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Four Issues of The Poems of Ossian

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Four Issues of *The Poems of Ossian*

In 'Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic controversy; a contribution towards a bibliography' [*Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, xxx, 1926] pp. 425-7, George F. Black includes in his chronological list of editions in English of the *Poems of Ossian* the following three entries:

The Poems of Ossian, being a literal translation from the original Gaelic into English; with a dissertation concerning the era in which the poet lived; and a critical dissertation by the late Rev. Hugh Blair, D.D. . . . Collected and translated by James Macpherson, A.M., and published under the patronage of the Highland Society of Scotland. Edinburgh, 1762. 8°.

An obvious fraud. Mr. J. N. Methven writes that he has a copy in his possession, "The title page, page containing the short preface and the contents page, are different paper from the rest of the book. I think it is the Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1812, edition really."

The Poems of Ossian . . . A new edition. Inverness: Printed by & for John Young, 1804. 8°.

The Poems of Ossian, the son of Fingal. Translated by James Macpherson, Esq. A new edition, carefully corrected, and greatly improved . . . Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, Netherbow, 1812. 2 p.l., xvii, (1)20-459(1)p. 8°.

There is a copy of each of these publications in J. Norman Methven's Ossian collection, which was presented to the National Library of Scotland by the collector in 1941.

Although Dr. Black is clearly right in describing the '1762' edition as 'an obvious fraud', the two statements of J. N. Methven quoted in his note might well have been amplified. It is true that the title, preface and contents list are printed on three leaves of paper that is different from (and manufactured much later than) that of the rest of the book; but it is worth adding that the rest of the book itself (228 leaves collating A-3L⁴) is printed on sheets from a number of different stocks of paper. Since, however, they all bear watermark dates between 1799 and 1802, this fact does nothing to redeem the spurious imprint date of '1762'. J. N. Methven's second statement, 'I think it is the Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1812, edition really', is in a sense true, but it does

not tell the whole story: it does not bring out the relationship between the spurious '1762' publication and those of Inverness 1804 and Edinburgh 1812, copies of which are in Methven's collection, not to mention another, dated Inverness 1815, which is not represented in this collection, but a copy of which was acquired separately by the National Library of Scotland in 1949. It is listed in John J. Dunn, 'Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic controversy: a supplementary bibliography' [*Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, lxxv, 1971] p. 466.

All four publications are in fact separate issues of an edition printed (as we hope to establish) by John Young of Inverness and issued by him (for the first time, so far as can be ascertained from material in the National Library of Scotland) in 1804. The preliminary quire of this 1804 issue collates π^6 , pp.[1-4,i-v]vi-viii, of which pp.[1-2] contain the half-title (verso blank), pp.[3-4] the title (verso blank), pp.[i-ii] 'Advertisement' (verso blank), pp.[iii-iv] the list of contents (verso blank) and pp.[v]-viii the text of the preface that first appeared in the Edinburgh edition of 1792. A further issue of Young's edition was published in 1812 by Oliver and Boyd of Edinburgh. The preliminary quire collates π^4 , pp.[1-4,i]ii-iv, of which pp.[1-2] contain the title (verso blank), pp.[3-4] the list of contents (verso blank) and pp.[i]-iv the preface of the Edinburgh 1792 edition. The 1815 issue, the imprint of which reads: 'Inverness: Printed for and sold by William Ettles, 1815', has apparently only one leaf, which contains the title (verso blank), before leaf A1. In the National Library of Scotland copy this titleleaf is tipped to the preceding free endpaper. Since another copy, reported by Professor G. Ross Roy of the University of South Carolina, also has only the titleleaf before leaf A1, it appears probable that this makeup represents the issue in its complete state and that no prelims are wanting in the two copies. The actual date of publication of the '1762' issue is unknown, as is the identity of the publisher. The prelims of J. N. Methven's copy consist of title (verso blank), preface (verso blank) and list of contents (two pages) — three leaves in all, of which the first and third (title and contents) are conjugate.

Because the pagination of the book itself, excluding prelims, runs from page [v] to page 459, it is obvious that the quire of prelims that fits best with this pagination is that of the Oliver and Boyd issue of 1812 ([1-4,i]ii-iv), and this 'fit' may have encouraged J. N. Methven to regard this (as is implied in his note quoted by Dr. Black) as the original form of the edition. If we examine the copy in the National

Library of Scotland, however, it becomes equally clear that the type of the prelims is quite different from that of the book. An inspection of the Inverness 1804 issue, on the other hand, gives good reason for believing that here the prelims and the book were both printed from the same fount of type, despite the failure of the pagination of the prelims ([1-4,i-v]vi-viii) to dovetail with that of the book. Absolute certainty is difficult because the fount is not very distinctive and the quality and consistency of the paper is not constant throughout the prelims and the book.

Fortunately there is other evidence to back up that of the type. The watermark ('B 1802') in the first leaf of the prelims occurs in a number of the quires of the book itself, which indicates that the prelims and certain sections of the book were printed from a common stock of paper. Moreover, the fact that the date of the watermark is 1802, and that the watermark dates in other sheets (in the National Library of Scotland's copies of all four issues) range from 1799 to 1802 (excluding 1801), confirms the contention that the 1812 issue is unlikely to have been the first.

The evidence of the type and the watermarks is supported by that of the tailpiece ornament which includes the word 'FINIS' and occurs on page 459. This ornament also appears on the last page of the text (page 225) of *Craig Phadric* [a volume of poems] by David Carey, 1811, the whole of which was undoubtedly printed by Young. Indeed Young's imprint, 'Printed by J. Young, Inverness', is printed on the reverse side of page 225.

Thus it is reasonably certain that the text as well as the prelims of the 1804 issue of *The poems of Ossian* was printed at Inverness, as the imprint states: 'by and for John Young'.

John Young, printer and bookseller in Inverness, issued in August 1807 the first number of the first weekly newspaper published in Inverness, *The Inverness Journal and Northern Advertiser*. He was also the publisher of several works in Gaelic and English. There is a short note on him in John Noble's 'Bibliography of Inverness newspapers and periodicals', first published in *Scottish Notes and Queries* in 1888 and included in *Miscellanea Invernessiana*, Stirling 1902, a posthumous collection of Noble's works edited by John Whyte. Noble wrote: 'A fair specimen of his [Young's] capabilities as a printer, and reflecting credit on his press, is the edition of "Poems [or rather 'Poetry'] chiefly in the Scottish Language," by Dr. Robert Couper of Keith, 2 vols., post 8vo, Inverness, 1804 . . . Mr. Young also published a very handsome edition of "Ossian's Poems," Macpherson's translation . . .'

Young's work was evidently competent enough to extend his reputation far beyond Inverness and south of the Highland Line. His printing of *Ossian* was, as we have seen, thought worthy of publication in Edinburgh by Oliver and Boyd (unfortunately the Oliver and Boyd archives, now deposited in the National Library of Scotland, do not appear to contain any record of the firm's association with Young); his 1804 edition of Couper's *Poetry* was published, according to the imprint, by Vernor and Hood of 31 The Poultry, London; and book-sellers with an interest, expressed in the imprint, in the 1811 *Craig Phadric* were (apart from Young himself) L. Grant & Co. and Smith & Clark of Inverness, I. Forsyth and W. Young of Elgin, Archd. Constable & Co. and W. Creech of Edinburgh, and Vernor, Hood & Sharpe of London.

From the extent of his business connections it would appear that Young's press was generally a commercial success, although the three reissues of the 1804 *Ossian* may suggest that on this occasion the printer had overestimated the initial sales potential of his book and was thus left with a considerable stock of sheets which had to be disposed of later in stages.

The edition, exclusive of prelims, collates A-3L⁴, 228 leaves. The pagination, straightforward but tedious to record because every blank page and the first page of each poem and section is unnumbered runs as follows (unnumbered pages are recorded within square brackets): [v]vi-xvii[18-19]20-42[43]44-52[53]54-62[63]64-71[72-73]74-81[82-83]84-87[88-89]90-95[96-97]98-101[102-103]104-109[110-111]112-114[115]116-126[127]128-134[135]136-146[147]148-158[159]160-165[166-167]168-172[173]174-182[183]184-188[189]190-194[195]196-204[205]206-219[220-221]222-232[233]234-243[244-245]246-254[255]256-263[264-265]266-274[275]276-283[284-285]286-296[297]298-302[303]304-308[309]310-315[316-317]318-321[322-323]324-326[327]328-330[331]332-334[335]336-337[338-339]340-365[366-369]370-448[449]450-459[460].

The contents are as follows: pp.[v]-xvii: A dissertation concerning the æra of Ossian; pp. [19]-337: Text of *The poems of Ossian*; pp. [339]-365: A dissertation concerning the poems of Ossian; pp. [367]-448: A critical dissertation on the poems of Ossian, by Hugh Blair; pp.[449]-459: Appendix; p.[460]: [A statement on the arguments of Mr. Smith in his *Galic antiquities* and Dr. Samuel Johnson].

The type-area of leaf C1 recto (p.21), including running title and footnotes, is (height first) 180 x 94 mm. The ornament on leaf Tr3

recto (p.337) measures 25 x 25 mm., and the ornament on leaf 3L4 recto (p.459) measures (height first) 21 x 35 mm.

It is hoped that this description will suffice to identify copies of any other issues (if such there be) that may come to light.

ROBERT DONALDSON

National Library of Scotland
