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The poems of Ossian

in two volumes ; to which are prefixed dissertations on the æra and
poems of Ossian

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Lathmon

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LATHMON:

A

POEM.

VOL. II.

B

LATHMON.

A POEM.

ARGUMENT.

LATHMON, a British prince, taking advantage of Fingal's absence on an expedition in Ireland, made a descent on Morven, and advanced within sight of Selma, the royal residence. Fingal arrived in the mean time, and Lathmon retreated to a hill, where his army was surprized by night, and himself taken prisoner, by Ossian and Gaul the son of Morni. The poem opens with the first appearance of Fingal on the coast of Morven, and ends, it may be supposed, about noon the next day.

LATHMON:

A POEM.

ARGUMENT.

SELMA, thy halls are silent. There is no sound in the woods of Morven. The wave tumbles alone on the coast. The silent beam of the sun is on the field. The daughters of Morven come forth, like the bow of the shower; they look towards green Erin for the white sails of the king. He had promised to return, but the winds of the north arose!

Who pours from the eastern hill, like a stream of darkness? It is the host of Lathmon. He has heard of the absence of Fingal. He trusts in the wind of the north. His soul brightens with joy. Why dost thou come, O Lathmon? The mighty are not in Selma. Why comest thou with thy forward spear? Will the daughters of Morven fight? But stop, O mighty stream, in thy course! Does not Lathmon behold these sails? Why dost thou vanish, Lathmon, like the mist of the lake? But the squally storm is behind thee; Fingal pursues thy steps!

The king of Morven had started from sleep, as we rolled on the dark-blue wave. He stretched his hand to his spear, his heroes rose around. We knew that he had seen his fathers, for they often descended to his dreams, when the sword of the foe rose over the land, and the battle darkened before us. "Whither hast thou fled, O wind!" said the king of Morven. "Dost thou rustle in the chambers of the south; pursuest thou the shower in other lands? Why dost thou not come to my sails; to the blue face of my seas? The foe is in the land of Morven, and the king is absent far. But let each bind on his mail, and each assume his shield. Stretch every spear over the wave; let every sword be unsheathed. Lathmon^a is before us with his host: he that fled^b from Fingal on the plains of Lona. But he returns, like a collected stream, and his roar is between our hills."

Such were the words of Fingal. We rushed into Carmona's bay. Ossian ascended the hill: he thrice struck his bossy shield. The rock of

^a It is said by tradition, that it was the intelligence of Lathmon's invasion, that occasioned Fingal's return from Ireland; though Ossian, more poetically, ascribes the cause of Fingal's knowledge to his dream.

^b He alludes to a battle wherein Fingal had defeated Lathmon.

Morven replied: the bounding roes came forth.
The foe was troubled in my presence: he col-
lected his darkened host. I stood, like a cloud
on the hill, rejoicing in the arms of my youth.

Morni^c sat beneath a tree, at the roaring
waters of Strumon; ^d his locks of age are grey:
he leans forward on his staff; young Gaul is
near the hero, hearing the battles of his father.
Often did he rise, in the fire of his soul; at the
mighty deeds of Morni. The aged heard the
sound of Ossian's shield: he knew the sign of
war. He started at once from his place. His
grey hair parted on his back. He remembered
the deeds of other years.

“My son,” he said to fair-haired Gaul, “I
hear the sound of war. The king of Morven
is returned, his signals are spread on the wind.
Go to the halls of Strumon; bring his arms to
Morni. Bring the shield of my father's latter
years, for my arm begins to fail. Take thou
thy armour, O Gaul! and rush to the first of
thy battles. Let thine arm reach to the renown

^c Morni was chief of a numerous tribe, in the days of
Fingal, and his father Comhal. The last-mentioned hero was
killed in battle against Morni's tribe; but the valour and con-
duct of Fingal, reduced them, at last, to obedience. We find
the two heroes perfectly reconciled in this poem.

^d Stru'-moné, *stream of the hill*. Here the proper name
of a rivulet in the neighbourhood of Selma.

of thy fathers. Be thy course in the field, like the eagle's wing. Why shouldst thou fear death, my son? the valiant fall with fame; their shields turn the dark stream of danger away; renown dwells on their aged hairs. Dost thou not see, O Gaul! how the steps of my age are honoured? Morni moves forth, and the young meet him with awe, and turn their eyes, with silent joy, on his course. But I never fled from danger, my son! my sword lightened through the darkness of war. The stranger melted before me; the mighty were blasted in my presence."

Gaul brought the arms to Morni: the aged warrior is covered with steel. He took the spear in his hand, which was stained with the blood of the valiant. He came towards Fingal, his son attended his steps. The son of Comhal arose before him with joy, when he came in his locks of age.

"Chief of roaring Strumon!" said the rising soul of Fingal; "do I behold thee in arms, after thy strength has failed? Often has Morni shone in fight, like the beam of the ascending sun; when he disperses the storms of the hill, and brings peace to the glittering fields. But why didst thou not rest in thine age? Thy renown is in the song. The people behold thee, and bless the departure of mighty Morni. Why

didst thou not rest in thine age? The foe will vanish before Fingal."

"Son of Comhal," replied the chief; "the strength of Morni's arm has failed. I attempt to draw the sword of my youth, but it remains in its place. I throw the spear, but it falls short of the mark. I feel the weight of my shield. We decay like the grass of the hill: our strength returns no more. I have a son, O Fingal! his soul has delighted in Morni's deeds; but his sword has not been lifted against a foe, neither has his fame begun. I come with him to war; to direct his arm in fight. His renown will be a light to my soul, in the dark hour of my departure. O that the name of Morni were forgot among the people! that the heroes would only say, "Behold the father of Gaul!"

"King of Strumon," Fingal replied, "Gaul shall lift the sword in fight. But he shall lift it before Fingal; my arm shall defend his youth. But rest thou in the halls of Selma; and hear of our renown. Bid the harp to be strung, and the voice of the bard to arise; that those who fall may rejoice in their fame; and the soul of Morni brighten with joy. Ossian! thou hast fought in battles: the blood of strangers is on thy spear: thy course be with Gaul, in the strife; but depart not from the side of Fingal!

lest the foe should find you alone, and your fame fail in my presence."

I saw Gaul^e in his arms; my soul was mixed with his. The fire of the battle was in his eyes! he looked to the foe with joy. We spoke the words of friendship in secret; the lightning of our swords poured together; for we drew them behind the wood, and tried the strength of our arms on the empty air.

Night came down on Morven. Fingal sat at the beam of the oak. Morni sat by his side, with all his grey-waving locks. Their words were of other times, of the mighty deeds of their fathers. Three bards, at times, touched the harp: Ullin was near with his song. He sung of the mighty Comhal; but darkness^f gathered on Morni's brow. He rolled his red eye on Ullin: at once ceased the song of the bard. Fingal observed the aged hero, and he mildly

^e Ossian speaks. The contrast between the old and young heroes is strongly marked. The circumstance of the latter's drawing their swords, is well imagined, and agrees with the impatience of young soldiers just entered upon action.

^f Ullin had chosen ill the subject of his song. The *darkness which gathered on Morni's brow*, did not proceed from any dislike he had to Comhal's name, though they were foes, but from his fear that the song would awaken Fingal to a remembrance of the feuds which had subsisted of old between the families. Fingal's speech on this occasion, abounds with generosity and good sense.

spoke. "Chief of Strumon, why that darkness?
Let the days of other years be forgot. Our
fathers contended in war; but we meet together
at the feast. Our swords are turned on the foe
of our land: he melts before us on the field.
Let the days of our fathers be forgot; hero of
mossy Strumon!"

"King of Morven," replied the chief, "I
remember thy father with joy. He was terrible
in battle; the rage of the chief was deadly.
My eyes were full of tears, when the king of
heroes fell. The valiant fall, O Fingal! the
feeble remain on the hills! How many heroes
have passed away, in the days of Morni! Yet I
did not shun the battle; neither did I fly from
the strife of the valiant. Now let the friends
of Fingal rest; for the night is around; that
they may rise with strength to battle against
car-borne Lathmon. I hear the sound of his
host, like thunder moving on the hills. Ossian!
and fair-haired Gaul! ye are young, and swift
in the race. Observe the foes of Fingal from
that woody hill. But approach them not; your
fathers are not near to shield you. Let not
your fame fall at once. The valour of youth
may fail!"

We heard the words of the chief with joy.
We moved in the clang of our arms. Our steps
are on the woody hill. Heaven burns with all

its stars. The meteors of death fly over the field. The distant noise of the foe reached our ears. It was then Gaul spoke, in his valour: his hand half unsheathed his sword.

“Son of Fingal!” he said, “why burns the soul of Gaul? My heart beats high. My steps are disordered: my hand trembles on my sword. When I look towards the foe, my soul lightens before me. I see their sleeping host. Tremble thus the souls of the valiant, in battles of the spear? How would the soul of Morni rise, if we should rush on the foe! Our renown would grow in song: our steps would be stately in the eyes of the brave.”

“Son of Morni,” I replied, “my soul delights in war. I delight to shine in battle alone, to give my name to the bards. But what if the foe should prevail; can I behold the eyes of the king? They are terrible in his displeasure, and like the flames of death. But I will not behold them in his wrath! Ossian shall prevail or fall. But shall the fame of the vanquished rise? They pass like a shade away. But the fame of Ossian shall rise! His deeds shall be like his father’s. Let us rush in our arms; son of Morni, let us rush to fight. Gaul! if thou shouldst return, go to Selma’s lofty hall. Tell to Everallin that I fell with fame; carry this sword to Branno’s daughter. Let her give

it to Oscar, when the years of his youth shall arise."

"Son of Fingal!" Gaul replied with a sigh; "shall I return after Ossian is low? What would my father say; what Fingal, the king of men? The feeble would turn their eyes and say, "Behold Gaul, who left his friend in his blood!" Ye shall not behold me, ye feeble, but in the midst of my renown! Ossian! I have heard from my father the mighty deeds of heroes; their mighty deeds when alone! for the soul increases in danger."

"Son of Morni," I replied, and strode before him on the heath, "our fathers shall praise our valour, when they mourn our fall. A beam of gladness shall rise on their souls, when their eyes are full of tears. They will say, "Our sons have not fallen unknown: they spread death around them." But why should we think of the narrow house? The sword defends the brave. But death pursues the flight of the feeble; their renown is never heard."

We rushed forward through night; we came to the roar of a stream, which bent its blue course round the foe, through trees that echoed to its sound. We came to the bank of the stream, and saw the sleeping host. Their fires were decayed on the plain; the lonely steps of their scouts were distant far. I stretched

my spear before me to support my steps over the stream. But Gaul took my hand, and spoke the words of the brave. "Shall the son of Fingal rush on the sleeping foe? Shall he come like a blast by night, when it overturns the young trees in secret? Fingal did not thus receive his fame; nor dwells renown on the grey hairs of Morni, for actions like these. Strike, Ossian, strike the shield; and let their thousands rise! Let them meet Gaul in his first battle, that he may try the strength of his arm."

My soul rejoiced over the warrior: my bursting tears came down. "And the foe shall meet thee, Gaul!" I said: "the fame of Morni's son shall arise. But rush not too far, my hero: let the gleam of thy steel be near to Ossian. Let our hands join in slaughter. Gaul! dost thou not behold that rock? Its grey side dimly gleams to the stars. Should the foe prevail, let our back be towards the rock. Then shall they fear to approach our spears; for death is in our hands!"

I struck thrice my echoing shield. The starting foe arose. We rushed on in the sound of our arms. Their crowded steps fly over the heath. They thought that the mighty Fingal was come. The strength of their arms withered away. The sound of their flight was like that of flame, when it rushes through the blasted

groves. It was then the spear of Gaul flew in its strength; it was then his sword arose. Cre-mor fell; and mighty Leth. Dunthormo struggled in his blood. The steel rushed through Crotho's side, as bent, he rose on his spear; the black stream poured from the wound, and hissed on the half-extinguished oak. Cathmin saw the steps of the hero behind him; he ascended a blasted tree; but the spear pierced him from behind. Shrieking, panting, he fell. Moss and withered branches pursue his fall, and strew the blue arms of Gaul.

Such were thy deeds, son of Morni, in the first of thy battles. Nor slept the sword by thy side, thou last of Fingal's race! Ossian rushed forward in his strength; the people fell before him; as the grass by the staff of the boy, when he whistles along the field, and the grey beard of the thistle falls. But careless the youth moves on; his steps are towards the desert. Grey morning rose around us; the winding streams are bright along the heath. The foe gathered on a hill; and the rage of Lathmon rose. He bent the red eye of his wrath: he is silent in his rising grief. He often struck his bossy shield; and his steps are unequal on the heath. I saw the distant darkness of the hero, and I spoke to Morni's son.

“Car-borne chief of Strumon, dost thou

behold the foe? They gather on the hill in their wrath. Let our steps be towards the ^gking. He shall rise in his strength, and the host of Lathmon vanish. Our fame is around us, warrior, the eyes of the aged ^h will rejoice. But let us fly, son of Morni, Lathmon descends the hill." "Then let our steps be slow," replied the fair-haired Gaul; "lest the foe say, with a smile, "Behold the warriors of night. They are, like ghosts, terrible in darkness; they melt away before the beam of the east." Ossian, take the shield of Gormar, who fell beneath thy spear. The aged heroes will rejoice, beholding the deeds of their sons."

Such were our words on the plain, when Sulmathⁱ came to car-borne Lathmon: Sulmath chief of Dutha, at the dark-rolling stream of Duvranna.^k "Why dost thou not rush, son of Nuäth, with a thousand of thy heroes? Why dost thou not descend with thy host, before the warriors fly? Their blue arms are beaming to

^g Fingal.

^h Fingal and Morni.

ⁱ Suil-mhath, a man of good eye-sight.

^k Dubh-bhranna, dark mountain-stream. A river in Scotland, which falls into the sea at Banff, still retains the name of Duvran. If that is meant in this passage, Lathmon must have been a prince of the Pictish nation, or those Caledonians who inhabited of old the eastern coast of Scotland.

the rising light, and their steps are before us on the heath!"

"Son of the feeble hand," said Lathmon, "shall my host descend! They are but two, son of Dutha! shall a thousand lift their steel! Nuäth would mourn, in his hall, for the departure of his fame. His eyes would turn from Lathmon, when the tread of his feet approached. Go thou to the heroes, chief of Dutha! I behold the stately steps of Ossian. His fame is worthy of my steel! let us contend in fight!"

The noble Sulmath came. I rejoiced in the words of the king. I raised the shield on my arm; Gaul placed in my hand the sword of Morni. We returned to the murmuring stream; Lathmon came down in his strength. His dark host rolled, like clouds, behind him; but the son of Nuäth was bright in his steel.

"Son of Fingal," said the hero, "thy fame has grown on our fall. How many lie there of my people by thy hand, thou king of men! Lift now thy spear against Lathmon; lay the son of Nuäth low! Lay him low among his warriors, or thou thyself must fall! It shall never be told in my halls, that my people fell in my presence; that they fell in the presence of Lathmon when his sword rested by his side: the blue eyes of Cutha would roll in tears; her steps be lonely in the vales of Dunlathmon!"

“Neither shall it be told,” I replied, “that the son of Fingal fled. Were his steps covered with darkness, yet would not Ossian fly! his soul would meet him and say, “Does the bard of Selma fear the foe?” “No: he does not fear the foe. His joy is in the midst of battle!”

Lathmon came on with his spear. He pierced the shield of Ossian. I felt the cold steel by my side. I drew the sword of Morni. I cut the spear in twain. The bright point fell glittering on earth. The son of Nuäth burnt in his wrath. He lifted high his sounding shield. His dark eyes rolled above it, as, bending forward, it shone like a gate of brass! But Ossian's spear pierced the brightness of its bosses, and sunk in a tree that rose behind. The shield hung on the quivering lance! But Lathmon still advanced! Gaul foresaw the fall of the chief. He stretched his buckler before my sword; when it descended, in a stream of light, over the king of Dunlathmon!

Lathmon beheld the son of Morni. The tear started from his eye. He threw the sword of his fathers on earth, and spoke the words of the brave. “Why should Lathmon fight against the first of men? Your souls are beams from heaven; your swords the flames of death! Who can equal the renown of the heroes, whose deeds are so great in youth? O that ye were in

the halls of Nuäth, in the green dwelling of Lathmon! then would my father say, that his son did not yield to the weak. But who comes, a mighty stream, along the echoing heath? the little hills are troubled before him; a thousand ghosts are on the beams of his steel; the ghosts of those who are to fall¹ by the arm of the king of resounding Morven. Happy art thou, O Fingal! thy sons shall fight thy wars. They go forth before thee; they return with the steps of their renown!"

Fingal came, in his mildness, rejoicing in secret over the deeds of his son. Morni's face brightened with gladness; his aged eyes look faintly through tears of joy. We came to the halls of Selma. We sat around the feast of shells. The maids of song came into our presence, and the mildly blushing Everallin! Her hair spreads on her neck of snow, her eye rolls in secret on Ossian. She touched the harp of music: we blessed the daughter of Branno!

Fingal rose in his place, and spoke to Lathmon, king of spears. The sword of Trenmor shook by his side, as high he raised his mighty arm. "Son of Nuäth," he said, "why dost

¹ It was thought in Ossian's time, that each person had his attending spirit. The traditions concerning this opinion, are dark and unsatisfactory.

thou search for fame in Morven? We are not of the race of the feeble; our swords gleam not over the weak. When did we rouse thee, O Lathmon! with the sound of war? Fingal does not delight in battle, though his arm is strong! My renown grows on the fall of the haughty. The light of my steel pours on the proud in arms. The battle comes; and the tombs of the valiant rise; the tombs of my people rise; O my fathers! I at last must remain alone! But I will remain renowned; the departure of my soul shall be a stream of light. Lathmon! retire to thy place! Turn thy battles to other lands! The race of Morven are renowned; their foes are the sons of the unhappy!"

P O E M