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## 'Lost in Words': Macpherson's Ossian, Translation, and Ballad Collection in the Eighteenth-Century Scottish Gàidhealtachd

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### Abstract & Keywords

#### English:

*Ossian* scholarship has moved beyond questions of forgery and authenticity to consider the poems' international influence as a founding text of European Romanticism. Building on recent work in translation studies, this essay considers *Ossian* as the first substantial attempt to translate Gaelic poetry into English, exploring Macpherson's relationship to his Gaelic sources, and his rejection of contemporary 18th century anglophone translation codes. Influenced by the theories of Hugh Blair and other members of the Scottish Enlightenment, Macpherson rendered traditional Gaelic heroic ballads in a highly figurative prose poetry, couched in the language of the sublime and the primitive. In conclusion, the essay turns to the posthumously published 'Gaelic' *Ossian* which turns out to be largely a back-translation of the 1760's 'English' text. Yet Macpherson stimulated interest in Gaelic culture at a time of crisis, and his 'foreignizing' effect created an influential translation paradigm for Gaelic poetry and culture.

**Keywords:** Ossian, romanticism, authenticity, Gaelic

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The opening lines of 'Fragment VIII' of James Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760) represent the blind 3rd century Celtic bard Ossian lamenting the death of his father Fingal (Fionn mac Cumhail) and his son Oscar, as the 'last of his race' of Fenian warriors, whose heroic and amorous deeds, as narrated by the blind bard, provided the substance for the spate of poems 'translated' from Scottish Gaelic that followed in rapid succession:

By the side of a rock on the hill, beneath the aged trees, old Oscian sat on the moss; the last of the race. Sightless are his aged eyes; his beard is waving in the wind. Dull through the leafless trees he heard the voice of the north. Sorrow revives in his soul: he began and lamented the dead. How has thou fallen like an oak, with all thy branches round thee! Where is Fingal the king? Where is Oscar my son? where are all my race? Alas! in the earth they lie. I feel their tombs with my hands. (Gaskill 1996: 18) [1]

A native Gaelic speaker from Badenoch in the Central Highlands, James Macpherson studied at Aberdeen University with Dr Thomas Blackwell, an expert on Homeric epic. In the *Ossian* poems, he sought to re-mediate the popular poetry of his own Gaelic culture in the form of national epic, addressed to a wider, English-speaking readership in Scotland and beyond. Although in 1760 nearly a quarter (23%) of Scotland's population still spoke Gaelic, both the language and culture were in a state of deep crisis as a result of the proscription of clanship following the battle of Culloden in 1746 (Durkacz 1983: Withers 1988). Macpherson's 'ancient epics' *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763), along with a number of shorter narrative poems, were rendered in a highly figurative poetical prose which had a huge impact on the European literary climate of the late eighteenth century, important harbingers of Romanticism. In the Preface to *Fingal*, Macpherson affirmed that his 'literal prose translations' into English rendered original poems in the 'the Galic or Earse language', collected in the Highlands of Scotland from both oral and manuscript sources. He noted that hitherto, Gaelic speakers familiar with the originals had 'despaired of making the compositions of their bards agreeable to an English reader', showing a 'modesty, which perhaps the present translator ought, in prudence, to have followed' (Gaskill 1996: 50). The preface to *Fragments* (actually the work of Macpherson's patron, Dr Hugh Blair, Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University) cast some light on their startlingly original style: 'the translation is extremely literal. Even the arrangement of the words in the original has been imitated; to which must be imputed some inversions in the style, that otherwise would not have been chosen' (Gaskill 1996: 6). In an important recent article, *Ossian* scholar Howard Gaskill underlines this point, although no modern commentator would endorse Macpherson and Blair's claim to 'literalism': his 'prose poetry is intended to read like translation. The abundant use of inversion is just one way in which Gaelic structures are allowed to shimmer through the surface of the target language. The resulting strangeness is...poetically extremely effective, and... contributed as much to *Ossian's* success in the Anglophone world as the exoticism of the subject matter' (Gaskill 2013: 295).

To modern readers, *Ossian* most often conjures up the word 'forgery', a charge devastatingly levelled at Macpherson by Dr Johnson, who claimed that '[the poems] never existed in any other form that than which we have seen'. How could they be, the great lexicographer insisted, given that Scottish Gaelic 'merely floated on the breath of the people', lacking any written archive more than a hundred years old: 'If we know little of the ancient Highlanders, let us not fill the vacuity with *Ossian*' (Black 2007: 210). In this essay however I want to change the terms of the argument by discussing the *Ossian* poems as *translations* rather than as forgeries, heedful of Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler's argument that 'translation is [never just] an act of faithful reproduction, but, rather, a deliberate and conscious act of selection, structuration, and fabrication - and even, in some cases, of falsification, refusal of information, counterfeiting, and the creation of secret codes' (quoted Basnett 2019: 554). My claim here is that Macpherson's role as a pioneering translator in this sense has been seriously neglected by scholars: the power of his 'translations' from a minoritized language like Gaelic not only galvanised the eighteenth century British and European literary system (*Ossian* was rapidly translated into all the other major

European languages); but also, by means of a ‘complex, multiply-mediated feedback loop’ (McLane 2008: 77), it transformed Gaelic literature and tradition in both Scotland and Ireland, for better or for worse. In the conclusion to my essay, I will consider *Ossian’s* ‘zombie’ effect.

Although the forgery charge has been revived by Hugh Trevor-Roper and Thomas Curley in recent decades, the current consensus is summed up by Howard Gaskill’s description of *Fingal* as ‘a synthetic epic...in part a collage of genuine elements, in part free invention’ (Trevor-Roper 2008; Curley 2009; Gaskill 1994: 646). Twentieth century Gaelic scholars Derick Thomson and Donald Meek convincingly demonstrated how Macpherson adapted seventeen or eighteen Scottish and Irish Gaelic Fenian or *Fiannaigheacht* ballads, collected just in the manner that he claimed (Thomson 1952; Meek 1991).[2] These ballads, mainly dating from the late middle ages and common to the Scottish and Irish *Gàidhealtachd*, were based on even older literary material, most especially the Fenian Cycle of literature, and, to a lesser extent the Ulster Cycle, both set in the distant Gaelic past. The temporal locus of the Finn Cycle is most often Patrick’s mission (5th century) and the Ulster Cycle is largely set in the 1st century, but neither Cycle belong to those periods as such. Repeatedly infused with new, contemporary literary concerns in mid- and late-medieval prosimetrum texts like the *Acallam na Senòrach* (12th century Ireland), and in those ballads found in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* (early 16th century Scotland), the tales circulated in the popular oral tradition of the cèilidh house, surviving well into the twentieth century, especially in Scotland where the manuscript tradition was weaker than in Ireland. Lesa Ní Mhunghaile writes that ‘the ballads or narrative poems, known as *laoi(dh)*, *dán*, or *duan* in Irish and Scottish Gaelic respectively, are attributed in the tradition to Fenian heroes, particularly *Oisín* (*Oiséan* in Scotland)...They are composed in loose forms of syllabic verse known as *óglachas*, and in the oral tradition they were chanted or sung’ (Ní Mhunghaile 2017: 28).

If the forgery charge against Macpherson now looks tired, the status of *Ossian* as a threshold text in the ‘spatial turn’ of European translation has recently emerged into the scholarly limelight, following important work by Gaskill, Gauti Kristmannsson and others. Gaskill writes that ‘Ossian journeyed through Europe in a bewildering variety of forms, including hendecasyllable Italian *sciolti*, German hexameters, French poetic prose, Dutch alexandrines, Greek 15-syllable lines, Russian four-foot trochees, or indeed...the [Icelandic] eddic metre of *fornyrthislag*’ (Gaskill 2013: 295). The first translation from Macpherson was Melchior Cesarotti’s Italian *Fingal*, published at Padua in 1763, followed by his complete Italian translation of 1773: although Goethe’s translation of ‘The Songs of Selma’ in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) is the most celebrated German rendition, the Austrian Michael Denis’s complete German translation had been published in 1768/9, and Le Tourneur’s French came out in 1776/7: all included notes and scholarly paratexts, especially translations of Hugh Blair’s influential *Dissertation*. There is something strikingly postmodern about *Ossian’s* European reception: to quote Gaskill again, ‘it is not simply that Denis consults Cesarotti, Cesarotti later consults Le Tourneur for his revisions, and Le Tourneur himself is used by virtually all subsequent French translators. When one considers that the first translators imagined that they were translating a translation, it seems extraordinary that they should find themselves being translated in their turn. How many removes is that from the putative original?’ (Gaskill 2013: 657)

The complexity is compounded if we turn back to examine Macpherson’s relationship to his Gaelic sources. In a recent essay, Gauti Kristmannsson considers *Ossian* as a salient example in modern translation studies of ‘pseudotranslation’: ‘texts which have been presented as translations with no corresponding source texts in other language ever having existed’ (Kristmannsson 2017: 39). Rejecting this charge, Kristmannsson prefers to describe Macpherson as a ‘foreignizing’ translator from Gaelic who challenged the Augustan paradigms of British eighteenth-century translation practice, evidenced both in relation to his other contemporaries, and Macpherson’s own controversial later translation of Homer’s *Iliad* into cadenced prose. Reversing the charge of ‘pseudotranslation’, he proposes that the ‘literary history we have been taught on Macpherson and his period is, without him and his work, truly ‘pseudohistory’ (Kristmannsson 2017: 51). The historical context has been enhanced by recent research exploring Macpherson’s place within ballad collecting networks in eighteenth-century Highland Scotland, such as Victoria Henshaw’s recent study of his relationship with Jerome Stone, James McLagan, Donald McNicol, John Stuart, John Smith, and Joseph Macintyre, all bilingual Gaelic-speaking Church of Scotland ministers, except for Stone, a Dunkeld schoolmaster who taught himself Gaelic (Henshaw 2016). All of these men, who constitute the core of a ‘Gaelic Enlightenment’, collected Fenian lays and manuscripts but (with the exception of Stone and Smith) made no attempt at English translation or publication. Correspondence between members of the collection networks still survive, as do the manuscripts themselves, exemplified by the McLagan archive in Glasgow University Special Collections, which contains a number of manuscript poems lent by the minister of Blair Atholl to James Macpherson in 1760.

Macpherson stands out from the other collectors to the extent that he was persuaded by the anglophone Scottish *literati* to publish English translations of Gaelic lays with which he had been familiar since boyhood in the cèilidh-houses of Badenoch, as well as material collected during his 1760 tour of the West Highlands, Skye, and parts of the Outer Hebrides. The only precedent was Jerome Stone’s translation of the Gaelic lay *Bas Fhraoch* (“The Death of Fhraoch”) as “Albin and the Daughter of Mey”, published in the *Scots Magazine* in 1756 alongside the original Gaelic text. This was based on a medieval Irish ballad from the Ulster (rather than the Fenian) cycle, albeit one that had long been domesticated in Scotland.[3] Remarkably, Stone’s was the first ever published translation of secular Gaelic poetry into English, so was the only model available to Macpherson.[4] Stone made no attempt to ‘foreignize’ his translation from Gaelic, and showed no scruples in freely adapting his source ballad into pentameter couplets, described by Fiona Stafford as ‘a florid composition using the sentimental diction of eighteenth-century English verse’. Here is a stanza from Stone’s “Albin and the Daughter of Mey”, preceded by the Gaelic source text and a literal translation, in which the original is infused with fashionable sentimentalism:

Thogamar anois an cluin Fraoich,  
Corp an Laoich an Caiseal Chro.  
On Bhas ud a fhuair am fear,  
Mearg is mairion na dhaigh beo.

*Literal translation:*

We bore to the grave of Fraoch  
The body of the hero to its circular pale;

After the worthy has died,  
To be alive is our regret.

*Stone's translation:*

But now he's gone! and nought remains but woe  
For wretched me; with him my joys are fled,  
Around his tomb my tears shall ever flow,  
The rock my dwelling, and the clay my bed! (quoted in Stafford 1988: 64-5)

Macpherson's decision to translate his sources into rhythmic prose rather than follow Stone's verse translation has usually been attributed to the influence of Dr Hugh Blair, as well as other members of the Scottish literati possessed by an enthusiasm for the sublime and the primitive, as contemporaneously theorised by Edmund Burke. Blair praised the style of Macpherson's 'translation' of *Ossian* in his 1763 *Dissertation* as 'rapid and vehement...the language has all the figurative cast, which...partly [the result of] a glowing and undisciplined imagination, partly the sterility of language and the want of proper terms...always introduced into the early speech of nations...carries a remarkable resemblance to the style of the Old Testament' (Gaskill 1996 354).

Because Macpherson didn't preserve transcriptions from his collecting tours of 1760, it was indeed hard to compare the 'English' *Ossian* with any of its Gaelic sources.[5] In 1763, aiming to satisfy 'those who doubt the authenticity of Ossian's poems' (Gaskill 1996: 330), Macpherson published a verse *Specimen* of the Gaelic 'original' of *Temora* book 7. (Impressively, Goethe managed to translate 38 lines of the *Specimen's* Scottish Gaelic into German with the help of John O'Brien's 1768 Irish-English dictionary). Probably produced in collaboration with his kinsman the Gaelic poet Lachlan Macpherson of Strathmashie, the *Specimen* is written in an idiomatic and literary Gaelic beyond Macpherson's unassisted capacity, although Derick Thomson suggests that some 'obscurities and clumsiness of phrase' suggest 'it being a translation from [his] rather vague English': unfortunately, this was a harbinger of things to come, as we'll see below (Thomson 1952: 86).

For years before his death in 1796, Macpherson insisted that he was preparing the 'Gaelic originals' of *Ossian* for publication as further proof, a project left unfinished at the time of his death, despite a generous grant of £1000 from a group of patriotic 'Highland worthies' in colonial Bengal (Sinclair 1807: I, p.lxxxviii). These alleged 'originals' (produced with the assistance of Capt. Alexander Morrison - I'll return to them in my conclusion) didn't appear in print until 1807, too late to be considered in the 1805 *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland...into the Nature and Authenticity of Ossian*, which aimed to lay the controversy to rest alongside the recently interred bones of its perpetrator. Chaired by the veteran novelist Henry Mackenzie, the Committee sent out questionnaires to numerous Highland ministers and gentlemen in order to ascertain the nature of popular Fenian literature still current in the *Gàidhealtachd* and its proximity to Macpherson's *Ossian*. But pending the publication of Macpherson's 'Gaelic originals', it was frequently forced to defer judgement until such time as they appeared.

This obstacle notwithstanding, the Committee left no stone unturned in trying to conjure up diverse Gaelic 'sources', usually from other collected versions of well-known ballads that Macpherson had drawn on. Space permits only a brief example, in which the *Report* compared a passage of *Fingal* with a verse source allegedly collected from oral tradition, collected by Gaelic scholar and poet Rev. John Smith of Campbelltown. This passage, representing an unusually proximate relationship between source and translation, describes the unfurling of Fingal's standard in Book 4. Smith cites his source as a ballad entitled *Cath Fhinn agus Mhanois* ("The Battle of Fionn and Magnus"), which he had collected 'from the recitation of Calum an Raodhair':

Chuir sinn Deo-greine ri crann,  
Bratach Fhinn bu ghairge treis,  
Lomlan do chlochahibh an òir,  
'S ann leinne bu mhor a neas.  
Iomadh claidheamh dorn-chrann oirn,  
Iomadh sròl ga chur ri crann,  
An cath mhic Cumhail nam fleadh  
'S bu lionmhor sleagh os ar ceann.

*(Literal Version):*

We set the sun-beam to the pole,  
The standard of Fingal of stoutest might,  
Full-studded with stones of gold;  
With us it is held in high respect.  
Many were our swords with fist-guards.  
Many the standards reared on poles,  
In the battle of the son of Cumhal of feasts,  
And many the spears above our heads.  
(Macpherson, *Fingal Bk 4, p. 87*).

We reared the sun-beam of battle; the standard of the king. Each hero's soul exulted with joy, as, waving, it flew in the wind. It was studded with gold above, as the blue wide shell of the nightly sky. Each hero had his standard too; and each his gloomy men. (Mackenzie 1805: 81-2)

The Investigative Committee was satisfied that this kind of comparison did indeed prove Macpherson's reliance on authentic tradition. Nevertheless, it regretted that something of the original had been 'lost in translation': while in the original Gaelic verse 'the scene and circumstances are given distinctly...embodied in clear and accurate description', in Macpherson's translation 'they are frequently lost in words, of which the sound pleases the ear, but which are of a general indeterminate sort, that might belong to any other place or object of a similar kind' (Mackenzie 1805: 129). The *Report* concluded that Macpherson had indeed 'collated' authentic material from oral performance and Gaelic manuscripts, but had also 'suppl[ie]d chasms, and [given] connection, by inserting passages which he did not find, and [adding] what he conceived to be dignity and delicacy to the original composition' (Mackenzie 1805: 152). Although this incited Walter Scott to demand (in an 1805 review) 'let us therefore hear no more of Macpherson', 27 new editions of the English *Ossian* rolled off the press before 1830, proving both that the *Report* was inconclusive, and that the romantic reading public couldn't get enough of it (Scott 1805: 462). Since its first publication, *Ossian* inspired waves of tourists to visit the Scottish Highlands to

absorb the melancholy resonance of mist and mountains, searching for the Gaelic 'originals' and Fingalian topography, copies of the poems

What does this all amount to? From the perspective of 1805, at a historical moment when the 'rules of enunciation' for cultural poetics were just beginning to emerge (the Committee's methodology was originally proposed by the philosopher David Hume), Macpherson was criticized for failing to provide an adequate translation or record of his sources, which had been 'lost in words'. On the other hand, from his own completely different perspective 45 years earlier, Macpherson's pioneering translation from Gaelic had clearly challenged the accepted translation paradigm exemplified above by the passage from Stone's translation of "Albin and the Daughter of Mey". His 'foreignizing' effect had thus created an influential, although many would say *unfortunate*, translation paradigm for Gaelic poetry. Michael Cronin writes (referring to Douglas Hyde's twentieth-century prose translations from Irish) that 'literalism becomes subversive when...the target language itself is undermined or altered by a different syntax, sound-system or lexicon' deriving from the source language, especially in a colonial or para-colonial context (Cronin 1996: 136). As Kristmannsson indicates, the fact that Macpherson's prose *Fingal* was 'translated intralingually' into English heroic couplets no less than *three times* in the 1770's 'indicates a literary system shocked and responding with repeated reproduction within the 'acceptable' parameters' (Kristmannsson 2017: 48). Convention demanded that Macpherson's *Ossian* should look more like Dryden's verse translations from Virgil.

Shocking the prevailing literary system was one key to *Ossian's* phenomenal success. However, more problematically, Macpherson's volumes were an ideologically as well as aesthetically doctored version of his Gaelic sources, in purging Irish connections. In a letter of 1760, he insisted that 'my fragments are not of Irish extraction...I see no reason our writers have to make us a colony of Irish': this was developed in his 1763 *Dissertation on Temora* into a full-blown attack on Irish bards for having 'appropriated' an older Scottish tradition of Fingalian poetry. Citing Irish ballads like 'Teantach mor na Fion' and 'Gairibh Mac-Starn', [6] he distinguished a later, corrupted, Irish corpus from the 'pure' and ancient bardic Ossianic tradition native to Scotland: 'the [Irish tales] are entirely writ in that romantic taste, which prevailed two ages ago - Giants, enchanted castles, dwarfs, palfreys, witches and magicians form the whole circle of the poet's invention' (Gaskill 1996: 219, 221, 217-8). Macpherson's collaborator Rev Andrew Gallie later commented on the 'broken poems of Ossian, handed down from one generation to the other', 'corrupted' by oral tradition; 'I think great credit is due...to him who restores a work of merit to its original purity' (Mackenzie 1805: 44).

Although the epic action of *Fingal* and *Temora* took place in Ireland, Macpherson insisted that Fingal and his Fianna were of Scottish rather than Irish origin. *Ossian's* controversial chronotope, flying in the face of popular tradition in Scotland that frequently identified Fionn as an Irish hero, was based on a bardic nationalism that rejected the later traditions of the *fianaighecht* ballads, products of a Catholic popular culture common to Gaelic Ireland and Scotland. The fact that *Ossian's* 3rd century provenance predated Christianity in Scotland allowed for a sort of 'negative Protestantism' that mollified moderate Presbyterian opinion, whether that of the enlightenment Edinburgh literati, or Gaelic-speaking Highland ministers, struggling to purge their parishioners of pre-reformation 'Romish superstitions'. St Patrick, Oisein's interlocutor in many of the source ballads, is airbrushed out by Macpherson as an historical anachronism (See Gaskill 1996: 119 notes 1, 32 and 219; Thomson 1952: 43). Little wonder that Irish antiquarians like Sylvester O'Halloran and Charles O'Connor were outraged by Macpherson's provocative description of ancient Ireland as a Caledonian colony, even if, as Clare O'Halloran notes, the debate stimulated a defensive revival of interest in Irish Gaelic traditions (O'Halloran 1989: 73). [7] The Irish poet Charlotte Brooke learnt from Macpherson's mistakes in publishing her *Reliques of Ancient Irish Poetry* in 1789, a collection which included a number of ancient Fenian ballads in English verse translation, and (well-advisedly) included Gaelic originals printed in the Irish *corra-litir* typeface.

I will conclude by discussing *Ossian's* 'feedback effect' on Gaelic poetry and tradition mentioned at the beginning. As stated, in 1760 the protocols for collecting ethnographic material had not yet passed a threshold of formalization - ballad collectors like Thomas Percy, Robert Burns and Walter Scott freely adapted their vernacular sources and had little respect for oral tradition (McLane 2008:79, Leask 2009). In a 27th Oct 1760 letter to the respected collector James McLagan, Macpherson (ominously) praised the 'purity' of the Gaelic ballads which McLagan had lent him for the preparation of his Ossian 'translations', 'as you have taken pains to restore the style' (Mackenzie 1805: Appendix 154). Anja Gunderloch has shown that Duncan Kennedy, collecting Gaelic ballads in the 1770's, freely collated versions from diverse oral sources, and that more problematically, 'both the style and references to nature are clearly indebted' to Macpherson's 'English' *Ossian* (Gunderloch 2012: 186). Sources collected by both Kennedy and Rev John Smith (similarly indebted), were employed by the Highland Society Report as 'authentic' texts with which to test Macpherson's *Ossian*, ignoring the fact that some of the Gaelic material was already 'contaminated' by the influence of Macpherson's English translations.

But arguably, the most scandalous episode in Macpherson's career as a translator occurred posthumously, when in 1807 Sir John Sinclair published *The Poems of Ossian, in the Original Gaelic, with a Literal Translation into Latin*. As I mentioned above, the public was finally presented with the long-promised 'originals' of *Ossian* in the form of metrical Gaelic blank verse, left nearly completed by Macpherson at his death. Extraordinarily enough, Sinclair now dismissed Macpherson's English *Ossian* as 'a loose...and turgid translation from the original', containing plagiarisms from modern poetry not present in the Gaelic, and called for a more adequate modern translation of the 'originals' that were published in his volume (Sinclair 2007: I, clxx).. Macpherson the 'translator' was being sacrificed on the altar of critical judgement, in order to consecrate his Gaelic 'originals' as an authentic national epic. Perversely, however, Sinclair enabled the incorrigible Highlander to rise like a zombie from his grave. Although the authenticity of the Gaelic *Ossian* was long accepted, in 1952 Derick Thomson dismissed the 'originals' as mere back-translations from the English *Ossian*, ridiculing the execrable Gaelic of their author, 'one stage further removed from [the original] ballads than the English of 1763' (Thomson 1952: 85-9). [8] Thomson (himself an accomplished modern Gaelic poet) is scathing about the results: 'bad grammar and violated idioms abound everywhere... adjectives are used as nouns, or without 'gu' as adverbs'. The original of one line from *Temora* Book 1 ('A thousand swords are half unsheathed') reads: 'Leth gach claidheamh o mhile sgiath'. The poor quality is exposed in a literal translation of the Gaelic: 'Half of each sword from a thousand flanks...the Gaelic is quite as bad as the translation...no poet would compose in this sort of language' (Thomson 1952: 86).

However, Donald Meek has recently taken a different view, arguing that for all its faults the 1807 'zombie' *Ossian* had 'a remarkably stimulating influence on nineteenth-century Gaelic literature', and like Macpherson's

original poems, 'exalted the status of the Gaelic language and culture' at a time of cultural and political crisis. The jury is therefore still out on *Ossian's* feedback effect on Gaelic literature, although there is no doubt that one positive outcome was serious ethnographic research on popular Fenian tradition (Meek 2004: 41, 66).[9] Ironically, the 1807 'Gaelic' *Ossian* was rapidly translated into German and proved the most popular edition in nineteenth-century Germany - the German quest for authenticity had resulted in the authorization of a text that was actually one stage further removed from Macpherson's original sources than his 1760's English 'translations' (Gaskill 1994: 657).[10] I'll conclude with the thought that if Macpherson had claimed to have been the *author* of the *Ossian* poems, rather than merely their 'translator', would he have faced charges of *plagiarism* from the Gaelic sources, in proportion to the charges levelled against him for forgery and 'pseudo-translation'? It is a shame he was unable to find some authorial position 'in-between tongues', to play on the Gaelic word for 'translation'.[11]

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## Notes

[1] James Macpherson, 'Fragment VIII', *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland*, (1760). Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent citations from *Ossian* are from Gaskill (1996). Compare with the early-16th century Ballad VIII, *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore*, 37-9. 'Feeble tonight is the strength of my hands; there is not on earth my fellow in years; it is no wonder that I am sad, a pitiful, worn-out rag of an old man...I was the Fian's valorous councillor in the battle of Crunnmhoin. Many a one was slain there, after whom I am left feeble' (quoted in Stafford 1988: 142).

[2] Macpherson's dependence on authentic sources seems to have declined as he became more confident of the success of his literary experiment: whilst at least 12 passages in *Fingal* have been identified as translating or closely adapting sources, the later epic *Temora* only yields one single example, the narrative of the death of Oscar in Book 1.

[3] A version appears in the Scottish *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, c. 1520.

[4] Ironically, the same decades which saw a systematic official attack on the Gaelic language also coincided with the beginning of a printed corpus and an extraordinary poetic revival of which the *Ossian* phenomenon is a symptom rather than a cause. The first secular book to be printed in Gaelic, Alexander Macdonald's radical Jacobite poetry collection *Ais-Eiridh na Sean Chànoin Albannaich* ("The Resurrection of the Ancient Scottish Language") appeared only nine years before in 1752, but without any English translation. The first Scottish Gaelic translation of the New Testament was printed in 1767, seven years after Macpherson's *Fragments*, a text that would do much to create a standard literacy in the Scottish *Gàidhealtachd*, and subsequently an orthographic and lexicographic standard for translators.

[5] Although rather easier in relation to manuscripts like the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, in his possession during the period of composition. Macpherson's London publisher, Thomas Becket, claimed that in 1762 'the originals of Fingal and other poems of Ossian lay in my shop for many months...for the inspection of the curious'. There is no reason to doubt his claim, but these 'originals' were probably Macpherson's own notes of transcriptions and collations of Gaelic source material for *Fingal*, rather than ancient Gaelic manuscripts: few members of the London literati were qualified to read Gaelic manuscripts in 1762, let alone assess their relationship to the published *Ossian*. It was later claimed that some notes had been lost in Pensacola, Florida, when he was secretary to the Governor there in 1763 (Sinclair 1807: I, lxxxvii). In 1773, Dr Johnson demanded 'If the poems were really translated, they were certainly first written down. Let Mr Macpherson deposit the MS in one of the colleges of Aberdeen where there are people who can judge, and if the professors certify the authenticity, then there will be an end of the controversy' (Black 2007: 64).

[6] 'Teanntachd Mhòr na Fèinne' is the Scottish title of the ballad known in Irish as 'Laoidh Airghinn Mhóir': 'Duan Gharbh mhic Stairn'. Thanks to Peadar O'Muircheartaigh for this information.

[7] In her 1806 novel *The Wild Irish Girl*, Sydney Owenson's 'Prince of Inismore' insisted that Fingal's denomination 'King of Morven' had nothing to do with the West Highland peninsula of that name, but rather signified *Riagh Mòr Ehionne*, 'King or Chief of the Fhians, or Fians, a body of men [...] which [...] in the annals of Scottish history or Scottish poetry, would be vainly sought' (Owenson 1806/1986: 100).

[8] Macpherson appears to have made heavy weather of the back-translation (even if assisted by the more Gaelic-literate Capt. Alexander Morrison), which was left incomplete on his death, the delay in publication being attributed to the need to complete the task, and re-transcribe the poems in the orthography of the 1767 Gaelic New Testament that was now accepted as a standard.

[9] Meek notes that *Ossian* was enlisted by 19th century Gaels in opposing forced emigration, sheep clearance, and in support of the Crofter's War. (Meek 2004: 55, 58)

[10] Appropriately enough, it was a German scholar, Ludwig Stern, who first identified the 1807 'originals' as back-translations and also pioneered the study of his authentic Gaelic sources later developed by Derick Thomson and Donald Meek (Ní Mhugháile 2017: 32).

[11] *eadar-theangannan* / *eadar-theangachadh*. I would like to thank Dr Peadar O'Murcheartaigh for his invaluable comments in revising this essay for publication.

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