Macpherson's creative reconstructions

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

"HIS thin ghost appeared, on a rock, like the watry beam of the moon, when it rushes from between two clouds, and the midnight shower is on the field. She followed the empty form over the heath, for she knew that her hero fell. I heard her approaching cries on the wind, like the mournful voice of the breeze, when it sighs on the grass of the cave."

Like it? Hate it? Is it poetry? Is it prose? Is it a literal translation of third-century Gaelic verse? Or the fevered imagination of a young man mentally affected by ethnic cleansing?

The only one of these questions to which there can be an unqualified answer is the fifth. James Macpherson's so-called Ossianic 'translations' are no such thing. The term for them nowadays is 'creative reconstructions'. But at least now, with the appearance of the first full English edition of these influential texts for a century, we are at last in a position to judge the answer to some of the other questions for ourselves.

From the moment the 'Fragments' appeared in 1760, 'Fingal' in 1762, and 'Temora' in 1763, such a massive superstructure of comment, analysis, research and debate was built upon Ossian that the texts themselves began to disappear underneath. Dr Johnson denounced Macpherson as a fraud and a 'Scotsman on the make'. Continentals like Goethe, having no hang-ups about Scottish identity, simply enjoyed it as poetry — Napoleon is said to have slept with Cesarotti's Italian translation under his pillow. And many Highland writers and commentators were willing to swear (to the extent of what seems to us like perjury) to the total authenticity of the work as an accurate and even literal translation of existing ballads.

Of course the texts have themselves to blame for being so long out of print. "My love is a son of the hill. He pursues the flying deer. His gray dogs are panting around him; his bow-string sounds in the wind. Dost thou rest by the fount of the rock, or by the noise of the mountain-stream? The rushes are nodding with the wind, the mist is flying over the hill." To my mind, it is a picture of Macpherson's own Badenoch (with just a dash of the rhythm of genuine Gaelic ballads), indeed hunting was done there with bows and hounds until the seventeenth century. Not verse and not prose, not story or song, more of a MOOD, the sort of damp but dynamic Speyside mood that tastes better out of a bottle. So it's comforting that even such an enthusiast as Dr Hugh Blair, who encouraged Macpherson to translate the ballads in the first place, remarked of the result: "An ordinary reader is at first apt to be dazzled and fatigued, rather than pleased. His poems require to be taken up at intervals, and to be frequently reviewed."

To the likes of Blair, it was the conviction that the poems were the authentic voice of the third century that made them worth the effort. But in the same way, I am convinced that it is as the voice of a young post-Culloden Highlander that we must see them today. Macpherson must have been as traumatised by 1746 and its aftermath as is many a youngster from today's Falls or Shankill. "Within half a mile of the farm at Invertromie near Kingussie, where he was born in October 1736," says Fiona Stafford in her splendid introduction, "stands the imposing fortress erected by the British army in the 1720s as part of the campaign to bring order to the Highlands after the 1715 Rising. Ruthven Barracks, with its commanding view of the Spey valley, formed one of the strategic centres in the great network of roads and bridges built under the command of General Wade to reduce the possibility of further insurrection."

She goes on to tell how Cluny and his people rose for Prince Charles in 1745, how they burned the Barracks, and how next year the community was destroyed by the violence of the victors of Culloden, the district being repeatedly searched for the outlawed MacPherson chief. "Between the ages of ten and eighteen, James Macpherson thus lived through scenes of appalling violence, and saw his home and family under the constant threat of further oppression."

It's no surprise, then, if James's work has a pervasive atmosphere of drifting melancholy, of loss, isolation and transience. It is, however, a text for our own time too, in the sense of being a response to an intellectual climate which has parallels today. As Malcolm Laing put it in 1805, "The origin of the poems may be distinctly traced. On awaking from a long lethargy that succeeded the union, the Scots, with their national ardour, sprang forward towards industry and commerce, and began to vie with the English in every literary pursuit." The times demanded a national epic; academics, such as those at Aberdeen University where Macpherson studied, defined the requirements of the genre; and young James duly obliged.

I take the Laing quote from Howard Gaskill's collection of essays 'Ossian Revisited' (1991). I might have taken hundreds more from Stafford's excellent biography 'The Sublime Savage' (1988). Like a multiple offender, Macpherson is being 'rehabilitated', and about time too. He WAS guilty of a deception, but he has been vilified enough. Nowadays we go beyond punishing the guilty. We try to learn from their experience.

How then to understand Macpherson? Let me try. His first language is Gaelic but he is no Gaelic scholar. His English has been drunk not as mother's milk but through Homer and the Old Testament. At university he is taught to expect that the oral traditions of a warrior society may preserve an epic literature. Trapped between two cultures, he burns for recognition as a loyal Highlander and an English poet.

When Blair asks him in 1759 to make English translations of Gaelic pop-songs (for that is what they are) he is understandably reluctant. Consulting the Highland intelligentsia — people like the poets Lachlan Macpherson of Strathmashie and Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair — he finds to his surprise that not only do they see it as useful propaganda, but that they will help him. Anyway, he knows the formula. Take contemporary ballads, strip away humour and christianity, stitch the rest together, and voilà! the third-century original. He is 23 years old.

The ‘Fragments’ of 1760 and ‘Fingal’ of 1762 contain some genuine stuff. But how does one translate an oral tradition? By now he has manuscripts but can make little of them. He prefers simply to translate the impression the ballads make on his mind.

‘Fingal’ meets instant critical acclaim. The effect on a 26-year-old can be guessed. His friends fade, and for ‘Temora’ he is on his own. Save for the outline of the plot, it is a work of creative imagination. He will brave it out. After all, since Culloden, the Gael has nothing left but his language and his literature. Disarming Acts have torn the very clothes from his back. Is he not to be allowed to be the judge of his own tradition? This, then, is why Stafford says, “Macpherson’s ‘Ossian’ is a text belonging exclusively to neither Gaelic nor English culture, and can only be understood sympathetically as an attempt to mediate between the two.”

Stafford’s assessment of the text’s attractions is acute. “The sudden juxtapositions from the main narrative to the tales enclosed within are disorienting, but since so much of the text is constituted from episodes or ‘digressions’, the reader seems to be invited to move further and further into the Ossianic world, leaving behind any critical apparatus. The repetitious nature of the language, imagery, metre and even the plots, has an almost mesmeric quality, while at the same time evoking a landscape and cast of characters sufficiently imprecise to allow the reader’s full participation in the creative experience. Just as Macpherson seems to have responded to what he saw as the fragments of a heroic culture with an act of creative reconstruction, so his audience is forced to share the work of restoration, and produce an imaginative experience that is unique to each reader.”

The text certainly gathers ambivalence like a wall gathers moss. In one place Macpherson writes of the ballads: “They are not set to music, nor sung.” In another: “They were adapted to music; and the most perfect harmony was observed.” Again, Blair wrote of the Ossianic heroes: “Of military discipline and skill, they appear to have been entirely destitute.” But Napoleon thought: “They contain the purest and most animating principles and examples of true honour, courage and discipline, and all the heroic virtues that can possibly exist.”

All the old paradoxes were to the fore in a conference in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of Macpherson’s death which I attended in Oxford a few weeks ago. Hugh Trevor-Roper, the man who thought the Hitler Diaries were genuine, was on hand to denounce Macpherson as a fraud, as he had done before. This time he had little support, and even admitted it. Personally, I have admired Macpherson ever since I found out how much he was loved and respected in Badenoch, as a surviving Gaelic elegy for him demonstrates. What now deserves study is the remarkable solidarity of the Highland people behind Macpherson. But look at it this way. Here is a man whose kinsfolk the British authorities had tried to exterminate as Jacobite vermin. While never ceasing to champion his people and their language, he followed a path which led to his burial, according to his will, in Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey, the holiest place of his friends and his enemies alike.

Howard Gaskill deserves much praise for his sure-footed execution of a complex task. Including as it does Macpherson’s introductions and Blair’s dissertation, this new standard edition of the ‘poems’ whets the appetite for a well-indexed edition of subsequent key texts of the controversy. No-one now is better placed than Gaskill to understand the ambivalence of a man silently screaming for acknowledgement. Macpherson in 1765, he says, “is evidently no longer willing to be upstaged by a figure he regards in large part . . . as his own creation. He is jealous of Ossian . . .”

No doubt he’s lying in the Abbey with a very contented smile on his face.

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