

THE AUTHENTICITY AND ORIGIN OF THE  
POEMS OF OSSIAN.



It was the profound Dr. Johnson who said "The poems of Ossian never appeared in their original form before their framing and formation in the mind of Macpherson." Far be it from me to impute any conscious unfairness to the renowned critic who loved truth better than his country, yet, having based his scathing denunciation of the efforts of the Scottish translator, upon the results of a hurried trip through the Highlands, it is nothing more than a mere conjecture, and as such it deserves to be accepted.

Notwithstanding his pointed reflection on the honesty of Macpherson, Dr. Johnson was forced to admire the genius of the man who opened the way to a new field of literature, and in terms of the highest praise he refers to the rich and melodious strains in which the highland bard sings the songs of his nation. It is not improbable that the long controversy as to the origin of the Ossianic poems, was prompted as much by their intrinsic worth—which in the appreciation of competent judges is inferior to none of the ancients—as by any well-founded suspicion regarding the honesty of the translator. The poems of Ossian were no sooner given to the world than literary men in England and Ireland saw fit to call into question the prefaced remarks of Macpherson bearing on the material and source from which he compiled his verses. The former openly asserted that the so-called Ossianic poems were a mere fabrication, whilst the latter contended that the poems in question were of Celtic origin, and that to Ireland alone belonged the honor which the venerable bard of Selma gave promise of conferring.

The cloud of darkness which at that time surrounded the question has since then disappeared, and it is hardly probable in the light of subsequent developments, that the first contention has any supporters in our time. Nor have Irish scholars, who should know the value of their strictures, succeeded any better in making

good their charges against the much-abused "purloiner."

Bearing upon the accusation of Dr. Johnson, and others, it will be, no doubt, of interest to inquire into the results of the investigation which followed the appearance of Macpherson's rendition of Ossian. In the year 1805, there appeared the Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland, appointed to inquire into the nature and authenticity of the poems of Ossian, and it may with full safety be asserted that the report in question has settled the difficulty, and proved to the satisfaction of every candid enquirer, that poems bearing the name of Ossian, were in circulation in the Highlands before Macpherson was able to be aware of their existence. In perfect agreement with the views of the above mentioned committee, are the words of Dr. Hugh Blair, in his appendix to his treatise on the Ossianic verses. He thus writes: "The testimony of many of the most respected gentlemen of the Highlands, which I have obtained by direct correspondence, is, I judge, strong and irrefragable evidence in favor of the authenticity of the poems now given to the world as genuine productions of ancient Highland Bards." That Mr. Blair was fully aware of the important influence which the discovery of the Ossianic poems would have upon the literary taste of his time, is evidenced by the fact that he thought the share which he had in introducing them, was a part of his life for which he deserved well both of his age and of posterity.

In connection with the question, as to whether the poems of Ossian are genuine or not, it will be of material service to detail the particulars which were gathered by Sir John Sinclair in reference to a Gaelic manuscript of Ossian, which existed at Douay in Flanders, before Macpherson had made any collection of the poems of the bard of Selma. Among other things which were established beyond the semblance of a doubt, the following deserve to be recalled as they are of special interest and bear directly upon the point at issue. The Rev. John Farquharson, a