

THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE POEMS OF OSSIAN.

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When in the eighteenth century the poems of Ossian were published by James MacPherson, great surprise was felt that poems purporting to belong to a very remote age, could have been transmitted mainly by oral tradition. Many wondered that poems, ostensibly the production of a very rude and early age, could contain ideas so grand and sentiments so refined and elegant as the poems of Ossian undoubtedly possess. It was in literary circles deemed necessary to subject these writings to a very rigid examination. That poems of acknowledged beauty could remain so long in obscurity; that they could have floated in comparative safety across many centuries; that in a country greatly removed from the influence of classical learning, sentiments similar to those which pervade the writings of Ossian could be cherished; that suddenly from a comparatively unknown portion of Scotland there issued poems which speedily made a great impression in the literary world,—was sufficient to draw the critical attention of many. There were not wanting those who maintained that it was impossible for poems to be handed down during many centuries mainly by oral tradition. The beauties pervading the poems of Ossian soon made a marked impression in learned circles; and hence arose the eagerness wherewith men like Johnson, Hume and Laing, endeavoured to prove that the poetical writings in question were the composition of MacPherson himself. Occupying, as these men did, a very distinguished place among the learned of that age, it is not wonderful that their efforts to overthrow the authenticity of Ossian, induced others to regard the entire poems as a forgery and as the production of MacPherson himself. It was to be expected that the opinions of writers who in all likelihood bestowed some attention on the vexed question of the genuineness of the poems ascribed to