

(RE-) MAKING OSSIAN.

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The story of Ossian was, of course, a kind of construction, a 'translation' or interpretation. More than this it was an epic myth and the progenitor of a host of paintings, etchings and decorative schemes that explored the narrative of Ossian's tales and visions. This sense, then, of a 'constructed narrative' chimed with my own practice and the opportunity to re-make Ossian as a contemporary fable seemed apposite; for the myth and mythologies of Ossian surely remain pertinent in our age.

The purpose of this essay is to describe the thought processes and strategies used in the creation of my exhibition 'Ossian, Fragments of Ancient Poetry'. This was first exhibited in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh in October 2002, and was subsequently presented in UNESCO Paris during 2005.

The exhibition exists as a series of twenty-five large-scale digital prints on canvas, with the addition of an extra image for Paris.

My initial concept for the work was to investigate themes of history, time and memory, all of which would relate to a broader theme of myth. I was interested in using James Macpherson's (1736-96) neglected but once hugely influential text *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland* as a foil for exploring the twin notions of 'truth' and 'myth'. This would key into a fundamental concern in all my work, which is the questionable value of the photograph as document, empirical truth, or objective fact. The idea of using Macpherson/Ossian as a metaphor of the 'forging' of a nation based on circumstance, language and geography seemed to me to have a direct bearing on perceptual processes I utilise in my work. The piecemeal nature of such historical processes seemed to me to reflect the creative process in some way, particularly in relation to photography and the relationship between author and subject.

I was first drawn to the possibility of exploring Ossian as a subject when I read an article by Robert Crawford in the *London Review of Books*. I was immediately attracted by his comments on the fragment as a form 'which speaks of cultural ruin and of potential re-assembly. It is central to the development of Romanticism, Modernism and Postmodernism.'¹ This seemed to connect to the area that my thinking was developing toward in terms of historical and cultural narrative, whilst relating directly to my method of constructing photographic artworks.

¹ Robert Crawford, 'Post Cullodenism', *London Review of Books* 18.19, 3rd Oct 1996.

As is the case with my most recent exhibitions, I knew there would also be the notion of a journey through the work, or a kind of convoluted narrative that would cross-reference the images within an open-ended dialogue. I had a loose structure for the work in my head, at the same time allowing for the possibility of strands of narrative to suggest themselves to me as I made the individual images. I was very aware that certain glaring omissions and simplifications would inevitably result, but felt that, as I was not in the business of constructing a historical pantheon or a series of illustrations to Ossian, this would be forgivable. I knew that portraiture would figure heavily, but did not want to make straightforward representations of various figures. The notion of carving the images onto stone over the series came to me early, working in a sense with the foundations of history and culture. I had in mind Robert Burns ‘Inscription For The Headstone Of Fergusson The Poet’²:

No sculptured marble here, nor pompous lay,
 “No storied urn nor animated bust;”
 This simple stone directs pale Scotia’s way,
 To pour her sorrows o’er the Poet’s dust.³

I propose here to reflect upon this convoluted narrative in the order of each image’s development and creation.

Blind Ossian I-IX

The first series of images within the exhibition, ‘Blind Ossian I-IX’ serve as a kind of backbone to the exhibition [FIG. 19a-19/i]. The source for the image originates in an engraving for the frontispiece of ‘The Poems of Ossian’ 1807, attributed to Alexander Runciman [FIG. 1]. The idea for this series came from a desire to make a cycle of images that create a sense of the passage of time with the blind figure of Ossian as a constant imprint on the landscape, culturally and physically. I wanted to echo elemental evocations of the land and natural dramas as found in Ossianic poetry, a sense of desolation and a depopulated landscape. The face of Ossian is painted and carved three-dimensionally over an arrangement of carved stones. As the series evolves we see the shape of the Ossian/landscape change as if by the movement of light at particular times of day. Gradually the figure crumbles and fades until we merely perceive a vague outline of the image, something there and not there. In a sense I was trying to reference the process involved in the original etching, the gradual wear of the etching plate, the dissolution of the image through repetition. There is also the notion of something that is both present

² The stone was erected at Burns’ expenses in February-March, 1789.

³ Robert Burns (1759–1796). *Poems and Songs*. *The Harvard Classics* 1909–14.

and absent - the 'positive' of the inked line and the 'negative' of the blank areas of paper. This becomes a metaphor for the fusion of the real and the fabricated in Macpherson's 'translations' of Ossian, which are themselves emblematic of the mingling of the mythical and the factual in Scottish history.

While I was creating this cycle of works I was reading James Thomson's somnambulistic epic poem 'The City of Dreadful Night' (1874), and something of that poem's urban sonority has crept in...

'For life is but a dream whose shapes return,
Some frequently, some seldom, some by night
And some by day, some night and day: we learn,
The while all change and many vanish quite,
In their recurrence with recurrent changes
A certain seeming order; where this ranges
We count things real; such is memory's might'⁴

As I read this poem, considering its geography of melancholy (and its relation to Ossianic geographies), I was struck by the sense of narrative through space. I was considering Ossian as an entity both invisible and omnipresent, 'It is impossible to see Ossian anywhere, because he is everywhere'⁵. Concurrently (realising I was moving away from or expanding on my Ossianic sources) I had been reading William Ferguson's book on national identity⁶. As I navigated through the fictional geography of Thomson's city, I was considering Ferguson's description of the 'origin myth': the widely practised mythopoeic habit from antiquity of invoking myth to assert a prior claim over the land that people inhabit. In this case Scotia, daughter of Pharaoh, progenitor of the race of Gaels or Scots. I began to see a possible link with Thomson's 'winged Woman'⁷ (a direct reference to Dürer's 'Melancholia I') and the figure of 'Scota'.

Scota 01

The engraving, 'Melancholia I' upon which the next image in the series, 'Scota 01' [FIG. 20] is based is an allegorical self-portrait by the German Renaissance artist, Albrecht Dürer. [FIG. 21] In the

⁴ James B.V.Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998), p29

⁵ Paul Baines, *Ossianic Geographies: Fingalian Figures on the Scottish Tour, 1760-1830*, *Scotlands* 4.1(1997), p.45.

⁶ William Ferguson *The Identity of the Scottish Nation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.

⁷ Thomson, p.69

Dürer etching, the winged figure, a paradoxically earthbound angel, sits dejectedly, surrounded by the objects that represent the pursuit of knowledge and understanding; symbols relating to Mathematics, Astronomy, Philosophy, Geometry and the Arts. The image speaks in general terms about the futility of the search for Truth.

Here, it becomes the starting point for an allegory alluding to the predicament of the contemporary Scottish artist. *Scota* represents both Scotland and the artist when intellectual ambition and creative imagination are constrained by the limitations of the modern world. The work contains particular references to photography as an ostensible recorder of ‘truth’, from glass negatives to the computer keyboard and the digitized copies of a portrait of James Macpherson [FIG. 22] strewn on the ground. Digital manipulation makes possible a fake photography and a ‘fake’ reality.

Cruthni I-III

This interest in the ‘origin myth’ led to another direction in the contemplation of the forging of the identity of the Scottish nation. The complex and problematic makeup of the diverse tribes who, at various times, inhabited Scotland, and, the nation’s tortuous relationship with England and Ireland led me to consider the aboriginal Scottish inhabitants, whose traces still populate the landscape of Scotland - the Picts. My readings led to the name ‘Cruthni’, eponym for the Picts, and to the creation of the triptych ‘Cruthni I, II, and III’ [FIG.23 a-23-c]. In this series the carved/striated stone blocks used in the *Blind Ossian* series re-appear to form a thumbprint over a structure reminiscent of Pictish standing stones.

The idea of identity is very much the centre of this triptych, the literal transcription of a thumbprint. The sense of being *here*, but invisible, is apt in relation to the Pictish presence in Scottish culture. They are, and have been, due to their mysterious ghost-like echo through Scottish history (and frequent use as a bulwark against the Celticisation of Scotland⁸), unknowable. Through the triptych we see this transmutation from thumbprint to the double helix of the DNA molecule, via Ossian’s Harp – the analogue through harmony to the digital.

Fragments I to VIII

My initial idea for this (sub) series [FIG.24 a- 24 h] came from an interest in computer morphing software popularly used to integrate different characteristics of two faces with one another.

⁸ William Ferguson, ‘Goth versus Gael’, *Identity of the Scottish Nation*, pp.250-270

Throughout the series of works I had included as small details two opposing fragments of ‘cultural icons’, these being a picture of a Maori chief, the other a 1960’s plaster figurine, ‘Jock’ from Bossons of England. An archetypal ‘noble savage’ and a caricature music hall ‘Harry Lauder’ Scot. In the spirit of Macpherson I took these small ‘fragments’ and expanded them into their own epic.

I wanted to reflect on the changing perception of culture and people through time by ‘morphing’ the face of the Maori chief to the aspects of the ‘Jock’ figure. This echoes in some way the journey of Macpherson – from lauded translator of ancient verse to maligned and lampooned fraudster⁹.

Strewn around the ground, as fragment details mirroring the preceding works, are digital and analogue photographs of a portrait of Macpherson himself, between real and imagined, sublime and scorned. Towards the end of this series the ‘Harry Lauder’ figure slowly fades to leave the original tableaux, devoid of all life. It is upon this geographical and cultural *tabula rasa* that James Macpherson will make his appearance.

I decided upon the triumvirate of portraits, Scott, Burns and Macpherson, because I wanted to highlight three of the most famous protagonists of that ‘passion for collecting and refurbishing, if not creating, the old literature of Scotland’¹⁰ that was typical in this period of Scottish history. Scott collected Scottish ballads and published *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* before launching into a novel-writing career in 1814 with *Waverley*. Burns also worked to collect and preserve Scottish folk songs, sometimes revising, expanding, and adapting them. From youth Burns had been interested in collecting the fragments he had heard sung or found printed, and he came to regard the rescuing of this almost lost national inheritance in the light of a vocation. In spite of the fact that he was constantly in severe financial difficulties, he refused to accept payment for this work, preferring to regard it as a patriotic service.

Portrait of Sir Walter Scott

Another figure who had great influence in the development of the Romantic movement, Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), features here imposed over a crumbling edifice reminiscent of the Scott Monument in Edinburgh’s Princes Street [FIG.25]. I was interested in Scott’s mark on the Scottish landscape and the popular image of Scotland. It was Scott who largely defined Scotland’s image in the nineteenth century, even including the clan tartans, which he helped invent in his role as pageant master

⁹ ‘All hail, Macpherson! Hail to thee, sire of Ossian! The Phantom was begotten by the snug embrace of an impudent Highlander upon a cloud of tradition’, William Wordsworth, ‘Essay supplementary to Preface’, 1815.

¹⁰ William Ferguson, ‘Goth versus Gael’, pp.250-270.

on the occasion of George IV's visit to Edinburgh in August 1822.

Aspects of this outlandish pageantry, in which Scott engineered an image of Scotland similar to the country in his romantic novels, are alluded to in the portrait of Scott, which is based on the classical bust of Scott by Bertel Thorwaldsen, in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery [FIG. 26]. Scott appears as if frozen, surrounded on his left by the detritus of Scottish 'shortbread tin' memorabilia, Jimmy hats in a sticky sweet version of the 'land o' cakes'¹¹. To his right are more sinister reminders of the other side of Scottish society in this time, Insurrection¹² and the Clearances¹³.

Portrait of Robert Burns

It seemed obvious that Robert Burns (1759-96) should figure prominently in the narrative [FIG.27]. His connections to Macpherson and Ossian, both as source of inspiration for the 'heaven-taught ploughman' and parallel perception as a 'noble savage': 'Macpherson and Burns can be seen as providing fictional and real representatives, respectively, of the Scottish peasant poet'¹⁴ This mutual connection to the land further encouraged me to place Burns within my own Ossianic landscape; 'Ossian as poet of nature links with Burns self-concept as a poet of 'Nature's Making', to create an even more palatable noble savage within the Scottish literary tradition'¹⁵.

The portrait is based on the drawing by Archibald Skirving (1749-1819), based in turn on the famous portrait by Alexander Nasmyth (1758-1840) [FIG. 28].

The image contains references to many of Burns' works, the red rose, green rushes etc. In

¹¹ Burns used this expression to describe Scotland in the opening line of his poem 'On the Late Captain Grose's Peregrinations Thro' Scotland' 1789: "Hear, Land o' Cakes and brither Scots". Robert Fergusson had already used the expression in his poem 'The King's Birthday in Edinburgh': "Oh, soldiers! For your ain dear sakes - For Scotland's, alias, Land o' Cakes." George IV also made use of this in a toast given on his visit to Edinburgh, 1822, "All the chieftains and all the clans of Scotland, and may God bless the Land of Cakes!"

¹² 'The Scottish Insurrection of 1820, was a week of strikes and unrest, a culmination of Radical demands for reform which had become prominent in the early years of the French Revolution, but had then been repressed during the long Napoleonic Wars. Artisan workers, particularly weavers in Scotland, sought action to reform an uncaring government, gentry fearing revolutionary horrors recruited militia and the government deployed an apparatus of spies, informers and agents provocateurs to stamp out the trouble.' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1820_Rising. [July 2007]

¹³ See John Prebble, *The Highland Clearances*, Penguin Books, 1963.

¹⁴ Valentina Bold ' *Poor as a Poet': Macpherson, Burns and the Peasant poet* Scotlands 4.1 (1997), p.111.

¹⁵ *ibid*

the left hand corner a fragment interposes Burns' features onto that of the 'noble savage'. On the right there is a wooden mallet with the word 'worldwide' inscribed on it, a reference to Burns Masonic connections¹⁶.

Twa Dogs

Whilst investigating the various strands and connections between Burns and Ossian, I came across the reference in 'Twa Dogs' to Cuchullin's dog in 'Fingal':

The tither was a ploughman's collie
 A rhyming, ranting, raving billie,
 Wha for his friend an' comrade had him,
 And in freak had Luath ca'd him,
 After some dog in Highland Sang,
 Was made lang syne,
 Lord knows how lang.¹⁷

Whilst re-reading this poem, it occurred to me I could re-interpret this dialogue between two dogs, one 'o' high degree' and the other a ploughman's collie', as a meditation on more contemporary dualities in Scottish society [FIG. 29].

Football in Scotland is symptomatic of the ongoing conflicts of identity that exist in Scottish life; especially since the influx of Catholic immigrants from Ireland began in the middle of the nineteenth century. The most obvious example of this is the phenomena of Rangers versus Celtic, a century-old rivalry that has been fueled by the mutual animosity between Glasgow's Catholic and Protestant communities. Celtic was founded in 1888, with the original intent of raising money for food and clothing for poor Irish Catholic immigrants in Glasgow's East End. It soon developed into a rival for Rangers, which was founded in 1873 and had a strong affiliation with Unionism and Protestantism. I wanted to make each dog not only representative of Rangers and Celtic-Catholic and Protestant, I

¹⁶ 'Burns' popularity aided his rise in Freemasonry. At a meeting of Lodge St. Andrew in Edinburgh in 1787, in the presence of the Grand Master and Grand Lodge of Scotland, Burns was toasted by the Worshipful Grand Master, Most Worshipful Brother Francis Charteris. When he was received into Edinburgh Lodges his occupation was recorded as a "poet". In early 1787, he was feted by the Edinburgh Masonic fraternity. The Edinburgh period of Burns life was fateful as further editions of Burns poetic output were sponsored by the Edinburgh Freemasons, ensuring that his name spread around Scotland and subsequently to England and abroad.' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Burns. [July 2007]

¹⁷ Robert Burns (1759–1796). *Poems and Songs*. The Harvard Classics. 1909–14.

also wanted to highlight the phenomenon of commodified tribalism - the faintly ludicrous aspect of attributing such emotional attachments to corporate companies. Hence the head of each dog is made from training shoes, one Nike, the other Adidas. The record in the right hand corner is 'Scotland's Own Tartan Lads' (The Alexander Brothers) to represent the opposing football fans - Celtic waving their Irish tricolours and Rangers with their Union Jack and England flags - united in their Scottishness. The framed photo in the centre is a double symbolic figurehead for each persuasion, King Billy *and* the Pope. Dialectic oppositions abound in this picture, as well as a number of puns ('Gales' honey, the 'fan'). A darker undertone of terrorism is hinted at with the inclusion of 'Scotch on the Rocks' a 70's novel of Scottish nationalist terrorism, but it is worth remembering that a situation such as that in Ulster didn't happen in Scotland - the Twa Dogs still inhabit the same hearth.

This Catholic/Protestant duality remains, sadly, an aspect of Scottish life.

Portrait of James Macpherson

The last picture in the series of portraits is Macpherson himself, and is a forgery [FIG. 30]. I commissioned a Photoshop expert to produce a 'forgery' of one of my works, digitally creating a portrait of James Macpherson in my style and (ironically) based on an anonymous painting in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery that is itself a copy of a portrait of Macpherson by Sir Joshua Reynolds [FIG. 22]—a triple compound forgery perhaps?

The forgery is enacted upon the last image in the series of 'Fragments', the aforementioned geographical and cultural *tabula rasa*, suggesting the devastated 'lost world of the Gael', which Macpherson's Ossian came to become a salve.

I gave a digitised scan of this image, along with the pseudo Reynolds, to my 'expert' and requested that he try, as far as possible, to make a portrait of Macpherson as if in my style. I suggested he accept no payment for this, and should regard it as a patriotic service (his response shall remain unrecorded). It is, I think, possible to scrutinise this image and in conjunction with a similar scrutiny of my genuine works, detect the forgery. Just.

I have tried to cover as many aspects and layers of meaning as possible in my journey through these works. The body of works took over two years to complete, and it is not possible here to fully explore all the layers of meaning and reference in the works. Particularly the repeated meditations on the current state of the medium of photography as we enter the digital age. There are, I think, parallels here between the age of Macpherson and our own as we enter this new digital age.

For further reading I would recommend Tom Normand's excellent text 'Calum Colvin's Ossian' in the catalogue for the exhibition published by the National Galleries

of Scotland.¹⁸

Napoleon

As a kind of postscript I will end with some thoughts on my image of Napoleon [FIG. 31]. To reflect the wider impact of Ossian beyond Scotland, and to mark the exhibition coming to Paris it was suggested I might want to create a portrait of Napoleon, who was very influential in his devotion to the cult of Ossian. ‘I have even been accused of having my head filled with Ossian’s clouds’ he is said to have exclaimed on St Helena¹⁹. The effect of his enthusiasm for Ossian encouraged the painters Gérard, Girodet, Delacroix and Ingres to produce Ossianic works, and reflects the importance of Macpherson in the development of European Romanticism.

To evoke Napoleon’s enthusiasm for the martial elements of Ossian, it seemed apt to create my own version of David’s ‘Bonaparte Crossing the St. Bernard Pass’ (1800; Musée National de Malmaison, Rueil-Malmaison, France).

I was fascinated by the nature of this painting: Napoleon as the personification of the Romantic hero, on a par with Hannibal and Charlemagne whose names appear carved in the foreground rocks. The reality of the scene depicted is, of course, much less prosaic, as can be seen in Paul Delaroche’s 1848 painting of the same name. This fictional quality in the scene, coupled with another more ‘documentary’ version of the same scene interested me in relation to the depiction of history and art. I was also intrigued to discover that four variants of the original painting commissioned by Charles IV of Spain exist. They were painted by David and his workshop and differ in the colour of the horses and the cloak. This ambivalence in terms of authorship extends across many of the images in this series.

Whilst related to the works in the Ossian series, this image stands alongside. The stony landscape of Ossian pierces the carpet tiles of a contemporary office setting, suggesting an imaginative romantic landscape in an alternatively grey corporate world.

For me the Ossian project was an intense, complicated, open-ended journey, and it remains so. The correspondences, connections, and associations outlined above are a mere fragment of the matrix of allusions within the project. As with all my work, I would hope that these suggestions, quotations,

¹⁸ Tom Normand, ‘Calum Colvin’s Ossian’, in *Calum Colvin. Ossian. Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, Edinburgh, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 2003, pp.11-61

¹⁹ William Ferguson, “James Macpherson and ‘The Invention of Ossian’”, *The Identity of the Scottish Nation*, p.241.

and references will reveal themselves slowly to the audience, so that each encounter with the images opens up new vistas and intellectual landscapes. Moreover, I would hope that each image 'thinks itself within the viewer' so that we each meet Ossian according to our personal needs and desires. This, after all, is how Ossian has functioned culturally and historically, and how it will relate to our future self-knowledge.