Ossian in English literature

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OSSIAN IN ENGLISH LITERATURE.

BY

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OSSIAN IN ENGLISH LITERATURE.

The influence of a great author upon the literature of a people is often subtle and elusive, with an undefinable, intangible quality difficult to trace. It results in a gradual moulding of the taste of succeeding generations, an unconscious impression of his spirit upon theirs, and an increasing appreciation of that spirit through the retrospection brought by a growing perspective.

It is this almost imperceptible effect which is produced by the poetry of Ossian, the Gaelic bard whose name echoes down to us through seventeen centuries. No poet has ever received more relative fame than this traditional singer of the third century.

The history of Ossian is shrouded in myth. The several accounts concerning him agree that he was the son of Fin Mac Cuoll, or Fingal, the famous leader of a race of giants called Fianna or Feinne, or, according to a more recent nomenclature, Fenians. Finn is said to have been the son of a Scottish king and a Scandinavian princess, and the grandson of a Druid. Burton (1) gives the derivation of Finn as Fin Gall, White Stranger, and supposes him to have been the leader of a marauding Scandinavian force.

The country, the origin, the date of

(1. History of Scotland.)
existence, and the existence of the Fianna are all uncertain and disputed.

External evidence would seem to indicate that Ireland was the native country of the Fianna. After the publication of Macpherson's Ossian in 1763, Scotland claimed exclusive rights to Ossian and the Fianna. A fierce dispute between Ireland and Scotland ensued,—a dispute which was rather futile, because the two countries were practically one in language and in people for many centuries.

There are two theories in regard to the origin of the Fianna. A legend concerning them tells of the selection and mating of one hundred of the largest youths and one hundred of the largest maidens of Ireland. The result of the "survival of the fittest" in several generations was the Fianna. Another less mythical and more credible supposition is that given by Dr. Hyde, based on Keating (1). It states that the Fianna were picked guards of the king's household, whose duties were to quell injustice on the part of the king and nobles, and, in certain cases, to compel obedience and crush revolts on the part of the people. From November until May, they were quartered on the king's subjects; during

(1 A Literary History of Ireland, by Dr. Hyd.)
the remainder of the year, they lived by hunting and fishing. A candidate for admittance to the body of the Fianna was compelled to perform prodigious feats of valor, a failure in any one of them being sufficient to cause his rejection.

The date of the existence of the Fianna is even more doubtful, as there is a discrepancy in the date of their history as given by the ancient manuscripts, and historical conditions as we know them do not agree with those given by the manuscript. The legendary history relates the extermination of the four tribes of the Fianna through their inter-tribal feud at the Battle of Gabhra, or Gowra, about 283 or 284 A.D. Ossian is supposed to have survived until the time of Patrick in the ninth century. It is evident that either the Fianna must have lived later than the third century, or that Ossian must have been killed with his tribe. The legend assumes further that Ireland was imperiled by invasion, since Finn and his warriors were supposed to guard Ireland against the Lachlannach or Norsemen. Historical conditions show that Ireland was free from marauders in the third century and, had it not been, its kings were strong enough to repel invasions without the aid of militia. Norse invasions did not occur until about the ninth century. Upon this basis, Professor Nutt is inclined to place the Fenian heroes in the ninth century. Mr. J. MacNeill rejects "Ossian and the Ossianic Literature. Prof. Nutt."
this theory, and explains the third century story (1). In his introduction to the "Duanaire Finn," he gives his supposition that the kings of Ireland in Finn's time were usurpers, or had, at least, recently gained the ascendancy. Ireland's division into Conn's half and Mogha's half indicates a revolution. By the seventh or eighth century, the Milesian line was firmly established, and the people were practically one. The hero-tales of the subject people were introduced, with the heroes dignified by contact with the ruling class. The Norse invasions occurring about this time strongly modified the legend. This theory explains the growth of many elements in the story. Mr. Nutt refuses to accept it, because there is no evidence of a conquering race from outside Ireland, nor of a subject-race in Ireland. A study of the poems with a view to selecting the Milesian and non-Milesian elements would throw light on the question.

There is no proof in regard to the existence of Ossian and the Fianna. For many centuries, the stories of them were transmitted orally. As we have seen, they were descended from the Druids. The accounts concerning the Druids are meager, being based only on the stories which the Romans obtained by hearsay. (2) The Druids, moreover, kept no written records. Since the bards were a minor order of the Druids, it is quite natural that Ossian, a bard, and a direct descendant from the Druids,

(1. Ossian and the Ossianic Literature.)
(2. Ireland. Hon. Emily Lawless.)
should not have committed his poems to writing.

There are, however, arguments both for and against the existence of the Fianna. The two main arguments against their reality are internal and historical. The former is the extreme improbability of the stories, which contain so many mythical and fairy elements; the latter is the historical insignificance of Finn. In the "Book of Leinster", Finn was a chieftain of Leinster who assisted his King Breszel in his wars, and who seems to have been regarded primarily as a magician. (1) Later, he appears to have been transformed and given greater importance. Both of these objections may be explained by the addition of elements with the growth of the story.

The evidence in favor of their existence are more numerous. The mountains, glens, and rivers of Scotland and Ireland bear the names of Fingal and his followers. Were these names invented with the stories? Furthermore, the existence of other peoples of centuries ago has been accepted on less evidence than is furnished for the existence of the Fianna. The only traces of the Firbolg and the Tuatha de Danaan are the great stones and prehistoric remains at Moytura, the traditional field of their great battle in great Britain.

(1. Encyclopaedia Brittanica.)
Still stronger evidence is that given by Dr. Hyd, from a study of Irish manuscripts. (1) Of these, there are a large number in existence. Many of them give complete lines of genealogies, all carefully traced and fitting in closely with each other. "The Annals of the Four Masters" is a manuscript compiled in the fifteenth century, a professed copy of earlier manuscripts. It gives the histories and complete genealogies of Irish clans, dating from 1700 B.C. "The Book of the Dun Cow" was transcribed in 100 A.D. in the "Book of Leinster" and fifty years later in the "Book of Ballymote" and the "Book of Leean". In the latter, reference is made to the Cin or Code of Dromneachta, which is now lost, but which, according to evidence by Keating and by the "Book of Leinster", existed at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Cuan O'Lochoin gives an account of the "Saltir of Lair", ascribed to Cormac Mac Art. There is no external proof that these manuscripts are historical records of the Irish people, but the internal proofs are so strong as to make their authenticity almost unquestioned. The "Annals of Ulster" give eighteen records of eclipses and comets from 496 to 884.

(1 A Literary History of Ireland.)
which agree even to the day and hour with the calculations of modern astronomers. The extreme difficulty of determining astronomical dates even approximately would lead one to think that these records must have been made by an eye-witness, or must be a copy of the records of eye-witnesses.

The agreement of the annalists with other documents is significant. The "Annals of the Four Masters" agrees with the Welsh pedigree of Ellen, mother of Owen, son of Howel Dha, and eleven of his ancestors. It agrees also with the Antiphony of Bangor, an ancient service book, in regard to fifteen abbots of the monastery of Bangor. Furthermore, it agrees with Bede in mentioning the father of a certain Scot. These agreements can hardly be mere coincidences.

The annalist Tighearnach quotes widely from ancient manuscript, his work showing that he must have had access to large libraries. The original Irish manuscripts used by him are not now extant, but the correctness of his citations from foreign authors implies a corresponding accuracy in them. He accepts Irish genealogies as given down to 300 B.C. If we accept the evidence as to his integrity, his statement should surely be valuable as proof.

A check which was placed upon the tribal genealogies was still further in favor of the truth of these
annalists. This check was effected by a yearly convention of bards at Tara. The senachies and ollavvs were each very jealous of the other's work and curbed any tendency toward falsification by inflicting heavy penalties.

The reality at least of Niall of the Nine Hostages, who came to the throne in 356 and who was the father of Laoghaire, king when Patrick came to Ireland, is undoubted. Niall's great-grandfather was Fiachaidh. His father was Cairbre of Liffey, who overthrew the Fenians and his father Carmac mac Art, son of Conn of the Hundred Battles. This genealogy seems the more probable when we notice that no genealogy was traced to the De Danaan, who were gods and strictly mythical, but that Cormac Cas, son of Cihioill Olum, a famous king of Münster, is said to have married Ossian's daughter. Neither is there any genealogy traced to Chuchulain. The Irish, who took extreme pride in illustrious ancestry would doubtless have claimed him, had there been any opportunity to use fictitious family trees.

In 1900, Dr. Joyce read before the Royal Archaeological Institute a paper on "The Truthfulness of Irish Records." (1) In this he followed the same line of thought as Dr. Hyd, basing his arguments on such physical

phenomena as eclipses, on the testimony of foreign writers,—the agreement in some details with the English chronicles; and on the consistency of the Irish records themselves. As an example of their accuracy in recording eclipses, he cites the solar eclipse of 664 A.D., which was given correctly by the annals as May 1, but was given by Bede as May 3. In a reply to this paper, Mr. James Watson stated that these were no true tests. (1) He said: "Any priest of a hierarchy determined to deprive one people of all their ancient records and to adapt them to the history of another people could as easily supply his interpolations with the correct days on which eclipses of the sun or high tides occur as Dr. Joyce can do at the present time. The Annals of Ulster and Tighearnach's Annals appear to me to be old Scots' records copied after the eleventh century, when the Roman Catholic church was beginning to usurp the place and power of the Culdee church of Scotland; and the copyists interpolated them to support the mythical history of Britain and Ireland." Mr. Watson states further in support of his belief examples of coincidences between several of the chronicles and the annals in the recording of historical events.

Mr. Watson's proof is incomplete. He does not mention the ancient "Books" of Ireland, and he

(1. The Truthfulness of Irish Records. Athenaeum, Aug. 18,-'00.)
fails to account for the long, closely-fitting genealogies of the Irish people. However, he has raised a question which it would be well to investigate, bearing as it does upon the early history of Ireland in general, and, more particularly, upon the Ossianic question.

The earliest literary evidence for the Ossianic tradition is found in the twelfth century. Ossian is mentioned by Giraldus Cambrensis. At that time also it is said that "Fingal was so popular that the bishops complained that their people were more familiar with Fingal than with their catechism." There is also later evidence. In 1375, a work of Barbour's was published which contained the following: "'Behold him,' said MacDougall to one of his leaders. 'He protects his followers against us as Gaul the son of Morni defended his tribe against the rage of Fingal.'" (1) In 1525, in an interlude in the Mannatyne manuscript, Wealth, an allegorical personage, affirms himself to be descended from "Fin Mac Coul and Gow Mac Moru" (2). Bishop Carswell, in 1567, reprobated Ossian's poems as being vain and worldly. (3) These Celtic heroes are also mentioned by Gawain Douglas and by Hector Boere, the Scottish historian. (4).

(1, 2, 3. Report of the Committee appointed by the Highland Society.)

(4. Report of the Committee appointed by the Highland Society.)
The Ossianic literature properly includes all the stories relating to the Fianna. Not all of the poems ascribed to Ossian, and it is conjectured that many of the poems which are ascribed to him were composed rather by Finn. The amount of the Ossianic literature has been estimated at approximately eighty thousand lines. It is particularly interesting because of its gradual accretions. Its development may be easily traced in the ancient manuscripts. There are three distinctly marked stages, called by Mr. Nutt the pre-mediaeval Ossianic romance, the mediaeval Ossianic romance, and the post mediaeval Ossianic romance. (1).

The older cycle dates from the earliest beginnings through the twelfth century. The material includes the oldest Irish manuscript, the "Book of the Dun Cow," which was compiled from older manuscript in the latter part of the eleventh century, and the "Book of Leinster", compiled about fifty years later. The bulk of this material concerns Chuchulain. Of the one hundred thirty-four pages in the

(1. As it was impossible to read the poems themselves, practically this whole section concerning the literature has been adapted from English accounts of it. The books used were: A Literary History of Ireland, by Dr. Hyd; Ossian and the Ossianic Literature, by Mr. Nutt; Encyclopaedia Brittanica; Celtic Literature.)
"Book of the Dun Coro", only six are Ossianic. The "Book of Leinster" is about one-fourth Ossianic. It contains three poems ascribed to Ossian, five to Finn, and two to Caoilte. It contains also numerous references to Finn.

The poems of this period give incipient the themes and the general qualities of the later poems and tales. The descriptions of nature are anticipated by Finn's description of winter, from the "Book of the Dun Cow".

"A tale here for you, oxen lowing, winter's snowing, summer's passing; wind from the north, high and cold, low the sun and short his course, wildly tossing the wave of the sea. The fern burns deep red. Men wrap themselves closely, the wild goose raises her wonted cry, cold seizes the wing of the bird; 'tis the season of ice; sad my tale!"

The supernatural element is strong.

The "Book of the Dun Cow" relates a story of Finn's reincarnation in the seventh century, as Mongan, a king of Ulster, supposedly the son of Fiachra.

In this earlier cycle, Ossian, Fergus and Caoilte are represented as remaining until the time of Patrick, when they recount to him the deeds- "of the days of old." A favorite device of the later stories is
employed in the topographical enumeration.-- Caoilte recalls the stories as brought back to him by the mountains, and glens. The note of loneliness is sounded in this poem of Caoilte:

"Small to-night the vigour of my feet,
I know my body is flesh;
Good was the running of my feet
Until the Talcend came.

Swift were my feet,
In my head my eyes kept ward,
My arms were wont to feed the carrion crow,
My weapons ne'er lacked a shout of victory."

Notice also the love of the chase and of war portrayed in the poem. That, too, is a prominent feature later.

The following fragment from "The Book of the Dun Cow" shows that the Diarmuid -Grainne story already existed. "As Grainne, daughter of Cormac, said to Finn,
'There lives a man
On whom I would love to gaze long,
For whom I would give the whole world,
O Son of Mary! though a privation!"

Further evidence of the existence of this story in this cycl
is found in two references to the unfaithfulness of Finn's wife, in an early Glossary, ascribed to Cormac, "King - Bishop of Cashel", A. D. 837-903.

Another poem, very evidently of this cycle is one supposed to be composed by Finn after eating of the "Salmon of Knowledge." It, too, shows a deep love of nature.

"May-Day, delightful time! How beautiful the colour; the blackbirds sing their full lay; would that Laighig were here!--The cuckoos sing in constant strains. How welcome is ever the noble brilliance of the seasons! On the margin of the branching woods the summer swallows skim the stream. The swift horses seek the pool. The heath spreads out its long hair, the weak, fair bog-down grows. Sudden consternation attacks the signs, the planets, in their courses running, exert an influence; the sea is lulled to rest, flowers cover the earth."

The second period dates approximately from the twelfth century to the sixteenth. The Ossianic lore shows a marked increase, having almost entirely displaced the Chuchulain legend. Mr. Nutt explains this rapid growth and substitution by the change in rulers. From the fourth to the tenth century, the line of Niall of the Nine Hostages held the throne. Since the kings were from Ulster, the bards celebrated pre-eminently the deeds of Chuchulain and Conall Cearnach, the Ulster braves.
At the beginning of the eleventh century, Bran of the Dalga Cais, a Munster chieftain, wrested the throne from the Hy Niall, or descendants of Niall. The eleventh century bards, of the court of Brian, thereafter brought into prominence the tales of the Fenians, who were associated primarily with the south of Ireland. This hypothesis explains the lack of the definite historical touch so evident in the Chuchulain legend, as well as the antagonism of the Fenians and the Lochlannach, or Norsemen, as represented in this cycle, owing probably to the inclusion of the championship of Brian and his successors.

The chief composition of this period is the "Colloquy of the Ancients," which is preserved in the Book of Lismore, and in Laid and Rawlinson. Caolite and Ossian are the survivors until the time of Patrick. Caolite accompanies Patrick in his journey throughout Ireland, giving him much valuable information concerning places and reciting tales of the Fianna. Patrick at first has scruples against listening to the pagan stories, but is reassured by his guardian angel, who tells him to listen and record. The tales of Caolite are about one hundred in number. The themes are various. "We find instances of the theme of an over-sea princess fleeing from an
abhorred husband or suitor to seek protection with those patterns of chivalry and valour, Finn and his champions; we have raids, oversea, by Fenian warriors in search of brides or treasure." Further, there are the dealings of the Fianna with the faery folk.

The general tone of the poems is similar to that of the earlier cycle. The lament of Crede! over her husband is a typical example:

"The haven roars, and O the haven roars, over the rushing race of Rhinn-da-bharc. The drowning of the warrior of Loch-da-chonn, that is what the wave impinging on the strand laments. Melodius is the crane, and O melodius is the crane, in the marshlands of Druim-da'-thre'-n. 'Tis she who may not save her brood alive. The wild dog of two colors is intent upon her nestlings..... Sore suffering to me is Cael, and O Cael is a suffering sore, that by my side he is in dead man's form; that the wave should have swept over his white body, that is what hath distracted me, so great was his delightfulness. A dismal roar, and O a dismal roar, is that the shore's surf makes upon the strand.......... As for me the calamity which has fallen upon me having shattered me, for me prosperity exists no more."

The stories of the third cycle date from the beginning of the sixteenth century. They are found in the Book of Lismore, named from James MacGregor, Dean
of Lismore, who collected them, taking down all that particularly appealed to him through oral recitation of the Gaels, from 1511 to 1550. They are found also in the Duanaire Finn, which was compiled from earlier manuscripts about 1627, and in the Transactions of the Ossianic society of Dublin.

The most important poem of the period is the "Battle of Ventry," which tells of the repulse by Finn and his warriors of Daire, the king of the whole world, when he comes to invade Ireland. It consists of a medley of incidents, and is written in an inflated, verbose style very difficult to read. The tale of the wonderful might of the Fianna, their remarkable prowess in repelling their enemies, their gallant rescue of distressed maidens, and their bravery in the chase here reaches its culmination.

The "Pursuit of Diarmid and Grainne" was fully developed by this time, although many different versions of it occur. The theme, however, is essentially the same. Grainne, the prospective bride of Finn, fell in love with Diarmid the beautiful and laid "geasa" on obligation which no true Fenian could resist,—upon him to fly with her. Diarmid very reluctantly consented. They fled into the forest, and were pursued by Finn, who showed
a vindictiveness scarcely in keeping with his heroic
traits shown elsewhere. They made several miraculous
escapes, sometimes with the aid of spears or other super-
natural means. At last Diarmid was killed by the poison
from a wild boar. He had slain the boar and measured him
at the command of Finn, but Finn wished revenge.

"Diarmid, measure with care again,
The boar against the hair;"
Mournful it was to see
That deed of the hero fair.

He went on that errand sad,
And measured the boar again;
But he trod on a poisonous bristle,
And he felt in his heel a pain.

The hero fell on the field—
Mac Doon that had no deceit;
He lay there beside the boar:—
Now, there is the tale complete."

After Diarmid's death, the refractory Grainne returned to
Finn. Different versions exist of the flight, of the
various escapes and, of the death of Diarmid. Ireland is
still full of interesting landmarks reputed to be the
resting-places of Diarmid and Grainne.

Independent stories and romances form a
large part of the post-mediaeval cycle. A typical poem
relates the conversation of Finn with Fergus the bard,
concerning Oscar in the Battle of Gabhra. (1)

"A literal rendering of MacLauchlan's modified by Marley.)
"Now, O Bard--my son's son, my desire,
Now Oscar of him, Fergus, tell
How he hewed at the helms ere he fell."

"Hard were it Finn to number,
Heavy for me were the labour,
To tell of the host that has fallen,
Slain by the valour of Oscar.
No rush of the waterfall swifter,
No pounce of the hawk on his prey,
No whirlpool more sweeping and deadly,
Than Oscar in battle that day.
And you who last saw him could see
How he trobbed in the roar of the fray,
As a storm-worried leaf on the tree
Whose fellows lie fallen below.
As an aspen will quiver and sway
While the axe deals it blow upon blow.
When he saw that Mac Art, King of Erin,
Still lived in the midst of the roar,
Oscar gathered his force to roll on him
As waves roll to break on the shore.
The king's son, Cairber, saw the danger,
He shook his great hungering spear,
Grief of Griefs!- drove its point through our Oscar,
Who braved the death-stroke without fear.
Rushing still on Mac Art, King of Erin,
His weight on his weapon he threw,
And smote at Mac Art, and again smote
Cairber, whom that second blow slew."

The most important development in the later stories is the disputes with Patrick. Caoilte does not usually play a part in them. The reminiscences of the past are those of Ossian, and the disputes between him and Patrick form a much larger part of the story than heretofore. The disputes are very bitter. Ossian is a genuine pagan, who refuses to accept Christianity, and contrasts God with Finn and his might, scorning Patrick and the "Cleric chanting sin." Patrick, is, as Mr. Nutt describes him,
"a sour and stupid fanatic, harping with wearisome monotony on the damnation of Finn and all his comrades." When Patrick tells the old bard that the Fenians will not be allowed to enter heaven, he replies:

"Think you that He was like MacCool,
The brave and mighty Finn?
Into whose prescence all on earth
Could freely enter in?" (1)

Again, when Patrick terrifies Ossian with a vision of hell, with the Fianna fiercely beset on all sides and rapidly losing ground, and then offers Ossian any wish he might have for them, Ossian, defiant to the last, replies:

"I ask no help of the Father,
I ask no help of the Son,
Nor of the Holy Spirit,
Ever Three in One.

This for my only asking,
And then let might prevail,
Patrick, give Gull Mac Morna
An iron tug to his Mail." (2)

The latest rearrangement of the legendary substance was the composition of "Ossian in the Land of Youth" by Michael Comyn in the middle of the eighteenth century.

The most important development in the legend,—the one which at least secured for it a deservedly prominent place is Macpherson's Ossian. Since the story of it is widely known, we give here only a brief account of it.

In 1759, when James Macpherson was at the home of Graham, where he was tutor, he met Home, to whom he showed some fragments of Gaelic poetry, supposedly genuine, which he possessed. Home took him to Drs. Blair and Ferguson, who urged him to publish a translation of them. Macpherson complied, and in 1760 published a translation of fifteen poems, entitled "Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland." At the same time, Macpherson stated that in the Highlands there existed an epic poem, which he would take down and translate and publish, if money were donated to pay the expenses. The literary world evinced the greatest interest in the enterprise and subscriptions were immediately forthcoming. Accompanied by Mr. Lachlan Macpherson, and later by Mr. Ewen Macpherson, Macpherson made a tour of the Highlands, starting in June, 1760. In October, having collected much Gaelic Lore, including a manuscript alleged to be from the Clanranald family, he returned to his home in Badenoch. There he prepared his materials. In January, 1761, he
went to Edinburgh. The next year, "Fingal", an epic poem in six books, and sixteen other poems appeared. They were followed in 1763 by "Temora," an epic poem in eight books. The poems were enthusiastically received. The descriptions of wild mountain scenery, the intense love of nature and the open air appealed to the people. They had grown weary of the precise, fettering art of the earlier part of the century and were becoming interested in the romantic past, as shown in the impulse to reproduce on the stage the manners of the Middle Age and of the Renaissance and the customs of the far-off east. (1) Paul Henri had already initiated the "Norse and Celtic Renaissance" with his "Introduction a' l'histoire de Dannemare" (1755-6) and "Monumens de la mythologie de la poesie des Celts et partic ulierment des anciens Scandanavians" (1756). The growing curiosity in regard to matters ancient made the time a most fitting one for the publication of Ossianic poems. It is a significant fact that Macpherson's Ossian preceded by only a few years the publication of the old English verses with which Chatterton so completely gulled the public.

Even from the beginning, however, there was an underlying current of skepticism, which soon developed

(1. Development of the English Literature and Language. A. H. Welsh.)
into open objection, and led to a fiery dispute, in which all the prominent scholars and literati of the time took part. On one side were the English critics; on the other, Highland ministers and Gaelic scholars. It was a time when Gaelic was a term of reproach, and fierce national prejudice only added fuel to the flames.

Macpherson's chief opponent was Dr. Samuel Johnson who, like many other Englishmen of his time, was violently opposed to all things Scottish. His experience with Lauder had embittered him, and from the first, he denounced the poems and their author unreservedly. There was, besides, no evidence on the Gaelic side of the question, as the ancient manuscripts had not yet been unearthed to the view of the general public. Johnson even took a trip through the "Highlands and Islands" in order to disprove the authenticity of the poems. He was handicapped, however, by his unprepossessing personality and by his ignorance of Gaelic. Johnson's trip accomplished little for Ossian. Principal Shairp has said concerning it that when a countryman of the Highlander could scarcely induce him to repeat ancient poetry, it was scarcely to be expected that two men, "hurrying from one house to another, and asking a few lawyer-like questions, could extract from the shy and sensitive Gael his hidden treasures of lore." (1)

(1. Ossian: Principal Shairp. Living Age 110:153.)
Considering his attitude and his ignorance of Gaelic, Johnson's conclusions were very natural. They are well represented by these assertions, made to Boswell: (1) "There are, I believe, no Erse M.S.; if there are M.S., let them be shown, with proof that they are not forged for the occasion." "There is not in the world an Erse M.S. one hundred years old." "The poems of Ossian have never existed in any other form than that which we have seen." "It was never said that any man of integrity could recite more than six lines of the original Ossian. Needless to say, these assertions have since been disproved. The "Red Book of Clanranald" and other manuscript matter has been found; the Highland Society found poems of Ossian existing in other forms, and found, too, men who could recite them.

Johnson's opposition was so violent that Macpherson became aroused and wrote to Johnson, threatening personal violence. Johnson replied with the following letter, which has been published many times. (2).

Mr. James Macpherson:

I received your foolish and impudent letter. Any violence offered to me I shall do my best to repel, and what I cannot do for myself the law shall do for me.

(1. Life of Samuel Johnson. James Boswell.)
(2. Samuel Johnson. E. T. Mason.)
I hope I never shall be deterred from detecting what I think a cheat by the menaces of a ruffian.

What would you have me retract? I think it an imposture still. For this opinion I have given my reasons to the public, which I here dare you to refute. Your rage I defy. Your abilities, since your Homer, (Dr. Johnson here refers to a translation of Homer by Macpherson, which was considered very poor) are not so formidable; and what I hear of your morals, inclines me to pay regard, not to what you shall say, but to what you shall prove. You may print this if you will.

Samuel Johnson.

At the same time, Sir John Hawkins tells us, he provided himself with a cudgel, a heavy oak plant about six feet long with a diameter of three inches near the head, which was formed of the clipped-off root of the plant. This he kept constantly within reach. He heard nothing further from Macpherson.

Mr. Laing, the historian, agreed with Johnson in his strenuous denunciation of Macpherson. With an over-keenness for plagiarism, he found in the "Poems of Ossian" references to many classical works, and even to the Bible. (1) His dissertation on the subject shows that

(1. Report of the Committee appointed by the Highland Society.)
he must have examined carefully and minutely both the poems and the works to which he thought they referred. Many of his instances are rather far-fetched. It would be difficult to say, even in the passages most plainly similar, that Macpherson derived his ideas from any certain source.

Macpherson himself took few measures to silence these criticisms. In answer to the challenge to produce his Gaelic manuscript, he left it at the shop of Bickett, his publisher. As no one came to examine the manuscript, Macpherson after a few months withdrew it, and became fierce in his denunciation of a public which made dogmatic statements without adequate grounds. He should at least be given credit for showing his manuscript, in spite of his subsequent silence.

There were also many who defended Macpherson. Dr. Hugh Blair, who had first urged Macpherson to undertake the publication of the poems, now espoused his cause. He accepted the poems as genuine translations and wrote a long critical dissertation, comparing the epic poem "Fingal" to the Iliad and dubbing Macpherson the "Celtic Homer." (1) Like all enthusiasts, he read into the poems

(1. The poems of Ossian, translated by James Macpherson, with a Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian by Dr. Hugh Blair, 1862.)
more than they really contained, finding the character portrayals varied and definite and the descriptions beautiful, with the selection of the right details and the episodes and circumstances particularly happy and fitting. He urged the strong internal evidence of the poems as one of the chief arguments for their authenticity.

In the face of so much skepticism, Mr. David Hume wrote to Dr. Blair urging him to investigate in the Highlands concerning the existence of the poems and their certification. He advised Blair to find the Clanronald manuscripts, and compare the original and the translation; to find proof that Ossianic poems had long been recited in the Highlands; to find the points of resemblance between these poems and Macpherson's. Blair took up the matter and wrote to many Scottish ministers, and obtained an universal reply in favor of the existence of Ossianic poems.

The same line of inquiry was taken by the Highland Society through a committee appointed 1797. The committee made a thorough investigation, and in 1807 published a report, which was drawn up by Henry Mackenzie, who is known as the author of the "Man of Feeling." The report was exhaustive and did not differ essentially from the final conclusion concerning the poems. It stated that there was a general basis of tradition upon which the poems were founded; that such poems had been found both in
manuscripts and in recitation of the Highlanders; that Macpherson had used many of these tales, which he had combined with work of his own. (1) The extent of the use of the poems was unknown; no entire poem could be found to agree with Macpherson's translation.

The committee further stated some of Macpherson's sources. The poem "Fingal" was based on a ballad telling of the invasion of Magnus the Barefooted, King of Norway. Its fifty stanzas of four lines each were dilated into five books. No Gaelic original could be found for the first book of the epic, which relates an episode concerning Cuthullin, general of the Irish tribes, and Swaran, king of Lochlin. Pieces from detached ballads had been inserted throughout the poem. Macpherson had probably become careless in regard to the use of originals when he published the second book; for no genuine authority could be found for it. The famous "Address to the sun," which Mr. Laing assumed was based on Milton, was found to be a genuine Gaelic poem, which Macpherson had partially changed. Mr. MacDiarmid said that he had heard it repeated thirty years before, together with other

fragments of ancient poetry by an old man in Glenlyon, who had learnt it from people in the glen before Macpherson was born. The original "Address to the Sun" may be found in the "Preliminary Discourse" to the "Poems of Ossian", edition of 1862.

Investigation had been particularly difficult because the Highlanders had misunderstood the motives of it, and had thought it was rather the question as to the existence of Ossianic poetry than the honesty of Macpherson. Hence, they defended him valiantly.

The year following the publication of the report, a new impetus was given to the question by the publishing of Macpherson's Gaelic version. Money had been collected to defray the expenses of the publication of this version, but Macpherson had neglected it. At his death, in 1796, he left the manuscript, with the accompanying money, with his executors. The manuscript contained Gaelic originals for only about half of the poems. Many Highlanders accepted the Gaelic originals as genuine, but the majority of the people still viewed Macpherson as an entire fraud. It was even said that the Gaelic was translated from the English by Macpherson, because the Gaelic of the genuine parts of his "Ossian" differed widely from the Gaelic of the original.
In 1862, attention was again called to the Ossianic controversy by the publication of the Book of the Dean of Lismore, containing poems collected in the early part of the sixteenth century. It contained twenty-eight poems from Ossianic literature, nine being attributed directly to Ossian. They had been transcribed into modern Gaelic and English in 1813 by Mr. Thomas MacLauchlan. This book settled conclusively the fact that ancient Gaelic poetry did exist and had been handed down for some centuries.

In 1870, Dr. Clerk, minister of the parish of Kilmallie, published a literal translation of Macpherson's Gaelic side by side with the Gaelic and with Macpherson's translation written below for comparison. He prefixed this with a long dissertation on the authenticity of the poems, in which he argued that Macpherson's Ossian was only a translation. He gives first the testimony of Mr. Lachlan Macpherson and Mr. Ewen Macpherson that they had assisted him to take down poems; the statement of Malcolm Macpherson that he had given him a manuscript; and the evidence of Rev. Gallie, Captain Morrison and Rev. M'Nicol that they had seen Macpherson's manuscript. Later, he urges that the Gaelic is entirely the original and the English the translation, because of this testimony, Macpherson's ignorance of Gaelic, his inferior compositions in
English, and the obvious defects and blemishes of the poems, which he thinks Macpherson would have been too clever to print had he written the poems. He adds the evidence that Macpherson obtained help in translating the poems and that he left the manuscript at his publisher for inspection. All of this evidence in favor of the Gaelic as the original, except Macpherson's ignorance of Gaelic, which other writers are inclined to dispute, tally with the conclusions reached by the committee of the Highland Society. It is not inconsistent with the statements made by those who testified that Macpherson had manuscripts, to think that Macpherson used part of the originals and pieced them together with Gaelic fragments of his own. Even if his English composition were inferior Macpherson could readily imitate the English of the translation. Dr. Clerk's translation itself shows that Macpherson followed the original (where he had an original) closely enough to catch the loftier notes of the poems, even in his own peculiar style. The defects and blemishes of the poems prove nothing. Macpherson might have left them for the same reason that Dr. Clerk thinks he would have removed them if the poems had been original,—his cleverness. Dr. Clerk's account is a full detailed one, covering all the points of the controversy.
Dr. Clerk's translation is from the Gaelic text published in 1807. It shows painstaking efforts in phrasing and explanations. The translation of Macpherson has shorter sentences, and many sentences in the imperative, giving a continuous effect of action and over-emphasis. Macpherson often overworks certain adjectives in his constant use of them, so that his work shows a tendency toward monotony. The following illustrations will show the difference in the two translations.

This is a fragment of the literal translation from "Carrie-Thura:"

"He raised aloft the spear of darkness,
Stood fiercely his lorty head,
Fingal went against him in wrath,
His bright blue sword in his hand,—
Son of Luno of swardest cheek,
Moved the light of the steel through the spectre;
The evil wraith of death (went) under gloom.
He fell without shape, and away
On wind of the black cairns, like smoke
Which a boy, with stick in hand, raises
Around a hearth of discord and of gloom.
Now compare Macpherson's rendering of the passage.

"He lifted high his shadowy spear!—He bent forward his dreadful height. Fingal, advancing, drew his sword; the blade of dark--brown Luno. The gleaming path of the steel winds through the gloomy ghost. The form fell shapeless into air, like a column of smoke, which the staff of the boy disturbs, as it rises from the half-extinguished furnace."

Macpherson has often been accused of being
obscure. Notice the concreteness of the latter passage, particularly in figures of speech and of phrasing, as compared with the former. It is scarcely fair, however, to judge Macpherson's Ossian by comparing it with the literal translation of his own Gaelic original; for the extent of his changes and additions in that original is unknown.

The "Leabhar Dearn", or "Red Book of Clanranald," now in the possession of Admiral Reginald MacDonald, was found in 1873. (1) It was examined by Mr. J. F. Campbell and Mr. Standish O'Grady, both authorities on Celtic literature. Their verdict was that it "did not contain one line of Macpherson's Ossian." This was the last publication having reference to the Ossianic controversy.

The general conclusion reached by impartial students of the poems, and the one still held by the literary world is essentially the same as that of the Highland Society,—that Macpherson worked incoherently on unorganized material without which he could have done nothing; that he would have ranked high as sole original author; that perhaps half of his work was translation, and that the remainder of it was written by him and published fraudulently with the real translations under the name of Ossian.

The immediate effect of Macpherson's work was to arouse and interest in translating and imitating ancient Gaelic poems. Macpherson, indeed, had not been

(1. Encyclopaedia Brittanica.)
first in the field. In 1751, Alexander M'Donald, a widely known Gaelic poet, had published a collection of Gaelic poems. In 1756, Jerome Stone had called attention to the ballads by publishing a translation in the "Scots Magazine." At his death, he left a collection of "Gaelic Laye", which was lost for a time, but which was given to the University of Edinburgh at the death of Dr. Clerk.

Macpherson stimulated the interest in ancient Gaelic poetry, and gave the work an impetus which it would probably have lacked otherwise. His Ossian was followed in 1780 by Dr. John Smith's "Collection of Ancient Poems", translation "from the Gaelic of Ossian, Ullin, Giran and others." Smith's "Old Lays," or "Seann Dana", published in 1787, is a prose translation. His work is also partly a fraud. In 1780, John Clark, a land-surveyor in Badenoch, published a small volume called "Caledonian Bards," which contained a long poem "Mardubh", of dubious origin. Patrick Mac Gregor, a barrister, published in 1841 the "genuine remains of Ossian", Still more recently, J. F. Campbell has published his well-known "Tales of the West Highlands."

In regard to the influence of Ossian, it would be difficult to separate the genuine Ossian from the translation. The name of Ossian has been ever pre-eminent in
Celtic literature. Macpherson's translation has extended its scope; "no single work in Celtic literature has had so wide-reaching, so potent and so enduring an influence."

Many themes have been derived from the Ossian's tales. "The Pursuit of Diarmid and Grainne," the most widely known of the tales, has given us Lancelot and Modred in the Arthur legend. Poems adapted from Ossian are:

- Tennyson's "The Voyage of Maeldune"
- Yeats' "The Wanderings of Ossian"
- Dr. John Smith's "The Madness of King Goll."

Many other poems of modern Celtic literature are traceable to Ossian. A few examples will suffice:

- John Todhunter, "The Lament of Aideen for Oscar"
- Samuel Ferguson: "Aideen's Grave".
- Chatham O'Byrne: "Grainne (after the death of Diarmid)."

Innumerable others might be mentioned; for the Gaels both in Scotland and in Ireland have never tired of singing the deeds of Finn and the Fianna.

But the spirit of the Ossianic literature, the fierce love of nature, the love of battle, the spirit of melancholy, is more subtly imitated than the themes, and correspondingly harder to trace. Neither is there any proof that any author has received his inspiration from a particular source. Even the author himself can often not state his sources.
We give here examples of Ossian's influence through the dissemination of his poetry as seen in three authors—Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Byron.

Chambers states that Coleridge was deeply influenced by Ossian, but the only trace of it is in his concrete imagery. His poems include a short selection, entitled "Imitated from Ossian" and "The Complaint of Minathoma (From the same)." The following selection from the latter shows how well he has succeeded in catching the bardic spirit:

"How long will ye round me be swelling,  
O ye blue-trembling waves of the sea?  
Not always in caves was my dwelling,  
Nor beneath the cold blast of the tree.  
Through the high sounding halls of Cathloma  
In the steps of my beauty I strayed;  
The warriors beheld Minathoma,  
And they blessed the white-bosomed Maid!"

In Wordsworth, the supreme nature poet, who was fond of calling himself bard, there are traces of Ossianic traits. Wordsworth emphatically denied the authenticity of Macpherson's Ossian, saying that it was "essentially unnatural—- a forgery audacious as worthless". Yet he was very fond of mythological fiction, and it is highly probable that he unconsciously imitated the spirit of Ossian. As evidence for this, we have his poem "Glen-Almain," and the lines "Written on a Blank Leaf of Macpherson's Ossian," beginning,

"Oft have I caught upon a fitful breeze,  
Fragments of far-off melodies,
With ear not coveting the whole,
A part so charmed the pensive soul."

Although it is rather perilous to judge from the use of single expressions, we may state that Wordsworth uses frequently phrases prominent in Ossian: rocks are described often as "mossy"; "ghosts" and "spirits" appear; "vapours" and "mists" often obscure the atmosphere.

In Lucy Gray, the lines,

"And sings a solitary song
That whistles in the wind"

remind one of Ossian, as do also the following from "Yew-trees"

"With altars undisturbed of mossy stone
United worship, or in mute repose
To lie, and listen to the mountain flood
Murmuring from Glaramaras inmost caves".

Byron was influenced more than either of these by the Gaelic bard, and his works give unmistakable evidences of it. In his "Oscar of Alva", he has appropriated from Ossian the names Lora, Alva, Glenalvon, Oscar and Mora, and has used throughout the Ossianic style of wording, as:- "dusky "hills of wind; "Why grows the moss on Alvin's stone?"; "Dark was the flow of Oscar's hair, wildly it streamed along the breeze". The phrasing results in giving the poem an antique air almost equal to that of Macpherson's translation. "When I Roved a Young Highlander" contains the expression "Morven of snow", with
Byron's note appended that "Gormal of snow" is frequently found in Ossian. Part of the poem is written after the manner of the blind bard's complaints.

"The mountains are vanished, my youth is no more,
As the last of my race, I must wither alone,
And delight but in days I have witness'd before."

"The Death of Calmar and Orla. An Imitation of Macpherson's Ossian" is admirably done, although it is scarcely as rough as Macpherson's work, nor has it quite such a primitive touch.

In these lines from a "Fragment", Byron has caught the Ossianic atmosphere of the spirit world.

"When, to their airy hall, my Father's voice
Shall call my spirit, joyful in their choice.
When, poised upon the gale, my form shall ride
Or, dark in mist, descend the mountain side;
Oh! May my shade behold no sculptured urns,
To mark the spot where earth to earth returns.

The very active effect of Ossian upon Byron seems to have ceased about 1807. In that year, he published "Ossian's Address to the Sun in Carthon". An accompanying note states that Macpherson "was in places turgid and bombastic".

In 1874, Harvard received, as part of the bequest of Charles Summer, two volumes of "The Poems of Ossian", which had once belonged to Byron, who had received £20 from Summer for them. They were valuable in that they
contained Byron's autographs and complete annotations, and on the fly-leaf at the end of the first volume a poem entitled "A Version of Ossian's Address to the Sun. From the poem Carthon". This poem, together with the marginal notes, was published for the first time in 1898 by the Atlantic Monthly. It is less pretentious than the first poem, and more nearly keeps the spirit of the original. In the notes Byron's praise for Macpherson is unstinted. This would seem to indicate that the poem was written before 1807, when a note of criticism had already crept into Byron's statements concerning Macpherson.

These examples will suffice to show how wide was the influence of Ossian, particularly of Macpherson's Ossian, and, at the same time, how indefinable it is. The spurious elements of the later Ossian really affect little its real value. Although Macpherson's style may have been super-rhetorical, and his character delineations confused and indistinct, he has furnished us with a sort of translation which has never been imitated so as to catch in the same way the real spirit of the ancient Gaelic poems,—the sensuous love of nature, the air of intense melancholy, the din of spears and shields with the moods and passions of the primitive warriors, and the atmosphere of the spirit world. More important than all, Macpherson has been directly instrumental in stimulating an interesting the Gaelic language and literature. He has, in fact, been
the precursor of the Celtic Renaissance.