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James Macpherson & Ossian

an exhibit from the G. Ross Roy Collection

Thomas Cooper Library
University of South Carolina
July-September 1998
James Macpherson & Ossian
The present exhibit of writings by and about the Scottish poet James Macpherson (1736-1796) welcomes to Thomas Cooper Library the eighth W. Ormiston Roy Memorial Visiting Research Fellow, Dr. Valentina Bold from the University of Aberdeen. Macpherson was himself a student, first at King’s College, Aberdeen, and then at the rival Marischal College, before his versions of traditional Gaelic poetry made the name Ossian famous throughout Europe and America.

In addition to its outstanding holdings of Robert Burns and Burnsiana, the Roy Collection also encompasses extensive holdings of many other Scottish poets, from the early 18th century to the present. Dr. Bold’s research interest in Macpherson provides a good opportunity to showcase the Roy Collection’s extraordinary depth of material on a once widely-influential writer who deserves renewed critical attention.

What is shown here is only a sampling of the Macpherson material available in Thomas Cooper Library; the Roy Collection has not only many more British editions and reprints, but also many American printings, many examples of contemporary efforts at versifying Ossian, much material on other poets’ response to Ossian, and additional items on the debates over authenticity.

The exhibit also gives opportunity to include other recent acquisitions: a first edition of James Boswell’s Journal of a
Tour to the Hebrides, donated by Dr. Donald Kay, and Hill Burton’s Life and Correspondence of David Hume, from the James Willard Oliver David Hume Collection. Macpherson’s late pamphlet on American independence is from the Yates Snowden Collection in the South Caroliniana Library. Unless otherwise indicated, all items in the exhibit are by Macpherson.

Case 1: Early Writings and Fragments
* Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1723-1792. James Macpherson. Reynolds’s portrait of Macpherson, painted in 1772 at the height of his fame, is shown from the engraved frontispiece to Poems of Ossian, ed. Laing (1805).
* “The Highlander,” shown from The poems of Ossian, Dublin: D. Graisberry for P. Wogan, 1802. Macpherson’s early poems were written in the immediate shadow of the last Jacobite Rising and the defeat of the Highland clans at Culloden in February 1746.
* “Two fragments of antient poetry
collected in the Highlands of Scotland,”
Gentleman’s Magazine, June 1760.
* Fragments of ancient poetry,
collected in the highlands of Scotland
and translated from the Galic or Erse
language. Edinburgh: Hamilton and
Balfour, 1760.
* Fragments of ancient poetry . . .
Dublin: Sarah Cotter, 1760.
* Fragments of ancient poetry . . .
The 2d ed. Edinburgh: Hamilton and
Balfour, 1760.

Case 2: Fingal, Temora and the
Works
* Fingal, an ancient epic poem, in six
books: together with several other
poems, composed by Ossian the son of
Fingal. Translated from the Galic
language. London: Becket and De
Hondt, 1762.
* “A Dissertation on the Antiquity &c.
of the Poems of Ossian the Son of
Fingal,” shown in Fingal . . . 2nd ed.
London: Becket and De Hondt, 1762.
* Temora, an ancient epic poem, in
eight books: together with several
other poems composed by Ossian, the
son of Fingal. Translated from the
Galic language. London: Beckett and
De Hondt, 1763.
* The works of Ossian: the son of
Fingal translated from the Galic
language . . . 3d ed. London: Becket
and De Hondt at Tully’s Head, 1765.
2 vols. Despite the title page, this was
actually the first collected edition of
Macpherson’s Ossian.
* The poems of Ossian, Translated by

Ossian in Scotland: editions from Berwick-on-Tweed in the Borders (1795), the illustrated edition published by Morrison of Perth, on the edge of the Highlands (also 1795), an edition from the Highland city of Inverness (1804), and a nicely-preserved 1830 Edinburgh edition in original printed boards.

Case 3: the Ossianic Controversy


**Case 4: Ossian in Europe and America**


* Pierre Marie François Louis

* Alexander Macdonald, d. 1837.
Phingaleis, sive Hibernia liberata, epicum Ossianis poema, e celtico sermone conversum.
Edinburgi: J. Moir, 1820.

* The poems of Ossian, the son of Fingal. Translated by James Macpherson, Esq. Philadelphia: Thomas Lang, 1790.
First American edition.


Case 5: Macpherson after Ossian

* Dedication to Lord Bute, shown from Macpherson, Temora. Dublin: Leathley and Wilson, 1763.


* Original papers; containing the secret history of Great Britain, from the restoration to the accession of the House of Hanover. To which are prefixed extracts from the life of James II. as written by himself. 2nd ed. 2 vols. London: Strahan and Cadell, 1776.

* The rights of Great Britain asserted
against the claims of America: being an answer to the Declaration of the general Congress. London: Cadell, 1776. Yates Snowden Collection, South Caroliniana Library.

The G. Ross Roy Collection and the Scottish collections
The G. Ross Roy Collection of Robert Burns, Burnsiana and Scottish Poetry includes both a core collection of over 4000 Burns items, from the Kilmarnock edition onwards, and extensive holdings of many Scottish poets (Ramsay, Fergusson, MacDiarmid, but many others), particularly from the early 18th century to the present. Related Scottish collections include Scott, Carlyle, Galt and Stevenson, as well as extensive stack holdings of related scholarship and of Scottish fiction.

Holdings are detailed in the library’s on-line catalogue (USCAN). On-line exhibits drawn from the Burns and Stevenson collections are available through the Department’s home-page (www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/rarebooks).

The W. Ormiston Roy Memorial Visiting Research Fellowship
Each summer, this fellowship brings a scholar to Thomas Cooper Library for research on a topic covered in the Roy Collection. Inquiries to: Roy Fellowship, Rare Books & Special Collections, Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208, or by e-mail to spcoll@tcl.sc.edu.

This exhibit has been curated by Patrick Scott (scottp@tcl.sc.edu).