James Macpherson's First Epic

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In June of 1760, Macpherson’s *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* was published anonymously with a short preface by Dr. Hugh Blair, who was then at work preparing his lectures on belles lettres. A warm commendation from the pastor of the High Church of St. Giles assured the volume attention at least in the North, for at that time “Blair was one of the most signally honored men in Edinburgh”; furthermore, the poems had already been circulated among the Edinburgh literati and had received praise from such distinguished figures as Hume, Robertson, Ferguson, and Home. In view of the strong nationalistic feelings current in Scotland at the time, it would not have been difficult to predict the popularity in the North of the first published volume of what purported to be a translation of Highland poetry; but probably no one, least of all Macpherson himself, would have anticipated the great vogue these poems were to enjoy in England and throughout Western Europe.

How different was the reception that had awaited Macpherson’s first volume, *The Highlander*, published in Edinburgh by Walter Ruddiman, Jr., just two years earlier. It too was anonymous, but on that occasion there was no commendatory preface. *The Scots Magazine* made note of its existence and its cost (one shilling) but failed to review it. *The Edinburgh Magazine*, also published by Ruddiman, ignored the poem completely. Macpherson suffered the most bitter fate of any artist: he was completely ignored.

*The Highlander*, an epic poem in six cantos, deals with the rising fortunes of Alpin, the Scottish protagonist; he begins as an unknown youth of obscure lineage but, as the poem progresses, he distinguishes himself through acts of courage and generosity. Ultimately he emerges as the new Scottish king. The first three cantos show his excellence during time of war, the final three during peace.

At the outset we learn that Sueno has led a band of Scandinavian invaders against the Scots, who are governed by Indulph. Alpin first shows signs of his daring by instigating and leading a bold and successful night raid against the powerful enemy. During the course of this action he overcomes the young champion of the Danes, Haco; but in recognition of his valor and prowess Alpin befriends his adversary, and the two young men exchange gifts. On the following day (Canto II)

the two armies struggle heroically for supremacy, and, though victory flits from one side to the other, the day ends without either side emerging victorious. Alpin again shows himself as an uncommonly skillful and courageous warrior. That night (Canto III) Alpin leads a carefully chosen band of valiant Scots to destroy the enemy fleet. Their purpose is accomplished, and the alarmed invaders are put to rout. Alpin generously allows Haco to escape with his bride Aurelia, who has come on the expedition disguised as a warrior.

The war over, Alpin once more displays his heroism by rescuing Culena, the daughter of Indulph, from a base attacker (Canto IV). The Highlander, furthermore, shows himself as adept in courtly athletics as he was in battle. In Canto V the noble ancestry of Alpin is revealed; he is in fact a prince, the son of the murdered King Malcom. Subsequently he assumes his true name, Duffus. Although Indulph immediately offers to restore the throne to the rightful heir, Duffus refuses because he recognizes his inexperience in affairs of state. He seeks and wins the hand of Culena (Canto VI), ensuring the union of the two dynasties. When the King is unexpectedly murdered by Danish pirates, Duffus assumes the throne with the prospect of a long and benevolent reign over a loving people.

It is obvious that certain major aspects of The Highlander are later reflected in Ossian, particularly in the first epic, Fingal. The setting is Scotland in the remote past, and the central action revolves around the people's defense of their homeland against Scandinavian invaders, led in The Highlander by Sueno, in Fingal by Swaran. The heroes of both poems defeat the invading force and restore peace to the land.

The Highlander no less than Ossian expresses a plea for Scots national feeling, which reached its peak during the half-century following Culloden. Largely because of its Scottish theme, John Home's tragedy, Douglas, kept Edinburgh in an ecstasy of praise, and made its author a celebrated literary figure; in the North he was frequently called the "Scottish Shakespeare." Probably because of its utter conventionality, The Highlander received little attention despite its patriotic appeal.

Macpherson drew upon details from the recent past in his epic. With bagpipes playing, the kilted Scots, proudly wearing their tartans, go into battle:

To show invaders that they dar'd to die,
For barren rocks, for fame and liberty (III, 31).

Not only do the Scots repeatedly express fervent national sentiments, but their generous patriotism and heroic valor, which serve to keep
their nation free, are in marked contrast to the conduct of their southern neighbors:

England's subdu'd, the Saxons are o'ercome,
And meanly own a Danish Lord at home (I, 8).

There is also a marked tendency to idealize the past, and to reflect the conviction that man in a more primitive state acted from more disinterested motives. In Osian such an assumption is never stated explicitly since the poems are supposed to be a direct reflection of a primitive mind, but as readers we are struck by the generosity and compassion of these ancient people. By listing faults not shared with contemporary times, Macpherson in passages of The Highlander more explicitly suggests the nobility of an early period. The Caledonian court is a model of openness based on benevolence, honesty, and trust; in the event of private oppression, the court will seek to remedy it:

No frowning spear-man guards the awful door;
No borrow'd terror arms the hand of pow'r:
No cringing bands of sycophants appear,
To send false echoes to the monarch's ear.
Merit's soft voice, oppression's mournful groan,
Advanced, unstill'd, to th' attentive throne (I, 6).

The art and architecture reflect the manly simplicity of the people's martial lives:

The royal hall, in simple nature great.
No pigmy art, with little mimickry,
Distracts the sense, or pains the weary eye:
Shields, spears and helms in beauteous order shone,
Along the walls of uncemented stone (III, 38).

Like the description of the court, the details of the Caledonian council meeting are an almost explicit condemnation of the contemporary state of affairs and reaches the proportions of a catalogue of current political abuses:

Within the high-arch'd hall the nobles sat,
And formed in council the reviving state;
For instant peace solicitous prepare,
And raise a bulwark 'gainst the future war.
No high-flown zeal the patriot hurl'd along,
No secret gold engag'd the speaker's tongue,
No jarring seeds are by a tyrant sown,
No cunning senate undermines the throne.
To public good their public thoughts repair,
And Caledonia is the general care.
No orator in pompous phrases shines,
Or veils with public weal his base designs.
Truth stood conspicuous, undisguis'd by art,
They spoke the homely language of the heart (IV, 49).
In *The Highlander* and in Ossian the characters are conceived with the same uniformity. There is no one in either work that could be described as a complex character. Some of the figures in the latter work might be called compound in that they are, for instance, courageous *but* proud, or fierce *in war but* generous in peace; but in general the delineation is between the good and the bad. The view of hero and villain is usually as stereotyped as in the American Western before the discovery of psychological realism. Alpin, who is the epireme of the noble warrior, reflects the general over-simplification of character when he comments that his rescue of Culena deserves no special recognition, for he

But frightened from his prey a sensual slave,
The gloomy sons of guilt are never brave—
Whoe'er would seize on a defenceless fair,
Would shun the sword and fly amain from war (IV, 48).

In addition to these similarities to Ossian, there are three features of *The Highlander* which are later developed into major themes: the convention of female disguise (always as a warrior), the interest in violent, forbidding landscapes, and the central role of the courtly bard.

We are told that Aurelia and Haco were married, but even before the marriage could be consummated, he was called to war. She was supposed to remain at home, but in her determination not to be parted from her lover, she disguises herself as a young warrior and joins the expedition. Variations on this same device occur in Ossian with such frequency that they become as monotonous as they are incredible.

The natural settings in *The Highlander* are not nearly so prominent as in Macpherson's later work, and are usually brought in as epic similes. However, in this use they are almost always depictions of nature in a violent and threatening state:

Thus on a night when rantling tempests war,
Thro' broken clouds appears a blazing star;
Now veils its head, now rushes on the sight,
And shoots a livid horror thro' the night (I, 9).

Finally, when we are given a description of the bards at court, their function is conceived of in terms identical with those of Ossian:

Harmonious bards exalt the tuneful voice:  
A select band by Indulph's bounty fed,  
To keep in song the mem'ry of the dead!  
They handed down the ancient rounds of time,  
In oral story and recorded rhyme (V, 69).

After recognizing that there are a number of similarities between *The Highlander* and Ossian, we must hasten to add that the total
artistic effect of the two works is vastly different, and it is this difference that to a large degree explains the fact that the earlier poem was almost completely neglected, not only by the general British reading public, but even in Edinburgh, where works by Scots dealing with a native scene were so rare that when they did appear they were apt to be accorded lavish praise.

_The Highlander_ is clearly the work of an inexperienced writer, who is trying his hand at employing the conventions of neo-classical epic verse as derived from Dryden's and Pope's translations, but who is unable to use the convention in an imaginative or creative way. The use of periphrasis is stock. The sun is referred to as "the beam of day," "the flaming lord of day," and "the occidental light." Waves are "liquid mountains," and the seabirds are the "songsters of the spray." Compound epithets abound and though more original are no more fortunate. We find "steel-clad ridges" (i.e. lines of warriors), "tree-set vale," "tear-distilling maids," and "favor-speaking mein." The fashionable "y" adjectives derived from nouns are also common: "ridgy sea," "spunny waves," "healthy wild," and "pearly grass."

The heroic couplets are generally managed with little vigor, though there are passages that suggest Macpherson might have learned to handle the form with flexibility and even grace:

Thus when devouring hatchet-men invade,
With sounding steel, the forest's leavy head,
The mountains ring with their repeated strokes;
The blading firs, the elms, the aged oaks,
Quake at each gash; then nod the head and yield;
Groan as they fall, and tremble on the field.
Thus fell the men; blood forms a lake around,
While groans and spears hoarse harmony resound.
The mountains roar, and thunder back each noise,
And echo [sic] stammers with unequal voice (II, 20-21).

More commonly, however, we find lines that suggest an inexperienced poet straining to sustain the form and fiction of his work. Cliches abound and are often placed in a stressed position; Alpin,

Resolved to offer to his king and lord,
The gen'rous service of his trusty swod (I,14).

There are even examples of what might be called a mixed cliche:

Yet hear this thought. —Within the womb of night,
Confirm the troop, and arm the youth for fight (I, 10).

Unconscious puns sometimes produce ludicrous effects:

Whence is the youth? I see fierce Denmark warms
Each gen'rous breast, and fires 'em into arms (I, 6).
And an extension of a metaphor results in an image that borders on the grotesque:

> At length returning life her bosom warms,
> Glows in her cheeks and lights up all her
> charms (IV, 46).

There are indications of Macpherson's laboring to find rhymes. We find inversion and padding often:

> Silent and slow she moves along the main,
> Behind, her maids attend, a modest train! (IV, 44).

Language is sometimes forced for the sake of rhyme:

> Slow-curling waves advance upon the main
> And often threat the shore, and oft abstain (IV, 45).

Similarly words are forced into unnatural syntactical structures for the sake of rhyme:

> Th’ astonished chiefs congeal’d in dumb amaze,
> Stiffen’d to silence, on each other gaze (V, 67).

Such specific weaknesses in the management of the poem are indicative of more than technical inadequacy. There is rarely an indication that the author has thought or felt very deeply about the subject. Despite the praise given to simple emotional diction—"the homely language of the heart"—the poem itself is better described in terms of the "pompous phrases" that it ostensibly condemns. The pervasive torpor of the lines suggests the efforts of an earnest young man rather dispiritedly completing a poetic exercise by sticking doggedly at it. Macpherson's comment on imitative poets, made some fifteen years later in his preface to *The Iliad*, may well be based on his own youthful experience; it is at any rate an astute commentary on his own early work:

> The greatest genius, when employed merely in copying, must be unhinged; The fancy, which should animate genuine poetry, is curbed and depraved; and the judgment, which ought to preconcert the whole frame of a perfect work, becomes languid for want of employment.

The question of why Macpherson wrote Ossian in the extraordinary manner in which he did affords no simple explanation; those who seek to portray him either as a well-meaning adapter or as a thorough-going charlatan fail to take into account the whole of the evidence, for

at each stage in the composition of the poems he was probably something of both. What is evident from a reading of *The Highlander* is that Macpherson was not a mere literary opportunist; he had a genuine and serious desire to fashion an epic on a Scotish theme long before the publication of *Fingal and Temora*.

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