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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

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Cath-Loda, Part First

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A CHIEF PART OF THE
will that power to place as a poet, and not to
please only, but often to command, to trans-
port the soul to heaven, we may very safely
trust that his productions are the offspring of
true and uncommon genius; and we may boldly
assert that a Poet among those whose works
are in the world
M. 1784

CATH - L O D A:

Δ

P O E M.

DUAN FIRST.

ARGUMENT.

FINGAL, when very young, making a voyage to the Orkney islands, was driven, by stress of weather, into a bay of Scandinavia, near the residence of Starno, king of Lochlin. Starno invites Fingal to a feast. Fingal, doubting the faith of the king, and mindful of a former breach of hospitality, refuses to go.—Starno gathers together his tribes; Fingal resolves to defend himself.—Night coming on, Duth-maruno proposes to Fingal, to observe the motions of the enemy.—The king himself undertakes the watch. Advancing towards the enemy, he, accidentally, comes to the cave of Turthor, where Starno had confined Conban-carglas, the captive daughter of a neighbouring chief.—Her story is imperfect, a part of the original being lost.—Fingal comes to a place of worship, where Starno and his son, Swaran, consulted the spirit of Loda, concerning the issue of the war.—The rencounter of Fingal and Swaran.—*Duän* first concludes with a description of the airy hall of Cruth-loda, supposed to be the Odin of Scandinavia.

CATH-LODA.

° DUAN FIRST.

A TALE of the times of old!

Why, thou wanderer unseen! Thou bender
of the thistle of Lora; why, thou breeze of the
valley, hast thou left mine ear? I hear no dis-

° The bards distinguished those compositions, in which the narration is often interrupted by episodes and apostrophes, by the name of *Duán*. Since the extinction of the order of the bards, it has been a general name for all ancient compositions in verse. The abrupt manner in which the story of this poem begins, may render it obscure to some readers; it may not therefore be improper, to give here the traditional preface, which is generally prefixed to it. Two years after he took to wife Ros-crana, the daughter of Cormac, king of Ireland, Fingal undertook an expedition into Orkney, to visit his friend Cathulla, king of Inistore. After staying a few days at Caricthura, the residence of Cathulla, the king set sail, to return to Scotland; but, a violent storm arising, his ships were driven into a bay of Scandinavia, near Gormal, the seat of Starno, king of Lochlin, his avowed enemy. Starno, upon the appearance of strangers on his coast, summoned together the

tant roar of streams! No sound of the harp, from the rock! Come, thou huntress of Lutha, Malvina, call back his soul to the bard. I look forward to Lochlin of lakes, to the dark, billowy bay of U-thorno, where Fingal descends from ocean, from the roar of winds. Few are the heroes of Morven, in a land unknown!

Starno sent a dweller of Loda, to bid Fingal to the feast; but the king remembered the past, and all his rage arose. "Nor Gormal's mossy towers, nor Starno, shall Fingal behold. Deaths wander, like shadows, over his fiery soul! Do I forget that beam of light, the white-handed daughter^d of kings? Go, son of Loda; his words are wind to Fingal: wind, that, to and fro, drives the thistle in autumn's dusky vale. Duth-

neighbouring tribes, and advanced, in a hostile manner, towards the bay of U-thorno, where Fingal had taken shelter. Upon discovering who the strangers were, and fearing the valour of Fingal, which he had, more than once, experienced before, he resolved to accomplish by treachery, what he was afraid he should fail in by open force. He invited, therefore, Fingal to a feast, at which he intended to assassinate him. The king prudently declined to go, and Starno betook himself to arms. The sequel of the story may be learned from the poem itself.

^d Agandecca, the daughter of Starno, whom her father killed, on account of her discovering to Fingal a plot laid against his life. Her story is related at large in the third book of Fingal.

maruno,^e arm of death! Cromma-glas, of iron shields! Struthmor, dweller of battle's wing; Cormar, whose ships bound on seas, careless as the course of a meteor, on dark-rolling clouds! Arise, around me, children of heroes, in a land unknown! Let each look on his shield, like Trenmor, the ruler of wars. "Come down," thus Trenmor said, "thou dweller between the harps! Thou shalt roll this stream away, or waste with me in earth."

Around the king they rise in wrath. No words come forth: they seize their spears. Each soul is rolled into itself. At length the sudden clang is waked, on all their echoing shields. Each takes his hill, by night; at intervals, they darkly stand. Unequal bursts the hum of songs, between the roaring wind!

^e Duth-maruno is a name very famous in tradition. Many of his great actions are handed down, but the poems, which contained the detail of them, are long since lost. He lived, it is supposed, in that part of the north of Scotland, which is over against Orkney. Duth-maruno, Cromma-glas, Struthmor, and Cormar, are mentioned, as attending Comhal, in his last battle against the tribe of Morni, in a poem, which is still preserved. It is not the work of Ossian; the phraseology betrays it to be a modern composition. It is something like those trivial compositions, which the Irish bards forged, under the name of Ossian, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Duth-maruno signifies, *black and steady*; Cromma-glas, *bending and swarthy*; Struthmor, *roaring stream*; Cormar, *expert at sea*.

Broad over them rose the moon!

In his arms, came tall Duth-maruno; he from Croma of rocks, stern hunter of the boar! In his dark boat he rose on waves, when Crumthormo^f awaked its woods. In the chase he shone, among foes: No fear was thine, Duth-maruno!

“Son of daring Comhal, shall my steps be forward through night? From this shield shall I view them, over their gleaming tribes? Starno, king of lakes, is before me, and Swaran, the foe of strangers. Their words are not in vain, by Loda’s stone of power.—Should Duth-maruno not return, his spouse is lonely, at home, where meet two roaring streams, on Crathmo-craulo’s plain. Around are hills, with echoing woods, the ocean is rolling near. My son looks on screaming sea-fowl, a young wanderer on the field. Give the head of a boar to ^gCan-dona,

^f Crumthormoth, one of the Orkney or Shetland islands. The name is not of Galic original. It was subject to its own petty king, who is mentioned in one of Ossian’s poems.

^g Cean-daona, *head of the people*, the son of Duth-maruno. He became afterwards famous, in the expeditions of Ossian, after the death of Fingal. The traditional tales concerning him are very numerous, and, from the epithet in them, bestowed on him (*Can dona of boars*), it would appear, that he applied himself to that kind of hunting, which his father, in this paragraph, is so anxious to recommend to him. As I

tell him of his father's joy, when the bristly strength of I-thorno rolled on his lifted spear. Tell him of my deeds in war! Tell where his father fell!"

have mentioned the traditional tales of the Highlands, it may not be improper here to give some account of them. After the expulsion of the bards, from the houses of the chiefs, they, being an indolent race of men, owed all their subsistence to the generosity of the vulgar, whom they diverted with repeating the compositions of their predecessors, and running up the genealogies of their entertainers to the family of their chiefs. As this subject was, however, soon exhausted, they were obliged to have recourse to invention, and form stories, having no foundation in fact, which were swallowed, with great credulity, by an ignorant multitude. By frequent repeating, the fable grew upon their hands, and, as each threw in whatever circumstance he thought conducive to raise the admiration of his hearers, the story became, at last, so devoid of all probability, that even the vulgar themselves did not believe it. They, however, liked the tales so well, that the bards found their advantage in turning professed tale-makers. They then launched out into the wildest regions of fiction and romance. I firmly believe, there are more stories of giants, enchanted castles, dwarfs, and palfreys, in the Highlands, than in any country in Europe. These tales, it is certain, like other romantic compositions, have many things in them unnatural, and, consequently, disgustful to true taste; but, I know not how it happens, they command attention more than any other fictions I ever met with. The extreme length of these pieces is very surprising, some of them required many days to repeat them, but such hold they take of the memory, that few circumstances are ever omitted by those who have received them only from oral tradition: What is still more

“Not forgetful of my fathers,” said Fingal, “I have bounded over the seas. Their’s were the times of danger, in the days of old. Nor settles darkness on me, before foes, though youthful in my locks. Chief of Crathmo-craulo, the field of night is mine.”

Fingal rushed, in all his arms, wide-bounding over Turthor’s stream, that sent its sullen roar, by night, through Gormal’s misty vale. A moon-beam glittered on a rock; in the midst, stood a stately form; a form with floating locks, like Lochlin’s white-bosomed maids. Unequal are her steps, and short. She throws a broken song on wind. At times she tosses her white arms: for grief is dwelling in her soul.

“Torcul-torno^h, of aged locks!” she said,

amazing, the very language of the bards is still preserved. It is curious to see, that the descriptions of magnificence, introduced in these tales, are even superior to all the pompous oriental fictions of the kind.

^h Torcul-torno, according to tradition, was king of Crathlun, a district in Sweden. The river Lulan ran near the residence of Torcul-torno. There is a river in Sweden, still called Lula, which is probably the same with Lulan. The war between Starno and Torcul-torno, which terminated in the death of the latter, had its rise at a hunting party. Starno being invited, in a friendly manner, by Torcul-torno, both kings, with their followers, went to the mountains of Stivamore, to hunt. A boar rushed from the wood before the kings, and Torcul-torno killed it. Starno thought this behaviour a breach

“where now are thy steps, by Lulan? Thou hast failed at thine own dark streams, father of Conban-cârgla! But I behold thee, chief of Lulan, sporting by Loda’s hall, when the dark-skirted night is rolled along the sky.—Thou, sometimes, hidest the moon with thy shield. I have seen her dim in heaven. Thou kindlest thy hair into meteors, and sailest along the night. Why am I forgot, in my cave, king of shaggy boars? Look from the hall of Loda, on thy lonely daughter.”

“Who art thou,” said Fingal, “voice of night?”

She, trembling, turned away.

“Who art thou, in thy darkness?”

upon the privilege of guests, who were always *honoured*, as tradition expresses it, *with the danger of the chase*. A quarrel arose, the kings came to battle, with all their attendants, and the party of Torcul-torno, were totally defeated, and he himself slain. Starno pursued his victory, laid waste the district of Carthlun, and, coming to the residence of Torcul-torno, carried off, by force, Conban-carglas, the beautiful daughter of his enemy. Her he confined in a cave, near the palace of Gormal, where, on account of her cruel treatment, she became distracted.

The paragraph, just now before us, is the song of Conban-carglas, at the time she was discovered by Fingal. It is in lyric measure, and set to music, which is wild and simple, and so inimitably suited to the situation of the unhappy lady, that few can hear it without tears.

She shrunk into the cave.

The king loosed the thong from her hands.
He asked about her fathers.

“Torcul-torno,” she said, “once dwelt at Lulan’s foamy stream: he dwelt—but, now, in Loda’s hall, he shakes the sounding shell. He met Starno of Lochlin, in war; long fought the dark-eyed kings. My father fell, in his blood, blue-shielded Torcul-torno! By a rock, at Lulan’s stream, I had pierc’d the bounding roe. My white hand gathered my hair, from off the rushing winds. I heard a noise. Mine eyes were up. My soft breast rose on high. My step was forward, at Lulan, to meet thee, Torcul-torno! It was Starno, dreadful king! His red eyes rolled on me in love. Dark waved his shaggy brow, above his gathered smile. Where is my father, I said, he that was mighty in war? Thou art left alone among foes, O daughter of Torcul-torno! He took my hand. He raised the sail. In this cave he placed me dark. At times, he comes, a gathered mist. He lifts, before me, my father’s shield. But often passes a beam¹ of youth far distant from my cave. The son of Starno moves in my sight. He dwells lonely in my soul.”

¹ By *the beam of youth*, it afterwards appears, that Conbancarglas means Swaran, the son of Starno, with whom, during her confinement, she had fallen in love.

“ Maid of Lulan,” said Fingal, “ white-handed daughter of grief! a cloud, marked with streaks of fire, is rolled along thy soul. Look not to that dark-robed moon; look not to those meteors of heaven. My gleaming steel is around thee, the terror of thy foes! It is not the steel of the feeble, nor of the dark in soul! The maids are not shut in our caves^k of streams. They toss not their white arms alone. They bend, fair within their locks, above the harps of Selma. Their voice is not in the desert wild. We melt along the pleasing sound!”

* * * * *

Fingal, again, advanced his steps, wide through the bosom of night, to where the trees of Loda shook amid squally winds. Three stones, with heads of moss, are there; a stream, with foaming course: and dreadful, rolled around them, is the dark-red cloud of Loda. High from its top looked forward a ghost, half-formed of the shadowy smoak. He poured his voice,

^k From this contrast, which Fingal draws, between his own nation and the inhabitants of Scandinavia, we may learn, that the former were much less barbarous than the latter. This distinction is so much observed throughout the poems of Ossian, that there can be no doubt, that he followed the real manners of both nations in his own time. At the close of the speech of Fingal, there is a great part of the original lost.

at times, amidst the roaring stream. Near, bending beneath a blasted tree, two heroes received his words: Swaran of lakes, and Starno, foe of strangers. On their dun shields, they darkly leaned: their spears are forward through night. Shrill sounds the blast of darkness, in Starno's floating beard.

They heard the tread of Fingal. The warriors rose in arms. "Swaran, lay that wanderer low," said Starno, in his pride. "Take the shield of thy father. It is a rock in war."—Swaran threw his gleaming spear. It stood fixed in Loda's tree. Then came the foes forward, with swords. They mixed their rattling steel. Through the thongs of Swaran's shield rushed the blade¹ of Luno. The shield fell rolling on earth. Cleft the helmet^m fell down. Fingal stopt the lifted steel. Wrathful stood Swaran, unarmed. He rolled his silent eyes; he threw his sword on earth. Then, slowly stalking over the stream, he whistled as he went.

Nor unseen of his father is Swaran. Starno turns away in wrath. His shaggy brows wave

¹ The sword of Fingal, so called from its maker, Luno of Lochlin.

^m The helmet of Swaran. The behaviour of Fingal is always consistent with that generosity of spirit which belongs to a hero. He takes no advantage of a foe disarmed.

dark, above his gathered rage. He strikes Loda's tree with his spear. He raises the hum of songs. They come to the host of Lochlin, each in his own dark path; like two foam-covered streams, from two rainy vales!

To Turthor's plain Fingal returned. Fair rose the beam of the east. It shone on the spoils of Lochlin, in the hand of the king. From her cave came forth, in her beauty, the daughter of Torcul-torno. She gathered her hair from wind. She wildly raised her song. The song of Lulan of shells, where once her father dwelt. She saw Starno's bloody shield. Gladness rose, a light on her face. She saw the cleft helmet of Swaran.ⁿ She shrunk, darkened, from Fingal.—“Art thou fallen, by thy hundred streams, O love of the mournful maid!”

U-thorno, that risest in waters! on whose side are the meteors of night! I behold the

ⁿ Conban-carglas, from seeing the helmet of Swaran bloody in the hands of Fingal, conjectured that that hero was killed. A part of the original is lost. It appears, however, from the sequel of the poem, that the daughter of Torcul-torno did not long survive her surprize, occasioned by the supposed death of her lover. The description of the airy hall of Loda (which is supposed to be the same with that of Odin, the deity of Scandinavia) is more picturesque and descriptive, than any in the Edda, or other works of the northern Scalders.

dark moon descending, behind thy resounding woods. On thy top dwells the misty Loda: the house of the spirits of men! In the end of his cloudy hall bends forward Cruth-loda of swords. His form is dimly seen, amid his wavy mist. His right hand is on his shield. In his left is the half-viewless shell. The roof of his dreadful hall is marked with nightly fires!

The race of Cruth-loda advance, a ridge of formless shades. He reaches the sounding shell, to those who shone in war. But, between him and the feeble, his shield rises, a darkened orb. He is a setting meteor, to the weak in arms. Bright as a rainbow on streams, came Lulan's white-bosomed maid.