

INTRODUCTION

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James MacPherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* was published in 1760. Within the year, we learn from Howard Gaskill, it was translated into French by Diderot himself.¹ In the two and a half centuries that have passed since then, the work has been translated into practically every literary language under the sun and it is likely that, somewhere, it has always been in print. That would be a remarkable bibliographic history for any book, but for a work whose exact nature was a matter of controversy from the day it was published and which has been routinely debunked as a fraud, it is truly extraordinary; nor does Ossian's topicality seem to be fading even now in this post-modern era. On the contrary, the occasion for the conference whose transactions are recorded in this volume was the exhibition at the UNESCO building in Paris of Calum Colvin's remarkable series of images, *Ossian, Fragments of Ancient Poetry*. It is a title which invokes MacPherson directly and the work itself is a striking witness to his enduring topicality. Among the essays below, the artist has contributed an illuminating commentary on his own work, backed by Tom Normand's contribution which further examines it in the context of the photographic image and its role in the preservation, generation and perhaps even the creation of memory. Ossian, too, is in part at least a created memory. That analogy with an art form not invented till forty years after MacPherson's death is typical of the way in which, for all that it is deliberately archaic, Ossian appears paradoxically also to be precociously modern. It is around that paradox that much of the discussion here revolves.

It is testimony to the enduring fascination of Ossian that it should inspire an artist in the twenty-first century, but the undoubted success of Colvin's work also takes us deeper into the nature of MacPherson's poetry and its appeal. Colvin's way of working is highly synthetic. He makes an image by construction and assemblage, incorporating found objects and borrowed images as well as objects and images he has made himself. In the series, for instance, the megalithic monument, which provides the background to many of the images, is made of cut blocks of actual material. The leitmotif of the series, Ossian's head, is projected onto this, though, as the pictures progress, like a ghost or chimera, it disappears. This head is based on an engraving of Ossian, reputedly after Alexander Runciman and used as the frontispiece for an edition published in 1807 [FIG. 1]. That was ten years after MacPherson's death and twenty after the death of Runciman and, appropriately, there is already some dubiety about the exact status of this image. It was always a fiction, clearly, but as it does not relate directly to any of Runciman's known Ossian images, is it twice a fiction? This is typical of the layering in Ossian.

¹ See Howard Gaskill's essay below.

Reflecting this, adding MacPherson's own portrait to the series, Colvin gave it a similarly doubtful status. Based on a contemporary portrait, it has been computer-generated in Colvin's style, but without his intervention or oversight.

In Colvin's series, against dominant images like Ossian's head, MacPherson's portrait, the head of Robert Burns, or indeed David's portrait of Napoleon added for the French exhibition (see Calum Colvin's essay below)—and both the latter are national icons in their respective countries, whose exact status becomes more problematic the more closely they are examined—all sorts of other secondary details are worked in. Thus a wide variety of associations is brought together to be unified finally when the whole assemblage is made into a photograph, a single framed picture.

There is a close analogy here between Colvin's art and MacPherson's in spite of the gap of time as well as the difference in art form that separates the poet and the artist. For MacPherson's Ossian is synthetic too. It is a construct, a collage, even, of fragments, both real, (or found) and invented, unified by presentation. You could even see MacPherson's chosen style of language as like collage. Fragments of text are put side by side without linking conjunctions, in parataxis as Howard Gaskill points out.² It is a little like Picasso's use of fragments of newspaper and isolated words in the synthetic cubist pictures that are, by another route, also ancestor to Colvin's work. If that seems a remote analogy however, one of the recurrent themes in the papers below is, nevertheless, Ossian's modernity. Following Colvin's lead, it throws light on that discussion to consider Ossian's links with the visual tradition, not only in terms of the impact of MacPherson's poetry, but also of the background it shares with significant contemporary developments in the visual arts. For in Scotland at just the moment of Ossian's publication, they do also independently prefigure modernism in a very striking way.

Colvin, however, also sees his identity as a Scot as just such a construct, just such a layered synthesis of fact and fiction and it is that which he explores in his images. Nor was the impact of Ossian in this way unique to Scots and Scotland. Just how wide it was, but also by extension how universally Colvin's analysis of its importance in the synthetic structure of modern identities can be applied, is reflected in the observation made by Joep Leerson in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*. Before the publication of Ossian, he argues, there was no such concept as a 'national epic',³ not at least of one with contemporary relevance (Virgil's *Aeneid* had long been recognised as the national epic of Rome for instance) but after the appearance of Ossian, the discovery or creation of an epic that could be associated with national origins was part of the essential equipment of any community claiming an

² See below, p. 21-22

³ Joep Leerson, 'Ossian and the Rise of Literary Historicism' in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* ed. Howard Gaskill, p.114 and passim.

ancient history and independent identity.

If they are still relevant now, however, these were also already active questions in eighteenth-century Scotland even before MacPherson. Scotland was one of the first to claim its identity as a European nation, yet that identity was now in crisis. MacPherson's achievement belongs in the broader context of the Enlightenment and the way in which it was shaped by these circumstances, though also by the cruel impact they had on MacPherson's own people, the Highland Gaels.

Forty years before MacPherson, Allan Ramsay senior consciously responded to the crisis of identity triggered by the Union. When he published the *Evergreen* in 1724, while he was not seeking a national epic perhaps, he was certainly concerned with the historic poetry it included as a vehicle of identity. "These good old bards," as in his introduction he termed the *makars* of the fifteenth and sixteenth century Renaissance in Scotland, were not a curiosity. They were part of a national canon. This was the literature of Scottish identity. It was also the poetry of Scottish literature's origins --- and thus the nation's origins too. Indeed, further, in keeping with that status, Ramsay claimed primitive status for his 'good old bards' when he wrote of the "Natural Strength and Simplicity of Style our Forefathers practised."⁴

Ramsay was followed by Thomas Blackwell, professor in Aberdeen, who elaborated this idea of the primitive into a radical perspective on Homer as bard of the preliterate stage of human society. Blackwell also contrasted the historical primitive with the present, the effete present with the intense experience of primitive life. "The marvellous and wonderful is the nerve of the epic strain;" then continued with the question, "but what marvellous things happen in a well ordered state?"⁵ Prudently, however, he also added that in spite of the marvellous and wonderful, things "your lordship will join in the wish that we may never be a proper subject of an heroic poem."⁶ Things were definitely better in the eighteenth century.

Blackwell also followed the logic of his view of primitive society to propose that, as the vehicle for the expression of that sense of the marvellous and wonderful, the language of the epic is itself primitive and this informs the epic too. "It is certain, that the primitive parts of the Languages reputed Original, are many of them rough, undeclined, impersonal Monosyllables; expressive commonly of the highest Passions and most striking Objects that present themselves in solitary savage Life."⁷

⁴ *Works of Allan Ramsay (Scottish Text Society 1945-74)* 6 vols, Vol.IV, p.236.

⁵ Thomas Blackwell, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (2nd. ed., London, 1736), p.26

⁶ Blackwell, p.28

⁷ Blackwell, p.41

Blackwell might not have deemed Gaelic one of the Original Languages, but Gaelic still has the sobriquet ‘the language of Eden,’ the claim made for it by Alasdair MacMhaighster Alasdair in 1751.⁸ Modern Gaelic was a sophisticated literary language. It was however little understood beyond the Gaels’ own community. Coupled with Blackwell’s vision of the progress of language, this was an invitation to MacPherson to construct a synthetic primitive language and call it Gaelic in translation. In so doing, he proposed a language that was one stage of sophistication beyond Blackwell’s rough monosyllables, but was still so primitive that it was constructed of clauses apparently thrown out without conjunctions or other words to perform the usual connecting functions of language. Implicitly in the progressive view of the history of language proposed by Blackwell, Ossian was therefore more primitive than Homer. Indeed Blackwell himself allows that interpretation when he remarks, “Upon a nearer view of what Homer spoke, we find it not original, but derived from others more ancient.”⁹

It was via Blackwell that these ideas about the nature of primitive language, suitably adapted, entered the visual arts. In a striking coincidence, it was also in 1760, the year of MacPherson’s first publication, that Gavin Hamilton completed *Andromache mourning the Death of Hector*¹⁰, the first of his series of six Homeric pictures and the first in a style intended to be appropriate to Blackwell’s view of Homer. In these pictures, though they may not be to our eyes obviously ‘primitive’, Hamilton nevertheless turned his back on the baroque and rococo. Instead he emulated the simplicity and grandeur of the primitive style as Blackwell had identified it. It was also an approach, if not an actual style, in keeping with the earliest stages of Greek art as George Turnbull, another Aberdeen professor, described them in his *Treatise on Ancient Painting* published in 1740. Notably too, Canova records how Hamilton directed him for inspiration to sculptors like Nicola Pisano and Jacopo della Quercia, both Italian Primitives, artists specifically identified as ‘primitive’ both then and later.¹¹

In the present discussion, however, it is what might be called Hamilton’s moral naturalism that is most relevant. He was inspired in this by his own reading of the philosophy of moral sense. He was a pupil of Francis Hutcheson alongside Adam Smith at Glasgow University, but as an artist he also followed William Hogarth here. In emulation of the English artist’s famous ‘modern moral subjects’ (*Harlot’s Progress*, *Rake’s Progress*, *Marriage A-la-mode*), he too planned a dramatic series of pictures that from the start he intended should be engraved. In place of Hogarth’s reflection of

⁸ In “Aiseiridh na Sean Chánoin Albannaich”; see John MacQueen, *Progress and Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1982), p.75-76

⁹ Blackwell, p.44

¹⁰ See FIG.2, another painting from that series by Gavin Hamilton.

¹¹ Melchior Missirini, *Della Vita di Antonio Canova* (Prato, 1824) I, p.41

modern life, however, he shifted his frame of reference to the remote past in order to convey the grandeur of primitive passions in the original ‘natural’ condition of human society when they were still undimmed by the controlling conventions of civilisation.

Here too, Blackwell is important. He provided a historical framework for the philosophy of moral sense; not a progressive one, it must be said, but a retrogressive one, a story in fact of the loss of innocence, even an analogy of the Fall. In an age of innocence human nature had greater simplicity and openness and thus a more vivid and more responsive imagination. “So unaffected and simple were the manners of those times that the folds and windings of the human breast lay open to the eye; nor were people ashamed to avow passions and inclinations which were entirely void of art and design,” he argued.¹² This was the appeal of Ossian as both MacPherson himself and Hugh Blair identify it. Paraphrasing Blackwell, Blair writes of how Ossian is witness to a time when the feelings of men and women are ‘raised to the utmost, their passions have nothing to restrain them, their imagination nothing to check it. They display themselves to one another without disguise and converse and act in the uncovered simplicity of nature.’¹³ These were the conditions in which the feelings on which moral sense depends flourished with the greatest intensity.

This was the logic of the primitive that Hamilton pioneered and which became central in the development of modern art. Likewise, the distinctive feature of Ossian’s modernism and the implicit justification of the moral purpose of art, as Macdonald points out, lay, not in allegory and conventional forms of moral example, but because it offered a route to an imaginative vision with real moral impact because it was of far greater intensity. As David Hewitt quotes from *Childe Harold* --- thus also proving his thesis of the nature of the poet’s indebtedness to Ossian --- Byron sums up this whole discussion with perfect economy. What is the whole aim and justification of art?¹⁴

‘Tis to create, and in creating live

A being more intense

Long before Byron, however, in 1772 Alexander Runciman pursued this same goal of intensity through imaginative freedom in the Hall of Ossian [FIG.3]. Painted with dazzling spontaneity, the whole ceiling was carried out with little preparation and completed in just three months. It was a precocious attempt to apply Ossian’s primitive parataxis to visual imagery, to use visual abbreviation and the deliberate disregard of conventional rules to foreshorten, as it were, visual language and so

¹² Blackwell, p.34

¹³ Hugh Blair ‘A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian’ in *The Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1763), p.4.

¹⁴ See David Hewitt’s essay below.

emulate qualities found in Ossian, or that perhaps Ossian was actually composed to embody.

Runciman first formed this ambition inspired by Gavin Hamilton in Rome just as Hamilton had been inspired by Blackwell. Runciman was not alone in his search for a more authentic model of the primitive than the one Hamilton had found. He and Henry Fuseli, working together in Hamilton's circle in Rome, first tried the model of vase painting available to them in the collection Sir William Hamilton had formed in Naples and which was published from 1766 onwards. Its graphic energy and visual simplicity seemed an epitome of the primitive. There was good reason to suppose it was an art form that had come down from the time of Homer and could thus provide an authentic model of visual art from Homer's time. Runciman's *Origin of Painting*, planned in Rome around 1771 and completed in Edinburgh in 1773, is an epitome of this. At the same time that he did his first drawing for that picture, Runciman also did a drawing of Ossian [FIG. 4A] which has striking freedom and energy and is different from any of his experiments with a style derived from vase painting. A landmark in the evolution of modern art, it was the first visual image to have all the 'primitive' characteristics of a visual equivalent to MacPherson's poetry. It was the catalyst therefore.

Strikingly, too, as the wind blows through the trees and the strings of his harp, Ossian's song is the song of nature herself. If the sound of a waterfall is substituted for the sound of the wind, this is exactly what was realised by the creation of the Ossian summerhouse, or belvedere, also confusingly later called the Hall of Ossian, which was built on the Falls of Bran a few years later. It was designed to harness the music of the waterfall, making a direct analogy between the sound of the water and Ossian's verse. To complete this long circle, Calum Colvin has also recently installed a remarkable image of Ossian in the building.

Murdo Macdonald, in his essay, argues that it was the view of Ossian already reflected at the Falls of Bran that inspired what became the conventional poetic imagery of the Highland landscape and that this was before Scott, even if it was Scott who made it fashionable. The case for Ossian and the artists anticipating Scott here is a powerful one. It would be even more clearly the case if Alexander Runciman's Hall of Ossian had survived. Runciman set the poetry in the landscape it describes, 'the land of the pouring torrent' in honour of MacPherson, or the land of 'nature in her wildest grace' as Macdonald puts it. Runciman's reputation as a painter of Scottish landscape, which was considerable, must have rested largely on those paintings, for few easel pictures have survived by him that would justify it. Indeed the Hall of Ossian even included a scene of Druids and standing stones anticipating the example Macdonald cites of James Barry doing this.

Although his drawing of Ossian was done in Rome, it was only on his return to Scotland that Runciman changed from his original proposal of a series illustrating the life of Achilles to the poetry of Ossian in his plan for the decoration of Penicuik House. The reasons for the change were certainly

partly patriotic, but clearly, as the drawing demonstrates, Ossian also offered him a better opportunity to fulfil his new ‘modern’ ambitions. Indeed it was the catalyst for his modernity and so for much that followed. MacPherson had successfully focussed ambitions in the visual arts which up till then had been present, certainly, but had not till then found their vehicle.

To the extent Runciman’s choice was patriotic, it was also patriotism coloured by a sense of Scotland’s special qualification in the pursuit of the kind of primitive moral naturalism that Hamilton had explored through Homer. MacPherson’s claim was that Ossian was a genuine poetic survival made possible by the remoteness of the Highlands, he believed. Not only were they well placed geographically for such a survival, but the Highlands could also be held to be untouched by the march of later historical civilisations. Contemporary Scots also believed, however, that, lying outside the Roman Empire, the rest of Scotland, too, was innocent of the corrupting conventionalisation of Roman classicism (a view not a little coloured by the distance claimed by Protestantism from Roman Catholicism). That Scotland had successfully defied the Roman Empire was a matter of great pride. “Oh Scotland! that cou’d yence afford/To bang the pith of Roman sword” wrote Runciman’s friend, Robert Fergusson, in his *Elegy On the Death of Scots Music* (published in the *Weekly Magazine*, March 5th, 1772).

This view of Scotland, however, overlooked the very real contemporary crisis of Gaeldom. Even as Ossian offered the Gaels as a model of the new primitive, the Gaelic speaking part of the country was still reeling from the disaster of the Forty Five and the genocide that followed. There were therefore very important reasons why MacPherson should want to reclaim the ancient cultural significance of Gaelic just as Ramsay had done Scots. Gaelic civilisation not only stretched back a very long way, but, as Angus Peter Campbell rather sadly observes in his contribution below, it also continued to flourish in the eighteenth century in a much more genuine form than that represented by Ossian. There was indeed, he suggests, a real choice available at the time between Duncan Ban Macintyre’s authentic Gaelic poetry and James MacPherson’s synthetic verse. MacPherson, as a Gael writing in English, made a choice, the wrong choice Campbell argues. It was not one for whose consequences he was alone to be responsible, but it is a shadow that still hangs, not only over Ossian, but as Colvin implies, over the whole construct of Scottish identity. The intertext of Ossian is of paradise lost. It was not the Christian paradise that was lost however. It was an actual historical age of innocence that was still remembered in the oral traditions of the Gaelic people that MacPherson claimed he was recording. It was now lost, not because of any sin or transgression, but just because that is the way things are. It is no wonder that Ossian has exercised such a powerful imaginative hold for such a long time. Blake’s opposition of Innocence and Experience followed logically, but so does Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*.

Walter Scott already had a pretty clear understanding both of the character and of the significance of Ossian and also of the mismatch between them. He also saw how in the end the enduring

importance of the phenomenon of Ossian is neither a function of the supposed, nor of the actual origin of the poetry, far less of its truth, whatever that may be. It was quite simply the imaginative impact that Ossianic poetry had and still has, for better or for worse, on poetry, on art and on literature more widely. In his paper here, Howard Gaskill quotes this key passage from Scott: “But, while we are compelled to renounce the pleasing idea ‘that Fingal lived, and that Ossian sung,’ our national vanity may be equally flattered by the fact, that a remote, and almost barbarous corner of Scotland, produced, in the 18th century, a bard capable not only of making an enthusiastic impression on every mind susceptible of poetical beauty, but of giving a new tone to poetry throughout all Europe.”