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## CHAPTER TWO

### Ossian and the Gaelic World

Lesa Ní Mhunghaile

James Macpherson returned to his native Badenoch in 1756 to take up a post as a country schoolmaster. Once there:

it is believed, he began to collect Gaelic poetry, without any other view at that time but to amuse himself in that solitude. That was no difficult task in the then state of Badenoch, when a number of old men were still alive who had a great mass of Gaelic poetry treasured up in their memory, which they used to recite to their countrymen when assembled beside a cheerful fire in the long winter nights.<sup>1</sup>

The poetry Macpherson collected primarily related to a vast corpus of Gaelic heroic literature that was hundreds of years old and had been preserved in the Scottish Highlands. This chapter will examine that corpus as a context for Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), *Fingal* (1761/2) and *Temora* (1763). It will begin by outlining the various interlinked strands of the heroic corpus, with a particular emphasis on the *Fiannaigheacht* ballad tradition (known in English as Fionn or Fenian ballads) which formed the basis of Macpherson's 'translations'. It will then discuss the relationship between the authentic Gaelic tradition and Macpherson's 'translations', drawing attention not only to differences but also to characteristics common to both.

## The Heroic Gaelic Literature of Ireland and Scotland

Macpherson was following in the footsteps of a number of collectors, who, from the early eighteenth century, had been collecting Gaelic songs and poetry in the Highlands. Alexander Pope (c.1706–1782), Minister of Reay, Caithness, made his collection around 1739, while Archibald Fletcher, a farmer in Auchalladar, Glenorchay, learned the poetry by heart and dictated it to local scribes in 1750. Jerome Stone (c.1727–1756), a teacher in Dunkeld made his collection around 1755, as did the Rev Donald MacNicol (1735–1802), Minister of Lismore, Argyll.<sup>2</sup> Stone was responsible for publishing the first ‘translation’ of a Gaelic Fionn ballad, ‘Bás Fhraoich’ (Fraoch’s Death), as ‘Albin and the Daughter of Mey’, in the *Scots Magazine* for January 1756.<sup>3</sup> His commentary highlighted the literary value of Gaelic poetry: ‘those who have any tolerable acquaintance with the Irish language, must know, that there are a great number of poetical compositions in it [...] Several of these performances are to be met with, which for sublimity of sentiment, nervousness of expression, and high-spirited metaphors, are hardly to be equalled among the chief productions of the most cultivated nations.’<sup>4</sup>

Stone’s publication drew attention to a literary tradition hitherto unknown outside the Highlands and almost certainly provided both an exemplar and the impetus for Macpherson’s activities. Macpherson had grown up in a region in which the native Gaelic tradition, handed down orally from generation to generation, was still strong and he would have been familiar with that tradition from childhood even if he was not strongly literate in Gaelic.<sup>5</sup> Some of that tradition had also been preserved in manuscripts created by and disseminated among the bardic order. Manuscript texts were written either in the Classical Gaelic standard language that had been employed by the learned classes in both Scotland and Ireland until the late seventeenth century or in the ‘modified and distinctively Scottish form of Classical Gaelic’ that emerged in the following century.<sup>6</sup>

Ireland and Scotland constituted a common linguistic area during the Middle Ages and shared a common literary heritage. Poets travelled between the two countries and Scottish poets trained in Irish schools and vice versa.<sup>7</sup> As a result the same tales and ballads often circulated in both countries. An important component of this shared literary heritage is a corpus of heroic literature, central to which are two cycles of heroic tales known as the Fenian or Fionn cycle (*Fiannaigheacht*, *fian*-lore) and the Ulster cycle (*Rudhraigheacht*). Both comprise literary prose tales and narrative ballads in oral and manuscript form. The Fionn cycle was the most popular and widespread of all Gaelic narrative cycles. Traditionally situated in the third century, it relates the exploits of Fionn mac Cumhaill, his son Oisín and a band of warriors known as the *fianna*.<sup>8</sup> References to Fionn can be found in eighth-century texts written in Ireland where he is presented as a warrior and a seer. The key prose text is ‘Agallamh na Seanórach’ (*The Colloquy of the Ancients*), a number of narratives framed by a story in which the heroes Oisín and Caoilte mac Ronáin have survived long enough to relate the exploits of the *fianna* to Saint Patrick.<sup>9</sup> Other important texts in the cycle include ‘Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne’ (*The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne*), ‘Cath Gabhra’ (*The Battle of Gabhra*) and ‘Cath Finntrágha’ (*The Battle of Ventry*).

The Ulster cycle, based on the Ulaidh, an ancient people from whom the province of Ulster got its name, is traditionally situated in the first century and centres on the king Conchobar mac Nessa, ruler of the Ulaid, and the hero Cú Chulainn. The longest and most important story is the ‘Táin Bó Cúailnge’ (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*). Also of note is ‘Longes Mac nUislenn’ (*The Exile of the Sons of Uisneach*), which tells the tale of Deirdre, destined at birth to cause slaughter and devastation in Ulster. Tales relating to the cycle are preserved in Irish-language manuscripts of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries but the language of the earliest stories is dateable to the eighth century. In earlier tradition the Ulster and Fionn cycles were quite separate but motifs from the Ulster cycle were gradually incorporated into

the Fionn cycle, which over time took the place of the Ulster cycle in popular tradition. Distinction was preserved, however, though, as Thomson has noted, there were exceptions in Scotland such as ‘Laoidh an Tailleoir’ (*‘The Ballad of the Tailor’*).<sup>10</sup>

A discussion of the Fenian ballad (or lay) tradition is pertinent when considering the relationship between Macpherson and the Gaelic tradition.<sup>11</sup> The ballads or narrative poems, known as *laoi(dh)*, *dán* or *duan* in Irish and Scottish Gaelic respectively, are attributed in the tradition to Fenian heroes, particularly Oisín (Oiséán in Scotland). They are usually classified by subject matter by modern folklorists: *síodh*-ballads (ballads relating to the otherworld), *bruidhean*-ballads (ballads relating to battles), ballads of magical visitors, invader-ballads, ballads of internecine strife, pursuits and rescues, elopements, foreign expeditions, monster-slayings and hunts.<sup>12</sup> The tradition contains a large number of narrative poems in addition to elegies and eulogies, poems about nature and debate poems. Individual ballads may contain a number of different styles.<sup>13</sup> They are composed in loose forms of syllabic verse known as *óglachas* and in the oral tradition they were chanted or sung.<sup>14</sup>

Although ballads are attested in Irish manuscripts from the time of the Book of Leinster (c.1160), many of the ballads which are contained in surviving collections were composed during the period extending from the end of the twelfth century to the sixteenth century.<sup>15</sup> The oral and written lay tradition co-existed, each sustaining the other, although the written tradition was the stronger of the two until the seventeenth century. During that period there was no substantial alteration to the tradition with the important exception of a change in overall tone, which moved from heroic to romantic and started to find room for hints of the burlesque.<sup>16</sup> Around the sixteenth century, a number of ballads were collected together to form a new type of *Agallamh* known as *Agallamh Oisín agus Phádraig*.<sup>17</sup> Approximately one hundred and one complete copies of this text have been preserved in manuscripts, the earliest of which is found in the *Duanaire Finn* manuscript.<sup>18</sup> It is

noteworthy that there was less interest in the debate between Oisín and Pádraig in the later Scottish tradition, perhaps due to the Reformation and the subsequent evangelical movements in the Highlands.<sup>19</sup> It is also important to note that after the sixteenth century the Scottish ballad tradition was primarily sustained by oral transmission and it appears that the recitation of Fenian ballads survived in the repertoire of traditional singers longer in that country than in Ireland.<sup>20</sup>

There appears to have been greater variation in individual texts in Scotland during the later period than in Ireland, perhaps reflecting the stronger manuscript culture in Ireland, which had a tendency, relatively speaking, to stabilise texts, despite retaining a ‘considerable variety of readings’.<sup>21</sup> In general, it is difficult to establish with certainty which ballads were composed in Scotland and which in Ireland. For example the ballad ‘Is fada anocht a n-Oil Finn’ (*Time passes wearily in Elphin tonight*), in which Oisín laments the passing of the *fianna* and compares his present unhappiness to his former happiness, is common to the Irish and Scottish tradition but as it refers to Elphin in Co. Roscommon it was most likely composed in Ireland and from there passed into the oral tradition in Scotland.<sup>22</sup> Certain ballads that were common to the two countries developed a distinct Scottish dimension as, for example, ‘Eas Ruaidh’ (*Assaroe*) or ‘Cath Ríogh na Sorcha’ (*The Battle with the King of Sorcha*), while some ballads composed in Ireland, such as ‘Laoidh Fhraoich’, were accepted and localised in parts of Gaelic Scotland. Indeed some ballads appear to have been preserved in Scotland only such as ‘Laoidh Fhraoich’ and ‘Laoidh Dhiarmaid’, both of which were very popular in the Scottish tradition.<sup>23</sup> Scotland, therefore, played an important role in preserving ballads that have been lost in Ireland and of course the converse may also be true.<sup>24</sup> It is important to emphasise this shared Gaelic literary heritage particularly in light of Macpherson’s claims that the Irish had appropriated ‘Ossian and his heroes to their own country’ and the ensuing reaction in Ireland to such claims.<sup>25</sup> As the evidence above

demonstrates, it is too simplistic to claim that one country appropriated the literary tradition of the other.

The two most important collections of Early Modern Fionn ballads are contained in the Scottish manuscript, *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, and the Irish manuscript, *Duanaire Finn (The Poem Book of Fionn)*. The former was compiled in Perthshire by Sir James McGregor, Dean of Lismore of Argyll, and his brother Duncan, mainly from the oral tradition between 1512 and 1542.<sup>26</sup> It is noteworthy for the distinctive orthography they employed. Scots-based and written in ‘secretary hand’, a style of European handwriting developed in the early sixteenth century for writing English, German, Welsh and Gaelic, it conveyed ‘an approximation of the Gaelic sounds’ rather than an old Gaelic script or standard Classical Gaelic spelling.<sup>27</sup> Meek has noted that it ‘represents what is perhaps the high point of meticulous recording of the Finn ballad texts within the medieval tradition’.<sup>28</sup> It contains around twenty poems belonging to the Fionn cycle.<sup>29</sup> The *Duanaire Finn* manuscript was written in Louvain and Ostende between 1626 and 1627 by Niall Gruama Ó Catháin and Aodh Ó Dochartaigh for their patron Captain Somhairle Mac Domhnaill of Antrim, an officer in the Spanish army of the Netherlands. It contains sixty-nine ballads from the Fionn cycle and a version of *Agallamh na Seanórach* omitting the poetry.<sup>30</sup> There are only four ballads common to *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* and *Duanaire Finn*. This is significant because it demonstrates that despite the shared literary inheritance, the Scottish tradition was ‘preserving if not actually creating’ ballads that were not known in Ireland.<sup>31</sup>

In Ireland, the ballad tradition remained popular in both the manuscript and oral traditions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ballads were regularly expanded and a number of new Fionn ballads were composed during the eighteenth century. The first, ‘Suirghe Ghuill’, was composed by the poet and scribe Seán Ó Neachtain (c.1640–1729) in Dublin in 1713. It was termed ‘pseudo-Ossianic’ or ‘spurious Ossianic’ by Standish Hayes

O'Grady, who noted that 'the style and plot are mock heroic and burlesque'.<sup>32</sup> It tells of how Angliota, the king of Troy's daughter, visits Ireland in distress and requests the protection of the *fianna*. The second ballad, 'Laoi Oisín ar Thír na nÓg' ('*Oisín's lay concerning the Land of Youth*'), composed possibly around 1750, has been ascribed to Micheál Coimín (c.1680–1760) of Co. Clare.<sup>33</sup> It recounts Oisín's journey to Tír na nÓg and his subsequent return three hundred years later. The theme was well known in the Gaelic literary tradition as it is found in the stories *Echtrae Chonnlai* and *Immram Brain*. Coimín displays a good knowledge of the *fiannaíocht* tradition, though the ballad displays the same weaknesses as other late compositions, suggesting that poets were constrained by the fetters of the ancient tradition and a genre that was exhausted by the eighteenth century. That said, had he not composed the ballad, the ancient story of Oisín in Tír na nÓg might have been lost to posterity.<sup>34</sup> Other late Fionn ballads include 'Laoi Mheargaigh' or 'Laoi Mhná Mheargaigh' ('*The Ballad of Meargach*' or '*The Ballad of Meargach's wife*'); 'Lá dhúinne ar Sliabh Fuaid' ('*One day on Sliabh Foy*'), which may have been composed by the Northern scribe, Muiris Ó Gormáin; and 'Laoi Chab an Dosáin' ('*The Ballad of the Mouth of the Tuft*'), which has been termed 'one of the most obscene literary pieces in pre-modern Irish literature'.<sup>35</sup>

### **The relationship between Macpherson's translations and the authentic Gaelic tradition**

Macpherson claimed that the poems he had published were translations of the Gaelic-language material he had collected in the Highlands 'after a peregrination of six months'.<sup>36</sup> Although it appears that he had initially intended to replicate the poetic metre of the authentic tradition in the translations, they were eventually presented in rhythmical prose. It appears that Macpherson may have been heavily influenced by Hugh Blair in the decision to use this particular style and that it was most likely influenced by concerns regarding how Gaelic

poetry could be best presented to an English-speaking audience.<sup>37</sup> Accusations of charlatanism and forgery abounded from the outset but in recent decades scholars have come to a more nuanced understanding of Macpherson's treatment of Gaelic language material. It seems likely that Macpherson was not helped by being insufficiently conversant in literary Gaelic to fully understand his raw materials, and the 'confusion and vagueness' of some of his borrowings may be the result of him often having had only a general sense of the meaning of the texts he encountered.<sup>38</sup>

The first detailed attempt to deal with the Macpherson's claims was an anonymous article entitled *Mémoire de M. de C. a Messieurs les Auteurs Du Journal des Sçavans*, probably penned by the Bishop of Cloyne John O'Brien (c.1701–1769), published over five issues of the *Journal des Sçavans* in 1764.<sup>39</sup> A large part of the *Mémoire* consisted of a detailed attack on the historical structure that Macpherson had provided for his translations. In the final instalment, M. de C. argued that 'Fingal' was composed of elements taken from the tales 'Cath Finntrágha' (*The Battle of Ventry*) and 'Bruidhean Chaorthainn' (*The Rowan-tree Dwelling*) and was heavily dependent on a third tale written in verse, 'La guerre ou la descente de Dearg files de Diric Roi de Lochlin' (*The war of the descent of Dearg, son of Diric, King of Lochlin* [Scandinavia]). He claimed that 'Carthon' was also based on *Bruighean Caorthoin* and noted the following:

We shall never finish if we wish to enter here into a detailed examination of all his other poems: it suffices to note that they are all drawn from the same source, composed in the same spirit, and the originals have all been falsified with the same skill.<sup>40</sup>

The next serious attempt to examine the veracity of Macpherson's claims was an investigation by the Highland Society of Scotland in 1805. Its report concluded:

[...] the Committee has not been able to obtain any one poem the same in title and tenor with the poems published by him. It is inclined to believe that he was in use to supply chasms, and to give connection, by inserting passages which he did not find, and to add what he conceived to be dignity and delicacy to the original composition, by striking out passages, by softening incidents, by refining the language, in short by changing what he considered as too simple or too rude for a modern ear, and elevating what in his opinion was below the standard of good poetry. To what degree, however, he exercised these liberties, it is impossible for the Committee to determine.<sup>41</sup>

The investigation compared *Ossian* with Fionn ballads collected by Duncan Kennedy and others and those published by Charlotte Brooke in *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789). One of the authentic ballads assessed in the *Report* was 'Laoidh an Mhoighre Bhoirb', also known in Scotland as 'Cath Rìgh na Sorcha' or 'Eas Ruadh', the earliest version of which is found in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*. The *Report* concluded that 'the simplicity and distinctness of narrative in the original ancient poem will be easily contrasted with the general and more ornamented expression of Macpherson's translation'.<sup>42</sup> However it would be another ninety years before Ludwig Chr. Stern undertook a detailed study of Macpherson's poems and identified a number of the sources that Macpherson had employed.<sup>43</sup> He also examined Macpherson's Gaelic 'originals' as published posthumously in 1807 and was left in no doubt that they had been back-translated from the English texts.<sup>44</sup> Stern was scathing in his condemnation of *Ossian*: '[i]t may be conceded that Macpherson had to some small extent

imbibed the spirit of Gaelic poetry, but he had so mixed it up with noxious sentimentality and religious unction that it became scarcely recognisable as a native product'.<sup>45</sup> Derick Thomson built on the foundation laid by Stern's work and demonstrated that Macpherson drew on sixteen or seventeen Gaelic ballads. He argues that Macpherson used the ballads in a number of different ways: 'sometimes adopting and adapting a plot, sometimes producing a loose translation of a sequence of lines or stanzas, and more often taking names or incidents or references from the Gaelic texts and reproducing variants of these'.<sup>46</sup>

Thomson found that the epic *Fingal* 'makes the most pervasive and detailed use of Gaelic ballads of any of Macpherson's books'.<sup>47</sup> Two ballads, 'Duan a' Ghairbh' and 'Laoidh Mhaghnuis' form the main outline of the plot and the main episodes are based on three others: 'Fingal's visit to Norway', 'Duan na n-Inghinn' (*The Ballad of the Maiden*) and 'Suireadh Oisein air Eamhair Aluinn' (*Oisín's Courtship*). There were, however, other echoes. For example, Macpherson amalgamated versions of 'Moighre Borb' and 'An Ionmhuinn' (a seventeenth-century imitation of the former ballad) to create the 'Maid of Craca' episode in *Fingal*, Book III.<sup>48</sup> 'Moighre Borb' also formed the basis of Fragment VI. Macpherson also used other ballads in a more restricted manner elsewhere in the volume. These include 'Sliabh nam Ban Fionn', 'Ard Aigneach Goll' (*The Praise of Goll*) and possibly a ballad about Cú Chulainn's chariot.<sup>49</sup>

Macpherson's 'The Battle of Lora' has close affinities with the ballad 'Teanntachd Mhòr na Fèinne' (*The Fian's great distress*), following the same sequences of events contained in the Gaelic albeit laying emphasis in different places. St. Patrick is transformed into a Culdee, the Fenian princess is given the name Bosmina and a lengthy description of compensation in the Gaelic is greatly reduced.<sup>50</sup> Macpherson acknowledged that he used a version of the ballad he had received from James MacLagan but it appears that he also used a

number of other versions of the ballad, namely those of Jerome Stone and a version similar to that of Archibald Fletcher.<sup>51</sup>

A version of ‘Bás Chonlaoich’ (*The Death of Conlaoch*) was used in the construction of ‘Carthon’, although Thomson describes Macpherson’s treatment of the original as ruthless.<sup>52</sup> The Gaelic poem, a version of which is found in the Book of the Dean of Lismore, tells of how Cú Chulainn unwittingly kills his son Conlaoch. In ‘Carthon’, the heroes become Clessámmor and Carthon respectively and Macpherson reverses their roles. In ‘Carthon’ Clessámmor dies of grief, an addition to the Gaelic ballad. As in all of Macpherson’s adaptations of Gaelic works, the style he employs in ‘Carthon’ differs greatly from ‘Bás Chonlaoich’ which is ‘told with economy and restraint’.<sup>53</sup>

A final example of Macpherson’s adaptation of Gaelic ballads is found in his use of a ballad or prose story relating to the hero Ferdiad and the Ulster cycle tale ‘Táin Bó Cuailnge’ (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*). Ulster cycle texts were in circulation in eighteenth-century Scotland, including among the works of Macpherson’s contemporaries such as James McLagan and Uilleam MacMhurchaidh. Thomson suggests that Macpherson may have obtained the ballad or story from oral sources or the historical works of Irish historians such as Geoffrey Keating and Roderick O’Flaherty.<sup>54</sup> It makes its appearance in ‘Fingal’ (Bk. II) where Ferdiad is killed by Cuchullin. Macpherson’s version provides a ‘distorted summary’ of the Irish tale and changes its atmosphere ‘almost beyond recognition’.<sup>55</sup>

Donald Meek has also suggested that Macpherson was aware of the prose tale ‘Cath Finntrágha’, ‘one of the tales most highly prized in the medieval Gaelic world’, and that it may have influenced the storyline of ‘Fingal’.<sup>56</sup> The tale’s main theme concerns an attack on Ireland by the Vikings, an important theme in Gaelic prose and ballads.<sup>57</sup> Meek has posited that Macpherson may have viewed the invasion theme as the major epic theme of medieval

Gaelic literature and that he was trying to ‘recapture the epic of invasion’ in ‘Fingal’.<sup>58</sup> Macpherson’s knowledge of prose as well as ballad tales is significant in another way too. After 1550 the distinction between prose and ballads became more fluid, particularly in the case of tales and ballads that shared a common theme. As a result, Macpherson may have found Gaelic ballads ‘in a form which suggested that there was an easy exchange between prose and verse, and, in the final assessment, that there was no reason to distinguish the two forms’.<sup>59</sup>

Macpherson’s translations omitted any references to Christianity although St. Patrick played a prominent role in the authentic Gaelic ballad tradition.<sup>60</sup> Instead, the cleric is transformed into son of Alpin by Macpherson. A number of the Gaelic ballads tend to the anti-clerical and the comic tension between St Patrick and Oisín, who has great difficulty embracing Christian ideals of life, forms part of their appeal.<sup>61</sup> The absence of references to Christianity in the poetry was defended by Hugh Blair in his ‘Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian’ (1763) and offered as proof of the antiquity of Ossian: ‘the druidical superstition was, in the days of Ossian, on the point of its final extinction [...] whilst the Christian faith was not yet established’.<sup>62</sup> To sum up his treatment of his Gaelic sources on this point and others, in addition to taking inspiration from a number of prose tales, Macpherson used much of the detail of Gaelic ballads and tales but adapted and re-ordered them so as to re-fashion them into texts that would suit the tastes of Romantic readers and appeal to a non-Gaelic-speaking audience.

### **Characteristics shared with the authentic Gaelic tradition**

Yet for all the differences with regard to the style and tone of Macpherson’s translations and their relationship to the authentic Gaelic tradition, it is important to note that they share a

number of characteristics in common with authentic Fionn ballads, characteristics that are key to the overall Ossianic affect.<sup>63</sup> Blair remarked that ‘the two great characteristics of Ossian's poetry are tenderness and sublimity’:

Ossian is perhaps the only poet who never relaxes or lets himself down into the light and amusing strain [...]. One keynote is struck at the beginning and supported to the end; nor is any ornament introduced, but what is perfectly concordant with the general tone or melody. The events recorded, are all serious and grave; the scenery throughout, wild and romantic [...]. His poetry, more than that of any other writer, deserves to be styled, *The Poetry of the Heart*. It is a heart penetrated with noble sentiments, and with sublime and tender passions; a heart that glows, and kindles the fancy; a heart that is full, and pours itself forth.<sup>64</sup>

An elegiac theme is one of the distinguishing features of *Fragments* and Meek has suggested that in giving prominence to such themes, Macpherson was ‘reflecting what became the dominant mood of the modern ballad corpus of Scotland’.<sup>65</sup> Ossian constantly compares his former and current condition unfavourably and, according to Blair, this contrast ‘diffuses over his whole poetry a solemn pathetick air, which cannot fail to make impression on every heart.’<sup>66</sup> This is a comparison directly available to Macpherson from his Gaelic sources. In the following ballad, Oisín laments the fact that he has aged:

Do bhádhusa úair fá fholt bhuidhe chas

is nach ffuil trem chenn acht fionnfadh gerr glas [...]

m'fholt anocht is líath, ní bhía mar do bhá. (*Duanaire Finn XXV*)

*Once I was yellow-haired, ringleted,*

*Now my head puts forth only a short grey crop [...]*

*Tonight my hair is hoar, it will not be as once it was.*

In 'Fragment II', Oisín presents himself as the last of his race: 'Yes, my fair, I return; but I am alone of my race. Thou shalt see them no more: their graves I raised on the plain'.<sup>67</sup> This can be compared with:

Fada liom gach lá dha ttig

ní mar sin fa cleachtadh dhúin

mo bheith a ffegmais na fFían

do cuir sin mo ciall ar ccúil (*Duanaire Finn, LV*)

*Wearisome to me is each succeeding day:*

*It was not so we used to be: my being parted*

*from the Fianna has upset my wits.*

Also common to both are the ways in which Ossian's nostalgia is evoked via features of the landscape:

Guth gadhoir a gCnoc na Ríogh

ionmhoin liom in síodh fo ffuil

ba meinice leinn fulacht fían

eidir in slábh agus muir. (*Duanaire Finn*, XXXII).

*The beagle's cry on the hill of kings!*

*The mound it circles is dear to me:*

*We often had a fían's hunting feast*

*between the moorland and the sea.*

In 'Fragment VIII', Ossian is reminded of his father and son by the sound of the river:

'How hast thou fallen like an oak, with all thy branches round thee! Where is Fingal the King? where is Oscar my son? where are all my race? Alas! in the earth they lie. I feel their tombs with my hands. I hear the river below murmuring hoarsely over the stones. What dost thou, O river, to me? Thou bringest back the memory of the past.'<sup>68</sup>

There are many such examples of sentiment in the authentic tradition where feelings of love, sorrow, friendship and nostalgia are expressed. A variety of emotions come to the fore in the first ballad in *Duanaire Finn*, 'Eól damh senchus Feine Finn' including jealousy,

vengeance and guile, and pride.<sup>69</sup> In a ballad concerning Caoilte's sword, Oisín appears as a 'man of feeling' as he sheds tears, remembering the past escapades of the *fianna*:

Nochan feadar créd do-dhén

fil mo rosg ag sileadh déir

cloidhiom Caoilte ba caom gné

is meabhair lemsa gurab é. (*Duanaire Finn XLVII*)

*I know not what I shall do:*

*my eye is shedding tears:*

*I remember that this is comely Caoilte's sword.*

In general, Macpherson's texts and the Gaelic ballads share an emphasis on the subjective experience and perspective of the individual, the creating consciousness of Oisín. Other characteristics in common include references to nature, hunting, life outdoors and the honour code by which members of the *fianna* were bound. This latter characteristic was transformed into behaviour reminiscent of chivalry in Macpherson's epics, a feature that appealed to Blair in his commentary on 'Carric-thura' in 'Critical Dissertation': 'Lathmon is peculiarly distinguished, by high generosity of sentiment. This is carried so far, particularly in the refusal of Gaul, on one side, to take the advantage of a sleeping foe; and of Lathmon, on the other, to overpower by numbers the two young warriors, as to recall into one's mind the manners of Chivalry'.<sup>70</sup>

In conclusion, the relationship between James Macpherson's translations and the authentic Fionn tradition is complex. Although much work has been done by scholars such as Stern, Thomson and Meek in identifying Macpherson's sources, there are still areas that would merit investigation, in particular his development of the overall framework for his Ossianic poems via Gaelic examples, and his use of prose sources. As Meek suggests, his use of the ballad tradition might then merit a re-investigation in light of those aspects.<sup>71</sup> Equally, while there are significant differences between *Ossian* and its Gaelic inspiration, it is not true to say that all the features of the Ossianic are superimposed onto the Gaelic works. Rather, *Ossian* represents a heightening and emphasising of features of the Gaelic work in and through the language of eighteenth-century Sentimental writing in English.

In the final analysis though, the most important dimension of the relationship between *Ossian* and the Gaelic world is the attention *Ossian* drew to the authentic Fionn cycle tradition in both Scotland and Ireland. In Scotland, the interest that was sparked in the tradition resulted in the collection of manuscripts and the bringing to light of collections that had already been made, while in Ireland the controversy Macpherson provoked with his allegations regarding the Scottish origin of the Fionn cycle led to the collection and publication of authentic material in order to refute his claims. The success of *Ossian* did indeed encourage a series of 'imaginary translations', 'pseudo-historical notes' and 're-fabricated Gaelic versions' but this does not detract from the fact Macpherson's so-called 'translations' played an important role not only in the salvaging of a central component of the literary heritage of Ireland and Scotland but in its elevation to a higher status throughout Europe.<sup>72</sup> Macpherson's *Ossian* and the imitations that followed it also acted as a stimulus to Gaelic poets and prose writers during the nineteenth century by offering them new ways to deal with Gaelic language and literature and 'fresh perspectives in which to view the Highlands, Islands, and even the Gaels themselves'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Ramsay, *Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century, from the mss. of John Ramsay, esq. of Ochertyre*, ed. by Alexander Allardyce (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1888), I, pp. 545–46.

<sup>2</sup> The collecting of Gaelic material, particularly Fionn ballads, gathered pace after the publication of Macpherson's *Ossian* works. Collections made in the second half of the eighteenth century included those by the Rev. James McLagan (1728–1805) of Blair Atholl; and Ewen MacDiarmid, Rannoch (a manuscript written between 1762 and 1769); Duncan Kennedy, a schoolmaster in Kilbrandon, Argyll, in 1774; Mathew Young, Bishop of Clonfert in the Scottish Highlands in 1784; Dr Alexander Irvine, Minister of Little Dunkeld, Perth, in 1801. See J. F. Campbell, *Leabhar na Feinne. Heroic Gaelic Ballads collected in Scotland chiefly from 1512 to 1871* (London: Spottiswoode and Co., 1872); Derick Thomson, *Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Glasgow: Gairm, 1994), p. 82; Anja Gunderloch, *Làmh-sgrìobhainnean Gàidhlig Oilthigh Ghlaschu. The Gaelic Manuscripts of Glasgow University: A Catalogue* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Stone's poem was not a translation but it used the broad theme of 'Bás Fhraoich'.

<sup>4</sup> *Scots Magazine*, 18 (1756), pp. 15–17.

<sup>5</sup> Derick Thomson, "'Ossian" Macpherson and the Gaelic World of the Eighteenth Century', *Edinburgh University Review*, 40 (1963), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Moray Watson and Michelle Macleod (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to the Gaelic Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 11; Donald E. Meek, 'The Scottish Tradition of Fian Ballads in the Middle Ages', in Cathal Ó Háinle and Donald E. Meek (eds), *Unity in Diversity: Studies in Irish and Scottish Gaelic Language, Literature and History*, (Dublin: School of Irish, Trinity College Dublin, 2004), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Kuno Meyer, *Fianaigeacht: Being a collection of hitherto inedited Irish poems and tales relating to Finn and his Fiana, with an English translation* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1910); Gerard Murphy, *The Ossianic Lore and Romantic Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: At The Three Candles, 1961); Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); James MacKillop, *Fionn mac Cumhaill: Celtic Myth in English Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986); Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *Fionn Mac Cumhaill:*

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*Images of a Gaelic Hero* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988) and Sharon J. Arbuthnott and Geraldine Parsons (eds), *The Gaelic Finn Tradition* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed consideration of the *Agallamh*, see Aidan Doyle and Kevin Murray (eds), *In Dialogue with the Agallamh. Essays in Honour of Seán Ó Coileáin* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014). See also, Nollaig Ó Muraíle, ‘Agallamh na Seanórach’, in Pádraig Ó Fiannachta (ed.), *An Fhiannaíocht, Léachtaí Cholm Cille, 25*, (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1995), pp. 96–127.

<sup>10</sup> Derick S. Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson’s ‘Ossian’* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1952), p. 11. Macpherson has often been criticised for mixing the two cycles together.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Meek has drawn attention to the problematic use of the terms ‘ballad’ and ‘lay’ to translate the Gaelic terms ‘laoi’ and ‘duan’. See Donald E. Meek, ‘Development and Degeneration in Gaelic Ballad Texts’, in Bo Almqvist, Séamas Ó Catháin and Pádraig Ó Héalaí (eds), *The Heroic Process* (Dublin: Glendale Press, 1987), p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> Murphy, *Ossianic Lore*, p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Meek, ‘Development and Degeneration’, pp. 132–33.

<sup>14</sup> In Scotland the Fionn ballads are most commonly known as *Duain na Féinne(adh)*. In colloquial Gaelic the *fianna* are known as *Féinn*, *Fèinn* or *Finn*, depending on dialect, and also *An Fhéinn* and *Na Fiantaichean*. An individual is known as *Fiantaiche*. See John MacInnes, ‘Twentieth-Century Recordings of Scottish Gaelic Heroic Ballads’, in Almqvist et. al, *Heroic Process*, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Meek, ‘The Banners of the Fian in Gaelic Ballad Tradition’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 11 (Summer 1986), 29.

<sup>16</sup> Peadar Ó Conaire, *Na Laoithe Fiannaíochta sa Bhéaloideas* (unpublished MA thesis, University College Galway, 1982), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Murphy, *Duanaire Finn* III, pp. 204–15; Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, ‘The Development of the Debate between Pádraig and Oisín’, in Almqvist et. al, *Heroic Process*, pp. 183–205; Síle Ní Mhurchú, ‘Agallamh Oisín agus Phádraig: composition and transmission’, in Arbuthnot and Parsons (eds), *Gaelic Finn Tradition*, pp. 195–208. For the development of the relationship between Oisín and St. Patrick, and the portrayal of a ‘tragi-comic Oisín’ with a shift from the heroic to the humorous, see David Krause, ‘The Hidden Oisín’, *Studia Hibernica*, 6 (1966), pp. 7–24.

<sup>18</sup> Ó Fiannachta, ‘The Development of the Debate’, p. 194.

<sup>19</sup> Meek, ‘Scottish Tradition of Fian Ballads’, p. 20.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 14. In Scotland, the ballads and their melodies, dating from the later medieval period, were recorded from the 1940s onwards by members of the University of Edinburgh's School of Scottish Studies. See, MacInnes, 'Twentieth-century Recordings', pp. 101–30.

<sup>21</sup> Meek, 'Development and Degeneration', p. 137.

<sup>22</sup> Murphy, *Duanaire Finn* III, p. 121.

<sup>23</sup> Meek, 'Scottish Tradition of Fian Ballads', p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Meek, 'The Gaelic Ballads of Scotland: Creativity and Adaptation' in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), pp. 32–35.

<sup>25</sup> James Macpherson, 'A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian' published in *The Works of Ossian, The Son of Fingal* (1765). See, Gaskill, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 223. For a discussion of the reaction of scholars in Ireland to such claims, see Clare O'Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004); Mícheál Mac Craith, 'We know all these poems': The Irish Response to Ossian', in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 91–108; Lesa Ní Mhumbaile, *Charlotte Brooke's Reliques of Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2009), pp. xxxvi–xxxvii.

<sup>26</sup> For the Book of the Dean of Lismore, see S. Innes and A. Petrina, 'The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in Carla Sassi (ed.), *The International Companion to Scottish Poetry* (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2016), pp. 44–45; Martin MacGregor, 'Creation and Compilation: The Book of the Dean of Lismore and Literary Culture in Late-Medieval Gaelic Scotland', in Thomas Clancy and Murray Pittock (eds), *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 2007), I, 209–18; Martin MacGregor, 'The view from Fortingall: the worlds of the Book of the Dean of Lismore', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 22 (2006), pp. 35–85.

<sup>27</sup> Watson and Macleod, *Edinburgh Companion*, p. 14. The orthography is the same kind used to write Lowland Scots and was a common way of writing Scottish Gaelic in the Late Middle Ages.

<sup>28</sup> Meek, 'Scottish Tradition of Fian Ballads', p. 13. For a detailed consideration of *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, see Donald E. Meek, 'The corpus of Heroic Verse in the Book of the Dean of Lismore' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Glasgow, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> Neil Ross (ed.), *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1939).

<sup>30</sup> Ruairí Ó hUiginn, 'Duanaire Finn: patron and text', in *Duanaire Finn: Reassessments*, ed. by John Carey (London: Irish Texts Society, 2003), pp. 79–106.

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<sup>31</sup> Meek, ‘Scottish Tradition of Fian Ballads’, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Standish Hayes O’Grady, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Library*, 3 vols (London: British Museum, 1926), I, p. 637.

<sup>33</sup> Máirtín Ó Briain, ‘Some material on Oisín in the Land of Youth’ in D. Ó Corráin *et al.* (eds), *Sages, Saints and Storytellers* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1989), pp. 181–99. There has been some debate regarding the authorship of the ballad. It was first published by the Ossianic Society and the following was stated as a foreword to the text: ‘The Council of the Ossianic Society do not hold themselves responsible for the authenticity or antiquity of the following poem; but print it as an interesting specimen of the most *recent* of the Fenian Stories’. See Brian O’Looney (ed.), *Transactions of the Ossianic Society for the year 1856* (Dublin: John O’Daly, 1859), p. 228.

<sup>34</sup> Máirtín Ó Briain, ‘Micheál Coimín agus Oisín i dTír na nÓg’ in Aingeal Ní Chualáin and Gearóid Denvir (eds), *Macalla* (Gaillimh: Coláiste na hOllscoile, Gaillimh, 1984), pp. 162–63; 164.

<sup>35</sup> Seosamh Watson, ‘Laoi Chab an Dosáin: Background to a late Ossianic Ballad’, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland/Iris an dá Chultúr*, 5 (1990), 37–44 (p. 37).

<sup>36</sup> Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, p. 51. In 1760, after the success of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, Macpherson toured the Highlands searching for Gaelic manuscripts that would vindicate his claims as to the authenticity of his Ossianic poems. Among the valuable manuscripts he is credited with salvaging were *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* and *The Little Book of Clanranald*. He also took down many Fionn ballads from oral recitation.

<sup>37</sup> Mícheál Mac Craith, ‘Ionrachas James Macpherson?’ in Mícheál Mac Craith and Pádraig Ó Héalaí (eds), *Diasa Díograise. Aistí i gCuimhne ar Mháirtín Ó Briain* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2009), pp. 121–42.

<sup>38</sup> Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, p. 63.

<sup>39</sup> Diarmaid Ó Catháin, ‘An Irish Scholar Abroad: Bishop John O’Brien of Cloyne and the Macpherson Controversy’ in Patrick O’Flanagan and Cornelius G. Buttimer (eds), *Cork History and Society: interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1993), pp. 499–533.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 511.

<sup>41</sup> Henry Mackenzie (ed.), *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland: Appointed to inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable & Co., 1805), pp. 151–54 (152).

<sup>42</sup> *Highland Society Report*, pp. 333–34. See also Ní Mhunghaile, *Charlotte Brooke's Reliques*, Part I, pp. 288–93, Part II, pp. 56–64.

<sup>43</sup> Ludwig Chr. Stern, 'Die Ossianischen Heldenlieder' in *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteraturgeschichte*, 8 (1895), pp. 50–86, 143–74. Translated in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 22 (1897–8), pp. 257–325.

<sup>44</sup> Stern, 'Ossianischen Heldenlieder' p. 268; James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian, in the original Gaelic, with a literal translation into Latin by the late Robert Macfarlan* 3 vols (London: W. Bulmer & Co., 1807).

<sup>45</sup> Stern, 'Ossianischen Heldenlieder' pp. 274–75.

<sup>46</sup> Derick Thomson, 'James Macpherson – the Gaelic Dimension' in Fiona Stafford and Howard Gaskill (eds), *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), p. 21; idem, Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*. See also Micheál Mac Craith, 'Fingal: Text, Context, Subtext', in Stafford and Gaskill (eds), *From Gaelic to Romantic*, pp. 59–68.

<sup>47</sup> Derick Thomson, 'Macpherson's Ossian: Ballads to Epics', *Béaloideas*, pp. 54–55 (1986–87), pp. 243–64 (260).

<sup>48</sup> Stern, 'Ossianischen Heldenlieder', pp. 308–10; Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, pp. 29–31.

<sup>49</sup> Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Thomson, 'James Macpherson – the Gaelic Dimension', p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, p. 47.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> Meek, 'Gaelic Ballads of Scotland', p. 40.

<sup>57</sup> Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Vikings and the Viking Wars in Irish and Gaelic Tradition* (Oslo: I kommisjon hos J. Dybwad, 1931); Proinsias Mac Cana, 'The Influence of the Vikings on Celtic Literature', in Brian Ó Cuív (ed.), *The Impact of the Scandinavian Invasions on the Celtic-speaking Peoples c.800–1100 AD* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975), pp. 78–118.

<sup>58</sup> Meek, 'Gaelic Ballads of Scotland', p. 47 n. 57.

<sup>59</sup> Meek, 'Gaelic Ballads of Scotland', p. 41.

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<sup>60</sup> Howard Gaskill, 'Ossian in Europe', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 21:4 (December 1994), pp. 643–78 (658).

<sup>61</sup> For a discussion, see Krause, 'The Hidden Oisín', pp. 7–24.

<sup>62</sup> Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, p. 355.

<sup>63</sup> Liam Mc Cóil, 'Ossian', *Oghma* 8 (1996), pp. 20–31.

<sup>64</sup> Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, p. 356.

<sup>65</sup> Meek, 'Gaelic Ballads of Scotland', p. 38.

<sup>66</sup> Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, p. 398.

<sup>67</sup> Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, p. 9.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> Mc Cóil, 'Ossian', p. 27.

<sup>70</sup> Gaskill, *Poems of Ossian*, p. 375.

<sup>71</sup> Meek, 'Gaelic Ballads of Scotland', p. 47 n. 57.

<sup>72</sup> Derick Thomson, 'Bogus Gaelic Literature', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow*, 5 (1958), pp. 172–88 (177).

<sup>73</sup> Donald Meek, 'The Sublime Gael: The Impact of Macpherson's Ossian on Literary Creativity and Cultural Perception in Gaelic Scotland' in *Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. by Gaskill, p. 43.