

“GREATEST LITERARY HOAX EVER?”

FORTNIGHTLY CLUB OF REDLANDS

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I [1]

Meeting #1984... Until this summer’s revision I was scheduled for Meeting 1983, but if I’d been assigned to #1984 earlier you might have heard much about Mr. Orwell. I did think about switching topics, but ultimately decided that we get enough Orwell on the evening news.

When most of us choose a topic we’re not already fully familiar with, we assume it’ll be manageable, and hope it’s not too narrow to justify a full paper. What we very often discover, and quickly, is that the topic is enormous, beyond the range of a whole book. So it is with the felonies and misdemeanors of fake and forgery that populate the literary galaxy like numberless stars. Just to give you an idea of next two dozen papers I plan to write, well into the 22nd century:

- In 622 BCE a high priest named Hilkiah (2 Kings 22:8) claimed he had unearthed a long-overlooked scroll in the Temple in Jerusalem, recorded in what we now call Moses’ 5th book, our Deuteronomy 12-26. By happy “coincidence,” the scroll provided new, authoritative grounds for religious reforms of the current king, Josiah (trad. 648-09 BCE), which the king, now fully authorized, ruthlessly carried out. But that a document of such value would lay undiscovered in such a place for so long has made later scholars suspicious: did Hilkiah redact a version of Deuteronomy to support the purifying forms he endorsed? Not sure, but the “**found text**” soon became an archetype of fiction writers and scammers alike.
- Historian Anthony Grafton tells the story of the late 6th century mythographer and historian Acusilaus of Argos, who composed expansive stories of gods and heroes and claimed that his father had found them on bronze tablets in their garden. This adds a new element to the “found text” that has also had dozens of successors: a precious text is found in a surprising or inaccessible place, copied verbatim, then lost, eliminating individual authorship and making the claim of divine or cultic authorship more plausible. By the 4th BCE a number of cities and temples—Lindos on Rhodos is a fine example— invented records of their heroic pasts to magnify their authority and their popularity.¹

¹ For first prize in combining the Old and the New, Irish translator Philip Terry claims to have discovered the long-buried papers of a certain French poet and WW II resistance fighter Jean-Luc Champerret, who in turn claimed to have broken the small “alphabet” of seventy markings made on the walls of the Lascaux caves some 17,000 years ago: he “translated” some 600 very short poems that Terry has now edited and published: fiction of a fiction of a fiction! Some of poems are terrific: “The white eye / of the black bison / is like a star at night.”

- From the divine forgery to the human: long-dead individual authors' works suddenly reappear. A 4th BCE Stoic known as Dionysus the Renegade —what else?—wrote a fake Sophocles play² and included acrostics insulting his living philosophical enemies.
- From a single forgery to centuries of invention: The great Roman historian Livy (c. 59 BCE – 17 CE) wrote a massive work *Ab Urba Condita* (*From the Founding of the City*) covering eight centuries: we have only 35 of its 142 “Books”. This led to at least a dozen attempts from the 12th century forward to fill the gap. The “missing” manuscripts were always found in a musty back shelf of an old monastery... As recently as 1924 a well-regarded Livy scholar claimed to have found a complete copy of *Ab Urba Condita* in (and I quote) “a cranny of an ancient monastery.”
- The renowned Roman doctor Galen became so enraged by finding forged works under his name offered for sale at Roman bookstalls that he wrote a whole book refuting the forgers who had attached themselves, barnacle-like, to his toga. (It didn't work out: Renaissance scholars often quoted from Galen's alleged treatise on *The Humours*, which was one of the forgeries the master had railed against).
- On and on: there's forged ancient Roman monument inscriptions that claim to preserve the will of Julius Caesar; there's the Christian deuterion-Pauline letters of Timothy and Titus and the forged *Donation of Constantine*;³ there's fake medieval illuminated mss.; there's nostalgia-driven inventions of early national history (think King Geoffrey of Monmouth and the English descent from the Trojans); there's fabricated Hebrew inscriptions that “prove” Vienna's Hapsburgs were descended from survivors of Noah's flood. The Folger library in D.C in has a whole collection of forged “Shakespeare plays,” and signatures, not to mention the endless controversy over whether Shakespeare was “Shakespeare.” There's sad 17-year-old Thomas Chatterton who killed himself after his faux-medieval poems by one Thomas Rowley were exposed; finally, there's the all-time champion, 19th century Frenchman Vrain-Denis Lucas's **27,000** historical and literary forgeries, a fitting over-the-top finale to this rapid-fire catalogue of hoax's infamous and charming history before our time.⁴
- In our era we've had Clifford Irving's “autobiography” of Howard Hughes; we've had the forged Hitler diaries that for a time fooled the great British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper; more darkly there's the shameful *Protocol of the Elders of Zion* and *The Education of Little Tree*, the latter a 1976 heartwarming best-seller of a young orphan Cherokee making his way, beloved by both the New York Times and Oprah, until its author was revealed as one Asa Carter, aka Forrest Carter, an avowed white supremacist, KKK leader and speechwriter for George Wallace (“Segregation forever” one of his credits)

² It was titled *Parthenopaeus*, (a son of [Hippomenes](#) and Atalanta, and one of the Seven against Thebes)

³ An 8th CE claim for the 4th CE emperor willing his Western empire to the Church before departing for Byzantium, shot through with errors and anachronistic Latin.

⁴ Edgar Allan Poe summarizes the 19th century four-step Hoax process: “The great effect wrought upon the public mind is referable, first, to *the novelty of the idea*; secondly to the fancy-exciting and reason-repressing character of the alleged discoveries; thirdly, to the consummate tact with which the deception was brought forth; fourthly, to the exquisite *vraisemblance* [likelihood] of the narration.” Quoted in Young, 23.

until Wallace fired him for being too extreme.⁵ Despite those shameful credentials it is still popular and widely sold! Darker still are the fake Holocaust memoirs written for money.⁶ And that's not to even mention the fake online biographies—young attractive Americans allegedly dying of cancer written by cynical middle-agers, or created identities for every purpose from seduction to scandal to (sedition) insurrection.

- Whew! There's an implicit *contract of trust* that we think we've made with writers of any genre, and even when we figure out that that contract's been broken, as with Little Tree, we're often still susceptible to the power of our initial enchantment: aesthetics triumphing over authenticity. That's emphatically the case in my chosen "Greatest Literary Hoax Ever."

II

"History is the agreed-upon lie." Napoleon

[2] One afternoon in the early autumn of 1759, Scotsman James Macpherson, age 23, fledgling poet and university-trained in classics at both Aberdeen and Edinburgh, fell into conversation in the southern resort town of Moffat with a fellow Scot, a playwright and one-time minister named John Home. [3] Macpherson felt trapped in his tedious tutoring job and was looking for opportunities. Three years earlier Home's patriotic play, *Douglas*, had achieved great success among his countrymen—no less than David Hume was among those hailing him as the Scottish Shakespeare—and had a brief run in one London theatre. But there the reception had been rougher—famous actor David Garrick rejected it, and the formidable Dr. Samuel Johnson gruffly proclaimed that "there were not ten good lines in the whole play"—drawing yet another literary battle line between the superior, imperial English and the downtrodden, culturally impoverished Scots. Many Anglophile Lowlanders agreed with that judgment; those illiterate, violent Highlanders had no history worth recording; their clothes alone confirmed it. [4] The decisive defeat thirteen years earlier of the Stuart Pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie at Culloden, [5] put paid to fantasies of Scots' political independence, and led to the execution or transportation of more than a thousand Jacobites, and the "clearances" (i.e., forced evictions) of many Highlanders'

⁵ Among other examples I especially prize the "young Muslim woman" who anonymously "authored" the much-acclaimed short story collection *Down the Road, Worlds Away*; she turned out to be a middle-aged Anglican vicar in Brighton named Toby Forward. Or there's a whole new category of plagiarism: the Buried or Unwritten Disclaimer, in which someone poses as someone else. There are scores of examples of this, but my favorites non-fiction include the white male Australian, 47 year-old Leon Karmen, who wrote a memoir of a young Aboriginal woman named Wanda (*My Own Sweet Time*, 1995). The novel won the Dobbie award for a first novel by a woman, and became a set text in Australian high schools. When the "fraud" was discovered, the book was pulped and Karmen excoriated — yet the text was still the same text. So even though everyone agreed that this book "gave insight into what it meant to be a member of the 'stolen generation' of Aboriginal children," it was pulped.

And among the most beloved of 100s of art forgers is Han van Meegeran, especially his "Vermeers" one of which fooled Göering. He was put on trial after the war for collaboration, but was acquitted when he said it was a patriotic act to preserve Holland's genuine heritage!

⁶ plus the highly controversial novel/autobiography by Jerzy Kozinski, *The Painted Bird*.

villages by the scorched earth rampage of the victorious Duke of Cumberland.⁷ [I also have enough info to do a paper on my ancestor, Flora Macdonald, [6] who rescued the Prince] The Duke's actions "would now satisfy the UN criteria for genocide."⁸ [7] That defeat touched Macpherson personally; he had grown up near a Scots military barracks, and his uncle Ewan, a commander at Culloden, rightly fearing execution, had been forced into hiding for nine years after the massacre.

Macpherson and Home were also aware that the English were in the midst of burnishing their own literary history, self-consciously elevating Shakespeare as their "Gigantic Genius" (Gibbon), and forgiving Milton his republican views for the sake of his Satan and his magisterial poetry. Dr. Johnston himself had begun his life-long, canonizing project, *Lives of the English Poets*. So what about our Scots heritage, the two young men heatedly asked? At college Macpherson had already written an interminable (bad) heroic poem, *The Highlander*, but he knew that it, like Home's play, lacked historical credibility. Then Home, who maintained strong connections with Edinburgh scholars, told James about another minister, one Alexander MacDonald (!), who had published a book of Gaelic verse ("Gallic" in Scots dialect), and of other poets and researchers who were exploring the ancient compositions of Scotland's earliest Celtic cultures. [8] Macpherson suddenly had a mission: literary, patriotic, adventurous, perhaps even heroic. And the idea of rendering ancient Gaelic poetry into English, repurposing the language of the conqueror and its snobbish, genteel poets to give voice to a silenced, "barbaric" people, must have been particularly tempting, thrilling, for this twenty-three year old.

But there were obstacles, plenty of them. No ancient manuscripts were known to exist. Macpherson had grown up hearing and speaking some Gaelic, but struggled to read it because of its non-standardized spelling. However, he had a childhood friend, Lachlan Strathmashie, who was fluent in Gaelic and had a system for transcribing its poetry into Roman letters, a system he used to craft his own verse. And through him and two other friends he came to know of an early 300-page 16th century manuscript, *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, that contained poems and fragments copied from 12th century manuscripts and ascribed to a still older poet known as "Oisín." About a quarter of the *Lismore* text was "Ossianic." Macpherson immersed himself in that manuscript, and by

⁷ I can't resist adding that 24 year-old Flora Macdonald, after much persuasion from her warrior stepfather Hugh Macdonald, who had "forced" her mother into marriage, risked her own life and those of her clan. She rescued the Prince from certain capture by dressing his 6'0" fame as her "Irish maid" "Betty Burke"—he was a terrible actor, putting her in even greater danger—and smuggling him over ten harrowing days to her family home on the Isle of Skye. From there, after many other escapades, he escaped to the continent. She was soon arrested, taken to London on a prison ship, but so charmed her captors that, even as her fellow Jacobites were drawn and quartered, she was informally adopted by the sentimental Tory Jacobite Lady Anne Primrose, who after the 1747 General Amnesty provided her with a handsome dowry and the use of her post chaise to return to Scotland in a kind of triumph. She kept one of the Prince's shoes, which she and her husband Allan MacDonald later sold for a handsome sum. In 1774 they and 500 other Scots emigrated to North Carolina and, ironically, supported the English Royal cause during the Revolution because as semi-feudal, Ossian-like clan folk they rejected democracy. She and her fellow settlers were consequently persecuted by the triumphant new Americans, contributing to Ossian-flavored patriotism in the South, and had to return to Scotland. In a final historical flourish, she was buried in one of the carefully saved sheets the Prince had once slept in. Once free, he soon became a bad-tempered wino in Rome, and never thanked her. See Flora Frazer, *Pretty Young Rebel: The Life of Flora Macdonald*.

⁸ Gaskill, *Reception*, 3. At the battle, that lasted only an hour, 1/5th of the 5,000 Scots "army" were killed; English losses were out at 50.

the time he met again with John Home several months later, he chanted the verses in Gaelic, and then showed him a section of his English prose translation of what he described as a 3rd century Gaelic narrative of the death of Oscar, son of the bard Ossian. Home was delighted, and even more delighted when Macpherson shortly produced several more fragments in translation. By April of 1761 Macpherson had finished his six-book, 19,000-line recreation of the legendary battle of Fingal [FIN-gal] and Swaran, and the fading of the age of Ossian.⁹ [9] Home carried the news to the cadre of patriotic scholars at Edinburgh, including David Hume, and a new, concerted movement to rescue and celebrate ancient Scots traditions was born—what contemporary historian Murray Pittock calls “Scotland’s positive global brand.”

Before we get to the poems, a word about the literary culture in which they appeared. In the Anglophone world of the later 18th century two new qualities especially “appealed to public taste: first, ‘melancholy’ or ‘the pathetic’ and, second, ‘the sublime.’¹⁰ Melancholic verses you probably remember from your dusty English lit storage closet: poems like Goldsmith’s “Deserted Village” or Thomas Gray’s “Elegy in a Country Churchyard” or his poem celebrating the ancient Welsh bard, all poems that convey the particular, oddly pleasurable emotions of sadness, sorrow and loss: a palace in ruins, a door quietly closing, a turning away, an era ending, and all presaging the coming Romantic privileging of feeling over Augustan formality, of ruins over new palaces, and of free-flowing verse forms over the mechanical regularity of heroic couplets. Those feelings enabled “social sympathy” and a realization of “the duties of humanity.”¹¹

As for the sublime, just a few years before Macpherson and Home met up, conservative English philosopher Edmund Burke brought out his monograph *A Philosophical Inquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.... The passion caused by the great and the sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. [10]

⁹ “I have seen the walls of Balclutha, but they were desolate. The fire has resounded in the halls; and the voice of the people is heard no more. The stream of Clutha was removed from its place, by the fall of the walls.— The thistle shook, there, its lonely head: the moss whistled to the wind. The fox looked out, from the windows, the rank grass of the wall waved round its head. Desolate is the dwelling of Moina, silence is in the house of the fathers.” “Carthon: a Poem” in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, 128. And from “Berrathon”: “The life of Ossian fails. I begin to vanish on Cona; and my steps are not seen in Selma. Beside the stone of Mora I shall fall asleep. The winds whistling in my grey hair shall not waken me.... The chiefs of other times are departed; they have gone without their fame. The sons of future years shall pass away; and another race arise. The people are like the waves of ocean: like the leaves of woody Morven, the rustling blast, and other leaves lift their green heads.” *Ibid.*, 198. Compare this rhetoric to the scorched-earth desolation of *Isaiah* 13.

¹⁰ Trevor-Roper, 77.

¹¹ Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*. This short passage from *Fingal VI* shows how deftly Macpherson wove 18th century sentimental values into his text. Fingal instructs his grandson: “O Oscar! Bend the strong in arms: but spare the foe: tides against the foes of thy people; but like the gale that moves the grass to those who seek thine aid.”

Beauty merely warms the heart, harmonizes, while the sublime dwarfs the individual and compels surrender to the fearful greatness of a natural scene or artwork, either in the present or in the overpowering feelings of super-human grandeur that reached their zenith in the long-ago past: Burke cites Milton on Satan and death, Arthurian legend, ancient Druids, “the terrible uncertainty of the thing described.” So, [11] the sublime immerses us in the incomprehensible, the infinite, the overwhelming, and often leads directly to melancholy: the sublime experience fades, leaving us in the humdrum, grey present. And the poet who was held to be a master of both in the late 18th century was, no great surprise, Homer. The wrath of Achilles, the acts of superhuman heroism and the omnipresence of gods and spirits, the death of Hector, the fall of Troy and the suffering of the Trojan women: all bespoke the greatest achievements of literary art in an age that was neither primitive nor as coldly overcivilized as modern Europe. Further, blind Homer was the greatest of many traveling bards, chanting his poems to audiences around the eastern Mediterranean, just as ancient Celtic bards sang to villagers and Highland chiefs.¹² Add in the 18th century conviction that true epics, and poetic geniuses who created them, only flourished in the natural, spontaneous climate of so-called-but-not-really “primitive” or “barbarian” societies.¹³ Those alleged primitive cultures were now re-seen, à la Rousseau, not just as admirable alternatives but as true sources of simple virtue, purity of spirit, untainted originality and authenticity: in short not the Noble Savage but the Noble Celt and his Noble Bard.¹⁴ The ancient Celts who were always losing, always being pushed back from the borders of more powerful peoples, now could claim literary and cultural power that dwarfed the pretensions of London.

Macpherson, university trained, was fluent in Greek and Latin and knew his Homer well. When national pride and personal fame coincide, who can resist? We’ve seen that he had access to a 16th century collection of Gaelic heroic poetry fragments which claimed earlier sources in the 12th—but that wasn’t nearly old enough for what his imagination, his patriotism and his sense of his own degraded time demanded.

So here’s a few names and a tiny sample of what he “discovered.” [12]
[WIKI: *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763) the two epics.

- singer is the aged Ossian, blind like Homer and Milton,
- his dead son is Oscar
- Oscar’s lover is Malvina who now tends the old poet
- Ossian’s father is the hero Fingal, Ireland’s Finn Maccool: “Finn” = “fair”)
- the time is 3rd century CE in SW (the Roman emperors Septimus Severus and Caracalla are obliquely referred to)...
- “endless battles and unhappy love...” mistaken identities and slayings; loss, loss

¹² Is it “Seltic” or Keltic”? In English, when the letter “C” is followed by an “E,” it’s pretty much always said like an “S”: Think “cement,” “cellphone,” “race” and “dance.”

¹³ By the time of Macpherson’s project the writing of epics had virtually ceased in England: popular writing was not primitive enough! (Rubel, *passim*).

¹⁴ Macpherson wrote in his preface to the long poem *Temora* that the poem was about Highlanders who “lived in a country only fit for pasture; they were free of that toil and business, which engrosses the attention of a commercial people.”

For this first reading, [13] take a deep breath, close your eyes if it helps, and imagine yourself an 18th century Scot, proud and poor, humiliated at Culloden, hearing for the first time the ancient bard Ossian evoking an aged father's loss of his only son:

"My tears are for the dead—my voice for those who have passed away. Tall thou art on the hill; fair among the sons of the vale. But thou shall fall like Morar; the mourner shall sit on thy tomb. The hills shall know thee no more; thy bow shall lie in the hall unstrung...

Who on his staff is this? Who is this whose head is white with age, whose eyes are red with tears, who quakes at every step? It is thy father, O Morar, the father of no son but thee. He heard of thy fame in war, he heard of foes dispersed. He heard of Morar's renown, why did he not hear of his wound? Weep, thou father of Morar! Weep, but thy son heareth thee not. No more shall he hear thy voice—no more awake at thy call. When shall it be morn in the grace, to bid the slumberer awake? Farewell, thou bravest of men! Thou conqueror in the field!—but the field shall see thee no more, nor the dark wood be lightened with the splendor of thy steel. Thou has left no son. The song shall preserve thy name."

Remember your reaction, and remember that this would have sounded as unmodern, archaic, to a heritage-hungry 18th century audience as it does to you. And keep in mind that the qualities that we may resist in this writing—repetition, dreaminess, unsubtle emotions—were just the sort of qualities that 18th century audiences expected from epics. In fact it was claimed by several that *Ossian* was *superior* to Homer precisely *because* it was rougher, cruder, simpler, less refined and ornate, and above all, because it was more impassioned and *unrestrained in his emotions*.¹⁵ *Ossian* is conjured in Homer's image, not made out of thin air. Significantly, Macpherson doesn't acknowledge his debt, indeed even mention Homer at all, in his introduction to *Fingal*: a very loud silence.

For this second reading a Scots hero, facing death, calls his fellows to battle: [14]

"Then let them talk of mortal men; of every man but Erin's chief. Let me be forgot in their cave. I will not fly from Swaran! If fall I must, my tomb shall rise, amidst the fame of future times. The hunter shall shed a tear on my stone; sorrow shall dwell round the high-bosomed Bragéla. I fear not death, to flee I fear! Fingal has seen me victorious! Thou dim phantom of the hill, shew thyself to me! come on thy beam of heaven, shew me my death in thine hand; yet I will not flee, thou feeble son of the wind! Go, son of Colgar, strike the shield. It hangs between the spears. Let my warriors rise to the sound, in the midst of the battles of Erin. Though Fingal delays his coming with the race of his stormy isles; we shall fight, O Colgar's son, and die in the battle of heroes!"

The sound spreads wide. The heroes rise, like the breaking of a blue-rolling wave. They stand on the heath, like oaks with all their branches round them; when they echo to the stream of frost, and their withered leaves are rustling to the wind! High Cromla's head of clouds is grey. Morning trembles on the half-

¹⁵ See Dué, 37.

enlightened ocean. The blue mist swims slowly by, and hides the sons of Inisfail." (*Fingal* Book II)¹⁶

Macpherson himself described the style as "measured prose": Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, direct and unself-conscious. They lines have a kind of crafted artlessness that give them an aura of sincerity and honesty, and treat landscape as virtual characters, living forces: highly experimental in 1760.

So, picking up the threads of our story: John Home brought Macpherson to Edinburgh, where the literati urged and soon funded publication in 1760 of what became *Fragments of ancient poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Gaelic or Erse language*:¹⁷ quite a sober, scholarly title for such a cultural bombshell. The sixteen poems were termed, in the preface written by Hugh Blair, "coeval with the very infancy of Christendom in Scotland... and originally episodes of a greater work which related to the wars of Fingal." Blair wrote this despite knowing no Gaelic and seeing no originals. But he was book-smart: he sent copies to a select number of English writers—Thomas Gray of "Churchyard" fame and gothic novelist Horace Walpole, who enthused and asked for more—and also to see copies, please, of the originals.¹⁸ Gray wrote, fatefully, that he was aware that they might be fakes, but "really I do not care," since their quality was so moving. Note that. And note this also: when Macpherson sent him more poems and cover letters, Gray loved the poems but found Macpherson's letters "badly written and badly reasoned"¹⁹—and took *that* as further proof of the poems' authenticity, since a clever forger would never have written such clumsy prose. It confirmed Gray's prejudice about the backwardness of those

¹⁶ Patricia Meyer Spacks has observed, the supernatural seems to be a "genuine part of the poetic texture"; and she adds that "within this poetic context, the supernatural seems convincing because believed in: it is part of the fabric of life for the characters of the poem. Ghosts in the Ossianic poems, almost uniquely in the mid-eighteenth century, seem genuinely to belong; to this particular poetic conception the supernatural does not seem extraneous." (Spacks, 1962, pp. 86-87.)

¹⁷ Erse or Earse may refer to: An alternative name for any Goidelic language, especially the Irish language, from Erische. A 16th–19th-century Scots language name for Scottish Gaelic. Aue and Erse, tributaries of the Fuhse. (Wiki)

¹⁸ Walpole to Sir David Dalrymple, April, 1761: "There are most beautiful images in it, and it surprises me how the bard could strike out s many shining ideas from a few so very simple objects, as the moon, the storm, the sea and the heath, from which he borrows almost all his allusions... My doubts of the genuineness are all vanished." Cited in Rosenblum, 30. And there were others: novelist Tobias Smollett ranked Ossian above Homer and Virgil; Robert Burns said that *Ossian* provided "glorious models after which I endeavor to form my conduct." Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote two poems in the manner of *Ossian*: on and on...

¹⁹ Gray to Thomas Wharton, June, 1769: "I am gone mad about them. They are said to be translations (literal and in prose) from the Erse-tongue, done by one Macpherson, a young clergy-man in the Highlands... I was so struck, so *extasié* with their infinite beauty, that I writ into Scotland to make a thousand inquiries, the letters I have in return are ill-wrote, ill-reason'd, unsatisfactory, calculated (one would imagine) to deceive one, & yet not so cunning enough to do it cleverly. In short, the whole external evidence would make one believe these fragments... counterfeit; but the internal is so strong on the other side, that I am resolved to believe them genuine, spite of the Devil and the Kirk.... This Man is the very Demon of Poetry, or he has lighted on a treasure hid for ages." Cited in Rosenblum, 25-26: also see Trevor-Roper, 92.

Highlanders; the maladroit Macpherson can only be the conduit for a lost age, not its maker. And add a third layer of time-honored deception: in a letter to English poet William Shenstone, Macpherson claimed that “a county surgeon somewhere in Lachaber had the whole epic by heart” but as he is somewhat old, and is the only person living who has it entire,” haste and funding, much funding, was required to secure transcription.²⁰ Not ancient tablets in a garden but an isolated, dying bard who remembers “with great purity” was Macpherson’s own phrase (*Dissertation* [1762], 49, cited in Gaskell) yet only recalls fragments.²¹ For all that, it worked. Three crucial admissions and inferences that made Macpherson’s gambit—and many like it across the centuries—a rousing success. [15]

Next, Macpherson, with two Gaelic-reading relatives, traveled to the Hebrides, where, by-the-by, the Macdonald family of Clanranald ruled. He transcribed the Gaelic ballads he heard, scoured the clan’s 16th century manuscript volumes of verse, and persuaded the chief to part with the best of them, the *Little Book of Clanranald*, which contained thirty poems. That book never saw the Hebrides again—and formed Macpherson’s basis, along with the mysterious country poet-surgeon, for “translating” and elaborating the Ossianic voice into epics that sought to rival the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. And it must be said that Macpherson, whatever his sins, did rescue, transcribe and later publish Gaelic poetry that would otherwise have been lost and that he clearly prized.²² So there was oral and textual basis for Macpherson’s flights, but nothing from anywhere near the 3rd century and certainly nothing to support his claim of a complete epic poem, or of a fifteen-century-long oral tradition. He temporarily appeased his Edinburgh colleagues with a couple of age-treated medieval manuscripts to make them seem closer to an imagined original—late C19th scholars determined that he had back-translated his own work into Gaelic—and for the next twenty years became very inventive²³ about the reasons for not producing more. This is how hoaxes work: giving us shared beliefs and hopes, “assumed beliefs, greenlighted by committee” (Young, 113).

In London Walpole and Gray were again won over by the 1762 *Fingal* text of six full books (which you heard a bit of) and helped secure / fund its publication. [16] And they weren’t alone: William Blake was much influenced by the poems; Byron, fully aware of the forgery charges, paid Macpherson the high compliment of writing a worthy imitation of Ossian in *Hours of Idleness*. Wordsworth, Coleridge (“Imitated from *Ossian*”) and of course Robert Burns all cited him.²⁴ The great romantic critic William Hazlitt named the four great poets of the West as the Bible, Homer, Dante and Ossian

²⁰ Letters of David Hume, I, 330.

²¹ Casey Dué on the problems of oral transmission: “Macpherson attempted to combat this attitude by emphasizing the preservation of the poetry in festival settings and by means of a system of high ranking, specially trained bards.”

²² Ross, 116; Trevor-Roper, 110

²³ One example: In 1762 he announced that he had deposited the original manuscripts with a London bookseller, a **Mr. Becket**, in the Strand, for those who wished to see them. Soon afterwards he announced their withdrawal, since no one had made a request to see them. (Trevor-Roper, 113). An irresistible aside: **Samuel Beckett’s** short story “Fingal” in *More Pricks and Kicks* (1934) gives us a mock-heroic updating of the *Fragments*. “Fingal” (Irish Finn) is both a proper name and a place-name in North County Dublin.

²⁴ Underwood, 239, 244. Byron’s “Oscar of Alva” and “Death of Calmar and Orla”; Coleridge’s “Imitated from Ossian” and “Complaint of Ninathóma”; Wordsworth’s sonnets on the Cave of Staffa and sections of *The Prelude*. There are many other adaptations and imitations by lesser-known English poets.

(not Shakespeare), and wrote “There is one impression that he conveys more entirely than all other poets, namely the sense of privation, the loss of all things, of friends., of good name, of country—he is even without God in the world.”²⁵ These writers are praising *Ossian* as poetry, not just as an ancient curiosity. As Macpherson himself wryly remarked: “those who have doubted my veracity have paid a compliment to my genius.”²⁶ Scholar Frank Monk summarizes: “Ossian's strange exotic wildness and his obscure, terrible glimpses of scenery were in essence something quite new.... to modern readers they [may] resemble too much the stage-settings of melodrama. But in 1760, his descriptions carried with them the thrill of the genuine and of naïvely archaic” (Monk, 126).²⁷ Stretching the point, perhaps, but a number of early novelists claim to be “historians” publishing lost letters or manuscripts—think of *Frankenstein*—and no one dismisses them for not producing the “originals.”

Of course there were skeptics, plenty of them. Historical questions arose: How, for example, were Ossian and the bards singing in Gaelic in the 3rd century, when the Scots didn't arrive in Caledonia from Ireland until the 6th century?²⁸ Were the native Picts secret Gaelic speakers? Literary questions arose: Macpherson's translations had flavors not only of Homer but also Milton and the KJV (like Blake and Whitman) and even Walpole's Gothic *The Castle of Otranto*, all too close to prevailing English tastes, and apparently in a language that hadn't evolved over the ensuing fifteen centuries. And why, unlike Homer, were there so few concrete details about the land, customs, clothing, fauna and flora—and when there were any, how they strongly resembled medieval Britannia, (moated castles and all)? Even philosophical puzzles arose: how did these ancient Scots develop such a refined and sensitive Christian-like morality without speculating about any other ideas whatsoever?

Things heated up: satiric sketches appeared. [17] In this image Macpherson is reduced to the role of street musician rather than a respected poet. He is shown playing drums with his feet, plucking a harp with one hand, and playing a wind instrument with the other. A woman holds out a cup for alms to a reticent bystander. More important, Dr. Johnson, an English chauvinist and Scotland debunker, weighed in after his tour of the Highlands: “I believe [the poems] never existed in any other form than that which we have seen. The editor, or author, never could shew the original; nor can it be shewn by any other; to revenge reasonable incredulity, by refusing evidence, is a degree of insolence, with which the world is not yet acquainted; and stubborn audacity is the last refuge of guilt. It would be easy to shew it if he had it; but whence could it be

²⁵ Cited in Gaskill, *Reception*, 3.

²⁶ [Quoted in Henry Grey Graham, *Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1908), p. 240.] PROJECT Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/8161/8161-h/8161-h.htm#linknoteref-11>

²⁷ Among the many contemporary tales of forgeries turned authentic, David Nokes' novel *The Nightingale Papers* (2005) gives an entertaining spin. In a Welsh castle, once up a time, “Madoc,” the great bard of the *Basque Cantos*, Thomas Madoc, his sister Jane, and others formed the “Nightingale Circle” of poets, and a bevy of contemporary scholars descend in the sacred site to investigate. One of the professors, McWhinnie, finds secreted documents in the castle's long deserted tower that prove the *Cantos* were written by sister Jane—BUT it turns out that other scholars forged *those* documents even as McWhinnie turns his discovery of the scattered fragments into a full-blown epic — and argues for their “authenticity” anyway! No end of fun! (Nokes' biography of Swift is entitled *A Hypocrite Reversed...*)

²⁸ Crotty, 25. Antrim colonizers who set up the kingdom of Del Ríada

had... many man could have written this doggerel, and many woman, and many children?"²⁹ This so infuriated Macpherson that he challenged Dr. J to a duel! [18]

Critiques multiplied, especially among the Irish, who weren't pleased by the implication that they had descended from Scottish Highlanders, not the reverse, or that their language was "less pure, less agreeable, less original" than the poetry of Ossian.³⁰ They were understandably irate that their legends, written down in medieval times but set in the 3rd century CE, had been co-opted, or just plain stolen: not only the bard Ossian, but Fingal himself (Fionn MacCumhaill, more commonly known as Finn MacCool), and others were commonly sung in 17th and 18th century Ireland. They pointed out that Scots bards typically learned their craft in Ireland, and there were no historical grounds for suddenly transposing ancient Irish ballads to their upstart neighbors.³¹ It apparently never occurred to Macpherson to go to Ireland: was that because of his resolute Scottish patriotism, or because he feared Irish scholars would unmask him?

Parenthetically, Macpherson went on to be a legitimate historian of note, working with David Hume and others, and publishing several carefully footnoted volumes of Scots history based on rigorous reliance on primary sources (Jim MacPherson, *passim*). Really.

You might be forgiven for thinking that all these critiques ended the matter. Exactly the opposite happened: [19] Macpherson's synthetic poems and expansive imagination resonated so deeply with readers that their genuineness seemed self-evident, whatever the unfeeling Dr. Johnsons of the world might think.³² Here's the best single account I've read of how skepticism and aesthetic rapture rivaled each other in Ossian's readers: Mr. Malcolm Laing, Macpherson's arch-prosecutor whose critiques of Ossian make Dr. Johnson's seem tame, was deeply moved, despite himself, by the power of the poems. Here's what he wrote, almost against his will:

"From a singular coincidence of circumstances, it was in this house, where I now write, that I first read the poems in my early youth, with an ardent credulity that remained unshaken for many years of my life; and with a pleasure to which even

²⁹ Samuel Johnson, *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*; Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, I, 396. Boswell also quotes Sir Joshua Reynolds: "Sir, a man could write such stuff forever, if he would abandon his mind to it." II, 126.

³⁰ Macpherson, *Dissertation*, cited by Crotty, 25. Macpherson didn't stop there: "When we look to the language, it is so different from the Irish dialect, that it would be as ridiculous to think, that Milton's *Paradise Lost* could be wrote by a Scottish peasant, as to suppose, that the poems ascribed to Ossian were written in Ireland."

³¹ Trevor-Roper, 110ff, for specifics.

³² Perhaps the most moving tribute to *Ossian* came a full century later, from Matthew Arnold in 1866: "I am not going to criticize Macpherson's *Ossian* here. Make the part of what is forged, modern, tawdry, spurious, in the book, as large as you please; strip Scotland, if you like, of every feather of borrowed plumes which on the strength of Macpherson's *Ossian* she may have stolen from . . . the true home of the Ossianic poetry, Ireland; I make no objection. But to be left... *a residue with the very soul of the Celtic genius in it, and which has the proud distinction of having brought this soul of the Celtic genius into contact with the genius of the nations of modern Europe, and enriched all our poetry by it.* Woody Morven, and echoing Lora, and Selma with its silent halls! —we owe them a debt of gratitude, and when we are unjust enough to forget it, may the Muse forget us" (emphasis mine). *Lectures and Essays in Criticism* III, 370-71. Cited in Rosenblum, 39. Arnold's ideal of the scholar-gypsy owes much to Ossian.

the triumphant satisfaction of detecting the imposture is comparatively nothing. The enthusiasm with which I read and studied the poems, enabled me afterwards, when my suspicions were once awakened, to trace and expose the deception with greater success. Yet, notwithstanding the severity of minute criticism, I can still peruse them as a wild and wonderful assemblage of imitation with which the fancy is often pleased and gratified, even when the judgment condemns them most."³³

Many Scots scholars dismissed skeptical critics as English bigots, and several chauvinistic Scottish lords built follies, houses, even temples, as *Ossian* shrines. *Ossian* repopulated the barren Highlands with a rich historical imaginary that the brutal Duke of Cumberland had laid waste: ancient voices carried on the wind, a haven, even a secular heaven of earthly immortality, of ghostly voices from a prehistoric past that trumped narrow-minded empiricists and underwrote contemporary Scotland's greatness.³⁴ One modern critic summarizes this way: "These the pale phantoms of boundless chivalry... built a new bridge to the citified present" of commercial Edinburgh.³⁵

But, you ask, "The Greatest Literary Hoax Ever?" So, Part III

III

It wasn't just Scots that were enchanted: *Ossian* went international. (On continental Europe the further you were from the Highlands, the more likely you were to believe.) It was an international and unparalleled clusterfake (!)³⁶ Translations appeared quickly in all the major and several of the minor European languages. [20] Aspiring nationalists, both revolutionary and reactionary, across the Continent took *Ossian* to heart; ancient genteel heroes, a threatened language, autumnal decay, the absence of authoritarian religion... it became both a text of revisionist history and a political manifesto easily tailored to their ambitions—and its radical, complex form of stories within stories coupled with its minimalist prose attracted many as well. In 1760, even 1800, there were no well-known national epics writers and patriots could appeal to: no *Beowulf*, no *Nibelungenlied*, no *Kalevala*, no *Chanson de Roland*: all these came to light in the early 1800s after centuries of obscurity or outright oblivion.³⁷ In Italy a cult of young devotees developed around the translator, Abbé Cesarotti, who dubbed *Ossian* "the greatest poetic genius of all time" and took the name for his own. In Germany, Goethe, no less, declared *Ossian* the equal of Shakespeare, and included a seven-page excerpt in his 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* [21] (ASIDE: it's the first international celebrity novel; urban readers lined up to rent a copy for an hour; "Werther fever" led to copycat suicides, clusters of them, embraced the book in their last moments; despite being banned in Italy and Denmark the hero's wardrobe was

³³ The Poems of Ossian, ed. Malcolm Laing (Edinburgh, 1805), I, 441. Available at Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/8161/8161-h/8161-h.htm#linknoteref-11>

³⁴ Underwood, 237-39. He also notes that ghosts were rare in authentic Celtic legend, but omnipresent in Macpherson's recreated past.

³⁵ Buchan, p.

³⁶ The title of Data Colada's blog cited in the New Yorker, 10/9/23, 47.

³⁷ Leerson, 114. Leerson adds that the *Kalevala* is itself a scholarly construction from folk-song fragments, with an elastic structure that allowed for adding new sections supplied by enthused Finnish readers of earlier editions throughout the first half of the 19th century.

copied across Europe and porcelain tea-sets depicting his fate were crafted in China; even Frankenstein's "monster" read it! And it was my first and, until a few months ago, only encounter with *Ossian*).³⁸ A 1901 bibliography of German translations, imitations and reviews of Macpherson's work runs to more than sixty pages. [22] There's Von Langer's 1823 painting of the bard: NB the maiden taking dictation: "authenticating" transmission of the text. There's an early Latin hexameter translation!³⁹ [23] In Denmark, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Spain, you pick: the mania for collecting ancient folk tales, folk songs and legends and fairy tales (e.g., the brother Grimm, who openly championed *Ossian's* cause) as founding, non-Greco-Roman works, were all inspired by *Ossian's* "recovery."⁴⁰ [24] This terrific Hungarian painting of *Ossian* conjuring the spirits of heroes past expresses the awakenings of ancient nationalism right across Europe. Historians Colin Kidd and James Coleman assert without qualification that the *Ossian* poems played a central part in the formation of C19th European nationalism.⁴¹

So, pick a country: let's just take France. (OK, I'll pick.) Prominent French translators—that is, translations of translations of non-originals!—produced editions that swept through the country even as Voltaire ridiculed the new-found epic. For one, the poems had "a profound, lasting and decisive effect on Chateaubriand,"⁴² who "translated" the poems into *style savage*, then used its linguistics to give voice to Native Americans in three novels.⁴³ But far and away *Ossian's* most important French advocate?—the poems became the favorite reading material of the young Napoleon, who carried it, along with *Werther* and 350 other books, with him to and from Egypt, and read it repeatedly, even in exile on St. Helena. Then came paintings: [25] Napoleon commissioned Francois Gérard's *Ossian on the Banks of the Lora* for Josephine's residence, while his imperial bedchamber in France was to have Ingres's ten-foot canvas *The Dream of Ossian* (1813) mounted above the Emperor's bed... [26] Other French artists from David to Girodet treated *Ossian* themes well into the 19th century: dreams, ghostly landscapes, epic battles. Neoclassical stylists had their turn: here's another Ingres' take. [27] Napoleon's Marshall Bernadotte carried the poem to Sweden, and gave the name Oscar [Macpherson's invention] to successive kings of Sweden."⁴⁴ At the battle of Borodino in 1812: Napoleon carried the beloved book in his luggage, and the night before the famous battle the two principal Russian generals, Yermolov and Kutusov, read their translation of *Fingal* to each other. They both thought it superior to their own

³⁸ Here's *Werther* in full-blown enthusiasm: "Ossian has displaced Homer in my heart. What a world the magnificent poet carries me into! To wander across the heath, with the storm-winds roaring about me, carrying the ghosts of ancestors in steaming mists through the dim moorlight. To hear from the mountains, amid the roar of the forest streams, the half-dispersed groaning of the spirits from their caves..." (trans. Underwood, 245)

³⁹ Gaskill, Translation, 295.

⁴⁰ Gaskill, *Reflections*, passim. Jakob Grimm instructs his readers to suspend their modern-day sensibility if they want to understand ancient epic: "Born in the past it transmits the past to us, without abandoning its specific character, and if we want to enjoy it, we must displace ourselves into wholly vanished conditions." Cited by Joep Leerson ("Ossian and the Rise of Literary Historicism," in Gaskill, *Reflections*, 113).

⁴¹ "Mythical Scotland," in Devine and Wormald, eds, pp. 67–70.

⁴² Gaskill, *Reflections*, 17, and Colin Smethurst, "Chateaubriand's *Ossian*," in *Ibid*, 126–142.

⁴³ *Les Natchez* (written between 1793 and 1799 but published only in 1826), *Atala* (1801) and *René* (1802).

⁴⁴ Trevor-Roper, 134.

national epic, *The Song of Prince Igor*.⁴⁵ Apocryphal?—possibly, but eminently believable. [28] Still other French painters invented allegories, blending Greek, Roman and imagined Gaelic heroism. Odds on the most daring is Girodet's canon-busting portrayal of Ossian welcoming dead *French* heroes to a kind of Valhalla: myth and history are one!⁴⁶ [29] Both Victor Hugo and Alexander Dumas were fans; the latter memorized hundreds of lines of the poems. Even parodies carried its popularity forward: in Hungarian the infinitive of the verb *finfall* means "to fart frequently," but that only meant that more Hungarians knew their Ossian. In sum, scholar Joep Leersen argues convincingly that "*Ossian* changed attitudes to the nature of literary inspiration as a mantic, almost shamanistic visionary communion with a spiritual Otherworld...its importance does not lie in its subject matter or literary form.... [but] its flavor, its heroic-melancholy sentimentalism, its thematization of loss and historical defeat, its use of liminality and mantic ideas of inspiration..."⁴⁷ Nearly a century later Lady Jane Wilde named her second son Oscar Fingal O'Flarhertie Wills Wilde.

And let's not even start on the musical compositions, choral glees, and lieder settings: Beethoven ("two of my favorite poets are Homer and Ossian") Schubert set several poems, [30] Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture* is subtitled *Fingal's Cave*, Brahms four "Gesang aus Fingal," Massenet's opera *Werther*, and the now-forgotten seventy sold-out performances in Paris of an 1804 five-act opera, *Ossian ou Les Bards*, composed by Jean-Francois Le Seuer (Berlioz's teacher) that Napoleon attended and sent composer a Legion of Honor cross the next day.⁴⁸

Perhaps it's fitting that both Macpherson, the great forger, and Dr. Johnson, his great critic, are buried near one another in Westminster Abbey.⁴⁹

OSSIAN, AMERICA, AND THE AFTERMATH OF OUR CIVIL WAR

In February 1773 Thomas Jefferson [31] wrote to James Macpherson by way of the poet's cousin Charles: "These pieces [sic] have been, and will I think during my

⁴⁵ Peter France, "Fingal in Russia," in Gaskill, ed, *Reception...* pp 259-74. Questions of authenticity also plague *The Song of Prince Igor*: the texts purports to be early medieval but has a number of unexplained anachronisms, and the "original" manuscript can't be consulted because it was a victim of the Great Fire in Moscow after the Russian retreat from Borodino (Leersen, in Gaskill, *Reflections*, 116). Leerson adds "The notion of a discrete and unproblematic national epic is perhaps a naïve idealization," and cites a number of other problematic 19th century national epics (117ff).

⁴⁶ Macdonald, in Gaskill, *Reception*, 402-3.

⁴⁷ Leerson, in Gaskill, *Reception*, 111. James Buchan's excellent study expands on this theme.

⁴⁸ Smith, in Gaskill, *Reception*, 379. Smith describes three other 19th century operas based on Ossian.

⁴⁹ Over the top: The 2000 *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century British Philosophers* (Thoemmes Press) has entries on many minor thinkers, and one in particular caught the eye of David Fate Norton, emeritus philosophy professor at McGill. It was on a certain Beg Eolach Moidhach (c.1715-1745), who wrote only in Gaelic and rejected the English language. He reportedly "died from drowning in Loch Lomond in April, 1745, when he was fleeing reprisals from English whom he had insulted." Shortly thereafter a relative fled with Moidhach's papers to Russia; those notes are now, allegedly, somehow housed in the library of the Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University in Moscow. Norton tried to trace the author of the entry, one Neas Riogh óEolas, but the editors reported that he had moved to Canada without leaving a forwarding address. Norton pointed out that there were no English soldiers quartered in the Highlands in 1745 to chase the poor man, and—the clincher—the author's name translates roughly as "Ness, King o'Knowledge" and the alleged 18th century philosopher's name translates as "Hare of Little Knowledge." Macpherson's Gambit still inspires! Shea, 21.

lifetime continue to be to me, the source of daily and exalted pleasure. The tender, and the sublime emotions of the mind were never before so finely wrought up by human hand. I am not ashamed to own that I think this rude bard of the North the greatest Poet that has ever existed." Like everyone else, Jefferson requested a copy of the Gaelic originals, but of course never received one. And it wasn't just Jefferson: "Before 1800 the then-popular American poets Josius Arnold, Joseph Ladd, John Linn, William Mumford, and Jonathan Sewall all had imitated or parodied the Scottish bard" (Rosenblum, 40). They're little known today, but many others after 1800 are not: James Fenimore Cooper's noble Native Americans owe much to Ossian, especially in the "translation" of ancient Indian language, and in the death of Uncas in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) to that of Oscar in *Temora*.⁵⁰ Thoreau believed the translations to be authentic, and compared them to "Homer, Isaiah, and the American Indians... only the simplest and most enduring features of humanity are seen, such essential parts of a man as Stonehenge exhibits of a temple."⁵¹ Walt Whitman called the poems "the stanchest [sic] friends of my other soul, my poems."⁵² No surprise, Poe and Scotsman Herman Melville were fans. By now it's clear that "absolute source-fidelity" was no longer of central interest to this generation of Americans; the forger Macpherson is now hailed as a visionary poet and a founder of Romanticism, not a calculating deceiver.⁵³ [32]

So *Ossian* reached 19th century America, North and South. But the poems' strongest influence, especially on the South, came indirectly, mediated by the most popular and influential Western novelist of the first half of the 19th century.

Macpherson was of course not the only Scots poet or prose writer bent on recovering the country's ancient traditions. At least a dozen others were active in the latter days of the century, legitimately composing poems in what became the consensus "Ancient Manner" in the primitive-yet-sophisticated style of *Ossian*. Many of these were printed on broadsheets and sold on the streets of Edinburgh. And from the age of ten, a certain lad, proud member of the Clan of Swinton and undaunted by his limp from childhood polio, bought those broadsheets, proudly memorizing many stanzas like this one: "The dews of summer night did fall— / The Moon, sweet regent of the sky, / Silvered the walls of Cumnor Hall / and many an oak that grew nearby."⁵⁴ [33] His name? Walter Scott. By the time he turned fourteen Scott (bn. 1771) was already a frequent visitor at the home of the now elderly dramatist John Home—remember John Home?—and through him and other scholar-friends encountered *Ossian*. *Ossian* "dazzled" him and left its mark, a decisive mark, on his imagination. "I devoured rather than perused *Ossian* and could repeat whole *duans* [cantos] without remorse."

As late as 1805 he celebrated *Ossian's* "giving a new tone to poetry throughout all Europe."⁵⁵ By 1809, he would declare Macpherson's poems forgeries, [34] but by then the greatest master of the Scottish revival was well launched; like Macpherson but with full legitimacy Scott himself began collecting ancient folk works: *Minstrelsy of the*

⁵⁰ Mark Twain on Cooper and Ossian: "This bronze noble of nature, is then made to talk like Ossian for whole pages, and measure out hexameters, as though he had been practicing for a poetic prize". *Life on the Mississippi*.

⁵¹ *The Dial*, January, 1844. Cited in Rosenblum, 40.

⁵² Cited in DeGaetano, 134.

⁵³ Leerson, in Gaskill, *Reception*. 109-110, 116. A linguistic turn in support of "good forging": In German *fegen* means not only a "bad" sense of betraying, but a "good" sense of cleaning up and improving: the helpful forger! (Eng. "forging").

⁵⁴ William Mickle, "Cumnor Hall," cited in E. Johnston I, 61.

⁵⁵ *Edinburgh Review* 6 (July 1995), 462, cited by Rosenblum, 52.

Scottish Border, with its 48 bardic poems plus two of Scott's own, came out in 1802, followed by *Lay of the last Minstrel* in 1805 (pub. 1816), then *Marmion* (Flodden Field) in 1808 and, closest to *Ossian*, the ballad-epic *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) in six cantos, matching Fingal.⁵⁶ (*Marmion* contains the famous lines best applied to Macpherson: "O what a tangled web we weave, / When first we practice to deceive.") Then came the novels, almost tumbling over one another: *Waverly* with its ballad-loving hero (begun 1805, pub. 1814), *The Antiquary* (1816: 1794 setting, maybe the best?)⁵⁷, *Rob Roy* (1817), and onward: 27 in all, way too many to list. Most of the first dozen had 17th-18th century settings, but made use of many oral traditions that he'd collected; the mythic aura of Scotland lost or forgotten flourished on ground prepared by *Ossian*.⁵⁸ [35] And there was plenty of non-fiction too, editing huge editions of Dryden (1808) and Swift (1814), and especially *The Border Antiquities of England and Scotland* (2 vols., 1814-1817), a History of Scotland, countless reviews. Walter Scott in effect dispersed *Ossian* across the wider field of Scottish history and fiction, reviving its melancholic defeats and the codes of clan loyalty that suffered them. Novels were the new form for epic, and like epics less "civilized" than high lyric poetry or drama. Sir Walter was part Augustan rationalist and serious scholar, part Freemason and knighted Tory romantic, and it's the conservative narrator of lost causes and lost honor that we'll finish with.

Scott was everywhere in the old South, as were immigrants and descendants of the Highlanders and rural Ulster; "between 1650 and 1775 many thousands were banished to the American colonies for political, religious or criminal offenses."⁵⁹ Plantations were named "Waverly" in South Carolina, "Caledonia" in North Carolina, and even bourgeois Lowlander Scots who had little respect for their country's peasants felt the pull of the ancient tales; after all, they too had lost at Culloden. Family bookshelves held their Scott editions—even if they were not always read, they represented. *Ossian*, Scott: in a way they'd written the South's 19th century history before it happened to them.⁶⁰ [36]

In the Scottish Highlands and in Alabama and Georgia, for some even today, a great war may be lost, but it is never over. Only the winners, the English or the North, think everything's headed back to normal. Losing isn't something to comprehend and accept; instead it becomes *a way of comprehending*, of reseeing the world. Sustaining legends, however fraudulent, are created. "Pride, identity, grief and grievance coalesce in the story of defeat. They keep it alive, it keeps them alive."⁶¹ Defeated heroes from Hector and Dido to Shakespeare's Hotspur to Milton's Satan and Robert E. Lee have always stirred us, especially if we are, like the Scottish Highlanders, poor,

⁵⁶ Scott speculated that Macpherson's method of composition was first to think of the Gaelic word then translate it into English; Howard Gaskill, the leading contemporary *Ossian* scholar, thinks it likely Scott was right. (*Reception*, 11)

⁵⁷ Nigel Leask argues that *The Antiquary's* "Gothic" character Oldbuck's planned epic *The Caledonian* owes a significant debt to *Fingal*.

⁵⁸ From *Waverley* 1st chapter: "...passions common to men in all stages of society, and which have alike agitated the human heart, whether it throbbed under the steel corslet of the fifteenth century, the brocaded coat of the eighteenth, or the blue frock and white dimity waistcoat of the present day." Scott's theme of a common humanity across the ages (from WIKI). The most widely book read today—*Ivanhoe*—had a medieval English setting; Scott was no blind patriot.

⁵⁹ ancestralfindings.com/immigration

⁶⁰ Kirsti Simonsuuri's punning comment on *Ossian*— "It is not entirely cynical to say that if the poems of *Ossian* had not existed, it would have been necessary to invent them" (111)—applies to the South's conservative imagination as well.

⁶¹ Burroughs, 75

downtrodden, scattered, ridiculed by arrogant victors. You prize manners and values that your conquerors belittle; you claim a melancholic-yet-macho heritage whose deep power you didn't recognize until you lost it. In sum, you have your ballads and your stories, and they become oracular, virtual scripture. It won't surprise you that the Confederate battle flag, with its St Andrew's cross, bears strong resemblance to banners the defeated Highlanders carried at Culloden.⁶²

If you think I'm exaggerating the force of literary influence, I'll call as witness Mr. Samuel Clemens. [37] In *Life on the Mississippi* (chapters 38 and 40) Twain tells us that Ossian and Scott together occupy the shelves of Southern readers, and then tells us what he really thinks of "The Wizard of the North": "Then comes Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments, and by his single might checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back; sets the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society. He did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote. Most of the world has now outlived good part of these harms, though by no means all of them; but in our South they flourish pretty forcefully still. Not so forcefully as half a generation ago, perhaps, but still forcefully.... But for the Sir Walter disease, the character of the Southerner-- or Southron, according to Sir Walter's starchier way of phrasing it-- would be wholly modern, in place of modern and medieval mixed, and the South would be fully a generation further advanced than it is. It was Sir Walter that made every gentleman in the South a Major or a Colonel, or a General or a Judge, before the war; and it was he, also, that made these gentlemen value these bogus decorations. For it was he that created rank and caste down there, and also reverence for rank and caste, and pride and pleasure in them. Enough is laid on slavery, without fathering upon it these creations and contributions of Sir Walter. Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war.

Unfair and exaggerated?—Yes, but a more tempered scholar writes: "[Scott's novels] assign victory and civility to the side that in some way anticipates modernity; they assign individual bravery, a strict sense of personal honor, and passionate loyalty to the party of anachronism." (Burroughs, 83). Highland regalia, mock-ancient ceremonies, invented customs are everywhere in Scott as they are in *Ossian*. [38] Sherman's March through the South seemed to mimic the Highland Clearances of the victorious Duke of Cumberland, which the crofters' and so-called "rednecks'" ancestors had suffered. Other testimonies: South Carolina's great Civil War diarist, Mary Chestnut, the Confederate's Cassandra, mentions Scott twenty times in her diaries, and uses yet another Scott novel, *The Fair Maid of Perth*, to imagine the grief of a neighbor who lost two sons in battle and comments on Southern 'readiness to lead forlorn hopes, &c., &c.:'⁶³ And there's the moving fantasy of another South Carolinian, Berry Benson

⁶² And there's a town of Ossian in Indiana, if you care to visit.

⁶³ Among a score of further examples, I'll include just famous hoaxer: "Grey Owl," a well-off Britain named Archibald Balaney who claimed in books and lectures to be the son of a Scotsman and an Apache woman, and who promoted environmental and First People causes for money and mock-fame.

of the Army of Northern Virginia, made famous by Shelby Foote, that rings of *Ossian*:
[39]

Who knows but it may be given to us, after this life, to meet again in the old quarters, to play chess and draughts, to get up soon to answer the morning roll call, to fall in at the tap of the drum for drill and dress parade, and again to hastily don our war gear while the monotonous patter of the long roll summons to battle? Who knows but again the old flags, ragged and torn, snapping in the wind, may face each other and flutter pursuing and pursued, while cries of victory fill a summer day? And after the battle, then the slain and wounded will arise, and all will meet together under two flags, all sound and well, and there will be talking and cheers and all will say; did it not seem real? Was it not as in the old day?" (Cited in Burroughs, 87.) [40]

Don't those sentiments live on in the ruinous nostalgic ideology of Southerners after 1865, what one-time Tennessee governor Andrew Johnson called "Restoration" of a heroic, defeated past? Don't the KKK's white sheets symbolize "the ghosts of the Confederate dead," and don't they uncannily resemble the still-embodied ghosts that haunt the doomed warriors of *Ossian's Fingal* and *Temora*? [41] *Gone with the Wind* indeed! An entire paper could be written tracing *Ossian's* music and images in the emotions of the defeated South. And Woodrow Wilson, apostle of the South's values, said that as a teen he learned history best from Scott. Even Frederick Douglass: his biological father was named Bailey, but Douglass chose his freedman surname from the hero of *The Lady of the Lake*, who fought against James V of Scotland.

Even today, don't our half-conscious images of "Celtic" culture owe something to *Ossian's* mists, mountains, and melancholy? Or take the music—and music videos—of Celtic artists like Enya, Era or Blackmore's Night: don't they claim go adapt (maybe forge?) ancient Celtic songs to our era? [42]

V

At the beginning I complained about the breadth of my original topic, but now I—and you?—can also complain about the inexhaustibility of tracing *Ossian's* influences across the Western world. And to prove there's no end to it, *Ossian's* misty landscapes easily take a darkly ironic contemporary shade: consider the rise (or return) of *volkisch* nationalism, invented traditions, imperial invasions, selective historical amnesia, tribal loyalty, passionate nostalgia for worlds that never existed. Literary relevance is never far away—and neither is challenging the pure originality of classics such as *1984*. The year before she met him, George Orwell's (Eric Blair) first wife Eileen O'Shaughnessy published a dystopian poem entitled "End of the Century 1984" that shares concepts, sources and imagery, including Big Brother's "telescreens," with the novel, originally titled "The Last Man in Europe" and changed just before publication in 1984. Orwell never publicly acknowledged the poem.

The last last word, from James Baldwin: the "force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in are unconsciously controlled by it, and it's literally present in all that we do."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ "The White Man's Guilt" *Ebony*, August, 1965.

FINAL IMAGE OF OSSIAN [43]

30 seconds, then [44-46] during questions

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For more Ossian:

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ABSTRACT: "Greatest Literary Hoax Ever?"

18th century Scotsman James Macpherson, encouraged by fellow poets and scholars after the crushing defeat of the Scots by the English at Culloden, composed some 19,000 lines of Gaelic verse allegedly sung by a 3rd century bard named Ossian. The poems evoked the melancholy of defeat and cultural loss of his day, as well as the grandeur and sublimity of both nature and superhuman heroism: both powerful new emotions in the European imagination that fueled the rise of Romanticism. Despite being forgeries, the two epics, *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763) not only galvanized Scot patriotism and won the praise, indeed the devotion, of writers, painters and composers across Europe, but deeply influenced aspiring nationalists, both revolutionary and reactionary, across the Continent. Hungarian rebels and Emperor Napoleon alike took Ossian to heart; its ancient heroes, its threatened language, autumnal decay, the absence of authoritarian religion, all had their cultural and political uses. Among those most moved was early 19th century's most popular novelist, Walter Scott, who fell under *Ossian's* influence as a boy, and whose consequent epic poems and 27 novels of the mythic aura of Scotland lost or forgotten, captured not only European but 19th century American imaginations, especially those in the South. Tales of rebellion against a powerful (Northern) oppressor appealed to ante-bellum, and, even more strongly, to the defeated Southerners. Their nostalgia for a lost world—what President and Southerner Andrew Johnson, rejecting "Reconstruction," called "Restoration"—that even today roils American politics.