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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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A Dissertation concerning the Æra of Ossian

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A

DISSERTATION

CONCERNING THE

ÆRA OF OSSIAN.

VOL. I.

B

DISSEMINATION

CONTEMPORARY

AREA OF ORIGIN

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A
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INQUIRIES into the antiquities of nations afford more pleasure than any real advantage to mankind. The ingenious may form systems of history on probabilities and a few facts; but, at a great distance of time, their accounts must be vague and uncertain. The infancy of states and kingdoms is as destitute of great events, as of the means of transmitting them to posterity. The arts of polished life, by which alone facts can be preserved with certainty, are the production of a well-formed community. It is then historians begin to write, and public transactions to be worthy remembrance. The actions of former times are left in obscurity, or magnified by uncertain traditions. Hence it is that we find so much of the marvellous in the origin of every

nation; posterity being always ready to believe any thing, however fabulous, that reflects honour on their ancestors.

The Greeks and Romans were remarkable for this weakness. They swallowed the most absurd fables concerning the high antiquities of their respective nations. Good historians, however, rose very early amongst them, and transmitted, with lustre, their great actions to posterity. It is to them that they owe that unrivalled fame they now enjoy, while the great actions of other nations are involved in fables, or lost in obscurity. The Celtic nations afford a striking instance of this kind. They, though once the masters of Europe from the mouth of the river Oby^a, in Russia, to Cape Finisterre, the western point of Galicia in Spain, are very little mentioned in history. They trusted their fame to tradition and the songs of their bards, which, by the vicissitude of human affairs, are long since lost. Their ancient language is the only monument that remains of them; and the traces of it being found in places so widely distant from each other, serves only to shew the extent of their ancient power, but throws very little light on their history.

^a Plin. 1. 6.

Of all the Celtic nations, that which possessed old Gaul is the most renowned; not perhaps on account of worth superior to the rest, but for their wars with a people who had historians to transmit the fame of their enemies, as well as their own, to posterity. Britain was first peopled by them, according to the testimony of the best authors^b; its situation in respect to Gaul makes the opinion probable; but what puts it beyond all dispute, is, that the same customs and language prevailed among the inhabitants of both in the days of Julius Cæsar^c.

The colony from Gaul possessed themselves, at first, of that part of Britain which was next to their own country; and spreading northward, by degrees, as they increased in numbers, peopled the whole island. Some adventurers passing over from those parts of Britain that are within sight of Ireland, were the founders of the Irish nation: which is a more probable story than the idle fables of Milesian and Gallician colonies. ^dDiodorus Siculus mentions it as a thing well known in his time, that the inhabitants of Ireland were originally Britons, and his testimony is unquestionable,

^b Cæs. l. 5. Tac. Agric. c. 2.

^c Cæsar, Pomp. Mel. Tacitus. ^d Diod. Sic. l. 5.

when we consider that, for many ages, the language and customs of both nations were the same.

Tacitus was of opinion that the ancient Caledonians were of German extract; but even the ancient Germans themselves were Gauls. The present Germans, properly so called, were not the same with the ancient Celtæ. The manners and customs of the two nations were similar; but their language different. The Germans^e are the genuine descendants of the ancient Scandinavians, who crossed, at an early period, the Baltic. The Celtæ^f, anciently, sent many colonies into Germany, all of whom retained their own laws, language, and customs, till they were dissipated, in the Roman empire; and it is of them, if any colonies came from Germany into Scotland, that the ancient Caledonians were descended.

But whether the Caledonians were a colony of the Celtic Germans, or the same with the Gauls that first possessed themselves of Britain, is a matter of no moment at this distance of time. Whatever their origin was, we find them very numerous in the time of Julius Agricola, which is a presumption that they

^e Strabo, l. 7.

^f Cæs. l. 6. Liv. l. 5. Tac. de Mor. Germ.

were long before settled in the country. The form of their government was a mixture of aristocracy and monarchy, as it was in all the countries where the Druids bore the chief sway. This order of men seems to have been formed on the same principles with the Dactyli Idæ and Curetes of the ancients. Their pretended intercourse with heaven, their magic and divination were the same. The knowledge of the Druids in natural causes, and the properties of certain things, the fruit of the experiments of ages, gained them a mighty reputation among the people. The esteem of the populace soon increased into a veneration for the order; which these cunning and ambitious priests took care to improve, to such a degree, that they, in a manner, ingrossed the management of civil, as well as religious, matters. It is generally allowed that they did not abuse this extraordinary power; the preserving the character of sanctity was so essential to their influence, that they never broke out into violence or oppression. The chiefs were allowed to execute the laws, but the legislative power was entirely in the hands of the^s Druids. It was by their authority that the tribes were united, in times of the greatest danger, under

^s Cæs. l. 6.

one head. This temporary king of Vergobretus^b, was chosen by them, and generally laid down his office at the end of the war. These priests enjoyed long this extraordinary privilege among the Celtic nations who lay beyond the pale of the Roman empire. It was in the beginning of the second century that their power among the Caledonians began to decline. The traditions concerning Trathal and Cormac, ancestors to Fingal, are full of the particulars of the fall of the Druids: a singular fate, it must be owned, of priests, who had once established their superstition.

The continual wars of the Caledonians against the Romans hindered the better sort from initiating themselves, as the custom formerly was, into the order of the Druids. The precepts of their religion were confined to a few, and were not much attended to by a people inured to war. The Vergobretus, or chief magistrate, was chosen without the concurrence of the hierarchy, or continued in his office against their will. Continual power strengthened his interest among the tribes, and enabled him to send down, as hereditary to his posterity, the office he had only received himself by election.

^b Fer-gubreth, *the man to judge.*

On occasion of a new war against the *King of the World*, as tradition emphatically calls the Roman emperor, the Druids, to vindicate the honour of the order, began to resume their ancient privilege of choosing the Vergobretus. Garmal, the son of Tarno, being deputed by them, came to the grandfather of the celebrated Fingal, who was then Vergobretus, and commanded him, in the name of the whole order, to lay down his office. Upon his refusal, a civil war commenced, which soon ended in almost the total extinction of the religious order of the Druids. A few that remained, retired to the dark recesses of their groves, and the caves they had formerly used for their meditations. It is then we find them in *the circle of stones*, and unheeded by the world. A total disregard for the order, and utter abhorrence of the Druidical rites ensued. Under this cloud of public hate, all that had any knowledge of the religion of the Druids became extinct, and the nation fell into the last degree of ignorance of their rites and ceremonies.

It is no matter of wonder then, that Fingal and his son Ossian disliked the Druids, who were the declared enemies to their succession in the supreme magistracy. It is a singular case, it must be allowed, that there are no

traces of religion in the poems ascribed to Ossian, as the poetical compositions of other nations are so closely connected with their mythology. But gods are not necessary, when the poet has genius. It is hard to account for it to those who are not made acquainted with the manner of the old Scottish bards. That race of men carried their notions of martial honour to an extravagant pitch. Any aid given their heroes in battle, was thought to derogate from their fame; and the bards immediately transferred the glory of the action to him who had given that aid.

Had the poet brought down gods, as often as Homer had done, to assist his heroes, his work had not consisted of eulogiums on men, but of hymns to superior beings. Those who write in the Gallic language seldom mention religion in their profane poetry; and when they professedly write of religion, they never mix, with their compositions, the actions of their heroes. This custom alone, even though the religion of the Druids had not been previously extinguished, may, in some measure, excuse the author's silence concerning the religion of ancient times.

To allege, that a nation is void of all religion, would betray ignorance of the history of mankind. The traditions of their fathers, and

their own observations on the works of nature, together with that superstition which is inherent in the human frame, have, in all ages, raised in the minds of men some idea of a superior being. Hence it is, that in the darkest times, and amongst the most barbarous nations, the very populace themselves had some faint notion, at least, of a divinity. The Indians, who worship no God, believe that he exists. It would be doing injustice to the author of these poems, to think, that he had not opened his conceptions to that primitive and greatest of all truths. But let his religion be what it will, it is certain he has not alluded to Christianity, or any of its rites, in his poems; which ought to fix his opinions, at least, to an æra prior to that religion. Conjectures, on this subject, must supply the place of proof. The persecution begun by Dioclesian, in the year 303, is the most probable time in which the first dawning of Christianity in the north of Britain can be fixed. The humane and mild character of Constantius Chlorus, who commanded then in Britain, induced the persecuted Christians to take refuge under him. Some of them, through a zeal to propagate their tenets, or through fear, went beyond the pale of the Roman empire, and settled among the Caledonians; who were ready to hearken

to their doctrines, if the religion of the Druids was exploded long before.

These missionaries, either through choice, or to give more weight to the doctrine they advanced, took possession of the cells and groves of the Druids; and it was from this retired life they had the name of ¹*Culdees*, which, in the language of the country, signified *sequestered persons*. It was with one of the *Culdees* that Ossian, in his extreme old age, is said to have disputed concerning the Christian religion. This dispute, they say, is extant, and is couched in verse, according to the custom of the times. The extreme ignorance on the part of Ossian, of the Christian tenets, shews, that that religion had only lately been introduced, as it is not easy to conceive, how one of the first rank could be totally unacquainted with a religion that had been known for any time in the country. The dispute bears the genuine marks of antiquity. The obsolete phrases and expressions peculiar to the times, prove it to be no forgery. If Ossian then lived at the introduction of Christianity, as by all appearance he did, his epoch will be the latter end of the third, and beginning of the fourth century. Tradition here steps in with a kind of proof.

¹ Culdich.

The exploits of Fingal against ^k Caracul the son of the *king of the world*, are among the first brave actions of his youth. A complete poem, which relates to this subject, is printed in this collection.

In the year 210 the emperor Severus, after returning from his expedition against the Caledonians, at York fell into the tedious illness of which he afterwards died. The Caledonians and Maiatæ, resuming courage from his indisposition, took arms in order to recover the possessions they had lost. The enraged emperor commanded his army to march into their country, and to destroy it with fire and sword. His orders were but ill executed, for his son, Caracalla, was at the head of the army, and his thoughts were entirely taken up with the hopes of his father's death, and with schemes to supplant his brother Geta.—He scarcely had entered the enemy's country, when news was brought him that Severus was dead.—A sudden peace is patched up with the Caledonians, and, as it appears from Dion Cassius, the country they had lost to Severus was restored to them.

The Caracul of Fingal is no other than Caracalla, who, as the son of Severus, the empe-

^k Carac'huil, *terrible eye*. Carac-'healla, *terrible look*.

Carac-challamh, *a sort of upper garment*.

ror of Rome, whose dominions were extended almost over the known world, was not without reason called the *Son of the King of the World*. The space of time between 211, the year Severus died, and the beginning of the fourth century, is not so great, but Ossian, the son of Fingal, might have seen the Christians whom the persecution under Dioclesian had driven beyond the pale of the Roman empire.

In one of the many lamentations of the death of Oscar, a battle which he fought against Caros, king of ships, on the banks of the winding Carun¹, is mentioned among his great actions. It is more than probable, that the Caros mentioned here, is the same with the noted usurper Carausius, who assumed the purple in the year 287, and seizing on Britain, defeated the emperor Maximilian Herculius, in several naval engagements, which gives propriety to his being called *the King of Ships*. The *winding Carun* is that small river retaining still the name of Carron, and runs in the neighbourhood of Agricola's wall, which Carausius repaired to obstruct the incursions of the Caledonians. Several other passages in traditions allude to the wars of the Romans; but the two just mentioned clearly fix the epocha

¹ Car-avon, *winding river*.

of Fingal to the third century; and this account agrees exactly with the Irish histories, which place the death of Fingal, the son of Comhal, in the year 283, and that of Oscar and their own celebrated Cairbre, in the year 296.

Some people may imagine, that the allusions to the Roman history might have been derived, by tradition, from learned men, more than from ancient poems. This must then have happened at least three ages ago, as these allusions are mentioned often in the compositions of those times.

Every one knows what a cloud of ignorance and barbarism overspread the north of Europe three hundred years ago. The minds of men, addicted to superstition, contracted a narrowness that destroyed genius. Accordingly we find the compositions of those times trivial and puerile to the last degree. But let it be allowed, that, amidst all the untoward circumstances of the age, a genius might arise; it is not easy to determine what could induce him to allude to the Roman times. We find no fact to favour any designs which could be entertained by any man who lived in the fifteenth century.

The strongest objection to the antiquity of the poems now given to the public under the

name of Ossian, is the improbability of their being handed down by tradition through so many centuries. Ages of barbarism, some will say, could not produce poems abounding with the disinterested and generous sentiments so conspicuous in the compositions of Ossian; and could these ages produce them, it is impossible but they must be lost, or altogether corrupted in a long succession of barbarous generations.

These objections naturally suggest themselves to men unacquainted with the ancient state of the northern parts of Britain. The bards, who were an inferior order of the Druids, did not share their bad fortune. They were spared by the victorious king, as it was through their means only he could hope for immortality to his fame. They attended him in the camp, and contributed to establish his power by their songs. His great actions were magnified, and the populace, who had no ability to examine into his character narrowly, were dazzled with his fame in the rhymes of the bards. In the mean time, men assumed sentiments that are rarely to be met with in an age of barbarism. The bards, who were originally the disciples of the Druids, had their minds opened, and their ideas enlarged, by being initiated into the learning of that celebrated order. They could form a perfect hero

in their own minds, and ascribe that character to their prince. The inferior chiefs made this ideal character the model of their conduct; and, by degrees, brought their minds to that generous spirit which breathes in all the poetry of the times. The prince, flattered by his bards, and rivalled by his own heroes, who imitated his character as described in the eulogies of his poets, endeavoured to excel his people in merit, as he was above them in station. This emulation continuing, formed at last the general character of the nation, happily compounded of what is noble in barbarity, and virtuous and generous in a polished people.

When virtue in peace, and bravery in war, are the characteristics of a nation, their actions become interesting, and their fame worthy of immortality. A generous spirit is warmed with noble actions, and becomes ambitious of perpetuating them. This is the true source of that divine inspiration, to which the poets of all ages pretended. When they found their themes inadequate to the warmth of their imaginations, they varnished them over with fables, supplied by their own fancy, or furnished by absurd traditions. These fables, however ridiculous, had their abettors; posterity either implicitly believed them, or, through a vanity

natural to mankind, pretended that they did. They loved to place the founders of their families in the days of fable, when poetry, without the fear of contradiction, could give what character she pleased of her heroes. It is to this vanity that we owe the preservation of what remain of the more ancient poems. Their poetical merit made their heroes famous in a country where heroism was much esteemed, and admired. The posterity of those heroes, or those who pretended to be descended from them, heard with pleasure the eulogiums of their ancestors; bards were employed to repeat the poems, and to record the connection of their patrons with chiefs so renowned. Every chief in process of time had a bard in his family, and the office became at last hereditary. By the succession of these bards, the poems concerning the ancestors of the family were handed down from generation to generation; they were repeated to the whole clan on solemn occasions, and always alluded to in the new compositions of the bards. This custom came down to near our own times; and after the bards were discontinued, a great number in a clan retained by memory, or committed to writing, their compositions, and founded the antiquity of their families on the authority of their poems.

The use of letters was not known in the north of Europe till long after the institution of the bards: the records of the families of their patrons, their own, and more ancient poems, were handed down by tradition. Their poetical compositions were admirably contrived for that purpose. They were adapted to music; and the most perfect harmony was observed. Each verse was so connected with those which preceded or followed it, that if one line had been remembered in a stanza, it was almost impossible to forget the rest. The cadences followed in so natural a gradation, and the words were so adapted to the common turn of the voice, after it is raised to a certain key, that it was almost impossible, from a similarity of sound, to substitute one word for another. This excellence is peculiar to the Celtic tongue, and is perhaps to be met with in no other language. Nor does this choice of words clog the sense or weaken the expression. The numerous flections of consonants, and variation in declension, make the language very copious.

The descendants of the Celtæ, who inhabited Britain and its isles, were not singular in this method of preserving the most precious monuments of their nation. The ancient laws of the Greeks were couched in verse, and

handed down by tradition. The Spartans, through a long habit, became so fond of this custom, that they would never allow their laws to be committed to writing. The actions of great men, and the eulogiums of kings and heroes, were preserved in the same manner. All the historical monuments of the old Germans were comprehended in their ancient songs^m; which were either hymns to their gods, or elegies in praise of their heroes, and were intended to perpetuate the great events in their nation which were carefully interwoven with them. This species of composition was not committed to writing, but delivered by oral traditionⁿ. The care they took to have the poems taught to their children, the uninterrupted custom of repeating them upon certain occasions, and the happy measure of the verse, served to preserve them for a long time uncorrupted. This oral chronicle of the Germans was not forgot in the eighth century; and it probably would have remained to this day, had not learning, which thinks every thing, that is not committed to writing, fabulous, been introduced. It was from poetical traditions that Garcilasso composed his ac-

^m Tacitus de Mor. Germ.

ⁿ *Abbé de la Bletterie Remarques sur la Germaine.*

count of the Yncas of Peru. The Peruvians had lost all other monuments of their history, and it was from ancient poems, which his mother, a princess of the blood of the Yncas, taught him in his youth, that he collected the materials of his history. If other nations then, that had often been overrun by enemies, and had sent abroad and received colonies, could for many ages preserve, by oral tradition, their laws and histories uncorrupted, it is much more probable that the ancient Scots, a people so free of intermixture with foreigners, and so strongly attached to the memory of their ancestors, had the works of their bards handed down with great purity.

What is advanced, in this short Dissertation, it must be confessed, is mere conjecture. Beyond the reach of records, is settled a gloom, which no ingenuity can penetrate. The manners described, in these poems, suit the ancient Celtic times, and no other period that is known in history. We must, therefore, place the heroes far back in antiquity; and it matters little, who were their contemporaries in other parts of the world. If we have placed Fingal in his proper period, we do honour to the manners of barbarous times. He exercised every manly virtue in Caledonia, while Helio-gabulus disgraced human nature at Rome.

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FORMS OF ORIGIN