

**Dafydd Moore, ed., *The International Companion to James Macpherson and The Poems of Ossian*. Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2017. Pp. 187. £14.95. ISBN 9781908980199.**

In his essay in this volume, Paul deGategno describes the potential scale of James Macpherson's literary achievement, at least as it appeared to allies among the Enlightenment literati: 'This young man of talent, who with the proper guidance and encouragement might carry off a magnificent feat of securing for the Scots a distinctive cultural identity' (16). In a half-decade of activity encompassing *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), *Fingal* (1761/2), *Temora* (1763) and a collected *Works of Ossian* (1765), this Ruthven writer, it seemed to many of his supporters then and since, had no less than reshaped the idea of Scotland. Macpherson's prose-poems, orated by the ancient Celtic bard Ossian and dealing with the martial achievements of a fading race of warriors, were a legitimate pan-European sensation fifty years before Walter Scott's Waverley Novels. Today, the richness of scholarship on eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Scotland has helped to re-establish a degree of public interest in Scott. The same cannot (yet) be said of Macpherson or his Ossianic texts. Still, this *International Companion* adds weight to a view of the Ossian phenomenon as a central – perhaps even the central – instance of what continues to be a staple critical fascination with this period in Scottish culture: the relationship between Enlightenment and Romanticism. A major textual output of the Scottish Enlightenment in both thematic and contextual terms, it is not ridiculous to credit the Ossian poems with the invention of literary Romanticism, at the same time ushering in a new perspective on national culture across Europe.

Moore's volume has an appropriate sense of itself as a canon-making device, covering many of the key aspects of Macpherson's work, summarizing the extant critical debate while introducing new developments. It will make a valuable teaching aid, while there is also plenty here to exercise experts in the field. Moore's introduction builds on his previous work in the area to offer an erudite overview, particularly contextualising interest in *Ossian* within the 'four nations' tendency in the academy. He suggests that a reluctance to make a 'contributionist' case for Scottish literature has limited a proper analysis of Macpherson's place within the British public sphere, whereas on the continent his full 'role within national literary cultures' has been confronted (8). Whether or not that is true, the essays here develop a picture of a versatile, politically engaged writer. DeGategno's analysis of the correspondence sketches the canny manoeuvrings of a man who operated as a government propagandist. Robert W. Jones attempts a preliminary look at Macpherson's historiography, which mounted an attack on an opposition politics of despair that sounds ironically Ossianic in tone (131). Moore's own ambitious contribution on Macpherson's translation of the *Iliad* complicates the link between this project and the Ossian material, suggesting that the engagement with Homer failed (or was at least flawed) because of a tension at the heart of Enlightenment primitivism that had animated Macpherson's more celebrated work. The primitive past, Moore observes, had to be both alien and familiar, distant and universal, and if this was generative for *Ossian*, it was more simply problematic for Macpherson's *Iliad*.

Much of the existing literature on Macpherson has focused on the question of authenticity which surrounded the polite-primitive Ossianic texts from their first reception. This volume manages to address that component without allowing it to become overwhelming, the theoretical motif of 'translation' offering a way to move beyond what is a potential cul-de-sac. In this context, Cordula Lemke develops 'nostalgia' as a central topos of Macpherson's work and indeed of the ambivalent energy of cultural Scottishness. Though it is not without imperfections, readers might want to approach Lemke's piece before the previous one by Gauti Kristmannsson, which develops a sophisticated argument about Macpherson's place in the history of translation, rendering accusations of fraud or forgery

trite. Continuing the motif of translation, Lesa Ní Mhunghaile writes a telling polemic on *Ossian*'s relationship to the extant Gaelic tradition in Ireland and Scotland, Robert Rix focuses on the 'Gothic' or ancient Germanic tradition, and Murdo Macdonald lists connections with visual art that merit more theoretical consideration.

There is a familiar argument that Macpherson offered a 'vacated Highland' landscape devoid of detail, which for critics like Peter Womack served the ultimately imperialist tendency of his work – invested in a safe, defeated Scotland. In this volume, Sebastian Mitchell finds instead an interplay 'between the specific and the general' in a symbolic landscape capable of varied rhetorical effect (65). Certainly Macpherson's *Ossian* poetry, as rendered in these essays, demonstrates the ideological instability that has attracted critics to this period in Scottish culture. The series editors preface the book with the comment that it is both 'timely and welcome' (vii) – a bold declaration to put inside a front cover, but it is hard to disagree.

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