James Macpherson & Ossian

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James Macpherson & Ossian
an exhibit from the
G. Ross Roy Collection
of Robert Burns, Burnsiana & Scottish Poetry

Department of Rare Books & Special Collections
Graniteville Room, Thomas Cooper Library
University of South Carolina
July-September 1998
Preface

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.

It is not always fully appreciated that, in addition to its outstanding holdings of Robert Burns and Burnsiana, the Roy Collection also encompasses extensive holdings of many other Scottish poets, more particularly from the early 18th century onwards. Each summer the Ormiston Roy Fellowship, endowed by Dr. and Mrs. Roy in memory of Dr. Roy’s grandfather, brings to the University a scholar to research some topic appropriate to the collection’s strengths. 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 and acknowledge 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. Thanks are due to Robin Copp and South Caroliniana Library for loan of Macpherson’s late pamphlet on American independence, from the books of Professor Yates Snowden. The Roy Collection was originally catalogued under a Title IIC grant by Jamie Hansen and Paul Schultz, and this exhibit, like any from Special Collections, would not have been possible without their work.

Patrick Scott

Associate University Librarian for Special Collections
Case 1: Early Writings and Fragments

Sir Joshua Reynolds, P.R.A., 1723-1792.

James Macpherson.

James Macpherson (1736-1796), an Invernesshire schoolmaster, became through his versions of traditional Celtic poetry, one of the most influential literary figures of the later 18th century. Reynolds’s portrait of Macpherson, painted in 1772 at the height of his fame, is shown here from the engraved frontispiece to Poems of Ossian, ed. Laing (1805).

James Macpherson,
“The Highlander,”
shown from The poems of Ossian, the son of Fingal translated
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. He turned to an earlier Scotland in his first long poem, “The Hunter,” which remained unpublished, until he reworked it for The Highlander, his first separate publication, which appeared from the Edinburgh firm of Walter Ruddiman Jr., in 1758.

James Macpherson,
“Ode on the Death of Marshall Keith,”
in Thomas Blacklock, 1721-1791, ed., A collection of original poems.
Edinburgh, Printed for A. Donaldson and sold by R. and J. Dodsley and J. Richardson, 1760.
Like others from northeast Scotland, during his early career Macpherson was closely associated with pro-Jacobite nationalist circles. The Jacobite hero James Keith, who had risen in exile to be one of Frederick the Great’s field marshals, was shot leading a cavalry charge in 1758. This poem, like its sequel hailing the anticipated return of Keith’s brother George, the Earl Marischal, was originally published in Ruddiman’s Scots Magazine. The blind poet Thomas Blacklock was later among the first to recognize the greatness of Robert Burns. In this collection, presented as “By the Rev. Mr. Blacklock, and other Scotch gentlemen, Macpherson’s contributions are all unsigned. A second volume, including signed poems by Macpherson, was issued in 1762, though a proposed third volume never appeared.

James Macpherson,
“The Cave,”
in Malcolm Laing, 1762-1818, ed., The poems of Ossian, &c., containing the poetical works of James Macpherson, Esq.. In prose and rhyme: with notes and illustrations.
Like several of Macpherson’s other contributions to magazines and to Blacklock’s collections, this poem remained unrecognized till Laing identified it, and pointed out parallels to his Ossianic writing, in this posthumous edition. Intrigued by such early poems, a group of the Edinburgh literati from the Select Society, including John Home, Alexander Carlyle, Adam Ferguson, and
Hugh Blair, urged Macpherson to show them further examples of Gaelic tradition.

Thomas Maclauchlan, 1816-1886, ed. and tr.
The Dean of Lismore's book; a selection of ancient Gaelic poetry from a manuscript collection made by Sir James M'Gregor, dean of Lismore, in the beginning of the sixteenth century. Edited with a translation and notes.
Edinburgh, Edmonston and Douglas, 1862.
Introduction and notes by William Forbes Skene, 1809-1892.
In the 1740s and 1750s, clergymen and scholars such as Jerome Stone, Donald MacNichol and James Maclagan, had been gathering the fast-vanishing evidence of traditional Gaelic poetry, and Macpherson visited or corresponded with several of these pioneers. Macpherson’s sources for his Ossianic poems combined oral tradition with manuscript sources such as the 16th century Book of the Dean of Lismore, shown here, which remained unpublished till the mid-19th century.

[James Macpherson],
“Two fragments of antient poetry collected in the Highlands of Scotland,”
One of the unsigned early periodical printings from Macpherson’s first Ossianic collection.

James Macpherson,
Fragments of ancient poetry, collected in the highlands of Scotland and translated from the Galic or Erse language.
Edinburgh, G. Hamilton and J. Balfour, 1760.
Shown with James Macpherson,
Fragments of ancient poetry : collected in the Highlands of Scotland and translated from the Galic or Erse language
Dublin : Printed for Sarah Cotter, 1760.
This slim volume established Macpherson’s distinctive Ossianic style that would make his name and sweep Europe. Even before publication in June 1760, this collection was being widely circulated, and not only within Scotland. Copies went through various intermediaries to Horace Walpole, Joseph Warton, and Thomas Gray. The enthusiastic Blair provided a laudatory preface, hinting at further discoveries to come, and individual sections appeared in the Scots Magazine, the Gentleman’s Magazine, and the Annual Register (in a review by the young Edmund Burke). In July, prodded by Blair, the Select Society sponsored a subscription dinner of Edinburgh lawyers and others to fund Macpherson while he collected further Ossianic writings for publication.

James Macpherson,
Fragments of ancient poetry, collected in the highlands of Scotland and translated from the Galic or Erse language.
Edinburgh, G. Hamilton and J. Balfour, 1760.
Shown with: James Macpherson,
Fragments of ancient poetry collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and tr. from the Galic
or Erse language. The 2d ed.
Edinburgh, Printed for G. Hamilton and J. Balfour, 1760.
The pages shown here for comparison between the first and second Edinburgh editions give a
good idea of the general character of the work that established the Ossianic craze. For the second
edition, Macpherson added a new Fragment XIII, with consequent renumbering of later
fragments.

Case 2: Fingal, Temora and the Works

James Macpherson,
Fingal, an ancient epic poem, in six books: together with several other poems, composed by
Ossian the son of Fingal. Tr. from the Galic language . . .
Macpherson’s field-trip of 1760-1761 took him not only to his home area near Inverness, but
across also to the Hebridean islands, still the heart of Gaelic-speaking culture. The result was no
longer mere fragments, but a full-fledged 19,000-word Scottish epic poem challenging
comparison with Homer and the ancients; one reviewer judged it superior to both the Iliad and
the Aeneid. Moreover, in format, the slim pamphlet of the Fragments was now superseded by
the broad pages of a fine two-volume quarto, published in London in December 1761. The
Inverness schoolmaster, with a London publisher and influential London patrons, was now James
Macpherson, Esq..

James Macpherson,
“A Dissertation on the Antiquity &c. of the Poems of Ossian the Son of Fingal,”
in 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 . . .
For the first edition of Fingal, Macpherson had provided this prefatory essay, which draws on
contemporary Scottish theories of cultural development to justify its claims for the authenticity of
Macpherson’s Ossianic sources.

James Macpherson,
Temora, an ancient epic poem, in eight books: together with several other poems composed
by Ossian, the son of Fingal. Tr. from the Galic language . . .
The success of Fingal launched Macpherson on the London social scene, and it was there that he
wrote a follow-up volume Temora, equally splendid in appearance. The new work was based on
a single ballad source, with none of the extensive fieldwork and correspondence that had gone
into his previous Ossian publications. Perhaps because of murmurings about Fingal, or seeking a
preemptive strike against criticism of the new book, Macpherson’s preface now harshly attacked
any criticism of the Ossian poems as ethnocentric and ignorant. He added notes and commentary
as evidence of his scholarliness, and he even added an appendix of 400 lines of Gaelic verse, as a sample of the materials he claimed to translate. It was a strategy that proved two-edged, because it gave ammunition to his classical critics in a way that the more modest Fragments had not done.

James Macpherson,
The works of Ossian: the son of Fingal translated from the Galic language . . .
2 vols. Modern quarter calf, cloth.
Open to show a passage from Temora. Despite the title page, this was actually the first collected edition of Macpherson's Ossian: "The words 'Third edition' refer to the previous publication in a separate form of Fingal and Temora" (British Museum Catalogue). The edition reprinted not only Macpherson's own prefatory Dissertation, but also that by Hugh Blair (see next case).

James Macpherson,
The poems of Ossian, Translated by James Macpherson, Esq...
A new ed., carefully corrected, and greatly improved.
This "new edition" represented Macpherson's final rearrangement of the Ossian poems, and for it he also reworked his prefatory dissertation. Countless English-language reprints followed, both in Britain and America, but after 1773 Macpherson himself never returned to the Ossianic material.

Ossian in Scotland
Because of later controversy over its authenticity, it is worth noting that Macpherson's Ossian was regularly reprinted by Scottish publishers, including publishers from northern burghs where local purchasers would presumably be able to adjudicate for themselves. Shown here are (from bottom to top) an edition 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 edition in original printed paper-covered boards.

Case 3: the Ossianic Controversy--Professor Blair vs. Dr. Johnson

John Hill Burton, 1809-1881, ed.
Life and Correspondence of David Hume
James Willard Oliver Collection of David Hume.
The philosopher and historian Hume was one of the original Edinburgh group who encouraged Macpherson to publish the Fragments. This letter of 1760 reflects that early strong support, but it already shows caution about some of Macpherson's claims, and by the publication of Fingal, in 1762, Hume would express overt distrust of Macpherson's "highland prejudices" and "nationalist prepossessions." By the 1770s, when Macpherson moved onto Hume's territory of seventeenth
century political history, Hume had become a convinced opponent.

Hugh Blair, 1718-1800.

A critical dissertation on the poems of Ossian: the son of Fingal
Ownership stamp of the Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow. Modern quarter calf, cloth.
Macpherson’s strongest and most unwavering publicist was the Revd. Hugh Blair, fashionable preacher and first regius professor of rhetoric at Edinburgh University. Blair promptly added discussion of Macpherson’s Fragments and Fingal in his lectures on epic and the Homeric bard. Even though he frugally kept those lectures unpublished till 1783, after his retirement, this separately-published version of the Ossian lectures made his position widely-known. Indeed, Blair’s Critical Dissertation was frequently included in later Ossian editions.

Samuel Johnson, 1709-1784,
Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland.
Among the fiercest and earliest critics of Macpherson was Dr. Johnson. When Blair, visiting London in 1763, asked him what modern poet could have written Ossian, Johnson replied “Many men, many women, and many children.” Johnson’s journey to Scotland in 1773, with Boswell, was in part to investigate the Ossianic claims. His subsequent book argued trenchantly that Macpherson was an insolent deceiver in the claims he still made that Fingal and Temora were translations, not reworkings. (The library’s first edition of this work is currently at the conservators).

James Boswell, 1740-1795,
Journal of a tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, Ll.D.
Recently donated by Dr. Donald A. Kay.
Boswell’s own account of the journey was published after Johnson’s death, and gives a rather gentler version of Johnson’s inquiries about Ossian among the Gaelic gentry. Johnson, apparently, conceded that Macpherson drew on oral tradition, reserving his scepticism for Macpherson’s claims about the historic integrity of Ossianic epic materials.

Dr. Johnson’s final riposte to Macpherson
from Sir John Hawkins, Life of Samuel Johnson, Ll.D.
Soon after the publication of Johnson’s energetic statement of the case against Ossian, Macpherson wrote threatening him with violence. The letter reprinted here reiterates Johnson’s assertion that Macpherson was a cheat and an imposter. Among those who agreed with Johnson was Hume, who wrote an “Essay on Ossian” (never published), deploying the methods of his sceptical “Essay on Miracles.”
Mackenzie, Henry, 1745-1831; Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland.

Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland appointed to inquire into the nature and authenticity of the poems of Ossian ... with ... some of the principal documents on which the report is founded.


Partly as a result of Johnson's book, scepticism about Macpherson's work intensified in the 1770s. Following Macpherson's death in 1796, the Highland Society of Scotland took up the challenge, appointing an investigative committee to be chaired by the novelist and essayist Henry Mackenzie. The long-delayed Report did work of lasting importance in collecting Gaelic oral tradition, and never directly accuses Macpherson of falsification, but made clear nonetheless that there were no extant source-texts for complete works and that Macpherson had significantly modified his oral sources.

Patrick Graham, 1754?-1835.

Essay on the authenticity of the poems of Ossian; in which the objections of Malcolm Laing, Esq., are particularly considered and refuted. . . . To which is added an essay on the mythology of Ossian's poems, by Professor Richardson.

Edinburgh: P. Hill, 1807.

The Roy Collection contains numerous publications on the Ossianic controversy, which continued for another forty years or more. The Scottish historian Malcolm Laing, who edited Macpherson's works in 1805, had stressed the parallels between literary and Biblical originals, Macpherson's early original poetry, and his Ossianic translations. Graham, a Highland minister who dedicated his study to the Duke of Atholl, was by no means simplistic in his defense, and develops a theory of oral literature that tries to account for such parallels.

John Smith, 1747-1807.

Sean dana; le Oisian, Orran, Ulann, &c. Ancient poems of Ossian, Orran, Ullin, &c. Collected in the western Highlands and isles; being the originals of the translations some time ago published in the Gaelic antiquities.

Edinburgh, C. Elliot; [etc., etc.] 1787.

Bookplate of Duncan Cameron. Original blue-gray boards, rebacked.

The sources for Ossian, if extant, were unavailable for scholarly discussion, and several attempts were made to collect and print them, in Macpherson's defense. In 1783, a group of Highland gentlemen from the East India Company had given the Highland Society of London a thousand pounds to pay for an edition of Macpherson's Gaelic source manuscripts. Macpherson accepted the money gladly but never himself produced the book. The collection shown here is a follow-up to Smith's earlier Galic antiquities (1780), which had printed his dissertation on the authenticity of the poems of Ossian, and English translations from the sources here given in Gaelic.

MacNeill, Archibald.

Notes on the authenticity of Ossian's poems

[Edinburgh]: Printed for the author, 1868.

An example of the many later Ossianic studies in the Roy Collection, most of which argue for the
authenticity of Macpherson’s oral sources.

Case 4: Ossian in Europe and America

Macpherson, James, 1736-1796; Merck, Johann Heinrich, 1741-1791, editor.
Works of Ossian.
Francfort : I. G. Fleischer, 1783.
4 vols. Later white half calf, marbled boards. Bookplate of Edward Herschel, M.D.
Within a few years of publication, Macpherson’s Ossian had been republished and translated in most European countries. The extraordinary impact of Ossian in German literature and art was increased by Goethe’s long quotation from Fingal in the preface to his Sufferings of Young Werther (1774) and is evident also in Klopstock, Herder, and others. The Roy Collection contains two copies of this early German edition of the English-language text. The first German translation was by J. N. C. Michael Dennis in 1768-1769.

Melchiorre Ceserotti, 1730-1808, tr.
Le poesie di Ossian tradotte.
The Abbe Ceserotti, a Paduan rhetoric professor, corresponded with Macpherson as early as 1763, and his very free Italian translation was published ten years later, subsidized by one of Abbe’s English friends. It was influential both in Italy and also, through Napoleon, in France. The future Emperor first read Ossian in the Ceserotti translation in his teens, identifying Scotland and Corsica, and he awarded the Abbe a lifelong pension in 1797.

Pierre LeTourneur, 1736-1788, tr.
Ossian, Fils de Fingal, Bardes du 3e Siecle; poesies galliques, traduits sur l’anglais de Macpherson
Translations from both the Fragments and Fingal had appeared in French periodicals immediately after their first publication, the latter translated by Denis Diderot the Encyclopaedist. The first full translation was LeTourneur’s, first published in 1776 and frequently reprinted.

Pierre Marie Francois Louis Baour-Lormian, 1770-1854, tr.
Ossian, barde du IIIe si–cle : poesies galliques en vers fran?aise
This later French translation is one of thirteen to follow in Diderot’s and LeTourneur’s footsteps. Among French writers deeply responsive to Ossian were Chateaubriand, Lamartine, and Hugo.

Alexander Macdonald, d. 1837.
Phingaleis, sive Hibernia liberata, epicum Ossianis poema, e celtico sermone conversum, tribus praemissis disputationibius, et subsequentibus notis ... Augusto Frederico ... Sussexiae duci, dictatum.
Edinburgi: J. Moir, 1820. Modern gray binder’s cloth.

As the pencil annotations show, Macdonald was a Catholic priest in Crieff, Perthshire. His was only one of several translations of Ossian into Latin, and his preface, also in Latin, looks back to the learned tradition of Scottish latinism in such writers as George Buchanan and Thomas Ruddiman. Also in the Roy Collection is the three-volume Latin version by Professor Robert Macfarlan (London 1807).

Macpherson, James, 1736-1796.
The poems of Ossian, the son of Fingal. Translated by James Macpherson, Esq..
A new ed., carefully cor., and greatly improved.
Philadelphia: Thomas Lang, 1790.

Andrew Hook, in his Scotland and America (1975), argues that, in “the creation and definition” of American romantic ideas of Scotland, “no single work compares in importance with Macpherson’s Ossian.” Copies of British editions had been offered for sale in Philadelphia as early as 1766; Thomas Jefferson had read it enthusiastically in 1773; and John Trumbull had used at least the name in his satire M’Fingal (1775), but this is the first of the many editions to be issued by American publishers.

John Wodrow,
Fingal: an ancient epic poem in six books / by Ossian the son of Fingal; translated into English heroic rhyme by John Wodrow ...
Edinburgh: Printed for the author [and] sold by A. Donaldson, J. Bell, and J. Dickson, 1771.

Only a decade after the first publication of Macpherson’s Fingal, Wodrow, a protégé of Dr. Thomas Blacklock and a staunch proponent of Ossianic authenticity, could assert that “they are now familiarly known throughout the British dominions; they have been translated into the most polite, modern European languages, and received with deserved applause.” Wodrow’s Fingal, in heroic couplets, is only one of more than a dozen versifications in the Roy Collection. Wodrow had also published a versification of Macpherson’s shorter work, Carthon, in 1769.

Case 5: Macpherson after Ossian

Macpherson and Tory Politics
Dedication to Lord Bute
shown from Macpherson, Temora. Dublin: A. Leathley and P. Wilson, 1763.

As with other 18th century Scots authors (Thomson, Hume, Burns), Macpherson’s literary success introduced him to powerful political patrons and was rewarded with apparently unrelated government sinecures. Macpherson had dedicated Fingal to an unnamed “nobleman of exalted station,” whom he named in Temora as the powerful Tory politician John Stuart, Earl of Bute (who was chancellor of Marischal College). In 1764, Bute’s patronage sent Macpherson to the newly-acquired colony of West Florida, as provincial secretary, and when he returned in late 1765
(retaining an income for life), he gained the patronage of other Tory ministers, Lord Shelburne, and then Lord North (soon to be prime minister). From 1780 onwards, he sat in parliament as M.P. for Camelford, Cornwall, with financial support from the Indian prince, Mohammed Ali, Nawab of Arcot. The government also rewarded Macpherson’s loyalty with the forfeit lands of Ewen of Cluny, covering his home parish in Scotland, and in 1794 he commissioned Robert Adam to build him a Palladian mansion there. On his death in 1796, Macpherson was buried in Westminster Abbey.

James Macpherson,

An introduction to the history of Great Britain and Ireland.
Contemporary brown calf, spine gilt.
Several major figures among the Scottish literati, including David Hume, William Robertson, and Tobias Smollett, had earned substantial reward from their historical writings. Macpherson had already written about Celtic cultural origins and early Scottish history, in his introductory dissertations to Fingal, Temora and the collected Ossian, and when in the 1770s he too turned to writing history, it was this early Celtic material on which he focused. The Scottish historian John Pinkerton condemned the work as “vanity” and “nonsense,” but its ideas of Celtic origins influenced Edmund Gibbon in his Decline and Fall, and it went through four editions in ten years.

James Macpherson, transl.

The Iliad of Homer.
One of the original influences on Macpherson’s concept of Ossian as epic bard was his Aberdeen professor Thomas Blackwell’s interpretation of Homer, and comparisons between Homer and Ossian had often been accompanied by exhortations to Macpherson to rival the long-dominant translation by Alexander Pope. In the event, Macpherson’s prose translation (which was also issued with facing Greek text and explanatory notes) only drew cries of outrage from the critics.

James Macpherson,

The history of Great Britain, from the Restoration, to the accession of the House of Hanover.
This more modern history was commissioned by the publisher William Strahan as a continuation of the enormously successful history by David Hume, which concluded with the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Macpherson’s is a quite explicitly politicized, as a pro-Jacobite account of how the Elector of Hanover became King of Great Britain. Hume wrote to Strahan that it was “one of most wretched Productions that ever came from your Press.” What nonetheless makes it of lasting interest is its reliance on unpublished source materials (see next item).
James Macpherson, comp.

**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.**


These “Original Papers” were designed to support Macpherson’s pro-Tory stance in the *History*, depending in part on Jacobite archives (including James II’s memoirs and the papers of his secretary of state in exile) and in part on confidential papers from the Hanoverian side, selected to show the duplicity of Hanoverian politicians such as Harley and Walpole.

Macpherson, James, 1736-1796.

**The rights of Great Britain asserted against the claims of America: being an answer to the Declaration of the general Congress.**

London, Printed for T. Cadell, 1776.

*Yates Snowden Collection, South Caroliniana Library.*

One of Macpherson’s latest works was this anonymous counter-attack to the American Declaration of Independence; secretly funded by Lord North’s government, it argued against negotiation and in favor of strong British military control. In addition to at least eleven British printings, Macpherson’s pamphlet was also reprinted several times in Philadelphia itself.