

**THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF JAMES  
MACPHERSON, CONTAINING A  
PARTICULAR ACCOUNT OF HIS FAMOUS  
QUARREL WITH DR. JOHNSON, AND A  
SKETCH OF THE ORIGIN AND INFLUENCE  
OF THE OSSIANIC POEMS. [LONDON]**

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The Life and Letters of James Macpherson, Containing a Particular Account of His Famous Quarrel with Dr. Johnson, and a Sketch of the Origin and Influence of the Ossianic Poems.  
[London] by Bailey Saunders

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Fig. 1. — *Portrait by Thomas Gainsborough of Mrs. F. B. (Mrs. F. B. (Mrs. F. B.))*

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## P R E F A C E.

AMONG educated Englishmen Macpherson commonly passes for an audacious impostor who published his own compositions as the work of an ancient writer, and received due punishment at the hands of Dr. Johnson. The historians of literature compare him with Chatterton, and brand him as a forger. Even those who refrain from giving him a harsh name treat him with doubt and hesitation. An equal obscurity envelops his life and actions and the nature of his work ; and the result of ignorance or misconception is that he has obtained something less than justice.

If none but the great deserved a biography, this book would not have been written. For Macpherson was in no sense a great man : he was a miscellaneous writer of considerable talent, a busy journalist, a member of parliament, an agent for an Indian prince, a popular and prosperous citizen ; and, beyond the fact that

he brought out the Ossianic poems at the age of twenty-five, he did little in the sixty years of his life that would entitle him to permanent remembrance. This work of his youth was, as he declared, translated from Gaelic fragments found in the Scottish Highlands. By its wonderful success, and its no less wonderful influence on literature, both in England and on the Continent, it gave him, in his own day, a world-wide reputation. Literary fashions have suffered many changes in the century that has passed since his death, and Macpherson's reputation no longer exists; but his work retains an historical interest of a curious and unique character. It is strange evidence of the instability of literary fame that poems which, three generations ago, were everywhere in vogue and everywhere imitated—which appealed to the feelings of all the cultured classes in Europe, and excited the enthusiasm even of a Goethe, a Byron, and a Napoleon—should now be almost forgotten.

The origin, reception, and extraordinary effect



of the Ossianic poems form a chapter, hitherto unwritten, in the literary history of the eighteenth century; and to attempt to write it is, I trust, at least a respectable endeavour. I have thrown it into the form of a biography because the question of the authenticity of the poems largely turns on Macpherson's actual proceedings, and his personal character and attainments; and thus it is that some interest still attaches to the details of his life, so far as they can be discovered.

While I believe that, on the whole, he has been greatly slandered, he is certainly no hero; and I hope that I am not afflicted, in regard to him, with what has been called the *lues boswelliana*, or the disease of admiration. I hope also that I am free from any suspicion of national prejudice; I have not the honour of being a Scotsman. My curiosity about so wide and perplexing a subject as the Ossianic controversy was aroused by an accident; and one of the recognised ways of getting rid of a burden is to write a book on it.

I have been fortunate in obtaining some information from unpublished sources in the British Museum and elsewhere. My best thanks are due to the Marquess of Abergavenny for kindly permitting me to make use of a series of Macpherson's letters preserved in the library at Eridge; and to Mr. Brewster Macpherson of Belleville for the reproduction of Romney's portrait of his ancestor. I am also grateful for assistance rendered by friends, notably by Miss Mary Grant (of Kilgraston) and by Mr. John Cameron Grant (of Glenmoriston).

*May 21, 1894.*

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