circumstance ended the career of the poor schoolmaster of Ruthven. [*Gentleman's Magazine*, 1796.]

With him did not die out the Ossianic controversy. Englishmen forgot it, but Scotsmen were too eager for the credit of their country not to vindicate the credit of Ossian. Macpherson had left with his trustee the £1000 for the purpose of publishing Ossian in the original language, but in his cheats no such documents were to be found. All the papers were modern, either in his own or his friends' writing, consisting of pieces taken down from recital, except a few unimportant manuscripts which he had borrowed and never returned. [*Highland Society Report*, p. 80.] But where was the Gaelic Epic? A few years later the Highland Society formed a Committee, under Henry Mackenzie, to investigate into the sources of the famous work, and information was sought from those who best knew Gaelic poetry. The result was not satisfactory. Old men who had aided and believed in Macpherson, were ready to remember passages which they had heard in their youth, and to prove his veracity, fluently recited Gaelic verse which he had never used. Octogenarian

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

lairds and ministers quoted many Ossianic ballads, totally forgetting that they bore no resemblance to any in Macpherson's version. The lapse of forty years does not improve the memory of men, though it may wonderfully improve their imagination.

The Report was issued in 1805, the conclusion arrived at, to the disgust of all believers, being that many memories of the Fingal legends lingered in the North, that many ballads were still recited, that many parts of Macpherson's version were formed from fragments of those songs which he had altered and interpolated at his will; but as for an epic, such as he gave it, none was to be found. [*Highland Society Report*; M. Laing's *Ossian*; Campbell's *Tales of West Highlands*; Laing's *History of Scotland*, 1800, ii. 377; *Celtic Monthly*, Jan.-April, 1787; *Academy*, 1871.] later investigation led to results more destructive still to the pretensions of the famous "poems of Ossian," whom Macpherson ignorantly claimed as Highland - hopeless chronology, confused topography, wrong nationality, customs that ancient Celts never had, armour they never wore, a poetic style they never used, heroes and heroines with epithet names, which they never bore, all contained in a work which, save in a few passages, was never heard from the lips of Highland bard, far less sung by Ossian. That Macpherson - a young, raw, country lad - should have virtually manufactured this work, was a marvellous feat. As he truly told the world, "those who have doubted my veracity have paid a compliment to my genius." We find the same sombre vein in his bombastic juvenile poem, "The Highlander," as in Ossian; but he improved by practice as he provided material to meet the demands of his urgent admirers for more and more supplies of Ossian. Gray the poet was puzzled when the poems first appeared, what to believe - was it all genuine or a fraud? He found by correspondence with the young man, that his letters were "ill-wrote, ill-reasoned," which would show he was "equally unable to invent these poems or to translate them so admirably. In short, he is the very demon of poetry, or he has alighted upon a treasure hid for ages." The puzzle lay there. Another problem was still to be solved, which Dr. Blair urged on Hume. "Is it credible that he could bring so many thousand people into a conspiracy with him to keep the secret, or that some would not be found who would cry out, 'These are not the poems we deal in: you have forged characters and sentiments we know nothing about: you have modernised and dressed us up?'" [*Saunders's Life of James Macpherson*, p. 208.] Yet Macpherson seems to have achieved the incredible.

Ossian came to English readers as a revelation, and opened up a world of sentiment of which they had never imagined. The wilds of the Highlands were then shrouded in mystery - trackless wastes which southern feet had never trod, and remote isles washed by stormy seas which their ships had seldom sailed, peopled

JAMES MACPHERSON

by a barbarous race with ways uncouth and tongue unknown. This newly recovered poetry seemed to reveal the life, the feuds and loves, the genius of that people thirteen centuries before, beside the surging sea, amid the misty glens, by the lonely mountain tarns and roaring torrents, which the raven, eagle, and vulture made wilder still by their cries. The appearance of Ossian fitted in with the era of sentiment which had sprung up - sentiment which was domestic in *Clarissa Harlowe*, romantic in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, poetic in Percy's *Reliques*. By Macpherson sentiment was stirred for ancient life among the mountains, mists, and seas of the far North. Ossian may be no more read, yet it cannot be ignored, for it was a great force in literature. We see its influence not too happily in Gray's *Bard*; over Coleridge in his poetic immaturity of 1793; over Byron in his callow days, when he was under its glamour. One remembers how Burns, whose favourite authors were deplorably sentimental, enumerates "Ossian" as one "of the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct" - how, or why, or when, he does not explain.

But abroad, still wider and more enduring was the effect. The translation of Cæsarotti initiated a new poetic school in Italy. In Germany, then going through its romantic stage, it was hailed with rapture. Klopstock wrote turgid odes after its worst style; Herder gloried in it; Bürger versified it; Schiller found rare beauty and grandeur in the life of Celtic past with its background of mist; and Goethe tried his skill in translating it; and his *Werther*, to express his agonised emotions, turns to the melancholy bard of the North, and in his strains pours forth his abject woes. Voltaire laughed his dry laughter like the crackling of thorns over it, and for a while France was unthrilled. At last even it gave way to the spell, especially when Napoleon, who knew it through the Italian translation, and loved the grandiose, was moved to admiration for "Ocean," as he spelt it, carrying it with him as his favourite reading during his campaigns. French parents found baptismal names for their children in its pages, and either to please his master or his own taste, Bernadotte took a name from Ossian for his son, who became Oscar I. of Sweden, and transmitted his name to successors. [Saunders's *Life of Macpherson*, p. 19.]

The poems of Ossian are unread to-day, and will seldom be read again. They weary with their sombre monotony, their meagre sameness of sentiment and simile, their vagueness, their rhapsodies. Nevertheless they have a distinct place in literature, and with Matthew Arnold's verdict we may content ourselves: "Make the part of what is forged, modern, tawdry, spurious in the book as large as you please, there will still be left a residue with the very soul of the Celtic genius in it, and

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

which has the proud distinction of having brought this soul of the Celtic genius into contact with the genius of the nations of modern Europe and enriched all our poetry by it. Windy Morven and echoing Sora, and Selma with its silent halls! we owe to them a debt of gratitude, and when we are unjust enough to forget it, may the Muse forget us.” [Arnold’s *Celtic Literature*, p. 153.] As to the weary controversy on the origin and genuineness of this once famous work, though it may be too much to say that the last word has been written, it is pretty certain that the last word has been read.