

THOMAS M. CURLEY

**Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud  
and the Celtic Revival  
in Great Britain and Ireland**



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# SAMUEL JOHNSON, THE *OSSIAN* FRAUD, AND THE CELTIC REVIVAL IN GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

James Macpherson's famous hoax, publishing his own poems as the writings of the ancient Scots bard Ossian in the 1760s, remains fascinating to scholars as the most successful literary fraud in history. This study presents the fullest investigation of his deception to date, by looking at the controversy from the point of view of Samuel Johnson. Johnson's dispute with Macpherson was an argument with wide implications not only for literature, but for the emerging national identities of the British nations during the Celtic Revival. Thomas M. Curley offers a wealth of genuinely new information, detailing as never before Johnson's involvement in the *Ossian* controversy, his insistence on truth-telling, and his interaction with others in the debate. The appendix reproduces a rare pamphlet against *Ossian* written with the assistance of Johnson himself. This book will be an important addition to knowledge about both the *Ossian* controversy and Samuel Johnson.

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*To Ann*  
*Once again and always*





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## *Prefatory acknowledgments*

The original impetus for this study of the Celtic Revival in the age of Johnson occurred during my years as a doctoral candidate under Walter Jackson Bate at Harvard University. John Kelleher, then dean of Irish Studies in the United States, urged me to probe Samuel Johnson's ties to Irish intellectuals involved in the controversy over James Macpherson's fraudulent Scottish Gaelic poetry (1760–3) attributed to the legendary bard, Ossian. I carefully stored the suggestion in my memory for possible use in the future. In the meantime my curiosity turned to other Johnsonian matters of travel, empire, law, and politics. My graduate-school interest in Macpherson did bear some early fruit at Columbia University, where I finally tracked down a copy of William Shaw's rare anti-*Ossian* pamphlet, published in 1782 with Johnson's little-known assistance. In 1987 I spoke about their collaboration at conferences sponsored by the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh and contributed an essay to *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment* (Aberdeen University Press, 1987), edited by Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock. Having published on *Ossian*, I redirected my energies into two decades of scholarship focused on preparing the first biography of Johnson's friend, Sir Robert Chambers, and the first edition of Chambers's Vinerian Law Lectures, which Johnson helped to compose.

When I turned to completing this book, I was surprised to find that my essay on the *Ossian* controversy had provoked my own mini-controversy, with revisionist scholars bent on rehabilitating Macpherson's reputation. This development lent urgency to a project of long choosing and beginning late. It required me to undertake a comprehensive survey of *Ossian* scholarship and a painstaking evaluation of the entire *Ossian* canon, comparing it with genuine Gaelic poetry, in consultation with Gaelic specialists, like Micheal Mac Craith, for the fullest elucidation of the literary deception to date. Without such an assessment discussion of Johnson's personal investment in the contest would have diminished

value and meaning for readers. Only close analysis of Macpherson's creative process could properly clarify the strengths and weaknesses of Johnson's stance against *Ossian*.

Johnson purportedly stated that "A man will turn over half a library to make one book." My obligations extend to several libraries at home and abroad and to many archivists and scholars who helped me to make this book possible. I happily note the learned intervention of my son, Jon R. Curley, in proofreading my manuscript. I am proud to mention the unfailing assistance of fellow Johnsonians, John L. Abbott, John J. Burke, Jr., the late Donald J. Greene, the late J. D. Fleeman, and the late Paul J. Korshin. My friends, Paul Hamill, Nollaig O'Muraile, and James Reibman, and my colleagues, Charles C. Nickerson, Evelyn Pezzulich, and Louis and Cynthia Ricciardi, all lent their faithful support at almost every stage of this project's unfolding. Among Scottish Enlightenment specialists, Richard Sher taught me to proceed with caution in examining personalities associated with the *Ossian* controversy and furnished me with invaluable documentary evidence of Johnson's patronage of William Shaw. George Mc Elroy made me privy to his unpublished survey of Macpherson's political propaganda and his unpublished stylometric analysis of Shaw's writing for internal evidence of Johnson's contributions. Thomas Kaminski sponsored my presentation of a paper on Johnson and the Irish at a splendid 2003 meeting of the Johnson Society of the Central Region located at Notre Dame University. Then too in 2005 Lance Wilcox kindly oversaw a reading of my paper on *Ossian* at the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies.

Before the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Boston in 2004, I spoke about the need for reassessing recent scholarship exaggerating *Ossian*'s reputed authenticity. That experience led to an invitation to engage in an essay debate for volume 17 (2006) of *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*. The result was a monograph-length article, "Samuel Johnson and Truth: The First Systematic Detection of Literary Deception in James Macpherson's *Ossian*," a study which constitutes the intellectual blueprint of this book. I am particularly grateful to Jack Lynch, editor of *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, for publishing my essay and for permission to reproduce material in chapters 5 through 7 below taken from two other articles in volumes 12 (2001) and 18 (2007) of this journal.

I am profoundly thankful for generous funding of my scholarship in England, Ireland, and Scotland from the Center for the Advancement of Research and Teaching at Bridgewater State College, from an Irish-American

Research Fellowship of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in 2001, and from the National Endowment for Humanities under a Summer Stipend in 1999 and a Fellowship for College Teachers in 2000. I consider myself especially indebted to the president of Bridgewater State College, Dana Mohler-Faria, for conferring on me in 2005 the signal honor of a presidential fellowship, freeing me from a year's teaching duties for final preparation of this book.

Nobody can write a book of scholarship without acknowledging the indispensable aid of all those keepers of archives who guide research, suggest possibilities, and uncover solutions. Therefore, I am very beholden to the gracious staffs of the Houghton and Widener Libraries at Harvard University, the British Library, the National Libraries of Scotland and Ireland, the Signet Library and the General Register House at Edinburgh, the Pearse Street Public Library at Dublin, and the Linen Hall Library and Science Library of Queen's College in Belfast. Siobahn O'Rafferty unlocked the treasures of the Royal Irish Academy, and Stephen Parks directed me to the rich offerings of the Beinecke Library of Yale University. I was supremely served, year after year, at the Maxwell Library of Bridgewater State College by Marcia Dineen, Pamela Hayes-Bohanan, Cynthia J. W. Svoboda, and, above all, Mary Ellen West, who steadfastly made available myriad texts, and Dennis Moser, who created a computerized reproduction of the rare pamphlet in my appendix. To my indexer, Sylvia B. Larson, and my copy editor, Hilary Scannell, I extend my very deep gratitude.

My greatest debt must begin and end at home. To my beloved wife, Ann, who always tells the truth, I dedicate this book on Johnson's love of truth in life and literature.

## CHAPTER I

### *An introductory survey of scholarship on Ossian: why literary truth matters*

Ossian sublimest, simplest bard of all,  
Let English infidels M'Pherson call.

Charles Churchill, *A Prophecy of Famine* (1763)

Concerning Samuel Johnson, a very close friend affirmed that “no man had a more scrupulous regard for truth; from which, I verily believe, he would not have deviated to save his life.”<sup>1</sup> No writer angered Johnson more than did James Macpherson for perpetrating what arguably became the most successful literary falsehood in modern history. With the monumental exception of his *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–81), Johnson’s most notable literary undertaking in old age after his edition of Shakespeare (1765) involved debunking Macpherson’s bogus poetry. Exposing Macpherson’s fabricating ways was a fitting activity for an author ranked as England’s greatest moralist. This book, therefore, is fundamentally a study about Johnson and *Ossian*, Johnson’s interest in Gaelic culture and linguistics, and his involvement in a controversy smoldering throughout the British Isles for almost the final quarter-century of his life. The present chapter briefly reviews the enormous amount of scholarship published about Macpherson since 1800. The subsequent focus of attention lies on much of the pre-1800 critical response by Scottish, English, and Irish participants in a Celtic Revival, which unleashed national cultural wars over historical origins and political precedence for an ethnically mixed people. The contest over the authenticity of Macpherson’s pseudo-Gaelic productions became a seismograph of the fragile unity within restive diversity of imperial Great Britain in the age of Johnson.

Although the mass of scholarship about the controversy might appear exhaustive (this writer, decades ago, naively thought the whole question resolved beyond further dispute), recent developments have warranted renewed inquiry. In particular, a current generation’s worth of revisionist studies requires the revisiting of some of their leading claims and

counterclaims from a Johnsonian point of view. To their credit, these scholars offer a salutary reminder that the many varieties of fakery and literary fraud should resist being subjected reductively to a simple judgmental system of right and wrong. The boundaries of truth, falsehood, and literary fiction can be devilishly difficult to separate, and even though we may think we know deception when it occurs, it can be difficult to define and demonstrate why it is a culpable act. Nonetheless, while standards of right and wrong can be seen as contingent norms, they are not – and were not – meaningless norms. Johnson, like most of his compatriots, cared deeply about deception.

A great deal of new and important information is marshaled here to show that Johnson was the arch-enemy of falsehood in the *Ossian* business, not only for offending against morality but also for violating authentic history and the simple human trust that makes society possible. Chapter 2 sets forth the most thorough examination of the overall spuriousness of *Ossian* to date in order to provide readers with the necessary background for evaluating in later chapters the attitudes and arguments of supporters and antagonists of Macpherson in the British Isles during the last half of the eighteenth century. Chapter 3 probes Johnson's omnipresent demand for truth in life and literature and then examines his fascinating interaction with Grub Street frauds and farsighted advocates of British antiquities like Thomas Percy. Chapter 4 sheds much new light on *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, a classic of travel literature, responsible for reigniting the *Ossian* controversy and instigating Macpherson's legendary, yet half-understood demand for satisfaction bordering on a challenge to a duel with Johnson. Chapters 5 and 6 comprise a groundbreaking investigation of Johnson's Irish connections to the Celtic Revival and to opponents of *Ossian* – patriots like Charles O'Connor and Thomas Campbell who embodied the complexities of national identity during Ireland's first modern stirrings for independence. Chapter 7 uncovers Johnson's last word on *Ossian*, as enunciated by his forgotten friend, the Scottish-Gaelic linguist, William Shaw, Macpherson's foremost adversary near the end of the century. Finally, an appendix contains an annotated transcription of Shaw's rare *Reply to Mr. Clark* (1782), polished carefully by Johnson on the eve of its publication.

Macpherson claimed to have published literal prose translations of Gaelic poems by an ancient Gaelic bard called Ossian supposedly from the third century, although Macpherson sometimes equivocated about the dating of the canon. In fact, Macpherson invented most of the *Ossian* canon himself, even though he did occasionally draw on oral and

manuscript sources of extant Gaelic ballads. *Ossian* was neither ancient nor authentic, but it made an indelible impression on many Romantic and modern authors. Surprisingly, a number of recent scholars intent on rehabilitating Macpherson's reputation have miscalculated, or opted to sidestep, the crucial issue of the authenticity of his publications. No one wants to obstruct the valuable reassessment of *Ossian* in progress. Although by the twentieth century it had become something of a curiosity rather than staple literary fare of university lecture halls, there are modern critics who understandably find the work worthwhile reading as an aesthetic object amenable to complex literary and cultural analysis. It certainly generated an important episode in the history of taste. But if any scholars wish to ensure a judicious investigation of those qualities within its make-up that affected later Western literature to the delight of so many readers, they should proceed with a clear perspective on the nature of its creation. As to why the nagging question of Macpherson's falsehood refuses to go away, Johnson would have answered that truth in literature and life is a perennial human concern inextricably tied to the survival and fulfillment of the race.

In any case, the controversy over *Ossian* has never really died, notwithstanding the passage of two and a half centuries. Even when we exclude editions of *Ossian* and omit doctoral dissertations about it, an admittedly unscientific enumeration of writings on the matter reveals a very significant output of publications. Since 1800 there have appeared in English about 135 books and 150 articles touching on Macpherson, wholly or in part, directly or indirectly. Determining the overall number and partisanship of these works can be a tricky business, because few of them are unambiguously hostile or enthusiastic. However, a dutiful survey of these materials leaves the distinct impression that approximately as many books but roughly twice as many articles have come out in support of *Ossian* for its aesthetic value or historical significance.<sup>2</sup> This critical ascendancy becomes especially noticeable since the 1980s when revisionist scholars, sympathetic to Macpherson, spearheaded a serious assessment of his canon in at least two biographies, three collections of essays, an excellent modern edition of *Ossian* in 1996, a four-volume printing of all first editions in 2004 (including early critical and creative writing inspired by the controversy), and several other articles and monographs offering significant new commentary.

All this useful scholarship has helped to elucidate *Ossian*'s aesthetic character and importance for Romantic and modern literature in Europe and America, without usually giving sustained attention to the matter of

its genuineness. Instead, either a lack of interest in the issue or, more often, vague and unexamined assumptions about indebtedness to Gaelic sources can compromise otherwise worthwhile critical probing. Some modern enthusiasts of *Ossian* prefer an ahistorical perspective on the controversy. They downplay the historical issue of authenticity, sometimes to shield Macpherson from negative criticism, even as they resort to the historical argument of his immense influence on later writers as evidence of *Ossian*'s enduring value. A discrepancy surfaces: they sidestep historical considerations surrounding the work's controversial creation and yet focus on historical considerations surrounding its undeniable literary impact in the West. For them authenticity either is not a crucial matter or is brushed aside as something already established in no need of further evaluation. Moreover, some of them argue that art has priority over literary history (as if literary concerns can be divorced from authorial context, even though worth and authenticity are not inseparable), that literary forgery verges on legitimate fiction (a conflation potentially degrading to the dignity of literature) because both are make-believe rather than factual (if the two are difficult to distinguish, fiction's "lies" are not real lies since they do not ask to be accepted as "true" in a definitive historical sense), and that truth is relative or conditional or undiscernible anyway (in fundamental opposition to Johnson's convictions).

A mere glance at previous studies touching on the authenticity issue can uncover a surprising degree of inconsistency and uncertainty about Macpherson's creative process. Even Derick Thomson's indispensably authoritative *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's 'Ossian'* (1952) has led to some misunderstanding. He summed up the scholarly accomplishment of the above monograph in a later essay, "Macpherson's *Ossian*: Ballads to Epics" (1987): "That *part* of Macpherson's work that rested securely on genuine Gaelic ballads has been elucidated in a fairly definitive way."<sup>3</sup> He took justifiable pride in discovering most of the Gaelic sources influencing not every work of *Ossian* but, strictly speaking, only a *portion* of the canon. Contrary to what some readers have surmised, he did not state that all or most of *Ossian* was Gaelic based or qualified in any sustained, substantial way as translation, paraphrase, or even creative adaptation. Most recently he has argued, in "James Macpherson: The Gaelic Dimension," in *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (1998), that Macpherson's sixteen or so sources played "a somewhat subsidiary role" in his creative process.<sup>4</sup> In the final analysis, Thomson devoted himself to identifying the actually few similarities between *Ossian* and Gaelic tales in the relatively small "part" of the canon where sources



could be pinpointed convincingly, from words and phrases to occasional episodes and, rarer still, general narrative blueprints. He inferred that Macpherson “was not a mere forger,” and yet that “although much has been found in common between Macpherson’s work and the ballads, *essentially they are profoundly different*” (*Gaelic Sources*, 75 and 83; emphasis added).

This careful finding of a profound difference between Gaelic tradition and literary invention has received less acknowledgment than it deserves. Such is the case with Joseph Bysveen and Paul J. DeGategno, who suppose that the debate has long since been settled in, respectively, *Epic Tradition and Innovation in Macpherson’s Fingal*, and *James Macpherson*.<sup>5</sup> However, despite the conclusions of Thomson and DeGategno, Howard Gaskill disagrees that the authenticity issue has any certain determination, even though it now seems “reasonably clear” that the “deception” ranged from occasional translation and adaptation to complete fabrication, according to his introduction to *Ossian Revisited* (1991).<sup>6</sup> A critic like Dafydd Moore weighs in with yet another opinion, namely, that authenticity has been sufficiently established generally in Macpherson’s favor (not true). He goes further and deems the matter a distraction impeding *Ossian’s* acceptance in his otherwise astute *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson’s The Poems of Ossian*.<sup>7</sup> Again, Moore disagrees with well-taken scholarly curiosity about *Ossian’s* genuineness in “The Critical Response to Ossian’s Romantic Bequest” (2003).<sup>8</sup> Moore’s disapproval of our entertaining concerns about literary authenticity appears in the passage below, with corrective queries about his objections inserted in brackets:

We might even feel that the obsession with the issue demonstrates a singular failure to understand the nature of literary or artistic appreciation [is not Macpherson’s creative process crucial to an “appreciation” of his achievement and artistry?], or indeed literature or art itself [is not *Ossian’s* creation relevant to current critiques of fiction and forgery?], but then this is the beauty of the tactic, since, if *Ossian* is a fraud, if it is not “real”, then it is not literature or art [it *is* literature and art fraudulently publicized as literal translation rather than mainly authorial invention; its ambiguous status results in ambiguous value judgments], and so it can be treated without reference to the standards of the discipline [has not the controversy always concerned standards of literary study?].

Obviously the authenticity issue has refused to go away, and rightly so. According to that leading authority, Howard Gaskill, the “relationship of *Ossian* to authentic Highland tradition . . . is either ignored or underplayed.”<sup>9</sup> Disputants on both sides of the controversy have at times

neglected the matter, but the party most responsible for ignoring or for overplaying *Ossian's* Gaelic roots for almost the past half-century has been a group of scholars intent on reviving interest in Macpherson by minimizing embarrassing, if vital, questions of intellectual concern. Some scholars come close to denying that fabrication occurred, on the shaky grounds that the mostly made-up work of *Ossian* was not totally make-believe because of its occasional reliance on sixteen or so Gaelic sources. To palliate Macpherson's conduct, they imply negligible deception by virtue of his use of some Gaelic antecedents, however slight and fitful their actual influence on his canon. Hence, they contend erroneously that "much" or "many" of the work(s) "in large part" "drew heavily on existing poetic traditions" to such "a considerable degree" or with such "an almost total indebtedness" to Gaelic sources that Macpherson "is not, in general, making things up."<sup>10</sup> In accordance with this misreading of the episode, Macpherson qualifies as a "creative editor/translator" engaged in an "act of creative reconstruction" productive of "a blend of Highland tradition and Macpherson's imagination" or "a collage of more or less genuine translations" or "a synthesis of Gaelic poems" or "a pastiche of genuine Gaelic myth cycles" which "creatively adapted the rich Gaelic ballad tradition of the Highlands."<sup>11</sup> This mistaken faith in a core genuineness in *Ossian* has within a quarter-century practically become a critical conviction eliding the boundary between literary truth and falsehood in analyses of Romantic identity:

James Macpherson, an upwardly-mobile young Scot hoping to make his name in literary London, pieced together assorted Scottish tales and ballads, arranged them into classical epic form, and attributed them to the bard Ossian who may have lived three hundred, but certainly not one thousand, years earlier.<sup>12</sup>

Wishful thinking obscures the actuality of large-scale authorial invention and causes the works of *Ossian* to be designated variously as "a paraphrase of genuine orally transmitted Fenian lore" or as "imitations of a sort, but that term does not do justice to Mac Pherson's inspired transformation of his sources" or as "creative translations" or, most strangely of all, as "a translation without an original."<sup>13</sup> On this slippery slope of evasive terminology, the favored classification by Macpherson scholars is his own preferred description of his deception as a "translation" – about the least applicable word available to capture and convey his original literary artistry. The use of the term "a translation," like all the others previously noted, is thoroughly misleading. How can either a lay reader or a general scholar come to grips with the underlying realities of the controversy or of

the canon under the impress of such obfuscation and vagueness? Taking no chances, one puzzled commentator on modern Scottish literature finds no other way out of the confusion than to flirt with contradiction and refer to Macpherson as “the compiler and/or fabricator of the epics *Fingal* . . . and *Temora*.”<sup>14</sup> We can best serve truth about the fabricated core of *Ossian*, and best honor its creator, simply by calling Macpherson a writer of mostly original literature. In doing so, we appease both critical camps by recognizing a great deal of invention disguised as translation and by affirming creative authorship, so appealing to the Romantics, in much of its production. Candor about his falsehood yields clarity about his achievement.

More accuracy and precision in future scholarship are absolutely necessary for a number of reasons. First, a fuller understanding of the actual make-up of *Ossian* would go hand in hand with any consideration of its relevance to Celtic, Scottish, and British identity issues since the advent of devolution. How much of an actual Gaelic dimension resides in the canon? What is ethnically traditional and what uniquely Macphersonian about its content to make it conducive or resistant to engendering valid or invalid, helpful or hurtful, stereotypes about the people of Scotland within and apart from the United Kingdom? Second, a surer perception of its ambiguous status touches directly on the fields of Gaelic literature and linguistics. Does its fitful correspondence and idiosyncratic break with the Highland heritage of verse and prose, transmitted orally and in writing, throw any new light on these two fields of intellectual inquiry? Can its controversial nature contribute to awakening more widespread interest in Gaelic studies?

Third, investigation of the inner dynamics of its creation is important for the study of Scottish history and Gaelic folklore by illuminating how a mostly spurious construction of the past can adulterate and/or replace received tradition in oral and written form. Even when invented history and fakelore become integral to a culture, the possibilities of their careful differentiation from the native cultural legacy can help to elucidate what is new and inherited in Scotland’s evolving nationhood. Probing *Ossian*’s authenticity clarifies how different the canon usually is from the mythology and historical paradigms preserved in Gaelic literature. Excusing Macpherson’s fabrication by seeing him as a bard, merely renovating ballad conventions, misses the overwhelming authorial uniqueness and inventiveness that made for a drastic departure from tradition under the guise of fidelity to it. So it is that a majority of Gaelic specialists have come to view him as a mixed blessing, having a contradictory impact on

their discipline: he stimulated the collection of genuine material, even as he caused attention to shift toward his spurious creations and subsequent Ossianic imitations adulterating the native literary heritage.

Fourth, a firmer grasp of *Ossian's* largely fabricated make-up should be part and parcel of inquiries into the manifold elements of the artistry that made it so overwhelmingly popular with Romantic writers. Was its minimal Gaelic dimension or its predominant Macphersonian sentimentality most responsible for the Ossianic vogue? Fifth and finally, investigation of the genesis of the canon mainly from Macpherson's imagination lays open the complicated mechanics of his authorial procedures for clearer comparison and contrast with the questionable practices of a careless editor like Thomas Percy, outright forgers like brilliant Thomas Chatterton or acerbic John Pinkerton, or unfaithful translators of Gaelic like John Clark and John Smith. All in all, coming to terms with the authenticity issue is obviously central to evaluating the *Ossian* controversy, which indeed helped to make Macpherson famous and continues to spur debate over his triumphs and transgressions.

Polarized attitudes about *Ossian* had existed from the outset of Macpherson's literary career and kept the printing presses busy throughout the later eighteenth century. The climax of the heated, sometimes volcanic, exchange of opinions in the earliest stages of the dispute came in the form of *The Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland* (1805). Evoking contrary responses even now, this nuanced treatise gathered together invaluable documentary evidence about the controversy, with a false-seeming neutrality, to argue that *Ossian* reflected a genuine body of Gaelic poetry substantially refined by Macpherson. Further muddying of the waters surrounding the authenticity issue occurred with the publication of the bogus *Poems of Ossian in the Original Gaelic* (1807), offering false validation of the fabricated English *Ossian* and destined to adulterate Gaelic literary tradition. Countering these developments were major anti-Macphersonian contributions by Malcolm Laing. He wrote a first-rate "Dissertation" exposing deception in his *History of Scotland* (1800), followed in 1805 by his debunking edition of *The Poems of Ossian*, containing important verse juvenilia and a scrupulous, if forced, dissection of modern literary borrowings behind the canon's creation.<sup>15</sup>

While Gaelic specialists in the Victorian age increasingly cast doubt on Macpherson's integrity, printings and defenses of *Ossian* in English appeared regularly in every decade of the nineteenth century. On the continent, moreover, editions appeared in Bohemian, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Swedish and

gave rise to a plethora of critical and creative writing confirming the spread of the Ossianic vogue abroad. At home imitators turned the canon into heroic couplets, blank verse, prose tales, songs, plays, ballet pantomime, and opera. Probably the principal scholarly appreciation of the Victorian era was Bailey Saunders's *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson* (1894), rich in new documentary evidence but wrongly characterizing *Ossian* as a paraphrase and Johnson as a bigot incompetent to judge it. Sympathy for Macpherson waned during the first half of the twentieth century. A learned three-volume edition of the canon in German by Otto Jiriczek in Nazi-controlled Heidelberg in 1940 could obviously do little to resuscitate critical interest in America and Britain. A few noteworthy studies did enter the public domain, such as J. S. Smart, *James Macpherson: An Episode in Literature* (1905) and George F. Black's *Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic Controversy: A Contribution towards a Bibliography* (1926), complemented by John J. Dunn's "Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic Controversy: A Supplementary Bibliography" (1972) and Margaret M. Smith's "James Macpherson 1736–1796" (1989).<sup>16</sup> In the main, however, curiosity about the controversy suffered a steep decline, not to be reawakened until the Great Depression and two world wars had passed by.

In the same period serious study of Johnson and Boswell followed a contrary trajectory after a long limbo of Victorian condescension and neglect. The authoritative first five volumes of the Hill–Powell edition of *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–64) preceded – the index in volume VI followed – the publication of the most significant modern discovery in eighteenth-century literature. This was the treasure trove of journals and papers of James Boswell, starting in the 1930s at Yale University under Frederick A. Pottle and appearing periodically there since 1950. These two scholarly enterprises prepared directly for the remarkable post-World War II renaissance of Johnson studies led by James L. Clifford, Walter Jackson Bate, Donald J. Greene, and others. The result was the standard, as yet incomplete, Yale edition of Johnson's *Works*, including the publication of not one, but two editions of *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* by Mary Lascelles (1971) and, authoritatively, by J. D. Fleeman (1985). Clifford, Greene, John Vance, and Jack Lynch successively compiled *A Bibliography of Johnsonian Studies* from 1887 to 1998 and bore loyal witness to the startling but true phenomenon that no other British author of the eighteenth century has come close to generating more scholarly publication than has Samuel Johnson. At the end of the twentieth century, the complete five-volume collection

of *The Letters of Samuel Johnson* (1992–4) appeared at last, owing to the devoted editorial labor of Bruce Redford. Complementing all this exemplary scholarship was J. D. Fleeman's capstone performance in two volumes, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (2000).<sup>17</sup> In testimony to the by now established centrality of the author in his era, Paul J. Korshin in 1987 inaugurated at the University of Pennsylvania *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*. In the new millennium Harvard University holds the huge Hyde collection to make the Houghton Library the preeminent treasure-house of Johnsoniana in the world.

All this renewed scholarly activity led the way for a reappraisal of Johnson's role in the *Ossian* controversy and for a revival of interest in Macpherson. No more than a trickle of articles about *Ossian* came out in the 1960s, prior to John Whitehead's generally overlooked *This Solemn Mockery: The Art of Literary Forgery* (1973) and Robert Folkenflik's neutral "Macpherson, Chatterton, Blake and the Great Age of Literary Forgery" in *The Centennial Review* (1974). The trend soon changed into a growing torrent of scholarship, partly under the increasing influence of new critical theory, given to anti-canonical, postmodernist, and postcolonial impulses embraced by the academy. With the political prospect of devolution in Scotland, considerable soul-searching about national identity elicited a number of publications. At one extreme were books by Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977) and *After Britain* (2000), in conjunction with David McCrone's *Understanding Scotland* (1992) and Regina Bendix's *In Search of Authenticity* (1997).<sup>18</sup> Theirs was by and large a neo-Marxist denial of ethnic identity and historical tradition as merely a human invention, "useful, powerful fictions," in need of transcendence via egalitarian openness to global diversity as an antidote to racism encouraged by narrow nationalism since the Romantic era. Nairn blames Macpherson, among others, for a "fake Celticism" endowing Scots with a mere "simulacrum of identity" interfering with the evolution of the nation. The animus against *Ossian* among sociologists like Nairn reflects a larger repugnance to deplorable Celtic typecasting lent respectability by a famous fan of Macpherson, Matthew Arnold, in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867). Cairns Craig's *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (1996) critiques Nairn's anti-essentialism, and Andrew Hook warns fellow Scots that dismissing Macpherson, no matter his bad faith, risks complicity with imperialistic England in "Ossian Macpherson as Image Maker" (1984).<sup>19</sup> But indulging in any kind of Celtic identity politics received a major setback from an anthropological point of view in Simon James's controversial *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People*

or *Modern Invention?* (1999): “the idea of race, nation or ethnic group called Celts in Ancient Britain and Ireland is indeed a modern invention” originating in eighteenth-century antiquarian fantasies like James Macpherson’s *Ossian*.<sup>20</sup>

Many moderate commentators, who subscribe to the reality of an enduring ethnic inheritance, nevertheless share Nairn’s distaste for Ossianic national stereotyping.<sup>21</sup> The most notorious modern debunker of Macphersonian myths has to be Hugh Trevor-Roper, whom not a few *Ossian* enthusiasts consider their *bête noire* because of his contemptuous essay, “The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition” (1983).<sup>22</sup> Far more sympathetic to Scottish nationalism, if increasingly wary about Ossianic mythology, is Murray Pittock, one of the most prolific and sanest writers about his country’s identity. His four earliest books explore the historical legacy of Jacobitism discerningly, granting *Ossian* an undue grounding in Gaelic tradition and yet conceding its “factitious Scottishness” from its “idiosyncratic” accommodations to British tastes.<sup>23</sup> Pittock wisely advises all to see Scottishness “steadily and see it whole” as an “important, nay a crucial premiss in the development of the Scotland and Britain which it will be possible to create in the future.” Far from explaining away national identity as an intellectual construct capable of liberatory global reinvention, William Ferguson’s thesis in *The Identity of the Scottish Nation* (1998) is essentialist in his insistence on a core historical selfhood shared by the nation.<sup>24</sup> He sees Scottishness, in the Highlands especially, as grounded in a specific past evolving into the present culture of a specific people within a specific place, springing from “an early Gaelic tribal root that flourished in Ireland.” If national identity rests on some surviving underlying geographical-historical actuality, then Macpherson’s fabricated mythology amounts to a distortion of Scottish character, as it undergoes reassessment at a time of promising, if difficult, transition for the country.

Allied to concerns about *Ossian*’s dubious impact on identity issues past and present is the much-debated topic of the politics behind its creation. Are the canon’s basic political sympathies (1) pro-Scottish and/or pro-Jacobite (Pittock’s well-argued position), (2) pro-Scottish and pro-Unionist, or (3) simply pro-Unionist? Of these alternatives, the second suits the fundamental ambiguity of *Ossian* as an anglicized Caledonian product of a modern eighteenth-century consciousness coming to terms with an imagined Highland antiquity. Seeing mixed political allegiances in its author as both Scottish citizen and British subject would be congruent with the perception of Macpherson’s handiwork as offering an



ambivalent nostalgic vision of an ancient era overtaken by modernity. The merging of present and past, the familiar and the alien, Unionist loyalty and Highland patriotism would seem to have made for stimulating, if unthreatening, reading matter for subjects throughout the British Isles, and not in Scotland alone. Surprisingly, relatively few scholars accept this duality in its make-up. Richard B. Sher does adopt this ambivalent perspective in perhaps the finest single treatment of later eighteenth-century Scotland ever published. His *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (1985) ties *Ossian's* admixture of Scottish and British sympathies to a Unionist-oriented militia question tapping into thwarted feelings of national patriotism north of the English border. Equally superb is Howard Weinbrot's richly comprehensive survey of the literary impact of such political compromise in *Britannia's Issue* (1993). Detailed demonstration of Macpherson's divided loyalties fills the pages of Colin Kidd's *A Union of Multiple Identities* (1997) and Melvyn Kersey's "The Pre-Ossianic Politics of James Macpherson" (2004).<sup>25</sup> So it is that Matthew Wickman sums up the very mixed political allegiances of the Ossianic canon in *The Ruins of Experience: Scotland's "Romantick" Highlands and the Birth of the Modern Witness* (2007):

the nostalgic tenor of *Ossian* forges a *circumstantial link* to the ambivalent national imaginary – "Scottish" in one register, "Highland Jacobite" in another, "British" in a third – which defined Scottish identity after the Union of 1707.<sup>26</sup>

Most scholars incline, and plausibly so, to a one-sided interpretation of *Ossian's* political leanings as decidedly pro-Unionist, rendering the canon primarily an instrument of English imperialism rather than an expression of Highland patriotism or of mixed loyalties to both Britain and Scotland. Taking this line are many solid studies, including Kenneth Simpson's *The Protean Scot* (1988), Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (1992) and his *The Modern Poet* (2001), Penny Fielding's *Writing and Orality* (1996), Leith Davis's *Acts of Union* (1998), Sebastian Mitchell's "James Macpherson's *Ossian* and the Empire of Sentiment" (1999), and K. K. Ruthven's *Faking Literature* (2001). Bearing directly on *Ossian's* politics are major evaluations of Irish, Scots, and British historiography by Ian Haywood in *The Making of History* (1986), by Joep Th. Leerssen in *Mere Irish and Fior-Ghail: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality* (1986), and by Colin Kidd in *Subverting Scotland's Past* (1993) and *British Identities before Nationalism* (1999).<sup>27</sup> There remains a question, not yet fully addressed, rising out of Macpherson's debated politics and dubious invention of tradition. To what degree is or is not *Ossian* an artistic betrayal of



Scottish/Highland/Gaelic tradition by virtue of its translation into the foreign language of imperial Great Britain under the cultural-literary influences of the dominating superpower, England?

Contamination of the national heritage is a preoccupation of contemporary folklorists. Alan Bruford, like many other Gaelic specialists, holds to enduring narrative prototypes standing behind variant versions of Fenian narratives in *Gaelic Folk-Tales and Medieval Romances* (1969). Granting the manifold possibilities of creative variation in a longstanding heritage of story-telling, some folklorists nonetheless tend to rank *Ossian* as fakelore, generally inventing, rather than following even loosely, ballad conventions. Such is the case put forward by Phyllis A. Harrison in “Samuel Johnson’s Folkloristics” (1983), by Alan Dundes in “National Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore” (1985), by Jan Vansina in *Oral Tradition as History* (1985), and by John R. and Margaret M. Gold, *Imagining Scotland* (1995). Other folklorists have come to stress a contrary point of view. The mercurial nature of oral tradition, in their opinion, militates against much inviolability in the Gaelic literary heritage for our making any kind of a determination against the authenticity of *Ossian*. James Porter takes this stand in “‘Bring Me the Head of James Macpherson’” (2001).<sup>28</sup>

In this regard, Donald Meek likens *Ossian* to a freely creative compilation of Fenian tales crafted in the middle ages, entitled *Acallam na Senorach*, as evidence of the absence of any pure form of Fenian narrative. Meek therefore disputes other leading specialists (Derick Thomson specifically) who denigrate Macpherson for literary forgery, when they should commend him for invigorating Gaelic literature, in “Development and Degeneration in Gaelic Ballad Texts” (1987) and in “The Sublime Gael” (2004). Joep Leerssen also argues against “a rarefied philological standard of absolute source-identity” but still concedes Macpherson’s “mauvaise foi,” in line with Micheal Mac Craith’s warning about the Highlander’s dubious assurance of restoring Fenian poetry to its original purity, in respectively “Ossian and the Rise of Literary Historicism” (2004) and “‘We Know All These Poems’: The Irish Response to Ossian” (2004). Contrary to Meek, Joseph Falaky Nagy distinguishes *Acallam na Senorach* from the “spurious” and “wilder concoctions” of *Ossian* under Macpherson’s “ambitious invention” in “Observations on the Ossianesque in Medieval Irish Literature and Modern Irish Folklore” (2001). Ultimately Meek himself contends that, however Gaelic based *Ossian* occasionally may be, its encasing narrative frame “was largely of his own making” for imparting “a new view of the Highlands to the gullible

and expectant public . . . The Ossianic model also tended to contaminate certain aspects of the real tradition.” These are the well-taken conclusions of Meek’s major work of scholarship, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (2000). Thus he and Thomson seem in final accord about Macpherson’s ambiguous legacy. The fact that *Ossian* has little or no place in Thomson’s surveys of Gaelic verse – *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (1974) and *Gaelic Poetry in the Eighteenth Century* (1993) – speaks volumes about its spurious relation to Highland literature.<sup>29</sup>

For the past quarter-century revisionist scholars have led a laudable reconsideration of Macpherson’s canon. A proliferation of worthwhile analyses has resulted, with no end in sight. Four individuals stand out among many others responsible for this signal development. Fiona Stafford published a full-scale appreciation of Macpherson’s achievement, omitting his political career, in *The Sublime Savage* (1988). Another biocritical study, *James Macpherson* (1989) by Paul DeGatigno, offers an even more candid treatment of the authenticity issue and a more detailed, if equally sympathetic, review of individual works. Most important, Howard Gaskill spurred the revisionism with his “‘Ossian’ Macpherson: Towards a Rehabilitation” (1986) and afterwards promoted reappraisals as editor of three collections of essays, which are particularly persuasive about Macpherson’s international impact.<sup>30</sup> These contributions are *Ossian Revisited* (1991), *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (1998), co-edited with Stafford, and *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (2004). His premier achievement is the standard modern edition of *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works* (1996), generally non-partisan, based on the 1765 *Works of Ossian*, with useful notes and glossary. Supplementing this edition is Dafydd Moore’s welcome four-volume *Ossian and Ossianism* (2004). This publication can save researchers much time and trouble required for archival and on-line inquiry by gathering together facsimile reprints of all Macpherson’s first editions (volumes I and II), generous extracts of early literary criticism about *Ossian* to 1827 (volume III), and an admirable sampling of creative writings of the Ossianic vogue through 1826 (volume IV).<sup>31</sup> The general introduction is an evenhanded survey of the controversy, and the only omission – acknowledged by the editor – is the absence of another volume collecting genuine Gaelic literature (with faithful English translations) bearing on the disputed creation of *Ossian*.

Revisionist scholars often ground their primary defense of *Ossian*’s greatness on its undoubted influence on later Romantic literature. From 1974 into the new millennium, ten or so studies have regarded

Macpherson as Romantic forerunner of the poet as prophet, in line with attempts at improving his reputation by shifting the focus away from the pejorative charge of literary lying. The most significant champion of this theme is Nick Groom, a leading authority on Thomas Percy and antiquarianism as a result of three excellent publications graced with careful traditional scholarship: a facsimile first edition of *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1996); a careful examination of context and content in *The Making of Percy's Reliques* (1999); and a collection of essays under his editorship, *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture* (1999). Most recently he has contributed a comprehensive apologia on behalf of literary forgery, primarily in Britain from the mid-eighteenth century to the present, entitled *The Forger's Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature* (2002).<sup>32</sup> The very title hints at the intellectual exuberance and playful flair for semantics on display in this encyclopedic inquiry about forgery and literary creation. The book seems at its best in matters of copyright and in connecting Chatterton and fellow writers to Romanticism and literary inspiration. Where it departs from Johnson's dictates about truth and literature is in its emphasis on artistic vision transcending representational norms of classical mimesis and allowing the factually false to become imaginatively true.

Its insightful manipulation of a kind of postmodernist Romanticism seems to render truth itself a questionable hypothesis preferably to be eschewed in discussions of forgery: "But society is reluctant to allow that truth might be merely an ideological special effect, and so fixes it as an abstract ideal, outside history. This is why criticism is compelled to condemn forgeries" (*The Forger's Shadow*, 65). This critical perspective erases much of a dichotomy between legitimate fiction and illegitimate forgery in the supposition that forgery creates a "hybrid realism, both true and false" (15). According to this merging of what Johnson deemed ontological opposites (see his *Dictionary* definitions of *truth*, "the contrary to falsehood" and *false* as "not morally true," "not physically true"), forgery deserves serious consideration through avoidance of society's arbitrary and derogatory significations of a falsehood:

It is not enough to accuse forgeries of simply being deceitful and morally wrong; it is precisely by being able to break out into the real, to make the literary more real, that they can tell us a bit more about how literature works. Of course it could be argued that this book *by tricking away the authentic, is a part of the condition or crisis it is purporting to diagnose – which is doubtless the case* – but my intention is really to encourage [others to read poetry] a little differently. (15; emphasis added)

Although Johnson would heartily have objected to this “tricking away” of the authentic, we are encouraged to put aside old-fashioned moral distinctions and understand that Macpherson’s falsehood is his imagined truth: “Inspiration is a form of composition that guarantees the authenticity of the poetic self precisely because it lies outside that self, in some other region” (106). We should avoid pejorative terms and meaningless value judgments which, it is contended, seem irrelevant to artistic inspiration and bar Macpherson, and others like him, from the mainstream of literature:

Can forgery be defined without a debilitating recourse to words like real, true, or authentic? . . . What we are reading here is literature and it should be judged on aesthetic terms: whether it is good or bad, influential or indifferent . . . (55–6)

Such relativistic commingling of contrarities was, as the book acknowledges, anathema to Johnson. He could never have subscribed to a true and false realism, because, in his opinion, reality, in itself or as reflected in legitimate fiction, was truth and remained in contradistinction to the false as reflected in forgery and fantasy. By extension, he could not have condoned the elimination of ethical concerns in judgments about literature, which at its best was to imitate lived experience and point to higher moral and religious verities glimpsed in lived experience. Because art acquired its dignity and purpose from an honest and instructive mirroring of human life, literature would suffer ultimate degradation from a failure to distinguish between truth and falsehood in fiction, between true making based on the actual world and a false making-up of deliberate deception and empty fantasy. As Terry Eagleton noted,

Literary propositions are parodies of real-life ones, not versions of real-life lies . . . Such terms [like real, true, or authentic] may have a debilitating ring to them [revisionist critics like Groom] in Soho clubs, but perhaps rather less so among those families who still want to know where the Bosnian Serbs buried the bodies.<sup>33</sup>

A modern audience, unlike Johnson, might relish indulging in arresting intellectual concepts expressing a contrariness reminiscent of Oscar Wilde’s rebellious paradoxes. Wildean echoes of an aesthete’s praise for lying and regret over its decay under Victorian moral earnestness reverberate in assertions like the following: “All poets are liars; some are better liars than others; those who lie with the most effrontery are called forgers” (65) in the annals of “literature, that most monumental fabrication” (2), because “[a]rtistic invention remains an endorsed form of lying, of

defrauding an audience by bewitching with illusions that blur the sense of emotional or psychic reality" (71). Johnson would have considered disturbing and sophisticated such obscuring of boundaries between fiction and falsehood and such Romantic elevation of visionary artistry over mimetic imperatives in authorship. In his scheme of things, the shocking statements would have amounted to a perverse denial of a difference between right and wrong in any reckoning of literary authority or artistic procedures. History and human experience had priority over fiction, however exquisite or even soundly reality-based in its execution: "The most artful fiction must give way to truth."<sup>34</sup>

One does not have to be a Samuel Johnson to sense problematic points of discussion in Groom's chapter on Macpherson. The positions taken there merit more than passing consideration as representative of a critical approach adopted by other revisionists in recent decades. For example, a description of Macpherson's workmanship expresses not only multifold options for his creative process but also the kind of imprecision found in studies by like-minded scholars desirous of disassociating him from the stigma of fabrication: "He had translated and edited, or written, or indeed forged, depending on one's point of view, one of the most extraordinary works of the age" (109). Sidestepping the authenticity issue might seem at first glance a matter of praiseworthy openness to intellectual possibilities of worthwhile literature, free of stuffy outmoded moral prejudice against Macpherson. But on deeper reflection we might feel concern for uninitiated readers puzzling over this potentially confusing assessment of *Ossian's* complex creation. As Pat Rogers wisely warns admirers of Chatterton, in Nick Groom's own collection of essays, "Even if we wish to argue that such deception could still promote valuable literary innovation, which few today would dispute, it is still necessary for us to *know* the extent of the deception if we are to assess the scale and importance of the innovation."<sup>35</sup>

The need for a clearer understanding of Macpherson's literary methods is just as pressing for evaluating the scale and importance of his contribution to Western literature. Almost every Gaelic specialist agrees that his *Temora* exploits sources very meagerly – only in the opening episode of Oscar's death – out of eight long books of made-up epic narrative. Even the six-part *Fingal*, for all its complex use of Gaelic antecedents, is mainly the product of Macpherson's creative imagination in its book-by-book unfolding. His claim of retrieving an ancient archetype corresponding exactly to his English prose was nonsense. What follows is Nick Groom's very different explanation of the Gaelic

roots of the two epics, with clarifying remarks duly inserted in brackets as helpful correctives:

Macpherson really did collect manuscripts and transcribe traditional songs, and Fingal and Temora were in large part [not so] derived from these remains. But he also fashioned his own interpolations [actually he fashioned the bulk of the canon] to fill his gaps or lacunae, or to replace obscure or inconsistent readings [as the partisan and obsolete 1805 *Report of the Highland Society* tentatively concluded], and so his “translation” was effectively a paraphrase [wrong; no substantial, sustained paraphrasing exists in either epic, beyond scattered passages], carefully adapted to [actually concocted largely for] the tastes of his eighteenth-century readers. Such freedom is typical of the bardic tradition itself [his was an idiosyncratic departure from Fenian tradition, most Gaelic specialists say], and Macpherson was virtually composing as a “bard” [true, an original author but falsely advertising himself as a literal translator]: reworking [utterly transforming from slender resources] Ossianic stories, themes, and language into an epic [mainly of his own devising devoid of any significantly authentic corresponding Gaelic archetype] to celebrate the mythic past [principally a self-invented history] and clarify [really distort by fabrication, according to devolution-era Scots commentators] the identity of post-Jacobite Scotland. In other words, Macpherson was “reinventing” *Ossian* [no, he inclined toward sheer invention with relatively little recourse to Ossianic literature] by developing a new poetry of contemporary myth [of his creation based on a “discovery” of nonexistent iron-age poetry palmed off as true tradition and faithful English transcription]. The charge of forgery is just too flippant an explanation [why so, if the charge of falsehood is demonstrably accurate and at times conceded to be so by Nick Groom himself?]. (111–12)

Overestimating Macpherson’s indebtedness to genuine Gaelic literature not only misstates the case seriously but also robs him of the distinction of authorship. It seems the wrong perspective for a book aiming to vindicate him and fellow creators of essentially original writing, who showed how forgery changed the course of literature. Giving Macpherson his due, by telling the whole truth about *Ossian* and taking the bitter with the better, would make him more than a bard standing on the shoulders of predecessors merely reworking Fenian conventions. He would emerge more or less as a self-created genius of self-invented myth whose enduring inspiration for Romantics is a matter of historical record. Some might dispute the conclusion that he directly paved the way for poetry of exhilarating Romantic vision as unduly aggrandizing his place in the annals of literature. But should this particular premise of *The Forger’s Shadow* survive critical scrutiny and become widely accepted, his reputation would surely benefit immensely from the establishing of his stature as an original author.

In this chapter and elsewhere in *The Forger's Shadow* readers might take note of a few other questionable assertions, which, granting the considerable merits of the book as a whole, do qualify as misrepresentations of Johnson. Insisting that Johnson's angry confrontation with Macpherson amounts to a "fable – a fake even" (108) stage-managed by Boswell the biographer is just wrong and in defiance of overwhelming evidence to the contrary set forth in chapter 4 below. Labeling Johnson the "arch-pragmatist" (205), allegedly undervaluing inspiration in literary creation ("he did fervently believe that writing literature and criticism was an activity of application rather than inspiration," 114), risks flirting with the same reductive stereotyping that revisionist scholars censure for marring the study of Macpherson. Johnson certainly appreciated genius behind artistic inspiration in others and described it memorably in his *Life of Pope*:

Pope had likewise genius; a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights, still wishing to be higher; always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, there is a misreading of his *Life of Milton*. Johnson supposedly "damns" (205) Milton for the transcendent subject matter of his Christian epic (not so) because of his inconsistent use of the agency of spirits, "mixing materiality with immateriality" (this may be so but it is not an overall censure of the transcendent Miltonic vision). In the same vein, Johnson allegedly "belittles Milton at every opportunity" (206) for being spanked in college, looking like a little girl, and falsely libeling Charles I. On the contrary, Johnson sought to clarify dubious and/or exaggerated reports wrongly demeaning or overly glorifying Milton's literary pre-eminence. We are also told that "Johnson concludes by declaring that Milton is 'to be admired rather than imitated' before the rather hollow judgement that 'The highest praise of genius is original invention' " (206–7). This is inaccurate. In fact, Johnson wrote that Milton "is to be admired rather than imitated" in his use of blank verse, and even that trifling reservation fades away before the notable qualification preceding the statement: "But, whatever be the advantage of rhyme, I cannot prevail on myself to wish that Milton had been a rhymers; for I cannot wish his work to be other than it is, yet, like other heroes, he is to be admired rather than imitated."<sup>37</sup> Nor did Johnson ever render anything like a hollow judgment about his subject's inventiveness. He did dislike Milton's religion and politics, to be sure; he could express sometimes niggling objections



to specific works and aspects of the canon, but ultimately he gave Milton all due credit for his singular achievement in heroic poetry. In Johnson's estimation, original invention made Milton second only to Homer among all poets. Johnson's conclusion, like much else in the critique of *Paradise Lost*, is anything but carping. What we discover at the close is a moving act of obeisance to breathtaking genius: "he was born for whatever is arduous; and his work is not the greatest of heroick poems, only because it is not the first" (*Milton*, 1: 295).

Specialists in the requisite fields will have to determine matters of importance beyond the scope of this book. Did literary forgery really change the course of post-Enlightenment literature? Should ethical considerations affect reader-response to texts and the status of authors in mainstream literature? Did fabricated literature like *Ossian* cast a beneficent or malignant spell on truth-seeking Romantic visionaries coming later? The answer in *The Forger's Shadow* is a confident affirmative but comes close to being a *non sequitur* in its articulation: "Macpherson's literary integrity is in any case surely proven by the considerable fascination he exercises across the western world" (112–13). Does "integrity" mean something besides honesty? We should ask whether enduring popularity and widespread influence are in themselves convincing evidence of literary integrity and literary worth. It must be conceded that authenticity and literary worth do not necessarily go hand in hand and that there are no easy answers for distinguishing truth, fiction, and falsehood. But a thorough relativism is not the answer, even though it may be difficult to define deception and to explain what is wrong with it in absolute philosophical terms. Because deception collided with historicity and had a potential for sowing confusion in the extra-literary world, Johnson had to condemn it, or everyday life and one's perception of everyday life threatened to become meaningless.

*Ossian* certainly wielded an immense influence on Romantic authors like Wordsworth, who, however, came to believe that an authentic literary response to nature could not reside in second-rate Augustan verse or in Ossianic flights of fraudulent fancy, as he declared in his *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface* [to the *Excursion*] (1814). The *Essay* expressed his injured sense of recent critical neglect for having inaugurated a new visionary simplicity in defiance of the contrived poetry popular with his contemporaries. He saw Johnson as a champion of artificiality in English literature, despite glimmers of "true simplicity and genuine pathos" from Johnson's close associate, Bishop Percy, in *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.<sup>38</sup> But a starker absence of authenticity plagued *Ossian*. It was a



dangerously fashionable body of work, whose false bottom of made-up artistic form and substance devoid of genuine Gaelic genius ensured its emptiness as meaningful literature of vision. Macpherson came in for severe criticism as a Macbeth-like pretender to the literary throne and a Satanic begetter of a deadly new line of poetry (alluding to Milton's Sin and Death) for a fallen world of artistic creation:

All hail, Macpherson! Hail to thee, Sire, of Ossian! The Phantom was begotten by the snug embrace of an impudent Highlander upon a cloud of tradition . . . and the thin Consistence took its course through Europe, upon the breath of popular applause . . . (3:77)

Wordsworth weakened his argument by denying *Ossian's* immense impact on Romantic prose and poetry for proof of how "essentially unnatural" Macpherson's works were. Nevertheless, Wordsworth's thoughtful, if defensive, reservations about the "essentially unnatural" character of *Ossian* in its imagery of nature ("words are substituted for things") and in its representation of Highland antiquity might well induce scholars to reexamine the relationship of literary authenticity to literary inspiration in creating Romantic poetry and prose of valid vision, "true simplicity and genuine pathos." Authenticity, at least for Wordsworth, was one of the prerequisites for a poet's seeing and singing truth.

Despite serious differences in outlook, Wordsworth and Johnson would have agreed that nothing but access to genuine Gaelic tradition could reveal to poets and others the truth of nature and human life in the Highlands. A lovely lyric, "Written in a Blank Leaf of Macpherson's *Ossian*," contains a compelling exhortation for literary truth at all costs, in reaction to a half-century of literary deception and Ossianic controversy:

Spirit of Ossian! If imbound  
In language thou may'st yet be found,  
If aught (intrusted to the pen  
Or floating on the tongues of men,  
Albeit shattered and impaired)  
Subsist thy dignity to guard,  
In concert with memorial claim  
Of old gray stone, and high-born name  
That cleaves to rock or pillared cave  
Where moans the blast, or beats the wave,  
Let Truth, stern arbitress of all,  
Interpret that Original,  
And for presumptuous wrongs atone; –  
Authentic words be given, or none!<sup>39</sup>

## CHAPTER 2

### *James Macpherson's violation of literary truth*

Forgery is one of the most dangerous and extensive evils to which men are subjected by the combinations of society and the regulations of civil life.

Sir Robert Chambers,

*A Course of Lectures on the English Law* (1766–70)

A biographical sketch is in order: the perpetrator of literary deception was an ambitious young author, large of frame and irritable in disposition, who was university educated but lacking a degree. Wanting to escape the obscurity of schoolteaching, he made his bid for literary fame in the metropolis by publishing some anonymous poetry. Notoriety, however, was difficult to come by, until he turned to the first major project of his writing career. This was a work of almost complete fabrication, composed rather quickly over several years and based on very meager original materials or, mostly, none at all. From slight cues he invented a whole cast of characters and imposed a monotone declamatory style of high drama on his literary creation for a pervasive nobility of sentiment. Initially he probably felt no serious qualms of conscience about a seemingly harmless manipulation of minimal sources, as the duped public responded well to his efforts. His virtual authorship, despite hints and suspicions, remained widely unknown until after his death, and burial in Westminster Abbey crowned his worldly successes. This is the true story of James Macpherson, creator of *Ossian* (1760–3), and this is the true story of Samuel Johnson, creator of the *Parliamentary Debates* (ca. 1740–3). These future adversaries both launched their careers by a literary fraud, but with a fundamental difference that speaks volumes about character and its absence in the human spirit. On the one hand, a guilt-ridden Johnson privately tendered warnings to the unwary and, virtually on his deathbed, took pains to make amends by identifying his debates for posterity. On the other hand, Macpherson went to his grave perpetrating

literary fraud by helping to make public a false Gaelic "original" to validate his mainly counterfeit English *Ossian*.

Johnson's tender conscience was integral to his standing as England's greatest moralist. His later fame as the foremost debunker of Macpherson's fabricating ways suited his canonical reputation as a truth-teller in literature then and now. What follows is the fullest investigation of Macpherson's literary deception to date. It can be demonstrated, with a satisfactory degree of probability, that Johnson's inference about the essentially spurious nature of the *Ossian* works was correct, despite professions to the contrary by some recent scholars. Painstaking examination of old Gaelic literature, in consultation with Gaelic specialists and by recourse to professional Gaelic studies, by Derick S. Thomson in particular, only confirms his insight and elucidates the complex reality of Macpherson's imposture by reference to his creative process. The result of that inquiry is compellingly clear. The Ossianic canon is almost completely Macpherson's invention. Twenty-eight out of his thirty-nine titles – 72 percent of all the individual works comprising *Ossian* – have no apparent antecedents in genuine Gaelic literature and are therefore entirely his own handiwork. The remaining eleven pieces, or 28 percent of the titles, have but generally loose ties to approximately sixteen Gaelic ballads. Meticulous comparison of these works with their sources shows that even the relatively small Gaelic-based portion of *Ossian* similarly qualifies as largely Macpherson's creation. Contrary to his claims, Macpherson was no editor or translator of ancient poetry. He was an author of new, and historically bogus, literature. As Johnson had charged, Macpherson committed literary fabrication.

Distantly behind *Ossian* are Gaelic myths shared by Ireland and the Highlands about Cuchulain and especially Fionn, set respectively in the first and third centuries and surviving in Gaelic tales primarily after the twelfth century. Despite earlier references to the Fionn story in Scotland, the oldest extant Scots-Gaelic manuscript of literature on the subject is the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* (ca. 1512–42), which Macpherson recovered for posterity. Fenian tales have several recurrent features from the time of the early modern era and possess a remarkable degree of correspondence even in wildly variant versions. Often a blind old Oisín laments change for a vanished Gaelic military society, as he debates St. Patrick over the merits of Christian versus pagan mores. The stories extol a heroic code for a stalwart band of famous warriors and emphasize graphic battles, hunting, resisting (often Norse) invasions, visiting nobility or receiving (often Norse) guests, and abducting or rescuing female strangers. Born into

a rich Gaelic heritage, Macpherson oddly suppressed the Gaelic penchant for supernatural wonders, magic, monsters, giants, and shape-shifting creatures and erased religious references even to St. Patrick.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Fenian story-telling tends to be sparse and simple, fast-paced and focused, sometimes racy and bloody, and usually unsentimental, *Ossian* tends toward vagueness and digressiveness, high-minded theatrical emotion, and gothic ghostliness reminiscent of eighteenth-century sentimental literature.

Perhaps the only unmistakable commonality with Gaelic tradition is the pervasive sense of melancholy for a lost past, which Macpherson milked to the utmost to convey a heightened feeling more appropriate to current graveyard school meditations on mortality. The public response then and into the Romantic era was enthusiastic. Why? One partial but logical explanation is that Macpherson gave his audience what they wanted in their own contemporary literature giving them the false impression that he had discovered a truly ancient literature. Readers embraced the Ossianic craze believing that it offered them genuine relics of Gaelic antiquity never seen before in English. But they were actually indulging in the taste for the sentimentalism and gothicism that characterized contemporary poems and novels, in the grand style of melodramatic drama, in the solemnity of English Bible rhetoric, and in the epic seriousness of Dryden's Vergil and Pope's Homer.

Although perceptive individuals, like Evan Evans and Charles O'Connor, conversant in Celtic languages suspected literary fraud from the start, convincing doubt among professional Gaelic specialists had to wait until after the mid-nineteenth century. Even in this group, some of the notable Victorian collectors of Fenian tales like John Francis Campbell and Alexander Mac Bain came late to their eventual profession of large-scale fabrication in *Ossian*, hampered as they were by a lingering loyalty to the sensitivities of fellow Highlanders.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter a decidedly skeptical stance against Macpherson overtook the scholarship of Ludwig Stern, Neil Ross, Gerard Murphy, and Daithi O'hOgain, who pointed out Macpherson's duplicity and acknowledged his mixed role in the birth of modern Gaelic studies. More recently Micheal Mac Craith and Alan Harrison judge him to have been initially innocent of deception, since he may have considered that taking harmless liberties with a small nucleus of sources maintained sufficient authenticity.<sup>3</sup> Only Donald E. Meek has come close to excusing Macpherson for his questionable creative techniques – he “was not a literary hijacker” – by appealing to bardic conventions of adhering to literary tradition inventively. However, even this eminent Gaelic scholar admits that no matter what sources Macpherson

managed to follow, he "made creative use of these texts, and encased their narratives in a frame which was largely of his own making."<sup>4</sup> The foremost authority on this matter has been Derick Thomson, author of *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's 'Ossian'* (1952) and many other valuable publications flowing from this monograph for a half-century. Although most of the approximately sixteen Gaelic sources associated with *Ossian* had come to light by the end of the eighteenth century, Thomson's analysis of them is so groundbreaking and so thorough that few succeeding studies have appeared uninfluenced by him, however right or wrong their interpretations of his conclusions may be. The following survey of Macpherson's creative process capitalizes on Thomson's findings for the purpose of clarifying them and providing the most extensive examination of the essentially bogus nature of the *Ossian* poems yet to appear.

Thomson's evaluation is certainly judicious, but his sympathetic focus on the minimal portion of *Ossian* making usually limited use of Gaelic ballads, rather than on the originality of the bulk of the canon, has caused scholars to exaggerate its debt to genuine sources in too many subsequent books and articles. We are properly cautioned by Thomson to avoid presuming that "Macpherson's whole work was a forgery."<sup>5</sup> But this statement does not mean, as some might like to read it, that the whole work – or even most of the work – was a faithful derivative of genuine Gaelic antecedents or without massive contributions by Macpherson. Thomson's summing up, however, cuts through the ambiguity surrounding the fundamentally made-up nature of *Ossian* with all due clarity: Macpherson

collected a considerable quantity of Gaelic Ossianic ballads from oral and manuscript sources, and used characters and stories, related traditions and history, *as and when it suited him*; sometimes following the gist and sequence of the ballads *but more often altering these, always adding ideas and incidents which have no Gaelic counterpart, and imposing on the whole a style which bears very little resemblance to anything in Gaelic literature*.<sup>6</sup>

No one should argue that all of *Ossian* is pure fabrication on the one hand or, on the other, that it consists largely of a reworking of traditional Gaelic verse. Nor should we believe that the loosest eighteenth-century standards of translation could justify the dominant amount of sheer invention in a work publicized repeatedly as literal translation.

On this point, it should be noted that all Johnson's *Dictionary* definitions, bearing on the various kinds of translation possible, ultimately centered on achieving correspondence rather than creativity in transforming any foreign literature into English. The term *translation* is simply

“3. The act of turning into another language. 4. Something made by translation; a version.” More specifically, the definition of *literal* – “2. Following the letter, or exact words” – denoted precise fidelity to an original text and could not apply to *Ossian*, despite Macpherson’s professions to the contrary. His claim of literal translation would have made him something he was not, namely, a *metaphrast*, “one who translates word for word from one language into another.” Even *paraphrase* as “a loose interpretation” rarely pertained to the almost wholly made-up Ossianic canon, because the term implied correspondence to some well-defined, full-blown authentic original, which seldom existed to shape Macpherson’s creative process substantially. Nor would any of Johnson’s definitions of *imitation* be suitable appellations, because sustained resemblance to an original was, once again, a *sine qua non* condition of such artistry usually missing in Macpherson’s works. Following Dryden and Pope, Johnson understood the act of translation to be a *via media* between, ideally, something approaching the duplication of metaphrase and, less desirably, loose interpretation found in paraphrase or, freest of all, wholesale adaptation in imitation – “3. A method of translating looser than paraphrase, in which modern examples and illustrations are used for ancient, or domestick for foreign.” Perhaps the definitive statement on the fidelity expected of translators appeared in Johnson’s *Life of Dryden*:

While they [different languages] run on together, the closest translation may be considered as best; but when they divaricate, each must take its natural course. When correspondence cannot be obtained, it is necessary to be content with something equivalent. *Translation therefore, says Dryden, is not so loose as paraphrase, nor so close as metaphrase . . . A translator is to be like his author.*<sup>7</sup>

Although it may be impossible at this late date to identify precisely every single source behind the *Ossian* canon, the research of specialists, Thomson especially, has provided a reasonable stocktaking of the majority of genuine Gaelic influences for guiding an inquiry into Macpherson’s creative process and for settling the authenticity debate. The burden of proof lies on critics disputing careful findings of such scholars to identify an extensive additional body of authentic sources validating a much more substantial Gaelic substratum for *Ossian* than the relatively meager foundation heretofore established. So far, after the passage of two and a half centuries, nobody has come forward with any such discovery. Fortunately, non-Gaelic readers can turn to a sufficiency of faithful English translations

and paraphrases of the known sources for comparison with Macpherson's works to gauge, safely and impartially, the approximate degree of his indebtedness to Gaelic literary tradition. One overall finding from such an inquiry becomes apparent. Any of *Ossian* not about Fingal or Cuchulain or their band of warriors seems entirely made up, except for *Dar-thula*. Scrupulous investigation of texts points to a related and paramount conclusion. To repeat, Macpherson is really the author of *Ossian*: twenty-eight of his thirty-nine titles – almost three-quarters of his individual works – have no identifiable counterparts in Gaelic tradition. The rest of his titles do make occasional use of sixteen or so Gaelic sources but in so freewheeling and subordinate a way as to secure him the title of an original author. He never translated literally or, except for a few instances, ever really paraphrased substantially. To be sure, there is sustained paraphrase behind Fragment VI repeated in a portion of *Fingal* III, also behind Ossian's courtship in a portion of *Fingal* IV, and, with significant alterations, behind *The Battle of Lora*.<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, even in the lesser part of his canon with an identifiable Gaelic dimension, he almost always expanded freely, at times misunderstood or repressed, and often conflated and arbitrarily interpolated authentic ballad narrative in a process of lavish literary transformation far removed from surviving Gaelic tradition.

His creative process constitutes the key for unlocking the extent of his deception. What was behind the complicated scheme to fool the public into granting him literary notoriety? A logical explanation would be raw ambition firing a Highland lad (1736–1796), somewhat familiar with Gaelic, to matriculate at the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh in the early 1750s without a degree, prior to teaching at his birthplace of Ruthven-Badenoch and then tutoring a local worthy's son in unwelcome obscurity. A versifier from his earliest years, he published to no acclaim two particularly interesting works of epic proportion, *The Hunter: A Poem* (pro-Scottish) and *The Highlander* (pro-British). The six cantos of *The Highlander*, although cast in thumping heroic couplets echoing Dryden's Vergil and Pope's Homer, anticipated his six-part prose epic *Fingal* in story line, melancholy nobility of sentiment, nature similes, and even source material (Alpin the hero = [St. Patrick] MacAlpin; Sweno and Magnus the Norse invaders = Swaran the Norse enemy of Fingal). But the earlier heroic poem resembled an ornate medieval romance with Christian references and episodic plotting, in contrast to the simpler prehistoric pagan romance of *Fingal*. Nonetheless, *The Highlander* of 1758 represents an obvious link to later Ossianic productions and previewed

Macpherson's interest in Gaelic tradition, early Scottish history, and an evolving patriotism toward Great Britain during the Seven Years' War:

See Scot and Saxon, coalesced in one,  
Support the glory of the common crown.  
Britain no more shall shake with native storms,  
But o'er the trembling nations lift her arms.<sup>9</sup>

Fame was in the offing for Macpherson. Early in October 1759, with an introduction from the Gaelic-speaking academic, Adam Ferguson, he talked about old Highland poetry with John Home, author of the play *Douglas*, at the spa town of Moffat. This might have been a planned meeting rather than a chance encounter, and Ferguson, an admirer of Gaelic literature, possibly brought up the subject separately with both acquaintances beforehand. Something less innocent than coincidence might explain how Macpherson just happened to have specimens of Gaelic verse with him at the time.

When Mr. Home desired to see them, Mr. Macpherson asked if he understood Gaelic. "Not one word." "Then how can I show you them?" "Very easily," said Mr. Home, "translate one of the poems which you think a good one, and I imagine that I shall be able to form some opinion of the genius and character of the Gaelic poetry."<sup>10</sup>

Let it be carefully noted that Home's recollection of the very beginning of the *Ossian* hoax revolved around a request for faithful English translation of genuine ancient Gaelic literature. It was a demand destined to elicit repeatedly false assurances of its being fulfilled, when in fact faithful translation seldom occurred at all throughout the *Ossian* canon. In just a day or two the first English specimen came to light, the "Death of Oscur" published as Fragment VII, and, like almost all the rest of *Ossian*, it was a work mainly of Macpherson's contrivance.

Fragment VII had only tenuous ties to genuine Gaelic literature, specifically, to a conventional lament by Ossian in the first paragraph and, vaguely thereafter, to a legendary love triangle involving handsome Diarmaid in an illicit tryst with Fionn's intended wife, Grainne.<sup>11</sup> Macpherson turned topsy-turvy any faint echoes of this salty Fenian romance. According to his wholly reimagined tale, Dermid and his friend, Oscur, the son of Ossian, defeat mighty Dargo and then both fall in love with the dead man's daughter. Selflessly, lovelorn Dermid begs Oscur to kill him in single combat and end his misery. Oscur duly, if reluctantly, obliges but dies himself, slain by his lady, who commits suicide. On a hill in one tomb the three lovers lay buried, finding in death togetherness



denied them in life. This morbidly sentimental piece had very little in common with the tangled love story of Grainne, Fionn, and Diarmaid, the last of whom died differently, from a magic boar's poisonous bristle which brought vengeance to a cuckolded husband. Moreover, tradition associated the victor of King Dearth of Denmark (Macpherson's Dargo) with the Fenian warrior, Goll, son of Morna, and not with Dermid, made-up "son of Mornay" in Fragment VII. Worst of all, Macpherson attempted to cover up his wild departure from Gaelic tradition by inventing a new "Oscar, thou son Caruth" for a later revised Fragment VII so as to differentiate him from "Oscar, the son of Ossian" dying in *Temora*, not accidentally, but on the battlefield. When the discrepancy arose in the canon, Macpherson simply rewrote his handiwork, made up two Oscars, and brazenly justified his revision on the trumped-up basis of newfound (read nonexistent) source material: "A more correct copy of that fragment, which has since come to the translator's hands, has enabled him to correct the mistake, into which a similarity of names had led those who handed down the poem by tradition."<sup>12</sup> His sympathetic modern editor, Howard Gaskill, found this lame face-saving stratagem difficult to forgive.

Macpherson gave up his specimen of the "Death of Oscur" to John Home with an appearance of extreme reluctance. This reluctance, he claimed, was owing to his insecurity about capturing the beauty of Gaelic verse in English and perhaps sprang also from reservations about thwarting his plans for recognition as a poet in his own right: "*That his Highland pride was alarmed at appearing to the world only as a translator.*"<sup>13</sup> Perhaps too, if any stirrings of conscience still touched him, his hesitation reflected well-taken doubts about going on with a deception which, if challenged, could make fools of his kindly patrons and himself. But the die was cast, and he handed over, a few days later, two or three additional English specimens. An excited Home rushed the works to Edinburgh, and many of the intellectual elite there stood solidly behind their new Highland bard. His foremost literary patron would be the eminent, if gullible, Professor of Poetry and Belles Lettres, Dr. Hugh Blair, who henceforth virtually made himself a collaborator on the *Ossian* project, amazingly without the least suspicion of any fraud. On the contrary, he urged Macpherson to ready more English specimens for the press, even lectured on *Ossian* at the university, and then moulded public taste in its favor with the most elaborate and discerning analysis of its artistry composed in the eighteenth century, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (1763).

Part of a letter never previously published indicates what pride Blair naively took in his connection with the bogus legacy of old Ossian:

There is an abruptness in his manner, a lack of proper Connection & Transition; which might naturally be expected from such a writer, he fails sometimes in particularity of narration, but in the highest beauties of Poetry, in the Sublime especially & the Pathetick, I know no writer beyond him. Some of the other Poems are superior in merit to Fingal. We admire him here Exceedingly; and in London, no less. He is att the 3d Edition; & Translations of him are begun into the Italian, German, & French. No less a Man than Monsr Diderot att Paris is said to be translating him into French. Towards the End of my Course I gave a Lecture of an hour & a half upon the Poetry of Ossian when many People of Distinction & of Taste were present; it was insisted on to be printed. I am accordingly Enlarging & Preparing it for the Press, under the title of a Critical Dissertation . . . at London.<sup>14</sup>

Blair's rash enthusiasm knew no bounds. His *Critical Dissertation* would become part of many future editions of *Ossian*, and an increasingly skeptical David Hume would soon advise attaching an appendix containing affidavits of authenticity from credulous Highlanders. Blair complied – to Johnson's later disgust – and never wavered in his support of Macpherson. Indeed, he had the temerity to tell the truly greatest of all Scottish poets, a slightly miffed Robert Burns, that promoting the controversial *Ossian* project came close to ranking as the capstone accomplishment of his career:

The Success you have met with I do not think was beyond your merits and if I have had any small hand in contributing to it, it gives me great pleasure. I know no way in which literary persons who are advanced in years can do more Service to the World than in forwarding the evidence of rising genius, or bringing forth unknown merit from obscurity. I was the first person who brought out to the Notice of the World the Poems of Ossian, first by the *Fragments of Antient Poetry* which I published, & afterwards by my setting on foot the Undertaking for Collecting & Publishing the Works of Ossian; and I have always considered this as [the most *crossed out*] a *meritorious* action of My Life.<sup>15</sup>

Anyone benefiting from the hindsight of literary history should sense the folly of the obstinate faith and misdirected pride manifested in this self-congratulatory apologia.

It was originally the Edinburgh literati, men like Blair, who encouraged Macpherson to assemble a collection of specimens of native poetry in English for the first Ossianic volume, entitled *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language* (Edinburgh: G. Hamilton and J. Balfour, 1760).

Twelve of his sixteen English Fragments were his own creation, and only Fragments VI, VII, VIII, and XIV had ties to real Gaelic ballads. Thus, three-quarters of the titles sprang directly from his fabricating imagination, and yet the preface stated misleadingly that the "translation is extremely literal."<sup>16</sup> Of the very few Gaelic-based Fragments, three refer to Fenian tradition, and the other tells of Cuchulain. Thus, Fragment VI, about Fenian warriors protecting a woman fleeing a suitor, is a free paraphrase of the Maid of Craca story from at least two ballad versions.<sup>17</sup> More significant is Fragment VII, marking the beginning of the *Ossian* deception as the first English specimen of ancient poetry shown to John Home. Advertised as "a literal prose translation," it is more than three-quarters make-believe.<sup>18</sup> As discussed previously, the opening reflects a genuine lament of Ossian, but the romantic tale of Oscur, Dermid, and their mutual love for Dargo's daughter (all of whom die) amounts to sentimental invention. Discernible here are distant Gaelic echoes of Diarmaid's elopement with Grainne, Fionn's intended wife who desired both Diarmaid and Oisín, not Macpherson's Oscur. Fragment VIII, about a combat between Gaul and Oscur, represents a thorough recasting of three separate sources conflated into a single story with a new sentimental ending of Gaul's sister pleading for peace: (1) "Ossian's Lament" in the first three and last paragraphs; (2) the "Praise of Goll" in the fourth paragraph; and (3) the wrestling match (repeated in *Fingal* between Fingal and Scandinavian Swaran) from the "Lay of Manus" between peace-making Fionn and Magnus the Scandinavian invader.<sup>19</sup>

The most important piece for raising our suspicions of literary deception already in progress is Fragment XIV about Cuchulaid defying Garve the Scandinavian invader. The story, supposedly incomplete, adumbrates both the narrative and the major sources of *Fingal* in its mimicking the opening of "Garbh Mac Stairn" and its alluding to the "Lay of Manus" through mention of a wrestling match between the heroic protagonists. This deduction is noteworthy.<sup>20</sup> When the *Fragments* appeared in June of 1760, it seems that Macpherson was already meditating an epic like *Fingal*, primarily of his own devising. Such preparations were apparently taking place, even before his later Scottish tours supposedly uncovered a nonexistent authentic Gaelic original of *Fingal*, prior to his publication of an English *Fingal* in December of 1761. Was not Hugh Blair, "in consequence of the conversations I had held with Mr Macpherson," somehow able to give a plot summary of the as yet undiscovered – and, in any case, mainly fabricated – "heroic poem" in the preface to the *Fragments*?<sup>21</sup>

In particular there is reason to hope that one work of considerable length, and which deserves to be called an heroic poem, might be recovered and translated, if encouragement were given to such an undertaking. The subject is, an invasion of Ireland by Swarthan King of Lochlyn; which is the name of Denmark in the Erse language. Cuchulaid, the General or Chief of the Irish tribes, upon intelligence of the invasion, assembles his forces; councils are held; and battles fought. But after several unsuccessful engagements, the Irish are forced to submit. At length, Fingal, King of Scotland, . . . arrives with his ships to assist Cuchulaid. He expels the Danes from the country; and returns home victorious . . . The last three poems in the collection are fragments [XIV, XV, XVI] which the translator obtained of this Epic poem; and tho' very imperfect, they were judged not unworthy of being inserted. If the whole were recovered, it might serve to throw considerable light upon the Scottish and Irish antiquities.<sup>22</sup>

The assertion that the last three fragments are authentic remnants of the lost epic offers us the first certain sign of a premeditated imposture taking shape. Macpherson repeats the claim in his note for Fragment XIV: "This is the opening of the epic poem mentioned in the preface. The two following are parts of some episodes of the same work."<sup>23</sup> Although all three do reappear in *Fingal*, the problem with this testimonial for the genuineness of these "remains of ancient genius" (5) is the embarrassing fact that Fragments xv and xvi, if not xiv, are purely Macpherson's own invention without a shred of the Gaelic authenticity so baldly alleged in the critical apparatus. Here indisputably we catch him in a falsehood, built on the larger untruth of a genuine archetypal Gaelic epic to be recovered and translated literally for public consumption. He would afterwards announce his impossible feat of finding the missing epic to James M'Lagan on 10 January 1761: "*I have been lucky enough to lay my hands on a pretty complete poem, and truly epic, concerning Fingal.*"<sup>24</sup> In direct contradiction to this statement is the fact that no authentic Gaelic epic at all like the elaborate *Fingal*, whether "*pretty complete*" or collated from remnants of a supposed ancient ur-text about Cuchullin, Fingal, and Swaran, ever existed, except possibly in the form of a modern Gaelic fabrication by Macpherson and his associates.

The internal dynamic behind the production of the *Fragments* not only points to deliberate deception but also previews all three principal modes of literary creation responsible for the remainder of his canon: (1) sheer invention; (2) lavish invention with varying correspondence to a single identifiable Gaelic source; and (3) lavish invention with varying correspondence to multiple amalgamated Gaelic sources. Once again, as these categories imply, Macpherson was an author of basically original literature, probably more independent in using Gaelic tradition than was

Milton in following biblical tradition for *Paradise Lost*. After the enthusiastic reception of the *Fragments*, his Edinburgh patrons, led by Blair and David Dalrymple, later Lord Hailes, sponsored a subscription funding an expedition in the Highlands and Hebrides. There Macpherson would attempt to gather more Gaelic poetry in manuscripts and by oral tradition about the end of August 1760 for six weeks, prior to another trip some time between late October and early January. James Boswell himself, then a firm fan of *Ossian*, joined the list of subscribers. Reluctant to undertake field research initially, Macpherson capped his search for authentic sources with the recovery of the precious *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, and, returning to the city, worked on his Gaelic discoveries with the help of a few Gaelic-speaking intimates. Surprisingly, even after this exposure to new materials, his creative process for printing more supposedly Ossianic translations did not materially change and in fact conformed to the three categories of literary inventiveness generating his first publication.

So it happened that he resumed hiding his real role of author from the public by claiming again to be a faithful translator in his next and most famous publication, *Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem, in Six Books: Together with several other Poems, composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal. Translated from the Galic Language, By James Macpherson* (London: T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt, 1762). Out of seventeen individual titles, only *Fingal* and five shorter pieces have ties to genuine Gaelic literature. The other eleven are totally make-believe – category (1) above – despite Macpherson's misleading assurance in the opening "Dissertation" that "compleat poems were only given" (52) from Gaelic into English throughout the volume. Four of the five short works have some sort of Gaelic basis in a single source – category (2) above. *The Battle of Lora* is an amplified version of *Teanntachd Mhor na Feinne*.<sup>25</sup> *Dar-thula* is a very loose variant of the Deirdre legend.<sup>26</sup> Only the latter two-fifths of *Carthon* had a discernible antecedent in *Duan Conlaoch*.<sup>27</sup> *Carric-thura*, if also primarily invented, has a peripheral relation to the *Tale of the Muilgheartach*.<sup>28</sup> Finally, as for the fifth short work, the early *Temora*, only the middle two-fifths have Gaelic roots in "The Battle of Gabhra" as well as in the closely related lay of the "Death of Oscar" and, like *Fingal*, it falls into category (3) above.<sup>29</sup>

The centerpiece of the volume, *Fingal*, is Macpherson's most ambitious and complex Gaelic-based creation, a freewheeling amalgamation of multiple altered sources and much invention resulting in fundamentally original fiction. In its entirety as a finished epic of six books, it was by no means a literal translation or a paraphrase or an editorial reconstruction of

some ancient Gaelic ur-text – which did not exist – even if Macpherson really presumed its survival (a questionable hypothesis) in a fragmented state. On the contrary, the epic archetype likely sprang largely from his own imagination with some shaping influence from diverse, if distant, Gaelic and European models. The creative process involved extensive invention of an overall story line exhibiting an economy of modified repetition of narrative adapted from two major prototypes, “Garbh mac Stairn” (for book 1 and the beginning of book 11) and “The Lay of Manus” (for books 11 through VI). For all his boast of literal translation, Macpherson inconsistently admitted to introducing a format of periodic digressions to the tale that he was supposedly transcribing directly into English. Accordingly, the main plot makes room for frequent episodes, sometimes of his devising and sometimes of Gaelic origin, reflecting at least seven more sources than the two major antecedents mentioned above. Derick Thomson summed up the borrowings succinctly:

Macpherson fused two ballads, those of “Garbh mac Stairn” and “Magnus” or “Manus” in order to construct the main outlines of his plot. Also he draws on three ballads for his main episodes. These are “Fingal’s Visit to Norway”, “Duan na h-Inghinn” (“The Maid of Craca”), and “Ossian’s Courtship”. In a more restricted way he makes use of the ballads “Sliabh nain Ban Fionn”, The “Praise of Goll”, and possibly of a ballad about Cu Chulainn’s chariot. Finally he uses a ballad or a prose story about Ferdiad and the “Tain Bo Cualnge” generally, together with other traditions concerning the Ulster and Fenian heroes, which he may have derived from oral sources or from historical works . . .<sup>30</sup>

On the face of this statement, readers might conclude that a substantial substratum of Gaelic literature permeated *Fingal*. Such is not the case. Not made explicit here is how small the genuine Gaelic contribution is to Macpherson’s epic and how different the sources usually are from his story. *Fingal* consists of some 19,000 words spanning eighty-five pages in the first edition. As such, in its general plot it obviously had to be a thoroughgoing amplification of faint hints principally from two compact ballads, “Garbh mac Stairn” and “The Lay of Manus,” each with a verse content that would fit in usually no more than about fifty stanzas and the latter source seldom found with verse exceeding around a hundred stanzas in extant variants. From such tiny beginnings the second longest work in Macpherson’s *Ossian* canon had evolved into a complete and complicated epic through a process of substantial imaginative elaboration.

Let us turn to the particulars of the creative process behind *Fingal*. Less than half of book 1 has links with traditional Gaelic antecedents, and the links are usually tenuous. Here Macpherson so heavily manipulated plot

cues from "Garbh mac Stairn" as to generate a new story line about Cuchullin opposing Swaran's invasion of Ireland from Lochlin.<sup>31</sup> He compounded his sentimentalized alteration of this source's straightforward story by interpolating four digressions, two of which (Morna and Duchomar; Cuchullin's praise of Bragela) are sheer invention. The same creative process obtained in book II, with wholesale amplification of plot cues from the "Lay of Manus" for Cuchullin's second confrontation with Swaran on the Ulster coast.<sup>32</sup> A third of the narrative consists of three digressions not found in the ballad source; once again, two of these (Digrena and Crumal; Galvina and Comal) were entirely invented, while the episode of Ferda and Deugala made very free use of the Irish epic, the *Tain*. Midway in book III, Macpherson made minimal use of conflated plot cues from "Garbh mac Stairn" and "The Lay of Manus" to shape his own tale of Fingal's arrival from Scotland and offer of help to defeat the invasion. The story line here is basically a modified repetition of the action in book I, evoking faintly the same prototype of "Garbh mac Stairn" but now in conjunction with dim echoes of the "Manus" ballad, as Fingal replaces Cuchullin in the role of epic protagonist. Digressions missing in both these Gaelic sources make up half of book III and closely follow different Gaelic antecedents, "Fingal's Visit to Norway" and "The Maid of Craca," respectively.<sup>33</sup> Cuchullin's defeatism appears nowhere in authentic Gaelic tradition.

More than three-fifths of book IV massively amplifies a mere thread of the plot development in "Manus," and, here too the narrative is basically another modified repetition of the central action of doing battle with Swaran. Two digressions not present in "Manus," but based respectively on ballads about "Ossian's Courtship" and the "Praise of Goll," help to draw the reader's attention away from the underlying repetitiousness of the overall story line.<sup>34</sup> The first third of book V is a sentimentalized transformation of the great battle in "Manus," and the remainder (the love triangle of Ullin, Lamderg, and Gelchossa; Cuchullin's despondency) is Macpherson's own handiwork.<sup>35</sup> Book VI, finally, is a very free adaptation of the peaceful conclusion in "Manus," exhibiting yet again a modified repetition of action in Fingal's restoring Swaran, and then Cuchullin, from defeat to heroic dignity. Here we find the standard Gaelic-based framing device of a lamenting Ossian opening and closing the narrative.<sup>36</sup> Here also can be found the customary recourse to digressions, either fabricated (Grumal's tale) or Gaelic-inspired (Fingal's deer hunt in *Sliabh nain Ban Fionn*; Trenmor's journey to Lochlin recalling "Fingal's Visit to Norway" used in book III).<sup>37</sup>



Out of this creative potpourri of large-scale invention and relatively minimal exploitation of Gaelic literary tradition emerged *Fingal* and the rest of the canon, including the final Ossianic installment, *Temora, An Ancient Epic Poem, in Eight Books Together with several other Poems, composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal. Translated from the Galic Language, By James Macpherson* (London: T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt, 1763). The evidence of Macpherson's creative process from first to last suggests a consistent preference for making up his material rather than for letting Gaelic antecedents control his literary productivity. This tendency holds true in his eight-book *Temora* and its five shorter companion pieces. If anything, they are almost all thoroughly make-believe. In the otherwise invented epic, *Temora*, only book 1 originated in a reworking of the Gaelic "Death of Oscar" and "Battle of Gabhra."<sup>38</sup> Everything else in the 1763 volume, like most of the preceding *Ossian* canon, ranks as false coin of the British literary realm. In sum, Macpherson was Ossian.

Was he a shameless literary imposter, as Johnson surmised? In view of the documentary evidence marshalled here, few fair-minded observers might want to think otherwise. Some mitigating factors might be mentioned on his behalf, although deception seems to have been undeniably present from the beginning.<sup>39</sup> It should be conceded that Macpherson did make use of a genuine Gaelic literary heritage to guide him, however loosely and peripherally, in his inventions. Second, he was a poet, unaccustomed to the exacting standards of scholarly transcription that his own editorial comments led Johnson to expect. After all, Macpherson acted like a bard following Gaelic tradition known to him since boyhood, even though his transformation of that legacy seems clearly a case of mainly original authorship rather than of conventional bardic adaptation of an inherited body of evolving native literature. Third, any problems in understanding Gaelic would have induced him to make fanciful transformation of the ballad material available to him. Finally, standards of translation could be more liberal then. But even Johnson, who occasionally accepted taking editorial liberties as in the case of Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) for the sake of modern refinement, ultimately wanted fidelity to the text: "the translator must, at all hazards, follow his original . . ."<sup>40</sup> Even a "free" translation like Thomas Maurice's unscholarly version of *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1780) needed, in Johnson's view, to conform to the primary text:

The Author was not fettered by his text, but guided by it; he has however not forgotten the boundaries by which liberal translation is distinguished from that which is wild and licentious. He has always endeavoured to represent the sense of his original . . .<sup>41</sup>



Any attempt to condone Macpherson's conduct must falter under the irresistible pressure of compelling indications of dishonesty throughout his enterprise. Seven times in all these publications, there are hollow professions of having performed literal translation, when in fact most of his English *Ossian* was his creation. There were no exactly corresponding authentic Gaelic texts at his disposal to sustain allegedly word for word transcriptions. In this regard, Thomson is refreshingly blunt: "Literal translation is never to be expected from Macpherson, except in isolated phrases . . ." <sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Macpherson convinced Hugh Blair, his unsuspecting coadjutor who knew no Gaelic, that their joint endeavors made public a scrupulous reproduction of ancient Gaelic poetry. Five times Blair emphasized the point. For example, in his preface for the *Fragments*, he stressed that "The translation is extremely literal. Even the arrangement of the words in the original has been imitated . . ." (6). He reiterated the erroneous claim more strenuously in his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal*, which Macpherson himself edited prior to its publication in 1763. Blair's little-known note to the publisher, Thomas Becket, confirms Macpherson's careful supervision of the work:

Please make my Compliments to Mr. Macpherson . . . In the meantime, I have made such alterations in the Passages he has excepted to, as I imagine will satisfy him. As this has occasioned a pretty long alteration in the last Paragraph, pray attend that this be correctly printed; & desire Mr. Macpherson to take the trouble to revise the last sheet for that end. <sup>43</sup>

Tellingly, that last paragraph vetted by Macpherson contains unstinted praise for the "faithfulness and accuracy" of the "literal version" of the English *Ossian*, so much so, that to "translate literally, and yet with such a glow of poetry . . . proves the translator to have been animated with no small portion of Ossian's spirit" (399). So too in the appendix (1765) to the treatise, Blair affirmed "the case of a literal translation" (402).

All these and other assurances merely followed the lead of the instigator of the project. For Macpherson just as readily insisted on literal translation. Twice in his critical apparatus for *Fingal* he stated as much. With the help of Highlanders he could announce his recovery of a full-blown Gaelic epic descending from the third century: "it was by their means I was enabled to compleat the epic poem," supposedly by collating surviving fragmentary variants of a Gaelic ur-text. His was an impossible achievement, because no such prehistoric ur-text existed, but he boldly insisted on it anyway: "It is only my business to lay it before the reader, as I found it" (36). This declaration is not only deceptive but also confusing.

Did Macpherson, after all, gather together fragmentary remains into a new literary whole (“to compleat the epic poem”) and so subject it to literal translation, or did he find the ancient epic original intact and so render it exactly into English? To pose the problem differently and truthfully, he falsely affirmed something that did not exist and reconstructed something primarily of his own imagining. He availed himself of a few modern Gaelic sources and yet did so without actual grounding in a genuine epic archetype supposedly surviving piecemeal or in its entirety for many hundreds of years. Nothing in Gaelic tradition came close to corresponding to *Fingal* as a whole.

No such ambiguity surrounds his later statement about the contents of his entire 1761 volume, including *Fingal*. They are all advertised as literal translations, all as close to being English duplicates of genuine Gaelic texts as possible: “And all that can be said of the translation, is, that it is literal, and that simplicity is studied. The arrangement of the words in the original is imitated, and the inversions of the style observed” (52). This is an outright lie, and his professing it renders him part of that compromised Swiftian species of humanity who have said the thing that is not. Still he persisted in untruth as late as his final edition of *Ossian* in 1773, when in the preface he again boasted of his ability to give the public a “literal version” (412). All such assertions, Blair’s and his own, lay at the heart of the literary deception surrounding *Ossian*. Their repeated assertion of literal translation constituted the most telling proof of dishonesty in the episode, especially in combination with the evidence of both extant Gaelic literature (usually so different in character and content from his own) and the overwhelmingly inventive creative process which made literal translation impossible.<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately, Macpherson could depend upon the public’s ignorance of Gaelic tradition to protect him from a decisive verdict on his duplicity in his time and, occasionally, into our own. Johnson’s skepticism entailed grave doubts about the matter of literal translation. For that reason he demanded that the Gaelic originals of *Ossian* be revealed so that experts could decipher the truth about the provenance of their English incarnation. He did not believe that Gaelic counterparts close to most of *Ossian* could be retrieved, but he wrongly supposed that Macpherson’s pretense to a faithful adherence to authentic sources meant his depending on manuscripts solely. That mistake played into Johnson’s more egregious error of discounting both oral tradition and a venerable body of surviving written documents, older than a hundred years, conserving a rich literary heritage in Gaelic. He evidently missed Macpherson’s more

complicated explanation of having "completed" poems by collecting and comparing Gaelic variants from both oral tradition and manuscripts to clarify the likeliest original state of sources for their supposedly exact translation into English. If such an editorial procedure did at times affect the largely invented content of a minority of works making up *Ossian*, the final product in English was never the result of literal translation. Gaelic sources at his intermittent disposal served him not as "originals" in the technical sense of line for line paradigms but as periodic prompts for generally original literary creation.

There may be a slim possibility of Macpherson sincerely thinking himself somehow able to deduce the ultimate Gaelic originals of his canon and differentiate them from corrupt modern versions. He said so early on:

Frequent transcription and the corrections of those, who thought that they mended the poems by modernizing the ideas, corrupted them to such a degree, the translator was induced to hearken to the solicitations of a gentleman [Blair] deservedly esteemed in Scotland, for his taste and knowledge in polite literature, and published the genuine copies under the title of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*. (51)

It seems incredible that Macpherson could openly boast of an ability to divine and replicate the pure pre-literate state of Fenian literature, when he himself expressed contempt for oral culture and endorsed distrust of oral tradition in his historical writings. Even worse, it was hypocritical of him to have criticized "corrupted" ballads and tales from the more recent time of the early modern era onward, when these relics of Gaelic literature were the only sources available as occasional catalysts for the corrupting transformation of Gaelic literary tradition in *Ossian*. Was Macpherson a victim of delusion or a perpetrator of deception? Common sense suggests that he performed the latter role from the start, but he may have played both parts simultaneously in this business.

To be sure, the *Ossian* volumes were principally Macpherson's own contrivance, whether he deceived himself into believing in superhuman editorial powers for restoring a nonexistent primordial corpus of Gaelic literature or deliberately deceived others into accepting this impossibility. Composing *Ossian* mainly from his imagination and then calling it historically true were bad enough, even if a doubtful hypothesis of overweening self-delusion might serve to mitigate the deed. Equally damaging to his reputation was masterminding an ingenious history of early Scotland lending credibility to the bogus *Ossian*. This he did in his elaborate,

sometimes spurious, critical apparatus accompanying his texts, also by his printing John Macpherson's specious *Critical Dissertations on the . . . Ancient Caledonians* (1768), and finally in his preparing an equally speculative *Introduction to the History of Great Britain* (1771), elevating Scotland over Ireland as the Gaelic mother country, in line with his epic glorification of Scottish Fingal over Irish Cuchullin. Most offensive of all was his part in contriving a Gaelic *Ossian* and then passing it off as the authentic original. Since closely corresponding Gaelic antecedents seldom existed and since Gaelic ur-texts for *Fingal* and *Temora* were impossible to come by, why not simply invent them? The scheme generated a phony *Specimen of the Original of Temora* (1763), culminating in perhaps the grandest fabrication of all, *The Poems of Ossian in the Original Gaelic* (1807), a work based on a literary concoction of Macpherson and his associates either early on in the *Ossian* imposture or in the closing years of his life. The *Ossian* episode had thereby come full circle in duplicity, from the production of spurious literal translations of largely nonexistent authentic Gaelic "originals" to the publication of modern Gaelic translations of mostly invented Gaelic "originals." Illusion begot illusion *ad nauseam* for the creation of a literary hothouse of empty artificiality where most vestiges of historical reality in the Highlands gave way to authorial make-believe.

Fortunately, an obscure lawsuit buried in the Session Papers of the Signet Library at Edinburgh sheds revealing new light on the genesis of this dishonest Gaelic curiosity. According to the petition in the case (21 November 1806), Macpherson felt so stung by well-taken demands for the "originals" of the English *Ossian* from critics, Johnson especially, that he dearly wanted a validating Gaelic *Ossian* to appear in print. Delays owing to professional responsibilities deterred him, but by 1780 hints of a Gaelic *Ossian* becoming public soon filtered into a book subjected to his editorial tampering in a full-scale attack against Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775):

To put the matter beyond the contradiction of the unprejudiced, and the unbelief of the most incredulous, I am glad to be able to inform the public, that the whole of the Poems of *Ossian* are speedily to be printed in the original of *Gaelic*. In vain will it be said by Dr. *Johnson* and others, who have manifestly *resolved* not to believe in the authenticity of the poems, that the same man who would invent them in English, might clothe them in a *Celtic* dress. To this I answer, that it would be impossible for any person, let his talents be ever so great, to impose a translation, for an *original*, on any critic in the Gaelic language.<sup>45</sup>

In defiance of this profession of literary integrity in the last sentence, the impossibility of deceiving later specialists would indeed lead to the eventual unmasking of the Gaelic version as a modern fabrication. But at the time the unprofessional state of Gaelic studies probably made the risks of detection seem negligible, and Macpherson pushed ahead with the project by fits and starts as part of a trumped-up self-vindication.

According to the Session Papers, he consulted with the Highland Society of London (founded in 1778) to find ways of underwriting the scheme, which would help to redeem reputations sullied from national culture wars of literary controversy. Firsthand, if far from impartial, testimony of William Shaw can be found in a very rare anti-*Ossian* pamphlet to corroborate Macpherson's interaction with officials of the Highland Society:

In Spring, 1780, Delegates from the Highland Club in London, composed of the nobility and gentry of the Highlands, waited on Mr. Macpherson, to request his publication of the Earse originals of OSSIAN, or to deposit a copy in the publick libraries, lest they be lost. I was present when a report of his answer was made by these gentlemen to the club. The honourable Archibald Fraser, esq. of Lovat, addressed Lord Adam Gordon in the chair, and said, "that according to their direction, they had waited upon Mr. Macpherson, to request that he would publish his originals of FINGAL;" and that he replied, "*that if the society would procure 500l. from the lords of the treasury, to be levied from the forfeited estates, to pay the expences, he would publish it; but said that it would be done some day at his own expence.*" After some debate on the subject, it was thought inexpedient to apply to their lordships of the treasury for money for such a purpose, as a private subscription among the natives of Scotland might do as well.<sup>46</sup>

The Session Papers attest to Macpherson's refusal of the Highland Society's suggestion of a subscription and document a subsequent financial incentive for accepting the work. Despite sufficient personal wealth to expedite the scheme on his own, Macpherson looked to another source for monetary support. The future plaintiff in the suit, Sir John Mac Gregor Murray, then a Bengal-based adventurer, raised a subscription of nine hundred pounds, eighteen shillings, and four pence for the project on his own initiative. A significant, if little known, note by Macpherson for the Highland Society, dated 4 July 1784, shows how this unexpected windfall from India buoyed his hopes of accomplishing his plans:

*I still adhere to the promise* I made several years ago to a deputation of the same kind, that is, to employ my first leisure time, and a considerable portion of time it must be, to do it accurately, in arranging and printing the originals of the Poems of Ossian, as they have come to my hands.<sup>47</sup>

The drift of this message points clearly – and duplicitously – to Macpherson’s assembling and transcribing Gaelic “originals” antedating his English *Ossian* and constituting its collated prototype, which he always claimed to have reproduced faithfully, even literally. The expectation of Murray and other financial backers similarly hewed to the line of seeing in print the genuine Gaelic sources, from which the *Ossian* canon derived directly.

Obviously such an outcome could not, and did not, happen. By September 1785 Macpherson assured Murray, “I have nearly the first volume of the original Gaelic ready for the press, and it will be printed in a *few months* in a manner suited to the spirited munificence of our Bengal friends” (3). With his usual prevarication, he implied something done, when it was not performed at all according to expectation. The materials in the process of compilation, were the very opposite of “originals”; the end result must have represented the consummate fakery of Gaelic poetry either being cobbled together at this late date or made up long ago before *Fingal* first appeared. Macpherson’s wrestling with Gaelic would have made for very slow progress on a final deception, if undertaken in his closing years. He never finished the task of publication, and, when advice reached him late in life simply to follow his Gaelic manuscripts for his intended publication, he sent Adam Ferguson a revealing letter apparently confirming, despite previous conflicting remarks, that there never was an independent Gaelic prototype for *Ossian*, at least in manuscript:

he seems not to know that there is scarce any manuscript to be followed, except, indeed, a very few mutilated ones in a kind of Saxon characters, which was utterly unknown to the Highlanders as either the Greek or Hebrew letters.<sup>48</sup>

So by his testimony it seems that no written Gaelic primary source really existed after all. Nor had antecedents survived orally to buttress Macpherson’s claim of sustained literal translation in his publications. Gaelic “originals” had to be invented, just as the English *Ossian* had been invented years before.

His unscrupulousness about planning to foist this hoax on the public reached beyond the grave. His will bequeathed Murray’s thousand pounds to the Highland Society, and Murray, now a member of the committee for preparing a Gaelic *Ossian*, sued for the return of his subscription money. Whatever the result of the case, Murray lived to see the Highland Society of London publish in 1807 supposedly the complete Gaelic *Ossian*. Thomson forthrightly condemns “the patent fraudulence of this production,” which seems partly the handiwork of overzealous Scots building on the phony

"originals" left by their deceased beloved bard.<sup>49</sup> One last point bears mentioning about Murray's legal action, in the follow-up "Answers for James Macpherson, Esq., of Belleville" (Macpherson's eldest natural child, the principal defendant in the case). This document insisted, despite opinions to the contrary in some quarters, that *The Report of the Highland Society* (1805) and *The Poems of Ossian in the Original Gaelic* (1807) both appeared for the express purpose of verifying *Ossian*. Their veneer of neutrality was a transparent smokescreen for partisanship that boiled over into some residual nastiness toward a long-gone Samuel Johnson, the "greatest antagonist to the authenticity of Ossian."<sup>50</sup> Both misguided tomes defended the indefensible and, although still of occasional interest to specialists, inevitably faded into well-deserved obscurity.

Despite all the dubious, intricate measures making the *Ossian* enterprise seem respectable, it is understandable that there will always be readers able to put aside their reservations and relish Macpherson as a creator of bracing new sentimental-gothic emotions. Many Romantics did so, and there is ultimately no disputing a taste for the operatic heroics and histrionic melancholy pervading his sagas and resulting in many powerful passages about human mutability in a primitive setting. Critics have every right to probe his artistry and influence with all the energy and insight manifested in scholarship of the past quarter century. Dafydd Moore, for example, has related *Ossian* to a rich European tradition of romance narrative, and other modern commentators have found echoes of the canon reverberating through so much of Romantic literature as to be indisputable proof of its long-range inspiration in the West. But in all this useful reassessment nobody should believe Macpherson's claims of being a faithful editor/translator or overlook his embrace of falsehood in violation of authentic history, legitimate Gaelic studies, and valid national identity in Scotland.

At this late date no one can fully explain why Macpherson chose to engineer a literary deception. Perhaps he wanted fame and fortune without scruple. Perhaps he simply enjoyed hatching an elaborate antiquarian scheme and in the process fooled himself into intuiting a surviving epic tradition that he could shape into being with a bard's license for poetic innovation. He seemed desirous of celebrity early on, and it will be recalled that *The Highlander* of 1758 not only anticipated the plot of *Fingal* but also mentioned the later epic's principal Gaelic prototype of Magnus the Dane. The failure of his youthful poetic voice may well have caused him to look for success in an Ossianic disguise of ancient bardic utterance. Already in his preface to *Fingal* there are hints of frustration

over the fact that a callow, if promising, modern author like himself should have had to resort to ancient times in search of contemporary acclaim. Reflecting on the difficulty facing an apprentice-poet hungry for recognition, he offered this revealing meditation:

This consideration might induce a man, diffident of his abilities, to ascribe his own compositions to a person, whose remote antiquity and whose situation, when alive, might well answer for faults which would be inexcusable in a writer of this age . . . [Concerning the works of Ossian] it would be a very uncommon instance of self-denial in me to disown them, were they really of my composition. (35)

Teetering here, it seems, between half-admission and half-disavowal of authorship, Macpherson came perilously close to indulging in reverse psychology, coyly denying what was internally clamoring for affirmation.

Later on, a cryptic suggestion of authorship surfaces again, this time in the composition of *Temora*: "My impartiality might be suspected, in my account of a work which, in some measure, is become my own" (215). Still more tantalizing are expressions of defensiveness by 1773 over the many intervening years of controversy surrounding his role in writing *Ossian*:

Those who have doubted my veracity have paid a compliment to my genius; and were even the allegation true, my self-denial might atone for my fault. Without vanity I say it, I think I could write tolerable poetry; and I assure my antagonists, that I should not translate what I could not imitate. (477)

Registering a climactic defiance of his critics, Macpherson's preface to *The Poems of Ossian* (1773) toys with the idea of confounding the distinction between a translator and an author: "A translator, who cannot equal his originals, is incapable of expressing its beauties" (412). All the statements, it is true, have an enigmatic drift preventing any decisive reading of his conduct or intentions. But if his motives for the undertaking remain conjectural, what he had undertaken in publishing his canon seems irrefutable: he fabricated *Ossian*.



### CHAPTER 3

## *Johnson on truth, frauds, and folklore: in the company of Thomas Percy*

Truth, whether in great or little matters, he held sacred.  
Sir Joshua Reynolds, "On Johnson's Character"

Famous for his fierce advocacy of integrity, Johnson demanded truth in life and literature. He possessed a Renaissance faith in the ability of reason and conscience to comprehend moral and religious principles of God's natural and revealed law. This older rationale for cognition he merged with the newer Enlightenment drive for empirical and inductive enquiry in all areas of endeavor, where fact-based knowledge led to larger generalizations about the human condition. Truth might be difficult to grasp as well as to bear, but it was prerequisite for all that was humanly worthwhile. One of the most moving statements in all his moral essays testifies fearlessly to the limitations of our ever fully apprehending the meaning of the objective world with anything like certainty:

Life is not the object of science: we see a little, a very little; and what is beyond we only can conjecture . . . The only thought, therefore, on which we can repose with comfort, is that which presents to us the care of Providence, whose eye takes in the whole of things, and under whose direction all involuntary errors will terminate in happiness . . . (*Adventurer* 107)

Profound skepticism was as deeply rooted in Johnson as any confidence-laden conviction about our duty to find the truth, and both attitudes point to a desperate human need for the divine. Because we see as through a glass darkly, frauds of any type further perplexed the already clouded maze of fate with truth-seeming unrealities and weakened trust in ourselves and others.

However difficult, however harrowing, the search for truth was the prime human necessity and, hence, the principal theme of his moral writing. As he advised a beloved friend by letter,

Whether to see life as it is will give us much consolation, I know not, but the consolation which is drawn from truth, if any there be, is solid and durable, that which may be derived from error must be like its original fallacious and fugitive.<sup>1</sup>

Honesty remained an imperative in all walks of life, for personal morality and a harmonious society: "for the confidence which makes the happiness of society is in some degree, diminished by every man whose practice is at variance with his words."<sup>2</sup> Humanity could not evolve beyond bestial backwardness to fashion advanced civilizations without a firm foundation of probity. Lying was inherently inimical to individual improvement and fruitful civic interaction and deserved severe condemnation comparable to the summary retribution exacted by law for crimes of falsification:

There is, I think, an antient law in Scotland, by which Leasing-making [lying] was capitally punished. I am, indeed, far from desiring to increase in this kingdom the number of executions; yet I cannot but think, that they who destroy the confidence of society, weaken the credit of intelligence, and interrupt the security of life . . . might very properly be awakened to a sense of their crimes, by denunciations of a whipping post or pillory: since many are so insensible of right and wrong, that they have no standard of action but the law; nor feel guilt, but as they dread punishment.<sup>3</sup>

This hard-line position bears comparison with the harsh punishment of forgery noted in law lectures that Johnson helped Sir Robert Chambers to compose from 1767 to 1770 for the new Vinerian Chair of English Law at Oxford University: "Forgery is one of the most dangerous and extensive evils to which men are subjected by the combinations of society and the regulations of civil life."<sup>4</sup> As a consequence of an eighteenth-century paper economy needing protection from tampering, forgery became a capital crime under George II. In an era of recurring debate over the copyright status of literary property, the analogy between literary and commercial forgery was too obvious to be missed by Johnson. However, it is a curious fact that only once, in a letter to Boswell on 25 February 1775, did he ever directly associate duplicitous dealings tied to *Ossian* with the word "forged."<sup>5</sup> He preferred more disagreeable terms like "imposture," "improbable fiction," "falsehood," or "a cheat."

The Johnsonian allegiance to truth for a worthwhile life extended very much to his chosen profession of literature. As a moralist and literary critic, he insisted on the representational quality of all writing and paid little heed to escapism or visionary possibilities in literary artistry. Any adherence to art for art's sake would have come close to qualifying as dereliction of authorial duty to the human race. Creative works had value for Johnson only if they represented reality faithfully for the sake of our improved practical living, our moral betterment, and, above all, our

spiritual fulfillment. He subscribed to these goals early in his career, when, for example, he evaluated all the major varieties of learning suitable for a youth's education:

Other Acquisitions are merely temporary Benefits, except as they contribute to illustrate the Knowledge, and confirm the Practice of Morality and Piety, which extend their Influence beyond the Grave, and increase our Happiness through endless Duration.<sup>6</sup>

Near the end of his life, the same imperatives held sway in his *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–81):

Whether we . . . wish to be useful or pleasing, the first requisite is the religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong; the next is an acquaintance with the history of mankind, and with those examples which may be said to embody truth . . . Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason.<sup>7</sup>

Reason and reality had priority over imagination and fiction, which at best vivify and clarify our sense of the world – and at the worst distort and fantasize our grasp of life. Sheer make-believe appealed to immature or backward minds and gave way, in the course of individual and social development, to the more solid satisfaction of acquiring objective knowledge about the extra-literary world:

We first discard absurdity and impossibility, then exact greater and greater degrees of probability, but at last become cold and insensible to the charms of falsehood, however specious, and from the imitations of truth, which are never perfect, transfer our affection to truth itself.<sup>8</sup>

Although Johnson as a boy delighted in reading old romances and later cultivated the romantic possibilities of literature in (albeit anti-romantic) Eastern tales like *Rasselas*, he also had deep-seated reservations about this type of writing. *Ossian* not only indulged in sustained fantasy but was also false in its essential make-up by pretending to be a faithful transcription of ancient Gaelic tradition, when it was by and large a modern fiction inventing its own version of the Highland past: "Whoever practises forgery, endeavours to make truth the vehicle of falsehood."<sup>9</sup> Such topsy-turvy twisting of intellectual priorities amounted to the rankest perversion of authorship. Although authenticity and aesthetic value are not necessarily inseparable, they usually were decidedly so to Johnson's way of thinking. In his view, literature, for all its inherent make-believe, had ultimately to reflect our extra-literary world for humanity's well-being.

Surely this aspect of his philosophy of writing would in itself have gone far in explaining his aversion to the *Ossian* fraud.

The best literature was a paradoxical union of opposites. It combined romance and reality to offer an imaginatively invigorated mirror of otherwise mundane human experience. Similarly, the most winning fiction was a fact-based artifact where “[n]ew things are made familiar, and familiar things are made new.”<sup>10</sup> Then too the language of literature, at its most useful, forwarded the great goal of bridging inner and outer realms of being. Johnson considered effective writing capable of establishing a correspondence “between the words and the sentiments, or . . . the ideas and the original objects . . .”<sup>11</sup> Language could express adequately an author’s private feeling and personal grasp of external reality to a reading public of strangers. Words could be made to communicate things, and fiction could be made to communicate an extra-literary world. Nevertheless, the pressing exigencies of human life relegated even fine poetry to subsidiary importance in the scheme of things: “Johnson repeated the common remark, that there is no necessity for our having poetry at all, it being merely a luxury, an instrument of pleasure, it can have no value, unless when exquisite in its kind.”<sup>12</sup> With rigorous consistency, he could put aside professional self-interest and subordinate his role as man of letters to higher human needs in acknowledging unequivocally that “the most artful fiction must give way to truth.” Hence, the bedrock worth of literature, even when exquisitely beautiful, was its usefulness in communicating instructive knowledge about the human predicament.

There exists no better exposition of Johnson’s confident understanding of the meaning of truth than in *Rambler* 96. This allegory eschews blurrings of truth and falsehood and posits instead a binary opposition between the two that makes for a perpetual contest for control of the world. At the risk of sliding into tautology, his *Dictionary* defines truth first by resorting to this binary opposition and then by positing a Lockean assumption of correspondence between subjective perception and objective reality: “1. The contrary of falsehood; conformity of notions to things.”<sup>13</sup> So too *Rambler* 96 argues that truth is objective reality and essentially different from vacuous falsity. It is one and ultimately invincible, independent of human cognition but comprehensible to reason, and antithetical in its divinely ordained uniformity amid human diversity to an epistemology of relativism. Falsehood, by contrast, is a nonentity, a nothingness, a seeming rather than a something, a distortion of reality, a parody of being.

Truth came among mortals from above, and Falsehood from below. Truth was the daughter of Jupiter and Wisdom; Falsehood was the progeny of Folly ["Want of understanding" in Johnson's *Dictionary*] impregnated by the wind [of insubstantiality] . . . Falsehood always endeavoured to copy the mien and attitudes of Truth, and was very successful in the arts of mimicry . . .

to the end of deceiving the hapless human race into falling under her bad dominion.<sup>14</sup> Falsehood played on the weaknesses of people to retard, if never to outstrip, "unconquerable" truth (IV: 152) by making dexterous use of such negative attributes of the human condition as fraud, sophistry, vanity, suspicion, impudence, obstinacy, mercurial indirection, prejudice, and passion. "There are, indeed, in the present corruption of mankind, many incitements to forsake truth" (IV: 148).

To facilitate the inevitable victory of truth, fiction came into being as a God-given aid to make naked truth, offputting in its severity and solemnity, palatable to imperfect humanity. Fiction shared with reprehensible falsehood the power to assume and communicate an attractive appearance but for the purpose of enticing our weak and wayward minds into wanting to see truth:

For this reason many arts of instruction have been invented, by which the reluctance against truth may be overcome; and as physick is given to children in confections, precepts have been hidden under a thousand appearances, that mankind may be bribed by pleasure to escape destruction . . . (IV: 149)

In Johnson's *Dictionary*, fiction is defined as essentially invention ranging between, at its best, something positively instrumental for apprehending truth ("1. Fiction. 2. Discovery. 3. Excogitation; act of producing something new.") and, at its worst, something negatively disposed to falsifying truth ("4. Forgery."). Worthwhile fiction is not empty falsity subsisting on pure fantasy or on fallacious reasoning. On the contrary, serious literature is a product and a conveyor of wisdom. According to the allegory, its make-believe is reality based and therefore humanly meaningful: "The Muses wove in the loom of Pallas [wisdom], a loose and changeable robe, like that in which Falsehood captivates her admirers; with this they invested Truth and named her Fiction" (IV: 152). Fiction is secondary to truth but far superior to falsehood when it inculcates truth by means of an imaginative allure to be "disrobed by Reason" for our unalloyed contemplation of "Truth" beyond fiction in "her original form . . . and resistless dignity" (IV: 152).

With these intellectual priorities in mind, Johnson could famously single out Shakespeare as the greatest dramatist to have appeared so far in human history, or at least in modern times:

The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight a-while, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth. Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life.<sup>15</sup>

Shakespeare indubitably excelled as a supreme communicator of reality among playwrights. His art, at its best, facilitates our comprehension of truth, but no art in itself creates the truth that it so winsomely conveys. There is very little place in Johnson's literary criticism for poetry of pure vision, apprehended by a transcendent imagination and powering forth supernal realities beyond ordinary experience and normal cognition, as some later Romantics and moderns have so magnificently attempted in literature. By virtue of Milton's supernatural subject matter that so fascinated Johnson, *Paradise Lost* might seem the one grandly successful exception in his literary criticism to the Johnsonian rule of art's subservience to outward reality rather than to purely imagined vision. Here was a poem of enraptured seeing, as Johnson readily confessed. However, in his considered view, the truth of Milton's epic came not solely from the self-contained literary dynamic of an inspired creating imagination but also from the poem's vital dependence on the unimpeachable external reality of the Bible, containing the paramount truth of God's inspired Word. Through Milton's immersion in the Bible, his imagination accomplished indeed the unique goal of "realizing fiction," that is, of reifying the wonderful and actualizing the fabulous, and thereby letting readers experience the otherworldly and the natural as exactly the same.<sup>16</sup> His epic "contains the history of a miracle, of Creation and Redemption . . . the probable is therefore marvelous, and the marvelous probable. The substance of the narrative is truth . . ." (I: 285). Here for once romance and reality, fiction and fact, the divine and the earthly converged into something like a total oneness of literary being, despite inevitable imperfections in artistic execution and human interest, "for faults and defects every work of man must have" (I: 288). Anchored in supreme biblical truth, Milton miraculously squared the circle of ontological contrarities to body forth one of the greatest heroic poems, more than worthy of competing with the *Iliad* in the highest rank of literary achievement.

In keeping with intellectual imperatives privileging truth above everything else, Johnson detested dishonesty always and, truth be told, painfully regretted on his deathbed his own exercise in literary falsehood known as the *Parliamentary Debates*.<sup>17</sup> His conscience should have felt violated by these largely phony debates, despite their being filled with fine oratory and astute political argumentation running every month for about three years in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (from November 1740 or July 1741 to 1743–4). They comprised his first major literary enterprise, a case of inspired Grub Street hackwork but essentially bogus and totally out of character with his normally career-long devotion to telling the truth. They remained an embarrassment to his biographers, not to be excused by their compassionate appeals to early daunting struggles for fame and fortune without a university degree or connections to forward his ambitions. At first he reportedly saw no imposture in taking up the task for his humorless boss, Edward Cave. He possibly enjoyed the otherwise burdensome act of writing because of the anonymity of literary fabrication, which protected him from having to answer for the quality of his performance. Perhaps too, the experience left him a later empathy with other literary sinners whom he, nevertheless, almost inevitably wound up censuring for violating truth.

The government had recently banned the popular magazine practice of printing the debates of Commons and Lords. To sidestep the legislative prohibition, somebody, perhaps Johnson, in 1738 – when Jonathan Swift was alive – proposed continuing the reporting under a thin disguise of newly discovered political deliberations of a nation made famous in *Gulliver's Travels*. The result was *Debates in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia*, the lead article for the June issue of 1738, launching a series of mostly made-up parliamentary speeches. Johnson seems to have been the anonymous author of much of this inaugural article, whether jointly scripted or of his own penning at least through the first fourteen paragraphs. The piece was a departure from his more usual grand style of compassionate moral reflection. It indulged in pseudo-Swiftian satire, audaciously advertising the whole fallacious undertaking as sharing the absolute truthfulness of its inspiration, *Gulliver's Travels*,

a relation, which (however rejected at its first Appearance, by some, as incredible, and criticis'd by others, as partial or ostentatious) has, with the Success almost always attendant on Probity and Truth, triumphed over all Opposition, gain'd Belief from the most obstinate Incredulity, and establish'd a Reputation in the World, which can fear no Diminution, nor admit of any Increase.<sup>18</sup>

Let this self-conscious nonsense be contrasted with Johnson's exactly opposite evaluation of the classic satire "written in open defiance of truth and regularity" in his *Life of Swift* forty years later, and something of his youthful impudence becomes apparent in devising a magazine article defiant of truth and regularity in its content.<sup>19</sup> The heavy-handed irony should have signaled a warning to readers to take his ostensible statements with a grain of salt as part of a patent journalistic trick for airing otherwise censured news. The shared recognition of the ruse by author and audience might have exonerated Johnson from liability to downright duplicity, were it not for the fact that the irony concealed a larger inexcusable ruse, namely, that the public would be duped into thinking all the made-up parliamentary debates to follow were genuine. While the boundaries of truth and falsehood slipped into one another, the article appropriately portrayed the Western World itself as a topsy-turvy arena of horrible human exploitation under cruel imperialism, whose foundation "is like the Mahometan World, which rests upon an Elephant, which is supported by a Stone, which is supported by nothing" (285). All is vacuous illusion, like the parliamentary debates filling future issues.

Although something in him years later took lingering pride in hearing unsuspecting readers praise his contributions as specimens of high oratory, Johnson ultimately repented this grand deception, concocted from slender materials or, usually, from none at all. The duty of a journalist, he would one day write, entailed obedience "at least to the first law of History, the Obligation to tell Truth."<sup>20</sup> He would try living up to that same ideal in literature generally and, as far as the parliamentary debates were concerned, he did what he could do to undo the damage of his indiscretion as a thoughtless novice writer. To that end he privately revealed his dishonest handiwork to acquaintances and publicly forswore its repetition in his prefatory address as editor of the *Literary Magazine* from 1756 to 1757. His would be a firm purpose of amendment never to tolerate a similar imposition in a magazine:

The speeches inserted in other papers have been long known to be fictitious, and produced sometimes by men who never heard the debate, nor had any authentic information. We have no Design to impose thus grossly on our Readers, and shall therefore give the naked arguments used in the discussion of every question and add, when they can be obtained, the Names of the Speakers.<sup>21</sup>

The final act of contrition occurred six days before his death. From a friendly printer paying his last respects, he borrowed early volumes of *The Gentleman's Magazine* and carefully bent the pages of his debates so as to



correct for posterity a disreputable episode of his early career hurtful to historical truth.

A notorious charlatan, George Psalmanazar (1697?–1763), offered Johnson a spectacular role model for doing penance to purge the sin of literary lying. In an age when such sinners abounded, Psalmanazar occupied the top tier of tricksters, whose unbelievable absurdities matched the incredible gullibility of an overly insular public. Passing himself off as a native of Formosa, he invented a language and history of the remote country so successfully as to make himself an exotic attraction for high and low in the city and at Oxford. His apparent conversion to a life of rectitude as an Anglican communicant flies in the face of the real possibility that his confessional posthumous autobiography was riddled with lies. Nonetheless, his public show of contrition won Johnson's enduring reverence, so much so that he turned over to Mrs. Thrale for her edification his copies of Psalmanazar's fake narrative and the suspect spiritual autobiography repudiating the hoax, *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa* (1704) and *Memoirs of \*\*\*\*\*. Commonly known by the Name of George Psalmanazar* (1764). Mrs. Thrale, aware of her companion's regard for the penitent, carefully inscribed each volume for placement in her magnificent new library at Streatham: "Given to H. L. Thrale by Dr. Sam: Johnson I suppose about the Year 1770."<sup>22</sup> Her dating was apt, coinciding with Johnson's diary entry for June of 1770 respectfully acknowledging "Psalmanazar whose life was I think, uniform."<sup>23</sup> By "uniform" the diarist meant overall righteousness wrested from the fortitude needed to abandon vice for virtue. The fellow's life seemed to have embodied the admired pattern of repentance for impostors that Johnson demanded for himself and others in his knockabout literary world.<sup>24</sup> The conscience-stricken tenor of his own end, whatever stark differences existed between fake political reporting and colossally fake Formosan impersonation, was in keeping with that puzzlingly worshipful attitude toward the rascal.

A more significant literary liar of Johnson's early acquaintance happened to be a Scotsman, William Lauder (1680–1771), a failed schoolmaster educated at the University of Edinburgh and dedicated to blackening John Milton's reputation. Crazy perhaps by a golf accident costing him a leg, Lauder migrated to London obsessing over the damage done to his academic prospects at home owing to a singularly petty cause. According to his later apologia overseen by Johnson, he had edited Arthur Johnston's Latin poetry for use as a school text and then blamed its rejection by the authorities on Pope's defaming Johnston in an odious

comparison with Milton in the *Dunciad*. Elsewhere he ascribed his animosity to a belief that Milton committed fraud in a work, *Eikon Basilike*, to damage the reputation of the executed King Charles I. What mighty contests rose from such trivial things! Beginning in January of 1747, a series of articles in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, dealing with suspected literary borrowings uncovered in *Paradise Lost*, seemed initially moderate enough in their claims. Curious and feeling compassionate toward this strange scholar ("he was deceived, by thinking the man too frantick to be fraudulent"), Johnson kindly took to ghostwriting Lauder's "Proposals" in August for a subscription in support of an edition of Hugo Grotius's *Adamus Exsul*, a supposed antecedent of Milton's epic.<sup>25</sup> The "Proposals" became the preface to Lauder's mean-spirited *Essay on Milton's Use and Imitation of the Moderns in His Paradise Lost* (14 December 1749). This disgraceful tome, 160 pages in length, set out to demonstrate that Milton shamelessly plagiarized from several neo-Latin sources, when, on the contrary, Lauder himself had interpolated lines from William Hogg's Latin translation of *Paradise Lost* into these obscure sources for doctored proof of Milton's alleged thefts.

Rendered guilty of wrongdoing by association with the daffy pedant, Johnson then and later stood unfairly accused of inveterate contempt for Milton's achievement because of his innocent connection with Lauder's malicious scheme. Such was not the case. The Johnsonian preface to the fraud contains not a whisper of nastiness toward Milton – actually termed the "mighty genius" – or any derogatory hints of plagiarism in "this great poem."<sup>26</sup> Even more, the ghostwritten postscript by Johnson constituted a moving testimony of esteem for Milton's memory by appealing for public charity on behalf of his indigent granddaughter in honor of "that poet, whose works may possibly be read when every other monument of British greatness shall be obliterated."<sup>27</sup> This eloquent praise contradicts the false stereotype of Johnson as the arch-traducer of Milton among literary critics. He remained by and large a neutral, unwitting partner in Lauder's bad business. Hence, immediately after he was publicly admonished to disassociate himself from Lauder in Rev. John Douglas's *Milton Vindicated from the Charge of Plagiarism* (26 November 1750), he engaged in damage control reflecting his innocence.

To that end he penned "A New Preface by the Publishers" (1 December 1750) advertising the perpetration of fraud. He also took the decisive step of ghostwriting a full-blown confession for Lauder, entitled *A Letter to the Reverend Mr. Douglas, Occasioned by his Vindication of Milton* (dated 20 December; published 2 January 1751). This secularized act of contrition

adhered to the penitential guidelines of mainstream Christianity. First, there was magnanimous acknowledgment of the rectitude of any offended parties, followed by full avowal of the sinner's particular fault in unflinching detail, proceeding to a prayer for pardon and redemptive absolution reconciling the sinner with the good and the godly of this world and the next, and ending with a promise of amendment and a pious reminder of our common susceptibility to vice in the treacherous pilgrimage of life:

On the sincerity and punctuality of this confession, I am willing to depend for all the future regard of mankind, and cannot but indulge some hopes, that they, whom my offence has alienated from me, may by this instance of ingenuity and repentance, be propitiated and reconciled. Whatever be the event, I shall, at least, have done all that can be done in reparation of my former injuries to Milton, to truth, and to mankind; and entreat that those who shall continue implacable, will examine their own hearts, whether they have not committed equal crimes without equal proofs of sorrow, or equal acts of atonement.<sup>28</sup>

Johnson would soon recommend such edifying openheartedness to human frailty for the reduction of capital punishment in *Rambler* 114 and, later on, for the merciful forgiveness of Rev. William Dodd, executed for forgery in 1777. The utter absence of contrition in the *Ossian* fraud would only have aggravated the gravity of Macpherson's literary crime in the conscience-laden recesses of Johnson's mind. As it was, he probably had to force the public confession on the prevaricating Lauder, who ruined the penitential spirit of the piece by appending testimonies of his good character as well as a postscript lamely defending his indefensible behavior.

Should Johnson have felt guilty about his acts of ghostwriting in this episode or, for that matter, on any other occasion in his career? A few commentators have deemed his ventriloquism as bordering on literary fraud and, in the case of Lauder, as tainting him with criminal complicity. But should this interpretation have any validity, Johnson himself seems never to have considered his ghostwriting culpable conduct, whether for profit or out of kindness to friends. And he was famously supersensitive about sinfulness. Not a single diary entry, soul-searching prayer, or revealing letter registered self-doubt throughout all his many references to unheralded authorship for others, even in the sacrosanct area of scripting sermons for ministers of the Gospel. Indeed, a humble prayer for God's illumination preceded his secret collaboration on the political-legal writings of William Gerard Hamilton and Sir Robert Chambers in the later 1760s. Nor did his foremost early biographers – Boswell, Mrs. Thrale, and Sir John Hawkins – ever judge such efforts as anything more than

unsung acts of generosity conferring style, wisdom, and honor on the compositions of acquaintances.<sup>29</sup>

It is true that early in his career Johnson at least once had kind words for authorial candor about silent contributions by others in his early biography of Richard Savage:

A kinder name than that of vanity ought to be given to the delicacy with which he was always careful to separate his own merit from every other man's, and to reject that praise to which he had no claim. He did not forget, in mentioning his performances, to mark every line that had been suggested or amended; and was so accurate, as to relate that he owed three words in *The Wanderer* to the advice of friends.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, near the end of his life, he at least once castigated posthumous editorial tampering with an author's text in his biography of James Thomson:

The poem of *Liberty* does not now appear in its original state; but . . . was shortened by Sir George Lyttelton, with a liberty which, as it has a manifest tendency to lessen the confidence of society, and to confound the characters of authors, by making one man write by the judgement of another, cannot be justified by any supposed propriety of the alteration, or kindness of the friend. – I wish to see it exhibited as its author left it. (IV: 99)

However perilously close these statements came to being in conflict with Johnson's literary ventriloquism, his readiness to render others unacknowledged aid, by direct engagement or preparatory supervision, lasted a lifetime of writing. His anonymous editorial responsibilities for *The Gentleman's Magazine* would in themselves have constituted an indelible early apprenticeship in ghostwriting. What became a routine business obligation of his lean years in Grub Street, where anonymity probably liberated him from the demands of known authorship under unpredictable public scrutiny, might have dulled his conscience from anxious self-examination over any possibly disturbing implications of the practice. As a consequence, he saw ghostwriting not as a matter of deceitful collusion but as a well-honed professional activity in editing and instructing, analogous to an academic's monitoring the performances of less experienced student writers in the form of subsidiary hands-on assistance to improve communication, stimulate productivity, and promote knowledge. It represented for him a helping hand to another author, devoid of any design to dupe readers. Normally firm and frank about bowing to truth, he did not, for good or ill, consider truth violated or his integrity compromised by employing an anonymous pen for the

benefit of writers and their readers. That so scrupulous a moralist as Johnson found no fault in this activity lends only further complication to critical probings of the complicated ethics of literary ventriloquism.

The Lauder affair was a cause of embarrassment rather than a source of consuming guilt afflicting a co-conspirator bent on doing Milton wrong. Johnson was deceived himself and, once the truth came out, was quick to expose a deception never of his devising. Had he believed himself morally disgraced, why would he then have independently turned to writing about Milton in the *Rambler* and reminded readers of his connection with a disgraced Milton-basher? Only months before, just after Lauder published his dishonest charges of Miltonic plagiarism, Johnson on 5 April 1750 donated a laudatory verse "Prologue" for a benefit performance of *Comus* to aid Milton's indigent granddaughter: "At length our mighty Bard's victorious Lays / Fill the loud Voice of universal Praise."<sup>31</sup> This acknowledgment of the great poet's return to favor by the early eighteenth century certainly avoids Lauder's vindictiveness. Even as public scandal erupted at the end of 1750, Johnson, far from feeling tainted by his associate's turpitude, evidently capitalized on the publicity by devoting moral essays to literary criticism on Milton. In the wake of Lauder's discomfiture, *Ramblers* 78 and 80 (8 and 18 December) discussed self-delusion and dishonesty respectively: "Whoever commits a fraud is guilty not only of the particular injury to him whom he deceives, but of the diminution of that confidence which constitutes not only the ease but the existence of society."<sup>32</sup> After the ghostwritten confession of Lauder appeared in the new year, Johnson launched an essay evaluation of *Paradise Lost* in imitation of Addison's *Spectator* and without any of Lauder's pathological rancor. Whereas *Ramblers* 86 and 88 (12 and 19 January) corrected a false taste for Miltonic versification and rugged language, *Ramblers* 90 and 91 (26 January and 9 February) extolled the poet's harmony and invention, while *Rambler* 93 (5 February) turned this evenhanded study into a lesson for literary critics to cultivate impartiality always. Accordingly, when, half a year later, *Ramblers* 139 and 140 concluded the series on Milton, balanced assessment emerged as the hallmark of literary inquiry: "Such are the faults and such the beauties of *Samson Agonistes*, which I have shown with no other purpose than to promote the knowledge of true criticism."<sup>33</sup> Because Johnson never succumbed to idolatry for any author, enthusiasts then and now have sometimes dismissed his brilliant pursuit of measured, capaciously alert literary criticism as intellectually narrow and condescending. Boswell long ago tried removing that misconception in the *Life of Johnson*, especially about his

subject's genuine veneration of Milton the epic poet, if not the radical republican, and Boswell was correct to do so.<sup>34</sup>

Lauder's story lacks a tidy ending. All the trouble Johnson had taken to ensure that the reprobate Scotsman came clean with the public turned out to be a waste of time. Lauder made a bad confession after all for failing to amend his mad career of defaming Milton. In March 1751 he printed an unapologetic *Apology* retrieving the Archbishop of Canterbury's patronage for the 1752 publication of a two-volume study of ninety-seven authors supposedly pillaged in *Paradise Lost*. Reviving false evidence of plagiarism, he also developed a new line of attack suggested recently by Thomas Birch's *Life of Milton*. Birch's appendix made reference to an allegation that Milton under Cromwell planted a pagan prayer from Sidney's *Arcadia* into Charles I's parting words before execution, in *Eikon Basilike*, to show up the pious martyr king as nothing but an infidel plagiarist on the scaffold. Lauder uncritically pounced on this rumor as prime ammunition for more Milton-bashing in "King Charles I Vindicated from the *Charge of Plagiarism* Brought against him by *Milton*, and *Milton* himself convicted of several *Forgeries* and gross *Impositions on the Public*" (1756). Once again, Rev. John Douglas in print made short work of this foolish pamphlet.

Prior to this final humiliation, Lauder all along proved himself incorrigibly ingenious in his mendacity. A passage from an unpublished letter to Birch in 1751 reveals a self-deluded man incapable of differentiating truth from falsehood under the pressure of self-preservation. In it Lauder had the temerity to tell a fed-up Birch that all his previously empty claims of literary thievery in *Paradise Lost* were only intentional falsehoods for generating publicity highlighting Milton's more heinous crime of falsely maligning King Charles:

Thus I have told you Sincerely the true Motive that induc'd me to interpolate a few lines into some Authors quoted by me in my late Essay on Milton, which has made as great a noise almost, as if I had denied the Divinity of our Saviour, ridiculed his Miracles, or declar'd open war against Heaven & Earth: And yet not above twenty or thirty Lines at most, of Milton were affected by them . . .<sup>35</sup>

If Lauder had exasperated Birch and Douglas, then he must have frustrated Johnson mightily. Exposed as an unstable personality, he eventually drifted away from London controversy into impoverished obscurity and death at Barbados in 1771.

Johnson, it seems, entirely washed his hands of this unrepentant eccentric and yet did obliquely allude to Lauder's scholarly obsessions many

years afterwards. The *Life of Milton*, for example, mentioned Milton's alleged slander of Charles I but the regicides, rather than the poet, received the lion's share of the blame for forging royal records. A final summing up of the genesis of *Paradise Lost* provided an even more telling indicator of Johnson's mature response to the fraud and its unavailing depreciation of the great epic on the unconvincing basis of conjectural source-hunting:

Whence he drew the original design has been variously conjectured, by men who cannot bear to think themselves ignorant of that which, at last, neither diligence nor sagacity can discover . . . He was naturally a thinker for himself, confident of his own abilities, and disdainful of help or hindrance: he did not refuse admission to the thoughts or images of his predecessors, but he did not seek them.<sup>36</sup>

Here clearly Johnson had distanced himself from anything smacking of Lauder's duplicitous and delirious campaign of defamation, notwithstanding grave reservations about Milton's politics, religion, and personality in the *Life of Milton*.

Exacting standards of discriminating literary inquiry went hand in hand with an irrepressible skepticism in all areas of historical writing. He insisted that

distrust is a necessary qualification of a student in history. Distrust quickens his discernment of different degrees of probability, animates his search after evidence, and, perhaps, heightens his pleasure at the discovery of truth; for truth, though not always obvious, is generally discoverable . . .<sup>37</sup>

Johnson's interest in history, if liable to be underestimated, was serious and embraced the languages and antiquities of the British Isles within a European context reaching to classical times. Early on he meditated various historical projects, and an obscure book review for *The Gentleman's Magazine* in July of 1742 seemed very much in line with his curiosity about the wellsprings of British civilization:

But if it be considered that by the Conquests of the *Northern Nations* the whole Face of *Europe* was changed, and that new Laws and Customs were established and new Languages were produced by them, which remain at this Day among us, it will appear not useless to attend to the Customs and Transactions of those Times, from which, however they are censured for Barbarity, many excellent Laws are derived; and to examine the Manners of those Men who have at least some Right to our Regard as our Ancestors, and from this Nation a Particular Title to Veneration as the Authors of our Constitution and the Fathers of Liberty.<sup>38</sup>



The gist of this forgotten notice paralleled advice tied to Johnson's first major historical project, his compilation of a sales catalog for the voluminous Harleian Library in 1742:

The northern nations have supplied this collection, not only with history, but poetry, with Gothick antiquities and Runick inscriptions; which, at least, have this claim to veneration above the remains of the Roman magnificence, that they are the works of those heroes by whom the Roman empire was destroyed; and which may plead, at least in this nation, that they ought not to be neglected by those that owe to the men whose memories they preserve, their constitution, their properties, and their liberties.<sup>39</sup>

The problem he found with accounts of remote antiquity, including studies of his own island, lay in their inordinate reliance on sheer speculation for lack of reliable data:

All that is really *known* of the ancient state of Britain is contained in a few pages. We can know no more than what the old writers have told us; yet what large books have we upon it, the whole of which, excepting such parts are taken from those old writers, is all a dream . . .<sup>40</sup>

The best historiography adhered firmly and faithfully, as far as possible, to firsthand factual evidence in an engaging elegant style that managed to tell the truth attractively without slanting or fictionalizing human experience. Thus the least intrusion of invention in biography and history, when compromised by imaginary conversations or events and impossibly omniscient narration, was anathema. Even if the result had to be nothing but a spartan recording of simple chronology, nothing was to interfere with the empirically recoverable reality of the past as deduced from painstaking examination and conservative interpretation of surviving information. Superior to fiction by virtue of its direct grounding in fact, history constituted a discipline dependent on memory, which, whether trustworthy or not, lay at the heart of one's sense of personal identity and external reality. As Imlac stated so superbly in *Rasselas*, "To judge rightly of the present we must oppose it to the past; for all judgment is comparative, and of the future nothing can be known."<sup>41</sup> Such a lofty philosophical perspective made even lowly antiquaries, often amateur specialists given to collecting odd rarities, contributors to a proper understanding of the human condition past and present. Helpmates of historians, antiquaries could arouse frequent ridicule in Johnson's moral essays for their devotion to arcane studies but not without due acknowledgment of their value for enlarging learning and harmless human



pleasures. In that respectful spirit Boswell found himself urged seriously to become an antiquary of his Lowland language and heritage for a history of his homeland: “‘Make a large book; a folio.’ BOSWELL. ‘But of what use will it be, Sir?’ JOHNSON. ‘Never mind the use. Do it.’”<sup>42</sup>

Johnson had brilliantly practiced what he preached to Boswell in the greatest historical project of his life, and perhaps of his century, on behalf of his country and of the entire English-speaking world. This was *A Dictionary of the English Language*, an encyclopedic stocktaking of the nation’s linguistic resources propitiously timed to coincide with the expansion of the British empire spreading the tongue of a formerly marginalized island people around the world. Today’s global hegemony of the language promoted by his masterwork outlasted the legacy of British imperialism that Johnson so loathed. And yet he perceived the aptness of an imperial metaphor to describe his lexicographical undertaking throughout an eight-year ordeal that sealed his commitment to historical and linguistic study and refined his rigorously pragmatic sense of the hit-or-miss nature of societal change and human progress.<sup>43</sup> His was in its own way a veritable history of England through the recording of words, etymologies, definitions, and illustrations of usage embodying verbally the country’s literary and cultural heritage from the early modern era to contemporary times. As early as his *Plan for a Dictionary of the English Language* (1747), he likened his language to the British Constitution as a product of homebred evolution and foreign invasion. Like the immemorial formation of the English body politic, its venerable make-up similarly inspired a conservative political loyalty to “general custom” as the fundamental guideline for its evaluation. An initial resolve to fix the hallowed inheritance of words, motivated by naive patriotism to preserve the past, collided with the ungovernable chaos of linguistic development that remained resistant to rationalist regulation or radical reform. True to the ruling political metaphor, he portrayed himself as a tentative empire-builder and founding magistrate in the mould of a Britain-bound Caesar, trying to impose a little law and order on a virgin wilderness of words: “I shall be considered as exercising a kind of vicarious jurisdiction” under an imperially generous patron, Lord Chesterfield.<sup>44</sup>

As it happened, great expectations of taming and stabilizing the national legacy of words moderated significantly in the patronless and often thankless enterprise to be introduced by the somber Preface to a *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). The previous persona of an imperial conqueror dwindled now to far more modest self-characterization as a

mere military engineer/settler, clearing the way through a daunting domain and reduced to a strictly experiential and very limited ordering of a “wild and barbarous jargon.”<sup>45</sup> Permeating the famous preface was a new wizened sense of evanescence in language and in life. He still aspired to “constancy and stability” (xviii: 78) so as to safeguard “the genius of our tongue” (xviii: 95) with roots in ancient Germanic, enriched by the Latin of the Church and the classics, modified by Norman incursions of medieval French, but in danger of modern corruption from effete Frenchification. Hence, his project endorsed the goal of arresting degeneration and maintaining the native hardiness of a language descending from barbaric orality and polished by the spread of literacy and then of printing.

In this regard, a key three-stage assumption of historical progress, best summed up in *Idler* 63, governed his outlook on linguistics, human life, and *belles lettres*. Language, like literature and society, displayed a recurrent pattern of development from (1) rude simplicity to (2) civilized convenience and elegant variety into (3) luxurious over-refinement and decline, whenever controllable forces of decay contaminated cultural advancement. According to this grand scheme of historical progress, a middle stage of ripeness and civilized improvement offered the ideal measure of excellence for adjudicating everything, including linguistic usage. However, the final third of the preface gravely acknowledged the failure to attain any such ideal in the postlapsarian world of language and human endeavor. Devoid of the buoyant metaphorical imperialism in earlier writing, the closing paragraphs of the preface added up to a moving *memento mori* related to the moral vision in his classic poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.

There was clear-sighted recognition of irresistible change and inevitable decay undercutting all previous hopes and dreams. Johnson had come to see his *Dictionary* as a desperate effort to keep his living language alive, his ebbing linguistic heritage vital, and even his mortal British Constitution viable, before death destroyed all in the long run, whether it be the language, the nation, or the widowed lexicographer himself. No “dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from decay” (xviii: 105). No lexicographer, he had to concede, could create a linguistic utopia or reclaim words from the impact of human folly, vanity, and affectation productive of linguistic alteration. His great work, after all, served the patriotic goal of collecting the national heritage of words before its unavoidable extinction one day. It would help, albeit for a limited time

only, to ward off the grim specter of inexorable mutability and mortality, however imperfect and finally impossible his whole mission might be:

Life may be lengthened by care, though death cannot be ultimately defeated: tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language. In hope of giving longevity to that which our own nature forbids to be immortal, I have devoted this book, the labour of years, to the honour of my country, that we may no longer yield the palm of philology, without a contest, to the nations of the continent . . . (XVIII: 109)

This grandiloquent appraisal was an elegy for a decaying England rather than a paean for expanding empire. And yet, paradoxically, it was empire that would invigorate and extend English into the *lingua franca* of modernity. Furthermore, contrary to his pessimistic tone, this hard “labour of years” ended not in personal failure but in bracing international acclaim.

That he knew very well the nationalistic dimension of his dictionary-making finds confirmation in his letter to a celebrated literary historian and minor poet, Thomas Warton, at Oxford. Looking forward to publication at long last, Johnson delicately inquired about the possibility of an MA degree to grace his name on the title page, not so much to compensate for an incomplete university education but to advertise the high seriousness of his work. Diplomatically complimenting the Oxford don for a recent study of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, he implied that his forthcoming *Dictionary* served a similar patriotic purpose “for the advancement of the literature of our native Country.”<sup>46</sup> His appeal proved successful, and Warton entertained him on his first sojourn to the university since his impoverished departure from Pembroke College a quarter-century earlier. The contrast between his past misfortunes and present prospects of literary greatness must have made this an exquisitely joyous visit, capped by a meeting with the Radclivian Librarian, Rev. Francis Wise, a devoted antiquary who could not resist reading a dissertation on recondite Greek mythology to his company. Johnson heartily disliked such arcane exercises but, needing his two English hosts to secure him an MA, kept himself in good humor. Particularly pleasing to him was Wise’s well-stocked personal library, a virtual “nest of British and Saxon antiquities,” to which Johnson paid a return visit a year later, after a promise to lend a Finnish dictionary, “the only copy perhaps in England.”<sup>47</sup> Whatever his reservations about antiquarianism, he had toyed with the idea of publishing some sort of compilation of historical lore focused on his homeland: “I remember Dr Johnson once told me he had intended

in an early part of his Life to compose a Dictionary of English or British Antiquities.”<sup>48</sup> Later on, he let himself dabble in it as a pastime and was curious about the budding field of comparative mythology, as expounded in Jacob Bryant’s *A New System of Ancient Mythology* (1774–6):

though at first not disposed to relish it, as thinking it too fanciful, yet he said as he looked further into it, he found the Author bring together so many particulars in support of his Opinion, that he could not but think it highly remarkable.<sup>49</sup>

Johnson had come a long way from the mocking disparagement of virtuoso antiquaries enumerated in *Rambler* 177, such as the single-minded pedant bent on collecting “old ballads, for he considered them as the genuine records of the national taste” (*The Rambler*, v: 171).

Although Johnson later gained unwelcome notoriety for mocking the growing fashion of folk poetry, it is less well known that he gave positive assistance to the century’s foremost authority on English ballads, destined to become a fellow foe of Macpherson in the *Ossian* controversy. This was the eminent Thomas Percy (1729–1811), an energetic scholar-prelate highly flattered by the opportunity of entering the orbit of Dictionary Johnson through the mediation of James Grainger in the summer of 1756. Percy was then almost middle-aged, presiding over two Anglican livings around Easton Maudit, Northhamptonshire, a remote parish well north of Oxford. In London he had promised to gather subscriptions for the long-awaited edition of Shakespeare, Johnson’s next major project, coming into being fitfully during the entire time of their closest association. Percy had a very important literary venture of his own to carry out. In 1753 he accidentally came upon a seventeenth-century commonplace book of transcripts of ballads, romances, and songs in danger of destruction. Thinking of publishing this rarity, he at first said nothing to anyone, including his former college classmate and minor poet, William Shenstone. Not until the autumn of 1757 did Johnson become apprised of the discovery, but once he gained Percy’s confidence, he had the honor of becoming one of the prime movers of the most famous antiquarian collection of his nation’s folklore at that time, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765): “Mr. Johnson has seen my MS. & has a Desire to have it printed.”<sup>50</sup>

Soon again, on 9 January 1758, even more substantial support seemed in the offing:

It was the importunity of my friend Mr. Johnson, that exhorted a promise of this kind from me [about publishing the text]. – Indeed he made me very tempting offers: for he promised to assist me in selecting the most valuable pieces & in

revising the Text of those he selected: Nay further, if I would leave a blank Page between every two that I transcrib'd, he would furnish it with proper Notes, &c. &c. — a work for which he was peculiarly fitted by his great Acquaintance with all our old English Romances &c . . . (folios 10a–b)

At this point, Percy later inserted a red-ink footnote indicative perhaps of testiness over any impression that Johnson deserved sharing credit for producing the *Reliques*: “These Promises he never executed: nor except a few slight hints, delivered *viva voce*, did he furnish any Contributions, &c.” Besides revealing his self-consciousness about writing private correspondence for posterity, this footnote was a misleading afterthought about the reality of their collaboration. Their consultations, if casual and periodic, were nonetheless vital for the book’s eventual publication and for the composition of the dedication, possibly a little of the preface, and some of the glossary. Joint deliberations affected aspects of the book’s initial conception and execution, so much so that Johnson’s slow progress on Shakespeare combined with Percy’s marriage in 1757 to delay significant work on the *Reliques* for almost two years. By his own testimony, Percy let his coadjutor determine when preparations would begin in earnest: “After all, I shall be in no hurry to enter upon my task: it was agreed that I was to receive a Summons first from Mr. Johnson and he has his hands full at present” (folio 10b).

Most troubling was not Percy’s minimizing the contributions of others but his remark that Johnson offered to help “in revising the Text.” This early editorial decision to tamper with manuscript content constituted the most controversial feature of the venture, causing severe critics like Joseph Ritson to disparage the *Reliques* for a corrupting misrepresentation of traditional folklore. Who was responsible for this questionable editorial policy? Johnson and Shenstone evidently supported it, and either of these advisors could have suggested it. But Percy, the ultimate caretaker of the project, was just as likely to have laid down the guidelines for his helpers to endorse. Why Johnson even went along with this intrusive policy remains open to speculation. The absence of any authoritative originals behind the variant and mutilated texts available to Percy might have seemed reason enough for accepting editorial revisions of ephemeral literary material already subjected to repeated recension in oral tradition and print literacy. Then too, according to Johnson’s three-stage assumption of historical progress from rudeness through civilization to decadence, balladry represented a primitive form of popular poetry in need of editorial polish for civilized modern readers. This bias against the natural simplicity of the past pervaded the Johnsonian dedication for the *Reliques*

and spilled over into the preface drafted by Percy in his collaborator's company. Although reading poetry of sentimental simplicity could bring tears to Johnson's eyes, he disdained a fashionable affectation of literary naturalness in a contrived ballad like *Hardyknute*, which he correctly suspected of being a modern forgery: "People talk of nature. But mere obvious nature may be exhibited with very little power of mind."<sup>51</sup> As a result, artfully unleashing all the rhetorical power of cultivated verse had top priority in his mind.

Whoever inspired the plan, refashioning the "rude" verse in the *Reliques* happened often, if usually in minor ways. The editor, to his credit, made frequent use of quotation marks to signal extensive interference. Unfortunately, he left silent some negligible and substantial alterations, and at least nine ballads fell victim to wholesale "correction" for a false literary heightening.<sup>52</sup> Johnson's subscribing to these methods, if understandable for a bystander favoring civilized literary artistry, does not entirely correlate with his editorial pronouncements elsewhere. On the one hand, he rejected any modernizing tampering with texts in his edition of Shakespeare:

if phraseology is to be changed as words grow uncouth by disuse, or gross by vulgarity, the history of every language will be lost; we shall no longer have the words of any authour; and, as these alterations will be often unskillfully made, we shall in time have very little meaning.<sup>53</sup>

On the other hand, his *Life of Gray* praised the poet's refinement of wild Germanic and Welsh literature in English: "the imagery is preserved, perhaps often improved . . ."<sup>54</sup> Evidently for the sake of enlightened polish, primitive poetry permitted editorial liberties, whereas modern literature did not. And yet did not Johnson cite the *Reliques* in his edition of Shakespeare for authoritative texts to demonstrate emendations in ballads found in plays like *Othello*? "This couplet is not in the ballad, which is the complaint, not of a woman forsaken, but of a man rejected. These lines were probably added when it was accommodated to a woman."<sup>55</sup> If Percy's ballad was itself liable to be corrupted in the *Reliques*, then how could anybody confidently conjecture what the bard did or did not add to it? The inconsistency seems simply never to have crossed Johnson's mind, even though it casts serious doubt on Percy's editorial practices.

Apparently not until 1760, after a two-year hiatus, did Percy push ahead with his project by finding a publisher. This revived activity coincided with the renewal of Johnson's assistance. On 4 October Johnson wrote apologetically about his lengthy silence but now undertook a personal inquiry

with the Dodsley brothers about prospects for publication. James Dodsley made an offer soon to be retracted temporarily, not "so good as might be hoped, nor so bad as might be feared," according to a shrewd Johnsonian calculation of profits.<sup>56</sup> The matter did not rest there; Johnson two months later sought an alternative printer to spur on the undertaking: "I went this morning to Mr. Millar, and found him very well disposed to your project. I told him the price of 3 vols. was an hundred guineas to which he made no objection."<sup>57</sup> However, reservations about letting Andrew Millar circulate Percy's papers in strange hands put the project on hold. As Shenstone's advisory role waned, Johnson's solicitousness intensified, and by 19 May 1761 Percy engaged in serious discussions with him in London about both the ballads and the final choice of publisher, namely, James Dodsley. As a sign of serious progress well under way, six or so further visits with Johnson took place over the summer, buttressed by consultation with other helpers, like Dr. Richard Farmer at Cambridge University, to enrich his collection with more ballad treasures. Less than a quarter of the almost two hundred pieces in the *Reliques* came from the folio manuscript discovered by Percy. The process of gathering up new specimens of antique verse to fill the projected three volumes of the work would require considerable time, research, and reflection. Henceforth, active participation by Johnson declined, at least by 12 September 1761, when he refused his first invitation to visit Easton Maudit owing to George III's coronation, "after which I purpose to pass some time with you."<sup>58</sup> But no such rendezvous came to pass for a long while.

In Johnson's absence, Percy could fortunately rely on the learned company of a fellow Anglican minister, old Edward Lye (1694–1767), at the vicarage of Yardley Hastings, Northamptonshire. Country prelates like these men, well-educated members of the only profession accorded some aristocratic dignity without noble birth, served a valuable and often overlooked function of introducing not only piety but also a measure of polish and learning to the remotest English parishes. Often zealous scholars in their own right, they contributed large numbers to the substantial corps of antiquaries flourishing throughout Great Britain in the century. Lye's specialty lay in ancient Germanic lore, and his bringing out the manuscript of Francis Junius's *Etymologicum Anglicanum* with an Anglo-Saxon grammar, followed by an edition of Gothic Gospels, graced his membership in the Society of Antiquaries. His current labor, the preparation of an Anglo-Saxon and Gothic dictionary, would naturally have attracted the attention and patronage of Dictionary Johnson. Ailing as well as aged, Lye looked to free himself from the straitened



circumstances of his country parsonage for the sake of pushing forward with his ambitious scholarship. A good-hearted priest like Percy, sensitive to the concerns of needy curates, tried to come to his aid. Johnson too, compassionate as usual and intent on promoting linguistic studies of all kinds, took up the cause with alacrity. Recently pensioned himself, he joined Percy in probing the possibility of obtaining a governmental subsidy for Lye on 3 September 1763: "I have never seen Lord Bute since we talked together. But I do not despair, I wait for calmer times and will then try the fate of our petition."<sup>59</sup> No royal pension materialized, but Johnson lent further support more effectually by finding Lye a publisher and managing a subscription for printing costs.

Performing this new unsung act of kindness required a sampling of Lye's Anglo-Saxon and Gothic dictionary and a detailed estimate of costs for a prospective printer. What follows is a previously unpublished letter from Percy to Johnson, complying with a request for information to initiate the process of publication in London:

Our friend Mr. Lye after having been long confined by a severe fit of Illness, at length begins to venture out and this day for the first time dines at my home. Tho' still incapable of holding a pen, he begins to renew his attention to business, and has desired me to thank you in his name for your obliging offer with regard to his Saxon Dictionary. Inclosed I send a Specimen of the Work, a calculation of the Expence attending it, and a copy of Mr. Blair's Letter containing Lord Granville's proffered assistance. With regard to Mr Prince's Estimate, Mr Lye desires me to observe that he is [of] opinion, [that *deleted*] the work will extend to 200 sheets, for which an additional allowance will be made: As for his expences of attendance at the press &c. he has not thought necessary to take notice of them, tho' they will not be trifling.

Mr Lye joins with me in wishing that you wd. give him an opportunity of conferring with you on this subject by making your promised visit into Northamptonshire; and in the mean time begs the favour of you to accept of a Copy of his Edition of the Gothic Gospels, which you will be pleased to send for to Mr. Hobson's in Searjeant's Inn, Fleetstreet, who upon sight of this Letter will deliver it to your servant.

My wife joins with me in most respectful Compliments to yourself and Miss Williams, and in hoping we shall be favoured with the Company of you both.<sup>60</sup>

The gift of the Gothic Gospels duly found its way into Johnson's private library. Lye himself, tired of waiting for Johnson to visit Easton Maudit, talked with him about publication plans in London on 10 April 1764. Welcome news a year later confirmed that all went very well with the subscription, especially after a liberal donation from the Archbishop of Canterbury and from the prospect of more patrons from members of



the clergy and Johnson's own Club. "If you print at London," Johnson wrote reassuringly, "you will like Mr. Allen the printer better than most others. He is a Northamptonshire Man. Go on boldly, I doubt not your Success."<sup>61</sup> Edmund Allen in fact took up the commission, and within months Johnson sent sound advice about printing matters and readying proposals for the subscription. By 8 March 1766 he happily announced that at long last sheets were coming off the press and that "all the club subscribes."<sup>62</sup> Sadly, Lye never lived to see his work finished or in print. Shortly after his death in 1767, another antiquary, Rev. Owen Manning, took charge of completing for Allen *Dictionarum Saxonico- et Gothico-Latinum* (1772). All Johnson's generous effort had the productive outcome of helping to make public a fellow lexicographer's final contribution to philological learning.

At the same time Percy's *Reliques* moved steadily toward its own completion, without any direct intervention from Johnson until almost the eve of its publication. Another helpmate, Richard Farmer, a Cambridge don and scholar of Shakespeare, received regular updates from Easton Maudit about Johnson's concurrent research on the bard's plays. Johnson's plans for an appendix would allow acquaintances to contribute notes to his much-heralded edition, and Percy seized the chance to hand over a few observations published eventually in the critical apparatus for *Henry IV*, *Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Othello*: "I have accordingly transmitted him a few trifling ones. – *Have you any inclination to become a contributor? – If so now's your time.*"<sup>63</sup> Farmer declined the invitation but did join forces with Percy in a task of some value to Johnson, that of compiling ballads illustrating Shakespeare for volume 11 of the *Reliques*. Otherwise, Percy grew strangely protective about keeping Farmer's research away from Johnson's notice. He dearly wanted the celebrated editor of Shakespeare under his roof at Easton Maudit but to be left inhospitably segregated from Farmer's potentially beneficial scholarship: "Yet Johnson is come here, no more than yourself. – What an aggregate of disappointments . . . *I shall be one of the first to desire you . . . not to part with your remarks to any other person, not even to my friend Mr. J- - - n.*"<sup>64</sup> Exactly why Percy adopted this conspiratorial stance is unclear. Was he reacting to Johnson's notoriously careless handling of other people's borrowed materials in his research? Or was Percy, illiberally playing one friend off against another, succumbing to a scholar's peccadillo of hoarding discoveries so that another scholar could not take credit for them? Whatever his motive for secretiveness, he had the long-deferred pleasure of greeting Johnson

and Anna Williams at Easton Maudit on a first and only visit, from 25 June to 18 August 1764.

The extended sojourn offered the harried Shakespeare editor a desperately needed escape from coping with depression and the seemingly never-ending demands of a daunting and increasingly distasteful project announced almost twenty years ago. Cramped quarters notwithstanding, Percy's lovely thatched cottage with a fine garden and noble vista afforded the guests a tranquil setting for rubbing shoulders with his pretty young wife, their little children, and a stream of local visitors eager to meet the great man. For both the host and the visitor, the long stay turned into a productive vacation, each involving himself in the other's work of putting the finishing touches to their respective editions. It marked their most intense collaboration since the mutual decision to prepare the *Reliques* for publication three or so years earlier, and it was their last prolonged coming together for the rest of their lives. Johnson received proof sheets for *Othello*, read the glossary for volume I of the *Reliques*, gave advice for a printing of the *Spectator* essays, and probably took special interest in volume II, containing Percy's essay on the early English stage and ballads illustrating Shakespeare. Midway in the visit Percy wrote to Farmer again about contributing last-minutes notes to the Shakespeare edition, with yet another warning about reserving any research findings for his own scholarship. A sneak preview of Johnson's proof sheets grudgingly elicited high praise:

*from what I have seen, I can venture to assure You that the work is by no means contemptible, & will not do him discredit.* Over and above the Annotations, he has given at the end of each play a short *Critique*, on the general merits of it, which as far as I have seen is new & masterly.<sup>65</sup>

As for the completion of the *Reliques* during Johnson's stay at Easton Maudit, two indispensable chores remained undone, the crafting of a dedication and a preface for the entire compendium of ballads, songs, sonnets, and romances. As his visit came to a close, Johnson on 13 August 1764 transformed Percy's preliminary draft into a majestic "Dedication to the Countess of Northumberland," elevating the *Reliques* into something akin to his own *Dictionary* for offering a virtual literary history of the country from early times. Philosophical generalizations here would reverberate in the preface to follow. According to the dedication, these "reliques," a term implying timeworn sacredness, could serve as vital tools of historical inquiry for recovering the ancient past. In this regard, a Johnsonian three-stage theory of historical progress justified the appearance

of the *Reliques* and its patronizing critical and editorial perspective on how the public should react to its uncouth content:

No active or comprehensive mind can forbear some attention to the reliques of antiquity: it is prompted by natural curiosity to survey the progress of life and manners, and to inquire by what gradations barbarity was civilized, grossness refined, and ignorance instructed.<sup>66</sup>

With these sentiments likely in mind, Percy on 16 August prepared an apologetic preface, confessing his initial reluctance to publish in order to compliment, first and foremost, two men from among the many who made the compilation possible: "At length the importunity of his friends prevailed, and he could refuse nothing to such judges as the author of the *Rambler*, and the late Mr. *Shenstone*."<sup>67</sup> To render unsophisticated poems worthy of a civilized modern readership, Percy set forth his dubious rationale of strategic editorial polishing. He blithely implied that a little civilizing of the primitive made the poetry more palatable, without undermining its historicity "as of genuine and undoubted antiquity." Contradiction of course bedeviled his compromise solution for editing: "His object was to please both the judicious antiquary and the reader of taste; and he hath endeavoured to gratify both without offending either" (I: x–xi). Although the editorially refined *Reliques* had an incalculable effect on British Romanticism for a "reader of taste" like Wordsworth or Coleridge, not a few future antiquaries would take mighty offence at the liberties employed in textual transcription. More emendation of the preface occurred in mid-autumn, possibly in further consultation with "my oracle," Johnson, prior to the publication of the whole work on 11 February 1765, well in advance of the appearance of the edition of Shakespeare's plays on 10 October.<sup>68</sup> As Johnson looked to the end of his own long labor, he might have sensed the admittedly subdued recognition of his loyal assistance from the proud editor of the *Reliques*: "To the friendship of Mr. *Johnson* he owes many valuable hints for the conduct of the work" (I: xii). More, it seems, might have been acknowledged in return for what Percy derived from that friendship.

Any consideration of Johnson's part in the *Ossian* controversy must take into account his commitment to the *Reliques* on historical grounds, well before Macpherson ever went public with his sensational fabrications. If it is true that Johnson favored refined modern poetry, then it is also evident that his longstanding interest in probing the remote past piqued his curiosity about the new romantic vogue for antique literature of primitive simplicity and emotional naturalness. His coming disdain for

*Ossian* would rest more on moral and intellectual judgments about its fraudulent make-up lacking historicity than on aesthetic reservations about its violation of classical decorum. Although Johnson acceded to a policy of editorial polishing, a difference arguably existed between accepting some silently emended ballad texts and allowing a mostly bogus Ossianic canon to remain unchallenged when it was advertised as wholly authentic. Percy let himself become an intrusive editor of actual literature from the British past. Macpherson was an original author posing as a scrupulous editor and literal translator of impossibly ancient literature that he usually fabricated and only occasionally derived from mainly faint cues in modern Gaelic tradition.

The groundwork for the *Reliques* had been laid well before *Ossian* appeared, and not until after Percy selected a publisher did his correspondence begin to register references to Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* in the summer of 1761. Thereafter, Percy's dawning awareness of *Ossian* as a possible rival to his own antiquarian venture may well have helped to steel his determination to ready his work for the press. From the first, any hints about Macpherson's offerings tended to be negative, expressing suspicion of fraud, if alloyed with measured delight in sentimental Ossianic heroics. A friendly Staffordshire rector of Welsh extraction, Rice Williams, confirmed Percy's doubts about the genuineness of the *Fragments* in excerpts from letters made public here for the first time: "I have perus'd the Erse fragments there is a pleasing natural simplicity in Some of them, I wish they don't owe a deal to Macpherson's, or some other Person's decorating fancy & invention."<sup>69</sup> In a short while, further reflection by Williams on 14 August 1761 had so deepened his distrust that he urged Percy to write Macpherson directly for evidence of any authentic Gaelic sources:

I beg you'll if possible find a way to communicate to Mac Pherson that Mr. [Evan] Evans very justly remarks in his letter to me on the omission of the original in his late Erse publication, especially as he promises a larger collection after the approbation his Specimens met with; I am really afraid the world is probably impos'd upon, when I consider Mac Pherson's pretension to the knowledge of the Welsh, Cornish, Amoric, Erse, Irish & Galic languages; he told his Bookseller he wd engage to the poetry of either [that is, any of these languages] in 6 weeks' time.<sup>70</sup>

Such concerns lay behind Percy's warning in his preface to *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763) that Macpherson's failure to produce originals fueled widespread fears of imposture.

In that same summer of 1761 Percy initiated a noteworthy correspondence with potentially the greatest Welsh scholar of the age of Johnson, Evan

Evans (1731–89), who played a sadly neglected part in the *Ossian* dispute. An accomplished antiquary and Welsh poet, this unfortunate minister of the Gospel laid claim to a unique upbringing in the native bardic tradition, making him a master collector of antique verse and a prime instigator of a Welsh renaissance during nationalist culture wars over *Ossian* at the time. Like Percy, he commenced his antiquarian pursuits independent of the *Ossian* craze, copying much of the traditional poetry associated with Taliesin in 1758 and rediscovering ancient poetry by Aneirin. He, not Macpherson, qualified as the true trail-blazing translator of old British verse possessing literary power and yet anchored in historical authenticity. What obstructed his claim to fame was chronic alcoholism, aggravated by repeated failure to obtain gainful ecclesiastical promotion or to persuade the Church of Wales to stop the use of an English liturgy incomprehensible to the laity. Johnson, once a heavy drinker, joined Percy in helping this flawed scholar-bard find a suitable outlet for his antiquarian preoccupations and ministerial ambitions. Percy from the start urged Evans to publish samples of the bards, in imitation of Macpherson's *Fragments*, as part of a patriotic celebration of the diverse literary heritage of a newly united Great Britain:

I will also communicate them to several eminent *Literati* of my acquaintance, and to mention one in particular, Mr. Johnson the Author of the *Rambler*, *Dictionary*, &c who will, I am sure, be glad to recommend your work, and to give you any advice for the most advantageous disposal of it.<sup>71</sup>

Percy originally hoped to obtain a few specimens of Welsh verse for a volume of his own representing a literary cross-section of international cultures. But gradually the idea of a collection of bardic poetry took hold, even though Evans modestly balked at taking on a project so important to the contemporary Welsh renaissance: "Your promising to recommend my labours to Mr. Johnson and the rest of the literati of your acquaintance is very obliging, but I am afraid I can produce nothing worthy of their attention."<sup>72</sup> More persuasion became necessary, as both men shared plans for an ambitious book of bardic poetry. Evans would surpass Macpherson's *Fragments* by including sound originals in Welsh and Latin for validating "liberal" English translations that would prove attractive to scholars and lay readers alike. As Percy admonished,

Tho' probably one reader in ten believes the Specimens already produced [by Macpherson] to be genuine. – How much greater attention would be due to an Editor, who preserves the Original itself from oblivion, and fixes its' meaning by an accurate Version.<sup>73</sup>

While Evans considered these plans, Percy told Shenstone of having mixed feelings about the latest Ossianic work to appear under the title of *Fingal*. Disliking its monotonous rhythm and minimal plotting, Percy nevertheless loved its sublime sentimentality, despite reservations about its spuriousness:

An affectation is too [often *deleted*] generally studied: so as to betray (I think) a copiousness that the piece is not what it is made to pass for. – After all it is a most extraordinary production, whether Modern or antique, and richly abounds with the Sublime & pathetic: & shows a Genius in the Composer equal to any Epic production.<sup>74</sup>

Such enthusiasm for the romantic appeal of *Ossian*, even though its authenticity always seemed dubious, helps to explain why Macpherson's provocative example influenced so much of Percy's advice on the preparation of a competing text of ancient Welsh poems. His suggestions to Evans on 14 August 1762 continued in this vein:

I think a select collection of such pieces thrown into a shilling pamphlet, would not fail of proving as acceptable to the public as the Erse Fragments: and wd. be far more satisfactory, because you cd. remove all suspicions of their genuineness, which I am afraid Mr. Macpherson is not able to do.<sup>75</sup>

To repeat, let Evans provide authenticating originals missing in the bogus *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, but be sure to emulate Macpherson's enticing – and profitable – rhetorical mode of English translation, down to anglicizing awkward Celtic names. Obeying these instructions, Evans on 28 August expressed a similarly divided response to *Fingal*, liking its "spirited translation" but supposing Irish origins and a much more recent dating for its make-up. His unique proficiency in Welsh literature left him wisely skeptical about Macpherson's preposterous assumption of an uncorrupted oral tradition and an unchanging Erse language that supposedly preserved prehistoric poems intact for impossibly easy translation. This was a breakthrough insight in contemporary criticism of *Ossian*:

What is said of their being handed down by tradition seems to me improbable, and if they are as indeed as old as the fourth century. They must have preserved their language surprisingly, to be able to understand such antiquated works.<sup>76</sup>

Although Percy richly deserves all due credit for prodding Evans into publishing, it was the patronage of the eminent Welsh-born antiquary, Daines Barrington, that induced the Dodsley brothers to bring out the groundbreaking *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards* on 3 June 1764. Unlike *Ossian*, this book remains a landmark contribution

to the true history of ancient British literature. It offered the first solid selection of *Cynfeirdd* (early poets) and *Gogynfeirdd* (medieval court poets) with authentic translations and verifiable texts in order to transcend the spuriousness of the *Ossian* volumes. An English prose translation of ten genuine poems, far more fascinating than Macpherson's fabrications, preceded a learned Latin treatise on the bards, followed by all the Welsh originals with Latin translations. The entire performance was praiseworthy, except for one unhappy particular. The preface made craven obeisance to the superiority and authenticity of *Ossian*, in direct defiance of Evans's own astute misgivings expressed even in a few subsequent notes within the book itself. Out of scholarly politeness, he had brought himself to lie about a lie:

As to the genuineness of these poems [of *Ossian*], I think there can be no doubt; but though we may vie with the Scottish nation in this particular, yet there is another point, in which we must yield to them undoubtedly. The language of their oldest poets, it seems, is still perfectly intelligible, which is by no means our case.<sup>77</sup>

Looming tragedy for Evans lurked in this ill-advised and insincere concession. As he probably hoped, this act of genuflection to Macpherson kept him out of the *Ossian* controversy, when, ironically, involvement in the contest by a forthright denunciation of the fraud might just have provoked notoriety enough to have saved the Welshman from sinking into obscurity. Evans would pay dearly for his mistake.

Percy and Johnson proved loyally supportive at the time and long after his collection of Welsh poetry became public. At Easton Maudit Johnson sat down to read the recently printed *Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards* with that special kind of pleasure he felt for any scholarship advancing language study. On 23 July 1764 Percy assiduously communicated his famous friend's enthusiastic verdict in a congratulatory letter, a portion of which merits quoting at length because of its obscurity and relevance to the *Ossian* controversy. While Johnson heartily applauded the antiquarian discoveries, he, like Percy, took exception to the false praise accorded a literary falsehood in Evans's preface:

Mr. Johnson (authr. of the Rambler, &c.) who has been with me on a visit for this month past, has read it over with attention, and is very much pleased with your performance. He desires you to proceed in your studies, he thinks them interesting, and that you will deserve greatly of the literary world by pursuing them with that vigour [of *deleted*] & capacity, which you have already shown. He hopes you will be able to rescue from oblivion, whatever remains of ancient



British genius can be recovered, and thinks your labours deserve [the most *deleted*] encouragement.

The only thing he blames in your book is the credit you have given at the beginning of it to the Pretensions of Mc Pherson and his Erse Poetry: He and every other penetrating Person I have ever conversed with look upon it, as almost all an imposition, and that of no very artful kind. A little attention will convince any discerning reader of the imposture: and the world begins pretty generally to smell out the cheat. Thus his (Mc. Pherson's) assertion about the [Celtic *deleted*] incorruptibility of the Erse Language, and its having rec.d no alterations during a course of so many ages, is considered in the Light it deserves, when all the world knows that there are hardly two glens in the Highlands which speak the same dialect: and that it often happens that the inhabitants of two different sides of the mountain, hardly understand one other when they meet, so widely does their Erse differ: in short all the difference of dialect that prevails in any other language, (Welsh or English, for instance) prevails, as I am assured by [Scottish gentlemen *deleted*] competent judges, in the Gallic Tongue and yet this Language is asserted to be an incorruptible & invariable vehicle of ancient traditionary poems.<sup>78</sup>

All this argumentation merely repeated Evans's own earlier doubts about *Ossian*. Percy went further in his noteworthy critique by proceeding to internal evidence:

But every page of the Greater Poems contains evident marks of imposition – Thus we have pompous description of a fine Warriours Car, ornamented with all the Splendour of Eastern Luxuriance, in a country where the rocky mountainous [cragginess *deleted*] situation, no wheeled Carriage could ever go over a mile, before the fine roads were made by General Wade since the last rebellion. Before that time it was as impossible for a Chariot to move about in the Highlands, as it was that such a chariot should be made by a rude savage people, who were so ignorant of the arts of life as not to have invented a bare tent or hut to cover them from the cold in their expeditions. – Then whoever has the least [acquaintance *deleted*] knowledge of the Highland Horses, will laugh heartily at the pompous description given of the foaming steeds that draw this chariot: the breed of native Highland Horses in these degenerate days, is considerably more diminutive than those little *Keiffels* wch. run about your Welsh Hills. (folios 96b–97b)

Among the telltale signs of literary fraud, mention was finally made of Macpherson's defiant prevarication over any questioning of his honesty. If last on the list of damning evidence, his insolence seemed to betray strongly the fraudulence of his canon. Percy's commentary on this point is highly significant because it is the first and only indication that Johnson ever met Macpherson. It also contains one of the earliest references to Johnson's well-founded skepticism about the claims surrounding *Ossian*:



Indeed the very unsatisfactory answers that are given by Mc. Pherson himself, whenever pressed on this subject, contain a very strong presumption that all is not sound. To some he blusters, pretending to esteem their doubts so contemptible as not to deserve an answer: To others he gives bare [assertions *deleted*] affirmations without any proof. He fell in company with Mr. Johnson, who put to him several questions relating to his publications: he answered [all *deleted*] each of Mr. Johnson's questions with a short round assertion; but got off from the subject as soon as he could; & turned the discourse to something else.

So much for the Erse Poems, which [are *deleted*] contain as bold an attempt to impose on Mankind as was ever practised, & could never have succeeded if almost all the Scots had not been simple enough to make it a national affair, and to join in imposing on themselves & others: for you can hardly meet with a scottish Gentleman who will not tell you that he knows somebody who has heard all these songs repeated, in the Highlands. (folios 97b–98a)

Long before Johnson famously libeled the Scots for a conspiracy to support *Ossian*, Percy came to the same conclusion as part of his growing disbelief in the hoax. Evans must have winced at reading the crushing letter. In reply his only defense for his prefatory self-betrayal in his *Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards* was that friendly advice caused him to moderate his otherwise firm conviction of literary fraud: "My own opinion has been and always is that Mackpherson [sic] is a downright cheat, and I could bring convincing proofs of it, besides those you mention."<sup>79</sup> Sadly, plans for a second volume never came to pass, owing to mounting clerical tribulations, which the extraordinary kindness of Percy and Johnson alleviated for a time. Percy's correspondence documents magnanimous maneuvers to obtain appointments at short-lived curacies in England, prior to Evans's unhappy return to Wales, eventually on a meager stipend from a local patron in 1778. Percy unfailingly looked out for this poor priest's best interests, even securing patronage in Wales, until the patron's patience wore out.

All the while, Johnson's solicitude made for a leitmotif of compassion throughout the exchange of letters:

Mr Johnson never sees me without inquiring after you, whom he thinks most usefully employed, and wishes you had public encouragement to exert your valuable talents to the most advantage: I believe he would be glad to do any thing to promote it . . .<sup>80</sup>

A poignant diary entry by Johnson on his tour of Wales in 1775 alluded to the wayward, once brilliant, scholar in the appropriate context of a proposal for advancing a Welsh renaissance: "After dinner, the talk was of preserving the Welsh language. I offered them a scheme. Poor Evan Evans

was mentioned, as incorrigibly addicted to strong drink.”<sup>81</sup> The disease blasted Evans’s scholarly promise and clerical prospects. Periodically drunk and derelict, forced at last to share a tiny cottage with an elderly mother, he reportedly wandered aimlessly along country lanes clutching a leather satchel crammed with papers and parchments of bardic verse, the only precious commodity left to him in his abandoned state. He deserved better then and respectful remembrance thereafter. Instead, he died alone and forgotten.

More than any other factor, the preparation of Evans’s *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards* ensured Percy’s close attention to *Ossian* as a model to emulate and avoid in compiling antique literature. But another event pushed the good prelate, much against his will, into the turbulent center of the *Ossian* controversy. All along Percy expressed doubts about Macpherson’s fabrications and said so openly at Edinburgh in October of 1765, while in the process of escorting an aristocrat’s son for matriculation at the university. Word of his skepticism circulated quickly among the city’s true believers, especially his two hosts, Hugh Blair and Adam Ferguson, who set out to convert the author of the *Reliques* to a belief in the bogus relics of *Ossian*. What form that convincing took remains unclear. Percy later recalled a short and crowded time-frame of happenings, comprising an afternoon tea with Ferguson exhibiting Erse poems and, in Blair’s company, a recital by a Highland undergraduate singing and interpreting Erse verse for comparison with *Fingal*. Whether or not these memories flowed from distinct or interconnected incidents, they coalesced in Percy’s mind into a single episode causing an about-face in his sentiments, a new conviction of *Ossian*’s authenticity, which he would eventually have to disavow. As a result of the Edinburgh experience, there appeared in the second, 1767, edition of the *Reliques* a favorable mention of *Ossian*, which the next edition of 1775 suppressed, after an unidentified Scotsman warned Percy of duplicity in the episode. All these twists and turns did no harm until William Shaw in 1781 renewed the *Ossian* controversy by publishing a pamphlet implying, without authorization, that Percy had been duped by Blair and Ferguson years ago at Edinburgh. A war of words erupted in the press over the issue. When Ferguson cried foul in the newspapers, Shaw retracted, and then when a rival pamphleteer denied deception by the Edinburgh elite, Percy exonerated Blair in print but less definitely cleared Ferguson of blame. So again Ferguson publicly proclaimed his innocence and absence from that suspicious Erse recital of long ago, shortly before Shaw

republished most of the petty print proceedings at the end of another pamphlet against *Ossian* early in 1782.<sup>82</sup>

The childish bickering in public mortified Percy, soon to become Bishop of Dromore in Ireland and, therefore, eager to distance himself from such indecorous antiquarian warfare. He gladly washed his hands of a very disagreeable matter that only hardened his distaste for literary fraud. But the *Ossian* controversy would not go away, primarily because the enduring celebrity of his own writings and associations guaranteed continuing interest in his antiquarian scholarship and opinions of *Ossian*. Years afterward he got wind of an astounding disclosure directly from a certain Sir John Elliot, who said that Macpherson confessed privately to having invented all of *Ossian*.<sup>83</sup> This revelation, of course, set off a chain reaction of queries among many people still curious about the long-simmering dispute. Upon receiving the news, a Scots physician and man of letters, Robert Anderson (1750–1830), persuaded Percy in 1803 to draft a formal statement of the disclosure, which eventually came to the attention of that preeminent Macpherson-basher, Malcolm Laing. Then Laing in turn gratefully forwarded a copy of his debunking *Poems of Ossian* (1805), along with the pro-Macpherson *Report of the Highland Society* (1805), for an expert summary verdict on the debate. Percy not only sided with the foes of Macpherson but also sent a fuller opinion to Laing's publishers. A portion of this letter, likely representing his last word on *Ossian*, appears here for the first time. In it he noted recently correcting his statement for Laing in a more conciliatory manner befitting a man of God, who nevertheless still smarted resentfully from his brushes with this controversy. Unfortunately, his charitable frame of mind caused him to write too forgivingly about Macpherson's moral lapses in begetting his first work, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, in actuality as much a fabrication as the rest of the canon was. Oscillating between kindly caution and embittered conviction of literary deception, old Bishop Percy wanted the whole unpleasant subject buried peacefully and permanently:

I desire not to revive a forgotten controversy in which I was exceedingly ill treated. I am very willing . . . [that] the whole shd. rest in oblivion; and I am also willing to excuse Sr. J[ohn]. Macpherson [the Highland undergraduate at the Edinburgh recital of Erse (1745–1821), later ally of Macpherson and a Governor General of India], who was then I believe not 20 years of age. I hope therefore the manner in which I have represented the whole transaction will be allowed to pass & prevent all further hostility on the subject; yet leave all the arguments against *Ossian* in their full force. I have even softened some hard expressions against Macpherson himself: For at first setting out I would not call his *attempts Forgeries*,

into which he was drawn as Mr. Laing observes by the credulity, (I wd. add urgent importunities of Blair & Home &c).<sup>84</sup>

The close bond between Percy and Johnson made for a memorably productive relationship beneficial to the study of native folklore, the rise of British Romanticism, and the furtherance of the bishop's own fame. As a token of Johnson's fond regard, Percy was elected to the famed Club (also known as the Literary Club) during its first significant expansion, on 15 February 1768 with two other eminent men – the learned Vinerian Professor of English Law at Oxford, Sir Robert Chambers, and the playwright, George Colman. Formed in 1764 by the century's foremost English artist, Sir Joshua Reynolds, partly as a therapeutic outlet for Johnson to exercise his mind and conversational skills, the Club included in its original membership the great Edmund Burke, the comic genius, Oliver Goldsmith, John Hawkins the attorney, the Catholic physician, Christopher Nugent (Burke's father-in-law), a stockbroker, Anthony Chamier, and two other gentlemen, Bennet Langton and the irreverent Topham Beauclerk. A tenth member, Samuel Dyer, joined subsequently, prior to Percy's election. The society initially expanded slowly and brought together some of the most illustrious British writers, thinkers, and politicians of the age. Johnson himself saw no need for a large fellowship, because even a small number of these select members would always suffice for scintillating meetings. He even liked to think of the group as a compact assemblage of human learning, with Percy qualifying as his resident authority on antiquarian knowledge. Percy was a faithful attendant of the Club and remained an admirer of Johnson, despite different career trajectories separating their personalities. Whereas the aging Johnson stood forth as a hugely acclaimed author set in his brash, domineering ways, the younger Percy had to discipline himself into a hard-working prelate alert to establishing his eminence and careful about his dignity. Whatever their differences, Percy loyally helped to keep the memory of Johnson alive in English literature by joining a large number of annalists preserving his sayings and bearing witness to his all-encompassing love of truth.

No doubt Johnson compromised that love of truth early on, in his fabrication of parliamentary debates, but he seemed to have found in frauds like Psalmanazar and Lauder eccentric examples of repentance and reparation for keeping the record straight with readers on his deathbed. He could be charged with inconsistency. Ghostwriting for others seems never to have disturbed his exacting conscience, and he often professed

contrary positions in the heat of debate from an unstoppable drive to talk for victory. Nevertheless, the achievement of Dictionary Johnson was inextricably tied to truth-telling, whether patriotically focused on the cultural history of his homeland or morally centered on the universal experience of the human race. The most trivial departure from his exacting code of ethics pained his conscience to the very end. Shortly before his death, he made clear how scrupulous was his fidelity to truth, in advice to Charles Burney about writing an impeccably faithful biography of Handel: "All truth is not indeed of equal importance, but if little violations are allowed, every violation will in time be thought little, and a writer should keep himself vigilantly on his guard against the first temptations to negligence and supineness."<sup>85</sup> This lesson was especially cogent for his age of literary legerdemain, which, like our own, had shown a regrettable, if perhaps not so unapologetic, penchant for dissolving the line of demarcation between truth and falsehood in the world of letters.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Searching for truth in the Highlands: Macpherson throws down the gauntlet*

Little did I once think of seeing this region of obscurity, and little did you once expect a salutation from this Verge of European Life. I have now the pleasure of going where nobody goes, and of seeing what nobody sees. Our design is to visit several of the smaller Islands, and then pass over to the Southwest of Scotland.

Johnson to Hester Thrale, 6 September 1773

A survey of critical reaction to *Ossian* and its fraudulent underpinnings from the perspective of Johnson's love of truth and interest in antiquarianism provides a needed backdrop for an examination of his direct involvement in the controversy. This chapter, therefore, focuses on the first stage of his part in the business, his search for the truth about *Ossian* in the Highlands, and his notorious feud with Macpherson after his famous travel book appeared in 1775. Johnson "from the first" considered *Ossian* fraudulent and awful poetry, and it is fitting that a Scot, James Boswell, recorded Johnson's possibly earliest reaction to Macpherson and his work.<sup>1</sup> On 14 July 1763 the celebrated biographer-to-be, who had originally supported *Ossian* fully and financially as an early subscriber and knew its author well, told his famous new friend about Macpherson's iconoclasm, "how he railed at all established systems. 'So he would tumble in a hog-sty,' said Johnson, 'as long as you look at him and cry to him to come out. But let him alone, never mind him, and he'll soon give it over.'" <sup>2</sup> Johnson unknowingly pegged the Highlander's character perfectly. Macpherson at this stage was an ambitious and unsettled opportunist who would indeed transform himself from a patriotic Highland poet posing as Ossian to a conservative British propagandist for George III's ministry in a highly successful quest to get ahead. Even more telling was Johnson's witty and wise response to Boswell's subsequent comment about Macpherson in the *Life of Johnson*:

"I added, that the same person maintained that there was no distinction between virtue and vice." JOHNSON. "Why, Sir, if the fellow does not think as he

speaks, he is lying; and I see not what honour he can propose to himself from having the character of a liar. But if he does really think that there is no distinction between virtue and vice, why, Sir, when he leaves our houses, let us count our spoons.”<sup>3</sup>

And when we retire to our houses to read *Ossian*, let us be on our guard about the author’s honesty and the work’s integrity.

Such an unfavorable early impression of this man was not likely to have helped change Johnson’s contempt for his literary creation. Coincidentally, around the time when he first met Boswell in mid-May of 1763, his new Scottish friend frequently crossed paths with Ossian Macpherson himself and his keenest defender, Hugh Blair. Boswell on 19 May “breakfasted with Macpherson, who read me some of the Highland poems in the original.”<sup>4</sup> Introduced by another Scotsman, James Fordyce, Blair earlier that spring visited Johnson, following the January publication of his influential critique on behalf of Macpherson, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal*. Keeping his authorship of this treatise a secret, Blair could not miss a chance of asking his distinguished company for an opinion of the book. An unsuspecting Johnson memorably voiced his complete skepticism about *Ossian* but later felt a flicker of anger at Blair for hiding his leading role as apologist of the disputed works during their previous conversation:

Johnson had all along denied their authenticity; and, what was still more provoking to their admirers, maintained they had no merit . . . Dr. Blair, relying on the internal evidence of their antiquity, asked Dr. Johnson whether he thought any man of a modern age could have written such poems? Johnson replied, “Yes, Sir, many men, many women, and many children . . . I am not sorry that they [Blair and Fordyce] got thus much for their pains. Sir, it was like leading one to talk of a book, when the author is concealed behind the door.”<sup>5</sup>

We have noted that Thomas Percy in 1764 left the one extant report of a face-to-face encounter between Johnson and Macpherson over the authenticity issue, with Macpherson shying away from adequately answering any of the sharp questions put to him.<sup>6</sup> A later remark by Johnson suggests the particular type of inquiry causing the haughty Highlander to become evasive during their only meeting. Johnson cited Voltaire’s response to another literary forgery: “Voltaire put the same question . . . that I did to Macpherson: ‘Where is your manuscript?’”<sup>7</sup> It would be the central issue of all future Johnsonian interrogation, to which there could be no legitimate answer, unless it took the shady form of a fabricated Gaelic “original” produced before or after the equally fabricated English

*Ossian*. By 1 July 1765 Blair heard surprising news supposedly about Johnson's newfound faith in *Ossian* and egotistically ascribed this incredible change of mind to his own recently published appendix to his *Critical Dissertations* containing Highland testimonials in support of Macpherson's veracity. Blair proudly reported the rumor to Hume: "I have converted even that Barbarian Sam. Johnson by it; who as L. Elibank tells me owns himself now convinced. Will you still have any Scruples?"<sup>8</sup> Johnson's altered conviction, if at all possible, had to be a passing fancy or mere politeness; Blair's smug feeling that his work had converted Johnson was to prove completely erroneous. Precisely because of the appendix, Blair would join Macpherson as an object of Johnson's censure in private and in print.

Guided by intellectual priorities rendering truth of foremost importance, Johnson composed *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) for assessing Highland culture, including *Ossian*, within the imperial context of Great Britain. As he stated about all exploration and discovery at the start of the trip, "The use of travelling is to regulate imagination by reality, and instead of thinking how things may be, to see them as they are."<sup>9</sup> His classic travel book, composed with this ideal in mind and shaped artistically by a pervasive sense of utter environmental scarcity, has become part of recent and sometimes careless revisionism in scholarship. For example, the work stands accused of relaying a one-sided "imperial vision" far "from sympathetic to any form of cultural nationalism" caused directly by anti-Scots prejudices producing "antipathy to Erse [Scottish Gaelic]" and scorn of *Ossian*.<sup>10</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth. The criticism, so fashionably new, is really outmoded, conjuring up the Victorian caricature of Johnson as an imperialistic John Bull of English literature, upholding the Tory establishment, advocating aristocratic values of his country and language, and oblivious to human diversity and oppression at home and abroad. What his works actually have to say is a very different and complicated story.

His *Journey*, for example, expresses compelling, if not complete, sympathy for the oppressed other, at the expense of his homeland's imperialist policies and his empire-building countrymen subjugating the Highlanders: "Their pride has been crushed by the heavy hand of a vindictive conqueror . . ."<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that Johnson differentiated hardy Highlanders from less appealing Lowlanders: "By their Lowland neighbours they [Highlanders] would not willingly be taught; for they have long considered them a mean and degenerate race" (26). After the failed Highland uprising of 1745–6, he expressed indignation that "there



remain only their language and their poverty. Their language is attacked on every side" (46). A humanitarian solution lay partly in abrogating punitive English legislation and restoring the traditional dress, arms, and language to the people "to reconcile them to their country" (80) for their own good and for Great Britain's stability at a time of American insurrection. Any patriotic predisposition to extol the legislative union of the kingdoms in 1707 underwent discernible qualification from his firsthand confrontation with a suffering nation desperately needing economic improvement and deserving glowing praise for their courage, civility, hospitality, and simplicity – all qualities that were central to the overall health and harmony of Britain. Johnson's call was neither for complete cultural assimilation nor for the balkanization of Britain into distinct statelets. Detesting imperialism, despite his loyalty to homeland, he promoted compromise, not radical political programs on either the right (punitive suppression) or the left (wrenching social reforms of venerable traditions). His hope was for unity within diversity rather than for total metropolitan hegemony crushing all local/regional uniqueness.

Four interrelated concerns, all of them revolving around polarities, permeate the *Journey* in accordance with the overriding duality of Johnson's moral vision on the Highland tour. First, there is the travel book's marked political dimension, distinguished by a dual appreciation of both clan society and Anglo-British community. Never in his career had he a better, more sustained opportunity of reflecting on the early history of his country than during his secret collaboration with Sir Robert Chambers on *A Course of Lectures on the English Law* from 1766 to 1770 for the Vinerian Professorship of Oxford University. His ensuing Highland expedition allowed him imaginatively to confront this national past for glimpses of the kind of "savage virtues and barbarous grandeur" (46) investigated in the Vinerian lectures. All too complacently the lectures had praised the legislative union of England and Scotland creating modern Great Britain in 1707:

By this union which had been long wished and often projected, Scotland gained an immediate admission to that commerce which had been established over the world by English industry and English power; and became entitled to the benefits of trade in its advanced state, without partaking the dangers or suffering the losses of the first adventurers. They have since gained likewise an increase of liberty, and a deliverance from the oppression of old feudal establishments, and of incommodious and vexatious tenures. The advantage to England is, that the whole island is united in one interest, and can act upon all occasions, with its full power.<sup>12</sup>

However, the trip through the Hebrides, despite lingering preconceptions, was a true learning experience conducive to a reexamination of cultural assumptions amid the spectacle of a strange new humanity. Johnson's growing sense of the disturbingly ambiguous status of the Highlands in painful social transition, half-savage and half-civilized, caused him to modify earlier chauvinism and question his government's policy of repression and forced assimilation in the wake of the recent Jacobite uprising there. A coercively homogenized Great Britain might very well be devoid of greatness and become effete.

Although the *Journey* did register concern at St. Andrews over religious laxity generated "by trade and intercourse with England" (3), Johnson's initial response to political union was overwhelmingly laudatory. At the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh he even saw the actual Treaty of Union. When Boswell, a Hanoverian loyalist nostalgic about Jacobitism, lamented the loss of Scotland's independence, Johnson granted the point with tongue in cheek: "No, no, I shall agree to a separation. You have only to go *home*."<sup>13</sup> Boswell of course was at home, and his companion really did favor the Union under the cover of anti-Scottish banter. Early on, indeed, the Union was credited with causing the planting of a few trees in the Lowlands (6) and with imparting some civilization to backward Highlanders:

Till the Union made them acquainted with English manners, the culture of their lands was unskilful, and their domestick life unformed; their tables were coarse as the feasts of Esquimaux, and their houses filthy as the cottages of Hottentots . . . (21)

Subsequent generalizations about the environmental conditioning of Highlanders defended recent laws disarming them and replacing feudal justice with a centralized system for the sake of their assimilation: "they are now losing their distinction, and hastening to mingle with the general community" (38). Even banning traditional dress at first drew praise for facilitating "their coalition with their fellow-subjects" (41).

But once intensive exposure to humanity in the Hebrides took place in earnest, English patriotism gradually gave way to empathetic ambivalence and eventually to openhearted sympathy toward a revered way of life endangered by modernity. As soon as there was a recognition that ancient clan society was fast disappearing, a change of heart began to surface in his allegiances. Johnson's deployment of passive verbs to capture the people's emasculation in his early description of Skye betrayed regretful second thoughts about his government's punitive measures:

The clans retain little now of their original character, their ferocity of temper is softened, their military ardour is extinguished, their dignity of independence is

depressed, their contempt of government subdued, and their reverence for their chiefs abated . . . (46)

Johnson conceded that any alleviation of poverty from the inroads of a modern economy seemed to compensate for the loss of venerable traditions, "and the possibilities of gain will by degrees make them industrious" (46). It was, therefore, heartening that at Talisker in Skye the enlightened heir of the chieftainship of Coll, Donald Maclean, appeared as a living embodiment of a compromise solution for the Highlands (62), balancing the old and the new by encouraging future improvements carefully adapted to the cultural and physical conditions of the region. The same thematic evenhandedness carried over into Johnson's summary account of the Hebrides (63–99), in his compassionate treatment of rudimentary agriculture and commerce ("there are some advantages which money cannot buy," 71), and in his criticism of a vindictive British government imposing wrenching changes on the people ("Their ignorance grows every day less, but their knowledge is . . . to shew them their wants," 74). Because a once pastoral society now experienced radical transformation, "no settled notion can be formed" (73) about the best possible plan for the area to meet the challenge of a brave new world of modern progress.

However, despite the difficult projecting of sound solutions for the Highland problem, Johnson's careful weighing of alternatives began inclining away from the imperial priorities of British Union toward the dire needs of the regional ethnic group. For example, previous support of punitive legislation disarming Highlanders yielded to a desire for political accommodation, as his early anglocentrism and ensuing ambivalence evolved into emergent partisanship on behalf of clan society. He conceded that a warlike segment of the kingdom posed risks for all the rest in peacetime. But he increasingly questioned whether the abolition of laws inimical to clan society might not strengthen Great Britain with a much-needed infusion of martial courage and self-sufficiency to arrest spreading rebellion in British America: "To lose this spirit, is to lose what no small advantage will compensate" (75). For this reason, emigration and the subsequent depopulation of the nation, first confronted at Anoch (29), became a recurrent topic of such alarming concern in his calculations as to push him to side with Highlanders against the new phenomenon of rapacious landlords for the greater good of the entire country:

To hinder insurrection, by driving away the people, and to govern peaceably, by having no subjects, is an expedient that argues no great profundity of politicks. To soften the obdurate, to convince the mistaken, to mollify the resentful, are worthy of a statesman; but it affords the legislator little self-applause to consider where there was formerly insurrection, there is now a wilderness. (80)

This conciliatory political wisdom, so unlike his harsh anti-Americanism in *Taxation No Tyranny* (1775) and so like Burke's statesmanlike call for compromise with the colonies, was hardly the stuff of jingoistic imperialism.

Worry over emigration fittingly climaxed at Coll, the seat of the far-sighted Donald Maclean. Had this enterprising chieftain-to-be not met with premature death at sea in the coming months, he might have made a role model for other clansmen to preserve traditions on a secure basis of commercial innovation. Here at last Johnson put aside past reservations about the Highland problem and called for concessions to appease the natives and thereby solidify the larger political entity of Great Britain:

The great business of insular policy is now to keep the people in their own country . . . [A]ll that go may be considered as subjects lost to the *British* crown; for a nation scattered in the boundless regions of *America* resembles rays diverging from a focus. All the rays remain, but the heat is gone . . . [T]hey are a nation no longer. As they contribute not to the prosperity of any community, they must want that security, that dignity, that happiness, whatever it be, which a prosperous community throws back upon individuals. (109)<sup>14</sup>

Coming to a newfound openness toward his homeland's diversity, Johnson concluded his touring by hoping for the reforestation of an improved Highlands (116), by bestowing measured praise on the Edinburgh elite (135), and by complimenting Lowlanders on their improved use of English (135) for the better unity of the British body politic. His final description of a progressive school for physically challenged youth at Edinburgh expressed a brave but faint hope that underdeveloped Highlanders might also learn to hold on to their identity by renovating their habitat amid the culture shock of badly needed prosperity that might come from better integration with the united kingdom: "after having seen the deaf taught arithmetick, who would be afraid to cultivate the *Hebrides*?" (137). Unfortunately, the unhappy future of the Highlands would run counter to his restrained humane hint of social possibility, very properly posed here, at the very end of the travel book, as a stark question rather than as a positive affirmation.

Despite dark doubts enveloping the narrative, Johnson did return home, as Boswell insisted, with his prejudices much lessened and his kindness for Scottish friends much magnified. As a mark of Johnson's fellow-feeling for Highlanders, he early in 1775 happily cooperated in making the *Journey* available to George III, who, contrary to modern postcolonial assumptions of its anglocentric bias, reportedly found it too sympathetic to upstart Highlanders and their Catholic heritage!

According to Horace Walpole, the king “sent for the book in MS. and then wondering, said, ‘I protest, Johnson seems to be a Papist and a Jacobite!’ – so he did not know why he had been made to give him a pension.”<sup>15</sup> But the anecdote was probably apocryphal. The monarch had no need of a manuscript, because Johnson sent George III an advance printed copy, “and I hear he likes it.”<sup>16</sup> On 29 December 1774 Johnson had previously complied with Dr. William Hunter’s desire to show it to the royal family: “I have not the courage to offer it myself, yet I cannot forbear to wish that He may see it, because it endeavours to describe a part of his Subjects, seldom visited, and little known, and his Benevolence will not despise the meanest of his people” (11: 164). Here can be found an expression of genuine regard for Highlanders. Johnson was serious enough about their plight to hope that his sympathetic political deliberations reached the very head of the imperial establishment. In the end he could proudly tell Mrs. Thrale, “that the king fell to reading the book as soon as he got it, when anything struck him, he read aloud to the Queen, and the Queen would not stay to get the King’s book, but borrowed Dr. Hunter’s” (11: 165).

The second preoccupation of the *Journey*, also impressed with duality, has to do with history. This concern revolves around a contrast between an old Scotland civilized by Catholic Christianity and a degenerate modernity destructive of that ancient heritage under pressure from the Calvinistic Lowlands given over to a new secular Whiggism. Johnson, it seems, never forgave Calvinistic Protestants for the English Civil War, and this bias played into his well-known jibes against Scots.

“Pray, Sir,” Boswell asked, “can you trace the cause of your antipathy to the Scotch?” Johnson. “I can not.” Boswell. “Old Mr. [Thomas] Sheridan says it was because they sold Charles the First.” Johnson. “Then, Sir, old Mr. Sheridan has found out a very good reason.”<sup>17</sup>

His prejudices did not usually extend to all north Britons, but mainly to Lowlanders, because of their association in his mind with Calvinistic Christianity and its evolution into a modern secularism to be found, for example, among representatives of the Scottish Enlightenment, like David Hume. Furthermore, any prejudices against Scots differed from rank racism, because Johnson believed in the essential sameness of humanity and happily cultivated close relationships with them, beginning most notably with Boswell. His reservations were less blindly nationalist (Little Englander) in origin than they were religious (pro-Anglicanism) and political (anti-Whig Toryism) at heart.

His tour served as a moving time-tunnel into the fading history of Catholic Scotland, which he revered rather than reviled and sincerely mourned for the passing of a venerable way of life. Some readers, in reaction to recent scholarly debate over Johnson's ideological affiliations, might want to see his fascination with Catholic Scotland as evidence of his being a Jacobite in politics and a Nonjuror in religion.<sup>18</sup> But by middle age his deepest loyalties involved a Tory Anglican acceptance of the Hanoverian status quo, if interpenetrated with nostalgic sympathy for a more fervent pre-Calvinistic Christianity in the British past. To his way of thinking, the "Christian religion always implies or produces a certain degree of civility and learning," integral to the rise of advanced civilization throughout the British Isles, including Ireland.<sup>19</sup> Because of his bedrock conviction about early Christianity's beneficent role in history, Johnson's mature attitude toward Roman Catholicism had none of the knee-jerk hostility found in so many fellow Protestant subjects. As he advised Boswell at the start of the tour, "You are frightened by what is no longer dangerous, like Presbyterians by Popery."<sup>20</sup> When Boswell in turn reminded Johnson that in Presbyterian Scotland adherents of the Church of England were a minority group of dissenters, his devoutly Anglican companion had a witty comeback: "'Sir,' said he, 'we are here as Christians in Turkey.'" Spiritually Johnson sometimes felt himself among infidel barbarians in the gloomy process of having to inspect neglected ruins of John Knox's Reformation on the coastal road to Inverness and near any Catholic isles of the Hebrides. Out of respect for violated sacral glory, he usually took off his hat while walking through ecclesiastical buildings, however broken down or converted to profane modern uses. The depressing scenes played into a predominant mood and theme of melancholy disappointment and desolation shaping the artistic unity of the *Journey*.

The motif surfaced first, with memorable rhetorical power, at St. Andrews, "a city once archiepiscopal" (2), where the cathedral was a heap of rubble, the town lacked commercial vitality, and the university shrank to two colleges with a chapel turned into a greenhouse. All he could do with the devastation was to reconstruct dimly the fallen splendor in his imagination, and such a sad mental exercise became a routine feature of his future sightseeing: "[T]o see it pining in decay and struggling for life, fills the mind with mournful images and ineffectual wishes" (5-6). The ensuing shell of a monastery at Aberbrothick reinforced the sense of religious loss and his need for reimagining the early Christian era

with the skills of professional archaeologists: "They might from some parts still standing conjecture its general form, and perhaps by comparing it with other buildings of the same kind and the same age, attain an idea very near to the truth" (8). Northward, Aberdeen and Elgin unfolded the same story of sorry decline, from episcopal eminence to modern decay in an irreligious age: "It seems to be part of the despicable philosophy of the time to despise monuments of sacred magnificence" (18). Criticism of the Kirk of Scotland spilled over into the exploration of the Hebrides, because its followers spearheaded the ruination of Catholic Scotland and continued to connive at leaving relics of its rich spirituality in disrepair on isles like Raasay: "The malignant influence of *Calvinism* has blasted ceremony and decency together . . . Of the destruction of churches the decay of religion must in time be the consequence" (53). To be sure, many of the learned ministers impressed him enough to make him wish "that they had not been Presbyterians" (87), but the Kirk's failure to provide adequately for Protestant services in the remote isles represented a far more serious danger than rumors of Catholic proselytizing there: "If any missionaries are busy in the Highlands, their zeal entitles them to respect, even from those who cannot think favourably of their doctrine" (88). All this unabashed sympathy for a bygone Catholicism would hardly have helped to endear this English author, presumed to be blindly prejudiced, to the Calvinistic Scottish readership of the *Journey*.

Johnson's repeated visits to abandoned sacred sites became the geographical catalyst for vivid, emotion-laden empathy with a Catholic antiquity once responsible for transforming north Britain from backward paganism to gradual Godfearing civilization. For this reason, at Coll he dearly regretted not seeing the strictly Catholic Hebrides:

Popery is favourable to ceremony; among ignorant nations, ceremony is the only preservative of tradition . . . We therefore who came to hear old traditions, and see antiquated manners, should probably have found them amongst the Papists. (106)

Chapel ruins lightened the tedium of travelling in Ulva and Mull on the way to climactic spiritual encounters at Inch Kenneth, "the isle whose savage race, / By Kenneth's voice was won to grace," and above all at Iona, "where savage clans and roving barbarians derived the benefits of knowledge, and the blessings of religion" (123).<sup>21</sup> Investigation of Iona was the capstone experience of Johnson's psychological identification with the holy origins of north Britain's religious heritage. Here memorably was the



culmination of the travel book's recurrent – ironically, Ossian-like – sense of melancholy loss and destitution provoked by the remnants of a sacred past up against the realities of a profaned present. The island's degeneration loomed like an ugly symbol of the triumph of soulless secularism. To exorcise that terrible image, there was the hope, a slim hope, that a long-ago spiritual awakening would some day return: "Perhaps, in the revolutions of the world, *Iona* may be sometime again the instructress of the Western Regions" (127).

The third overall element exhibiting duality in the *Journey* is the narrator himself, that subjective presence mediating between an objective *terra incognita* of his observations and the external readership of strangers sharing in his confrontation with the wild new reality of bleak northern geography. On the one hand, Johnson was a romantic traveller, far more sensitive to sublime natural scenery than were rival tourists like Boswell and Thomas Pennant. As a romantic tourist, he had a keen interest in primitive manners and remote antiquity at "this verge of European Life."<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Johnson could be a hardheaded scientific explorer. Humanistically preoccupied as a moralist with inhabitants, he followed professional techniques of Enlightenment travel for careful, comprehensive, and skeptical inquiry about human life abroad.

This urbane lover of London civilization responded strongly, not always positively, to sublime scenery, whether it be imagining "all the terrific grandeur of the tempestuous ocean" off Slanes Castle (15), fancying a raging waterfall along Lough Ness (25), or surveying disturbing mountainous landscape (29–31) and barren moors (115) thereafter. He achieved a striking imaginative empathy with vestiges of the storied Highland past. The sight of rugged Skye and Mull's old castles made legendary medieval times come vividly alive to his mind: "The fictions of Gothic romances were not so remote from credibility as they are now thought" (63). He could daydream about becoming laird of the Isles of Scalpay or Islay and the bardic historian of Coll: "His age, his size, and his bushy grey wig with this [blue bonnet] covering on it, presented the image of a venerable *sennachie* . . . and he seemed much pleased to assume the appearance of an ancient Caledonian," perhaps like Ossian the bard!<sup>23</sup> At the high point of his imaginative embrace of antiquity, Iona occasioned a masterful psychological rationale for his romantic escapism from present surroundings: "Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses; whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of human beings" (123–4). The uniquely human capacity for romantic identification with otherness,



freeing the mind from animal-like bondage to immediate sensations, qualified as a quasi-visionary faculty for a transcendent apprehension of abstracted realities. Not unlike Romantic travelers in literature, Johnson capitalized on the possibilities of intense emotional oneness with the past, the distant, and the future throughout the *Journey*.

Coexisting with his romantic sensibility was a pervasive aspiration to maintain the high standards of scientific travel expected of all serious explorers and recommended by the Royal Society since the seventeenth century. At the ripe age of sixty-four he took justifiable pride in his healthy resilience and curiosity enabling him to reach and record true *terra incognita* close to home: "I have now the pleasure of going where nobody goes, and of seeing what nobody sees."<sup>24</sup> He by no means considered himself a master geographer on a par with Captain James Cook. If anything, allusions to that sailor's recent first voyage of momentous Pacific discovery filtered into the *Journey* only to lend a humbling perspective on the far more modest achievement of Highland travel. But it is a happy coincidence that England's foremost navigator and moralist should have conducted their empirically oriented inquiries in remote places at roughly the same time. Although a landlubber literary man, Johnson produced one of the finest travel books. His unique contribution to travel literature was wedding fidelity to mundane detail ("The true state of every nation is the state of common life," 16) and a humanist focus on people ("our business was with life and manners," 24) as a profound moralist penetrating the core experience of cultural phenomena with the rhetorical flourish of pithy elegant simplicity and a unifying artistic vision of desolation and mutability. The book's distinctively successful feature remains the author's ability to elicit wisdom out of the passing human scene in a manner reminiscent of some of his best work, from his *Ramblers* to *Rasselas*. Therefore, if the book in its political content had generic ties with his *Political Tracts* of 1776, it also stands comparison with the moral writings of his magnificent middle years. His honest humility at the close suited a plain-spoken scientific traveller scrupulous about telling the truth: "I cannot but be conscious that my thoughts on national manners are the thoughts of one who has seen but little" (139).

Johnson's detractors liked to ascribe his reason for touring Scotland to a preconceived plan of debunking *Ossian*, when in fact the motive force for the trip was an explorer's hunger for the new and the unknown inspired by his early acquaintance with Martin Martin's *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703). A copy of the text, borrowed by

Boswell from the Advocates' Library as a guidebook for the expedition, has an inscription bearing witness to its nostalgic value:

This very Book accompanied Mr Samuel Johnson and me on our Tour to the Hebrides in Autumn 1773. Mr Johnson told me that he had read Martin when he was very young . . . His Book is a very imperfect performance; & he is erroneous as to many particulars, even some concerning his own Island. Yet it is the only Book upon the subject, it is very generally known. I have seen a second edition of it. I cannot but have a kindness for him, notwithstanding his defects. James Boswell. 16 April 1774.<sup>25</sup>

Boswell's diluted regard for the *Description* coincided with his companion's opinion. Although Martin wrote at the behest of the Royal Society, he seemed inadequately scientific to Johnson for neglecting a fuller record of an ancient life no longer existing in 1773 (52). Martin's dull style, his Presbyterian anti-Catholicism, and his slightly greater credulity about second sight would not be repeated in the *Journey*. As Johnson wrote of another unenlightened chronicler of Scotland, Hector Boece,

The first race of scholars, in the fifteenth century, and for some time after, were, for the most part, learning to speak, rather than to think . . . The examination of tenets and of facts was reserved for another generation. (10)

The *Journey* belonged to such a later generation of Enlightenment thought and scientific travel.<sup>26</sup>

A call for sound calculation of Aberbrothick abbey, dependent on careful conjecture of vestigial dimensions and comparison with similar structures, aimed at producing a just approximation of the artifact. A desire for accurate measurement went hand in hand with romantic appreciation of sublime sights, as at Slanes Castle (15), Lough Ness (23), Anoch (30), and Mull (128–30). Concern for professional standards of investigation stopped him from reporting on Fort George: "I cannot delineate it scientifically, and a loose and popular description is of use only when the imagination is to be amused" (19). Harsh Highland terrain led him to advise traveling lightly (21), and lack of proper instruments led to criticism of sloppy observation and delayed recording compromising "the veracity of itinerary narratives" (122). The difficulty of gathering trustworthy information instigated warnings about evanescent oral tradition, inconsistent native testimony, and antiquarian credulity at Skye (39–41), on Iona (126), and on matters of second sight and Gaelic literature (89–99). Above all, scientific travelogs like Johnson's adhered to a prescribed format, moving from chronological reporting of data to periodic

generalizations about a destination organized around set topics and subtopics of geography, natural history, and inhabitants for utmost comprehensiveness. The *Journey* routinely proceeds from chronological narration to general reflections on the Highlands (33–8), a natural history of Raasay (48–51) and Coll (103–5), and, most ambitiously, a summary scientific survey of the geography, natural history, and inhabitants of the Hebrides (63–99). As with everything else in life, so also with travel, truth was the ultimate Johnsonian objective. Empirical reality constituted the source and measure and test of reliable exploration and accurate excogitation. His most important pronouncement ever on this point appeared in the key section on Anoch:

It is true that of far the greater part of things, we must content ourselves with such knowledge as description may exhibit, or analogy supply; but it is true likewise, that these ideas are always incomplete, and that at least, till we have compared them with realities, we do not know them to be just. As we see more, we become possessed of more certainties, and consequently gain more principles of reasoning, and found a wider basis of analogy . . . (31)

Fourth and finally for the *Journey*, duality affected even the recording of information, as the narrative combined studied impersonality with submerged personality revealing inner dividedness – anguish and exhilaration – over his challenging experience so far away from home. A feeling of lonely old age intensified from direct exposure to what he considered fascinating but frightening glimpses of the root drives and desires of naked human nature existing in sterile northern geography. Like Imlac in *Rasselas*, he undertook the tour with low expectations of finding fulfillment abroad: “I am afraid travel itself will end likewise in disappointment.”<sup>27</sup> His immersion in a forbidding new environment would give rise to an opposite longing for consoling companions and comfortable civilization at home. At the start of the trip, Johnson grew melancholy at the thought of being completely shut off from communication with Mr. and Mrs. Thrale: “I know not when I shall write again. I am but poorly.”<sup>28</sup> Privately, by 12 September, he told Boswell of their possibly cutting their planned itinerary through Mull to Iona: “I long to be again in civilized life.”<sup>29</sup> Home would prove the proper emotional setting for him to ponder his chronological remarks drafted during the tour and then to prepare new summary reflections on the Highlands for publication.

No place felt less like home or left his curiosity more uneasily piqued by its stark novelty than the mind-boggling wilderness of Anoch. Significantly,

while abroad, he sent word of feeling mental stagnation at the sight of Anoch for lack of London company:

I looked round me, and wondered that I was not more affected, but the mind is not at all times equally ready to be put in motion. If my Mistress, and Master, and Queeny [Thrale] had been there [at Anoch] we should have produced some reflections among us either poetical or philosophical, for though *Solitude* be the nurse of woe, conversation is the parent of remarks and discoveries.<sup>30</sup>

However, further reflection on Anoch back in London among dear friends transformed a tepid experience into the linchpin episode of awakening inspiration in him to write the *Journey*, in reaction to terrifying self-discovery of human fragility in a wasteland:

An eye accustomed to flowery pastures and waving harvests is astonished and repelled by this wide extent of hopeless sterility . . . Whether I spent the hour well I know not; for here I first conceived the thought of this narration . . . The phantoms which haunt a desert are want, and misery, and danger; the evils of dereliction rush upon the thoughts; man is made unwillingly acquainted with his own weakness, and meditation shews him only how little he can sustain, and how little he can perform . . . (31–2)

Johnson's moodiness in public on 30 September, when bad weather stalled him at Skye, related directly to his absence from familiar faces conducive to activating his mind into rewarding cogitation about his island-hopping adventures:

As it is I travel too much with my mind at home, and perhaps miss many things observable, or pass them with transient notice, so that the image, for want of reimpression which discussion and comparison produce, easily fades away. (11: 95)

Only when separation gave way to reunion with his circle in London would Johnson have the protective psychological serenity for effective meditation on the disturbing spectacle of bleak ruins and denuded landscapes reminding him of vanished Christian Catholic civilization, human mutability, and personal fragility. Otherwise, while at Coll and Mull in October, he became heartily tired of his isolation: "I want to be on the mainland, and go on with existence. This is a waste of life."<sup>31</sup> Almost seventy days without letters from home – after 21 August to 28 October – proved utterly frustrating: "I have no great patience to stay to hear the history of the Macleans. I'd rather hear the history of the Thrales" (302). Not until he neared the end of the trip on 3 November did his low spirits and health revive from justifiable pride in his physical accomplishment of arduous

travel in old age: "I am, I thank God, better than I was. I am grown very superiour to wind and rain . . ." (II: 114).

Thus, however enlivening his tour and his fellow-feeling for the Highlanders, he could not totally avoid feeling alienated abroad and in need of a supportive domestic scene for the intellectual composure and stimulation to help bring the *Journey* into actual being. Convenience and an opportunity for physical relaxation were not the only reasons causing him to wait for his return to his favorite city to draft his travel book. He seems also to have looked for a psychological release from an intimidating sense of personal vulnerability on the road by means of the protective stability of a familiar environment to collect his thoughts about a remote place evocative of Ultima Thule, that farthest global extremity to the north in classical antiquity. Only in customary English surroundings did he attempt to extend himself beyond day-by-day reporting of his wanderings preserved in on-the-spot memoranda and letters to Mrs. Thrale. London was the beloved locale affording him intellectual ease and amplitude for composing his general observations on the Highlands (33–8) and the Hebrides (63–99), more than 40 percent of the travel book and the very portion destined to win his countrymen's highest praise. In stark contrast to all his early anticipations of disappointment with traveling and all his homesickness away, his safe return enabled him to deliver a more upbeat, if ultimately mixed, verdict on the Highland experience at the close of the *Journey*:

We were now to leave the Hebrides, where we had spent some weeks with sufficient amusement, and where we had amplified our thoughts with new scenes of nature, and new modes of life . . . Of these Islands it must be confessed, that they have not many allurements, but to the mere lover of naked nature. The inhabitants are thin, provisions are scanty, and desolation and penury give little pleasure . . . (130)

The irony was that he could not properly tell the story of his daunting travels, until he was at rest and found peace through the welcome emotional distancing of being home.

Although the *Journey*, properly read, shows Johnson sympathetic to Highlanders and yet loyal to Great Britain, he must be faulted for undervaluing both their ancient heritage of learning and the new learning of the Scottish Enlightenment in the Lowlands. The space that he devoted in the book to these two intellectual matters, if relatively tiny, played a disproportionate part in provoking not a few Scottish readers into stoking a firestorm of ill will, still smoldering in some quarters. His

description of the Highland literary tradition, functioning as a prelude to his well-founded indictment of *Ossian*, is misinformed and much too harsh. He underestimated the amount, age, and quality of genuine Gaelic verse and incorrectly denigrated oral tradition as an effective mode of poetic transmission. Because of his dismissiveness, some commentators then and now succumbed to the mistaken idea that he was hostile to all things Caledonian. Debunking *Ossian* particularly tarnished Johnson's reputation as a Scottophobe and led to the erroneous notion of his contempt for Scottish Gaelic, otherwise known as Erse, a language diverging increasingly from its Irish counterpart since the late seventeenth century. On the contrary, as his nation's leading lexicographer professionally interested in linguistics, he was probably the only major English author ever to champion Gaelic by writing passionately about preserving it from extinction: "There is no tracing ancient nations, but by language; and therefore I am always sorry a language is lost, because languages are the pedigree of nations."<sup>32</sup>

Linguistics helped to unlock a nation's identity and history, and so Johnson always encouraged saving a record of languages, if not from China to Peru, then at least from India to Ireland. After English, Gaelic, in fact, seems to have been his first linguistic priority. By 1757 he called on the Gaelic-speaking antiquary, Charles O'Connor, to spearhead a Celtic Revival and explore links between Irish (known today as Q-Celtic or Goidelic) and Welsh or Breton (since labeled P-Celtic or Brythonic) on behalf of Irish anthropology and historical linguistics.<sup>33</sup> Contrary to current scholarly perception, Johnson's linguistic curiosity shows that he should not be written off as an imperialist anglophile. We have seen how, with Percy, he encouraged Edward Lye and Evan Evans in their respective studies of old Germanic languages and Welsh lore. He later subscribed to Rice Jones's compilation of old Welsh poetry, *Gorchestriion Beirdd Cymru: neu Flodau godidowgrwydd awen* (1773), and recommended, during his tour of Wales in 1775, a scheme for saving Welsh through republishing Sion Dafydd Rhys's grammar, *Cambrobrytannicae Cymrae-caeve linguae institutiones et rudimenta* (1592).<sup>34</sup>

In fact, Johnson's actions on behalf of Scottish Gaelic were far more strenuous and salutary than any other linguistic initiative, except for his groundbreaking labors on behalf of the English language. When in 1765 the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) moved to suppress a Gaelic translation of the Bible to further the assimilation of disaffected Highlanders into the British empire, he helped put a stop to this outrage. His eloquent letter of 13 August 1766, intended for this

body of Lowland Hanoverian loyalists, registers hot indignation over their letting imperialist politics impede the higher cause of religion. Nothing, not the empire, not loyalist designs for Anglo-Scottish integration, had precedence over Christianity and the ultimate human need for eternal salvation through access to Scriptures in a native tongue. American slaveholders in the British empire denied blacks that supreme prerogative of religious knowledge with a criminality worse even than the evil of Catholic clergymen suppressing lay instruction in the Bible. Only near the end does his letter grudgingly take up the possibility, as a secondary consideration, that Highlanders introduced to an Erse Bible might go on to study English for more learning. Whatever the consequence, preparing a Scottish Gaelic Bible would promote not only religion but also knowledge, especially in linguistics:

To those who have nothing in their thoughts but trade or Policy present power or present Money I should not think it necessary to defend my opinions but with Men of letters I would not unwillingly compound by wishing the continuance of every Language however narrow in its extent or however incommodious for common purposes till it is repositied in some Version of a known book that it may be always hereafter examined and compared with other languages and then permitting its disuse.<sup>35</sup>

Seven years later in Scotland, Johnson felt rightly gratified by news that a Highland congregation had celebrated him in their prayers for encouraging an Erse Bible. The *Journey* alludes to his good work in a covert reproof of the SPCK: “there were lately some who thought it reasonable to refuse them a version of the holy scriptures, that they might have no monument of their mother-tongue” (46). Consistent with his championing an Erse Bible, his fantasy of purchasing the tiny Hebridean isle of Scalpay on the Highland tour entailed the duty of civilizing the people with a school, an Episcopal church, and a press, “where we should print all the Erse that could be found.”<sup>36</sup>

As it happened, he possessed an inaugural Gaelic translation of scriptures (1754) in his private library and received a gift copy of the very Gaelic New Testament he had promoted, *Tiamnadh nuadhar Tighearna agus Slaniugh-fhir Josa Chrisod* (1767), inscribed in his own hand “by – [James] Stuart. Minister of Kellen in Perthshire.”<sup>37</sup> These texts, particularly the printing of 15,000 copies of the latter translation by Stuart, played a major role in stabilizing Scottish Gaelic at a hazardous time of declining usage in the Highlands. Hoping in his own small way to contribute to the preservation of Erse, Johnson deposited four Gaelic religious works in the Bodleian Library, including this 1767 New Testament, within a few months of his



return from the Highlands. Very fittingly Boswell sent him these texts, including the first Erse wordlist, Alexander MacDonald's *Gaelick and English Vocabulary* (1741), as donations from the SPCK. This generosity might well have seemed to Johnson a modest way for the SPCK to have expiated its former neglect of Gaelic learning. Equally important, almost to the end of his life he remained an indispensable abettor of the Highlander, William Shaw, in the publication of a flawed *Erse Grammar* (1778) and *Erse Dictionary* (1780) as well as a noteworthy *Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Ossian* (1781, 1782).<sup>38</sup> No enemy of Erse, Johnson was the one canonical writer in the annals of English literature to care deeply about its survival. It was not this little-known language but its pretended English translator, James Macpherson, who aroused the great Englishman's ire for giving the world a literary falsehood useless to the study of true Highland history and Gaelic linguistics:

I look upon M'Pherson's *Fingal* to be as gross an imposition, as ever the world was troubled with. Had it been really an ancient work, a true specimen how men thought at that time; it would have been a curiosity of the first rate. As a modern production, it is nothing.<sup>39</sup>

The greatest philosopher of the age and of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume, ultimately thought the same, and both men were more right than wrong in this regard.

For all his support of Erse, Johnson did make many mistakes about the character and resilience of the language and about the value and abundance of the native poetry. He notoriously depreciated oral tradition – as did Macpherson – and yet at Coll affirmed oral tradition as sometimes capable of passing on a reflection of true history embedded within legend: “This story, like all other traditions in the Highlands, is variously related, but though some circumstances are uncertain, the principal fact is true” (III). He was wrong so absolutely to confound illiteracy with ignorance and to equate literacy with learning. Thus he erred in supposing that Erse was the “rude speech of a barbarous people” with “few thoughts to express” and that it “never was a written language” before the past century (95 and 97). The undeveloped state of Gaelic studies helps to explain, but does not finally excuse, Johnson's misunderstanding of the rich Highland literary heritage. If anything, the obscurity of Gaelic should have taught him restraint in his published remarks, whose inaccuracies continue to haunt appraisals of his Highland adventure and unfortunately blur the ultimate correctness of his verdict against *Ossian*. Only in this survey of Highland learning did he succumb to intellectual recklessness, perhaps



partly in response to his anticipating writing the scathing, no-holds-barred critique of Macpherson that climaxed his general reflections on the Hebrides. A dogmatic presumption of Macpherson's guilt colored his inquiries on the tour and in the *Journey* generated severe, "talking for victory" legal rhetoric reminiscent of a prosecution and a magisterial judgment before a court of human opinion. Boswell regretted the lack of prior consultation that might have saved Johnson from embarrassment and controversy sure to follow publication: "I hope I should have prevailed with him to omit or soften his assertion that 'a Scotsman must be a sturdy moralist, who does not prefer Scotland to truth,' – for I really think it is not founded; and it is harshly said."<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately for Johnson, Boswell's concerns were prescient.

In fact, early Gaelic prose and verse constitute a substantial and sophisticated literary legacy reaching back hundreds of years through oral tradition, buttressed by manuscripts conserving the contributions of well-trained historians and bards, who survived, albeit in rapidly dwindling numbers, into the eighteenth century. In Ireland writing survives from as early as the sixth through the tenth centuries, with a growing number of manuscripts retrievable after about the eleventh century. The earliest continuous Gaelic written in manuscript in Scotland is the *Book of Deer*, but any significant production of manuscripts generally came later, beginning with the late medieval *Book of the Dean of Lismore* recovered in the Highlands by Macpherson.<sup>41</sup> In the background of the *Ossian* deception lay two major ballad cycles about Fionn and Cuchulain respectively, with allusions to the Fionn legend traceable to the seventh century and with Fionn balladry flowering in the twelfth century. In the eighteenth century even Gaelic speakers had an uncertain understanding of this venerable literary heritage, and Macpherson himself did not adequately grasp the power of oral tradition (more than once he himself denied its reliability) for preserving the past. Given the unprofessional situation of Gaelic studies, it is not surprising that Johnson knew next to nothing about the ancient vitality of a language that he wanted so much to save from perishing. Amazingly, lacking as he did such valuable knowledge, he could nonetheless intuit correctly that Macpherson had imposed on an unsuspecting public a pseudo-Gaelic body of literature mainly of his own making and out of step with bona fide Highland tradition.

During the tour at least five times he openly contested the veracity of *Ossian* and at least twice demanded the fulfillment of Macpherson's impossible promise in his advertisement for the first edition of *Fingal*

(1761/2) to show his genuine “Originals,” copies of which were supposed to be published or “deposited in one of the public libraries.”<sup>42</sup> The academics of Macpherson’s alma mater at Aberdeen were the first on the trip to hear their defiant English visitor air his familiar challenge: “Let Mr. Macpherson deposit the MS in one of the colleges at Aberdeen where there are people who can judge, and if the professors certify the authenticity, then there will be an end of the controversy.”<sup>43</sup> Nobody took up the challenge. To his credit Johnson did attempt unsystematic investigation of the issue, an earnest search compromised perhaps by a preconception of imposture by Macpherson. Johnson first heard Scottish Gaelic on the road to Inverness, “‘I’ll warrant you,’ said Mr. Johnson, ‘one of the songs of Ossian’” (85), and, later, from rowers chanting ditties while island hopping. Further sampling of the native tongue happened at a Lough Ness hut and through the Isle of Skye, capped by festive parties of step-dancing and singing in his honor at Ostaig (“Miss Isabel Macpherson sung lively Erse songs to us,” 340), at Dunvegan (“we had the music of the bagpipe every day,” 305) and, according to the *Journey*, at Raasay: “I listened as an *English* audience to an *Italian* opera, delighted with the sound of words which I did not understand” (48). At Coll he put his one good ear close to a bagpipe during a recital of traditional tunes by Neill Rankin and Donald Maclean and mused over a Gaelic prose tale about John Garve as a specimen of orally transmitted history “which probably no two relaters will tell alike” (101). On Mull Mary Maclean treated him to ballads by John Maclean the bard and proved the “only interpreter of *Earse* poetry that I could ever find” (114).

Dogmatically overbearing in his research on the tour from a conviction of literary falsehood having been perpetrated, he had worse luck with men of the Hebrides. Rev. Martin Macpherson, son of an inventive Highland historian influencing the author of *Ossian*, failed to persuade Johnson that a number of Erse manuscripts survived (they really did exist). Also at Skye Johnson came across a learned Gaelic speaker of far greater importance to his inquiries about Erse, namely, the Rev. Donald Macqueen, who believed firmly in *Ossian*. Cowed as he was by his formidable English interrogator, Macqueen seemed annoyingly equivocal and left Johnson suspecting that the minister had fallen victim to an indistinct memory of snatches of Gaelic verse only remotely like occasional lines of *Fingal*. The vague resemblances between genuine verse and a largely made-up epic in English led many other defenders of *Ossian*, then and after, to suppose that Macpherson engaged in faithful editorial restoration of ancient Highland poetry for a British audience. Johnson perceptively

pointed out the difference between textual reconstruction and fraudulent invention: "I am not disputing that you may have poetry of great merit, but that Macpherson's is not a translation from ancient poetry."<sup>44</sup> Even worse, Macqueen had naively, if wholeheartedly, contributed a testimonial of authenticity to the 1765 appendix of the foremost apologia for Macpherson's canon, Hugh Blair's *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763).

The sincere, although misguided, partisanship of Macqueen and Blair irked an already defensive Johnson enough to chide them anonymously later on in the *Journey* for preferring Scotland to the truth about *Ossian*. A wrongful assumption took shape in Johnson's mind on the trip that these two Scotsmen dissembled, hiding misgivings about the entire business, when in fact both of them remained fervent adherents of *Ossian* to the end. Boswell had heard harsh criticism of Macqueen from Johnson. "Sir," Johnson said of Macqueen, "he has told Blair a little more than he believes, which is published; and he sticks to it . . . Why is not the original deposited in some public library, instead of exhibiting attestations of its existence?" (206, 380). Later Boswell cryptically recorded Johnson's disparagement of "Blair's Dissertation [as] enough to damn [the author's reputation]."<sup>45</sup> Publicly during the tour Johnson subjected Macqueen to a hearty browbeating for seeming to conceal his actual disbelief in *Ossian* so stubbornly: "You do not believe it, I say before you, you do not believe it, though you are very willing that the world should believe it."<sup>46</sup> Johnson's ensuing commentary on this discussion, if hard on the innocent Presbyterian minister, is right on target about the creation of *Ossian* by duplicitous James Macpherson: "He has found names, and stories, and phrases – nay passages in old songs – and with them has compounded his own compositions, and so made what he gives the world as the translation of an ancient poem."<sup>47</sup> This statement says it all about the overall spuriousness of Macpherson's canon, only about one-quarter of whose titles reflected fitful Gaelic inspiration, whereas the remainder amounted to sheer authorial invention.

The conversations with Macqueen on Skye on 22–23 September 1773 carried directly over, with tighter rewording and rephrasing, into the most controversial section of the *Journey* attacking *Ossian*. For all his flawed assessment of old Gaelic literature and oral tradition, Johnson hit a bull's-eye on the central point where Macpherson's work was not fundamentally authentic: "I suppose my opinion of the poems of Ossian is already discovered. I believe they never existed in any other form than that which we have seen" (98). Recalling words he spoke in Boswell's company

during their stormy September sojourn at Skye, he slipped into legal discourse in the *Journey* and rhetorically passed judgment on Macpherson's method of creation for a fraudulent canon widely considered genuine by patriotically predisposed Scots:

He has doubtless inserted names that circulate in popular stories, and may have translated some wandering ballads, if any can be found; and the names, and some of the images being recollected, make an inaccurate auditor imagine, by the help of Caledonian bigotry, that he has formerly heard the whole . . . (98)

Despite the unfortunate inflammatory style, his explanation sums up the basic mode of fabrication (although Macpherson never exactly "translated" ballads actually available to him) and the underlying reason for the acceptance of *Ossian* by gullible Gaelic speakers. This deserved rebuke of Macpherson was followed by unmerited censure of the Rev. Donald Macqueen in the *Journey* for concealing his disbelief in *Ossian* simply out of nationalistic pride:

I asked a very learned Minister in Sky, who had used all arts to make me believe the genuineness of the book, whether at last he believed it himself? but he would not answer. He wished me to be deceived, for the honour of his country; but would not directly and formally deceive me. Yet has this man's testimony been publicly produced, as of one that held Fingal to be the work of Ossian . . . (98)

Fortunately, this unfair reproof did not name the minister, who, in mitigation of the injustice, did receive praise in the *Journey* as a learned guide through Skye. But for the anonymous rebuke of his supposed bad faith about *Fingal*, he had every right to feel aggrieved, because he had repressed his mistaken conviction of its authenticity only out of politeness to Johnson.

Nobody has previously taken serious notice of the fact that the indictment of Macpherson in the *Journey* also involved submerged but severe criticism of his credulous champion, the Rev. Dr. Hugh Blair. It was widely known that Blair had promoted the pseudo-Gaelic project from the beginning, especially in *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian*, probably without ever suspecting its fundamental falsity. Johnson not only made oblique reference to this publication but, more importantly, also answered the principal defense of *Ossian* in the appendix of Blair's tract with its appeal to the united testimony of Highlanders. The affidavit-collecting Blair, quite as much as Macpherson, provoked the infamous Johnsonian jibe against Scottish integrity that so worried Boswell on account of its harshness:

The Scots have something to plead for their easy reception of an improbable fiction: they are seduced by their fondness for their supposed ancestors. A Scotchman must be a very sturdy moralist, who does not love *Scotland* better than truth: he will always love it better than inquiry; and if falsehood flatters his vanity, will not be very diligent to detect it . . . (99)

Thus, we can now discern not one, but at least two, and probably three irritants behind this oft-cited blast at Scottish honesty: Macpherson's untruthful pretensions to genuine Gaelic literature of remote antiquity and Blair's complicit listing of biased Highlanders like Macqueen, unknowingly testifying to the truth of a lie. Contrary to some current criticism of the *Journey*, it was not so much Johnsonian English prejudice against Scots motivating the attack as it was patriotic Scottish prejudice on behalf of falsehood calling forth a stinging rebuke. Morality ever counted more with Johnson than nationalistic English pride and supposed Scottophobia.

Postcolonial commentators have a habit of blaming Johnson for a largely exaggerated xenophobia of racist and imperialist proportions toward his neighbors to the north.<sup>48</sup> Generally it was a far less toxic matter of his undiplomatic style of dogmatic forthrightness clashing with Caledonian supersensitivity bred from an unwarranted inferiority complex in the national psyche. Lowlanders, not Highlanders, were the focus of his jibes. Usually Johnson was indulging in annoyed jocularly at the expense of an eminently enterprising, if understandably insecure and poorer nation, inclining toward group solidarity to facilitate the difficult attainment of fame, fortune, and acceptance among their reluctant fellow subjects in the south. He, like many of his countrymen, resented what he perceived as a parochial penchant among Scots for favoring each other in all walks of life to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. The *Journey* alluded to this supposed phenomenon enabling people with modest abilities, aided by sheer pluck and an unfair "national combination," to "make their way to employment, riches, and distinction" (134). Reacting to a sense of incessant self-promotion by his northern neighbors, he felt subliminal competitiveness, producing a string of invidious comparisons between English and Scottish cultures: "We have taught that nation to write, and do they pretend to be our teachers?"<sup>49</sup>

So he relished poking fun at the people's hard-scrabble oat diet and at the inferiority of the Scottish Enlightenment, Scots speech, Highland civilization, Lowland education, learning, and agriculture, down to the barren landscape of rugged mountains and treeless moors. The nation symbolically floated in his imagination looking like a destitute stepchild

within the British family, “like a man in rags; the naked skin is still peeping out.”<sup>50</sup> It seemed a beneficiary of the Union that he endorsed, until the sight of downtrodden noble Highlanders tempered his chauvinism. At the heart of his bias against Lowlanders lay two paramount sentiments – abiding horror of primitive backwardness anywhere and deep-seated reservations about the religious and political legacy of Scots Calvinism in the modern history of his country. And yet for all his defensiveness, it was ironically a Scotsman, Lord Bute, who bestowed on Johnson the financial security of a royal pension allowing him to escape the relentless cycle of writing for his bread that so distressed his earlier career. The gratitude expressed with dignified restraint for this seismic alleviation had to be heartfelt: “your Lordship’s kindness includes every circumstance that can gratify delicacy, or enforce obligation.”<sup>51</sup>

Obviously, too many Englishmen gave vent to mindless anti-Scottish prejudices, in the wake of the most recent failed Highland uprising. Negative stereotyping of nationalities then and now is deplorable. If any factor can extenuate his fault – and prejudices against Scots he did possess and express freely – it is the certainty that Johnson never harbored in his heart anything like hatred for a people whom, after all, he took so much trouble to visit in their homeland and unhesitatingly befriended at home. As his greatest Scottish intimate, Boswell, made clear, “But it was a prejudice of the head, and not of the heart. He had no ill will to the Scotch . . .”<sup>52</sup> In the *Journey* especially, the hot anger directed against Macpherson, Blair, and their supportive countrymen reflected something far more serious than English chauvinism, playful or otherwise. His indignation here is earnest and severe, fueled by a perceived violation of truth that challenged his most cherished intellectual principles. Widespread advocacy of an imposture, whether well meant or dissembled, represented one more egregious assault on truth disrupting the indispensable bonds of trust needed to hold society together. As a consequence, Johnson’s remarks are excessively and intentionally provocative, although he maintained enough self-control to avoid mentioning any of his adversaries by name. In doing so, he shielded himself from possible litigation for libel. But, giving vent as he did to barely controlled contempt for *Ossian*, he could not protect himself from the worse danger of a veritable challenge to a duel from hotheaded James Macpherson.

The grueling four-month expedition through Scotland left Johnson at sixty-four in surprisingly fine health and good spirits upon his return to London on 26 November 1773. Boasting of his farflung travels to friends, he wasted hardly a day in setting his mind on creating a travel

book of his exciting experience. Plunging into the project, he begged Boswell to forward any useful information, but, to their mutual regret later on, the work went ahead so quickly that relatively little outside advice would affect its shaping. As Johnson crowed, this would be a book written largely without the assistance of books or experts. But dangers lurked in his decision to go it alone. Nobody intervened to cause him to probe seriously some of his dogmatic, if finally accurate, preconceptions against *Ossian*. No helpful hand softened his notoriously blunt statements about a proud people portrayed as a roughhewn, if indispensably hardy, component of Great Britain under pressure from American insurgency. He probably intended no downright maliciousness and repeatedly asked Boswell to send cordial remembrances to generous Scottish hosts like Robertson, Blair, and Lord Hailes. But his newfound affection for Highland chieftains and Scottish Enlightenment celebrities never intruded on his being as determinedly clear eyed as he could be about north Britain in the travel book. He made such amazing progress throughout the winter and spring that he could report delivering most of the manuscript to the publisher, William Strahan, by 21 June 1774.<sup>53</sup> A summer expedition to Wales delayed completion until the following autumn, when Boswell relayed the gift of Gaelic religious texts from the SPCK for Johnson to deposit in the Bodleian Library on behalf of the study of the Erse language. By 25 November the last page of the *Journey* underwent correction for the first printing around the middle of December. Advance copies found their way to Mrs. Thrale, Governor General Warren Hastings in India, and George III, well before distribution of the travelog to booksellers on 13 January 1775.

In the months before publication, hints of anxiety about its reception began to haunt Johnson's correspondence. At least three times after July, expressions of concern about the absence of prior consultation between them reached Boswell, who himself worried that the lack of editorial oversight would result in thoughtless outspokenness likely to stir up trouble among countrymen like Blair and Macpherson.<sup>54</sup> Blair, it seems, did not take inordinate personal offence at the implicit, if sufficiently pointed, criticism of his support for *Ossian* in the *Journey*. Already at Edinburgh in the company of some of the Scottish Enlightenment elite, he had directly heard Johnson deriding *Fingal* as the patent contrivance of a modern mind ("the production of a man who has the advantages that the present age affords"): "Nothing is more easy than to write enough in that style if once you begin."<sup>55</sup> Unhappy with Johnson's brusque dismissal of *Ossian*, Blair did desire Macpherson to take "proper measures"



for refuting the “frivolous objections” in the *Journey*.<sup>56</sup> But Blair stayed on friendly terms with Johnson who later heaped high praise on the Scotsman for his gifts as an author of sermons.

The principal recipient of Johnsonian scorn, Macpherson, was indeed stung to the quick. He allowed himself to be swept up in an embarrassing confrontation with Johnson that has come to rank as “one of the most famous minor episodes in literary history.”<sup>57</sup> This celebrated conflict, one of the well-documented events in Johnson’s closely examined career, has nevertheless come under critical fire as mere myth manipulated by biographers to aggrandize his fame and discredit his Scottish foe. Some commentators cast doubt on whether Macpherson could be supposed to have threatened actual physical violence, in the form of a duel or some other equally brutal clash of arms or fists. Instead, Boswell is said to have taken the lead in spreading the tall tale of a truncheon-wielding Johnson at sixty-five (as William Shaw and John Hawkins recounted) pitted against a brawny Highlander intent on assault and battery. The result of this allegedly fake publicity was its significant contribution to the lasting damage done to the fame of *Ossian* and its creator.<sup>58</sup> However well-intentioned this interpretation may be for enhancing Macpherson’s reputation, history cannot be ignored in the final analysis of artistic achievement. The facts of the case contradict this modern misreading of the past, and the devil is in the details gathered together here from familiar and little known sources.

Some time around the *Journey*’s distribution to booksellers on 13 January 1775 and before the announcement of its publication on 18 January, Macpherson got wind of offending passages, accusing him of insolence, arrogance, and guilt in imposing a false *Ossian* on a credulous readership. So Johnson had written with little care for the consequences:

I suppose my opinion of the poems of Ossian is already discovered. I believe they never existed in any other form than that which we have seen. The editor, or author, never could shew the original; nor can it be shewn by any other; to revenge reasonable incredulity, by refusing evidence, is a degree of insolence, with which the world is not yet acquainted; and stubborn audacity is the last refuge of guilt . . . (98)

These fighting words, taunting Macpherson to do the impossible and reveal nonexistent authentic Gaelic originals behind his pretended translations, cried for some response. The defiant Johnsonian rhetoric impugned Macpherson’s integrity at the very time when he planned to show himself to the public yet again as a reliable historian, preparing two separate tomes on modern Britain under William Strahan, the same



London-based Scottish publisher who brought out the *Journey*. Authorial credibility at this delicate moment lay wide open to merciless ridicule. A humiliating anonymous pamphlet, with the title of *A Letter to James Macpherson* (1775), suggests how much his reputation as a man of letters could be compromised, once Johnson's broadside appeared in print:

He positively accuses you of forging the works of Ossian; – he ridicules, with that keenness almost peculiar to himself, the attempts which have been made by you, to convince the world of the existence of those works; and he enforces his charge in so home a manner, that it certainly requires from you, attention and replication. Clear up, Sir, to the World, the disputed origin of your first-born, before you expect the world to give credit to the authenticity of another offspring.<sup>59</sup>

Macpherson had a testy personality, according to a greater Scot, kindly David Hume: "I have scarce ever known a man more perverse and unamiable."<sup>60</sup> True to his surliness, Macpherson commenced a barely civil correspondence with Johnson in the expectation of securing a retraction under the implicit threat of harsh retribution. Thus it happened that two opponents, each notorious for irascibility, headed for a collision over the authenticity of *Ossian*. Macpherson's letters from the start contained veiled but ominous warnings of severe retaliation, should his will not have its way in wresting proper satisfaction for perceived insults. Traces of the formal language of a challenge to a duel come to the surface, with studied coolness, even though Johnson's eventual reaction to the letters suggests a Macphersonian threat, not of a gentlemanly duel, but of thuggish violence. On 15 January the indignant Highlander directed Strahan in writing to mediate a change to less provocative language in the *Journey* by "that *impertinent fellow*" and enclosed for Johnson's possible reading a note, in which the following warning appears under a polite guise:

But I suppose you will agree with me, that such expressions ought not be used by one gentleman to another; and that whenever they are used, they cannot be passed over with impunity. To prevent consequences that may be, at once, disagreeable to Dr Johnson and to myself, I desire the favour that you will wait upon him, and tell him that I *expect* he will cancel from his *Journey* the *injurious expressions* above mentioned [reflecting on the character of the author of *Ossian*].<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps on the same day, Macpherson contacted Strahan again, in an angrier vein, perhaps with growing impatience for some response. Were it not for the need to avoid spoiling current publication plans, Macpherson informed his printer,

I should before this time have *traced* out the author of this journey, in a very *effectual* manner. Unless I have a satisfactory answer, I am determined (indeed, it is necessary) to bring that business to a *conclusion* before I *begin* any other.<sup>62</sup>

With this new letter Macpherson submitted an example of the kind of “advertisement” of apology wanted from Johnson. This scripted retraction denied any intention to give personal offence and promised deleting obnoxious words in a “second impression” of the *Journey*. On 17 January Strahan anxiously and dutifully promised Macpherson to extract the requested apology as soon as possible.

Of utmost importance, on the next day, 18 January, Strahan confirmed that Johnson was the first of the belligerents to take a decisive step for ending the dispute:

I have seen Dr Johnson. He declares under his Hand to me, that he meant no *personal affront* to you, and we shall take care that exceptionable Words shall be left out in all future Editions, the present ones being already too dispersed to admit of Alteration. He says it is not to Temora but to Fingall he makes Objections, yet I find by your Advertisement, in your second Collection of Poems, that it was the original of Fingal that was left for several months in [the bookseller, Thomas] Beckett’s Hands, for the Inspection of the Curious. I think this is sufficient, especially as you declare yourself indifferent with regard to a Want of Belief in others.<sup>63</sup>

This rare disclosure of Johnson’s pacific gesture to put a halt to the quarrel, tantamount to an apology, sheds crucial light on the primary instigator of the dispute, once the *Journey* became public property. The trouble-maker now was by no means Johnson, no matter how much his harsh words in the travel book incited hard feelings. If Strahan is to be believed, Johnson declared to him either firmly or in writing (“under his Hand to me”) that he aimed to register objections primarily to the authenticity of *Fingal* but never meant to personalize his pronouncements on *Ossian* in a way that would seem focused on insulting Macpherson. In addition, “we” – either Strahan with Johnson’s backing or Strahan alone as corporate press proprietor – pledged to excise offensive language in future editions. Soothing ruffled feathers, Strahan closed with a comforting reminder that Macpherson had already given proof of *Fingal*’s authenticity by producing its “original” years ago at Becket’s bookshop but did not require Johnson to disavow his disbelief in the work as part of the agreed upon accommodation. The Highlander now had what he wanted, or so it seemed.

In Strahan’s communication Johnson’s conciliatory clarification of intent was neither insincere nor a betrayal of his convictions. He let it be

known that he still doubted *Fingal* but, strictly speaking, had not inquired about the other major epic, *Temora*, on the tour and therefore could say nothing about it conclusively. Apparently holding out an olive branch of peace, he disclaimed any misimpression of having wanted to malign the man when the principal purpose, after all, was exposing the work. This acknowledgment would probably have gone far in appeasing Macpherson, were it not for Strahan's failure to fulfil the terms of the accommodation precisely. Macpherson had only Strahan's private epistolary assurance of Johnson's non-malicious intent and not the requested public "advertisement" of such an avowal, including the removal of offensive words from a "second impression" of the *Journey*. Even worse, it was impossible for Strahan to have kept any pledge about excising pejorative language in a second printing.

Macpherson may have misunderstood Strahan's peace-making note and missed his perhaps evasive use of the plural, "the present ones," implying that not only the published first edition but also the second edition of the *Journey* (in fact printed simultaneously with the first edition or on the verge of publication) were equally beyond alteration.<sup>64</sup> For the sake of his diplomatic effort, Strahan was possibly being deviously unclear in communicating concessions that he might never have expected to be forced to carry out entirely as demanded by Macpherson. The printing of the second edition began in November of 1774 and thus overlapped with bringing out the first edition. Both editions, the publisher realized, were in such an advanced state that there was no easy way of correcting or recalling texts without significant delays in production. And as fate would have it, no other printings would issue from the publishing house until 1785 and 1791. We know that Macpherson owned a copy of the second edition (unannotated), which, if printed on or immediately after 18 January, would have demonstrated the absence of any requested changes around this critical time of negotiations for a peaceable solution. Of course, it is possible that his fury was fueled by Johnson's sudden disavowal of his reported clarification of intent rather than by Strahan's ostensible failure to make good on the accord in print. But no documented hint of such a Johnsonian change of heart has surfaced so far. The damage done to Macpherson's reputation had no remedy, and an explosion was inevitable, well beyond the reported conciliatory gesture by Johnson to defuse, owing to the strong possibility of bad-faith bargaining on Strahan's part.

Macpherson perhaps independently set in motion a little defensive measure to help mobilize public opinion in his favor against the charge in

the *Journey* about his refusal ever to reveal originals of *Ossian*. Strahan's crucial pacific letter of 18 January reminded Macpherson that his 1763 advertisement for "A Specimen of the Original of Temora. Book Seventh" mentioned a public display of a copy of the originals of the *Fingal* volume in the London bookshop of Thomas Becket for many months. In that note Strahan let Macpherson know that such an event seemed a sufficient answer to Johnson's demand for primary sources behind *Fingal*'s authenticity. Strahan had no idea that any Gaelic materials on display at Becket's shop, whatever else they were, could not constitute genuine sources – Erse originals not concocted by Macpherson and/or his cronies – in the absence of a closely corresponding Gaelic ur-text for *Fingal* either from oral tradition or in manuscript. Could it be mere coincidence that Becket, now, just happened to print a notice, dated 19 January 1775, corroborating a former exhibition of Gaelic sources in the *London Chronicle* and *St. James Chronicle*? It is difficult to imagine Becket taking the trouble to circulate this piece of news without Macpherson's intervention. Possibly taking his cue from Strahan's latest note, the author of *Ossian* had every reason to arrange for a newspaper notice of his long-ago exhibition of a "copy" of Erse "originals" timed to refute the recent attack in the *Journey*.<sup>65</sup>

Because Johnson saved few letters from correspondents, we do not have the one important note from his adversary causing the final rupture in the strained last-minute efforts to arrive at a modicum of reconciliation. No doubt, some serious provocation happened within the next forty-eight hours of Strahan's final stab at mediation to have so suddenly transformed Johnson's measured goodwill into the legendary outrage of literary history. In corroboration of this surmise, the extant evidence, when pieced together from obscure documents, points to a very offensive letter of defiance from Macpherson, using again the style of a challenge to a duel implicit in his earlier communications relayed to Strahan. First, there is the testimony of the carrier of the lost letter, William Duncan, that such a threat was indeed tendered: "I was the bearer . . . of a letter of challenge he wrote to the late Dr Samuel Johnson, in consequence of what the Doctor published . . . respecting his belief of the authenticity of the Poems of Ossian."<sup>66</sup> Second, the recipient of the lost letter, Johnson, confirmed Macpherson's obnoxious aggressiveness at the time in correspondence with Boswell: "But Macpherson is very furious" and "Macpherson never in his life offered me the sight of any original or of any evidence of any kind; but thought only of intimidating me by noise and threats . . ."<sup>67</sup> The quarrel was by no means a cooked-up melodrama

stage-managed by Boswell, then a distant bystander at Edinburgh. It was a very real *cause célèbre* playing out at London. Something menacing arrived at Johnson's door to unleash from his pen his famous retort to what had to be a gross insult boding ill will and danger to his life or limb.

Third, contemporary witnesses lend further credibility to a violent turn in the conflict. Had the episode amounted to nothing more than a fable of Boswell's manipulation to make his friend look good for posterity in the *Life of Johnson*, then why did there appear independent accounts of a near coming to blows? Newspapers had a field day in reporting the comic incongruity of the muscular middle-aged Highlander going after the brave old Englishman in one-to-one combat. One tabloid, *The Morning Post*, had Johnson facing Macpherson with pistols charged by paper cartridges made up of *Ossian* manuscripts on 24 January, followed on 1 February by the erroneous announcement of Macpherson's sending finally not one but two long menacing letters to Johnson. A week later *The London Evening Post* made public an exchange of "authentick complimentary [sic] cards" between the antagonists elucidating the content of Macpherson's lost letter.<sup>68</sup> The National Library of Scotland preserves a lengthy letter of 15 February by Boswell's friend, Sir William Forbes, praising and blaming the *Journey* and then alluding to the above newspaper notice:

Copies of Cards are handed about here, which have passed between Mr M.cpherson & Dr. J. on that Subject [of *Ossian*]: Mr. M.cpherson tells the Dr. that after his having obstinately Shut his eyes against any Species of Conviction with regard to the Authenticity of the Poems, he thinks himself at liberty to load the Dr. with the most opprobrious epithets; since the Dr.'s age & infirmities debar Mr. M.c from demanding the Satisfaction of a Gentleman, for the impeachment of impositions, which Dr. Jn. has thrown on him.<sup>69</sup>

To substantiate Forbes's characterization of the offending lost letter, Thomas Campbell's diary entry of 25 March documents his hearing vaguely comparable words of insolence in London: "The latter [Macpherson] tells the Doctor that neither his age nor infirmity shd. Protect him, if he came in his way &c."<sup>70</sup>

Here we can catch a good glimpse of Macpherson's taunt to Johnson, waiving a challenge to a duel for the purpose of heaping verbal abuse on his declining manhood in decrepit old age. In keeping with the dueling protocol of reviling an opponent for forgoing a challenge, Macpherson warns that he will feel free to hurl with impunity the worst insults on his

stubbornly close-minded enemy, too enfeebled by disease and the passage of years to be worth engaging in armed combat. Campbell's version of the threat implies looming physical violence rather than a future posture of humiliating public ridicule of Johnson. Either way, the affront was clearly grave enough to cause a self-respecting man like Johnson to grab a stout truncheon and reply by stern letter in order to show just how well he could take care of himself under the threat of abuse and/or assault from a lying fool. Nothing in the records offers any ground for radically revising our traditional understanding of the whole episode. The only new revelation is Strahan's report of Johnson's pacific gesture in an effort to stop the feud on the eve of its climax, however hurtful the evidence of his goodwill and his antagonist's boorishness may be to Macpherson's literary standing. In one corner was a gifted Highland purveyor of literary falsehood, in the other England's greatest moralist and critic, characteristically defending truth in life and in letters.

Johnson's often-anthologized reply to Macpherson on 20 January 1775 only validates all the contemporary hints that intolerable insults, involving some intimidating suggestion of a duel, had brought the dispute to its celebrated fiery climax. So significant was this letter to contemporaries that friends like Shaw and Boswell asked for dictated versions of it to preserve for posterity. Johnson obliged and by mistake changed, among other variations from the first draft, his original term "insult" into "violence" in his second sentence – probably in response to his subliminal sense of the brutality of Macpherson's challenge.<sup>71</sup> Johnson's plain-spoken answer to Macpherson's outrage, imposing tight, white-knuckle control over increasingly ferocious hostility, indicates the punishment considered appropriate for an impostor recently convicted in print. Accordingly, employing an opprobrious term of criminality, he now disparaged the offensive Highlander by letter as a "Ruffian," defined in his *Dictionary* as "a brutal, boisterous, mischievous fellow; a cut-throat; a robber; a murderer." In other words, a hoodlum bully had just sent a communication clearly promising trouble, perhaps even violence, that no gentleman could ignore. And so Johnson reacted in kind to the injury done to his dignity and threw down his own epistolary gauntlet. He first unleashed his own forceful threat of physical and legal retaliation and then offered counter-insults impugning Macpherson's morals and literary ability after his panned Ossianic prose translation of the *Iliad* in 1773. Finally, Johnson dared him to prove the authenticity of *Ossian* and even to circulate this magnificently bold letter. It was ringing testimony of a fearless author's unflinching devotion to truth:

Mr. James Macpherson – I received your foolish and impudent note. Whatever insult is offered me I will do my best to repel, and what I cannot do for myself the law will do for me. I will not desist from detecting what I think a cheat, from any fear of the menaces of a Ruffian.

You want me to retract. What shall I retract? I thought your book an imposture from the beginning. I think it upon yet surer reasons an imposture still. For this opinion I give the publick my reasons which I here dare you to refute.

But however I may despise you, I reverence truth and if you can prove the genuineness of the work I will confess it. Your rage I defy, your abilities since your Homer are not so formidable, and what I have heard of your morals disposes me to pay regard not to what you shall say, but to what you can prove.

You may print this if you will. SAM. JOHNSON<sup>72</sup>

What happened when Johnson defied his opponent to make good his threats and his professions of authenticity with such unforgettably uncompromising brevity? Macpherson backed down from both challenges. He kept a low public profile in the contest and eventually helped to make public a bogus Gaelic *Ossian*, in the hope of bolstering his false claims. Otherwise, he never again engaged openly in a controversy disturbing the peace of the literary world at London and Edinburgh. Preoccupied with his lucrative political career as administration propagandist, lobbyist for an Indian potentate, and eventual Member of Parliament for Camelford, he had little time for defending an early literary triumph that brought him his first glory and earliest gain. But nursing as he did abiding anger over his treatment from Johnson, he fought a nasty rearguard action of retaliation through other writers until the early 1780s.

The well-publicized clash between Johnson and Macpherson on the eve of publication helped to generate respectable sales of the travel book but put the author on the defensive thereafter. There would be more prodding of Boswell for emotional support and additional information needed to mount a possible counter-attack as the *Ossian* controversy now revived for a second time: “can you give me any more intelligence about him or his Fingal? Do what you can, and do it quickly.”<sup>73</sup> On 2 February Boswell made the mistake of relaying an unconfirmed rumor that Macpherson offered to show the Gaelic originals of his works, backed by expert testimony, as proof of his veracity. This was probably empty hearsay, and Johnson replied with righteous exasperation over this false impression of Macpherson’s behavior: “I am surprized that, knowing as you do the disposition of your countrymen to tell lies in favour of each other, you can be at all affected by any reports that circulate among them.” The fact that this rebuke termed his famous letter to Macpherson



of 20 January 1775 his “last answer” tends to substantiate Strahan’s arresting claim of having transmitted a previous Johnsonian gesture of conciliation to Macpherson for a response. The remainder of Johnson’s disdainful letter to Boswell was not so enlightened. Erroneous positions about Scottish Gaelic in the *Journey* found restatement here and elsewhere in his correspondence and conversation. His failure to reexamine his shaky notions may indicate continuing defensiveness. Macpherson was wrongly represented as asserting having translated from “old manuscripts” (11: 177), when in fact *Ossian* supposedly rested on a collation of Gaelic texts preserved more by oral tradition than by manuscripts. That misreading led in turn to a wrongheaded insistence on illiteracy in the ancient Highlands and, hence, the lack of any validating Erse manuscripts. Because the argument seemed irrefutable, Johnson would repeatedly demand a public exhibition of manuscript sources behind *Ossian*, when he had simply to call for a full disclosure of any originals, written or otherwise, to expose how made-up Macpherson’s works really were. To Johnson, nothing else but genuine Gaelic manuscripts matching the so-called English “translation” would dispel doubts about authenticity. Not even transcriptions prepared by Macpherson or his allies from written and oral Gaelic materials would suffice, owing to a correct surmise that a bogus Gaelic translation of the English *Ossian* would be foisted on the public, in 1807, as a true original for the fabricated canon.

To do Johnson justice, his appeal for validating originals was fundamentally on target. After all, *Ossian* was advertised as a literal translation, and the absence of any actual Gaelic antecedents corresponding exactly, even comprehensively, to the vast majority of Macpherson’s works constituted devastating proof of fraud. If anything, painstaking source-hunting in manuscripts and from recitations based on received tradition would gradually demonstrate, at least in future centuries, Macpherson’s relatively marginal dependence on Gaelic literature. For somebody unacquainted with Erse and given the poor state of Gaelic studies, Johnson surely had commendable instincts in pinpointing the gravest weakness in Macpherson’s elaborately scripted pretensions to authenticity. Although it is clear that Johnson compromised his case by undervaluing genuine Gaelic verse, his ultimate presumption of Ossianic falsehood stood the test of time. Even some of these errors might have disappeared, had he attended to Boswell’s recent warning that visiting Highlanders affirmed the reality of written Erse “for many centuries.”<sup>74</sup> Johnson impulsively denied the information, including a rumor that Macpherson possessed an old Clanranald manuscript, and committed



a worse blunder of supposing that actual Fenian verse came from the English *Ossian* rather than from Highland tradition. He also paid heed to muddled gossip, perhaps partly true and partly false, that Macpherson worked up a few Gaelic translations from his own writings and then taught a boy to set them down to counter the accusation of imposture: "If he had not talked unskillfully of manuscripts, he might have fought with oral tradition."<sup>75</sup> But Johnson missed the point that Macpherson maintained a dependence on both oral and written tradition, even though neither wellspring of Gaelic literature provided substantial and sustained inspiration for an essentially fabricated canon.

When the *Journey* finally came out, Boswell's requests for some reassuring news about public reactions became more insistent. On 18 February he at last obtained the text in several parcels taking four days to arrive from London. He finished it by three the next morning, surprisingly with less relish than he later expressed for its contents, after further reflection convinced him of its excellence.<sup>76</sup> But no trace of his tepid first impression appeared in his glowing letter of praise immediately sent to Johnson. Characteristic of the critical mood of the Edinburgh elite was the reserved reaction of Boswell's banker friend, Sir William Forbes. In anticipation of reading the *Journey*, Forbes was the first man, except for Johnson, to look at its companion piece in manuscript, *A Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, for the lively biographical context of the recent trip. Despite the honor of meeting Johnson at the beginning and end of the Highland expedition, Forbes expressed qualified approval of the *Journey*, mixed with disappointment for its sometimes sharp and faulty comments on his homeland:

The Doctor is a man of very eminent merit in many respects; but he is subject to inveterate prejudices, which indeed are conspicuous in many places of this publication: he is likewise very blind & very deaf; owing to all which, it is not surprising that he Should fall into many mistakes . . . There are however a great many new & important Observations & discussions in this work, which are well worth reading. I believe Mrs. Forbes is an admirer of the Poems of Ossian: She will probably not thank the Dr. much for his Scepticism on that head.<sup>77</sup>

Boswell's annual spring visit to London, in 1775, marked his first reunion with Johnson since the most prolonged interaction ever to happen in their lives, a year and a half ago in Scotland. Reaching the city on 21 March, he quickly made his way to the great man's apartment, brandishing an armful of Scottish newspapers reviling the *Journey* for their mutual titillation. Adding spice to this reading fare for the all-male company was Boswell's

retelling of Hume's memorable put-down back at Edinburgh about all the unreliable Highland testimony supporting Macpherson's imposture. Hume

would not believe the authenticity of *Fingal*, though fifty barearsed Highlanders should swear it. No, said Mr. Johnson, "nor though fifty Lowlanders should; for you know all Scotsmen to a man – nay, not all, but *droves* of 'em – would come and attest any thing which they think for the honour of Scotland."<sup>78</sup>

Boswell remained privately at odds with this oft-heard slur on his countrymen's honesty but seldom made his discomfort known until after Johnson's death. Hume would have seemed a rare Scotsman, an infidel philosopher to boot, who honored truth above homeland, but Johnson never heard the rest of Hume's conversation lambasting the *Journey*. That revelation would have added fresh fuel to a smoldering fire of longstanding enmity between these two intellectual giants. Boswell, caught in the middle, wisely kept mum about the negative comments.

Perhaps the only common ground staked out by Hume and Johnson was their hearty skepticism toward *Ossian*. However, Hume came to his disbelief late in his distinguished career. Initially he had subscribed to *Fingal* and then advised Blair on finding stronger proofs for its genuineness in the form of an appendix of Highland testimonials for the naively uncritical *Critical Dissertation on Ossian* in 1765. Hume went so far as to supervise a French translation of the appendix for continental consumption. Fortunately, his famed pragmatism as a philosopher eventually eroded his enthusiasm and induced a healthy incredulity remarkably like Johnson's own. They both ascribed *Ossian's* popularity to its presumed antiquity, both conceded some genuine Gaelic influences amid predominant Macphersonian invention, both suspected a modern sensibility at work under the thin antique veneer, both disliked the author and his insipid artistry, both discounted a viable oral tradition of venerable Erse poetry, both disdained the withholding of hard evidence of genuine Gaelic originals, both extolled Irish literature as the true Gaelic motherlode, and both scorned a national conspiracy of obstinate Scots for propping up baseless pretensions to authenticity. Hume found the imposture so repellent that at the end of his life he penned a comprehensive critique without equal among the anti-*Ossian* writings of the period for its logical reasoning and rhetorical punch. Unfortunately, he could not bring himself to print his exceptional essay, "Of the Authenticity of Ossian's Poems," possibly out of deference to his credulous Scottish compatriots and perhaps owing to embarrassment for ever

having championed the fraud.<sup>79</sup> Whatever the reason, its non-appearance left a vacuum for William Shaw to fill with one of the most powerful attacks ever to reach the public before the end of the century. And Johnson would be at Shaw's side to spur on this notable contribution to the last phase of literary controversy within his lifetime.

Boswell would record more Johnsonian bluster and bravado against *Ossian* at an evening party hosted by the Thrales on the day of his arrival in town. Instead of a deeper reflection on complicated linguistic issues surrounding the deception, there was more of a lazy tendency on Johnson's part to rely on familiar and facile arguments designed to elicit applause from associates predisposed to extending approval. Accordingly, he repeated his by-now stale, erroneous assumption that no old Gaelic manuscripts existed in the anciently illiterate Highlands and denounced all testimony to the contrary as worthless and mindless Scottish partisanship. For once Boswell mustered the courage to challenge the insult to his country: "'Well,' said I, 'that is patriotic,'" and for once Johnson backed off from his prejudiced perspective, "'That is very well.'"<sup>80</sup> But the about-face was temporary. At the next gathering of the Club on 7 April, Johnson resumed pontificating incorrectly on the premodern scarcity of Highland literacy and manuscripts for the benefit of the like-minded membership. Although his common sense and capacious grasp of literature ensured recognition of fraud from the start, his failure to uncover Ossianic originals on the Highland tour left him overly skeptical about the rich reality of Gaelic literature. Smugness had set in and deterred him from exploring new avenues of inquiry that would have made his case against *Ossian* more compelling than it already was.

Even a hero-worshipper like Boswell, deprived of a decisive verdict, remained in limbo about the authenticity issue. Johnson probably never knew that his greatest biographer began as an admirer and subscriber of *Ossian* and, despite mounting doubts, never fully jettisoned his early enthusiasm even as late as 1786: "I believe more than some, and less than others."<sup>81</sup> Hedging his bets, he conjectured that only "some" invented connecting interpolations intruded on the supposedly Gaelic-based English "translation." Uneasy still, he then admitted to "irremediable doubt," only to shrug off his confusion, unconvincingly, as merely idle speculation amid allegedly universal unconcern about the *Ossian* controversy – precisely when public interest in the fraud peaked in the mid-1780s. Not until his *Life of Johnson* in 1791 did he acknowledge disbelief in *Ossian*: Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* at first beguiled Boswell into becoming a fervent fan, but the implausibly sophisticated

epic, *Fingal*, broke the spell, and the unmet Johnsonian demand for a display of the manuscript original erased any residual credulity permanently. Of course, this revelation came late in life, long after the days when he used to sit patiently listening to Johnsonian abuse of a work that he secretly and dearly loved.

Newspaper reviews of the *Journey* showed a disquieting rift in opinion along obvious nationalist lines of English and Scottish partisanship, just when the unity of the British body politic faced the threat of incipient American rebellion. The contest over literary fabrication may have mirrored larger anxieties over the country's overall stability and ability to resist disintegrating pressures within the island and around the empire. Johnson's *Journey* bore vivid witness to these contemporary political concerns, before it focused on debunking *Ossian* as an upstart expression of Scottish patriotism falsifying history and defrauding the British public. Let Scotland's enthusiasts of *Ossian* indulge in Caledonian self-glorification by escaping into make-believe heroics conducive to sharpening military ardor among Highlanders for the better protection of Great Britain. But let England's intellectual elite, like its political establishment, keep firm control of the internal national debate by insisting that the irresistible power of truth remained on its side and reigned supreme over all regional sensitivities and sectional dissent. The primacy and prestige of an anglocentric way of seeing things had to prevail over subordinate local interests and provincial patriotic obsessions. Johnson's travel book, if increasingly respectful of the diversity found in the unique Highland society, ultimately took a pro-British line. He upheld the superiority of civilized literacy over barbaric orality and the priority of enlightened empirical inquiry over Ossianic fable and falsehood in keeping with the supremacy of his highly developed homeland in cultural and political considerations on the eve of full-blown American insurrection.

The January issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine* highlighted the commingling of literary criticism and ominous current events in America. The lead article reprinted the last-ditch "Petition from the American Congress to the King," destined to precipitate disastrous English retaliation causing the American Revolution. Then came a favorable review of the *Journey*, praising Johnson as a Homer and Boswell as a Ulysses and stressing the attack on *Ossian*, without conceding its definitive debunking, owing to the rumored exhibition of validating originals long ago. For the time being, therefore, the hyper-nationalist contest between rival English and Scottish camps would remain undecided and unstoppable.<sup>82</sup> Future numbers of *The Gentleman's Magazine* would carry articles less hospitable to Johnson primarily because of his unpopular anti-American

tract, *Taxation No Tyranny* (1775). This pamphlet only added to his unsavory reputation as an inflexible dictator in print for its harsh, if legally sound, endorsement of absolute parliamentary sovereignty over British subjects on both sides of the Atlantic: "In sovereignty there are no gradations. There may be limited royalty, there may be limited consulship; but there can be no limited government."<sup>83</sup> Although famously independent and personally averse to tyranny, Johnson seemed absolutist and anglo-oriented to his pro-*Ossian* antagonists. The oft-used label of London's literary dictator was not so complimentary a title as it might seem today, within the context of unfolding *Ossian* controversy and concurrent American crisis.

The most substantial denunciation of the *Journey* did not appear until a half-decade afterwards and contained passages of abuse and indecencies likely added surreptitiously by Macpherson himself. This was Donald M'Nicol's noteworthy *Remarks on Dr. Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Hebrides* (1779; actually 1780), an unremittingly hostile critique almost as long as the *Journey* itself. The author was an able clergyman and Gaelic scholar, who expressly denied any direct connection with Macpherson. However, it seems that insulting information contributed by Macpherson found its way into the text as the book passed through the press. Intimate details of the rupture with Johnson point to external tampering with the text, down to telling echoes of Macpherson's provocative lost letter at the heart of the bygone dispute, with its offensive charge of ungentlemanly conduct justifying harsh retaliation:

To bring forth such an accusation [of imposture by Macpherson in the *Journey*] . . . is a *ruffian* mode of impeachment which seems to have been reserved for Dr. Johnson . . . A gentleman would not have expressed himself in that manner, for his own sake; a man of prudence would not have done it, for fear of giving just offence to Mr. Macpherson . . . [T]he language, in which he [Johnson] expressed his doubts, deserved chastisement. To prevent this, he had age and infirmities to plead [my emphasis]; but not content with that security, which, I dare venture to say, was sufficient, he declared, when questioned, that he would call the laws of his country to his aid. Men, who make a breach upon the laws of good manners, have but a scurvy claim to the protection of any other laws.<sup>84</sup>

M'Nicol's *Remarks* had the dubious distinction of helping to instigate the final phase of the *Ossian* controversy involving Johnson. Partly as a rejoinder to this book, a pamphlet by William Shaw soon became part of a renewed public debate, under the title of *An Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Ossian* (1781). Shaw's little-known but significant part in the dispute is the subject of the final chapter, but a few points should be made for the sake of rounding out the present discussion. Shaw

put forth the strongest case against Macpherson since the publication of the *Journey*, partly owing to some prior consultation with Johnson. Here for the first time we find the story of Johnson resorting to a truncheon as “the *argument ad hominem*, or *baculum* [walking-stick]” for the ultimate rejoinder to Macpherson’s misconduct.<sup>85</sup> Given the possibility that Johnson himself passed on the anecdote (repeated in biographies of him by Shaw and Sir John Hawkins in 1785 and 1787 respectively) and dictated from memory his famous letter to Macpherson for Shaw’s use, there may be more than a grain of truth behind his reported weapon-wielding posture of self-defense in dealing with Macpherson. In retaliation, another Highlander, John Clark, published *An Answer to Mr Shaw’s Inquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Ossian* (1781). A protégé of Macpherson, Clark brought the public debate to a new low of crude innuendo and, incidentally, preserved the last extant reference to Macpherson’s missing letter of defiance addressed to Johnson six years earlier. According to Clark, that lost communication hinted at a threat of a duel, prevented by an insulting consideration of Johnson’s physical decline:

The fact, as I am assured by a friend, was as follows: Mr Macpherson had written to him [Johnson] by the hands of a gentleman [William Duncan, the letter-carrier], that as he had declined to withdraw from his book the injurious expressions reflecting on Mr Macpherson’s *private* character, his age and infirmities, alone, protected him from the treatment due to an infamous liar and traducer.<sup>86</sup>

We might hazard a guess as to the identity of Clark’s “friend” supplying this information, namely, Macpherson himself or somebody in his confidence. If this inference is correct, the version of events narrated here would naturally have been skewed in Macpherson’s favor. But the fact is that Johnson had likely not declined to right perceived wrongs within the *Journey*. On the contrary, he reportedly offered a fence-mending disclaimer of any malicious intent to insult the author of *Ossian*. But when Strahan could not live up to his promise of printing a notice of apology or deleting disagreeable language, Macpherson went on the offensive, and the rest is literary history. Macpherson died a rich man, unrepentantly bequeathing money for another hoax in the form of a fabricated Gaelic *Ossian* (1807), as Europe thrilled to the melancholy grandeur of his works. Paradoxically, the most successful literary liar in modern history lies buried in Westminster Abbey, across from a memorial in the Poets’ Corner over the remains of Samuel Johnson, the supreme truth-teller in English literature.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Charles O'Connor and the Celtic Revival in Ireland*

Dr Johnson having a laudable passion for the Discovery of every useful matter hitherto hid in the old languages of Britain and Ireland, readily encouraged every attempt to throw light upon any Such matter. Charles O'Connor to Joseph Cooper Walker, 10 January 1786

Ireland's greatest living poet, Seamus Heaney, made glowing reference to Samuel Johnson during his acceptance of the 1995 Nobel Prize for Poetry, in order to underscore his artistic quest to capture the Shakespearean wholeness of our human reality within the complicated context of divided national identity: "In such circumstances, the mind still longs to repose in what Samuel Johnson once called with superb confidence 'the stability of truth,' even as it recognizes the destabilizing nature of its own operations and enquiries."<sup>1</sup> This chapter and the next highlight a rarely discussed, but fruitful, issue of scholarship on the age of Johnson, namely, Ireland's complex connection to the political entity of Great Britain and the role of the *Ossian* controversy in elucidating contemporary pressures of awakening nationhood in the land. The *Ossian cause célèbre* figured importantly in early formulations of national self-definition in Ireland during a Celtic Revival, which culminated in a brilliant epoch for writers of the magnitude of Yeats and Joyce. The story of Johnson's part in the controversy extends to the generally neglected but significant Irish literary renaissance commencing in the eighteenth century. The *Ossian* craze became one of the catalysts of this development, and Johnson can justly lay claim to being one of the movement's prime promoters through his ties to Charles O'Connor. Johnson's complicated view of the island kingdom and his varied relationships with opponents of *Ossian* there glimpse the first stirrings for separate statehood and residual socio-economic rifts disturbing the political landscape to the present day. To focus on Johnson and the Irish is to uncover a fascinating phase of the *Ossian* dispute and capture glimmerings of the modern destiny and dilemmas of the nation.



National culture wars had erupted among subjects in the British Isles over the origins and authenticity of Macpherson's canon. *Ossian* offered participants of the Scottish Enlightenment a potent way of having their cake and eating it too with regard to asserting national distinctiveness and yet British commonality by membership in a united kingdom. Macpherson's publications soothed their acceptance of modern progress under the Union in offering a pseudo-Celtic (perhaps even crypto-Jacobite) celebration of a Scottish past marked by Gaelic primacy over Ireland and renovated by anachronisms borrowed from current British culture. Ossian's fabricated Celtic world, if doomed to destruction, was poetically resurrected anew for its Scottish audience by its absorption of a contemporary Britishness in its literary affiliations (such as the popular cult of the primitive, the exotic, the melancholy, and the sentimental). The anglicized Highland Celt called Fingal ultimately stood forth as archetypal Great Briton. He was a hybrid figure, with whom English readers could sympathize as a novel (if suspect) icon of Union, post-Culloden Scots could identify as a fellow patriot (if safely within the British fold), and Irish fans could empathize as an embodiment (if Scottified by Macpherson) of their own Gaelic heritage central to developing a sense of nationhood under the British empire. *Ossian* therefore gave simultaneous expression to an imperialist and nationalist mythos of political identity, based on Scottish Gaelic traditions muting Irish Gaelic antecedents while assimilating fashionable conventions of modern English literature.

Johnson supported the patriotic reassessment of Ireland's past and surely knew of the indignant Irish response to the seeming theft of its Gaelic literary heritage by Macpherson in *Ossian*. Johnson should be commemorated as the first classic English author to promote Irish studies in his little-known role of intellectual midwife at the birth of the Celtic Revival in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> Related to his sympathetic interest in Irish learning was his outrage at injustices against native Catholics responsible for Gaelic tradition. He was one of the very few Englishmen to declare his contempt for his government's mistreatment of Irish Catholics and, although he defended the British empire during the American Revolution, he never readily compromised his opposition to imperial oppression of the island's majority population. His profound humanity made for a divided response to imperialism; although he supported his mother country at a time of grave national danger, all his life he denounced the denial of basic human rights to any of its colonial subjects. Simple Christian charity always had equal weight with love of country.



Johnson lived in an age when Ireland was painfully redefining its national identity as neither wholly native nor entirely colonial but as an ambivalent amalgam of both conditions. King William's defeat of James II and the Treaty of Limerick in 1691 confirmed the primacy of the Church of Ireland, left Presbyterian dissenters without formal freedom of worship, and crushed the predominant Catholic citizenry with severe religious and civil disabilities. At least 70 and perhaps 80 percent or more of the roughly 3.7 million inhabitants were Gaelic-speaking Catholics, well below half of whom could read English by century's end.<sup>3</sup> To the English this body of subjects comprised an invisible underclass without rights, dignity, or much more than a modicum of real estate in their names. So insignificant were these native Irish to the British establishment that the leading teacher of law who ought to have known better, Sir William Blackstone, virtually discounted their presence in his classic *Commentaries on the Laws of England*: "The inhabitants of Ireland are, for the most part, descended from the English, who planted it as a kind of colony, after the conquest of it by King Henry the Second . . ."<sup>4</sup>

Catholic landholding fell from an already abysmal 14 percent of the total acreage in 1704 to merely 10 percent or even lower in 1776. Penal laws from 1695 through the 1720s, however laxly enforced, curtailed almost every aspect of Catholic lives, including especially worship and education, and had the effect of breeding a resentful Catholic identity in a teeming group of peasants and a dwindling gentry of native Irish and assimilated "old English" ancestry. The Protestant ruling class, made up mainly of English settlers coming after the Reformation and known as the Ascendancy, paradoxically subscribed to a policy of oppression which was supposed to strengthen their position but which actually intensified their own insecurity. Persecution might prop up their power and yet laid the groundwork for periodic insurrection. Even as they dreamed of forging a more distinct nation, they still preferred to keep the mass of Irish Catholics out of Irish self-government. Although part of the British empire, the country under their control agitated for independence, without entirely renouncing its loyalty to the crown, despite pressures for severance during the American and French Revolutions. The inability to bring about Catholic emancipation in a timely and meaningful fashion hobbled the dynamic for independence then, just as much as it inhibited unification later.

Any impression that Ireland was of foremost concern to Johnson would be misleading. Only one publication, his *Life of Swift*, comes close to concentrating on the country as the highly significant backdrop for the biographical portrait. However, for all the paucity of published

commentary, more than enough evidence exists to document his complex outlook on the place and its people. Of particular importance is a full and authoritative statement of Ireland's legal status found in lecture 15 from part 1 of *A Course of Lectures on the English Law* composed by Sir Robert Chambers in association with Johnson from 1766 to 1770. Johnson certainly knew this lecture, most likely helped to inspire its actual content, and echoed its arguments throughout *Taxation No Tyranny* (1775). Produced in the autumn of 1766 for delivery to Oxford undergraduates, lecture 15 gives utterance to standard legal doctrine prior to reforms in the Irish body politic under the impact of American Revolution. It is a straightforward, non-polemical expression of the conservative side of his attitude toward Ireland. There are no traces of Johnson's progressive side, no hints of his ferocious indignation against a Protestant minority lording itself over a Catholic majority. Any reservations about imperialism and its by-products, racism and religious intolerance, had no place in an academic discussion of the English law as it was and not as it should be.

According to lecture 15, Ireland, like British America, was "not comprised in the kingdom of Great Britain" but existed apart in a state of subordination.<sup>5</sup> The Normans had beaten the natives by 1171 and opened the way for the subsequent plantation of English subjects there. Thus, by right of conquest and by virtue of settlement, this dependent country resembled a colony "in the hands of the king" of England (1: 285). As for its population, a crucial legal distinction obtained between settlers and aboriginal inhabitants: "colonists are held to carry with them the laws and privileges of Englishmen, a conquered people is not entitled to those advantages till they are expressly granted to them by the crown" (1: 285). However cruel and impolitic discriminatory measures might be, the implication is that colonizers and natives could coexist under different – and unequal – codes of law. It might be objected that the subjugated natives of a once sovereign land are entitled to break their compulsory political "contract" (1: 282) with their foreign conqueror under the natural law. For the natural law requires all participants to be free and equal, rather than forced and unequal, in the process of forming a social contract. But the greater good of quiet and effective government holds sway to negate this argument and invalidate native resistance to authority. The priority of peace and stability countenances the jurisdiction of the conquering state, simply because of its superior power to enforce obedience and realize the ultimate political goal of civil order. Stripped of the tangled legal logic, lecture 15 actually endorses naked force over natural rights for the common welfare of the empire. Under this authoritarian principle

of sheer physical necessity, might makes right in the imperial scheme of things.

Richard Fitzgilbert de Clare, the Norman Earl of Pembroke known as Strongbow, initiated the takeover behind Henry II's assumption of royal dominion and establishment of an anglicized civil polity at least within the English Pale. By 1264 Irish Parliaments came into being and in 1494 enacted legislation ensuring imperial dependency "termed Poyning's laws, from Sir Edward Poyning, then lord lieutenant" mandating "that all English statutes, then made, should be of force in Ireland" (1: 285). Notwithstanding its subordination, Ireland during the Renaissance rose to the status of a kingdom in its own right under the statute 35 Hen. 8, c.3:

but this honorary distinction conferred on it by the English Parliament for the sake of adding another title to the king's style, gives it no degree of independence and . . . it is still as much subject as before to the superior legislature, who may make laws to bind Ireland, and without whose consent it cannot be severed from the crown of England . . . (1: 287-8)

Any remaining possibility of legislative autonomy from the English Parliament at Westminster ended decisively with the passage of the Declaratory Act in 1720. The so-called kingdom constituted, after all, an abject colony. Under the executive authority of the lord lieutenant at Dublin Castle were judicial and legislative branches analogous, if inferior, to the English institutions at Westminster. The Irish Parliament also had two houses that met every two years, but its Commons were chosen only at a monarch's accession for the entire reign, until the Octennial Act of 1768 allowed for elections every eight years. Home rule had no reality in a legislative process requiring the approval of both the lord lieutenant and the British Privy Council before and after the Irish Houses of Lords and Commons tried to pass a measure into law. Such was the doctrine of empire likely adopted by Johnson, with varying degrees of humanitarian qualification, regarding England's sister island throughout his life. Although progressive and conservative tenets intermingled in his ideas about Ireland, the disastrous course of the American Revolution for the British empire did cause him in old age to mute his humanitarianism and take a hard line against his country's enemies.

A very significant coda in this doctrine of empire did issue from Johnson's lips in 1773, when he railed against British abuse of Irish Catholics under penal laws:

Did we tell them we have conquered them, it would be above board: to punish them by confiscation and other penalties, as rebels, was monstrous injustice. King

William was not their lawful sovereign: he had not been acknowledged by the Parliament of Ireland, when they appeared in arms against him.<sup>6</sup>

According to this reasoning, William III's defeat of James II was by no means a repetition of the ancient Norman conquest of Ireland, allowing the British victor to impose what laws he wanted, however discriminatory, on a beaten alien enemy. Victorious Williamite forces could not claim to have conquered a foreign-born people and therefore could not levy harsh new laws against vanquished Irish Jacobites by right of conquest. On the contrary, these Irish Catholics were genuine subjects, not an alien enemy race, long before the Glorious Revolution. Consequently, they were still entitled to the laws and privileges of true subjects afterwards. Nor did they commit a crime like treason forfeiting their status as true subjects. They were no traitors, because they fought for their then lawful monarch. His rival, King William, if already legitimated by the Parliament of England, had not yet secured official recognition from their Irish Parliament. To punish true subjects as traitors and make them liable to an arbitrary imposition of newfangled penal laws violated the British Constitution blatantly. The British Parliament wielded the right to rule Ireland as a subject nation but had no right to legislate injustice or condone wrongdoing against lawful subjects. Under the principle of physical necessity, might made right, it is true, but could never maintain a juridical impossibility, such as the contradiction of legality sanctioning illegality. Might made right, Johnson avowed with ruthless pragmatism, but right could not equal wrong for long without retaliation in this world and the next. Johnson arraigned the awful situation of Irish Catholics as an inexcusable evil of empire. He had long detested their oppression as well as fashionable prejudices, or "cant," masquerading as self-evident truths among Protestants for justifying the worst intolerance.

In fact, platitudinous bigotry had provoked his comment about the illegality of penal laws as part of his most anthologized tirade against mistreating Irish Catholics in the *Life of Johnson*. The catalyst for this outburst was a debate over religious toleration taking place at the home of London booksellers, the Dilly brothers, notorious for their radical acquaintances. Foremost among the debaters was a self-interested advocate of freedom of worship, Dr. Henry Mayo. A diehard dissenter to the core, Mayo represented a species of Briton almost as annoying to Johnson as a Whig patriot. Johnson silently appealed to that favorite principle of political necessity in Sir Robert Chambers's *A Course of Lectures on the English Law* to vindicate a magistrate's right to prohibit the utterance of

doctrine "contrary to what that society holds to be true" (II: 249). This "physical right" to enforce conformity in public speech, if not in private conscience, rested on the sheer naked force behind the magistrate, as representative of the majority in a society, to compel the weaker minority to obey the will of the preponderant citizenry. The brilliant give and take of the talk, with both sides probing issues plausibly on a very intricate subject, eventually turned to Thomas Leland's *History of Ireland*. During the wandering conversation, a subliminal association of ideas seems to have registered in Johnson's mind, perhaps leading suddenly to a sense of the hypocrisy of his true-blue Protestant company, arguing for free speech at home while oblivious to its absence for Catholics in the sister kingdom. If the principle of physical necessity upheld the will of the majority in England, then it should apply to the horribly abused majority population of Ireland. It did not, glaringly so, and a terrible wrong was the consequence:

The Irish are in a most unnatural state; for we see there the minority prevailing over the majority. There is no instance, even in the ten persecutions [of early Christians by the pagan Roman empire], of such severity as that which the Protestants of Ireland have exercised against the Catholics . . . (II: 55)

The widespread stereotype about Irish wildness, dirtiness, and ignorance, which stung Irish Protestants and Catholics alike, catered to a British superiority complex but seems not to have prejudiced Johnson against the Irish. On the contrary, his many interactions with Irish visitors only enhanced his fondness for the race. He liked to contrast them, always favorably, to the Scots, who came out a poor second in his ethnic ratings. The linkage had a political dimension. Scotland and Ireland had begun the eighteenth century in opposite trajectories as far as union with Great Britain was concerned. A majority of Presbyterian Scots seriously balked at integration with England in 1707 but learned to relish the connection with a patriotic pride that made possible Boswell's celebration of his oneness with the John Bull of English literature in the *Life of Johnson* at a time when the French Revolution promised an ominously new world order. By contrast, many Anglo-Irish at first strove to have their own union with England but to no avail and then spent the rest of the century in search of autonomy, with American and French revolutionaries as role models for winning home rule.<sup>7</sup>

Like most immigrants, Irish and Scottish *émigrés* in London tended to be clannish and relied on networking with their own kind for preferment, pleasure, and putting off homesickness in a cold metropolitan environment

accentuating their otherness. Johnson, although respectful of national differences and intent on preserving Gaelic culture, set a premium on overall political integration of all His Majesty's subjects for the sake of civic harmony. He wanted to see diverse groups embracing a sort of union with Great Britain even in their daily private lives. Whereas at home the Irish inclined toward separation from England, when abroad they seemed to Johnson amenable to acclimating themselves to unfamiliar settings, especially among Londoners: "The Irish mix better with the English than the Scotch do; their language is nearer to English" (11: 242). The Scots, he claimed, minded more their own tribal self-advancement than true fellowship with all British subjects and yet, as he must have known, increasingly dominated the machinery of empire as loyal civil servants. Nevertheless, Johnson preferred hearing a brogue to a burr emanating from the mouths of individuals who flocked to meet him, and not a few of his Irish compatriots in their turn considered his friendship a great event in their lives.

To be sure, Ireland seemed too tame, too much a poorer version of prosperous England ever to tempt Johnson to visit it. It is an overlooked fact that he had a lively curiosity about wild northern climes of utter barrenness satisfying basic human necessities, thereby exposing the root drives and desires of people in an uncivilized environment. Newspapers gave much attention to Arctic areas, and he read travel books about these forbidding regions with anthropological relish. In the 1750s he meditated visiting Iceland and even offered to accompany Christopher Smart's wife there to allow her an escape from her dreary life as a shopkeeper in Dublin, far from her infants, her deranged poet-husband, and her concerned parents in London:

I am not surprised to hear that you are not much delighted with Ireland. To one that has passed so many years in the pleasures and opulence of London, there are few places that can give much delight . . . Dublin, though a place much worse than London, is not so bad as Iceland. You will now be hardened to all from the sight of poverty, and will be qualified to lead us forward, when we shrink at rueful spectacles of smoaky cottages and ragged inhabitants.<sup>8</sup>

Nothing came of the projected Icelandic expedition, but Johnson's longstanding fascination with northern geography eventually resulted in a tour, not of Ireland, but of the sister Gaelic site of the Scottish Highlands for a glimpse of "savage virtues and barbarous grandeur" central to his anthropological interests. Boswell so enjoyed his role of travel guide that he tried persuading Johnson to try a follow-up trip to Ireland in 1777 and

again in 1779, but to no avail. Their conversation on that point has become a classic of badinage in the *Life of Johnson*: "BOSWELL. 'Should you not like to see Dublin, Sir?' JOHNSON. 'No, Sir; Dublin is only a worse capital.' BOSWELL. 'Is not the Giant's-Causeway worth seeing?' JOHNSON. 'Worth seeing, yes; but not worth going to see'" (III: 410). It is a pity that Johnson's itinerary of places to see did not include Ireland because, contrary to his smug expectations, many striking scenes and new socio-political phenomena awaited him in a land promising him a wealth of warm welcomes from Irish acquaintances, high and low. He would have witnessed a nation moving toward modern independence and a capital city beginning a magnificent building boom.

The Irish who knew him hailed from all social ranks, the aristocracy, the clergy, and a genteel middle class made up of artist-littérateurs, historians, lawyer-politicians, and booksellers. With one exception, all of them had links to the Protestant Ascendancy, even Edmund Burke, the most famous Irishman of the century after Swift. Theirs was a conservatism more moderate by and large than Johnson's legally orthodox understanding of British imperial authority as espoused by English jurists. Some of them exhibited complacency toward the status quo, others favored reform and more autonomy, a few desired closer integration with England, and most wanted relaxation of the imperial hold to varying degrees, without a complete cutting of ties to Hanoverian monarchy. Johnson's oldest Irish associates included people friendly with his nemesis, Lord Chesterfield, the cultured nobleman who made a tolerable viceroy of Ireland from 1745 to 1746, prior to returning home and earning infamy for refusing to bestow patronage on the *Dictionary*. Johnson, despite the insult, showed no reluctance to consort with many people in the Chesterfield orbit: Rev. Dr. Samuel Madden (1707–1762), education reformer and co-founder of the progressive Dublin Society; George Faulkner (1699?–1775), Swift's printer who published the major Irish newspaper, *The Dublin Journal*; Lord Orrery (1706–1762), Swift's first biographer; and Thomas Southwell, second Baron Southwell (1698–1766), former lord lieutenant of Ireland, whose drunken pious brother, Edmund (b. 1705), and natural son, Mauritius Lowe the painter (1746–1793), also crossed paths with Johnson.

To anyone assuming that Johnson was blindly imperialist about Ireland, his public endorsement of the patriot politics of Dr. Charles Lucas (1713–1771) in the *Literary Magazine* (1756–7) will doubtless come as a surprise. Temporarily exiled in London by Dublin authorities, the reform-minded Lucas wrote a tract on the healthfulness of spa waters,



which Johnson reviewed, with praise for its author as a champion of Irish freedom: "Let the man thus driven into exile for having been the friend of his country be received in every other place as a confessor of liberty, and let the tools of power be taught in time that they may rob but cannot impoverish."<sup>9</sup> Lucas's well-publicized sufferings on behalf of a small new activist wing in Irish politics marked the beginning of a national reawakening that would not really dissipate until the century's close. The unsettled decade of the Seven Years' War, when Johnson's intellectual creativity reached its zenith, also marked his period of fiercest anti-imperialism aroused by this first world war in English history. And yet, even then, decades before the American Revolution, he insisted that British colonies contribute financially to the mother country in payment for their own defense. He was always as severe toward American colonists as he was toward European imperialists. Johnson's hostility to empire, virulent by the mid-1750s in the *Literary Magazine*, helps to explain his siding with Lucas's progressive patriot politics back in Dublin.

Around this time another Irishman known to Johnson, Rev. Dr. William Maxwell (1732–1818), arrived at London soon after his leavetaking from Trinity College, Dublin. He would be a chaplain of the Middle Temple for the next twenty years, before his promotion to rector at Mount Temple, Westmeath, from 1775 to 1808. Through the mediation of George II's official printer in Ireland, George Abraham Grierson (ca. 1728–1755), a first meeting took place in 1754 to commence what Maxwell so movingly described as "a connection, that was at once the pride and happiness of my life."<sup>10</sup> So much of a legend had Johnson already become in his productive middle age that the young clergyman, like many other future visitors, felt compelled to make a careful record of the conversation. Boswell luckily enriched his *Life of Johnson* with Maxwell's "Collectanea," a remarkable series of sayings containing perhaps the best summing-up of Johnson's political principles and affection for Ireland. Spanning two decades of Johnsonian talk but stressing opinions from the earlier years of the friendship, the anecdotes covered a range of topics as wide as the speaker's humanity was capacious: personal oddities, his charity, love of country, reservations about the Scots and James Macpherson's forged Ossian poems, his austere moral philosophy, and his mother's death, which required Maxwell's clerical attendance to soothe his sorrow.

According to Maxwell, Johnson's politics were less a matter of ideological Toryism and more a case of moral idealism about statecraft, with due regard for constitutional checks and balances springing from a



mutual respect for the prerogatives of the crown and the liberties of the people. Whiggism was anathema, embodying an unprincipled and potentially irreligious mode of governing by corruptive wheeling and dealing. Absolutism was equally evil for nullifying individual freedoms. At its best, the English body politic rested on a bedrock foundation of wisdom and virtue under a responsible prince willing to be the directing soul, rather than the irresponsible tool, of an administration made to work for the good of subjects. As for Maxwell's own homeland,

He had great compassion for the miseries and distresses of the Irish nation, particularly the Papists; and severely reprobated the barbarous debilitating policy of the British government, which, he said was the most detestable mode of persecution. To a gentleman, who hinted such policy might be necessary to support the authority of the English government, he replied by saying, "Let the authority of the English government perish, rather than be maintained by iniquity. Better would it be to restrain the turbulence of the natives by the authority of the sword, and to make them amenable to law and justice by an effectual and vigorous police, than to grind them to powder by all manner of disabilities and incapacities. Better (said he) to hang or drown people at once, than by an unrelenting persecution to beggar and starve them." (II: 121)

Johnson's unsettling remarks went to the heart of the rottenness of imperialism in Ireland and require careful consideration: if imperial England could not govern justly and pursue the common good of all its people, then it possessed no right to rule; as a worse alternative, if it had to resort to harsh measures to maintain law and order, then it would be better to erect a peaceful police state of compulsory unity than the even crueller imperial system now in place bent on a painfully prolonged crushing of the majority population. Better a mass execution of these people than their never-ending persecution; better sudden genocide than lingering torture; better a holocaust than a hell on earth for Irish Catholic men, women, and children! Behind Johnson's outrage was an abiding humanitarianism never totally replaced by other political priorities for strengthening an endangered British empire in the future. Helping the poor and the downtrodden was a fixed principle with him and, not surprisingly, turned up again, much later, in Maxwell's memorabilia: "Where a great proportion of the people (said he,) are suffered to languish in helpless misery, that country must be ill policed, and wretchedly governed: a decent provision for the poor, is the true test of civilization" (II: 130-1). Amen. When a former colonial governor expressed disapproval of economic policies beneficial to Irish agriculture but hurtful to English trade, the retort was swift and crushing: "you talk the language of

a savage: what, Sir? Would you prevent any people from feeding themselves, if by any honest means they can do it?" (II: 130–1).

The Swiftian savagery of his outrage attested to a sincerity of conviction beyond any mere talking for victory or shock effect. What a sensation the outburst must have made on an audience unaccustomed to hearing a pro-Catholic point of view. Rarely in the Catholic-baiting climate of imperial Protestant Britain did there surface much sympathy or even a mere mention of Irish Catholics. At most they were a subliminal concern of perpetual menace for British rulers, better left in a twilight zone of psychological denial. They were a problem seemingly beyond resolution and therefore worthy of continuing repression. No doubt, listening to the most esteemed of living English writers, renowned for his reverential Protestant faith, bring up this shameful topic to the forefront of discussion must have been offputting. Fearlessly Johnson cut through the cant of fashionable bigotry to focus on an issue which only the most enlightened Irish politicians of the century, like Edmund Burke, Henry Grattan, and Wolfe Tone, cared to address directly.

Johnson's fair-mindedness went hand in hand with a firm respect for the past glory of Irish civilization and, unfortunately, for what he perceived to be a dwindling assemblage of brilliant minds in modern times:

he said, Swift was a man of great parts, and the instrument of much good to his country. – Berkeley was a profound scholar, as well as a man of fine imagination; but [Archbishop James] Us[s]her, he said, was the great luminary of the Irish church; and a greater, he added, no church could boast of . . . (II: 132)

Most important, the country's rich intellectual heritage begged for preservation by historians, and so seriously did Johnson hold to this belief that he became a steadfast promoter of Irish studies: "He frequently exhorted me to set about writing a History of Ireland, and archly remarked, there had been some good Irish writers, and that one Irishman might at least aspire to be equal to another" (II: 121).

No Irishman played a more instrumental part in Johnson's involvement in Irish studies than did George Faulkner. Their acquaintance began at least by 1742 and probably earlier, owing to business dealings with each other in the literary world. At the time Faulkner already ranked as the pre-eminent bookseller at Dublin and editor of its most widely read newspaper, having made a name and a small fortune for himself from issuing a first edition of Swift's works. An emotionless entrepreneur in journalism who loved to wear fine clothes, he shrewdly oversaw the expansion of his printing operations, cultivated good relations with

influential people like Lords Chesterfield and Orrery, and cherished two lifelong projects of publishing Swift's entire canon and encouraging scholarship on the history of Ireland. Ever ready to defend the interests of his country, he managed to persuade a disbelieving Johnson that England had drained the Irish treasury of 50,000 pounds over the previous half century: "How so, sir! (said Dr. Johnson) . . . From whence . . . does all this money come?" [Faulkner replied] 'Come, why out of the blood and bowels of the poor people of Ireland!'"<sup>11</sup>

One of their meetings, in the winter of 1756–7, had a very special significance for calling Johnson's attention to perhaps the leading Irish Catholic intellectual of the eighteenth century, Charles O'Connor of Bellanagare (1710–91). The consequence would be Johnson's participation in the Celtic Revival and his acquiring the distinction of being the first, and perhaps the only, major English author ever to champion Irish studies. This noteworthy episode has received scarce notice in the voluminous annals of Johnson's life. O'Connor remains a figure of relative obscurity, and surprisingly so, because he then ranked as chief activist for Catholic emancipation and a considerable force for awakening a cultural renaissance that has culminated in the spectacular achievements of modern Irish literature. An authoritative biography has never appeared to do justice to his brilliant advancement of the interrelated goals of national pride and religious toleration through a selfless life of writing on behalf of Irish historical inquiry in opposition to penal laws.<sup>12</sup>

Born in a humble cottage at Kilmacranny, County Sligo, O'Connor became part of the silent and diminishing Catholic gentry, when his father recovered 700 acres at Bellanagare, County Roscommon, after forfeitures of property by the late seventeenth century. Difficult of access then and now, his old gray-stucco Georgian manor known as the Hermitage would seem a fit object of restoration by the Republic of Ireland to create a memorial for a great early patriot of national healing. Here O'Connor pursued the career of a very learned, if disenfranchised, country squire, sensitive about the sufferings of Irish Catholics but resolutely hopeful for their economic liberation and accommodation to both their Ascendancy-run nation and the British empire for the common good of religiously divided Irish subjects:

Time will, sooner or later, blot out the Phantasms of fugitive Opinions [of bigotry], and to make the long Night of *Prejudice* give way to the *Lights* held forth by *Nature* . . . Let us presume, and presume *confidently*, that this Day is not only dawning, but breaking in upon us.<sup>13</sup>

Growing pride in an ancient Irish heritage of liberty belonging to all could lead to fuller intellectual enlightenment, stronger national identity, and more prosperity. O'Connor's dual interest in history and politics assumed the same ideal of fostering unity within diversity for his country.

O'Connor was Johnson's only Catholic Gaelic-speaking acquaintance in Ireland and in fact led the opposition there to Macpherson's anti-Irish historiography buttressing the fabrication of *Ossian*. Mastery of written Gaelic provided unique advantages for serious, if undisciplined, inquiry in the wild and woolly field of Irish antiquarianism.<sup>14</sup> Long before literary controversy erupted, Faulkner handed over to Johnson, by the spring of 1757, a rare specimen of O'Connor's learning published four years previously, a book which, for all its flawed historiography, helped to launch the Celtic Revival in Ireland for the rest of the century. Although Johnson had reservations about speculative studies of remote antiquity, Faulkner successfully recommended at least dipping into O'Connor's treatise of approximately 250 pages, entitled *Dissertations on the Antient History of Ireland: Wherein an Account is Given of the Origine, Government, Letters, Sciences, Religion, Manners and Customs, of the antient Inhabitants* (1753). As a result of his reading, Johnson penned a glowing exhortation for O'Connor to continue spurring the advancement of scholarship about the literature and language of Ireland. This intellectual mission had a top priority because longstanding turmoil in the island and widespread ignorance of Gaelic had interfered with the recovery of reliable historical information. And yet the nation that once saved European civilization in the dark ages had a heritage worth recovering. In addition, more knowledge of links in languages like Irish, Welsh, and Breton would further the disciplines of anthropology and historical linguistics.

What Johnson sent O'Connor on 9 April 1757 ranks among his most important letters. His endorsement of one man's preliminary research should be read as a landmark manifesto for all Irish studies, composed at a time when, as Johnson surmised, Gaelic faced extinction. O'Connor and his fellow Irish scholars recognized the great significance of his letter. It was nothing less than a call for a renaissance of modern learning about Ireland:

I have lately by the favor of Mr. Faulkner, seen your account of Ireland, and cannot forbear to solicit a prosecution of your design. Sir William Temple complains that Ireland is less known than any other country, as to it's ancient state. The natives have had little leisure, and little encouragement for enquiry; and strangers not knowing the language, have had no ability.

I have long wished that the Irish Literature were cultivated. Ireland is known by tradition to have been once the seat of piety, and learning; and surely it would be very acceptable to all those who are curious either in the original of nations, or the affinities of Languages, to be further informed of the revolutions of a people so ancient, and once so illustrious.

What relation there is between the Welch, and Irish Languages, or between the language of Ireland, and that of Biscay, deserves enquiry. Of these provincial, and unextended tongues, it seldom happens that more than one, are understood by any one man; and therefore, it seldom happens that a fair comparison can be made. I hope you will continue to cultivate this kind of learning, which has lain too long neglected, and which if it be suffered to remain in oblivion for another century, may perhaps never be retrieved. As I wish well to all useful undertakings, I would not forbear to let you know how much you deserve, in my opinion, from all lovers of study, and how much pleasure your work has given to, Sir, Your most obliged and most humble Servant, SAM. JOHNSON.<sup>15</sup>

This splendid letter is a far more elegant performance than the roughhewn book of pioneering research that evoked it.

O'Connor's *Dissertations* is a collection of essays rather than a chronological history narrative. Boasting a pseudo-scientific comprehensiveness in its miscellaneous topics of inquiry, it does have the distinction of being the first notable antiquarian work on Ireland in the age of Johnson. Nothing of equal scope had appeared since the seventeenth century, when Irish and Scottish historians had already begun disputing the pre-eminence of their respective countries for the title of mother country of Gaelic culture in the face of contempt for both places by equally partisan English commentators. Steeped in accessible and arcane sources, O'Connor set out to rehabilitate Ireland's image by commonplace conceptions of a glorious precolonial and pre-Christian past destroyed by external English aggression and internal tribal warfare. No documents existed to confirm decisively his principal assumption of a highly developed aristocratic civilization with the use of letters before the introduction of Christianity in the fifth century. His catalogs of princes and warriors mixed a little fact and much fable, his comparative linguistics upheld wild conjectures about Irish origins and primordial Milesian ties to eastern Mediterranean cultures by way of Spain, and his discussion of early Gaelic times succumbed to gross idealization. Anachronism, credulity, disorganization, and rhetorical imprecision marred the entire work. Whereas Macpherson later treated Scots to a primitivist historiography of noble savages in *Ossian*, O'Connor took an opposite tack and envisaged a highly advanced society of ancient Gaels to explode racist stereotypes about supposedly ignorant Irishmen, past and present.

To his credit, O'Connor labored early in a field rife with obscurity and not yet well served either by available authoritative collections of primary sources or by scientific tools of research. He saw himself as "a first *Discoverer*; leaving the Honour, as well as Advantage, of Cultivation to his *Successors*."<sup>16</sup> More important, he had the wisdom and humility to sense his limitations, to keep working toward substantially improved publications in the future, and to hope for the rise of more capable and impartial scholars from among his countrymen. Like Johnson and Faulkner, he encouraged others to pursue Irish studies with a high seriousness. Had Johnson read the *Dissertations* with any care, he might have detected defects and political biases. He may well have recoiled at the insistence on a pre-Christian Irish literacy and civilization. Christianity was to him the wellspring of England's own civilization, and he specifically directed O'Connor to write about Ireland, not in its prehistoric paganism, but as "the seat of piety, and learning" during its monastic golden age following St. Patrick's conversion of the nation in the fifth century. This preferred focus was in keeping with Protestant interest in the possibility of a primitive non-papist Irish Christianity conferring legitimacy on the Church of Ireland. Nevertheless, the very extravagance of O'Connor's historiography might have seemed symptomatic of an earnest scholarly exuberance that Johnson wanted to see nurtured and matured for the sake of better antiquarian studies to come.

The introduction sets forth the author's credentials and his underlying themes with a hyperbolic energy aimed at imparting national pride in a readership oblivious to the glories of an aristocratic antiquity filled with freedom and devoid of bigotry. More familiarity with the old Irish constitution, working then "for rational Liberty and for those Endowments of Body and Mind" ennobling the original body politic, might help the public revive the heroic past in a degraded modern state disgraced by religious discrimination (vii). This reading of Irish antiquity echoed the conventional Whig interpretation of the freedom-fostering British Constitution. Applied to a neighboring kingdom widely considered backward by comparison with England, this anachronistic Whig view of a pristine past of liberty and a high-minded aristocracy elevated Ireland's stature as a nation worthy of a less servile position in the modern British empire. A venerable tradition of freedom united both countries and needed only revitalization to create an enlightened modern Ireland, embracing both religious diversity and one political faith in a common identity and destiny within the empire (226). Untold centuries of isolation from the rest of Europe ensured for the Irish a distinctive cultural

legacy unsullied by foreign adulterations until relatively recent changes beginning with the Norman invasion. A wholesome heritage of ancient aristocratic liberty was recoverable for the Irish race in modern times as the mighty motive force for national unity, domestic prosperity, and imperialist cooperation with Great Britain.

Postcolonial literary theory postulates profound complexity in authorial responses to the presentation of natives, settlers, and rulers in narratives. The nebulous status of eighteenth-century Ireland as simultaneously a Gaelic Catholic homeland, a distinct Ascendancy-run Protestant kingdom, and a dependent British colony inevitably gave rise to a richly ambivalent colonial discourse.<sup>17</sup> The *Dissertations* exemplified the composite strains of this mongrel national make-up. O'Connor accepted the dubious theory of Milesian Celtic settlements importing from the ancient East, via Spain, a high culture to Ireland to demonstrate that these wandering Gaels or "Scots" did not fit the popular stereotype of the Irish as an abysmally backward people. These migrations seemed to have gone in a northwesterly direction that made Ireland, not Scotland, the site of the original Gaelic culture in the British Isles. All this was of course a very contrived reading of scarce and highly speculative evidence.

Supposedly the ancient Irish erected an aristocratic constitutional monarchy comparable to England's modern parliamentary system, replete with a well-wrought balance of powers between executive and legislative branches: "Their Constitution . . . was founded originally upon democratic Principles, and on the proper Equilibrium of the prime contending Orders depended the Safety and due Oeconomy of the whole System" (85). The portrayal of an ancient anglicized model of free government might foster in Irish subjects a fellow-feeling with their English masters from sharing a legacy of constitutional freedom, which a modern liberty-loving England could readily advance through extending equal citizenship under the law for the good of Ireland and Great Britain. Glorious old Ireland did eventually disappear, from its lapsing into unruly internal factiousness productive of corruption, civil war, and vulnerability to Norman encroachments. Sadly, Norman invasions from England doomed the native civilization because the Normans subjugated the country without imparting the protections of the British Constitution, at the very time when it most needed the stability of English law for its survival (59). The denial of English law to the indigenous Irish in the middle ages and, again, after the Reformation, retarded modern progress because it led to the imposition of a separate set of discriminatory regulations curtailing the freedom and productivity of most of the inhabitants.



The implication of O'Connor's reading of Irish history seems closely related to the purpose of his political pamphlets. He was appealing for greater justice and toleration from the country's rulers. England risked endangering its own legacy of law and liberty by not fully conferring both on its sister isle. His sentiments, if loyalist in tendency, nonetheless posed a subversive challenge to the status quo, which required considerable softening when he published the second edition of the *Dissertations* in 1766. His colonial discourse in the first edition displayed an ambiguity deeply rooted in a love-hate response to his Ascendancy government. Elements of resistance writing included daring swipes at the English for causing Ireland's proverbial ignorance (32–3) and its modern decline: "Who would think that the Generality of the present *Irish* are the Remains of a free, learned, and polite Nation?" (41). Even more confrontational was an English translation of a bard's Gaelic denunciation of Britain as an example of poetry "stirring up the Irish to Rebellion, what those bitter Writers called by another Name; *nothing less than the Spirit of Liberty, and the Assertion of the Rights of their Fathers*" (63). Johnson had access to the first edition to sample the suppressed anger. Given his respect for the liberty of individuals, he would have understood and might well have sympathized.

The story of O'Connor's subsequent relationship with Johnson is of equal scholarly interest and is also reported here for the first time. When Faulkner in London forwarded Johnson's magnificent response to the receipt of *Dissertations on the Antient History of Ireland*, O'Connor felt profound elation. Opening channels of communication with the principal English writer of the age qualified as a milestone in his life and a prime inspiration for him to devote his remaining years to researching Irish history. Indeed, a portion of his previously overlooked reply to Faulkner, dated 4 May 1757 and written from his residence at distant Bellanagare, testifies to his overwhelming gratitude for this astonishing turn of events:

But how shall I acknowledge your Obligations on myself in particular? . . . You now bring Mr. Johnson & me together . . . His *Ramblers* & other Works have set him (as Mr. Pope expresses it) "*at the Top of the Sublime Character.*" As a Communication with such Men collects the most pleasing Circumstances of private life, how much must I not owe to one who brought about such a Communication in my own Favour? I set this on the level with the greatest Services ever done me.

I shall beg leave, Dear Sir, to trouble you Soon, with forwarding a Letter from me to Mr. Johnson. I am this Day too much taken up with the Thoughts of my own good Fortune, not to communicate them to my Dublin friends; Pride has a Share in this, Mr. Faulkner's unmerited Service a greater.<sup>18</sup>



Although no letter directly to Johnson has survived, something extraordinary was in the offing. Through Faulkner's mediation in London, a clandestine negotiation took place almost immediately to prod Johnson into writing on behalf of religious toleration in Ireland. According to a grandson, Rev. Charles O'Connor, who issued an outspoken biography of his forebear in 1796 (suppressed from sale), Faulkner had long spread the word among Dubliners about Johnson's heartfelt sympathy for Irish Catholics "as an oppressed and degraded people for whom humanity loudly demanded that something should be done to elevate them to the dignity of human nature."<sup>19</sup> The greatest of English moralists might be just the right man to take up their cause and make a difference in their wretched lives through the unmatched power of his eloquent pen.

Following the publication of the *Dissertations* in 1753, O'Connor turned to pamphleteering and creating a Catholic Committee in 1756 to increase pressure for the removal of penal laws. Neither a Jacobite nor a revolutionary, he pushed for Catholic emancipation on a conservative platform of rapprochement with the Protestant ruling class. On the eve of his receiving Johnson's wonderful letter, he issued his profession of Catholic solidarity with British rulers in "The Protestant Interest, Considered relatively to the Operation of the Popery-Acts in Ireland" (1757). The newly formed Catholic Committee took up his reform program and looked to generate the best possible publicity by employing any leading literary lights of the day willing to argue its case before the British public. Now that Johnson was in direct communication with O'Connor, no one else must have seemed better suited or more readily available for the task of writing against penal laws than the most eminent living English author, happily known for his support of Irish Catholics. Not a week passed before O'Connor wrote to Faulkner a second time with a request to convey a letter directly to Johnson about advocating religious toleration in print for a fee of 50 guineas. Faulkner would make a most effective mediator, because of his well-known neutrality among Protestants and Catholics in his popular newspaper. He apparently suggested the idea of offering proper remuneration for Johnson's assistance, to be collected from political sympathizers. To O'Connor, King William's policy of religious inclusiveness needed to be resuscitated now as never before. He dearly hoped to capitalize on the precious new opportunity of having Johnson as a spokesman and acted swiftly to promote his agenda.

From his residence on his Roscommon farm, he sent Faulkner on 10 May 1757 a packet of correspondence aimed at moving Johnson to agitate for Irish Catholics. His cryptic prose paralleled the rhetorical imprecision

that he favored for his self-protection in his earliest publications. Muddled writing muted anything possibly offensive or dangerous in his discourse and was a way of hiding from the authorities. An evasive style tellingly reflected the terrible political repression endured by his Catholic compatriots:

Enclosed I send you a Letter to be forwarded to Mr. Johnson. From the contents, you must surely Judge that I am myself in earnest turned *Rambler*; I request you will make my Apology to him on this Account. I wd. engage him in the Cause of an innoxious people, punished by Law for no other Reason but because they are mistrusted by the Law-makers. Your Engagements with the public brought you acquainted with the chief Men of this party, and you can not think so meanly of their Honor & Gratitude but that they are as willing as able to make Mr. J. a Suitable Return, could he be prevailed upon to undertake the Service of the public so far as it can be connected with their Manumission from Bondage. You who acquired so much popularity by weekly Paragraphs in favor of the National Interest, and who have spread your Influence by keeping clear of Party Reflexions, are the fittest Man I know to negotiate this affair Secretly with our People. Dr. Jennings will assist you with his own Interest among them, & I need not mention many more to you, who certainly will be far from putting the least Slight on a Project which if brought to bear [~~crossed out: (with yr. Friend beyond the Water),~~] is indisputably the best laid, that could be thought on, for restoring us all to that Condition in which King William wisely left us. I shall dun and Sollicit my Friends in the City on this Subject as soon as you give me Leave. I am in the mean time with the greatest Affection & Gratitude

your most obliged and obedient Servt  
Ch O'Conor.<sup>20</sup>

To keep up the momentum of the negotiation, two weeks later O'Conor promised to follow Faulkner's advice about quickly mailing for Johnson's use helpful background information, comprising his own latest pamphlets and digests of penal laws. A Dublin-based relative, Michael Reilly, would furnish the requisite sources to familiarize Johnson with the issues and win him over to their cause. The material sent to London possibly included O'Conor's recent tract, *Maxims Relative to the Present State of Ireland. 1757. Humbly submitted to the Consideration of the Legislative POWERS*. This essay was easy reading, outlining like a catechism twenty-four reasons for reconciling religious divisions in a period of famine devastating to Irish Catholics. The unhappy times demanded an "Identity of political Principles" among diverse religious groups.<sup>21</sup> National solidarity meant the participation of all subjects in the economy of their society. Let Catholics enjoy legal remedies possessed by Irish dissenters and do away with penal laws and antique prejudices preventing the majority

population from contributing to the prosperity of Ireland and the empire. There need be no fear of treachery, especially after Pope Benedict XIV sanctioned the duty of Catholic loyalty to a non-Catholic state: "The *Papists* can do this Country no active Hurt; and Doctor SWIFT hath long ago told us, from his own Experience of the Party, that they have no *Inclinations to any*: But they can do us great and lasting Good" (15–16).

Hoping that his own views and other writings on the Catholic problem might stimulate Johnson's ideas on the subject, O'Connor sent his last letter on the matter to Faulkner from his farm estate on 25 May 1757. The concluding portion of this rare letter makes clear that serious preparations for the secret project were about to be set in motion:

My learned and excellent Friend Dr. Jennings will I know, to his utmost, exert himself in the Affair which, I trust, you will be enabled to negotiate with Mr. J – n. You happily opened, and you have been long opening, a Treaty of Peace between the Public & a Party hitherto obnoxious on the score of Religion. It is our Business to pursue with great Earnestness Such a Treaty (if possible) to its Conclusion. If we fail, we shall fail with honor, at least with a better Impression than any which Zeal could hitherto give, or Prejudice receive; and is not that gaining a great Point? Materials from Acts of Parliament & from Reason previous & often superior to all Acts of popular Assemblies shall not be wanting to your Friend if he can be won to act in this one Capacity to the Public, & (may I say) for his own Fame. My Cousin [Michael] Reilly of Usher's Street (the Editor of the *Dissertations*) will supply a good Part of those Materials, if you or Dr. Jennings apply to him. I have been out all this Day attending Pioneers & enclosing one of my Parks. I shall however write another Letter this night (if I can) to Dr. Jennings. If I can not, I request you will apologize for me, till I can more fully give him my Mind by the next Post.<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, after all the careful planning and coaxing, nothing happened. By 4 October 1757 Michael Reilly noted the absence of any response from Johnson. O'Connor thereupon turned to a less ambitious undertaking on behalf of Catholic rights by assisting his colleague, Dr. John Curry, with the publication of *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Rebellion of 1641* (1758), a work exposing alleged Protestant abuses fomenting an infamous Catholic uprising against recent English settlers in early modern Ireland.

Like Johnson, Burke in London was eventually consulted for assistance, this time about prodding David Hume in 1760 to emend his anti-Catholic account of the 1641 uprising in his popular *History of England*, based on information supplied from Curry's *Historical Memoirs* and O'Connor's own *Dissertations*. Why did Johnson reject the Catholic Committee's earlier overtures? No longer editor of the *Literary Magazine*

because of his unpopular journalistic stand against the Seven Years' War, he needed work and, as Faulkner divined, would have welcomed a stipend of 50 guineas in return for some pamphleteering against penal laws. Then too he was predisposed to favoring Irish Catholics and, despite insistence on Anglican tests for matriculation at Oxford and Cambridge universities years later, disapproved of requiring loyalty oaths in English militias. He seemed tailor-made for the commission. But equally compelling obstacles prevailed to dictate his refusal. He was probably weary and wary of controversy in the wake of his severance from the *Literary Magazine*, was intent on returning to the preparation of his edition of Shakespeare, and was certainly too far removed from Irish affairs to involve himself in a rancorous public debate over religion and politics.

O'Connor to his credit took no offense at the rebuff. In his eyes having Johnson's fine letter supporting Irish studies was reward enough and a salutary goad for aspiring to intellectual excellence in his own scholarship and in the antiquarian endeavors of his associates in the Celtic Revival. Basking in the glow of praise from Johnson, O'Connor made himself a devoted disciple of the great writer and felt a new impetus to improve his *Dissertations* before a second printing in 1766. Determined to be less an outright propagandist and more a careful historian in the future, he amended and greatly enlarged the original text. To that end, he refined his style and organization and restrained some, if by no means all, of his earlier glorification of Irish antiquity. Most important, the *Ossian* controversy had intervened to disturb the peace of British antiquaries and besmirch Ireland's rightful reputation as Gaelic mother country outrageously claimed for Scotland by that literary liar, James Macpherson. Consequently, O'Connor in his second edition of the *Dissertations* replaced subversive pro-Catholic political discourse with forthright literary criticism of the fraudulent *Ossian* project for the satisfaction of aggrieved Irish readers, Protestants and Catholics alike.

Macpherson might rightly claim title to being an important instigator of the Celtic Revival by having provoked Irish counter-attacks against his highly speculative historiography upholding Scotland's precedence in Gaelic culture within the British Isles. He reignited chronic Hiberno-Caledonian disputes over racial origins occurring since the Renaissance. Problems began with the publication of *Fingal* in 1761. In the critical apparatus Macpherson asserted the allegedly corrupt state of Irish bardic verse by way of praising the undefiled Scottish Gaelic materials behind his own English "translations" like *Fingal*: "The story of this poem is so little interlarded with fable, that one cannot help thinking it the genuine

history of Fingal's expedition, embellished by poetry" descending orally from the third century (Howard Gaskill's edition, 37). He extolled the grand simplicity of his "authentic" prehistoric sources – which did not exist. By contrast, he denounced anachronistic inconsistencies and linguistic contamination betraying the spuriousness of modern bardic compositions, including Irish verse. Such was his claim, despite the fact that modern bardic compositions constituted his only sources whenever he followed any, usually loosely, in slightly more than a quarter of all his titles. He argued that telltale signs of corrupted later texts pervaded Irish poetry: "In one of them Ossian is made to mention himself as baptized by St. Patrick, in another he speaks of the famous crusade, which was not begun in Europe for many centuries after" (37). His objection to Irish anachronisms flies in the face of similar portrayals of Ossian beseeching St. Patrick for Christian salvation in the early Scottish Gaelic collection recovered by him just before *Fingal* appeared, namely, *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*. As usual, his best defense was a groundless offensive. To add insult to injury, he conjectured that Celts from Scotland "were the founders of the Irish nation; which is a more probable story than the fables of Milesian and Gallician colonies" (44).

An early critic of Macpherson, Rev. Ferdinando Warner, after some consultation with O'Connor, tried answering these insulting assertions in *Remarks on the History of Fingal, and other Poems of Ossian* (2 February 1762). A clergyman of the Church of England, Warner, like O'Connor, defended the Milesian origins of the Irish people and their ownership of the literary mythology brazenly Scottified in *Ossian*. There was no accusation of literary forgery, only an admonition about rectifying a falsified historiography likely to have been lifted from the very Irish chronicles by Geoffrey Keating and Roderic O'Flaherty lambasted in the critical apparatus of *Fingal*. As Warner suspected, "it is not improbable that he might collect the Substance of it from the Antiquities which he holds so cheap."<sup>23</sup> This shrewd observation happened to be correct and galling to Macpherson, especially while he was in the process of mining and manipulating the same Irish chronicles for the elaborate story behind his next fabricated Gaelic epic, *Temora*. His vengeance came in the form of an "Advertisement" defiantly abusing Irish chroniclers and attacking Warner for his ignorance of Gaelic and Irish antiquities. Under pressure from this jibe, Gaelic-speaking O'Connor received prominent mention as a chief authority in Warner's next project, *The History of Ireland* (1763). O'Connor claimed to have disabused Warner of the notion that *Fingal* was a translation: "I endeavoured to cure him of his prejudice by arguments

that I think are unanswerable, till the original is produced, what I am sure cannot be produced."<sup>24</sup> Warner, however, enjoyed reading *Fingal* as much as O'Connor did and insisted on its being a translation, not of a third-century "Original," but of a relatively modern body of Gaelic antecedents generated by creative Irish and Scottish bards. Unfortunately, his purpose in the *History of Ireland* was not proving Macpherson's ultimate responsibility for *Ossian*; he wanted instead to reaffirm O'Connor's idealized vision of an anciently civilized Ireland as Britain's mother country of Gaelic culture, which Macpherson woefully misrepresented.

In the national culture wars surrounding *Ossian*, Warner conceived himself, as many other English commentators did, to be a neutral observer, devoid of Scottish or Irish partiality. Although he was one of a tiny minority of Protestant historians to share O'Connor's ruling assumption of a literate pre-Christian Irish civilization, his English superiority complex imposed severe limits on his professed impartiality. This Anglican cleric actually stereotyped the Irish as pusillanimous, restricted British loyalty and citizenship to Anglo-Irishmen, contended that ancient Christians had to be non-papist and that modern Catholics had to be subservient, and wrote off the country as a conquered, if somehow independent, colony of Great Britain best left without any more autonomy. All this condescension really amounted to a reactionary imperialist perspective on a restive country that would have disappointed a patriotic Irish Catholic like O'Connor.

As so many other disenfranchised Catholic intellectuals had to do for survival, O'Connor swallowed his pride and continued to write in defense of Ireland's glorious past and promising present. All along he recommended conciliatory political compromise designed to bridge religious differences at home and wed resurgent nationalism with allegiance to the British body politic. His joining with Warner in opposing Macpherson's pretensions to precedence in Gaelic culture was integral to this program and would have pleased proud Irishmen of all stripes. He had long opened himself to attack from Macpherson's supporters when, almost a decade before the *Ossian* controversy started, the first edition of his *Dissertations* posited ancient Irish supremacy over Scotland in opposition to a succession of Caledonian historians, from Hector Boece to Sir George Mackenzie. In the wake of Macpherson's ever more arrogant dismissals of Irish bards and Irish antiquarianism in his most recent publication of *Temora*, some direct reply in print from O'Connor became imperative. His earliest objections to Ossianic claims appeared in Gaelic and English annotations peppering his personal copies of *Fingal* (now in the Royal

Irish Academy) and *Temora* (now in the National Library of Ireland). For example, Macpherson's swipe at Irish historians elicited indignation in the margin, "longantach an dalbacht [so amazing this audacity!]," while repeated assurances that a pure prehistoric Gaelic *Ossian* survived orally provoked justifiable skepticism on an end-sheet: "Qu: What preserved, the Songs of Ossian? Ibid. The Highland language is pure & original? Qu: Could it be so, without the Culture of Letters?"<sup>25</sup>

At pains to improve his skills as an historian, O'Connor virtually rewrote his *Dissertations* for the second edition of 1766 and inserted a major assessment of *Ossian* for the first time. As he characterized the challenge of his new task, "Macpherson resembles the cuttlefish, which endeavors to escape by involving itself in a flood of muddy liquor, not unlike ink. It cost me some labor to bring him into open light; I then found it easy to master him."<sup>26</sup> O'Connor's treatise against Macpherson appeared as a three-part appendix of sixty-two pages, dated 24 March 1766 and entitled, "A Dissertation on the First Migrations and Final Settlement of the *Scots* [meaning *Irish* Gaels] in *North-Briton*; With occasional Observations on the Poems of *Fingal* and *Temora*." The primary concern, made clear in this awkward title, was Macpherson's erroneous history rather than the dubious Gaelic provenance of *Ossian*. This emphasis, similar to Warner's focus on bad historiography, may have had the sorry consequence of encouraging other Irish writers to downplay the crucial question of literary forgery for an indecisive debate over rival notions of equally speculative national origins. As yet, Gaelic scholarship about bardic traditions was unequal to the challenge of deciphering large-scale fabrication in *Ossian*.

O'Connor's solid, if necessarily imperfect, grounding in Gaelic learning afforded him linguistic competence enough to refute Macpherson's cardinal assumption that Gaelic originals behind *Ossian* could have remained unchanged and intelligible after fifteen centuries. O'Connor observed ironically and correctly that for Gaelic poetry of such remote antiquity, illiterate Highlanders over the centuries simply could not have maintained the alleged primordial purity of

*Ossian's* Erse, a Dialect kept from Corruption by *the Salt of oral Tradition* only, and luckily preserved from the Infidelity of Transcribers, who, in the Course of a Thousand years, might compose such Mistakes as would set the Learned hard to rectify.<sup>27</sup>

This learned argument for inevitable linguistic corruption of ancient texts constituted an important contribution to the debunking of *Ossian*. As a result, O'Connor rightly perceived that *Ossian* was a modern production



but wrongly considered it primarily the handiwork of a modern Gaelic bard powerfully turned into English by Macpherson. This was overestimating *Ossian's* debt to genuine Gaelic sources and hugely underestimating how much sheer invention went into most of the canon. Hence, O'Connor did not unmask Macpherson as a creative author but instead found him a creative translator of some latter-day Gaelic versifier's concoction of Fenian tradition:

The Poet, whoever he was, picked up many of the Names of Men and Places to be found in those Tales, and Invention made up the rest. In digesting these Poems into present Forms, Chronology was overlooked, and the Actors of different Ages [such as the supposedly third-century Fionn and first-century Cuchulain] are all made Coevals . . . (27)

Privately O'Connor came to feel grave distrust of *Ossian's* authenticity but in print took the milder line of Warner and an influential Catholic antiquary, Sylvester O'Halloran, specifically, that Macpherson followed relatively recent Gaelic antecedents. Their reluctance to issue an outright condemnation perhaps stemmed partly from their personal enjoyment of this anglicized Gaelic literature for spreading interest in Celtic culture and partly from their inability to believe anybody capable of such colossal literary contrivance. As O'Connor's grandson reported of his forebear's taste for *Ossian*, "I once mentioned to him Dr. Johnson's opinion 'that a child could write such wild inconsistent nonsense as *Ossian*.' 'No,' said he, 'Dr. Johnson did not say so seriously?'"<sup>28</sup> Dr. Johnson was indeed serious in his appraisal and, very able to comprehend the magnitude of the literary hoax, reacted with a revulsion missing in less morally sensitive participants in the controversy. If he exaggerated the amount of authentic modern Gaelic inspiration behind *Ossian*, O'Connor was nevertheless smart enough to expose the falsity of the supposed antiquity of its sources. This alone was a worthwhile insight, because, after all, the widespread assumption of its being an ancient artifact in its fidelity to primordial Gaelic poetry played a major part in its high valuation by duped contemporary readers.

Moreover, O'Connor had a remarkable grasp of its many rhetorical ploys that made what were "mere modern compositions" seem so beguilingly antique to a gullible public:

We confess, and confess with Pleasure, that they are the Compositions of a fine lively Genius [a modern Gaelic bard, not Macpherson], and that they exhibit a considerable Share of poetical Merit in Mr. *Mac Pherson's* Translation. They recommend themselves, by an apparent antique Dress, and an oriental Scriptural



Turn in the Expression; without any Mixture of the *fanatical Cant* of the Times [Macpherson's removal of authentic medieval religious references from his bogus *Ossian*]. The Novelty of the Plan, and seemingly artless Construction of the Whole, are very engaging. An affecting Grace in the Sentiment, and an Imagery nobly sublime, unite in several Parts. But then, these Beauties are disgraced by a *Marvellous* [Macpherson's melancholy ghosts] *injudicious, even to Puerility*; a frequent Reiteration of the same Ideas [a frequent complaint by critics], and a *poor Machinery* [Macpherson's avoidance of supernatural agency to forward his minimal plotting]. In the Notion, however, that such Poems of the *Epic Species* are Works of remote Antiquity, their Inequalities and Blemishes are easily overlooked, in Favor of their Beauties and wild Ornaments . . . (60–2)

O'Connor's part in the *Ossian* controversy seems not to have affected Johnson's thinking, despite their common (and misguided) mistrust of oral tradition. On the contrary, the intellectual impact seemed very much in the opposite direction, from Johnson on to O'Connor, who felt inspired by their lucky acquaintance to rededicate himself to Irish studies. Any doubts about a Johnsonian influence behind O'Connor's future labors should dissipate from the evidence of his openhearted profession of indebtedness in his second edition.<sup>29</sup> Other figures, like Burke and Thomas Leland, received due acknowledgment for their assistance. But the individual praised first and foremost in the preface for evoking practically a new book was none other than the internationally acclaimed English lexicographer who unstintingly endorsed Irish studies:

The first Hints have been communicated by Dr. SAMUEL JOHNSON, a Gentleman not more to be valued for great Extent of Knowledge and Genius, than for the Honour he has done, and the great Service he has rendered his native Country, by bringing most Nations more intimately acquainted with its Language and Literature. Far from joining in the current Prejudice against the present Subject, or oppressing the Writer who undertook it, with Censure, even where Censure was justly due, he approved of an Endeavour to revive (as far as they can be usefully revived) the antient Language and Literature of a Sister Isle, "which was once the prime Seat of Learning in all *Christendom*." The smallest application from such a Man, was sufficient with the Dissertator to overlook many Discouragements which lay in his Way; and yet, his having it not in his Power to consult some old Manuscripts, scattered at present through various Countries, rendered a Compliance with Doctor *Johnson's* Desires, a desperate Undertaking.<sup>30</sup>

By the autumn of 1766 Faulkner, the publisher of the second edition, had talked directly with Johnson, who naturally enjoyed these complimentary remarks. "He returns you Thanks," O'Connor learned, "for the honourable Mention you have made him in the Preface to your Dissertations and

promised to write to you [*crossed out*: which I wish he may do, but he is grown so idle since he got his Pension, that he hath not wrote one Line from that to this date].”<sup>31</sup> Ever in search of copy to publish, the shrewd bookseller later on let Johnson serve as a role model of diligence to prod O’Conor into finishing his own projects in a note of 3 September 1772: “I have been told, that . . . Dr. Johnson is also augmenting his Dictionary for a new Edition in Folio. I should be very glad that you would do so for your Dissertation” (115).

O’Conor could not help but be thinking of some new undertaking somehow tied to the *Ossian* controversy. By now his *Dissertations* marked him as the then foremost adversary of Macpherson in Ireland and soon caused him to be reviled by name in a publication ominously echoing his own title, specifically, *Critical Dissertations on the Origin, Antiquities, Language, Government, Manners, and Religion of the Ancient Caledonians, Their Posterity the Picts and the British and Irish Scots* (1768). This fanciful historical treatise, by a then-deceased Rev. John Macpherson, railed against O’Conor and like-minded antiquaries who dared to undermine Scotland’s precedence as Britain’s Gaelic mother country by a specious recourse to a Milesian prehistoric migration to Ireland. Johnson dipped into this pretentious book at Skye with typical disdain for antiquarian works heavy on conjecture and light on factual evidence: “you might read half an hour and ask yourself what you had been reading. There were so many words to so little matter; there was no getting through the book.”<sup>32</sup> It was probably not a coincidence that James Macpherson (no relation but an associate of the Reverend Macpherson) became editor of this posthumous work, which, with a preface of his own, served to buttress empty historical claims for *Ossian*’s genuineness.

There followed yet another fanciful tome, Macpherson’s own *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771), challenging any supposition of a full-blown pre-Christian civilization in a literate prehistoric Ireland. O’Conor now found himself at the receiving end of a rancorous antiquarian dispute but remained upbeat: “The two Macphersons will of Course be defeated, and their opposition will be of use in whetting the Weapons of Research.”<sup>33</sup> The controversy did have the beneficial effect of exciting much useful, if tentative and at times intemperate, Gaelic scholarship. But trying to make his optimistic prophecy come true, O’Conor considered other possibilities of answering the Macphersons in the form of an enlarged third edition of his *Dissertations* or perhaps by means of a polemical appendix to a wholly new work. Neither project materialized, as old age sapped his intellectual energy from

coming up with any additional arguments to wield against *Ossian*. Not until 1775 did he publish again, by completing an English edition of Roderic O'Flaherty's posthumous apologia for his principal work, entitled *The Ogygia Vindicated: Against the Objections of Sir George Mac Kenzie, King's Advocate for Scotland in the Reign of King James II.*

O'Connor's twenty-three page introduction to this edition, "A Dissertation on the Origin and Antiquities of the Antient Scots of *Ireland* and *Britain*," resumed his quarrel with Macpherson's fallacious historiography and this time did so with slightly more sophistication. False assumptions still abounded to be sure, but it contained his most cautious interpretation to date of prehistoric Celtic migrations and Christianity's signal contribution to Irish culture. He made clear his well-intentioned attempt to meet higher scholarly standards: "New acquisitions brought me new information, and on the discovery of a former mistake, I had no molestation from vanity (which is folly) to persist in it."<sup>34</sup> He persisted in his conviction that the Gaelic basis of *Ossian* lay in "mere modern compositions" of creative Gaelic bards, "collected *by the industry*, and shaped into form *by the interpolations* of the ingenious Editor," who indeed managed to capture the old poetic fire (xii–xiii). A footnote paid tribute to Johnson's celebrated stance on the controversy, without indicating his mentor's far deeper disbelief in there being any Gaelic authenticity at all in *Ossian*: "Some observations of Dr. *Johnson* in his *Journey through the Western Isles of Scotland*, shed day-light on the birth and parentage of the poems ascribed to *Ossian*" (xiv).

Unmollified by compliments, Johnson soon sent word of his disappointment with O'Connor for not heeding the advice about Irish studies proffered by letter two decades ago. The complaint, when it reached Bellanagare, would have been unexpected and disturbing – at least initially. Johnson's belated letter, dated 19 May 1777, reopened a long-discontinued dialogue between the two men aimed at inciting O'Connor to produce more Irish scholarship. The letter opened with an apology and a rebuke. A common friend visiting London, Rev. Dr. Thomas Campbell, had recently spoken so highly of O'Connor that Johnson went away feeling guilty over his failure, years ago, ever to have responded to the Catholic Committee's plea for help in promoting religious toleration in Ireland. The time had come for Johnson to express belated regret for the breakdown in communications. But he also felt obliged to criticize the absence of any groundbreaking progress in Irish studies during the past twenty years since he last wrote to O'Connor. The only important new work to appear in that long interval of time, Rev. Dr. Thomas Leland's

*History of Ireland* (1773), unfortunately concentrated only on better known times after the Norman Conquest without attending to the truly novel and instructive period of ancient Irish Christianity. Let O'Connor muster the intellectual energy to lay the groundwork for a history of how the Irish saved early European civilization after their conversion to Christianity. A valuable document for the fledgling discipline of Irish studies, Johnson's correspondence deserves to be quoted at length:

If I have ever disappointed you, give me leave to tell you that you have likewise disappointed me. I expected great discoveries in Irish Antiquity, and large publications in the Irish language. But the world still remains as it was, doubtful and ignorant. What the Irish Language is in itself, and to what languages it has affinity are very interesting Questions, which every man wishes to see resolved that has any philological or historical curiosity. Dr. Leland begins his history too late; the Ages which deserve an exact enquiry, are those times (for such times there were), when Ireland was the School of the West, the quiet habitation of Sanctity and literature. If you could give a history, though imperfect, of the Irish Nation from its conversion to Christianity, to the invasion from England, you would amplify knowledge with new Views and new objects. Set about it therefore if you can, do what you can easily do, without anxious exactness. Lay the foundation, and leave the superstructure to posterity.<sup>35</sup>

Johnson's reproof may well have shamed O'Connor from sending a reply, then or ever. But the rebuke did give added weight to the original exhortation in 1757 influencing his pursuit of historical scholarship to the end of his long life. Despite old age, unavoidable lack of competence in archaic Gaelic, and obvious difficulties in acquiring primary sources, he kept to the task commanded by Johnson. A reference to a "literary Undertaking" in Johnson's letter might have signified an edition of the *Annals of the Four Masters* contemplated by O'Connor (who owned a complete original by the late 1770s), until he probably lost confidence in his ability to translate the work. More in keeping with Johnson's advice was O'Connor's preparation of a never-finished "general History from the 2d. to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century."<sup>36</sup> Later plans for a "Memoir" on pre-Christian Ireland point to an underlying unwillingness to comply completely with Johnson's wise injunction to focus on Ireland's golden age of Christianity from St. Patrick's arrival to the Viking onslaughts. O'Connor's preference for chronicling pre-literate pagan times was his Achilles' heel for succumbing to romantic reconstructions of a nebulous past. Nevertheless, his highly respected position in the first Celtic Revival remained secure, so much so that in 1772 he was invited to be a corresponding member of the Select Committee of Antiquarians of the Dublin Society in anticipation of the

greater honor of becoming one of the first two Catholics elected to the elite Royal Irish Academy by 1786. It is therefore fitting that his fine portrait hangs today inside the grand reception room, between the first-floor front windows, of the modern Royal Irish Academy building.

The note of admonition in Johnson's last letter to O'Connor produced no hard feelings. The Irishman took the words as constructive criticism for his future research and hardly relaxed his devotion to "that Great Man."<sup>37</sup> In the final stage of the *Ossian* controversy when old Johnson figured prominently among the naysayers, O'Connor followed in step with increasing suspicion of outright literary fraud. He came even closer to adopting complete Johnsonian skepticism about the whole matter than he ever cared to reveal previously in print:

It was a pleasing Imposition on the public, and the Author [O'Connor previously preferred the term editor] must be rejoiced to find all the panegyrics on Ossian to revert to himself. Had he indeed published those Poems in his own Name, those exaggerated praises of the work would never appear; and on the whole, critical Sagacity was never more egregiously duped.<sup>38</sup>

Deeming himself a disciple of Johnson, he lauded the master's prose style and the *Dictionary* and familiarized himself with the *Ramblers*, *Rasselas*, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, and the posthumous *Prayers and Meditations*. Johnson's death understandably put him in mind of the two prized letters in his possession, letters that Boswell now wanted for his projected *Life of Johnson*. The intermediary of this literary transaction was another prominent antiquary of the Celtic Revival, Joseph Cooper Walker, who communicated Boswell's desire to acquire at least Johnson's first letter to O'Connor written in 1757. The response from O'Connor, in a little-known note of 23 March 1785, was positive:

It is to be regretted that of all Subjects relating to the antient state of this country, Civil and Ecclesiastic, it [monasticism] is the least regarded by Irish readers . . . [A]s Dr. Johnson encouraged me to proceed on the Subject, it would be a Credit to me and it would indulge my vanity, that that letter should come out in a publication of his Epistolary Correspondence. – Should any Such be offered to the public. You will I think forgive this vanity of mine, if you do, I would begg leave to put the original in your hands.<sup>39</sup>

By 13 May the other letter "which Dr Campbel brought me from Dr. Johnson" in 1777 reached Walker too. Not long after this negotiation, Walker relayed news about Boswell's forthcoming *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1786). When this work arrived at the Hermitage, O'Connor so enjoyed its contents that the prospect of having his two precious letters

published in a future biography of Johnson seemed more delightful than ever. Inserting the correspondence in such a literary context would do lasting honor to Irish studies and to the O'Connor name:

Dr. Johnson having a laudable passion for the Discovery of every useful matter hitherto hid in the old languages of Britain and Ireland, readily encouraged every attempt to throw light upon any Such matter. He even condescended to encourage me in that study, on this principle I would be thankful to you, if you prevailed on Mr. Boswell in his intended life of that Great Man to give a place to the two letters he wrote to me. It would be very gratifying to my family, and indeed give myself more Consideration hereafter, than the possession of the power and property of my Ancestors for some ages past.<sup>40</sup>

Continuing concern about losing the correspondence in the mail induced him to transcribe in his own hand the original 1757 letter from Johnson and to request that Walker make copies of both letters before anybody else got hold of them. A previously unknown note of 26 April 1786 reveals how serious he was about having the correspondence published in some forum that would do honor to Johnson and his own name:

I am told that at present Mr. Boswell's hands are full of Law Business, and if Sir John Hawkins's Life of Johnson be published this Summer [of 1786], it may retard or put a th[ough]rough stop to that promised by the former Gentleman [Boswell]. If either could be prevailed on to take the two letters addressed to me, it would be the highest honour I could expect on this Side of the Grave.<sup>41</sup>

The earnestness of these previously forgotten remarks bears witness to the lasting impact that Johnson had on O'Connor.

As it happened, the two treasured letters received a proper memorial not only in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* but also in two major contributions to Irish studies, Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (1786) and Campbell's *Strictures on the Ecclesiastical and Literary History of Ireland* (1789). Their citation of this correspondence paid homage to the role that both Johnson and O'Connor played in the Celtic Revival. Walker especially saw fit to acknowledge the old antiquary's help in the production of his own work, the first ever to concentrate solely on surveying the national bardic tradition. Not surprisingly, humble gratitude marked O'Connor's reply:

I very warmly thank you for a quotation from one of Dr Johnson's Letters to me. A letter from one of the first Writers of his age or any Age to such as I am does honour to his heart by wishing well, to the studies of a person who he knew meant well however unequal to the Task he undertook. To such a friendly turn of mind I must attribute the many kind things you say about me in your book . . .<sup>42</sup>

Finally, Charlotte Brooke, author of one of the very earliest English translations of authentic Fenian poetry, fittingly praised O'Connor among the principal Irish antiquaries in her *Reliques of Ancient Irish Poetry* (1789). Dying at the Hermitage in 1791, he may lie buried a few miles from his ancestral estate, across the main street of Bellanagare, up a hilly road to an untended cemetery containing in the far rightward corner a mouldering chapel crypt of the O'Connor clan that would eventually produce a candidate for US president in 1876. For all his limitations, the last great patriarch of his ancestral lands had stood with Johnson on the right side of the controversy over the debated genuineness of *Ossian*. A good man and patriotic historian, he lived his faith, served peace and justice for all, and loved his country.

## CHAPTER 6

### *Johnson and the Irish: more opposition to Ossian*

The Irish people are alike strangers to the glory that is reflected from the ancient celebrity of their country, and to all the generous sympathies that flow from such a revelation. How powerfully Doctor Johnson felt the importance of this too long neglected inquiry is evidenced by his correspondence with Charles O'Connor. "I have long wished," writes this profound thinker, "that the Irish literature were cultivated."

John Dalton, "The Social and Political  
State of the People of Ireland" (1830)

Ireland can take justifiable pride in being first and foremost among nations to recognize Johnson's literary genius through the granting of its highest academic degree. The now-clichéd title of "Doctor" Johnson did not exist until Trinity College bestowed on him its doctorate in canon and civil law on 8 July 1765 in honor of the matchless elegance and usefulness of his writings ("ob egregiam scriptorum elegantiam et utilitatem"). That Ireland should have bestowed the first of his two honorary doctorates was singularly appropriate, not only because of his fame as a moralist-lexicographer praised in the document, but also in light of his less celebrated advocacy of Irish studies. Of the seven signatories listed on the totally unexpected diploma, only Dr. Francis Andrews and Rev. Thomas Leland seem to have had any claim to Johnson's notice. As the kindly provost of Trinity College, Andrews could count on solid Irish parliamentary support for funding professorships in Greek and mathematics, underwriting the addition of fellows and a chair of modern history, and beautifying the grounds with a building program resulting in the university's imposing west front facing College Green today. Poor health in his final years made Andrews seem a worse administrator than he had been when he had the good sense to single out Johnson for something like official national homage. Johnson's grateful letter to him became lost, but the other communication, informing Leland of his happiness with the degree, did survive:



Men can be estimated by those who know them not, only as they are represented by those who know them; and therefore I flatter myself that I owe much of the pleasure which this distinction gives me, to your concurrence with Dr. Andrews in recommending me to that learned society.<sup>1</sup>

Despite previous contact with Johnson, Leland looked to a great Irish patriot, Lord Charlemont, for arranging at London in 1768 a meeting to strengthen ties with the famous English moralist. Such a meeting, if it took place, would have suited the cleric, because he was a bright and ambitious academic eager to curry favor with the elite.

Leland in his younger days sometimes sounded a more liberal political note than the staid conservatism he professed in his scholarly maturity. Burke, he predicted early, would make an illustrious statesman useful in orating against Ireland's exploitation by British place-seekers: "I wish we had a hundred Burkes, to take their & our Revenge in England, for that worse than Egyptian plague of Locusts sent here, to blast & defile this wretched Land."<sup>2</sup> Such annoyance with the influx of English civil servants dissipated later, after Leland's appointment during the Townshend regime, 1768–72, as chaplain to the lord lieutenant, whose able Irish chief secretary, George Macartney, went on to join the Club and serve in important posts for the British empire. Leland had prudence enough to swim with the tide of affairs and profess loyalty to the government in subsequent publications. His principles came close to Charles O'Connor's program of accommodating Irish interests to the larger liberty-loving, if imperial, context of the British Constitution. He also, like O'Connor, sided with national unity through greater religious toleration, a position enunciated in a sermon of 1771 on the traumatizing Catholic massacre of Protestant Irish settlers in 1641: "If we would indeed bring down a blessing upon our nation, let us, in the first place, labour to unite together in the bands of love and affection, as fellow-christians and fellow-citizens, with an equitable attention to the rights, interests and welfare of all" by means of better – that is, Protestant – education, the lessening of political divisions, and the revival of true – that is, Protestant – religion.<sup>3</sup>

The general similarity of political convictions helped to seal the friendship started between Leland and O'Connor by George Faulkner. But a slowly dawning awareness of Leland's deeply rooted, if politely restrained, dislike of Catholicism inevitably caused O'Connor to feel growing disillusionment, also politely subdued, with his Protestant colleague. On the surface mutual admiration and goodwill abounded, to the degree that Leland, as keeper of the university's Irish manuscript holdings, kindly

secured the Catholic scholar unprecedented access to a library for High Church Protestants only. In return for the good deed, O'Connor in 1767 gratefully extolled Leland as perfectly suited for the daunting task of writing the history of Ireland from the time of the Norman Conquest. This learned, seemingly unbiased man of the cloth

would thro' his Philosophical Knowledge render us wiser than we are, and no nation ever wanted the true Knowledge of their proper Interests more than ours . . . [L]et him feel the Reproach, that if we do not exhibit a *Hume* or a *Robertson* in our own Island, it will be his Fault.<sup>4</sup>

Great expectations in 1767 gave way to considerable disappointment upon the publication of Leland's *magnum opus*, *The History of Ireland from the Invasion of Henry II to William, Conqueror of James II* (1773). Despite poor sales and later scholarly neglect, Leland's performance bears comparison with the work of his Scottish rivals in the contest for excellence in history-writing. Devoid of Hume's stylistic fluidity and Robertson's highly charged depiction of events, the Irishman had valuable strengths of his own. He brought to his interpretation of early modern Ireland a discerning ability to analyze complex human motives behind epoch-making actions, an unusual evenhandedness in dealing with Irish natives and English settlers, and an unflagging skepticism toward fantastic legends, romantic primitivism, and patriotic invention. These qualities won favor, at least initially, with Johnson and Burke. According to his "Preliminary Discourse," Leland shared with Hume and Robertson a basic conservatism in his concern to trace the forces "establishing the authority of the crown of England, in a country, now, a respectable member of the British empire." The result is disciplined imperial discourse striving for impartiality and resistant to indulging in politically subversive commentary.

A determination to steer clear of controversy caused Leland to avoid the *Ossian* question, despite the urgings of friends, and mandated a posture of disinterestedness in the use of sources rife with biases. Ignorance of Gaelic made for an intellectual debt "above all, to the zealous friendship and assistance of CHARLES O'CONOR, esquire," whose scholarship influenced the "Preliminary Discourse" on ancient times (iv). The historiography showed a marked advance in professionalism. There were sensible warnings about the absence of written evidence prior to Christianity, the admixture of fact and fable in early writings, and the unreliability of previous historians inclined to making extreme interpretations along partisan lines of British dismissiveness and Irish glorification.

Historical truth was a *via media* between an imperialist superiority complex and a colonial inferiority complex compensating through self-idealization. The ancient Irish were neither noble nor total savages but imperfectly civilized; early Christians were neither saints nor sinners but simply better off than their pagan forebears; Henry II's policies lay somewhere between brilliance and brutishness; and his Norman Conquest was both a success and a failure for Ireland's future, uniting settlers with the mother country and yet segregating natives from the civilizing benefit of English law. Subsequent centuries of mounting wrongs done to the nation stemmed "not from any inequitable or oppressive principles in English government," but from Norman adventurers, Elizabethan upstarts, and Stuart opportunists acting in defiance of the liberty-loving British Constitution.<sup>5</sup>

The cool judiciousness enveloping the multi-volume performance was part and parcel of its loyalist orientation and, consistent with this imperialist viewpoint, almost always evaporated whenever the subject of Roman Catholicism emerged. Let popes and priests come up for discussion, and objectivity vanishes from the narrative. Adopting Archbishop James Ussher's notion of a St. Patrick "free from the erroneous novelties of Rome" (*History of Ireland*, xviii) went hand in hand with other stock Protestant stereotypes of a base medieval clergy, a saintly Luther, and modern enlightenment on the heels of the Reformation. Fairness at times intruded into the interpretation, especially when Leland forthrightly linked Catholic grievances to the periodic failure of Protestants to act like Christians in their new home. But such concessions to dispassionate analysis seemed far too minimal to O'Connor for overall historical accuracy. Publicly he applauded the work for teaching readers how to be "wise men and good citizens," but privately he lamented its pro-Protestant bias and hurried coverage.<sup>6</sup> The author appeared to have compromised his high standards to please his superiors in the Church of Ireland and Trinity College for the sake of "present advantages either within his grasp or within his expectations."

Leland for his part pointed with pride to having the approval of Johnson and Burke, even though Johnson actually disliked the modern focus on post-Conquest Norman Ireland, and Burke much later proved an unsympathetic reader. Almost as offputting as its anti-Catholicism was its plodding prose to match the dull repetitious events filling the chronicle. The fact that Irish history after the Norman invasion too often seemed a sideshow to the story of England's rise to the rank of a superpower poses inherent difficulties in exciting interest for any author, as it did for Leland.

But his virtues outweighed his limitations. However tedious his history can be, his reliability, comprehensiveness, and cautiousness represented real progress in Irish historiography.

No similar verdict need apply to the works of Colonel Charles Vallancey (1721–1812). *The Dictionary of National Biography: Index and Epitome* summed up this man as “ignorant of Irish; published worthless tracts on Irish philology and history, 1772–1802.” That estimate seems apt. Of English birth and a British career officer, Vallancey was an outsider who considered himself an insider. He was an agent of empire and yet an enthusiast of Irish antiquity and O’Conor’s theories of national origins, with a penchant for comparative linguistics to deduce preposterous links with Eastern civilizations from Africa to India for the glorification of Ireland’s cultural heritage.<sup>7</sup> He took a leading part in the Celtic Revival as a founding member of the Royal Irish Academy and as head of an earlier prototype, the Select Committee of Antiquarians of the Dublin Society. In his highly speculative *Essay on the Antiquity of the Irish Language* (1772) Vallancey sided with Catholic antiquaries, O’Conor and Sylvester O’Halloran, in the *Ossian* controversy by arraigning the futility of Macpherson’s scheme of Gaelic prehistory. But his flickering distrust of Catholics made Vallancey a potentially lethal associate for O’Conor, who became the subject of a negative report to the chief secretary at Dublin Castle. “I wish this Gentleman,” Vallancey wrote behind his friend’s back, “could be made a real Friend of Government . . .”<sup>8</sup> A servant first of the empire and secondarily of his adoptive nation of Ireland, he had the good luck of presenting Johnson a copy of *A Grammar of the Ibero-Celtic, or Irish Language* (1773), probably at one of their three meetings in 1784. Whatever his private doubts about O’Conor, Vallancey in this work similarly pronounced Macpherson’s specimen of modernized Gaelic in *Temora* “a strong evidence of the novelty of this poem, or if it be ancient, it is proof of the unlettered ignorance of the ancient Gaelic Scots.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, *Ossian* was either spurious in its boasted antiquity or lacking in the primordial purity of Irish Gaelic, from which old Erse had to be a debased offshoot.

Concerning the Irish and all other ethnic groups in the British Isles, Johnson insisted on political unity but, equally important, accepted some retention of cultural diversity. For example, dialectal variations in speaking the king’s English played a part in the struggle for social acceptance. To this end, Johnson prided himself on suppressing his broad Midland English accent – although he never did lose regional pronunciations – and praised Boswell for cultivating unscottified speech. But he

could be just as scornful of Irishmen like Congreve and Swift in the *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–81) for trying to hide their nationality under an affectation of Englishness. Ideally, any ethnic distinctiveness had to coexist with some degree of British commonality in both political and social realms of human endeavor. Of the thousands of Irish residents in England, the best known in Johnson's circle were the multi-talented Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Edmond Malone, and the peerless Edmund Burke. Willingly giving up birthplace for the boundless advantages of the capital city of the English-speaking world, the Irish, like other *émigrés*, usually protected some of their national identity from being totally absorbed in the new milieu. In the process, native and host cultures underwent some transformation from cross-fertilization within England, in much the same way that indigenous customs and British mores interacted in Ireland to produce a colonial hybridization still evident in Georgian Dublin architecture.

Probably the only Hibernian figure ever to come close to rivaling Johnson in contemporary adulation from the literary world was Burke (1729–97), the pre-eminent Irishman and British statesman of his age. Their celebrated friendship actually simmered with tensions of a largely political nature. Each man recognized and revered the other's greatness, without a doubt, and Johnson's high estimation is legendary:

Burke, Sir, is such a man, that if you met him for the first time in a street where there was a shower of cannon bullets & you & he ran up a stair to take shelter he'd talk to you in such a manner that when you came down you'd say this is an extraordinary man.<sup>10</sup>

Even more laudatory was a hearsay report – possibly apocryphal – that “during his acquaintance with life,” Johnson “knew but two men, who had risen considerably above the common standard. The one was Lord Chatham, the other was Edmund Burke.”<sup>11</sup> What drew them together is uncertain. Perhaps it was their association with William “Single-Speech” Hamilton, who, profitlessly for both, early in the 1760s employed Burke in Dublin for secretarial duties under the lord lieutenant and then turned to Johnson in London for advice on parliamentary matters. The founding of the Club in 1764 ensured interaction, but politics produced a chasm of repressed resentments.

Johnson favored an older, idealistic tradition of party-less government unanimous in loyalty to its constitutional leadership and had no use for Burke's Whiggish system of competing interest groups and wheeling-and-dealing power politics for the smooth running of the state. The Whigs

seemed a throwback to disruptive dissenter factions stirring up civil war chaos in the seventeenth century. Theirs was a party of destabilizing tendencies cynically exploiting public opinion by playing on seductive buzzwords of public liberty and individual rights. To Johnson the moralist, fundamental principles admitted no compromise, but to Burke the practical politician who epitomized “a *bottomless* Whig,” expediency and accommodation made the state work.<sup>12</sup> The manipulation of human imperfection and self-interest oiled the wheels of government for the enactment of high-minded initiatives. Compromise was the essence of governance for Burke, a paradox of a statesman, both pragmatic and visionary, who could complacently describe his British House of Commons as “a mass by no means pure; but neither is it wholly corrupt, though there is a large proportion of corruption in it” (111: 234). Johnson, by contrast, wanted a purity that he knew was not of this world; however, striving for the impossible made progress possible. Burke and Johnson differed not only in basic beliefs but also over specific issues such as their government’s response to the American Revolution and the Spanish seizure of the Falkland Islands. But only once, as far as we know, did Ireland come up for discussion between them, and without rancor. Crop failure and mercantilist trade policies caused unprecedented Irish emigration to the American colonies in the era. When Burke supported the contradiction that emigration made Ireland more populous, Johnson countered with a pun on the word “bull,” defined in his *Dictionary* as “a blunder”:

[JOHNSON.] “Thirty cows in good pasture will produce more calves than ten cows, provided they have good bulls.” E. [BURKE.] “There are bulls enough in Ireland.” JOHNSON. (smiling,) “So, Sir, I should think from your argument.” (111: 232)

In 1792 Burke paid moving public homage to the memory of Johnson in Parliament. Whatever their political differences, “Dr. Johnson was a great and good man, his virtues were equal to his transcendent talents, and his friendship I value as the greatest consolation and happiness of my life.”<sup>13</sup>

Proud of his Irish birth from a mixed marriage, Burke espoused Catholic emancipation only early and late in his parliamentary career. Mostly he concentrated on establishing himself as a renowned defender of a Protestant British Constitution for the Rockingham Whigs, famously so during the French Revolution. Like other displaced Irish, Burke could be ambivalent in his allegiances. Many a speech seethes with conflicted imperial discourse rooted in a dichotomy of advocacy for the historic

organic unity of Britain and for the reform of colonial injustice worldwide. Believing in natural-law uniformity but adhering to Montesquieu's theory of relativity in human affairs, he had to recognize that the British Constitution was a unique national heritage for a particular island-bound people rather than a universal paradigm of freedom and order for non-English people.<sup>14</sup> Irishness was deemed a cultural entity distinct from Englishness and related to, if not entirely equated with, Britishness. In keeping with his sometimes forgotten streak of patriotism for the land of his forebears, he became in 1790 the first and perhaps the only eighteenth-century individual allowed honorary membership in the Royal Irish Academy. Cautious at first about Ireland's growing urge for autonomy during the American Revolution, he yet acquiesced in the Irish Revolution of 1782 for offering what turned out to be the empty promise of allowing the island race to shape its own political destiny and including disenfranchised Catholics in governance.<sup>15</sup> He foresaw that true nationhood, based on the participation of all the people in their laws and liberties, would never emerge in Ireland without Catholic emancipation.

Burke shared with Johnson and O'Connor an interest in advancing Irish national identity, religious toleration, and Irish studies and generously loaned out his manuscript collections for antiquarian research. He expressed early disbelief in *Ossian*, according to skeptical David Hume:

I was told by Burke, a very ingenious Irish gentleman, the author of a tract on the Sublime and Beautiful, that on the first publication of Macpherson's book, all the Irish cried out, *we know all these poems, we have always heard them from our infancy*. But when he asked more particular questions, he could never learn, that any one had ever heard, or could repeat the original of any one paragraph of the pretended translation.<sup>16</sup>

A quarter-century later, Burke had become convinced that Macpherson had perpetrated literary deception violating historical truth and harmful to antiquarian inquiry: "it was culpable to carry on a literary imposture upon which facts could be founded so . . . that the world should be deceived as to manners and ancient history."<sup>17</sup>

The Irishman most responsible for perpetuating Johnson's memory in English literature, Edmond Malone (1741–1812), was a celebrated author in his own right. Born of an Irish father and an English mother, he pursued his education at Trinity College, Dublin, and at the Inner Temple, London. As these dualities suggest, he grew up a child of two cultural worlds but finally surrendered himself up to English civilization, as personified by his two principal intellectual enthusiasms, Shakespeare and



Johnson. An annuity of a thousand pounds after his father's death in 1774 freed him from a dreary Dublin law practice for a life of letters in London, beginning in 1777. A fussy, totally dedicated gentleman scholar, he published the works of Dryden and Reynolds, exposed literary forgeries by Chatterton and William Henry Ireland, and won renown for his then standard editions of Shakespeare. In Malone's mind Johnson alone could compare with Shakespeare, and such devotion to the living literary hero of his life never wavered from the time of their first meeting in 1764.<sup>18</sup> Once settled permanently in London, Malone turned to solidifying his attachment to Johnson by securing a place in the Club. However, entrée to that exclusive fraternity was no easy matter. The original society of eight members in 1764, convening at the Turk's Head, Gerrard Street, for evening dining and conversation once a week, expanded to twenty-two loosely connected individuals in 1777. Johnson looked askance at the resulting loss of intimacy and therefore took pleasure in backing the candidacy of a dear companion like Malone in 1779. But Malone's first bid failed, and his election had to wait until 5 February 1782, to be followed by his becoming the Club's dutiful treasurer for life.<sup>19</sup>

The future pattern of his busy career as editor and literary critic fulfilled the sobriquet bequeathed him by Boswell, "*Johnsonianissimus*," most reverent Johnsonian of them all. A faithful keeper of the literary flame, he summed up Johnson's brilliance in a rare letter about plans for erecting the monument found today in St. Paul's Cathedral:

The World in general consider Johnson as a great writer in prose and verse . . . I may add also, that the universality of his knowledge, the promptness of his mind in producing it on all occasions in conversation, and the vivid eloquence with which he clothed his thoughts, however suddenly call'd upon, formed a very distinguished part of the character of his genius, and place him on higher ground than perhaps any other quality that can be named.<sup>20</sup>

Dedicated to the goal of spreading Johnson's fame as a writer and talker, Malone contributed to the second, 1778, edition of the *Johnson–Steevens Shakespeare* (1773), penned an obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1784), attended the Westminster Abbey burial, led the fundraising drive for John Bacon's statue at St. Paul's, collected sayings for future biographers, and greatly aided Boswell's completion of classic memorials, beginning with *The Journal of the Tour to the Hebrides* (1786). The labors of Boswell and Malone on the *Life of Johnson* had affinities to an act of political union, an authorial Great Britain up against French Revolution,



threatening “the peace, good order, and happiness of society, in our free and prosperous country . . .”<sup>21</sup> A Scotsman and Irishman had jointly celebrated a representative Englishman, whose conservatism safeguarded against contemporary radicalism and whose genius produced a moralist for all times. In the process collaborators from diverse British backgrounds had identified with an eponymous British hero, and ethnic otherness found an imperial homeland in Samuel Johnson. Malone’s little-known announcement of Boswell’s death poignantly documented the personal cost of losing such a precious, productive friendship:

I suppose you know poor Boswell died on Tuesday Morning [19 May 1795], without any pain. I don’t think he at any time of his illness knew his danger. – I shall miss him more and more every day. – He was in the constant habit of calling upon me almost daily, and I used to grumble sometimes at his turbulence; but now miss and regret his noise and his hilarity and his perpetual good humour, which had no bounds. – Poor fellow, he has some how stolen away from us, without any notice, and without my being at all prepared for it.<sup>22</sup>

Malone’s strengths, his generous loyalty and scrupulous diligence, went hand in hand with a snobbish smugness befitting an arch-reactionary in politics. A charter member of the Royal Irish Academy thanks to a colleague in Johnson’s Club, Lord Charlemont, Malone turned into a confirmed and complacent bachelor worshipping all things British and indulging in the tidy verities and old biases of his privileged Irish birth. His adoptive Englishness weaned him of his early yearnings for Ireland’s independence, and British bigotry discolored his view of Catholics. He came to embrace the union of the two kingdoms in 1801 out of utter hatred for the French Revolution and for its menacing by-product, Catholic involvement in the Rebellion of United Irishmen in 1798. Irish Catholics, he told William Windham, “are a cunning, false, perjured, ferocious and sanguinary people . . . What then can be done with such a savage race, but to bind them up from the power of doing mischief?”<sup>23</sup> Very astutely, Windham, a humane conservative, immediately answered this savage anti-Catholicism with a savage rhetorical question: “Suppose I admitted that they are what you describe, what can be done? You would not have us kill them all?”<sup>24</sup> Malone might revere Johnson, but he missed matching his master in Christian compassion for humanity, no matter the race, color, gender, or creed.

Religious toleration eventually proved a stumbling block for the career of a man with far more public notoriety at the time, namely, Lord Charlemont, the most distinguished Irish patriot in the Club. James Caulfeild

(1728–1799), fourth viscount, 1734, and first earl, 1763, of Charlemont was the only member of Johnson's circle to rank as a true forefather of modern Ireland for his prominent part in its movement for independence. Surprisingly, among Johnsonians he remains largely unknown. The oversight is unfortunate, because Charlemont's ties to the Club and Irish politics have valuable information to offer literary historians. He was a different breed of nobleman compared to other Irish aristocrats in Johnson's company, like Lords Orrery, Southwell, Lucan, and Althorp, taken up with the pursuit of social prestige and pleasures in London salons. With blood ties to ancestral estates at Armagh and Tyrone, he took pride in his Irish identity and committed himself early to serving the interests of his country. That overriding priority never wavered.

Although Lord Charlemont never agitated for complete severance from England, Ireland's inferior status so rankled with him as to make the issue of an equality between the kingdoms the *cause célèbre* of his Whig patriot creed. According to his exceptional but neglected autobiography stored in the Royal Irish Library, "early I formed in my Mind some vague Ideas of a future Possibility of emancipating my country, and indulged in a distant Hope . . . in that great and happy Revolution."<sup>25</sup> To forward that ambition, he resolved to turn his titled position to the useful advantage of propelling him to leadership in the new and relatively tiny Patriot Party for the sake of national autonomy. Developing into a connoisseur of the arts, Charlemont took up periodic residence in London, especially between 1764 and 1773, when he frequented fashionable coteries like the Dilettanti Society. The mediator of his introduction to Johnson's literary set in this period was the fiery Italian, Joseph Baretti, whom Charlemont had met on a grand tour of Mediterranean countries ending in 1754 and prompted to go to England in search of fame and fortune.

Charlemont's election as fourteenth member of the Club in 1773 introduced him to perhaps the most illustrious intellectual society in London. He was present when Boswell joined their fellowship: "Johnson placed himself beside a chair, on which he leaned as on a desk or pulpit, and with humorous formality gave me a *Charge*, pointing out the conduct expected from me as a good member of this club."<sup>26</sup> Political obligations back in Ireland made such heady experiences all too short lived but not easily put out of mind. Once he left London by the summer of 1773 for the next eight years, Topham Beauclerk served as newsmonger of Club doings for the absent nobleman and playfully exhorted him to abandon his beloved homeland:

Leave your parliament, and your nation to shift for itself, and consecrate that time to your friends, which you spend in endeavouring to promote the interest of half a million scoundrels . . . The club exists but by your presence; the flourishing of learned men is the glory of the state. Mr. Vesey will tell you, that our club consists of the greatest men in the world, consequently you see there is a good, and patriotic reason for you to return to England in the winter.<sup>27</sup>

On 20 November 1773 a ridiculous rumor about Johnson's progress on the Highland tour preceded a funny warning about the entire Club membership visiting Ireland to force the beleaguered aristocrat back to London where he belonged:

Johnson has been confined for some weeks in the Isle of Sky; we hear that he was obliged to swim over to the main land, taking hold of a cow's tale . . . Our poor club is in a miserable decay; unless you come and relieve it, it will certainly expire . . . If you do not come here, I will bring all the club over to Ireland, to live with you, and that will drive you here in your own defence. Johnson shall spoil your books, Goldsmith pull your flowers, and Boswell talk to you; stay then if you can . . . (1: 345, 347)

At Dublin a crisis more academic than political in nature threatened to entangle Johnson in the internal affairs of Trinity College at the time. Charlemont considered Johnson a proper person to become involved in a controversy over the new leadership at Trinity by virtue of their status as alumni, both of them with honorary doctorates. The problem revolved around the successor of Dr. Francis Andrews, a lawyer, John Hely-Hutchinson (1724–1794). A remarkable orator in the Irish House of Commons sympathetic to Catholics and national independence, he lacked academic credentials and, even worse, had a reputation for servility to Dublin Castle totally unacceptable to a Patriot activist like Charlemont. His glaring failing, that of using his post for turning parliamentary representation of the college into a pocket borough for his sons, moved Charlemont to write to Beauclerk in July 1774 about interesting Johnson in opposing the appointment of the new provost:

They who value Literature, and wish well to their Sister Country, may be apprised of the dangerous Predicament in which we now . . . Johnson among others, should exert himself and exclaim against this Horror. He is a Member of our University, and ought not silently to see it ruined.<sup>28</sup>

Nobody in the Club seems to have taken up this campaign. Hely-Hutchinson certainly felt no reluctance to sit in Johnson's company two years later, when Beauclerk met him and came away in complete sympathy with Charlemont's earlier judgment about the provost: "I agree with you

that there never was a more scandalous thing than making the man provost that is made.”<sup>29</sup>

Charlemont's concern about Irish education was of a piece with his lifelong devotion to his country's welfare. The interests of Ireland were always his political focus, so much so that he came to distrust any countryman who longed to integrate with English culture. Although since 1750 he had kept a home in London for visits in between sessions of the Irish Parliament, sojourns in England seemed increasingly a betrayal of birthright and national duty. Establishing more permanent residence in Dublin in 1773, he lived in an elegant Palladian townhouse, built in 1765 and now converted into a museum of modern art, the Hugh Lane Gallery, in Parnell Square North, not far from James Joyce's neighborhood and bordering the Garden of Remembrance, dedicated in 1966 to all those who, like this Irish Whig Patriot, made nationhood possible. Charlemont had joined Charles Lucas and Henry Flood in taking command of the Patriot contingent in the Irish House of Commons to press for a bill allowing periodic elections of its members, in conformity with English convention. Otherwise, standard Irish procedure dictated that Members of Parliament sat in office for an entire reign without much fear of having to answer to restive constituents. The greater leverage that more frequent elections would give Irish parliamentarians and their electors in dealing with the British administration seemed obvious to many observers, but not to Johnson:

The duration of Parliament, whether for seven years or for the life of the King, appears to me so immaterial, that I would not give half a crown to turn the scale the one way or the other. The *habeas corpus* is the single advantage which our government has over that of other countries.<sup>30</sup>

It must be conceded to Johnson that the Irish Habeas Corpus Act – not put into effect until 1781–2 – provided an essential safeguard, when not suspended, against arbitrary arrest and false imprisonment by officials prone to harsh governmental crackdowns on local insurrections and future mass rebellion. It was also sadly true, as Johnson surmised, that the Octennial Act, requiring elections of Irish Members of Parliament every eight years, did little to curb internal corruption or external influence from Dublin Castle.

But change had come to Parliament and promised more constitutional innovations on the political horizon, especially during the American Revolution. The epoch-making unleashing of pent-up energies for separation

from the empire among Americans made for a tidal wave of anti-British, independence-oriented feeling spilling over the shores of Ireland. The analogy between oppressed American colonists and subjected Irish nationals remained too clear to be missed by their friends and foes alike in the British Isles. Differences, of course, existed between the two discontented sectors of the British empire.<sup>31</sup> Ireland never witnessed the weakening of royal power or sense of connection with England found in British America and, although victimized by commercial exploitation, remained free of direct taxation by the mother country. The Ascendancy's desire for independence failed to become the passionate conviction for complete separation mobilizing almost half the population of the thirteen colonies. These crucial distinctions resulted in contrary national destinies, but there was substantial common ground for creating a fellow-feeling among Irish and American patriots. They certainly shared a history of justifiable grievance against England's political and economic policies under mercantilism, and, sadly, both groups nurtured an unjustifiable legacy of bias against inhabitants outside the charmed circle of white Protestant subjects. As a Whig lover of liberty, Charlemont sided with "the American Colonists, then termed Rebels for their heroic Struggles in vindication of their natural Rights" but meditated no radical overhaul of the aristocratic status quo.<sup>32</sup> He in fact denounced democracy, wanted property qualifications for parliamentary representation, rejected total divorce from Great Britain, and, worst of all, acquiesced in religious intolerance – albeit with initial reluctance.

Did Johnson himself sense the similarity between the Irish and American states of affairs? Probably so. His contempt for slave-holding Americans could have easily translated into distaste for Ascendancy patriots seeking freedom for themselves but none for suppressed Catholics. Any whiff of this hypocrisy would have intensified Johnson's support for his British Parliament's conciliatory Catholic Relief Acts – inciting the Gordon Riots of 1780 – for the purposes of increased military recruitment in waging war against rebellious Americans. The death of the Old Jacobite Pretender in 1766, followed by Vatican recognition of George III, preceded a search in Ireland for an acceptable loyalty oath for Catholics to abjure the pope's temporal authority and fill depleted British regiments. In fact, Johnson's loathing for intolerant Whig patriots at home and abroad allowed him simultaneously to stand up both for Britain's ruling authority and for victims of British colonialism, like Irish Catholics and American slaves. His *Taxation No Tyranny* (1775)

capitalized on the comparable political status of Ireland and America to drive home the lesson of England's legitimate imperial power:

In the controversy agitated about the beginning of this century, whether the English laws could bind Ireland, Davenant, who defended against Molyneux the claims of England, considered it as necessary to prove nothing more, than that the present Irish must be deemed a colony.<sup>33</sup>

Even if Ireland was technically a distinct kingdom with its own Parliament for taxing subjects, still the Declaratory Act of 1720 vested supreme power in the British Parliament (435). Johnson never forgot the losers in an expanding Protestant America, whether they were native peoples, black slaves, or newly conquered papists. Very telling was his defence of the Quebec Act of 1774, permitting French Canadian Catholics their own laws and religion within the British empire, despite bigoted Protestant protest from so-called patriots of human rights on both sides of the Atlantic.

Unfortunately, when Charlemont meditated the possibility of remedies for the Catholic problem, he offered his sympathy to the victims of discrimination but tendered no serious solution for their plight. He played a prominent part in a popular but unauthorized national militia, known as the Volunteers, to deter possible French invasion amid a weakening of local law and order during the American Revolution. If ostensibly loyal to Britain, this paramilitary force intimidated the powers at Westminster into granting freer trade and seemingly more autonomy. Concessions such as the repeal of the 1720 Declaratory Act and a modification of Poynings's laws placed some curbs on Ireland's official subservience to England. This major new thrust in Irish politics constituted the Revolution of 1782. But genuine self-government never happened. Among other facets of continuing colonial subjection, the British Privy Council still wielded veto power over Irish legislation, and the Irish Parliament had limited authority over the accountability of the executive at Dublin Castle. Unresolved haggling over Catholic disabilities and Dublin parliamentary politics caused the Volunteer program and the Patriot Party to wither away in the years before the French Revolution and the defensive Union with Great Britain, dissolving a separate Ireland by 1801.

In the end, the political fortunes of the Volunteer earl proved far less successful than his learned activities connecting his love of country to the patriotic underpinnings of the Celtic Revival for nationalist self-esteem. He had the happiness and the honor of becoming the first president of the new Royal Irish Academy from 1785 to his death in 1799. This important

institution had depended upon his patronage from the very beginning. The society actually convened at Charlemont House on 18 April 1785 for its inaugural organizational meeting and boasted thirty-eight original members united in their enthusiasm for an encyclopedic investigation of the cultural and natural history of Ireland to the end of spurring a richer sense of national identity among their countrymen. In this spirit, he took pride in a fellow member's publication of a few modern Gaelic ballads, with English translations, casting doubt on the authenticity of *Ossian* and its historiography in the first issue of *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* in 1787:

From Parts of these Ballads it is clear that McPherson has taken many Passages in his Poem, tho' so strangely alter'd, and bedaubed with ornament, so swollen with Bombast, and disfigured by Figures, that their simple Origin is barely Cognizable – One Circumstance is however whimsical and curious, that wherever Ireland is mentioned, as it frequently is, the Caledonian has taken care to put Scotland in it's Place.<sup>34</sup>

In keeping with Charlemont's office and advocacy of Irish studies, his massive elegant portrait in profile hangs today in a place of honor and prime visibility behind the foyer stairway of the present Royal Irish Academy building in downtown Dublin.

Johnson's Club included two Church of Ireland clerics, besides Bishop Thomas Percy. Dr. Richard Marlay (*ca.* 1728–1802), eventually Bishop of Waterford and uncle of the renowned Irish liberator, Henry Grattan, joined the Club in 1777, and English-born Dr. Thomas Barnard (1728–1806) – Dean of Derry, 1769, Bishop of Killaloe, 1780 – secured election to the Club in February of 1775. This secular honor earned Barnard his chief claim to remembrance as an intelligent, worldly, and witty presence, who became something of a father confessor to Boswell. On one occasion, this *bon vivant* clergyman was sharply corrected by Johnson for declaring that nobody improved after the age of forty-five. The unpleasantness induced poor Barnard to pen for the Club some comic verses reflecting on Johnson's blunt ways with people, but hurt feelings lingered. "I love him," Barnard told Boswell, "but he does not love me. & complained of his harsh rough manners saying that when he smiled he shewed the teeth at the corner of his mouth like a dog who is going to bite."<sup>35</sup> When Johnson's travel account of the Highlands then appeared with its unsparing rebuke of Scottish partisanship in the *Ossian* dispute, Barnard nervously wondered out loud if a subsequent trip to Ireland would lead to even worse criticism of a sister Celtic people. The retort, recorded in

*The Life of Johnson*, has passed into legend: “No, Sir; the Irish are a FAIR PEOPLE; – they never speak well of one another” (II: 307).

Barnard participated in the *Ossian* controversy as a like-minded Johnsonian skeptic. Like other English commentators, he professed neutrality in his fifty-five page tract, *An Examination of the Arguments contained in a Late Introduction to the History of the Antient Irish and Scots* (London: J. Johnson, 1772; misattributed to Thomas Leland). Although he politely argued that national origins should not matter in an enlightened age, he criticized Macpherson’s arrogant anti-Irish historiography for its credulous manipulation of inadequate sources making for poor anti-quarianism. Ever the diplomat straddling English and Irish political priorities, Barnard ended his modest analysis as he began it, on a conciliatory note, with kind words for Macpherson the poet, if not the historian. He intended to prepare a longer treatise on defective Scottish historiography but produced only a cautious little essay, “An Enquiry containing the Original of the Scots in Britain,” embracing a unionist scholarly compromise open to both Scottish and Milesian-Celtic roots for the Irish. It was possibly the only writing ever to bear his name, appearing in the first volume (1787: 25–41) of the *Royal Irish Academy Transactions*. He was a founding member of this Academy for advancing all aspects of Irish studies. Consulting with Joseph Banks, Royal Society president and fellow Club member, Barnard had recently surveyed learned societies throughout Great Britain to draw up proper regulations for the new one at Dublin. There is a neat symmetry in the fact that his correspondence with Banks, offering the first full account of the new institution, should have ended by recalling their shared involvement in the Club under the leadership of Johnson, a “modern Socrates,” who had himself pushed Irish studies:

I am happy to find that our Club of Gerard Street is able to furnish Presidents for Ireland [Charlemont at the Royal Irish Academy], as well as England [Reynolds at the Royal Academy; Banks at the Royal Society], & to the most Respectable Societies of Both Kingdoms both of literature & arts – esto Perpetua.<sup>36</sup>

The last important Irishman to enter Johnson’s life, Rev. Dr. Thomas Campbell (1733–1795), was an Irish-born anglophile devoted to the Church of Ireland. He dramatically embodied the contemporary ambiguity of Irish national identity, caught between staunch loyalty to Great Britain and residual blood ties to his homeland. He was Johnson’s Irish Boswell writ small, whose modest diary record of their encounters possesses an unbowdlerized vividness and frankness sometimes missing in the monumental, if



hero-worshipping, *Life of Johnson*. Campbell's intellectual obligations to Johnson in notable publications on Irish culture bear comparison with the Scot's own debt to the same "literary Colossus" for far more famous works of literature. Like Boswell, Campbell was ambivalent in his nationalist allegiances. He could claim Irishness beyond dispute by virtue of his birth, education, vocation, and avocation as a scholar of Irish studies involved in the Celtic Revival and its current consciousness-raising of his countrymen. Nevertheless, he felt an ever stronger affiliation with British unionism to the extreme degree of wanting ethnic uniqueness to be replaced by imperial homogenization. Ireland should disappear by assimilating itself fully with the mother country: "thus losing its evil habits, and its very name, it be no more Ireland, but West England, or little Britain, and that the stile of our Sovereign be *Britanniarum Rex*."<sup>37</sup>

Campbell's preference for such a legal novelty as a king of all Britons would certainly have repelled a Whig Patriot like Charlemont, would have worried Irish nationalists/British loyalists like O'Connor and Leland, and would have thrilled only an ultra-conservative like Malone. Not even their famous comrade, Johnson, supportive of England's authority, could have stomached a full surrender of national identity to British hegemony. An absolute assimilationist principle in Irish politics was untenable because it required ignoring irrevocable native traditions and sweeping aside unresolved conflicts over Catholic rights within a Protestant empire. Campbell, however, prided himself on his British super-patriotism and, nothing daunted by prevailing Irish nationalism, tirelessly rode "my hobby horse in recommending a Union."<sup>38</sup> His Union did have room for Irish Catholics, provided they paid the steep price of transforming themselves into "Protestants in principle," discarding Catholic-Gaelic selfhood and Irish nationhood. By no means crudely bigoted, Campbell wrote movingly against penal laws and for Catholic participation in the economic prosperity of the island. No blind lover of empire, he blamed England for Ireland's backwardness, promoted progress at home, and ranked among the more enlightened historians of the contemporary Celtic Revival. At the same time, his top priority was not solely his homeland's prosperity but "the future aggrandisement of the British Empire at large" under Protestant domination made secure by the virtual conversion of Irish Catholic multitudes to his own established church.<sup>39</sup>

Born the son of a clergyman at Glack, County Tyrone, Campbell received his BA (1751), MA (1761), and LLB/LLD (1772) degrees from Trinity College for his ordination and curacy at Clogher (1761) leading to his elevation as chancellor of St. Macartan's, Clogher (1773). Nothing

out of the ordinary happened to this tall, handsome clergyman, until he embarked on his first sojourn in England for about two months early in 1775 and started keeping an incomplete diary (1775–95), noteworthy for its candid entries about his new friend, Samuel Johnson. A leisurely trip of five days from Dublin to London brought Campbell to the doorstep of the Thrales on 14 March, just about two months after Johnson's collision with Macpherson during the *Ossian* controversy. Mrs. Thrale found the middle-aged Irishman "a fine showy talking Man," and he returned the compliment with unconscious male chauvinism: "She is a very learned Lady & joyns to the charms of her own sex the manly understanding of ours."<sup>40</sup> Initial contact with the aging but feisty Johnson happened on 16 March in the company of Henry Thrale. First impressions of the Englishman's eccentricities made for an offputting experience. Johnson had

the aspect of an Idiot – without the faintest ray of sense gleaming from any one feature. With the most awkward garb & unpowdered grey wig on one side only of his head, he is forever dancing the Devils jig, & sometimes he makes the most driveling effort to whistle some thought in his absent paroxisms. He came up to me and took me by the hand (53)

with a kindness allaying the earlier shock of such a forbidding presence.

A second encounter occurred three weeks later, on 5 April, this time arranged by Boswell, whose veneration of Johnson amounted "to a degree of superstition" (68) not always shared by Campbell. The discussion turned to a comparison of Scottish and Irish learning, and Johnson rested his case for Ireland's superiority by reciting a catalog of great modern writers. Naturally pleased by this glowing judgment of his country, Campbell retorted with patriotic praise of his homeland's hallowed past, which coincided exactly with Johnson's view of early Christian Ireland:

Encouraged by this I went back to assert the Genius of Ireland in old times & ventured to say that the first Professors of Oxford & Paris &c – were Irish. Sir Says he I believe there's something in what you say, & I am content with it, *since they are not Scotch*. (74)

These remarks would have long-range ramifications for Campbell's own scholarly projects later on. His first book, published with Johnson's help, contained five essays on Irish culture basically amplifying this diary conversation, even though Campbell reversed the earlier verdict and pronounced the Irish literary renaissance inferior to the current Scottish Enlightenment. His second book also took inspiration from this diary conversation by detailing how monastic Ireland saved European civilization.

He made no secret of this enormous debt to Johnson for his new writing career on behalf of a Celtic Revival.

A day later Boswell, in Johnson's presence, confirmed the impact of the recent meetings on Campbell: "I told him Campbell's odd expression to me concerning him: That having seen such a man was a thing to talk of a century hence – as if he could live so long" (11: 343). Johnson laughed appreciatively, but Boswell's further compliment that Campbell made the trip to England for the express purpose of seeing Johnson, smacked of annoying idolatry unworthy of a man of the cloth. A third visit on 8 April found Johnson "not in good spirits" as he chaffed Boswell about the clannishness of Scots: "he said they were not singular – The negroes & Jews being so too" (76). Three more interviews followed, including one at Johnson's own apartment on 24 April and then another at the Thrale townhouse on 20 April for some harsh reflections on the nascent American Revolution:

Talking – after dinner of the measures he wd. pursue with the Americans – he said the first thing he wd. do wd. be to quarter the Army on the Citys & if any refused free quarters, he wd. pull down the persons house, if it was joyned to other houses; but wd. burn it if it stood alone . . . (83–4)

Johnson would later apply these outrageous sentiments of brutal retaliation to the other hotspot of nascent rebellion in Ireland, to Campbell's indignation. But Campbell's initial impression of Johnson was so positive as to receive acknowledgment in the prelate's major publications on Irish studies.

The first of these works, *A Philosophical Survey of the South of Ireland, in a Series of Letters to John Watkinson, M.D.* (1778), showed the impact of Campbell's recent first foray outside his northern Irish parish. This travel book put the experience of journeying to London in reverse, with a pseudo-English observer on a goodwill tour of Ireland, for the inter-related purpose of enhancing Irish regard for the English and increasing English sympathy for the Irish. It represented a work of imperial discourse but written to seem pro-Irish, pro-Catholic, and pro-colonial, until the unflinching reality of its unionist Protestant orientation surfaced in the second half. It was the literary counterpart of the political act of union that it promoted, seeking to open channels of communication and interconnectedness between the two kingdoms to the end of forging them into one Britain. Demanding truth in life and literature, Johnson was later heard to deplore the deception of a writer of travels assuming a fictional persona: "He carries out one lye; we know not how many he

brings back.”<sup>41</sup> The least hint of fiction subverted the documentation of facts. But if Campbell was the object of Johnson’s censure, the fiction created by an Irishman with an English identity had the desired effect of sliding into the hoped-for fact of his country’s assimilation with Great Britain.

As soon as he returned home buoyed by his happy times in London, Campbell decided to pay homage to England by preparing his loyalist travel account of a three-month trip to Dublin and southern Ireland. He finished the manuscript of the *Survey* by October of 1776 and immediately set out for another visit to London lasting until May of 1777. No diary of this long stay exists, but the evidence suggests that his main intent was to find a publisher and that a subsidiary effect of the trip was continued anglicization of his outlook and friendships. Mrs. Thrale noted with some wonderment that “Johnson liked him of all Things in a year or so” (II: 519) of their introduction in 1775; in other words, full bonding did not occur until this second sojourn. By then, it seems, Campbell looked more to England than to Ireland for some of the deepest roots of his identity as citizen and priest. Appropriately, therefore, his *Survey* appeared in London in March 1778 (although dated 1777) and showed a few clear signs of his new closeness to the literary lion of England. Johnson not only received praise twice in the text but also contributed a Latin epitaph on Goldsmith and may have helped to arrange for its printing by favorite publishers, Strahan and Cadell. These circumstances may suggest some familiarity with the book, an inference that would make the *Survey* the only identifiable description of contemporary Ireland that Johnson may have read with some attentiveness.

Had he looked into it, what would he have found in style and content? Unlike his own *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, the *Survey* is less a travel book of reflections arising out of the passing scene than a series of treatises imposed on a setting described perfunctorily in the course of forty-five letters. The journey itself, clearly of secondary concern, ends on page 289 in a narrative running to 466 pages and becomes a pretext for at least two hundred pages of extended discussion on four principal topics: (1) Irish antiquarianism; (2) the Catholic problem; (3) the case for a union with Britain; and finally (4) Ireland’s cultural creativity in the past and its prospects under a union with Britain. Campbell not only disguised his identity and nationality behind a feigned English persona of cosmopolitanism, but he also led readers early into thinking that he would adopt a moderate, even pro-Irish point of view in the narrative. His “Advertisement” did concede England’s superiority but

gave the false impression of an anti-British perspective by indulging in criticism of the mother country's "too narrow, if not illiberal" policies reducing Ireland to an inferior state. Casting himself as an enlightened reformer, he began the *Survey* on the symbolically optimistic note of enjoying renewed physical health during a dawning day promising manifold improvements for a booming Dublin and an underdeveloped southern Ireland after six hundred years of war and degradation.<sup>42</sup> Exploiting a traditional emblem of Ireland, Campbell likened the nation to a beautiful woman shabbily dressed (138), whose legendary laziness and nastiness were not inborn but conditioned by political neglect and oppression (144). And yet deflating one stereotype of Irish shiftlessness did not stop him from perpetuating other old chestnuts about Irish hot tempers and high-spiritedness.

The *Survey*'s first preoccupation, Irish antiquarianism, made it seem distinctively pro-Irish discourse in its advocacy of scholarship abetting the country's growing self-consciousness. Criticism of the antiquarian movement, although present and at times severe, was intentionally submerged under pointed praise for O'Connor (68), Vallancey (66), Sylvester O'Halloran (223), and Leland (416). Such plaudits overshadowed discreet brickbats impugning their patriotically overblown claims for a rich Irish antiquity. Campbell kept in abeyance his real conviction that national origins lay shrouded in mystery and that Irish civilization came about only after the arrival of Christianity (237–48). This he did in order to seem open to preposterous theories of ancient Phoenician-Irish ties and impossibly sophisticated prehistoric societies (72). Diplomatically accepting and rejecting anachronistic historiography, he espoused Ireland's priority over Scotland as the motherland of Gaelic culture, in answer to James Macpherson's nonsensical antiquarianism and concocted Ossianic poetry: "Whence issued forth at great Mc Pherson's call, / That old new epic pastoral Fingal" (77). The clever borrowing of Charles Churchill's couplet signaled Campbell's allegiance not only to fellow Irish historians but also to English opponents of *Ossian*.

After a debunking survey of Scottish historians vainly defending their nation's Gaelic primacy in the British Isles, he attacked Macpherson for his supposedly topsy-turvy reliance on Irish balladry in his Erse productions and Ossianic historiography:

Yet, up starts another Scotchman still more hardy, who finding no authorities, either at home or abroad to support the darling antiquity of his native country, is for annihilating all authorities against it; and vainly dares to obtrude upon us for true history, the inverted sonnets of Hibernian bards. (77)

Following O'Connor, Campbell sided with Geoffrey Keating and Roderic O'Flaherty in arguing for Irish, not Scottish, origins of Ossian and his heroes (85). As Vallancey affirmed, "Ossian's poems are all short ballads [rather than Macphersonian epics], not yet collected to his knowledge by any one" (86). Campbell therefore promoted the sadly neglected project of preserving Ireland's manuscripts and publishing bona fide Gaelic poems to advance Irish studies and determine once and for all the precise nature of Macpherson's literary fraud: "It were to be wished that these [bardic songs] as well as the ancient Irish manuscripts in T. C. D. [Trinity College, Dublin] and elsewhere, were printed and translated . . . For in another century the Irish language . . . will probably be extinct" (430). A decade would pass before this farsighted proposal, long supported by Johnson, would begin to bear fruit in English translations of authentic Fenian verse by Thomas Hill in England (1783–4) as well as Matthew Young (1787) and, above all, Charlotte Brooke (1789) in Ireland.

Campbell revealed himself to be the disciple of Johnson in the national culture wars surrounding the *Ossian* controversy. According to the *Survey*, Johnson, more than anyone else outside Ireland, best served the Hibernian cause of establishing the primordial Gaelic heritage of Ireland by leading the campaign exposing Macpherson's hoax. No other Irishman came so close as Campbell did to adopting Johnson's extreme skepticism about an Iron Age *Ossian*, under the (mistaken) notion that written Scottish Gaelic preserving poetry in manuscript could not have existed before the past century:

In short, the forgery committed in the publications of Fingal and Temora, is so clearly detected by the sagacious and learned author of the *Tour to the Western Isles*, that to oppose the evidence of such fictitious works, to that of established history, would be to persist in a most audacious insult to the understandings of mankind. There are, we know, original poems ascribed to Ossian. Mr. M\_\_\_\_\_n may have taken their images and sentiments, may have adapted their manner and spirit, but he has so changed the matter and order of the narration, by putting in, and leaving out, and other metamorphosing methods, that his work may be called any thing rather than a translation. (86)

This statement, seconding Johnson's position in *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, remains a reliable summing up of Macpherson's massive invention and some free use of extant Gaelic ballads to produce his pseudo-antique canon in quasi-free verse English prose. In subscribing to Johnson's ultimate verdict, Campbell offered the most accurate assessment of the literary fraud to be found among Irish antiquaries, from O'Connor and O'Halloran to Vallancey and Young.

The author of the *Survey* then mocked Lord Kames for explaining *Ossian's* impossibly anachronistic refinement as a "miracle" of old bardic inspiration (87). On the contrary, Macpherson's epics were only modern creations powerfully attractive to contemporary readers. Although Campbell – unlike Johnson but like O'Connor and O'Halloran – found the works appealing, he considered them the bogus handiwork of a gifted, although duplicitous, Highlander, rifling modern Irish verse to exalt Scotland:

Let those celebrated epics then be at best considered, but as ingenious Centos [patchworks] culled from Irish Bards; garbled and transposed, curtailed and interpolated, they are certainly not originals, and consequently they are not Ossian's. Perhaps they are better. If so, let Scotland glory in them; but detected as they are by Dr. Johnson, betrayed by Lord Kaimes, and self-condemned throughout, they must remain only a monument of the ingenuity of the Editor.

Ossian sublimest, simplest bard of all  
Let English infidels M'Pherson call. (88–9)

Except for the error of supposing dependence on Irish sources in *Ossian*, this inference was correct, and Campbell's use of Charles Churchill's couplet put him squarely in the camp of "English infidels" like Johnson in the culture wars provoked by the controversy.

Campbell's occasional ambiguity about Irish antiquarianism carried over into his examination of the second major concern, Irish Catholics. Condescending description of their habits existed side by side with fitful appreciation and even some ecumenism toward papist liturgy: "Yet, even here, it is possible, that God may be worshipped in spirit and in truth" (130). This confused perspective continued in the often compassionate but finally closed-minded overview of the Catholic problem in letters xxvii, xxxi, and xxxiii. Assailing the "virulence" of anti-Catholicism as an irrelevant relic of resistance to long-gone Jacobitism, Campbell forthrightly accused the British government of betraying the tolerant Treaty of Limerick in 1691 by imposing disastrous penal laws under a vengeful Whiggism. Intolerance amounted to a nationally self-defeating Protestant blunder from the beginning:

We keep the Irish dark and ignorant, and then we wonder how they can be so enthralled by superstition; we make them poor and unhappy, and then we wonder that they are so prone to tumult and disorder; we tie up their hands, so that they have no inducements to industry, and then we wonder that they are so lazy and indolent . . . (253)

We have met the enemy, and he is us.



What was the solution for the abandonment of so many by so few in such inept control of the country for so long? The remedy was twofold and maddeningly tightfisted toward Catholics. First, let them join in the economic prosperity resulting from free trade and from repealing penal laws, but be sure to handicap their ownership of property and exclude them from politics to maintain their second-class citizenship. Second, let them subscribe to an acceptable oath of allegiance for the sake of their eventual reformation and assimilation with the Protestant body politic: "But, taught moderation by our example, they will, in due time, see not only the temporal, but the spiritual advantages of our happy constitution" (262). The refreshingly progressive tendency of Campbell's thinking about Catholic deprivations dwindled to a lame parochialism on behalf of Protestant self-interest. Ecumenism degenerated into sectarianism, in the confident expectation that religious diversity would merge into conformity to the established church of imperial Great Britain. The catholic essence of Christianity would evaporate away in the shrunken melting-pot of a state religion. Nor did Campbell seem at all aware that weaning Catholics from their faith intruded on the very core of their humanity and their Irish identity. But he probably never thought to ask Catholics how they felt about such assimilationist schemes.

The latent unionism expressed itself openly in the last quarter of his narrative, dealing with politics and culture respectively. Letters xxxiv through xxxvii acknowledged that most of the Irish, despite uneasy loyalty to England, prided themselves on "their liberties, their privileges, and their constitution" (331) as subjects of a distinct kingdom. But Campbell showed his true-blue unionist colors. He stressed his opposition to the independence movement of Patriot politics leading soon to the Revolution of 1782. Instead, he supported a fusion of the two kingdoms under the British Constitution so as to dissolve Ireland as a separate entity for the benefit of the mother country: "The Irish should be glad to accept, and the English ready to impart to them the benefits of our equal constitution" (334). This event would compensate for the loss of British America (348), strengthen the British crown (337) and the empire (350), and induce a cultural reawakening treated in letters xxxix through xliv. The final section of the *Survey*, comparing and contrasting the cultural heritage of Ireland and Scotland, had its probable origin in Campbell's memory of his conversation with Johnson on the subject. Although the author still agreed with Johnson about the greatness of Ireland's golden age of early Christian civilization, he now gave the palm of



excellence in modern arts and letters to Scotland because, be it noted, of its union with England since 1707.

Ireland came out the loser in the cultural competition by virtue of its provincial status proceeding from the absence of its own union with Great Britain. Therefore, contrary to all prevailing assumptions about an intellectual revival in concert with a homebred intra-island nationalism, Campbell's recipe for a cultural reawakening in Ireland rested squarely on the future victory of unionism in a homogenized British Isles:

In a great nation [like England], the genius of individuals will participate of the national greatness; it will in some measure be buoyed above itself. Whereas in a subordinate one [like Ireland], it will be depressed to the low level of the national fate. If Edmund Burke had exerted his talents to the utmost in his native country, he would never have been compared to the orators of antiquity. And if Dr. Johnson had spent his life in the same place, we should not now look up to him, as the *Colossus* of literature . . . (408–9)

This unionist orientation of the *Survey* went hand in hand at the close with a new conciliatory willingness to praise Macpherson for reviving interest in old Gaelic poetry (430–1). *Ossian*, after all, belonged to a Celtic Revival shared by a brilliant Scottish Enlightenment and by a still-fledgling Irish literary renaissance. Hence, a little parting respect for the creator of *Ossian* was in order for the better cohesiveness of Great Britain.

Complimentary references and an ostensibly progressive outlook in the *Survey* might have pleased Johnson, if he read the book, whatever his possible reservations about its phony English narrator. Charles O'Connor liked it immensely and seems not to have detected the muted anti-Irish undercurrent of some of its ambiguously presented opinions: "I am under the greatest obligation to the learned stranger as in other parts of his work he pronounces a very favorable judgment of my *Dissertations*."<sup>43</sup> O'Connor, not yet aware of Campbell's authorship, fell into the error of reading his own convictions into pleasantly packaged imperial discourse that went well beyond even his own loyalist support for Great Britain. O'Connor's hope for a union of the two kingdoms entailed insistence on religious diversity, not Catholic assimilation, as part of the political accommodation. His unionism had so healthy a dose of nationalism that he could welcome the seeming victory of modern Irish statehood in the Revolution of 1782. Campbell, by contrast, grew more outspoken about his Protestant biases. His reactionary unionism surfaced in further publications and lasted his lifetime. Just before his death, as the French Revolution threatened to overwhelm even remote Ireland, his final printed

sermon proclaimed his fervent loyalist creed, in opposition to Thomas Paine's equal rights of man: "England exhibits a model of government approaching nearest that ideal perfection" of statecraft.<sup>44</sup> In keeping with his British sympathies, in the face of peasant insurrection and worsening health, he fled his homeland for England and made Johnson's beloved London his final resting place. There he died on 20 June 1795 at the age of sixty-two.

Probably Campbell's most valuable literary legacy is a rare work of enlightened historiography that Johnson could take some justifiable credit for inspiring in its thematic focus, its critical stance, and its sometimes elegant style. This was *Strictures on the Ecclesiastical and Literary History of Ireland: from the Most Ancient Times till the Introduction of the Roman Ritual, and the Establishment of Papal Supremacy, by Henry II. King of England. Also, an Historical Sketch of the Constitution and Government of Ireland, from the Most Early Authenticated Period Down to the Year 1783*. So much better than this clumsy title indicates, the book made its appearance in 419 octavo pages at the Dublin publishing house of Luke White in the autumn of 1789, followed by a London printing in 1790 by G. G. J. and J. Robinson. The core of the text, the *Strictures*, took up the first 255 pages of the Dublin printing and ranks as one of the best early antidotes for the reckless antiquarianism of the Celtic Revival. Not the least of its appeal is that it qualifies as a genuinely Johnsonian treatise of skeptical historiography that challenged prevailing anachronism and primitivism unfounded in fact. The imprint of Johnson's influence, although undeniable, has hitherto gone unnoticed. If O'Connor and Faulkner had the honor of turning Johnson's attention to a burgeoning Irish literary renaissance, then Campbell earned the distinction of coming closest to creating the kind of book that Johnson wanted to see adorning Irish studies. What is more, Campbell himself stressed that the *Strictures* fulfilled such a Johnsonian mandate. For the sake of a valued friendship and some self-promotion, he gloried in the fact that his publication issued forth as the brainchild of the most highly regarded English author of the era.

It was intended as a companion piece for a never-finished *magnum opus* about Ireland since its Norman Conquest, entitled *The History of the Revolutions of Ireland*. Nothing of the project survived, except for a statement of purpose, approved by Burke, promising a succinct survey of past events, free of antiquarian wrangles, in support of the thesis that England's incomplete bestowal of its constitutional heritage on Ireland

impeded progress there and that only a modern merger of the two kingdoms could overcome past mistakes.<sup>45</sup> Preparations for the *Strictures* and this larger *History* occurred throughout the 1780s, amid disturbing rumors that the author intended to rebuke other Irish scholars for their unreliability and super-patriotism. Campbell could not find a London publisher for his proposed *History* and therefore concentrated on getting out the *Strictures* for preliminary publicity. Burke had advised starting with the Norman Conquest, but Johnson had urged recounting the more obscure story of How the Irish Saved Civilization in the centuries between St. Patrick and Henry II. Campbell thus thought to serve two intellectual masters. The Burkean plan failed to materialize, but the Johnsonian *Strictures* fulfilled a wise directive, announced to O'Connor by Johnson in 1757, that of paying homage to the proposition that "Ireland is known by tradition to have been once the seat of piety, and learning."<sup>46</sup> In keeping with his dual discipleship, Campbell dedicated the *Strictures* to Burke for lending out Irish manuscripts and then, in the table of contents, pointed to the presiding genius behind the book's design, "Plan of the Work, recommended by Dr. Johnson." The first paragraph, noting Johnson's dealings with O'Connor, put Campbell's debt beyond dispute:

But the interval between the legation of St. Patrick, and the domination of Henry II. – during which Ireland is known to have been the seat of piety and learning, – is a period peculiarly interesting to all those who are curious either in the original of nations, or the revolutions of a people certainly ancient and traditionally illustrious. So fully penetrated was Dr. Johnson with this opinion, that in a letter to Mr. O'Connor, in the year 1777, he thus expresses himself: "Dr. Leland begins his history too late. The ages which deserve an exact enquiry, are those times (if such times there were) when Ireland was the school of the West, the quiet habitation of sanctity and literature."<sup>47</sup>

The *Strictures* abandoned the polite touch of his previous *Survey* and plunged into controversy by taking to task a long line of Irish historians, from O'Flaherty and O'Halloran to Vallancey, O'Connor, and even Leland, for glorifying pre-Christian times. Distancing himself from O'Connor, the diehard Protestant unionist now held to the possibility of Scythian-Germanic roots for the Irish and no longer subscribed to a primordial Celticism favored by Catholic antiquaries. He donned the mantle of fearless truth-teller, given to distinguishing between painstaking fact and facile fiction. But he humbly admitted to Burke his own inability to meet Johnson's high standards of historical inquiry. Lacking much new information, he would at least attempt to discover sounder

ways of assessing tired old interpretations tending to distort or darken an already mysterious past:

If, by simplifying my original plan, these sheets shall in any degree supply what our learned friend [Johnson] considered as a *desideratum* in Irish literature, they are indebted to you for the hint [Burke wanted the essential spirit of an age]. In one respect, I fear, they will too nearly answer [to] what he expected; for without *anxious exactness* they will unavoidably betray all that imperfection to which he gave such a latitude; but they can scarcely amplify knowledge because they cannot furnish new objects, and they only aspire at giving new views of such as are old. A lens does not create the rays of light, it only collects them. (2–3)

Campbell endorsed a clear-sighted Johnsonian vision of history – one not beginning in an idealized antiquity but displaying a fitfully progressive movement from barbarity caused by original sin, toward gradual civilization, law, and order in the course of humanity's arduous effort to recover a lost rectitude. His book would offer a series of authentic biographical portraits of major ecclesiastical figures, enriched by examples of their writings spanning five centuries. Patriotism was too often the refuge of scoundrel politicians and inept historians. He would prove his love of country by going beyond nebulous traditions to uncover extant scraps of verifiable data for a credible celebration of a true golden age following Ireland's acceptance of Christianity: "Under this impression I have now laboured to ascertain the fact, beyond the cavil of scepticism that there was a time (of which Dr. Johnson doubted) when *Ireland was the School of the West*" (3). Contrary to this puzzling assertion that Johnson "doubted" Ireland's ancient renown, he insisted on the greatness of early Irish Christianity. The *Strictures* had embraced this Johnsonian theme and demonstrated that it was to "Christianity we must ascribe the first dawns of civility in this country, contrary to all that he [O'Connor] and others have said of Pagan times" (225). Focusing on the Ireland of saints and scholars had long attracted Protestant historians searching for evidence of a primitive, non-Romish Christianity legitimating the Church of Ireland. Campbell adopted a Protestant perspective on Christianity's civilizing role in Ireland and readily believed that the early Church remained "free from any subjection to the See in Rome, both in temporals and spirituals" (152). Not until the Norman Conquest compelled conformity to papal regulation did religion turn fundamentally Roman Catholic.

Had Johnson lived to read the book, he might have found its critique of Irish antiquarianism congenial to his own hardheaded realism in historiography. The *Strictures* repeatedly warned against reaching back too

far into the past. Not even classical authorities offered more than a dim light on remote times. Scholars had to avoid jumping to conclusions based on fantastic analogies between old Ireland and ancient Mediterranean civilizations. Attempting such doubtful connections made for dubious patriotic idealization of the homeland. National origins, far from being pristine, were barbaric and largely unknowable. Did not backwardness characterize all national pasts, even great England's own savage beginnings, despite its Whiggish reputation for a long legacy of liberty? Much better would it be to regard Ireland "as an infant state, emerging from ignorance and barbarism, like Hercules arising from his cradle, and like him too labouring under a hard task master" of English ancestry (8). The spirit of the European Enlightenment demanded a sobering dose of truth-telling: "The eighteenth is not the century for supporting figments, which posterity only pardons because they are the productions of the darkest periods of the middle age" (10). A Johnsonian call for preserving Gaelic was integral to enlightened Irish historiography:

And Doctor Johnson, who would not depreciate them [extant ancient manuscripts preserving the Gaelic language], says, "that words are the daughters of earth, but that things are the sons of Heaven." It is true that this great scholar wished for a publication and translation of the most valuable of the Irish manuscripts. Yet he entertained no high opinion of their contents: he said that "he considered them as a literary curiosity, as a first effort of the human mind to enlarge its powers; and that their being printed would conserve a language and embalm a speech". (34)

Midway in the treatise, Campbell launched a stinging broadside against *Ossian*. The *Strictures*, like his previous *Survey*, followed Johnson's lead but now with something like equivalent contempt for Macpherson. There was unrelenting criticism of an anti-Irish historiography and a bogus poetry laden with telltale anachronisms depicting prehistoric warriors "clad in complete steel and burnished armour" and comporting themselves with incredibly "elegant manners and sentiments" (169). The public had fallen for a false-seeming antiqueness:

He brought forward his counterfeit Epicks, whose manifold defects and deformities were not so much pardoned for the beauties, thinly scattered, which they contain, as from the persuasion that they were the works of an ancient Artist. But as mere poems, these spurious productions should have passed for harmless things, had not the author in feigning a fable, forged also a history . . . (170)

Campbell, like Johnson, believed mistakenly that Scotland lacked very old manuscripts preserving Fenian literature and that oral tradition could

not have transmitted lengthy poetry like *Fingal* and *Temora*. In any case, the pseudo-Gaelic poetry so commingled fact and fable as to be an unreliable historical guide for antiquaries. "Authority confirms the dictates of reason" (171) in the person of Samuel Johnson, who had decisively exposed the hoax and a sorry conspiracy of Scottish defenders:

It really shocks candour to reflect upon the various devices which have been used, to give a currency to this flimsy fabrication; and, however they may reconcile their consciences to literary fraud, it must remain an indelible stain upon the heads and hearts of those who have either lent their names, or prostituted their talents, to abet and propagate such a flagrant imposture. (171)

The unionist sympathies in the *Strictures* were pervasive. The whole tide of Irish history would have taken a felicitous turn, in Campbell's view, had the Norman invasion under Henry II reduced all the nation under the same English law "as one people" (251). This persistent faith in integrating with Great Britain as the only path to progress ran oddly counter to Patriot-oriented argumentation for national independence in a long (335–8) footnote, notable for preserving Johnson's fullest statement about Ireland. The remarks are a rare addition to his thinking about the country in his final years, on the eve of the Irish Revolution of 1782. Their catalyst was Campbell's grave objection to Blackstone's premise in *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–70) that England's title to Ireland derived from right of conquest by naked force. But, Campbell countered, if that premise held true, then what if an internal superior force arose at any time to annihilate that title and free itself from subjection? Did not the oppressed Catholic majority hold the raw power to enforce its will? Here truly was a troubling recipe for rebellion. In fact, Johnson elsewhere had likely endorsed both England's domination of Ireland and the rights of Irish Catholics by appealing to the same principle of physical necessity in Sir Robert Chambers's *A Course of Lectures on the English Law*. Now, on a visit to London on 11 June 1781, Campbell heard Johnson profess such a principle in defense, not of rebellion, but of British empire and parliamentary sovereignty at Westminster.

An altercation erupted when talk turned to recent disturbances caused by the Volunteer movement in Ireland, at an ominous time of American Revolution. Campbell bridled at the suggestion of disloyal Irish insurrection and vigorously defended the Volunteers as solid and substantial citizens, many from the upper class. Johnson heartily disagreed: "What! Sir, don't you call it a *Disturbance* to oppose legal government with arms in your hands, and compel it to make laws in your favour? Sir, I call it

rebellion, as much as the rebellions of Scotland" (337). Campbell stood his ground, blending British loyalty and Irish patriotism for the sake of his homeland's political autonomy:

Doctor, said I, I am exceedingly sorry to hear that declaration from you, whom I always considered as a friend, sometimes partial, to Ireland: But this I can say, that we have always considered ourselves as among the most loyal of his Majesty's subjects, at the same time that, though obliged to submit, we have always denied allegiance to the supremacy of a British Parliament. (338)

The Patriot tendency of Campbell's words, not very compatible with his unionist tenets, inflamed Johnson to insist on Ireland's subjection to England by right of conquest:

Sir, says the Doctor, you do owe allegiance to an English Parliament, for you are *a conquered nation*; and had I been minister I would have made you submit to it – I would have done as Cromwell did, I would have burned your cities and roasted you in flames. – After this explosion, I perhaps warmly replied – Doctor! Your advice to treat the Americans in that manner has not succeeded altogether to your wishes – the times are altered. To which he replied, Sir, you say truly that the times are altered, for power is now no where; our government is a government of influence, but not of power. Yet had we treated the Americans as we ought, and as they deserved, we should have at once razed all their towns and let them enjoy their forests. But (in a jocular way repeating what he before said) when we should have roasted the Americans as rebels, we only whipped them as children; and we did not succeed, because my advice was not taken. (338)

The jocularly seeping into Johnson's talking for victory signaled a slightly conciliatory shift of mood, as hotheadedness subsided to cooler and kinder reflection on the Irish situation. Johnson's final comment, although no less supportive of British sovereignty than his previous outburst, displayed more openness to the other side of the question. What emerged was a paradox of pro and con, of fidelity to the mother country but sympathy for the underdog, which captured the essence of Johnson's complicated outlook on Ireland. Love of imperial homeland never entirely displaced his compassion for suffering humanity thirsting for justice. It should be stressed that he spoke the following words, so seemingly devoid of compromise, "with a smile" that smacked of artful argumentativeness rather than of complete conviction:

Though I hold the Irish to be rebels, I don't think them altogether wrong; but you know that you compelled our Parliament, by force of arms, to pass an act [easing trade] in your favour: Though what you claim ought to have been granted, as you say, yet the mode of requisition was rebellious. Well, Doctor, said I, let me ask you, do you think that Ireland, would have recovered her usurped



right by any other means? To which he candidly answered, I believe she would not: However, a wise government should not grant even a claim of justice, if an attempt is made to extort it by force. We had some more conversation on the same subject, till at length it came to this issue – Why, Sir, I don't know but I might have acted as you did, had I been an Irishman, but I speak as an Englishman. (338)

The peaceful finale of this debate underscored Johnson's frank awareness of the absence of any decisive resolution between the contrary demands of sovereignty versus justice – authority necessary for lawful order versus rebellion necessary for a last-resort recovery of human rights against governmental wrongs. He talked for victory on behalf of a cogent political principle, but Campbell did so too and effectively brought this legal match to an intellectual draw, as the conflicting claims of England and Ireland ended in friendly impasse. Indeed, around the time of the conversation, Johnson could take an exactly opposite position in his *Life of Swift* and concede English oppression of the sister kingdom. This well-known biography showed no traces of the belligerent British jingoism honestly reported by Campbell. It actually revealed empathy with nationalist stirrings occurring in Ireland. As he wrote movingly, Swift taught the Irish “first to know their own interest, their weight, and their strength, and gave them spirit to assert that equality with their fellow-subjects to which they have ever since been making vigorous advances, and to claim those rights which they have at last established.”<sup>48</sup>

Such patent fellow-feeling for the Irish, however sincere, would not outweigh Johnson's defensiveness on behalf of England in his final years, when worsening health and repeated military setbacks for the empire left him in a dark mood about the mother country's affairs. Not long after the *Life of Swift*, he penned his last statement about Ireland, in gloomy reaction to the Revolution of 1782 and with a prophecy of future turmoil from French interference that almost came to pass by century's end:

I have no national news that is not in the papers, and almost all news is bad. Perhaps no nation not absolutely conquered has declined so much in so short a time. We seem to be sinking. Suppose the Irish having already gotten a free trade and an independent parliament should say we will have a King, and ally ourselves with the house of Bourbon, what could be done to hinder or overthrow them?<sup>49</sup>

It was an ominous question to pose, a question all the more frightening for all loyal Englishmen if they could have known how farsighted his observation proved to be. Let only the words “Republic” and “Napoleonic



France” replace “King” and “house of Bourbon” in this passage, and Ireland’s potential destiny had been laid bare in miniature.

Pessimistic in old age about the fortunes of the British empire, Johnson could not foresee the demise of the Irish independence movement in the triumph of the Union of 1801 and the defeat of the French Revolution afterwards. But at his most discerning, he did penetrate to the heart of issues moving the Irish to seek independence. He spoke against England’s long legacy of plunder and persecution urging the sister island on to growing autonomy. He belonged to that enlightened minority of brave souls set squarely against mistreatment of the Irish Catholic majority, a wrong so grievous in his eyes as to vitiate the right of empire on the one hand and to make impossible just home rule on the other. That humanitarian conviction, held firmly against a prevailing tide of bigotry, was truly prescient. Perhaps more than any other factor, the failure to realize universal emancipation caused the unraveling of the Revolution of 1782, unseated the Ascendancy by forcing the union of the kingdoms, eventually dismantled the British empire in Ireland – even after the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 – and continued to unsettle the political landscape thereafter.

A comprehensive survey of Johnson’s career-long encounters with the Irish sheds light on his little-known participation in their Celtic Revival and his varied political response to empire, colonial subjection, and national liberation. The large cast of characters who entered his life brought him into contact with diverse and often overlapping manifestations of nationalism complicating the country’s cultural heritage: Gaelic Catholic (O’Conor); colonial Ascendancy (Leland); *émigré* (Burke, Malone, Maxwell); Whig Patriot (Lucas, Charlemont); and Protestant unionist (Barnard, Campbell). The rich literature of Ireland has reflected this hybrid admixture of native and imperial strains in intricate interaction under evolving socio-political pressures. Johnson was by and large a concerned observer of Irish cultural diversity and political upheaval beginning to transform the island into a modern nation. He delighted in its people, revered its Christian past, and proved a noteworthy spokesperson for respecting and preserving its cultural history. The Irish who met him reciprocated his kind regard by paying homage to his salutary impact on their lives and writings with a near-unanimous esteem and affection accorded to no other English literary figure of their time. And most of the Irish who engaged in the *Ossian* controversy looked to his powerful example in opposing Macpherson for corroboration of Ireland’s

pre-eminence in Gaelic literature, language, and lore. Around the time of the Catholic Emancipation Act, an essay for the *Royal Irish Academy Transactions* bore witness to Johnson's leadership among the Irish in debunking *Ossian*:

Foremost in the van of Macpherson's opponents stood the learned Doctor Samuel Johnson . . . By a force of mental compression, which was eminently his own, he has condensed into a few sentences almost all that can be adduced against the authenticity of Macpherson's *Ossian*.<sup>50</sup>

A closing tribute seems in order and long overdue. In the list of his manifold accomplishments, another achievement deserves remembrance: Johnson was the earliest and perhaps the strongest proponent of Irish studies in English literature. Certainly on the score of wanting a scholarly assessment of the national past, leavened by hearty distrust of *Ossian*, Johnson and the Irish were one.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Johnson's last word on Ossian with William Shaw: a finale to controversy*

My assertions are for the most part purely negative; I deny the existence of Fingal, because in a long and curious peregrination through the Galic regions I have never been able to find it.

William Shaw (with Samuel Johnson), *A Reply to Mr. Clark's Answer* (1782)

William Shaw the Highlander came out of nowhere into Johnson's later life of writing. Their first meeting coincided with the revival of the *Ossian* controversy, instigated by *A Journey to the Western Highlands of Scotland*. Their forgotten friendship originated in a common desire to further the study of Gaelic and climaxed in a heated war of words over Macpherson's popular pseudo-Gaelic poetry near the end of Johnson's life. While Scots upheld farfetched Ossianic claims as a matter of national honor, Irishmen objected to historical revisionism slighting the primacy of their Gaelic identity. Englishmen in their turn could regard the noisy dispute with aloof neutrality or invincible skepticism reflecting a superiority complex toward other subjects in the British Isles at a perilous time of American Revolution. Within a context of smoldering culture wars at home exacerbated by insurrection abroad, Shaw emerged in the literary debate as a Scottish Gaelic scholar with Johnsonian allegiances, a true British composite of ideological dichotomies making him seem a traitor in his countrymen's eyes and a defender of truth in his own. Beginning as a fervent believer in *Ossian*, he evolved into its arch-enemy, receiving praise for his candor as well as blame for his ties to the English literary establishment out of suspected self-interest.

Coming late to Johnson's aid in the *Ossian* dispute, Shaw possessed limitations of mind and character not always apparent to the old literary lion during their almost decade-long relationship. Although any assessment of their association requires careful sifting of conflicting data, Shaw's story is worth telling. It is crucial for understanding both Johnson's final involvement in the controversy and a fascinating pamphlet of their shared production, *A Reply to Mr. Clark's Answer* (1782), directed against

Macpherson and fellow perpetrators of literary fraud. This rare tract is reproduced in the appendix to this book. Circumstances surrounding the publication of the *Journey* in the winter of 1774–5 help to account for their unlikely alliance, given the wide disparities in their ages and origins. Defensiveness on Johnson's part about the accuracy and outspokenness of the *Journey*, around the time of Macpherson's virtual challenge to a duel, left him vulnerable to befriending anybody presenting himself as a Gaelic authority capable of settling the question of *Ossian*'s authenticity. His much-publicized conflict with Macpherson necessitated more sophisticated answers to knotty problems about Erse literature than his sound instincts could muster on his own. Therefore, when he most needed expert allies, on the eve of the *Journey*'s publication, the timing of William Shaw's arrival at his doorstep, "About Christmas, 1774," must have seemed auspicious.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps too rashly, Johnson fastened on this brash young Highlander as an ideal helpmate to fulfill a twofold goal of advancing Gaelic studies and exposing Macpherson's fraud decisively.

A word of warning is in order here about the difficulty of tracing their relationship. Shaw was usually responsible for the historical record of their friendship, but he hardly qualified as an impartial witness. Scholars considering his versions of events must proceed with due caution, skeptical detachment, and a judicious openness to alternative interpretations by reading between the lines of statements from weighing the accuracy of conflicting comments in his works. A notable example of inconsistency in Shaw's reporting concerned the all-important matter of his precise attitude toward *Ossian*. Was he initially a believer or a doubter? Consulting his writings yields disparate answers to this question. In his self-promoting biography of Johnson in 1785, he interjected a third-person account of himself as undecided about *Ossian* during their first meeting in 1774:

Shaw, being a Highland man, the Doctor interrogated him much on his knowledge of the Erse, and whether the Poems of Ossian existed in the language. The answer which Shaw made was, that he often had wished, to be clearly ascertained of the fact, whether they did or did not. This candour and frankness strongly recommended him to Johnson's notice and friendship.<sup>2</sup>

But all other extant evidence contradicts this purported neutrality and indicates his faith in *Ossian* early on. In addition to all his anti-*Ossian* tracts, his formal testimony in 1786 for a court of law, again in the third person, confirmed his initial credulity:

For many years of his life he [Shaw] believed the poems of Ossian to be as their editor [Macpherson] affirms, the genuine productions of ancient Caledonian

bards. As such he read them; as such he admired them; and in his analysis of the Gaelic language he quoted them as authorities. But, in the course of the journey which he made into the Highlands of Scotland [1778] to collect materials for the compilation of his Dictionary [of the Gaelic language in 1780], he came to the knowledge of facts and circumstances, which led him first to doubt, and then to disbelieve the whole story told by Mr Macpherson, with regard to these poems, and to consider them as no better than literary forgeries and fabrications.<sup>3</sup>

The above passage likely expresses the true state of the case of his evolving convictions. The inference seems unavoidable. Either Shaw let his memory and ego cause him to mute his youthful ardor for *Ossian* in his biography of Johnson, or he did not conduct himself with the alleged frankness that sealed their relationship. If the latter explanation holds true, then Shaw could have been guilty of concealing his real feelings to ingratiate himself with the foremost enemy of *Ossian* in England. Of course, such behavior would be less a matter of downright double-dealing and more a case of diplomatic psychological adjustments to make a good first impression. Anyhow, within a few years of their introduction, Johnson must have learned of Shaw's early embrace of *Ossian* from seeing glowing references to Macpherson's canon in his protégé's *Analysis of the Gaelic Language* of 1778. Surprisingly, any awareness of mixed allegiances seems not to have diminished Johnson's kind regard in the least. Finally, as Shaw adumbrated in his questionable report of their first acquaintance, a reevaluation of his initial convictions did take place in the course of his Gaelic scholarship.

Who was this mysterious stranger destined to play such a leading, if heretofore little-known, role in Johnson's final entanglement with the *Ossian* controversy? Shaw was an obscure but ambitious Scotsman born on 3 February 1749 in remote Clachaig, Kilmorie Parish, on the Isle of Arran. He ferried to Ayr on the mainland for his early education, attended King's College, Glasgow University, apparently without earning a degree, prior to his belated receipt of an MA from the university in 1777. His early life experiences remain hazy, until the pivotal event of his career when he found his way into Johnson's good graces through the mediation of James Elphinston. Divinity interested Shaw from the start, and his lack of an undergraduate degree did not prevent him from tutoring around the British Isles or from qualifying at London, on 9 July 1776, for his license to preach as a dissenting clergyman.<sup>4</sup> Such a religious affiliation would normally have repelled, rather than attracted Johnson, who was nevertheless drawn to this roughhewn individual with his aura of precocious Gaelic learning. One might ask how a young man, scarcely

twenty-five, could have seemed capable of living up to the image of a master Erse linguist. No answer to this puzzling question has descended to posterity. Nor do we have any idea of his appearance or many clear-cut clues about his character, except suspect calumny spread by Scottish controversialists with an ax to grind in vengeful reaction to his anti-*Ossian* stance. To circulate here ugly gossip in overheated tracts from the dispute risks engaging in inexcusable mud-slinging all over again.

However, some personality traits have emerged with sufficient clarity. Shaw's limited linguistic abilities should not becloud the fact of his Gaelic-speaking background and acquaintance with Erse tradition enabling him to detect Macpherson's imposture presciently. If he lacked scholarly proficiency – something few others really possessed before the nineteenth century – he knew the language well enough to compose its first, admittedly primitive, grammar and dictionary. He seems to have been a mixed bag of a fellow: quarrelsome and unrefined, intellectually cocksure but not very erudite, promising but not profound, officious and yet pushy, arrogant but awkward with thickly accented English, and capable of stretching the truth or exploiting people to get ahead and have his way. Although Johnson's esteem never wavered, a few associates in his illustrious circle felt differently. Boswell could privately grumble, "I have a very bad opinion of Shaw," for heavy-handed dealings in the *Ossian* controversy embarrassing to Thomas Percy.<sup>5</sup> Something had to be amiss when Shaw himself felt obliged to make a defensive public declaration of comparable criticism of his conduct by another Scottish ally of Johnson: "when Dr. [James] Beattie . . . ventured to insinuate something derogatory on the veracity of this gentleman [Shaw], Johnson's answer was, '*I never before heard so much said against Mr. Shaw, and I do not believe it.*'"<sup>6</sup> Far more damning scandal about his doings as a schoolmaster and minister would be propagated by his enemies. But Johnson rightly disregarded the worst rumors as one sided and unsubstantiated. He stubbornly resisted extrapolating terrible character flaws out of the rubbish of malignant pamphlet warfare. He remained a loyal patron to the end.

As their bonding took shape from a common desire to promote Gaelic studies, Shaw simultaneously courted Johnson's nemesis, Macpherson, also for help with his Gaelic scholarship to launch the first Erse grammar. At this early stage Shaw seems to have been a wide-eyed enthusiast of *Ossian* and naturally sought the company of its creator, reputed to be a peerless Gaelic authority. In the future a bitter hostility did develop between the two Highlanders, once they became antagonists in a resurgent *Ossian* controversy. This later enmity colored Macpherson's slanted

recollection of his supposedly low regard for Shaw from the time of their first acquaintance in the mid-1770s:

That Mr. Macpherson . . . conceived a very indifferent opinion, both of Mr. Shaw's poetical talents and knowledge of the Galic . . . That Mr. S. called repeatedly, but at long intervals, upon Mr. Macpherson; by whom he was received with a cold and distant civility.<sup>7</sup>

It seems scarcely credible that an offputting frosty reception could coexist with the admission of Shaw's willingness to call repeatedly on his countryman in London over a five-year period. Shaw's answer to this skewed version of events points to the contrary reality of a once strong cordiality between them:

Instead of *introducing myself* to Mr. Macpherson, I was made acquainted with him in 1774–5, as a “man who had studied Gaelic” . . . With Mr. Macpherson I have had many conversations on Galic, he saw my MSS. of the grammar, and when I advised with him concerning some particulars relative to the structure of the Earse, our opinions not altogether coinciding, he recommended to me to do it in the easiest manner to myself, “as there were no judges of Galic.” From the same motives he thought his Fingalian fraud could never be detected.<sup>8</sup>

Befriending Macpherson and Johnson at the time of their very public feud speaks volumes about Shaw's tough-minded determination to succeed, no matter what animosities stood in his way. Availing himself of the celebrity of two avowed enemies to advance his ends, he soon accomplished a feat in his mind since his undergraduate days, that of being the first to set forth the elements of Scottish Gaelic. Whether or not there was initially any risk that his helpmates might take offence at his divided loyalties, Johnson had to have realized Shaw's admiration of Macpherson and yet never flinched from supporting the Gaelic scholarship in progress. The Erse grammar bore witness to this odd triangular arrangement, with Shaw taking responsibility for the work while avowing his obligations both to *Ossian* and to Johnson: “To the advice and encouragement of Dr. Johnson, the friend of letters and humanity, the Public is indebted for these sheets.”<sup>9</sup> If this praise did not suffice to let Macpherson's allies know of Shaw's acceptance in Johnson's circle, then another acknowledgment highlighted the fact in the kind words for “Mr. Boswell, whose manners as a gentleman and taste for polite learning, hath gained him the esteem and friendship . . . of one of the most renowned Heroes of the age,” namely Samuel Johnson (xvi).

Boswell had previously looked over the grammar in manuscript, in abridged form, at the behest of the Earl of Eglinton in April of 1776 and,

bestowing qualified approval, sent it to Johnson “as proof that Erse had not been neglected.”<sup>10</sup> Hearing of Shaw’s authorship only after dipping into it, Johnson supported its publication, led a subscription for defraying printing costs, and even scripted elegant “Proposals” for Shaw to spearhead the project. Johnson, it seems, was properly wary enough about Shaw’s linguistic skills to delay going ahead with the subscription until his former *Dictionary* assistant, the Highlander Alexander Macbean, endorsed the work. Then on 11 March 1777 Johnson relayed to Boswell his tentative recommendation of “Shaw, who seems a modest and sensible man” to spur the process of raising money among interested Scots.<sup>11</sup> The letter displayed his usual generosity toward struggling authors and his good sense about selling their wares:

The book is very little, but Mr. Shaw has been persuaded by his friends to set it at half a guinea, though I had advised him only a crown [half that price or five shillings] and thought myself liberal. You, whom the authour considers as a great encourager of ingenious men, will receive a parcel of his proposals and receipts . . . (III: 12)

Boswell likely recognized instantly that the enclosed “Proposals” for publication had the earmarks of “*the hand of a MASTER*.”<sup>12</sup>

The ghostwritten “Proposals” attest to the importance that Johnson, England’s premier lexicographer, attached to philological inquiry for the sake of Gaelic studies:

Though the Earse Dialect of the Celtic Language has, from the earliest Times, been spoken in Britain, and still subsists in the Northern Parts and adjacent Islands, yet by the Negligence of a People rather warlike than lettered, it has hitherto been left to the Caprice and Judgment of every Speaker, and has floated in the living Voice, without the Steadiness of Analogy or Direction of Rules. An Earse Grammar is an addition to the Stores of Literature, and its Author hopes for the Indulgence always shewn to those who attempt to do what was never done before. If his Work shall be found defective, it is at least all his own; he is not like other Grammarians, a Compiler or Transcriber; what he delivers, he has learned by attentive Observation among his Countrymen, who perhaps will be themselves surprized to see that Speech reduced to Principles, which they have used only by Imitation.

The Use of this Book will however not be confined to the Mountains and Islands; it will afford an important and pleasing Subject of Speculation, to those whose Studies lead them to trace the Affinity of Languages, and the Migrations of the ancient Races of Mankind.

As this Book is intended for the curious and the learned, a few Copies more than what are subscribed for will be printed.

The Subscribers Names will be printed.<sup>13</sup>



Printed in December of 1777 but not published until the following July, *An Analysis of the Galic Language*, issued from the London publishing house of W. and A. Strahan, 136 pages in quarto. Contrary to Shaw's prediction of a one-time printing, R. Jamieson brought out a second edition in 1778 at Edinburgh for a more realistic four shillings per copy, prior to a final London reprinting of the undistinguished text in 1787. Dedicated to Lord Eglinton and advertising Shaw's recent MA, the rudimentary grammar boasted 182 subscribers taking 296 copies. People on both sides of the *Ossian* controversy signed on to the project, with Boswell and Percy leading the Johnsonian camp and Macpherson (good for two copies) and John Mackenzie, secretary of the Highland Society of London, heading the pro-*Ossian* forces. The split in allegiances carried over into Shaw's fence-straddling introduction. At one extreme, he voiced an Ossianic lament, anti-English to the core, about the lost heritage of *Fingal* "suppressed and obliterated by the policy of a neighbouring monarch [Edward I], I could sit down and weep over its fall, execrating the policy of usurping invaders, ever destructive to letters, humanity, and its rights."<sup>14</sup> Then too, "ingenious Mr Macpherson" (ix) received praise for besting Irish antiquaries in his *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, from which Shaw learned to assert, wrongly, the greater purity of Erse over Irish Gaelic (xii–xiii). At the other extreme, Shaw reaffirmed the Johnsonian belief in the priority of Irish Gaelic, because of its abundance of books and manuscripts, and similarly wanted to save a native language from instability and extinction.

As Macpherson had argued, the very orality of Scottish Gaelic preserved much of its original "purity" and hence made it "one of the greatest living monuments" (vi) of the "mother-tongue of all languages in the west" (xvii). As Dictionary Johnson had upheld, "To reduce to rule a language without books . . . is an undertaking adventurous" (xiv) but absolutely essential for its survival and scholarly study. From a postcolonial critical perspective, the *Analysis* in its own modest way was something of a mini-Great Britain as a linguistic performance. It endorsed a comparable vision of unity within diversity embraced in Johnson's *Journey* for the overall good of the British Isles. It united immense sectional pride in a local tongue and universalist metropolitan standards for its grammatical organization "founded on the general philosophy of the language" (xvi) under the influence of authorities like James Harris and James Elphinston (xiv). On the one hand, Shaw the Highlander gloried in a widespread notion that Gaelic was the prototypical language of Europe. On the other hand, Shaw the classicist noted awkward departures in primitive Erse

usages from the civilized European norm. He himself must have seemed a living embodiment of cultural duality, an anglicized Scot like Boswell, proud of his birthplace but at home in the British political heartland of London.<sup>15</sup>

Just as Johnson had castigated the anti-Erse SPCK, so too Shaw bemoaned anglocentric policies barring Highlanders access to Scriptures. While the "Bible is not yet translated" by uncaring Gaelic speakers (ix), "yet there are several ambitious to be reputed the translators of a few lines of poetry" (x), namely, imitators of Macpherson making money off turning Fenian verse into English. Angry about unmet religious needs, Shaw called for improving the well-being of a marginalized nation as an urgent matter of social policy for strengthening the British empire. The argument coincided with the call for compromise in Johnson's *Journey*:

To see a people, naturally capable of every improvement, though once misled by ignorance, stripped of their ancient habits and customs, and deprived of the Scriptures in their own tongue, the right of Christians, never denied to the most savage Indians, is at once a complication of inhumanity and imprudence. Better slay their bodies to secure their affections, as Rome was wont to do with heretics to bring their souls to heaven, than keep them in ignorance, with the expectation that, after some generations, the English language, manners, and improvements, may begin to dawn. At this day, there is no equal number of people in Britain so useful to the state. Upon every emergency they supply our navy with good seamen, and our armies with valiant soldiers. But strip them of their dress, language, the name and honour of Gael, and they soon degenerate . . . (xi–xii)

Throughout the introduction Shaw cultivated an evenhanded stance of neutrality toward the two looming intellectual presences in his Gaelic scholarship. Refusing at this point in his career to take sides in the *Ossian* controversy, he paid closing compliments to both Macpherson and Johnson in his final exhortation for public support of a threatened language. One passage combined awed mention of *Fingal* and distinct echoes of Johnson's grand tribute to Iona in the *Journey*:

I saw with regret, a language once famous in the western world, ready to perish without any memorial by . . . which Fingal inspired his warriors with the desire of immortal fame. I wished an account given to the world of a language, through which, for so long a period, the benefits of knowledge, and the blessings of religion were communicated to savage clans and roving barbarians . . . within the walls of the illustrious Iona. (xvi)

In the same vein, the penultimate paragraph began with one more Johnsonian entreaty on behalf of Gaelic studies to illuminate "the affinity

of languages or trace the migrations of the ancient races of mankind" (xvii) and ended with another reverential allusion to *Fingal*: "The language that boasts of the finished character of Fingal, must richly reward the curiosity of whoever studies it" (xvii).

After the introduction, the text paid obeisance to Macpherson's achievement by including some of his pseudo-Gaelic fragments of *Ossian* to illustrate Erse usage. Shaw was obviously as yet unaware of the made-up nature of these fragments. If he is to be believed, he wanted more specimens, but repeated requests to Macpherson for Ossianic material proved unavailing, and he began to suspect deception of some kind:

Mr. Macpherson promised me a sight of them . . . [A]nd yet, although he appointed, at least six [meetings] at different times, a day for shewing them to me, and as I often waited upon him, there was always some apology made: – the manuscripts were at his house in the country; or mislaid; or the key lost; or I should see them at some other time . . . Let the public draw inferences.<sup>16</sup>

As for Johnson feeling slighted over any perceived chumminess between Shaw and Macpherson, nothing seems to have affected his appreciation of the book or its kind acknowledgment of his services. Johnson was supposedly very gratified at receiving a copy: "Sir, you have treated me handsomely; *you are an honour to your country*."<sup>17</sup>

By December of 1777 a grateful Johnson asked Boswell to contact Lord Eglinton, to whom the *Analysis* was dedicated, for help in securing a military chaplaincy for Shaw.<sup>18</sup> The solicitation came to nothing, and by the time the *Analysis* appeared next summer, Shaw had already decided on a major venture that, for good or ill, would strengthen his reputation as a Gaelic authority. He would compile the first Erse dictionary to complement his feat of the first Erse grammar. At Johnson's urging, he sought donations for the expensive project from fellow Scots, but a Macpherson mafia against Johnson allegedly scotched that avenue of support: "Application was therefore made to the Highland Club . . . but he found by the underhand dealings of Macpherson and his party, and Shaw's connexion with Johnson, nothing would be contributed."<sup>19</sup> Here again a discrepancy surfaces in the evidence of the above incident. Although Shaw may have consulted the Highland Society of London before work began on the Erse dictionary, the records tell a different story. Actually, after his return from field research through the British Isles in January of 1779, he petitioned the Highland Society's patronage and was refused a subscription in its name, even though individual members could contribute. The reason for the rejection was more benign than Shaw indicated

in his conspiracy theory. A rival Erse dictionary by a group of Highlanders was then in progress, if never finished, and the competition resulted in the official rebuff.<sup>20</sup> Far from Macpherson orchestrating resistance at the time, he, like “Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.,” listed himself as a subscriber to Shaw’s dictionary! A behind-the-scenes conspiracy of sorts, manipulated by Macpherson, possibly emerged later on, once an open declaration of war in print ignited an explosive new phase of controversy over *Ossian*. But prior to this event, the reality for Shaw was likely generally amicable relations with his two patrons in opposite literary camps.

Johnson, as England’s great lexicographer, would probably have tendered well-considered advice about the format of the Erse dictionary. Shaw’s “Proposals” for a general subscription certainly laid down a program of goals worthy of comparison with the ambitious aims of Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*. Promising maximum thoroughness in compiling all “valuable” words, Shaw proposed nothing less than “a complete Galic Library,” plundering normative oral and written sources to illustrate nuances of meaning in the collected vocabulary.<sup>21</sup> Subscribers would also find a glossary of persons, places, and events in history and legend. That an amateur Gaelic speaker like Shaw, merely thirty years old, could contemplate such a feat is scarcely credible. He was projecting a professional exercise in historical linguistics not to be attempted by Gaelic specialists on this scale until the twentieth century. Even Johnson had to express an elegy of dashed hopes regarding his once encyclopedic aspirations for codifying the English language. Given the imperfect state of Gaelic studies and Shaw’s necessarily limited proficiency, failure was more than possible. It was inevitable.

Not at all daunted by the scope of his plans, Shaw in the spring of 1778 set off on an expedition of a projected 3,000 miles in Scotland and Ireland, supposedly with Johnson’s blessing ringing in his ears on the day of departure: “*Sir, if you give the world a Vocabulary of that language, while the island of Great-Britain still stands in the Atlantic Ocean, your name will be mentioned.*”<sup>22</sup> The grandiose prophecy, if true, never found fulfillment in the mediocre production made public within just two years. Shaw’s insistence that he paid two to three hundred pounds for the trip at his own expense was highly dubious. Would a poor *émigré* cleric support a nonprofit enterprise by expending a sum of money roughly equivalent to the annual income of Johnson’s royal pension? Fortunately, the chronology and geography of the journey, if not its financing, have a firm basis in fact. Touring the Highlands, some of the Hebrides, and a little

of Ireland for "near six months," Shaw returned to London by the autumn of 1778. A threefold purpose governed his inquiries. His primary obligation involved gathering spoken and written words, sometimes by compensating contributors in archives and on the road. Two other concerns had his attention: he was intent on finding ancient Gaelic originals of *Ossian* and on acquiring subscribers to pay for his mounting debts incurred by the dictionary.

Whether or not his field research was so sloppy or circumscribed as hostile critics contended, his scholarly responsibilities did take him a long distance, even to Ireland. A passage from a forgotten letter to the eminent Gaelic antiquary, Charles O'Connor, dated 10 September 1778 from Dublin, verified Shaw's diligent search for firsthand linguistic data, including any possible Gaelic specimens of *Ossian*:

I have for some time cultivated the Galic Language, being born in the highland part of Scotland and lately published an Analysis of it at London – I have this Summer made a progress into the Islands, & different parts of Scotland for the various dialects and now am pursuing it in Ireland where it was once much attended to – Your book, Sir, on the Antiquities of Ireland I have read wh. Pleasure and in consequence of that meant to apply to you for further Information had you happened to be in town; but as I came directly to Dublin by water I now fear I shall not have the pleasure of seeing as much of the Country as I imagined once [I would *crossed out*], having left my horses at Ayr from whence I sailed – However I hope you will be so kind as to favour me wh. your further opinion of Ossian's poems and an Extract of a few lines, in the Roman Letter, of what you may have in your possession . . .<sup>23</sup>

Upon his return to London, Shaw's unsuccessful bid for the Highland Society's support in January of 1779 forced him to continue finding random subscribers for a dictionary having limited appeal and usefulness. His preparation of a demanding work coincided, happily at first, with the Duke of Gordon's naming him, in June, a minister of the Kirk of Scotland for the parish of Ardcloch in the Presbytery of Nairn. The prospect of steady employment must have been initially heartening, even though the appointment entailed distant exile from London for a low annual salary of fifty pounds. It quickly proved an untenable post because of strong resistance from the laity just a month and a half after he accepted the post on 3 August.<sup>24</sup> Later on, his enemies tried to sully his reputation by dwelling on sordid details of his failed incumbency. By mid-October a petition signed by sixty parishioners aimed at his expulsion by impugning his accent, his morals, and his piety. He denied the specific accusations, affirmed his goodwill toward an admittedly unhappy congregation, but

never contradicted the fact, according to his own words, that “the presentation was disputed” at Ardclach.<sup>25</sup> His absenteeism for the sake of publishing his dictionary combined with persistent local discontent to force his resignation on the following 1 August. His recent difficulties did not sway him from dedicating his work to the Duke of Gordon on 26 May 1780. Never a man to give up easily, he tried rebounding from his discomfiture by instituting a suit before the Scottish Lords of Session for the recovery of fifty unpaid pounds owed him, he argued, by virtue of his official act of induction into the living.

By his own account, he soon abandoned the Kirk of Scotland for the Church of England and settled in Kent as a curate through Johnson’s mediation: “So far was the Doctor interested in the success of his co-adjutor in this business [of debunking *Ossian*], that he addressed him to take orders in the Church of England . . .”<sup>26</sup> This ham-fisted suggestion of an ecclesiastical *quid pro quo* payoff of Shaw for the sake of enhancing his reputation with English readers, in making common cause against Macpherson, is suspect on several counts. That a scrupulous Christian like Johnson would advise anybody to switch religious principles for a clerical post as a reward and an aid for exposing literary fraud seems incredible. To Johnson’s way of thinking, such an ill-motivated change of religious affiliation would have utterly and obviously violated the sanctity of faith and personal conscience: “we ought not, without very strong conviction indeed, to desert the religion in which we have been educated.”<sup>27</sup> But an even surer sign of error casts doubt on Shaw’s clumsy statement, in the form of a wrongful association of ideas leading him to conflate separate events. His taking of Anglican orders occurred in 1780, well before his enlisting publicly in Johnson’s battle against *Ossian* in 1781. No friend of Presbyterianism, Johnson may well have counseled the unemployed minister to consider the Anglican priesthood, but only if religious conviction lay behind the decision. In words possibly polished by Johnson, Shaw did affirm the spiritual sincerity of his embracing the Church of England, a decision he would maintain for the rest of his long life: “I . . . determined to unite myself to a church, whose doctrines were more suitable to my own private opinions.”<sup>28</sup> Johnson’s helping a needy scholar-cleric find a living was not unusual. He had already done so for the Welsh poet-antiquary, Evan Evans, and did so again 1780 for Shaw, in a kind note asking the vicar of St. Nicholas in Kent to welcome the new curate, “a studious and literary man” who “is my friend.”<sup>29</sup>

Shaw, around June of 1780, completed *A Galic and English Dictionary. Containing All the Words in the Scotch and Irish Dialects of the Celtic, that*

could be collected from the Voice, and Old Books and MSS, printed by W. and A. Strahan in two octavo volumes, for the hefty price of two guineas. Once again, a publication by Shaw had active backing from Johnson, who offered largely unheeded advice about its make-up, subscribed to it, and kept a copy in his library. Once again, dual loyalties to Highland homeland and British state pervaded the introductory matter. The dedication to Alexander, Duke of Gordon, expressed elegiac pride in having memorialized a dying language still spoken by "many of his Majesty's faithful and loyal Subjects, who have ever been the firm Friends of Regal Government, and over whom Your Grace is so considerable a Chieftan."<sup>30</sup> This political subtext of harmonized allegiances gave way in the preface to a more one-sided concern about the fading heritage of a formerly splendid Celtic nation, now in the "decline and eve of existence as a separate people in the British Isles," whose language once was "probably the speech of Paradise." Affirming his patriotic attachment to birthplace, Shaw revealed his high hopes of literary acclaim: "instigated by some learned men, I have been ambitious to cast my mite into the stores of Literature, gleaned from the remains of the venerable Celtic." Stressing extensive field research to win critical favor, he claimed a false dichotomy between unwritten Erse ("there being few books, and still fewer MSS") and Irish, whose "perfection" proceeded from its being "the written and studied language."

Although Shaw's dictionary ranks as the first of its kind, it never came close to measuring up to a "complete Galic Library" advertised in his subscription proposals. It offered little more than an indiscriminate inventory of Erse and Irish words, gathering together a hodgepodge of dialects, of obsolete and contemporary vintage, with English equivalents. This was no grand Johnsonian survey of the native tongue, documenting shades of meaning embodying a people's linguistic history by comprehensive illustrations from a surviving legacy of literature. The promised glossary of Scottish personages and lore never materialized. All that it comprised was a bare-boned compilation of about 30,000 Gaelic items with English equivalents. To Shaw's credit, the preface at least acknowledged "a more contracted plan than I at first proposed," even as it exaggerated the completeness of the vocabulary.<sup>31</sup> His collection did improve on the simple wordlist in Alexander Macdonald's *New Gaelic English Vocabulary* (1741), which Johnson had transmitted to the Bodleian Library. But its overall inadequacy drew embarrassing criticism from opponents in the *Ossian* controversy and provoked a few subscribers to withhold their payments.



In a difficult subscription drive, an impressive total of 205 signatories pledged themselves to purchase the work. Eleven Highlanders, disgusted with their purchase, refused to pay their two guineas apiece upon receipt of their copies. Litigious as ever, Shaw again looked to the Court of Sessions for redress against the eleven deadbeats, beginning in May of 1783.<sup>32</sup> The wheels of justice turned slowly, and not until February of 1784 and the spring of 1785 did dueling lawyers go to court, each side brandishing arguments straight out of the current *Ossian* controversy. Shaw's case made much of a supposed conspiracy theory that his subscribers defaulted in line with their countrymen's hostility toward his consorting with a notorious Scottophobe like Johnson defaming their beloved *Ossian*:

the petitioners appear to have conceived no small dislike at Dr Johnson; and they were not a little offended that the respondent should cultivate an intimacy with a person whom they reckoned the sworn and covenanted foe of Scotland and Scotsmen.<sup>33</sup>

Counsel for the other side countered with charges of Shaw's incompetence recently raised by pro-*Ossian* foes against his dictionary.

Whether or not his ties with Johnson exacerbated the opposition of the eleven Highlanders, their genuine disillusionment with the *Gaelic Dictionary* seems to have determined their non-payment from the start. Their Lordships on 15 June 1785 sought expert opinion of his linguistic scholarship, and even though only one of three Gaelic authorities had anything good to report, Shaw prevailed in the litigation on 21 January 1786. His victory probably hinged on two strong points in his favor: the Highlanders had unpaid books in their possession, and, as his counsel stressed, the unpredictability of a literary undertaking like his made variations between subscription stipulations and finished product unavoidable. Therefore, all original financial obligations had to be honored. He now looked forward to receiving the missing money, with payment of interest plus costs for an expensive legal process by the losers in the case. Nine of the eleven Highlanders appealed the decision on 1 February. The outcome of this action is unknown. All that apparently survived was a legal document, "Answers for the Reverend Mr William Shaw" (16 February 1785), rehashing Shaw's conspiracy theory of Scottish antagonism against Johnson and rehearsing lame linguistic excuses for his deficient dictionary. Shaw deserved all his money, but his lexicography deserved few accolades.

The most noteworthy development coming out of Shaw's labors on the dictionary seems to have been his evolving loss of faith in *Ossian*. This



gradual change of mind ushered in the final phase of major eighteenth-century controversy over Macpherson's spurious canon. It will be recalled that Shaw sowed confusion around the fact of his early conviction of *Ossian's* authenticity in his later biography of Johnson, probably his most widely read writing. He misrepresented himself as wholly neutral about the poems, from the time of their first meeting to the eve of his word-gathering trip for the Erse dictionary in the spring of 1778,

that as a secondary work, he would do every thing in his power, to collect specimens, if such could be got, at least be in possession of facts . . . to remove all doubts from his own mind, of their spuriousness or authenticity; and that he would afterwards talk or write as he could procure evidence.<sup>34</sup>

This distortion of his original fondness for *Ossian* would hide his embarrassing naivete from the public. Moreover, a pretense of impartiality would contradict charges of a preconceived plan with Johnson to expose Macpherson. The reality was otherwise. He was long a true believer, so much so that on the dictionary expedition he initially intended to surpass Macpherson's feat of issuing mere translations by finding the ancient originals and winning immortal fame from their publication!

Yes, at the time of the trip, Shaw had his suspicions of Macpherson for withholding public access to anything but a small number of his Ossianic specimens in Gaelic. But Shaw attributed the secretiveness not to Macpherson's concealment of fraud – the primary reason for his foot dragging – but to his desire to foster the impression that he was the brilliant author, rather than the lowly translator, of so wonderful a work. This rash inference initially fed Shaw's credulity and fueled an ambition to beat his famous countryman at his own game. He would do nothing less than put the world in possession of some of the pure prehistoric prototypes of the English versions for the first time. John Clark, a Highland acquaintance given to creating false Erse poetry of his own, confirmed Shaw's zeal to discover Ossianic source material in its antique pristine state. With both of them surmising that Macpherson dishonestly reworked current Gaelic ballads, Shaw urged Clark to assist in compiling the true ancient originals, with English translations: "I encouraged Mr. Clark to offer to the Public a genuine Collection of Highland Poetry; for I was yet willing to believe, that much Highland Poetry was somewhere to be found."<sup>35</sup> For a time, until at least April of 1779, Shaw trusted that ancient originals could be found, before he eventually lost all faith in *Ossian*, recognized the impossibility of ancient counterparts existing, and prepared to go public with his newfound skepticism:

I was elated with anticipated success; and it was my intention to have superseded Mr. Macpherson, by publishing an original, could it be had. I had resolved, had I met with any convincing evidence, to . . . convert not only Dr. Johnson, but the public, by taking the affidavits of those who recited the poetry, and those who witnessed it taken down by me in writing . . . I wandered from island to island, wet, fatigued, and uncomfortable. No labour I thought too much, no expence too great, whilst I flattered myself with converting the disbelieving Doctor Johnson, recovering some of the poetry of Ossian, and stripping Mr. Macpherson's brow of what I then used to call them, "stolen bays;" for I then believed there might be an original, and that he wished rather to appear the *author* than the *translator*.<sup>36</sup>

Inevitable frustration and failure dogged the search. Instead of third-century Erse archetypes coming to light, there was only relatively modern Fenian verse, which Shaw habitually and misleadingly dubbed "*compositions of the 15<sup>th</sup> century*" (32), deemed far inferior to the English *Ossian*. Strictly speaking, he was correct in disqualifying this more recent body of Gaelic poetry from consideration as word-for-word Gaelic antecedents of a work pretending to be a literal translation of uncorrupted Iron Age poetry. Macpherson had repeatedly stressed his retrieval of a collated but pure prehistoric ur-text subjected to faithful English translation. Shaw took him at his word, looked for ancient and undefiled source material, but could not find any, because it did not survive in that advertised form. No wonder Macpherson reportedly denied being asked for Gaelic originals of *Ossian*:

That he [Macpherson] does not recollect, that Mr Shaw ever presumed to ask a sight of his manuscripts [prior to the publication of Shaw's Erse grammar]; and that, even if he had, Mr Macpherson should not have indulged his curiosity, as he both disliked the manners of the man, and knew that he was not capable of forming any just judgment upon the matter.<sup>37</sup>

But any such disavowal had to be false by virtue of the internal evidence of Shaw's *Analysis of the Galic Language* incorporating a few of Macpherson's Gaelic specimens, at least one of which had not been published before.

Even more damaging was Shaw's allegation that, after his research expedition for the Gaelic dictionary early in 1779, Macpherson practically admitted to creating *Fingal*. If Shaw is to be believed, he accused Macpherson of duplicity to his face and promised to publicize the imposture, a threat he would soon fulfill in pamphlet warfare:

Now I shall publicly convict him here again of another gross and willful falsehood: In 1778-79, on my return from my tour in the Highlands, and

Ireland, having one morning waited upon Mr. Macpherson, after enquiring what success I had in collecting vocables, I answered, very great success, but that I now, more than ever, wondered whence he had the originals of Fingal and Temora, as I could find no poetry of such merit in that language, the compositions of the 15<sup>th</sup> century being far inferior to what was ascribed to Ossian. I told him that some day I would publickly make him the author of Fingal. He answered, "it is more honourable to be an author than a translator at any time; and I expect to be treated like a gentleman." I replied, that one gentleman had always a right to expect that from another.<sup>38</sup>

Given Macpherson's churlish threat of a duel already hurled at Johnson, there was menacing consistency in this alleged demand for gentlemanly treatment from Shaw.

Contributing to Shaw's disillusionment was his growing awareness of widespread imposture by a new generation of Erse fabricators, like John Clark, cashing in on Macpherson's lucrative scam. Shaw was soon to expose Clark's spurious handiwork – "Mr. Clarke, when I charged him with it, confessed it was entirely made up" – and trigger a pamphlet debate marking the last significant phase of contemporary controversy over *Ossian*.<sup>39</sup> Nor was Shaw himself above feeling tempted to try his hand at making up Erse verse for profit. He even boasted his ability to contrive Erse sources for lending a phony authenticity to his fabricated Gaelic poetry in English: "(for I also was about to be a translator!) . . . I should find it no difficult matter, in my notes, to give specimens of the *original*" (26). Complementing this revelation of planning his own Ossianic hokum was his mocking vignette of how he went about such bogus versifying in English, itself a delicious unmasking of the practices of all imitators of Macpherson:

I remembered, when . . . in a poetic mood, I jingled together on paper, with suitable invented Gallic names, the epithets of blue-eyed, meek-eyed, mildly-looking, white-bosomed, dark-brown locks, noble, generous, valiant, tears, spears, darts, hearts, harts, quivers, bows, arrows, helmets, steel, streams, torren[t]s, noble deeds, other times, bards, chiefs, storms, songs, &c. and produced a little poem, which reads pretty smoothly; and, if I had a mind to publish it, it would be no difficult matter to persuade some people I had translated it from the Gallic: for I might translate a stanza of it in Earse, shew it to the inquisitive, and say I had the rest by me; after which they would never enquire. (17)

Fired by a belated conviction of *Ossian*'s spuriousness and resisting the impulse to create his own counterfeit verse, Shaw decided to retaliate at the end of a decade of rampant imposture. The 1770s were a disgraceful period of literary lying, starting with ill-conceived endorsements of *Ossian*'s

historicity in Lord Hailes's *Ancient Scottish Poems* (1770), John Whitaker's *History of Manchester* (1771), Macpherson's *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771), and Robert Henry's *History of Great Britain* (1771). In the background of Johnson's attack in the *Journey* lay Macpherson's last edition of *Ossian* (1773), followed by its eccentric defense in Lord Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774). Considering *Ossian* the greatest literary discovery ever, Kames believed in it precisely because it was an impossibility, an inexplicable miracle of advanced artistry from backward prehistory. The great historian, Gibbon, initially showed more commendable caution, only foolishly to suspend judgment later on. By mid-decade the Chatterton controversy moved to center stage but left Johnson on the sidelines with little to say, even after his inspection of the poetry at Bristol with Boswell late in April of 1776. Neither a recitation of Thomas Chatterton's wares by credulous George Catcott nor William Barrett's "ocular demonstration" of made-up manuscripts altered Johnson's skepticism. However, the Rowley poems, unlike the *Ossian* canon, did excite real appreciation.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the poet's unfulfilled potential moved Johnson enough to conjecture "some middle man," older and more experienced, behind the achievement. Thomas Tyrwhitt's editions of Chatterton's works, from 1777 on, prepared for major critiques in 1782, by Edmond Malone and Thomas Warton. Johnson's last reference to *Ossian* in his correspondence bore witness to the Chatterton vogue. Malone's debunking *Cursory Observations on the Poems attributed to Thomas Rowley* elicited Johnsonian wonderment about the silly public adherence to patent literary forgery: "For Ossian there is national pride, which may be forgiven though it cannot be applauded; for Chatterton there is nothing but the resolution to say again what has once been said."<sup>41</sup>

As the Chatterton vogue made headway, the *Ossian* controversy eventually revived, with more partisan fury than ever, by the end of the decade. A potent factor rekindling the feud was the publication of more ersatz Erse poetry by Highland versifiers following in Macpherson's devious footsteps for a little fame and fortune of their own. John Clark, Shaw's erstwhile friend destined to become an arch-enemy, belonged to this new wave of literary fabricators. Macpherson's pupil and later his imitator and defender, Clark passed himself off as a translator of Ossianic poetry in *The Works of the Caledonian Bards* (1778).<sup>42</sup> Similarly claiming a "pure" pre-Christian Erse literature, he too promised to reveal his Gaelic originals without ever producing them, because his volume was largely his own. According to modern estimates, eight of his twelve

English “translations” were mostly made up, and even two of four Gaelic-inspired pieces had only tenuous ties to native tradition. Shaw ended their acquaintance by exposing Clark's deceptive ways in largely bogus works like the epic, *Morduth*, and an elegy, *Words of Woe*.<sup>43</sup> Another pseudo-Gaelic versifier was John Smith, author of *Galic Antiquities: Consisting of a History of the Druids, particularly of those of Caledonia; a Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian; and a Collection of Ancient Poems translated from the Galic of Ullin, Ossian, Orran, &c.* (1780). Shaw would, in the process of criticizing Blair and Kames, take telling aim at both this book's weak defense of *Ossian* and its doctored Erse poetry in English. Smith's fourteen *Ancient Poems* were an unhappy anglicized amalgam of Gaelic matter and invented content, replete with notes containing spurious Erse variants of spurious Erse originals. The best that can be said about the “translations” of this Highland cleric, a prominent Gaelic authority, was his honest admission of having “considerably altered” his source material.<sup>44</sup> A trifling reference to Thomas Percy's supposed belief in *Ossian*'s authenticity would in a year's time ignite a heated mini-controversy among the literati of Edinburgh and London.

What evoked repeated lamentation from Shaw about Smith and all other imitators of Macpherson was their failure to make public credible Gaelic originals for their works. The absence of persuasive primary sources and a reliance on hollow secondary evidence of assertions, affidavits, and internal content led Shaw to a shrewd conclusion, that whenever Gaelic specimens did appear, almost surely the English “translations” inspired these Erse texts and not vice versa: “indeed Mr. Smith gives us not those of the old poet, but, those he made from his English original; the local phraseology, and the forced strain of which to any discerning reader, point out the imposition.”<sup>45</sup> This astute deduction also applied to Smith's reconstruction of Gaelic texts from intermingling invented and genuine ballad stanzas in *Sean Dana le Ossian, Orran, Ullan, &c. Ancient Poems of Ossian, Orran, Ullin, &c. Collected in the Western Highlands and Isles; Being the Originals of the Translations Some Time Ago Published in the Galic Antiquities* (1787).<sup>46</sup> Confirmation of Shaw's prescient insight about the contrived nature of such collections, a conviction previously held by Johnson too, would have to wait until the advent of more sophisticated Gaelic scholarship in future centuries. Both men were probably the first commentators to notice the unprecedented infiltration of bogus Erse verse into the native literary tradition to conceal Ossianic fraud.

In addition to the provocations of Macpherson and allies like Clark and Smith, a book-length attack by one other irritant, Donald M'Nicol,

was decisive in driving Shaw into the center of violent controversy during the first half of the 1780s. M'Nicol published a stinging critique of 371 pages, entitled *Remarks on Dr. Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Hebrides; in which are contained Observations on the Antiquities, Language, Genius, and Manners of the Highlanders of Scotland* (1779). Paying lip-service to the Union, M'Nicol was a patriotic Highland minister of undoubted Gaelic learning, with thinly veiled contempt for all things English, embodied in Johnson the Scottophobe. Familiarity with Erse enabled him in his book to pose effective correctives for Johnson's rash dismissal of the longevity and quality of the native literary heritage. Shaw took particular exception to the prelate's insistence that the Highland Society of London possessed Ossianic manuscripts. Shaw missed finding old Ossianic materials in London, denied their existence, and lost a possible opportunity of revising his erroneous Johnsonian assumption about the scarcity of written Erse. Shaw was on surer ground in seeing Macpherson's hand in some of the more scurrilous passages of the *Remarks*, even though M'Nicol disavowed editorial tampering evasively, "so far as I know."<sup>47</sup> In fact, the book's caustic criticism of the ungentlemanly anti-Ossian stance in the *Journey* reads so much like Macpherson's reported threatening of Johnson to a duel in 1775 as to betray external interference in the text.<sup>48</sup>

Clinching Shaw's inference of outside influence in the *Remarks* was the inclusion of a letter by Macpherson, supposedly transmitted by a third party, denying that he ever prevented the English nation from seeing his collection of ancient Gaelic poetry. It was Macpherson's answer to a slur in the *Journey* about his haughty disregard for English readers rightly concerned about his authenticity. Typically evasive, this overlooked note was his last extant communication expressly directed against his nemesis, Johnson:

Dr. Johnson has either been deceived himself, or he wittingly deceives others. That I might have said in company, that there still remained many poems in my hands *untranslated*, is not improbable, as the fact is true; but that I should have accompanied that assertion with a sarcasm on the English nation, is *impossible*; as I have all along most thoroughly despised those narrow principles, which suggest national reflections to illiberal minds . . . As I never courted the friendship, nor was ambitious of the company, of Dr. Johnson, he cannot authenticate the assertion, from his *own* knowledge; and if he received the anecdote from others, they either flattered his prejudices, or imposed upon his weakness. (327–8)

Although Macpherson likely possessed much genuine Gaelic poetry, the material never constituted what unwary readers might have construed

it to be, word-for-word ancient Erse prototypes for the published canon. In keeping with the deceptive message, a concluding announcement in the *Remarks*, perhaps penned by Macpherson too, promised that his Gaelic originals “are speedily to be printed” (360). The advertisement was a false promise, first posed twenty years ago when Macpherson commenced his literary fraud. And apart from a made-up Gaelic fragment of *Temora* in 1763, no Gaelic *Ossian* would appear until the spurious Erse “original” of Macpherson’s canon in 1807. Nevertheless, a Gaelic edition was always reported to be right around the corner. The empty declaration here seems one more indication of a malignant presence that Shaw uncovered in the *Remarks*, to the point of exaggerating Macpherson’s role in its production. Reading the tedious tome, Johnson for his part laughed at its belated pretentiousness: “Who will read a five shilling book against me,” attacking his *Journey*, published five long years ago?<sup>49</sup> While he seemed blessedly immune to its abuse, Shaw prepared for pamphlet warfare against *Ossian* in response to M’Nicol’s onslaught and to all the fallacious Erse verse of Macpherson, Clark, and Smith.

Johnson’s labor of love, *The Lives of the English Poets* (1779–81), allowed little time for him to facilitate Shaw’s entry into this new and noisy stage of literary controversy. Shaw would be on his own in striking out against their enemies’ pretensions, and he did so with a head-turning boldness. Except for the indictment in the *Journey*, there never appeared anything quite like his uncompromising debunking of the fabricated Ossianic literature *per se*. Irish antiquaries stressed false historiography, rather than the fallacious verse, in order to reassert their island’s priority as Gaelic mother country. Closer to home, the preponderance of critiques by authors from Blair to M’Nicol tended to weigh in *Ossian*’s favor. Following Johnson’s lead, Shaw helped to redress the imbalance by shifting attention to the fraudulent verse itself and took pride in the new direction that their focus on the *Ossian* canon, instead of its specious historical background, had brought to the dispute.

Elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries on 17 May 1781, Shaw exhibited his antiquarian prowess for discovering literary falsehood on 7 July with the publication of *An Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Ossian* (London: J. Murray, 1781; 87 octavo pages; printed also at Dublin by Patrick Byrne, 1782, 172 duodecimo pages). For all its flaws in style and substance, probably no better exposé engaged the public’s attention until the next century, when Gaelic studies became a more sophisticated discipline. It provided the first review of the history of the controversy thus far, prophesying more pseudo-Erse versifying by Scots,



as it served up an energetic vindication of Johnson's stand in the quarrel. Almost all its caveats about Macpherson and fellow fabricators like Clark and Smith, almost all its objections to apologists like Blair, M'Nicol, and Donald Maclean have stood the test of time. Enhancing its value is the real possibility that Johnson tendered modest help in marshaling its evidence. Admittedly, in his customary self-serving way, Shaw overstated this assistance. At most Johnson perhaps advised a little "in conducting its argument," approved its publication despite concerns about counter-attacks, and, according to his blind boarder, Anna Williams, "read the whole over" for her private hearing.<sup>50</sup> He may also have steeled Shaw's resolve with bracing words of encouragement: "*We shall prevail in this controversy.*" Shaw went so far as to label Johnson his "coadjutor in this business," but it is likelier that the pamphlet was almost entirely Shaw's own in conception and composition.

There are a few internal hints of some cooperation. The *Enquiry*, for example, tends to exaggerate Johnson's achievement as the first detector of *Ossian*, when it would have been more accurate to have rated him the commanding foe of Macpherson in the century: "The ingenious and learned Dr. Johnson first started objections, and those arose from the internal evidence of the poems against their authenticity, and other facts, which served to confirm the Doctor in his infidelity."<sup>51</sup> More complimentary references surface, as Shaw hammers home Johnson's favorite proof of deception, that ancient originals for validating *Ossian* did not exist, despite broken promises to exhibit genuine antecedents:

I should have been as happy as any of my countrymen can be, to have it in my power to produce the original . . . but as not one line of it has hitherto been seen, but what Mr. Macpherson has favoured us with, imposed as a specimen, though actually translated from the original English, I am so far a friend of truth, I cannot permit an imposition to descend to posterity undetected. (29)

Further evidence of his mentor's influence – "I have the honour to mention the immortal name of Doctor Johnson amongst my friends" (21) – came in the form of periodic citations of the *Journey*. The strongest clue of Johnson's involvement has to be the printing of his classic letter of 20 January 1775 in defiance of Macpherson, apparently dictated from memory, because of minor variations in this version. How else could Shaw have obtained the text for immediate use?

In the history of *Ossian* criticism, the *Enquiry* ranks as a noteworthy, if very imperfect, performance. Shaw's writing skills left much to be desired,



whether in striving for sublime effects with awkward Johnsonese or in lapsing into ridiculous moments of ungrammatical Scotticisms and typographical errors. He had an unfortunate knack for abrupt transitions and repetitious disputation lacking in logical organization. Clarity and intellectual cogency suffered as a result, and carelessness about quoting sources and making clear-cut distinctions compromised an otherwise effective attempt at demonstrating fraud. Happily, he avoided Johnson's mistake of fixing on Erse manuscripts for written proof of authenticity and usually wanted either written or oral antecedents, "a deposit of the manuscript, or a publication of the original" (6), for purposes of verification. This demand for a disclosure of the originals, whether written or orally transmitted, went straight to the heart of the weakness in the case made by advocates of *Ossian*. Ancient poetry from the third century did not exist in the British Isles, and modern Gaelic verse had no sustained or substantial correlation with the English *Ossian*. Shaw, like Charles O'Connor, had sufficient proficiency in Gaelic to dismiss airy-fairy notions of prehistoric prototypes descending to modernity from fifteen hundred years ago. He also knew enough about Erse verse, which he habitually and misleadingly assigned to the fifteenth century, to determine its essential dissimilarity from both the English and Gaelic concoctions of Macpherson. Paradoxically, he shared Macpherson's strange contempt for modern Gaelic poetry to such a degree that he considered its supposed artlessness a compelling reason for discounting the genuineness of the sophisticated artistry in *Ossian*.

To be sure, his vagueness in distinguishing modern and ancient sources did lead to chronic misunderstanding about the gist of his argument, namely, that he had conducted an unavailing search specifically for Iron Age archetypes, in accordance with Macpherson's claims. The absence of prehistoric precedents, combined with an abiding sense of an obvious disparity between modern Fenian verse and *Ossian*, led Shaw to the correct conclusion that Macpherson had practiced deception all along:

Thus I spared not labour nor expence to procure knowledge; but found myself not a little mortified, when all they could repeat was nothing but a few fabulous and marvelous verses; or stories concerning Fionn Mac Cumhal, alias Fingal, and his Fiona or followers . . . I believed these to be the *compositions of the 15<sup>th</sup> century*; and beyond the next mountain, in the next valley, or the neighbouring island, something of the *genuine Ossian's* poetry might have remained. I therefore traversed and pervaded the whole for near six months, but to no purpose, as to Ossian's poetry . . . (32)

The interrelated falsity of Macpherson's translations and originals, as elucidated by reference to extant source material, constituted Shaw's breakthrough contribution to unmasking *Ossian*. And it should be noted that this crucial insight built on Johnson's intuitive discernment of colossal imposture.

Mistakes did tarnish Shaw's coverage. Following Johnson, he wrongly urged the paucity of written Erse (8) and lapsed into false distinctions between the Scottish and Irish Gaelic traditions (32–3). Exposing Macpherson's imitators for the first time, he nevertheless went too far in charging Clark (17) and Smith (23–4) with complete fabrication. Above all, he made far too much of the notorious Johnsonian censure of Scottish chauvinism for the purpose of discrediting the opposition. Rancorous Caledonian patriotism, if a major factor sustaining support of *Ossian*, bordered on becoming an obsession with Shaw. He imagined Macphersonian conspiracy everywhere around him because he cast himself as a uniquely truth-telling Highlander bridging the divide between Scots and Englishmen as a promoter of Erse and an ally of Johnson. Accusing his countrymen of knowingly backing falsehood (11, 22), he did exonerate some fellow Scots, like Blair, of wilful fraud in a psychological profile of mass self-delusion echoing the *Journey*:

They were glad of this new and unknown honour [of Ossianic epics]; and many of the names of the heroes in the poems being familiar to their ears, of which they had often heard mention made in the tales and fables of the Highlands in their youthful years, and . . . at this day, [they] could be easily led by a little "*Caledonian* bigotry," not only to believe, but to vouch for their being a "literal translation of the poems of Ossian" . . . (39–40)

Overall, the strengths of the *Enquiry* outweighed its weaknesses. Its censure of Macpherson's boorish defiance of Johnson (6–7) and survey of Blair's unconvincing internal evidence for *Ossian's* genuineness (11–17, 38–45) were on target. No previous critique had so forcefully pointed out Macpherson's telltale insinuations of actual authorship (3, 13, 21–2, 31) or to his withholding sources indicating whether translation or invention took place (24–5). No other publication of the era so astutely predicted an extensive concoction of Gaelic texts (2, 18, 47–8) for an elaborate cover-up of the hoax. On this point, Shaw made effective use of Charles Vallancey's detection of modern Gaelic usage invalidating the contrived Erse specimens published so far by Macpherson as some of his so-called ancient originals (9–11). He devoted more attention than Johnson ever did to refuting Macpherson's specious pro-Scottish historiography with an accurate summary of Ireland's modern Fenian tradition (18–20). He

was the first to see that a relatively modern Gaelic poem, "Magnus," rather than some reputed prehistoric prototype, lay behind *Fingal* (18). A closing allusion to William Lauder's imposture – perhaps indebted to Johnson – brought home the need for caution in literary dealings with Scotsmen of the past and present (47). The pamphlet ended as it began, with the by-now insistent Johnsonian challenge for adherents of *Ossian* to exhibit validating originals (48).

Shaw afterwards went to great lengths to ensure maximum exposure for the *Enquiry* in the print media. He must have enjoyed reading *The Gentleman's Magazine's* generous three-column review, headed by an anonymous letter from Shaw entitled – prematurely, to be sure – "The Controversy on Ossian's Poems decided." This piece afforded immodest propaganda for Shaw, the "one Scotchman who loves truth better than his country, and is a moralist sturdy enough to declare it, though it should mortify his Caledonian vanity."<sup>52</sup> Yet another notice of the *Enquiry*, quoting Johnson's dictated letter of defiance to Macpherson, found its way into the August issue to excite more interest in the contest.<sup>53</sup> The articles underscored the pamphlet's grave objection to the absence of Gaelic originals undercutting the veracity of all ersatz Highland poetry in vogue. They drew attention to Macpherson's invasive doctoring of M'Nicol's *Remarks*. And most notably, they highlighted M'Nicol's innocuous mention of Thomas Percy's support of *Ossian*, a questionable claim destined to generate a stormy war of words in the coming months. The added publicity of an embarrassing debate over Percy's real convictions surely delighted Shaw, who did much to stir up the trouble. Prior to Shaw's publication of the *Enquiry*, Percy, by then a like-minded skeptic, privately divulged a suspicion that Blair and Adam Ferguson had years ago, in 1765, orchestrated a recital of Erse poetry at Edinburgh to deceive him into believing *Ossian*. Shaw reported this conversation in the pamphlet without authorization. As a result, on 21 July 1781 Ferguson retaliated swiftly and bitterly, sending John Douglas a note for publication in London newspapers disclaiming any complicity in a staged deception of Percy.

An excerpt of Ferguson's little-known cover letter for this note made clear that his fidelity to *Ossian* was as stubborn as ever, despite mounting evidence of imposture. He promised to remain an incorrigible enthusiast, no matter if it turned out to be a hoax:

The [bogus Gaelic] Specimens I had seen apart from the Curiosity of them are very interesting as efforts of the Imagination & the Heart equal to any Poetry

I know, & whether genuine or Spurious I shall never be ashamed of having mistaken them for originals.<sup>54</sup>

Shaw, in a newspaper notice of 31 August, at first accepted Ferguson's explanation but later retreated from his own public recantation: "What I have said of Dr. Blair and Mr. Ferguson, when I shall be convinced of their innocence I shall willingly retract . . ." <sup>55</sup> Percy, still angry at being mentioned in the *Enquiry*, felt called upon to circulate his own newspaper advertisement, dated 10 November 1781, expressing his wish to exonerate Blair more than Ferguson of any past duplicity. This qualification added more salt to the wound of Ferguson's hurt pride. The indignant Scot answered the perceived insult by publishing two letters addressed to Blair, dated 18 August 1781 and 17 January 1782, the first politely denying his presence at a long-ago Erse recitation and the second insultingly insisting on the point. *The Gentleman's Magazine* issued this new correspondence in January 1782, framing it with an incorrect prediction that it marked the end of "this disagreeable and personal dispute . . ." <sup>56</sup>

Although poor Ferguson was almost certainly guiltless of any shady conduct, he unfortunately would be subjected to further embarrassment in this overblown conflict. The victim of faulty memories and false gossip, Percy continued to show acquaintances in private what spotty evidence his memoranda and letters supplied him in support of his version of bygone events. Shaw too stood by his original accusation in the second edition of the *Enquiry*, to the point of including an appendix reprinting many of the newspaper letters that had done so much to sully the reputations of the principals in the trivial quarrel. Reacting to Shaw's latest affront, Blair affirmed Ferguson's innocence in an unpublished letter expressing considerable frustration with the entire business:

But on the other hand in my old letters to him, not only is there nothing said of Mr Ferguson present, but it is expressly said that Mr [John] M Pherson *translated* some of the originals of the Gaelick Poetry, whereas the part of the Translator was by Percy's account given to Mr Ferguson . . . To me the whole affair is totally immaterial as I never denied nor controverted this recital for which the Dean of Carlisle [Percy] with so much vehement and misplaced heat contends. <sup>57</sup>

Almost simultaneously, the newly installed Bishop Percy in Ireland received word that Ferguson, still combative but ailing at Bath, "drew up a few remarks . . . handed out among your mutual acquaintances, to take off the impression [that Percy's correspondence] might have made." <sup>58</sup> Happily, for the sake of a little justice on Ferguson's behalf, it seems that

the proud Scotsman had, after all, the last word on righting the wrong done to his besmirched honor in the *Ossian* controversy.

Shaw's *Enquiry* was too inflammatory and incriminating to remain unchallenged for long. A harsh rebuttal by John Clark appeared in the late autumn of 1781, entitled *An Answer to Mr Shaw's Inquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Ossian*. An introductory open letter to Shaw, acknowledging "our former intimacy," arraigned his countryman's low origins, character, and motives for taking Johnson's side in a contest blemished by English national prejudice. Character assassination dominated discussion of a detractor crudely labeled "Impudens, impurus, inverecundissimus" – "downright shameless, dirty arch-liar!"<sup>59</sup> Mocking Shaw's Gaelic scholarship and changing opinions of *Ossian*, Clark did offer valid correctives for his adversary's erroneous positions on Scottish Gaelic by stressing the survival of manuscripts, linguistic ties between Erse and Irish Gaelic, and a rich bardic heritage in the Highlands. However, unmindful of Shaw's distinction between ancient and modern sources, he missed his adversary's crucial insistence on the absence of prehistoric prototypes for *Ossian* and therefore ignored the *Enquiry's* irrefutable case against so-called English "translations" devoid of corresponding Gaelic originals descending, as Macpherson stated, from the third century. The closest that Clark came to conceding imposture was to admit that he, like Macpherson, tampered with modern Gaelic in their English productions: "the translator of Ossian has really curtailed and left out a great part of those poems which he has introduced as episodes" to larger narratives we now know as mostly of his own making (19). Clark palliated their inventive methods on specious grounds: they merely avoided literal translation, without performing the substantial fabrication actually being practiced!

The polemic concentrated not on hard evidence disproving fraud but on discrediting Shaw for personal weaknesses and intellectual inconsistencies. It culminated in a section, "*Shaw contra Shaw*" (65–71), cleverly outlining contradictions in his adversary's writings reflecting a shift from belief to skepticism regarding *Ossian*. All the maligning created a cumulative impression of Shaw as being an opportunistic Highlander who turned traitor against his homeland's heritage by embracing newfound religious and literary convictions ingratiating him with England's intellectual elite for personal gain. How exactly Shaw could have satisfied all this alleged venality by taking poorly paying Anglican orders and issuing eighteen-penny pamphlets against *Ossian* seems to have escaped Clark's carping mind. Writing off the Anglican conversion as a self-serving

surrender to Johnson's temptation of lucrative ecclesiastical preferment clashed with Shaw's public revelation that his beloved patron "lived not to see him provided for."<sup>60</sup> Denying a Scottish conspiracy to delude Percy into believing *Ossian*, Clark insinuated that Johnson, on the contrary, had been Shaw's dupe all the while:

I would not be ready to suspect that the Author of the Rambler could support a falsehood, knowing it to be such . . . I cannot therefore help expressing my astonishment at your insolence, in . . . imposing on him under the mask of friendship, on purpose to induce him to provide for you. Such being avowedly your intentions, I hope to acquire some merit with the Doctor for opening his eyes to the imposture.<sup>61</sup>

This conciliatory posture gave way to hard words for Johnson's ignorance of Erse, insolence toward Macpherson, and patronage of Shaw. Even worse was Clark's rank scandal-mongering about Shaw's failings as a schoolteacher and minister. Casting doubt on the *Enquiry's* message forced him to put his major effort into defaming the messenger.

Neither Shaw nor Johnson would let such crude invective pass without a reply. What can be stated here for the first time in compelling detail is that they eventually joined forces in composing a published response to Clark's abuse. Their counter-attack, in preparation during the winter of 1781–2, is a valuable document in the history of the controversy, if for no reason other than the fact that the foremost English author of the age had a part in its composition. Shaw took charge by penning a rough draft, probably at Rochester, where he had recently commenced auxiliary clerical duties as an Anglican priest. New evidence has come to light from the letter books of John Murray (1745–93), printer of the *Enquiry*, verifying his receipt of the draft in a very sloppy state and its immediate transfer to Johnson for correction. If nothing else, the speedy turnover of the unrefined manuscript indicates how closely Johnson had become identified with Shaw in the *Ossian* debate. Murray's answer to Shaw, dated 26 January 1782, enclosing Johnson's acknowledgment of editorial supervision, constitutes undeniable proof of his involvement in a reply to Clark. The entire letter is published here for the first time:

I had the favour [pleasure *deleted*] of your letter with the answer you meant to give to Mr. Clarke. Before the publication, I sent it over to Dr. J. for his opinion. In my own Judgement it is not correct enough, and were it published in its present state might do you more harm than good. I saw Dr. J. to Day, who told me he had been ill for 4 or 5 days past but desired me to call on Monday.

The *Enquiry*, may now be considered as out of print. This gives you an opportunity to correct & enlarge it for a new edition. In doing this, however, you

must take proper pains, and by no means give your additions in a slovenly manner. By no means follow the Example of your Opponents in giving abuse for argument. Stick close to the Question in debate; and you will be the more successful the politer you write upon the subject.

I beg to be informed how soon you can be ready, for I wish to go to press immediately. The thing being in Vogue should suffer no delay, but continue to be pressed upon the public. I am, Yours &c.

I would propose to print the Letters of Ferguson, Percy &c. in a P S at the end of the pamphlet, turn over

The following is a copy of a note which I have Just rece.d from Dr. J. with your Ms:

Sir

I have done for this, what can be done easily; but it cannot be made of much use. Mr. Shaw must be more diffuse and more distinct, and I would advise him rather to write wt Merriment than Anger. (I am yours &c.)<sup>62</sup>

Owing to the above letter, we can construe Johnson's assistance in sharper outline than ever before. Ailing from an eventually lethal combination of chronic emphysema and bronchitis, Johnson loyally and quickly turned to the task of polishing the coarse draft and perhaps set down some emendations in interlinear fashion on the original handwritten sheets. His contributions likely amounted to matters of style rather than of substance, although any extensive rhetorical flourishes might have entailed tinkering with argumentation. The short time for revision by no means precluded him from putting his stamp on considerable portions of a tract eventually comprising twenty-nine octavo pages in print. After all, a single day accounted for the composition of all twenty-nine printed pages of *The Patriot* (1774), without benefit of another writer's intellectual blueprint to facilitate the writing process. Evidently the initial plan was for Shaw to use the draft corrected by Johnson, not for an appendix to a second edition, but as a guide for interpolating additional passages directly into a revised text for a new printing. The comment in Johnson's note, regarding the perfunctory inadequacy of his editing, may imply his expectation that Shaw would craft an altered second edition of the *Enquiry*, rather than reissue it virtually unchanged, except for deleting a final paragraph and including two new appendices. The wise advice for Shaw to strive for more clarity, graciousness, even humor seems more applicable to the labor of recasting the original pamphlet than to relying on the humorless reply to Clark returned by Johnson with stylistic refinements. Shaw took the easy way out and made do with a more graceful essay for an appendix to a reprinted *Enquiry*, followed by another appendix of reprinted correspondence bearing on the Percy-Ferguson dispute.



Murray's follow-up letter of 4 February 1782 confirms their decision to capitalize quickly on the polished Johnsonian answer to Clark for the sake of financial returns:

I have no objection to your finishing the pamphlet in the manner you propose, and add it to a postscript since you think it would be too much trouble for you to incorporate your answer to Clarke in the text.

The 250 Copies [at Murray's bookshop] now they are all sold, have hardly cleared 40l – But as I would venture to print 500 Copies upon a second edition I have no objection to share profits with you if it yeald any, without putting you to any risk in expences.

I have some difficulty in getting your short letter in answer to Clarke printed. Your Opponants having carried their influence against you even into the newspapers. I shall try again.

I am yours &c You must use expedition otherwise you have no chance of being read.<sup>63</sup>

Murray's words may throw corroborative light on Shaw's frequent complaint of behind-the-scenes obstructionism from Macpherson and his allies. Long a propagandist for the English ministry, Macpherson wielded considerable influence on the print media and now perhaps interfered with Shaw's latest maneuvers to plant news items advertising his coming second edition. Murray broke the blockade, as he promised, and generated useful advance publicity. By March 1782 *The Gentleman's Magazine* carried two open letters by Shaw, pledging to denounce Clark and daring Macpherson to deny repeated assurances of exhibiting his *Ossian* originals some time soon. Reacting to a partisan review of Clark's *Answer* in the February issue, Shaw declared himself of Johnson's party in no uncertain terms: "I am obnoxious to some of my countrymen, because I am acquainted with Dr. Johnson, and do not believe in Ossian."<sup>64</sup> As Shaw excited public interest in newspapers and periodicals, Johnson cooperated with Murray's goal of swiftly completing the second edition by putting final editorial touches to the new appendix. There is the evidence of Johnson's diary entries, attesting to his supervision of page proof: on 18 March "I corrected Shaw"; on 20 March "Shaw came. I . . . ended with Shaw"; and on 23 March "Corrected proofs for Shaw."<sup>65</sup>

His good efforts helped to ensure the speedy 3 April publication of the "Second EDITION Corrected" of *An Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Ossian. With a Reply to Mr. Clark's Answer* (London: J. Murray, 1782).<sup>66</sup> The *Reply to Mr. Clark's Answer* deserves reproduction, in the appendix following this chapter, on its own merits and for preserving Johnson's last long exercise in ghostwriting to be found in his



canon. The overwhelming primary evidence of his impact on the essay comes with persuasive secondary evidence from contemporary witnesses. As early as in *The Gentleman's Magazine* review in April, the secret was out for all to decode about the Johnsonian cast of Shaw's *Reply*, "in which the writer appears to fight under the shield of Achilles."<sup>67</sup> Clark himself, in his next printed diatribe, felt called upon to hint at the abler hand sustaining his opponent's disputation: "From the first page of the *Reply*, it appears probable, that Mr. Shaw has had recourse to a more correct pen than his own."<sup>68</sup> Boswell ascribed the "greatest part, if not the whole" of the *Reply* to his famous friend and even quoted five paragraphs in the *Life of Johnson*.<sup>69</sup> Then too a note by the learned Samuel Parr in his copy of *A Galic and English Dictionary* affirmed that Shaw's "style, in the first [*Enquiry*] is clumsy and obscure, but in the second, it was much improved, by the assistance of Dr. Johnson."<sup>70</sup> Climaxing this testimony is the modern finding of the late J. David Fleeman, the premier bibliographer of Johnson's writings. While tempering the inflated estimate in the *Johnson Bibliography* (1915), Dr. Fleeman acknowledged the introduction of "some" alterations, "probably not substantial but stylistic," in *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (2000).<sup>71</sup>

Finally, the internal evidence of Johnsonian rhetoric and sentiments allows for a reasonably reliable appraisal of specific contributions to the *Reply*. Shaw was a plain, sometimes rugged writer, capable of labored elegance but susceptible to awkwardness and obscurity in his choice and arrangement of words and arguments. If his bluff combative style can be compared to a blunt dagger hacking away at antagonists, then Johnson's prose might be likened to a well-tempered, two-fisted ceremonial broadsword, sweeping through Scottish opposition with a controlled energy, precision, and epic majesty harmonizing the jarring complexities of literary debate. Dependent on given subject matter in an unfinished draft, Johnson had primarily to refine the stylistic crudity of Shaw's first-person narrative. He may also have imparted a new focus on *Fingal*, in place of previous interest in the *Ossian* canon generally, and ensured the retention of his longstanding errors – the supposed scarcity of Erse manuscripts, the supposed superiority of Irish Gaelic, and the supposed inefficacy of oral tradition. Careful study of content yields the following conclusions. Johnson's influence in the original 1782 printing seems strongest in close to half the *Reply*, starting with the opening seven octavo pages (except for the footnote on page 52), proceeding to lighter editorial intervention from octavo page 58 through the top paragraph of octavo page 61 and again in much of octavo page 74 until the

middle of octavo page 75, and concluding in the final three octavo pages in the eighteenth-century printing.<sup>72</sup> His contributions, therefore, came mainly at the beginning and the end but diminished in the middle, wherever strings of quotations cluttered the exposition or wherever Gaelic technicalities and Scottish personalities distanced him from editorial engagement.

Responding to the accusations in Clark's *Answer*, the *Reply* countered them all, one by one. It stressed the overarching Johnsonian caveat that no matching Erse original existed to validate *Ossian*, either from the third century or a later transcription of a prehistoric prototype transmitted by oral tradition. All that could be found was relatively modern and decidedly inferior Highland poetry "of the 15<sup>th</sup> century" (71) exploited by Macpherson, Clark, and Smith "as common place helps" for constructing English poetry of negligible indebtedness to Fenian tradition in Scotland or Ireland: "Let the reader keep the main question in view; does Fingal exist in the Earse language?" (75). It did not. Nevertheless, made-up Gaelic specimens circulated to dupe people into believing in the survival of bona fide Iron Age originals:

I should have been convinced if I had heard Temora and Fingal in any considerable parts, repeated in the Highlands or Hebrides. I should have been convinced if I saw them now in any antient MS. But a few passages or fragments pretended to be transcribed or antient MSS. will not convince me. I wonder more such have not already been fabricated . . . (78)

His parting suspicion of Gaelic concoctions undertaken to dupe readers, including a complete Gaelic *Ossian*, proved all too sadly true.

The grand exordium of the *Reply* has Johnson's stylistic signature, with echoes of his ghostwriting for William Lauder and his later correspondence on Macpherson:

Whoever undertakes to oppose the prejudices of the public, or counteract the interest of individuals, must expect to find many keen and acrimonious adversaries. Of this danger I had notice when I proposed to detect the counterfeit Ossian; but considering myself as supported by the strong defence of a good conscience and invigorated with the power of resistless truth, I have ventured to bring the question to a trial, and to give that opinion which I still maintain against menaces and calumny, and which nothing but conviction shall force me to retract.

For impressing this conviction very slight endeavours have hitherto been used. My adversaries, instead of proving the genuineness of Fingal, have contented themselves with insulting me; as if it were a consequence, that because Shaw is weak and wicked, Fingal is genuine. – My business is to keep the main question

full in sight – Is Fingal found in the Galic language? Their business is to hide it behind remote considerations, in hopes that while the public is busied in enquiries into my family and fortune, they will let Fingal pass unexamined, and not reproach its defenders with their hardness of assertion and penury of evidence. (51)

As for Clark's *ad hominem* diatribe, Shaw pleaded his integrity as an impartial Gaelic scholar. His change of mind about *Ossian* was neither insincere nor inconsistent but symptomatic of an honest openness to mounting reasons for skepticism transcending defensive Scottish chauvinism: "I have been able to sacrifice prejudice to truth" (55). Criticism of his Gaelic dictionary provoked a retort reminiscent of Johnson's own sense of imperfection in the *Dictionary of the English Language*: "There is, I suppose, no dictionary without innumerable faults; and for mine it will be a sufficient apology to say, that it is the first" (56). In any case, it did not require much linguistic learning to know the impossibility of retrieving an ancient Gaelic analogue for authenticating *Ossian*:

But to determine nothing not to be something, a very little knowledge is sufficient . . . If I could not know whether a Galic copy of Fingal were antient, I can at least be confident that no man within my reach of enquiry pretended to shew a copy. (56)

Macpherson's alleged refusal to disclose any more than a few trifling Gaelic specimens produced skepticism and the discovery that the author of *Fingal* had depended upon relatively modern, not ancient, sources for fabricating the epic: "one of these stanzas is the original of a sentence of Fingal, but it is taken from a piece of the 15<sup>th</sup> century . . . This is a plain proof of what I have before advanced that these compositions are entirely made up" (71). He recognized the piece to be "*Laoidh Ghairbh Mac Starno*" and, in doing so, became the first to identify this key antecedent of *Fingal* and glimpse the inner workings of Macpherson's fraudulent creative process. The complete unraveling of the imposture would require almost two centuries of scholarly probing, but his astute insight was a first solid step in detecting wholesale literary falsehood. On this point alone, his achievement in the eighteenth-century phase of the *Ossian* controversy merits remembrance. With Johnson's help, Shaw eloquently fulfilled a promise allegedly made to Macpherson in person, that he would expose the literary deception publicly. The splendid finale of the *Reply* summed up the failure of the opposition to furnish decisive evidence on behalf of *Ossian* and seems an echo of Johnson's conversation with Henry Mayo in 1778: "DR. MAYO. 'Pray, Sir, are Ganganelli's letters authentick?'"

JOHNSON. ‘No, Sir. Voltaire put the same question to the editor of them, that I did to Macpherson – Where are the originals?’”<sup>73</sup> The question came up again at the end of the pamphlet, this time too without any expectation of an answer proving works like *Fingal* to be genuine:

If Fingal exists in Galic, let the MSS. be shown – When Nodot pretended to have discovered a complete Petronius at Belgrade, the general cry of the learned was, “shew us the manuscript.” When very lately some letters were printed under the name of Pope Ganganeli, the reasons, however specious, that were offered for the authenticity, were effectually silenced by one demand, “shew us the originals”. (79–80)

With the appearance of *A Reply to Mr. Clark’s Answer* on 3 April 1782, Johnson concluded his active connection with the *Ossian* controversy and was soon to retire from the world of letters generally. His apprehensions about Shaw arousing bitter enemies were well taken. On the defensive, Shaw likely submitted an anonymous newspaper article, “The Ossian Controversy Stated,” praising his pamphlets and, significantly, confirming that Johnson challenged Macpherson for originals at their one and only meeting long ago.<sup>74</sup> Another article signed “Anti-Ossian” – probably Shaw – appealed to Johnson for a definitive refutation of *Ossian* “to rescue your Gallic coadjutor from the odium incurred by espousing your cause . . .”<sup>75</sup> These minor skirmishes in the press were followed by forty-five pages of venom from the irrepressible John Clark in *An Answer to Mr. William Shaw’s Reply to Mr. Clark on the Subject of Ossian’s Poems* (1783). This angry sequel basically repeated previous vituperation with heightened rancor: “Whether his Patron Dr. Johnson has gained our *Inquirer* with money, or converted him with argument, shall be left to the Reader to determine” (13). Clark rightly maintained that old Erse manuscripts existed but, once again, failed to produce the ancient sources for *Ossian*. Instead, the polemic stooped to a new low of mean-spirited innuendo about Shaw during his tenure in a Scottish grammar school and as a Presbyterian cleric.

At this point in the dispute almost everything conceivable had been said and done to defeat the defenders of literary lying. Nevertheless, something had to appear, yet again, in crushing response to Clark’s indefatigable calumny. According to Shaw’s very doubtful report, Johnson contemplated a summary reply:

had Johnson’s health permitted him, during the last six month, he intended to have drawn out and published a state of the controversy from the beginning, to balance the arguments and evidence on both sides, and to pronounce judgment on the whole.<sup>76</sup>

How could such a project have won Johnson's consent, once the ravages of advanced old age and a stroke enfeebled him mortally? Given his lack of technical knowledge of Gaelic, what more could he have added to his past musings on the matter? Shaw had to rely on his own devices and divinings to bring out his last installment of pamphleteering against Clark and Macpherson, seventy-nine pages long, entitled *A Rejoinder to an Answer from Mr. Clarke, on the subject of Ossian's Poems* (Rochester: T. Fisher; sold in London: S. Crowder, J. Matthews, and A. Murray, 1784). Published about six months before Johnson's death, this document remains a rarity with, apparently, only two copies surviving today.<sup>77</sup> It is better written than the *Enquiry* but, lacking the helping hand of a master stylist like Johnson, displays the same old tendency toward prolixity, awkwardness, repetitiousness, disorganization, and imprecision. It reiterates previous argumentation a little more forcefully, especially by muting the mistaken Johnsonian dismissal of oral tradition and Erse manuscripts. But it resurrects the notion of a Scots cabal of Macpherson loyalists to account for all the hostility toward Shaw and Johnson: "The pen of Dr. Blair has been employed in this controversy, and the mouths of Macnicol, Clarke, &c. are the channels which he [Macpherson] has endeavoured to discharge his resentment" (9).

Shaw did what he could to address all the disturbing remarks about his failings as an educator and cleric. He countered by quoting what he claimed were Clark's own incriminating words disclosing the dishonesty of current Gaelic versifying:

"I took," says he, "a tale, or a piece of ordinary poetry, such as a song, capable of illustration; I enlarged, added, mended, embellished, and *made up* a poem." I myself tried this experiment; (I have the poems still by me) and found no great abilities are necessary for *this sort of translation* . . . (22)

Shaw's admission of his own flirtation with literary fabrication was on the order of taking a thief to catch a thief, and he vividly demonstrated Clark's phony artistry by giving a genuine Gaelic poem, its literal translation, and Clark's unrecognizable rendition (42–55). Shaw also pointed to a convincing new authority in support of his favorite Johnsonian thesis that no parallel Gaelic originals for *Ossian* existed from remote antiquity. An Englishman touring Scotland, Thomas Hill, recently showed how current, rather than ancient, Gaelic verse furnished Macpherson with cues for literary fabrication in six groundbreaking articles published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* from December 1782 to July 1783.<sup>78</sup> Hill's identification and translation of Macpherson's major modern sources for *Fingal* and *Temora*,

such as “Manus” and “The Death of Oscar”, only confirmed Shaw’s case against *Ossian* with all its telltale artistic sophistication:

These fabulous accounts and marvelous stories are undoubtedly, as I have observed in my Enquiry, the *only* materials Mr. Macpherson has had. His poetry is as far superior to theirs as the composition of a lettered writer of the eighteenth century ought to be to that of the illiterate bards of the fifteenth. (27)

From such findings, the *Rejoinder* arrived at three key conclusions. First, *Fingal*, like all else in the canon, was *not* “the production of an antient Highland bard, of the name of Ossian” (33). Second,

it cannot be copied from old songs, because these old songs do not exist; at least they cannot be shewn, that we might compare the translation with the originals. I grant that the fables and legendary tales of the fifteenth century exist; but these are of such incoherence, and so void of merit and probability, that they only supplied Mr. Macpherson with some materials and popular names. (34)

Third, “That as the original of which they talk and boast cannot be shewn, the poems of FINGAL and TEMORA are wholly a *forgery of Mr. Macpherson’s*” (34). Equally impressive was Shaw’s closing review of the weak arguments for *Ossian*’s authenticity based on unconvincing internal evidence, uncritical testimonials, unfounded rumors of genuine Gaelic originals, and unedifying abuse of critics to denigrate sound criticism (68–76). To repeat, nothing but proof of corresponding ancient Gaelic originals would do, and nothing of the sort had ever come to light. Therefore, Shaw declared victory in the national culture wars surrounding *Ossian*, as an upright Highlander jettisoning Scottish prejudice by joining hands with England’s leading man of letters in the transcendent cause of truth: “My industry in cultivating the language, and my exertions to investigate truth, when the prejudices of interested and wicked men shall have subsided, may procure approbation from a succeeding age” (78–9).

Out of gratitude for his productive association with Johnson, Shaw had the melancholy honor of publishing the first ambitious biography of the famous Englishman, entitled *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Late Dr. Samuel Johnson; Containing Many valuable Original Letters, and several Interesting Anecdotes both of his Literary and Social Connections. The Whole Authenticated by Living Evidence*. Appearing first in *The Morning Chronicle* on 9 June 1785, this intelligent, if self-advertising, act of homage for a fallen friend capitalized on firsthand information from intimates for fashioning a candid, sometimes severe, record of a uniquely great man of

singular goodness. It explains why Shaw felt himself so strongly attracted to the illustrious Johnsonian orbit. According to the compact biography, a rare combination of virtue and genius made his subject a perennial role model of peerless stature in the world of letters "that of late it has been deemed a sort of literary discredit not to rank in the number of his acquaintances, his admirers, or his imitators."<sup>79</sup> Despite insufficient evidence, Shaw was adept at probing personal and professional traits fundamental to Johnson's achievement – an original, restlessly sagacious mind infinitely knowledgeable about human experience, leavened by a pious, despondent, and compassionate spirit, all of which established him as the domineering literary dictator of paradoxical kindness and captiousness. The glaring defect of the biography resides in Shaw's self-centered account of the *Ossian* controversy, filled with distortions about his fruitful interaction with Johnson.

When Johnson died, Shaw was still a relatively young man of thirty-six, but the heady time of notoriety as a Gaelic scholar and controversialist was over for him. An ever-deepening obscurity dogged his future in an uneventful clerical career passed in rural England. As part of his ministry, in 1787 he began pursuing his bachelor of divinity at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, without receiving the degree until 1800, five years after his appointment as rector of Chelvey in Somerset. Nostalgia for the glory days of the London literary scene in Johnson's company lingered into extreme old age, from the evidence of a scrawled letter by Shaw posted three years before his death on 16 September 1831. Outliving the age of Johnson by almost half a century, he sent a proposal of one last publication about the vanished era to the son of his former printer, John Murray. Poignantly, the octogenarian hoped to win assent for a projected memoir of his life and times as a Gaelic scholar by boasting close ties with the most fascinating personality in all of English literature: "I must remind you that I am the Author of the Galic *Analysis* and Galic Dictionary, sold by your father &c &c. I was the intimate friend & acquaintance of Dr. Samuel Johnson."<sup>80</sup> However imperfect, their former endeavors on behalf of Scottish Gaelic in opposition to corrupt pseudo-Ossianic versifying remained the high point of Shaw's long life.

On the occasion of making public an annotated *Reply to Mr. Clark's Answer* in the appendix of this book, we should note again that it was a collaborative venture initially inspired by Shaw and subsequently corrected by Johnson as his last lengthy specimen of argumentative prose.<sup>81</sup> It stands as a testimony to their long-forgotten friendship, sealed, as



Shaw wrote movingly, by his acute sense of Johnson's abiding integrity and boundless humanity:

He was the friend and advocate of whatever enlarges, heightens, refines, or perfects the happiness of humanity. To this great and prevailing object all his labors had an immediate reference, and his whole life in public and private was consecrated to the welfare and honour of his species.<sup>82</sup>

These wise words captured a conviction central to Johnson's achievement, revolving around his ever-present awareness of the blessings of human civilization at the heart of his personal investment in the *Ossian* controversy. Probing literary relics of the national heritage for trustworthy glimpses of "savage virtues and barbarous grandeur" in the British past contributed mightily to his overarching intellectual goal of evaluating and championing human progress.<sup>83</sup> "There is no part of history so generally useful," Imlac observes in *Rasselas*, "as that which relates the progress of the human mind, the gradual improvement of reason, the successive advances of science, the vicissitudes of learning and ignorance, which are the light and darkness of thinking beings . . ."<sup>84</sup> Assessing *Ossian*'s authenticity in the context of a changing Highland society was, in the final analysis, part and parcel of such a grand historical inquiry. Exposing its falsehood in the *Journey* helped to correct and clarify the historical record of the possibilities and limitations of genuine human accomplishment within a primitive culture confronting the challenges of modern civilization. Although Johnson learned to revere the Highland way of life from seeing it at firsthand, he characteristically sided with civilization there and everywhere on earth as the fittest environment for optimum human happiness.

In the Johnsonian scheme of things, were not all true benefactors in literary history involved in the amelioration of the human race as catalysts of intellectual improvement, beacons of artistic light, and civilizers of letters and life? Was it not Shakespeare's genius to refine a primitive stage, Spenser's gift to polish a roughhewn vocabulary, Milton's brilliance to achieve the consummate Christian epic, Addison's merit to tame unruly prose, and Dryden's renown as well as Pope's greatness to harmonize undisciplined poetry?

From the time of Gower and Chaucer, the English writers have studied elegance and advanced their language, by successive improvements, to such harmony as it can easily receive, and as much copiousness as human knowledge has hitherto required . . . (*Idler* 63)



Did not Johnson's own canon promulgate the same sweeping vision of historical betterment in the island? His *Dictionary*, his edition of Shakespeare, his work on Sir Robert Chambers's *A Course of Lectures on the English Law*, and his *Lives of the English Poets* all celebrate human progress in the trial-and-error attainment of civilization within the national culture.

Ascertaining the nature and degree of intellectual advancement required a reliable understanding of the realities of the past through the scanty remains transmitted to posterity. Circulating spurious antiques like the *Ossian* canon, with its bogus imitations, invented Gaelic translations, and pseudo-antiquarian vindications, obviously distorted historical truth and compromised the lessons to be learned from human history. It was, after all, a serious offence eroding civilized human society:

There is no crime more infamous than the violation of truth. It is apparent that men can be social beings no longer than they believe each other. When speech is employed only as the vehicle of falsehood, every man must disunite himself from others, inhabit his own cave, and seek prey only for himself . . . (*Idler* 20)

Johnson was only being consistent with bedrock intellectual imperatives in helping to elucidate the cultural legacy of the British Isles by antiquaries like Thomas Percy in England, Evan Evans in Wales, Charles O'Connor in Ireland, and William Shaw in Scotland. Touching their lives, he became embroiled in a British culture war of competing national rivalries over ownership of the current Celtic Revival. He dominated the metropolitan center of English letters in an era marked by a Welsh recovery of ancient poetry, an Irish reaffirmation of ancestral identity and primacy in Gaelic tradition, and a Scottish appropriation of Fenian legend for suspect self-glorification as first parent of British Celticism.

His injecting healthy skepticism into the controversy and spearheading the discomfiture of *Ossian* remained integral to his career-long demand for telling the truth in life and literature: "Poets, indeed, profess fiction; but the legitimate end of fiction is the conveyance of truth . . ."<sup>85</sup> He made many mistakes in discussing oral tradition and Gaelic literature, but he correctly intuited the essentially made-up nature of *Ossian*. Systematic investigation of the process behind its creation has uncovered the truth that twenty-eight out of the thirty-nine individual titles – 72 percent of the works in the canon – have no genuine Gaelic antecedents and are Macpherson's invention. The remaining eleven titles – a mere 28 percent of his productions – have generally such loose and fitful ties to about

sixteen Gaelic ballads as to amount to his creations for the most part. He was the freewheeling author, rather than faithful editor or literal translator, of exciting new literature without very much historical validity in its genesis or in its representation of Fenian antiquity.

Only the truth will set us free and keep us free in all areas of human endeavor. From such an assumption, Johnson believed that art must imitate truth to be worthwhile, that literary forgery was deceptive fantasy and not meaningful fiction, and that *Ossian* violated the truth of Scottish history, Gaelic tradition, and Highland national identity: "If we know little of the ancient Highlanders, let us not fill the vacuity with *Ossian*."<sup>86</sup> The debate over the integrity and consequences of the *Ossian* legacy will no doubt continue to exercise the minds and pens of academics, in keeping, we hope, with the wisdom of Johnson's advice about the two principal ways for promoting meaningful progress in learning and life:

He that wishes to be counted among the benefactors of posterity, must add by his own toil to the acquisitions of his ancestors, and secure his memory from neglect by some valuable improvement. This can only be effected by looking out upon the wastes of the intellectual world, and extending the power of learning over regions undisciplined and barbarous; or by surveying more exactly her antient dominions, and driving ignorance from the fortresses and retreats where she skulks undetected and undisturbed. (*Rambler* 154)

## APPENDIX

### *A Reply to Mr. Clark's Answer*

by

*William Shaw in association with Samuel Johnson*

## INTRODUCTION

William Shaw on 7 July 1781 published *AN ENQUIRY INTO THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE Poems ascribed to OSSIAN* (London: J. Murray, 1781) in 87 octavo pages priced at a shilling and a half. For all its flaws, this pamphlet was one of the most effective eighteenth-century indictments of the literary hoax perpetrated by James Macpherson and his imitators in pseudo-Gaelic versifying. It provoked John Clark (d. 1807), another fabricator of “ancient” Scottish Gaelic verse, to retaliate with *An ANSWER to Mr Shaw's Inquiry into the Authenticity of the POEMS ascribed to OSSIAN* (Edinburgh and London: C. Elliot, T. Longman and T. Cadell, 1781) in 76 octavo pages priced at one shilling. The counter-attack of Shaw and Johnson surfaced on 3 April 1782 with the printing of the “Second EDITION Corrected” of *AN ENQUIRY INTO THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE POEMS ascribed to OSSIAN. WITH A Reply to Mr. CLARK's Answer* (London: J. Murray, 1782), priced again at a shilling and a half. Except for the deletion of a final anecdotal paragraph, the only consequential change in the reissued *Enquiry* (octavo pages 1–48) was the inclusion of the twenty-nine page *Reply* (octavo pages 51–80), followed by five letters (octavo pages 81–8) concerning Thomas Percy's part in the *Ossian* controversy.

A transcription of the *Reply* itself appears below, with annotations to elucidate meaning and Johnsonian contributions to the text. Shaw penned a rough draft, which the publisher sent to Johnson for extensive polishing. Johnson's contributions were more a matter of style than of substance and seem most pronounced in close to half the text, starting with the first nineteen paragraphs (except for the footnote about Shaw's lineage), proceeding to lighter editorial intervention in the next nine paragraphs, and concluding with occasional refinements for the final eighteen

paragraphs (except for the footnote about Clark's vocation). Johnson's assistance, therefore, came mainly at the beginning and at the end but diminished in the middle, wherever strings of quotations cluttered the exposition or wherever Gaelic technicalities or Scottish personalities distanced him from editorial engagement. The publication of the *Reply* marked for Johnson, if not for Shaw, the finale of his participation in the *Ossian* controversy. The essay constituted Johnson's last lengthy exercise in ghostwriting near the end of a distinguished career not infrequently dedicated to helping other authors meet the demands of literary productivity.

AN  
ENQUIRY  
INTO THE  
AUTHENTICITY  
OF THE  
POEMS ASCRIBED TO OSSIAN.  
WITH A Reply to Mr. CLARK's  
ANSWER.

THE SECOND EDITION corrected

by

W. SHAW, A.M.F.S.A.

Author of the GALIC DICTIONARY and GRAMMAR.

LONDON.

PRINTED FOR J. MURRAY, No 32, FLEET STREET.

M. DCC. LXXXII

A REPLY TO MR. CLARK'S ANSWER

WHOEVER undertakes to oppose the prejudices of the public, or counteract the interest of individuals, must expect to find many keen and acrimonious adversaries.<sup>1</sup> Of this danger I had notice when I proposed to detect the counterfeit Ossian; but considering myself as supported by the strong defence of a good conscience and invigorated with the power of

resistless truth, I have ventured to bring the question to a trial, and to give that opinion which I still maintain against menaces and calumny, and which nothing but conviction shall force me to retract.<sup>2</sup>

For impressing this conviction very slight endeavours have hitherto been used. My adversaries, instead of proving the genuineness of Fingal, have contented themselves with insulting me; as if it were a consequence, that because Shaw is weak and wicked, Fingal is genuine.—My business is to keep the main question full in sight—Is Fingal found in the Galic language? Their business is to hide it behind remote considerations, in hopes that while the public is busied in enquiries into my family and fortune, they will let Fingal pass unexamined, and not reproach its defenders with their hardness of assertion and penury of evidence.

I am indeed not afraid of presenting myself before the public with all my accusers clamouring against me, and doubt not but that when the charges of artful and interested men shall have been diligently discussed, and the clamours of a prejudiced rabble shall have subsided, I shall be found a man whom his ancestors\* do not disgrace, and who does not disgrace his ancestors, a man whose morals deserve no blame, and whose industry deserves praise, who has at least this merit, that he first regulated his native language by grammar and arranged it by alphabet; but let the reader always bear in mind that the genuineness of Fingal does not depend upon the character of Shaw.<sup>3</sup>

My assertions are for the most part purely negative; I deny the existence of Fingal, because in a long and curious peregrination through the Galic regions I have never been able to find it. What I could not see myself I suspect to be equally invisible to others, and I suspect with the more reason, as among all those who have seen it no man can shew it.<sup>4</sup>

\* As amongst other curious arguments Mr. Clark has adduced a new one, which I shall call, the *Argument from Genealogy*, it has been thought proper to give the following account of my family—When Robert, son of Robert Bruce king of Scotland had been defeated, and had fled to the Islands until his followers should be able to collect a sufficient force to bring against the king of England, my ancestor by the mother's side Cook, of whom my uncle Capt. Cook, often in London is the representative, and Shaw my progenitor, of whom my father is the lineal descendant, attended the Prince, the latter as his temporary cupbearer, while on the Island of Arran, and administered to his necessities. They attended him with a company of men to Bannockburn, where fifty thousand English are said to have been slain, after which the king granted by a military tenure to Cook, the lands called at this day *Glenri* in Arran, or the valley of the king, and to Shaw those of *Lettir* in Arran and *Sornbeg* on the continent, but which are now swallowed up by the nobles.—It is well known from the history of Scotland, that estates in Arran were commonly given to the favourites of the crown.—The arms of the Sornbeg and Lettir family to this day are three covered cups, &c. vide Nisbet's Heraldry. The late family of Greenock, of which the present Lord Cathcart is a lateral representative, I believe to have been a branch of this family.

What the defenders of Fingal have been able to collect, imagine, or invent, has been accumulated, as I have reason to suspect, by their united labour in a pamphlet entitled, *An Answer to Mr. Shaw's Inquiry*, by Mr. Clark of Edinburgh, which, whatever other qualities it may want, must be admitted to have a claim to all the notice due to disingenuity, impudence, and falsehood.

Of his disingenuity the first page affords a specimen, where he represents the English as denying the existence of poetry among the Highlanders. That the Highlanders had poetry was never doubted, for perhaps no people has been ever found without it. The existence even of Fingal is not absolutely denied, but is doubted with that degree of distrust which falls properly and justly upon those who say what they do not prove, when the proof would be easy, if what they said were true, and their interest would prompt them to produce it, if they had it.<sup>5</sup>

There is however a resource behind, he that can say nothing for his cause can still vilify and calumniate his adversary. The genuineness of Fingal it is indeed impossible to maintain, but there are hopes that I who have questioned it may be made contemptible. For this purpose my private conduct had been examined; a discontented servant had been excited to accuse me, and one story at least has been told of which I cannot guess the author or the occasion.—It is said that when I was preaching upon the uncertainty of life, I played a trick to alarm my auditory by sinking down as lifeless in the pulpit. The fact is so humorously related, that if any man desires to laugh, I would recommend it to his perusal. But let him not suppose that he is laughing at me, who think myself obliged to declare upon such provocation, that the whole narrative is a lie; that it is a lie malicious and premeditated; and as this is true, or false, I call upon mankind to judge of my veracity and that of my opponents.<sup>6</sup>

Mr. Clark compares the obstinacy of those who disbelieve the genuineness of Ossian to a blind man, who should dispute the reality of colours, and deny that the British troops are clothed in red:—The blind man's doubt would be rational if he did not know by experience that others have a power which he himself wants; but what perspicacity has Mr. Clark which nature has withheld from me or the rest of mankind?

The true state of the parallel must be this. Suppose a man, with eyes like his neighbours, was told by a boasting corporal, that the troops indeed wore red cloaths for their ordinary dress, but that every soldier had likewise a suit of black velvet, which he put on when the king reviews

them. This he thinks strange, and desires to see the fine cloaths, but finds nobody in forty thousand men that can produce either coat or waistcoat. One indeed has left them in his chest at Port Mahon, another has always heard that he ought to have velvet cloaths somewhere, and a third thinks that he has heard somebody say that soldiers ought to wear velvet. Can the enquirer be blamed if he goes away believing that a soldier's red coat is all that he has?

But the most obdurate incredulity may be shamed or silenced by facts. To overpower contradictions, let the soldier shew his velvet coat, and the Fingalist the original of Ossian.<sup>7</sup>

The difference between us and the blind man is this.—The blind man is unconvinced because he cannot see, and we, because though we can see, we find that nothing can be shown.

I am accused of inconsistency, in having spoken at different times with greater and less respect of the Galic language and writers; but if I am inconsistent, is Fingal, therefore, genuine? Of the Galic language I always spoke and wrote in the same manner; I always mentioned it as an antient tongue, ennobled by the bravery of those who spoke it; but I always declared it not to be a written language till within these fifty years that the Highland ministers published some little tracts for the instruction of the people.—Of their authors, for writers they had none, I perhaps once believed more than I believe at present; but my belief was part of the general stream of national credulity, a conformity to opinions of which I could give no proof, and of which I now find the proof to be impossible. From such changes of mind no deductions can be drawn, but that I once had the Scotchman's prejudices, and that I have been able to sacrifice prejudice to truth.<sup>8</sup>

My skill in the Galic has been called in question.—This charge indeed my vanity did not suffer me to expect. I thought that when to the opportunities of a native I had added the diligence of a student, when of a tongue so little cultivated I had compiled the first grammar and dictionary, my zeal would be praised, and my skill not depreciated. But alas! I am now represented as decrying that language which I have cultivated with so much labour, and with being ignorant of that which I valued myself upon teaching others. I am at last the native of an Island where the worst dialect of the Galic is spoken, and in my dictionary a dozen of blunders, real or imaginary, have been noticed by malicious penetration.<sup>9</sup>

Of an unwritten language it is not easy to ascertain the preference of dialects. Let it however be admitted, that one dialect may excel another



by the regularity of its terminations and the constancy of its analogy, yet he who knows one may quickly learn the rest, and that I have learned them, my grammar and dictionary will I hope sufficiently evince.

He that imagines that by noticing a few faults he can depreciate a dictionary, only exposes his own ignorance.—There is, I suppose, no dictionary without innumerable faults both of redundancy, deficiency, and mistakes; and for mine it will be sufficient apology to say, that it is the first; and that it was collected not from MSS. of *Fingal* or the *Caledonian Bards*, but from the rude conversation of cottagers and shepherds.

If MSS. had been shewn me, of which it was a question in what age or what country they had been written, those who did not approve of my opinion might with some reason have pretended to doubt my skill. But to determine nothing not to be something, a very little knowledge is sufficient. He who cannot tell whether a book be elegant, can at least tell whether there be a book. If I could not know whether a Galic copy of *Fingal* were antient, I can at least be confident that no man within my reach of enquiry pretended to shew a copy. A man may be sometimes defrauded by false money, but no man can think himself paid with no money at all.<sup>10</sup>

I cannot, indeed, charge the admirers of *Fingal* with many endeavours to deceive me, it was a sufficient crime with them to demand proof, and when I ventured to confess my doubts, I was put to silence with violent outcries as an abettor of Johnson and an enemy to my country.

To incite the rabble of the north against me is the apparent design of Mr. Clark. My mention of the Highland cottages, into which I was obliged to creep, is represented as a national insult, as if it were not already known by the rest of Britain that the Highlanders were poor. My design was, not to reproach their poverty, but to recommend my own diligence, and to shew I spared no labour by which information would be gained.

In return, however, for my insolence, one of the meanest of the Highland houses was my father's. Let us mark how this relates to the question. In a logical enthymeme it stands thus: *Mr. Shaw's father lives in a mean house, therefore no man can deny Fingal is genuine.*<sup>11</sup>

This, however, shews the impertinence of Mr. Clark's remark, that I ought to prefer the cottage of the bard to the palace of the chief, for I left no cottage untried where there was any hope of intelligence.

When I came back disappointed, I had at Edinburgh some conversation with Mr. Clark which in itself proves nothing, the circumstance of "Mr. Macpherson's carrying to London all the valuable poetry," only is true.<sup>12</sup>

It is true likewise, that Mr. Clark introduced Cameron the taylor, a native of Lochaber, to my knowledge—I certainly paid him for two or three hours of three or four days that he sat with me, and took down in writing some songs which I wished to be able to sing at the Highland club. He can repeat nothing pretended to be written by Ossian, except some of the marvellous tales which I believe to be of the 15th century. Should Mr. Clark again assert it, I ask if there was not pen, ink, and paper, to be had at Edinburgh; and if “his mind be such a library of Celtic poetry,” why do they not take copies? Will Mr. Clark, like a Gothic Barbarian, allow this *Library* to die without making him heir to what has been transmitted by his ancestors? I call upon the public to attend particularly to this fact, and to exact in a particular manner the originals of his own poems. But alas! Mr. Clark will tell us that “other avocations” prevented, and before he had had leisure poor Cameron died! To defend the genuineness of Ossian seems not be Mr. Clark’s original design, for what he says may most of it be true, and yet Fingal may be a forgery.<sup>13</sup>

The attention with which I heard and copied the recitations of Cameron is, I think, a proof of my willingness to receive information; but how does it shew that I took what he recited for the works of Ossian? That in my journey I did not visit Mr. Macnicol is undoubtedly true, but if I shunned him as an adversary of Dr. Johnson, I must have done it by the second sight; for his book was not then published, and the first notice I had of him was from Dr. Robertson on my return to Edinburgh.<sup>14</sup>

Among other fals[e]hoods, it is told by Mr. Clark that I declared to him my resolution of denying on my return to London the authenticity of Ossian’s poems, and of abusing the Scotch. “*This, says he, as I imagined, was with a view to humm the good people of England by proposing to gratify their prejudice against the Scotch at the expence of their own pockets.*” Let the probability of the assertion be considered.—The people of England are very indifferent about the question. To *hum* or to be *hummed* upon this occasion is peculiar to the Scotch. These mountains of English gold were to rise only from an eighteen penny pamphlet, in which there was as much chance of loss as profit, and of which the profit could not be much.<sup>15</sup>

The history of my grammar and dictionary, of my hopes and disappointments, is nothing to the purpose. The only evidence of Mr. Clark is contained in the following paragraph: “The epic poems of Fingal and Temora I have never heard rehearsed by any *single* Highlander, in the same arrangement in which Mr. Macpherson has published them. By *different* persons I have frequently heard almost every passage in those

two poems, with no more difference from the translation than what the genius of the language required, and not near so much as there is between the different editions of those poems in the different parts of the Highlands."<sup>16</sup>

To this confident assertion I am not afraid to reply that I do not believe it. This is not the only part of the pamphlet in which his fury has overpowered his veracity. I do not believe he has heard them, because with as good ears and more opportunities I could never hear them. I do not believe him, because in the next page he charged me with saying to him what I never said, that the *translator* of Ossian had curtailed the poems which he hath introduced as episodes. I could not say it, for I could never know it, having never seen nor heard the poems.<sup>17</sup>

It is true, that, upon a supposition which I then thought probable, I encouraged Mr. Clark to offer to the public a genuine collection of Highland poetry; for I was yet willing to believe that much Highland poetry was somewhere to be found. But I am now convinced it is only in the moon, for on earth I could never see it. The MSS. of Mr. Clark, like those of Mr. Macpherson, were always invisible; of the Maid of Creca I never saw a line; of the Earse poetry I never heard him repeat more than a single stanza; nor has any been found in his possession excepting twenty lines which he once gave to Sir James Foulis. As to Malvina's dream, which is produced against me as a piece of Earse poetry acknowledged by myself, I allow that I printed it, but I do not consider it as antient poetry; for I never heard nor saw it in the Highlands.—I have been told that was first shown in English, by Mr. Macpherson, to one of the Lords of Session, who was pleased so much that he required the original. It was then given in Earse, but Mr. Macpherson only knows by whom it was composed.<sup>18</sup>

I am charged with disingenuous policy in making use of the term Earse instead of Galic.—It is my business to distinguish; it is that of my adversaries to perplex. The term Galic is indeed used by the Highlanders both for the language of Ireland and their own. The Irish was the learned and the written dialect; the Earse Galic was merely vocal, and therefore often corrupt. In the Irish Galic were many MSS. in the Earse Galic there were none. It is therefore the artifice of my opponents to talk of Galic poetry and Galic MSS. by which they mean, if they mean any thing, MSS. in the Irish Galic. These they shew, and of these they boast; and say that the Earse and Irish Galic had the same characters and the same contractions, when the truth is, that the Scotch Galic had till very lately no character at all. Thus with the term Galic they play fast and loose.

When they talk of the poetry of the Highlands, they would be thought to mean the Scotch Galic; but they dismiss us to the Irish Galic when they talk of MSS.<sup>19</sup>

“Our enquirer, however, has fixed upon one thing that will satisfy him effectually: if we will produce the originals in Ossian’s own hand writing with proper vouchers that there is no collusion, he will then condescend to be converted. What answer does the reader imagine I should give to a man who demands originals in the hand writing of a man who had never heard of letters? He would think me highly reprehensible did I honour those demands with any other notice than a contemptuous silence.”<sup>20</sup> Mr. C. quotes fals[e]ly, then triumphs over his own knavery and folly. I look not for Ossian’s own hand writing, but I look for a transcript of a transcript; for some copy however distant.

But Mr. Clark’s Ossian never heard of letters. If Ossian lived in the third century, being an Irishman, he must have heard of letters and known them. If he had been a Highlander, as Mr. Macpherson endeavours to make him, even of a later age, I could not expect much knowledge of letters from him. “The most antient grammar of the Irish (says the learned Col. Valancey, on the same page with whose name that of Shaw is unworthy to be written!) is the *Uiraceachd nan eigas*, or primer of the bards, written by Forchern some few years before our vulgar æra, transcribed and illustrated by *Ceann faoladh nam foghlama*, an author of the 7th century.”<sup>21</sup> A copy of this *Uiraceachd* is in the Colonel’s possession, and there is another in Trinity College Library.”

The Col. p. 28, preface to his grammar says, “It appears very extraordinary that the great and learned Ossian should have been ignorant of the radical construction of his mother tongue in the 2d century, and that it should be recovered by the Synod of Argile in the 17th century; probably the Earse owes this refinement to the Ibero Celtic; we know no other way to account for it. It was the misfortune of North-Britain, says Dr. John Macpherson in the preface to his critical dissertations, to have been almost totally destitute of letters, at a time when Monkish learning, and those religious virtues which arose from ascetic austerities, greatly flourished in Ireland and England. This was the case in the 7th and 8th centuries.”<sup>22</sup>

Again p. 10. “We have reason to believe from the unfavourable climate, and steril nature of the soil, in that part of Scotland which lies to the west of Drumalbin, that the ancestors of the Scots lived long in an uncultivated state; as destitute of great national events as of letters to transmit them to posterity:” And p. 12. “It does not appear that letters were any

part of the booty which they (the Scots) carried home with them from the deserted Roman provinces." Contrary, therefore, to what is asserted in Mr. Clark's pamphlet, letters were not received by the Irish from the Romans, but from the Phœnicians. Such authority the author of the *Bards* and of *Fingal*, I believe, cannot overturn, by their own unsupported assertion.<sup>23</sup> If Ossian knew letters, he must have committed the poems to writing, and transcripts of what is said to be so much admired, would have still existed. If he *did not* write, it is improbable, notwithstanding Mr. Clark's conjectures about the mode of transmitting them, that so much poetry could be orally preserved. Mr. Macpherson talked of manuscripts and he is now required to shew them. Mr. Clark, if he can, may now be "contemptuously silent," for he surely has nothing reasonable to say.

"To prove beyond the power of contradiction, the disingenuity as well as the gross ignorance of Mr. Shaw, on a subject which he pretends to understand better ("as well as") than any man living, I will lay before the reader the following facts—Mr. Mackenzie has authorized me to say, that Mr. Shaw had seen the MSS. in his possession before the publication of his pamphlet, had looked at them, and turned over the leaves; but at that time had read only a few words in different places. That since the publication he has again seen those MSS. and again read single words in different places; but on being pressed by Mr. Mackenzie in presence of *another gentleman*, to read a few sentences, he applied to one page of a MSS. in verse; and after poring about a quarter of an hour he made out three lines, which related, as read aloud by Mr. Shaw himself, to Oscar the son of Ossian: upon being asked how these lines agree with the doctrines of his pamphlet, Mr. Shaw answered, that he believed they were the compositions of the 15th century, and not of Ossian." Mr. Mackenzie, if he has said this, has said more than is true. The fact is, that soon after the appearance of Mr. Macnicol's scurrility against Dr. Johnson, I asked a sight of these MSS. and after examining them, Mr. Mackenzie asked me whether there was not some of Ossian's poetry? I replied, none of the originals of the *translations* Mr. Macpherson had published; that a few pages, the only poetry in those MSS. were of far inferior merit to any thing Mr. Macpherson had given as a specimen of Ossian—to oblige him I read one or more sentences of it.—Last summer, after the publication of my *inquiry*, having occasion to wait on Mr. Mackenzie, by appointment, but not on subjects of Galic, I was shewn into a room until Mr. Mackenzie should return, who was gone out a little before. From the window I saw Mr. Mackenzie coming, followed at a little distance by a young lad, who

appeared like the apprentice of some mechanic, on whom Mr. Mackenzie looked back, every now and then, as if he were afraid of losing him. The circumstance struck me—Both came up stairs, and this young man standing at a respectful distance at the other end of the room, after I had talked over the subject of my visit, Mr. Mackenzie introduced the MSS. and looking behind him at the young man, as if he desired him to attend, requested me to read pieces of the MSS.—I perceived that there was some design to entrap me, and that this young Highlander, “another gentleman,” had been brought for that purpose, and therefore I positively refused.<sup>24</sup>

All the truth contained in Mr. Mackenzie’s narration is, that I saw in his possession some pages of poetry; but it was not Earse, it was not Fingal. Mr. Mackenzie seems to have no great delight in the controversy, for I have received a very formal message forbidding any further use of his name.

“These MSS.” says Mr. Clark, “were intended to prove that Mr. Macnicol had shewn to the public that there still exist Galic MSS. written many centuries ago, in contradiction to Dr. Johnson, who precipitately averred, that there is not a MS. in the Highlands a hundred years old.”<sup>25</sup> Here is a trick played, in which the term Galic is of sovereign virtue. Dr. Johnson never denied the existence of Galic MSS. for the term Galic, perhaps, he did not know; he only said there were no Earse MSS. and so far as yet appears he was right in saying so; for the MSS. yet produced are not Earse; they are Galic, but not Scotch Galic.

Mr. Clark affirms, that these MSS. were not shown as containing any of the poems of Ossian; but Mr. Macnicol, to whose page he refers, will sufficiently refute him; “among these are contained some of the poems of Ossian.”<sup>26</sup>

Mr. Clark’s weapons of controversy are sometimes falsehoods so audacious, that he assumes a kind of infernal dignity, and sometimes disingenuity so mean as would disgrace a pickpocket on his trial—Mr. Shaw’s words, says Mr. C. are these:

“I believe I may say it *without vanity*, I understand the Galic as well as any man living.” The same high strain of encomium is repeatedly pronounced on his own superior knowledge;—yet the truth at last comes out, and he acknowledges his ignorance. Says he, “I rummaged Trinity College Library, had different persons in pay who understood the characters and contractions.”—Very mortifying! to be obliged to hire persons for information in a language of which he had written a grammar and dictionary [the dictionary was not then written], and which a few pages back, he himself knew as well as any man living.<sup>27</sup>

In this place every reader but himself will find that here is nothing to do with ignorance or knowledge; but a complaint that I wanted time, and a little boast, that to supply that want I procured the help of able men.

His next pages about St. Columbe and Galic literature, and the manners of the Highlands have little relation to the present question. I will allow him that historical songs are sometimes the amusement of the common people, as the stories of Robin Hood are sung in English villages; but that long poems are learned, retained, or transmitted, neither my own observation has informed me, nor can I gather it from what I can learn of other countries.—I never heard a Highlander repeat more than fifty lines together of continued narrative, or coherent sentiment. In Wales, where the people are idle and pastoral like the Highlanders, the learned Mr. Evan Evans, who has lately published a collection of antient Welsh poems, does not appear to have exhibited any traditional or transmissive legends. He copied what he had from books, and judging very rationally of other countries by his own, lets his reader know that he gives Mr. Macpherson very little credit.<sup>28</sup>

What I have said of Dr. Blair and Mr. Ferguson, when I shall be convinced of their innocence I shall willingly retract; but whether that time is yet come, the readers when they will peruse the appendix will candidly determine.<sup>29</sup>

Of my interview with Mr. Macpherson the account is altogether false; it is thus related:

“Similar to it, is what Shaw alleges concerning his interview with Mr. Macpherson on the subject of the poems of Ossian. The distance of my place of residence from that gentleman prevented me from applying to him in person; I chose therefore to request a friend to wait on him in London, rather than write to him; that friend accordingly waited upon him in my name; and he gave in substance the following detail—That several years ago Mr. Shaw called at his house and *introduced himself*, without either recommendation, or prior acquaintance whatsoever, but merely as a native of one of the Scotch Isles, and a man who had studied the Galic language. That the avowed object of his calling was, to solicit Mr. Macpherson’s interest to promote a subscription for a grammar of the Galic language which he had written or had in contemplation to write. That as a specimen of his knowledge of the Galic, he left for Mr. Macpherson’s perusal and judgment, a translation of Mr. Pope’s Messiah, which has been since printed and annexed by Mr. Shaw to his grammar. That Mr. Macpherson upon perusal of this specimen, conceived a very indifferent opinion, both of Mr. Shaw’s poetical talents and



knowledge of the Galic, being that spoken in the Isle of Arran, and the words throughout mis-spelt, and scarcely intelligible. That Mr. S. called repeatedly, but at long intervals, upon Mr. Macpherson; by whom he was received only with a cold and distant civility. That he does not recollect that Mr. Shaw ever presumed to ask a sight of his MSS. and that even if he had, Mr. Macpherson should not have indulged his curiosity, as he both disliked the manners of the man and knew that he was not capable of forming any just judgment upon the matter. That whatever farther than what is stated above, has been written or said by Mr. Shaw, relative to personal interviews with Mr. Macpherson, is mere exaggeration, or a fiction meant to deceive and mislead the public.”—We shall soon see who has formed stories to “mislead and deceive the public!”<sup>30</sup>

I am sorry that Mr. Macpherson, who *now* lives among gentlemen, should thus expose himself to be convicted publicly of a palpable, wilful, and premeditated fal[l]sehood, and from the basest motives too, to injure a young man’s reputation, who wisheth honestly to go through life, and who never offered any injury to him excepting a declaration of his disbelief of Ossian.—But as it is in defence of my own reputation, I must and will tell the truth. Instead of *introducing myself* to Mr. Macpherson, I was made acquainted with him in 1774–5, as a “man who had studied Galic,” by a letter from a gentleman, whose name, if I am called upon, I am able to produce. Some years afterwards Mr. Macpherson saw my translation of Pope’s Messiah, and was pleased *then* to say civil things of it—As to his now declared opinion of my talents, I am perfectly indifferent. His interest is to depreciate me as much as is possible, and of his interest he will never lose sight, being the only principle that actuates him. With Mr. Macpherson I have had many conversations on Galic; he saw my MSS. of the grammar, and when I advised with him concerning some particulars relative to the structure of the Earse, our opinions not altogether coinciding, he recommended to me to do it in the easiest manner to myself, “as there were no judges of Galic.” From the same motives he thought his Fingalian fraud could never be detected.

Within these two years, Mr. Macpherson has asked me to his house.

When the grammar was going to press, I requested of Mr. Macpherson to furnish me with specimens of Ossian’s poetry to serve as examples, and to illustrate the prosody.—In my account of Galic prosody, I intended to take whatever I could get of Ossian, together with the best songs, as my text and guide, and to form rules of Earse prosody from them. Mr. Macpherson civilly promised to give me different pieces of Fingal and Temora for that purpose, because he had told in his notes and



preface, that the “versification was various;” but put me off exactly in the manner I have related in the *inquiry*.—“The MSS. were in the country, the key lost,—or I should see them some other time.” Having by these fruitless applications despaired of seeing any of Ossian’s pieces, I took the 7th book of Temora and Malvina’s dream, and from these lines, and some printed songs, was enabled to give some account of Earse prosody.—The critical reader may prove the truth of this by applying my rules to the seventh book of Temora, *vide* Grammar—Yet Mr. Clark most unfairly takes advantage, and misrepresents this prosody, by opposing these rules to what I have said in my *inquiry*, and thence concludes, I then believed in Ossian, and knew that these poems were authentic. If I thought so, I did not know it—I had not *then* the opportunities of knowing I have since had by travelling in the Highlands, and other circumstances; and a man may change his opinion when he has sufficient reason so to do, with great propriety.<sup>31</sup>

The personal interviews that I have said I had with Mr. Macpherson he denies and gives his kinsman, Mr. Clark, authority to say I never “*presumed* forsooth, *presumed* to ask a sight of *his* MSS.”—Now I shall publicly convict him here again of another gross and wilful falsehood: In 1778–9, on my return from my tour in the Highlands, and Ireland, having one morning waited upon Mr. Macpherson, after enquiring what success I had in collecting vocables, I answered, very great success, but that I now, more than ever, wondered whence he had the originals of his Fingal and Temora, as I could find no poetry of such merit in that language, the compositions of the 15th century being far inferior to what was ascribed to Ossian. I told him that some day I should publicly make him the author of Fingal. He answered, “it is more honourable to be an author than a translator at any time;” and “I expect to be treated like a gentleman.” I replied, that one gentleman had always a right to expect that from another. But, continued I, “will you be so kind as to repeat to me a few lines of Ossian that have not yet been published?” After some meditation, and biting his pen, he wrote three stanzas, which he said were the originals of such and such pages of such and such books of Fingal, as marked by himself.—These couplets I have still in my custody in his own hand writing; they are now to be seen in the hands of Mr. Murray, my bookseller, whenever they are required, as a proof that I have *presumed* to ask a sight of some of his poetry, and also that he gave me some couplets. It is a true saying, and particularly in the affair of Ossian, that to defend one falsehood many more must be invented. It is worthy of notice, that one of these stanzas is the original of a sentence of Fingal, but it is taken from a

piece of the 15th century; and the piece is in the possession of several Highlanders at this hour.—It consists of about twenty couplets, and the best of them Mr. Macpherson has used as common place helps—This is a plain proof of what I have before advanced, that these compositions are entirely made up.—I can prove that this is a modern piece by Mr. Macpherson's own preface and introduction to his Fingal, where he says, that "in Ossian's time, neither the Christian Religion was introduced into the Hebrides, nor into Ireland," and that "surnames were not then known." Now this piece is called a *Laoidh*, or hymn, *Laoidh Ghairbh Mac Starno* or the hymn of *Garv Mac Starno*; *Mac Starno* being a surname. The two other stanzas are one of the seventh book of *Temora* already published, and the other from *Malvina's dream*, also published, so that though at this time willing to oblige me, he could not favour me with any thing new.<sup>32</sup>

"Mr. Macpherson also authorized my friend to declare to me that the allegation of Mr. Shaw, that the MSS. in the hands of Mr. Mackenzie are the same that were deposited with his bookseller, by Mr. Macpherson, for the inspection of the public, is an *absolute falsehood*."<sup>33</sup> I had no other authority for the above allegation than that of Mr. Mackenzie, who the first time he shewed me these MSS. signified that they came to him from Mr. Macpherson.

Mr. C. proceeds to tell the public that I examined his MSS. and criticised his translations. If by MSS. he means Galic MSS. I declare with great solemnity, that Galic MS. in Mr. Clark's possession I never saw. The six lines which he has triumphantly inserted, I have heard him repeat again and again with great emphasis; but by printing them as a specimen of a greater number, I am afraid he means to deceive the public. I do not know him to be in possession of more than these six, and about a dozen more he has given to Sir James Foulis, and which I have seen in his hands.—In my private conversation with Mr. Clark these six are all that I have heard, and more than I have seen.<sup>34</sup>

What he says concerning *Iurram na Truaidhe*, I believe is true, I had mistaken one song for another, and what I have advanced concerning it is an error of my memory.<sup>35</sup>

In an argument with Mr. Clark on the authenticity of the poems, I asked him how it could happen, that neither I nor any body else could meet with any poetry concerning these ancient heroes, Fingal and Ossian, but the hyperbolic compositions of the 15th century, and that the 7th book of *Temora*, and *Malvina's dream*, were not repeated by those who commonly repeated Highland poetry.—He replied with emphasis, that

this argument should not long stand, for that he himself would take the trouble to read it to a Cady until he got it by heart. At another time he offered to produce a Cady (or porter) who could repeat the 7th book of Temora, but the man could not get beyond a dozen of lines! If Mr. Clark is sure of a *thousand*, why did he not mention one or more of them, that could repeat this book? This circumstance is a confirmation of what I have said; he chose the man in question, because he knew no others; but if the controversy continue, he may, perhaps, bring another, and be busy in the mean time in teaching him to recite it.<sup>36</sup>

After this the reader is led astray by another digression, relating to Mr. Smith, which I shall pass over slightly, because it has no relation to the genuineness of Fingal. Mr. Smith has one advantage over some of his competitors for the Celtic laurels, he gives his reader reason to believe, that some specimens of Galic poetry are really in his hand: but I am at the utmost distance from believing that any part of them were composed by Ossian.<sup>37</sup>

With respect to Mr. Macleod, I now say again what I have said before, that I offered him half crown a line for any part of Ossian that he would repeat—Such offers at a jovial table are not very serious—My intention was to provoke him to repeat something, but the provocation had no effect. What he has heard Mr. Macpherson read, he has not distinctly told us; and the passages which he has received from Mr. Macpherson, he does not tell us the length of, nor consequently whether they are not such as might be occasionally fabricated.<sup>38</sup>

As the anecdote of the scolloped shell hath been so particularly noticed, I think it necessary to explain that matter.—The reader is to observe, that I never made mention of the gentleman's name—The fact is simply thus—That anecdote I set down on a blank page, at some distance from the *finis* of the MS. of the Inquiry, for the sake of my own memory, as a laughable circumstance, without any intention of publishing it. When I delivered the MS. to Mr. Murray, to be printed for him, for I live at some distance from town, I drew my pen across that anecdote; and was myself displeased and surprized, when I saw that the printer, or Mr. Murray, had brought it forward to the place where it stands in print—The very situation being at the *finis* of the pamphlet, is a confirmation of this account.<sup>39</sup>

I lament my negligence, and ask pardon for the imputation, and hope that the ingenuity of this confession will give me a right to credit in what I shall affirm, and what I shall deny.<sup>40</sup>

With regard to the Highland Clergyman who advised me to translate Fingal, I do not know that he seriously intended to have the experiment

tried; for it was not at all likely that I should embrace such a proposal. Yet I am of opinion that the event would be what he said; and that many would aver, and very innocently aver, that they had heard from their childhood what was then recited.<sup>41</sup>

I make no doubt that if I were to read Fingal in the Highlands, multitudes who never heard the original, would believe that they had heard it; and deliver their belief upon oath, without consciousness of falsehood.—Such is the uncertainty of memory, such the grossness of vulgar apprehension, and such the violence of national prejudice, that a few names to which their ears had been accustomed, a few images to which their eyes were familiar, and a few incidents which may be supposed to occur in all their stories, joined to the obscurity of a new language, would easily gain credit to a new composition.

I do not mean by this to reproach the Highlanders, the same trick might, I believe, be played in any rude nation where knowledge is traditional.<sup>42</sup>

I have not in any part of my disquisition asked these admirers of Celtic literature, how they knew any poem to be Ossian's. Ossian, according to Mr. Clark,\*\* never heard of letters, his poems could therefore only float along the stream of tradition, in which they might be mutilated, corrupted, and confounded with a thousand others; and a traditionary error, once admitted, cannot be corrected.—I have not asked them whether the poems be Ossian's, for there is yet a previous question to be decided, whether they have any poems at all—Let the reader keep the main question in view; does Fingal exist in the Earse language?<sup>43</sup>

In return for my contemptuous mention of MSS. to which Dr. Johnson was referred, in the hands of the secretary to the Highland Society, which were *Galic* indeed, but *Irish Galic*; and where instead of the works of Ossian, I found a little Irish poetry, and enough of Irish and Highland genealogies, the reader is drawn off again by a tale of Lauder; but still the great question is laid asleep, and poor Fingal shifts for itself.<sup>44</sup>

My character is next attacked by a furious letter from Mr. Macnicol, whose acrimony and petulance will not add much to his credit. What he says merely contumelious is below an answer; what facts he has advanced

\*\* That the reader may know who Mr. Clark my ostensible opponent is, he himself informed me that he had served an apprenticeship to, I think, a lapidary at Edinburgh; but now lives by land surveying. He told me also, that he was nearly related to Mr. Macpherson, was his pupil when he taught a parish school in Badenoch for twenty pounds a year; he is therefore interested greatly in this controversy; and being a *Translator without Originals* will meet with all the credit that he deserves.

I will endeavour to discuss—The conversation which he relates between Mr. Seton and me, I sincerely profess myself not to remember. If Mr. Seton affirms it, I will not dispute the exactness of his memory, and still less that of his veracity. The report, be it true or false, is of little consequence.<sup>45</sup>

The public is particularly required to remark the underhand diligence of Mr. Macpherson and his party, to ruin the character of his opponent, and instead of producing his MSS. to obstruct enquiry. The following fact, for the truth of which I refer to Mr. Murray, is a proof of it—Having on the publication of Mr. Clark's pamphlet sent up a letter to Mr. Murray to be published, after looking about a month for the appearance of it, I received for answer, "That he had met with some difficulty in getting my short letter published, as my opponents had carried their influence against me, even into the papers; but, says he, I shall try again."<sup>46</sup>

His next charge is, that I have changed sides, *and the world is asked what can be expected from the confident assertions of one so wavering in his disposition.* The world will surely expect more veracity from a man who has changed sides by conviction than from one who resolves to stay for ever where he happens to stand. How do we grow wiser but by changing our opinions? He is then in doubt whether I am yet come to a final resolution. Though I am afraid instruction will do him little good, I will resolve his doubts. When he or any other man shall prove my present opinions to be erroneous, it is my purpose to retract them.<sup>47</sup>

But hear, reader, the tragical history of Macintyre of Glenoe, from whom I borrowed about two sheets of paper folded in octavo, containing a collection of Earse words, with liberty to transcribe them; for without that liberty of what use had been the loan? These papers I did not immediately return. By keeping what I had the liberty to transcribe, I could gratify no vicious disposition but idleness. *Yet this shameful and glaring breach of confidence was instantly made public over the whole neighbourhood. And as the complaint came from a person of Glenoe's known modesty and integrity, Mr. Shaw's character was immediately blasted, and marked with the proper stigma. At that very time it was thought prudent, as a caveat to the community, to send a note relative to the above mentioned fraud to the publishers of the Weekly Magazine; but they did not think proper to interfere with private characters.*<sup>48</sup>

These important papers have since been returned, but they let it be supposed that I never had returned them. To detain by negligence, for there could be no other cause, a paper lent to be transcribed, and of which

the transcript is to be printed, can be no *gross* violation of social duties—When once printed, it was worth nothing to Glenoe. Yet let it be remarked, that this offence, which would have been very venial in any body else, was to have *blasted* me in the public papers. If malice could have discovered any thing worse in my conduct, the worst had certainly been told. I can only say, I am afraid that it is beyond the hopes of man to live long without some greater crime. But so bad was now my character, that few, says Mr. Macnicol, would entrust me with MSS. my intention was now publicly known; *and if I saw any thing in them that reflected honour on the country, they were confident I would destroy them.* This can only be answered with derision.

He hints likewise a change of more importance, that I have left the Scotch for the English communion; but he would have it believed that what I have done was not by choice but by compulsion. I was presented to the living of Ardilach by the Duke of Gordon; but when I visited the place I found the presentation was disputed, and that the right remained to be tried; I therefore by a voluntary deed, demitted, and determined to unite myself to a church, whose doctrines were more suitable to my own private opinions. This is the true state of the transaction, and therefore Mr. Clark's narrative is impudently false.<sup>49</sup>

The following pages, destined to my complete and irrecoverable confusion, in which I am shown, *Shaw contra Shaw*, and at variance with myself if they even contained all the contradictions, pretended to be found, would prove only what I very willingly confess, that with respect to the abundance of Earse literature I have changed my mind. I once certainly believed too much; I perhaps now believe too little; but when my present belief shall be overpowered by conviction, I have already promised to change my mind again.<sup>50</sup>

It may be very reasonably asked, what would give me the conviction I require. I should have been convinced if I had heard *Temora* and *Fingal* in any considerable parts, repeated in the Highlands or Hebrides. I should be convinced if I saw them now in any antient MS. But a few passages or fragments pretended to be transcribed or antient MSS. will not convince me; I wonder more such have not been already fabricated.<sup>51</sup>

Dr. Johnson hinted, that he should not admit any thing as an original that was not after his challenge speedily produced; for he suspected that what was wanting in evidence might be supplied by zealous industry; and I have lately received information that *Fingal* is now distributed among some zealous Highlanders, to be translated into Earse. When it shall come out, I shall be apt to say, *Hic niger est, hunc tu, Romane, caveto.*<sup>52</sup>

The pamphlet concludes with a history of my journey, and a ridiculous account of my manner of travelling, with another gross and impudent falsehood, that I confessed myself ranging the Highlands at the expence of some persons in England to collect proofs against the authenticity of Fingal. It is false that I made any such declaration. It is false that I travelled at any man's expence but my own.—Where are the Englishmen that care whether Fingal was of Scotland or Ireland; whether Ossian be genuine or suppositious? My undertaking was to enlarge my knowledge of the Earse language and literature, and the result of my enquiry was, that Fingal cannot be found in the Highlands, either written or recited.<sup>53</sup>

Surely there is a time when a question like this must have an end. If Fingal exists in Galic, let the MSS. be shown—When Nodot pretended to have discovered a complete Petronius at Belgrade, the general cry of the learned was, “shew us the manuscript.” When very lately some letters were printed under the name of the Pope Ganganelli, the reasons, however specious, that were offered for the authenticity, were effectually silenced by one demand, “shew the originals.”<sup>54</sup>

If the originals of Fingal can ever be shown, opposition may be silenced, but till then its defenders may justly be considered as sharing the fate of other liars, in being reduced to the necessity of accumulating falsehood upon falsehood, and supporting one imposture by another.<sup>55</sup>

## Notes

### I AN INTRODUCTORY SURVEY OF SCHOLARSHIP ON OSSIAN

- 1 Thomas Percy, "Anecdotes and Remarks by Thomas Percy," in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1897), II: 218.
- 2 For useful, if incomplete, lists of publications, see George F. Black's *Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic Controversy: A Contribution towards a Bibliography* (New York: New York Public Library, 1926); John J. Dunn, "Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic Controversy: A Supplementary Bibliography," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 75 (1972): 465–73; Margaret M. Smith, "James Macpherson: 1736–1796," in vol. III (1700–1800), pt 2, of *Index of English Literary Manuscripts* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1989), 179ff.
- 3 Derick S. Thomson, "Macpherson's *Ossian*: Ballads to Epics," in *The Heroic Process: Form, Function and Fantasy in Folk Epic*, eds. Bo Almquist, Seamus O Cathain, and Padraig O'Healai (Dublin: Glendale Press, 1987), 259; emphasis added.
- 4 Derick S. Thomson, "James Macpherson: The Gaelic Dimension," in *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations*, eds. Howard Gaskill and Fiona Stafford (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998), 23.
- 5 Joseph Bysveen, *Epic Tradition and Innovation in Macpherson's Fingal* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wicksell International, 1982), 9; Paul J. DeGategno, *James Macpherson* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), 1.
- 6 Howard Gaskill, ed., *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1991), 6.
- 7 Dafydd Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson's The Poems of Ossian* (Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2003).
- 8 Dafydd Moore, "The Critical Response to Ossian's Romantic Bequest," in *English Romanticism and the Celtic World*, eds. Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rawes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 38–53.
- 9 Howard Gaskill, ed., introduction to *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (New York: Thoemmes, 2004), 1.
- 10 For these miscalculations, see respectively Peter T. Murphy, *Poetry as an Occupation and an Art in Britain: 1760–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University



- Press, 1993), 23 and 27; Robert P. Fitzgerald, “The Style of Ossian,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 6 (1966): 25; John Macqueen, *Progress and Poetry: The Enlightenment and Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1982), 89; Nicholas Groom, *The Forger’s Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature* (London: Picador, 2002), 111 (on *Fingal* and *Temora*); and Murray G. H. Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and the Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 73, and *The Myth of the Jacobite Clans* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1995), 37.
- 11 For these misleading designations, see respectively, Fiona Stafford, preface to *From Gaelic to Romantic*, introduction to James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Work* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1996), xvi, and *The Sublime Savage: A Study of Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1988), 85; Uve Boker, “The Marketing of Macpherson: The International Book Trade and the First Phase of the German Ossian Reception,” in *Ossian Revisited*, 87; Moore, “The Critical Response to Ossian’s Romantic Bequest,” 23–4; David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 20; James Porter, “‘Bring Me the Head of James Macpherson’: The Execution of Ossian and the Wellsprings of Folkloristic Discourse,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 114 (2001): 399; and Matthew Wickman, “The Allure of the Improbable: *Fingal*, Evidence, and the Testimony of the ‘Echoing Heath,’” *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 115 (2000): 181.
  - 12 Margaret Russett, *Fictions and Fakes: Forging Romantic Identity, 1760–1845* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2. This study “assumes that both lies and fictions are linguistic categories, varieties of narratives” (12), rather than ethical dichotomies intrinsically related to realities of historical experience. The danger of this relativistic assumption is the needless difficulty involved in correcting historical error in a book like this one, confusing the eighteenth-century Scottish schoolteacher turned literary liar, William Lauder, with the “Jacobite bishop” (9), Dr. William Laud, seventeenth-century Archbishop of Canterbury.
  - 13 For these misleading terms, see respectively K. K. Ruthven, *Faking Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 399; Murphy, *Poetry as an Occupation and an Art*, 27; Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 110 and 76; and Gauti Kristmannsson, “Ossian: A Case of Celtic Tribalism or a Translation Without an Original,” in *Transfer: Übersetzen-Dolmetschen-Interculturalität . . .*, eds. Horst W. Drescher, Jürgen Herber, and Lothar Gorke (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1997), 452.
  - 14 Christopher Whyte, “Fishy Masculinities: Neill Gunn’s *The Silver Darlings*,” in *Gendering the Nation: Studies in Modern Scottish Literature*, ed. Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1995), 56.
  - 15 *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland, Appointed to Inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian*, ed. Henry Mackenzie (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable Co., 1805). Malcolm Laing, “Dissertation,”

- in *The History of Scotland, from the Union of the Crowns on the Accession of James VI To the Throne of England, to the Union of the Kingdoms in the Reign of Queen Anne*, 2 vols. (London: 1800), 11: 377–453, and *The Poems of Ossian, &c. containing the Poetical Works of James Macpherson, Esq. in Prose and Rhyme*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1805).
- 16 See J. S. Smart, *James Macpherson: An Episode in Literature* (London: David Nutt, 1905) and n. 2 above.
  - 17 J. David Fleeman, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Treating His Published Works from the Beginnings to 1984* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).
  - 18 Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (Edinburgh: Lowe and Brydone, 1977), and *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (London: Granta Books, 2000); McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*; Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).
  - 19 Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996); Andrew Hook, “Ossian Macpherson as Image Maker,” *The Scottish Review*, 6 (1984): 39–44.
  - 20 Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 136.
  - 21 In the same vein, see Malcolm Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 1979) and Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands* (London: Macmillan, 1989).
  - 22 Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 15–41, published posthumously as a book, *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 75–188 especially.
  - 23 Pittcock criticizes Ossianic stereotyping in his most recent *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) and *Scottish Nationality* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), following his *Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and the Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 1991), *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), *The Myth of the Jacobite Clans* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1995), and *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685–1989* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).
  - 24 William Ferguson, *The Identity of the Scottish Nation: An Historic Quest* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1998).
  - 25 Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Howard D. Weinbrot, *Britannia’s Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Colin Kidd, *A Union of Multiple Identities: The British Isles, c. 1750–c. 1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Melyvn Kersey, “The Pre-Ossianic Politics

- of James Macpherson,” *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 27 (2004): 61–75.
- 26 Matthew Wickman, *The Ruins of Experience: Scotland’s “Romantick” Highlands and the Birth of the Modern Witness* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 115.
  - 27 Kenneth Simpson, *The Protean Scot: The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988); Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Robert Crawford, *The Modern Poet: Poetry, Academia, and Knowledge since the 1750s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Penny Fielding, *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture, and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Leith Davis, *Acts of Union: Scotland and the Literary Negotiation of the British Nation: 1707–1830* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Sebastian Mitchell, “James Macpherson’s Ossian and the Empire of Sentiment,” *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 22 (1999): 155–72; Ruthven, *Faking Literature*; Ian Haywood, *The Making of History: A Study of the Literary Forgeries of James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton in Relation to Eighteenth-Century Ideas of History and Fiction* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986); Joep Th. Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fìor-Ghail: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, Its Development and Literary Expression Prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: John Benjamin, 1986); Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland’s Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689–c.1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Colin Kidd, *British Identities before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
  - 28 Alan Bruford, *Gaelic Folk-Tales and Medieval Romances: A Study of the Early Modern Irish Romantic Tales and Their Oral Derivatives* (Dublin: Folklore of Ireland Society, 1969); Phyllis A. Harrison, “Samuel Johnson’s Folkloristics,” *Folklore* 94 (1983): 57–65; Alan Dundes, “National Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore: A Reconsideration of *Ossian*, the *Kinder-un-Hausmarchen*, the *Kalevala*, and Paul Bunyan,” *Journal of Folklore Research*, 22 (1985): 5–18; Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); John R. and Margaret M. Gold, *Imagining Scotland: Tradition, Representation and Promotion in Scottish Tourism since 1750* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995); Porter, “‘Bring Me the Head of James Macpherson,’” 396–495.
  - 29 Donald E. Meek, “Development and Degeneration in Gaelic Ballad Texts,” in *The Heroic Process*, 131–60; Donald E. Meek, “The Sublime Gael: The Impact of Macpherson’s Ossian on Literary Creativity and Cultural Perception in Gaelic Scotland,” in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. Howard Gaskill (New York: Thoemmes, 2004), 40–66; Joep Th. Leerssen, “Ossian and the Rise of Literary Historicism,” and Micheal Mac Craith, “‘We Know All These Poems’: The Irish Response to Ossian,” in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, 109–225 and 91–108 respectively; Joseph Falaky Nagy, “Observations on the

- Ossianesque in Medieval Irish Literature and Modern Irish Folklore,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 114 (2001): 436–46; Donald E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 2000).
- 30 Gaskill, “‘Ossian’ Macpherson: Towards a Rehabilitation,” *Comparative Criticism*, 8 (1986): 113–46.
- 31 Dafydd Moore, ed., *Ossian and Ossianism*, 4 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- 32 Nick Groom’s reaction to the following critique of his treatment of *Ossian*, in *The Forger’s Shadow*, appears in “Samuel Johnson and Truth: A Response to Curley,” *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Journal*, 17 (2006): 197–201. See Groom’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 3 vols. (London: Thoemmes, 1996); *The Making of Percy’s Reliques* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).
- 33 Terry Eagleton devotes a chapter to *The Forger’s Shadow* in *Figures of Dissent: Reviewing Fish, Spivak, Zizek and Others* (London: Verso, 2005).
- 34 Johnson, *Adventurer* 92, in *The Idler and Adventurer*, eds. Walter Jackson Bate, J. M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell, vol. 11 of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 424.
- 35 Pat Rogers, “Chatterton and the Club,” in *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture*, ed. Nick Groom (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 144.
- 36 Pope, in *Samuel Johnson: The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; with Critical Observations on Their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), IV: 62.
- 37 Milton, in *Lives*, I: 294. For Johnson on Milton’s blank verse, see F. R. Leavis, “Johnson as Critic,” in *Samuel Johnson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Donald J. Greene (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965), 72–3: “Milton . . . is powerful enough to prevail over [Johnson] the critic’s training [as an Augustan preferring heroic couplets].”
- 38 William Wordsworth, *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface* (1814), in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 111: 75. For Macpherson’s impact, see John Robert Moore, “Wordsworth’s Unacknowledged Debt to Macpherson’s Ossian,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 40 (1925): 362–78, and Richard Gravel, *Wordsworth’s Bardic Vocation, 1787–1842* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1–2, 38, and 172. Wordsworth’s reaction to Macpherson’s authenticity is noted by Fiona Stafford, “‘Dangerous Success’: *Ossian*, Wordsworth, and English Romantic Literature,” in *Ossian Revisited*, 49–72, and by David Hill Radcliffe, “Ossian and the Genres of Culture,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 31 (1992): 230–1. See also Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 45: “Although Wordsworth condemns Macpherson roundly, he takes issue with the affective and procedural inauthenticity of the verse, and not with the author’s extrinsic or private fraudulence.” It is difficult to see how such aesthetic and moral issues could be divorced for Wordsworth.

- 39 Wordsworth, “Written in a Blank Leaf of Macpherson’s Ossian” (1824, 1827), lines 17–30, in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, eds. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), IV: 38–9.

## 2 JAMES MACPHERSON’S VIOLATION OF LITERARY TRUTH

- 1 Derick S. Thomson provides excellent surveys of Gaelic literature in *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1974) and *Gaelic Poetry in the Eighteenth Century* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1993). Also helpful are Alfred Nutt, *Ossian and Ossianic Literature* (London: David Nutt, 1910), James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical, An Introduction and Guide* (Dublin: Padraic Tailliur, 1979), Charles W. J. Withers, *Gaelic in Scotland, 1698–1981* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1984), James Mac Killop, *Fionn mac Cumhaill: Celtic Myth in English Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), Alan Bruford, “Oral and Literary Fenian Tales,” in *The Heroic Process: Form, Function and Fantasy in Folk Epic*, eds. Bo Almquist, Seamus O Cathain, and Padraig O’Healai (Dublin: Glendale Press, 1987), 25–58, and Donald E. Meek, *The Scottish Highlands: The Churches and Gaelic Culture* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996).
- 2 John Francis Campbell, in his *Introduction to Popular Tales of the West Highland, Orally Collected*, 4 vols. (London: Alexander Gardner, 1890–3), went so far as to hypothesize a bardically reconstructed Gaelic poetry as the (never identified) archetype which Macpherson later translated into his English prose *Ossian* to explain away unpleasant evidence of fraud (IV: 75). Further research only increased Campbell’s skepticism, as is evident in summaries of his letters collected in an indispensable resource for specialists, *Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts in Selected Libraries in Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. John Mac Kechnie, 2 vols. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1973). Campbell had no illusions at the end, although he was still an admirer of *Ossian* in *Leabhar Na Feinne: Heroic Ballads Collected in Scotland Chiefly from 1512 to 1871*, intro. Derick S. Thomson (1871; rpt. Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), 218: “He [Macpherson] was a great original genius and master of fiction, as I now know.” For Alexander Mac Bain’s wavering opinion of Macpherson, see his essay, “Who Were the Feinn?,” *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow*, 2 (1891–4): 70–2.
- 3 Ludwig Stern’s “Ossianic Heroic Poetry,” which Thomson deemed an important study, is contemptuous of Macpherson in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 22 (1897–8): 257–325. See Neil Ross’s introduction to *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1939), xxiii. Gerard Murphy edited pts 11 (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1933) and 111 (Dublin: Educational Co. of Ireland, 1953) of *Duainaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn*, ed. Eoin Mac Neill for pt 1 (London: David Nutt, 1908). Murphy’s final judgment is that “James

- Macpherson's epics were mainly a figment of his own imagination" in *The Ossianic Lore and Romantic Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland, 1955), 6. Daithi O'hOgain found Ossian a totally idiosyncratic departure from Gaelic literary tradition in *Fionn mac Cumhaill: Images of the Gaelic Hero* (New York: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), 313–15. Grateful acknowledgment must be made again for the learned advice of Micheal Mac Craith and Alan Harrison, two skeptical Gaelic scholars, still willing to give Macpherson some benefit of the doubt in his admittedly questionable procedures of composition. But see note 20 below for Mac Craith's well-taken suspicions of deception early on in Macpherson's project.
- 4 Donald Meek defended Macpherson in "The Gaelic Ballads of Scotland: Creativity and Adaptation," in *Ossian Revisited*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1991), 19, but concedes much invention in *Ossian* in *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 2000), 38–9.
  - 5 Derick S. Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's 'Ossian'* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1952), 72.
  - 6 "'Ossian' Macpherson and the Gaelic World of the Eighteenth Century," *Aberdeen University Review*, 40 (1963): 14; emphasis added.
  - 7 Dryden, in *Samuel Johnson: The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; With Critical Observations on Their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 11: 125.
  - 8 Although *Calthon and Comal* was Macpherson's invention (except for Ossian's closing lament), he added a note translating the lament of Dargo's wife, which was indeed a faithful paraphrase of a Gaelic source, translated by Matthew Young as "The Lamentation of the Wife of Dargo" in "Ancient Gaelic Poems respecting the Race of the Fians, collected in the Highlands of Scotland in the Year 1784," *Transactions of the Royal Irish Society*, 1 (1787) 58–61. For Macpherson's version subjoined to *Calthon and Comal*, see *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1996), ed. Howard Gaskill, intro. Fiona Stafford, 174–5 and 466n. 26. All further references to *Ossian* and Blair's related works are to this modern edition.
  - 9 Macpherson, canto v of *The Highlander*, lines 177–80, in *The Poems of Ossian, &c. containing the Poetical Works of James Macpherson, Esq. in Prose and Rhyme*, ed. Malcolm Laing, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1805), 11: 570.
  - 10 "Note from Mr. Home" (undated) in Appendix of *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland, Appointed to Inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian*, ed. Henry Mackenzie (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable Co., 1805), 68–9. Thomson suspected a preconceived plan by Macpherson to develop the *Ossian* canon from the start in "James Macpherson: The Gaelic Dimension," in *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations*, eds. Howard Gaskill and Fiona Stafford (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998), 17–26, and earlier in "Macpherson's *Ossian*: Ballads to Epics," in *The Heroic Process*, 20.



- 11 Compare Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, 16–17 and 156, and Ross, *Book of the Dean*, 121 and 75–7.
- 12 *Poems of Ossian*, 156–7 and 459. See n. 29 below.
- 13 George Laurie [to Malcolm Laing?], 18 January 1782, in Laing, *Poems of Ossian, &c. containing the Poetical Works of James Macpherson*, xv: n. 8
- 14 Blair to ? [ca. 1762], National Library of Scotland 3219, folios 1a–b.
- 15 Blair to Robert Burns, 4 May 1787, National Library of Scotland 3408.
- 16 Blair, preface to *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, in Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, 6.
- 17 Fragment vi is a conflation of at least two ballad versions, “Cath Rìgh na Sorchà” and “An Ionmhuinn” (“The Maid of Craca”), according to Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, 14 and 29–31. Campbell, in *Leabhar Na Feinne*, xii and 127, anticipated this discovery. Stern also identified two ballads, “Maighre-borb” and “The Battle of Illan,” with a brief English summary, “Ossianic Heroic Poetry,” 308–10. More helpful for purposes of comparison are English translations in Ross, *Book of the Dean*, 137–47, in *Reliquiae Celticae: Texts, Papers, Studies in Gaelic Literature and Philology left by the late Reverend Alexander Cameron, L.L.D.*, eds. Alexander Mac Bain and John Kennedy, 2 vols. (Inverness: Northern Newspaper and Printing Co., 1892–4), 1: 20–31 and especially 244–6, and by Matthew Young, “The Combat of Osgar and Illan, Son of the King of Spain,” *Transactions of the Royal Irish Society*, 1 (1787), 174–81.
- 18 James Macpherson, “A Dissertation Concerning the Antiquity, &c. of the Poems of Ossian,” in Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, 51. For English translations of Ossian lamenting old age and change, see Ross, *Book of the Dean*, 6–7, 9–11, 37–9, 59, 117–36, and n. 36 below. For an English summary of Diarmaid’s romance with Grainne, see Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, III: 49–60, 64–9, and 74–86, O’Hogain, *Fionn mac Cumhaill*, 171–5, and Doragh Smyth, *A Guide to Irish Mythology* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996), 139. Fragment vii is considered only tenuously tied to Gaelic tradition by Campbell, *Leabhar Na Feinne*, 152, by John Whitehead, *This Solemn Mockery: The Art of Literary Forgery* (London: Arlington Books, 1973), 78–80, and by Micheal Mac Craith, “‘We Know All These Poems’: The Irish Response to Ossian,” in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. Howard Gaskill (New York: Thoemmes, 2004), 103.
- 19 This is my own identification of Gaelic sources behind Fragment viii. For Ossian’s lament, see previous note. Variant English translations of the “Praise of Goll” appear in *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, III: 309–11, *Duainaire Finn*, 1: 319–29, and especially Ross, *Book of the Dean*, 61–9. The wrestling match can be found in book v of *Fingal*, similarly based on the central battle of the “Lay of Manus.”
- 20 Stern saw the relevance of “Garbh Mac Stairn” to Fragment xiv (“Ossianic Heroic Poetry,” 298). The identification of the wrestling match from the “Lay of Manus” is my own inference and is important for establishing evidence of a bogus epic already being premeditated, before any tour of the Highlands by Macpherson brought to light a supposed Gaelic original for

*Fingal*. My finding confirms Micheal Mac Craith's insight in "The 'Forging' of Ossian," in *Celticism*, ed. Terence Brown (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996), 132:

only Macpherson himself could have supplied the outline [of the supposed Gaelic epic original mentioned in Blair's preface to the *Fragments*] . . . A character called Garbh mac Stairn [so mentioned in Fragment XIV but replaced by "Swarthan" in Blair's prefatory outline of the epic] actually occurs in genuine Gaelic ballads . . . The contradictions between the actual Fragment and the preface indicate that while Macpherson had genuine Gaelic ballads in mind, a process of recasting was already under way.

- 21 Blair to Henry Mackenzie on drafting the preface to *Fragments*, 20 December 1797, in appendix to *Report of the Highland Society*, 88. For the possibility that some of the English *Ossian* might have reflected a made-up Gaelic version already at hand, see Gaskill's fine "What Did James Macpherson Really Leave on Display at His Publisher's Shop in 1762?," *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 16 (1990): 67–89.
- 22 Blair, preface to *Fragments*, in Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, 6.
- 23 Macpherson, footnote for Fragment XIV, in Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, 416n. 50.
- 24 Macpherson to James M'Lagan, 10 January 1761, in appendix to *Report of the Highland Society*, 155. Hugh Trevor-Roper, in his posthumous *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), postulates an intermediate Gaelic prototype, cobbled together largely by a friendly kinsman, Lachlan Macpherson of Strathmashie, in the last three months of 1760 from bits and pieces of old Ossianic ballads taken from recitations and manuscripts recovered recently on a Highland tour for collecting Gaelic specimens. James Macpherson then allegedly translated this Gaelic concoction into the *Fingal* and *Temora* volumes and kept it in his possession as the basis of the bogus Gaelic Ossian published in 1807. However, contrary to Trevor-Roper's assertion that James Macpherson translated from such a made-up Gaelic text is his own statement that "all Gaelic scholars . . . agree that in structure, form, and content the [1807 Gaelic Ossian] does not correspond with the English [Ossian]" (169). In line with this point, we must not forget that almost three-quarters of the *Ossian* canon is sheer Macphersonian invention, without authentic Gaelic antecedents, either ancient or modern, behind its creation. Not the first to propose an intermediate Gaelic source behind his fabrications (see nn. 2 and 21 above), Trevor-Roper propounds an informed conjecture founded on circumstantial evidence that inadequately accounts for a preceding publication, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (June 1760). This volume was contrived before the supposed intermediate Gaelic concoction and the later English *Ossian* volumes and yet was the same as those subsequent volumes in style and internal creative make-up. If we suppose an intermediate Gaelic prototype fabricated before the *Fragments* and not simply a preconceived plan by James Macpherson to contrive an Ossianic epic in English, what would have motivated such elaborate imposture prior to the advent of any Ossianic craze? For that matter, did not James Macpherson by himself previously make readily available to John Home English specimens – or "fragments" – allegedly derived from



certain Gaelic poems? To write off the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* as a “previous common venture” of Lachlan and James Macpherson without any substantiation (185) is to overlook the fact that James Macpherson on his own composed youthful English poems anticipating *Fingal* in story line, melancholy nobility, nature similes, and even source material and on his own published an Ossianic translation of the *Iliad* in 1773. These are telling reasons for assuming that the laird of Strathmashie need not “have played a considerable part in the construction of *Fingal* and *Temora*” (176) and that it is plainly wrong to argue “that there is little in James Macpherson’s other work to suggest that he was capable of writing the works of Ossian” without a hypothetical bogus Gaelic version to guide him (180). In any case, the possibility of an intermediate Gaelic version early on in the fabrication of the English *Ossian* does not alter the internal creative dynamic, the extent, or the offensiveness of James Macpherson’s literary deception.

- 25 *The Battle of Lora* followed the ballad source in skeletal outline but changed the plot by the Romantic-gothic elaboration of Erragon’s tomb, in *Fingal*’s admonition about elopement, by Bosmina’s appearance and reaction to the king’s refusal of ransom as well as by *Fingal*’s magnanimous cessation of slaughter and burial of the king, in Lorna’s grief-induced death, and by the closing addition of the ghosts of Lorna and Aldo. The emotion-laden alterations run counter to the fundamentally unromantic ballad tale of the worst Fenian battle (except perhaps for the Battle of Gabhra) and almost overwhelm the central plot motif of the fleeing woman, halfway through the ballad. According to the *Report of the Highland Society*, 154, Macpherson told M’Lagan on 10 January 1761 that his ballad source, *Teanntachd Mhorna Feinne*, “is far from being a bad poem, were it complete . . .” Is there a possible suggestion here that he had to tamper with the poem to make it complete? Not so, according to his introductory note for *The Battle of Lora*: “This poem is compleat” (440). Such a comment would seem to convey the false impression that he faithfully translated a wholly intact Gaelic original, without having made the above alterations, when in fact he introduced changes to the traditional story, by a creative process of fabricated elaboration, well beyond the dictates of the Gaelic original. Thomson, in *Gaelic Sources*, 42, argued that Macpherson “follows the sequence of his ballad source with some considerable fidelity” but without literal translation. Campbell in *Leabhar Na Feinne*, 95–6, and Stern, 305, saw fewer affinities between the Gaelic and Macphersonian versions. For purposes of comparison with *The Battle of Lora*, consult Matthew Young’s “The Invasion of Ireland by Erragon,” *Transactions of the Royal Irish Society*, 1 (1787): 182–95, the English translation in *Duainaire Finn*, 111: 362–9, and “The Great Strait of the Feinn,” *Dewar Manuscripts*, ed. John Mac Kechnie, trans. Hector Maclean (Glasgow: William Mac Lellan & Co., 1964), 1154–60.
- 26 *Dar-thula* followed the Deirdre story very faintly in skeletal outline. According to Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, 55, “he loses much of the story,” because he

- wholly invented the address to the moon, the ghosts of Cuchullin and Colla, the battles against jilted lovers, and Ossian's praise of Nathos. For English translations of the Deirdre story to contrast with *Dar-thula*, see *Reliquiae Celticae*, 421–63, and Alexander Carmichael's "Deirdre," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 14 (1887): 370–87.
- 27 For the largely invented content of *Carthón* surrounding the father–son combat related in *Duan Conlaoch*, see Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, 48–51, and Stern, 296–7, with some reversal of combat roles between father and son introduced by Macpherson, who also, I suspect, added faint echoes of the Gaelic legend of Cuchulain's migration to Scotland and mating with Aife, mother of Conlaoch. An English translation of one version of *Duan Conlaoch* appears in Ross, *Book of the Dean*, 168–75, and a brief English summary can be found in Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, 198–9.
  - 28 For the borrowed Gaelic episode, inspiring less than one-third of *Carric-thura*, see Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, 51–3. An English summary of the *Tale of the Muilgheartach* (The Monster-Hag of Norway behind Macpherson's Spirit of Loda) can be found in Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Vikings and the Viking Wars in Irish and Gaelic Tradition* (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1931), 216–18 and 221–7. An English translation of one version of the story appears in Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, 111: 136–59.
  - 29 The opening of *Temora* faintly parallels the beginning of *Fingal*, but the central episode derived from different Gaelic sources, specifically, "The Battle of Gabhra" and "The Death of Oscar," which Macpherson framed by invented episodes of the ghosts of Cuchullin and Cormac, the killing of Cormac by Cairbar, and the arrival of noble Cathmor to revenge the fate of his brother, Cairbar. See Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, 14 and 59–68, and Stern, "Ossianic Heroic Poetry," 315–23, for useful commentary and a summary. Compare *Temora* with "Battle of Gabhra," trans. Nicholas O'Kearney, *Transactions of the Ossianic Society*, 1 (1853): 68–133 (verse translation) and 134–53 (prose translation). Other English translations appear in *Reliquiae Celticae*, 40–53, and Ross, *Book of the Dean*, 53–67. Thomas Hill published "The Ode of Oscar," in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 53 (1783): 484–94, and Matthew Young offered another English translation, "The Death of Oscar," in *Transactions of the Royal Irish Society*, 1 (1787): 58–61. Similarly, Campbell translated *Laoidh Osgair* in *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, 111: 322–47, and condemned Macpherson for his fabricating ways in *Leabnar Na Feinne*, 185: "That pestilent Scotchman had shaken the whole system [of authentic Gaelic literature]; to make Caledonian Epics with fragments of the ruin which he had made."
  - 30 Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, 14.
  - 31 *Ibid.* 14–20. For English summaries of "Garbh mac Stairn," see Stern, "Ossianic Heroic Poetry," 297–8, and Christiansen, *The Vikings and the Viking Wars in Irish*, 88–99. *Reliquiae Celticae*, 220–4 and 357–61, and *Leabnar Na Feinne*, 3–6, offer Gaelic variants.
  - 32 *Gaelic Sources*, 21–3 and 26–8. For English summaries of the "Lay of Manus," see *Leabnar Na Feinne*, 74–7, Stern, "Ossianic Heroic Poetry," 300–4, and

- especially Christiansen, *The Vikings and the Viking Wars in Irish*, 135–55. Compare and contrast *Fingal* with Thomas Hill's translation of the Gaelic *Magnus* in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 53 (1783): 33–7, and with Charlotte Brooke's *Magnus the Great: A Poem in Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789) (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970), 35–65.
- 33 *Gaelic Sources*, 28–31. For an English summary of “Fionn's Visit to Norway,” see especially Christiansen, 183–97, as well as O'hOgain, *Fionn mac Cumhaill*, 196–98. A prose translation appears in Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, 111: 382–6. For “The Maid of Craca” (previously making up Fragment v1), see n. 17 above.
- 34 *Gaelic Sources*, 31–41. For an English translation, see *Leabhar Na Feinne*, 141–2, and “Ossian's Courtship of Eivirallin,” by Matthew Young in *Transactions of the Irish Royal Society*, 1 (1787): 52–7. Variations on the “Praise of Goll” appear in English in *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, 111: 309–11, *Duainaire Finn*, 1: 319–29, and especially Ross, *Book of the Dean*, 61–9.
- 35 *Gaelic Sources*, 23–6.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 26. For English translations of the framing device of Ossian lamenting (used repeatedly by Macpherson), see Ross, *Book of the Dean*, 6–7, 9–11, 37–9, 59, 117–23, and 124–35, *Duainaire Finn*, 32–57 and 194–5, *Reliquiae Celticae*, 10–19, and *Laoite Fiannuigheachta*, ed. John O'Daly, in *Transactions of the Ossianic Society*, 4 (1856): 2–63. Gaelic variants of the lamenting motif can be found, for example, in *Laoite na Feinne*, ed. Padraig O Siofradha (Dublin: Cloluct an Talboroig, 1941), 1–23, and *Fian-Laoite*, ed. Seoram Laoroe (Dublin: Clodanna, 1918), 70–8.
- 37 *Gaelic Sources*, 40–1. For an English translation of *Sliabh nain Ban Fionn*, see Ross, *Book of the Dean*, 12–17, and for “Fingal's Visit to Norway,” see n. 33 above.
- 38 See *Gaelic Sources*, 59–68, and n. 29 above.
- 39 Thomson reversed his earlier opinion that Macpherson initially intended no deception and came to see a “carefully constructed plan” from the start in “James Macpherson: The Gaelic Dimension,” in *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations*, eds. Howard Gaskill and Fiona Stafford (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998), 20.
- 40 Samuel Johnson, *Dryden*, in *Lives*, 11: 144. Johnson offered to help Percy in modernizing original texts for *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. See Percy to William Shenstone, 9 January 1758, British Museum Additional Manuscripts 28221, folio 10b: “Indeed he made me very tempting offers: for he promised to assist me in selecting the most reliable pieces & in revising the Text of those he selected.”
- 41 Johnson, preface to Thomas Maurice's *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1780), in *Samuel Johnson's Prefaces & Dedications*, ed. Allen T. Hazen (1937; rpt. Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1973), 141–2.
- 42 Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, 42.
- 43 Blair to Thomas Becket, 30 December 1763 [a mistake for 1762?], quoted by R. W. Chapman, “Blair on Ossian,” *Review of English Studies*, 7 (1931): 82.

- 44 Thomson so closes “Macpherson’s Ossian: Ballads to Epics,” in *Heroic Process: Form, Function and Fantasy in the Folk Epic*, 262:

The mixed motives that came into play in the construction of *The Poems of Ossian* may make it more difficult to exonerate Macpherson, or to see his creative achievement in an uncluttered light. Had he not claimed authenticity so loudly we would not look for it; had he not so busily falsified Scottish and Irish history his fabricated notes would not intrude on our appreciation of his fiction; had he been less of a nationalist his reception in England might have been kinder.

- 45 Donald M’Nicol, *Remarks on Dr. Samuel Johnson’s Journey to the Hebrides; in which are contained, Observations on the Antiquities, Language, Genius, and Manners of the Highlanders of Scotland* (London: T. Cadell, 1779 [actually March 1780]), 360. A strong case for Macpherson’s occasional tampering with this text, including passages in the near vicinity of this quotation, appears in Robert F. Metzdorf, “Macpherson and Johnson,” in *Eighteenth-Century Studies in Honor of Donald F. Hyde*, ed. W. H. Bond (New York: The Grolier Club, 1970), 45–61.
- 46 William Shaw, *A Rejoinder to an Answer from Mr. Clarke, on the Subject of Ossian’s Poems* (Rochester: T. Fisher, 1784), 71–2.
- 47 Macpherson to John Mackenzie, Secretary of the Highland Society of Scotland, 4 July 1784, in “Petition of Sir John Mac Gregor Murray of Lanvick, Baronet . . . against James Macpherson, Esq., of Belleville [son of James “Ossian” Macpherson], and the other executors of the late James Macpherson, Esq.” (21 November 1806), Signet Library Session Papers 472, 3.
- 48 Macpherson to Ferguson about John Davidson’s friendly advice for preparing the Gaelic *Ossian*, 1793, quoted by J. S. Smart, *James Macpherson: An Episode in Literature* (London: David Nutt, 1905), 193n. 2.
- 49 Thomson, appendix 11, *Gaelic Sources*, 85.
- 50 *The Poems of Ossian in the Original Gaelic, with a Literal Translation into Latin, by the Late Robert Macfarlan, A.M. together with a Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems, by Sir John Sinclair, Bart. . . . Published under the Sanction of the Highland Society of London*, 3 vols. (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1807), 1: iii–iv and xcii–xciii noting Thomas Ross as transcriber and agent of “the new literal translation” of *Ossian* into Gaelic. A waffling anti-Johnson note appears in *Report of the Highland Society*, 53.

### 3 JOHNSON ON TRUTH, FRAUDS, AND FOLKLORE

- 1 Johnson to Bennet Langton, 21 September 1758, in *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992–4), 1: 167. For a fine survey of the topic, see Jack Lynch, “Samuel Johnson’s ‘Love of Truth’ and Literary Fraud,” *Studies in English Literature: 1500–1900*, 42 (2002): 601–18.
- 2 Browne, in *The Works of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.*, 11 vols. (London: W. Pickering, 1825), vi: 478.

- 3 *Adventurer* 50 in *The Idler and the Adventurer*, eds. Walter Jackson Bate, J. M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell, vol. 11 of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 366.
- 4 Sir Robert Chambers, *A Course of Lectures on the English Law Delivered at the University of Oxford, 1767–1773, by Sir Robert Chambers, and Composed in Association with Samuel Johnson*, ed. Thomas M. Curley, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 1: 422.
- 5 Johnson to Boswell, 25 February 1775, in *Letters*, 11: 181.
- 6 *Preface to the Preceptor, Containing a General Plan of Education* (1748), in *Samuel Johnson's Prefaces & Dedications*, ed. Allen T. Hazen (1937; rpt. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1973), 186. For Johnson's intellectual priorities, see Walter Jackson Bate, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 129–76, and Maurice J. Quinlan, *Samuel Johnson: A Layman's Religion* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964).
- 7 *Milton*, in *Samuel Johnson: The Lives of the Most Eminent Living Poets; With Critical Observations on Their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 1: 248–9 and 282. For Johnson's literary priorities, see Bate, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson*, 177–233, as well as Leopold Damrosch, Jr., *The Uses of Johnson's Criticism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976) and Donald J. Greene, *Samuel Johnson: Updated Edition* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 109–10, 137–40, 150, and 169–70.
- 8 *Rambler* 151, in *The Rambler*, eds. Walter Jackson Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, vols. 111–v, in *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), v: 40.
- 9 *Account of a Book* [by William Tytler] *Entitled an Historical and Critical Enquiry into the Evidence Produced by the Earls of Moray and Morton against Mary Queen of Scots* (1760), in *Works* (1825), vi: 87.
- 10 *Pope*, in *Lives*, iv: 71.
- 11 *Rambler* 3, 111: 17. For an opposite view of literature, see, for example, Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), as well as Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999).
- 12 See James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson. Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, ed. L. F. Powell. 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–64), 11: 351–2, and Johnson, *Adventurer* 92, 11: 24.
- 13 Consider other telling *Dictionary* definitions of *truth*: “2. Conformity of words to thoughts. . . . 3. Purity from falsehood. . . . 8. Reality.” So too for Johnson's definition of *reality*: “1. Truth; verity; what is, not what merely seems.” By contrast, *falsehood*, is “1. Want of truth. . . . 2. Want of honesty; treachery . . . A lie; a false assertion.” *Fiction* ranges from good to bad between these opposites: “1. The act of feigning and inventing. . . . 2. The thing

- feigned or invented. . . . 3. A falsehood; a lie.” But *fiction* is fundamentally different from *real*, which is “2. Not fictitious; not imaginary; true; genuine.”
- 14 *Rambler* 96, IV: 149–50.
  - 15 Preface to *Shakespeare*, 1765, in *Johnson on Shakespeare* ed. Arthur Sherbo, vols. VII–VIII of *Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, VII: 61–2
  - 16 *Milton*, in *Lives*, I: 282.
  - 17 Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I: 152 and IV: 408. For Johnson’s parliamentary debates, see especially Benjamin Beard Hoover, *Samuel Johnson’s Parliamentary Reporting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), James L. Clifford, *Young Sam Johnson* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), 256–64, and Thomas Kaminski, *The Early Career of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 41–3 and 123–43.
  - 18 *Debates in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia*, in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 8 (1738): 283. As Betty Rizzo notes astutely, “Johnson was quite capable of literary forgery in a good cause,” in “‘Innocent Frauds’: By Samuel Johnson,” *The Library: Transactions of the Bibliographical Society*, 8 (1986): 249–64.
  - 19 *Swift*, in *Lives*, III: 203.
  - 20 “Of the Duty of a Journalist” (1758), in *Samuel Johnson’s Prefaces & Dedications*, 211.
  - 21 “To the Public” (1756), in *Samuel Johnson’s Prefaces & Dedications*, 129.
  - 22 See items 231 and 232 in *A Preliminary Handlist of Copies of Books Associated with Dr. Samuel Johnson*, ed. J. David Fleeman (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1984), 54.
  - 23 *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr. with Donald and Mary Hyde, vol. 1 of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 134.
  - 24 For Johnson’s admiration of Psalmanazar, see *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, III: 443, and *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D., during the Last Twenty Years of His Life, by Hester Lynch Piozzi*, in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 vols. (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1897), I: 266–7.
  - 25 Johnson’s view of Lauder is in “List of Books, with Remarks” in [Francis Blackburne’s very critical] *Remarks on Johnson’s Life of Milton* (1780), in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 50 (1780): 236.
  - 26 *Preface to an Essay on Milton’s Use and Imitation of the Moderns in His Paradise Lost*, in *Works* (1825), v: 268, 269. The best account of Lauder, based on five trail-blazing articles by Michael Marcuse, is by James L. Clifford, *Dictionary Johnson: Samuel Johnson’s Middle Years* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 57–70. See also Paul Baines, *The House of Forgery in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Brookfield, USA: Ashgate Press, 1999), 81–90.
  - 27 “Postscript,” in *Works* (1825), v: 271.
  - 28 *A Letter to the Reverend Mr. Douglas, Occasioned by His Vindication of Milton*, in *Works* (1825), v: 274.
  - 29 See *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, IV: 344, John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.*, ed. Bertram H. Davis (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 166,



- and Hester Lynch Thrale, *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale, 1776–1809*, ed. Katherine C. Balderston, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn. 1951), 1: 204. Fredric V. Bogel explores the psychological complexity of Johnson's ghostwriting in *The Dream of My Brother: An Essay on Johnson's Authority* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1990). Kathryn Temple speculates that Johnson felt guilt over his questionable writing acts causing "abject horror" for Macpherson's handiwork in *Scandal Nation: Law and Authorship in Britain, 1750–1832* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 86–8.
- 30 *Savage*, in *Lives*, III: 187.
- 31 "A New Prologue Spoken at the Representation of *Comus*" (ll. 15–16), in *Samuel Johnson: The Complete English Poems*, ed. J. David Fleeman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 93.
- 32 *Rambler* 80, IV: 55.
- 33 *Rambler* 140, IV: 383.
- 34 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I: 228–31.
- 35 Lauder to Thomas Birch, 15 March 1751, British Library Additional Manuscripts 4312, folio 67b.
- 36 *Milton*, in *Lives*, I: 265, 294–5.
- 37 *Review of the Account of the Conduct of the Dutchess of Marlborough* (1742), in *Works* (1825), VI: 5–6.
- 38 Anonymous notice in the "Foreign Books" section of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 12 (1742): 391, dealing with the *Antiquitates* of Lodivicus Muratori. For his antiquarian projects, see Paul Tankard, "That Great Literary Projector": Samuel Johnson's *Designs*, or Catalogue of Projected Works," *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, 13 (2002): 103–80.
- 39 Johnson, *An Account of the Harleian Library* (1742), in *Works* (1825), v: 185.
- 40 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, III: 333. See especially John A. Vance, *Samuel Johnson and the Sense of History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1984), and Martine Watson Brownley, "Samuel Johnson and the Writing of History," in *Johnson After Two Hundred Years*, ed. Paul J. Korshin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 97–109.
- 41 Johnson, *Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. Gwin J. Kolb, vol. XIV of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), II2.
- 42 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II: 92.
- 43 See Vance, *Samuel Johnson and the Sense of History*, 22, and Robert De Maria, Jr., "Johnson's Dictionary," in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 100.
- 44 Johnson, *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* (1747), eds. Gwin J. Kolb and Robert De Maria, Jr., *Johnson on the English Language*, in vol. XVII of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 55. For the common law dimension of Johnson on language, see Anne McDermott, "Johnson the Prescriptivist? The Case for the Defense," in *Anniversary Essays on Johnson's Dictionary*, ed. Jack Lynch and Anne McDermott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 129–46. Indispensable also

- is Allen Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary: 1746–1773* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- 45 Preface to a *Dictionary of the English Language*, in vol. XVIII of *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 75.
  - 46 Johnson to Thomas Warton, 16 July 1754, in *Letters*, 1: 81.
  - 47 Johnson to Thomas Warton, 10 June 1755 and 28 November 1754, in *Letters*, 1: 109 and 88.
  - 48 Thomas Percy to George Paton, 30 September 1778, in *The Correspondence of Thomas Percy & George Paton*, ed. A. F. Falconer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 157.
  - 49 Bennet Langton to Boswell, 10 August 1776, in *The Correspondence of James Boswell with Certain Members of the Club*, ed. Charles N. Fifer (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 72.
  - 50 Percy to William Shenstone, 24 November 1757, British Library Additional Manuscripts 28221, folio 6b. The authoritative biography is by Bertram H. Davis, *Thomas Percy: A Scholar-Cleric in the Age of Johnson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989). Particularly helpful among the Percy Letters are the following: *The Correspondence of Thomas Percy & Richard Farmer*, ed. Cleanth Brooks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1946); *The Correspondence of Thomas Percy & Evan Evans*, ed. Aneirin Lewis (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957); *The Correspondence of Thomas Percy & John Pinkerton*, ed. Harriet Harvey Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and *The Correspondence of Thomas Percy & Robert Anderson*, ed. W. E. K. Anderson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). I have availed myself of British Library originals for the sake of uncovering unpublished letters and identifying manuscript markings affecting the interpretation of texts.
  - 51 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 11: 91.
  - 52 Albert B. Friedman, *The Ballad Revival: Studies in the Influence of Popular on Sophisticated Poetry* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1961), 205.
  - 53 *Johnson on Shakespeare*, VIII: 996.
  - 54 *Gray*, in *Lives*, IV: 184.
  - 55 *Johnson on Shakespeare*, VIII: 1043–4.
  - 56 Johnson to Percy, 4 October, 1760, in *Letters*, 1: 191.
  - 57 Johnson to Percy, 29 November 1760, in *Letters*, 1: 194.
  - 58 Johnson to Percy, 12 September 1761, in *Letters*, 1: 201.
  - 59 Johnson to Percy, 3 September 1763, in *Letters*, 1: 231.
  - 60 Percy to Johnson, [ca. summer of 1763], British Library Additional Manuscripts 32325, folios 8a–b.
  - 61 Johnson to Edward Lye, 17 August 1765, in *Letters*, 1: 251.
  - 62 Johnson to Bennet Langton, 8 March 1766, in *Letters*, 1: 265.
  - 63 Percy to Richard Farmer [ca. October 1762], British Library Additional Manuscripts 28222, folio 4.
  - 64 Percy to Farmer, 9 October 1763, folio 26a.



- 65 Percy to Farmer, 29 July 1764, folio 44a.
- 66 “Dedication to the Right Honourable Elizabeth Countess of Northumberland: In Her Own Right Baroness Percy, Lucy, Poynings, Fitz-Payne, Bryan, and Latimer,” in *Johnson’s Prefaces & Dedications*, 167.
- 67 The preface, in a facsimile edition, with an introduction by Nick Groom, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 3 vols. (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996), 1: ix.
- 68 Percy to Farmer [ca. 10 November 1764], in *The Correspondence of Thomas Percy & Richard Farmer*, 79.
- 69 Rice Williams to Percy, 26 July 1761, British Library Additional Manuscripts 32330, folio 15b.
- 70 Williams to Percy, 14 August 1761, folio 23a.
- 71 Percy to Evan Evans, 21 July 1761, British Library Additional Manuscripts 32330, folio 13a. For Evans and the Welsh literary renaissance, see *The Letters of Lewis, Richard, William and John Morris, of Anglesey, (Morrisiaid Môn) 1728–1765*, ed. John H. Davis, 2 vols. (Oxford: Fox, Jones & Co., 1906), *Additional Letters of the Morris of Anglesey (1735–1786)*, ed. Hugh Owen, 2 vols. (London: Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1947), Saunders Lewis, *A School of Welsh Augustans: Being a Study in English Influences on Welsh Literature During Part of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1924), Prys Morgan, *A New History of Wales: The Eighteenth Century Renaissance* (Llanybie: Christopher Davies, 1981), Moira Dearnley, *Distant Fields: Eighteenth-Century Fictions of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), and “Sir William Jones, the Celtic Revival and the Oriental Renaissance,” in *English Romanticism and the Celtic World*, eds. Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rowes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20–34.
- 72 Evans to Percy, 8 August 1761, folio 17a.
- 73 Percy to Evans, 15 October 1761, folio 28b.
- 74 Percy to Shenstone, 22 February 1761, British Library Additional Manuscripts 28221, folios 90ab.
- 75 Percy to Evans, 14 August 1762, British Library Additional Manuscripts 32330, folio 39a.
- 76 Evans to Percy, 28 August 1762, folios 43ab.
- 77 Evans, Preface to *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards. Translated into English, with Explanatory Notes on the Historical Passages, and a short Account of Men and Places mentioned by the Bards, In order to give the Curious some Idea of the Taste and Sentiments of our Ancestors, and their Manner of Writing* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1764), ii.
- 78 Percy to Evans, 23 July 1764, British Library Additional Manuscripts 32330, folios 95a–96b.
- 79 Evans to Percy, 10 September 1764, folio 99a.
- 80 Percy to Evans, 18 December 1764, in *The Correspondence of Thomas Percy & Evan Evans*, 103–4.

- 81 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, v: 443.
- 82 For the charges and counter-charges, see Davis, *Thomas Percy: A Scholar-Cleric in the Age of Johnson*, 148 ff., and ch. 7 below.
- 83 Concerning this accusation against Macpherson, see *The Correspondence of Thomas Percy & Robert Anderson*, 123, 132, 137, 185–6, 191, 197–8, 201, and 282.
- 84 Percy to Monsieurs Bill and Bradfute, 16 April 1806, National Library of Scotland 599, folios 61ab.
- 85 Johnson to Charles Burney, 11 November 1784, in *Letters*, iv: 131.

#### 4 SEARCHING FOR TRUTH IN THE HIGHLANDS

- 1 James Boswell, *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*, LL.D. eds. Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (New York: Viking Press, 1936), 379.
- 2 *Boswell's London Journal: 1762–1763*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), 302.
- 3 *Boswell's Life of Johnson. Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, ed. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–64), 1: 432.
- 4 *Boswell's London Journal*, 264.
- 5 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 1: 396.
- 6 See Percy to Evan Evans, 23 July 1764, British Museum Additional Manuscripts 32330, folio 97b.
- 7 Boswell, 15 April 1778, *Boswell in Extremes 1776–1778*, eds. Charles McC. Weis and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 284.
- 8 Blair to David Hume, 1 July 1765, National Library of Scotland MS 23253. Their mutual friend responsible for the rumor was Patrick Murray, Fifth Baron Elibank.
- 9 Johnson to Hester Thrale, 21 September 1773, in *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992–4), 11: 78.
- 10 Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 26, 70, 77, and 86, but disputed by Leith Davis, *Acts of Union: Scotland and the Literary Negotiation of the British Nation, 1707–1830* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 191n. 8, by Ian Duncan, “The Pathos of Abstraction: Adam Smith, *Ossian*, and Samuel Johnson,” in *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, eds. Leith Davis, Ian Duncan, and Janet Sorenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 38, and by Nicholas Hudson, “Johnson, Scotland and the Evolution of Modern British Nationalism,” an address delivered at the Midwest Johnson Society in May of 2002. Misreadings of Johnson's imperialism in the Highlands sometimes reappear in Sorenson's *The Grammar of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 42 and 72. For Johnson's antipathy and divided response to

imperialism, see Donald J. Greene, “Samuel Johnson and the Great War for Empire,” in *English Writers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. John H. Mendendorff (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), and Thomas M. Curley, “Johnson and America,” *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, 6 (1994): 31–73. Charles Hinnant notes an artistic shaping of the *Journey* from a focus on Highland destitution in *Samuel Johnson: An Analysis* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 107.

- 11 Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. J. David Fleeman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 74. For Johnson’s divided view of independence and authority, Highland courage and British control, see Tim Fulford, *Landscape, Liberty, and Authority; Poetry, Criticism, and Politics from Thomson to Wordsworth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 73–115.
- 12 Lecture 14 “Of Aliens, and of the Incorporation of England with Wales and Its Union with Scotland” in pt 1 of *A Course of Lectures on the English Law Delivered at the University of Oxford, 1767–1773, by Sir Robert Chambers, Second Vinerian Professor of English Law and Composed in Association with Samuel Johnson*, ed. Thomas M. Curley, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 1: 279–80. For ties between the *Lectures* and the *Journey*, see Thomas M. Curley, “Johnson’s Tour of Scotland and the Idea of Great Britain,” *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 12 (1989): 135–44.
- 13 Boswell, *Boswell’s Journal of a Tour*, 24.
- 14 Compare with the first of the *Lectures* for Sir Robert Chambers in pt 11:  
Society rightly adjusted and regularly administered imparts to every individual its collective strength and collective wisdom, by laws which direct the actions of those who are not able to judge for themselves and protect the persons and properties of those who are insufficient for their own defence . . . (1: 305)
- 15 *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, 11: 290, n. 2.
- 16 Johnson to Boswell, 14 January 1775, in *Letters* 11: 166.
- 17 *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, 1v: 168.
- 18 See Thomas M. Curley, “Johnson No Jacobite; Or, Treason Not Yet Unmasked” and “Part II, A Quotable Rejoinder from A to C,” *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, respectively 7 (1996): 137–62 and 8 (1997): 127–31, both of which side with Donald Greene and Howard Weinbrot against controversial claims of Howard Erskine-Hill and Jonathan Clark for Jacobite and Nonjuror sympathies in Johnson.
- 19 Johnson, “The History of the English Language,” in *Samuel Johnson on the English Language*, eds. Gwin J. Kolb and Robert De Maria, Jr., vol. xviii of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 127.
- 20 *Boswell’s Journal of a Tour*, 37.
- 21 The opening of Johnson’s “Insula Sancti Kennethi” in English, in *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, v: 325–6.
- 22 Johnson to Hester Thrale, 6 September 1773, in *Letters*, 11: 62.
- 23 *Boswell’s Journal of a Tour*, 311–12.
- 24 Johnson to Hester Thrale, 6 September 1773, in *Letters*, 11: 62.

- 25 Item D30 in *A Preliminary Handlist of Copies of Books Associated with Dr. Samuel Johnson*, ed. J. David Fleeman, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1984), 75.
- 26 See Thomas M. Curley, *Samuel Johnson and the Age of Travel* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1976), first and final chapters especially.
- 27 Johnson to Hester Thrale, 12 August 1773, in *Letters*, 11: 50.
- 28 Johnson to Hester Thrale, 17 August 1773, in *Letters*, 11: 53.
- 29 *Boswell's Journal of a Tour*, 158.
- 30 Johnson to Hester Thrale, 21 September 1773, in *Letters*, 11: 73. See also Pat Rogers, *Johnson and Boswell: The Transit of Caledonia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 25–6.
- 31 *Boswell's Journal of a Tour*, 271–2.
- 32 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, v: 225.
- 33 Johnson to Charles O'Connor, 9 April 1757, in *Letters*, 1: 152.
- 34 See Item D25 in *A Preliminary Handlist of Copies of Books Associated with Dr. Samuel Johnson*, 74, J. J. Parry, “Dr. Johnson’s Interest in Welsh,” *Modern Language Notes*, 36 (1921): 374–6, and *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, v: 443 and 589.
- 35 Johnson to William Drummond, 13 August 1766, in *Letters*, 1: 270, and *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 11: 28–29nn. 2 and 508.
- 36 *Boswell's Journal of a Tour*, 127.
- 37 Items 231 and 232 in *Preliminary Handlist of Books*, 62. See also Derick S. Thomson, *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (London: Blackwell Reference, 1983), 23–4 (by Donald E. Meek) and 262–3 (by John A. Smith), Charles W. J. Withers, *Gaelic in Scotland, 1698–1981* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1984), 120–3, and Donald E. Meek, *The Scottish Highlands: The Churches and Gaelic Culture* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 1–14 and 18–19.
- 38 Thomas M. Curley, “Johnson’s Last Word on Ossian: Ghostwriting for William Shaw,” in *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of Aberdeen*, eds. Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), 375–431. Richard B. Sher, in “Percy, Shaw and the Ferguson ‘Cheat’: National Prejudice in the Ossian Wars,” in *Ossian Revisited*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1991), 207–45, rightly criticizes Curley for overstating Johnson’s assistance for Shaw. Nevertheless, if Johnson was not a ghostwriter for the *Enquiry* in the sense that he did much of the actual composing, he supplied a little information for the first edition of 1781, likely read it, and then corrected – sometimes composed perhaps – the twenty-nine page *Reply to Mr. Clark's Answer* in the second edition of 1782.
- 39 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, v: 241. See Hume to Blair, 19 September 1763, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 1: 399: “It is in vain to say, that their beauty will support them [Macpherson’s Ossianic poems], independent of their authenticity.” Unlike Johnson, however, Hume never made public his skepticism in his unpublished essay against *Ossian* (1775), probably out of deference to his Edinburgh colleagues and in response to his own early support of *Ossian*.

- 40 Boswell's *Journal of a Tour*, 79n. 9.
- 41 Thomson, *Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, 59–61, 89–90, and 99–101. See also Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
- 42 James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works* (Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh Press, 1996), ed. Howard Gaskill, 33.
- 43 Boswell's *Journal of a Tour*, 67.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 204.
- 45 Boswell: *Laird of Auchinleck, 1778–1782*, eds. Joseph W. Reed and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 3 March 1779, 63.
- 46 Boswell's *Journal of a Tour*, 22 September 1773, 204.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 23 September 1773, 206.
- 48 An emblematic example of this misreading of Johnson as bigoted imperialist is by Rajani Sudan, *Fair Exotics: Xenophobic Subjects in English Literature, 1720–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), which is answered by Melvyn Kersey, "‘The Wells of English Undeified’: Samuel Johnson's Romantic Resistance to Britishness," in *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, 17 (2006): 69–84, and by Nicholas Hudson, *Samuel Johnson and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 49 "Apophthegms, &c., from Hawkins's Edition of Johnson's Works," in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1897), 11: 10.
- 50 Boswell's *Journal of a Tour*, 341. See also John Cannon, *Samuel Johnson and the Politics of Hanoverian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 114. Undue stress on Johnson's Scottophobia continues in modern scholarship, such as in Hans Utz, "A Genevan's Journey to the Hebrides in 1807: An Anti-Johnsonian Venture," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 27 (1992): 46–71.
- 51 Johnson to John, Earl of Bute, 20 July 1762, in *Letters*, 1: 208.
- 52 Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, 11: 300–1.
- 53 See Johnson to Boswell, 21 June and 26 November 1774, in *Letters*, 11: 144 and 155.
- 54 Johnson to Boswell, 4 July and 1 October 1774 and 14 January 1775, in *Letters*, 11: 145, 150, and 166.
- 55 Boswell's *Journal of a Tour*, 379.
- 56 Hugh Blair to Elizabeth Montagu, 1 April 1775, Huntington Library MO488.
- 57 Walter Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 519.
- 58 Nick Groom, *The Forger's Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature* (London: Picador, 2002), 107–8. James Mac Killop, *Fionn mac Cumhail: Celtic Myth in English Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 80, also casts doubt on Macpherson's threatening Johnson physically: "We cannot know for certain if this is true as Boswell did not see the contents of Macpherson's final contemptuous letter and it has not survived." See nn. 61 and 63 for Fiona Stafford's article, differing from my reconstruction of events in her underplaying the brutishness of Macpherson's behavior.

- 59 John Almon [?pseud. "A Rustic,"], *A Letter to James Macpherson, Esq. with an Address to the Public on His History of Great Britain, and His Original Papers* (London: J. Almon, 1775), 5.
- 60 Hume to Blair, 6 October 1763, *Letters of David Hume*, 1: 403.
- 61 Macpherson to William Strahan, 15 January 1775, in Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson* (1894; rpt., New York: Haskell House, 1968), 245, and Macpherson to Johnson, 15 January 1775, in Fiona Stafford, "Dr. Johnson and the Ruffian: New Evidence in the Dispute between Samuel Johnson and James Macpherson," *Notes & Queries*, 36 (1989): 72.
- 62 Saunders, *Life and Letters of Macpherson*, 247, and Stafford, "Dr. Johnson and the Ruffian," 73.
- 63 The admirable discovery of this crucial letter from Strahan to Macpherson, 18 January 1775, was made by Fiona Stafford, who points out in "Dr. Johnson and the Ruffian," 74, that the

phrase ["no *personal affront*"] is clearly an echo of Macpherson's Advertisement and the description of Johnson's declaration "under his hand" suggests that Strahan had obtained a written endorsement of the apology and a firm promise to remove the offending sentence from future editions of the *Journey*.

I agree, but Stafford suggests, 72, that Macpherson's opening note to Johnson "actually contains no threat of physical violence." That Johnson was persuaded by Strahan to make a conciliatory gesture to stop the quarrel is indicated by another facet of the publisher's letter to Macpherson. Why would Strahan be needlessly circumstantial about Johnson objecting to *Fingal* but not to *Temora*, unless Johnson had said so in the course of a pacific negotiation mediated by Strahan? If anything, the publisher's mention of Johnson's continuing reservations over *Fingal* risked inflaming rather than appeasing the offended Highlander. Strahan had only to invent Johnson's overall compliance and leave it at that. To be sure, Johnson in Scotland investigated *Fingal* but not *Temora*, which is never mentioned in his writings or conversation or in Boswell's account of the Highland tour.

- 64 See Stafford, "Dr. Johnson and the Ruffian," 73, and Fleeman's edition of the *Journey*, introduction and 251–2.
- 65 Compare the wording of the Becket advertisement of 19 January 1775 reproduced in *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 11: 510–11, with almost identical language in Macpherson's 1763 advertisement for his Gaelic specimen of book VII of *Temora*, in Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, 330: "To print any part of the former collection was unnecessary, as a copy of the originals lay, for many months, in the bookseller's hands, for the inspection of the curious." Gaskill notes in *Poems of Ossian*, 541, that any Gaelic *Fingal* possibly on display at Becket's bookshop was "concocted by Macpherson himself, with or without help, from friends."
- 66 William Duncan to John Sinclair, 9 June 1806, in *The Poems of Ossian, in the Original Gaelic, with a Literal Translation into Latin, by the Late Robert Macfarlan, A.M. together with a Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems*,

- by Sir John Sinclair, Bart . . . Published under the Sanction of the Highland Society of London, 3 vols. (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1807), 1: cxxx.
- 67 Johnson to Boswell, 21 January and 7 February 1775, in *Letters*, 11: 170 and 176–7.
- 68 Fleeman, Introduction to *A Journey*, xxx–xxx1. See *The Letters of David Garrick*, ed. David M. Little and George M. Kahrl, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 111: 993, for Garrick writing to Boswell on 8 March 1775 that Londoners perceived the dispute initially as a violent feud between Johnson and Macpherson:
- You have heard I am Sure of Letters and Messages (very rough ones indeed) that have passed between the Dr & Mr Macpherson – but Nine Days have done wth their business, as they do with all Wonderful Matters, almost annihilated it . . . how the dispute about Fingal will end, I cannot Yet Say; I hope not wth bloody Crowns, as seem'd likely at first.
- 69 Sir William Forbes to John Forbes, 15 February 1775, National Library of Scotland MS3112, folio 26b. See also Fleeman, introduction to *A Journey*, xxx, and Stafford, “Dr. Johnson and the Ruffian,” 75.
- 70 Thomas Campbell, *Dr. Campbell's Diary of a Visit to England in 1775*, ed. James L. Clifford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947), 61.
- 71 Stafford, in “Dr. Johnson and the Ruffian,” 76, sees the later change in the dictated letter as evidence of aggrandizing Johnson by debasing his enemy through “the myth of the marauding Macpherson . . . derived largely from the partisan biographers of the eighteenth century.” The marauding Macpherson was no myth; as Johnson wrote in his original famous letter, “Your rage I defy.”
- 72 Johnson to Macpherson, 20 January 1775, in *Letters*, 11: 168–9.
- 73 Johnson to Boswell, 21 January 1775, in *Letters*, 11: 170.
- 74 Boswell to Johnson, 18 February 1775, in *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 11: 308–9.
- 75 Johnson to Boswell, 25 February 1775, in *Letters*, 11: 181.
- 76 *Boswell: The Ominous Years: 1774–1776*, eds. Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 56–7.
- 77 Forbes to John Forbes, National Library of Scotland MS3112, folios 25b–26b.
- 78 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 11: 311. See also *Boswell: The Ominous Years: 1774–1776*, 73.
- 79 David Hume, “Of the Authenticity of Ossian's Poems,” in *Philosophical Works*, eds. Thomas Hill Greene and Thomas Hodge Grose (1874–5; rpt., Darmstadt, Germany: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964), 1v: 415–24. For his changing sentiments on *Ossian*, see especially Hume to David Dalrymple, 16 August 1760; Hume to William Strahan, 9 February 1761; Hume to Blair, 19 September 1763, 6 October 1763, December 1763, 20 July 1765; and Hume to Gibbon, 18 March 1776, in *Letters of Hume*, 1: 328–31, 342–3, 398–401, 403–4, 418–19, 513–14, and 11: 310–11 respectively.
- 80 *Boswell: The Ominous Years: 1774–1776*, 89.
- 81 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, v: 389–90 and 11: 302.
- 82 *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 45 (1775): 35–8.



- 83 Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny*, *Samuel Johnson: Political Writings*, ed. Donald J. Greene, in vol. x of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 423. For a notice of the pamphlet in March, see *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 45 (1775): 335–6.
- 84 [James Macpherson, in] Donald M'Nicol, *Remarks on Dr. Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Hebrides* (London: T. Cadell, 1779), 365–7. See R. F. Metzendorf, "M'Nicol, Macpherson, and Johnson," in *Eighteenth-Century Studies in Honor of Donald F. Hyde*, ed. W. H. Bond (New York: Grolier Club, 1970), 45–6 especially.
- 85 William Shaw, *An Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Ossian* (London: J. Murray, 1781), 12–13. For reports of a weapon-wielding Johnson, see Shaw, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the late Dr. Samuel Johnson* (1785), in *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, eds. O. M. Brack and Robert E. Kelley (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1974), 173, and John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. Bertram H. Davis (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 217.
- 86 John Clark, *An Answer to Mr Shaw's Inquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Ossian* (Edinburgh: C. Elliott, 1781), 48.

#### 5 CHARLES O'CONOR AND THE CELTIC REVIVAL IN IRELAND

- 1 Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture 1995* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1996), 13–14. For Johnson on Ireland, see Thomas M. Curley, "Johnson and the Irish: A Postcolonial Survey of the Irish Literary Renaissance in Imperial Great Britain," *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, 12 (2001): 67–197, as well as preliminary studies by R. J. Kelly, "Dr. Johnson and Ireland," *Irish Review*, 1 (1911): 234–42, by John O'Connor, "Dr. Johnson and Ireland," in *Johnson Club Papers*, eds. George Whale and John Sargeaunt (London: Fisher Unwin, 1920), 87–99, and by Richard J. Dircks, "Johnson's Knowledge of Ireland," *Notes & Queries* (1967): 172–6.
- 2 For the first Celtic Revival, see Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature, 1880–1980* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985); John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987); and R. F. Foster, "History and the Irish Question" and "Varieties of Irishness: Cultures and Anarchy in Ireland," in *Paddy & Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Penguin Press, 1993), 1–39. On *Ossian*, see Clare O'Halloran, "Irish Re-Creations of the Gaelic Past: The Challenge of Macpherson's *Ossian*," *Past and Present* 124 (1989): 69–95, and especially her exemplary Cambridge University dissertation, "Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate on the Celtic Past in Ireland and Scotland in the Eighteenth Century" (1991).
- 3 David Noel Doyle, in *Ireland, Irishmen and Revolutionary America, 1760–1820* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1981), estimates Ireland's eighteenth-century



population as approximately half of England's seven million inhabitants; four-fifths of the Irish were Catholic and owned about 10 percent of the land. Kevin Whelan, in *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity, 1760–1830* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press–Field Day, 1996), 15, has a higher estimate – 20 percent – for Catholic ownership of Irish soil. R. B. McDowell, in *Irish Public Opinion: 1750–1800* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943), guesses at an Irish Catholic populace of two million, in line with the calculation of Johnson's Club colleague, George Macartney, author of a no-nonsense travelogue, *An Account of Ireland in 1773. By a late CHIEF SECRETARY of the Kingdom* (London: [publisher unlisted], 1773). Arthur Young noted Ascendancy abuse of Catholics in *A Tour in Ireland: With General Observations on the Present State of that Kingdom, Made in the Years 1776, 1777, and 1778. And Brought Down to the End of 1779*, 2 vols. (Dublin: George Bonham, 1780). See also R. B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), and David Dickson, *New Foundations: Ireland, 1660–1800* (Dublin: Helicon Press, 1987).

- 4 Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765–9), introduction, IV: 100.
- 5 *A Course of Lectures on the English Law Delivered at the University of Oxford, 1767–1773, by Sir Robert Chambers, Second Vinerian Professor of English Law and Composed in Association with Samuel Johnson*, ed. Thomas M. Curley, 2 vols. (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1986), I: 281.
- 6 James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson. Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, ed. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–64), II: 255. In his argument Johnson overlooked the possible binding force of Poynings's laws buttressing English sovereignty and mandating King William's legitimacy in Ireland, immediately upon his legal accession to the English throne by parliamentary statute at Westminster.
- 7 See Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), chs. 1 and 2 especially.
- 8 Johnson to Anna Maria Smart, late 1758, in *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992–4), I: 170.
- 9 Johnson, review of *An essay on Waters; in three parts, treating of simple waters, of cold medicated waters, of natural baths*, in *The Literary Magazine: or, Universal Review*, 4 (15 July–15 August 1756), ed. Donald J. Eddy, 2 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978), I: 167.
- 10 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II: 117.
- 11 *Ibid.*, V: 44.
- 12 The Royal Irish Academy preserves two typescripts for creating a biography: Charles O'Connor, S.J., "The Early Life of Charles O'Connor (1710–1791) of Belanagare at the Beginning of the Catholic Revival in Ireland in the 18th Century," 1930; Catherine A. Sheehan, "Charles O'Connor of Belanagare: A

Survey of His Literary Activities,” Fordham University thesis, 1948. See also Charles Owen O’Conor, *The O’Conors of Connaught* (Dublin: [publisher unlisted], 1891).

- 13 Charles O’Conor, *The Case of the Roman-Catholics of Ireland. Wherein the Principles and Conduct of that Party are fully Explained and Vindicated* (Dublin: P. Lord, 1755), 78.
- 14 The famous blind bard, O’Carolan, was said to have taught harp-playing to O’Conor, who later contributed to “The Life of Turlough O’Carolan,” in Joseph Cooper Walker, *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (1786; rpt., New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1971).
- 15 Johnson to O’Conor, 9 April 1757, in *Letters*, 1: 151–2. In the Pearse Street Public Library Gilbert Manuscripts 203, no. 14, a possibly apocryphal letter by George Faulkner (not his handwriting) to O’Conor, 14 May 1757, confirms Johnson’s high regard but asserts an unbelievable Johnsonian desire to master Irish:

Doctor Johnson also passes the highest encomiums on you, and says, that your Dissertations have made him so anxious for more knowledge of Ireland, that he orders me to send him an Irish grammar, dictionary and Bible, that he may be able to write in that language.

Then too, Johnson is here termed a “Doctor” – an appellation not used until the Trinity College honorary doctorate in 1765. Hence, the letter seems a fake.

- 16 Charles O’Conor, *Dissertations on the Antient History of Ireland: Wherein an Account is Given of the Origine, Government, Letters, Sciences, Religion, Manners and Customs, of the antient Inhabitants* (Dublin: James Hoey, 1753), viii.
- 17 See Thomas O. Mc Loughlin, *Contesting Ireland: Irish Voices against England in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), 135–60.
- 18 O’Conor to Faulkner, 4 May 1757, British Library Egerton Manuscripts 201, folio 31a, silently modernized in *The Letters of Charles O’Conor of Belanagare: A Catholic Voice in Eighteenth-century Ireland*, eds. Robert E. Ward, John F. Wynn, S.J., and Catherine Coogan Ward (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 32–4, and printed in original state by Robert E. Ward, in *The Prince of Dublin Printers: The Letters of George Faulkner* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 76–8.
- 19 Rev. Dr. Charles O’Conor, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the late Charles O’Conor of Belanagare, Esq. M.R.I.A.* (Dublin: J. Mehain, 1796), 334. It can be inaccurate, and its citing of letters is unreliable.
- 20 O’Conor to Faulkner, 10 May 1757, British Library Egerton Manuscripts 201, folio 33a, silently modernized in *Letters of O’Conor*, 34–5, and cited with minor errors in *Prince of Dublin Printers*, 78–9.
- 21 *Maxims Relative to the Present State of Ireland. 1757. Humbly submitted to the Consideration of the Legislative POWERS* (Dublin: [publisher unlisted], 1757), 8.
- 22 O’Conor to Faulkner, 25 May 1757, British Library Egerton Manuscripts 201, folios 35ab, mentioned in *Letters of O’Conor*, 35, and cited with minor errors

in Ward, *Prince of Dublin Printers*, 81. Michael Reilly's letter of 4 October 1757, telling O'Connor that Johnson never sent a reply, is mentioned in Sheehan's thesis, "Charles O'Connor of Belanagare," 155. Rev. Charles O'Connor in *Memoirs of O'Connor*, 334–5, sheds further light on the episode:

I have a letter in my possession from Faulkner to Dr. Jennings engaging him to write pressingly to Mr. O'Connor to collect 50 guineas among his friends to send as a *douceur* to Dr. Johnson, with an abstract of the penal laws, and Mr. O'Connor's own writings on the subject. "I sent the Doctor my last javelin," says Mr. O'Connor, speaking of his Maxims in his reply to Jennings, "but I fear I have thrown it in vain; men in power will not be convinced, there is an obstinacy yoked with pride in this case, and a phantom of hatred stalks behind to cement the league between them. I am glad however that I threw it, as Doctor Johnson will see, that a negative on the plan relative to our waste lands, will render our task-masters inexcusable; it will shew that they persecute, merely for the sake of persecution, and that the injury they do us in not granting us leases of the red bogs of Ireland falls ultimately on themselves." Why Doctor Johnson did not undertake the task proposed in favour of the Irish peasants, after speaking of the Catholics so favourably, I could never discover; when his cooperation was despaired of, Doctor Curry laid his shoulders indefatigably to his *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Rebellion of 1641*.

Readers should be warned that the letter refers to Johnson as "Doctor," a title not used by O'Connor until the Trinity College honorary doctorate of 1765. Henry Brooke (1703?–1783) agreed to pamphleteer for O'Connor in the early 1760s.

- 23 Ferdinando Warner, *Remarks on the History of Fingal, and other Poems of Ossian: Translated by Mr. Macpherson. In a Letter to the Right Honourable the Lord L.*— (London: H. Payne, W. Cropley, and J. Walter, 1762), 11.
- 24 O'Connor to John Curry, 4 June 1762, as quoted by Catherine A. Sheehan, in "Some Notes on the Ossianic Controversy," *Notes & Queries*, 195 (1950): 301.
- 25 See respectively the annotations in O'Connor's copy (RIA MR/16/30) of *Fingal* (Dublin: Richard Fitzsimons, 1762) and O'Connor's copy (National Library of Ireland LO596) of *Temora* (Dublin: A. Leathly and P. Wilson, 1763).
- 26 O'Connor to Curry, 15 October 1765, in *Letters of O'Connor*, 180.
- 27 Sect. 3, in *Dissertations on the History of Ireland, to Which is Subjoined a Dissertation on the Irish Colonies Established in Britain with Some Remarks on Mr. Mac Pherson's Translation of Fingal and Temora* (Dublin: G. Faulkner, 1766), 42–3.
- 28 Rev. Dr. Charles O'Connor, *Memoirs of O'Connor*, 430–1.
- 29 Johnson's encouragement of O'Connor contradicts the misconception of his "virulent anti-Gaelic prejudices" by Terry Eagleton – and by other scholars – in "The Good-Natured Gael," *Crazy Jane and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 71.
- 30 O'Connor, preface to *Dissertations on the History of Ireland*, iv–v.
- 31 Faulkner to O'Connor, 7 November 1766, in *Prince of Dublin Printers*, 104.
- 32 Boswell, *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, eds. Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (New York: Viking Press, 1936), 165.
- 33 O'Connor to Curry, 29 November 1771, RIA/B12.
- 34 "A Dissertation on the Origin and Antiquities of the Antient Scots of Ireland and Britain," in *The Ogygia Vindicated: Against the Objections of Sir George*

*Mac Kenzie, King's Advocate for Scotland in the Reign of King James II. (A Posthumous Work) by Roderic O'Flaherty, Esq; to which is annexed an Epistle from John Lynch, D.D. to M. Boileau, the Historian of the University of Paris, on the Subject of Scottish Antiquities. With . . . Notes, critical and explanatory, on Mr. O'Flaherty's Text* (Dublin: G. Faulkner, 1775), xlvii–xlvi.

- 35 Johnson to O'Connor, 19 May 1777, in *Letters*, III: 23–4.
- 36 O'Connor to Charles Vallancey, 13 October 1784, National Library of Ireland Bolton Manuscripts, 16,350, folio 41.
- 37 O'Connor to Walker, 10 January 1786, Pearse Street Public Library Gilbert Manuscripts 203, no. 6, silently modernized in *Letters of O'Connor*, 458.
- 38 O'Connor to Chevalier Thomas O'Gorman, 4 July 1781, British Library Additional Manuscripts 21121.
- 39 O'Connor to Walker, 23 March 1785, no. 1, and 13 May 1785, no. 2, silently modernized in *Letters of O'Connor*, 451–2.
- 40 O'Connor to Walker, 10 January 1786, no. 6. For O'Connor's copy, in his own handwriting, of Johnson's letter to him, dated 9 April 1757, see Royal Irish Academy Manuscripts B.1.1.
- 41 O'Connor to Walker, 26 April 1786, no. 11.
- 42 O'Connor to Walker, 14 June 1786, no. 13. Owing to Charles Vallancey in 1788, the lord lieutenant awarded O'Connor a pension.

#### 6 JOHNSON AND THE IRISH: MORE OPPOSITION TO OSSIAN

- 1 Johnson to Leland, 17 October 1765, in *Boswell's Life of Johnson. Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, ed. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–64), I: 518 (and for the Trinity College degree, I: 488–9), and *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992–4), I: 257. For Provost Andrews, see Constantia Maxwell, *Dublin Under the Georges: 1714–1830* (1936; 3rd edn. Tower House, Portrane, Ireland: Lambay Books, 1997), 184–5. Sir William Chambers's reply of 15 April 1768 to Lord Charlemont's request for Leland's introduction to Johnson is in *Manuscripts and Correspondence of James, First Earl of Charlemont*, 2 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1891), I: 286.
- 2 Leland to Charlemont, 11 March 1766, National Library of Ireland Neg. 96. Pos. 288, no. 6.
- 3 Leland, "Sermon XXVIII: On the Anniversary of the Irish Rebellion, 23 October 1771," in *Sermons on Various Subjects*, 3 vols. (Dublin: George Bonham, 1788), III: 19–20.
- 4 O'Connor to Faulkner, 13 June 1767, British Library Egerton Manuscripts 201, folio 47b.
- 5 Leland, *The History of Ireland from the Invasion of Henry II. With a preliminary discourse on the Ancient State of that Kingdom*, 3 vols. (Dublin: Brett Smith, 1814), book I, ch. 1, final paragraph. According to O'Connor writing

to John Curry (n.d.) in *The Letters of O'Connor of Belanagare: A Catholic Voice in Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, eds. Robert E. Ward, John F. Wrynn, and Catherine Coogan Ward (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1988), 294, "Lord Lyttelton, Mr. Burke, Dr. Johnson, he [Leland] tells me, have pronounced a flattering sentence on his history."

- 6 O'Connor, editor's preface, *The Ogygia Vindicated: Against the Objections of Sir George Mac Kenzie, King's Advocate for Scotland in the Reign of King James II. (A Posthumous Work) by Roderic O'Flaherty, Esq; to which is annexed an Epistle from John Lynch, D.D. to M. Boileau, the Historian of the University of Paris, on the Subject of Scottish Antiquities. With . . . Notes, critical and explanatory, on Mr. O'Flaherty's Text* (Dublin: G. Faulkner, 1775), xxiii; O'Connor to Curry, 9 February 1773, in *Letters of O'Connor*, 286.
- 7 See also Paul Muldoon on Vallancey in *To Ireland, I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124–5.
- 8 Vallancey [to Thomas Orde], 1 October 1784, National Library of Ireland Bolton Manuscripts 16,350, folio 19.
- 9 Charles Vallancey, *A Grammar of the Iberno-Celtic, or Irish Language* (Dublin: R. Marchbank, 1773), xxvii–xxviii.
- 10 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, v: 465 and 108.
- 11 Thomas Campbell, *Strictures on the Ecclesiastical and Literary History of Ireland: from the Most Ancient Times till the Introduction of the Roman Ritual, and the Establishment of Papal Supremacy, by Henry II. King of England. Also, an Historical Sketch of the Constitution and Government of Ireland, from the Most Early Authenticated Period Down to the Year 1783* (Dublin: Luke White, 1789), pp. 296–7. The anecdote may be spurious because the praise for Chatham is unique; Johnson elsewhere detested the man.
- 12 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, iv: 223.
- 13 Burke, *Parliamentary History*, xxx: 109, as quoted by Elizabeth R. Lambert, "Johnson on Friendship: The Example of Burke," in *Johnson After Two Hundred Years*, ed. Paul J. Korshin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 121.
- 14 Seamus Deane, in *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writings since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), argues that Burke emphasized "both the uniqueness and the universality of the national character" (9) "which is characteristically British" (18) and which became a paradigm of "universal human nature . . . within the national limits of the British state" (14). But for Burke's recourse to Montesquieu for the uniqueness of each nation, see Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Shreveport, LA: Huntington House Inc., 1986), 87–8 and 99–100.
- 15 For Burke on the Irish Revolution of 1782, see especially his *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrische, Bart., M.P., on the subject of the Roman Catholics of Ireland and the propriety of admitting them to the elective franchise, consistently with the principles of the Constitution, as established at the Revolution* (1792).
- 16 David Hume to Hugh Blair, 19 September 1763, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), i: 399–400.

- 17 Boswell in 1787 on Burke about *Ossian*, in *Boswell: The English Experiment, 1785–1789*, eds. Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), 150.
- 18 See J. Chetwood to Edmond Malone, November 1765, in Sir James Prior, *The Life of Edmond Malone, Editor of Shakespeare* (Smith, Elder & Co., 1860), 19, for a first impression of Johnson.
- 19 Malone to Lord Charlemont, 5 April 1779, National Library of Ireland Neg. 96. Pos. 288, no. 15.
- 20 Malone to Sir William Scott, 21 May 1795, British Library Additional Manuscripts 22548, folio 25.
- 21 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 1: 12. See also Peter Martin, *Edmond Malone, Shakespearean Scholar: A Literary Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 22 Malone to William Windham, 21 May [1795], British Library Additional Manuscripts 37854, folio 130.
- 23 Malone to Windham, 12 June 1798, folios 144b–145b.
- 24 Windham to Malone, 12 June 1798, as quoted in Martin, *Edmond Malone*, 222.
- 25 Charlemont's autobiography for his three sons, n.d., Royal Irish Academy Manuscripts 12. R. 7, folio 13. See also Maurice James Craig, *The Volunteer Earl: Being the Life and Times of James Caulfeild, First Earl of Charlemont* (London: Cresset Press, 1948).
- 26 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 11: 240.
- 27 Topham Beauclerk to Charlemont, 5 July 1773, in *Memoirs of of the Political and Private Life of James Caulfeild [sic], Earl of Charlemont*, ed. Francis Hardy, 2 vols. (2nd edn.; London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1812), 1: 329–30.
- 28 Charlemont to Beauclerk, July 1774, Royal Irish Academy Manuscripts 12. B. 12–21, folio 88.
- 29 Beauclerk to Charlemont, 1776, in “Anecdotes by Hannah More,” *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1897), 11: 183n. 4.
- 30 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 11: 172–3.
- 31 See especially David Noel Doyle, *Ireland, Irishmen and Revolutionary America, 1760–1820* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1981), and R. B. McDowell, *Irish Public Opinion: 1750–1800* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943), ch. 3. See also Henry Grattan's comment in *Memoirs of the Life and Times of the Rt. Hon. Henry Grattan. Edited by his Son, Henry Grattan, Esq. MP.* 5 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1849), 1: 208: “Lord Chatham justly observed, that *Ireland was America.*”
- 32 Charlemont, autobiography, folio 105.
- 33 Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny*, ed. Donald Greene, in vol. v of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 433.
- 34 Charlemont to Henry Flood, 15 September 1787, British Library Additional Manuscripts 22930, folio 175a, on Matthew Young's article, “Ancient Gaelic Ballads Respecting the Race of the Fians, collected in the Highlands of Scotland in the year 1784,” *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, 1 (1787): 43–120.



- 35 Boswell citing Thomas Barnard, as quoted in *The Correspondence of James Boswell with Certain Members of the Club*, ed. Charles N. Fifer (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), xxxiii.
- 36 Barnard to Sir Joseph Banks, 4 May 1785, Royal Irish Academy Manuscripts 12N3, folio 8.
- 37 [Thomas Campbell], *A Philosophical Survey of the South of Ireland, in a Series of Letters to John Watkinson, M.D.* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1777 [actually 1778]), 372.
- 38 Campbell to Thomas Percy, 9 September 1790 and 15 December 1788, British Library Egerton Manuscripts 201, folio 80b and folio 76b.
- 39 *Philosophical Survey*, 350.
- 40 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II: 519; Campbell, *Dr. Campbell's Diary of a Visit to England in 1775*, ed. James L. Clifford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947), 51.
- 41 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV: 320.
- 42 Campbell, *Philosophical Survey*, 63.
- 43 O'Connor to Denis O'Connor, 9 May 1778, in *Letters of O'Connor*, 362.
- 44 Campbell, *Discourse Delivered in the New Church of St. Luke's, Gallowen, on Sunday the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 1793* (Dublin: Bonham, 1794), 68.
- 45 *Strictures*, 1.
- 46 Johnson to O'Connor, 9 April 1757, in *Letters*, I: 152.
- 47 Campbell, *Strictures*, 1.
- 48 Johnson, Swift, in *Samuel Johnson: The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; with Critical Observations on Their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), III: 208.
- 49 Johnson to John Taylor, 3 August 1782, in *Letters*, IV: 64–5.
- 50 William Hamilton Drummond, "To Investigate the authenticity of the Poems of Ossian . . . A Prize Essay . . . Read May 25, 1829," *Royal Irish Academy Transactions*, 16 (1830): 7–8.

7 JOHNSON'S LAST WORD ON OSSIAN  
WITH WILLIAM SHAW

- 1 William Shaw, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Late Dr. Samuel Johnson; Containing Many valuable Original Letters, and several Interesting Anecdotes both of his Literary and Social Connections. The Whole Authenticated by Living Evidence* (1785), in *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, eds. O. M. Brack, Jr. and Robert E. Kelley (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1974), 174. Another useful edition is by Arthur Sherbo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 5–56.
- 2 *Memoirs of Johnson*, 174.
- 3 "Answers for the Reverend Mr William Shaw, Pursuer; to the Petition of Duncan Macdonald of Glengary, John Macpherson of Urie, Patrick Grant of Glenmoriston, Andrew Macpherson of Benchar, James Grant of Shogly, Alexander Grant of Corriemony, William Mackintosh of Holm, Hugh Fraser

- of Eskdale, and Captain James Fraser of Culduthill, Defenders,” 16 February 1786, Signet Library Session Papers, 172 (1786–90), no. 29, 3.
- 4 For Shaw’s life, see *Notes & Queries*, (1890) 391–2 and 498, and Kenneth D. Macdonald, “The Rev. Dr. William Shaw – Pioneer Gaelic Lexicographer,” *Transactions of the Gaelic Society, Inverness*, 1 (1979): 1–19. See also Thomas M. Curley, “Johnson’s Last Word on Ossian: Ghostwriting for William Shaw,” in *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of Aberdeen*, eds. Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), 375–431.
  - 5 Boswell to Thomas Percy, 25 December 1781, in *The Correspondence of James Boswell with Certain Members of the Club*, ed. Charles N. Fifer (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 119.
  - 6 Shaw, *Memoirs of Johnson*, 174.
  - 7 John Clark, reporting Macpherson’s comments by the mediation of a “friend” visiting London, in *An Answer to Mr Shaw’s Inquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Ossian* (Edinburgh: C. Elliot; London: T. Longman and T. Cadell, 1781), 33–4.
  - 8 Shaw, *An Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Ossian. With a Reply to Mr. Clark’s Answer* (London: J. Murray, 1782), 68–9.
  - 9 Introduction, *An Analysis of the Galic Language* (Edinburgh: W. and T. Ruddiman; London, W. and A. Strahan 1778), xvi.
  - 10 *Memoirs of Johnson*, 174. See entry for 17 April 1776 in *Boswell: The Ominous Years, 1774–1776*, eds. Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 340.
  - 11 Johnson to Boswell, 11 March 1777, in *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992–4), 111: 12.
  - 12 James Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson. Together with Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson’s Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, ed. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–64), 111: 107.
  - 13 Johnson, “Shaw’s Proposals,” in *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson Treating his Published Works from the Beginnings to 1984*, ed. J. David Fleeman, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 11: 1290–1.
  - 14 Shaw, introduction to *Analysis of the Galic Language*, ix.
  - 15 Janet Sorenson, in *The Grammar of Empire in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), considers Shaw’s Gaelic scholarship a “good scam” (179), his interaction with Johnson realigning to an “Anglo camp” (177–8), and his debunking of Macpherson an abandonment of Scottish/Gaelic “cultural affiliation” (177). This is too severe and simple; Shaw was pro-British but pro-Highlander too.
  - 16 Shaw, *Enquiry . . . With a Reply*, 24.
  - 17 *Memoirs of Johnson*, 174.
  - 18 See Johnson to Boswell, 27 December 1777, in *Letters*, 111: 102.
  - 19 Shaw, *Memoirs of Johnson*, 175.
  - 20 See Macdonald, “The Rev. William Shaw,” 7–10.
  - 21 Macdonald, 5–6, from the Scottish Record Office.



- 22 Shaw, *Memoirs of Johnson*, 175.
- 23 Shaw to Charles O'Connor, 10 September 1778, Royal Irish Academy, O'Connor Correspondence, B12.
- 24 Macdonald, 10–13, from the Scottish Record Office.
- 25 Shaw, *Enquiry . . . With a Reply*, 78.
- 26 *Memoirs of Johnson*, 176.
- 27 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 111: 298–9. See also Sermon XIII in *Sermons*, ed. James Gray, vol. XIV of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), attacking early Christian hypocrites, “whose conversion, real or pretended, gave them an opportunity of preying upon artless simplicity” (137).
- 28 Shaw, *Enquiry . . . With a Reply*, 78.
- 29 Johnson to Rev. Charles Allen, 1780, in *Letters*, 111: 322.
- 30 See Shaw, dedication and preface to *A Galic and English Dictionary. Containing All the Words in the Scotch and Irish Dialects of the Celtic, that could be collected from the Voice, and Old Books and MSS* (London: W. and A. Strahan, 1780).
- 31 See Macdonald, “The Rev. William Shaw,” 14, and *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 11: 279, 285, and 508.
- 32 See “The Rev. William Shaw,” 13–18, from the Scottish Record Office.
- 33 Shaw, “Answers for the Reverend Mr William Shaw, Pursuer,” 16 February 1786, Signet Library Session Papers, 172 (1786–90), no. 29, 3.
- 34 *Memoirs of Johnson*, 175.
- 35 *Enquiry. . . . With a Reply*, 60.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 30–1.
- 37 John Clark, relaying Macpherson's unconvincing statement reported by a friend asked to visit the defiant Highlander in London during the resurgence of the *Ossian* controversy in *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 33–4.
- 38 Shaw, *Enquiry . . . . With a Reply*, 70.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 40 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 111: 50–1. See entry for 17 May 1781 in *Boswell: Laird of Auchinleck, 1778–1782*, ed. Joseph Reed (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 359.
- 41 Johnson to Edmond Malone, 2 March 1782, in *Letters*, IV: 14.
- 42 John Clark, *The Works of the Caledonian Bards. Translated from the Galic. Volume 1* (Edinburgh: T. Cadell and C. Elliot, 1778; 2nd edn. 1783), 10.
- 43 The bogus *Morduth* in three books is the premier piece, and the bogus *Words of Woe* is the tenth of twelve works. Later Shaw asserted that Clark admitted to inventing the opening Ossianic apostrophe of the sixth “translation,” entitled *The Chief of Scarlaw*, in *A Rejoinder to an Answer from Mr. Clarke on the Subject of Ossian's Poems* (Rochester: T. Fisher, 1784), 19.
- 44 John Smith, *Galic Antiquities* (Edinburgh: T. Cadell and C. Elliot, 1780), 129, and Shaw, *Enquiry . . . With a Reply*, 26. Ludwig Stern's Victorian condemnation of Smith's fraud was confirmed by Derick S. Thomson, in “Bogus Gaelic Literature c.1750–c.1820,” *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of*

- Glasgow, 5 (1958): 180–1, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's 'Ossian'* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1952), 3, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1974), 105, and "James Macpherson: The Gaelic Dimension," in *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations*, eds. Howard Gaskill and Fiona Stafford (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998), 26.
- 45 Shaw, *Enquiry . . . With a Reply*, 27.
- 46 Published at Edinburgh by Charles Elliot.
- 47 See a lengthy letter by Donald M'Nicol attacking Shaw, 5 October 1781, in Clark's *Answer to Mr Shaw's Inquiry*, 53–4.
- 48 See Donald M'Nicol, *Remarks on Dr. Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Hebrides; in which are contained, Observations on the Antiquities, Language, Genius, and Manners of the Highlanders of Scotland* (London: T. Cadell, 1779; actually March 1780), 364–7. Robert F. Metzdorf detected Macpherson's hand in "Macpherson and Johnson," in *Eighteenth-Century Studies in Honor of Donald F. Hyde*, ed. W. H. Bond (New York: Grolier Club, 1970), 45–61.
- 49 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 11: 308.
- 50 Shaw, *Memoirs of Johnson*, 176.
- 51 *Enquiry . . . With a Reply*, 1–2.
- 52 The June issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 51 (1781): 251–2.
- 53 The August issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 51 (1781): 377.
- 54 Adam Ferguson to John Douglas, 21 July 1781, British Museum Additional Manuscripts 2182, folio 48b.
- 55 Shaw, *Enquiry . . . With a Reply*, 66. See Bertram Davis, *Thomas Percy: A Scholar-Cleric in the Age of Johnson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 256–7.
- 56 The January issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 52 (1782): 12–13.
- 57 Hugh Blair to Joseph Carlyle, 18 April 1782, National Library of Scotland 3408, folios 21ab.
- 58 Carlyle to Percy, n.d., folios 21b–22a.
- 59 Clark, *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, epigraph on title page.
- 60 Shaw, *Memoirs of Johnson*, 176.
- 61 Clark, *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 10–11.
- 62 I am very indebted to Richard B. Sher for Murray's correspondence from the Letter Copybooks of John Murray, VIII: 484–5.
- 63 Letter Copybooks of John Murray, VIII: 487.
- 64 The March issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 52 (1782): 107.
- 65 Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with Donald and Mary Hyde, vol. 1 of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 313, 315, and 317.
- 66 The *Enquiry* occupies 1–48, the *Reply to Mr. Clark's Answer* covers 51–80, and five letters on Percy's dispute with Blair and Ferguson follow on 81–8. It was priced at a shilling and a half per octavo copy.
- 67 The April issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 52 (1782): 185–6.

- 68 Clark, *An Answer to Mr. William Shaw's Reply to Mr. Clark, on the subject of Ossian's Poems* (Edinburgh and London: J. Elliot and T. Cadell respectively, 1783), 5.
- 69 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 1: 23–4 and 1v: 252–3.
- 70 Samuel Parr, *Bibliotheca Parriana. A Catalogue of the Library of the late reverend and learned Samuel Parr, LL.D.* (London: John Bohn, 1827), 700.
- 71 Fleeman, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 11: 1538–9.
- 72 Professor George McElroy, in a personal communication, corroborated much of this evaluation of Johnson's impact on the *Reply* by recourse to a "stylometric analysis" of the text based on word count and sentence–paragraph structure in the prose of Johnson and Shaw.
- 73 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 111: 286 and 522–3.
- 74 The November issue of *The London Magazine*, 51 (1782): 511.
- 75 The entire article was quoted by Shaw in his *Memoirs of Johnson*, 176–8 and n. 56.
- 76 Shaw, *Memoirs of Johnson*, 178.
- 77 Shaw's *Rejoinder to Clark's Answer* is in the archives of the Russell Library, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Ireland, and University of Göttingen, Germany.
- 78 For Hill's articles, see *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 52 (1782): 570–1; 53 (1783): 33–6, 140–4, 398–400, 489–94; and 54 (1784): 590–2, 662–5.
- 79 Shaw, *Memoirs of Johnson*, 138.
- 80 Shaw to John Murray, 15 August 1828, from the Letter Copybooks of John Murray.
- 81 *Ossian and Ossianism*, ed. Dafydd Moore, 4 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2004), has generous unannotated extracts of Shaw's 1781 *Enquiry*, 111: 249–72, and the 1782 *Reply*, 111: 304–20.
- 82 Shaw, *Memoirs of Johnson*, 186.
- 83 Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. J. David Fleeman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 46.
- 84 *Rasselas*, ed. Gwin J. Kolb, vol. xvi of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1990), 113.
- 85 Waller, in *Samuel Johnson: Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; With Critical Observations on Their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 11: 40.
- 86 *A Journey*, 99.

## APPENDIX

- 1 This entire Johnsonian opening page countered John Clark's accusation of Shaw's venal insincerity by reaffirming the central issue in the *Ossian* debate that no satisfactory authenticating Gaelic prototypes for made-up works like *Fingal* (T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt, 1762) had come to light.
- 2 Compare this and the next paragraph with Johnson to Macpherson, 20 January 1775, in *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992–4), 11: 168–9:

Whatever insult is offered me I will do my best to repel. . . I will not desist from detecting what I think a cheat, from any fear of the menaces of a Ruffian. You want me to retract. What shall I retract? I thought your book an imposture from the beginning. I think it upon surer grounds an imposture still. For this opinion I give the publick my reasons which I here dare you to refute.

See also Johnson, *Lauder's Essay on Milton* (1747), in *Samuel Johnson's Prefaces and Dedications*, ed. Allen T. Hazan (1937. Rpt. Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1973), 81: "Any of these conjectures . . . may perhaps be shewn by resistless evidence to be better founded," and *Rambler* 31, in *The Rambler*, eds. Walter Jackson Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, vol. 111 of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 169 and 172.

with how much industry subterfuges and evasions are sought to decline the pressure of resistless argument . . . [H]e may impose on his audience . . . by intricate deductions of remote causes . . . that he may . . . puzzle the weak . . .

- 3 Compare with Johnson's "Proposals" (1777) in *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson Treating his Published Works from the Beginnings to 1984* ed. J. David Fleeman, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 11, 1290–1 for Shaw's *Analysis of the Galic Language* (Edinburgh: W. and T. Ruddiman; London: W. and A. Strahan, 1778): "An Earse Grammar is an Addition to the Stores of Literature; and its Author hopes for the Indulgence always shewn to those that attempt to do what was never done before." Shaw's note answered a swipe at his low origins in Clark's *An Answer to Mr Shaw's Inquiry into the Poems ascribed to Ossian* (Edinburgh: C. Eliot; London: T. Longman and T. Cadell, 1781), 75.
- 4 Shaw toured Scotland and a little of the Hebrides and Ireland in 1778 for his *Galic and English Dictionary*, 2 vols. (London: W. and A. Strahan 1780). Boswell attributed this and the next four paragraphs to Johnson in *Life of Johnson*, ed. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–64), 1v: 252–3. Compare with *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. J. David Fleeman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 98: "I believe they never existed in any other form than that which we have seen. The editor, or author, never could shew the original; nor can it be shewn by any other," and with Johnson to Boswell, 7 February 1775, in *Letters*, 11: 177: "Where are the manuscripts? They can be shown if they exist . . . *De non existentibus et non apparentibus*, says our law, *eadem est ratio*."
- 5 The sentiment about poetry's universality recurs in Shaw's *Rejoinder to an Answer from Mr. Clark, on the Subject of Ossian's Poems* (Rochester: T. Fisher, 1784), 26, and in Johnson's Commemoration of Handel (1785) in *Samuel Johnson's Prefaces and Dedications*, 32. See also *Life*, v: 240: "I am not disputing that you have poetry of great merit; but that M<sup>r</sup>Pherson's is not a translation from ancient poetry," and Johnson to Boswell, 7 February 1775 in *Letters*, 11: 177: "No man has a claim to credit upon his own word, when better evidence, if he had it, may be easily produced."
- 6 Clark reported Shaw's clerical grandstanding in a footnote of *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 4, and, rejecting Shaw's denial here, cited two letters testifying to the pulpit stunt in the *Answer to William Shaw's Reply to Mr. Clark on the Subject of Ossian's Poems* (Edinburgh: J. Elliott; London: T. Cadell, 1783), 10–12.
- 7 Compare this and the next paragraph with Johnson on Erse manuscripts in *Boswell: The Ominous Years, 1774–1776*, eds. Charles Ryskamp and Frederick

A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 89: “We have seen none; and we have no reason to believe that there are men with three heads, but that we have seen none,” and in *Journey*, 98: “The editor, or author, never could shew the original; nor can it be shewn by any other; to revenge reasonable incredulity, by refusing evidence, is . . . insolence.”

- 8 This insistence on the scarcity of written Erse was a favorite error of Johnson and Shaw. Compare with Johnson to Boswell, 7 February 1775 in *Letters*, 11: 177–8: “But . . . the Erse language was never written till very lately for the purposes of religion . . . If old manuscripts should now be mentioned, I should . . . suppose them another proof of Scotch conspiracy in national falsehood,” and with *Journey*, 95–9:

After what has been lately talked of Highland Bards, . . . many will startle when they are told, that the *Earse* never was a written language; that there is not in the world an *Earse* manuscript a hundred years old; . . . till some little books of piety were translated . . . by the Synod of *Argyle* . . . A Scotchman must be a very sturdy moralist, who does not love *Scotland* better than truth.

- 9 Compare this and the next two paragraphs with Johnson’s “Proposals” for Shaw’s *Analysis* (1778) in *Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 11: 1290:

the *Earse* Dialect . . . has hitherto been left to the Caprice and Judgment of every Speaker . . . without the Steadiness of Analogy, or Direction of Rules . . . [The] author hopes for the Indulgence always shewn to those that attempt to do what was never done before. If his Work shall be found defective, it is at least all his own: . . . what he delivers, he has learned by attentive Observation among his Countrymen . . .

See also “Advertisement” (1773) to Johnson’s *Dictionary*, in *Johnson on the English Language*, eds. Gwin J. Kolb and Robert De Maria, vol. xviii of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 375: “Many faults I have corrected, some superfluities I have taken away, and some deficiencies I have supplied . . . I have perhaps not need of more apology than the nature of the work will furnish . . .” John Clark published his mostly made-up *Works of the Caledonian Bards* in 1778 (Edinburgh: T. Cadell and C. Elliot).

- 10 Compare with Johnson to Boswell, 7 February 1775 in *Letters*, 11: 177: “A nation that cannot write, or a language that was never written, has no manuscripts. But whatever he [Macpherson] has, he never offered to show.”
- 11 Clark mocked Shaw’s poverty in *Answer to Shaw’s Inquiry*, 74–5. An *enthymeme* is “An argument consisting only of an antecedent and consequential proposition,” in Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. [London: W. Strahan, 1773].
- 12 Clark, in *Answer to Shaw’s Inquiry*, 7, on Shaw looking for Gaelic verse: “You answered sarcastically, that . . . Mr Macpherson had carried out all the poetry of the country.”
- 13 Shaw habitually ascribed extant Scottish Gaelic verse, including balladry recited by Alexander Cameron, to the fifteenth century in distinguishing this relatively modern poetry from nonexistent third-century Gaelic poetry, which Macpherson claimed to be the basis of his spurious English “translations.”
- 14 William Robertson the historian (1721–93) mentioned Donald M’Nicol, whose *Remarks on Dr. Johnson’s Journey to the Hebrides* appeared in March

- 1780 (London: T. Cadell), far too late to mark the author out as Johnson's enemy for Shaw to avoid in Scotland in 1778.
- 15 Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* had no such meaning of *hum*, here a Scotticism "to hoodwink."
  - 16 Clark's *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 17–18.
  - 17 Compare with Johnson to Donald Macquene in *Life*, v: 240–1: "You do not believe it. I say before you, you do not believe it . . . I look upon M'Pherson's *Fingal* to be as gross an imposition as ever the world was troubled with."
  - 18 The *Maid of Craca* was a genuine ballad story inspiring Macpherson's Fragment VI and an episode in book III of *Fingal*. *Malvina's Dream*, concocted by Macpherson into a Gaelic specimen from the first three paragraphs of his made-up *Croma*, illustrated linguistic usage in Shaw's *Analysis*, before Shaw suspected imposture.
  - 19 Although the common linguistic heritage of Scotland and Ireland diverged by the end of the seventeenth century, this sharp distinction between a vocal Erse and a written Irish Gaelic was false. But the notion was in line with Charles Vallancey's *A Grammar of the Ibero-Celtic or Irish Language* (Dublin: R. Marchbank, 1773), xxvii–xxviii, a book in Johnson's private library as an authorial gift. Clark rightly criticized Shaw's stress on the paucity of Erse manuscripts, as asserted in Johnson's *Journey*, 95–7: "*Earse* never was a written language . . . The *Welsh* and the *Irish* are cultivated tongues . . . *Earse* merely floated in the breath of the people, and could therefore receive little improvement."
  - 20 Clark's *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 21.
  - 21 Quoted with variations, here and elsewhere, especially in reproducing Gaelic words, from Vallancey's *Grammar*, ch. 2, 8 and notes (a) and (b). Charles O'Connor, the Irish antiquary, is the man, beside whom Shaw's name was unworthy to be written.
  - 22 Vallancey cited the preface, 2 (actually vi), of John Macpherson, *Critical Dissertations on the Origin, Antiquities, Language, Government, Manners, and Religion, of the Ancient Caledonians, Their Posterity the Picts, and the British and Irish Scots* (London: T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt, 1768). James 'Ossian' Macpherson wrote this preface.
  - 23 See Vallancey, *Grammar*, xi, on the speculative origin of Irish letters. Shaw and Johnson were too skeptical about oral tradition, but Clark and Macpherson were dishonest about relying on ancient poetry, whether transmitted orally or in manuscript, for their "translations."
  - 24 See Clark, *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 23–4, for John Mackenzie, secretary of the Highland Society of London founded in 1778. Shaw's first visit to Mackenzie occurred around March of 1780, when M'Nicol's *Remarks* appeared.
  - 25 Clark, in *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 24, contended that Scottish Gaelic materials at the Highland Society were to disprove Johnson's assertion that Erse manuscripts scarcely existed and not, as Shaw assumed, to demonstrate the originals of *Ossian*. Shaw countered, wrongly, that the manuscripts had to be Irish, because of Highland illiteracy.

- 26 M'Nicol's *Remarks*, 304, mentioned the Highland Society having "*An Duanaireadh Rudah*, or the *Red rhymmer*" with "some of *Ossian's* Poems, Highland Tales &c."
- 27 Clark's *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 25.
- 28 Evan Evans actually praised Macpherson in the opening page of the preface to *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1764) and reserved his doubts about *Ossian* for footnote h in the text, 49. Unlike Macpherson, Evans printed Welsh originals with his English translations to demonstrate authenticity. Shaw blundered again about oral tradition, even though no word-for-word authentic Gaelic archetypes, either in remote antiquity or later on, existed for English Ossianic epics.
- 29 Thomas Percy, a like-minded skeptic of *Ossian*, privately divulged a suspicion that Hugh Blair and Adam Ferguson had in 1765 orchestrated a recital of Erse poetry to deceive him into believing in *Ossian*. After Shaw reported Percy's charge in the *Enquiry*, Ferguson denied it in a newspaper notice of 21 July 1781. Shaw issued a public retraction in a letter of 31 August, only to retreat from his recantation in line with Percy's newspaper notice of 10 November 1781, expressing his wish to exonerate Blair more than Ferguson of any misconduct. The appendix to the *Reply* drew renewed attention to this squabble by reprinting five letters: (1) Shaw's newspaper notice of 19 January 1782 daring Macpherson to deny promising Shaw the sight of some Ossianic originals; (2) Ferguson's initial newspaper notice of 21 July 1781 denying any part in a long-ago Gaelic recital for Percy's benefit; (3) Percy's newspaper notice of 10 November 1781; (4) Ferguson's newspaper notice of 10 January 1782 reaffirming his innocence in defiance of Percy; and (5) Ferguson's letter of 8 August 1781 to Blair affirming his innocence.
- 30 Clark's *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 33–4. This denial of interaction with Shaw seems implausible by virtue of complimentary examples of usage from *Ossian* in his Erse grammar and in light of Macpherson's generous subscription to the Gaelic dictionary.
- 31 Shaw here admitted his transformation from early enthusiasm for *Ossian* to skepticism, and Clark had deemed this dishonest in *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 43–4.
- 32 See Clark's *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 34, disavowing meetings between Macpherson and Shaw over validating Gaelic manuscripts. The allusion to Macpherson's denial of Christianity and to surnames in Ossian's era conflated statements about the absence of religious references and clan names in "genuine" Ossianic poetry from the preface to *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (Edinburgh: G. Hamilton and J. Balfour, 1760) and *A Dissertation concerning the Antiquity, Etc. of the Poems of Ossian the Son of Fingal*, in *Fingal* (1762). Shaw was the first to identify "Garbh mac Stairn" as one of Macpherson's key sources behind "Fragment xiv" and book I of *Fingal*.
- 33 Clark's *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 34.
- 34 Clark's denial of fabricating his *Works of the Caledonian Bards* in *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 35–7, was dishonest. Eight of his twelve "translations" were made



up and two others took great liberties with Gaelic sources. According to Sir James Foulis (1714–91) in Clark's subsequent *Answer to Shaw's Reply* (Edinburgh: J. Elliot; London: T. Cadell, 1783), 24–5, the number of Gaelic lines comprised “no less than three hundred and fifty-eight!” But Shaw in his *Rejoinder* to Clark's *Answer* (Rochester: T. Fisher, 1784), 62, countered that Foulis's claim of possessing a Gaelic version of the first canto of Clark's epic *Morduth* “proves nothing but that he [Clark] who manufactured thirty lines might with a little more labour fabricate a whole Canto” into Gaelic. *Morduth* was bogus.

- 35 This concession to the genuineness of *Jurram na Truaidhe* was premature; Shaw himself demonstrated much fabrication in his 1784 *Rejoinder*, 42–55.
- 36 Shaw was correct in rebutting Clark, *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 20–1 and 38–9, because Macpherson concocted his Gaelic *Temora* (book VII) and *Malvina's Dream* as part of his helping to make public a bogus Gaelic *Ossian* either being cooked up at this late date or made up around the time when *Fingal* first appeared, to lend his works a false authenticity.
- 37 John Smith (1747–1807) was, like Clark, a pseudo-Gaelic versifier, whose *Galic Antiquities* (London and Edinburgh: T. Cadell and C. Elliot, 1780) contained fourteen “Ancient Poems,” which were an anglicized amalgamation of “considerably altered” modern Gaelic matter and sheer invention.
- 38 Shaw dismissed unsubstantiated claims about Macpherson's sources by Dr. Hugh Macleod, professor of church history at the university of Glasgow, as reported in Clark's *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 45–6.
- 39 The anecdote, likely alluding to Sir James Foulis for his foolish credulity over *Ossian*, appeared below “FINIS.” at the close of the *Enquiry's* first edition: “A gentleman promised to ornament a scalloped shell with silver, if I should bring him one from the Highlands, and to swear it was the identical shell out of which Fingal used to drink!”
- 40 The primary definition of ingenuity in Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* was “Openness; fairness; candour; freedom from dissimulation.” The fifth definition of credit was “Trust reposed,” suiting the sense here. Compare with Johnson's *Letter to the Reverend Mr. Douglas, occasioned by his Vindication of Milton* (London: W. Owen, 1751), 4:

On the Sincerity and Punctuality of this Confession, I am willing to depend for all the future Regard of Mankind, and cannot but indulge some Hopes, that they whom my Offence has alienated from me, may, by this Instance of Ingenuity and Repentance, be propitiated and reconciled.

- 41 For the Johnsonian rationale of national self-delusion in this and the next paragraph, compare with *Journey*, 98, cited by Shaw in the ninth and eleventh paragraphs of his *Enquiry*: Macpherson

has doubtless inserted names that circulate in popular ballads. . . and the names and some of the images being recollected, make an inaccurate auditor imagine, by the help of Caledonian bigotry, that he has formerly heard the whole . . . It is said, that some men of integrity profess to have heard parts of it, but they all heard them when they were boys . . . They remember names, and perhaps some proverbial sentiments: and, having not distinct ideas, coin a resemblance without an original.



- 42 Compare with *Journey*, 95 and 97, on Erse as “the rude speech of a barbarous people. . . I do not say that they deliberately speak studied falsehood, or have a settled purpose to deceive.”
- 43 Compare with Johnson’s “Proposals” for Shaw’s *Analysis*: “[Erse] has hitherto been left to the Caprice and Judgment of every Speaker, and has floated in the living Voice, without the Steadiness of Analogy, or Direction of Rules,” and with *Journey*, 96–8:

*Erse* merely floated in the breath of the people, and could therefore receive little improvement. . . . [The original of *Ossian*] would be easy to shew if he had it; but whence could it be had? It is too long to be remembered, and the language formerly had nothing written.

- 44 Shaw here erroneously reiterated his assumption in the *Enquiry* that Gaelic manuscripts mentioned in M’Nicol’s *Remarks* for Johnson’s possible inspection at the Highland Society of London were Irish rather than Erse.
- 45 A venomous letter of 5 October 1781 from M’Nicol to Clark in *Answer to Shaw’s Inquiry*, 52–8, alleged that Shaw in Scotland carelessly rejected Seton’s invitation to inspect Gaelic materials in M’Nicol’s possession, owing to the latter’s hostility to Johnson:

Mr Shaw asked “if I was not the person who was said to be writing against *Dr Johnson*?” Yes, replied Mr. Seton; and as you seem to know so much about him, you ought to see him, *unless you mean to travel like the Doctor*, and studiously avoid such places as are pointed out for your intelligence.

Shaw might have heard rumors of M’Nicol’s hostility to Johnson, but Seton’s purported conversation happened in 1778, two years before M’Nicol’s *Remarks* appeared to make public the author’s hostility.

- 46 Murray to Shaw, 4 February 1782, Letter Copybooks of John Murray, VIII: 487. This paragraph, abruptly breaking off from the preceding critique, was possibly interpolated after Johnson polished the original draft of the text and shortly after Murray here wrote Shaw about orchestrated resistance in the print media. Shaw similarly complained about the “underhand dealings of Macpherson and his party” in his *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Late Dr. Samuel Johnson* (1785), in *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, eds. O. M. Brack, Jr. and Robert E. Kelley (Lowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1974), 175.
- 47 M’Nicol, not Clark, castigated Shaw for switching to disbelief in *Ossian*, allegedly abetted by a mercenary conversion to Anglicanism, in *Answer to Shaw’s Inquiry*, 55.
- 48 From M’Nicol’s letter in Clark’s *Answer*, 56–7. Clark’s subsequent *Answer to Shaw’s Reply*, 38, noted that James Macintyre had lent ten sheets but retrieved only two.
- 49 This dignified self-defense did not tell the whole story. Alexander Gordon, Fourth Duke of Gordon (1743–1827), had in June of 1779 presented Shaw to the parish of Ardclach in the presbytery of Nairn for an annual salary of fifty pounds. But it proved an untenable post soon after Shaw’s formal acceptance on 3 August, owing to strong resistance from the laity unhappy with his

accent, his morals, and his piety. He denied the accusations set forth in a petition signed by sixty church members in mid-October, affirmed his goodwill toward his congregation, but, with telling vagueness, conceded here that the Arddlach presentation had been disputed. Absenteeism in London for publishing his Gaelic dictionary (dedicated to Lord Gordon) combined with persistent discontent at Arddlach to force his resignation on 1 August 1780. Eventually becoming a minister of the Church of England with Johnson's blessing, he brought a suit before the Lords of Session for the Arddlach income owed him, he argued, by his official act of induction to the living.

- 50 A closing section of Clark's *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 61–71, entitled "SHAW *contra* SHAW," cleverly outlined contradictions between Shaw's *Analysis* and *Enquiry* aimed at undermining his credibility but really reflecting Shaw's evolving opinion of *Ossian*.
- 51 For this suspicion of more fabricated Gaelic specimens being prepared in this and the next paragraph, compare with Johnson to Boswell, 7 and 25 February 1775, in *Letters*, 11: 176–7, 181: "Macpherson never in his life offered me the sight of any original or of any evidence of any kind . . . If there are manuscripts, let them be shewn, with some proof that they are not forged for the occasion," and see *Journey*, 98: "I am far from certainty, that some translations have not been lately made, that may now be obtruded as parts of the original work."
- 52 Compare the Latin tag meaning "This is sinister, beware of this, O Roman citizen," with its use in Shaw's *Suggestions Respecting a Plan of National Education* (London: R. Cruttwell, 1801), 17: "As therefore, my Lord, 'Hic niger est, hunc tu, Romane, caveto,'" and Shaw's *Life of Hannah More* (London: T. Hurst, 1802), 62: "Of this the proof ought not to be brought forward in books, but in a court of law. *Hunc tu Romane caveto*."
- 53 Compare with *Journey*, 97: "Mr. Boswell was very diligent in his inquiries; and the result of his investigations was, that the answer to the second question was commonly such as nullified the answer to the first." Clark, in *Answer to Shaw's Inquiry*, 73–6, hinted that Shaw depended upon Johnson for funding research in Scotland for the Gaelic dictionary as part of a preconceived plan to debunk *Ossian*. Shaw denied the charge and likely set out as a believer in *Ossian*.
- 54 Compare with Johnson to Boswell, 7 February 1775, in *Letters*, 11: 177: "The state of the question is this . . . Where are the manuscripts? They can be shown if they exist, but they were never shown," and with *Life*, 111: 286n. 2, and 522: "Pray, Sir, are Ganganelli's letters authentick?" JOHNSON. 'No, Sir. Voltaire put the same question to the editor of them, that I did to Macpherson — Where are the originals?'"
- 55 This last paragraph was repeated in Shaw's final *Rejoinder*, 76. Compare with *Adventurer* 50 in *The Idler and the Adventurer*, eds. Walter Jackson Bate, J. M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell, in *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 11: 365: "[B]ut the prosperity of the liar is of short duration; the reception of one story, is always an incitement to the forgery of another less probable . . ."

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