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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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Carthon

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CARTHON:

A POEM.



## ARGUMENT.

This poem is complete, and the subject of it, as of most of Ossian's compositions, tragical. In the time of Comhal the son of Trathal, and father of the celebrated Fingal, Clessámmor the son of Thaddu and brother of Morna, Fingal's mother, was driven by a storm into the river Clyde, on the banks of which stood Balclutha, a town belonging to the Britons between the walls. He was hospitably received by Reuthámir, the principal man in the place, who gave him Moina his only daughter in marriage. Reuda, the son of Cormo, a Briton who was in love with Moina, came to Reuthámir's house, and behaved haughtily towards Clessámmor. A quarrel ensued, in which Reuda was killed; the Britons who attended him, pressed so hard on Clessámmor, that he was obliged to throw himself into the Clyde, and swim to his ship. He hoisted sail, and the wind being favourable bore him out to sea. He often endeavoured to return, and carry off his beloved Moina by night; but the wind continuing contrary, he was forced to desist.

Moina, who had been left with child by her husband, brought forth a son, and died soon after.—Reuthámir named the child Carthon, *i. e.* the murmur of waves, from the storm which carried off Clessámmor his father, who was supposed to have been cast away. When Carthon was three years old, Comhal the father of Fingal, in one of his expeditions against the Britons, took and burnt Balclutha. Reuthámir was killed in the attack: and Carthon was carried safe away by his nurse, who fled farther into the country of the Britons. Carthon, coming to man's estate, was resolved to revenge the fall of Balclutha on Comhal's posterity. He sets sail from the Clyde, and falling on the coast of Morven, defeated two of Fingal's heroes, who came to oppose his progress. He was, at last, unwittingly killed by his father Clessámmor, in a single combat. This story is the foundation of the present poem, which opens on the night preceding the death of Carthon, so that what passed before is introduced by way of episode. The poem is addressed to Malvina the daughter of Toscar.



## CARTHON,

### A POEM.

A TALE of the times of old! The deeds of days  
of other years!

The murmur of thy streams, O Lora! brings  
back the memory of the past. The sound of  
thy woods, Garmallar, is lovely in mine ear.  
Dost thou not behold, Malvina, a rock with its  
head of heath? Three aged pines bend from its  
face; green is the narrow plain at its feet; there  
the flower of the mountain grows, and shakes  
its white head in the breeze. The thistle is  
there alone, shedding its aged beard. Two  
stones, half sunk in the ground, shew their  
heads of moss. The deer of the mountain avoids  
the place, for he beholds a dim ghost standing  
there\*. The mighty lie, O Malvina! in the  
narrow plain of the rock.

\* It was the opinion of the times, that deer saw the ghosts  
of the dead. To this day, when beasts suddenly start without  
any apparent cause, the vulgar think that they see the spirits  
of the deceased.



A tale of the times of old! the deeds of days of other years!

Who comes from the land of strangers, with his thousands around him? the sunbeam pours its bright stream before him; his hair meets the wind of his hills. His face is settled from war. He is calm as the evening beam that looks from the cloud of the west, on Cona's silent vale. Who is it but Comhal's son<sup>l</sup>, the king of mighty deeds! He beholds his hills with joy, he bids a thousand voices rise. "Ye have fled over your fields, ye sons of the distant land! The king of the world sits in his hall, and hears of his people's flight. He lifts his red eye of pride; he takes his father's sword. Ye have fled over your fields, sons of the distant land!"

Such were the words of the bards, when they came to Selma's halls. A thousand<sup>m</sup> lights from the stranger's land rose, in the midst of the people. The feast is spread around; the night passed away in joy. Where is the noble Clessámmor<sup>n</sup>? said the fair-haired Fingal. Where is the brother of Morna, in the hour of my joy?

<sup>l</sup> Fingal returns here, from an expedition against the Romans, which was celebrated by Ossian in a poem called *the strife of Crona*.

<sup>m</sup> Probably wax-lights; which are often mentioned as carried, among other booty, from the Roman province.

<sup>n</sup> Clessamh mor, *mighty deeds*.



Sullen and dark he passes his days in the vale of echoing Lora: but, behold, he comes from the hill, like a steed in his strength, who finds his companions in the breeze; and tosses his bright mane in the wind. Blest be the soul of Clessámmor, why so long from Selma?

Returns the chief, said Clessámmor, in the midst of his fame? Such was the renown of Comhal in the battles of his youth. Often did we pass over Carun to the land of the strangers: our swords returned, not unstained with blood: nor did the kings of the world rejoice. Why do I remember the times of our war? My hair is mixed with grey. My hand forgets to bend the bow: I lift a lighter spear. O that my joy would return, as when I first beheld the maid; the white-bosomed daughter of strangers, °Moina, with the dark-blue eyes!

Tell, said the mighty Fingal, the tale of thy youthful days. Sorrow, like a cloud on the sun, shades the soul of Clessámmor. Mournful are thy thoughts, alone, on the banks of the roaring Lora. Let us hear the sorrow of thy youth and the darkness of thy days!

“It was in the days of peace,” replied the

° Moina, *soft in temper and person*. We find the British names in this poem derived from the Galic, which is a proof that the ancient language of the whole island was one and the same.



great Clessámmor, "I came in my bounding ship, to Balclutha's<sup>p</sup> walls of towers. The winds had roared behind my sails, and <sup>q</sup>Clutha's streams received my dark-bosomed ship. Three days I remained in Reuthámir's halls, and saw his daughter, that beam of light. The joy of the shell went round, and the aged hero gave the fair. Her breasts were like foam on the wave, and her eyes like stars of light: her hair was dark as the raven's wing: her soul was generous and mild. My love for Moina was great; my heart poured forth in joy.

"The son of a stranger came; a chief who loved the white-bosomed Moina. His words were mighty in the hall; he often half-unsheathed his sword. "Where, said he, is the mighty Comhal, the restless wanderer<sup>r</sup> of the heath? Comes he, with his host, to Balclutha, since Clessámmor is so bold? My soul, I replied, O

<sup>p</sup> Balclutha, *i. e.* the town of Clyde, probably the *Alcluth* of Bede.

<sup>q</sup> Clutha, or Cluäth, the Galic name of the river Clyde; the signification of the word is *bending*, in allusion to the winding course of that river. From Clutha is derived its Latin name, Glotta.

<sup>r</sup> The word in the original here rendered by *restless wanderer*, is *Scuta*, which is the true origin of the *Scoti* of the Romans; an opprobrious name imposed by the Britons on the Caledonians, on account of the continual incursions into their country.



warrior! burns in a light of its own. I stand without fear in the midst of thousands, though the valiant are distant far. Stranger! thy words are mighty, for Clessámmor is alone. But my sword trembles by my side, and longs to glitter in my hand. Speak no more of Comhal, son of the winding Clutha!"

"The strength of his pride arose. We fought; he fell beneath my sword. The banks of Clutha heard his fall; a thousand spears glittered around. I fought: the strangers prevailed: I plunged into the stream of Clutha. My white sails rose over the waves, and I bounded on the dark-blue sea. Moina came to the shore, and rolled the red eye of her tears: her loose hair flew on the wind; and I heard her mournful, distant cries. Often did I turn my ship; but the winds of the East prevailed. Nor Clutha ever since have I seen, nor Moina of the dark-brown hair. She fell in Balclutha, for I have seen her ghost. I knew her as she came through the dusky night, along the murmur of Lora: she was like the new moon, seen through the gathered mist: when the sky pours down its flaky snow, and the world is silent and dark."

Raise<sup>s</sup>, ye bards, said the mighty Fingal,

<sup>s</sup> The title of this poem, in the original, is *Duan na nlaoi*, i. e. *The Poem of the Hymns*: probably on account of its



the praise of unhappy Moina. Call her ghost, with your songs, to our hills; that she may rest with the fair of Morven, the sun-beams of other days, the delight of heroes of old. I have seen the walls of Balclutha, but they were desolate. The fire had resounded in the halls: and the voice of the people is heard no more. The stream of Clutha was removed from its place, by the fall of the walls. The thistle shook, there, its lonely head: the moss whistled to the wind. The fox looked out from the windows, the rank grass of the wall waved round its head. Desolate is the dwelling of Moina, silence is in the house of her fathers. Raise the song of mourning, O bards! over the land of strangers. They have but fallen before us: for, one day, we must fall. Why dost thou build the hall, son of the winged days? Thou lookest from thy towers to-day; yet a few years, and the blast of the desert comes; it howls in thy empty court, and whistles round thy half-worn shield. And let the blast of the desert come! we shall be renowned in our day! The mark of my arm shall be in battle; my name in the

many digressions from the subject, all which are in a lyric measure, as this song of Fingal. Fingal is celebrated by the Irish historians for his wisdom in making laws, his poetical genius, and his foreknowledge of events. O'Flaherty goes so far as to say, that Fingal's laws were extant in his own time.



song of bards. Raise the song; send round the shell: let joy be heard in my hall. When thou, sun of heaven, shalt fail! if thou shalt fail, thou mighty light! if thy brightness is for a season, like Fingal; our fame shall survive thy beams."

Such was the song of Fingal, in the day of his joy. His thousand bards leaned forward from their seats, to hear the voice of the king. It was like the music of harps on the gale of the spring. Lovely were thy thoughts, O Fingal! why had not Ossian the strength of thy soul? But thou standest alone, my father! who can equal the king of Selma?

The night passed away in song; morning returned in joy. The mountains shewed their grey heads; the blue face of ocean smiled. The white wave is seen tumbling round the distant rock; a mist rose, slowly, from the lake. It came, in the figure of an aged man, along the silent plain. Its large limbs did not move in steps; for a ghost supported it in mid-air. It came towards Selma's hall, and dissolved in a shower of blood.

The king alone beheld the sight; he foresaw the death of the people. He came, in silence, to his hall; and took his father's spear. The mail rattled on his breast. The heroes rose around. They looked, in silence, on each other, marking the eyes of Fingal. They saw battle



in his face; the death of armies on his spear. A thousand shields, at once, are placed on their arms; they drew a thousand swords. The hall of Selma brightened around. The clang of arms ascends. The grey dogs howl in their place. No word is among the mighty chiefs. Each marked the eyes of the king; and half assumed his spear.

“Sons of Morven,” begun the king, “this is no time to fill the shell. The battle darkens near us; death hovers over the land. Some ghost, the friend of Fingal, has forewarned us of the foe. The sons of the stranger come from the darkly-rolling sea. For, from the water, came the sign of Morven’s gloomy danger. Let each assume his heavy spear, each gird on his father’s sword. Let the dark helmet rise on every head; the mail pour its lightning from every side. The battle gathers like a storm; soon shall ye hear the roar of death.”

The hero moved on before his host, like a cloud before a ridge of green fire; when it pours on the sky of night, and mariners foresee a storm. On Cona’s rising heath they stood: the white-bosomed maids beheld them above like a grove; they foresaw the death of the youth, and looked towards the sea with fear. The white wave deceived them for distant sails; the tear is on their cheek! The sun rose on the



sea, and we beheld a distant fleet. Like the mist of ocean they came: and poured their youth upon the coast. The chief was among them, like the stag in the midst of the herd. His shield is studded with gold; stately strode the king of spears. He moved towards Selma; his thousands moved behind.

“Go, with a song of peace,” said Fingal; “go, Ullin, to the king of swords. Tell him that we are mighty in war; that the ghosts of our foes are many. But renowned are they who have feasted in my halls; they shew the arms<sup>t</sup> of my fathers in a foreign land: the sons of the strangers wonder, and bless the friends of Morven’s race; for our names have been heard afar: the kings of the world shook in the midst of their host.”

Ullin went with his song. Fingal rested on his spear: he saw the mighty foe in his armour: he blest the stranger’s son. “How stately art thou, son of the sea!” said the king of woody Morven. “Thy sword is a beam of fire by thy side: thy spear is a pine that defies the storm. The varied face of the moon is not broader than

<sup>t</sup> It was a custom among the ancient Scots, to exchange arms with their guests, and those arms were preserved long in the different families, as monuments of the friendship which subsisted between their ancestors.



thy shield. Ruddy is thy face of youth! soft the ringlets of thy hair! But this tree may fall; and his memory be forgot! The daughter of the stranger will be sad, looking to the rolling sea: the children will say, "We see a ship; perhaps it is the king of Balclutha." The tear starts from their mother's eye. Her thoughts are of him who sleeps in Morven!"

Such were the words of the king, when Ullin came to the mighty Carthon; he threw down the spear before him; he raised the song of peace. "Come to the feast of Fingal, Carthon, from the rolling sea! partake of the feast of the king, or lift the spear of war! The ghosts of our foes are many: but renowned are the friends of Morven! Behold that field, O Carthon; many a green hill rises there, with mossy stones and rustling grass: these are the tombs of Fingal's foes, the sons of the rolling sea!"

"Dost thou speak to the weak in arms!" said Carthon, "bard of the woody Morven? Is my face pale for fear, son of the peaceful song? Why then dost thou think to darken my soul with the tales of those who fell? My arm has fought in battle; my renown is known afar. Go to the feeble in arms, bid them yield to Fingal. Have not I seen the fallen Balclutha? And shall I feast with Comhal's son? Comhal! who threw his fire in the midst of my father's



hall! I was young, and knew not the cause, why the virgins wept. The columns of smoke pleased mine eye, when they rose above my walls! I often looked back, with gladness, when my friends fled along the hill. But when the years of my youth came on, I beheld the moss of my fallen walls: my sigh arose with the morning, and my tears descended with night. Shall I not fight, I said to my soul, against the children of my foes? And I will fight, O bard! I feel the strength of my soul."

His people gathered around the hero, and drew, at once, their shining swords. He stands, in the midst, like a pillar of fire; the tear half-starting from his eye; for he thought of the fallen Balclutha; the crowded pride of his soul arose. Sidelong he looked up to the hill, where our heroes shone in arms; the spear trembled in his hand: bending forward, he seemed to threaten the king.

"Shall I," said Fingal to his soul, "meet, at once, the youth? Shall I stop him in the midst of his course, before his fame shall arise? But the bard, hereafter, may say, when he sees the tomb of Carthon, Fingal took his thousands to battle, before the noble Carthon fell. No: bard of the times to come! thou shalt not lessen Fingal's fame. My heroes will fight the youth, and Fingal behold the war. If he overcomes, I



rush, in my strength, like the roaring stream of Cona. Who, of my chiefs, will meet the son of the rolling sea? Many are his warriors on the coast: and strong is his ashen spear!"

Cathul<sup>u</sup> rose, in his strength, the son of the mighty Lormar: three hundred youths attend the chief, the race<sup>x</sup> of his native streams. Feeble was his arm against Carthon, he fell; and his heroes fled. Connal<sup>y</sup> resumed the battle, but he broke his heavy spear: he lay bound on the field: Carthon pursued his people.

"Clessámmor!" said the king<sup>z</sup> of Morven, "where is the spear of thy strength? Wilt thou behold Connal bound; thy friend, at the stream of Lora? Rise, in the light of thy steel, companion of valiant Comhal! Let the youth of Balclutha feel the strength of Morven's race. He rose in the strength of his steel, shaking his gristly locks. He fitted the shield to his side; he rushed, in the pride of valour.

<sup>u</sup> Cath-'huil, *the eye of battle*.

<sup>x</sup> It appears from this passage, that clanship was established, in the days of Fingal, though not on the same footing with the present tribes, in the north of Scotland.

<sup>y</sup> This Connal is very much celebrated in ancient poetry for his wisdom and valour: there is a small tribe still subsisting in the north, who pretend they are descended from him.

<sup>z</sup> Fingal did not then know that Carthon was the son of Clessámmor.



Carthon stood on a rock; he saw the hero rushing on. He loved the dreadful joy of his face: his strength, in the locks of age! "Shall I lift that spear," he said, "that never strikes, but once, a foe? Or shall I, with the words of peace, preserve the warrior's life? Stately are his steps of age! lovely the remnant of his years! Perhaps it is the husband of Moina; the father of car-borne Carthon. Often have I heard, that he dwelt at the echoing stream of Lora."

Such were his words, when Clessámmor came, and lifted high his spear. The youth received it on his shield, and spoke the words of peace. "Warrior of the aged locks! Is there no youth to lift the spear? Hast thou no son to raise the shield before his father, to meet the arm of youth? Is the spouse of thy love no more? or weeps she over the tombs of thy sons? Art thou of the kings of men? What will be the fame of my sword should'st thou fall?"

"It will be great, thou son of pride!" begun the tall Clessámmor. I have been renowned in battle; but I never told my name<sup>a</sup> to a foe. Yield to me, son of the wave, then shalt thou

<sup>a</sup> To tell one's name to an enemy was reckoned in those days of heroism, a manifest evasion of fighting him: for if it was once known, that friendship subsisted of old between the ancestors of the combatants, the battle immediately ceased;



know that the mark of my sword is in many a field. "I never yielded, king of spears!" replied the noble pride of Carthon: "I have also fought in war; I behold my future fame. Despise me not, thou chief of men! my arm, my spear is strong. Retire among thy friends, let younger heroes fight." "Why dost thou wound my soul?" replied Clessámmor, with a tear. "Age does not tremble on my hand; I still can lift the sword. Shall I fly in Fingal's sight; in the sight of him I love? Son of the sea! I never fled: exalt thy pointed spear."

They fought, like two contending winds, that strive to roll the wave. Carthon bade his spear to err; he still thought that the foe was the spouse of Moina. He broke Clessámmor's beamy spear in twain: he seized his shining sword. But as Carthon was binding the chief, the chief drew the dagger of his fathers. He saw the foe's uncovered side; and opened, there, a wound.

Fingal saw Clessámmor low: he moved in the sound of his steel. The host stood silent, in his presence; they turned their eyes to the king. He came, like the sullen noise of a storm,

and the ancient amity of their forefathers was renewed. *A man who tells his name to his enemy, was of old an ignominious term for a coward.*



before the winds arise: the hunter hears it in the vale, and retires to the cave of the rock. Carthon stood in his place: the blood is rushing down his side: he saw the coming down of the king; his hopes of fame arose;<sup>b</sup> but pale was his cheek: his hair flew loose, his helmet shook on high: the force of Carthon failed; but his soul was strong.

Fingal beheld the hero's blood; he stopt the uplifted spear. "Yield, king of swords!" said Comhal's son; "I behold thy blood. Thou hast been mighty in battle; and thy fame shall never fade." "Art thou the king so far renowned?" replied the car-borne Carthon. "Art thou that light of death, that frightens the kings of the world? But why should Carthon ask? for he is like the stream of his hills; strong as a river, in his course: swift as the eagle of heaven. O that I had fought with the king; that my fame might be great in song! that the hunter, beholding my tomb, might say, He fought with the mighty Fingal. But Carthon dies unknown; he has poured out his force on the weak."

"But thou shalt not die unknown," replied

<sup>b</sup> This expression admits of a double meaning; either that Carthon hoped to acquire glory by killing Fingal; or to be rendered famous by falling by his hand. The last is the most probable, as Carthon is already wounded.



the king of woody Morven: "my bards are many, O Carthon! Their songs descend to future times. The children of years to come shall hear the fame of Carthon; when they sit round the burning oak<sup>c</sup>, and the night is spent in songs of old. The hunter, sitting in the heath, shall hear the rustling blast; and, raising his eyes, behold the rock where Carthon fell. He shall turn to his son, and shew the place where the mighty fought; "There the king of Balclutha fought, like the strength of a thousand streams."

Joy rose in Carthon's face: he lifted his heavy eyes. He gave his sword to Fingal, to lie within his hall, that the memory of Balclutha's king might remain in Morven. The battle ceased along the field, the bard had sung the song of peace. The chiefs gathered round the falling Carthon; they heard his words with sighs. Silent they leaned on their spears, while Balclutha's hero spoke. His hair sighed in the wind, and his voice was sad and low.

"King of Morven, Carthon said, I fall in the midst of my course. A foreign tomb receives, in youth, the last of Reuthámir's race. Dark-

<sup>c</sup> In the north of Scotland, till very lately, they burnt a large trunk of an oak at their festivals; it was called *the trunk of the feast*. Time had so much consecrated the custom, that the vulgar thought it a kind of sacrilege to disuse it.



ness dwells in Balclutha: the shadows of grief in Crathmo. But raise my remembrance on the banks of Lora: where my fathers dwelt. Perhaps the husband of Moina will mourn over his fallen Carthon." His words reached the heart of Clessámmor: he fell, in silence, on his son. The host stood darkened around: no voice is on the plain. Night came, the moon, from the east, looked on the mournful field: but still they stood, like a silent grove that lifts its head on Gormal, when the loud winds are laid, and dark autumn is on the plain.

Three days they mourned above Carthon; on the fourth his father died. In the narrow plain of the rock they lie; a dim ghost defends their tomb. There lovely Moina is often seen; when the sun-beam darts on the rock, and all around is dark. There she is seen, Malvina! but not like the daughters of the hill. Her robes are from the stranger's land; and she is still alone!

Fingal was sad for Carthon; he commanded his bards to mark the day, when shadowy autumn returned: And often did they mark the day, and sing the hero's praise. "Who comes so dark from ocean's roar, like autumn's shadowy cloud? Death is trembling in his hand! his eyes are flames of fire! Who roars along dark Lora's heath? Who but Carthon, king of swords! The



people fall! see! how he strides, like the sullen ghost of Morven! But there he lies a goodly oak, which sudden blasts overturned! When shalt thou rise, Balclutha's joy? When, Carthon, shalt thou arise? Who comes so dark from ocean's roar, like autumn's shadowy cloud?" Such were the words of the bards, in the day of their mourning: Ossian often joined their voice; and added to their song. My soul has been mournful for Carthon; he fell in the days of his youth: and thou, O Clessámmor! where is thy dwelling in the wind? Has the youth forgot his wound? Flies he, on clouds, with thee? I feel the sun, O Malvina! leave me to my rest. Perhaps they may come to my dreams; I think I hear a feeble voice! The beam of heaven delights to shine on the grave of Carthon: I feel it warm around!

O thou that rollest above, round as the shield of my fathers! Whence are thy beams, O sun! thy everlasting light? Thou comest forth, in thy awful beauty; the stars hide themselves in the sky; the moon, cold and pale, sinks in the western wave. But thou thyself movest alone: who can be a companion of thy course! The oaks of the mountains fall: the mountains themselves decay with years; the ocean shrinks and grows again; the moon herself is lost in heaven; but thou art for ever the same; rejoicing in the



brightness of thy course. When the world is dark with tempests; when thunder rolls, and lightning flies; thou lookest, in thy beauty, from the clouds, and laughest at the storm. But to Ossian, thou lookest in vain; for he beholds thy beams no more; whether thy yellow hair flows on the eastern clouds, or thou tremblest at the gates of the west. But thou art, perhaps, like me, for a season, thy years will have an end. Thou shalt sleep in thy clouds, careless of the voice of the morning. Exult then, O sun! in the strength of thy youth! Age is dark and unlovely; it is like the glimmering light of the moon, when it shines through broken clouds, and the mist is on the hills; the blast of north is on the plain, the traveller shrinks in the midst of his journey.



