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Author(s)	Barr, Rebecca Anne; Tonra, Justin
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Reading nations, debating identities: new approaches to Macpherson's *Ossian*

I'm delighted to be talking here in Edinburgh about a project which has its very foundation the desire to engage new readers for a Scottish text. The project aims to harness social media and new reading technologies to bring to life the sequence of eighteenth-century poems known collectively as *Ossian*. Thanks to open-access creative commons licensing of material from the National Library of Scotland, the project will provide free access to accurate online texts of this seminal work, and will enable users to contribute comments and perspectives from their reading to an ongoing virtual discussion.

James Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* was first published in 1760, only fifty three years after the Act of Union with England and during a period of national turmoil in the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden. *Fragments* was Macpherson's first publication in a series of volumes that purported to be the remains of a third-century epic poem preserved in the Scottish Highlands through a process of oral transmission and recovered from ancient manuscript sources.

From initial publication these poems debated and investigated national identities and national literature. Rather than being articles of purely aesthetic interest, readers of Macpherson's work linked these texts to the assertion of national pride, debating not only their literary qualities but archipelagic identity politics in England, Ireland, and Scotland. Many of the first reviews of Macpherson's works queried whether the poems weren't *Irish* rather than *Scottish*, conflating the literature into a so-called 'Celtic Fringe'. Macpherson's response shows his sensitivity to questions of national identity and a desire to distinguish Scottish from Irish literature. Marshalling the Edinburgh Hugh Blair he claims a superior linguistic purity in his poems of *Ossian* and *Fingal*: claiming that the North Scot language is 'more pure, more agreeable' than that found even 'amongst the unmixed part of the Irish nation' (216). A Scotsman fluent in Gaelic can understand an Irish composition, whereas such comprehension is not reciprocal - an Irishman can only understand a Gaelic composition 'by study' (217). Therefore, Blair reasons, 'Scotch Gaelic is the most original and

consequently the language of a more antient and unmixed people.' Scots national identity is asserted by a process of competitive cultural triangulation. 'The pretensions of Ireland to Ossian,' Blair scornfully asserts, are swiftly dismissed by the poor quality of their poetry: it is the 'work of the modern period' – pastiches of ancient verse unlike the authentic Scots. Macpherson himself is yet more derisory, commenting on an Irish poem as displaying such 'frequent anachronisms...and so unequal in its composition that the poet was either mad, or drunk, when he wrote it' (*Works of Ossian*, 1812, 318).

If Blair and Macpherson downplay the historical affiliation between Ireland and Scotland in order to align themselves with an English readership, Ossian is nonetheless set 'antient barbarous Times' of war with the English. Macpherson's Whig compatriot James Thomson saw this as national prehistory, 'When Disunited *Britain* ever bled, / Lost in eternal Broil' and before Scotland 'grew' into a harmonious state of union with England 'Where *Wealth* and *Commerce* lift their golden Head' (*Spring*, 1728) much to the joy of all. In contrast to Thomson's unionist rhapsodies, Macpherson's poetry is defiantly strange – aggressively *foreign*. It is no wonder that reader response to his work was often couched in nationalist language, and often virulently anti-Scottish: reflecting English anxiety about Scottish ambition within the Union and bitter hostility to the recent events of the Forty Five Rebellion. Similarly, the poems' claims to ancient status stimulated competitive projects of antiquarian recovery and translation by Irish scholars – a movement which shaped Ireland's own sense of national identity and was ultimately utilised to articulate its independence from Britain. Written between England's 1707 Act of Union with Scotland and the 1801 Act of Union with Ireland, Macpherson's poems clearly investigate and *stimulate* questions of British, Irish, and Scottish national and cultural identities.

Perhaps because of its popularity, *Ossian* has been criticized for peddling a dewy-eyed vision of Highland mists and vanquished warriors that was all too amenable to English critics such as Matthew Arnold, who used his romantic vision to synthesise an imperial idea of colonized literatures natural subordination. Yet as Daffydd Moore has argued, *Ossian* does not simply manufacture a Scottish nation

for an English reading public. Moore argues that *reading Ossian* allows us to 'balance... [a vision of these poems as] culturally assimilative, or 'Anglo-British', with the fact that...the force of Anglo-Saxon hegemony did anything but welcome the poems with open arms' (Moore, *Reception*, 40).

A pungent instance of such Anglo-Saxon rejection can be seen in William Wordsworth's petulant refutation of *Ossian* in his *Essay Supplemental to the Poems* of 1815. Wordsworth's rejection of Macpherson's work is couched in distinctly xenophobic terms. Reacting violently against the sense of *Ossian's* international audiences, Wordsworth – himself an inhabitant of the borders – rejected the poem's ability to affect or penetrate the *English* language itself:

'As much as those pretended treasures of antiquity have been admired, they have been wholly uninfluential upon the literature of the Country...This incapacity to amalgamate with the literature of the island is, in my estimation, a decisive proof that the book is essentially unnatural...as audacious as it is worthless.' (655-666)

The inability to amalgamate, or *assimilate*, with *English* literature excludes Macpherson from the canon and prevent his work from producing any literary offspring. As literary breeding stock, *Ossian* is 'unnatural' – barren and infertile. Wordsworth's language fashions *England* as Island but also as creative power.

Our project aims to reopen debate on *Ossian* by presenting Macpherson's work in a new format – that of the online digital edition. Despite the prolific publishing history of the *Ossian* poems and their impact upon eighteenth century European culture the only twentieth-century scholarly edition of the text was Howard Gaskill's Edinburgh University Press print edition of the *Poems of Ossian* in 1996. Despite Gaskill's pioneering work in making *Ossian* available to readers in an accessible paperback format, his edition is problematic. In many ways, Gaskill's edition is an argument for *Ossian's* literary value. An eclectic text, it selects material from across the various editions, from a perspective of the 'best' literary quality: using aesthetic criteria informed by literary criticism and textual primitivism, Gaskill attempts to extricate the work from authorial intention.

Thus, he rejects the 1773 *Poems of Ossian*, in which Macpherson makes significant textual, stylistic and structural changes, as a ‘mutilated’ text which represents ‘the worst possible choice’ for a scholarly edition. Gaskill accuses the 1773 edition as ‘minimal Ossian and maximal Macpherson’ (xxv), and so seeks to restore the (inspired, autonomous literary) text to its primitive integrity.

Gaskill’s print edition was an important act of literary rehabilitation and revision, but it is hamstrung by print constraints which force him into a ‘reluctant compromise’ (ibid.) in which translations, glosses and editorial footnotes are relegated to the end of the edition or removed altogether and in which variants and accidentals are silently excised. Gaskill himself admitted the difficulties of the edition, noting the inevitable ‘distortion’ of the reading experience produced by the 1996 edition.

Ironically, the suitability for *Ossian*’s textual characteristic for a digital format demand is given voice within Gaskill’s edition—in Fiona Stafford’s introduction, entitled, ‘The Ossianic Poems of James Macpherson.’ Here, she describes several characteristics of the Ossianic texts which make their presentation suited to the digital medium. She uses a number of key phrases to describe the Ossian phenomenon, which make her introduction sound as though it were a prospectus for a digital edition. [SLIDE] “It is one of those rare texts that generates a life beyond its own pages,” (v) she writes, alluding to the inspiration it provided for countless literary, critical, musical, and artistic responses.

But in that phrase she also captures the way in which the texts push beyond the boundaries of the page, and the covers of the book—the way its multiple textual forms plead for a medium that can more effectively illustrate their complexity. [SLIDE] “Many of the peculiarities of *The Poems of Ossian* can, indeed, be seen to function as creative catalysts for the reader.” The textual variance which is curtailed in the printed edition is, to my mind, at the heart of understanding the peculiar evolution of the texts. [SLIDE] “The difficulties of following the plot...are also opportunities for readers to make their own connections, and to fill out the narrative gaps with their own stories” is a characteristic which can be enabled by the non-linear arrangement of the digital form, and possibilities allowed by the genetic encoding module of the TEI Guidelines. [SLIDE] “[H]is work evidently

offers readers the opportunity to enter the text and begin creating their own imaginative worlds,” alludes to the promotion of the role of the reader and his or her interpretive agency, as does her assertion that [SLIDE] “Macpherson's work indicates its resistance to any fixed interpretation”—the participatory aspect of *Ossian Online*, which I will describe in a few minutes is a recognition of this feature of the work. As, finally is the statement that *Ossian* is [SLIDE] “after all, pre-eminently a text of the margins.” Stafford’s explicit sense here is the way in which she reads *Ossian* as a negotiation between Highland and Lowland identities, between rural and urban, between Scottish and English/British/Irish, between Gaelic and English—but it also refers to the explosion of commentary which greeted its initial publication, and raged throughout the nineteenth century, and which is mirrored in the more recent academic engagements with the text which have remained marginalised within discrete academic boundaries. It is the aim of *Ossian Online* to enable to crossing of some of these boundaries.

This is beautifully illustrated in John Francis Campbell’s copy of the 1760 *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* held here at the National Library of Scotland. Campbell, an esteemed Gaelic scholar, annotated his editions of Macpherson’s works across years, modulating his appreciation of their Gaelic provenance in light of his own research and the publication of further scholarly works on Scots folklore and Gaelic poetry. So in 1869 Campbell compares Macpherson’s suppressed 1758 work *The Highlander* with the 1760 *Fragments* and writes ‘these fragments are not translations...but the ‘work of one mind.’ ‘There is in this a sort of vague echo of Gaelic ballads and traditions, altered and broken. It is like the recollections of things heard in childhood mixed with the ideas of a grown man who had tried his hand at epic two years before” (1-2). By 1884 he is decided - “I have no doubt about MacPherson’s *Ossian*. He composed the English first from his knowledge of Gaelic tradition & from his reading” (4). It is just this kind of educated and opinionated commentary that *Ossian Online* aims to promote.

[Slide] *Ossian Online* endeavours to bring together discrete and often competing perspectives into fruitful dialogue around the original texts to create a new

reading community and engage fresh knowledge and insight on this important work. The affordances of the digital ‘allow for the creation of better-than-print editions’, in which the role of the editor has changed and what can be offered to the reader has radically expanded. While Gaskill had to be selective and evaluative, we can create an **archive** of editions that allow readers to visualise change across editions, to interpret and judge those changes independently.

We hope it will ultimately lead to the creation of new critical edition, which will give readers the means of exploring the way in which the texts of the Ossian canon changed over the course of time. Because existing print editions fail to do justice to the rich and complex relationships between these texts and the way they were printed.

It will do this by means of TEI-encoding, linking sites of variance and revision that occur during the transmission of the texts to present and visualise the full extent and nature of these changes—instead of choosing which changes are ‘important’ as in Gaskill’s eclectic edition. This will exploit the possibilities that the web offers for tracing and articulating an evolving textual network. Such a task is difficult and necessarily compromised on the printed page, where the editor must usually resort to the shorthand of a critical apparatus.

Ossian’s model of devolved authority makes it a good candidate for allowing a collaborative annotations, as does its disciplinary breadth. Its mixture of gaelic sources, classical principles, and its impact on *European* - and *American* - literature necessitate a range of expert annotators, rather than a single figure. Questions of national and cultural identity have clearly been central to readings and interpretations of *Ossian* and this *diversity* of readings is mirrored in the wide range of different academic disciplines and reading communities (Romanticism, Celticism, Antiquarianism, etc.), who view *Ossian* as articulating their particular interests. Yet as Daffydd Moore has noted, even contemporary academic responses to *Ossian* are split into traditionalist readings (who are often anti-nationalist or anti-Scottish) and revisionists. An online edition allows for a variety of perspectives to exist in *debate* at the same time, available to readers and scholars alike. We hope that *Ossian* online will see readers collaborate, debate, and annotate this edition, synthesising for the first time a broad range of

disciplinary perspectives to provide an evolving community of research and a truly 'social edition.'

Putting Ossian online at this present moment raises the question of how readers will respond to Ossian at this critical juncture in Scottish and international political history. Given the present ferment around issues of national identity, autonomy, self-governance, and the politics of culture in forming and sustaining nation – be it British, Scottish or otherwise – there might be no better time to reread that upstart Macpherson. How will the new online context for the work affect its understanding and appreciation? What might *independence* mean for readers of Ossian – Scottish or otherwise? We hope that making his work freely available in this format will contribute in some small way to that debate.

National Library of Scotland,
26 August 2014.