

**NOTES ON THE  
AUTHENTICITY OF  
OSSIAN'S POEMS**

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Notes on the Authenticity of Ossian's Poems by Archibald MacNeill

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THE AUTHENTICITY  
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OSSIAN'S POEMS

BY  
A MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES  
OF SCOTLAND

*Archibald McNeill*

*"I've stood upon Achilles' tomb  
And heard Troy doubted; time will doubt of Rome."*  
—BYRON.

PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR

1868

## NOTES

ON THE

### AUTHENTICITY OF OSSIAN'S POEMS.

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THE publication of the Dean of Lismore's book has thrown additional light on the Ossianic controversy, and added fresh proofs of the authenticity of these poems. This manuscript, which is in the form of a quarto volume of some 311 pages, was written in the Gaelic language by the Dean of Lismore and his brother, betwixt 1512 and 1529, and contains upwards of 11,000 lines of Gaelic poetry, composed at different periods, 2500 of which are Ossianic. The latter are contained in 28 poems, 9 of which are directly attributed to Ossian, the others to different bards of the Feine. It forms one of the 65 Gaelic MSS. now collected in the Library of the Faculty of Advocates at Edinburgh, through the instrumentality of Mr Skene.

The contents of this volume, though alluded to in Report of the Highland Society's Committee, were unknown to the public, and would have probably remained so, had it not been for the perseverance and industry of

the Rev. Dr Maclachlan in deciphering, transcribing, and translating it. He has thus not only made accessible to the public many additional pieces of that class of poetry of which James Macpherson was the most successful collector, but afforded additional proof of the accuracy with which the Ossianic poems have been orally transmitted for generations; for many of the pieces collected by the Dean of Lismore from recitation in 1512, were also so collected by Mr Duncan Kennedy, with very little variation, nearly three centuries afterwards, as appears from the MS. collection made by that gentleman betwixt the years 1774 and 1783, which was purchased by the Highland Society of Scotland, and is now in the Advocates' Library at Edinburgh.

Before entering into further detail as to the contents of the Dean of Lismore's volume, and their bearing on the Ossianic controversy, it may be necessary to trace shortly the circumstances under which James Macpherson was induced to undertake the collection of the remains of Gaelic poetry, and the manner in which it was accomplished.

James Macpherson was born at Ruthven, in the county of Inverness, in the year 1738. He was descended from one of the oldest families in the north of Scotland, being nearly related to the chief of the clan Macpherson. He received the rudiments of his education at Inverness Grammar School; from thence he was removed to King's College, Aberdeen, and eventually to Edinburgh University, where he completed his studies.\*

\* See Highland Soc. Report (cited in the notes that follow as H. S. R.) p. 27.



In 1759, while tutor to Mr Graham of Balgowan (afterwards Lord Lynedoch), he met at Moffat with Mr John Home (the author of 'Douglas'), who had previously been told by Professor Adam Ferguson, a native of Athole, and acquainted with Gaelic, that there existed in the Highlands some remains of ancient Gaelic poetry. Mr Home mentioned the circumstance to James Macpherson, and was told by him that he had some pieces of ancient Gaelic poetry in his possession. After some difficulty, Mr Home obtained translations of two of these from Macpherson, took them to Edinburgh, and showed them to Drs Blair, Ferguson, and Robertson, by whom they were much admired. Macpherson was requested to translate all he had, being fifteen in number; and the translations furnished by him were published by Dr Blair, with a preface, in June 1760, in a little volume, under the title of 'Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland.' Soon after this publication, a subscription was set on foot to defray the expense of collecting the remains of ancient Gaelic poetry, and a dinner-party was got up, to which Macpherson was invited, with the view of inducing him to undertake a journey to the Highlands for that purpose.\* At this dinner-party, among others, there were present Drs Blair, Robertson, and Ferguson, Mr John Home, Mr Robert Chalmers, and Patrick, Lord Elibank. Macpherson agreed to undertake the collection, but not without considerable reluctance, as he feared that the search might prove unsuccessful to an extent that might disappoint his friends.

\* See Blair's Letter, H. S. R., p. 56.

He soon afterwards set out on his journey, and was accompanied during a great portion of it by two countrymen of his own, Mr Lachlan Macpherson of Strathmashie, a native of Badenoch, and Ewan Macpherson, formerly a schoolmaster in Badenoch, both of whom were much better Gaelic scholars than himself. He was afterwards joined and assisted by another Gaelic scholar, Captain Alexander Morison.

In this tour a number of MSS. were collected, and much Gaelic poetry was taken down from recitation, as we shall presently show.

On his return, Macpherson proceeded to Badenoch, which was his own native place, as well as that of Lachlan Macpherson, and there remained till January 1761,\* engaged, with the assistance of Lachlan Macpherson and the Rev. Mr Gallie, then a missionary in Badenoch, in preparing the materials for the next publication of the remains of Ossianic poetry. He then proceeded to Edinburgh, from whence he writes to the Rev. James M'Lagan a letter dated 16th January 1761.†

His task, so far as the arrangements of the Gaelic originals was concerned, had, it appears, been then accomplished; and, during his stay in Edinburgh, he seems to have been engaged in translating and in preparing the English version for the press.‡ So soon as this was completed he went to London, and, early in 1762, he there published a quarto volume, containing the epic of 'Fingal' in six books, and fifteen minor poems—viz., 'Comala,' 'The War of Caros,' 'The War

\* See Gallie's Letter, H. S. R., p. 31.

† See App. H. S. R., p. 157.

‡ See Blair's Letter, *Id.*, p. 59.

of Innis-Thona,' 'The Battle of Lora,' 'Conlath and Cuthona,' 'Carthon,' 'The Death of Cuthullen,' 'Darthula,' 'Carricthura,' 'The Songs of Selma,' 'Calthon and Commal,' 'Lathmon,' 'Oithona,' 'Croma,' and 'Berathon.' In the following year he published another quarto, containing another epic in eight books, called 'Temora,' and five minor poems. This volume contained also what was called a specimen of the original of 'Temora,' being a Gaelic version of the seventh book of that poem, and the only Gaelic bearing to be the original of any of the poems which appeared. The minor poems were, 'Cuthlin of Clutha,' 'Sulmala of Lummon,' 'Cath-Loda,' 'Oina-Morul,' 'Colna-Dona.'

The favourable reception given to these works is well known. It is sufficient here to observe that they were, in the first year after their publication, translated into almost all the languages of Europe.

Macpherson was soon assailed by scepticism as to the Gaelic origin of the poetry he professed to have translated; and though he declined to appeal to those who had aided him in the collection and translation of the poems, yet he furnished Dr Blair\* with their names, and consented to his applying to them. He also placed the original MSS. in the hands of Mr Becket, the London bookseller, and notified to the public by advertisement that he had done so.

In 1764 Macpherson accompanied Governor Johnstone to Pensacola, and after holding the official appointment of President of Council at West Florida, he returned to England in 1766.

\* See Blair's Letter, App. H. S. R., p. 60.