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Rude Bard of the North:**James Macpherson and the Folklore of Democracy:¹**

This paper examines the influence of James Macpherson's Ossianic verse on American cultural critics and writers. Remarks on the textual history of Macpherson's work in America—in Scottish, English and domestic editions—is followed by an exploration of Macpherson's impact on American culture, including his period as Secretary to the Governor of British West Florida. Through looking at a selection of poetic and political responses to Macpherson's Ossian, I suggest that the image of the Celt in America is founded in Macpherson's vision. Furthermore, I propose that Macpherson's folklore of an idealised, democratic Scotland had an indirect influence on the emergence of an American national identity.

The quotation in my title, 'Rude Bard of the North' is taken from a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to Charles McPherson in 1773:

Ossian's poems [in Macpherson's translation].... have been, and will I think during my life continue to be to me, the source of daily and exalted pleasure. The tender, and the sublime emotions of the mind were never before so finely wrought up by human hand. I am not ashamed to own that I think this rude bard of the North the greatest Poet that has ever existed. Merely for the pleasure of reading his works I am become desirous of learning the language in which he sung and of possessing his songs in their original form. (Jefferson 1950: 96-97)

The appeal of Macpherson's poems, on an international basis, has been well documented. The example is frequently cited of the Marquis de Chastellux's visit to Jefferson, at Monticello, in 1782. De Chastellux, at first, found Jefferson's manner 'grave and even cold' but, when they spoke of Ossian, 'a spark of electricity...passed rapidly from one to the other' (de Chastellux 1963: 229). Such effects are, of course, partly the product of eighteenth century sentimentalism. However, the direct impact of Macpherson, as 'rude bard of the North', should not be underestimated.

Macpherson's works were available in America, as in continental Europe, soon after their initial publication, and were frequently reprinted. A listing of editions in America was made by George Black in 1926, but this is preliminary and incomplete (Black 1926). Private and public collections held, and continued to hold, copies of Macpherson's works, from the late eighteenth century onwards. The early editions of Macpherson's works seem to have done long and steady service. An 1806 New Haven edition of *The Poems of Ossian, The Son of Fingal. Translated by James Macpherson, Esq. A new Edition. Carefully Corrected, and Greatly Improved, in two volumes*, produced for sale in New York, for instance, was originally the property of the Gloucester County Historical Society. It passed from here, as a duplicate copy, to 'The Deptford Institute Free Library of Woodbury, N.J'.² The 1773-74 library list of Philip Vickers Fithian included *Fingal* (Fithian 1957: 222).

The South, in particular, seems to have felt an affinity for Macpherson's works. The library of Angelica Singleton Van Buren (1816-1877)—the South Carolinian born daughter-in-law and hostess of President Martin Van Buren—for instance, included the two volume Edinburgh edition of Ossianic *Poems* (on the libraries of the colonial South see Edgar 1969). Perhaps this was related to the high rate of literacy, and large number of private, collegiate and provincial libraries there, as noted by Richard Beale Davis in *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South* (Davis 1978).

Moreover, the clergy, lawyers and doctors of Macpherson's period were often educated in Britain, or by Scots. Jefferson was educated at William and Mary by Professor William Small, a former student of the Aberdeen philosopher William Duncan. The physical plan of William and Mary was based on Marischal College, combining a preparatory school and university.

American editions of Macpherson's Ossianic verse were printed in Philadelphia, New York and Boston, all of which have long associations with 'Scottish flavoured musical composition'. Scottish musical collections, such as *The Scots Musical Museum*, were widely available at least from the late 1780s. Ann Dhu Shapiro, who has adeptly profiled this association, parallels the sentimental and nostalgic reactions to Scottish music in America to those of the London audience, which perceived Scottish songs as 'somewhat exotic' (Shapiro 1990: 72).³

The earliest American editions were simply reprints of the British texts. The first American edition of Ossian's works which I have seen was the Philadelphia one of 1790.⁴ Printed by Thomas Lang, at No 21, Church-Alley, this one volume book is entitled: *The Poems of Ossian, The Son of Fingal*. It includes a (by now standard on British editions) quote from Hugh Blair on the title page, 'We may boldly assign Ossian a place among those, whose works are to last for ages'. The copy I consulted, at the University of South Carolina, is signed 'W.J. Rees' but there is no further information about its provenance. This edition follows the 1773 London edition of Macpherson's works, including the 'Dissertation concerning the Aera of Ossian', 'Dissertation concerning the poems of Ossian' and 'Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian'. There are some cuts in the content of these sections, but none are substantial.

The 1806 New Haven edition follows the Edinburgh edition of 1792, and includes the extra contextual material which accompanied that text. Its hyperbolic preface states:

Their reception in this island, and, if possible, the still more ardent admiration which they have excited on the continent of Europe, supersedes, on this occasion, every purpose of attempting to praise them. (Macpherson 1806: v)

The various 'Dissertations' of the Edinburgh edition focus on the 'authenticity' of the text. This bias was carried on into the perceptions and presumptions of American audiences. The text itself, and its relation to Scottish culture, was less important than whether it could be verified as the truthful product of a real bard, representing the imagined Scottish homeland of the past.

The illustrations, on the other hand, fulfilled different functions for the American readers than for Scots. The images presented a prototypical image of the Celt to the American public. The 1790 Philadelphia 'Fingal', for instance, represents the Highlander in his kilt, both muscular and melancholic. He is a direct relative to his counterpart image in Scotland, which was starting to take shape in the late eighteenth century. This image, of course, would become more fully formed in the early nineteenth century, through the work of Walter Scott and James Hogg, for instance. The neo-classical woman at the hero's side, in her neo-classically wild landscape, literally baring her 'heaving heart' to his view, seems a visual ancestor of the Highland washer-woman, baring her muscular legs in a tub, beloved by nineteenth century illustrators in Britain. This is pre-Balmorality in its earliest stages. The edition just cited also features 'the King of Morven' facing the gods with aplomb, in the raging storms so often associated with Scotland. It is martial, combative Scotland which was, perhaps, a useful image for Americans in the 1790s.

Such images of semi-clad indigenous peoples were familiar to American audiences and, of course, there was cross-fertilisation between the American and Scottish traditions. See, for instance the illustrations to Richard Hacklvit's *True Pictures and Fashions in the People of that part of America novv called Virginia...*, which includes sixteenth century Picts, male and female, semi-clad and muscular in the later Ossianic style (Maucall 1995).⁵

Images like this, which conformed to the nascent shaping of the images of noble savages at home, were hugely influential in forming the folklore of the Celt in America. Guidelines were being offered to the American reading public as to the preoccupations of the Celt, and his equation with the Highlander, in Scotland. The notion of dishonesty, and deception, of the writer, associated with a purer and vulnerable people, would also prove influential.

Ossian held a profound, and lasting, imaginative appeal for Americans. In the University of South Carolina's library there is a copy of the Inverness edition of 1815, with a custom-made drawing of Foldath, the chief of Noma, on the front flyleaf.⁶ This shows a nineteenth century American impression of the Celt first hand. In his fine hat, this man looks a great deal happier than his Scottish-drawn counterparts. Such a personal response to Ossianic image is, perhaps, indicative of their profound imaginative appeal to Americans.

Some editions of Macpherson's work were specially oriented to the American market. Examples include the 1839 Philadelphia edition of *The Poems of Ossian*. The University of South Carolina copy is signed in pencil by E.G. Palmer. This, unlike most of the Scottish editions, has no illustration on the title page.⁷ It contains a good deal of extra contextual information, including a comprehensive account of 'Editions of Ossian's Poems, &c', and arguments regarding the authenticity of the text. It draws attention to the 'low and scurrilous' parody of Macpherson's work, Gisbal, Gaelic editions

of Ossianic verse and collections of bards contemporary to Ossian. In addition, this edition includes a 'Life of James Macpherson', first published in the 1835 New York edition of Macpherson's works.

Macpherson's life and work are given a detailed treatment here. American connexions are highlighted, with remarks on Macpherson's period in Florida and, apparently, the West Indies, between 1764 and 1766. The account continues in a way which becomes libellous, 'From indigence he thus became a man of fortune; and from a situation of inferior ranks among men of letters, his wealth placed him at the head of the Scotch men of literature in London...among whom fortune gave him an ascendancy to which his genius by no means entitled him' (Macpherson 1839: 11). After discussing Macpherson's subsequent career as a political writer, and as a Member of Parliament, the account gains even more venom:

Mr. Macpherson was tall, robust, clumsy and ill-favoured in his person, coarse in his appetites, unpolished in his manners, and loose in his morals. He was never married, but was engaged in a round of low amours. His memory may be regretted by a few, but must be execrated by the greatest part of his associates.

Cunning was a leading feature of Macpherson's character. It is asserted, that when he was engaged in support of the administration, and acted as intermediate between ministers and the persons who advocated their acts, the labours of their pens were presented as his own, and he reaped the reward of those talents which were exerted by his friends. He had the address to retain these coadjutors for a number of years in a state of dependence, feeding their expectations by

procrastinated promises, the delusion of which was dissipated only by his death. (Macpherson 1839: 11)

The suggestion is, here, that Macpherson was a schemer, working his way ‘through the misfortune of his cousin Colonel Macpherson’ to become the well-rewarded agent to the Nabob of Arcot, for instance. This account draws on the image of the raw Scottish bard which was becoming prevalent in Scotland, and which Macpherson played an instrumental role in developing (Bold 1997). The notion, based on the idea of Ramsay’s ‘Gentle Shepherd’, modified by Burns as ‘Heaven-taught ploughman’ and refined by James Hogg as the Ettrick Shepherd. Macpherson, perceived as a Highlander, and identified with his pre-literate creation, was seen as unlettered despite his university education.

Additional ethnic comments in the 1839 account infer that the presence of ‘both in England and Scotland, a party of men who bore no goodwill to the Gael, on account of the prominent part they had taken in the cause of Charles Stuart’, affected responses to the Ossianic texts (Macpherson 1839: 12). It is, intriguingly, speculated that when Macpherson went out to Florida with Governor George Johnson [*sic*] ‘if the [Ossianic] manuscripts ever existed, they were lost either there or during the passage to or from that country’ (Macpherson 1839: 13).

Ossian’s appearances in America, by the nineteenth century, were heavily contextualised. Critics focused on the authenticity of the texts, rather than their style or content, although the reading public seems to have been drawn primarily to their sentimental elements. Other material in the 1839 account offered guidelines on how to approach Macpherson’s Celts. Contextual material, presumably designed to be of particular interest to the American public, included a quotation from a letter of 6 October 1763 from David Hume to Hugh Blair: ‘I have scarce ever known a man more perverse

and unamiable [than James Macpherson]. He will probably depart for Florida with Governor Johnstone, and I would advise him to travel among the Chickasaws or Cherokees, in order to tame and civilize him' (Macpherson 1839: 17).

Later editions, such as the 1849 Boston *Poems*, were increasingly romantic in their presentation, particularly in the illustrations. The frontispiece to the 1851 Boston edition, too, comes complete with an image of a spear-carrying man in an engraving by H. Singleton, based on the image by A. L. Dickson.⁸ This man, about to throw his weapon from his chariot, sustains the image of the martial, neo-classical Celt, and the motto below reinforces it: 'Within the Car is seen the Chief: the strong armed Son Of the Sword'. The bard Ossian had by now become a standard figure. With his long white locks, protective muse, and pastoral setting, he exemplifies the warrior society of the past (the warrior behind him perhaps hinting at his stronger self in youth), muscular in physique even in his old age.

By 1851, Ossian was adapted to particularly modern tastes and, as well as the archaic looking engravings, the Boston editions included modern-looking line drawings. The women, at least, now wear more identifiable tartans, in line with contemporary tastes in America, which was beginning to be interested in tartan as a fashion item.⁹ The Scottish warrior here, almost lounging with his quiver at his side, is a romantic image, at one with the images of Scotland promoted in the *Waverley* novels, so popular in America in the early nineteenth century (see Hook 1975).

This edition includes Macpherson's own observations on the international reception of his work, written after his time in America and dated London 1773. This prefaced the revised edition of his work and, presumably, had particular resonance for an international audience:

The eagerness with which these poems have been received abroad, is a recompense for the coldness with which a few have affected to treat them at home. All the polite nations of Europe have transferred them into their respective languages; and they speak of him who brought them to light, in terms that might flatter the vanity of one fond of fame.... It is often the only index to merit in the present age...a writer may measure his success by the latitude under which he was born.... When he placed the poet in antiquity, the translator should have been born on this side of the Tweed (Macpherson 1851: 38-39).

American periodicals, and their readers, took a keen interest in Ossianic work at an early date. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* of January 23, 1766 announces that David Hall at the New Printing Office, Philadelphia has 'Just Imported...a large and valuable Collection of BOOKS'. This eclectic collection included '*Fingal* and *Temora*, ancient epic poems' along with 'Sewell's *history of the Quakers*', '2 vols. Homer, Greek', 'Astruc on the venereal disease', 'Smollet's voyages' and an '*Account of the first discovery and natural history of Florida*'. *Fingal* is advertised for sale again in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of July 12, 1770 from Thomas Andertson, Bookseller and Stationer, at the London Book Store, Philadelphia. Andertson seems to have specialised in items for the cultural tourist, such as 'letter cases...sermon cases...travelling desks, with or without shaving or writing equipages...cheap as in London', Walker's genuine Jesuit's drops and a 'universal worm destroying sugar plumb'. Other works by Macpherson, as well as the Ossianic volumes were, equally, available. In the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of September 8, 1773 there is an announcement that John Sparhawk, at the London Book store, in Second Street has 'a few copies' in stock of 'HOMER'S ILIAD, translated by James Macpherson, Esq; in two volumes,

quarto. This work has had such a rapid sale in London, that a large impression has been disposed off in less than one month’.

As well as announcements of sales, readers of periodicals were given reviews of Ossian, often offering some contextualisation. There is, for instance, a treatment of the Philadelphia edition of *The Poems of Ossian* in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1839; this reviewer replicated the Scottish debate about Ossianic authenticity:

This edition of the "much debated" Ossian is a very beautiful one indeed. Of the Poems themselves it is scarcely necessary to speak. To-day, thanks to a thousand critical investigations, their great merits, as well as minor deficiencies, are matters sufficiently well understood..... The Dissertations, we presume, are those of Dr. Blair—but there is nothing in the book to lead the reader to this opinion. Moreover, these treatises are all in favor of the authenticity of the Poems; it might have been as well, perhaps, to offer something on the other side of the question—especially as that other side is altogether the most tenable. (*Gentleman's Magazine* 1839: 228).

Once again, the critical focus is on Macpherson’s credibility, rather than the poems themselves, or what they reveal about Scottish culture specifically; their sentimental appeal seems to have been accepted *a priori*.

However, for the general American reader, and particularly for sentimental democrats, the matter of Ossian offered an aspirational image to sentimental democrats. In terms of Macpherson’s impact on the image of the Celt in America, there is a definite case to be made for the influence of Scottish philosophy, predisposing the American public towards the work of Aberdeen-educated and Edinburgh-inspired Macpherson, and his images of

ancient Celts. As a student at Aberdeen University, Macpherson was influenced by Thomas Reid and James Beattie; the Common sense input on his work is intriguing, and possibly appealed to American democrats. Macpherson and his mentor Hugh Blair (then Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University) were fascinated by social and poetic prototypes. In this contexts, the Celts could be seen an ideal society with bards as agents of cultural integration (see Bold 1997). Macpherson's language (elegant English with the exotic twist of Gaelic translation) made Ossianic verse particularly palatable to audiences in Scotland and abroad.

Macpherson's Ossian had an inclusive appeal for Americans just as for Scots. Described in vague terms, Ossian functions overseas, as at home, as the mouthpiece of a people, potentially useful for diverse imaginative reconstructions. Macpherson, in David Buchan's term, was presenting a prototype 'clannit' society in Scotland (Buchan 1997). In this culture, responsibility was shared between leaders, society lived in co operation, and bards celebrated the achievements of their warlike leaders very much as equals as, for instance, in this passage from *Temora*:

Selma is opened wide. Bards take the trembling harps. Ten youths carry the oak of the feast. A distant sun-beam marks the hill. The dusky waves of the blast fly over the fields of grass.—Why art thou so silent, Morven? The king returns with all his fame. Did not the battle roar; yet peaceful is his brow? It roared, and Final overcame.—Be like thy father, Fillan.
(Macpherson 1996, *Temora*: Book III)

Tracing Macpherson's influence on American culture can be done by looking at the use of Ossianic imagery and Ossianic Celts in American poetry. Poets, from the late eighteenth century onwards, perceived

Macpherson's Ossian in a variety of ways, producing versions of Ossianic societies from imitations to parodies. When I searched for 'Ossian' in the the *American Poetry Full-Text Database* (hereafter *APFD*) I came up with over 200 hits, 'Fingal' gave 7 and 'Temora' 8. There were big names like Whittier (9 hits), Longfellow (3) and Whitman (1); those with the most hits included John Blair Linn (35). Intriguingly—although I've not been able to verify this—the numerical majority of these poets seem to have been from the South: there seems to be something about the melancholic Ossian, denied the culture of his youth and living in melancholy, which appealed to the Southern psyche. Ossianic culture, in this context, represents a lost democracy of the South, and the enforcement of an alien culture.

For Northern poets, too, like Joel Barlow, who had spent time in England and knew Blake, the influence of Ossian on *The Columbiad* was direct. Barlow used Ossian on the Revolutionary Wars as an inspiration (French and American)—there's an obvious paradox in the Tory Macpherson influencing such statements. However, the classical references of Ossian; Homer; Bible; beyond narrowly national appeal. The appeal is both political and sentimental, as Ossianic society comes to represent a folklore of natural order.

Macpherson's poetry was set to music in America even before it was widely imitated, in a 75 cent chapbook form by Francis Hopkinson (1737–1791) as *The first American Poet-Composer: Ode from Ossian's poems For Voice and Harpsichord (or Pianoforte)*: Edited and Harmonized by Carl Deis: High in A: Price, 75 cents, net. The Ode was one of the more lyrical passages from Macpherson: 'Pleasant is thy voice, oh Carrel, and lovely are the words of former times..... / Oh, strike the harp in praise of my love!' (qtd from *APFD*).

There are a great many straight 'imitations' of Ossian in America. Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748–1816) wrote an imitation 'Of a Passage

from the Fifth Book of Ossian's 'Temora', stressing both martial and melancholic aspects of the poetry.

The hosts like two black ridges stood,
 On either side wild Lubar's stream....
 The rank grass of their graves on high. (qtd from *APFD*)

Brackenbridge also wrote *A poem on divine revelation; being an exercise delivered At the Public Commencement at Nassau-Hall, September 28. 1774. By the same Person, who on a similar occasion. Sept. 25. 1771. delivered a small Poem on the rising Glory of America.* This equates Ossian, Druids, natural religion, the sublime and the classical, in a way which reflects the guidelines for approaching Macpherson already established in Scotland:

The tale of war or song of Druids gave.....
 A purer strain though not of equal praise
 To that which Fingal heard when Ossian sung
 He sang the pride of some ambitious chief,
 For olive crowns and wreaths of glory won;
 I sing the rise of that all glorious light,
 Whose sacred dawn the aged fathers saw....
 The rocky hills and barren vallies smile,
 The desert blossom and the wilds rejoice. (qtd from *APFD*)

This is typical of many American responses to Ossian and, no doubt, influenced American views of the Celt.

Equally, as in Scotland, there were comic treatments in America of Ossianic material, suggesting a more sophisticated understanding of the

appeal of his idealised Celtic society. John Trumbull, in *McFingal*, presents an American version of the Scottish hero in the laconic style of McGonagall:

When Yankees, skill'd in martial rule,
 First put the British troops to school;
 Instructed them in warlike trade,
 And new manoeuvres of parade....

From Boston, in his best array,
 Great Squire M'Fingal took his way....
 His high descent our heralds trace
 To Ossian's famed Fingalian race;
 For though their name some part may lack,
 Old Fingal spelt it with a Mac;
 Which great M'Pherson, with submission,
 We hope will add the next edition.

His fathers flourish'd in the Highlands
 Of Scotia's fog-benighted islands;
 Whence gain'd our squire two gifts by right,
 Rebellion and the second-sight. (qtd from *APFD*)

McFingal's mission is simple: to 'Pull down the empire, on whose ruins/
 They meant to edify their new ones'.

Ossian was also parodied by Lemuel Hopkins (1750–1801) in *The Anarchiad: A New England Poem*. Written in concert by David Humphreys, Joel Barlow, John Trumbull, and Dr. Lemuel Hopkins. This, allegedly, is an epic found buried with antiquarian pieces, which tells, 'the story of the early emigration of a band of Britons and Welch to this country, and of an

existing tribe of their descendants, in the interior of the continent'. Half tongue in cheek, there is nevertheless a racial connexion here. It is politically relevant, of course, to the New England of its period, also claiming to be 'a National Poem, battling nobly for the right universal, for the majesty of law, and for the federal government'. Ossian is cited here as one of the inspirational seers of such a society. The Anarch himself, who relates the poem, is very much based on Ossian, addressing the council of war as their peer, and advocating putting the 'public weal' before personal interest (qtd from *APFD*).

Later poets drew different lessons from Ossian. In Whitman's 'Song of Peace', Ossian becomes an agent against war, although he celebrates the warrior. In 'The Survivor' Whitman himself becomes Ossian:

I am the last — I am the last —
 A lone, forgotten wanderer now....
 I am the last — I am the last— My kindred and my race are
 gone. (qtd from *APFD*)

Whitman equates Ossian with 'Charles Edward after the Battle of Culloden', in a poem which first appeared in the *Haverhill Gazette*, February 10, 1827:

God save the young Chieftain! he wanders alone,
 Forever cast out from his kingdom and throne. (qtd from
APFD)

Charles Edward is abandoned by the 'clansmen' who should have supported him here.

The Jacobites were often identified with Ossian during the nineteenth century, in a merging of history which created a folklore of the Scottish

political past: equated with loss of political integrity, loss of a democratic society, and general tragedy enforced by the colonial oppressors of England. Irishness often comes into this Celtic twilight land, just as the Scots and Irish are often conflated in modern America.

In a poem explicitly mourning the loss of homeland Whitman celebrates the native land of ‘The Emerald Isle’ (showing no distinction between Irish and Scottishness in the ancient Celts):

O'er the sea-girded isle of Hibernia shone.

Fair island thy vales are embalmed in the story....

Where Ossian's heroes strode onward to glory

(qtd from *APFD*)

In this ‘fair isle of the ocean’ the patriots lie in their tombs, but there is hope that ‘Once more may the spirit of freedom be kindled / And liberty over thy valleys shall shine’. There is a strong identification with the American experience of colonisation.

In a similar vein, in a poem dedicated to the ‘Man of the mighty days’ and the ‘prairies’, Red Jacket (from *Aloft*) becomes part of this equation; the native Indian likened to the native Scot. This is a celebration of the:

Product of Nature's sun, stars, earth direct — a towering
human form,

In hunting-shirt of film, arm'd with the rifle, a half-ironical
smile curving

its phantom lips, Like one of Ossian's ghosts looks down.

(qtd from *APFD*)

Macpherson's Ossian himself, as a Celtic bard at once cultured and savage, combined with imagery drawn from primitive prototypes from both North America and Europe, from Attuiock the Eskimo to the South Sea savage Omai and Mlle. Le Blanc, the 'Champagne' savage girl' (see Tinker 1964) to create a prototype noble savage with international impact. Just as the Celtic society of Ossian offered a model for the marvellous and exotic at home, so elements of these myths entered into American reimaginings both of self (particularly in relation to Britain) and the savage at home. Like the Indian, the Celt was a musical people; at once frightening and attractive, a Rousseauian creature from a golden age. The imagery and style associated with the Celt, in short, paralleled notions relating to the native American.

Macpherson, after the publication of the Ossianic poems, had the chance to observe such behaviour first-hand. His perceived familiarity with the savage at home was surely a factor in his appointment as provincial secretary to the eccentric Governor Johnstone in West Florida. West Florida was created by the Treaty of Paris, resolving the 7 Years' War, along with the governments of East Florida, Quebec, and Grenada. It is defined by the Proclamation of October 7 1763 as territory bounded to the South by the Gulph of Mexico, to the West by lake Pontchartrain and to the East by the Mississipi (see Rea and Howard, 1979).

Macpherson's time in Florida was brief (less than a year) but seminal. Cecil Johnson explains how Macpherson received the income for his secretaryship for 17 years, although he was in Florida for about nine months (Johnson, 1936). From the start, Johnson's government was resented at home, and by the military in Pensacola. The appointment of Johnson and Scots was savagely attacked in a letter to the *North Briton* of Sept 17 1763, and a tongue-in-cheek reply: *An appeal to the public, in behalf of George Johnstone, Est. Governor of West Florida*, (London: C. Moran, 1763).

Macpherson was part of the literary coterie in which the Governor, George Johnstone played a crucial role. Helped by the Earl of Bute, Johnstone drew several literary figures around him, including ‘horrible’ Archibald Campbell, quoted above, called ‘the father of English letters in British West Florida’ by Robert R. Rea (Rea 1960). Campbell, incidentally, was not impressed with Macpherson. ‘The Highland Homer’ features in Campbell’s ‘The Sale of the Authors’. There Macpherson is offered to the Scottish booksellers but, resident in England, does not want to be returned. The poet says, “‘I was like it muckle better...giff I were to be relegated among the Cherokees and the Chactaws o’ North America, whare I cud study the manners of thae fok; which I’m tald are highly epical, and sae I was e’en write a new original epic poem’ (qtd from *APFD*). He didn’t do this, of course, but gained experience and a reputation of being an American expert.

The post was, in the main, a sinecure—perhaps particularly attractive as an escape from the recent controversy. Paul de Gategno has surveyed this period, with acuteness (Gategno, 1992a). As Secretary to the Governor, in a new province, Macpherson was involved in only a few actions: a small amount of land speculation, serving as a JP in one case for instance, finally to carry a treaty home. His most intriguing involvement was as negotiator with the Indians, which Gategno does not treat in any detail (Gategno 1992a). West Florida, at this time, was in a volatile state, and Macpherson was chosen to take forward a treaty (Rea and Howard, 1979).

There is an engraving of Pensacola in 1765, with an intriguing connexion to Macpherson, by his fellow Scot and Aberdeen graduate George Gauld (1732-1782), the cartographer and naval surveyor.¹⁰ Gauld was born at Ardrack in the parish of Botriphny, Bamffshire [sic], North Britain; and educated at King's College, Aberdeen, between 1750 and 1753.

Like Macpherson, he worked as a schoolmaster before entering government service as a naval schoolmaster (Gauld 1765; Ware 1982).

Gauld's map of Pensacola shows an active harbour and thriving town (Gauld 1765). However, when Macpherson arrived in 1764, not long after the territory had been acquired due to victories in the 7 Years War, it was much more of a frontier town, with about a hundred huts and a dilapidated fort, susceptible to dampness. Palmetto roofs offered little defence against the elements, from the harsh summers to bitter winters. Brigadier General Frederick Haldimand, who knew Canadian winters well, declared the cold in Pensacola to be the worst he'd ever experienced.

The town, equally, seems to have been an unruly and unhealthy place. When Governor Johnson arrived in October 1764, to take over from the military government with civil powers, a town plan was drawn up with residential lots of streets in grids (Macpherson was technically responsible for land negotiations). The town did develop along these lines but slowly, without the good timber and brick hoped for. Drunkenness was habitual among all the inhabitants, military and civilian (there were two taverns by 1767). Pensacola jail was a bark hut, with an open door during the day, until 1769, and the town was a violent place. Disease was rife, from fever to an epidemic of flux which killed over a hundred people in 1765.¹¹

Macpherson's time there, though initially as a favoured man, cannot have been pleasant. Despite initially impressing Johnson, he seems to have fallen out with this volatile man. In an e-mail of 1998 Robin Fabel, Johnson's biographer, observed to me:

Johnstone's terse "I have found it necessary to send Mr. Macpherson to England" (1765)...contrast with his verbose recommendation of Mac to Lord Egremont, from Arundel Street on 20 July 1763, when he wrote

I take the liberty of recommending to Lord Egremont Mr. James McPherson, so well known in the literary world, for the office of secretary/ or register/ treasurer or naval officer, whichever his lordship shall approve. I have no right to ask any thing as a matter of favour to myself. If it is given, it must be bestow'd on his own merit and his lordship's attention to such men - I believe if Lady Egremont's vote was wanting as an admirer of his works, she would not refuse her interest, as I am informed by people of taste. A friendship which is strongly cemented between us would induce him to accept of one of those employments and, if he obtains it, I should not be surprised to see as many new lights thrown on the history of that part of America as are open on our own island by the works of Ossian.¹²

The benefit to Macpherson was largely on a personal level. Returning with colonial administrative experience, he was able to present himself as an expert on political, as well as poetic, democracy. Intriguingly, in addition to Macpherson's creative works, Jefferson possessed copies of the political tracts such as the *Rights of Great Britain asserted against the rights of America and a Short History of Opposition* (Macpherson, 1776).

Macpherson's impact on American political identity is more difficult to distinguish. As Leith Davis points out, Macpherson played an important role in forming notions of British nation:

Macpherson's poems and histories suggested an original homogeneity among the various constitutive races of Britain...[and] supplied a founding myth for the British Empire

which rooted it in native, not continental soil.....representing an "Other" nation whose separate history and culture were always already assimilated...provided a perfect model for the continuation of the hegemonic process' (Davis, 1983).

The Rights of Great Britain asserted against the claims of America: being an answer to the declaration of the General Congress is directed against A Declaration by the Representatives of the United Colonies of North America, now met in General Congress at Philadelphia, setting forth the Causes and Necessity of their taking up arms, signed by John Hancock (President) in Philadelphia, July 6, 1775. This precursor to the Declaration of Independence sets out the grievances of the colonies, arguing very much from the standpoint of the native land:

Our forefathers, inhabitants of the island of Great Britain, left their native land, to seek on these shores a residence for civil and religious freedom. At the expence of their blood, at the hazard of their fortunes, without the least charge to the country from they removed, by unceasing labour, and an unconquerable spirit they effected settlements in the distant and inhospitable wilds of America, then filled with numerous and warlike nations of barbarians.

A sense of violation comes out strongly here:

We fight not for glory or for conquest. We exhibit to mankind the remarkable spectacle of a people attacked by unprovoked enemies, without any imputation, or even suspicion of offence.... In our own native land, in defence of the freedom that is our birthright.

Macpherson, on the other hand, is outspoken in dismissing 'The audacity of the Congress, in asserting Falsehoods'. He does so with the language of democracy:

As long as they assume the language of a Sovereign State, this Kingdom can enter into no negotiation, can meet no compromise. Nations, as well as individuals, have a character, a certain dignity, which they must preserve at the risk of their existence. Great-Britain has obeyed the dictates of humanity beyond the limits prescribed by her reputation. To tempt her further, is full of peril, as her indignation begins to rise. She has long had reason to complain of American ingratitude, and she will not bear longer with American injustice. The dangerous resentment of a great people is ready to burst forth....The law of God and of Nature is on the side of an indulgent Parent, against an undutiful Child; and should necessary correction render him incapable of future offence, he has only his own obstinacy and folly to blame (Macpherson 1776: 79-80).

Such common sense language, intriguingly, is parallel to that of *the Declaration of Independence*. Paul de Gategno has suggested that, as an aficionado of Common sense philosophy, 'the character of the bard Ossian embodied the image of what Jefferson saw for himself: observance of duty, sincerity of purpose, tenderness of affection, deep regard for nature, and love of family' (Gategno 1992b: 1386; Martin 1992)¹³ I would go further, and suggest that, perhaps, Jefferson modelled his own language and

philosophy, at least partially, on Macpherson's rhetoric and notion of a golden age society.

Macpherson's Ossianic Scotland, with its potential for revival, set up a folklore of Scottish prototypical democracy with much wider implications. The impact on American culture of the Ossianic writer, while politically minimal, was imaginatively huge. Based on the textual history of his work in America, and the poetic and political responses it illicit, Macpherson's role, in shaping Scottish identity at home and abroad, at the very least, should not be underestimated.

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Notes

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² See Macpherson 1806, University of South Carolina, Rare PR3544.08 1806b

³ I am grateful to Paul Wells for drawing my attention to Shapiro's work.

⁴ See Macpherson 1790, University of South Carolina, Rare PR35544.A1 1790b.

⁵ I am grateful to Diane Dugaw for drawing my attention to these images.

⁶ See Macpherson 1815, University of South Carolina, Rare PR 3544.A1 1815.

⁷ See Macpherson 1839, University of South Carolina, Rare PR 3544.A1 1839.

⁸ See Macpherson 1851, University of South Carolina, Rare PR3544.A1 1851.

⁹ I am grateful to Marge Warren of North Carolina, for providing me with information about the introduction of tartan fabrics to North America.

¹⁰ There is a copy of this map in the Department of Special Collections, the John C. Pace Library, University of West Florida.

¹¹ On the early days of the settlement see, in particular, the *South Florida History Magazine* and *Florida Historical Quarterly*.

¹² See Johnston's papers, Kew, PRO 30/47/14/3 f.84.