

was wont to be the great entertainment of the Highlanders, to pass the winter evenings in discoursing of the times of Fingal, and rehearsing these old poems of which they have all along been enthusiastically fond; that when assembled at their festivals, or any public occasions, wagers were often laid who could repeat most of them; and to have store of them in their memory, was both an honourable and a profitable acquisition, as it procured them access to the families of great men; that with regard to their antiquity, they are beyond all memory or tradition, in so much that there is a phrase commonly used in the Highlands to this day, when they would express any thing which is of the most remote or unknown antiquity, importing that "it belongs to the age of Fingal." I have the pleasure of knowing a gentleman in Argyleshire, Scotland, who can recite Gaelic or Ossianic poems of great length, which, so far as I know, have not yet been published. He has repeatedly mentioned to me that it was customary in his early days for Highland families to spend the long winter evenings in listening to those who could recite poems having reference to the times of Ossian. He has often expressed a regret that, through inattention, he has allowed many of the poems he heard in his youth to pass into forgetfulness. In addition to the evidence we possess in favour of the great attention which was paid to the recital of poems among the ancient Highlanders, it should be remembered that, while intellectual darkness prevailed in many countries, there was a large measure of enlightenment in the Highlands of Scotland. It is well known that from Iona men went forth who carried rays of light into distant countries and sowed there the seeds of moral and spiritual knowledge. May it not with safety be supposed, that the industrious monks of Iona turned their attention to the poems of Ossian and committed them to writing? Certain it is that MSS. existed, containing Ossianic poems. Some of these were recovered after MacPherson published his Translation of Ossian. It was clearly proved that many MSS. were lost or destroyed during the political troubles which swept over the Highlands in the early part of the last century. Many trustworthy men affirmed that, if an effort had been made at an earlier date to procure MSS., many could be found throughout the Highlands. Had sufficient attention been given to the power which oral tradition had among the Highland bards, and to the Gaelic MSS. which existed, less bitterness would have been manifested towards MacPherson and