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## **The poems of Ossian**

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

**Macpherson, James**

**London, 1807**

Preface.

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## P R E F A C E.

WITHOUT increasing his genius, the Author may have improved his language, in the eleven years that the following Poems have been in the hands of the Public. Errors in diction might have been committed at twenty-four, which the experience of a riper age may remove; and some exuberances in imagery may be restrained with advantage, by a degree of judgment acquired in the progress of time. Impressed with this opinion, he ran over the whole with attention and accuracy; and, he hopes, he has brought the work to a state of correctness which will preclude all future improvements.

The eagerness with which these Poems have been received abroad, is a recompence for the coldness with which a few have affected to treat them at home. All the polite nations of Europe have transferred them into their respective languages; and they speak of him, who brought them



to light, in terms that might flatter the vanity of one fond of fame. In a convenient indifference for literary reputation, the Author hears praise without being elevated, and ribaldry without being depressed. He has frequently seen the first bestowed too precipitately; and the latter is so faithless to its purpose, that it is often the only index to merit in the present age.

Though the taste which defines genius by the points of the compass, is a subject fit for mirth in itself, it is often a serious matter in the sale of the work. When rivers define the limits of abilities, as well as the boundaries of countries, a writer may measure his success by the latitude under which he was born. It was to avoid a part of this inconvenience, that the Author is said, by some, who speak without any authority, to have ascribed his own productions to another name. If this was the case, he was but young in the art of deception. When he placed the Poet in antiquity, the Translator should have been born on this side of the Tweed.

These observations regard only the frivolous in matters of literature; these, how-



ever, form a majority in every age and nation. In this country, men of genuine taste abound; but their still voice is drowned in the clamours of a multitude, who judge by fashion of poetry, as of dress. The truth is, to judge aright requires almost as much genius as to write well; and good critics are as rare as great poets. Though two hundred thousand Romans stood up when Virgil came into the theatre, Varius only could correct the *Æneid*. He that obtains fame, must receive it through mere fashion; and gratify his vanity with the applause of men, of whose judgment he cannot approve.

The following Poems, it must be confessed, are more calculated to please persons of exquisite feelings of heart, than those who receive all their impressions by the ear. The novelty of cadence, in what is called a prose version, though not destitute of harmony, will not, to common readers, supply the absence of the frequent returns of rhyme. This was the opinion of the Writer himself, though he yielded to the judgment of others, in a mode, which presented freedom and dignity of expression, instead of fetters which cramp the



thought, whilst the harmony of language is preserved. His intention was to publish in verse. The making of poetry, like any other handicraft, may be learned by industry; and he had served his apprenticeship, though in secret, to the muses.

It is, however, doubtful, whether the harmony which these poems might derive from rhyme, even in much better hands than those of the Translator, could atone for the simplicity and energy which they would lose. The determination of this point shall be left to the readers of this Preface. The following is the beginning of a Poem, translated from the Norse to the Gaëlic language; and, from the latter, transferred into English. The verse took little more time to the writer than the prose; and he himself is doubtful (if he has succeeded in either), which of them is the most literal version.

#### FRAGMENT OF A NORTHERN TALE.

WHERE Harold, with golden hair, spread  
o'er Lochlin<sup>a</sup> his high commands; where, with

<sup>a</sup> The Gaëlic name of Scandinavia, or Scandinia.



justice, he ruled the tribes, who sunk, subdued, beneath his sword; abrupt rises Gormal<sup>b</sup> in snow! The tempests roll dark on his sides, but calm, above, his vast forehead appears. White-issuing from the skirt of his storms, the troubled torrents pour down his sides. Joining, as they roar along, they bear the Torno, in foam, to the main.

Grey on the bank, and far from men, half-covered, by ancient pines, from the wind, a lonely pile exalts its head, long shaken by the storms of the north. To this fled Sigurd, fierce in fight, from Harold, the leader of armies, when fate had brightened his spear with renown; when he conquered in that rude field, where Lulan's warriors fell in blood, or rose in terror on the waves of the main. Darkly sat the grey-haired chief; yet sorrow dwelt not in his soul. But when the warrior thought on the past, his proud heart heaved against his side: forth flew his sword from its place; he wounded Harold in all the winds.

One daughter, and only one, but bright in form, and mild of soul, the last beam of the setting line, remained to Sigurd of all his race. His son, in Lulan's battle slain, beheld not his father's flight from his foes. Nor finished seemed the ancient line! The splendid beauty

<sup>b</sup> The mountains of Sevo.



of bright-eyed Fithon, covered still the fallen king with renown. Her arm was white like Gormal's snow; her bosom whiter than the foam of the main, when roll the waves beneath the wrath of the winds. Like two stars were her radiant eyes, like two stars that rise on the deep, when dark tumult embroils the night. Pleasant are their beams aloft, as stately they ascend the skies.

Nor Odin forgot, in aught, the maid. Her form scarce equalled her lofty mind. Awe moved around her stately steps. Heroes loved—but shrunk away in their fears. Yet midst the pride of all her charms, her heart was soft, and her soul was kind. She saw the mournful with tearful eyes. Transient darkness arose in her breast. Her joy was in the chase. Each morning, when doubtful light wandered dimly on Lulan's waves, she roused the resounding woods, to Gormal's head of snow. Nor moved the maid alone, &c.

## THE SAME VERSIFIED.

WHERE fair-hair'd Harold, o'er Scandinia reign'd,  
And held with justice, what his valour gain'd;  
Sevo, in snow, his rugged forehead rears,  
And, o'er the warfare of his storms, appears  
Abrupt and vast.—White-wandering down his side,  
A thousand torrents, gleaming as they glide,



Unite below; and, pouring through the plain,  
Hurry the troubled Torno to the main.

Grey, on the bank, remote from human kind,  
By aged pines, half-sheltered from the wind,  
A homely mansion rose, of antique form,  
For ages batter'd by the polar storm.  
To this fierce Sigurd fled, from Norway's lord,  
When fortune settled, on the warrior's sword;  
In that rude field, where Suecia's chiefs were slain,  
Or forc'd to wander o'er the Bothnic main.  
Dark was his life, yet undisturb'd with woes,  
But when the memory of defeat arose  
His proud heart struck his side; he graspt the spear,  
And wounded Harold in the vacant air.

One daughter only, but of form divine,  
The last fair beam of the departing line,  
Remain'd of Sigurd's race. His warlike son  
Fell in the shock, which overturn'd the throne.  
Nor desolate the house! Fionia's charms  
Sustain'd the glory which they lost in arms.  
White was her arm, as Sevo's lofty snow,  
Her bosom fairer than the waves below,  
When heaving to the winds. Her radiant eyes,  
Like two bright stars, exulting as they rise  
O'er the dark tumult of a stormy night,  
And gladd'ning heaven with their majestic light.

In nought is Odin to the maid unkind.  
Her form scarce equals her exalted mind;  
Awe leads her sacred steps where'er they move,  
And mankind worship, where they dare not love.  
But, mix'd with softness, was the virgin's pride,  
Her heart had feeling which her eyes deny'd.  
Her bright tears started at another's woes,  
While transient darkness on her soul arose.



The chase she lov'd ; when morn, with doubtful beam  
Came dimly wandering o'er the Bothnic stream,  
On Sevo's sounding sides she bent the bow,  
And rous'd his forests to his head of snow.  
Nor mov'd the maid alone ; &c.

One of the chief improvements on this edition, is the care taken in the arrangement of the Poems, and the writer now resigns them for ever to their fate. That they have been well received by the Public, appears from an extensive sale: that they shall continue to be well received, he may venture to prophesy without the gift of that inspiration, to which poets lay claim. Through the medium of version upon version, they retain, in foreign languages, their native character of simplicity and energy. Genuine poetry, like gold, loses little, when properly transfused ; but when a composition cannot bear the test of a literal version, it is a counterfeit which ought not to pass current. The operation must, however, be performed with skilful hands. A Translator, who cannot equal his original, is incapable of expressing its beauties.

London, Aug. 13, 1773.